Also by Richard Flanagan

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Wanting

The Narrow Road to the Deep North

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cents a day. They spend it on themselves. The Japanese do not expect them to work. They should.

Should what, Evans?


He took a deep breath.

And they should pool their wages so we draw on it to buy food and drugs for the sick.

That again, Evans, Colonel Rexroth said. It is example that will get us through. Not Bolshevism.

I agree. When it is the right example.

But Colonel Rexroth was already ascending the stage. He thanked the entertainers, then spoke of how the division of the British Empire into arbitrary nationalities was a fiction. From Oxford to Oodnadatta they were one people.

His accent was thin and reedy. He had no gift for rousing oratory but a misplaced sense that his rank gifted him with this talent. He sounded, as Gallipoli von Kessler said, as though he were playing a flute out of his arse.

And for that reason, Colonel Rexroth went on, as members of the British Empire, as Englishmen, we must observe the order and discipline that is the very lifeblood of the Empire. We will suffer as Englishmen, we will triumph as Englishmen. Thank you.

After, he asked Dorrigo Evans if he would like to be involved in planning for the building of a proper cemetery overlooking the river, where they would be able to inter their dead.

I'd rather get the Black Prince to steal some more tins of fish from the Japanese stores to keep the living from dying, Dorrigo Evans said.

The Black Prince is a thief, Colonel Rexroth replied. This, however, will be a beautiful final resting place and worthy of the efforts of all concerned for the welfare of the men and far better than the present practice of just marching off into the forest and burying them wherever.

The Black Prince helps me save lives.

Colonel Rexroth produced a large sketch map outlining the location of the cemetery and the layout of the graves, with different sections for different ranks. Proudly, he told Dorrigo that he had reserved a particularly idyllic spot overlooking the Kwai for officers. He pointed out that the men were beginning to die, and dealing with the corpses was now a matter of the highest priority.

It is an irrefutable argument, he said. It's been a lot of work getting it this far. I'd love you to be part of this.

A monkey screeched in a nearby bamboo grove.

I am only doing it for the men, Colonel Rexroth said.

The trees began sprouting leaves and the leaves began covering up the sky and the sky turned black and the black swallowed more and more of the world. Food grew less and less. The monsoon came and, at first, before they learnt all that the rain portended, they were grateful.

Then the Speedo began.

The Speedo meant that there were no longer rest days, that work quotas went up, and up again, that shifts grew
longer and longer. The Speedo dissolved an already vague distinction between the fit and the sick into a vaguer distinction between the sick and the dying, and because of the Speedo more and more often prisoners were ordered to work not one but two shifts, both day and night.

The rains grew torrential, the teak and the bamboo closed in around them; Colonel Rexroth died of dysentery and was buried along with everyone else in the jungle. Dorrigo Evans assumed command. As a great green weight that reached to the black heavens dragged them back down into the black mud, he imposed a levy on the officers’ pay to buy food and drugs for the sick. He persuaded, cajoled and insisted on the officers working, as the ceaseless green horror pressed ever harder on their scabies-ridden bodies and groggy guts, on their fevered heads and foul, ulcerated legs, on their perennially shitting arses.

The men called Dorrigo Evans Colonel to his face and the Big Fella everywhere else. There were moments when the Big Fella felt far too small for all that they now wanted him to bear. There was Dorrigo Evans and there was this other man with whom he shared looks, habits and ways of speech. But the Big Fella was noble where Dorrigo was not, self-sacrificing where Dorrigo was selfish.

It was a part he felt himself feeling his way into, and the longer it went on, the more the men around him confirmed him in his role. It was as if they were willing him into being, as though there had to be a Big Fella, and, having desperate need of such, their growing respect, their whispered asides, their opinion of him—all this trapped him into behaving as everything he knew he was not. As if rather than him leading them by example they were leading him through adulation.

And with him now in tow, they together staggered through those days that built like a scream that never ended, a wet, green shriek Dorrigo Evans found perversely amplified by the quinine deafness, the malarial haze that meant a minute took a lifetime to pass and that sometimes it was not possible to recall a week of misery and horror. All of it seemed to wait for some denouement that never came, some event that made sense of it all to him and to them, some catharsis that would free them all from this hell.

Still, there was the occasional duck egg, a finger or two of palm sugar, a joke, repeated over and over, lovingly burnished and appreciated like the rare and beautiful thing it was, that made survival possible. Still there was hope. And from beneath their ever growing slouch hats the ever diminishing prisoners still made asides and curses as they were swept up into another universe in which they lived like ants and all that mattered was the railway. As naked slaves to their section of the Line, with nothing more than ropes and poles, hammers and bars, straw baskets and hoes, with their backs and legs and arms and hands, they began to clear the jungle for the Line and break the rock for the Line and move the dirt for the Line and carry the sleepers and the iron rails to build the Line. As naked slaves, they were starved and beaten and worked beyond exhaustion on the Line. And as naked slaves they began to die for the Line.

No one could reckon it, neither the weak nor the strong. The dead began to accumulate. Three last week, eight this week, God knows how many today. The hospital
hut—not so much a hospital as a place where the very worst were allowed to lie in filth and gangrenous stench on long, slatted platforms—was now filled with the dying. There were no longer fit men. There were only the sick, the very sick and the dying. Long gone were the days when Gallipoli von Kessler thought it punishment to be unable to touch a woman. Long gone was even the thought of a woman. Their only thoughts now were of food and rest.

Starvation stalked the Australians. It hid in each man’s every act and every thought. Against it they could proffer only their Australian wisdom which was really no more than opinions emptier than their bellies. They tried to hold together with their Australian dryness and their Australian curses, their Australian memories and their Australian mateship. But suddenly Australia meant little against lice and hunger and beri-beri, against thieving and beatings and yet ever more slave labour. Australia was shrinking and shrivelling, a grain of rice was so much bigger now than a continent, and the only things that grew daily larger were the men’s battered, drooping slouch hats, which now loomed like sombreros over their emaciated faces and their empty dark eyes, eyes that already seemed to be little more than black-shadowed sockets waiting for worms.

And still the dead kept on accumulating.

Dorrigo Evans’ mouth was so full of saliva he had to wipe his lips with the back of his hand several times to stop himself dribbling. Staring down at the badly cut, gristly and overdone steak lying in the rectangular cup of his tin dixie, its sooty grease smearing the rusting tin, he could not for the life of him think of anything he could want more in the world. He looked up at the kitchen hand who had brought it for his dinner. The kitchen hand told him how, the night before, a gang led by the Black Prince had stolen a cow off some Thai traders, had slaughtered it in the bush and, after bribing a guard with the eye fillet, had given the rest in secret to the camp kitchen. A steak—a steak!—had been carved off, grilled and presented to Dorrigo for his dinner.

The kitchen hand was, Dorrigo Evans could see, a sick man—why else would he be on kitchen duties?—sick with one or several diseases of starvation, and Dorrigo Evans understood that the steak was to that man too, at that moment, the most desirable, extraordinary thing in the universe. Making a hasty gesture, he told the kitchen hand to take it to the hospital and share it among the sickest there. The kitchen hand was unsure if he was serious. He made no movement.

The men want you to have it, the kitchen hand said. Sir. Why? Dorrigo Evans thought. Why am I saying I don’t want the steak? He so desperately wanted to eat it, and the men wanted him to have it, as a tribute of sorts. And yet, much as he knew no one would have begrudged him the meat, he also understood the steak to be a test that demanded witnesses, a test he had to pass, a test that would become a necessary story for them all.

Take it away, Dorrigo Evans said.

He gulped, trying to swallow the saliva that was flooding
his mouth. He feared he might go mad, or break in some terrible or humiliating way. He felt that his soul was not tempered, that he lacked so many of the things they now needed from him, those things that qualified one for an adult life. And yet he now found himself the leader of a thousand men who were strangely leading him to be all the many things he was not.

He gulped again; still his mouth ran with saliva. He did not think himself a strong man who knew he was strong—a strong man like Rexroth. Rexroth, thought Dorrigo Evans, was a man who would have eaten the steak as his right and, after, happily picked his highwayman's teeth in front of his starving men. To the contrary, Dorrigo Evans understood himself as a weak man who was entitled to nothing, a weak man whom the thousand were forming into the shape of their expectations of him as a strong man. It defied sense. They were captives of the Japanese and he was the prisoner of their hope.

Now! he snapped, nearly losing control.

Still the kitchen hand did not move, perhaps thinking he was joking, perhaps fearing an error in his understanding. And all the while Dorrigo Evans feared that if the steak stayed there in front of him a moment longer, he would seize it with both hands and swallow it whole and fail this test and be revealed for who he truly was. In his anger at the men's manipulation of him, in his fury at his own weakness, he suddenly stood up and started yelling in a rage—

Now! It's yours, not mine! Take it! Share it! Share it!

And the kitchen hand, relieved that he might now even get to taste a morsel of that steak himself, and delighted that the colonel was all that everyone said the Big Fella was, stole forward and took the steak to the hospital, and with it one more story of what an extraordinary man their leader was.

Dorrigo Evans hated virtue, hated virtue being admired, hated people who pretended he had virtue or pretended to virtue themselves. And the more he was accused of virtue as he grew older, the more he hated it. He did not believe in virtue. Virtue was vanity dressed up and waiting for applause. He had had enough of nobility and worthiness, and it was in Lynette Maison's failings that he found her most admirably human. It was in her unfaithful arms that he found fidelity to some strange truth of the passing nature of everything.

She had known privilege and never spent the night with doubt. As her beauty drifted away from her, a wake receding from a now-stilled boat, she came to need him far more than he did her. Imperceptibly to them both, she had become to him one more duty. But then his life was all duty now. Duty to his wife. Duty to his children. Duty to work, to committees, to charities. Duty to Lynette. Duty to the other women. It was exhausting. It demanded stamina. At times he amazed even himself. He would think there ought to be some sort of recognition for such achievement. It took a strange courage. It was loathsome. It made him hate himself, but he could no more not be himself now than he could have not been himself with Colonel Rexroth. And somehow what gave him
When his next leave—a six-day furlough—arose, he did not return to his uncle's hotel but took the overnight train to Melbourne, where he spent all his money on outings and presents for Ella, trying to lose himself in her, seeking to exorcise all memory of his strange encounter with Amy. Ella, for her part, would look greedily into his face, his eyes, and—with a growing concern in his heart which at moments approached terror—he could see her face straining to discover in his face and his eyes the same hunger. And what had been a beautiful, exotic face to Dorrigo Evans now simply seemed dull beyond imagining. Her dark eyes—which at first he had found bewitching—now appeared to him as credulous, even cow-like in their trust, though he tried very hard not to think it, and loathed himself all the more for thinking it anyway. And so he poured himself with renewed determination into her arms, into her conversations, into her fears and jokes and stories, hoping that this intimacy would finally smother all memory of Amy Mulvaney.

On his last night they went for dinner at her father's club. A RAAF major whom they met there made Ella laugh over and over with his jokes and stories. When the major announced he was leaving to go to a nearby nightclub, Ella begged Dorrigo that they go with him because he was such a hoot. Dorrigo felt a strange emotion that was neither jealousy nor gratitude but a strange mingling of both.

I love being with people, Ella said.

The more people I am with, Dorrigo thought, the more alone I feel.

Now the day began before the prisoners were awake, before the main body of guards and engineers were up, some hours before even the sun had risen; now, as Nakamura strode through the mud, breathing the wet night air, as his nightmares dissolved, as the methamphetamines cranked his heart and mind, he felt a pleasant anticipation. This day, this camp, this world, was his to shape. He found Colonel Kota, as Fukuhara had said, in an empty mess, sitting at a bamboo bench table eating tinned fish.

The colonel was a well-built man almost the height of an Australian, his physique belying a face that seemed to Nakamura to sag and fall away from either side of a shark-fin nose to ripples that trailed down his wrinkled cheeks.

Kota did not bother with small talk but got straight to business, saying he would be leaving in the morning as soon as transport could be arranged. From a soggy leather satchel the colonel produced an oiled japara folder, out of which he took a single sheet of typewritten orders and several pages of technical drawings so damp that they wrapped around Nakamura's fingers as he read them. The orders were no more complex than they were welcome.

The first order was technical: even though the major railway cutting was already half-completed, the Railway Command Group had altered Nakamura's original plans. They now wanted the cutting enlarged by a third to help with gradient issues in the next sector. The new cutting would entail a further three-thousand cubic metres of rock to be cut and carried away.

As Tomokawa poured sour tea for them both, Nakamura
bent down and retied the tapes of his puttee. They didn't have enough saws or axes to clear the jungle. The prisoners cut the rock by hand with a hammer and chisel. He didn't even have proper chisels for the prisoners to use, and when what they did have blunted, there wasn't enough coke for their forge to resharpen them. Nakamura sat back up.

Drilling machines with compressors would help, he said.

Colonel Kota stroked his sagging cheek.

Machinery?

He let the word hang in the air, leaving Nakamura to finish it off in his own mind—with the knowledge that there was no machinery, with the shame of having begged, the sense of being mocked. Nakamura lowered his head. Kota once more spoke.

There is nothing to spare. It can't be helped.

Nakamura knew he had been wrong to raise this matter, but was grateful that Colonel Kota seemed understanding. He read the second order. The deadline for the completion of the railway had been brought forward from December to October. Nakamura was overcome with despair. His task was now impossible.

I know you can make it possible, Colonel Kota said. It's no longer April, Nakamura said in what he hoped would be understood as an oblique reference to when headquarters had approved the final plans. It's August.

Colonel Kota's eyes remained fixed on Nakamura's.

We will redouble our efforts, a chastened Nakamura finally said.

I cannot lie to you, Colonel Kota said. I very much doubt there will be a corresponding increase in either machinery or tools. Maybe more coolies. But even that I can't say. We have over a quarter of a million coolies and sixty thousand prisoners working on this railway. I know the English and Australians are lazy. I know they complain they are too tired or too hungry to work. That they take one small spadeful and stop for a rest. One blow of the hammer, then they halt. That they complain about insubstantial matters such as being slapped. If a Japanese soldier neglects his work he expects to be beaten. What gives cowards the right not to be slapped? The Burmese and Chinese coolies that are sent here keep running away or dying. The Tamils, thankfully, have too far to run back to Malaya, but now they are dying everywhere from cholera, and even with the thousands more now arriving there is still not enough manpower. I don't know. None of it can be helped.

Nakamura returned to reading the typed letter. The third order was that one hundred prisoners were to be seconded from his camp for work at a camp near Three Pagoda Pass, some one hundred and fifty kilometres to the north on the Burmese border.

I don't have one hundred prisoners to spare, thought Nakamura. I need another thousand prisoners to complete this section in the time I have been given, not lose even more. He looked up at Colonel Kota.

The hundred men are to march there?

There is no other way in the monsoon. That can't be helped either.

Nakamura knew many would die trying to get there. Perhaps most. But the railway demanded it, the Emperor had ordered the railway, and this was the way it had been decided that the railway would be made. And he could
see that, in reality—this reality of dreams and nightmares that he had to live in every day—there was no other way for the railway to be built. Still he persisted.

Understand me, Nakamura said. My problem is practical. With no tools, and fewer men every day, how do I build the railway?

Even if most die of exhaustion you are to complete the work, Colonel Kota said, shrugging his shoulders. Even if everybody dies.

And Nakamura could see that, in this sacrifice too, there was no other way for the Emperor's wishes to be realised. What was a prisoner of war anyway? Less than a man, just material to be used to make the railway, like the teak sleepers and steel rails and dog spikes. If he, a Japanese officer, allowed himself to be captured, he would be executed on his ultimate return to the home islands anyway.

Until two months ago I was in New Guinea, Colonel Kota said. Bougainville. Heaven is Java, they say, hell is Burma, but no one comes back from New Guinea.

The colonel smiled, and the sags of his face rose and fell, reminding Nakamura of a terraced hillside.

I'm the proof that old soldiers' sayings are not always true. But it is very harsh there. The American air power is incredible. Day after day we were pounded by their Lockheeds. Day and night, bombed and strafed. We would be given a week's rations and expected to fight for a month. If we only had salt and matches in the combat area, we could have coped with anything. But I tell you, what of the Americans and Australians? They can boast only of their matériel power, their machines, their technology. Wait and see! We will wage a war of annihilation. Every officer and man in our army there is churning with the desire to massacre all the Americans and Australians. And we will win, because our spirit will endure when theirs crumbles.

And as the colonel talked, his terraced face seemed to Nakamura to hold within it so much of the ancient wisdom of Japan, of all that Nakamura found good and best in his country, in his own life. Nakamura understood that the colonel, with his gentle voice, was telling him something more than this story: that he was saying that no matter what adversity, no matter what lack of tools and manpower Nakamura might have to put up with, he would endure, the railway would be built, the war would be won, and all this would be because of the Japanese spirit.

But what that spirit was, what it precisely meant, Nakamura would have had difficulty saying. It was good and it was pure, and it was for him a more real force than the thorny bamboo and teak, the rain and mud and rocks and sleepers and steel rails they worked with each day. It had somehow become the essence of him, and yet it was a thing beyond words. And to explain what he was feeling, Nakamura found himself telling a story.

Last night I was talking with an Australian doctor, he said. The doctor had wanted to know why Japan had started the war. And I had explained the nobility of universal brotherhood that was our guiding idea. I mentioned our motto, _The Whole World Under One Roof_. But I don't think it came across. And so I said how, in short, it was now Asia for the Asians, with Japan the leader of the Asian bloc. I told him how we were liberating Asia from European colonisation. It was very hard. He kept on about freedom.
In truth Nakamura had had no idea what the Australian had been on about. The words, yes, but the ideas made no sense at all.

Freedom? Colonel Kota said.

They laughed.

Freedom, Nakamura said, and they both chuckled again.

Nakamura's own thoughts were a jungle unknown and perhaps unknowable to him. Besides, he didn't care about his own thoughts. He cared about being certain, sure. Kota's words were like shabu for his sick mind.

Nakamura cared about the railway, honour, the Emperor, Japan, and he had a sense of himself as a good and honourable officer. But still he tried to fathom the confusion he felt.

I remember early on, when the prisoners still had concerts, and one night I was watching. The jungle, the fire, the men singing their song, the 'Waltzing Matilda'. It made me feel sentimental. Even sympathetic. It was hard not to feel moved.

But the railway, Colonel Kota said, is no less a battle-field than the front line in Burma.

Exactly, Nakamura said. One cannot distinguish between human and non-human acts. One cannot point, one cannot say this man here is a man and that man there is a devil.

It is true, Colonel Kota said. This is a war, and war is beyond such things. And the Siam–Burma railway is for a military purpose—but that's not the larger point. It is that this railway is the great epoch-making construction of our century. Without European machinery, within a time considered extraordinary, we will build what the Europeans said it was not possible to build over many years. This railway is the moment when we and our outlook become the new drivers of world progress.

They drank some more sour tea, and Colonel Kota grew wistful about not being at the front, able to die for the Emperor. They cursed the jungle, the rain, Siam.

Nakamura spoke of how hard it was to keep driving the Australians out to work, and how if they were only a little more accepting of the great role destiny had given them, he wouldn't have to drive them so pitilessly. It wasn't in his nature to be so harsh. But in the face of the Australians' intransigence, he had to be.

They have no spirit, Colonel Kota said. That's what I saw in New Guinea. You charge them, they scatter like cockroaches.

If they had spirit, Nakamura said, they would have chosen death rather than the shame of being a prisoner.

I remember when I first went to Manchukuo, fresh from officer school, Colonel Kota said, clenching his hand as if around a handle or grip. A second lieutenant, very green. Five years ago. How long ago it seems. We had to undertake special field training exercises to prepare us for combat. One day we were taken to a prison for our trial of courage. The Chinese prisoners hadn't been fed for days. They were so scrawny. They were bound and blindfolded and made to kneel in front of a large pit. The lieutenant in charge unsheathed his sword. He scooped some water with his hand from a bucket and poured it over both sides of the blade. I have always remembered the water dripping off his sword.

Watch, he said. This is how you cut off heads.
On the following Saturday afternoon, the heat had grown to be unbearable. Having finished with the lunch sitting and made sure everything was ready for dinner, Amy Mulvaney decided to get changed and go for a swim. There was a large crowd smeared up and down the beach across the road from the King of Cornwall, and as she walked along the sand, listening to the waves and squeals, straw-hatted and in a pair of blue shorts and a white cambric blouse, she was aware of the gaze of both men and women.

The long, unbelievably hot summer days, the sensual nights, the stuffy bedroom and Keith's sounds and smells filled Amy Mulvaney with the strangest restlessness. She was full of yearning. To leave, to be someone else, somewhere else, to start moving and never stop. And yet the more the innermost part of her screamed to move, the more she recognised that she was frozen to one place, one life. And Amy Mulvaney wanted a thousand lives, and not one of them did she want to be like the one she had.

She had sometimes taken advantage of the war and Keith's lenient nature to escape for a night here and there. There had been some small adventures—a RAAF officer who had pressed her against the wall after a night's dancing, but to her great relief and slight disappointment, had only kissed her wildly and groped her a little. She had gone to bed with a travelling salesman who sometimes appeared at the hotel's back bar and whom she met outside a cinema in town one night. It had been an awful thing that, once begun, she felt could only end by letting it run its course. Compared to Keith, he'd had a strong, young body, and had been vigorous and attentive—too much so. For as soon as she found herself in bed naked with him, she was horrified: she could not bear his touch, his smell, his flesh. She wanted to be gone.

After, she had vomited and felt such a terrible emptiness that she had firmly resolved it could never happen again; a resolution that had helped her deal with the guilt she felt. She reasoned that perhaps, in the strangest way, this infidelity had ensured her fidelity thereafter to Keith. And because she had not loved the travelling salesman, there had been, she came to think, no real infidelity. Her love for Keith—such as it was—was still love: she still cared about him, was amused by him, and appreciated his gentleness and his numerous small kindnesses. The months after that disastrous night had in some ways been the best they had known. And yet even when she slept long and deeply and awoke feeling serene, with Keith bringing her a cup of tea in bed, Amy Mulvaney wanted something else, but what she wanted she was unable to say. As she sipped the tea and watched his large back lumber out the door, she could not help but wonder what that wanting was—the wanting that ate away at her stomach, the wanting that sometimes made her involuntarily shudder, the invisible, nameless, terrible wanting that she feared might be the very essence of life.

And so it had been for the last year, more or less. She flirted, but in a careful way; she made friends with those perhaps she shouldn't have, but again in a way that seemed to her and others, if not entirely appropriate, not inappropriate either. For that reason, because she felt a
strange freedom—even a security—in having decided that no acquaintanceship could end in anything untoward, she felt emboldened to sometimes do and say such things to men as she had to the tall doctor in the bookshop. But again she reasoned that perhaps, ultimately, there had been nothing wrong in her behaviour, for in some fundamental way she had loved none of them and she still loved Keith. She felt she had found a balance that would make that love stronger, and she did not know why as she had walked over to that tall doctor in the bookshop, she had slipped off her wedding ring.

And when Amy thought about it, she realised that what she had said to the tall doctor she had never said to anyone else before. She could not understand it, nor could she understand why she had put her hand on his at the club, nor why she held him when he had gone to leave her rooms. She was simply determined never again to do such foolish things. She tried to convince herself that what had taken place with him was already over. But in her heart she feared something else and she tried hard not to allow her fear words or even thoughts.

Throwing her towel down on the blinding sand, straw hat on top, and skipping out of her clothes, she felt her youth and body as power. And despite her insignificance and unimportance, Amy understood that if only for a short time she was somehow special and important. She ran into the water. Unlike many of the other women, who dawdled at knee height, Amy Mulvaney threw herself under a wave just at the point it was about to break on her. And when she burst back up, tasting salt, the sky an unbearable brilliance, all her confusion was gone and in its place she had the strange sensation that she had surfaced into some new centre of her life. For a moment everything was in balance, everything waited.

Amy floated. Far out to sea a small yacht sat listless on the still water. When she turned back around to the beach she saw a middle-aged man in an old-fashioned woollen bathing suit staring at her. He was hairless, his skin like that of a fowl before it went into the oven. He abruptly looked away.

Once more, she knew that strange, haunting emotion that would not let her be: but what Amy Mulvaney wanted she was unable to say. She swam a few strokes further out, and it was as if the sea, the sun, the slight breeze were all willing her to do something, anything, but something. As she looked up and down the surf, she saw other people in line with her, so many people, expectant, hopeful, similarly waiting for the next wave to break, hoping to ride its power in to shore. As the ocean began banking up in a rolling wall behind her she noticed that running along its crest was a long line of yellow-eyed, silver fish.

As far as she could see all the fish were pointed in the same direction along the wave face, and all were swimming furiously as they sought to escape the breaking wave’s hold. And all the time the wave had them in its power and would take them where it would, and there was nothing that glistening chain of fish could do to change their fate. Amy felt herself beginning to rise back into the wave’s swelling, she tensed in anticipation and excitement, not knowing whether she would succeed in catching it, and, if she did, where she and the fish might end up.
Colonel Kota unclenched his hand and said—

He spread his legs, raised the sword and with a yell swung it down hard. The head seemed to leap away. The blood was still spurting in two fountains when we had to follow. It was hard to breathe. I was frightened of making a fool of myself. Some of the others hid their heads in their hands, one messed his stroke up so badly a lung half popped out. The head was still in place and the lieutenant had to finish off the mess. And all the time I was watching: what was a good stroke, what was a bad stroke, where to stand next to the prisoner, how to keep the prisoner calm and still. Thinking about it now, I can see that all the time I was looking, I was learning. And not only about beheading.

When my turn came I couldn’t believe that I was doing everything so calmly because inside I was horrified. Yet I unsheathed the sword my father had given me without shaking, wet it as the instructor had shown without dropping it, and for a moment watched as those water beads rolled together and slowly ran away. You wouldn’t believe how much watching that water helped me.

I stood behind the prisoner, got my balance, carefully examined his neck—skinny and old, filth in its folds; I’ve never forgotten that neck. Before it had begun it was over, and I was wondering why there were little globules of fat on my sword that wouldn’t rub off with the paper they handed me. That’s all I was thinking—where did that fat come from in such a scrawny man’s scrawny neck? His neck was dirty, grey, like dirt you piss on. But once I had cut it open the colours were so vivid, so alive—the red of his blood, the white of his bone, the pink of his flesh, the yellow of that fat. Life! Those colours were life itself.

I was thinking about how easy it had been, how bright and beautiful the colours were, and I was stunned it was already over. Only when the next cadet officer stepped forward did I see that my prisoner’s neck was still pumping blood out in two fountains, just like the lieutenant’s victim, but only a little, so it must have been some time after I killed him that I noticed.

I no longer felt anything for that man. To be honest, I despised him for accepting his fate so meekly and wondered why he wouldn’t fight. But who’d be any different? And yet, I was angry with him for letting me slaughter him.

Nakamura noticed how, as he told his story, Kota’s sword hand continued clenching and unclenching, as if rehearsing or practiseing.

And what I felt, Major Nakamura, the colonel continued, was something so large in my stomach that it was as if I were now another man. I had gained something, that’s what I felt. It was a great and terrible feeling. As if I had died too and was now reborn.

Before, I worried about how my men looked at me when I stood in front of them. But after, I just looked at them. That was enough. I no longer cared or was frightened. I just stared and saw into them—their fears, their sins, their lies—I saw everything, knew everything. Your eyes are evil, a woman said to me one night. I would just look at people and that would be enough to frighten them.

But after a while this feeling began to die. I started
feeling confused. Lost. The men would start talking insolently again, quietly, behind my back. But I knew it. No one was frightened of me anymore. It's like Philopon—once you have it, even if it makes you feel lousy, you just want it again.

Can I tell you something? There were always prisoners. If a few weeks had gone by and I hadn't beheaded someone, I would go and find one not long for this world with a neck I fancied. I'd make him dig his grave . . .

And as he listened to the colonel's terrible story, Nakamura could see that even in such terrible acts, too, that there was no other way for the Emperor's wishes to be realised.

Necks, continued Colonel Kota, looking away to where an open door framed the rainswept night. That's all I really see of people now. Their necks. It's not right to think this way, is it? I don't know. It's how I am now. I meet someone new, I look at his neck, I size it up—easy to cut or hard to cut. And that's all I want of people, their necks, that blow, this life, those colours, the red, the white, the yellow.

Your neck, you see, Colonel Kota said, that was what I first saw. And such a good neck—I can see exactly where the sword should fall. A wonderful neck. Your head would fly a metre. As it should. Because sometimes the neck is just too thin or too fat, or they wriggle or squeal in terror—you can just imagine—and you botch it and end up hacking them to death in rage. Your corporal, though, bull-necked, his attitude, you see. I'd have to concentrate on my stroke and placement to kill him quickly.

And all the time he was talking, Colonel Kota went on clenching and unclenching his hand, raising and lowering it when clenched, as though he were readying his sword for another beheading.

It's not just about the railway, Colonel Kota said, though the railway must be built. Or even the war, though the war must be won.

It's about the Europeans learning that they are not the superior race, Nakamura said.

And us learning that we are, Colonel Kota said.

For some moments neither man spoke, then Colonel Kota recited:

> Even in Kyoto  
> when I hear the cuckoo  
> I long for Kyoto.

Basho, Nakamura said.

Talking more, Nakamura was delighted to discover that Colonel Kota shared with him a passion for traditional Japanese literature. They grew sentimental as they talked of the earthy wisdom of Issa's haiku, the greatness of Buson, the wonder of Basho's great haibun, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which, Colonel Kota said, summed up in one book the genius of the Japanese spirit.

They both fell silent again. For no reason, Nakamura felt his spirits abruptly rising at the thought of their railway delivering victory in the invasion of India, at the idea of the whole world under one roof, with the beauty of Basho's verse. And all these things, which had seemed so confused and lacking in substance when he had tried to explain them to the Australian colonel, now seemed so clear and obvious and connected, so kind and good, when talking with such a kind, good man as Colonel Kota.
To the railway, said Colonel Kota, raising his teacup.
To Japan, said Nakamura, raising his cup in turn.
To the Emperor! said Colonel Kota.
To Basho! said Nakamura.
Issa!
Buson!

They drained what was left of Tomokawa’s sour tea, then put down their teacups. And because they were two strangers with no idea what next to say, the silence that returned felt to Nakamura a mutual and profound understanding. The colonel opened a dark-blue cigarette case with the Kuomintang’s white sun emblazoned on it, and proffered it to his fellow officer. They lit up and relaxed.

They recited to each other more of their favourite haiku, and they were deeply moved not so much by the poetry as by their sensitivity to poetry; not so much by the genius of the poem as by their wisdom in understanding the poem; not in knowing the poem but in knowing the poem demonstrated the higher side of themselves and of the Japanese spirit—that Japanese spirit that was soon to daily travel along their railway all the way to Burma, the Japanese spirit that from Burma would find its way to India, the Japanese spirit that would from there conquer the world.

In this way, thought Nakamura, the Japanese spirit is now itself the railway, and the railway the Japanese spirit, our narrow road to the deep north, helping to take the beauty and wisdom of Basho to the larger world.

And as they talked of renga and waka and haiku, of Burma and India and the railway, both men felt a great sense of shared meaning, though exactly what they had shared neither would afterwards have been able to say.

Colonel Kota recited another haiku by Kato, and they agreed that it was this supreme Japanese gift—of portraying life so concisely, so exquisitely—that they, with their work on the railway, were helping bring to the world. And this conversation, which was really a series of mutual agreements, made them both feel considerably better about their own privations and the bitter struggle that was their work.

And then Nakamura looked at his watch.
You must excuse me, Colonel. It’s already 0350 hours. I must reschedule the work gangs to meet the new targets before reveille.

As he was about to leave, the colonel put his hand on Nakamura’s shoulder.
I could have talked poetry with you all night, the large man said.

In the darkness and emptiness of the hut, Nakamura could feel the intense emotion of Colonel Kota as he drew his arm around Nakamura and brought his shark-fin face in close. He smelt of stale anchovies. His lips were open.

In another world, Colonel Kota began. Men . . . men love.

He couldn’t go on. Nakamura pulled away. Colonel Kota straightened up and hoped he had been misunderstood. In New Guinea they had butchered and eaten both American prisoners and their own men. They had been dying of starvation. He remembered the corpses with their skinned thigh bones sticking out like gnawed drumsticks. The colours. Brown, green, black. He remembered the sweet taste. He had wanted another human being to know. That they had been starving and had no choice. To say it was all right. To hold him. To—
It can’t be helped, Nakamura said.
No, Colonel Kota replied, stepping backwards and flipping open his Kuomintang cigarette case to proffer another cigarette to Nakamura. Of course not.
As the major lit up, Colonel Kota said—

Even in Manchukuo
when I see a neck
I long for Manchukuo.

He snapped the cigarette case shut, smiled and, clenching his fist, turned and left, his strange laughter vanishing with him into the noise of the monsoon night.

Amy Mulvaney was astonished at how easily lying now came to her, and she felt both a shame and a joy in her new ability. Over dinner Keith had begun one of his rants about council politics, when she interrupted to tell him that she was spending the next day with an old girlfriend—they would drive to a distant, isolated beach for a picnic and a swim, and she would borrow the Ford Cabriolet for the purpose.

Of course, Keith said, and then immediately returned to his story about the new council clerk and his antiquated thinking on sewerage.

Say something real! Amy had nearly cried out. But what that real thing was, what it might sound like, she couldn’t say anymore, and besides, she didn’t really want his attention at all. And the more Keith rambled on about drains and the pressing need for sewers and modern planning regulations and water closets for all and national mechanisms, regulation and scientific administration, the more she longed for the brush of Dorrigo Evans’ fingers in the dark.

That night she had difficulty sleeping. Keith woke twice and asked her if she was ill, but before she answered he was asleep again, mouth rumbling, a minuscule salt pan of dry spume in the crease below his lips.

The next day began with her making her face up twice before she was satisfied and changing several times before settling on what she began with: dark shorts and a light cotton blouse cut to resemble a shawl which would show herself to advantage. Then she took the cotton blouse off in favour of a low-cut red blouse she fancied was like the one Olivia de Havilland wore in Captain Blood. But she had no skirt that went with it. And when, a little after ten, she picked up Dorrigo Evans from the sentry gate outside the barracks—Dorrigo Evans, who, she thought, with his smile, and his nose and the way he wore his hair a little longer than normal, really wasn’t that unlike Errol Flynn—she was wearing a rather impractical but, she felt, fetching light-blue floral skirt and a cream halter top.

With Dorrigo at her side, everything that had seemed to Amy dull and stupid now was delightful and interesting; all that yesterday felt like an ever more claustrophobic prison she had wished to escape today felt like the most wondrous backdrop to her life. But her nervousness was so great that she kept stalling the car and Dorrigo ended up driving.

God, she thought, how she wanted him, and how
The Goanna thought you was taking the piss, Jimmy Bigelow said, having a puff. Here—he held out the soggy cigarette butt for Darky.

Jimmy Bigelow's hand was covered with cracked scales, and was badly infected, all yellow and reds. Sickness terrified Darky Gardiner. It got hold of you and it would not let you go.

Here, Jimmy Bigelow said. Take it.

Darky Gardiner didn't move.

Only death is catching round here, Jimmy Bigelow said, and I ain't got that. Rightio?

Darky Gardiner took the smoke and—without letting it touch his lips—held it up to his open mouth.

Yet, Jimmy Bigelow said.

Darky took a pull on the cigarette. He watched four men carrying a bamboo stretcher stumble up towards the hospital.

Think that's Gyppo Nolan, Chum Fahey said.

The smoke rolled into Darky's mouth. It was sour and sharp and good.

That's our four-a-side crib competition down the gurgler, Sheephead Morton said. He turned to Rooster MacNeice. You interested in taking his place?

What? Rooster MacNeice said, still smarting from the humiliation of the eggshell.

Gyppo. He's . . . He's—well. Gone. And he loved the crib. He'd hate to think him just—

Dying?

Well. Sort of. I mean, the bloke could be an idiot. But he loved his cards. That was the gyppo I remember. And I know he'd want us to go on.

Playing crib?

Why not? Bridge wasn't ever Gyppo's lurk.

Darky Gardiner drew slow and long on the butt end a second time, dragging the smoke deep inside him and holding it there. For a moment the world was still and silent. With the rich, greasy smoke came peace, and he felt it was as if the world had stopped, and would stay stopped for as long as that smoke stayed within his mouth and chest. He closed his eyes, and whilst holding the butt end out for Jimmy Bigelow to take back, gave himself over to the nothingness that pervaded his body with the rich smoke. But his head was not right.

I hate cards, Rooster MacNeice said.

The rain returned. It was noise without comfort. It did not sweep faintly through the teak trees and the bamboo, it did not sigh, it did not create a tranquil hush. Rather, it crashed into the thorny bamboo, and the deluge sounded to Darky Gardiner like the noise of many things breaking. The rain was so loud it was impossible to talk.

He went out and stood in the tempest to wash the mud off. Filthy little creeks appeared around his feet as the rain formed rills and courses through the camp. He watched a dixie bob by their hut, and a moment later he saw a one-legged West Australian on bamboo crutches hopping in pursuit of it.

But his head was not right.

Every morning Dorrigo Evans shaves because he believes he must keep up appearances for their sake, because if it
looks like he no longer cares, why should they? And when he looks in the small service mirror, he sees its cloudy reflection blurring the face of a man no longer him: older, skinnier, bonier, hard in a way he never was, more remote and relying ever more on a few sorry props: his officer's cap, raffishly angled; a red scarf, tied bandana-fashion around his neck, a gypsy touch perhaps more for himself than for them.

Three months before, walking to a downriver camp to get drugs, he had come upon a Tamil romusha in a ragged red sarong sitting next to a creek, waiting to die. The old man was uninterested in what help Dorrigo Evans could offer. He waited for death as a traveller for a bus. Walking back along the same path a month ago he came upon the old man for a second time, now a skeleton picked clean by beast and insect. He took the red sarong from the skeleton, washed it, tore it in half and tied the better piece around his neck. When death comes for him he hopes to meet it similarly to the Tamil romusha, though he doubts he will. He does not accept the authorities of life, and nor will he, he thinks, of death.

He notices how they, his men, are also far older than they will ever be if they survive to grow old. Somewhere deep within them, do they know they only have to suffer but not inflict suffering? He understands the cult of Christ makes of suffering virtue. He had argued with Padre Bob about this. He hopes Christ is right. But he does not agree. He does not. He is a doctor. Suffering is suffering. Suffering is not virtue, nor does it make virtue, nor does of it virtue necessarily flow. Padre Bob died screaming, in terror, in pain, in hopelessness; he was nursed by a man Dorrigo Evans knew was said to have been a brutal standover man for a Darlinghurst gang before the war. Virtue is virtue, and, like suffering, it is inexplicable, irreducible, unintelligible. The night Padre Bob died, Dorrigo Evans dreamt he was in a pit with God, that they were both bald, and that they were fighting over a wig.

Dorrigo Evans is not blind to the prisoners' human qualities. They lie and cheat and rob, and they lie and cheat and rob with gusto. The worst feign illness, the proudest health. Nobility often eludes them. The previous day he had come across a man so sick he was lying face-down, nose just out of the mud, at the bottom of the rock face that marks the end of the Dolly, unable to make it the final few hundred yards home. Two men were walking past him, too exhausted to help, striving to conserve what little energy they had left for their own survival. He had to order them to help the naked man to the hospital.

Yet every day he carries them, nurses them, holds them, cuts them open and sews them up, plays cards for their souls and dares death to save one more life. He lies and cheats and robs too, but for them, always for them. For he has come to love them, and every day he understands that he is failing in his love, for every day more and more of them die.

It has been a long time since he has thought of women. But he still thinks of her. His world beyond here has shrunk to her. Not Ella. Her. Her voice, her smile, her throaty laugh, the smell of her asleep. He has conversations with her in his head. Does he love them because he cannot have her? He cannot have her. He cannot answer himself. He cannot.
Dorrigo Evans is not typical of Australia and nor are they, volunteers from the fringes, slums and shadowlands of their vast country: drovers, trappers, wharfies, roo shooters, desk jockeys, dingo trappers and shearsers. They are bank clerks and teachers, counter johnnies, piners and short-price runners, susso survivors, chancers, larrikins, yobs, tray men, crims, boofheads and tough bastards blasted out of a depression that had them growing up in shanties and shacks without electricity, with their old men dead or crippled or maddened by the Great War and their old women making do on aspro and hope, on soldier settlements, in sustenance camps, slums and shanty towns, in a nineteenth-century world that had staggered into the mid-twentieth century.

Though every dead man is a reduction of their number, the thousand POWs who first left Changi as Evans’ J Force—an assortment of Tasmanians and West Australians surrendered in Java, South Australians surrendered at Singapore, survivors of the sinking of the destroyer, HMAS Newcastle, a few Vics and New South Welshmen from other military misadventures, and some RAAF airmen—remain Evans’ J Force. That’s what they were when they arrived and that’s what they will be when they leave, Evans’ J Force, one-thousand souls strong, no matter, if at the end, only one man remains to march out of this camp. They are survivors of grim, pinched decades who have been left with this irreducible minimum: a belief in each other, a belief that they cleave to only more strongly when death comes. For if the living let go of the dead, their own life ceases to matter. The fact of their own survival somehow demands that they are one, now and forever.

A sack of letters from Australia had arrived with the bogged truck. This was a rare and unexpected pleasure. The POWs were aware that the Japanese witheld almost all mail, and such was the excitement that before breakfast was over the sack had already been opened and its contents distributed. Dorrigo was delighted to receive his first letter in almost a year. Before he even looked at the handwriting, he knew from its stiff card envelope that it was from Ella. He resolved not to open it until the evening, holding off on the pleasure of feeling that, somewhere else, another, better world continued on, a world in which he had a place and to which he would one day return. But almost immediately his mind rebelled and he tore open the envelope, so excitedly unfolding the two sheets that he partly ripped them. He began reading in a greedy fury.

Two-thirds of the way down the first page, he halted. He found himself unable to go on. It was as if he had jumped into a car and accelerated straight into a wall. The letters of Ella’s elegant copperplate hand kept scattering and rising off the page as dust motes, more and more dust motes bouncing off one another, and he was having trouble bringing her face to his mind. It seemed too real and entirely unreal at the same time.

He didn’t know whether it was the malaria attack he was still recovering from or exhaustion or the shock of receiving the letter, his first for the best part of a year. He reread it but was lost in a memory at once precise and imprecise, the dust motes brighter and wilder, the late-day sun more blinding than ever, and yet he could not see her face clearly. Thinking: The world is. It just is.
and which Rooster MacNeice understood he did not possess, made no sense to him and momentarily filled him with the most terrible hate. Rooster MacNeice turned back to the bamboos and tried once more to imagine them as gothic arches, his prison as a cathedral, and to fill his heart with beauty.

8

While the prisoners assembled in the downpour, Dorrigo Evans at their head, the Japanese waited in the administration hut until the worst of it was over, and only then came out. To Dorrigo Evans’ surprise, Nakamura was with them. Normally, Lieutenant Fukuhara oversaw the selection. Unlike Fukuhara, who always managed to look parade-ground perfect, Nakamura’s officer’s uniform was bedraggled and his shirt had dark mould blooms. He stopped to tie up a puttee tape trailing in the mud.

As he waited, Dorrigo Evans flexed his body as he once had on the football field, readying himself for the encounter. The prisoners counted off, a tedious process in which each man had to yell out his Japanese number. As the prisoners’ commanding officer and senior medical officer, Dorrigo Evans reported to Major Nakamura that four men had died the day before, two overnight, and that this left eight hundred and thirty-eight POWs. Of this eight hundred and thirty-eight, sixty-seven had cholera and were in the cholera compound, and another one hundred and seventy-nine were in hospital with severe illness. A further one hundred and sixty-seven were too ill for any work other than light duties. He pointed at the prisoners propped up against the log and said that there were in addition sixty-two reporting in sick this morning over there.

That leaves three hundred and sixty-three men for work on the railway, Dorrigo Evans said.

Fukuhara translated.

Go hyaku, Nakamura said.

Major Nakamura say he must have five hundred prisoners, Fukuhara translated.

We don’t have five hundred fit men, Dorrigo Evans said. The cholera is destroying us. It—

Australians should wash like Japanese soldier. Hot bath every day, Fukuhara said. Be clean. Then no cholera.

There were no baths. There was no time to heat the water even if they had them. Fukuhara’s comment struck Evans as the most bitter mockery.

Go hyaku! Nakamura exploded.

Dorrigo Evans had not expected this. For the past week they had been asked for four hundred men and after the theatre usually settled on about three hundred and eighty. But every day there were more dead and more sick and fewer able to work. And now there was cholera. But he continued as he had begun and repeated that there were three hundred and sixty-three men fit for work.

Major say produce more body from hospital, said Fukuhara.

Those men are sick, Dorrigo Evans said. If they are put to work, they’ll die.

Go hyaku, Nakamura said, without waiting for the translation.
Three hundred and sixty-three men, Dorrigo Evans said.

*Go hyaku!*

Three hundred and eighty, Dorrigo Evans said, hoping they could now settle.

*San hachi,* Fukuhara translated.

*Yon hyaku kyū jū go,* Nakamura said.

Four hundred and ninety-five, Fukuhara translated.

There was to be no easy settling.

They haggled on. After ten or more minutes further argument, Dorrigo Evans decided that if there had to be a selection of the sick to work, it should be based on his medical knowledge and not on Nakamura's insane demands. He offered four hundred men, citing once more the numbers of the sick, detailing their myriad afflictions. But in his heart Dorrigo Evans knew his medical knowledge was no argument and no shield. He felt the most terrible helplessness that was also his hunger eating him from inside, and he tried not to think of the steak he had so recklessly refused.

But beyond four hundred, he concluded, we are achieving nothing for the Emperor. Men will die who would be of much use once they're better. Four hundred is the best we can muster.

Before Fukuhara could translate, Nakamura yelled to a corporal. A white bentwood chair was hastily brought out of the administration hut. Mounting it, Nakamura addressed the prisoners in Japanese. It was a short speech, and when it was finished he stepped down and Fukuhara stepped up.

*Majō Nakamura have pleasure to lead you on railway construction,* Fukuhara said. He regret to find seriousness in health matter. To his opinion this due to absence of Japanese belief: health follows will! In Japanese army those who fail to reach objective by lack of health considered most shameful. Devotion until death good.

Fukuhara got down and Major Nakamura stepped back up on the chair and spoke again. This time when he finished he didn't get down, but remained standing, looking up and down the ranks of the prisoners.


Nakamura got down off the chair.

Happy bastard, Sheephead Morton whispered to Jimmy Bigelow.

Something fell. No one moved. No one spoke.

A prisoner had collapsed in the front row. Nakamura strode over, making his way along the row of prisoners until he reached the fallen man.

*Kura!* Nakamura yelled.

When there was no response to this or a second shout, the Japanese major kicked the fallen man in the belly. The prisoner staggered to his feet, before falling again. Nakamura kicked hard a second time. Again the prisoner rose to his feet and again he fell. His huge, jaundiced eyes were protruding like dirty golf balls—strange, lost things from another world—and no amount of kicking or yelling by Nakamura would move him. His wasted face and withered cheeks made his jaw seem oversized. It looked like the snout of a wild pig.
Malnutrition, thought Dorrigo Evans, who had followed Nakamura and now knelt down between him and the prisoner. The man lay in the mud, inert. His body was a wasted rack covered in sores and ulcers and peeling skin. Pellagra, beri-beri, Christ knows what else, thought Dorrigo. The man's buttocks were little more than wretched cables, out of which his anus protruded like a turkshead of filthy rope. A stinking olive-coloured slime was oozing out and over his string shanks. Amoebic dysentery. Dorrigo Evans shovelled the shitty mess of a man into his arms, stood back up and turned to Nakamura, the sick man hanging in his arms like a muddy bundle of broken sticks.

Three hundred and ninety-nine men, said Evans.

Nakamura was tall for a Japanese soldier, perhaps five foot ten, and well built. Fukuhara began translating, but Nakamura put up a hand and stopped him. He turned back to Dorrigo Evans and backhanded him across the face.

This man is too sick to work for Nippon, Major.

Nakamura slapped him again. And as Nakamura went on slapping him, Evans concentrated on not dropping the sick man. At six foot three, Dorrigo Evans was tall for an Australian. This difference in height at first helped him ride the blows, but they slowly took their toll. He focused on keeping his feet equally weighted, on the next blow, on keeping his balance, on not admitting to any pain, as though it were some game. But it was not a game, it was anything but a game, and he knew that too. And in a way he felt it was right he was being punished.

Because he had lied.

Because three hundred and sixty-three wasn't the real number. Nor was three hundred and ninety-nine. Because, thought Dorrigo Evans, the real number was zero. No prisoner was up to what the Japanese expected. All were suffering varying degrees of starvation and illness. He played games for them like he always played games, and he played games because that was the best he could do. And Dorrigo Evans knew there was a number other than zero that was also the real number, and that number was the one he now had to calculate, the addition of the least likely to die to the now three hundred and sixty-two least sick. And every day this terrible arithmetic fell to him.

He was panting now. As Nakamura's blows continued falling he concentrated on running through the hospital admissions again, the ones recovering, the light duties men; as Nakamura hit him on this side of his face, then that, he counted again the number of sick in the hospital—perhaps forty—who, if properly handled, might just be capable of being transferred onto light duties—as long as they were very light—and the same number of the best of the light-duties men could then be put into the work parties. The combined number was four hundred and sixty. Yes, he thought, that's the maximum number he could find, four hundred and six men. And yet today, as Nakamura hit him again and again, he knew it would not be enough. He would have to give up to Nakamura even more men.

As suddenly as he had begun, Major Nakamura stopped beating him and stepped away. Nakamura scratched his shaved head and looked up at the Australian. He stared hard and deep into his eyes, and the Australian returned
his stare, and in that exchange of glances they expressed everything that was not in Fukuhara's translation. Nakamura was saying he would prevail, come what may, and Dorrigo Evans was replying that he was an equal and that he would not submit. And only with that silent conversation finally done did the haggling resume in this strange bazaar of life and death.

Nakamura named the figure of four hundred and thirty men and would not budge. Evans blustered, held firm, blustered some more. But Nakamura had begun scratching his elbow furiously and now spoke forcefully.

The Emperor wills it, Fukuhara translated.

I know, Dorrigo Evans said.

Fukuhara said nothing.

Four hundred and twenty-nine, said Dorrigo Evans and bowed.

And so the day's deal was done and the business of the day began. Dorrigo Evans momentarily wondered whether he had won or lost. He had played the game as best he could, and every day he lost a little more, and the loss was counted in the lives of others.

He went over to the Wailing Wall and laid the sick man down by the log with the other sick, and was about to go to the hospital and begin the selection when he had the feeling he had lost or misplaced something.

He turned back around.

In the same way it covered logs, sleepers, fallen bamboo, railway iron and any number of other inanimate things, the rain now snaked over Tiny Middleton's corpse. It was always raining.

Yours, isn't it? Sheephead Morton asked, proffering Darky Gardiner a sledgehammer at the depot where the prisoners collected their tools. He had huge hands like vices and a head that he himself described as rougher than the road out of Rosebery. His name came not from his looks, but from his childhood growing up in Queenstown—a remote copper mining town on the Tasmanian west coast, a land made in equal parts of rainforest and myth—where for a time his family had been so poor that they had only been able to afford sheepheads for food. His gentleness when sober was only matched by his violence when drunk. He loved fighting, and once drunk he had challenged an entire busload of diggers returning from leave in Cairo to take him on. When told to shut up and sit down, he had turned to Jimmy Bigelow and, shaking his head in disgust, summed up a world of contempt with just eight words: You don't get rats out of mice, Jimmy.

Tiny's, Darky Gardiner said.

Tiny had marked the best hammer in the camp's collection by notching a T at the top of the handle so that he or Darky would recognise it each morning.

It's the best hammer, said Sheephead Morton, to whom such things mattered. The handle's a bit splintered but the head's a good pound heavier.

And while Tiny had his strength and they had been on a piecework system, it had been the best sledgehammer. Every blow had the extra power of its weight, slamming the drill harder and deeper and helping Tiny and Darky finish their quota early. You just had to be as fit and strong
Either way, high up on the thigh or at the hip, there's nowhere left to put any tourniquet and he bleeds to death. There's no fucking leg left, Squizzy. That's the problem.

If I can push down hard with something round and flat about here, said Taylor, prodding around his own groin with his fingers, feeling the arteries, the flesh, the span of the dilemma. Here, he said, pushing two fingers into his groin. Here—the femoral artery, that might stop the blood enough.

It might not.

It might not.

Maybe something like a spoon with the handle bent around? That might.

Might.

That'd do the job. And hopefully staunch the flow enough that you can work. He'll still bleed. But you get the stump off, clamp the arteries and then sew up. He'll still be bleeding but not so badly he'll die.

I'll have to go quickly.

You were never a man to dawdle.

Jack Rainbow's wasted body was trembling slightly. A low hiss pulsed in and out of his mouth.

Okay, said Dorrigo Evans, shaking his hands dry. He sent Jimmy Bigelow for a tablespoon and went back to the bamboo table.

We're just going to whittle that leg back a bit more, Jack, cut that stinking gangrene away and—

I'm cold, said Jack Rainbow.
prepared for the amputation, boiling the kitchen saw and the few surgical instruments they had. When all was finally ready, Dorrigo Evans gave the signal they were about to begin. The drip was removed and Jack Rainbow was rolled back around.

We will be as quick as we can, Dorrigo Evans said. Normal procedure. The key here is to keep bleeding to an absolute minimum. Hold him, he said, turning to Jimmy Bigelow and Wat Cooney. Spoon ready? he asked Squizzy Taylor. Taylor raised the now bent spoon in a mock salute.

Charge the windmill, Dorrigo Evans said.

He took a deep breath. Taylor pushed the spoon head gently but with growing firmness into the base of Jack Rainbow's wasted belly.

Torch, Dorrigo Evans said. Jimmy Bigelow came forward and shone the torch on the stump.

There was noise from the general hospital huts but it was almost immediately drowned out by Jack's screaming as Dorrigo Evans began cutting away his leg stump. The stench of the dead flesh was so powerful it was all he could do not to vomit. But Jack Rainbow's screams confirmed to Dorrigo Evans that he was doing what he had to do: cut into living flesh.

An orderly came running into the operating hut.

What do you want? Dorrigo Evans asked, not looking up.

The Goanna's taken Darky Gardiner out of the hospital. What?

We couldn't stop him. They dragged him out by his arms. Something about men missing up on the Line. There's a tenko happening now. They're going to punish him.

Later, Dorrigo Evans said, his face down almost at the level of Jack Rainbow's stinking remnant of leg, concentrating on the job at hand.

Major Menadue said only you can stop them.

Later.

When he severed the femoral artery it bled badly, but not wildly.


He clamped the femoral artery but the tissue just broke away and the fleshy tube spat blood out over the table and then continued pumping blood.

Push harder, he said to Taylor. He was thinking how he should have been there to stop such an outrage. He thought also of the broken still, the need to buy more anaesthetic from the Thai traders, and how in future he must always make the first amputation as low as possible to allow for such future horrors as this.

He clamped the femoral artery a second time, and for a second time it fell away, and he had to push up into the stinking dead flesh and clamp again. He stopped, waited. This time it held.

Okay, he said, okay.

He cut away more flesh. Within a minute he had cut off the rest of the rotting meat. There was bleeding, but Taylor was right, it was not too much, there had been enough leg left, just enough to amputate. For the first time in an hour he relaxed a little.

Spoon away? Taylor asked.

Not yet, Dorrigo Evans said. Pointing to the rotting meat on the table, he said to Jimmy Bigelow, Get rid of it, for Christ's sake.
Next Evans flensed enough skin to form a flap to cover the final wound. Then he neatly filleted the living leg muscles back from the bone, so that he could remove the bone higher up and the flesh could in time heal below and around it to form a tolerable stump.

Saw, he said.

An orderly handed him the kitchen meat saw. It was hard to get the traction he needed, so he worked with gentle small strokes, scoring the upper thighbone, seeking to avoid splinters and any further damage to the flesh. And soon enough a piece of bone the length of a finger dropped away.

The three men were now intensely focused on the operation. Dorrigo Evans set to work sewing up the femoral artery with a gut twine Van Der Woude had improvised out of a pig's intestine casings. These had been cleaned, boiled and pared into threads, then cleaned and boiled again, then boiled a third time before the operation. Compared to surgical ligatures, they were coarse, but they held. But this time he was sewing into nothing, wetness, a blur of tissue and blood. The torchlight was dimming, and he concentrated with all his being on getting each suture in exactly the right place.

And then the bleeding stopped.

He had done it. He had managed to suture the artery, and Jack Rainbow would live. He realised he was breathing heavily. He smiled. He began to prepare the rest of the muscles and skin flap for binding over the bone stump. He looked up at Squizzy.

Spoon away, Major. Gently.

Squizzy Taylor lifted the spoon. Dorrigo Evans kept working, more slowly now, more carefully. Jack would live. He would save this man's life. There was the recuperation to get through, the chance of infection. But his chances were now good. Not great, perhaps, but still good. He concentrated on doing the best job he could now, imagining a middle-aged Jack Rainbow with children, his stump on a cushion. Alive. Loved. And he knew that what he did was not pointless, without reason; that he had not failed.

Torch off, he said.

He was finished.

He stood up straight, rubbed his back, winked at Jimmy Bigelow and looked back down at the stump. It was a surprisingly neat job. He felt proud of his handiwork. He noticed a small seep of blood where he had just stitched the flaps of flesh together, but the orderly was cleaning the stump and wiped it away.

Dorrigo lit a cigarette, breathed in the welcome smoke deeply, and laughed.

A spoon, he said.

A bloody bent spoon, said Squizzy.

That's one for The Lancet.

When he glanced back at Jack, a few fresh beads of blood had appeared on the stump.

Why aren't you dressing and bandaging the stump? Dorrigo asked Wat Cooney, as he wiped away the blood a second time.

As if in answer, the blood almost as quickly reappeared. The stitched flaps were swelling, the small seepage was transforming into a persistent oozing, and then blood began to drip from every part of the wound. Wat Cooney looked up at Dorrigo in horror.

The stitches holding the femoral artery together must
have given way, Squizzy Taylor said, giving words to a thought Dorrigo did not wish to have. For a moment he was frozen.

Spoon! he suddenly yelled.

What? asked Jimmy Bigelow, who was on the other side of the hut.

The ligatures are gone on the femoral artery. We've got to open it back up.

Squizzy Taylor ran back with the spoon.

Torch! Jimmy, torch! We've got half a minute.

For after half a minute, he knew, Jack Rainbow's heart would have emptied his body of blood. Before he could get the spoon back in position Jack Rainbow's body jolted.

Spoon!

Jack Rainbow's body had gone into convulsions.

Spoon! Dorrigo Evans yelled.

Squizzy Taylor went to push the spoon down but couldn't keep it pressed against the bucking body. Jimmy Bigelow switched the torch on and got back in position, but the torch dimmed further and then died altogether.

Torch! Dorrigo Evans was yelling. Where's the fucking light?

The body was jumping wildly.

Hold him! Hold him down! Hard. Spoon! Hard! Hold the fucker!

I'm pushing as hard as I fucking can but the fucker won't stop, yelled Squizzy Taylor.

Blood was everywhere, blood over the bamboo, blood over them, blood dripping oily lines in the dark mud below. It took a few more moments for Jimmy Bigelow and Wat Cooney to get a good grip of Jack Rainbow and hold him, but still that emaciated tiny body jolted up and down as if electricity were coursing through it, and their grips slipped in the blood that now seemed to grease everything.

The leg, said Dorrigo Evans. Get the leg!

But there was really no leg left to get, only a weirdly moving and bloody thing that seemed just to want to be left alone. The tiny piece of thigh that remained was now so slippery with blood that it was very difficult to work on, and in the dim light and the confusion of blood Dorrigo Evans was having trouble seeing anything clearly. The tremors eased then stopped, and he managed to find the sutures holding the flesh together so that he could get back to the femoral artery, but when he snipped them Jack Rainbow jolted again. Squizzy's spoon slipped in the bloody slime, and blood spurted in a wild arc that reached as far as the foot of Jack Rainbow's good leg.

He was frantically searching the muck of Jack's stump with his fingers, trying to find something to stitch, pinching vaulting slime, groping pitching slop, there was nothing, nothing to stitch into, nothing that might hold the thread. The artery walls were wet blotting paper. There was, realised Dorrigo Evans, with a rising horror as the blood continued to pump out, as Jack Rainbow's body went into a terrible series of violent fits, nothing he could do. But there must be, he told himself. Think! Think! Look!

With each galvanic jolt blood was spewing out in a small fountain. It was as if Jack Rainbow's body were willingly pumping itself dry. Dorrigo Evans was trying to stitch as far up the artery as he could go, the blood was still galloping out, Squizzy Taylor was unable to staunch the flow, blood was everywhere, he was desperately trying
to think of something that might buy some time but there was nothing. He was stitching, the blood was pumping, there was no light, the stitches kept ripping, nothing held.

Push harder, he was yelling to Squizzy Taylor. Stop the fucking flow.

But no matter how hard Squizzy Taylor pushed, still the blood kept surging, spilling over Dorrigo Evans' hand and arm, running down into the Asian mud and the Asian morass that they could not escape, that Asian hell that was dragging them all ever closer to itself.

The convulsions gave way to shivering. Dorrigo Evans was pushing deeper into the stump, the flesh was tearing and falling away as he worked; his needle at one point hit the bone. He was trying to think, he was trying to find some way, he was trying not to give up hope when he heard Jack speak a few low words that were not much more than gasps and cracks of breath.

Big Fella?
Jack?
Will I die?
I think so.
Cold, he said. So fucken cold.

Dorrigo Evans kept steadily working on Jack's stump, his bare feet ankle-deep in the bloody mud below the makeshift bamboo operating table, his outer calm a strange thing he knew he preserved at the moments of greatest inner turmoil. He kept looking for that piece of artery, trying to find something in his work to hold on to, unconsciously clawing at the mud with his toes.

And then finally he had it, and he worked with the utmost care and delicacy to make sure his work would hold and Jack live, and when it was done and he lifted his head he knew Jack had been dead for some minutes and no one had known how to tell him.

Colonel Kota found the Korean sergeant ever more irritating. Everything about the guard seemed untrustworthy and unreliable. Even his affected way of walking and his exceedingly slow way of turning seemed somehow false. As he looked up and down the tangle of sleepers, rock, dirt, irons and naked slaves working like cockroaches, Colonel Kota understood why Koreans could never be used as frontline troops.

While he inspected the railway works—the embankments and sidings, the great cuttings through rocky hills, grey limestone cliffs holding up black clouds, and the magnificent teak trestle bridges over jungle gorges, bowing like rainbows in the monsoon deluge—all he could think of was how he had not killed the prisoner back along the track, and how the Korean sergeant had witnessed his strange behaviour. And yet, even now, he could not remember the exact order of the haiku's syllables. The Korean sergeant annoyed him immensely, seeking to please him with his affected smile, his ridiculous agreement with every comment Kota made, his boasting of the efficiency of their operation. Colonel Kota was convinced that behind every compliment was contempt, behind every agreement mockery, beneath every boast insolent superiority. On a hunch that he thought at best might embarrass the Korean