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SF PERUSALS

Pink Mist

by Owen Sheers

SAMUEL FRENCH

samuelfrench.co.uk

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Cover image: *Pink Mist* at Bristol Old Vic. Photo by Mark Douet.

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This text was correct at the time of print and may differ to what is presented on stage.

Pink Mist was first performed at Bristol Old Vic on 1st July 2015 with the following cast:

Lisa	**Erin Doherty**
Arthur	**Phil Dunster**
Taff	**Peter Edwards**
Gwen	**Rebecca Hamilton**
Sarah	**Zara Ramm**
Hads	**Alex Stedman**

This production was presented at the Bush Theatre from 21st January – 13th February 2016 and at Bristol Old Vic from 16th February – 5th March 2016 with the following cast:

Arthur	**Phil Dunster**
Taff	**Peter Edwards**
Gwen	**Rebecca Hamilton**
Lisa	**Rebecca Killick**
Sarah	**Zara Ramm**
Hads	**Alex Stedman**

Writer	**Owen Sheers**
Directors	**John Retallack & George Mann**
Designer	**Emma Cains**
Lighting Designer	**Peter Harrison**
Composer & Sound Designer	**Jon Nicholls**
Dialect Coach	**Gary Owston**
Production Manager	**Jason Barnes**
Stage Manager	**Owen Thomas**
ASM	**Heather Cryan/Suzanne Snook**
Producer	**Catherine Morgenstern**

Set built by Fred Stacey, Andrew Scrivens and Andrew Tinklin at the Bristol Old Vic Scenic Workshop. Set painting by Julian Adams. Trailer filmed and edited by Jack Offord. Rehearsal and production photography by Mark Douet.

George Mann is Associate Director at Bristol Old Vic (supported by the Quercus Trust and in partnership with the National Theatre).

With thanks to Ken Hames, Darren Swift, Lyndon Chatting-Walters, Sam Jones, Tim Dee at BBC Bristol, Caroline Steele, Tasha Savidge, Emma Keaveney-Roys, Steve King at Faber, Chris Terrill and all at Uppercut Films, Ben Hardstaff at Promptside, Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, the NT Studio, the Royal British Legion and the producers of The Two Worlds of Charlie F. for making the initial interviews behind the writing of this production possible.

The touring production of Pink Mist opened at Bristol Old Vic on 25th January 2017, presented by Nick Williams Productions.

Taff	**Peter Edwards**
Gwen	**Rebecca Hamilton**
Lisa	**Rebecca Killick**
Arthur	**Dan Krikler**
Sarah	**Zara Ramm**
Hads	**Alex Stedman**
Writer	**Owen Sheers**
Directors	**John Retallack & George Mann**
Designer	**Emma Cains**
Lighting Designer	**Peter Harrison**
Composer & Sound Designer	**Jon Nicholls**
Producer	**Nick Williams**
Assistant Producer	**Emma Cameron**
Marketing Manager	**Kate Walker**
Press Representative	**David Burns** david@davidburnspr.com 07789 754 089
Production Manager & Relighter	**Tom Kitney**
Stage Manager	**Tom Gamble**
Assistant Stage Manager	**Megan Doherty**

TOUR SCHEDULE

Bristol Old Vic

Monday 23 – Saturday 28 January 2017

Aberystwyth Arts Centre

Tuesday 31 January & Wednesday 1 February 2017

Sherman Theatre, Cardiff

Thursday 2 – Saturday 4 February 2017

New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich

Tuesday 7 - Thursday 9 February 2017

Oxford Playhouse

Tuesday 14 – Saturday 18 February 2017

Traverse Theatre

Thursday 23 – Saturday 25 February 2017

Devonshire Park Theatre, Eastbourne

Tuesday 7 – Saturday 11 March 2017

Pontio, Bangor

Tuesday 14 March 2017

Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea

Friday 17 & Saturday 18 March 2017

Theatre Royal Winchester

Monday 20 & Tuesday 21 March 2017

Birmingham Rep

Thursday 23 – Saturday 25 March 2017

West Yorkshire Playhouse

Tuesday 28 March – Saturday 1 April 2017

CAST

Peter Edwards

Peter graduated from Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in 2015 and was highly commended for the 2015 Peter O'Toole Prize.

Theatre includes: *The Crucible, Pink Mist* (Bristol Old Vic).

Credits whilst training include: *The Boy on the Swing, The Grand Gesture, The Merchant of Venice, Alice in Wonderland, Sauce for the Goose* (West Country Tour), *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, Speaking in Tongues*.

Rebecca Hamilton

Rebecca graduated from Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in 2015 and was the winner of the BBC Carleton Hobbs Bursary Award 2015 and highly commended for the 2015 Peter O'Toole Prize.

Theatre includes: *Pink Mist* (Bristol Old Vic); *City Of Strangers* (Tron Theatre); *Romeo and Juliet* (Lemontree Theatre); *Victoria and Albert's Christmas Carol* (V&A).

Rebecca has also been a member of the BBC Radio Drama Company appearing in numerous productions for BBC Radio 4.

Rebecca Killick

Rebecca trained at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama.

Theatre includes: Maid Marion in *Robin Hood* (The Egg); Dr Nelson in *Light* (Theatre Ad Infinitum); Wendy in *Peter Pan* (New Vic/Oxford Playhouse); Soprano in *The*

Last Mermaid (Wales Millennium Centre); Lisa in *Pink Mist* (Bristol Old Vic/ Bush); Performer/Puppeteer in *One Snowy Night* (Norden Farm Productions); Catherine Denham in *One Minute* (Delirium); Emilie/Baby Joey/ Annie Gilbert in *War Horse* (National Theatre); Moth in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Meyer Theatre); Patty Symcox in *Grease*, Elvira in *Blithe Spirit* (Turner Auditorium); Brink in *When Do We Start Fighting?* (Courtyard Theatre); Psychiatrist in *4.48 Psychosis* (Royal Academy of Music); Madge Syers in *Swifter, Higher, Stronger* (The Roundhouse); Dunyasha in *The Cherry Orchard*, Clara in *A Vampire Story* (Richard Burton Theatre Co.).

Film includes: Jemima in *Fugue State* (FireParty Films); Fiona in short film *Vertical Drop* (Sci-Fi 48 Hour Film Festival).

Radio includes: Buddug in *The Minister* (BBC Radio 4).

Dan Krikler

Dan has just graduated from Central School of Speech and Drama. His credits whilst training include The Archbishop in *The Heresy of Love* and Dean in *A Serious Case of the Fuckits* by Anna Jordan. He also features in ITV's *The Halcyon*. *Pink Mist* marks Dan's professional debut in a play.

Zara Ramm

Zara trained at LAMDA.

Theatre includes: *Snow Queen, Life Raft, Pink Mist, Swallows and Amazons, World Cup Final 1966, Treasure Island, Beasts and Beauties, Pheadra's Love* (Bristol Old Vic); *Alice in Wonderland* (The Watermill); *My Mother Said I Never Should* (The Theatre, Chipping Norton); *The Last Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor* (Tobacco Factory

Theatres); *The Nutcracker* (Bath Theatre Royal/The Egg); *Into the West* (Travelling Light Theatre Co); *Skellig* (Birmingham Stage Company); *Macbeth* (Northcott); Othello (Ludlow); *The Tempest* (Arts Threshold); *A Chorus of Disapproval* (Colchester Mercury); *Saigon Rose: The Case of Rebellious Susan* (The Orange Tree Theatre); *Cinderella, Dick Whittington, Sleeping Beauty* (Cheltenham Everyman); *State of Grace* (Reckless Kettle Theatre); *Dalston Songs* (Helen Chadwick Song Theatre).

Film includes: *The Merchant of Venice, Crazy Hands*.

TV includes: *Grandpa in My Pocket* (five series); *Teachers, Being Human, Afterlife 2, Passer By, Doctors, The Bill, Dead Gorgeous, Casualty*.

Zara has also recorded numerous audio books and is a regular reader of audio books for the BBC and Chatter Box Audio.

Alex Stedman

Alex graduated from ALRA in 2012.

Theatre includes: *Layla's Room* (Theatre Centre); *24 Hour Plays* (Theatre Royal Bath); *Primary Playmaker* (Oxford Playhouse) *Pink Mist* (Bristol Old Vic); *Honest* (Theatre West, Alma Tavern); *Boom* (Bush Theatre); *Do You Speak British* (Camden People's Theatre); *Little Pieces of Gold* (Southwark Playhouse).

TV includes: *Skins, Casualty*.

He is also a writer and has had his work performed at Theatre503 and at the Theatre Royal Plymouth as part of the Plymouth Fringe Festival.

CREATIVE TEAM

Owen Sheers
Writer

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright. He has published two poetry collections, *The Blue Book* and *Skirrid Hill* which won a Somerset Maugham Award. His debut prose work *The Dust Diaries*, a non-fiction narrative set in Zimbabwe won the Welsh Book of the Year 2005. His first novel, *Resistance* has been translated into eleven languages and adapted into a film. His latest novel, *I Saw A Man*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Prix Femina Etranger in France.

Owen's writing for theatre includes National Theatre of Wales' 72 hour site-specific production in Port Talbot, *The Passion*; a play created with wounded service personnel, *The Two Worlds of Charlie F.*, which toured the UK and Canada and won the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award, and NTW's *Mametz*. He has collaborated with composers on two oratorios, *The Water Diviner's Tale* and *A Violence of Gifts*. His verse drama *Pink Mist* was commissioned by BBC Radio 4 and won the Hay Festival Poetry Medal and the Wales Book of the Year 2014. The stage premiere of *Pink Mist*, produced by Bristol Old Vic, was a 2015 top ten theatre choice in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. *The Green Hollow*, his film poem to mark the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster was broadcast on the BBC in October 2016.'

A recipient of the St David's Award for Culture in 2016, he has been Artist in Residence for the Welsh Rugby Union, Writer in Residence at The Wordsworth Trust and a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library. He is currently Professor in Creativity at Swansea University.

John Retallack
Director

John is an Associate Artist at Bristol Old Vic and was the theatre's Associate Director from 2010-2013. Since 2013, he has been Tutor in Writing for Performance at Ruskin College, Oxford. From 2000-2010, he was the founding director of Company of Angels, which produces new and experimental work for young audiences. John was formerly artistic director of Oxford Stage Company (1989–1999) and was the founding director of Actors Touring Company (ATC) (1977–1985). His directing work has been awarded a number of prizes, including two coveted SWET awards, and he has toured and worked in many countries including Europe, India, Japan and America.

John's own plays for theatre are translated into several languages and published by Oberon and Methuen. He is currently under commission from The Unicorn Theatre to write a play about the Calais migrant camps and he is also developing a sequel to his 2001 play *Hannah and Hanna* for UK Arts International to be produced in January 2018.

George Mann
Director

George Mann is Associate Director at Bristol Old Vic, and Co-Artistic Director of Theatre Ad Infinitum.

For Bristol Old Vic, credits include associate director for *The Crucible* and movement director for *Sleeping Beauty*, alongside co-direction on the original production of *Pink Mist*.

In 2007 he founded the multi-award winning company, Theatre Ad Infinitum, with Co-Artistic Director, Nir Paldi. Highlights include *Odyssey* – co-writer, co-deviser, performer: a sell-out hit that continues to tour the world, George received The Stage Best Solo Performer Award

in 2009 for his performance directed by Nir. *Translunar Paradise* – director, writer, co-deviser, and performer: a sell-out at Barbican as part of the London International Mime Festival (LIMF) 2012, which picked up nine awards and toured the globe for four years. *Light* – director, writer, co-deviser, performer of live vocals: met with critical acclaim, it London Premiered and sold out at Barbican as part of LIMF 2015 subsequently returning to London for two sell-out runs at Battersea Arts Centre in 2016.

In December 2014, George won the Quercus Trust Award becoming Associate Director at Bristol Old Vic in partnership with National Theatre; he continues his role at Ad Infinitum part time.

Emma Cains
Designer

Emma trained at Nottingham Trent, and has worked as a set and costume designer for productions throughout the UK since graduating in 2001.

For Bristol Old Vic, Emma has worked as costume co-designer for *The Crucible*; designer for *Pink Mist, Short Fuses, Brave, Two*; costume designer for *Dido & Aeneas* (Bristol Proms); revival designer for *Swallows and Amazons*; costume supervisor for *Sleeping Beauty* and *World Cup Final 1966*. Other costume work includes: *The Little Mermaid, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Life and Times of Fanny Hill.*

Other designs include: *Macbeth* (RNT Education); *Star of Wonder* (Theatre in the Quarter); *Engineers Blue* (Brassworks Theatre); *A Laughing Matter* (Alma Tavern); *His Dark Materials, Mr Benn, The Best Christmas Present, Great Expectations, Cymbeline, Davy Jones Locker, Dickens and the Great Operatic Disaster, Jane Eyre, Lord of the Flies, Sweeney Todd, Twelfth Night,*

The Voyage of Lost Dreams (Nuffield Theatre); *Sprout, Walking Out, Chaser* (Proteus Theatre); *Seize the Day* (Hijinx Theatre); *Cold Comfort Farm* (Nottingham Playhouse); *Not Now Bernard, The Railway Children, The Drawer Boy* (New Perspective Theatre Co); *Bollywood Baraat* (Art Asia/City Eye Films).

Emma has also worked in film and television, and has guest lectured and lead workshops in set design and costume for the stage.

Peter Harrison
Lighting Designer

Peter trained at RADA.

His recent Lighting Designs include: *Britten in Brooklyn* (Wiltons Music Hall), *Pink Mist* (Bristol Old Vic, Bush Theatre), *In Nocentes*, and *Home Turf* (Sadlers Wells), *Bucket List* (Theatre Ad Infinitum), *Alfie White: Space Explorer* (Tall Stories), *Run* (Vault Festival), *Marsha – A Girl Who Does Bad Things* (Arcola Theatre), and *The Twentieth Century Way* (Jermyn Street Theatre).

Other Lighting Design credits include: *Much do About Nothing* (Ludlow Festival), *The Ballad of the Burning Star*, and *Translunar Paradise* (Theatre Ad Infinitum), *Jerry's Girls* (St. James Theatre), *Orestes* (Shared Experience), *The Doubtful Guest* (Hoipolloi), *Wuthering Heights* (Tamasha Theatre Company), *Once We Were Mothers* (Orange Tree, Richmond), and numerous pantomimes for First Family and Evolution Productions.

His Opera credits include *Paul Bunyan* (Welsh National Youth Opera), *Orpheus in the Underworld* (Royal College of Music), *Carmen* (Hampstead Garden Opera), and as an Associate, *Written on Skin* (Festival d'Aix en Provence / Royal Opera House).

Other work as an Associate Lighting Designer includes *Collaborators*, and *As You Like It* (National Theatre), *Made in Dagenham* (Adelphi Theatre), *I Can't Sing* (Palladium), and *The Commitments* (Palace Theatre, London).

Jon Nicholls
Composer & Sound Designer

Jon studied composition at the London College of Music and electrocaoustic music at Dartington. Music / sound scores for theatre include *Hamlet* (RSC); *Spring Storm*, *Beyond The Horizon* and *The Holy Rosenbergs* (National Theatre); *Bakersfield Mist* (Duchess); *Good Canary* (Rose, dir. John Malkovich) *Yerma*, *Idomeneus* (Gate); *Bracken Moor*, *Mermaid* (Shared Experience); *Richard III* (West Yorkshire Playhouse); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Sheffield Crucible); *The Duchess Of Malfi* (Nottingham Playhouse); *The Norman Conquests* (Liverpool Playhouse); *The Mother* (Tricycle / Bath Theatre Royal); *Things We Do For Love* (Bath Theatre Royal / national tour) and many other productions with theatres including Northampton Royal & Derngate, Northern Stage, Bath Theatre Royal Ustinov Studio, Birmingham Rep, Theatr Clwyd, Derby Playhouse & Salisbury Playhouse.

Screen work: scores for numerous documentaries for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky and Al Jazeera and over 30 short films.

He has also created music / sound designs for over 20 BBC radio dramas, including the original Radio 4 adaptation of *Pink Mist*.

www.jonnicholls.com

Bristol Old Vic is the oldest continuously-working theatre in the UK.

Its mission is to create pioneering twenty-first century theatre in partnership with the people of Bristol; inspired by the history and magical design of the most beautiful playhouse in the country.

Bristol Old Vic is led by artists who see the world with distinctive clarity and whose ability to articulate what they see allows us to understand and engage with our world afresh. The company's programme includes original production, artist development and outreach; its work connecting on a local, national and international level.

In 2016, Bristol Old Vic marked its 250th birthday, celebrating with a season of work from the theatre's history as well as its future. Work also began on the final phase of the building's capital development, which will deliver a new foyer and studio theatre in 2018 designed by Stirling Prize winning architects Haworth Tompkins.

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Dedication

This tour is dedicated to the memory of
Gareth Crabbe, 1977–2016.

Friend, father and soldier.

Combat Stress
The Veterans' Mental Health Charity
24-hr helpline 0800 138 1619
www.combatstress.org.uk

Author's Note

Pink Mist is a play that grew through ideas of voice. It began – without me knowing – in the voices of recently wounded service personnel and their families who I interviewed as part of my research for *The Two Worlds of Charlie F.*, a rehabilitation project in which many of those interviewees also performed in the final production. Although not verbatim theatre per se, because of Charlie F.'s dual purpose it was important the stories of the characters on stage closely echoed those of the soldiers in the cast. Which is why, when Tim Dee of BBC Bristol approached me about writing a play for radio, I decided to revisit those interviews and the territory of young soldiers returning from conflict.

Why that revisiting? Because of voice again: voices and stories still unheard in the material I'd gathered, especially from the women in the soldiers' lives. But also because I wanted to find a new voice; to discover a dramatic dialect, fueled by that original material, that would enable my invented characters to move beyond the interviews from which they were born, while still remaining within tonal calling distance of their essence.

Because this new play would be written for that medium of voice, the radio, in reaching for an authentic register I soon found myself drawn towards a form of verse drama – a series of rhythmically driven dramatic monologues underpinned by internal and line end rhyme and half-rhyme. At the time of the first draft this choice was very much instinctive. There was, I discovered, a restrained energy in a heightened speech inherited from everyday language that simply felt true to the experiences I was trying to render. But since that first writing, in watching *Pink Mist* shift from radio to page to stage, I've come to realise the play's musicality – a marrying of reportage with lyricism – doesn't just hit an authentic vocal note, but is also deeply necessary to its communicative effect.

Pink Mist is a play that breaks the cardinal dramatic rule of 'show don't tell'. None of its characters inhabit their stories in the moment. Rather, apart from the occasional interjection of dialogue, each of them tells their story, reporting back from the other side of the crucible with a hurt wisdom at odds with their youth or limited experience.

It's this retrospective 'telling' that helps the play achieve what I hope is a simultaneous sense of the contemporary and the ancient. The subject matter of *Pink Mist* is undeniably modern, and yet the essence of the stories of Arthur, Hads and Taff and the women in their lives is also tragically ancient – conflict's exploitation of youth; the struggle to return from an environment of violence to a landscape of the domestic; the loss of friends and love to the currents of nations and politics. It is this timeless quality, I believe, that is harnessed in the characters' acts of telling rather than showing their stories. A blending of memory, description and retrospective knowledge that strikes an almost atavistic note, taking us back to when stories were first told for survival, knowledge and belonging.

Pure telling, however, is rarely dramatically engaging and this is where the lyrical note of *Pink Mist* is vital. In acting as a counterpoint not just to the traumatic content of the play, but also to the dominant flow of told stories. For it is, I hope, in the poetry of their speeches that the characters in *Pink Mist* 'show' us, as well as tell us, their experiences – through imagery, rhythm and patterned echo, and by excavating their emotional trauma not through the dramatic immediacy of action, but via the deeper, subterranean channels of spoken music.

At a recent reading I gave of *Pink Mist* a member of the audience had to be escorted from the venue, hustled out as I continued reading from the stage. He was later brought back in to see the rest of the performance. His name was Mick, and he was ex-British Special Forces.

Afterwards he apologised for the disturbance he'd caused, explaining that what I'd been reading had triggered a flashback, sending him, momentarily, back to his days in service. When I asked him which part of the play had had this effect it wasn't a description of the Blue on Blue that wounds Taff, or the I.E.D that takes Hads' legs away or the vision of men on fire suffered by Arthur, but rather a moment from part four when Arthur describes '[a] tightening down of the pride and the bond... a deepening of where you belong.'

I mention this because a play is often somewhat protean for its creator. Over time its centre shifts, its weights of emphasis and concern slip. I set out to write a play about fragmentation – about the divisive shards war drives between people. And I did. But in watching *Pink Mist* go out into the world I've realised it's also a play about coming together. About how, for some young men, violent conflict promises to fulfill a series of psychological, economic and emotional hungers left unsatisfied by civilian society. An urgency to be involved, to be part of something important, to have a sense of identity, to care and be cared for and, most significantly perhaps, to belong. This, from what I can tell, is as true of some Jihadists as it is of young boys joining the military – the sense that a comradeship born of shared suffering will, somehow, complete them.

In the wake of this realisation, it's this question I hope audiences might take away from a performance of *Pink Mist*. How might we satisfy these hungers at home, within our societies, rather than away from them engaged in violence? How can we make the stories of Arthur, Hads and Taff begin to feel of a time, rather than timeless? Perhaps we can't, but that's no reason not to try, and for part of that trying to be the telling of their stories not via the anonymising narratives of politics and the media, but through the nuance and human detail of theatre.

Owen Sheers

GLOSSARY

Ally Irregular kit

Bluey Military airmail letter

Bootneck Military slang for the Royal Marines, possibly derived from the eighteenth-century practice of Marines cutting a strip of leather from their boots to wear around their necks to prevent sailors cutting their throats while guarding officers on board British sailing ships

Brize Royal Air Force Station Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

CamelBak Personal hydration system

Corp Corporal

Face furniture Facial hair

FOB Forward Operating Base

Griz To work through pain

Headley Court Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Surrey, England

Hellfire An air-to-surface missile developed primarily for anti-armour use

Herrick Codename for all British operations in Afghanistan since 2002

Hydrapods Apache helicopter delivery system for Hydra rockets

ICOM Integrated communications or unsecured walkie-talkie transmissions

I.E.D. Improvised Explosive Device

ISO container Intermodal or freight container

Jäger Bomb A bomb shot drink originally mixed by dropping a shot of Jägermeister into a glass of beer, but in recent years often more popular with Red Bull or other energy drinks

JTAC Joint Terminal Attack Controller

Lumi Illumination mortar

Medivac Medical evacuation

N.V.Gs Night-vision goggles

OPTAG Operational Training and Advisory Group

Painen Bristol colloquialism, to be in pain

Pitchen Bristol slang for settling snow

R.P. G Rocket Propelled Grenade

Sangar A semi-permanent fortified position or watchtower, possibly derived from the Persian slang for 'stone'

Terry British army slang for the Taliban

The Thekla An ex-cargo ship, now used as a nightclub, moored in the Mud Dock area of Bristol's Floating Harbour

The Tunnels Underground music venue in Bristol

WIMIK Weapons Mount Installation Kit, a stripped-down 'Wolf' Land Rover fitted with weapons and used as reconnaissance and close-fire support vehicles

‘Gwyr a aeth Gatraeth gan wawr,
Dygymyrrws eu hoed eu hanianawr’

‘Men went to Catterick with the dawn,
Their ardours shortened their lives’

Y Gododdin, c. 7th century

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR – 20/21 years old.

TAFF – 20/21 years old. Originally Welsh, moved to Bristol as a child.

HADS –20/21 years old.

GWEN – 20/21 years old. Arthur's girlfriend.

LISA – 20/21 years old. Taff's wife.

SARAH – Early 40's. Hads' mother.

1. After Before

The sound of wind on a high hill.

ARTHUR Three boys went to Catterick.
It was January,
snow pitchen on the Severn,
turning the brown mud white,
fishermen blowing on their fingerless gloves,
the current pulling their fishing lines tight.
That's how it was the morning when
the three of us did what boys always have
And left our homes for war.

Cos that's what we did, for sure,
make no mistake.
Not going someplace but leaving somewhere.
Getting out, moving on, away from here.
The three of us – Hads, Taff and me,
boarding the train that day,
a suitcase each and a couple of cans,
nervous drags when we changed at Darlington,
those fags going down
quicker than a cider in summer.

Three boys, going to Catterick for basic.

New recruits, crows they called us,
the beastings and learnings and drills all ahead of us.
But already there.
Three boys. Yeah,
we might have thought ourselves men,
but we weren't, not yet, not then.
Just three friends who'd once linked arms at school
when I was nine, Hads was seven and Taff just eight.
Touring the yard, a chain of three, chanting like fools,
Who wants to play war?
Who wants to play war?

Jump cut to ten years later and the answer was us,
we did.
The game became our way you see –
out, on, off. So yeah, we did.
Three boys, like I said, not men, leaving for Catterick.
Friend us on Facebook and you'll soon see
how quick our profile shots scroll back
from battledress to uniform,
from webbing to sports bag,
from ration pack to lunch box,
from out there to back here.

But we're not scrolling back, not yet anyway.
So three boys then, waiting for the bus at Darlington.
Smoke and winter breaths in the air,
eyeing the other lads, as pale and edgy as us.
None of them looked up to much,
but then neither did we.

None of us looked like squaddies or riflemen.
But it was all there, inside us, waiting to happen.
We didn't know it but we were already history.
And history's what we've become.
Not the kind that's recorded or sung, perhaps,
but history still. Our own, histories of one.

And look how far we've come. Full circle.
Back where we left from – Bristol.
Bonfire night, and all of us hiding like dogs
from the whizz-bangs, the bright and sparkly fun.

From up here I can see it all.
The rockets going up from Clevedon,
dropping their lights like lumies,
then soft popping ones, rising then falling
down in the city on George the Fifth Fields.
A crowd of orange faces round the fire and the guy,
burning.
Burning.

Can't go there. Or there. So better stay here.
Up on Dundry Hill, under the transmitter.
Under the clear night sky,
the last of the planes coming in to land.
Stars coming out. House windows turning on.
Street lights.
Always a light in the dark.
Even for Hads down there in the Shire,
sitting on his mum's sofa,

trousers rolled, curtains drawn,
cast in the aquarium light of the screen
as he plays Operation Afghan
to drown out the sound
of the kids on the street mucking around
with bangers and whistles, or anything else
that might make him jump, start or shit hisself.
Look at him, scoring the points, dropping them down,
reloading his mag.
Taking the role, tonight, of a Navy SEAL,
doing on that sofa what we all did, once, for real.

Where's Taff?
Not in the West, that's for sure.
Not in the Shire or out Severn Beach
where I used to live.
Not with Lisa either, or with Tom his five-year-old kid.
No, they'll be out Clevedon, or down on the fields,
taking part in the family fun.
But not Taff.

He's deep in the centre, taking cover,
mashing hisself on dubstep in the Tunnels,
dancing alone in the crowd,
feeling the bass vibrate in his ribs,
dropping down pills to mix with his meds.

He's painen, I can tell.
But there's no way he'll surface tonight.
Not with those rockets and fireworks

and all them kids oohing and ahhing,
and him, wanting to duck at every one,
go firm, get on the buckle.
No, Taff'll see the night through down there
deep in the Tunnels, filling his ears
with Forsaken, Headhunter and Pinch.
He knows he can't risk them, the rockets or the drink.
That if he lets 'em, they'll both take a mile off him,
never an inch.

So how'd we get here then?
How'd we close this circle so fast?
If you'll listen I'll tell you.
Cos it was me what got us boarding that train,
what got us leaving not going.
Yeah, it was me who said three boys
should go to Catterick,
with snow pitchen on the Severn,
fishermen blowing on their fingerless gloves.
My idea, my plan, to link our arms again,
to go on a tour.
To answer the chant of our school days with *us,*
us, we want to play war.

So let's talk about before,
about why I chose the rank and file.
It was January, like I said, 2008,
and I'd been thinking about it for a while.
Every time I came down Colston Avenue
I'd stop at the Army Information Centre,

pause at its window, read the ads,
the jobs, what they said you could do –
JTAC, Infantry, Driver,
Cook, Intelligence, Engineer.
Raise your sights the brochure said.
And one night, I did.

We'd been out on the piss and were going for a kebab
when some scutler of Hads' stopped in her tracks,
bent double and flashing her tramp-stamp,
chucked up her guts.
While we waited for her and her mates,
I read that line again –
Raise your sights.
When I did, I saw my own face,
my ghosted head, right where the picture
of a soldier's was,
so now his beret, his uniform, his whole rig was on me,
and I was him.

There were other ghosts too, reflected in that glass,
but they were from my present, not my future or my past.
A Friday-night crowd mashed on cider and pills,
blowing their packets on a night of forgetting,
of pulling and shots.
An ambulance, paramedics.
A drifting litter of boxes and cans,
girls more flesh than dress.
And I didn't want any of it.

The same big night in the same small town,
the Friday carrot at the end of the stick.
I wanted something else – him.
The man looking back at me,
the one with the uniform, the gun.
The one going somewhere, getting something done.

The next day I walked.
I was shacked up with Gwen in St Paul's back then
so I told her I'd be back for lunch, then left,
early morning.

GWEN But you didn't come back did you?
That was the day I lost you. I see that now.
I should have held on to you,
pulled you back into bed.
If only I could've seen inside your head.

ARTHUR But you can't, can you, babe?

That's a private place,
and right then, I didn't need you, I needed space.
But I did come back. I did.

GWEN No you didn't. Not Arthur anyhow.
Some other bloke, perhaps. But not my man.
You was always leaving, always,
from that day on.
Where did you go anyway?

ARTHUR Out to the bridge, at first.

GWEN What, to –?

ARTHUR – No! I had you. And Mum.
I was going the other way. I was looking for a life,

not to take one.

And anyway, I'd never do it there.

GWEN Why? Too common for you?

ARTHUR No. Just…

I saw a man once, who –

GWEN – You never told me.

ARTHUR I never told no one. Not even Mum.

I was only twelve, thirteen.

It were early on, mist in the gorge.

I was cycling over to Ashton, the golf course,

to look for lost balls in the rough, when –

He was standing at the edge, smoking a fag,

just past the Samaritans sign.

Looking straight out he was, at the dawn,

but I reckon he heard me,

cos he turned then, see.

Turned and looked right at me.

GWEN How old was he?

ARTHUR Older, to me I mean. But young now I guess.

Our age about. Twenty-two, twenty-three.

He was calm.

Just looked at me, took one long drag,

stubbed it out, then –

GWEN He jumped?

ARTHUR No.

Well, yeah, he did. But more like flew.

Ran a few steps then launched hisself over.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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