

Dear,

after all this, I will write different letters. And I will live a different life. And after all this I will write. Really write. But for now I will write this letter, here, lying in this hole, on these boards. I will write this as if I mean it. Like the new man, just arrived, writing like he means it, looks like he means it, writing there in a corner, stealing time, by candlelight, just for a short while, now and then. I've see him, seen his writing, not letters, but in a small book.

Looks like he means it, every word of it. It's a book of notes, fits in a pocket, close to his body, so I must suppose he means it seriously. And so does the singer-man, mean it seriously, the one further back there, round the blind sniper's alley. I hear him, sings softly mostly but still, like he means it, as if there is no question, like a bird, that can't help it, could only mean it.

We often hear the songs even from here, this far down, and the spaces in between the songs, hear those too. Hear everything, know every sound this place has, every sound we make here. And we hear everything, anything new or unusual, anything we don't know for sure was what we brought with us. The smallest new noise is like the loudest alarm bell sounding. Trees have all but gone. No sound there, the birds or even the leaves. We don't hear those any more.

Not so long ago most of us thought we would never hear anything again, not after that noise, guns sounding so loud you looked across, saw mouths move, like singing hearts out but no words, just an arm's length away; raised hands and screaming faces.

For days it seemed. Seemed nothing could carry on after that, but after the ringing in our ears faded it seemed that, well, yes, after all, we were carrying on, here, in this mud, pressing our bodies into the shapes of the holes in the ground, hiding again, repairing, waiting and filling the time, the time we thought would never move the same way again, time we thought had stopped, couldn't possibly go on in the same way ever again.

But seems it can. After all this we had thought, everything will just have to become different - but the deafening noise stopped its blasting and we stopped running.

Eventually we went back to this. Although, we know nothing sounds, smells, feels the same, never will, never could, just we don't say it that way at least.

Funny, after all that, one day, soon after, a man I didn't know before moved through our line and stopped for a smoke and got talking and something he said I remember – if you had a life to live, what kind of life would you live? Funny that, the idea of even asking that, as if you could even choose, especially after all this. It's like asking the birds - if you had a song to sing, what kind of song would you sing?

After all this I'll send you a poem I've been writing, and you'll have to let me know what you think.

After all this, I will leave. Like a lover knows how to leave - I read this somewhere, I didn't write it - like all lovers leave, too soon to get the real loving done. Leaving before the love is done. Getting the love done. Getting the loved one.

But after all this I do plan to leave somehow. I will take the boat – not across that Channel – I swear I will never cross that waterway again, I swear, not in this direction, as long as I live – but, no, I will

take the boat out to a new world, keep heading West, become something like a cowboy, a gunslinger, a killer and a lover. A man with his own gun.

A man with his own gun. And a famous name when he's still alive and then famously dead. Dear God, there are far too many of us all here to be famous for dying. It will have to be numbers not names that get us remembered.

After all this,
Well indeed - how are things in heaven?
Everlasting day or everlasting night?
Lies we never knew about?
What did we find?
A view of the sky,
from his slow-dying in a shell hole, looking up at the moon,
waiting and calling for water until nightfall signals at last to stop your asking.

After all this, I will have my own gun, like the handguns they buy back home and keep close to their bodies. Something for close range, not this rifle that jams no matter how well I clean it. Christ, after all this, this thing should be in a museum, carefully labelled: .303-inch Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE) Mark III with 1907 Pattern Bayonet.

No, my own hand gun, a pistol, not covered in mud, just some grains of desert sand - warm metal, in a warm dry landscape. No more mud. No more cold bodies. (I know that the surgeons can warm their hands when they cut to open the bodies. I've seen them and I have felt the moment of unexpected warmth come from wounds nearby, very close range, sudden).

No, no more cold bodies. Only the warmth of the inside side of a lover's flesh. And animals living and breathing. A horse with a name that I gave him and the only bones I will see will be animal bones, long dead and picked clean, lying quietly above ground, bleaching slowly in the sun.

After all this I'll learn which wild plants are best to survive the long desert rides, where to hold up for days in some abandoned barn and wait out my fever, the sound of my own breath, the sound of my gun shots boom boom hitting tin cans on a fence, and which songs fit my voice best.

And I imagine I remember learning about men dying at a young age in a gunfight in some saloon when I first saw part of a man's entrails bleed into the dirt and I thought to myself, didn't know bodies did that.

And I'll remember the day I was
blinded with tears and
deafened by the sound of
air moving in the lungs of men,
dying in some big shoot out or just by accident.