

John Fowle

DANIEL
MARTIN

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THE ARISTOS

THE COLLECTOR

THE EBONY TOWER

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

THE MAGUS

SHIPWRECK

DANIEL MARTIN

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact
that the old is dying and the new cannot
be born; in this interregnum a great
variety of morbid symptoms appears.

— ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Prison Notebooks*

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JOHN FOWLES

DANIEL MARTIN

The Harvest

But what's wrong with that man?
All afternoon (yesterday the day before yesterday and
today) he's been sitting there staring at a flame
he bumped into me at evening as he went downstairs
he said to me:
"The body dies the water clouds the soul
hesitates
and the wind forgets always forgets
but the flame doesn't change."
He also said to me:
"You know I love a woman who's gone away perhaps to the
nether world; that's not why I seem so deserted
I try to keep myself going with a flame
because it doesn't change."
Then he told me the story of his life.

— GEORGE SEFERIS, "Mr. Stratis
Thalassinus Describes a Man"

WHOLE SIGHT; OR ALL THE REST IS DESOLATION.

The last of a hanger ran under the eastern ridge of the combe, where it had always been too steep and stony for the plough. It was now little more than a long spinney, mainly of beech. The field sloped from the wall of trees, westward, a gentle bosom, down to the open gate onto Fishacre Lane. The dark coats lay there in against the hedge, covering the cider-jar and the dinner-bundle, beside the two scythes that had been used to clear the still-dewed hedge swathe much earlier that morning. Now the wheat was half cut. Lewis sat perched behind the faded carmine reaper, craning into the sea of blond stems for stones, his hand on the mower-lever, always ready to lift the blades. Captain hardly needed the reins; so many years of plodding, just so, down the new stubble next to the still-standing ears. Only at the corners did Lewis cry, softly, coaxing the old horse round. Sally, the younger horse, who had helped on the steeper ground, stood tethered beneath a thorn not far from the gate, cropping the hedge, her tail intermittently swishing.

Bindweed ran up the stems of the corn; seeding thistles, red poppies; and lower, the little cornfield violets called heart's-ease; with blue speedwell eyes and scarlet pimpernel, shepherd's glass, herb of the second sight. The field's name was the Old Batch — *batch* from *bake*, some ancient farm's own annual bread was always grown here. The sky's proleptic name was California; the imperial static blue of August.

There are four figures in the field, besides Lewis on the reaper-binder. Mr. Luscombe: red-faced and crooked-grinning, one eye with a cast behind his steel-rimmed spectacles, a collarless shirt with a thin gray stripe, darned, the cuffs worn, cord trousers with peaks at the back for the braces, but held up also by a thick leather belt. Bill, his younger son, nineteen, capped and massive, six inches taller than anyone else on the field, arms like hams, a slow giant, clumsy at all but his work . . . but see him scythe, dwarf the distort handle and the blade, the swaling drive and unstopping rhythm, pure and princely force of craft. Old Sam in breeches, braces, boots and gaiters, his face forgotten, though not his limp; a collarless shirt also, a straw hat with the crown detached on one side ("lets in th'ole air a bit, doan'ee see") and a tuft of wilted heart's-ease tucked in the black band. And finally a boy in his midteens, his clothes unsuited, a mere harvest helper: cotton trousers, an apple-green Aertex shirt, old gym-shoes.

They work in two teams, on opposite sides of the field, one clockwise, the other anti-clockwise, stooking. Clutching a sheaf in the right hand, just above the binder twine, never by the twine itself, then moving on to the next sheaf, picking that up in the same way in the left hand, then walking with the two sheaves to the nearest unfinished stook, a stook being four pairs of sheaves and a single "to close the door" at each end; then standing before the other sheaves propped against each other, lifting the two in each hand, then setting them, shocking down the butts into the stubble and simultaneously clashing the eared heads together. The simplest job in the world, it might seem to Queenie, back from her morning's cleaning at the Vicarage, who stands there in the lane beside her bicycle a moment, watching in through the open gateway for the idle pleasure of it. The boy waves from the top end of the field and she waves back. When he looks again, a minute later, she is still there, the old beige summer hat with the band of white silk and the tired artificial rose in front, the drab brown dress, the heavy old bicycle with its fret of skirt-protective wires over the back wheel.

The boy sets the first two sheaves, the founders, of a new stook. They stand, then start to topple. He catches them before they fall, lifts

them to set them firm again. But old Mr. Luscombe shocks his pair down six feet away, safe as houses. His founders never fall. He smiles lopsidedly with his bad teeth, a wink, the cast in his eye, the sun in his glasses. Bronze-red hands and old brown boots. The boy makes a grimace, then brings his sheaves and sets them against the farmer's pair. The insides of his forearms are sore already, his fingers not being strong enough to carry the sheaves far by grasp. If the stook is some way off, he hoicks them up against his side, under his arms, against the thistles. But he likes the pain — a harvest pain, a part of the ritual; like the tired muscles the next morning, like sleep that night, so drowning, deep and swift to come.

The crackle of the stubble, the shock of the stood sheaves. The rattle of the reaper, the chatter of the mower blades, the windmill arms above them. Lewis's voice at the corners: hoy then, hoy'ee, Cap'n, back, back, back, whoy, whoy. Then the click of the tongue: jik-jik, the onward rattle and chain and chatter. Thistledown floats southward across the field, in a light air from the north, mounting, a thermal, new stars for the empyrean.

And the day will endure like this, under the perfect azure sky, stooking and stooking the wheat. Again and again old Luscombe will shred an ear from its haulm and roll the grains between his heavy palms to husk them; cup his hand and blow the husks away; stare; then take a grain and bite it in half, the germ with its taste of earth and dust, and then spit it out; and carefully put the remaining grains in his trouser pocket, for the poultry, that evening. Three or four times the reaper's noise will stop abruptly. The stookers will stand and see Lewis climb down from his fenestrated iron saddle and know what it is again: the knotter is choked. A spew of unbound wheat behind the machine; the toolbox open. Lewis is brown and shy, much smaller than his younger brother — the family mechanic, and taciturn. The nearest pair of stookers will come up and gather armfuls of the unbound wheat; take three strong stems and rope them, then lead them under the armful and rick the ends where they meet, one twist only, but tight, tucking the ears under the bind to hold it firm; leave Lewis to his labors over the knotter and walk back to where they left their uncompleted rows. In silence, apart, treading the crackling stubble.

At one Mr. Luscombe will pull out his old fob, then cry to the field and start rolling a cigarette. They will straggle to the hedge by the gate, sweating, Lewis last, having taken Captain from the shafts and tethered him in the shade beside Sally; stand around the coats. The cider-jar will be unbunged. The boy is offered the first drink, from a tin mug. Bill lifts the whole gallon jar, tips it into his mouth. Old Sam

grins. And the boy feels the sour green swill down his gullet, down both gullets; last year's brew, delicious as orchard shade in the sun and wheat-dust. Lewis sups cold tea from a wire-handled can.

Long and distant, over the uncut serried rods of wheat: the five men walk along the lane hedge to the shade of an ash. Old Sam stops to urinate against the bank. They sit beneath the ash, or sprawl; out of the dish-cloth, white with blue ends, a pile of great cartwheels of bread, the crusts burnt black; deep yellow butter, ham cut thick as a plate, plate of pink meat and white fat, both sides of the bread nearly an inch thick; the yellow butter pearly and marbled with whey, a week's ration a slice.

Thic for thee, thic for thee, says doling Mr. Luscombe, and where's my plum vidies to?

Ma says to eat up they, says Bill.

Beauty of Bath, crisp and amber-fleshed, with their little edge of piquant acid. Still Primavera's, thinks the boy; and much better poems than bruised and woolly Pelham Widow. But who cares, teeth deep in white cartwheel, bread and sweet ham, all life to follow.

They talk a little, having eaten; the cider again, and nibbling apples. Lewis smokes Woodbines and stares at the reaper in the sun. The boy lies on his back, the stubble pricking, slightly drunk, bathed in the green pond of Devon voices, his Devon and England, quick and tortuous ancestral voices, debating next year's function for this field; then other fields. A language so local, so phonetically condensed and permissive of slur that it is inseparable in his mind, and will always remain so, from its peculiar landscapes; its combes and bartons, leats and linhays. He is shy and ashamed of his own educated dialect of the tongue.

Then there comes across the voices, from far off, five or six miles, the faint wail of a siren.

Torquay I reckon, says Bill.

The boy sits up, scanning the sky to the south. They are silent. The wail dies, changing pitch. A cock pheasant bells disyllabically up in the beeches above the field. Bill sharply raises his finger; and before it is fully up, a remote crump. Then another. Then the faint bass roll of a wing-cannon. Three seconds' silence; then the cannon again. And once more the pheasant bells.

Caught-ey on the hop agen, says Mr. Luscombe.

One o' they hit-and-runners, agrees Bill.

They stand out from the shade of the ash, watching south. But the sky is empty, blue, in peace. They shade their eyes, searching for a speck, a trail, a plume of smoke; nothing. But now an engine, at first

very faint, then without warning louder, closer, abruptly welling. The five turn cautiously back beneath the ash. The long combe is flooded with the frantic approach, violent machinery at full stretch, screaming in an agony of vicious fear. The boy, who is already literary, knows he is about to die.

Then for a few world-cleaving seconds it is over them, over the upper half of the field, only two hundred feet or so high, camouflaged dark green and black; blue-bellied, Balkan-crossed; slim, enormous, a two-engined Heinkel, real, the war real, terror and fascination, pigeons breaking from the beeches in a panic, Sally rearing, Captain the same and tearing loose from his tether, a wild whinnying. He canters away, then subsides into a heavy lumbering trot across the field. But the giant botfly is gone, trailing its savage roar. Mr. Luscombe runs, almost as heavily as his horse, bawling. Whoy there, Captain. Easy, boy, easy. Then Bill running as well, overtaking his father. The old horse stops at the edge of the uncut wheat, trembling. Another whinny.

The boy turns to Lewis: I saw the pilot!

Was 'er one o' they or one o' us's, asks Old Sam.

The boy shouts at him. German! It was German!

Lewis holds up a finger. Somewhere to the north they hear the Heinkel swing west.

Dartmouth, says Lewis quietly. He'll go out along the river.

As if something about that great sear of machinery, the quickness and inhumanity of it, the power, has impressed him; sweating away with rotten old horses, saved from the army by the farm . . . old Celtic softness for metal Romans. In midfield his father pats Captain and leads him gently back toward the reaper. Bill looks down toward the three by the hedge; then mimes a shotgun, following the Heinkel's flight, and points up the hill to where he would have had it fall. Even Lewis has a wry grin.

But then, though their ears stay cocked as they walk up into the field, no sound, no more war, no stuttering hammer of wing cannon, no crumps from the direction of Totnes or Dartmouth, no Hurricanes in pursuit. Only, as Lewis flicks the reins to start Captain on again and the stookers stoop to gather their first sheaves, a stertorous sound from the high azure. The boy looks up. Very high, four black specks, rolling, teasing, caramboling into one another as they fly westward. Two ravens and their young; the sky's eternal sleeping voice, mocking man.

Mysteries: how the pheasant heard the bombs before the men. Who sent the ravens and that passage?

Our daily bread: sheaves and stooks, the afternoon wearing on, the light ash-shadow creeping over the stubble. Inexorably the reaper

dwindles the wheat. The first rabbit runs, a cry from Lewis. It zigzags among the unstooked sheaves, leaps one like a hare, then takes cover inside a stook. Bill, who is nearest, picks up a stone and creeps close. But the rabbit is away, racing white scut, and the hurled stone flies harmlessly over its head.

Soon after three the field begins to fill with people, as if they had been secretly watching all the time and knew exactly when to appear. Two or three old men, a fat young woman with a pram, a tall gipsy with a lurcher at his heels: the saturnine "Babe" with his lantern jaw, man of darkness, constable's horror, distiller, or so rumored, of apple-jack in Thorncombe Woods. Then the Fishacre hamlet children dribbling back from school, seven or eight of them, five small boys and two little girls and an older one. The open gate is like a mouth; it sucks in all who pass. Queenie and old Mrs. Hellyer, though they must have walked up especially; and others, adults and children. Then little Mrs. Luscombe of the dark eyebrows, humping the tea-baskets. Beside her, a gentle-faced woman in a gray-and-white dress, severe and even for then old-fashioned, with an incongruous Eton crop . . . the stooking boy's aunt. And still more.

Now the wheat is six or seven swathes in breadth and some fifty yards long. Lewis cries at a corner to the nearest male bystanders.

Crawlin' with the buggers!

They all gather round the last piece: stookers, children, old men, Babe and his lurcher: a black-and-liver dog with a cowed, much-beaten look, always crouched, neurotic, hyperalert and Argus-eyed, never a yard from his master's heels. The young woman walks up on swollen ankles, carrying her baby son in her arms, the pram left by the gate. Some have sticks, others pile stones. A ring of excited faces, scrutinizing each tremor in the rectangle of corn: commands, the older men knowing, sternly cautious. Doan'ee fuss, lad, keep back. In the rectangle's heart a stirring of ears, a ripple of shaken stems, like a trout-wave in a stream. A hen pheasant explodes with a rattling whir, brown-speckled jack-in-the-box, down the hill and over Fishacre Lane. Laughter. A small girl screams. A tiny rabbit, not eight inches long, runs out from the upper border, stops bemused, then runs again. The boy who helped stook stands ten yards away, grinning as a wild band of children sprawl and tumble after the tiny animal, which doubles, stops, spurts, and finally runs back into the wheat.

Doan'ee 'ee dreadle the corn, bellows Mr. Luscombe at the eagerest boy. Young devil. Now Lewis whistles shrilly on the other side of the patch, pointing. This time it is a big rabbit, racing for the

lane hedge, the lurcher's side. The rabbit is through the human ring, jinking through the stones and sticks and stooks. The gipsy gives a low whistle, long-dying. The dog streaks away, using all its greyhound blood, its lethal dexterity. The rabbit escapes once by a last-second change of course. The lurcher flashes past, a little spurt of red dust from among the stubble as it twists back. It has everyone's eyes; even Lewis has reined in. This time the dog makes no mistake. It has the rabbit by the neck, shakes it violently. Another whistle from the gipsy, and it runs swiftly to its master, bent low, the still-kicking animal locked in its long jaws. The gipsy takes the rabbit by its hind legs, lifts it away and up and chops down with his free hand, just once, on the neck. Everyone there knows how Babe came by the lurcher; it is a village joke, like his nickname. The Devil came to Thorncombe Woods one night to thank him for selling so much rotgut to all they Yanks back over the Camp; and brought him the lurcher as a present. But as they watch man and dog, they know he isn't there because he needs the rabbits; he has every moonlit night and field for miles round for rabbits. But his is an ancient presence, and quasi-divine, of a time when men were hunters, not planters; he honors fields at cutting time.

Lewis starts the reaper off again. Now a rabbit springs every few yards, small and large; some terrified, others determined. Old men pounce, flail with their sticks, stumble, fall on their faces; and the children too. Guffaws, screams, curses, cries of triumph; the silent lurcher racing, twisting, snapping, merciless. The last swathe. Then a scream of pain, like a tiny child's, from the hidden blades. Without stopping, Lewis points back. A rabbit drags away, its hind legs sliced off. The boy who stooked runs and lifts it: the red stumps. Little green balls of excrement fall from the anal fur. Convulsive jerking, another scream. He chops, then chops again; a third time; then casually turns and throws the corpse toward a pile of others. Doe-eyes glazing, whiskers, soft ears, snowy scuts. He moves closer and stares down at the pile, a good twenty now. And his heart turns, some strange premonitory turn, a day when in an empty field he shall weep for this.

He looks up and sees his aunt and Mrs. Luscombe, the only two people in the field who have not joined in the massacre. They stand by a tablecloth spread on the stubble beneath the ash-tree, talking and watching. Beside them there curls up a twist of blue smoke; an old black kettle perched on stones. The final rabbit, the one most certain, hemmed with hunters, runs straight between myopic Old Sam's legs and outpaces all the boys who chase it. The lurcher tries to streak through them, loses balance and sight, at last permits himself a frus-

trated yelp, looks desperately around, so many shouting, pointing, urging bipeds; then sees the bobbing scut and sets off again. But the rabbit reaches the hedge a good few yards clear. The gipsy whistles. The dog lopes back, its tail down.

Then the prize-giving. Old Mr. Luscombe stands by the assembled kill; a little embarrassed, unused to playing Solomon. One here, one there, a small one to a child, a fat brace to Babe, another to Old Sam. Then six to the boy who stooked.

Take 'em down to the ash-tree, Danny.

And "Danny," whose preferred name is Dan, walks down the field, three pairs of hind legs in each hand, Nimrod, to the spread tea.

Little Mrs. Luscombe, with her eyebrows like commas, stands hands on hips by her twig fire, grinning at him.

You caught all they then, Danny?

I got two. One didn't count actually. It was caught in the blades.

Poor thing, says his aunt.

Mrs. Luscombe is politely but firmly scornful.

You didden have a stone wall round your garden, m' dear, you wouldn't feel sorry for *they*.

And his aunt smiles at him, maternally, as Mrs. Luscombe takes the rabbits, weighs them, approves, palpating their haunches; picks a good couple.

There's your supper, Danny.

Oh I say. Really? Thanks awfully, Mrs. Luscombe.

Are you absolutely sure? asks his aunt. Then: I don't know what we'd do without you.

Where's Father? asks the boy.

It seems the Rural Dean has called. About the porch.

He nods: nursing his solitude, his terrible Oedipal secret; already at the crossroads every son must pass.

He says, We'll just finish the stooking.

And he walks back to where they have gone back to work, but there are many more hands now, as in a Breughel. The children vying to lug the farthest sheaves closer for the men; even Babe sets to for that last twenty minutes.

Then back under the ash-tree, as ritual as Holy Communion, the old pink-and-white check cloth, the bread, the quart bowl of cream, the pots of raspberry and black-currant jam, the chipped white mugs, the two teapots, a brown-black with yellow bands, the same brown as the cake with all its hoarded sultanas and currants. Best the illicit scalded cream, its deep yellow crust folded into the voluptuous white.

No cream since time began could equal it; the harvest hunger, sun, the circle of watching children, the smell of sweat. Byre and meadow and breath of Red Devons. Ambrosia, death, sweet raspberry jam.

Did 'ee see 'un, ma? Did 'ee see 'un, Miz Martin? Us-all coulda touched 'un, couldn us, Danny?

Later.

He is alone among the highest beeches, over the stooked and now empty field, the marly combe; where he comes each spring to find the first moschatel, strange little transient four-faces, smelling of musk. Another mystery, his current flower and emblem, for reasons he cannot say. The sun in the extreme west, as he likes it best. Its slanting rays reveal the lands in a pasture-field on the other side of the valley, the parallel waves where an ox-plough once went many centuries before; and where he must pay a visit soon, childish, but another of his secret flowers, the little honeycomb-scented orchid *Spiranthes spiralis*, blooms on the old meadow there about now. He clings to his knowledges; signs of birds, locations of plants, fragments of Latin and folklore, since he lacks so much else. The leaves of the beeches are translucent in the westering sun. A wood-pigeon coos, a nuthatch whistles somewhere close above.

He sits with his back to a beech-trunk, staring down through foliage at the field. Without past or future, purged of tenses; collecting this day, pregnant with being. Unharvested, yet one with this land; and that was why he had been so afraid. It wasn't death, the agony in the mower's blades, the scream and red stumps . . . but dying, dying before the other wheat was ripe.

Inscrutable innocent, already in exile.

Down, half masked by leaves. Point of view of the hidden bird.

I feel in his pocket and bring out a clasp-knife; plunge the blade in the red earth to clean it of the filth from the two rabbits he has gutted; slit; liver, intestines, stench. He stands and turns and begins to carve his initials on the beech-tree. Deep incisions in the bark, peeling the gray skin away to the sappy green of the living stem. Adieu, my boyhood and my dream.

D. H. M.

And underneath: 21 Aug 42.