

EDWARD J. DELANEY

MY NAME IS PERCY ATKINS

1. A more immediate observation of a vintage wallflower

The air-conditioning is already getting a bit dodgy. On this fall evening, 1968, Tampa, in the clubhouse of the Ocean Breeze Apartment Community, the air comes out leaden and sweaty, and Percy needs to take purposeful and conscious breaths, deep down. The perfume is absolutely bloody stifling, too many old ladies packed into too small a space.

He stands at the edges of it all, where the checkerboard linoleum meets the wood-grain paneling, where the metal folding chairs are placed with liberal room in between for the wheelchair people, where everyone is old and where he may be the last one who still feels the same boyish anxiety that goes with the thought of actually approaching a female, even at a retirement-community square dance.

He wears a tag that is pinned to his shirt, over the heart. The tag already has the “My name is ...” printed on it, and the Community Center calligraphy class has filled in the name in flamboyant hand. “Percy Atkins.” He is dressed in a cowboy shirt (white yoke over salmon body, no fringes but pearl-like snap buttons, bolo tie with a turquoise setting, chinos, slip-on deck shoes, and a straw cowboy hat with a red trim, something the dime-store cashier might have thought he was buying for a grandchild. He has no children or grandchildren, and he has lived in Ocean Breeze for only a few months. He’s been in Tampa for nearly ten years. He was widowed not even a year ago and he decided he could not bear the house alone. Now he’s damned near afraid to go out.

Ocean Breeze is made up of the central clubhouse/pool complex, from which six long buildings radiate like spokes, each of those spokes a trainlike procession of small efficiency apartments, a black-top parking lot out beyond, encircling the place like the tire on the wheel. He has mostly stayed inside since arriving here. Early in the mornings, he drives in his Buick Special to his old neighborhood, where he can walk the familiar streets and then onto the nearby city golf course, where he is not an unfamiliar figure, where he will not be asked to leave, and where the occasional errant shot helps him know he can move lightly when he must.

He is a compact man, and lean, the waist still at twenty-eight inches but the chest much shrunken from what it was in his working days. He is five feet, nine inches tall, two inches less than he once was, when among his generation he was considered a fairly tall man. He's lived in the States for more than fifty years. He's taken an American wife and now he's buried her, and what were once yearly trips back to England (all-night train to New York and a Cunard liner across) became infrequent and then happened not at all as Martha became more unsteady.

Percy Atkins coughs, thinking about that. About him, of all people, surviving his wife. That one was a complete surprise. He never thought he'd be approaching something, in his dotage, resembling dating.

2. Various recollected unpleasantnesses, often repeated

The smell of the dank wool is the most curious connection to home. His whole life, that wet, musky scent that is walking in the Sheffield rain, on muddy roads; the smell of horse and ale and hay; the smell of sodden childhood. He sinks to the ankles of his boots and slogs on, shivering, the skin taut beneath the wool underwear and wool uniform and rucksack. This is the farthest end of the world for a boy from Britain: France. The deep oozing roads, the fulsome language he cannot disentangle. The puzzle of the terrain

on which his column marches, heading for the front alongside a convoy of lorries.

He has volunteered for this, as it has been with all the boys of his neighborhood, the “Pals” who have been called upon by Lord Kitchener to serve. His unit, the 2nd Barnsley Pals, have fallen in behind the Accrington Pals, with the Fusiliers ahead of them. There is a sense of giddiness in them all, the kind of laughing and sarcasm that is easy to men who know each other well, the long tedium of the march being broken up by the transmuting cliques and rivalries, the idle boasts and challenges to same. Much seems to revolve around arm wrestling or drinking contests. They’ve carried many of the old grudges all the way to the front—the competed-for girls, the lost football games, the schoolyard fights. Percy can’t get comfortable. He is not one to be chatty, in any event. Around him, familiar faces, many to which he can’t attach names but by which he can recall their context, a place or a moment.

It is June and the rains are unceasing and they march with long woolen coats on, making the day all the more stifling. They will make camp in late afternoon, and they will sit as the smell of the stew begins to waft across the cheerless fields. They will play cards and write letters and Percy is not as clenched when he is doing that, crammed in among so many boys from home.

The lice embed in the skull, the skin is unwashed for days at a time, the stubble of the beard itches under the helmet strap, and the stomach aches for more than what is given after a day’s march with a four-stone pack. But who is he to complain? Everybody is putting up with it. At least he’s not alone.

3. Sad revelations acknowledged at a certain point in one’s life

There is never enough money, and likewise never enough room. It is 1938 and he has turned forty and they still live in that third-floor apartment up under the eaves in Fall River, Massachusetts. There is a depression on. He is careful with their money. Most

of it is in cash, in rubber-banded stacks in the heavy iron safe in the corner of the bedroom. The quote-unquote Nest-Egg. The quote-unquote Family Fund. He has forbidden her from knowing their worth. She is not privy to the safe's combination.

He is past forty and she's just a bit younger, and they remain up under the eaves waiting for something to happen. But there will be no discussion of the fact that nothing has happened, nor likely will happen. He comes home from the mill and sits in his chair and reads the evening newspaper, and after dinner they might listen to radio. At night she sleeps as his coughs rumble up, up from other lives, never extinguished, one guttural cough that arcs through the entirety of adult life.

Tonight is like all the others. They've just eaten dinner and he has settled into his overstuffed chair, that one prized possession, to read his evening paper. He keeps up with the troubles on the other side, the growing war. It is stunning that this is happening. The memory of The Great War is a constancy for him, descending in his dreams or simply as a thought that rides on with him, like clouds in the sky of his life. This Depression keeps preoccupations more immediate. Everyone is struggling.

He is in the middle of his life and he has felt its long skein of easy concession. Even in the twenties, when others were doing well, he was only finding his way, first to Toronto, where the Canadian veterans had no work, then to Massachusetts, to the mill. When most of those others were brought down by the Crash, his only consolation was that he didn't have too far to fall. When he and Martha now find themselves childless in middle age, they are neither fully surprised nor disappointed.

"We probably didn't have the money for it," Martha says.

"Probably not," he says.

"We have our life—this one," she says, and he can only nod.

"It's not your fault," she says, and he doesn't nod at all.

4. The suggestion of a mild but potentially troublesome situation

The outer edges of the clubhouse recreation room are mostly peopled by the infirm and truly aged, not the healthy aged. It is a fact of this generation and also of medicine that Percy Atkins is one of a very small number of ambulant, lucid men in this “community,” while untold numbers of preternaturally healthy female septuagenarians barrel around the place with the kind of energy that sends unceasing loads of brownies north to grandchildren and keeps the gardens of Ocean Breeze so perfect the flowers have begun to look artificial. They all say “Hi!”—that big American “Hi” he hasn’t completely gotten used to in all these years. They have sun-splotched, lined faces under whimsical sun bonnets and hair hued as idiosyncratically as their beloved varietals, any color you want, any version. They chatter from the lawn chairs that they cluster along the covered breezeway leading from each front door to the scorching parking lot with its spongelike asphalt. They retreat after lunch to their blasting televisions and their histrionic “stories” that blare multiphonicly from open windows. They seem not to need air-conditioning even in the most stout heat, while he and the other old men seem never to turn off their wheezing window-mounted units.

And they are all here now, these women. In fact, at this moment, they are for the most part dancing with each other. The square dancing itself has not yet commenced, so the ladies are dancing in couples to the prefatory polka that issues from the record player in the corner, attended to by Staff. Staff is an assortment of tanned women in their late thirties who appear in the morning hours to be sure that if one is eager to paint, exercise, discuss great books, create floral arrangements or write in calligraphic form, one may most certainly do so. Most of them are named Eileen or Nancy, most likely the most popular baby-girl names of the late nineteen-twenties, but they must be differentiated as they come and go, leading to such coinages as “The New Eileen” or “Blonde Nancy.” Most of Staff will answer cheerfully to either

of the names, even if they are not even one of those. Staff will likewise remember your name without fail. *Hi, Percy!*

The women dance on. No men have yet entered the fray. Most sit in chairs at the edges with their lemonades and ginger snaps, lost in themselves, leaning on their canes, even in their cowboy garb. Many profess to be here only as spectators. Staff has decided that women dancing as men will wear yellow roses. Staff has thoughtfully provided for the event.

Off toward the main entrance to the recreation room is Mrs. Gottlieb, who has positioned herself strategically so as to be the first to greet all arriving guests. Mrs. Gottlieb is exceptionally friendly, *in mufti* with a billowing dress that, while quite loose, further advertises the sheer mass of the woman. Her makeup, as is the case with most of the women, is primarily a crimson lipstick which breaches the borders of the lips themselves and will be applied and re-applied as the festivities continue.

He looks around the room, and as he does his tongue works itself along the edges of his dental plate, a nervous gesture. How old he has become. He has come to realize in late age that old women aren't any more attractive to him than they were when he was younger, and the converse must most certainly be true. He is fit, all things considered, but he is an elderly man, white hair cut close along cracked and sun-leathered skin. *We all just want a bit of respite from the solitude.* Who is he to be picky? But as Mrs. Gottlieb turns and her glance catches him looking, she smiles coquettishly.

She lives in the next spoke over in their wheel, in Cluster 3, and she loves to wave. She's always standing up from her gardening and waving, in big arcing arm motions that worry her aging flesh, waving as he walks to his car in the early-morning cool, waving as he returns. *Hi, Percy!* His return wave has consequently been a more tentative one, mostly in the wrist.

5. The regrettable moment in which things must be ventured

It is dawn. Through the buildup, the bombardment of the Germans has been relentless. It is a gray and sticky day in which the uniform, soaked through from the previous days' heavy rains, barely lets him move. His boots sink in the mud of the trench floor, oozed up over the duckboards, and all along the way there are boys crouched over their rifles, awaiting the order to go over the top.

Percy is huddled in the trench next to his chum from home, Wesley Hitchens. They have been together since induction, two former schoolmates who didn't know each other very well. Wesley is terrified, while Percy has simply become disconnected from it all, has somehow been able to blot from his mind the idea that there will be any outcome of the actions they take. His consciousness refuses to ride ahead of the moment at hand. Years later, he will recognize that the courageous one of them was Wesley, brave enough at least to take each action with full knowledge of his remote chances. Percy will recognize he had simply run away in the only way that he could.

They have been here a long time and life down in the ground makes each hour and day crawl by with brutal exactitude. Percy is nineteen, Wesley eighteen, and they've found an affinity that traces itself back to nothing more complicated than their bottomless preoccupation with card games. Whist, in particular. They are forever hunting for thirds and fourths when they can be off duty in their funk holes cut into the sides of the trenches, and from time to time, some of the Highlanders Regiment clamber down the boards in their kilts and tam-o-shanters to join a game and try to steal away some biscuits or a tin of marmalade. It keeps their money and their cigarettes and their prized possessions circulating among them. None of it can leave the universe of the trench, as they can not. Beyond, the earth is turned and cratered, the trees are stripped of their leaves, the only birds they see in the sky are

the lurching homing pigeons in their low trajectories, carrying messages on their legs.

The word has circulated down the way: when the order comes, they are to climb the steps that have been carved into the front of the trench and begin walking, shoulder to shoulder. They have on their fifty-five-pound packs, all the equipment they will need to set up in forward positions.

“Last time in this bloody trench,” Wesley whispers, his voice quavering.

“Yes.”

“I hope they find higher ground for us to dig the next one.”

“I suppose,” Percy says, for it is he who is not keen on the idea of getting out of this trench, despite its fetid mud, its stink and its complement of slithering rats.

Now they hear the relayed shouts from down the line, and they begin to clamber up. It's a cool morning, and the sun is just beginning to peek through after so many days of rain. They come over and begin their slow advance. They have been told that the bombardment of the last three days has all but wiped out the Germans, and they are to take that ground. Percy is bracing himself for the sight of the mangled remains, the silent witness of the enemy bodies. The general mood, however, is of relief. Far down the way, one of the brigades has a football that they kick out ahead of them, the ball bouncing ahead and coming to rest to wait for them. Men move forward, cutting through their own defensive wires, through to open ground. Percy has his gun barrel forward, but what he is thinking of now is the otherworldiness of being up on the top, moving without constriction, regarding the world from its surface rather than from its gashed insides. He feels the momentary sensation of being unbound. And when all the machine-gun fire opens up from the other side, from the trenches that they have been told will be full of dead men, he is almost unable to understand.

Men are being hit all around him, instantaneously, and he goes down, the great pack slamming on top of him as if in emphasis.

The machine gun fire is hard and steady and he can hear the bullets humming just above him. Ahead, the front lines have been brought down completely. Those still alive are trying to drag themselves back. His own face pressing the mud, he still sees their wild eyes. If there is shouting, it does not register. A shell comes down not twenty feet from him, but it makes a weak bang—a seeming dud, no concussion, no hail of dirt or hot shrapnel. He is completely frozen in his indecision. To turn back, unwounded, will have consequences; he's heard no order to pull back and to do so on one's own is to return to a firing squad. But ahead, the bodies are toppled like a long chain. He watches the wounded coming back, crawling, terrified. Everyone is shouting but he understands none of it. He turns to locate Wesley but he cannot make out any shape in the suddenly rising fog. And it is only then that he realizes he is enveloped in the gas.

6. The thing in which one finds some long-embedded fact

At his mid-fifties, his breathing has become metronomic, just above conscious effort. The lungs, shrunken by the gas to about half their capacity, benefit from his work, the outdoors. He has left the mill to earn what he can cutting grass, shoveling snow, fixing roofs, attending to the gardens of more wealthy people in the more monied towns. Their English gardener. He is sometimes introduced that way. *This is Percy, my English gardener*, often followed by a giggle. He is, in some way, quaint to these people, with his clipped talk and his clipped hair and starched white trousers and shirt.

Martha works at the phone company now, in Information, the second shift. She took the work because the mill had become too much for Percy with its dank recesses and veils of dust and close air. He works more hours now, out in the air, but the money is less and the seasons can conspire against him. So his wife works, and makes no complaint, but after days outdoors he comes home and cooks for himself and sits reading, missing her.

In the evenings, after days in the sun, his fair skin is hot with the warmth of his burn. The muscles have the easy ache of a day working in fresh air, and it is late in the day, especially, that he must consciously think through the push and pull of inhalation and expiration. It's when he is tired that the breathing is most labored, most begrudging.

They have a dog now, a Corgi named Pierre. Pierre spends most nights curled on his small hooked rug, staring at Percy as he rustles through the newspaper. The dog's shallow pants are like an accompaniment to his own deep draws. The dog also seems wary of the newspaper itself, although Percy has never used a newspaper as discipline. When Percy finishes his reading and folds the newspaper over, the dog often scurries out of the room.

Most nights, Martha calls Percy at the beginning of her nine o'clock break, the ritual of the brief chat. But tonight it's ten o'clock and Percy can feel those low butterflies that come with a missed call, even though he knows she sometimes has to work through the break if someone has called out sick, or if it's an especially busy night—holidays and so forth.

"You want to ... ?" he says to Pierre. The dog peeks around from the corner. It is likewise their habit that he takes Pierre for a walk as soon as he has hung up with Martha. Pierre is looking nervous. But Percy wants the phone call. He breathes more deeply, trying to settle himself. If he finishes his sentence, if he says the word, *walk*, Pierre will become so agitated that if the walk doesn't commence forthwith, the dog will urinate on the floor within moments.

"Ring," he says to the phone.

"Do you ... ?" he says to Pierre, the dog's ears pricked at attention, its eyes searching for the leash. Percy knows he shouldn't be teasing the dog like that.

The phone finally rings. Only a half-hour from the end of her shift.

"Hallo," Percy says, a hint of annoyance seeping into his voice.

“Percy?”

“Yes ... who’s this?”

“Percy, it’s Eleanor. Well, something’s happened. Martha’s had a stroke, dear.”

7. The fascinating glimpse into the life of a mature gentleman much unlike himself

After his morning walk, it is Percy’s habit to return to his unit, draw the shades, turn the air-conditioning unit on High Cool, and sit watching television, often with the sound off. Nothing on television interests him all that much. But other than the regimented segments of time in which he prepares meals, attends to his hygiene, or keeps his household in basic working order, it seems now, even as time grows ever smaller, that it is a fundamental struggle to simply bridge those hours. Nothing awaits him, particularly.

In the evening, when the sun drops and there is the notion of cooling in this tropical haze, Percy will loose himself from the four walls and go for another walk, in the dusk. It is at about this time in his complex that the cocktail hour has arrived, and through many lighted windows he can see people, alone as he is, sitting in their chairs with tumblers in their hands, staring at the pale glow of the television. Another night falls on the lives of the people of Ocean Breeze.

But tonight, as he wanders back along the breezeway in the quarter-light, one of the apartments (the until-recently-vacant place four units down) has its door thrown open. From that door issues the music from a crackling Don Ho album. “Tiny Bubbles,” unmistakably. He can hear, too, the low murmur of conversation.

Percy steps back onto the grass, cutting a wide arc so he can see without being seen. He edges up to get an angle, and inside he can see a man about his age, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, white pants, and white shoes, all topped off by a white yacht cap with its life-preserver patch on the front. The man is behind a bamboo

bar no more than four feet long. There are three stools in front of the bar, and on each stool is one of Percy's female neighbors, each sitting insouciantly with a martini in the hand and a cigarette in the mouth. The man seems to be carrying on a conversation with each of them at the same time, effortlessly. And, as it turns out, to be talking to him as well.

"Care to join us, Bub?" the voice bellows from the apartment.

Percy steps to the doorway, feeling his shy smile creeping across his face.

"Thanks," Percy says, receding into the darkness. "No."

For weeks after that, Percy avoids direct contact but can't help making sidewise arcing walks to his own unit that take him out onto the grass, in the settling darkness, with well-timed glances into the man's doorway. Always, three women occupy the three stools, and Percy is always amazed that it seems a rotation of many of the women from his complex—old ladies, frumpy grandmothers now transformed by the simple act of this man's arch hospitality. Percy avoids contact until one night when there is a commanding rap on his own door. When he opens it, it is none other than the man himself, standing in his doorway with two umbrella-adorned drinks in what appear to be coconut-shell cups.

"Hi, Percy!" he says.

Percy just gapes as the man forces one of the drinks into his hand.

"Call me Cap'n Irv, 'cause everybody does," he says. "The ladies told me your name, and let me tell you, you'd be wise to stop in to my little place some one of these nights. These ladies need some companionship and there aren't too many of us—men, that is—around here. At least any worth a damn."

Percy nods. "You built a bar in your unit."

"I owned a tavern for thirty years and I guess behind a bar is where I'm most comfortable. You can guess the name of the place—Cap'n Irv's. That's what I've gone by all those years."

"Were you actually a captain?"

“You know I was, but in a different way. Not of a ship. I can’t even swim! No. Back in the First War. Artillery. I can tell that you were there, too.”

“Indeed.”

“You were gassed.”

“Yes.”

“I hear you coughing at night, when you’re out walking.”

“Yes.”

“There are so damn few of us left at this age, and all these damned women. I’m seventy-six and I don’t feel half that.”

Percy takes a sip from the drink. It’s very sugary, and he has never been one for sweets.

“I’m just letting you know you’re always welcome at Cap’n Irv’s anytime. In fact I could use a man like you to help me occupy the ladies.”

Percy knows this man won’t go away until the drinks are done, so he puts the coconut shell to his lips and sucks it all down. He hands the empty cup to Cap’n Irv.

“Thank you,” Percy says. “I most certainly will consider that.”

Afterwards, in his apartment, Percy sits in his chair feeling, in his head, the swirl of the drink, for he has never been much of a drinker.

8. The eventful morning in which he is both delivered and condemned

Those who’ve gotten the worst of the gas are laid out in the field hospital, nothing more than an open field set far from the trenches. Percy is on his back. He rubs his eyes with the heels of his palms and tries hard just to keep breathing. All around him he can hear the whimpering of boys who, like himself, have gotten it badly. The eyes burn beyond anything he could have imagined, just as he has heard the officers describe the effect in their briefings; he is enraged at himself for not having put on his gas mask, even if there had been no order to do so. He knows, from seeing other soldiers gassed, that right now there is nothing anyone can do for

him, even as his lungs shrink down like slowly burning paper. He breathed it in without feeling the immediate choking described in training; at that moment he took so long to notice it that now, two days after he breathed it, the effects have not passed; after two days, although he cannot see and can barely draw a breath, he is also not dead, nor are any of the others. “Phosgene,” he hears one of the officers saying. It is a new and different kind of gas than the chlorine they had expected. Nobody knows what happens after.

On the fourth day he is sent on his way back to England. He and the others, eyes still covered by gauze wrapping, walk in a chain, each man with his right hand on the right shoulder of the man in front of him. They are loaded onto lorries to a temporary military hospital far from the front lines, and within a week of the battle, when the eye gauzes are removed and he tests his dim and squinting vision, he is put on a ship back across the Channel.

He is delivered to Oakwood Hospital, Rotherham, where he is surrounded by boys who have been wounded, many far worse—lost limbs, complete blindness, deep shrapnel wounds. He hears that many boys from his town are dead or wounded. He hears that virtually all the men of Accrington, the Pals, are dead. Percy feels guilty in that there is not a scratch on him, only the deep burn under the ribs. Everyone is exceedingly cheerful, the ward clamorous with the laughter and badinage of these men. In the newspapers there are long columns of the dead, organized by regiment. His neighbors, the Walker brothers—Fred, Ernest and Charles, have all died. Sixty thousand British men died on that single day. Wesley is listed, the date of death actually two days after. Percy feels none of that euphoria of escape that resounds around him.

9. Some adjustments as they relate to the efficacy of one's own bodily capabilities

She looks at him in a face of perpetual surprise, even after five years. The face he first saw at the hospital, his uncertainty matched by her own mild but frozen-quizzical countenance, which has

never changed. They're in Florida now, 1959, so much cheaper than the North. Summers were difficult at first, but with the fans going all the time it became tolerable, the hot nights softer, the white-heated days somehow embracing. A little bungalow with burned-up grass and scraggly orange trees in the back.

They have no friends here, never tried. She can't stand to be looked at, can't stand to be the person she now is, fettered inside the slack corporeal reality. Percy understands. They live in nearly complete quiet, even as the explosions in his head seem to have risen, coming back more often after the younger years in which he thought they were eradicated. He wakes up coughing, night after night. He wakes up from a drowning depth that frightens him, yet is always familiar, and not the only fear he truly feels in the spooling days of these late-middle years. He doesn't want to think of that creeping gas, that lunar battlefield. He doesn't want to think of his dwindling time. He doesn't want to think about Martha dying, but he likewise doesn't want to think about what will become of her if he is gone.

10. A decision ventured, without excessive or foolish delay

The convention of the event is that one accedes to the invitations that come one's way. Mrs. Gottlieb happens to be advancing such an invitation, and Percy allows himself to be swept into the swirl of the square dance. Staff takes turns calling the dance as the record plays behind. Mrs. Gottlieb smiles demurely. As he turns and pivots, his hand light and chary on hers, the opportunity is such that he can contemplate what would be so awful about a degree of relenting, some sort of acknowledgement that he just seems to be going on and on, and that having a plan would not necessarily invite the wrath of indeterminate gods.

"Percy, did you used to be a cowboy?" Mrs. Gottlieb says flirtatiously, and he can feel himself flush.

"Only tonight," Percy says. "Only tonight."

He can feel himself relaxing into something, a thought he rarely allows himself. That he might become friendly with a woman, and in that friendliness, he could begrudge himself some time in the world with some company, no matter how overdue he has become. These ladies, many of whom have no idea who he is, seem surprised and enthralled with his British accent: *Tillie, he tawks just like Cary Grant!*

They dance on, changing partners, reconnecting, then veering off to the farther reaches of the Ocean Breeze clubhouse. Every so often, the needle skips on the square-dance record, and Eileen or Nancy from Staff interrupts her hand-clapping to push the tonearm forward, making everybody on the dance floor go into a momentary convulsive step to reposition their feet to match the beat. It begins to feel as if the record will never end. Percy can feel the screaming need for his lungs to find more air.

He can see Mrs. Gottlieb looking at him with a face registering horror. Ocean Breeze is not a stranger to various heart attacks, aneurisms and simple weary passings, but not at a square dance. More often, people simply stay unmoving in their lawn chairs until someone notices they're still sitting out there in the dark. Keeling over at an Ocean Breeze social is, for the most part, simply not done.

Time has funneled down to that pointy notion, one in which he has to consider the idea that he is not going to make it through this dance, through the next lap of the second-hand; but he wants to, wants so badly to complete this act and by doing so move toward the moment after that, in which something might be said, or ventured. The lungs feel as if they can seduce no oxygen at all. He wants, so much, to go on.

He cannot. He pushes away from Mrs. Gottlieb, whose face is now flushed and hurt, and he tries to maintain a controlled walk toward the fire exit. Pushing through, he is in open air, pulling hard into his lungs, his shrunken-leather lungs curled up under his ribs like dead leaves. He is alone in the dark, gasping in his pain, defeated once again, surviving once again.

11. Particular memory that presents itself on a somewhat recurrent basis

It starts at Rotherham, in that little recuperative bed, first as a flash of reconstitution. The first shards of the pieced memory, the most obvious things primary: the noise, the fear, the swimming struggle of body inside woolen uniform, of boots falling away under the vortical mud as it sucks around his puttees, the crush of his own gear holding him to the ground.

As the years go on, the dreams (but are memories dreams, if they do not concoct things that have not happened?) seem to bleed of certain colors and retain in them the more structural elements: the swerving search for Wesley, never realized, the first breach of gas in its benign entry, not understood; the horizon of dead and dying, infinitely—yes, that, the faces and bodies in their dour uniformity, woolen forms bogged in their muck, cries of anguish, the sense in it all that the air has gone from the world.

And then, in old age, the reckoning. The burying of the dead, all of them, fields of them, the burying of the sense that this moment is ever resolvable—ever, possibly, somehow—by its nightly screening in his mind's recesses. Somewhere out here at the end of the line, they begin to recede, as if time has run out on all of them but him.

12. The outcome of situations that can only be planned to a certain extent

After Martha's funeral, he writes letters north to explain what has happened, and receives letters back that console and outrage him: *For the best, Not a surprise, Gone to a better place ...* No one has come down but on the other hand no one was invited, none of these people grown so distant from him and Martha in the tightly circumvallated world. They cannot understand how he depended on her, even as he spooned food into her drooping mouth and carried her to the bathtub, her shrunken gossamer body. *You must be relieved ... It must have been a burden ...*

In the weeks after Martha has gone, Percy can only feel the sting of the fact, the moment: that their whole plan, the entire map of how it would be, has proven false. Him, standing over freshly turned soil, over the wife he thought would doubtlessly live on. Him, standing in the brilliant sunshine as his Martha settles into her darkness. Him, impossibly like this.

13. Some faint relief as provided by the carefully circumscribed art of the square dance

He hears someone coming to get him. Staff tends to keep a wary eye, but what he hears is a man's harrumphing breaths, behind him. None other than Cap'n Irv.

"Bub ... You didn't die, then," Cap'n Irv says.

"Close enough," Percy says.

"Really? I was only joking."

"Hmm."

"Well, don't worry, Mrs. Gottlieb will be okay."

"What happened to her?"

"You put her on the floor, Percy."

"Oh, good God."

"Staff checked her. She's fine. She landed softly."

"How horribly embarrassing, really though."

Cap'n Irv comes around to stand face-to-face with Percy, even though they are both in the dark.

"I didn't ever insult you, did I?"

"No, not at all."

"You should come by, sometime," he says. "I'll mix you a drink. You can entertain the ladies."

"I've made a complete fool of myself."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I think, all in all, it went well. You've been in a war, what the hell's anything else?"

Percy thinks about this. "Can't really believe I got this far."

"You and me both."

They stand there nodding their whitened heads in the sultry darkness.

“Mrs. Gottlieb is owed restitution,” Cap’n Irv says, and not without a lascivious air.

He goes slower now, slower even than the slow swirl of a bunch of elderly square-dancing Floridians, slower than the record allows. A couple of dozen people let the music get ahead of them, no one mentioning that they are all simply waiting up for a man whose lungs betray him, always.

Mrs. Gottlieb swings on his arm, smiling, unruffled by the past, the near past or the rest of the past.

Strangers, all of them, a world of strangers that spreads outside his door. But the touch of them is real, and they huff and wheeze as he does, and he somehow, miraculously, feels light on his feet, and carried along, on and on.

14. The one moment of all that must always remain most considered

He is always back to that instant, the eternal present moment, which comes to him like a wind turning around on itself, always pressing. That one true seam in one’s life in relation to which everything can be sorted to the before and after.

Back to that instant, the first tightening of the leg to push up toward the sky, the feet sunken in mud but firm in their place, all those gray skies behind him dank, yet familiar.

Back to that instant, the shout of the long-awaited order, the first dry taste of honor. The test, the challenge, the opportunity of attrition.

Back to that instant, the glimpse of muddy world over a bermed ridge, the other side there to be met.

Back to that instant of what he thought it would be, of the promise of transformation from a Barnsley lad to something bigger, more substantive, more eminent.

Back to that instant, the last clear breath of the world as he knew it.