

AN ABANDONED AIRFIELD – by Anya Page

When the wind is blowing from the past, this seeming empty space comes back to life. A horseman whistles as he guides his horse, slowly churning perfect furrows into the soil. Screaming black headed gulls alight behind, picking at the fresh earth. Crops rise then sway golden in the sun, are reaped, threshed, gathered into stooks. Every man, woman, and child labours with aching back from first light until sundown. The weather holds. The barns are filled. The farmer's bank account swells and the bellies of the village children are relieved from the knots of hunger for a time. The church is full, thankful in song.

Look again, and row after row of khaki canvas tents grow where the barley was planted last year. The trees in the copse are in sticky bud and the hedgerows are white with frothy hawthorn. Bees shimmer amid the pink clover. The breeze is laced with dynamite, petrol and sweat. Stumps are blasted, ground levelled. Swarms of men tend machines, which rip and smash through the hedges and undergrowth. The earth is spewed and flattened under the treads of bulldozers. Day and night, night and day, in muddy shifts, an aerodrome is built. From reveille to taps the men sing, as they work, as they mooch and jostle in the chow line. *"Jesu, Lord, Ain't dat a thing, Come back Baby."*

Look now, as squadrons of bombers roar in, with a fresh crop of men. Government issue, grown in America, harvested over here. Green faces, loose bowels; wisecracking, resolute. Lucky medallions buttoned into flying jackets; letters and keepsakes left under the pillow. It never gets any easier, as crew after crew take to the sky. *Count them out, count them home.* Sweat it out, in the hangars with the mechanics. Squint up at the sky. Wait, as the hands of the clock eke out the day. Wait, as the tousle eared mascot whines and shakes, keeping vigil for his crew.

Feel the goosebumps prick the shoulders of the naked girl under the army blanket, hear her sigh as she sloughs off the shop girl and reinvents herself as his fantasy, just for an hour. *Never want this war to end.* Feel the bloody resignation of the ground crew, sluicing the splattered, shattered fuselage. The tarmac runs red. Tonight there are spaces in the pub where men stood yesterday and tomorrow there will be new faces at breakfast.

But on a day like today, when the air is untroubled by eddies from the past, the shrill pipe of a curlew on the wing is the only accompaniment to the clinking links of the fence. Keep out!

Property of the Ministry of Defence, remnants of wartime enclosure. Nothing to see here, a barren stretch of concrete branded onto the landscape. A colony of weeds fighting through the cracks in the runway and a snarl of gorse insinuating its way into the fence. An empty space.