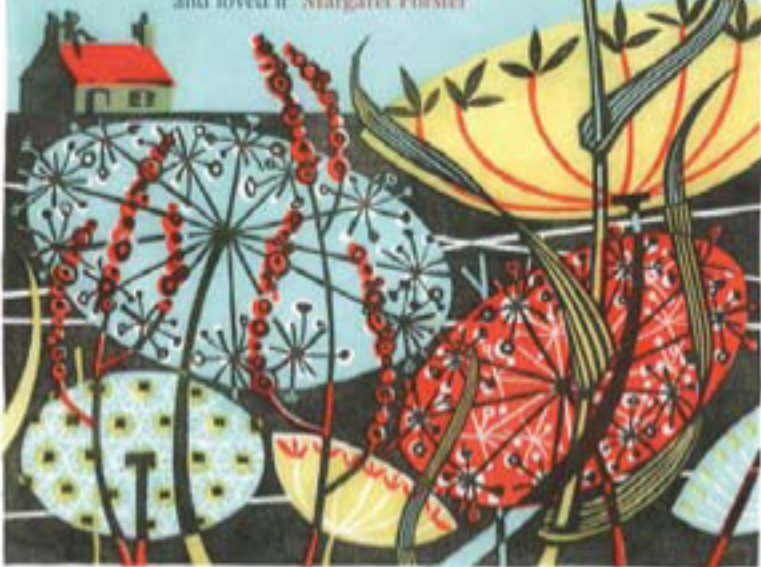




Jeremy Page

SALT

'Striking, funny, terrifying. I admired
and loved it' Margaret Forster



Salt
by
Jeremy Page

Copyright © Jeremy Page, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Salt

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Mud

Finding a man buried up to his neck in mud. That's how it's meant to have started. Him in the mud and her pushing a pram towards him over the saltmarsh. He's on one side of a creek and she's on the other. The pram is full of samphire and there's more of it in her hands and by her feet. Bright green samphire on black, oily mud, the start of this story has very few colours. And against the mud – quite unexpectedly – she's seen the shocking blond hair of the man.

She said she nearly tripped over him. That her wellies nearly kicked him like he was a washed-up fishing buoy, till at the last second – the very last second, which was also their first – he'd smiled politely, and said hello.

It's a pretty start to a story. Across the mud slicks and estuary there's a boat, which was wrecked many years before the man was. It's called the *Hansa*, and because it's sinking in mud and a rising tide the man has felt an affinity with it all morning. He's certainly had little else to look at, and the rest of the landscape fails to make sense – the sky is so watery blue and the sea so cloudy grey that just to look at it makes him feel upside down. Of course, what he cannot see – yet – are the clouds. A thin smoke-signalled line beyond the Holkham Meals. But *she* sees them all right, saw them the second they appeared, and for a moment she doesn't know what to do – should she run? She thinks better of it because she knows it's too late. The story of her and the man she found has already started. And another thing, she's seen the tall wooden figure

of a longshoreman on the creek's other side, looking like a cracked mast stuck in the mud, tattered rags of sails blowing from his shoulders.

So this young woman, some kind of creek-hopper, in that instant, with mud on her face and a man's coat on her back, boots on her feet, made a decision. She moved quickly, scattering samphire on to the man beneath her, weaving the muddy roots into his conspicuous blond hair and laying out bundles by the dozen along the bits of his arms and chest where they poked through the mud, and as the longshoreman began to wade into the creek she arranged the last of the samphire on the mound of his belly, finally running out when it came to his 'down there'. No, not even a solitary stalk was unaccounted for. She left that bit exposed, and in the seconds before the longshoreman arrived, she sat on her pile. Three an' six, two shillin' two an' six, she muttered. Needless to say the longshoreman had spent too many years staring at the horizon, talking to fish heads hanging from his hook or herring strung from his belt to notice anything odd about the woman counting her crop.

Though he'd meandered an unnecessary hundred yards across the marsh to see my grandmother, he had nothing in particular to say when he arrived. That being the usual path in Norfolk and this being the usual way of the marsh. They got by in silence, listening to the larks. The longshoreman sniffed, shifted his weight, moved off again. The young woman kept a wary glance on him and the herring swinging from his belt as he began to splatter some drops of weak piss on the mud, and as he shook himself dry she looked at how the fish hanging from his belt danced, their wide-mouthed expressions so close to a smile.

'Guess what I seen,' he began.

She continued the samphire count.

‘Guess what I seen yes’day.’

‘What?’

‘You ought a guess.’

‘Why?’

‘What I seen.’

‘Well, what was it?’

‘Ain’t you guessin’?’

Ill at ease, he ground his foot into the mud like all marshmen do.

‘I ain’t told no one.’

‘Thass because ain’t no one listen to you.’

The longshoreman frowned and sucked his breath in. ‘You put me off my count, thass trouble,’ she said.

‘Last night,’ he said, ‘I seen a man fell right out the sky. Out the moon maybe. Fell right out down here an’ I been lookin’ for him.’

She saw tufts of that blond hair poking through between the samphire. ‘Five an’ six, ha’penny . . .’

‘What them clouds say?’ the longshoreman asked, chuckling to himself. He gave her a wink and began to head off. He was, after all, infatuated.

Halfway into the lagoon – known as the Pit – with the water up to the hem of his waders, he turned back, looking a little more like a drowning man than usual, and shouted *I ain’t lying no how!* between the circling shrieks of gulls and terns.

And to the man struggling under her samphire pile she whispered you keep it quiet now ’cause that one’s got a long tongue. But the man she’d uprooted from the marsh like the samphire itself had other things on his mind. Maybe it’s just a story, but the story goes that once he was down there, the man weighed up his options, found to his surprise that this young woman wasn’t made entirely of mud, that she was probably still in her twenties, that her skin was smooth

and smelled like warm dry flints. The story has it that even while the longshoreman's waders and flapping oilskins were approaching through the creek, the buried man was thinking she must be worth a go, thinking about all a man can think about when he knows his number's up.

But maybe this is already far from the truth. Stories start simply enough, but they soon can't be trusted. What's certainly true is that the man did something to put her hackles up, because my grandmother half-carried half-dragged her man from the shore, across the saltmarsh, along the Morston Channel to Lane End, her cottage. To the one room where she slept, ate and washed. And there, in the middle of her room, she threw down the mud-man in near disgust. Crumpled and guilty, he shivered and coughed on her rug while she unhooked the tin bath and placed it on six raised bricks.

'You stink like cod. Should've gived you to that long-shoreman. I should've chucked you back in the sea on the end of his hook.'

It's possible he never understood a word she said.

For the next ten minutes she talked to herself as she carried water from the standpipe outside, sloshing it on the rug and across the curled-up legs of the man on her way to the tub. The man hid his head in shame as the water and the nonsense and the obscenities poured down round him till the tub was full.

These were the nights when German bombers growled through the sky, their bellies full with steel and cordite. When the moon was low their dark shapes and still-darker shadows came over the coast. Several hours later they'd return again, wearily, lighter in weight, fewer in number, dropping the occasional bomb on the forgotten land of creeks and channels

beneath them. On one of those nights it all began for me – crablines and samphire, tulips and bees, fireworks like delphiniums and agapanthus in the sky, smoking fish on racks by the dozen, elm trees and marsh fever, boats and rag clouds and dunes and woods and marshes and the dead sperm whale – war, after all, starts many things, and even though I wasn't born for another twenty-five years, my story, or at least the stories that made my story, began there.

Back in the cottage, the odd couple who just met on the marshes are sitting on the rug. Before them there's the blackened shape of the tin bath, under which my grandmother has placed candles to keep the water hot. The man, perhaps wondering whether he's to be cooked, nevertheless cuts his losses and steps – still with his boots on – into the tub. The steam rises lazily into the candlelight of the room. My grandmother kneels by the tub and begins to soap the marsh off his back, occasionally splashing him with water to make him keep still. She uncorks the mud from his ears and for the first time he listens to the murmuring of distant terns, the stirring of the chimney, a rusty weathervane on top of the roof. A lone bomber goes overhead, and an air-raid siren wails mournfully across the marsh. Blackout curtains hang against the windows and my grandfather must think that this woman lives in a cave. He is safe here. No one will ever see her candles.

It is a moment to savour in my family history.

When he stands, the steam rises softly from his skin like he's a man new made, from the mould. He's an impressive sight, youthful and relaxed, arms hanging calmly by his sides. He has the palest blue eyes she's ever seen. But she doesn't wrap the naked man in a warm towel. In fact, she doesn't have a

towel. She has a large bunch of muddy samphire stems, and slaps the man on the back of his shins to get his legs out of the way. He steps out, dripping, and her forearms go to work in the soiled water of the bath, washing out the roots.

He stands there dripping, uneasy, unsure what to do. He's confused, what with the watery sky, the cloudy sea, the creek-hopping woman, the longshoreman, the boiling cauldron and the strange green plant.

But she's not without heart, for lying on the bed is a clean white shirt and a dark suit, which has the smell of a wardrobe and marks on the shoulders where she's sponged the dust.

Where had that suit come from, and whose back had it come off? My grandmother sticks to her story – she claims she'd always had one ready, just for this type of occasion. Every woman, she adds, should have a suit at the back of the wardrobe, just in case. That the man she found was nearly naked – apart from the boots – and buried up to his neck in Morston Marsh – well, that was only incidental, a minor detail, although it certainly proved she'd been right to have a suit hanging up ready. So what happened to the suit, then? Chucked in the sea, my mother says, after he did what he did. Rat, my grandmother adds. Every story heads towards tragedy, given the time.

When the samphire was washed, my grandmother put several fistfuls of the plant into a saucepan set over the fire. The man nervously straightened his collar and waited, unaware of the spells that were about to be brewed. Like all the men in my family, his appetite was to be his downfall. And from the moment my grandmother had spied his ridiculous head sticking out of the mud, she'd known that her cookery would land him. She boiled cider vinegar. With her back to him so that he was forced to peer, she made a white sauce, uncorked an earthenware jar and added a dash of dark brown stock. The

vapours rose stealthily into the air like ghosts – chicken bones, fish heads, eyes of cod. She cracked two eggs and poured from shell to shell, letting the muscle and white drip carelessly on to the tiles. The plump yolks went in, and she began a vigorous thickening whisk, while the man's stare became more intent, more desperate, his shoulders beginning to sink with the acuteness of his hunger. She added the vinegar, a slice of butter, and bit by inexorable bit my grandfather was forced to succumb. The air was filled with smooth waves of scent: the creamy almost rancid bitterness of a dairy, the rotten-sweet dust of the summer orchard, the breath of corn, of malt, a whiff of the sea.

My grandmother laid the fleshy green samphire across a large plate and poured a generous puddle of hollandaise next to it. She sat by the man and raised a juicy stem of samphire in front of his eyes. Taunting him. She dragged it across the plate, twisting it like rope to gather the sauce, then she put it in his mouth, closing his hanging jaw with her other hand. She pulled it through his teeth, freeing the samphire and the sauce and the delicious creamy tang from the thin white stem and the still slightly muddy root. His eyes closed in bewilderment, then opened in delight. He was a gonner.

Between them, they devoured the samphire, turning the lush green stems into a pile of stringy roots. The man smelled the suit on his back, he smelled the years of stale air woven into it, he smelled the nets down by the creek, the cheap grease of candlewax and the fear and loneliness that was huddled on this bleak North Sea coast during these long dark nights. He smelled the animals huffing in the stables across the marsh, the children crouching hushed under kitchen tables, and high in the air, he smelled the sweet perfume of engine oil, of dark guns heavily greased and hot to touch, the acrid and compelling smell of war.

The man who would become my grandfather pulled the last stem of samphire through his teeth, wiped the yolky hollandaise off his chin and stared contentedly into the candle-flame. And, for the first time that evening, he took off his army issue boots and placed them carefully side by side under the narrow bed.

Days on the Wreck, Nights on the Quilt

Before it's even light, the man who was buried in mud the day before has climbed on to the roof of the cottage. He hugs the chimney like it's the mast of a boat and strains to see over the marshes. The tiles feel damp and mossy, and with his ear to the chimneypot he can just make out the eerie sound of the woman's snores coming from inside.

He needs to work out where he is, this misty edge of England, and little by little the saltmarsh reveals itself as the light spreads. At the foot of the garden, a rough mudslide slips into the Morston Channel. Clearly able to carry a sizeable boat, but draining to a trickle at low tide. Beyond it, a flat mile of saltmarsh until the branchless masts of other boats – there must be a channel there too. Yes, leading to a small village with high flint walls against the weather and the cold North Sea. He recalls seeing it on a map, it must be Blakeney. He sees the first of the luggers there, assembled on the quay, deciding which mud pool to dig their bait. A dreadful living. Beyond them the saltmarsh stretches as far as he can see, making its own horizon in a raised bank, which must mean another river is behind it. The Glaven, he suddenly remembers – it's the kind of thing a bomber can follow on moonlit nights. The river flows through a village called Cley next the Sea, an odd name in any language, past serene reed beds and a picture-postcard windmill. Not that serenity lasts long out here – the storm of 1953 will be sent that way fairly soon. They'll be climbing the trees and smashing holes through the tiles before that night is through.

The man knows that none of these channels, all of which point due north like a trident, actually reach the sea. They all drain into a four-mile-long lagoon called the Pit, and on the other side of the Pit is the Point: a low sweeping bank of sand, gravel, mud and dunes, which joins the land at Cley and stretches along the coast like a giant protective arm. Beyond that is the open water of the North Sea.

At this moment the sun rises miraculously, seemingly out of the distant mud of the saltmarsh, orange-yolked and unreal, and for a second my grandfather is illuminated like a film star, on set, in another man's suit. Blond hair, thin-skinned, with the neat ordered smile of a calm man. Those eyes seem impossibly clear, their sky-blue colour almost doesn't register in the light.

He scans the marshes, passing the place near by where a boat will be wrecked in 1953, Bryn Pugh's *Thistle Dew*. As he sweeps the marshes he lingers briefly on the spot where he was found buried in the mud, passes the oyster bed where I shall be locked in a cage and nearly drowned one day, over to the wreck that he spent all of yesterday morning looking at. Then, near the rising sun, he sees the silhouette of a pillbox, newly constructed. I'll examine the way shrimp have been eaten after a picnic there. Near the pillbox he sees a small oak copse and an isolated huddle of buildings and outbuildings. Not much to look at. More outbuilding than building at first glance – just a cattle shed used in storms and floods. But it has a good chimney, which is why my uncle will choose to make his smokehouse there in a few years' time. There's the lawn where we will cure the hocks, the room where he will build his fireworks, and there's the thick smokehouse door with its unreliable latch. Ah, yes, the latch. Looking at these buildings, you've really got to hand it to him. My uncle was a man of vision.

My grandfather will never know any of this. He will know

nothing about the mouthwatering smell of smoking fish, the massive door with smoke pulling through the cracks like nails being uncurled from the wood, or the fireworks being built in the Lab. But, for the moment, he's happy, he's alive and the sun is shining.

He puts his ear to the chimneypot and listens to the sounds of the cottage. Noises rise up at him like he's listening to a well. A shuffle of shoes on the tiles and, suddenly loud, a spit landing in the fireplace right below him. She must be up. He begins to slide down the roof on his backside, is unable to stop the acceleration, so falls the last few feet to land roughly in the garden. She's at the window glaring at him. Falling out the clouds again. *Where've you bin!* she mouths. He points to the sky. *Thassit!* she says, had enough of you. He smiles back, then brushes himself down – it's not a bad suit after all – and opens the door as if he owns the place. She's already turned her back on him.

Once inside, and not knowing what to do, he finds an oilcan and greases the door's hinges. He goes to the fireplace and closes a link in a chain which is giving way, he fixes the rattle on a window by hammering leather into the crack. He begins to whistle with his happiness. My grandmother doesn't want to acknowledge him, but is getting increasingly irritable with a man who can be so annoyed by little things after less than twelve hours in a place. Juss let him try fix my skillet – he'll know about it then. Just who did this perhaps on-the-run, possibly deranged, compulsive handyman think he was?

She unwraps a loaf-shaped block of cold oatmeal porridge and cuts four thick slices from it, melts lard on the skillet and fries the slices till they're golden brown. My grandfather's fixing spree grinds to a halt as the smell of frying fat fills the air. She's at it again, he thinks. He obediently sits at the table.

A wonky table – but he even misses that, such is the power of the woman’s cookery.

‘You carry on that fidget and I’ll clout you with the broom and that’s as solid as bugger,’ she began, ‘fannyin’ round like an old woman. Get your grub in an’ go fix the rowin’ boot.’

Perhaps he smiles at this point the generous smile of a man grateful for small mercies. His dreamy blue eyes glinting with the sheer pleasure of being alive, being well, being useful. Relaxed by the handiwork and the warmth of porridge he says one word – pointing to himself, he tells her to call him Hans.

‘*Hands?*’ she replies.

With his belly full of porridge, the hammer was given back to Hands – as he’d instantly become – and he was told to go fix the garden. Get out the house, more like, and Hands knew she meant it. Immediately outside the back door he almost tripped over a small rowing dinghy – the *Pip* – badly in need of caulking, splicing and varnish. Overjoyed with the project he went back to hug the marshwoman, but was met only with her finger pointing ‘out’ once more. He would need tools and materials, but other jobs needed doing first. So he vanished with a box of nails and spent the morning fastening wires to the fence and pegging the raspberry bushes, and as his sphere of fixing grew ever wider he returned to the roof, where he hammered down some of the loose tiles and finally, mercifully, ran out of nails. While he was up there he saw the longshoreman winding his tortuous way through the creeks like a man trying either to lose himself or find something he’d lost. A man not comfortable with straight lines.

On the roof, however, tiles had been realigned, coping stones raised and guttering levelled. The marsh was obviously sucking the cottage down, twisting its beams and cracking its walls in the process, but Hands was doing his best to polish

the rails of the sinking ship. As he reached up for the slanting chimneypot he spotted the longshoreman had arrived and was leaning against the gate. The gate leaned in turn against the longshoreman.

‘Goose! You got some bloke up the roof. Goose!’

Her real name’s Kitty, but it’s never used.

Hands looked down, waiting for the marshwoman to come out, but nothing happened.

The longshoreman waited too, nodded a quiet mornin’ to the man with the hammer, then began again: ‘Roof, Goose. Got some bloke on the chimney.’

The longshoreman shut up when she came out. He grinned knowingly; not that he knew much about anything.

‘What you grinnin’ at?’

‘You’re a rum ’un.’

‘You what?’

‘You heard.’

‘What?’

‘What I said.’

The days pass slowly in Norfolk. Hands sat down on his haunches, the hammer idle across his lap.

‘Don’t you make my gate stink of fish.’

‘Got you a dab, ain’t I,’ the longshoreman said, unhitching a pale flatfish from his belt and holding it out.

‘Chuck it down. I ain’t coming no closer ’cause of your breath.’

The longshoreman gave his fish a lingering kiss on the lips then chucked it down.

‘Thanks.’

‘That’s got grass on it now.’

‘It’ll wash.’

The longshoreman pulled out a bit of driftwood from his pocket: ‘And that’s a bit of wood.’

He chucked it on to a pile of similar-shaped wood and other bits of flotsam, looked up and nodded at Hands, pushed himself upright from the gate, leaned forward into his stride, and left.

And wrapped round the length of driftwood was a strip of fabric – part of the fine cream of a German silk parachute, woven in Dresden, found in a creek bed, hurriedly buried. Or so the story usually went, spoken either by my mother or my grandmother over the years. Though even this is uncertain: there are irregularities, details that change, inconsistencies in chronology. That fish, for one, seems likely to have been a red herring. Sometimes it's a plaice – a flatfish, admittedly – but other times it's been a whiting, a John Dory and, once, a mackerel. Whiting are never caught at that time of the year, and the longshoreman's bag of tackle never carried mackerel feathers.

Hands knew from the start he'd bitten off more than he could chew. However hard he worked, however many things he put right and made level, he knew the woman would sweep him out of the house with her broom one day. And so, up on the roof, I imagine he gazed long and hard at the gleaming roll of parachute silk against the muddy lawn, before turning his attention to the horizon, way beyond the marshes.

That little glimpse of him up on the roof is my invention, I admit, but here my story goes along with my grandmother's: Hands *liked* looking at the horizon. Long-sighted, dreamy-expressed, whatever you want to call it, she noticed it and didn't like it one bit.

She had a problem on her plate. She had a man in her suit and he was already looking into the distance. What to do? Well, her solution was to regard it as a fault in his eyesight. She made him work on things close at hand, made him hunt

for pins on the floor, pointed out a speck of dust and asked him what it was, made him search for crumbs under the table, made him inspect the moles on her back. He peered closer each time, completely unaware that his lovely long sight was being reeled in from the horizon like a sleeping fish at the end of her line. Unaware that his world was becoming her cottage. Eventually, she made him thread needles, night after night, with candles placed further and further off, until he rubbed his eyes and massaged his temples to get rid of the headaches. And after several months she put on his nose a pair of glasses she'd apparently had ready for him since the start, sat him in his chair in the dark and told him he looked *a real turkey*.

She had him by the eyes and she had him by the belly. Early in the mornings he'd be rushing over to light the fire, to clean the skillet, to put two gleaming plates on the table. He'd get the block of porridge off the shelf and put a knife next to it. Oatmealy vapours overran his dreams. Hands would guide the marshwoman to the hearth while she was still practically asleep. He'd put the wooden splice in her hand and ease it through the softening lard. He'd flick the fat on to the hot skillet, and as the sizzle and smell rose, her drowsiness would evaporate. Perhaps here he'd get a whack with the splice for being so meddlesome. A pretty little routine, until one morning, when my grandmother decided to be sick on his clean white plate.

Staring down at the mess, his hard-working and super-efficient hands had for once not known what to do. They rose slightly in the air and his fingers stretched out to grasp the things he didn't understand.

'Thass your fault filthy cud, stickin' me up you sly old devil. Thass what you deserve no less. And don't get no ideas about no runnin' off now you hair. Thar's no more porridge cake for you and no lordin' it round the house neither. I'll have a

quilt to keep me warm and thar's a needle in that there box.'

That was how Hands discovered he was to be a father.

Soon after, he was sent out to fill the samphire pram – a ripped fisherman's gansey found on Blakeney Quay, a washed-up laundry sack with Property of His Majesty's Royal Navy on it, a trawlerman's shirt, a sou'wester tied across a duck coop. He robbed a scarecrow of its Anderson tartan scarf and unwrapped the dishcloth Goose had bound her drainpipe with. And, most importantly, he found the main part of a rust-red jib sail, which he quartered, boiled the starch out of and ironed flat. Like the best of dreamers he found pleasure in challenge and beauty in his task. Soon he was threading a gorgeous blanket stitch round his fabrics, marvelling in the design and, with special care, weaving the magic of the sail into the quilt's finery.

As her pregnancy matures, he adds more patches until the quilt reaches the floor on both sides of the narrow bed. Each night they spoon each other, then she falls asleep on her back and Hands watches her belly pushing the quilt higher so that his first task of the morning is to widen the material, now putting in all the scraps of cotton, flotsam and sacking he can find. The parachute is used as a lining – the lightness of the material brought down to earth by strips of blackout curtain he's cut off below the windowsill. Eventually, nimble-fingered Hands works so fast that the quilt begins to stretch over the floor faster than any belly can raise it. The quilt expands across the tiles, becoming a rug, a doormat, even an added layer to pin up over the windows.

Exceeding his duties yet again, Hands earned the right to have time off. He was allowed to visit the pub. That's him in his element, sauntering over the marsh on a balmy summer's

evening, pockets filled with tern eggs, which he's been swapping for beer, pitch and caulking putty, humming a German tune. He's learned the best place to hide is to be in full view, sipping this strange warm soapy beer, allowing himself to be roped into a few hands of poker at the Map and Sail. He's got it all planned out. During the day he's taken to going out on the marsh, walking in strict grid pattern, establishing hypotenuse then figuring quadrants. He had no theodolite, and to my knowledge never made a map. The only thing he owned was a knife. Hands always carried a knife.

Following the Morston Creek from Lane End, Hands would walk to the small shore near the spot where he was first found. Perhaps he would squat down there in the mud, pluck a young stem of samphire and chew it while he stared across the Pit. Military fashion, then, he would take off his boots, tuck in the laces, then put them next to each other in order to make a platform. His trousers, shirt, cotton neckscarf and socks would be folded and neatly arranged on top of the boots so that nothing but his feet would touch the Morston mud. In only his underwear, he would walk into the Pit and, knife clenched between his teeth, he would start to swim. Heading for what? Freedom? Not yet.

Five minutes later he would haul himself from the water on the other side of the Pit, sinking all the while into deep folds of wet sand until he could grasp the rail. This was his goal – the wreck he'd seen, when his eyes were just a few inches above the mud. The *Hansa*. In Norfolk, 'hansa' means 'heron', but to Hands it must have seemed magical that the wreck which might have been his last sight on earth was practically named after him.

He stands there, dripping on the weather-blackened planks of the wreck. It's a thirty-two-foot North Sea trawler with a

long foredeck and two staved-in hatches to the hold. A double hull and a heavy beam, built in the Nordic design. The deck is at a crazy angle, sinking to starboard, where a hole wide enough to swim into has shattered the hull. At high tide the sea pours in, sloshing about inside the wreck with a lethal black inkiness, while at low tide, looking through the hatches, it seems the cargo has never been anything but the weed-smearred mud of North Norfolk. In the wheelhouse, the glass has long vanished. Gulls have peppered the wheel with their shit and clawed the paint down to bare wood. At other places, the paint has blistered away from the iron like psoriasis. A mizzenmast rises behind the wheelhouse, though there's no gaff or boom, and the rudder has been snapped off by the mud. It sticks out of the marsh, about twenty feet away, wrecked itself, totally without direction.

That summer, Hands would spend his day sitting on the jagged prow of the *Hansa*. He would sit, like myself nearly forty years later, with his naked legs dangling either side of the rotten bowsprit, prising limpets from the wood with the flat of his knife, gouging them from their glistening sockets before putting them in his mouth to chew. Soon all the limpets that had survived the knife would be welded to the hull like rivets. And so my grandfather would take his knife to the gunwale, deck, hatches and hawsepipe of the *Hansa*, and there he'd begin to carve the wood.

The mizzenmast becomes a rudimentary totem pole. The lowest animal is a large grinning whale, although it has more than a passing resemblance to the lesser weever which will nearly sting my mother as she reaches out to pull it off her crabline at exactly the same place seventeen years later. The first and only fish she ever caught. Above that, a beak and then the cruel cold eye of a gull like the one my father extricated from

my mother's hair. Then carved wooden waves, then higher still and the waves begin to look like flames, the strange blue glow of St Elmo's fire that grips the mast head before the onset of a storm. Finally, at the top, the carving of a boat with a solitary figure clinging to the shattered prow as it sinks.

Goose didn't like all this time spent on the *Hansa*. Days on the wreck were not a good sign; so, late in her pregnancy, she'd walked down to the Pit and shouted his name. She saw his hands worrying at the salt-withered wood and she watched him cracking his lunch against the windlass heads. When her voice reached him over the calm water, she saw him look back at her with his distant, dreamy gaze. He didn't wave, and he didn't come back.

On 8 May 1945, an unusually strong nor'westerly wind blew over the Morston Marshes, bending the marram and arrow-grass and forcing the terns to sit on their nests. In her cottage, my grandmother sniffed the air and decided she wouldn't go out on the marsh that day. On the way back to her bed, she abruptly went into labour.

Hands, out in the garden, heard the first ugly shape of her screams. He sat in the garden under the quilt – which was getting an airing – while the cries and curses came in fits and bursts. From inside the cottage, all she could see through the open door was a corner of the quilt hanging on the line, swaying in the breeze. She stared at it while the time passed, then saw it being slowly pulled along the line out of her sight, until it was gone completely. There was no sign of the man. Her contractions returned with new intensity, the pain forcing her head back on the pillow and silencing her tongue for once. And as Hands raised his brightly coloured quilted sail on the mended mast of the *Pip*, her waters broke, and she called out

for the man even though she could hear him slipping the boat down the muddy bank into the creek that led him to the Pit, the North Sea and a newly backing wind, which took him away for good.

And as my grandfather sailed his rickety craft into the choppy water of the North Sea, the bells rang from the flint churches in the flat country behind him. I imagine him craning his neck anxiously, pulling the sail closer to the wind so that warm air would billow into the patches of grass, marsh, corn, wood and heath sewn into the quilt, hoisted on his mast, rich and beautiful, filling with power and urging him away, telling him to leave, to escape, to stop turning back to a land rippling with the sound of bells like the wind now filling his sail. The bells rang until his boat was a dot on the horizon he so adored. Ringing and ringing, and then the first cries of his child, catching on the wind and following him out to sea. My mother was born and the war was over.