



Marcus Sedgwick Julian Sedgwick

VOYAGES IN THE
UNDERWORLD
OF ORPHEUS BLACK

For our sister — M.S. & J.S.

In memory of Group Captain Bill
'Dipper' Deacon and all who were made
to suffer through war. — A. D.

illustrated by Alexis Deacon




WALKER
BOOKS











WPN
C.O.10

31.1.1944

N.W.1729

1st March, 1944

BLACK Harry Walter

BORDER HOUSE, OLD FORD LANE, KNIGHTON, SHROPSHIRE.'

I conscientiously object to being registered in the Military
Service register:-

"Greed has poisoned men's souls, has barricaded the world
with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed.
We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in.
Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want.

Our knowledge has made us cynical.
Our cleverness, hard and unkind.

We think too much and feel too little.

More than machinery we need humanity.

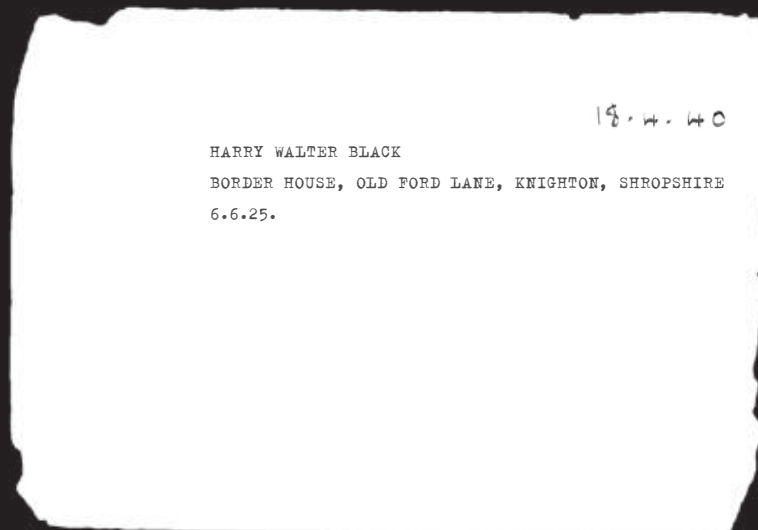
More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness.

Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost..."

From "The Great Dictator" by Charlie Chaplin

*Right: Harry Black's summons letter for
a conscientious objector's tribunal.*

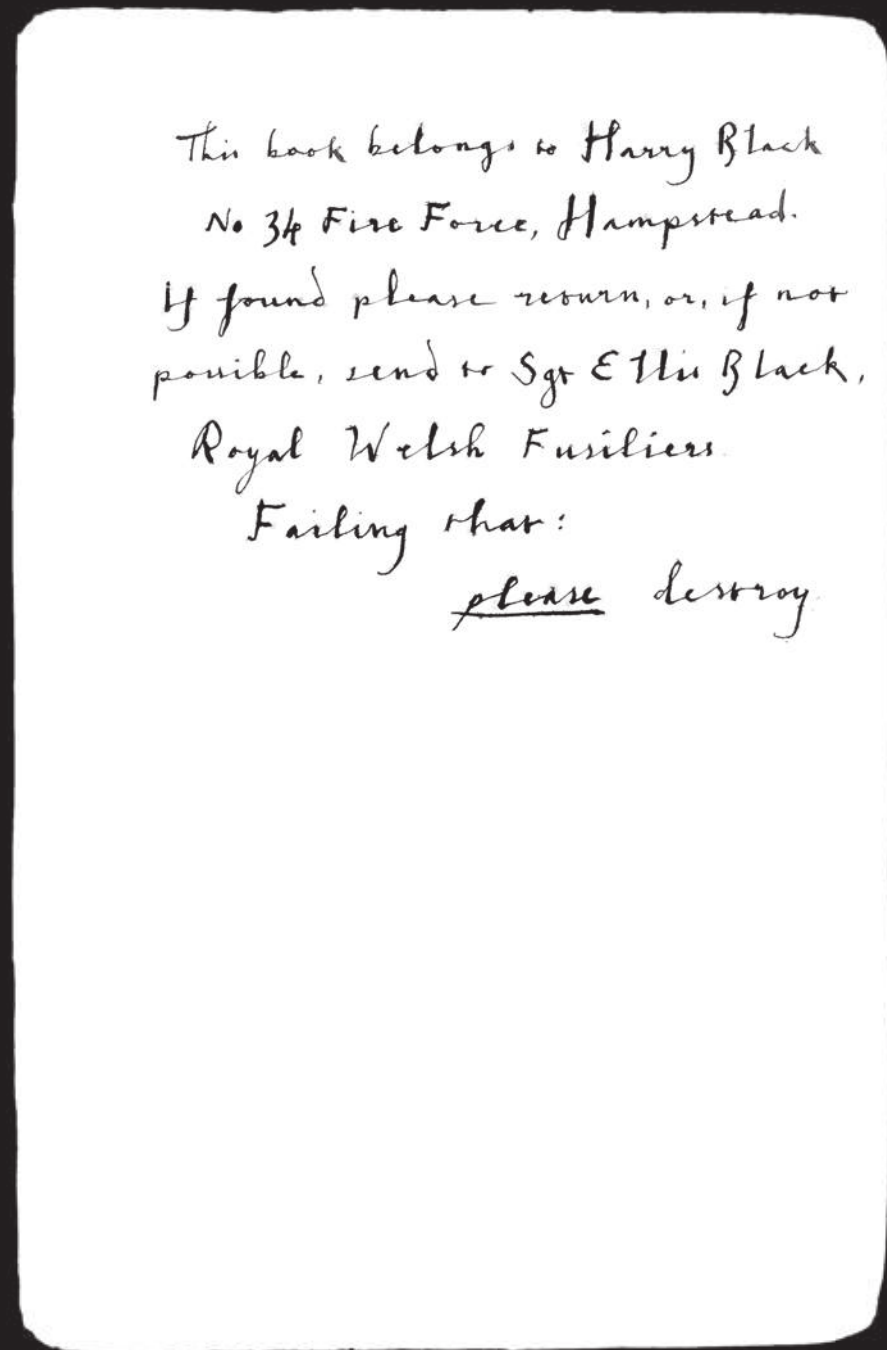
Dated 31 January, 1944.

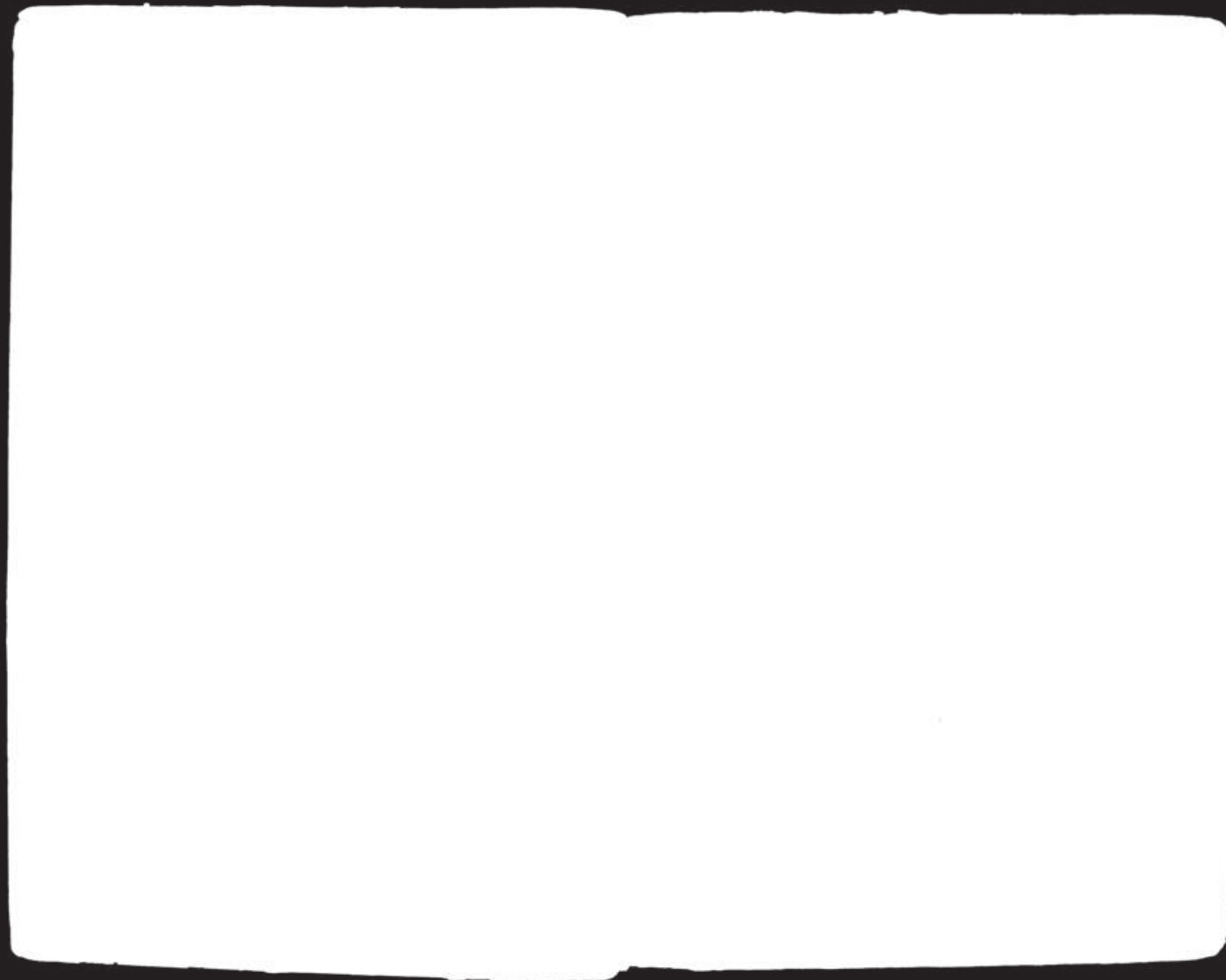


Above: Harry Black's conscientious objector's registration card.

Issued 18 February, 1944.

Right: Front cover of Harry Black's notebook. December, 1944





Interior spread from
Harry Black's notebook.
December, 1944

Black Out

Electricity.

Robot bombs.

The dark cave, also known as the Underworld.

Trans-cranial subsonic manipulation.

Courage and cowardice,

fear, abhorrence

and love.

The light of the sun.

I'll sing of all of these things before I am done.

I've a story to tell of Harry Black,
who went to the Underworld and how he came back;
of the love for his brother who'd pushed him away.

Of London by starlight, under attack,

of bombs falling, of people calling

through the darkened streets,

of sirens and wayfarers, of lost souls,

of vicious women and mindless dogs.

These are the things of which I'll sing.

These, and besides them, many things more:
 the persistent thrumming from deep underground,
 the way that firelight flickers on faces,
 and how the air vibrates after the smack of a bomb.
 Of underground rivers and swarming drones,
 and a pale German girl who wants to find home.
 Of eyeballs and landlords and tankards of beer.
 Of laughter when danger's near.
 Of Harry (and his brother, Ellis) and–

What's that? What's that?

Who am I?

Ask me slowly ...

... and I'll tell you.

Who am I?

I am Orpheus.

Musician, singer, poet and guide:

at your service!

Always.

You've met me before – in the streets, on the hills, at
 the edge of the milling crowd. When I stood like a
 wanderer at the cusp of your vision – that was me.
 When you thought you heard singing but couldn't be sure,
 when you felt someone breathe on the back of your
 neck, and when a voice said follow, but you didn't dare.
 That was me.

When something whispered inside your head, and
 implored you to listen, urged you to open your
 eyes, begged you to believe, hoped beyond hope
 that you would decide to expose your mind to
 something more; called out to you to say wake up!

Wake up!

Wake up!

When that happened...

Was that me too? Or was it you?

Perhaps it was both of us.

Perhaps we were working together, you and I,
because we have already met.

Mine is the oldest story of all. Mine, or one very much
like it; in which a hero with gifts beyond all measure
(in my case the gods had taught me to sing) ventures
into the deepest cave of greatest danger, going to face
the ultimate foe – the one who waits on a throne in the
dark, with a patient smile and a fingernail ticking.

Descent to the Underworld, the story so old it
existed before there were words with which to
tell it. To venture into the dark cave...

And the outcome? Triumph, or tragedy? For either can
occur; there are no guarantees where our hero is going.

Triumph or tragedy? In my case, a little of both.

And yes, you have met me before.

My reputation rests on the power of my song;
I could still the beasts; charm birds from the trees;
make fighting men sit down and weep.

My song could change the course of streams,
make stones rise up and dance.

Make trees lift their roots
and stride to the sea.

My reputation rests on my song,
and the fact
that I went to Hell, and back.

Orpheus, Orphée, Orfeo.

Hermes, Theseus.

Gilgamesh.

Odin.

Even Alice, who went to wrestle with the
unconscious of her creator.

You have met me before.

And now I'll sing to you of Harry Black, disowned
by his father, shunned by his brother, but with
gifts beyond all measure (in his case, a skill
with a pencil like a wizard with a wand).

The stage is dark.

Blacked out.

And as the curtain lifts, fire falls on London town...



Boxing Day 1944, 6.15 pm

Winter dusk in Kilburn, London. The world has been reduced to rubble and flame and dirty water, and the rockets and buzz bombs are falling again.

They bring death in two ways. The first, you receive some kind of warning at least. A siren, an engine growling and then cutting, a searchlight picking out chunks of shadow between the clouds. And the second, where it just hurtles at you from a clear sky, where there's no advance sound, no wailing, no time for a last thought. It simply arrives, annihilates, and only then comes all the noise and fury trailing in its wake for the survivors to hear. Then, if I'm still lucky enough to be amongst those survivors, I have to clear up what comes after.

Obliteration is our daily business, these days. *My* daily business.

I told Father I didn't want any part of it, told Ellis just the same, but one way or another death pulls you in, and you are meshed into the machinery of war.



The strange thing is you get used to it after a hundred nights or more. You get used to anything in time, I suppose ... or at least you think you do.

But tonight something has *changed*, as if a switch has been thrown deep inside me. And I need to try and understand what has happened – and start to do things differently.

Begin with immediate reality when you need to make sense of things, my old art teacher always said. Start with what's *bang slap in front of your damn nose* if you want to put the world into perspective.

So: the air smells of cold and smoke and burning plastic. I can hear flames crack as they devour the last of the factory we were never going to be able to save, a distant shudder as something big slams into Hackney and the ground rumbles. There are people shouting, a dog barking and, faintly – bizarrely! – someone scratching out a tune on a fiddle, a weird little melody that keeps repeating over and over, tickling away at the night air. Above me the sky is slashed by searchlights, and the anti-aircraft boys are banging away at any hint of a ghost or shadow they can see now the fog's blown clear. Yellow tracer and orange shell bursts to make a good show, lighting up the barrage balloons, littering the city with thousands more shards of hot metal.

Pointless.

But good for Father's business, good for the family's fortunes. The gunners are making the most of the clear spell, eating up the shells made by Black and Company at an appalling rate. They have some chance with the doodlebugs – they're slow enough to hit – but the new rockets are just too fast, as good as invisible. They hurtle up and through the stratosphere, and then fall where fate or luck or God or whatever you want to call it decrees.

It's four hours since we got the call that something had struck the Heurtebise Warehouse. A day-late Christmas lunch in full swing in the fire station, the radio at the maximum the volume knob will allow, blasting out Sandy MacPherson playing carols on his organ, and roast spuds and sprouts and a black market turkey being served under the makeshift decorations. Shouting *bang* because there's no snaps in the crackers! Just about got a mouthful of everything, and then the alarm went and we were on our way. Swearing mixed with the jokes from the crackers and everyone saying wasn't it *frigging cold* just to mask the fear. Brittle laughter. Keep it all warm, love; we'll be back in a jiffy. Keep it all good and warm till we're home.

But deep down everyone knows sometimes you don't come back.

Our engine picked down Maida Vale, feeling its way with the thin light from the slits we're allowed for headlights at last. (Thank God for that: I can still remember the awful thud when we hit that elderly pedestrian near Archway. He didn't stand a

chance. More people were being killed in road accidents than from Hitler's bombs in those dark days.)

Jokes and laughter dying as we approached the bomb site, words giving way to a dry mouth, a busy heartbeat. As soon as I saw the blazing remains of the warehouse I knew it couldn't have been a V2 because there was still too much standing. Oil bomb probably, to make that much flame. Or a doodlebug. We dragged out a hose and got it working from an underground tank, stepping round a bare foot lying in the street, an arm – the kind of horror show that comes back at you in the middle of lunch next day and makes you feel bad because you didn't feel bad at the time. (It's only the unusual or fantastic that sticks some days, like that hit on the taxidermy shop: stuffed crocodile lying in the gutter, zebra head perched on the canopy of a nearby hotel looking astonished to find itself there.)

This evening just seemed a job of dousing down the surrounding buildings and containing, but then through a shattered window in the factory I saw figures in the flames. Five or six of them standing, arms raised curiously as if beckoning me, but not moving at all. None of them trying to run or turn away and shield themselves from the approaching fire.

I batted Oakley on the shoulder and pointed. He gave me that solid nod of his, shouted to shift my blooming arse and the two of us fought our way into the ground floor, under that pile of flame

and burning timber and unstable masonry, the kind of *theatricals* we're not meant to be doing and the CO hates.

Two of the trapped figures were already burning, the flames serpentine along their outstretched arms sending up black smoke, poor souls swaying to and fro – very, very slowly. My stomach lurched and I waved, screamed *for God's sake get out of there*, then fought on towards them through the heat and smoke around us when they still didn't react. (Oh, Ellis, if you could have seen me then, my brother, you might take back some of those things you said about bravery and cowardice and the relative distribution of those attributes in the Black family!)

And then I heard Oakley laughing, and simultaneously coughing up his guts as the fumes got to him.

He tugged my arm. It's just a load of dummies, you dummy! Let's get out before the whole ruddy place comes down on us.

I looked around bewildered, too slow to understand (as ever!), still fixated on saving the doomed factory workers. I saw the other figures catch light and start to burn, still not making *any* effort to escape at all, and pushed on through the heat towards them – and at last realized what that daft bugger Oakley meant. Turns out Heurtebise was a factory and warehouse for shop outfitting: mannequins and display stuff like that. Just dummies.

Bloody dummy yourself, I thought and turned to go, but a

beam came thumping down between Oakley and me in a curtain of sparks, fire blocking my way, the heat hitting that intensity you know means you've only got a minute or so left. I turned, ran blindly towards the back of the building and kicked through a smouldering door, and found myself in an untouched store-room. Boxes were standing open, half packed, spilling up their contents: an entire crate of crooked left arms, a line of rounded-off female torsos, long legs with pointed toes, ghostly, unseeing faces waiting for wigs or hats – bodies! – to become something. A surrealist's dream.

An utter stillness there, strangely beautiful and yet gruesome too, like that image in Goya's *Disasters of War*. (Maybe I could do something with that for *Warriors of the Machine*? Could be a big double pager – words wrapping around the bodies, maybe a monoprint?) Despite the heat building at my back, the sound of the flames biting closer, the scene held me to the spot, images fixing themselves in my mind. Wonder-full.

On the far wall my escape route: a fire door, but next to it a row of small, dark wooden drawers caught my eye. They were neatly stencilled with words to excite any artist, begging to be opened: BURNT SIENNA; LAPIS; VIRIDIAN GREEN. Paints? I opened the one closest to the exit, labelled CERULEAN, and found myself staring at a rack of neatly arranged glass eyeballs of



the most wonderful, celestial, gorgeous blue, all presumably waiting to be planted in some dummy's head, but now, disconcertingly, hypnotically, gazing back up at me. I can't quite put it into words – presumably why Ellis is the writer, not me – but those blue eyes seemed somehow to *see* me. To gaze right into me, deep into my soul. As if somebody had just asked a vital question and was waiting for an answer. What a blue! Like when you look towards the horizon on a late summer's day. When I get the *Warriors* book up and running at last, I'm going to use that exact blue in each and every blessed image.

God knows how long I stared at those eyes. Probably just seconds, but that was the moment something clicked inside. As if someone had shouted my name and catapulted me from sleep. As if I'd just been looking at things for days, weeks, months, but not actually SEEING anything. And suddenly my own eyes were wide open. The blue staring at me...

Bugger it, I utterly forgot where I was, that I was in danger...

I suppose technically it was looting, but they would only have melted anyway, and I couldn't leave without taking something of that piercing blue vision with me, so I took off my glove, dipped my hand into the box of eyes. They were cold, really cold. Untouched by the heat of the firestorm all around. I hadn't expected them to

be so cold. Took a couple of decent handfuls and thrust them into my pocket. Around fifteen or so. A Christmas present to myself.

Then everything roared back into life, the fire coming through the door behind me like a dragon, the beams overhead cracking thunder and the sound of falling masonry that you soon learn in this job is telling you to get yourself out PDQ. I felt the back of my helmet becoming hotter and hotter, felt the fire through my jacket, vision going like I was on the edge of passing out, and bludgeoned open the locked fire door with my axe at the fourth blow and tumbled out into the backyard, coughing up all the smoke I'd swallowed along with a bit of Christmas lunch, trying desperately to find my bearings. Then staggered back round to the engine to report that the building was clear of people.

And all the time the eyeballs were clicking away in my pocket.

Thank God, Oakley said. I thought we'd lost you this time, you daft sod. There's still Christmas pud to have! He tried to laugh, but his face was white. No jokes now, just relief and the exhaustion that comes towards the end of a shift.

And indeed here I am, still alive. I'd normally be shattered, but instead there's a kind of agitated excitement throbbing through me. Like I should be somewhere else, or have forgotten something. That fiddler keeps playing steadily. Feel like I've heard that tune recently, but I can't place it.



I can see him now: a slim shadow leaning against a building on the other side of the street, loose strands of the white horsehair on his bow flickering in flame light as he picks out his melody. The water from our hoses is snaking down the street past him, slick with oil, pooling, flowing around the bodies and parts of bodies still lying in the street: a left hand disembodied, little finger cocked as if holding a cup of tea at the Café Royal. A head and shoulder and arm, the face turned away from me towards the fiddler. Nobody else seems to see him but me...

• • •

Something *has* changed. For the first time in ages and ages (first time since childhood?) I have realized that I am alive. Not just walking and breathing and talking and thinking, but really *alive*. I know it's not enough that I just survive, that I am still breathing. That's not living, is it? I need to make my life matter, my work matter, to see things clearly...

I want to write down what's happening, and in detail – not just scribble notes alongside my drawings like normal. My new project will be an artist's book, text and images together, as strong as I can make it. As I go through the dark streets of London I want to describe each precious moment and try and make something that's powerful and true from all this. The flames and bright stars and glittering river that defy the chaos: I want to make them sing! Too many false steps in my life so far.

So *now* I shall begin to live. And maybe that will help me put matters right with my brother. Maybe it will give me the strength to say the things I want to say. Because I *need* to say them. Can't take the pain of this rift any longer.

And because I can't sing for toffee, I'll rely on what I can do: draw and write with new conviction so that I can create something that will live independently of me. Even if Father has washed his hands of me, even if Ellis thinks I'm a waste of time right now, I'll make *Warriors of the Machine* my weapon against

all this nonsense around us. A New Year's resolution, a few days early – and one that I mean to stick at with every last little bit of my energy and strength. With the urgency of brushing fire from my head.

Oh! I've got these fifteen odd eyeballs clacking away in my pocket, and they can be my witnesses. Yes, I like that!



Death comes two ways, as I say: either with the rum-ble and sudden warning engine cut of the doodlebug, or silently; with the V2 you're blown to bits before you hear the roar of its engine and the sonic boom struggling to keep up. Three thousand miles an hour, Oakley said.

Three thousand bloody miles an hour.

You never know it's coming. So make the most of each and every moment.

Everything is strangely calm. No yesterday, no tomorrow. No Christmas Eve and no New Year's Day either. Just the sound of that violin and the stench from the factory. The water from our hoses coils towards the fiddler and makes a pool there before trickling away blackly down the street trying to find the distant river. The grit and filth of Kilburn transformed. I feel a kind of *elation* running through me.

• • •

Time to head back.

I'll leave one of the glass eyeballs here, tucked into a crack in the brickwork.

And here I will begin to live.



Becoming

I've died so many times it isn't funny anymore
 (and after the first death there is no other),
 but nevertheless,
 it must be said
 that I have learned a little more from each one.
 One should walk through many lives, I think, before
 starting to judge, before making pronouncements,
 before saying this is this, and that is that, and the
 biggest judgement of all: *you should... You! You should...*
 And I had to learn that lesson the hard way...
 A very hard way.

Here's a thing!
 A thing to ponder,
 something to make you sit and wonder:
 a paradox, perhaps,
 or just a trick,
 but
 until you have been someone else,
 how can you know who you are, yourself?

Of course, that is only something I realized
 when I died for the first time.
 Or, to be precise, when I began to live again,
 through someone else's eyes.
 Because that was when the dance really began,
 as I swung through the years with a querulous voice,
 always trying to sing my song
 and now and again I was able
 to step inside someone's mind
 and whisper their name.
 Harry! *Harry!*
 Can you hear me?
 Do you know who I am, who's calling you?
 It's Orpheus, Harry, *Orpheus*.
 I've come to call you to yourself,
 to make you wake,
 to help you see.
 And the most important thing is that *you* are me.
 Not yet, perhaps, but you will be when you wake,
 when you open your eyes, shaking at the things around you,
 trembling just from seeing the world at last.

Harry!
 I saw you at the warehouse.
 (Wasn't it *coward* that your father called you?)
 You and Oakley, fighting the fire.
 (Didn't your brother call you a *shirker*?)
 I know you heard me, Harry!
 Push through the door, Harry.
 Leave those lifeless workers behind
 and push through the door.
Become me, Harry. Become me,
 and then the adventure can begin.

And then...
 Something I hadn't foreseen.
 You plunged your hand into a box of blue...
