1

Why at the beginning of things is there always light? Dorrigo Evans' earliest memories were of sun flooding a church hall in which he sat with his mother and grandmother. A wooden church hall. Blinding light and him toddling back and forth, in and out of its transcendent welcome, into the arms of women. Women who loved him. Like entering the sea and returning to the beach. Over and over.

Bless you, his mother says as she holds him and lets him go. Bless you, boy.

That must have been 1915 or 1916. He would have been one or two. Shadows came later in the form of a forearm rising up, its black outline leaping in the greasy light of a kerosene lantern. Jackie Maguire was sitting in the Evanses' small dark kitchen, crying. No one cried then, except babies. Jackie Maguire was an old man, maybe forty, perhaps older, and he was trying to brush the tears away from his pockmarked face with the back of his hand. Or was it with his fingers?

Only his crying was in Dorrigo Evans' memory fixed. It was a sound like something breaking. Its slowing rhythm reminded him of a rabbit's hind legs thumping the ground as it is strangled by a snare, the only sound he had ever heard that was similar. He was nine, had come inside to have his mother look at a blood blister on his thumb, and had little else to compare it to. He had seen a grown man cry only once before, a scene of astonishment when his brother Tom returned from the Great War in France and got off the train. He had swung his kitbag onto the hot dust of the siding and abruptly burst into tears.

Watching his brother, Dorrigo Evans had wondered what it was that would make a grown man cry. Later, crying became simply affirmation of feeling, and feeling the only compass in life. Feeling became fashionable and emotion became a theatre in which people were players who no longer knew who they were off the stage. Dorrigo Evans would live long enough to see all these changes. And he would remember a time when people were ashamed of crying. When they feared the weakness it bespoke. The trouble to which it led. He would live to see people praised for things that were not worthy of praise, simply because truth was seen to be bad for their feelings.

That night Tom came home they burnt the Kaiser on a bonfire. Tom said nothing of the war, of the Germans, of the gas and the tanks and the trenches they had heard about. He said nothing at all. One man's feeling is not always equal to all life is. Sometimes it's not equal to anything much at all. He just stared into the flames.

2

A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else. In his old age Dorrigo Evans never knew if he had read this or had himself made it up. Made up, mixed up, and broken down. Relentlessly broken down. Rock to gravel to dust to mud to rock and so the world goes, as his mother used to say when he demanded reasons or explanation as to how the world got to be this way or that. The world is, she would say. It just *is*, boy. He had been trying to wrest the rock free from an outcrop to build a fort for a game he was playing when another, larger rock dropped onto his thumb, causing a large and throbbing blood blister beneath the nail.

His mother swung Dorrigo up onto the kitchen table where the lamp light fell strongest and, avoiding Jackie Maguire's strange gaze, lifted her son's thumb into the light. Between his sobs Jackie Maguire said a few things. His wife had the week previously taken the train with their youngest child to Launceston, and not returned.

Dorrigo's mother picked up her carving knife. Along the blade's edge ran a cream smear of congealed mutton fat. She placed its tip into the coals of the kitchen range. A small wreath of smoke leapt up and infused the kitchen with the odour of charred mutton. She pulled the knife out, its glowing red tip glittering with sparkles of brilliant white-hot dust, a sight Dorrigo found at once magical and terrifying.

Hold still, she said, taking hold of his hand with such a strong grip it shocked him.

Jackie Maguire was telling how he had taken the mail train to Launceston and gone looking for her, but he

could find her nowhere. As Dorrigo Evans watched, the red-hot tip touched his nail and it began to smoke as his mother burnt a hole through the cuticle. He heard Jackie Maguire say—

She's vanished off the face of the earth, Mrs Evans.

And the smoke gave way to a small gush of dark blood from his thumb, and the pain of his blood blister and the terror of the red-hot carving knife were gone.

Scram, Dorrigo's mother said, nudging him off the table. Scram now, boy.

Vanished! Jackie Maguire said.

All this was in the days when the world was wide and the island of Tasmania was still the world. And of its many remote and forgotten outposts, few were more forgotten and remote than Cleveland, the hamlet of forty or so souls where Dorrigo Evans lived. An old convict coaching village fallen on hard times and out of memory, it now survived as a railway siding, a handful of crumbling Georgian buildings and scattered verandah-browed wooden cottages, shelter for those who had endured a century of exile and loss.

Backdropped by woodlands of writhing peppermint gums and silver wattle that waved and danced in the heat, it was hot and hard in summer, and hard, simply hard, in winter. Electricity and radio were yet to arrive, and were it not that it was the 1920s, it could have been the 1880s or the 1850s. Many years later Tom, a man not given to allegory but perhaps prompted, or so Dorrigo had thought at the time, by his own impending death and the accompanying terror of the old—that all life is only allegory and the real story is not here—said it was like the long autumn of a dying world.

Their father was a railway fettler, and his family lived

in a Tasmanian Government Railways weatherboard cottage by the side of the line. Of a summer, when the water ran out, they would bucket water from the tank set up for the steam locomotives. They slept under skins of possums they snared, and they lived mostly on the rabbits they trapped and the wallabies they shot and the potatoes they grew and the bread they baked. Their father, who had survived the depression of the 1890s and watched men die of starvation on the streets of Hobart, couldn't believe his luck at having ended up living in such a workers' paradise. In his less sanguine moments he would also say, 'You live like a dog and you die like a dog.'

Dorrigo Evans knew Jackie Maguire from the holidays he sometimes took with Tom. To get to Tom's he would catch a ride on the back of Joe Pike's dray from Cleveland to the Fingal Valley turnoff. As the old draught horse Joe Pike called Gracie amiably trotted along, Dorrigo would sway back and forth and imagine himself shaping into one of the boughs of the wildly snaking peppermint gums that fingered and flew through the great blue sky overhead. He would smell damp bark and drying leaves and watch the clans of green and red musk lorikeets chortling far above. He would drink in the birdsong of the wrens and the honeyeaters, the whipcrack call of the jo-wittys, punctuated by Gracie's steady clop and the creak and clink of the cart's leather traces and wood shafts and iron chains, a universe of sensation that returned in dreams.

They would make their way along the old coach road, past the coaching hotel the railway had put out of business, now a dilapidated near ruin in which lived several impoverished families, including the Jackie Maguires. Once every few days a cloud of dust would announce

the coming of a motorcar, and the kids would appear out of the bush and the coach-house and chase the noisy cloud till their lungs were afire and their legs lead.

At the Fingal Valley turnoff Dorrigo Evans would slide off, wave Joe and Gracie goodbye, and begin the walk to Llewellyn, a town distinguished chiefly by being even smaller than Cleveland. Once at Llewellyn, he would strike north-east through the paddocks and, taking his bearings from the great snow-covered massif of Ben Lomond, head through the bush towards the snow country back of the Ben, where Tom worked two weeks on, one week off as a possum snarer. Mid-afternoon he would arrive at Tom's home, a cave that nestled in a sheltered dogleg below a ridgeline. The cave was slightly smaller than the size of their skillion kitchen, and at its highest Tom could stand with his head bowed. It narrowed like an egg at each end, and its opening was sheltered by an overhang which meant that a fire could burn there all night, warming the cave.

Sometimes Tom, now in his early twenties, would have Jackie Maguire working with him. Tom, who had a good voice, would often sing a song or two of a night. And after, by firelight, Dorrigo would read aloud from some old *Bulletin*s and *Smith's Weekly*s that formed the library of the two possum snarers, to Jackie Maguire, who could not read, and to Tom, who said he could. They liked it when Dorrigo read from Aunty Rose's advice column, or the bush ballads that they regarded as *clever* or sometimes even *very clever*. After a time, Dorrigo began to memorise other poems for them from a book at his school called *The English Parnassus*. Their favourite was Tennyson's 'Ulysses'.

Pockmarked face smiling in the firelight, gleaming bright

as a freshly turned out plum pudding, Jackie Maguire would say, Oh, them old timers! They can string them words together tighter than a brass snare strangling a rabbit!

And Dorrigo didn't say to Tom what he had seen a week before Mrs Jackie Maguire vanished: his brother with his hand reaching up inside her skirt, as she—a small, intense woman of exotic darkness—leaned up against the chicken shed behind the coaching house. Tom's face was turned in on her neck. He knew his brother was kissing her.

For many years, Dorrigo often thought about Mrs Jackie Maguire, whose real name he never knew, whose real name was like the food he dreamt of every day in the POW camps—there and not there, pressing up into his skull, a thing that always vanished at the point he reached out towards it. And after a time he thought about her less often; and after a further time, he no longer thought about her at all.

3

Dorrigo was the only one of his family to pass the Ability Test at the end of his schooling at the age of twelve and so receive a scholarship to attend Launceston High School. He was old for his year. On his first day, at lunchtime, he ended up at what was called the top yard, a flat area of dead grass and dust, bark and leaves, with several large gum trees at one end. He watched the big boys of third and fourth form, some with sideburns, boys already with men's muscles, line up in two rough rows, jostling, shoving, moving like some tribal dance. Then began the magic of

kick to kick. One boy would boot the football from his row across the yard to the other row. And all the boys in that row would run together at the ball and—if it were coming in high—leap into the air, seeking to catch it. And as violent as the fight for the mark was, whoever succeeded was suddenly sacrosanct. And to him, the spoil—the reward of kicking the ball back to the other row, where the process was repeated.

So it went, all lunch hour. Inevitably, the senior boys dominated, taking the most marks, getting the most kicks. Some younger boys got a few marks and kicks, many one or none.

Dorrigo watched all that first lunchtime. Another first-form boy told him that you had to be at least in second form before you had a chance in kick to kick—the big boys were too strong and too fast; they would think nothing of putting an elbow into a head, a fist into a face, a knee in the back to rid themselves of an opponent. Dorrigo noticed some smaller boys hanging around behind the pack, a few paces back, ready to scavenge the occasional kick that went too high, lofting over the scrum.

On the second day, he joined their number. And on the third day, he found himself up close to the back of the pack when, over their shoulders, he saw a wobbly drop punt lofting high towards them. For a moment it sat in the sun, and he understood that the ball was his to pluck. He could smell the piss ants in the eucalypts, feel the ropy shadows of their branches fall away as he began running forward into the pack. Time slowed, he found all the space he needed in the crowding spot into which the biggest, strongest boys were now rushing. He understood the ball dangling from the sun was his and

all he had to do was rise. His eyes were only for the ball, but he sensed he would not make it running at the speed he was, and so he leapt, his feet finding the back of one boy, his knees the shoulders of another and so he climbed into the full dazzle of the sun, above all the other boys. At the apex of their struggle, his arms stretched out high above him, he felt the ball arrive in his hands, and he knew he could now begin to fall out of the sun.

Cradling the football with tight hands, he landed on his back so hard it shot most of the breath out of him. Grabbing barking breaths, he got to his feet and stood there in the light, holding the oval ball, readying himself to now join a larger world.

As he staggered back, the melee cleared a respectful space around him.

Who the fuck are you? asked one big boy.

Dorrigo Evans.

That was a blinder, Dorrigo. Your kick.

The smell of eucalypt bark, the bold, blue light of the Tasmanian midday, so sharp he had to squint hard to stop it slicing his eyes, the heat of the sun on his taut skin, the hard, short shadows of the others, the sense of standing on a threshold, of joyfully entering a new universe while your old still remained knowable and holdable and not yet lost—all these things he was aware of, as he was of the hot dust, the sweat of the other boys, the laughter, the strange pure joy of being with others.

Kick it! he heard someone yell. Kick the fucker before the bell rings and it's all over.

And in the deepest recesses of his being, Dorrigo Evans understood that all his life had been a journeying to this point when he had for a moment flown into the sun

and would now be journeying away from it forever after. Nothing would ever be as real to him. Life never had such meaning again.

4

Clever bugger, aren't we? said Amy. She lay on the hotel room's bed with him eighteen years after he had seen Jackie Maguire weeping in front of his mother, twirling her finger in his cropped curls as he recited 'Ulysses' for her. The room was on a run-down hotel's third storey and opened out onto a deep verandah which—by cutting off all sight of the road beneath and beach opposite—gave them the illusion of sitting on the Southern Ocean, the waters of which they could hear crashing and dragging without cease below.

It's a trick, Dorrigo said. Like pulling a coin out of someone's ear.

No, it's not.

No, Dorrigo said. It's not.

What is it, then?

Dorrigo wasn't sure.

And the Greeks, the Trojans, what's that all about? What's the difference?

The Trojans were a family. They lose.

And the Greeks?

The Greeks?

No. The Port Adelaide Magpies. Of course, the Greeks. What are they?

Violence. But the Greeks are our heroes. They win.

Why?

He didn't know exactly why.

There was their trick, of course, he said. The Trojan horse, an offering to the gods in which hid the death of men, one thing containing another.

Why don't we hate them, then? The Greeks?

He didn't know exactly why. The more he thought on it, the more he couldn't say why this should be, nor why the Trojan family had been doomed. He had the sense that *the gods* was just another name for time, but he felt that it would be as stupid to say such a thing as it would be to suggest that against the gods we can never prevail. But at twenty-seven, soon to be twenty-eight, he was already something of a fatalist about his own destiny, if not that of others. It was as if life could be shown but never explained, and words—all the words that did not say things directly—were for him the most truthful.

He was looking past Amy's naked body, over the crescent line between her chest and hip, haloed with tiny hairs, to where, beyond the weathered French doors with their flaking white paint, the moonlight formed a narrow road on the sea that ran away from his gaze into spreadeagled clouds. It was as if it were waiting for him.

My purpose holds,
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars until I die.

Why do you love words so? he heard Amy ask.

His mother died of tuberculosis when he was nineteen. He was not there. He was not even in Tasmania,

but on the mainland, on a scholarship to study medicine at the University of Melbourne. In truth, more than one sea separated them. At Ormond College he had met people from great families, proud of achievements and genealogies that went back beyond the founding of Australia to distinguished families in England. They could list generations of their families, their political offices and companies and dynastic marriages, their mansions and sheep stations. Only as an old man did he come to realise much of it was a fiction greater than anything Trollope ever attempted.

In one way it was phenomenally dull, in another fascinating. He had never met people with such certainty before. Jews and Catholics were less, Irish ugly, Chinese and Aborigines not even human. They did not think such things. They knew them. Odd things amazed him. Their houses made of stone. The weight of their cutlery. Their ignorance of the lives of others. Their blindness to the beauty of the natural world. He loved his family. But he was not proud of them. Their principal achievement was survival. It would take him a lifetime to appreciate what an achievement that was. At the time though—and when set against the honours, wealth, property and fame that he was now meeting with for the first time—it seemed failure. And rather than showing shame, he simply stayed away from them until his mother's death. At her funeral he had not cried.

Cmon, Dorry, Amy said. Why? She dragged a finger up his thigh.

After, he became afraid of enclosed spaces, crowds, trams, trains and dances, all things that pressed him inwards and cut out the light. He had trouble breathing. He heard her calling him in his dreams.

Boy, she would say, come here, boy.

But he would not go. He almost failed his exams. He read and reread 'Ulysses'. He played football once more, searching for light, the world he had glimpsed in the church hall, rising and rising again into the sun until he was captain, until he was a doctor, until he was a surgeon, until he was lying in bed there in that hotel with Amy, watching the moon rise over the valley of her belly. He read and reread 'Ulysses'.

> *The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep*
> *Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,*
> *'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.*

He clutched at the light at the beginning of things.

He read and reread 'Ulysses'.

He looked back at Amy.

They were the first beautiful thing I ever knew, Dorrigo Evans said.

5

When he awoke an hour later, she had painted her lips cherry-red, mascaraed her gas-flame eyes and got her hair up, leaving her face a heart.

Amy?

I've got to go.

Amy—

Besides—

Stay.

For what?

I—

For what? I've heard it—

I want you. Every moment I can have you, I want you.

—too many times. Will you leave Ella?

Will you leave Keith?

Got to go, Amy said. Said I'd be there in an hour. Card evening. Can you believe it?

I'll be back.

Will you?

I will.

And then?

It's meant to be secret.

Us?

No. Yes. No, the war. A military secret.

What?

We ship out. Wednesday.

What?

Three days from—

I know when Wednesday is. Where?

The war.

Where?

How would we know?

Where are you going?

To the war. It's everywhere, the war, isn't it?

Will I see you again?

I—

Us? And us?—

Amy—

Dorry, will I see you again?

6

Dorrigo Evans felt fifty years pass in the wheezy shudder somewhere of a refrigeration plant. The angina tablet was already doing its work, the tightness in his chest was retreating, the tingling in his arm had gone, and though some wild internal disorder beyond medicine remained in his quaking soul he felt well enough to return from the hotel bathroom to the bedroom.

As he walked back to their bed, he looked at her naked shoulder with its soft flesh and curve that never ceased to thrill him. She partly raised a face damasked with sleep, and asked—

What were you talking about?

As he lay back down and spooned into her, he realised she meant a conversation earlier, before she had fallen asleep. Far away—as if in defiance of all the melancholy sounds of early morning that drifted in and out of their city hotel room—a car revved wildly.

Darky, he whispered into her back, as though it were obvious, then, realising it wasn't, added, Gardiner. His lower lip caught on her skin as he spoke. I can't remember his face, he said.

Not like your face, she said.

There was no point to it, thought Dorrigo Evans, Darky Gardiner died and there was no point to it at all. And he wondered why he could not write something so obvious and simple, and he wondered why he could not see Darky Gardiner's face.

That's flipping inescapable, she said.

He smiled. He could never quite get over her use of words like flipping. Though he knew her to be vulgar

at heart, her upbringing demanded such quaint oddities of language. He held his aged dry lips to the flesh of her shoulder. What was it about a woman that made him even now quiver like a fish?

Can't switch on the telly or open a magazine, she continued, warming to her own joke, without seeing that nose sticking out.

And his own face did seem to Dorrigo Evans, who had never thought much of it, to be everywhere. Since being brought to public attention two decades before in a television show about his past, it had begun staring back at him from everything from charity letterheads to memorial coins. Big-beaked, bemused, slightly shambolic, his once curly dark hair now a thin white wave. In the years that for most his age were termed *declining* he was once more ascending into the light.

Inexplicably to him, he had in recent years become a war hero, a famous and celebrated surgeon, the public image of a time and a tragedy, the subject of biographies, plays and documentaries. The object of veneration, hagiographies, adulation. He understood that he shared certain features, habits and history with the war hero. But he was not him. He'd just had more success at living than at dying, and there were no longer so many left to carry the mantle for the POWs. To deny the reverence seemed to insult the memory of those who had died. He couldn't do that. And besides, he no longer had the energy.

Whatever they called him—hero, coward, fraud—all of it now seemed to have less and less to do with him. It belonged to a world that was ever more distant and vaporous to him. He understood he was admired by the

nation, if despaired of by those who had to work with him as an ageing surgeon, and mildly disdained and possibly envied by the many other doctors who had done similar things in other POW camps but who sensed, unhappily, that there was something in his character that was not in theirs which had elevated him far above them in the nation's affections.

Damn that documentary, he said.

But at the time he had not minded the attention. Perhaps he had secretly even enjoyed it a little. But no longer. He was not unaware of his critics. Mostly he found himself in agreement with them. His fame seemed to him a failure of perception on the part of others. He had avoided what he regarded as some obvious errors of life, such as politics and golf. But his attempt to develop a new surgical technique for dealing with the removal of colonic cancers had been unsuccessful, and, worse, may have indirectly led to the deaths of several patients. He had overheard Maison calling him a butcher. Perhaps, looking back, he had been reckless. But had he succeeded he knew he would have been praised for his daring and vision. His relentless womanising and the deceit that necessarily went with it were private scandals and publicly ignored. He still could shock even himself—the ease, the alacrity with which he could lie and manipulate and deceive—and his own estimate of himself was, he felt, realistically low. It was not his only vanity, but it was among his more foolish.

Even at his age—he had turned seventy-seven the previous week—he was confused by what his nature had wrought in his life. After all, he understood that the same fearlessness, the same refusal to accept convention, the

same delight in games and his same hopeless hunger to see how far he might push a situation that had driven him in the camps to help others had also driven him into the arms of Lynette Maison, the wife of a close colleague, Rick Maison, a fellow council member of the College of Surgeons, a brilliant, eminent and entirely dull man. And more than one or two others. He hoped in the foreword he had that day been writing—without bothering it with unnecessary revelation—to somehow finally put these things somewhat to rights with the honesty of humility, to restore his role to what it was, that of a doctor, no more and no less, and to restore to rightful memory the many who were forgotten by focusing on them rather than himself. Somewhere he felt it a necessary act of correction and contrition. Somewhere even deeper he feared that such self-abasement, such humility, would only rebound further in his favour. He was trapped. His face was everywhere but he could now no longer see their faces.

I am become a name, he said.

Who?

Tennyson.

I've never heard it.

'Ulysses'.

No one reads him anymore.

No one reads anything anymore. They think Browning is a gun.

I thought it was only Lawson for you.

It is. When it's not Kipling or Browning.

Or Tennyson.

I am a part of all that I have met.

You made that up, she said.

No. It's very—what's the word?

Apposite?

Yes.

You can recite all that, said Lynette Maison, running a hand down his withered thigh. And so much else besides. But you can't remember a man's face.

No.

Shelley came to him on death, and Shakespeare. They came to him unbidden and were as much a part of his life now *as* his life. As though a life could be contained within a book, a sentence, a few words. Such simple words. Thou art come unto a feast of death. The pale, the cold, and the moony smile. Oh, them old-timers.

Death is our physician, he said. He found her nipples wondrous. There had been a journalist at the dinner that evening who had questioned him about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Once, perhaps, the journalist said. But twice? Why twice?

They were monsters, Dorrigo Evans said. You have no comprehension.

The journalist asked if the women and children were monsters too? And their unborn children?

Radiation, Dorrigo Evans said, doesn't affect subsequent generations.

But that wasn't the question and he knew it, and besides, he did not know whether radiation's effects were transmitted. Someone a long time ago had told him that they weren't. Or that they were. It was hard to remember. These days he relied on the increasingly fragile assumption that what he said was right, and what was right was what he said.

The journalist said he had done a story on the survivors, had met and filmed them. Their suffering, he had said, was terrible and lifelong.

It is not that you know *nothing* about war, young man, Dorrigo Evans had said. It is that you have learnt one thing. And war is many things.

He had turned away. And after, turned back.

By the way, do you sing?

Now Dorrigo tried to lose his memory of that sorry, awkward and frankly embarrassing exchange as he always did, in flesh, and he cupped one of Lynette's breasts, nipple between two fingers. But his thoughts remained elsewhere. No doubt the journalist would dine out on the story forever after, about the war hero who was really a warmongering, nuke-loving, senile old fool who finished up asking him if he sang!

But something about the journalist had reminded him of Darky Gardiner, though he couldn't say what it was. Not his face, nor his manner. His smile? His cheek? His daring? Dorrigo had been annoyed by him, but he admired his refusal to bend to the authority of Dorrigo's celebrity. Some inner cohesion—integrity, if you like. An insistence on truth? He couldn't say. He couldn't point to a tic that was similar, a gesture, a habit. A strange shame arose within him. Perhaps he had been foolish. And wrong. He was no longer sure of anything. Perhaps, since that day of Darky's beating, he had been sure of nothing.

I shall be a carrion monster, he whispered into the coral shell of her ear, an organ of women he found unspeakably moving in its soft, whorling vortex, and which always seemed to him an invitation to adventure. He very softly kissed her lobe.

You should say what you think in your own words, Lynette Maison said. Dorrigo Evans' words.

She was fifty-two, beyond children but not folly, and despised herself for the hold the old man had over her. She knew he had not just a wife, but another woman. And, she suspected, one or two others. She lacked even the sultry glory of being his only mistress. She did not understand herself. He had the sourdough smell of age. His chest sagged into shrivelled teats; his lovemaking was unreliable, yet she found it strangely wholesome in a way that defied sense. With him she felt the unassailable security of being loved. And yet she knew that one part of him—the part she wanted most, the part that was the light in him—remained elusive and unknown. In her dreams Dorrigo was always levitating a few inches above her. Often of a day she was moved to rage, accusations, threats and coldness in her dealings with him. But late of a night, lying next to him, she wished for no one else.

There was a filthy sky, he was saying, and she could feel him readying to rise once more. It was always moving away, he went on, as if it couldn't stand it either.

7

When they arrived in Siam in early 1943 it had been different. For one thing, the sky was clear and vast. A familiar sky, or so he thought. It was the dry season, the trees were leafless, the jungle open, the earth dusty. For another, there was some food. Not much, not enough,

but starvation hadn't yet taken hold and hunger didn't yet live in the men's bellies and brains like some crazed thing. Nor had their work for the Japanese become the madness that would kill them like so many flies. It was hard, but at the beginning it was not insane.

When Dorrigo Evans lowered his gaze, it was to see a straight line of surveyors' pegs hammered into the ground by Imperial Japanese Army engineers to mark the route of a railway that led away from where he stood at the head of a party of silent prisoners of war. They learnt from the Japanese engineers that the pegs ran in a four hundred and fifteen-kilometre line from north of Bangkok all the way through to Burma.

They outlined a route for a great railway that was still only a series of limited plans, seemingly impossible orders and grand exhortations on the part of the Japanese High Command. It was a fabled railway that was the issue of desperation and fanaticism, made as much of myth and unreality as it was to be of wood and iron and the thousands upon thousands of lives that were to be laid down over the next year to build it. But what reality was ever made by realists?

They were handed blunt axes and rotten hemp rope and with them their first job—to fell, grub and clear a kilometre of giant teak trees that grew along the planned path of the railway.

My dad used to say you young never carry your weight, Jimmy Bigelow said as he tapped a forefinger on the axe's dull and dented edge. I wish the bastard was here now.