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Opening Extract from...

Bereft

Written by Chris Womersley

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Lines from p.103 are from the poem 'Darkness' by Lord Byron
Lines from p.145 are from *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley

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I

The troopship *Argyllshire* carved through the ocean. Sergeant Quinn Walker leaned against one of the worn rails along its deck. He listened to the endless hiss of the waves and watched the glitter and trick of sunlight upon the water. A cigarette burned down to its soggy nub between his fingers, the tips of which were as yellow as ivory piano keys. Not only was his hair now flecked with grey, but also his eyes, as if the ash of the passing years were silting down through his innards, turning perhaps even his liver and heart to soot. Although only twenty-six years old, he had grown up in unexpected ways. No longer did he resemble the boy he had once been. He had become furtive, alert to the turning of the world, a man perpetually on the verge of departure.

A pod of dolphins threaded out and back beneath the water, spinning and hanging suspended for a second before vanishing again under the waves. Birds bathed in the rainbows that materialised in the spray. Quinn found it impossible to watch the ocean's surface without imagining what might be swimming in the dark universe below: whales and sharks; fish that barked; lizards that prowled the coral beds; the mighty leviathan. All the

creatures known and unknown.

From a tunic pocket he withdrew his Military Medal, a bravery medal awarded for actions undertaken on a night he now could not even recall, even though it was little more than two years ago. Perhaps the spit of gunfire, the wailing of men, the taste of dirt in his mouth, but these sensations could be from any night of the war. Of all the things in his life of which he had reason to be ashamed, he was perhaps most ashamed of this medal. *Conspicuous gallantry*, the citation had read, *and devotion to duty. He has shown great courage in rescuing men buried in galleries and has performed consistent good work throughout*. The coin and attached ribbon fit snugly in his palm. What a bloody joke. He cared not a jot for his own safety: that was not the same as bravery.

When he was certain no one was watching, he drew back his arm and flung the medal out over the waves. He was disappointed to lose sight of the medal immediately; he had hoped for the cruel satisfaction of seeing it trace a shining arc, glimmer in the sunlight and vanish with a minuscule plop into the vast ocean. No matter. The thing was gone.

All around him men drew on their English cigarettes, forming wraiths of smoke that were whisked away by the wind. A line of soldiers rested on the rails and stared at the horizon. Those soldiers who had become afraid of open spaces stayed below deck with the sick and the lame, snug within their hammocks, more secure in the warm, smoky brotherhood of men.

Quinn kept to himself, always shy in the company of others. At the start of the war they had nicknamed him Meek — Meek Walker — but as the war dragged on, and more and more men had become remote and wary, such shyness as his was no longer deemed worthy of comment, was barely even noticed.

Sometimes blokes clambered onto the railing and launched themselves into the air, arms flailing as they fell to the water, perhaps a glistening head before it went under for the final time, never to be seen again. A dark, wide mouth inhaling a last breath, lured by the enchantress Morgan le Fay into her palace beneath the waves. Quinn imagined these men descending into her dim and peaceful realm with seaweed about their necks, garlanded with bubbles, free of the earth and its mortal woes.

Those on deck shook their heads at the waste and reminded each other they had been warned before they set sail that the ship would not turn around to rescue anyone who fell overboard. There was no point in even mentioning it. *Imagine surviving all that we survived and then going like that? When so many men were lost? Bloody crazy.*

Quinn understood it, however, this lure of the ocean. To be so engulfed. Absolutely. Yes.

At North Head quarantine station, he stood with the rest to be hosed down. After everything, the sight of naked men still shocked him. Their unguarded selves were delicate, unwieldy creatures beneath their uniforms. Skin so thin and pale. Hidden away. Armless, many of them; legless; boys and men spattered with burn marks and coin-shaped scars. No wonder so many millions of them died: men are nothing when thrown into the machine of history.

Their luggage was fumigated and afterwards they were forced to inhale a solution of zinc sulphate to clear their lungs and prevent the influenza from taking hold.

The accommodations at North Head were lousy and there

were angry grumblings among the men. It was much less than returning soldiers deserved, they said. No way to treat war heroes. After all they had done for their country, for the Empire. Some whispered of escape, of setting out into the scrub. The mood turned mutinous, and it wasn't long before the men, all one thousand of them, marched through the gate down to the wharf at Manly where they took the steamer to Fort Macquarie. Quinn had imagined a cat's cradle of streamers; mothers and sisters and wives, a doughy press of women welcoming home their men, or what was left of them.

But there was no such fanfare. The soldiers were a rabble, ill-shod and half-broken, tubercular, mutilated and blind. Many hobbled with crutches, on bandaged legs. They all wore the gauze masks issued to prevent the spread of the epidemic. They marched as best they could from the quay through Sydney towards the cricket ground where they had been promised better accommodation. A crowd gathered about George Street and Oxford Street to have a gander. Trams were held up in the crush. Boys dashed out to touch the soldiers' legs or shake their hands. Young women smiled nervously and twittered to each other. Quinn shrugged past them all with his kitbag, acutely aware of the disappointment on the faces of those older women who hoped he might be someone else, a husband or brother or son — or a man at least known to them. He was glad of the mask that covered his ruined jaw; unlikely as it was, he had no wish to be recognised.

Quinn concentrated on the ground immediately ahead of him until he could bear it no more. He recalled some of the stories his mother had read to him and decided the Greeks should have been grateful the gods prevented their homecoming

after the sack of Troy; the return from war was surely worse than the leaving.

In the excitement it was easy to peel out of formation, slip between the crowds and disappear into the city's quiet and muggy streets. His heart shivered in his chest. His stomach cramped. In a dank Darlinghurst alley, he coughed and doubled over, hands on knees. Sweat jewelled on his forehead. A frightful sensation, tearing at his innards. He had been gassed during the war, and the residual malevolent fogs still hovered about the hollow parts of his body, settling here and there when he slept or was otherwise still. Although not as badly injured as many, there was no doubt the gas had damaged him, particularly his throat, which sometimes felt like, say, a violin with a frayed string that fluttered useless and annoying, tangling in those strings still tuned tight and in working order.

A marmalade cat eyed him dispassionately before setting about licking its paw. Quinn thought of oranges. All through the war in France he had craved one. Sometimes he woke at night with his lips dry as carpet, having dreamed of cramming a sliced quarter into his mouth, as he had done when he was a boy. On occasion he became obsessed and was unable to pass a farmer's cart or street stall without trying to locate one. The fruit assumed mythical, magical dimensions, as if it might cure him of not only his thirst, but of all that ailed him: his homesickness, his guilt, his sorrow.

Some months ago, in France, he glimpsed one in a girl's basket as she passed a truck in which he was sitting. She was only about ten, but she possessed the manner of someone much older, the way all children did in those long years. She had the basket wedged on her hip and paused to talk with a shawl-

draped crone before hoisting her load and entering a tabac. In the truck's cold and smoky cabin, Quinn watched her and prepared to follow — had even tensed his body to do so — when the burly sergeant returned with the orders and rumbled the engine into life. *Righto, let's go get some of them Germans, eh?*

A THIN, HARRIED DOCTOR working at a special table at Central Station examined Quinn and issued him with a certificate declaring him free of influenza. A nurse from the Red Cross pressed a paper bag full of cheese sandwiches on him and warned him the state borders were closed because of the epidemic. He boarded a train and travelled across the Blue Mountains, dozing in the heat, then down onto the brown pelt of the western plains beyond.

The train was packed with returning soldiers — a few silent and withdrawn, most of them smoking and carousing — but civilians as well. There was an elegant woman with her arm around her young son's shoulders, a hare-lipped farmer who reeked of beer, a boy with milky eyes, and a pair of girls who each wore red ribbons cinched tightly about their left wrists — one of the latest superstitious protections against the epidemic. The carriages were warm, the air thick with cigarette smoke. Quinn stood in the narrow passageway and stared out the window. He had removed his influenza mask to better enjoy the breeze upon his face. The countryside was dun-coloured and exhausted. A cluster of men at the far end of the passageway gossiped about the Wynne murder, in which a well-known Bathurst doctor had shot his philandering wife and fled the previous week. A sickly baby whimpered.

Like a bizarre spider unaccustomed to its surfeit of appendages, four drunken soldiers lurched arm in arm down the passage. Each was singing a different song with ramshackle gusto, and one of them appealed for the others to start again so they might sing in time, but they paid him no heed. One tripped and cut himself on a metal window lock. The soldier held up his bleeding hand. 'I'm wounded,' he wailed in mock despair as his friends laughed and clapped him on the back, grins splashed across their foolish faces. 'Send me home, Captain. Oh, please send me home.'

It was held that those who had seen death — been in accidents or war or the like — were sometimes filled with an unnatural exuberance and verve for life in the wake of their survival. If anyone were acquainted with death, it was these soldiers returning from war in Europe; Quinn recalled the atmosphere in London among those yet to be demobbed as one of barely restrained mayhem. Disbelief and guilt were a hazardous concoction. Men took risks riding on the backs of carriages or diving into the Thames on frost-bitten mornings, all whoops and crazed laughter, teeth flashing, a bottle in one hand and a slouch hat in the other. Quinn experienced none of their elation; he feared that, for him, the worst was yet to come.

He found himself stealing glimpses of the hare-lipped farmer for most of the journey, incredulous that this man had been going about his business at the same time that Quinn was thousands of miles away up to his chest in mud and blood and wreckage. The farmer smiled back ruefully, as if he imagined they shared something on account of their misshapen faces.

A young man in a smart suit and a boater approached Quinn, offered him a cigarette — a Havelock, gladly accepted — and

struck up a lazy conversation. The stranger smelled of menthol and cloves, and carried a white handkerchief with which he periodically dabbed his shining upper lip. He introduced himself as Mark Westbury. The chap was unsmiling but cordial, and attentive to the little Quinn told him of his time at war. Quinn was not inclined to idle conversation at the best of times, and found it difficult to hear over the clatter of the train and the general hubbub.

'And where did you serve, Sergeant … *Walker*, is it?'

Quinn started. 'How did you know my name?'

Mr Westbury indicated the name tag on Quinn's tunic. Of course.

The train rounded a bend. In the adjacent compartment a package wrapped in brown paper fell from the luggage rack. 'France, mainly,' Quinn said when he had steadied himself. 'Turkey as well.'

Mr Westbury studied Quinn. Now they had introduced themselves, he felt comfortable enough to stare at Quinn's scar. 'You're lucky,' he said.

Quinn had heard this a dozen times already. At the field hospital in France, again at Harefield Hospital when a wimpled nurse was making the bed next to his after taking away some poor bastard who had died in the night. *You might not fink it now, but you're one of the lucky ones*. Again on the troopship home. People said it to him all the time and were disappointed if he failed to invest his accord with commensurate enthusiasm.

'You're lucky to survive, I mean,' Mr Westbury added. 'Even with the … that scar and everything.'

'Yes,' he said at last. 'I'm lucky.'

Mr Westbury said something Quinn was unable to make out

over the noise of the carriage.

'What?'

'I said: You were *spared*.'

'Yes.'

After an awkward silence, the young man asked where he was going.

'Flint,' Quinn replied.

Mr Westbury nodded, although it was clear he had never heard of the place. Few people had. There was little reason to visit, now that the gold had been mined. Hardly anyone lived there. Not even cartographers bothered with it anymore.

'That's your home, I take it?'

Quinn observed this starched fellow, who had told him he was ineligible for military service on account of an impairment with his vision. He shrugged and drew on his cigarette, which caused a mild coughing fit.

'I suppose it is,' he said when he'd recovered. 'It is where I was born. There is something I need to set right.'

Mr Westbury dabbed impatiently at his forehead with his handkerchief. 'Well, lots of places have gone to wrack and ruin, you know. Lots of places.' It seemed he had lost interest.

Quinn threw down his cigarette and ground it out under his boot heel. A woman and her young daughter indicated they wished to pass, prompting Quinn and his new companion to stand back as far as the cramped space would allow.

They remained silent until the man, who had again been staring at the muddled scar along his jaw, motioned for him to lean in and said, in a tiptoeing voice, 'You should do something about your face. Cover it up, perhaps? Do you have a flu mask? You are frightening the children, you know.'

And Quinn, usually so reserved but seized by the devil, replied, also in a whisper, 'Well, the children have good reason to be frightened.'

At Bathurst he slunk from the station and began walking north-west. He left the town and kept going, at times along the road, at others clambering across plains or ragged outcrops of rocks. The earth was dry and hard under his feet, and the sky — blue and cloudless — yawned overhead, higher and more vast than any skies he had seen elsewhere in the world, a continent unto itself. Hawks circled like dark, watchful stars disentangled from their orbits.

He unpicked his name tag from his tunic and avoided places he might encounter people who could recognise him. The few farmers he saw nodded or waved their hats, glad to welcome home a soldier from the Great War. A family lumbered past with their possessions and five children piled atop a horse-drawn cart. The mouth and nose of each was covered by a gauze mask and they stared away and offered no greeting, obviously terrified of contagion. By and large, people paid him no heed. The sight of people walking alone was not so unusual after a war; there must be entire armies of men returning home, each in a ragged uniform, wandering tiny across the face of the earth. He had a nap beneath cypress trees in the middle of the day and pressed on until it was too dark to continue.

The countryside teemed with animals. Lizards and snakes, rosellas and magpies. At dusk, grey kangaroos bobbed in grassy fields and stood on their hind legs to watch him pass. Rabbits darted at the edges of his vision, and pairs of orange butterflies

flitted about him wherever he walked. And the hum, always the hum, heard even through his murky hearing, of flies and bees.

He was accustomed to walking long distances and made good progress. It was pleasant to feel so free, despite the trappings of war he carried still — his kitbag, the satchel with his gas mask, and his revolver jammed beneath his unbuttoned tunic. He took no bearings but just walked as if his forward motion might unravel the stink of war and all that had happened in the years he'd been away. Mirages trembled along the horizon. He saw massive vessels, a line of elephants, once an entire city with buildings and steeples, some vast metropolis that receded, then receded, then receded every time he drew near.

At the close of each day the sun sank from sight and set the horizon aglow for ten minutes. He camped away from the road and stared into the flames of his fire, his human replacement for the vanished sun. He rationed his sandwiches carefully. He prayed in his strange way, which was more like a sort of querying. At least now, after all these years, he had a sense of why he'd been spared. It was some consolation.

He fell asleep thinking of his sister, Sarah. Even with his eyes closed he knew where he was on the earth, could imagine his exact position as his internal compass swung about to orient him home.