

Beyond

Upon reading the collection of photographs, memoirs, documents and letters of Richard Van Emden's "The Soldier's War: The Great War through Veteran's Eyes".

There it is. The line. Dirt and sky, divided. People and air, divided. Safety and death, separated. I gaze upon it, squinting. If you go cross that line, I'm told, you are no longer *at War*. You are then *in*. *In battle. In War.*

So much is being held by that line, and yet it is simply the place where my compatriot before me decided to stop digging. It is the top of my trench, and the end of my country. Whatever lies beyond is another world.

One day, I will have to shake hands with those of No Man's Land. One day, perhaps, that line will no longer be in front of me, but behind.

But until then, all I can do is wonder, and gaze, and wonder again.

There has been so much talk of borders. I wonder what is between the borders, between my line at the top of my hole, and their line at the top of theirs. That is the first thing to decide.

Perhaps, I wonder, the land wants to belong to people. Perhaps, beyond that line, over the top, the land is miserable, and the plants dead, and the earth grey. Perhaps, if I were to go over the edge, I would step on Earth and it would be as if walking through ash, my boot sinking into death. The ash would flutter, because I would be running, and kicking it into the air, and it would float

behind me like dust in a beam of sunlight, black and white and grey and black, shredded photographs, shrapnel of ghosts.

Maybe, if the earth is dead, you could plunge your hand into it and discover more death, skulls and bones of the ancient and recent. The more I picture it in my mind, the more I see it as a volcanic wasteland, in which lava has ripped through the landscape in a river, dividing countries with a thick, smothering, black paintbrush. What, then, is left? Are puddles in Mo Man's Land steaming with the energy of Earth's fire, or are they cold and stagnant, like the one beneath my feet? Have the rocks been blasted into blackened shadows? Or could they be crystals, jewellery for the victors?

I wonder, I wonder. No one talks of Beyond, just of the enemy, and so I am left with the landscapes of my mind.

There is so much waiting, so much time for fantasies.

Perhaps it is not dead out there. Perhaps a Land of No Man is a happy land.

Beyond could be a territory rejoicing in its freedom from us and our fingertips. The land could be a lush green, in which plants never thirst for sun or rain, in which woodland creatures race through a panoply of spring flowers. Sun, I wonder, could be blessing this unviolated country just as it is sending clouds over France, for it favours this manless greenery, nostalgic for ancient times, before the universe was claimed by people.

What then, of us, the characters who will cross this unpopulated country? Will we, before we meet enemies and traitors, feel blessed to walk on such land, for it has been for the briefest of times unburdened by humanity? Perhaps it is the case that if I was to wander through such idylls I would be happy to meet my death, because any death is simply giving our Earth an inch more of itself.

If that is the case, I wonder whether the air will taste of freshness. I wonder whether I, stepping out into such a Levant, shall look behind me, and see the cracks of the earth like the aftermath of some disaster, and see the smoke of cigarettes and guns waft out of the holes and think, *Thank God, here is a land worth fighting for.*

Sometimes, when I am here, gazing at that ridge, the thought crosses my mind that what lies Beyond could be no mystery. After all, it may be a battlefield like all the others, like Bosworth, like Waterloo.

I remember the battlefields I used to read about as a child, not that long ago. I used to devour those books about war, collecting dust on the shelf. They never depicted the battleground in detail, but I always knew what they looked like nevertheless. So it is my turn now, to picture the warriors; then, perhaps, the image of the battleground will materialise.

I try to imagine it as just a space, an empty canvass. Into it step heroes and warriors, whose swords shine with sunlight or glisten with thundering rain. The evil knight's blade is scraped out of its sheath, while the heroes' sings to be taken into the air. The steeds are loyal, ready to carry their companions into underworlds, even puffing impatiently and baring their teeth. The battlecries ring out as the warriors charge towards one another, their armour rattling with the bounding gallop, and then comes the first blow, a mighty clash as weapon bites weapon, and they are flung to the ground. They dance to their feet, and wheel their blades through the air, hoping to stab at the heart of the opponent.

And where are they, such warriors? At the foot of castles and caves, where lakes and fields and haunted woods meet and growl at each other. More borders, more separations. All of these features could inhabit the world Beyond, or none.

Looking at that line, or placing my ear upon the Earth, I can tell that my dreams are failing, that even my imaginations are not getting a glimpse of No Man's Land. And yet, when all is different,

something must stay the same. I will take my gun, and it will gleam in the sun, or drip in the rain. My equipment will be heavy about me, but it does not matter because I carry with it my country, my past, my armour. My companions and I do not have steeds, but we will run together, through underworlds; indeed we have lived together in one for long enough.

And, when it counts, I will stride into the caverns and lakes, and see the eye of the beast, and raise whatever weapons I have and slay dragons and airplanes, fairies and tanks, knights and Germans.

Days pass, enough for me to envisage entire realms. Still I have not seen the forbidden country. Still it remains hidden, behind that line, that ridge. I have been staring at the roof of my trench for what seems like eternities. Sometimes, earth crumbles down from the edge, but still nothing is revealed; just more sky.

One day, a worm crawls out of the earth of Beyond. I place the nozzle of my rifle to it, and it wraps itself around the end. I bring it close, and whisper to it. *Where have you been? I say. Tell me secrets, you spy. Is it a land of ghosts? Do they roam, and talk to each other, and make bets upon future victories? Is the enemy far off, into the distance, or are we neighbours, resting on the roots of the same tree? Did you come from a knight's apple, or have you been squirming through the skull of a beloved? Do you know anything, or is it the same to you to roam through gardens or gunfire?*

Speak, or I will throw you back where you came. Be thankful, worm, to possess knowledge that men would kill to have for themselves. Be thankful, to see what I can only dream.

Still I wonder. I wonder whether I wake one day, and the war will have ended. I wonder, then, what it would be like to drop my weapons, my helmet, and to scramble up there and set eyes upon the centre of this tug-of-war. Would I laugh if it were just to be a stretch of mud? Would I cry? Would I take off my boots, and feel the mud seep happily through my toes, standing on a patch of Earth freshly abandoned by death and torture- no longer No Man's Land, no longer a disowned country, but *my* country?

Further on, there is another line, of course. After that space, which is no one's, there is another ridge, dividing dirt and sky, and the other side of it is *them*- whoever they are, whatever they look like. They are savages, cruel predators upon this homeland, massacring their way through our world. Or, perhaps, they are men like us, speaking an unknown language.

Some of them, I wonder, must be further from their home than I am from mine. Surely that must weigh on their hearts as some sort of indication of their wrongdoing?

I listen, I listen, but their fire sounds much like ours. I do not know whether thousands lie waiting with their heads just below the roof of the trenches just as I do, or whether there is just a clutch of them, toying with us.

Sometimes I think of them as inhabiting an underground palace, listening to choirs, putting up their feet and playing games. Perhaps their bunks come with tables and ink and quills, and they write to their loved ones about petty things such as their chef's failure to make good *sauerkraut*.

Sometimes I think of them as just like us, as if Beyond is a long mirror. And if that thought ever crosses my dreams, than I wonder what it would be like to finally raise my head over the top, and see my face rising up on the other side.

They say that time goes slowly for the young. For me, it matters not whether I have been here for years or seconds- to wait longer is surely madness. Never, in all the speeches, did they speak of this torture, of being on the border of a world without being able to so much as peek into it, to wait in the pocket of an Earth for so long it is as if our role is simply to populate it. I must see, even for the briefest moment, what lies ahead.

Surely, just having the shortest of glimpses will prepare me more than any drill, or practice, for the day when I finally get the call. Surely, when I will be able to tell the others who haven't seen what lies ahead, they will be grateful, and drink up my words and be able to sleep better than ever before.

Sleep now has become as foreign a concept to me as the land ahead- I am eternally, and never, dreaming. I have been told my whole life that I dream too much- and this is my time to stop. To prevent my mind from building any more castles, or graveyards.

It happens. Once I have made the decision, I find bravery that I did not know resided within me. It is getting dark; they will not see a thing. I scramble up on the soft earth, slipping a little on my boots. There it is. The line, dividing dirt and sky, people and air, safety and danger. I put my fingers over the top, in Beyond. A few short breaths- one, two, three. I drag myself up, just to put my eyes over the surface. I think of it like coming for air.

There is a glimpse, a bare, breathless glimpse. Then, in the hundredth of a moment, in the thousandth of a moment, the dirt about me writhes like there is fish beneath its surface, and there is a bullet in my head, and I wonder no more.