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Opening Extract from...

Bomber County:

The Lost Airman of World War Two

Written by Daniel Swift

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Bomber County

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Prologue: A Refusal to Mourn

The beach where the body washed up is wide and white, with cafés raised on stilts and couples drinking beer in the sand. There are windsurfers; children smacking the waves. He came to land in the middle of a summer holiday, and the mismatch is startling after the calm of the cemeteries where my father and I have spent the day. We buy ice creams in Callantsoog, the mall of a town that leads from the beach, and climb the high dunes.

Ice creams are 'ijscoupes' in Dutch. My father and I keep on our shoes as we walk on the sand, although we are surrounded by swimming costumes. There are promisingly sombre and warlike defences, great lines of black granite stretching out into the sea, and we marvel at them for a moment. What we are doing on the beach is looking for the memory of a corpse. But there is no sense of him here for there is no sense of debt. These are happy holidaymakers, and they are turning leisurely away.

The cemeteries scattered along the strange curve of land that is Noord-Holland are rich with duty. 'He died that we may live,' read so many of the gravestones, and the visitors' books are a chorus of insistent remembrance. 'We will not forget you,' the visitors write. On these hot days in June we are alone in the cemeteries.

In the first week of June 2007, my father and I took a trip. We went to Holland for an imperfectly marked anniversary, for on 12 June sixty-four years earlier my grandfather, my father's father, was killed. He was the pilot of a Lancaster bomber on a raid on Münster, and his plane never returned. Rather, his body washed up on a beach in Holland, and is buried there today.

Of the fall, little is known. The letter from the Air Ministry to my

grandmother explains that his body was found at Callantsoog on 17 June 1943, and two days later buried at Huisduinen cemetery. In 1946, the corpse was disinterred and moved a hundred miles south, to Bergen op Zoom. There were six other men on the plane. On 14 August 1943, the body of Sergeant J. J. Anderton washed ashore twelve miles south, at Bergen aan Zee. Anderton was the rear gunner on the Lancaster; the bodies of the five remaining crew members were never found. All we had was a date and a place, so we went to look and to work out what these words meant, the strange Dutch names with too many vowels.

We start in Brussels and drive north. The landscape is washed out; there is not very much of it, here. Holland is so flat that it looks like an airfield, and this effect is deepened by its most striking characteristic, the great new windmills, each a hundred feet high with huge white propellers. The plain of reclaimed land, sea-flat, round the archipelago of Zeeland leads to the spike of Noord-Holland, stretching north of Rotterdam. On one side is the North Sea, and the other is the IJsselmeer, the inland sea.

Holland is so flat that you might land a plane on it, if you had to; Holland is so flat you might attempt a crash landing. But Holland is also so close to England that you might think you could make it home to one of the emergency airstrips in Norfolk, just across the North Sea. These skies were full of planes on the night of 11 June 1943. There were 783 British bombers raiding Düsseldorf, and a further seventy-two on Münster, and all of them, in the hours before dawn, were trying to get home. Two Lancasters crashed in the IJsselmeer; another Lancaster and a Halifax downed in the Oosterschelde, one of the narrow channels in the Zeeland archipelago. Two more Lancasters and two Wellingtons fell to the sea off Noord-Holland. Further north, in the Waddenzee off Fryslân, a Stirling on its return from Düsseldorf was lost, and a Halifax from 51 Squadron survived all the way across the North Sea only to be shot down by a British anti-aircraft convoy just shy of the coast of Norfolk.

These are only the bombers we know were lost at sea that night. Two further Lancasters, two Wellingtons, a Halifax and a Stirling were lost without trace, and a further thirty-three planes crashed on land. They rained down in northern Belgium and near the target zones; they were shot down by Luftwaffe night-fighters at Eindhoven and Rotterdam or by the flak line at Amsterdam. Thirteen bombers fell on the Netherlands that night – five Lancasters, five Halifaxes and three Wellingtons – and this was the way home.

Flying west over the sea-flat landscape of Holland, before you reach the coast, a range of dunes a hundred feet high rises up, dividing the beaches from the fields. At Wijk aan Zee, sometime on that same morning of 12 June 1943, a Lancaster on its way back from Düsseldorf crashed on the dunes, and the crew are buried together in the civilian cemetery at Beverwijk; the seven are boxed around in stone and their graves are covered by the same creeping plant. Behind them is a single grave: Flying Officer H. C. Treherne of the Royal Canadian Air Force, who died on 29 June 1943. His body was found on the same beach on 14 August of that year. He was from Truro, in Nova Scotia, and he was twenty-two years old.

At the tip of Noord-Holland, where the dunes reach and finally fall into the sea, there is a bright red lighthouse. My grandfather was first buried here, on 19 June 1943, in a grave numbered 189 at Huisduinen cemetery. Huisduinen means 'House of the Dunes': it is a seaside resort, full of rows of brick houses and plump Dutch and German holidaymakers. In a café overlooking the sea and the lighthouse there are faded sepia photographs of people on the beach in the 1930s, before the war, and this sunny day in early June there are tables of schoolchildren raising their hands and eating plates of chips, drinking Coke.

The cemetery is shambolic, rambling. There is a Jewish corner, a children's section, a little field of Islamic graves. The dunes are creeping in. The paths are sandy, and the people buried often have a connection to the sea. In the 1950s, a boatful of Greek sailors drowned off the coast, and they are here, as are twenty Dutch

soldiers killed in 1940 or 1944, at the fall or the liberation of Holland.

At the cemetery, a groundsman on a tractor tells us in broken English about the flying monument at Den Helder, the tough little port round the bay. In the town, an ancient man walks us through the hot grid of streets to find it. It is a memorial for the North Coates Strike Wing. North Coates is an airbase in Lincolnshire, for the Bristol Beaufighters that attacked shipping along the Dutch coast. 241 airmen from North Coates were lost, and on the memorial two officers are named. Pilot Officer Ernest Kidd was twenty-four, and Pilot Officer Harold Stevenson was twenty-two, and both were lost in a raid of 18 July 1943.

Kidd and Stevenson, the pilot and the navigator from Lincolnshire, are not buried here. Their bodies are down the coast, where they today lie three rows from my grandfather. This curious business with the body, when I first read of it, struck me as undignified and somehow lonely, and it was a comfort to see, here, that he was not alone. Crews from at least eleven other planes were first buried at Huisduinen, and then at Bergen op Zoom: a Lancaster from 156 Squadron raiding Essen was shot down over the sea on 3 April 1943; the crew of a Halifax, raiding Leipzig, lost on 4 December of that same year; as were a Lancaster raiding Brunswick and a Whitley raiding Bremen. These bodies were recovered from the water or from the beach. His fate was common.

Squadron Leader James Eric Swift is buried in row 32B of Bergen op Zoom cemetery. '12 June 1943,' it says on his gravestone, below his name: 'The peace of God which passeth all understanding'. To his right is Flying Officer M. W. P. Clarke, the pilot of a Halifax crashed into the sea on 22 June 1943; behind him is Sergeant F. A. J. Edwards, the wireless operator on another Halifax, again lost at sea on 26 July 1943. He is surrounded by men who shared his end in different planes and on different raids. To his left are four Polish airmen, their graves tucked closely together, whose Wellington was shot down by a night-fighter on 6 June 1942. One row in front of

him are the crew of a Stirling lost just south of Den Helder on 4 June 1942.

The cemeteries daydream of order. They are administered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which was founded in May 1917 to discipline the tombs of First World War dead. As Sir Frederic Kenyon, the director of the British Museum who was in 1918 hired by the Commission to justify the design of cemeteries, wrote: 'The rows of headstones in their ordered ranks carry on the military idea, giving the appearance as of a battalion on parade, and suggesting the spirit of discipline and order which is the soul of an army.' Wherever possible, a crew or unit who died together are buried together, with no precedence given to higher ranks. The white headstones stand in regular lines, and the design is common to each cemetery, whether in Holland, North Africa or Malaysia. Each headstone is two feet six inches high, and one foot three inches wide; the inscription gives rank, name, regiment number and date of death. In any cemetery with more than forty graves there is a Cross of Sacrifice, a tall white crucifix, and where there are more than a thousand the cemetery will also include a Stone of Remembrance, a wide flat slab with three shallow steps leading up to it.

'It is clearly undesirable,' wrote Kenyon, 'to allow free scope for the effusions of the mortuary mason, the sentimental versifier, or the crank', and while he does not mention them here, he has in mind the families of the dead. For these rigorously uniform cemeteries, the same and the same and the same, were greeted with horror when the designs were first made public in 1919. There were debates in Parliament, and letters to the newspapers. As Lady Florence Cecil, wife of the Bishop of Exeter and mother of three sons lost in the First World War, wrote to *The Times* on 23 December 1919: 'these memorials to the dead do not as a rule appeal to mourners either collectively or as individuals. The bereaved desire consolation from personal tributes to their dead, not from well-drilled patterned uniformity.' Not only do we mourn for individuals, Lady Cecil is saying: we mourn also as individuals, and how we act at the

grave may be as much about our own desires as it is about the body in the ground before us.

Against such objections, however, the cemeteries stand today in strict and perfect lines, empty in the Dutch afternoons. Kenyon wrote: 'Each cemetery, it is hoped, will be beautiful, or at least satisfying in itself; but their effect becomes cumulative if all, under whatever circumstances, have the same main features and express the same ideas', and my father and I continue to visit cemeteries along the curve of the coast even after we have found my grandfather's grave. On the morning he fell there were six others with him: a young engineer named Norman Greenwood and the navigator, Cornelius Geary; the gunners, Charles Nash and James Anderton; the bomb aimer, Daniel Thomas, and the wireless operator, Christian Miller. Anderton spent two months in the water and is buried at a different cemetery, called Bergen General, and as if to distribute our tentative mourning, my father and I drive up to see him too.

The force of the cemeteries lies in their repetition of a boast: an ideal of what Kenyon called 'the whole sense of comradeship and of common service', where officers are buried by their men, pilots with their gunners. As Calvin wrote in 1574: 'death sheweth what we bee, and what is our nature.' Here, these men are shown to be soldiers and airmen, and the other traces of their lives – the whirls of experience and oddity that made them individuals – are irrelevant. In civilian cemeteries, gravestones will list a date of birth as well as of death, the moment of entry into as well as the point of departure from the little story of a life. The war graves list only the date of death, as if to say: when their lives began and what they did before, that is not of our concern.

But the graves are not wholly mute, for Kenyon allowed one element of variation. 'Leave should be given,' he wrote:

> for a short inscription of not more than three lines, to be added on the application of the next-of-kin, or other person or organisation

> (such as a regiment or religious community) whose claim is approved by the Commission, and at the cost of the applicant; but that the inscription must be of the nature of a text or prayer, and that the Commission shall have absolute power of rejection or acceptance.

Anything you write at a grave takes upon itself the nature of a prayer, but the humble verses on the stones at Bergen op Zoom are simple rhymes. 'We would give the world and more / To see the face we loved / come smiling at the door,' reads one marker, and another speaks of 'A loving husband / Always ready to aid / One that was better / God never made'. They rhyme because rhyme is orderly, and because it is easy to remember.

Sometimes an unexpected poetry appears. On the grave of T. McCluskey, a flight engineer who died on 1 June 1944, is the claim: 'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight', taken without attribution from Christopher Marlowe's savage morality play about an over-ambitious scholar, *Dr Faustus*. Elsewhere in Bergen op Zoom, the gravestone of A. R. E. Grayburn describes the missing soldier as 'a verray parfit gentle knight', which is from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and A. E. Housman is quoted. 'The lads that will die in their glory / And never be old' is from *A Shropshire Lad*, Housman's wistful telling of the losses of nineteenth-century England. Rereading the poem later, I came across the phrase I might choose as the marker for a missing airman: 'Comrade, if to turn and fly / Made a soldier never die / Fly I would, for who would not?'

But more often, the cemetery verses offer call-and-response in misquotation, with minor variations, on the theme of mortality. 'Into the mosaic of victory / Went a precious jewel – our son,' runs one, and a couple of rows later: 'In the mosaic of victory / Lies this, our precious part'. Like the children's game of Chinese Whispers, repeating an almost-copy of what you heard, these graves were playing with each other, hiding and seeking along the narrow rows. One marker mourned 'A smiling face / A heart of gold', and another recalled 'Beautiful memories / A smiling face'. Rupert Brooke, the

beautiful boy poet of the First World War, is everywhere here. Gunner A. J. Farthing of the Royal Artillery asks:

> Think this of me
> There's some corner
> Of a foreign field
> That is for ever England

and Pilot Officer A. F. Buck, lost at twenty-two, promises:

> Some corner
> Of a foreign field
> That is for ever England
> Thy will be done.

The family of M. Hinksman, a driver with the Royal Army Service Corps, hoped that:

> Because of him
> This corner
> In this foreign land
> Will be for ever England

and these three stand now within two rows of each other.

This was not a failure of the imagination but a testament to the repetitive formality of grief. In the cemeteries, it came to seem to me that the graves were quoting one another; that they were carrying on a conversation in verse, and they were little interested in our needy presence in the elegant houses of the dead.

At some point in the cemeteries, as I read the gravestones and wandered, their individual identities began to melt. I had been noting the names on the graves, their dates and regiments and honours, but it was a hot afternoon, and many graves to read, so I soon gave up on all this detail and instead wrote only the lines of poetry. The

cemetery verses began to replace the soldiers and airmen they were once chosen to commemorate.

He is not dead
He doth not sleep
He hath awakened
From the dream of life

I noted, without pausing to take also the name; elsewhere, 'Rest peacefully, darling' caught my eye, shocking in its intimacy. 'His life a beautiful memory / His death a silent grief', I saw, but since the memory of the life wasn't mine, I left it silent also on the name. The graves share this impulse: they are most moving when most obscure, when the pure white stone of mourning is encumbered with as little fact as possible. 'In memory of dear George / Killed in western Europe,' ran one inscription, too lazy or proud to note more. He was called George, he was loved, and he died somewhere.

These clean stones, mean on detail but rich in dignity, allow a little space for the play of the imagination. At a grave marked 'A soldier of the 1939–1945 war', I spent time wondering who he might have been, and my father and I were momentarily excited by this:

An airman of the 1939–1945 war.
A Sergeant in the Royal Canadian Air Force.
12 June 1943.
Known Unto God.

There was a Canadian sergeant on my grandfather's plane, and this could have been him. The date of the death and its means, the nationality and the rank all fit that which we knew of the mid-upper gunner, Charles Nash. In the absence of any other limiting detail, any note to falsify our fantasy, we were free to believe for a moment that we had found something here, something previously unseen.

What faded for me in Holland was the particularity of my grandfather's death. We began with a story so striking in its obscure places and its detail – a story of flying, falling, a body found and buried, moved and reburied – and came to see that there were many like this, many others. These other men of the missing are doubles, whose lives shadowed each other. The second corpse recovered from my grandfather's plane was that of the oldest man on the raid, a gunner called Sergeant James Joseph Anderton, and he is buried at a cemetery fifty miles up the coast, and his death is dated 12 June 1943. Yet at Bergen op Zoom is buried Sergeant James John Anderson, who died also on 12 June 1943. Change one letter, and you have a different airman who died on the same day. Anderson was from 51 Squadron, where Anderton was from 83 Squadron; Anderson was pilot of a Halifax, in a raid on Düsseldorf, and Anderton was gunner in a Lancaster raiding Münster: both flew and fell and died and were buried, and for a moment, they are two halves of the same story of bombing and loss.

The war cemeteries are memorials to quantity: they mourn in numbers, offer a consolation of scale, and this is how they resist the chaotic particularities of war death. 'And death shall have no dominion,' wrote Dylan Thomas:

> Dead men naked they shall be one
> With the man in the wind and the west moon;
> When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
> They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
> Though they go mad they shall be sane,
> Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
> Though lovers be lost love shall not;
> And death shall have no dominion.

Those who fly with the wind and the west moon, and those who sink into the sea, are not separate from one another but further iterations of the same. The final line of the stanza repeats the first,

and to compound the effect of ongoing process, of the same happening again and again, the poem opens with a conjunction: '*And* death shall have no dominion'.

The point of poetic repetition is that the second utterance of a phrase borrows the weight of the first. Repetition is quotation, and each death is a quotation of one previous. If memorials are quotations, then perhaps mourning may be too. Neither my father nor I had ever mourned this man. In the cemeteries, I wanted to learn how to mourn, and since this was a bomber, I needed to see how others had traced the loss of other bombers. In the war cemeteries of Noord-Holland, at the foot of the quiet grave, I needed Dylan Thomas.

Dylan Thomas is an unexpected war poet, and his letters suggest that he himself would have expected it least of all. For Thomas, the war kept getting in the way. He was terrified of being called up, and equally afraid that the outbreak of hostilities would prevent the irregular flow of cheques from his publishers upon which he survived. 'This bloody war won't stop the Dent monthly allowance, will it?' he wrote to his agent on 1 September 1939, the day that Germany invaded Poland. As E. M. Forster wrote: '1939 was not a year in which to start a literary career.' Thomas's third book, *The Map of Love*, was published a fortnight before Britain declared war on Germany. When after a couple of months of poor sales, his publisher wrote to describe the unfavourable news, Thomas replied: 'I blame the war.'

Blaming the war was useful. On 29 August 1939, he told his father: 'if I could pray, I'd pray for peace', and in other letters to friends and contemporary poets he unpacked why this might be. 'The Armed forces are not conducive to the creation of contemplative verse,' he announced to a friend on 14 September 1939, and continued in a curious image borrowed from the First World War: 'all my few sources of income are drying up as quickly as blood on the Western Front.' That same day, he grumbled to another acquaintance: 'Soon

there will not be a single paper paying inadequately for serious stories & poems.' On 13 December 1939, he wrote to his old friend the poet and airman Vernon Watkins: 'What do I want for Christmas? Oh, that's nice. I want a war-escaper – a sort of ladder, I think, attached to a balloon, – or a portable ivory tower or a new plush womb to escape back into.'

When success eluded him, he blamed the war, for he hated its distraction. 'All I want is time to write poems,' he wrote in September 1939, and the notion that war could prompt poetry seems never to have occurred to him. Thomas quarantined his poetry from the war with an almost maniacal intensity. He longed to flee to America, and told the American poet Kenneth Patchen on 27 November 1939:

> To call me an escapist is no insult. As far as a country at war goes, I'm hermetic. I want, among other things, to go on working, and I know I can work only in peace; I can't do a Brooke in a trench; mud shells shit and glory will make me swear & vomit, not write. So I want to be where there still is peace, peace at least from the propagating of hate, the enforcements of military discipline, the extraordinarily rapid growth of dictatorship all around me, and the immediate prospect of a noble death ha ha or ignoble detention ho ho as an antisocial shirker and – worse still – unrepentant individualist.

Recalling both the name and vocabulary of the famous Great War poets, Thomas turns against their example: his vision of poetry is founded on perfect isolation from the actual matters of combat.

As he told it, the Second World War was a personal affront to the poetic career and day-to-day life of Dylan Thomas. On V-J Day, which marked victory over Japan and the end to all hostilities, he wrote to his wife Caitlin to complain about the crowds at the festivities. 'London was terrible, terrible, terrible,' he reported, and

they caused him to miss his train. Not long after the end of the war, the poet and anthologist Oscar Williams sent Thomas two copies of a collection of poems he had recently assembled. Called simply *War Poetry*, the anthology for obvious reasons excludes Thomas's own verse, and there must have been some trace of a provocation hidden in Williams's apparently generous gift of two copies to the most famous anti-war poet in Britain. 'Thank you for the two copies: one for each eye,' replied Thomas, and went on to restate his earlier position:

> War can't produce poetry, only poets can, and war can't produce poets either because they bring themselves up in such a way that this outward bang bang of men against men is something they have passed a long time ago on their poems' way towards peace. A poet writing a poem is at peace with everything except words, which are eternal actions; only in the lulls between the warring work on words can he be at war with men.

Poetry, he insists, is a thing of peacetime; or rather, a war of its own, apart from the wars of men. Thomas continues: 'I think capital-letter War can only in subject matter affect poetry. Violence and suffering are all the time, & it does not matter how you are brought up against them.'

'It does not matter how you are brought up against them': perhaps Dylan Thomas tried so hard to separate himself from the war because he was a poet already at war. His most famous poems give again and again in rolling phrases the war of the heart, of man against nature, of the emotions locked in terrible struggle against the natural world. Here, for example, are the opening lines of one of his best-known early poems:

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.

And here, written less than a year before his death, is one of the most often quoted exhortations in English poetry:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Forcing, raging, blasting, burning: these are his central metaphors, and they are also the language of an emotional vision of warfare. Long before the German invasion of Poland, Thomas had militarized man's engagement with the world.

This fierce attention to the inner life at the expense of the daily modern world gives Thomas's poetry its resonance. He cares for things being the same, same as they ever were, not things being different, as they are now. As his biographer Paul Ferris notes: 'He was an answer to the machine; his poems contain few images from the twentieth century.' But to see Thomas solely as the chronicler of the raging inner life is to obscure an extraordinary cluster of war poems amongst his works. The mechanisms of modern war did ultimately matter to Thomas, and he was brought up against them in the autumn of 1940 and the spring of 1941. Dylan Thomas avoided participation in combat but he could not avoid the German bombing of England, and in time he wrote three haunting poems about the particular grief of aerial bombardment.

From September 1940, the bombs crept into Thomas's fears and dreams. On the night of 1 September, Thomas's hometown of Swansea was bombed. A week later, the Blitz began in London, and Thomas was in town for a meeting at the BBC. As he wrote to Vernon Watkins:

> I can't imagine Gower bombed. High explosives at Pennard. Flaming onions over Pwlldn. And Union Street ashen. This is all too near. I had to go to London last week to see about a BBC job, &

> left at the beginning of the big Saturday raid. The Hyde Park Guns were booming. Guns on the top of Selfridges. A 'plane brought down in Tottenham Court Road. White-faced taxis still trembling through the streets, though, & buses going, & even people being shaved.

Swansea sits on the Gower Peninsula; Pennard is an area to the west of the city, famous for its golf course, and Union Street is a shopping strip. Thomas names the landmarks under the bombs, and goes on:

> Are you frightened these nights? When I wake up out of burning birdman dreams – they were frying aviators one night in a huge frying pan: it sounds whimsical now, it was appalling then – and hear the sound of bombs & gunfire only a little way away, I'm so relieved I could laugh or cry.

When Thomas wrote this letter, during the first days of the Blitz, he was visiting friends in Gloucestershire, but could hear the planes a hundred miles away over London. Later, in February 1941, he and Caitlin were staying with his parents in Bishopston just outside Swansea, and after one night of particularly severe air raids he went into the city to see the damage. 'Our Swansea is dead,' he said to the friend who accompanied him on the tour of the rubble.

These experiences took time to filter through to verse. In the summer of 1941, when he was working in London, Thomas wrote a strange sonnet about a victim of the Blitz, 'Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred'. It begins with the explosion, but the bomb itself is curiously unmentioned:

> When the morning was waking over the war
> He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died,
> The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide,

> He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone
> And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor.

In dying, the old man becomes one with his surroundings: like the slaughtered floor and the funeral grains, his experience is shared by all at the scene. 'The craters of his eyes grew springshoots and fire,' continues Thomas, as the modern machinery of planes and bombs are tied into a natural cycle of an old man dying. What interests Thomas in death as in life is the collapse of personal variation, the moment at which particularity ceases and all things become the same.

The force of Thomas's poetry arises from its dirge-like dignity. Repetitive, running on, alliterative, everything he writes sounds a little like liturgy, and in the spring of 1944 he returned to bombing and wrote a poem that may best be read as a requiem mass for the air raid dead. 'Ceremony after a Fire Raid' begins with the same metamorphosis of individual mourning into an abstract ceremonial pattern. 'Myselves,' he writes:

> The grievers
> Grieve
> Among the street burned to tireless death
> A child of a few hours.

The newborn child is both one death and many, just as the single mourning poet is also all who will grieve, and he goes on to instruct how the service should proceed:

> Begin
> With singing
> Sing
> Darkness kindled back into beginning.

This is a collective form of grief, where 'by the fire-dwarfed / Street we chant the flying sea / In the body bereft.'

The final stanza of the poem offers a vision of a burning city filled with 'luminous cathedrals' and 'the weathercocks' molten mouths', where the poet sees:

> the dead clock burning the hour
> Over the urn of sabbaths
> Over the whirling ditch of daybreak
> Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire
> And the golden pavements laid in requiems.

The burning cities and the falling bombs haunted Dylan Thomas, and he described the scenes as an almost biblical landscape of violent transformation. But they are for him above all cycles rather than moments: the circling sun, and burning clocks, and the requiems they sing are all repetitions. The poet's duty, here in the slum of fire, is to find a vocabulary proper to mark these elements of an ongoing saga of life and death, of birth and resurrection, of destruction and the cycles of verse.

In his most famous poem of the Second World War, written at New Quay in Wales in early 1945, Thomas returns once more to the question of how to mark those killed in the air raids. The title of the poem, 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', is deceptive, for the poem does offer a version of mourning. Faced with 'The majesty and burning of the child's death,' Thomas writes:

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
> With any further
> Elegy of innocence and youth.

He will not sing, that is, in the elegiac mode: he will not detail this child, nor her specific passing. But the poem itself is an act of

mourning for all who have been lost, and this one little girl – he notes that she is a girl, though gives no other detail of character – here carries a larger pattern of remembrance. In long lovely lines, he goes on:

> Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
> Robed in the long friends,
> The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
> Secret by the unmourning water
> Of the riding Thames.

This one death will be as many, and the poem speaks in the voice of a gravestone inscription: here lies one from London. 'After the first death, there is no other,' it ends. All other deaths are as quotations of this one, repetitions of the single experience, and the duty of the poet is to mark the death but to keep the secret of the passing.

This is what it means, then, to refuse to mourn. It does not mean a refusal to mark. It is a diffuse kind of passion, one that creeps like the sand of the dunes at Huisduinen over the other graves too, one that can encompass both James Eric Swift and J. J. Anderton, Kidd and Stevenson, a nameless Canadian. The war graves of northern Holland stand secret by the unmourning water of the North Sea, and in their long rows they tell us that mourning must be a collective act, not for one alone but for other men lost in the flames.

On our last day in Holland, in another identical cemetery, something occurs to my father. We buy a couple of plants – *Alchemilla mollis*, known as ladies' mantle, which is hardy, my father says, and will probably survive the summer without too much attention – and drive back to Bergen op Zoom. There is no trowel at the cemetery, so my father digs with his hands while I carry water from the tap in the small plastic orange juice bottles we had bought for lunch in the car. The cemetery is empty as before, but we pause to check

that other graves have this same plant – a sign, perhaps, that it will live here – and drive to Brussels.

The rules for the behaviour of mourners at Commonwealth War Graves are clearly stated on their website. 'If you are visiting a cemetery or memorial we are delighted for you to lay a floral tribute,' they instruct: 'We ask that this is not permanent; it will be removed from the grave by our staff once it has faded.' We went to Holland and we didn't find him, exactly. But we were cheating a little, as we already knew where he was buried. I'm not sure that we wanted to find him, in the end; I think we probably wanted to invent him for ourselves. I think I wanted to tell a story, and he was available.