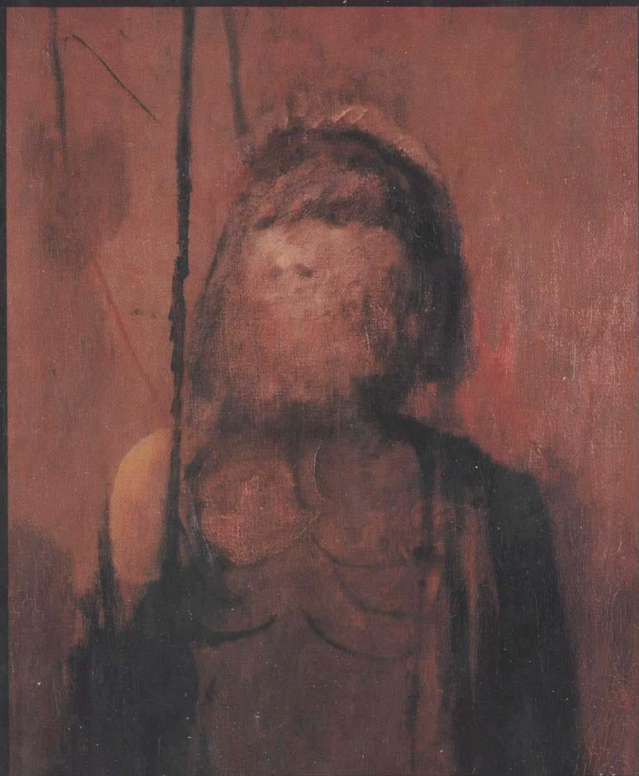


WILLIAM
GOLDING



DARKNESS
VISIBLE

DARKNESS
VISIBLE

by the same author

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DARKNESS VISIBLE

WILLIAM
GOLDING



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SIT MIHI FAS AUDITA LOQUI

Part One

MATTY

CHAPTER ONE

There was an area east of the Isle of Dogs in London which was an unusual mixture even for those surroundings. Among the walled-off rectangles of water, the warehouses, railway lines and travelling cranes, were two streets of mean houses with two pubs and two shops among them. The bulks of tramp steamers hung over the houses where there had been as many languages spoken as families that lived there. But just now not much was being said, for the whole area had been evacuated officially and even a ship that was hit and set on fire had few spectators near it. There was a kind of tent in the sky over London, which was composed of the faint white beams of searchlights, with barrage balloons dotted here and there. The barrage balloons were all that the searchlights discovered in the sky, and the bombs came down, it seemed, mysteriously out of emptiness. They fell in or round the great fire.

The men at the edge of the fire could only watch it burn, out of control. The water mains were broken and the only hindrance in the way of the fire was the occurrence of firebreaks here and there where fires had consumed everything on other nights.

Somewhere on the northern edge of the great fire a group of men stood by their wrecked machine and stared into what, even to men of their experience, was a new sight. Under the tent of searchlights a structure had built itself up in the air. It was less sharply defined than the beams of light but it was far brighter. It was a glare, a burning bush through or beyond which the thin beams were sketched more faintly. The limits of this bush were clouds of tenuous smoke that were lit from below until they too seemed made of fire. The heart of the bush, where the little streets had been, was of a more lambent colour. It shivered constantly but with an occasional diminution or augmentation of its brightness as walls collapsed or roofs caved in. Through it all—the roar of the

fire, the drone of the departing bombers, the crash of collapse—there was now and then the punctuating explosion of a delayed-action bomb going off among the rubble, sometimes casting a kind of blink over the mess and sometimes so muffled by debris as to make nothing but noise.

The men who stood by their wrecked machine at the root of one northern road that ran south into the blaze had about them the anonymity of uniform silence and motionlessness. Some twenty yards behind them and to their left was the crater of the bomb that had cut the local water supply and smashed their machine into the bargain. A fountain still played in the crater but diminishingly and the long fragment of bomb-casing that had divided a rear wheel lay by their machine, nearly cool enough to touch. But the men ignored it as they were ignoring many small occurrences—the casing, the fountain, some fantasies of wreckage—that would have gathered a crowd in peace time. They were staring straight down the road into the bush, the furnace. They had positioned themselves clear of walls and where nothing but a bomb could fall on them. That, oddly enough, was the least of the dangers of their job and one almost to be discounted among the falling buildings, trapping cellars, the secondary explosions of gas and fuel, the poisonous stinks from a dozen sources. Though this was early in the war they were experienced. One of them knew what it was like to be trapped by one bomb and freed by another. He viewed them now with a kind of neutrality as if they were forces of nature, meteors it might be, that happened to strike thickly hereabouts at certain seasons. Some of the crew were wartime amateurs. One was a musician and now his ear was finely educated in the perception and interpretation of bomb noises. The one that had burst the mains and wrecked the machine had found him narrowly but sufficiently sheltered and he had not even ducked. Like the rest of the crew he had been more interested in the next one of the stick, which had struck further down the road, between them and the fire, and lay there now at the bottom of its hole, either a dud or a delayed action. He stood on the undamaged side of the machine, staring like the others down the road. He was muttering.

"I'm not happy. No. Honestly chaps, I'm not happy."

Indeed, none of the chaps was happy, not even their leader whose lips were set so firmly together. For by some kind of

transference of effort from them, or by a localized muscular effort, the front of his chin trembled. His crew were not unsympathetic. The other amateur, a bookseller who stood at the musician's side and who could never put on his wartime uniform without a feeling of incredulity, could assess the mathematical chances of his present survival. He had watched a wall six storeys high fall on him all in one piece and had stood, unable to move and wondering why he was still alive. He found the brick surround of a window on the fourth storey had fitted round him neatly. Like the others, he had got beyond saying how scared he was. They were all in a state of settled dread, in which tomorrow's weather, tonight's Enemy's Intention, the next hour's qualified safety or hideous danger were what ruled life. Their leader carried out within limits the orders that were sent him but was relieved even to tears and shuddering when the telephoned weather forecast indicated that a raid was impossible.

So there they were, listening to the drone of the departing bombers, estimable men who were beginning to feel that though everything was indescribably awful they would live for another day. They stared together down the shuddering street and the bookseller, who suffered from a romantic view of the classical world, was thinking that the dock area would look like Pompeii; but whereas Pompeii had been blinded by dust here there was if anything too much clarity, too much shameful, inhuman light where the street ended. Tomorrow all might be dark, dreary, dirty, broken walls, blind windows; but just now there was so much light that the very stones seemed semi-precious, a version of the infernal city. Beyond the semi-precious stones, there, where the heart of the fire was shivering rather than beating, all material objects, walls, cranes, masts, even the road itself merged into the devastating light as if in that direction the very substance of the world with all the least combustible of its materials was melting and burning. The bookseller found himself thinking that after the war if there ever was an after the war they would have to reduce the admission fee to the ruins of Pompeii since so many countries would have their own brand-new exhibitions of the broken business of living.

There was an episode of roaring, audible through the other noises. A red curtain of flame fluttered near the white heart of the fire and was consumed by it. Somewhere a tank of something had

exploded or a coal cellar had just distilled out its own coal gas, invaded a closed room, mixed with air, reached flashpoint—That was it, thought the bookseller knowledgeably, and now safe enough to be proud of his knowledge. How strange that is, he thought, after the war I shall have time—

He looked round quickly for wood; and there it was, a bit of lath from a roof and lying close by his foot so he bent, picked it up and threw it away. As he straightened up he saw how intently the musician was attending to the fire with eyes now rather than ears and beginning to mutter again.

"I'm not happy. No, I'm not happy—"

"What is it old chap?"

The rest of the crew were also staring more earnestly into the fire. All eyes were aimed, mouths drawn in. The bookseller swung round to look where the others were looking.

The white fire, becoming pale pink, then blood-coloured then pink again where it caught smoke or clouds seemed the same as if it were the permanent nature of this place. The men continued to stare.

At the end of the street or where now, humanly speaking, the street was no longer part of the habitable world—at that point where the world had become an open stove—at a point where odd bits of brightness condensed to form a lamp-post still standing, a pillar box, some eccentrically shaped rubble—right there, where the flinty street was turned into light, something moved. The bookseller looked away, rubbed his eyes, then looked again. He knew most of the counterfeits, the objects that seem endowed with life in a fire: the boxes or papers stirred into movement by localized gusts of wind, the heat-induced contractions and expansions of material that can mimic muscular movement, the sack moved by rats or cats or dogs or half-burnt birds. At once and violently, he hoped for rats but would have settled for a dog. He turned round again to get his back between himself and what he was sure he had not seen.

It was a remarkable circumstance that their captain was the last to look. He had turned from the fire and was contemplating his wrecked machine with the kind of feeling that kept his chin still. The other men drew his eyes to them by not meaning to. They turned away from the fire far too casually. Where there had been a whole set of eyes, a battery of them staring into the melted end

of the world, that battery now contemplated the uninteresting ruins from a previous fire in the other direction and the failing jet of water in the crater. It was a sheer piece of heightened awareness, a sense sharpened by dread that made the captain look at once not where they were looking but where they were not.

Two-thirds of the way down the street, part of a wall collapsed and spilt rubbish across the pavement so that some pieces went bowling across the road. One piece struck, of all things, a dustbin left standing on the other side and a metallic clang came from it.

"Good God!"

Then the others turned back with him.

The drone of the bombers was dying away. The five-mile-high tent of chalky lights had disappeared, been struck all at once, but the light of the great fire was bright as ever, brighter perhaps. Now the pink aura of it had spread. Saffron and ochre turned to blood-colour. The shivering of the white heart of the fire had quickened beyond the capacity of the eye to analyse it into an outrageous glare. High above the glare and visible now for the first time between two pillars of lighted smoke was the steely and untouched round of the full moon—the lover's, hunter's, poet's moon; and now—an ancient and severe goddess credited with a new function and a new title—the bomber's moon. She was Artemis of the bombers, more pitiless than ever before.

The bookseller contributed rashly.

"There's the moon—"

The captain rebuked him savagely.

"Where did you think it would be? Up north? Haven't any of you got eyes? Do I have to notice everything for everybody? Look there!"

What had seemed impossible and therefore unreal was now a fact and clear to them all. A figure had condensed out of the shuddering backdrop of the glare. It moved in the geometrical centre of the road which now appeared longer and wider than before. Because if it was the same size as before, then the figure was impossibly small—impossibly tiny, since children had been the first to be evacuated from that whole area; and in the mean and smashed streets there had been so much fire there was nowhere for a family to live. Nor do small children walk out of a fire that is melting lead and distorting iron.

"Well! What are you waiting for?"

No one said anything.

"You two! Get him!"

The bookseller and the musician started forward. Half-way down the street the delayed-action bomb went off under a warehouse on the right-hand side. Its savage punctuation heaved the pavement across the road and the wall above it jerked, then collapsed into a new crater. Its instantaneity was dreadful and the two men came staggering back. Behind them the whole length of the street was hidden by dust and smoke.

The captain snarled.

"Oh—Christ!"

He ran forward himself, the others at his shoulder, and did not stop until he was where the air cleared and the heat from the fire became a sudden violent attack on the skin.

The figure was a child, drawing nearer. As they picked their way past the new crater they saw him plain. He was naked and the miles of light lit him variously. A child's stride is quick; but this child walked down the very middle of the street with a kind of ritual gait that in an adult would have been called solemn. The captain could see—and now, with a positive explosion of human feeling—why this particular child walked as it did. The brightness on his left side was not an effect of light. The burn was even more visible on the left side of his head. All his hair was gone on that side, and on the other, shrivelled to peppercorn dots. His face was so swollen he could only glimpse where he was going through the merest of slits. It was perhaps something animal that was directing him away from the place where the world was being consumed. Perhaps it was luck, good or bad, that kept him pacing in the one direction where he might survive.

Now they were so near that the child was not an impossibility but a scrap of their own human flesh, they became desperate to save and serve him. Their captain, indifferent now to the slight dangers that might ambush them in the street, was the first to reach the child and handle him with trained and devoted care. One of the men raced in the other direction without being told, to the phone a hundred yards away. The other men formed a tight and unprofessional knot round the child as he was carried, as if to be close was to give him something. The captain was a bit breathless but full of compassion and happiness. He busied himself with the kind of first aid for burns which is reversed by the