

Last Orders: Where Power Lies

**History revision for
an illiterate state**

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*When men with guns enforce their law
the disaffected always call this war.
And so the sum of everything that's planned
is an endlessly repeated ampersand.*

Last Orders: Where Power Lies

(from The Last Orchid, a work in very long progress)

**Eve, the patient in a coma,
issues more instructions**

*Our lips brushed. My fingers touched hers.
We were solo in our mutual cause.*

...

*“You must travel to a distant city,”
she advised. “To uncover where truth lies.”
Love was hard to find in her drab dimmed eyes,
drained by weariness, devoid of pity.*

1. Casus Belli

Casus Belli 1: Participants

What this saga is
about is participants,
and in particular
those egotists
in politics
we come to doubt:
public perpetrators, self-selected
to ensure the people are protected;
and how no one asks if they have the right
to do bad things on our behalf by night.

Settlements

After the ice age comes driftwood and seed
then birdlife and hope, then purpose and need.
The war canoes divide the waves like spears
opening torso oceans, settling scores,
island to island, land to random land,
treasure from treachery, clan from clan.
Driven by prowess, privation, power,
before there are sheep or sheers or ploughs,
star compasses hunt space from double hulls
spurning fear, splitting distances like skulls.
And with them come the imprints of home
in spores and seeds and eggs and sperm:
little else survives the raging reefs,
the sand-grave beaches or defiant grief.
Here is the last and furthest reach on Earth
of new-found land for human settlement.

Each day now heroes shrink the planet's girth:
Marco Polo trades across the orient
to glory at the court of Kubla Khan
in four millennia of Chinese pride:
and Norsemen farm as North Americans,
their metals marvelled by Algonkian tribes.

Meanwhile, minnow England dwindles as John's
cringing Magna Carta signs away force
with fingers crossed, his lands decant in France,
and civil law is spilled by civil wars.

The heat of the North Wind kneels on the sea

splintering the glass Pacific Ocean;
peoples scatter like slight spray on a breeze.
Be sure to explore Southland with caution.

Casus Belli 2: Explorers

Explorers are extraordinary guys
who have arrived with open hands and eyes;
they're looking for the place that makes their times:
discovery's an accident and prize.

The ones who follow wear a different guise.
first, though no one sees them, are the spies
then speculators wielding spades and lies
till agents put an end to compromise.

Territorial claims

Tsars and pharaohs choose their course,
and dodge the consequences;
intransigence in princes is proxy
for perspective, action, justice, cause;
placebo ministers and presidents
primp themselves in public making news.
And still the mandarins and measlemen
raid foreign aid, feign deals and quash disputes,
treat tickets for the opera like gold,
eager to view old tragedies retold.

What locks "lineage" to legitimate?
prizes privilege from parental choice?
puts forefathers in the family way?
There is no will to trust their paper chase,
no rationale for rulers to bear costs
or dispossess themselves. Dig deep enough
and you'll assess archaeology as dross.
Ancestors abdicate their times, but not
their status and estates; and thus they stay
to heap our futures under spoil and snot

and deem it heritage and legacy.
Yet the sack of Carthage was so complete
its crushed stones barely yield its own defeat;
its art and thought today are so much soot
where farmers puncture sterile soil for food,
and archaeologists for shards of truth.
Though it's clear that only relatives who

the living can recall are real to us,
we won't accept "the Past" has been abused
unless we see it painted on a bus.

Casus Belli 3: Warmongers

Even at our best we act as if gods,
imagine we manipulate the odds,
can still predict the future, manage risk.
make the planet wince when we show a fist.

The Long Brexit

So what this is about
are the dreams and claims you touted
of yesterdays on battlefields
and spittlefields you routed,
and foreign deals in cottage-fields
endlessly recounted, never doubted.
Eight centuries of overseas adventure
have meant you're
trading with the sense your
morals transcend all censure,
and the Holy Lord must thank you
that no force or will outranks you.

What it's about is fanatical peers
and beating Europe every hundred years;
with your Agincourts and your Waterloos
you never found out what it means to lose.
A century from when you boiled the Frog,
pickling the Kraut took a thirty-year slog;
Now, what a shame, you've really lost the plot
and joined the Age that History Forgot.

What this, though, is not about
is your hired hands, your soldier's entrail hands.
It's you, your bleeding heart and bloodlust plans,
leaders in a world stained pink who believe
with "Great" in a name the world is deceived.
It's about a country that can't fear war
enough - and lunatics who fear peace more.

Casus Belli 4: Slavers

Ravenous bugs ate the world, drank its juice
as populations slept at godless pews
The worms bought votes, and maggots stole estates,
cankorous yeasts clashed on the price of grapes.

In Sickness and in Wealth

Somehow we forget, we victors, aliens,
we long-since denizens, we citizens
of clandestine theft and hideous offence,
whose forefathers we've quietly forgiven
for their freebooting foreign flings of old,
taking untold territory and gold,
cargos loaded, stowed in living holds,
maybe three million bought and sold.
As we drown in greed we can live with hate
for all our oblivious and blatant
nauseating naked sequestrations,
the crimes we still believe we can escape.
While our plenty suffers no distemper
there will be others who do remember.

Casus Belli 5: Occupiers

"Here's the deal in regions we've selected:
if you behave we'll get your man elected -
it feels good to live in a democracy,
but you won't talk about the crock you see.

"Just remember how the world abhorred you
before our forces forcibly restored you;
All we ask is let us take a broad view
of goods you sell - so we can afford you.

"And guess whose mother country's mothers grieve
whether occupying armies stay or leave."

March the Third

It's March the Third, a day to mourn again
how soldiers turned their guns on citizens
who'd downed their tools because the government
was rooting for a side which wasn't them.

Today the presses roll to crush dissent
in case the anniversary makes friends.
Some students shouting slogans start to run.
Older women worn and diffident look on;
memorials and vigils make it worse,
says one. "This insecurity's our curse."
A man, 81, scratches an itching arse
and wonders if this too bodes something else.
Trains also run sometimes, and are obliged
to bear the names of wealthy businessmen
and carry adverts for pastries and pies.
A sanguine signalman has seen the trend.
Aloof, alert and in his nest, he rolls
a fag he loaths and waits for it to end.
The worried mother casts her vote for frocks,
imagines magic in the ballot box
will make her free again and turn back clocks.
Big guys arm-wrestle on the open road,
like the macho ministers who strut and goad
their enemies to fight for what they're owed.
A crowd forms; police twitch, force a cordon.
The priest at his prayers smells something rotten:
was some festival today forgotten?

A lone child darts among blades of sunlight
unaware of his shading parents' fright
about salvation and the coming night.
The lad, stabbed by something sharp in the sun,
gives a strange wordless howl like pain or joy.
On this March the Third one stray lawman's gun
foments a riot in the heart of a boy.

Casus Belli 6: Agents Provocateurs

If men with guns enforce uncivil law
don't be surprised that someone starts a war;

Let's Call It Civil War

Absentees and Whigs did for Irish scum,
exporting food while families succumbed
to rents, evictions, disease, starvation
needed to cure the overpopulation.
But Irishmen had form in taking stands
long before Cromwell or the Black and Tans,
so who the feck sucked Callaghan's decision
when troops hit Belfast with no mission?

Casus Belli 7: The Deaf

Again? When men with guns enforce their law
the disaffected always call this war.
(And so the sum of everything that's planned
is an endlessly repeated ampersand.)

You And Whose Army?

Don't expect us to forget your
acts, you strike-crush-picket-basher
macho bloody troop dispatchers -
gnashers Churchill, Baldwin, Thatcher,
whose forces took on working men
they'd been recruited to defend.

When union-thrashing plotter Thatcher built
up stocks to put the miners on the dole
they couldn't see the tip for all the coal.
They made mistakes; she countered them in guilt.
Her bloody cavalry were cops on horse,
and M4 army convoys fought her cause,
while she gave power and illegal source
to state-controlled and uncontrolled brute force.

Casus Belli 8: Whips

“Here's the bargain whoever gets elected:
we'll only save your seat while we're protected;
so if you act as if we're not connected
deal's off, we'll Rentokil the rats who wrecked it.”

Ru(1)in(g) party

Then most of all, what it's about
is the loutish lies you shout and sprout
about our poor, our down and out,
the tousled unloused
populace that you denounce
so easily while your luxuriating snout
inhales solely from the perfumed south.
All your counsel, all your accounts,
all your flounce and bounty can't amount
to half an ounce of caring proud, devout

and honest housing founders, without
whom your feckless rule is nowt.

The State

And in the end what it's about
is you, the State, in whose corrosive acid name
we made our claims and earned our fame;
it's you, the down-slope, dwarf Napoleon,
you, the global ogre, wind that's only sound,
the wrecking ball buffoon without a cause,
second-former playing with the fourth,
you, a one-time vaulter looking for a pole,
and you the sad goal-hanger pleading for a role.
It's you, and your crude realpolitik,
your squeak-like speech, your witless pique,
your pitiless beliefs, and weak and sneaky tweets,
you, your appetites, your sweaty nights,
your self-assuming dutiless rights.
In the last resort what it's about
is groundless, bootless national gout,
your arrogance and not your clout,
not who's in, but who you must keep out.

Rage

The Rage is on
from your contagion.
In every city, every village
entitlement and privilege
incite the mild and pillage
their respect for everyone;
silent deviance and stench are
a nation's price and licence
that pay for your adventures -
we lie, and hate, and lose delight,
now these surly islands die in spite,
and your escape is mild dementia.

Casus Belli 9: Losers

After the ice age come drifters in weeds
settling nothing with nothing to concede:
sea-bottom feeders making laws with lies,
a Ministry of Fish attracting flies.

Power feeds power - it needs no consents -
till power drains at everyone's expense
and there's only energy for rancour.

We won't always be their lost explorers;
how long do they think they can ignore us
and our anger?

2. War and Piss

In My Name 1: Dragonflies

Young brothers are swatting dragonflies
down by the Euphrates to avoid being stung.
Monstrous complex all-seeing eyes
follow their play; the drones hold still
in mid-air on green translucent wings;
like no known missile, the things dart
with terrifying speed and uncanny aim.
The boys know they are certain to be killed.

A father enters a room from a bombed-out street.
Terrified, he shoots point-blank a man there;
and covers the body with a black plastic sheet,
exempting him from its spent dead-eyed stare
and dread of revenge. He's a former chef
who trained for murder with invading forces
when café bombs changed his life mid-course.
He doesn't know who's issuing the orders,
why his leaders need internal borders,
why they dilute authority with slogans
ditch diplomacy for paranoia
or mix up reality with nightmare.
No one can say how long his job will run.

The father retires exhausted from battle;
he returns in tears to his children
who have escaped the drones
and are now hiding under blankets from scenes
of repetitious TV cartoon violence
where offenders are hammered literally
into the ground to come out misshapen
and yet miraculously viable.
All their father has hoped for
is that the state will protect them,
and the Ministry of War provides plausibility -
a spokesman to disseminate news of freedom
and pre-emptive and inventive self-defence.

Down by the marshes near the river's edge
awful larvae climb the reeds and shed their skins.
Within hours the dragonflies will have mated
in emphatic and erratic stingless flight
and laid eggs in backwaters of the war.
In time new monsters will be poised to fly.

In My Name 2: Freedom

A soldier, one of ours, enters a room
shoots the cringing man sitting alone.
Offscreen, his colleagues join the hum,
give a nod as the headcam zooms in
on the blood and bedclothes strewn
with the body in the evening gloom.
His lieutenant later tells the platoon
as the shaky video is shown,
“These scum are the reason we’ve come.
Thank god we can bring them freedom.”

In My Name 3: Glory

Old generals in TV studios wear
regimental ties, have three minutes air
to pack the war away like lead soldiers
boxed in cardboard and instant nostalgia.
The commentary by historians heats
the debate, like a gardener who repeats
hand-me-down wisdom from musty old men.
Facts, they claim, were less reliable when
knowledge was thin and prejudice was deep,
and journalists were known expenses cheats.

Now smart newsmen arrived at the war dressed
in flak jackets designed to withstand the best
propaganda, ready to slake their thirst
for reputation putting down the first
gun-deaf bomb-numb rough-drafted history.
By night they’d booze on neat hyperbole,
yet, for all the crap they spoke, body matter
they pissed and shat, or later found splattered
and dried on their beards, they were targets too,
in dreadful danger from collateral truth.
They’d a perfect view in the press hotel
when a friendly tank slipped one well-aimed shell
down the dead photographer’s camera lens
in case someone asked if our war made sense.

In my name 4: Honour

Again a soldier enters a room
shoots an unarmed man in his home.
“I could see him going for his gun.

You saw the same?" he tells his chums.
They agree it's a job well done,
and one more stinking Haji gone,
In time the night patrol moves on
down the lethal street to comb
for more insurgents in their zone.
They're our heroes, every one,
fighting an enemy barely known
indiscriminate as stones
that local kids have thrown,
or the honours that will come
in the war that darkness won.

In My Name 5: History

I've seen Salamis, Antioch, Sicilia,
I've dived at the Hellespont, whored by the Pillars
Dined with Dionysius and played dice with Zeus,
Baited bears in the Lebanon, taken teeth from Jews.
Yet I can't count the throats I slit, bellies disembowelled,
the bridges burned, the temples, battlefields we fouled,
I couldn't name one girl we took, enflamed by her screams,
any city that we sacked, or child we wrenched from dreams.
I can't recall the face of any friend who fell
beside me then, or whether I had known them well.
You'll never hear my name, and I can't give you dates.
But war is what I made. And history, and states.

A man enters an auditorium
his rucksack is the bomb.

3. Offence and Consequence

Not In My Name: Stateless

Back before PMs were famed for their dicks
when the language of Straw was hard as bricks
Cool Britannia thawed, just dropped off its stick;
Tracey and Damien didn't seem so sick.
Transparency veiled the ultimate trick
when the stooge coalition followed the hick
and the Press Office spread its newsless slick:
"There's an enemy within that's stained us:
if you're not with us, you're against us."

The old draft dodger seemed less angelic
when Baghdad Museum became a relic.
Civilisations came and went before
American tanks stirred the streets of Ur
and household utensils that survived five
millennia were used to pave the drive.
The message too was privileged and brainless:
"The love of Jesus Christ sustained us:
if you're not with us, you're against us."

Public statements groped for portentous
as our leader's fellow condescenders
manipulated signs the bombers sent us:
"They're Enemies of Freedom, not dissenters.
You can't explain pure Evil this horrendous:
those who understand them can't avenge us,
if you look for motives, you're offenders."
They want to add a question to the census:
Tell us, are you with us or against us?

Governments are run by traders who deal
in lies with countries they would like to steal;
democracy works since it serves the need
of those who want to rule, and they succeed
fantasising enemies to fool us.
So we've most to fear from our own rulers
when free citizens are told by censors,
"Opposition never has constrained us;
if you're not with us, you're against us."

The young see parliament to be sad old
hypocrites whose virgin sisters they sold
to win their seats; the old think we're skewered

by the young, and sibling traders feel secure
in power just as long as they obscure
the truth. The powerless dream too: they live
to crush the young with shock and awe belief:
“ Our intelligence is what convinced us
if you’re not with us you’re against us.”

If it takes madness to defeat mad terror,
if my freedom causes envy, error,
if the answer’s ancient rage and foreign war
while I grow rich and fearful, fat and strained -
if Life and Right can simply be exchanged,
if Truth and Justice oil our mass distractions,
then we pay too much for this abstraction:
“Right is ours, though half the world defamed us;
if you’re not with us, you’re against us.”

Honest leaders don’t need revenge or prayer;
they fly with new ideas, give chaos sight,
and join with Dylans railing at the night.
So if I didn’t cry I’d have to laugh,
when failed magicians saw the world in half,
use terror to distract us from despair.
It’s clear when liberties enchain us
and our savage watchdogs turn against us
that those charlatans have left us stateless.

[end]