

JONATHAN MEADES POMPEY

'He has done for Portsmouth (Portsmouth, for heaven's sake) what Baudelaire did for Paris, Joyce for Dublin and Paul Bowles for Tangier... One of the very best and most absurdly underrated novels of the nineties.'

STEPHEN FRY

unbound

POMPEY

JONATHAN MEADES

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Three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The first signature is 'Dan', the second is 'Justin', and the third is 'John'.

Dan, Justin and John
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PRAISE FOR *POMPEY*

'If Meades was a racehorse you'd be calling for a steward's enquiry. There's something in his feed which definitely gives him the lot. He's working at terribly high octane ... Meades has taken on a lot of the set pieces of the novel. He's taken on wonderful challenges. He's made Belgium interesting. He's done a fabulous *Heart of Darkness* take on the pygmy hunting in Africa. He's handled a staple of the proletarian novel, which is the abortion scene, which goes through from James Curtis in the '30s to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and he does that beautifully . . . Meades handles the whole sexual side of it like William Burroughs by way of Beryl Cooke'

Iain Sinclair, *Kaleidoscope*

'Disgusting and brilliant . . . Written with relentless energy and rhythm, phrase after phrase of the novel is "highly crafted" . . . the book is less wrought than spewed: a torrent of obsessive, angry, imaginative fireworks. Among the influences on Meades's style are the time-shifting principles of quantum physics, street slang and, with parenthetical page references throughout, literary deconstruction. The prose, constantly preening itself in its own dark mirror, is the author's greatest achievement and should earn Meades justifiable comparison to such modernist novelists as James Joyce and Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Thomas Pynchon and Martin Amis ... While Meades's novel risks imagining the unimaginable and speaking the unspeakable, it is not gratuitously shocking. Meades seems to evoke all of the

disenchantment of recent history with a narrative that withstands the fictional realities of a century which saw the Holocaust and the invention of the bomb. He embraces his own disillusionment refusing to create a single sympathetic character. What is the point of “good taste” in an irreversible, out-of-control, wicked world?’

Paul Spike, *Vogue*

‘With its mutilations, voyeurism, in-jokes, phantasmagoric idiolect and cruel humour, this is a harrowing and quite extraordinary book . . . It is lurid and ingenious . . . but so perverse you could get to love it’

David Profumo, *Daily Telegraph*

‘*Pompey* has a weirdly elegant architectonic to it, a sense of its own shape that is best got at by reading long and fast. And although it may sound cold and cynical, *Pompey*’s dominant mood is rather dreamy, sad and puzzled, a feeling partly created by having Meades himself appear in his narrative as a heartlessly normal suburban middle-class thug . . . Meades is interested in plumbing the mythological depths of lower-class southern English culture: its nouves and its wide-boys, its fleshpots and its gangs, the aspirations and the abjections hidden behind net curtains on pea-souped streets of rotting brick’

Jenny Turner, *Guardian*

‘A vast, deranged epic which demands of its reader furious attention . . . this book won’t be explained: it is as much about pulling and twisting language as anything else (Englishness, grossness, sensation, nostalgia) . . . It demands to be re-read the moment you finish it, if only because much of the first page is only explained by the last. Sometimes the relentless style bewilders and overwhelms, but there is more invention in a single page of *Pompey* than many young British novelists manage in fifty’

Richard Preston, *Harpers and Queen*

‘Any page . . . comes crammed with more freewheeling invention than many writers manage in a lifetime’

Tom Shone, *Sunday Times*

‘As if in some sci-fi story which posits a world where the Boston Tea Party had never taken place, *Pompey* exists entirely in England and speaks an untainted English, or Anglo-Meadelish at least, even when it travels to Europe or Africa. The vernacular is pilfered from every class and condition of Englishman – bless his chops, do his tronc, bint, jankers, a list of sexual euphemisms which could be extracted and published separately as an addendum to Partridge – and every age from the thirties to the fifties, stopping only at that coffee bar period when we started swapping our homespun neologisms for the flashier Yankee versions. In anyone else’s hands a money-spinning revivalist preacher would look across the Atlantic to Jim Bakker or Billy Graham for its influence: only Meades would find it in Max Miller’

John Diamond, *The Times*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Filthy English
Peter Knows What Dick Likes
Incest and Morris Dancing
The Fowler Family Business
Museum Without Walls

FOREWORD

With the publication of *Pompey*, the outrageously talented Jonathan Meades established himself as one of the funniest and truest writers we have. No one understands England better than Meades, its seediness, squalor and stylelessly corrupt hypocrisy, its eccentric wit and scabrous vitality. He has done for Portsmouth (Portsmouth, for heaven's sake) what Baudelaire did for Paris, Joyce for Dublin and Paul Bowles for Tangier, but in a style entirely his own and entirely suited to the hilariously seamy post-war world his novel inhabits. His stunning prose can pun, allude, shock and entertain without ever seeming to cry out for admiration. So I will cry out and admire it. One of the very best and most absurdly underrated novels of the nineties, it should have won a sackful of awards. As Shakespeare so prophetically cried: 'O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, Knew you not Pompey?'

Stephen Fry

INTRODUCTION TO THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

An introduction to the re-publication of a novel with which many will be unfamiliar should seek to achieve two aims. First, it should tell the potential reader why the book is worth reading. Second, it should seek to give a flavour of what the book is about: without giving away the story, or rendering it pointless to persist with it. In relation to the second point, perhaps it helps to give one supporting argument relevant to the first. Even if the plot of *Pompey* were to be revealed here, the book would still demand to be read because of its originality, its attention to truth, its verve, its radicalism and, above all, its author's exhaustive and almost exhausting command of language and metaphor.

Meades himself has several walk-on parts in *Pompey*, in one of which he sodomises a casual female acquaintance at a teenage party. To observe that that is one of the less disgusting features of a frequently distasteful narrative gives you the measure of the book. As the late *News of the World* used to say, all human life is there; and with it, every aspect of that life, however taboo, however extreme in its repellence. But then this is an epic of the South Country, stretching over thirty years (and this is just in its English locations) from Wiltshire to Southampton and finally to the eponymous city itself, Portsmouth, a place brim-full of freaks and monsters and restless social mobility for whom 'dystopian' is an inadequate adjective.

Why read *Pompey*? It is a work of genius. It is one of the outstanding works of English fiction of the last half-century. It is unremittingly disgusting, but unremittingly entertaining. It is cruel in its humour, but accurate in its depictions, whether of character or of atmosphere. It contains penetrating insights into the nature of being, and into the nature of our culture. In the quality of writing and innovativeness of plot and character it is apart from all other novels of the last half-century. It is as well that no serious person measures literary merit by Booker prizes and the like, for if it were so then *Pompey* would have had to win scores of them. It is one of the last truly great novels of the 20th century, and for it not to be better known is perhaps not least because of the way in which it cocks its leg, and then squats, over what passes for literary sensibilities in our culture.

What is *Pompey* about? The list is long. It starts, or so it seems, to be about the dislocation in society in the late 1940s and beyond, when men came back from war changed and broadened by it and in some cases stripped of any sense of morality. It is about the sexual revolution that was forced on the puritanical classes of the post-war era not by the Beatles or the Rolling Stones but by the spread of the lax behaviour of their inferiors (and of their betters). It is ostensibly about the fates of the four children of one man, Guy Vallender, who meets the first of several spectacular deaths endured by various of the characters. Vallender is no ordinary ex-officer trying to re-adjust to civvy street; he is a priapic and promiscuous firework manufacturer.

It is a book about the shortness of life, and of the absurdities inherent in life, be it long or short. Peculiarly, it is also a book about how Meades imagines Aids came out of Africa. Above all *Pompey* is a book about atheism, religion being mocked and derided through the Church of the Best Ever Redemption, founded by a double-amputee retired comedian who killed his wife in a car crash when eight times

over what would become the legal limit, having had rather too many treble scotches for the road in the age before the breathalyser. The death of the comedian's wife is as good an indication as any of how Meades presents life, or rather death, in all its unspeakable glory: the comedian is 'the drunk they cut from the wreck, in a coma, with the inside of his wife's face all down his dinner suit'. One of the commanding aspects of Meades's writing is his almost Dickensian obsession with detail, though Meades, unlike Dickens, uses it to enhance the idea of life as a parody of itself: he goes on to tell us, in relation to the gore-soiled dinner suit, that its wearer 'was a pioneer of the shawl collar look too'.

Meades's genius consists principally in his originality, though he has his antecedents. There is a picaresque flavour to the writing that imitates Sterne or Fielding. There is a deliberate, brick-throwing disregard for convention and restraint that echoes Samuel Butler, not least in Meades's own determination to settle scores with adherents of religion and their questionable ideas. But most of all there is an experimentalism and erudition that smack of Joyce, not just in the dense use of language but in the author's apparently puerile, but in fact equally parodic, insistence on being shocking.

However, life is shocking: the everyday unpleasantnesses and explicitnesses of it only cease to shock us because we become inured to them. We are not, yet inured to them when they are described with such belligerency, frequency and intensity as Meades does in his novel. In general speech, life and thought there remain many taboos; but there are no taboos for Meades. Incest, sodomy, bestiality, anal rape, near-necrophilia, gerontophilia, masturbation, auto-erotic enemas (the cause of one of the more startling demises in the book) and fellatio are but some of the sexual functions freely and carefully depicted. Other bodily functions, notably scatological, occur with inevitability.

Backstreet abortion is vividly described, though with a typically Meadesian twist; one of the most arresting phrases in the book is after a second abortion, when the foetus is said to have committed 'proxy suicide'. However, the avoidance of birth is, by that point, to be viewed as the avoidance of entering into a profoundly dysfunctional family, whose members have little but hatred for each other, and stand in uncertain relations to each other, not least because of Guy Vallender's copulative freedom. Most bodies are vile, their deformities and blemishes recounted with meticulousness, although it is amusing that the book's leading weakling is endowed with a penis of awesome size. Life, like death, among Meades's creations is always extreme. Nothing goes unobserved, and therefore nothing goes unexploited. The climax of the book, in which so many of its themes come together, exemplifies this.

Pompey's thirty-year span examines not so much the lives of its characters, but of a coarse, earthy, unpretentious idea of Englishness. The Belgians may intrude, the Congo may feature, the French secret service and its torturers may get a look-in, but this is a book about England. Had another not already commandeered the title, *Pompey* could just as easily have been called *Scenes from Provincial Life*. They are scenes from a period of social change more rapid and more profound than perhaps at any time in our history.

At times the book harbours a narrative of deliberate obscurity – which becomes one of the many jokes to be played on the reader. Meades cannot resist giving away snippets from the future, and dropping in the odd footnote. For him, these are real people, and this is real life, to be documented as such. It is his achievement that by the time the reader attains the otherwise incredible ending, the events it describes appear all too credible. The writing is heavily adjectival, but these are adjectives the author has minted for himself, rather as Joyce did: 'balloon breasted', 'food-mixed', 'dungsteaming' turn up within the first few

pages. They are necessary to give a fresh picture of ancient, rotting concepts: almost every bodily function imaginable (and some unimaginable), lubriciousness, ugliness, deformity, all the aspects of freakishness that mark out Meades's characterisation, and all the odours and festering sights that create his environment. Yet all this stench and putrescence, literal and metaphorical, are contained in an England all too recognisable, and all too real.

That reality hinges as much on the author's attention to detail as upon anything else. Meades's own loves and obsessions litter the book: his knowledge of food and architecture, and his appreciation of the minutiae of contemporary culture, notably in the branding of products, whose everyday banality he uses to ratchet up the sense of portentous absurdity in the lives of his creations. But in keeping with a work that focuses upon the rudiments of life, the food theme that courses through the book is one predominantly of offal; the architecture is of modern cheap and nasty (though he does single out at one point the Crittall window, circa 1937, which was neither); and the brands popular and disposable.

Meades's cast of characters ooze sleaze, venality, depravity, repellence, ignorance and absurdity. But he seems to be saying – not least about himself, hence his own intrusions into the narrative – that if we all look ourselves with sufficient thoughtfulness and care, we too have those failings and vices. There is little keeping most of us from tripping over the line from dignity into absurdity. It is the *News of the World* all over again. He prefaces his own work with the imprecation: 'After using this book please wash your hands.' But all he has done is confront us with ourselves.

Simon Heffer

I KNOW MORE THAN ANYONE ABOUT THE FIREWORK I
children, about their antic lives and special deaths.

The night is shrill with colour. It's bright enough to blind. Rubies change to white cascades. The man I saw becomes a bird. The man I saw becomes a bird. All the sky is filled with fountains. My head falls back so far it hurts. Their little mittened hands clutch mine. They gasp to see the flowers go dancing. Loud saltpetre fills our noses. Mineral light beats out the black. Darkness is defeated. That's when I remember that I know more than anyone about Bonny and Donald Tod (as they were from that day forward, for better surely and for richer, yes, till death did) and about Poor Eddie and his fearful gift, and about Jean-Marie's troubles with his work permit, and about Mrs Butt – all about her and her Daph and her Ray and her Ray's big boy Jonjon, who had double the muscles too. And there's nothing I can't tell you about the Old Man Dod who used to work in the print and whose hearing got so sharp with blindness. I can tell you about the teeth and diet of a six-year-old crocodile, and about the way that cancer does its stuff, how it moves like fires beneath the ground. I'll make you feel the noise of a skull being broken. I'll make you listen to the motor of obsession. I'll make you listen to another motor, the one that screeched at night in the dunes to free the wheels –

there's the gun beside him, there's the panic in his eyes, there's his forehead slapping against the steering wheel (they found blood on it: AO-1, not much, but enough). I can show you the flaw in the stone in the ring on a stiff finger and you'll never want to eat another soggy biscuit the rest of your days. You'll never take the kiddies to see the fleet or to picnic in a wood. Here's a palm that bleeds to order. Here's another that bleeds because the bolt went through the line of life and two arteries and a delta of tendons and through the median nerve and right into the wood.

I know these people. I lived around them. I've felt their breath and read their brains.

'Snooping?' Bonny's mother used to ask when she found me gaping into the fridge.

You bet.

I've looked on this lot as I did on the lactic profusion and dead animals that littered the racks of that humming coffin all those years ago: I can still inventory the stacked oblongs from the Commonwealth and the fatty fists of beef and the brand-new plastic tubs whose lids were the colour of surgical rubber, what I liked, what I sought when I sidled off to that kitchen was the icy balm, the cold gust when the light came on. There was the excitement. It was the defiance of summer and the certain eternity of electric midwinter that pulled me to it. The chill was all artifice, sure. But it stabbed for real. Did I think thus then? I didn't. I didn't think of the plays that could be made on *frozen*. I didn't know the milestones to eternity were quarterly bills - and bankruptcy was a distant state of disgrace, akin to tuberculosis and divorce.

After using this book please wash your hands. Thank you.

IT WAS ME THAT PUSHED POOR EDDIE IN THE RIVER.

The Grieving Widow gasped and started from the prone willow, so ripping her tartan trews (McGuinness, yellow and black). I remember my father's glare in the mini-second before he waded in after the floundering boy: I was for it. I remember the ripple on the water, the weed billowing like the hair of a drowned Venusian, the weeping leaves that stroked the stream, the moored boat and the rod with a gyroscopic reel. A gingham Thermos spilt, the rug turned moss green, a thistle spiked my thigh, my mother held a sandwich as though it was a Schick. John Constable had stood just here thirteen decades before and now Poor Eddie was in The Grieving Widow's arms, soaking her, sobbing, trembling, his hair stuck down with temporary brilliantine. That was the end of that picnic.

We rowed round the point and up the dark stream away from the spire past the jungle and Old Morphill's jazz-modern palace and the great cedars and Douglas pines in the garden of The Garth (which Bonny's parents didn't buy till years later, when Saxon-Smith the dentist disgraced himself and Grace Saxon-Smith moved the family away). Poor Eddie sat swaddled between his mother and mine in the stern and I cowered in the bow; my father's arms had

never looked so big, he feathered the oars with giant's ire, the rowlocks squeaked, his tattersall back glowered at me.

He moored the boat and had me drag the oars, one at a time, between the barren apple trees to the brick shed which had once been Twose's abattoir and whose stalls now housed the apiarist's tackle of Twose's deaf son, a reluctant butcher with a snail in his ear. I tripped over the slimy tiled duct down which the blood of countless beasts had flowed to the river, to the green pool where pike with massive memories still waited for the viscera of kine. The Grieving Widow led the ambulatory blanket to the Morris Minor whose muddied seats I would be blamed for; I hung back among the hives and lichenous trees of the orchard till my mother took me by the hand. No one spoke as the car jostled with the furrows; I sat in the back, in disgrace. I knew that what I had done would have been bad enough in any circumstances, no matter whom I had caused to ruffle the surface.

But with Eddie: it was a wicked thing to do to Poor Eddie, to say such things, to hurt him that way. Sure, he *did* invite it, all his life he invited it. His terrible passivity made ogres of us all, he was quarry.

Beside the willow where his mother sat an arterial leet, which fed the water meadows, joined the river. Mr Thick, the octogenarian drowner who worked the baby sluices, had properly succumbed to his trade disease (arthritis) and the channels were grown over with reeds. Poor Eddie gingered behind me as I stalked along the muddy bottom. I stopped where a rotten fence stake lay across my path; I had seen a viper here the previous autumn. It was in slough, it was the milky pink of antibiotic syrup. I kicked the reeds with my colander sandals and told Eddie that though it had been three feet long and broad as a cricket bat he was not to be scared because me, I had a father who would slay it (my very words) should it chase us. Poor Eddie's marmalade eyes seeped, he clambered from the leet and knock-kneed

beside it towards his mother. When I caught up with him he was on the bank where the water-rats had sculpted model cliffs; the river was immediately impervious to scrutiny, it was all surface, its bed was invisible, John Constable coloured it shiny tar and it hadn't faded.

'There are', I said, tugging his aertex sleeve, 'crocodiles in there, lots.'

He cried mutely, he must have marvelled at the abomination of the world. And then he was in a different plane to me, quitting the solidity of kingcups and cowpats for an horizontal foxtrot through the elements.

It was the splash, the splashes, the collisions of water with water that made her gasp, that made The Child Bride (not yet The Grieving Widow, not quite) gasp and start, and the cries too, those screeches – the last sound she heard the man she loved make was an appalling one, in all his life he'd never uttered such a noise. Death isn't like what goes before it, it brings along its own props, makes you do things dignity forbade, we're all cowards at the last – the screams were those of a man telling the devil he'd made a pact, that he'd sacrifice the poor little boy, anything, to be spared. The Child Bride (just about The Grieving Widow – *now*) hauled herself from the back seat of the shooting-brake where she'd been napping and, with one foot shoed and with one shoe in her hand, ran between trees with scaley, leprous bark, obscene blooms and leaves whose fallen spines pierced her instep. She ran by the abandoned termitaries where her son and his father had stood for her Leica five minutes before, for the last photograph – l. to r.: Eddie shying from the sun; his father, dressy in bush hat, dashing kerchief, martial shirt, jodhpurs, leather and canvas boots (one, filled still with limb, was netted two miles downstream); his father's left arm gripping a bargain knobkerrie; the termitary which was a ruined gothic asylum tower. She ran past the site of this unrepeatable tableau. She stumbled and hobbled towards the great river. And

there was Eddie. She called to him, swooped in embrace, and he turned from the sparkling caramel water which was also a grave and told her: 'Daddy gone in the river with a big fish.'

Now Eddie was not yet four years old or literate, but he'd been to the zoo, he owned a book of colour plates and avuncular prose called *Your Reptiles*, his sight was fine, his view had been unobscured. He knew what he had seen, he knew that a fourteen-foot-long crocodile (*Crocodylus cataphractus*, doubtless) is not a big fish; equally he knew he had to protect his mother from that terrible reality and thus discovered the comforting power of euphemism; and he was protecting himself too – an unspoken beast is a beast already in transit to oblivion. Shock possesses this apparatus of diversionary solace, shock is intoxicating, it invades your head, it's a benevolent trunk (you can o.g.), it's a sensory tourniquet (you can tie it too tight). The trouble is, it doesn't last; when its anaesthesia dissipates the hurt begins, the unbandaged wound begins to fester. The strength of shock is its aptness: it is a phenomenal reaction to a phenomenal circumstance. When it disappeared and you, Eddie, were returned to a mundane state, the memory of that circumstance refused to abate with it – the enemy was still there, and you were unprotected.

In the month following his father's death Eddie curled round his mother at night, cosseted her and hugged her as he had on the river bank. He stroked her while she keened, he clutched the hand that hadn't the cork-tip viced in it, he kissed her marvellous neck and her cheeks – which powder and light made like fruit, which tears made like brawn. He stood with her beside the aircraft when the box that brought back the bit was loaded. He nodded gravely when she cursed the man at the embassy whose desk had been so big it was like the incomprehensible continent itself. When she wept and wiped the pink moustache from the glass with her

ever kneading fingers Eddie offered his hanky, said that he'd take care of her and of the little sister they had always promised him.

'He's quite the little man,' said a porky, floral-printed woman who boarded the plane at Lagos. The Grieving Widow believed, wrongly, that she was mocking Eddie and ignored her while she listed the variety artistes she knew (Sid Field, The Fabulous Dunstables, Ray Butt, Luton And Who?), but Eddie revelled in the compliment and enjoyed listening to her because her friends had exotic names and cars with rumble-seats. When, though, he sensed his mother's distaste for his new companion he feigned sleep. He was that loyal; shock gave him strength. And the funeral protracted the shock: ritual heightens grief, makes it momentous, enforces concentration on its object who is yet gone for so short a time that it is unimaginable that he will not come back – the conviction of death's certainty is founded on prolonged exposure to absence rather than on the presence of the meat in the coffin or on bearing witness to the agent (physical or chemical, alien or quisling, sudden or chronic) of that immeasurable change. Thus it wasn't for a while that Poor Eddie properly connected his father's infinite truancy (and the lack of stairs in the house where his mother took him to live) to what he had seen under the equatorial sun that ruddied afternoon.

In the morning they had, once again, driven through the mad streets of Léopoldville from the Hotel Troozlaan (one bed for three) to the house behind the white wall on rue C. Lemaire where flies lived in the moist, crateral sores on beggars' limbs and where soft-boned children bit on roots protruding from the unmade pavement. Once again Eddie had sat with his mother on the terrace of the house (cubistic, piebald – dazzling bianco and acacia shade) while the balloon-breasted servant brought them coffee and fruit pulp. And for the third day running Eddie had, whenever he turned towards the house, seen his father and the man who

spoke funny English together in the room whose ceiling fan made slow parabolas: mostly the man sat on the edge of a teak table with verisimilar elephantine legs, mostly his father moved. He made scrolls in the muggy air with his hands, sometimes his hands were palmate claws, sometimes he pushed them across his huge forehead which Eddie thought was a sort of cheese. One time when Eddie looked his father was enacting a domestic calvary, his arms stretched along the window, the seat of his jodhpurs corrugated on the sill. Then he beat a pretend-drum and revolved to look out to the terrace: Eddie had never seen his face like that before, Eddie was frightened and delighted by his father's magical metamorphosis into pirate or giant or wicked gypsy. Eddie sensed (though he can hardly have articulated it to himself) that the intense actuality of panto and picture-books might shift into the everyday crawl – when you're that little time is a basket case in a broken chair, it moves with quadriplegia.

The man scratched his face which was made of roast, cracked pigskin and decorated with extra moustaches above his eyes, then he put a hand on Eddie's father's shoulder. Oh, Eddie was proud of the way his father scowled, of the way he spat words (jagged speech-bubble, exclamation marks), of the way he removed the chummy hand. You don't hear anything, the puzzling panes with massive boughs and a version of the sky on them preclude hearing, this is all mute-show. But there is sound in this scene: beside the interminable loop of hoopoes, grey parrots, green monkeys etc., there is the violin of the man's son. This, too, is repetitious.

In an upstairs room, behind a window meshed against insects, he is, once more, playing Dvorak's Humoresque; his tone, his phrasing, the length of pause between reprises are invariable, as they were yesterday and the day before. Now and then he walks onto the sun roof beside his room and stares unsmilingly down at The Child Bride and Poor Eddie,

all the while gripping the metal deckrails with hands too large for a boy of six years, too meaty for a violinist, so sprawlingly knuckled they promise willed asphyxia, paroxysmal ill, the fistic law. His eyes abet all this, they'll look indulgently on the wrong wrought by the hands. They track Eddie as he runs to greet his father who picks him up and holds him to his trunk; the little boy is soon astride his father's shoulders, complicating the silhouette. Then, before he knows it, they are back in the car. This time they have not bidden the man who spoke funny English goodbye, nor the boy. And this time they do not drive back to the hotel.

'Herman's Cross,' says Eddie's poor father, regretfully.

Poor Eddie's father drove to his death through the eastern suburbs of Léopoldville. Street goats fled nimbly from the shooting-brake's path, men in skirts on bicycles teetered as it passed. He held his hand on the horn and it cried like a fractious animal. Eddie sat on the rear seat gauging their progress into disorder: the houses got smaller; their white walls got dirtier; the walls stopped trying to be white; the houses stopped trying to be houses and became hutches, cardboard kennels, machines for subsisting in; a black face pressed itself to the window – it owned no teeth and had grey pus for lips; the king of Belgium's face was printed on a woman's bottom; Mr Macadam who lived near Bristol zoo and had visited every road before Eddie had not come here; Eddie felt car sick. And he was worried by the loudness of his father's voice and the way his father said the same things over and again: 'loose wallah [or loose Walloon] . . . morals of a pig'. Eddie assumed that morals were contiguous with skin. Another thing his father repeated was 'every last penny'. Also: 'no ruddy redress . . . end up in the damned slammer . . . you know what the Frogs say about them . . . over a barrel . . .'

The Child Bride raced herself at smoking, chain-lighting Craven A in a serial Dutch fuck while the vehicle did jarring vaults from one furrow to the next. When Eddie's father

wasn't shouting he was hissing oaths and mocking roadside women with enamel bowls and plaited mats: he responded to Eddie's complaint of car sickness with the phrase 'you wincey little driveller'. He accelerated and punched an insect. Eddie endured his oesophagal torture, the ball of socks in his gullet which jumped and distended as the hills became a switchback.

There was the river, there, across it, was Brazzaville with its sinuous attic of smoke. At Kallina Point Eddie's father stopped the shooting-brake and walked towards the cliff with a bottle of *alcool blanc*. The Child Bride was crying; she turned to Eddie and told him to go to his father. They looked down on the lake-like pool named after Stanley who first saw it the year Custer got his. Eddie's father stared at the bottle's label (gothic script and belfry), he didn't drink from it. He scraped the umber ground to reveal earth that was flowerpot red: 'Like Devon Eddie.' Eddie knew Devon was a sort of celestial chocolate that he was going to eat lots of when rationing ended; now, having seen the colour of the stuff, he wasn't so sure. He was even less sure when his father told him he had seen a calf born in Devon when he was the age Eddie was now. Eddie accepted that the mysteries of life and confectionery might be but one. Now, why was his father standing so still, so close to the edge of the cliff, what could he see in the river by coma-gaping at it? (River: pale chocolate and eight knots, cliff: 50 feet above it). And did the half gill of viscous liquor he distractedly and painfully swigged help him see? Unequivocal no - the label was a lie, it was a distillation of palms flavoured with mango skin, it promoted optical neuritis, coagulation of the tissues, melancholy, red noses in black people: it was good for camp-stoves and wounds. Eddie's father drank more; then he turned and took his little boy by the hand.

The next place they stopped was different because The Child Bride had quit weeping, just. She got out with the

smaller of the two Leicas Eddie's father had given her the day after they met, and he followed her through the passenger door to avoid the cutting rushes he had parked against – they swayed like a chorus of hissing sibyls. The happy family snaps: perm eight from mother, father, son, tree, termitary, bargain knobkerrie; it's The Child Bride who holds the bottle; in the one that Eddie took his parents are at a mad angle – his father's falling from the frame, his mother is begrutten but still pretty. Then the film is expended, she puts the camera in its case and lobs the bottle to him: 'Shut eye – 't'll make me beautiful for you again Poppet.' She moued and went back to the shooting-brake.

On the river bank Eddie wondered at his father's thirst and capacity for stillness (only his right arm and his thyroid cartilage moved). He liked the look of a thin isthmus stretching into the river, it was on his scale. The sun overachieved that day; shadows were black, made pygmies of everything, made pygmies. In the river floated black bodies, logs maybe – Eddie peered and the sandbanks, which rose like the dorsal deformations of drowned beasts, hurt his eyes. Everything seemed derived from animals: the trees were totemic ruins of animals; their super-terrestrial roots were skeletal claws dug for ever into the earth; their trunks were trunks – thick skinned proboscides frozen for all time; all the puny bushes wanted to be trees but couldn't, so cowered. And from one to another swung monkeys, gymnastic prostitutes, screeching because they wanted to be men but couldn't: animals have much to resent, and they get their own back – check the bottom of your shoes, the joint of heel and instep. That's nothing; when men conspire with them in that revenge (for no matter what end) men cede primacy.

Eddie's father knew that, knew this was sure death. He threw the empty bottle in the river and beckoned Eddie and hugged him, squatting.

'I love you Eddie,' he said, and fell back on his bottom. He bothered to dust the seat of his jodhpurs; he wasn't good at getting to his feet, he was a temporary quadruped when he told the bemused boy: 'Never trust a Belgian Eddie, never ever trust . . .' He tried to become a man again but his hooves failed him. 'Trusht' would be a phonetic misrepresentation, in that last stage he achieved emphatic consonantal precision. Then his elbows let him down. He shrugged and made a face that was all gums, and crawled towards the knobkerrie; he didn't turn to see Poor Eddie, who thought this was a game, crawling after him till his knees itched. The knobkerrie became a prosthesis for the already dying man. It just about supported him on his terminal stagger - wood alcohol, sun-glare and sweat turned that drip down the sandy isthmus (which was also a pirate's plank) into a babel for his eyes.

He conceived a formula for computing the number of grains of sand in the entire isthmus but forgot it before he could apply it.

He saw grains of sand the names of whose colours he knew he knew.

He forgot whether he was very hot or very cold. He saw a spur-winged plover grubbing on a little mudberg and his eyes told him the mudberg moved when the bird screeched, flew, became a mote. Then there was no mudberg. He was shagged by the strength he used, by the weakness that gave him strength, by his fear of the future that would never be the past, by his fear of the water that would quash oxygen, turn him eternally inert, fill him up till he overflowed. The finger of sand narrowed, water lapped up close by him either side, his short shadow rippled. He was with the river now, nearly. He took one last swing with the knobkerrie, at a pile of rotting branches and sun-stewed leaves and bark shards and something white.

Well, that did it. The mudberg showed its teeth and its terrifying grin with many folds too many like an evil

Irishman, it slapped him with its tail, the knobkerrie skittled to nowhere, he screamed before the first teeth got him – he could not believe it.

He saw the churned water getting red, as he bucked in frozen time he saw the machine that had come to keep him from himself, he saw its awful eye (just one) and teeth like amber arrowheads and the special tooth which had already severed his right leg. Up and down he went, in and out the water – he might have died of drowning after all; he might have died of shock (just the sight of such a lizard from hell is enough to make my spine sing). This one smelled of rancid musk, its skin was crazed, cratered scale, self-distending scale.

This one dismembered Eddy's father without ever letting go of him – it had many mouths; the water crashed in cataract. There was pink spray, that's the pink you see when you die – you give your blood to the world now you no longer need it.

In less than a minute Poor Eddie's father was dead; in his time, in real time it took the beast (387 kg; two full grown impala, a black child and part of a sewing machine already in its stomach) forty-one years to do for him – each of those years was meant to crawl in front of him. Something ruptured his kidneys and spleen during the seventeenth year, and his cerebral cortex snapped in the mid thirties – so he never reached the end, never saw himself as he was in that last instant, mouth to mouth (the second mouth is a deadly weapon). Now he's in the full foul reptile. Now Eddie hears his mother behind him. Poor Eddie's poor father was shaken into sobriety before he died.

IF YOU WALK DOWN BRITFORD LANE . . .

No, walk with me down Britford Lane. Can you remember the whaler by the Sea Scouts' hut and the echoes under New Bridge and the slimy island water rats? (They're just rats, really.) And what about the sleek MGs in Furlong's showroom: they were all polish and clean oil – smell it still? Can you? Can you remember? Did you follow me the way I came, past Arms's corner shop and Sid the butcher's and through the car park of The Swan (you've got gravel in your shoes)? Arms is dead and his daft son too, both proof that shock-frizz hair does not mean genius; Sid must be 80, if he's still with us, bless his chops, bless his kidneys, he knew his Vernon's – he cried when Duncan Edwards died, was most upset anyway; The Swan is The Grey Fisher now (and that's a steak you're eating). With me? Were you with me then? There was a house whose thatch was poured honey, there was another in whose garden sat an old man with purple sporades on his pate watching tits and finches peck at rinds, at bricks of lard – he was pining for his wife and he never felt the cold.

It was always cold down Britford Lane. There was always sleet down there; the morse babble of heaven's waste blew across the edge of town. The horses wore blankets all the year, they stood forlorn among henges of hay. The fields