Fly Away Peter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MALOUF

David Malouf, who is of mixed Lebanese and Jewish ancestry, grew up in Queensland, Australia, where he also attended university. After graduating, he divided his time between Australia and Europe, teaching English in a number of secondary and post-secondary institutions. His first breakthrough as a writer came midway through his teaching career, with the 1962 publication of *Four Poets*—a volume of poetry. Although he largely shifted his focus to novel-writing in the mid-1970s, many critics (as well as Malouf himself) consider his early experiences as a poet key to his compact and lyrical style as a writer of prose. In 1978, Malouf published his second novel—the widely acclaimed *An Imaginary Life*—and subsequently left his position at the University of Sydney to pursue writing full-time. In all, Malouf has written nine novels and multiple other works, including poetry and short story collections, essays, and even the librettos for several operas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Fly Away Peter*, Jim Saddler fights in World War I. Given that he hails from Australia and that all the other soldiers in his company are his countrymen, he's presumably a member of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). Originally formed in 1914, the corps dispatched (along with other companies) to the Ottoman Empire in 1915 before retreating after an unsuccessful attempt to win control of Constantinople. At this point, ANZAC went to Egypt and split into separate divisions. In 1916, they went to France and fought in the trenches of the Western Front. This is the period that Jim Saddler must have joined the military, since he doesn't go to Turkey or Egypt in the novel. As such, readers know that Jim came into World War I two years before its conclusion, which took place in 1918.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because of its wartime setting, David Malouf's novel *The Great World* is reminiscent of *Fly Away Peter*. Whereas *Fly Away Peter* takes place during World War I, *The Great World* is set during World War II. Nevertheless, both books focus on the nature of friendship in trying circumstances and interrogate what it takes to survive—both physically and emotionally—through violent conflict. It's clear that Malouf is interested in writing about war, as made evident by the fact that *Ransom*, one of his most revered works, retells a portion of Homer's *The Iliad*, which is about the Trojan War. In terms of more recent literature, *Fly Away Peter* fits in with a number of works about World War I, including R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, which depicts trench warfare in a similar fashion.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Fly Away Peter
- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Australia and Europe during World War I
- **Climax:** After having an out-of-body experience on the battle field, Jim makes his way through an otherworldly landscape where he encounters his dead friend Clancy Parkett, who warmly encourages him to dig through a garden to reach "the other side."
- **Antagonist:** The brutality of war
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

A Night at the Opera. The opera version of *Fly Away Peter* premiered in Sydney in 2015 and was performed by the Sydney Chamber Opera.

Recognition. *Fly Away Peter* won the Book of the Year award presented by an Australian newspaper called *The Age*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Twenty-year-old Jim Saddler lives in Australia in the years leading up to World War I. Spending his days birdwatching, he takes pleasure in identifying the species that fly through the coastal swamplands where he passes his time. One day, Ashley Crowther, a wealthy twenty-three-year-old who has recently returned from living in England, finds Jim watching a **bird** on his property. Having inherited this land, Ashley takes an interest in Jim's knowledge. In fact, he's so compelled by Jim's "passion" for birdwatching that he offers him a job, saying that he'll pay him to write a catalog of all the birds he sees on this plot of land, which he and Jim tacitly agree should become a "sanctuary."

Jim accepts Ashley's offer and is happy to have a new friend. Shortly after Jim starts his new job, he meets another bird aficionado—a middle-aged woman named Miss Imogen Harcourt. One day, he sees her taking a picture of a sandpiper while he himself looks at the same bird through his binoculars. Wanting to meet her, Jim goes to her cottage and looks at her pictures, and the two become fast friends. Miss Harcourt, for

her part, is impressed by Jim's intensity and devotion to birds.

Jim enjoys this blissful period of getting paid to do what he loves. However, this fulfilling life takes on a new quality when news of World War I finally makes its way to Australia. While on a short trip into Brisbane, Jim feels as if something in the air has changed. Everybody around him rejoices with a kind of ragged excitement, and he notices young men celebrating the news of the war in bars; they have just signed up for the military and are eager to become part of the action. Jim spends a restless night in a boarding house and returns to the sanctuary, where he resumes his peaceful existence, though now he senses that the war will inevitably take him away.

As young Australians pour into Europe, Jim puts off joining the military. Nonetheless, he can't help but recognize that the world is changing. Because of this, he eventually signs up to go to war, thinking that if he doesn't, he'll "never understand" why everything around him is so different.

In the military Jim is grouped with a number of Australians. He develops a fondness for Clancy Parkett, a jokester and trouble-maker who likes to tell stories about his days as a philanderer. He also befriends Bobby Cleese, an Australian bee-keeper who likes to talk about fishing in Deception Bay—something Jim finds soothing and familiar. He also finds reassurance in the birds that fly overhead, since they connect him to his life back home and remind him that there are still natural cycles undisturbed by the war.

The night before marching to the front of the line, Clancy convinces Jim to sneak out to a makeshift bar in a nearby village. As the two friends set off, a young soldier named Eric Sawney runs after them asks if he can join. An orphan who barely seems old enough to be a soldier, Eric latched onto Clancy early on and has since followed him wherever he goes.

At the bar, Clancy throws back hard liquor and tells a long, rambling story. Jim thinks at first that this story is about another one of Clancy's escapades as a flirtatious young man, but he realizes by the end that his friend is telling a more serious tale about a specific woman whom he must love, and who had some connection to Clancy's decision to join the army.

When his infantry reaches the frontline, Jim discovers how awful it is to be in the most dangerous place on the battlefield. The worst part isn't that the Germans are so close, but that the trenches are full of water and rats and the stench of dead bodies, since corpses have been poorly buried within the very confines of the dugout itself. Then, of course, there's the violence. Although Jim never actually sees any German soldiers, he's aware of their presence because of their sniper fire. One of Jim's fellow infantrymen dares to look over the parapet to catch a glimpse of what's beyond the trenches, and has his face blown off.

Even when the infantry isn't in the frontline, violence is everywhere. One day, while unloading ammunition from a truck and waiting for Clancy to bring him water, Jim is suddenly thrown through the air by an explosion. When he hits the ground he hears Eric—who was sitting nearby—screaming. Looking over, he sees that the boy's legs have been blown off. Before he can help, he realizes that he's covered in blood. Unable to find Clancy, the horrific truth dawns on him: he is covered in the only thing that is left of his friend, who exploded into a bloody mist that sprayed over his body.

Thankfully, Eric survives long enough to make it to the hospital. Several days later, Jim visits him and finds it difficult to avoid looking at the space under the sheets where the boys legs should be. He tells Eric that everything will be all right, but the boy challenges this notion, pointing out that he's an orphan with nobody to look after him.

At one point during his service, Jim is sent to gather firewood in a desolate forest and sees an **old man** digging in the ground. At first, he thinks the man must be digging a grave, but he soon sees that he's actually planting a garden. And although he feels pessimistic and hopeless—believing the world is full of violence and ugliness—this moment makes him think of home and of Imogen Harcourt, ultimately giving him a moment of bliss and hope for the future.

Ashley Crowther is also at war in Europe, though he joined the military as an officer. He did this not long after Jim left Australia, waiting only to make sure that his new wife gave birth to a healthy child. Every once in a while, his and Jim's paths will overlap, and the old friends will share a silent moment. Now, Ashley finds himself looking at a man with a garden hoe in a desolate area—the same man, perhaps, who gave Jim a sense of hope.

Later, Jim has an out-of-body experience as he and his company rush onto the battlefield and run toward enemy lines. He feels as if he's a bird flying above the entire scene, and then he realizes he's on the ground staring up at the sky. He feels his body dissolving in a strange way, before blinking and finding himself under a canvas tent. A number of other pale soldiers are crowded inside while a man sorts them out one at a time on a butcher block. Each person, he sees, has a tag affixed to his uniform. Turning to his side, he's surprised to find Ashely Crowther, who tells him to stand up and that he knows the way out.

Outside, Ashley leads Jim to place in the woods where the old man planted the garden. A number of people are digging in the ground, and Jim leaves Ashley's side to join them in the task. Clancy appears beside Jim, urging him on. When Jim says he thought Clancy "just disappeared into thin air," Clancy simply replies, "No, not air, mate. Earth." He then tells Jim that they must dig "through to the other side." As Jim begins to dig, he realizes that Ashley is nowhere to be found, but he concentrates on the task at hand, feeling that "this steady digging into the earth" might be "what hands were intended for," like "wings were meant for flying over the curve of the

planet to another season."

Ashley's wife tells Miss Harcourt that Jim has died, informing her that Ashley himself was wounded in the same battle but managed to survive. These days, Miss Harcourt likes to go to the beach and watch the waves breaking on the sand. While doing this one morning, she catches sight of a man surfing. Having never seen anybody on a surfboard, she finds herself exhilarated by the newness of the sport. However, this newness also pains her, since it reminds her that the past is gone, and this makes her think sorrowfully about how much she misses Jim. Nonetheless, she can't resist watching the surfer, deciding that it is an "eager turning, for a moment, to the future."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jim Saddler – A thoughtful twenty-year-old Australian with a passion for identifying **birds**. When he was fifteen, Jim saw his younger brother get killed by the blades of some farming equipment. Since then, he's found it impossible to express the horror of this experience. This is perhaps why he enjoys naming birds, as the hobby enables him to concretely describe something beautiful in the world. While he's watching a bird one day, a man named Ashley Crowther comes upon him and asks what he's doing. The property, Jim knows, belongs to Ashley. The men form a fast friendship, and Ashley invites Jim to work for him. Accepting this offer, Jim makes a comprehensive list of all the birds he sees flying through Ashley's "sanctuary." While on the job one day, he meets Miss Imogen Harcourt, a photographer who also enjoys observing birds. Together, they marvel at the wildlife on Ashley's property. Unfortunately, Jim's life changes drastically when he joins the military and goes to Europe to fight in World War I, where he makes friends with a number of fellow Australians in his infantry. Although he survives longer than the majority of his companions, Jim eventually dies in a bloody battle in which Ashley Crowther is also wounded.

Ashley Crowther – A wealthy twenty-three-year-old man who returns to Australia after years of expensive British schooling. Ashley takes pleasure in the "ragged" and unfinished qualities of the land he has inherited, making a point to let the property exist as it is while still finding ways to use and enjoy it. When he finds Jim Saddler birdwatching on the premises, he doesn't ask him to leave but instead offers him a job, liking that Jim can tell him about the many creatures that fly through his property. Ashley likes to hear Jim name the **birds** they see as they move through the swampland together. He also likes to deliver long-winded speeches that are inarticulate and hard to follow, though he doesn't mind sitting in silence, either. Before leaving for World War I, Ashley gets married and has a child. When he joins the military, he enters as an officer and finds that he is well-suited for this kind of command. Although he survives the war, he is wounded in the same battle that claims Jim's life.

Miss Imogen Harcourt – A middle-aged woman from Norfolk, England who came to Australia six years ago because her brother wanted to get into the gold-mining business. After her brother failed to get rich and returned to England, Miss Harcourt decided to stay, though she often wonders why. Now she lives in a small and somewhat dilapidated cottage and sells photographs to a nature magazine in London. She sees Jim one day while he's lying in the grass—he's looking through his binoculars at a **sandpiper**, which Miss Harcourt herself is photographing. Later, when Jim appears in her cottage to introduce himself, she shows him the picture she took, in which he lies blurred and obscured in the long grass, the sandpiper fixed in tight focus at the portrait's center. Both she and Jim love this photograph and establish a close bond, one that doesn't require them to talk very much when they go birdwatching together. After receiving news of Jim's death, Miss Harcourt goes to the beach and watches a surfer for the first time in her life, feeling both sad and exhilarated by the fact that life marches on into the future despite all the travesties of the past.

Clancy Parkett – One of Jim's fellow infantrymen in World War I. Like Jim, Clancy is from Australia. He's also something of a trouble-maker, though he's ultimately kind-hearted and friendly. A flirtatious man outside the war, Clancy eventually tells Jim about his love for one woman in particular, who—for reasons he doesn't make clear—seems to have inspired him to join the military. While bringing Jim some water one day, Clancy is taken out by enemy fire. His body completely evaporates into blood and gore that spray over Jim so that even after he bathes, he never feels like he's fully cleaned himself of his friend's insides. When Jim himself dies, he encounters Chancy, who instructs him in a friendly way to dig into the earth until he reaches "the other side."

Bobby Cleese – One of Jim's fellow Australian infantrymen in World War I. Bobby Cleese is fond of telling stories about fishing in Deception Bay, which is not far from where Jim grew up. Jim enjoys listening to Bobby talk about their home country, especially when they find themselves taking cover for long periods of time with nothing to do but worry about their lives.

Eric Sawney – One of Jim's fellow infantryman in World War I. Eric is a boyish soldier who hardly seems old enough to be in the military. An orphan, he latches onto Clancy Parkett early on, following him wherever he goes. Eric gets his legs blown off in the same explosion that kills Clancy, but manages to survive. When Jim visits him in the hospital, he asks who will take care of him when he returns from the war—a question Jim can't quite answer.

Wizzer Green – A man in Jim's infantry who picks a fight with him for no apparent reason. Wizzer makes a point of tripping

Jim, instigating a fierce standoff in which Jim feels as if he has to "defend" whatever it is about himself that has so offended Wizzer. Fortunately, Clancy steps in and battles Wizzer himself, though the fight is significantly less heated than it would have been if it had advanced with Jim. After this encounter, Jim avoids Wizzer because he's frightened of the violent nature that the man awakes in him. However, the dynamic of their relationship shifts when they encounter each other during a chaotic night while running frantically about the battlefield after their company has been split up. Ducking into a pit for cover, Jim finds Wizzer in the dark. Unable to see one another, they start fighting, but Jim soon recognizes Wizzer and yells at him to stop. When they stop grappling, Jim tries to convince him to venture out of the pit with him, but Wizzer refuses, too afraid to risk his life even though staying put is more dangerous in the long run.

Jim's Father – An old and bitter man who drinks heavily and tells Jim that, if he himself were younger, he would join the military so that he could fight in World War I. This, Jim thinks, is the old man's way of saying that he thinks Jim should sacrifice himself like his contemporaries have and enlist. Jim believes that his father wants to be able to say that he lost his son in the war so that he can feel as if he too has done something important. Sure enough, after Jim dies, his father tells Miss Harcourt, in an almost accusatory tone, "I lost my boy."

Connie – A young woman Jim meets while he's in Brisbane to buy a new pair of boots. While he's there, news of World War I finally reaches Australia, and the town goes wild with excitement. When Connie meets Jim, she assumes that he's about to join the military. As such, she decides to give him "something to remember" before he goes to war, leading him to her house and having sex with him before he emerges again into the night, which is still wild with the sound of young people partying in celebration of the war.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bert – Ashley Crowther's friend, who flies a **biplane** over the Australian swampland. Although Jim dislikes this disruption of the landscape's peace, Ashley arranges for Bert to take the young birdwatcher up into the sky. Two weeks later, Bert joins the military as a pilot.

Julia Bell (Julia Crowther) – Ashley Crowther's wife, whom he marries shortly before Jim leaves for World War I. After Julia gives birth, Ashley himself joins the war.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LANGUAGE AND NAMING

In *Fly Away Peter*, a novel about finding meaning in the face of death and war, language imposes a sense of order upon an otherwise chaotic world. Unfortunately, though, it's not always possible to use words to make sense of life, which is often full of incomprehensible forms of horror and tragedy. For instance, when his brother falls into the blades of a grain harvester, the novel's protagonist Jim Saddler is unable to express what has happened. No words, it seems, are adequate to describe his brother's gruesome death. This is not to say that language completely fails when it comes to human expression, however. Later in his life, Jim becomes obsessed with **bird** names, recording them in a comprehensive list with artistic handwriting that lends a sense of importance to the task. Ashley Crowther, the owner of the land on which Jim birdwatches, is deeply impressed by Jim's ability to name these birds, feeling as if beauty lurks in his friend's effort to articulate what he sees. Indeed, Jim proves that naming something is a way of making up for all the things language fails to capture. In this way, Malouf suggests that the mere attempt to order one's world using words is noble, an endeavor worth undertaking even if language is limited and thus bound to fail.

Jim first confronts the shortcomings of language when he's fifteen. Riding on the bumper of a grain harvester, his younger brother falls backwards into the machine's quick blades: "Jim had run a half mile through the swath he had cut in the standing grain with the image in his head of the child caught there among the smashed stalks and bloodied ears of wheat, and been unable when he arrived at the McLaren's door to get the image, it so filled him, into words." In perhaps the most important moment of his young life, Jim can't "get the image" of his mangled brother "into words." Simply put, he can't express what has just happened. This surely causes him to doubt the efficacy of linguistic communication. Malouf notes that "there were no words for [the accident], then or ever, and the ones that came said nothing of the sound the metal had made striking the child's skull, or the shocking whiteness he had seen of stripped bone, and would never be fitted in any language to the inhuman shriek [...] of the boy's first cry." In this passage, Malouf insinuates that there are certain experiences that simply can't be represented linguistically. The "sound the metal" blades make against Jim's brother is simply too elemental and ghastly to be recreated in words, and the "inhuman shriek" that the boy lets out is too strange and incomprehensible to describe. As a result, these experiences stay with Jim as memories that refuse expression.

Having watched his brother die in such a (literally) unspeakable way is perhaps what prompts Jim to describe and catalog the natural world. Unable to articulate horror, Jim decides to name things of beauty instead. He does this by pointing out birds to

Ashley, who never tires of his friend's knowledge. When Jim tells him that the "Dollar bird" has "come down from the Moluccas," Ashley is delighted. "When [Jim] named the bird, and again when he named the island, he made them sound, Ashley thought, extraordinary," Malouf writes. He continues, "[Jim] endowed them with some romantic quality that was really in himself. An odd interest revealed itself, the fire of an individual passion." Although Jim has, since childhood, carried around the atrocity of his brother's death—about which he has never been able to speak—he also has a "romantic quality in himself," one that becomes apparent when he names the Dollar bird. With the "fire of an individual passion," he essentially makes up for his failure to articulate the circumstances of his brother's death, focusing not on this shortcoming but on his ability to summon beauty and impose a sense of order upon the natural world, which is brimming with wildlife waiting to be identified and named.

Language can call forth a sense of beauty and wonder, but this isn't all it evokes. When Jim writes down the names of the birds he sees on Ashley's land—working to create a comprehensive record of the wildlife in this "sanctuary"—he feels as if he's bringing them to life. "This sort of writing was serious," Malouf asserts, "It was giving the creature, through its name, a permanent place in the world, as Miss Harcourt did through pictures." Using only words, Jim gives these creatures a "place in the world," one that feels "permanent." Language, then, can make something that might otherwise seem fleeting real and tangible. These names, Malouf explains, contain both "the real bird" that Jim has "sighted" *and* "the species" to which that bird belongs. As a result, the creature's existence comes to feel solid, since Jim is able to evoke not only its present existence but also its history. Unlike his brother's death, which feels so unfathomable and thus unspeakable, Jim can use language to describe these birds. And although this may not make up for the incommunicable horror of his brother's death, it at least proves that *some* things can find representation in language. This kind of expression, Malouf indicates, is worth pursuing because it makes a "permanent place" for beauty in a world that is otherwise full of chaotic horrors that escape language.

BOUNDARIES AND PERSPECTIVE

There are many boundaries in *Fly Away Peter*, such as the perimeter of Ashley Crowther's property, the borders between countries at war, and the edges of Miss Imogen Harcourt's photographs. However, Malouf showcases these boundaries only so that he can demonstrate their relative meaninglessness. What matters most, he suggests, isn't the actual presence of such borders, but the ways in which people *perceive* them. This often means disregarding arbitrary delineations altogether, as protagonist Jim Saddler does when he goes to World War I and stops keeping track of the country borders he crosses. This kind of approach puts an emphasis on actual human experience, prioritizing how a person views his or her surroundings without paying much attention to the ways in which these surroundings have been divvied up by others. At the same time, though, Jim doesn't *fully* ignore life's various boundaries and separations, but lets them inform his general perspective on life. Ultimately, Malouf suggests that, although official demarcations are often arbitrary, their presence can sometimes highlight—rather than obfuscate—that which lies beyond their bounds.

In order to illustrate how odd it is to divide the world into imaginary sections, Malouf scrutinizes the notion of property ownership. Although Ashley Crowther is a wealthy young man who is delighted to have inherited land in Australia, he also seems to understand that his proprietorship is intangible and somewhat insignificant. Upon returning to Australia after many years, he revels in the landscape; "Coming back, he found he liked its mixtures of powdery blues and greens, its ragged edges, its sprawl, the sense it gave of being unfinished and of offering no prospect of being finished." As he looks out at this slice of earth, the "edges" seem "ragged" to him, an indication that he views boundaries and perimeters as imperfect. "These things spoke of space," Malouf writes, "and of a time in which nature might be left to go its own way and still yield up what it had to yield; there was that sort of abundance. For all [Ashley's] cultivating, he liked what was unmade here and could, without harm, be left that way." Rather than wanting to shape this landscape, Ashley prefers to see it as "unmade," something that will continue to flourish regardless of whether or not it lies within boundaries of his legal property. In turn, Malouf encourages readers to interrogate the very idea of breaking the world up according to ownership, ultimately intimating that such distinctions have little to do with anything but the superficial whims of humankind.

Although territorial control is very important during war, Malouf demonstrates to readers that—like private property—the divisions of a battlefield are socially constructed. When Jim joins the military, he eventually finds himself in the trenches of France, where he and his fellow soldiers fight Germans, whose own trenches are not very far away. Given the physical setup of this kind of warfare, it becomes clear that both Jim's infantry and the Germans have superimposed their ideological differences onto the battlefield itself, as if the small amount of space between each dugout actually represents some kind of fundamental distinction. In other words, each side has allowed its ideas about opposition and disagreement to construct an imaginary boundary between itself and its enemy.

Interestingly enough, this sense of separation vanishes when the soldiers aren't actively fighting. One evening, Jim and a dozen other infantrymen go looking for firewood in the forest, where they find an **old man planting a garden**. This man reminds Jim of Miss Harcourt, and so he thinks about this moment in the coming weeks, but he never returns to the

location: "Jim didn't even know where it was, since they never saw a map—and he had no opportunity of observing what the old man had been planting or whether it had survived." In this moment, it becomes clear that experience and perspective are more important—more memorable—than specific boundaries and locations. After all, Jim doesn't "even know where" he is when he sees this man planting a garden, and this is because he's focused not on a "map," but on the moment itself. As such, the memory stays with him and informs his life even if he can't say where, exactly, it took place.

Malouf shows that a shift in perspective can change the way one thinks about boundaries. For example, when Jim first sees Miss Harcourt, he realizes that they've both been looking at the same **bird**, a sandpiper that he has been watching through binoculars and that she has been photographing. When he finally gets to look at the picture she took, he sees that everything but the sandpiper is out of focus, including his own form, which lies obscured in the blurry grass. "He was there but invisible," Malouf writes, "only he and Miss Harcourt might ever know that he too had been in the frame, hidden among those soft rods of light that were grass-stems and the softer sunbursts that were grass-heads or tiny flowers." As Jim looks at this photograph, he sees that a frame—a boundary—can accentuate something even as it obscures something else. As such, he comes to understand the importance of perspective; he and Miss Harcourt know that he is in this picture, but the framing and focus of the photograph suggest otherwise. "To the unenlightened eye there was just the central image of the sandpiper with its head attentively cocked," Malouf notes.

By calling attention to the "central image" of the photograph, Malouf subtly encourages readers to consider that which exists both inside and outside the frame. If Jim can go undetected even as he lies *within* the photograph, then readers can only imagine what exists beyond the picture's edges. In turn, Malouf demonstrates that boundaries can—by negation—hint at the utter expansiveness of the world. As such, these otherwise arbitrary borders can do the opposite of what they're intended to do, ultimately communicating a sense of openness rather than a sense of separation.

TIME, CHANGE, AND IMPERMANENCE

In *Fly Away Peter*, Malouf uses the passage of time to remind readers that everybody experiences change. This means that every single living being exists in an impermanent world that is constantly transforming. By highlighting the fact that nothing ever stays the same, Malouf brings the notion of mortality to the forefront of the novel, since the constant march of time inevitably leads to death. Because of this, people often want to dwell on the past as a way of ignoring the certainty of their own demise. When Jim is in the trenches of World War I, for example, he fantasizes about his prewar life in Australia, when he was safe and didn't have to consider his own mortality. This tendency to fixate on the past is also evident in the way Miss Harcourt mourns Jim's death, unwilling to forget about him despite the fact that there's nothing she can do to bring him back. Although Malouf suggests that it's natural to want to ignore or resist change, he also indicates that moving forward through life and accepting transformation is often as exciting as it is unavoidable. The only constancy in life is inconstancy itself, he intimates, and this is both sad and wonderful.

Malouf suggests that the past becomes easier to understand when a person suddenly undergoes a change that will throw him or her into a new and uncertain future. For instance, when Jim is about to leave for World War I, he visits his father one last time, and the old man's unexpected sentimentality catches him off guard: "It had made Jim, for a moment, see things differently, as if a line had been drawn between the past and what was to come, the two parts of his life, and he could look at all that other side clearly now that he was about to leave it," Malouf writes. As soon as he's about to "leave" everything he has ever known, Jim feels as if he can better understand how he has lived for the past twenty years. According to this sentiment, then, uncertain futures clarify a person's past, thus setting him or her up to take refuge in memory.

It is perhaps a good thing that Jim suddenly can "look at" his past "clearly" after deciding to leave for World War I, since when he actually reaches the trenches he turns to his memories for comfort. Fantasizing about his previous life, he listens to a fellow Australian soldier named Bobby Cleese talk about home. Taking cover for "a whole day and night" in a "shell-hole in front of the lines, so close to the enemy" that they can "hear the striking of matches in the trenches up ahead," Bobby talks to Jim about fishing in Australia. Jim revels in his friend's description of their native country, finding comfort in the thought of home. "But more reassuring than all this—the places, the stories of a life that was continuous elsewhere—a kind of private reassurance for himself alone, was the presence of the **birds**, that allowed Jim to make a map in his head of how the parts of his life were connected, there and here, and to find his way back at times to a natural cycle of things that the birds still followed undisturbed," Malouf writes. Here, Jim finds consistency between his past and current lives, looking at the birds as they "follow" the same migratory patterns he used to observe in Australia. Unfortunately, though, this feeling of consistency does little to change his actual circumstances—no matter how much he thinks about the past, he remains in a dangerous "shell-hole" near enemy lines.

The wish to mentally plunge into the safety of the past is understandably quite strong for somebody in undesirable circumstances. This is the case for Miss Harcourt, who finds herself stricken by grief after Jim's death and thinking constantly about what it was like when he was alive. A photographer, she "holds" his "image" "in her mind," but she

knows that she can't fully capture his "unique presence," since humans amount to more than what a mental (or photographic) image can capture. As she sits on the beach and thinks about this, Miss Harcourt sees—for the first time in her life—somebody surfing. Astounded and exhilarated by this unfamiliar act, she decides that she will "hold" this image "in her mind" alongside her memories of Jim. Thinking this, she starts to walk away, climbing the beach's dunes. "It was new," Malouf writes, "So many things were new. Everything changed. The past would not hold and could not be held." To Miss Harcourt, the act of surfing (which is unfamiliar to her) represents an "eager turning, for a moment, to the future."

Although she understands that "so many things [are] new," witnessing this advancement into the future is also painful. "*Jim*," she thinks, feeling that an embrace of the future requires a letting go of the past. Despite her desire to dwell in the past, though, she finds herself unable to ignore the beauty and excitement of this new world represented by the surfer, so she turns back and looks once more. In this way, Malouf shows readers that it's possible to simultaneously mourn the past *and* welcome the passage of time, which brings with it the possibility of new kinds of happiness.

FRIENDSHIP AND HUMAN CONNECTION

The relationships that Jim Saddler establishes throughout *Fly Away Peter* exemplify the fact that friendship often arises when people share something in common. For instance, when Jim first gets to know Ashley Crowther, he appreciates the respect Ashley has for **birds**—a respect Jim shares. Once the two men discover this mutual fascination, their friendship is able to take form. A similar thing happens when Jim meets Miss Imogen Harcourt, who is a photographer and bird hobbyist; he feels connected to her because she also enjoys the beauty of these small animals. With both Ashley and Miss Harcourt, Jim finds himself drawn toward friendship because of a shared interest or mindset. In addition, these relationships blossom according to the surrounding context, meaning that Jim connects with Ashley and Miss Harcourt in a manner that makes sense for the environment in which they interact. Indeed, Ashley's sanctuary is a tranquil setting, and so both of these relationships develop quiet and assured qualities. Later, when he goes to war, Jim discovers that even unfavorable circumstances can lay the groundwork for friendship, since the battlefield forces a common experience upon people, which they can use to connect. Throughout the novel, Jim's social interactions exhibit the fact that human relationships are shaped and informed by the environments in which they develop.

When Jim and Ashley first meet, they have very little in common. At least, this is true of their backgrounds. After all, Jim is from the lower-middle class and has never left Australia, whereas Ashley is wealthy and has just returned to the country after many years of attending school in England. As if the differences between the two men aren't already noticeable, the mere fact that Ashley—only three years Jim's senior—owns so much land is indication enough that these two men have led very different lives.

Despite this, they still manage to connect. This is because Jim finds a way to bring Ashley into his own world by pointing out a bird and giving him some information about it. Ashley stumbles upon Jim looking at a "Dollar bird" on his property, and rather than picking up and leaving, Jim directs his attention to the animal. "Ashley followed his gaze. The land shifted into a clearer focus, and he might himself have been able, suddenly, to see it in all its detail [...]. He was intensely aware for a moment how much life there might be in any square yard of it," Malouf writes. By helping Ashley see the beauty that he sees, Jim effectively invites him to share an appreciation of the land. In turn, Ashley suddenly sees everything in "a clearer focus." This, it seems, is how Jim views the world, and so the two men begin to share an outlook. In turn, their mutual appreciation for the land and the birds turns into a quiet friendship made up of long and mostly silent expeditions into the wilderness.

Like his relationship with Ashley, Jim's friendship with Miss Harcourt is built upon mutual interest and understanding. At first, though, Miss Harcourt isn't sure if they'll get along. When Jim comes to her cottage after seeing her take a picture of a bird that he was also looking at, she wonders about the nature of his visit: "She couldn't tell for the moment whether they would be friends or not; whether he had come here to share something or to protect a right." Miss Harcourt worries that Jim hasn't come to "share" his interest in birds with her, but to claim it as his own. She worries that he is going to tell her to stop taking photographs in Ashley's sanctuary. Fortunately, this isn't Jim's way. In reality, he only wants to connect with her based on what they have in common. Jim, for his part, quickly feels a sense of kinship with her because they both appreciate the same things: "He found he understood almost everything she said straight off, and this was unusual." Later, when they have firmly established their friendship, they enjoy each other's company on trips into Ashley's wilderness, where they sit "silent for the most part" and wait to catch a glimpse of a bird. This easy and "silent" companionship not only shows how comfortable they are with each other, but also the extent to which they take cues from their surrounding environment, relaxing into a kind of tranquility that aligns with both the land and their friendship itself.

The stress of war makes it easy for Jim to relate to his fellow soldiers, since they're all in the same predicament and therefore have something in common. However, he still finds himself at odds with a man named Wizzer, who makes a point of tripping him one day in the trenches. For whatever reason, Wizzer refuses to see Jim as a potential friend. When Wizzer

picks a fight with him, any kind of shared experience that might otherwise bond them together slips away. Malouf writes that "Jim had found himself defending whatever it was in him that Wizzer rejected, and discovered that he needed this sudden, unexpected confrontation to see who he was and what he had to defend." In this scene, a sense of wartime animosity has trickled into Wizzer's treatment of Jim. Although Jim doesn't necessarily invite this kind of antagonism, he comes to see it as a valuable thing, something that helps him understand himself.

Interestingly, though, the dynamic of Jim's relationship with Wizzer changes later on, when the immediate context surrounding their interactions suddenly shifts. Indeed, Jim's platoon gets separated one night on the battlefield as Germans ruthlessly fire at them. Unable to see in the dark, the soldiers run frantically about, desperately trying to find their way back to the group. At one point, Jim drops into a pit for cover, and just as he's about to run back into the mayhem, a man grabs him and starts fighting with him. After several moments of struggle, Jim realizes that this man is Wizzer. "Wizzer!" he shouts, "it's me, you mad bugger. Jim. A friend!" The fact that Jim calls himself "a friend" proves that human relationships depend heavily upon the surrounding context. Whereas Jim and Wizzer were once adversaries, now they see one another as friends. By emphasizing this abrupt transformation, Malouf solidifies the notion that interpersonal connections don't exist in and of themselves, but in relation to circumstance.

INNOCENCE AND MATURITY

At the center of *Fly Away Peter* is a young man who leaves behind a relatively idyllic life in Australia for the ghastly experience of war. As such, the story charts the loss of innocence, as Jim witnesses violent acts that blot out the blissful purity of his childhood. At the same time, though, Malouf's representation of this process is complicated and nuanced, since Jim's prewar life isn't quite as innocent or inexperienced as it might initially seem. In truth, Jim is cognizant of life's ugliness even before leaving for World War I, knowing all too well that death and loss are part of the human experience.

As a result, *Fly Away Peter* isn't simply story about the loss of innocence, but rather an account of Jim's maturity, which develops as he slowly stops seeing death as "extraordinary" and starts seeing it as inevitable. As a function of his experience as a soldier, he becomes pessimistic, failing to see how anybody can go on appreciating life in the face of horror. When he's at his most jaded, though, he sees an **old man planting a garden**, and this brings him hope. In light of this, *Fly Away Peter* becomes a tale not only about the slow loss of innocence, but also about the maturity it takes to see the good in life even in the midst of evil and sorrow.

At the beginning of *Fly Away Peter*, Jim has never left Australia and has barely even traveled beyond the rural area in which he was raised. Nonetheless, he is considerably less naïve than some of his contemporaries, who celebrate the news of World War I and eagerly sign up to join the fight. When he sees these people at a bar, he watches them get drunk and speak with "swagger" and "boldness" because they already feel like a "solid company or platoon." While these young men join the war simply for the thrill of it, Jim is hesitant. This is because he knows something about death, having watched his brother get mangled by the blades of some farming equipment. When he finally signs up, it's not because he's eager to join the war effort, but because he knows that if he didn't, he'd "never understand, when it was over, why his life and everything he had known were so changed." From the start, then, Malouf frames Jim as a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent young man, the kind of person who harbors no delusions about what it will be like to participate in a massive and bloody war.

Despite his relative maturity, Jim is still shocked by the gruesomeness of war. This causes him to reexamine his past life, challenging his previous worldview. "Jim saw that he had been living, till he came here, in a state of dangerous innocence," Malouf writes. "It wasn't that violence had no part in what he had known back there; but he had believed it to be extraordinary." Jim witnessed his own brother's horrific death and once, on a smaller scale, he rescued a bird whose leg somebody forced into a sardine tin, so he has always felt that he has an awareness of the kind of senseless travesty and cruelty that can arise in life. However, until this point, he has conceived of such horrors as "extraordinary," suggesting that he thinks life is otherwise good. Now, however, he sees that "violence" and depravity are woven throughout life, and this makes him think that he has been living with a "dangerous" sense of "innocence," one that has shielded him from the harsh reality of the world.

With Jim's loss of innocence comes an overwhelming feeling of pessimism. He wonders how anybody could ever overcome the undeniable fact that violence and tragedy are everywhere in the world. "What can stand," he wonders, "what can ever stand against it?" In this question, the "it" Jim refers to is life itself and the many difficulties it presents. While he used to think that "a keen eye for the difference [...] between two species of wren" might enable him to see the good in life, he no longer believes this. "Nothing counted," Malouf writes.

Moving through his soldierly duties with this bleak perspective, Jim comes upon an old man digging a garden in an otherwise war-torn landscape. "There was something in the old man's movements as he stooped and pushed his thumbs into the earth, something in his refusal to accept the limiting nature of conditions, that vividly recalled [Miss Harcourt] and for a moment lifted [Jim's] spirits." As Jim observes this elderly man's optimism, he regains his ability to appreciate life. Despite his abysmal surroundings, he manages to overcome the staggering cynicism that has come along with his complete loss of

innocence. This ability to find hope and beauty in dark times, Malouf suggests, is a mark of maturity. Having lost his sense of innocence, Jim now has an understanding of the world that balances the good against the bad, ultimately enabling him to "stand against" hardship.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BIRDS

Because Jim Saddler is a birdwatcher who finds joy in identifying the creatures he sees flying above, birds factor into many scenes in *Fly Away Peter* and come to represent a sense of freedom and unboundedness. No matter where Jim goes, he's able to look at the sky and spot multiple different winged species. Fascinated by their migratory patterns, he often considers how far they have flown. For instance, when he and Miss Imogen Harcourt spy a Dunlin in Australia, they're astonished because Dunlins come from Scandinavia or North Asia, meaning that this bird's journey has spanned roughly half the globe. Unlike humans, the birds that Jim sees pay no attention to the demarcations that supposedly make up the world. Rather, they fly wherever they want, lending Jim a sense of exhilarating liberty. Jim also takes comfort in seeing birds during the war, as they evidence that some natural patterns remain undisrupted by—and in effect, transcend—the violence of humankind. The birds' freedom ultimately suggests a certain arbitrariness and limit to the boundaries imposed by men on the world, which, in turn, would imply the foolishness of war fought over those boundaries in the first place.

BERT'S BIPLANE

When Jim watches Bert's biplane roar through the sky at the beginning of the book, he resents its noisiness and its imposition, for he feels that this machine has encroached upon the territory of the **birds** he so admires. This immediately establishes a sort of tension between the natural world and the technological advancements that the plane represents. Jim is suspicious of these advances, noting that planes are "new toys of a boyish but innocent adventuring," but they have already "changed their nature and become weapons," since the military has started using them as part of a "new fighting arm" in World War I. Because of this sudden change in use, Bert's biplane—and planes in general—take on a new significance in *Fly Away Peter*, representing the rapid changes that are inspired by the war and constantly unfolding around Jim.

THE OLD MAN AND HIS GARDEN

After many months at war, Jim begins to lose his ability to find beauty in life. Fortunately, he stumbles upon an old man planting a garden in an otherwise desolate landscape, and this experience renews his optimism. The old man's presence in the novel symbolizes hope and emotional resilience, two things that help Jim stay in touch with his sensitivity to beauty in the midst of a violent war. Although the land surrounding the old man has been torn up by violence—the trees devastated and stripped—he still works at planting his garden. "There was something in the old man's movements as he stooped and pushed his thumbs into the earth, something in his refusal to accept the limiting nature of conditions," Malouf writes, explaining why the man has such an influence on Jim's happiness. The man's "refusal to accept the limiting nature of conditions" shows Jim that it's worth striving to recognize or create beauty even in the most dismal circumstances. During Jim's out of body experience in the moment of his death, he notably imagines returning to the site of the garden and beginning to dig alongside Clancy, who was also killed in the war. They attempt to dig to the "other side," a symbolic reference to passing from the realm of the living to that of the dead. In a sense, though, they are also becoming one with the earth, which carries the possibility of renewal; even in death there is hope for beauty to grow again.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Fly Away Peter* published in 1982.

Chapter 1 Quotes

It was a new presence here and it made Jim Saddler uneasy. He watched it out of the corner of his eye and resented its bulk, the lack of purpose in its appearance and disappearance at the tree line, the lack of pattern in its lumbering passes, and the noise it made, which was also a disturbance and new.

Related Characters: Ashley Crowther, Bert, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening of *Fly Away Peter*, Jim stands on Ashley

Crowther's swampland and watches a biplane fly over the land. The plane belongs to Ashley's friend Bert, who eventually joins World War I as a pilot. Malouf emphasizes that this machine is a "new presence" that makes Jim "uneasy," suggesting that this young man is the kind of person who doesn't immediately embrace change. Instead, Jim approaches technological advancements skeptically. In this case, he especially resents the plane because he sees it as a "disturbance," or something that will scare away the birds. Since Jim cares so deeply for these birds and wants them to remain "undisturbed," he has trouble accepting this loud and cumbersome piece of machinery.

up the property, borders that are "invisible but clear." When Jim considers these "borders," he isn't thinking about lines of ownership or about legal demarcations, but about the divisions in the animal kingdom. Birds, he knows, are "free to cross" such divisions, but "for the most part" they stay "within strict limits." By highlighting this phenomenon, Malouf encourages readers to consider the idea of separation and how certain boundaries can alter the way a person (or animal) perceives his or her surroundings. This moment also mirrors that towards the end of the novel in the moment of Jim's death in the war, when he feels himself seeing the battle both on the ground and from above.

❝ He had a map of all this clearly in his head, as if in every moment of lying here flat on his belly watching some patch of it for a change of shape or colour that would be a small body betraying itself, he were also seeing it from high up, like the hawk, or that fellow in his flying-machine. He moved always on these two levels, through these two worlds: the flat world of individual grassblades, seen so close up that they blurred, where the ground-feeders darted about striking at worms, and the long view in which all this part of the country was laid out like a relief-map in the Shire Office—surf, beach, swampland, wet paddocks, dry, forested hill-slopes, jagged blue peaks. Each section of it supported its own birdlife; the territorial borders of each kind were laid out there, invisible but clear, which the birds were free to cross but didn't; they stayed for the most part within strict limits. They stayed.

Related Characters: Ashley Crowther, Bert, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This passage establishes Jim's familiarity with Ashley's land, which he has a "map of" in his "head." Jim has spent so much time in this area that he understands it down to the "individual grassblades" that make it up. What's more, he's so acquainted with the land that he has a dual perspective of it, moving "always on" "two levels": the earth and the sky. Not only does Jim have an intimate knowledge of what it's like to move through the swamplands on foot, he also projects himself into the sky and envisions what the land must look like from above. When he imagines this aerial view, he gets a sense of "the territorial borders" that divide

❝ Ashley was too incoherent to have explained and Jim would have been embarrassed to hear it, but he understood. All this water, all these boughs and leaves and little clumps of tussocky grass that were such good nesting-places and feeding grounds belonged inviolably to the birds. The rights that could be granted to a man by the Crown, either for ninety-nine years or in perpetuity, were of another order and didn't quite mean what they said.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This is an explanation of Jim and Ashley's friendship. Although Ashley often likes to go on long and "incoherent" diatribes, he and Jim are likeminded people. This is partly because they share a mutual appreciation of the land around them. They believe that the "water" and "boughs" and "leaves" and "grass" belong "inviolably to the birds." Even though Ashley technically owns this land, both he and Jim understand that this is an arbitrary distinction—this kind of ownership, they intuit, doesn't "quite mean" what people think it means. In other words, the fact that Ashley has been "granted" ownership of this area pales in comparison to the kind of natural dominion enacted by the birds that have been living in the swampland since before humans deigned to divide the earth up according to superfluous ideas about proprietorship.

Chapter 2 Quotes

But for Ashley this was the first landscape he had known and he did not impose that other, greener one upon it; it was itself. Coming back, he found he liked its mixture of powdery blues and greens, its ragged edges, its sprawl, the sense it gave of being unfinished and of offering no prospect of being finished. These things spoke of space, and of a time in which nature might be left to go its own way and still yield up what it had to yield; there was that sort of abundance. For all his cultivation, he liked what was unmade here and could, without harm, be left that way.

Related Characters: Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After having been in England for many years, Ashley has returned to Australia and inherited his father's land. Because he spent his childhood in Australia, the "landscape" is familiar to him even though he has since become used to the "greener" environment of England. He has an affinity for this swampland, loving its "powdery blues and greens" and the fact that it has "ragged edges." What's more, he feels as if his property—and the landscape in general—is sprawling, giving him the feeling that everything is "unfinished" and rough.

In turn, Malouf suggests that Ashley appreciates the fact that property ownership doesn't enable a person to contain a section of the earth in a manageable and tangible way. Rather, Ashley knows that his property should be "left" the way it is so that it can continue to "yield up what it had to yield." He sees the property as independent of his own influence and knows that he will never be able to fully possess it.

It was a landscape, Ashley thought, that could accommodate a good deal. That was his view of it. It wasn't so clearly defined as England or Germany; new things could enter and find a place there. It might be old, even very old, but it was more open than Europe to what was still to come.

Related Characters: Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Considering the swampland, Ashley thinks about the area in terms of how it exists in time. He knows that the land has preceded him and that it will also outlast him. In contrast to Europe, though, he feels as if the "landscape" is less "clearly defined." In other words, his property isn't as developed as countries like England or Germany. Humans, it seems, have had less of an influence on the wilderness in Australia than they've had in Europe. This aligns with Ashley's previous idea that the swampland is "unfinished." As time marches on, he thinks, "new things" might "enter" the area and "find a place" within it. Furthermore, considering that Europe is about to be ravaged by World War I—the farmlands of France and Germany torn up by trenches and explosions—Australia is comparatively better poised to run its course through time uninterrupted (relatively speaking) by the devastation of human conflict. Ashley is cognizant of this fact, viewing his own land as beyond the reach of the violence "still to come."

His voice was husky and the accent broad; he drawled. The facts he gave were unnecessary and might have been pedantic. But when he named the bird, and again when he named the island, he made them sound, Ashley thought, extraordinary. He endowed them with some romantic quality that was really in himself. An odd interest revealed itself, the fire of an individual passion.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Ashley first encounters Jim Saddler on his property. Having found Jim looking at a bird through binoculars, Ashley asks what he's doing. Jim explains that he's watching a Dollar bird, which, he adds, comes from the Moluccas (an archipelago in Indonesia). At first, Ashley notes that these details are "unnecessary" and "even pedantic." However, he also finds himself intrigued by Jim's knowledge and his ability to "name" such otherwise elusive and foreign things—an act that makes such things seem "extraordinary." In this moment, the author frames the mere act of linguistic identification as almost magical, capable of elevating something and granting it "some

romantic quality."

Interestingly enough, Ashley believes that this "romantic quality" doesn't lie in the Dollar bird itself, but in Jim's ability to "name" it. This is because he sees Jim's effort to describe the bird as the manifestation of his own "passion." In turn, Malouf portrays Jim's use of language as something that can bestow significance upon both what he's describing and himself.

Chapter 3 Quotes

It amazed him, this. That he could be watching, on a warm day in November, with the sun scorching his back, the earth pricking below and the whole landscape dazzling and shrilling, a creature that only weeks ago had been on the other side of the earth and had found its way here across all the cities of Asia, across lakes, deserts, valleys between high mountain ranges, across oceans without a single guiding mark, to light on just this bank and enter the round frame of his binoculars; completely contained there in its small life [...] and completely containing, somewhere invisibly within, that blank white world of the northern ice-cap and the knowledge, laid down deep in the tiny brain, of the air-routes and courses that had brought it here.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jim looks at a sandpiper that has migrated either from Northern Asia or from Scandinavia. The fact that this "creature" was on "the other side of the earth" just weeks before dazzles Jim, who is "amazed" to think about the number of "cities" and "lakes" and "deserts" and "valleys"—let alone *countries*—this tiny thing has flown over in order to arrive here, in Australia. What astounds him even more is that the bird can hold all this knowledge of the world in its small head, where a map of sorts must be "laid down deep in [its] tiny brain." Since Jim likes to think that he himself has a map in his head of the swampland, he's in awe of the sandpiper's ability to hold such a vast amount of geographical "knowledge." Malouf offers this amazement to readers, demonstrating Jim's engagement with the notion of traveling beyond boundaries.

"So this is it," he said admiringly. [...] "Where you work."

"Yes," she said, "here and out there."

As he was to discover, she often made these distinctions, putting things clearer, moving them into a sharper focus.

"The light, and then the dark."

Related Characters: Miss Imogen Harcourt, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Jim sees Miss Imogen Harcourt taking a picture of the same sandpiper that he himself is observing, he finds out where she lives and pays her a visit to introduce himself. When he knocks on the door, she tells him to let himself in because she's in the darkroom developing photographs. Eventually, she comes out and meets him, and before long, she takes him back into the darkroom to show him her work. In doing so, she makes a "distinction' between "here and out there," describing the difference as a contrast between "the light" and "the dark."

This habit of making "distinctions," Malouf notes, makes things "clearer" because it uses contrast and negation to bring whatever Miss Harcourt is talking about into "sharper focus." In turn, Malouf suggests that although divisions in the natural world are often arbitrary, demarcations can sometimes prove helpful, especially in the realm of language. By articulating the difference between one thing and another, Miss Harcourt is able to offer more pointed descriptions, thereby succeeding in using language to impose a sense of order on her life.

The sandpiper was in sharp focus against a blur of earth and grass-stems, as if two sets of binoculars had been brought to bear on the same spot, and he knew that if the second pair could now be shifted so that the landscape came up as clear as the bird, he too might be visible, lying there with a pair of glasses screwed into his head. He was there but invisible; only he and Miss Harcourt might ever know that he too had been in the frame, hidden among those soft rods of light that were grass-stems and the softer sunbursts that were grass-heads or tiny flowers. To the unenlightened eye there was just the central image of the sandpiper with its head attentively cocked. And that was as it should be. It was the sandpiper's picture.

Related Characters: Miss Imogen Harcourt, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the photograph Miss Imogen Harcourt took of the sandpiper when she and Jim were separately watching the bird. Jim finds himself in awe of the way she has composed the portrait, taking pleasure in the "sharp focus" of the sandpiper. This "focus" has essentially obscured his own body, which he and Miss Harcourt know is somewhere in the foreground of the picture, "lying there with a pair of glasses screwed into his head." Nonetheless, only they will ever know that he, too, is in this picture, since "to the unenlightened eye there [is] just the central image of the sandpiper."

This consideration of Miss Harcourt's composition invites readers to think about the ways in which perspectives shift according to how something is framed or put together. The way humans look at the world, Malouf intimates, isn't always consistent. Rather, perspectives change according to how something presents itself and to what a person knows about the thing he or she is looking at.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ [T]hey moved with their little lives, if they moved at all, so transiently across his lands—even when they were natives and spent their whole lives there—and knew nothing of Ashley Crowther. They shocked him each time he came here with the otherness of their being. He could never quite accept that they were, he and these creatures, of the same world. It was as if he had inherited a piece of the next world, or some previous one. That was why he felt such awe when Jim so confidently offered himself as an intermediary and named them: 'Look, the Sacred Kingfisher. From Borneo.'"

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

The way Ashley Crowther thinks about the birds that pass through his land is directly influenced by is conception of ownership. Rather than feeling as if he has complete dominion over the swamp and its many creatures, he sees himself as small and insignificant. Indeed, he can "never quite accept" that "he and these creatures" are "of the same world." This is partially because he views these birds as animals from a different time, since they have been living in these parts for generations—long before Ashley or any of his family members laid legal claim to the area. What's more, he understands that these birds will go on living in the swampland regardless of whether or not he owns the property. They know "nothing," he thinks, about him or his family, just as the family knows little about the birds. Because of this lack of knowledge, he values Jim's ability to name birds like the Kingfisher, since this at least gives him some indication of the beings with whom he's sharing this land.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Using his best copybook hand, including all the swirls and hooks and tails on the capital letters that you left off when you were simply jotting things down, he entered them up, four or five to a page. This sort of writing was serious. It was giving the creature, through its name, a permanent place in the world, as Miss Harcourt did through pictures. The names were magical. They had behind them, each one, in a way that still seemed mysterious to him, as it had when he first learned to say them over in his head, both the real bird he had sighted, with its peculiar markings and its individual cry, and the species with all its characteristics of diet, habits, preference for this or that habitat, kind of nest, number of eggs etc.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Part of Jim's job is to record the names of the birds he spots on Ashley's property. He does this in a notebook using his best handwriting. In doing so, he feels as if he's giving the birds "a permanent place in the world." This is significant, since Jim's own world is changing rapidly with the onset of World War I. Because of this, he values the notion that he can grant the birds he sees a "place in the world" that seems concrete and tangible. When he writes their names, he captures both "the real bird" and "the species" to which it

belongs. By drawing attention to this, Malouf indicates that language can do more than simply describe something—it can evoke an entire history while also solidifying something in the present.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ But it was there just the same, moving easily about and quite unconscious that it had broken some barrier that might have been laid down a million years ago, in the Pleiocene, when the ice came and the birds found ways out and since then had kept to the same ways. Only this bird hadn't.

"Where does it come from?"

"Sweden. The Baltic. Iceland. Looks like another refugee."

He knew the word now. Just a few months after he first heard it, it was common, you saw it in the papers every day.

Related Characters: Miss Imogen Harcourt, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jim and Miss Harcourt watch a Dunlin, a type of bird that hails—as stated by Miss Harcourt—from the Baltics. Jim is amazed to have found this new creature, which he's never seen before in these Australian swamplands. What's truly fascinating to him is that the bird is doesn't realize that it has "broken some barrier." Indeed, the Dunlin has broken *many* barriers, since its migratory patterns don't usually lead it all the way to Australia, a far-off continent. What's more, Jim understands that this Dunlin has not only transcended physical barriers but has also strayed from tradition. The migratory habits of its kind, he thinks, may have been established all the way back in the Ice Age, when "birds found ways out and since then [have] kept to the same ways."

When Miss Harcourt tells Jim that the Dunlin comes from Sweden, readers remember an encounter he had in Brisbane with a stranger who, talking about World War I, mentioned he was a Swede. At the time, Jim didn't know what this meant, having never heard the word. Now, though, knows Sweden is a country, since with the onset of the war the word has become a "common" fixture in the newspapers. In turn, readers see that Jim is slowly learning about the outside world. As the political situation in Europe invades the public consciousness, his life begins to change as well.

❝ It seemed odd to her that it should be so extraordinary, though it was of course, this common little visitor to the shores of her childhood, with its grating cry that in summers back there she would, before it was gone, grow weary of, which here was so exotic, and to him so precious.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Miss Imogen Harcourt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

When Jim tells Miss Harcourt he has seen a new bird, she follows him back into the swampland and waits to catch a glimpse of this mysterious creature. What she discovers, though, is that the bird isn't mysterious at all—it's merely a Dunlin, which is common in England. Because she's so used to seeing Dunlins, she has trouble understanding how Jim can view it as "extraordinary." However, she knows that it is, in truth, remarkable that this bird has made it all the way to Australia. Unfortunately, she has become "weary" of the Dunlin's "grating cry," and this makes it hard for her to become excited about its presence in Australia.

By juxtaposing Miss Harcourt's lack of enthusiasm with Jim's excitement, Malouf shows readers that two people can look at the same thing and have wildly different reactions. This means that a person's perspective is directly related to his or her past. Jim finds the Dunlin "precious" because he has never seen it, whereas Miss Harcourt is "weary" of it because she saw it so often in her youth.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Jim regarded it in a spirit of superstitious dread; and in fact these machines too, in the last months, had entered a new dimension. After just a few seasons of gliding over the hills casting unusual shadows and occasionally clipping the tops of trees, new toys of a boyish but innocent adventuring, they had changed their nature and become weapons. Already they were being used to drop bombs and had been organized, in Europe, into a new fighting arm.

Related Characters: Ashley Crowther, Bert, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Assuming that Jim would like to experience what it feels like to fly, Ashley arranges for Bert to take him up in the biplane. Unfortunately, Jim doesn't actually want to enter the sky in a machine, especially one that he regards with "superstitious dread." The fact that his fear of the biplane is "superstitious" suggests that Jim is irrationally distrustful of new technologies. At the same time, he's right about the fact that airplanes have been turned into "weapons." Although these machines began as "toys of a boyish but innocent adventuring," now they've been turned into killing implements in World War I. As a result, Jim's "superstitious dread" of airplanes only deepens. Not only are they loud and "disruptive"—as Malouf notes in the first chapter—they're also sinister and representative of the ways in which technological advances can be used to harm rather than help human civilization.

> If he didn't go, he had decided, he would never understand, when it was over, why his life and everything he had known were so changed, and nobody would be able to tell him. He would spend his whole life wondering what had happened to him and looking into the eyes of others to find out.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Jim's decision to become a soldier in World War I has little to do with patriotism or a desire to find excitement in life. He seems cognizant of the fact that the kind of excitement war will bring is dangerous and bloody. Still, he knows that this is a pivotal moment in history and senses that if he doesn't join the military, he won't have any way of understanding what has "happened" to everything he's ever known. A relatively quiet man, Jim doesn't trust the power of language to convey to him why everything has "changed." This makes sense, considering that he himself was unable to describe his brother's gruesome death to after he witnessed it as a fifteen-year-old boy. There are certain things that a person has to witness in order to understand, he knows, and this is why he joins the war.

Chapter 9 Quotes

> But more reassuring than all this—the places, the stories of a life that was continuous elsewhere—a kind of private reassurance for himself alone, was the presence of the birds, that allowed Jim to make a map in his head of how the parts of his life were connected, there and here, and to find his way back at times to a natural cycle of things that the birds still followed undisturbed.

Related Characters: Bobby Cleese, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In the chaos of war, Jim takes comfort in the stories told to him by a fellow Australian named Bobby Cleese. To take his mind off of the threat of death, Bobby talks about fishing in Deception Bay, which isn't far from where Jim grew up. Although these stories reassure Jim with the idea that "life" is "continuous" back at home despite the war, they aren't quite as "reassuring" as the birds that he sees while lying in a shell-hole on the battlefield. The "presence" of these creatures, Malouf notes, enables Jim to "make a map in his head of how the parts of his life [are] connected." Because his entire livelihood in Australia centered around observing the birds that flew through Ashley's property, their "presence" on the battlefield shows him that something, at least, has remained consistent between his past and present lives. Birds, he realizes, will continue the "natural cycle" of their migratory habits, completely "undisturbed" by the horror taking place on the ground.

Chapter 13 Quotes

[Bob Cleese] was a bee-keeper back home. That was all Jim knew of him. A thin, quiet fellow from Buderim, and it occurred to him as they lay there that they might understand one another pretty well if there was a time after this when they could talk. Everything here happened so quickly. Men presented themselves abruptly in the light of friends or enemies and before you knew what had happened they were gone.

Related Characters: Bobby Cleese, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Malouf considers the ways in which human relationships form according to the surrounding circumstances. While taking cover in a shell-hole only twenty feet from enemy lines, Jim realizes that Bobby and he have more in common than the fact that they're both from Australia. Bob, he remembers, is a bee-keeper, suggesting that he harbors the same kind of appreciation for nature and living creatures that Jim does. They might, Jim thinks, "understand one another pretty well if there [comes] a time after this when they [can] talk." Unfortunately, the context in which their relationship has developed thus far doesn't give them much of an opportunity to form a bond, other than the one they forge based on their basic mutual desire to survive. Malouf uses this contemplation of friendship and human connection to once again illustrate the relentless nature of time, which takes "friends or enemies" away as often and quickly as it presents them.

It was a great wonder, and Jim stared along with the rest. A mammoth, thousands of years old. Thousands of years dead. It went back to the beginning, and was here, this giant beast that had fallen to his knees so long ago, among the recent dead, with the sharp little flints laid out beside it which were also a beginning. Looking at them made time seem meaningless.

Related Characters: Bobby Cleese, Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When Jim visits Bobby Cleese in the hospital, he passes a group of soldiers crowded around the remnants of a mammoth. The soldiers are constantly digging trenches and passages that wind through the earth, and now they have stumbled upon a relic of history. This mammoth has been dead for "thousands of years" and represents the "beginning" of life, when the earth was still young. That this primitive beast lies "among the recent dead" is a testament to the fact that death is and always has been a reality. At the same time, though, the "recent dead" surrounding the mammoth in the ground are soldiers, and they have been killed by entirely unnatural causes. In this way, Malouf reminds readers of the inevitability of death while also reminding them that war exacerbates the human condition of mortality by prematurely ending the lives of young soldiers.

It was like living through whole generations. Even the names they had given to positions they had held a month before had been changed by the time they came back, as they had changed some names and inherited others from the men who went before. In rapid succession, generation after generation, they passed over the landscape.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Malouf puts into perspective how long Jim feels he has been at war. Although it has been less than a year since he first entered the military, it seems as if he has lived "through whole generations." This is partly because so many of his fellow soldiers have died and been replaced in "rapid succession." It's also because the military—and the steady stream of new soldiers—constantly change "the names" of various positions, altering the language used to describe their circumstances. Unsurprisingly, this has a disorienting effect on Jim, making it difficult for him to establish a sense of consistency while at war. As the cast of people shift around him and the wartime lingo continues to evolve, Jim is left with nothing to latch onto.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Jim had run a half mile through the swath he had cut in the standing grain with the image in his head of the child caught there among the smashed stalks and bloodied ears of wheat, and been unable when he arrived at the McLaren's door to get the image, it so filled him, into words. There were no words for it, then or ever, and the ones that came said nothing of the sound the metal had made striking the child's skull, or the shocking whiteness he had seen of stripped bone, and would never be fitted in any language to the inhuman shriek—he had thought it was some new and unknown bird entering the field—of the boy's first cry. It had gone down, that sound, to become part of what was unspoken between them at every meal so long as his mother was still living and they retained some notion of being a family.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Jim's first experience with death. When he goes to find help after his brother has fallen into the blades of a harvesting machine, he's unable to find "words" for what he has just seen. The "image" is too unfathomably gory and visceral to express using language. His brother's "shriek" resists description, since it is primal and "inhuman." As a result, the travesty settles into all that remains "unspoken" between Jim and his mother, a chasm in their relationship that escapes articulation. This experience teaches Jim that certain horrors are unspeakable. However, this doesn't cause him to underestimate the value of language, which he later uses to describe the birds he sees on Ashley's property. Even though language sometimes fails to capture wretchedness, Malouf intimates, it succeeds in communicating beauty.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ There were so many worlds. They were all continuous with one another and went on simultaneously: that man's world, intent on his ancient business with the hoe; his own world, committed to bringing these men up to a battle; their worlds, each one, about which he could only guess.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Ashley Crowther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Ashley has these thoughts after watching an old man mend a garden hoe in a desolate landscape. Ashley's company has just stopped by the side of the road on their way to the trenches when he sees this old man and considers his existence. This is a person who is going on with his life in spite of the war. He is "intent on his ancient business with the hoe," unwilling to give up such everyday tasks even though his land has been violated and death lurks all around him. His concentration makes Ashley think about the simultaneity of human life—while he himself focuses so singularly on "bringing [his] men up to a battle," this old man tends to his own tasks, and this makes Ashley feel both connected to and estranged from the man, who leads such a different life.

It's worth noting that Jim has also seen an old man with a garden hoe in a place touched by war. More likely than not, this old man is the same, and Jim and Ashley have just missed one another. In turn, this common experience connects the two friends and aligns with Malouf's idea about simultaneity. Indeed, Jim and Ashley's worlds are "continuous with one another and [go] on simultaneously," in this case seeming to parallel one another in a way that reminds readers of their bond.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ […] he was out of himself and floating, seeing the scene from high up as it might look from Bert's bi-plane, remote and silent. Perhaps he had, in some part of himself, taken on the nature of a bird; though it was with a human eye that he saw, and his body, still entirely his own, was lumbering along below, clearly perceptible as it leapt over potholes and stumbled past clods, in a breathless dream of black hail striking all about him and bodies springing backward or falling slowly from his side. There were no changes.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jim has just charged onto the battlefield, which is alive with gunshots and explosions. Despite the intensity of this experience, he manages to withdraw from himself by shifting his perspective. He taps into his experience of having flown in Bert's biplane, recalling what it was like to look upon the earth from above. This mental exercise lends him a sense of cool objectivity, enabling him to put himself in the mindset of a bird, although he knows that he still looks at the battlefield "with a human eye." He also remains aware of the fact that his body is "still entirely his own," meaning that he understands he can still get badly hurt.

In contrast with the rest of the novel's engagement with time and change, Malouf notes in this moment: "There were no changes." This seems odd, considering that Jim's fellow soldiers are dying left and right. However, Malouf is correct to point out that nothing new is happening on the battlefield. Death, he suggests, is time-worn and old. Dying is not an unprecedented act, and Jim seems to intuit this from his removed perspective.

❝ He saw it all, and himself a distant, slow-moving figure within it: […] the new and the old dead; his own life neither more nor less important than the rest, even in his own vision of the thing, but unique because it was his head that contained it and in his view that all these balanced lives for a moment existed: the men going about their strange business of killing and being killed, but also the rats, the woodlice under logs, a snail that might be climbing up a stalk, quite deaf to the sounds of battle, an odd bird or two […]

Related Characters: Jim Saddler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is yet another description of Jim's journey across the battlefield, a journey he witnesses not from his normal perspective, but from far above, as if he's flying through the air and looking down. As he does so, he sees "the new and the old dead" and realizes that his "own life" is "neither more nor less important than the rest." This altered perspective, it seems, has allowed him to look frankly at the matter of death. From above, he views mortality as a common thing, divorcing himself from the idea that his own death would be any more harrowing than somebody else's. Thinking this way, he manages to consider not only his own experience, but that of the many people surrounding him on the battlefield. He even thinks of "rats" and "woodlice" and "snail[s]" and "bird[s]" that are perhaps also making their way across the landscape. In this way, his removed viewpoint makes him feel united with all the living things on earth. Once again, then, Malouf illustrates how profoundly a shift in perspective can influence a person and his or her relationship to the surrounding world.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Maybe she would go on from birds to waves. They were as various and as difficult to catch at their one moment.

That was it, the thought she had been reaching for. Her mind gathered and held it, on a breath, before the pull of the earth drew it apart and sent it rushing down with such energy into the flux of things.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Miss Imogen Harcourt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after Miss Imogen Harcourt learns that Jim has died in World War I, she goes to the beach with her camera equipment. She sits in the sand and watches the waves as they roll one after another into the shore, and she finds peace in their swelling rhythms. She decides that photographing waves might be similar to photographing birds, since they—like birds—are difficult to capture. This resolution to photograph the waves suggests that Miss Harcourt has stopped making portraits of birds, perhaps because doing so reminds her (painfully) of Jim. Studying the waves is a perfect thing for her to do, since they represent the way that life is in constant motion. Waves, Malouf notes, become part of "the flux of things." Like life, they build to a peak and then scatter into nothingness, a reminder that even something with power and "energy" will one day be gone.

That is what life meant, a unique presence, and it was essential in every creature. To set anything above it, birth, position, talent even, was to deny to all but a few among the infinite millions what was common and real, and what was also, in the end, most moving. A life wasn't *for* anything. It simply was.

Related Characters: Jim Saddler, Miss Imogen Harcourt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Imogen Harcourt thinks this while reminiscing about Jim, whom she believed had an unshakeable sense of self.

She calls this a "unique presence," something that she now realizes is "essential in every creature." The reason she condemns setting "anything above" this "presence" is because Jim has been killed. As such, somebody has taken away his vitality, essentially setting an agenda "above" his existence. The war, she feels, wasted Jim's life, and the military tried to assign him a purpose that had nothing to do with his existence. This is why she now asserts to herself that a life isn't "*for* anything." If the everybody understood and accepted this, then Jim wouldn't have felt pressured to join the military and thus devote his life to a dangerous cause. Instead, he would have been able to continue his tranquil existence as a birdwatcher, whiling away his days in happiness.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Jim Saddler eyes a **biplane** as it loops lazily above the Australian swampland in which he spends his days. There is a "vast population of **waterbirds**" in this area, as well as a number of hawks and kestrels and other swooping creatures. Jim—an avid birdwatcher—watches the biplane all morning, feeling as if it is "a new presence," one that he resents because of "its bulk" and "the lack of purpose in its appearance and disappearance at the tree line." He dislikes that there's no discernable "pattern" in its flight path. Worse, the "noise" of its engine feels to him like a "new" "disturbance."

Jim's dislike of the biplane cues readers into his deep appreciation for nature and, above all, the birds that fly overhead. It also indicates that Fly Away Peter *is set during a time of growth and change, since it's clear that Jim is unused to the very idea of an airplane, causing him to see it as nothing more than a mere "disturbance." Instead of viewing this biplane as an exciting new advancement, he is weary of its strange, noisy, and lumbering presence.*

Jim knows this swampland well. He even has a "map" of it "in his head," as if he has seen it from both the ground level and from above, and he moves "always on these two levels, through these two worlds." Jim knows that every portion of this landscape—every "section"—has its own kinds of wildlife, and he pictures "the territorial borders" of each species laid out clearly. The **birds**, he understands, are "free to cross" these borders, but they don't. Instead, they stay "within strict limits" until it's time to completely leave, at which point they fly to the far reaches of China and Europe.

Malouf establishes the novel's interest in boundaries and perspective early on by giving Jim an acute awareness of the ways in which things are separated. Not only does Jim make a distinction between the land and the sky, he's also cognizant of the ways in which the earth itself is divided into different "sections," each of which belongs to a different species of bird. With this sensitivity to the idea of demarcation, Jim is able to jump back and forth between multiple perspectives, as if he can view his own life through alternate lenses—or even imagine what it might be like to be a bird.

The swampland belongs to a young man named Ashley Crowther, who has recently returned from many years of schooling in England. Having come back to take over his father's property, he has hired Jim to catalog the **birds** that live in the swampland, wanting to know what creatures fly in and out of the area. As for himself, Ashley enjoys entertaining guests in the large country house on the weekends, and he lets his friend fly the **biplane** out of the paddock on his land.

Considering that Ashley Crowther has been away for so long before inheriting this large piece of land, one might think that he wouldn't fully appreciate the abundance of nature on his own property. However, Ashley makes it clear right away that he respects the birds that consider his land their home. He shows this respect by hiring Jim, thereby suggesting that he admires the young man's desire to identify these otherwise nameless creatures.


When Jim had started working for Ashley, his father was skeptical. A defeated, pessimistic man, his father believes Jim is destined for a "flat" life, claiming that this sort of existence is "inevitable" for "the likes of" people like him. Jim, for his part, has always resented that his father has simply accepted "defeat." Nonetheless, he never challenges his father, knowing that the old man will become violent and bitter. This isn't because Jim is afraid of his father's violence, but because he's afraid that the man's "savagery" will "infect" *him*, since it is "of a kind that [can] blast the world."

Jim's fear of his father is worth examining. He isn't afraid of the old man's temper or physical stature, but of what he thinks his father might bring out in him. In other words, he understands that violent temperaments and pessimistic worldviews are contagious, knowing that they can "infect" people and even lay waste to "the world" at large. Considering that Fly Away Peter *takes place during and leading up to World War I, Jim's desire to avoid this kind of personal darkness foreshadows the sweeping, contagious nature of the world-wide darkness soon to come.*

Despite his father's skepticism, Jim had accepted Ashley's job offer. He feels a kinship with Ashley despite their disparate backgrounds, because Ashley has "a quiet respect for things" that Jim also respects. Of course, this mutual understanding of the world remains unspoken. Even if Ashley were to try to voice his feelings, he would fail because he is, on the whole, given to rather "incoherent" ramblings. Still, Jim knows his new friend believes, as Jim believes, that the natural world surrounding them belongs "inviolably to the **birds**." The fact that Ashley technically owns this property is superfluous, and both men understand this.

Jim and Ashley's friendship develops according to their mutual worldviews. Although Ashley often goes on long, "incoherent" rants, he understands the power of silence and seemingly intuits that this is important to Jim. Perhaps more importantly, both men see human-made boundaries as arbitrary. Legal ownership, they believe, is secondary to the kind of ownership that emerges in the animal kingdom, where birds lay claim to stretches of land simply by inhabiting them.

Not only does Ashley understand that his own land truly belongs to the **birds**, he also senses that Jim himself has certain "rights" over the area. These rights have to do with his "knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp, of every bird's foot." What's more, Jim has "a vision of the place and the power to give that vision breath." Jim also has the ability to name the birds that swoop by, and this is what Ashley covets most of all.

Ashley's respect for Jim's ability to name the birds on his property suggests that he wants to find a way to relate to his surrounding environment. This is unsurprising, considering that he has been gone for a long time and thus knows very little about where he now lives. To remedy this, he wants to learn the names of the creatures around him, thereby making otherwise mysterious beings tangible and identifiable. This, Malouf suggests, is exactly what language can give a person.

CHAPTER 2

Ashley is a serious and inquisitive man, even if he is often inarticulate. Interested in "social questions," he believes that "in the coming years there [will] be much to be done, stands to be taken, forces to be resisted, changes to be made and come to terms with." What excites him most is the idea of change, which is why he's so interested in "the air." Although he himself doesn't fly, his friend Bert has a **biplane**, and Ashley is happy to watch as Bert whips through the sky. Ashley has been in England for a number of years, but he discovers that returning to Australia isn't as strange as he anticipated. In fact, the openness of the land feels familiar, though he doesn't know much about his actual property. As such, he sets out to explore the grounds.

Ashley Crowther is the kind of person who loves life and all of the possibilities that come along with change. For him, the prospect of transformation is less daunting than it is exhilarating, though he does seem aware of the fact that the changes currently taking place in Europe will lead to violence, since "stands" will need to "be taken" (this is the novel's first indication of how World War I looms in its characters' consciousness). Otherwise, Ashley appreciates the fact that nothing in life stays the same, as evidenced by the pleasure he takes in aviation, a brand new frontier.

Ashley likes the landscape that surrounds him, finding pleasure in its "mixture of powdery blues and greens, its ragged edges, its sprawl, the sense it [gives] of being unfinished and of offering no prospect of being finished." These features make him think of "a time in which nature might be left to go its own way and still yield up what it [has] to yield." Relishing the place, he explores the land and acquaints himself with the people his father and grandfather—the last two owners—hired to maintain the grounds. This takes him two months. On the weekends, he entertains guests from Europe, who walk leisurely "on the verandah in the early morning," listen to Ashley play music on an upright piano, and watch Bert "wobble" in his **biplane** in the sky.

By characterizing Ashley's property as an "unfinished" place with "ragged edges," Malouf emphasizes the idea that legal boundaries are rarely tangible. Rather, the demarcations at play in the world are hazy and imprecise, as is the case with this Australian swampland with its "mixture of powdery blues and greens" and its sprawling nature.

Ashley's desire to acquaint himself with his property is what initially leads him to Jim. While riding through the swamp, he comes upon the young man lying in the grass with binoculars pressed to his face. Jim stands but doesn't apologize, and although this could be offensive, Ashley is more intrigued than taken aback. Jim tells him that he was watching a Dollar **bird**, before explaining the bird's origins. Although these facts might seem unnecessary, Ashley finds himself drawn in by Jim's knowledge—which make both the animal and the island it comes from sound "extraordinary" and "romantic."

Jim's ability to identify the Dollar bird moves Ashley because it helps him feel as if the world around him—which is otherwise so "ragged" and undefined—is tangible. By giving Ashley the name of this bird, Jim effectively brings it to life while simultaneously inviting Ashley to join him in his admiration of this beautiful creature. As such, their friendship develops with a sense of shared interest in the surrounding environment.


Ashley dismounts his horse and Jim hands him the binoculars, pointing out the Dollar **bird**. "I can see it!" Ashley says, and the two men smile at each other. They then smoke together in an "easy silence" until Ashley asks Jim how frequently he comes here to watch the birds. Jim tells him that he does this on a regular basis, and Ashley follows his eyes and realizes that Jim is able to see the land with a "clearer focus" than he is. Jim, he thinks, might be able to help him see the many details of the world around him, and suddenly he is "intensely aware" of "how much life there might be in any square yard" of this area. However, he knows that even if he trained his own eye to pick out these details, "he would have no name for" them.

In this moment, Ashley realizes the importance of finding language to name something in the natural world. Without the ability to identify a bird, seeing it is less meaningful. This is why he needs Jim: the young man will help him access the surrounding natural world, giving him words that will impose a sense of order upon that which might otherwise remain inscrutable.


Ashley asks Jim if he would like to work for him "on a proper basis," making lists of **birds** and turning "this into an observing place, a sanctuary." Explaining that he would pay Jim to do this, he waits for the young man's reply. After a moment, Jim says, "It sounds alright," and the two men shake hands.

Jim and Ashley's friendship takes form in accordance with their mutual interests. Jim, for his part, wants to spend time birdwatching in the wilderness, but until now there has never been any kind of financial incentive to do so. Ashley has the means to fund this passion, which he suddenly realizes he shares. As such, the two young men form a bond from which they can both benefit, suddenly realizing that they share a worldview about the importance of documenting—and, thus, putting language to—the birdlife in this "sanctuary."


CHAPTER 3

While working as a birdwatcher for Ashley one day, Jim spots Miss Harcourt. This happens when he's watching a sandpiper, a **bird** from "Northern Asia or Scandanavia." He's "amazed" to think that he can set his eyes upon an animal that was "on the other side of the earth" only "weeks ago," and wonders if the creature remembers all the places it's seen "so many darknesses ago." As he lifts his binoculars away, he momentarily sees a woman in a "sun-bonnet" standing before a tripod with a camera placed atop it. The camera is pointed in his direction, and Jim realizes that this woman is photographing the very same bird that he himself has been observing.

When Jim considers the sandpiper's migratory journey, he tries to fathom the fact that this tiny creature has crossed countless boundaries. The sandpiper has flown all the way to Australia, crossing continents and country lines, although this is—of course—meaningless to the bird, which most likely only takes note of the slow passage of time (the succession of "darknesses") and its current location. By thinking about how the bird must conceive of its travels, Jim shifts his perspective in an attempt to gain an alternate look at the world.

Later that day, Jim goes to a local bar for a drink and learns that the middle-aged woman he saw is named Miss Imogen Harcourt. Having found out where she lives, he pays her a visit in her run-down cottage. "Anyone home?" he asks. "Who is it?" replies a voice with a British accent. "Me," he says. "Jim Saddler. I works for "Mr. Crowther." Sounding as if it's strangely faraway, Miss Harcourt's voice returns, telling Jim to let himself in and that she'll be with him in a moment. "I'm in the dark room," she explains. Once inside, he analyzes her voice, thinking that it has the sound of a younger woman.

Jim's first impulse when Miss Harcourt asks who's at her door is to simply declare his presence by saying, "Me." Although he goes on to clarify this by adding his name, this initial response is worth considering, since it indicates his tendency to use language to signify in the simplest way possible. Indeed, by saying "me," he doesn't overcomplicate anything. Of course, this isn't effective when it comes to actual communication, but for a moment he simply relies upon the most straightforward way of classifying himself, a choice that speaks to his desire to catalog the world so that it is manageable and easy to understand.

When Miss Harcourt finally appears, Jim says, "I've come about that sandpiper. I seen you taking a picture of it." He then explains that he's Ashley's "**bird** man," saying, "I keep lists"—something Miss Harcourt says she already knows; she saw him the yesterday. Jim finds himself unused to Miss Harcourt's straightforward manner of speaking, since he has found that older women normally aren't so forthright. As they sit down to some tea, she offers him her story. She came to Australia from England six years ago, when her brother wanted to make a fortune as a gold-miner. Unfortunately, he failed and returned to England, but she decided to stay. Since then, she has been living in this cottage and earning a small supplemental income by sending her "nature photographs" to a London magazine.

Once again, Jim exhibits his penchant for simplicity, this time by describing his role in straightforward and unglamorous terms. "I keep lists," he says, downplaying the fact that he works in Ashley's "sanctuary." Although this might seem bashful and overly modest, Miss Harcourt appears to be a like-minded person, somebody who likes to speak without airs or embellishments. Jim takes note of this, thinking that she's blunter than he might have expected, but this doesn't seem to jar him. In fact, the two seem well-suited, both because they share a certain way of communicating and because they each have an interest in birdlife and nature.

Miss Harcourt takes Jim into her darkroom, saying that she works "here and out there. The light, and then the dark." When Jim looks at the photograph Miss Harcourt took of the sandpiper, he's impressed by how vividly she has captured the **bird**, which stands in tight focus at the center of the portrait. Even though he knows that his own body should be visible in this picture, he's surprised to see that his form is completely undetectable, out of focus and obscured by the grass and flowers: "To the unenlightened eye there was just the central image of the sandpiper with its head attentively cocked."

When Miss Harcourt describes her work as taking place in "the light, and then the dark," she reveals her sensitivity to the ways in which life is divided up into various sections. In this moment, she makes a distinction between the light and the dark, one that defines her work as a photographer. The attention she pays to the way things are separated also brings itself to bear on her photograph of the sandpiper. By blurring out Jim from the picture, she distinguishes the subject of the portrait—the sandpiper—from the foreground. However, she and Jim both know that he is, in fact, in the photograph. In this way, Malouf shows readers the power of framing and composition, suggesting that such things can significantly influence perspective.

Jim loves Miss Harcourt's photograph of the sandpiper, finding it appropriate that his body has been obscured by composition's focus. It is, after all, "the sandpiper's picture." He resolves to show this to Ashley, and from this point on, he, Miss Harcourt, and Ashley become "partners." A week later, Jim tells her about the "sanctuary," slightly embarrassed by the word's serious connotations. In fact, he never says this word again, finding it unnecessary because both Miss Harcourt and Ashley understand what he's doing and thus don't need to label it in such lofty ways. Moving forward, the three of them simply talk about "the **birds**."

Again, Jim displays his desire to keep things simple, preferring to speak about "the birds" rather than the "sanctuary." For him—and for the friends he has just made—describing something and giving it a name is enough; there's no reason to complicate things by assigning something an unnecessarily fancy term.

CHAPTER 4

When Ashley has visitors, Jim takes them on tours of the property. Driving them around in a small boat, he points out the **birds** they pass or that fly overhead. As he whispers these names, Ashley feels as if he makes the birds seem "wrapped in mystery" yet also clarifies them. For Ashley, these outings recall many afternoons spent on the water in England, but they also reach back farther than that, back to "some pre-classical, pre-historic, primaeval and haunted world [...] in which the birds Jim" identifies become "extravagantly disguised spirits of another order of existence." Riding around like this with his future wife and his various friends, Ashley revels in the birds' gracefulness. And when Jim identifies these creatures, his slightly awkward airs drop away, and he assumes a capable, poetic nature.

For Ashley, learning about the birds that live on his property evokes an awareness of the passage of time. These creatures, he knows, have been on the earth for thousands of years. They are "pre-historic" and "primaeval." When Malouf suggests that Ashley thinks of the birds as coming from a "haunted world," he means that the young man senses a form of mystery in the animals because they represent a time about which he knows very little. Indeed, these beings are "wrapped in mystery." At the same time, though, Jim helps make this "mystery" seem a bit more approachable, giving Ashley the linguistic tools he needs to take an interest in the animals surrounding him.

On trips through the swamps with Ashley's guests, Jim listens to the visitors talk about Europe and decides that it "must be a mad place." What's more, he hears that there is going to be a war. For now, though, he and Ashley focus on the present, concentrating on having a quiet lunch while the European guests talk amongst themselves. When Ashley *does* talk, he goes on discursive rants that are hard to understand. Still, though, Jim knows that Ashley is only trying to express "something essential to himself," and so he feels at ease with him both in silence and when Ashley rambles.

Throughout these first chapters, Malouf addresses the onset of World War I in subtle, glancing ways. At this point, Jim has only thought about the war fleetingly way, but readers can feel its presence begin to rush into the novel's otherwise tranquil plot. Jim, it seems, is a simple young man who—although he has a strong connection to his immediate environment—has never ventured out into the larger world. Instead of focusing on understanding that which lies beyond the confines of this swampland, he pays careful attention to smaller matters, like the coming and goings of birds or, as is the case in this moment, the minute interpersonal dynamics between him and Ashley.

CHAPTER 5

Jim first hears about the beginning of the war in August while he's in Brisbane to buy new boots. Coming out of the shoe shop, he senses a change in the air. "War! War!" the newsboys shout on the streets. For the most part, the small city is overtaken by a sense of excitement, though some people aren't so thrilled. "A bad business," one man says to him, "a catastrophe. Madness! I'm a Swede." Jim merely listens, wondering what it means to be a "Swede." Later, he listens to a young woman speak patriotically about the honor of joining the military. She says that she would certainly sign up if she were a man. "It's an opportunity," she notes with a certain hint of condescension regarding Jim's reluctance. When he looks out at the streets and sees young people celebrating and drinking, he feels "panicky."

The extent to which Jim has led a sheltered life becomes especially apparent when news of World War I reaches Australia. He knows so little about what lies beyond his small existence that he doesn't even understand what it means to be a Swede. At the same time, though, he also shows a certain maturity that his contemporaries don't possess. While they celebrate news of the war, he feels "panicky" and unsettled. This, it seems, is a more appropriate response, considering war is ghastly and violent. As such, Malouf presents Jim as a naive young man who is also intuitively mature, a combination that renders him a complex and dynamic character.

Jim senses that the war will eventually claim everybody, "as if the ground before him, that had only minutes ago stretched away to a clear future, had suddenly tilted in the direction of Europe, in the direction of *events*, and they were all now on a dangerous slope." When he goes to a bar in Brisbane, Jim sees a group of "youths" drinking heavily and acting as if they're already part of a "company or platoon," since they've just signed up for the military. Later that night, a young woman named Connie assumes that Jim, too, will be signing up. Because of this, she decides to take him home to give him "something to remember" before he has to zoom off to "the other side of the world."

Jim's feeling that the ground is going to "tilt" in "the direction of Europe" shows his sensitivity to change. Having led a tranquil life until now, he is sorely alive to how the war is going to affect everything he has ever known. Of course, his contemporaries are also able to feel this sense of imminent change, but they rejoice at the idea. Jim, on the other hand, is reticent to embrace this transformation.

Just before Connie and Jim go into her house, a sound of breaking glass rises in the streets, where there's a rowdy group of young people. "Abos!" Connie says. Failing to understand her, Jim simply stands there and gazes into the chaos. Before he follows Connie inside, he sees a man in a white shirt stumble away from the crowd with both hands on his face, blood dripping from his palms. "Aren't you coming in then?" Connie calls.

In this scene, Jim is exposed to violence for the first time. The blood dripping down the man's hands and—presumably—onto his white shirt represents the violence to come. And though Jim finds himself horrifically transfixed, Connie treats the situation as trivial and ordinary, trying to explain that a group of indigenous Australians called Aboriginals is responsible for the violence. There is, of course, no indication that this is actually the case, and this suggests that Connie is even more naïve than Jim, since she pretends to understand a situation that, in reality, she doesn't. Instead of trying to figure out what has happened, she quickly dismisses the situation by naming a false enemy, thereby enabling herself to ignore the fact that her own community has plunged into chaos. Jim, on the other hand, seems cognizant of the fact that this moment of violence is directly related to the war—yet another indication that he understands (on some level) the extent to which the war will change life all over the world.

Later that night, Jim walks back into the streets feeling "pleased with himself" after having had sex with Connie. When he returns to the boarding house where he's to spend the night, he finds himself unable to sleep because of a loud procession in the streets. This procession made up of young men in uniforms, "a group of naval ensigns" who have just joined the military. As he lies in bed and listens to them sing, he wonders if "this is what it will be like from now on" and whether he will get used to it. The next morning, he returns to the swampland, where Miss Harcourt asks if anything remarkable is "going on in Brisbane." "Well," he replies, "you know. The war. Not much otherwise." For a moment she looks concerned, but she doesn't ask if he'll join the military.

Once again, Jim's response to the news of World War I differs from his contemporaries' jubilant reactions. While they party through the night and sing boisterous songs, he lies awake and worries about how his life—and the world—is about to change. "Will I get used to it?" he wonders, demonstrating his reluctance to embrace transformation.

CHAPTER 6

As August fades into September, new **birds** arrive in the swamplands. "Refugees," Miss Harcourt calls them, a word Jim has never heard. In his best handwriting, he records these new arrivals in a "serious" manner; "It was giving the creature, through its name, a permanent place in the world, as Miss Harcourt did through pictures." When he shows Ashley the lists, he's pleased to hear his friend deem it beautiful. What he really appreciates, though, is that Ashley never says anything when he sees the actual birds—only when he looks at the lists. This, Jim feels, is how it should be. He likes that "The Book" elicits "verbal praise" from Ashley but that the actual birds are met with silence. Later that year, when Ashley marries Julia Bell, Jim gives them The Book and Miss Harcourt's sandpiper photograph.

Jim not only takes pleasure in writing out bird names, he also sees the task as "serious" work. Indeed, writing out these names gives a "creature, through its name, a permanent place in the world." This is especially significant for Jim because of his sense that the world is in the midst of rapidly changing. Worried that his own life is about to completely transform because of the war, he commits himself to establishing a sense of permanence with language, which he uses to identify birds that would otherwise go unrecorded and, thus, remain fleeting and mysterious.

CHAPTER 7

Not long before Ashley and Julia's wedding, Jim encounters a **bird** he's never seen before. Excited, he brings Miss Harcourt the following day to the place where he spotted the mysterious new arrival. After waiting in relative silence for some time, they finally spot the creature again. Miss Harcourt informs Jim that this bird is a Dunlin. "They used to come in thousands back home, all along the shore and in the marshes," she explains. "Common as starlings." Jim eyes the bird through his binoculars and repeats the name as if it's some magnificent new word. Both of them are perplexed as to why this Dunlin has flown to Australia, and is now "moving easily about and quite unconscious that it had broken some barrier that might have been laid down a million years ago."

The Dunlin's arrival in Australia is extraordinary to Jim and Miss Harcourt because it suggests that the bird has traversed many "barriers" in order to arrive in this unlikely place. The migratory patterns of birds have been established long ago, meaning that this Dunlin has strayed from history in order to end up on Ashley Crowther's property. In other words, this bird has taken an unprecedented journey—something that resonates with the idea of Australian soldiers signing up for the military and going to fight a historically monumental war on foreign soil.

"Where does it come from?" Jim asks, still looking at the Dunlin through binoculars. "Sweden," replies Miss Harcourt. "The Baltic. Iceland. Looks like another refugee." By this point, Jim has learned the word "Sweden." Since he first heard of it in August, Sweden has become a common word, something that appears daily in the newspapers. Jim decides that he and Miss Harcourt should photograph the Dunlin the following day, overjoyed to think that this might be the first time this kind of **bird** has ever been to Australia. As such, Miss Harcourt lugs her equipment to the same spot the next day. As she sets it up, Jim says, "Miss Harcourt, we've discovered something!" Of course, this discovery is, for her, a "rediscover[y]," but she says nothing. "The most ordinary thing in the world," she thinks.

In this moment, Jim and Miss Harcourt look at the same bird with different perspectives. For Jim, the Dunlin is rare and exciting, a thrilling new discovery. For Miss Harcourt, it is common and unremarkable except for the fact that it has suddenly reappeared in her life in an unlikely environment. As a result, she feels as if she has "rediscover[ed]" it, but she doesn't say anything to Jim about this; what is ordinary to her, she knows, can be a dazzling "discovery" for Jim. Indeed, this is a time of transformation for Jim, as he slowly learns about the outside world by hearing people talk about Sweden and, in this moment, by laying eyes on a foreign bird.

CHAPTER 8

Ashley arranges for Bert to take Jim up in the **biplane**, thinking it will delight him to be in the air amongst the **birds**. However, he's wrong about this, since Jim is uninterested in climbing into the sky. In fact, he discovers that he's quite afraid of going up in Bert's aircraft, though he doesn't voice this fear. Instead, he shows up at the agreed upon time and gets into the plane, which seems small and unwieldy. As he does so, he considers the fact that these machines have "entered a new dimension" in the past few months—while they used to be "toys of a boyish but innocent adventuring," now they are "weapons" that have already dropped bombs in Europe. In fact, in just two weeks, Bert himself will join the military as a pilot.

Part of the reason that Jim has no interest in flying in Bert's plane is probably due to the fact that he draws a stark delineation between the sky and the ground. In the very first chapter, Malouf makes it clear that Jim believes the sky belongs to the birds. As such, the young man thinks that airplanes have no business careening through the air. In addition, it doesn't help that these aircrafts themselves represent the kind of industrial advancements that have made World War I possible on such a large scale.

When the **biplane** gets into the air, Jim looks down and sees that the aerial view of the swampland he often imagines is actually quite accurate. The experience is a "confirmation" that the image in his head is "a true picture and that he need never go up again." Still, he thinks about this internal "map" and compares it to what the **birds** must have in their own heads, realizing just how extraordinary it is that these tiny creatures have such an intuitive sense of a vast geography.

Jim finds that his conception of his own home remains unaltered by this new vantage point, underscoring the deep, intuitive connection he has to the land. Rather than changing the way he sees his surroundings, this experience in the airplane only makes him appreciate birds all the more, marveling at their ability to navigate such large distances.

Around this time, people start responding to the war with a "new seriousness" brought about by their closeness to the increasing number of dead. Jim's father suddenly starts talking about how he would gladly go to war if he were young enough, and Jim senses that the old man thinks he—Jim—"should be lost as well." A "bitter" man, his father believes that Jim is "depriving him of his chance" to be a part of "the new century." Two weeks later, Jim gets drunk and signs up for the military, thinking that if he doesn't go, he won't understand how or why everything around him has changed.

Malouf presents Jim's father as a selfish man. Indeed, he is the kind of person who wants to be able to relate to current events even if it means endangering his son's life by sending him to war. He wants to feel as if he has some stake in "the new century." Interestingly enough, Jim ends up joining the war for similar reasons—he doesn't want to wake up one day and realize that everything has changed for reasons he can't understand. Since everybody in his generation is so eagerly going to war, he decides it's necessary to follow them if he wants to comprehend the world's inevitable transformation.

Ashley doesn't say much when Jim tells him he has signed up for the war, though it goes without saying that Jim's job will be waiting for him when he returns. Miss Harcourt, on the other hand, seems hurt and angry. Nevertheless, she's the one who ends up accompanying him to the train station when he leaves. As for his father, he finally becomes "sentimental," giving his son some money and drawing him close. This makes Jim suddenly feel "as if a line had been drawn between the past" and future, "the two parts of his life," the first of which he can see "clearly now" that he is leaving it. Within three months, after Julia gives birth to their first child, Ashley joins the war as an officer.

Malouf has already made it clear that Jim is sensitive to the ways in which things are divided or separated. Jim now applies this idea of demarcation to his own life, drawing a line between all he has known thus far and what is to come. Venturing forth into a new life, Malouf suggests, is the only way to gain clarity about the past. As Jim moves toward an unknown future, his perspective on his life in Australia suddenly shifts, granting him a new vantage point from which to consider his youth.

CHAPTER 9

In the military, Jim is grouped with a number of Australians, including a man named Clancy Parkett who is a kindhearted trouble-maker. Jim takes a liking to Clancy, who tells stories about his outings with women in the days before the war. Later on, he meets another Australian, Bobby Cleese. Bobby likes to talk about Deception Bay, where he used to go fishing. Jim takes comfort in listening to these stories, especially when he and Bobby are stranded in a "shell-hole" for an entire day and night. Close enough to hear the enemy striking matches, Jim revels in Bobby's words, which remind him of home. Even more comforting, though, are the **birds** that fly above, enabling Jim to think about how the different parts of his life are connected and "to find his way back at times to a natural cycle of things."

Looking into the sky, Jim finds continuity between his past and present circumstances. Ever since he said farewell to his father, he has felt as if there is a line between his old life and his current one, but now he manages to hold onto something that has remained the same in both: the presence of birds. This, coupled with the familiarity of Bobby's stories, helps him deal with the otherwise insurmountable amount of change that has recently overtaken him.

For some reason, a fellow soldier named Wizzer takes a disliking to Jim. Early on, Wizzer makes a point of tripping Jim, who finds himself suddenly wanting to viciously defend "whatever it was in him that Wizzer rejected." This helps Jim understand himself, since "enemies, like friends, told you who you were." As Jim and Wizzer square off to fight, Clancy steps in and takes Jim's place, but the "spirit" of the fight is less murderous. From that point on, Jim avoids Wizzer—not because he fears the man, but because he fears the dark parts of himself that Wizzer might coax out.

Jim's fear of Wizzer is similar to his fear of his father. In both cases, he isn't afraid of his opponent, but rather of his own dark predilections, which he worries might come out if provoked. This helps him understand himself, since his "enemies" force him to consider the fact that there are many different sides to his own identity. In the same way that his past and present are in many ways separate, his own personality is also divided into various sections. By recognizing the existence of his rather unsavory side, Jim can focus on being a good person, thereby avoiding a darkness that he might otherwise have no idea exists within him at all.

CHAPTER 10

After training in England, Jim's company—along with many others—makes its way through France. This is a long haul, and the soldiers' legs cramp up as they sit in train cars watching the snowy countryside scroll by. One day, Clancy and Jim decide they want to get some hot water for tea, so they jump off the train and run through the "soft French snow" until they reach the engine car, where they ask the engineer to give them some steaming water. Once they retrieve this, they fall back and wait for their own car, their fellow soldiers cheering for them as the train slides slowly past. Jim loves this and knows that he never would have done it without Clancy. When they drink the tea, Jim finds it wonderful and delicious.

As Jim makes his way toward the war, he develops meaningful friendships. Although his world has changed significantly and no doubt will continue to do so when he reaches the frontlines, for now he can take pleasure in the beauty of his new friendships. What's more, he seems to enjoy himself as he passes through these foreign countries, happy to be exploring new places that he would never have seen if he hadn't left his old life behind.

As Jim and his infantry unit draw closer to the front, he notices a change in the landscape. All around he sees trains and telegraph lines and barbed wire and countless constructions that speak to him of "the increased potential of the age." The entire scene reminds him of a picture he once saw in school of ancient Egyptians building the pyramids. Although his teacher had shown this picture to illustrate the cruelty of the Pharaohs and their stinging whips, Jim had a different "perspective," "impressed" by the industriousness of the works in the same way that now he finds himself impressed "by the movement he [sees] all about him."

For somebody who has until now been so weary of change, Jim derives a surprising amount of pleasure from the busy landscape that surrounds him. The fact that he's so impressed by "the increased potential of the age" suggests that he isn't as set in his ways as one might think. Rather, he begins to embrace the idea of transformation and technological advancement, though it's worth noting that he has not yet encountered the violence and horror for which all of this has been built.

CHAPTER 11

Jim's first station in the war is calm, since the town his company is assigned hasn't yet been "gas-shelled" or "deserted." Some of the locals respect the soldiers, but others eye them suspiciously, wanting only to go on with their farming. Jim's company is scheduled to join the frontlines on December 23rd. The night before, Clancy urges him to "break bounds" by sneaking off to a small nearby village, where there's a little unofficial bar in the "shell of a bombed out farm-house." Wanting always to follow the rules, Jim objects to the idea, but Clancy persuades him by saying, "Come on, mate, be a devil. We might all be dead by Christmas." Laughing, he adds, "I tell yer, mate, in this world you've got t' work round the edge of things, the law, the rules. Creep up from behind. The straight way through never got a man nowhere."

Once again, Malouf encourages readers to consider the presence of boundaries, this time calling attention to the borders that define the confines of where Jim and Clancy are allowed to roam. Clancy wants Jim to "break bounds," suggesting that "in this world" a person has to "work round the edge of things." By saying this, he intimates that, unlike birds—who can fly "straight" to their destinations—humans must learn how to interact with the various borders that define their lives. Even if such demarcations are socially constructed, they still affect how people move about the world, so Jim is forced to learn how to "creep up from behind" and "work round the edge[s]."

Jim agrees to accompany Clancy to the bar. As they set off, a boy named Eric Sawney runs after them. An orphan who seems too young to be a soldier, Eric has latched onto Clancy and followed him everywhere he goes. "Where yous goin?" he asks now, and Clancy says, "Nowhere much, mate. We're just walkin' down our meal." Eric sees through this, revealing that he knows they're trying to sneak off to the bar and then asking to come along Though Clancy tries to suggest that he's too young to drink, he eventually gives up and says Eric can join them.

The idea of youth and maturity is strange during war. After all, everybody in the military has been deemed old enough to kill and be killed. As such, the varying levels of innocence and maturity between the soldiers mean almost nothing, even if somebody like Eric seems much younger than everybody else. This is why Clancy stops trying to tell Eric he's too young to drink.

At the bar, Clancy drinks hard liquor while Jim and Eric drink white wine sweetened with syrup—a drink Clancy mocks. As Eric gets increasingly drunk and sleepy, Clancy tells Jim a long story about his escapades as a philanderer. To his surprise, though, Jim discovers—after having tuned out for a moment—that Clancy has suddenly started talking about a specific woman who seems to have had a significant effect on him. "Margaret she was called," he says before abruptly stopping. "So there you are. I joined up the next day." With this, he stands up and rouses Eric, and the three soldiers make their way back. The next day, they set out for the frontlines.

The fact that Jim drinks the same sweetened drink as Eric suggests that, like the young orphan, he isn't all that mature. This is a reminder that Jim is only twenty years old—and does not yet have a refined palate for alcohol. On another note, this evening in the bar lays the groundwork for Jim's friendship with both Clancy and Eric. Although these two men aren't necessarily the kind of people Jim would normally spend time with, the terror of war and the feeling of mutual fear brings these three soldiers together.

CHAPTER 12

The "trench system" that leads to the frontlines, Jim discovers, is intricate and hidden. The trenches are so close to the farmers that you could be in a ploughed field on minute, "and the next you were through the hedge and on duckboards." Jim observes that he can even "still see farmers at work" from the trench system; "there was all the difference between your state and theirs." As Jim's company moves along, the planks on the ground lead "straight to the war," and the closer they get, the muddier and more awful the conditions become. The smell of death increases as they advance, and bloody, empty-faced soldiers pass them on their way out.

Once more, Jim notes a distinction between two worlds: the muddy and desperate world of the trenches, and the calm quotidian world of the farmland surrounding this intricate system. As he marches toward violence and mayhem, he looks back and feels a profound "difference" between his "state" and the "state" of the farmers whose fields he has marched through so shortly before. In the same way that he can look back on his old life and observe it with something like objectivity, now he gains a fresh perspective on the lives of people who aren't in the war.

Jim recognizes some of the soldiers who pass him on their way out of the trenches, but they all look different, as if the war has "transformed" them in the eleven days they've been in the frontlines. As Jim himself begins to serve his time in the trenches, he slowly gets used to the horrid smell of rotting corpses. Strangely enough, he never even sees a German soldier, though he knows they're nearby, since snipers so often shoot at them. At one point a fellow soldier gets "too cocky" and peeks "over the parapet twice," only to have " his head shot off." When Clancy tells Jim the name of this unfortunate soul, Jim is horrified to discover he can't "fit a face to the name."

When Jim sees the "transformed" faces of soldiers who have just been on the frontlines, he gets his first glimpse at how profoundly and quickly war changes people. On another note, Jim's desire to name and identify things holds strong in the trenches, and his inability to do this when a fellow soldier is shot in the face thoroughly distresses him. After all, this is how he usually makes sense of life. In these circumstances, though, it's not always so easy.

Although the violent conditions of the war are certainly distressing, the true enemy is the ghastly state of the trenches themselves. Water seeps out of the ground and into everything, rising above Jim's boots and creating "cave-ins" in the walls, which bring "old horrors to light" because so many bodies have been hastily buried in the premises. One night during a torrent of rain, Jim feels a hand on the back of his neck. "Cut it out, Clancy," he says, but when he turns around, he sees a bloodless hand hanging out of the trench walls. Then, all at once, an entire corpse falls out and lands on him—an experience Jim is unable to banish from his memory and dreams.

Death surrounds Jim in the trenches. Everywhere he looks there is a grave or, at the very least, some kind of threatening condition. In this context, he has no choice but to recognize life's impermanence by contemplating the inevitability of his own end.

Worse even than the water and the corpses in the trenches are the rats, which feast on the spoils of dead men and then run over the living soldiers' faces at night. These creatures, Jim feels, stand in stark opposition to **birds**; he thinks, "To come to terms with the rats, and his disgust for them, he would have had to turn his whole world upside down."

Yet again, Jim draws a delineation between two things. In this instance, he separates rats from birds, seeing each animal as a symbol. Birds, of course, represent life and freedom, and rats represent death. In order to "come to terms with the rats," he realizes, he would have to completely invert his perspective, essentially turning "his whole world upside down."

In the support lines one day, Jim sits down and has some toast while he and his company unload boxes of ammunition, which will be taken into the trenches. As he eats, he waits for Clancy to come above ground with some water. Without warning, he feels as if his breath has been "knocked out of him," and his body is sent into the air. At first, he's unable to hear, but when the ringing in his ears dies, he hears Eric Sawney screaming. Eric is nearby, and his legs have been blown off. Suddenly, Jim is "aware" that he himself is covered in blood.

This is the first truly violent experience Jim has in World War I. It's worth noting that, despite the intensity of this event, Jim's enemies remain unseen. In fact, neither Jim nor any of his fellow soldiers are even engaged in a fight when they're suddenly plunged into violence and horror. This kind of abrupt eruption of pain, it seems, is the true experience of somebody engaged in trench warfare, where violence is removed and abstract right up until it's overwhelmingly immediate and tangible.

Jim is sure the blood on him must belong to Eric, but the boy is too far away for this to make sense. He then wonders if it's his own blood, asking himself if he's dead and wondering if this is "the beginning of another life." He thinks the "body's wholeness" may just be "an image a man carried in his head," and "might persist after the fact." But then Jim wonders where Clancy is and, in a shock of horror, realizes that his friend has been shot and that the blood belongs not to him or Eric, but to Clancy—the blood coating his skin is all that's left of his friend.

The idea that "the body's wholeness" is an "image that a man carried in his head" aligns with Malouf's interest in time and impermanence. If a human's life is contained in the "head," then there might be some form of continuity between life and death, assuming that consciousness persists after the end of a person's life. Unfortunately, though, death seems overwhelmingly permanent from the other side, which is what Jim experiences when he realizes that the only thing of Clancy that remains is a spattering of blood.

Jim visits Eric in the hospital and finds it difficult to keep himself from staring at the place where the boy's legs should be. "Listen, Jim," Eric says, "who's gunna look after me?" Eric says that, because he's an orphan, he has nobody to care for him. Jim is unable to respond, since "faced with his losses," he thinks his friend has " hit upon something fundamental," a question "about the structure of the world." Jim lies, trying to assure Eric that someone is bound to look after and that everything will be all right. When he turns to leave, though, Eric asks if Jim will visit again, His voice reaches Jim as he walks away, and though at first it sounds like "the voice of a child," it turns into that of "a querulous old man," and the sound haunts Jim.

Though Eric may once have seemed like a naïve young boy dressed in the clothes of a soldier, now he's faced with a difficult predicament, one that emphasizes both his youth and his maturity. Who, he wonders, will help him in life, now that he can't even get around by himself? This question might seem childish, but Eric is correct about the fact that he will need assistance for the rest of his life—in effect, he will never become independent, and is instead stunted by the traumatic experience of war both physically and mentally. Jim seems to sense that Eric is a mere child who has been flung into a harrowing kind of maturity before his time, and this is perhaps why Eric's voice takes on the quality both "of a child" and of an "old man," a tension that troubles Jim.

CHAPTER 13

Sliding across the battlefield on his stomach, Jim tries to find his company, which has been separated in the black of night while the air thrums with machine-gun fire and corpses lie about in all directions. Jim finds a shell-hole and takes cover, shielding his head with his arms and taking a moment to catch his breath, relieved to have found shelter. Before long, though, he realizes that staying in this shell-hole near enemy lines is more dangerous in the long run than venturing forth and risking getting shot. With this in mind, he moves to leave, but a hand grabs him by the heel. As he turns around, he immediately falls into a deadly struggle with an "unknown assailant," flailing brutally in the dark.

Malouf provides very little context for this scene, ultimately choosing to throw readers into the middle of a battle sequence in which Jim must try desperately to find his way through the dark. In doing so, he simulates Jim's confused perspective, encouraging readers to grope their own way through the scene in the same way that Jim must orient himself. When an "unknown assailant" attacks Jim, readers are reminded once again that the violence of trench warfare is muddled and abstract until, suddenly, it reaches out to touch a person in a very direct and tangible manner.

After struggling for several moments with this unknown antagonist in the dark trench, Jim realizes he knows the man. "Wizzer!" he shouts, "it's me, you mad bugger. Jim. A friend!" Astonished, the two men separate, both of them embarrassed that the other has found him hiding from the battle. Jim insists they get out and find their fellow soldiers, but Wizzer refuses. Jim tries to explain that it is safer to leave, but Wizzer won't listen. The large man even begins "to quake," his shoulders shuddering and jaw chattering as an "odd moaning sound" escapes from deep within his body. Jim finds himself wanting to "join Wizzer in making that noise," but "some sense of shame" keeps him from doing so.

In this moment, Malouf demonstrates to readers that human relationships depend heavily upon the context in which they take form. Although Wizzer and Jim have thus far proved themselves foes, now Jim calls himself "a friend." Faced with a powerful common enemy, the two men put aside their differences, proving that human connection is malleable and dependent upon a number of contextual factors.

Jim tells Wizzer he's leaving. Lifting himself toward the lip of the shell-hole, he looks back and says, "I wish you'd come Wizzer," but the man simply shakes his head. Giving up, Jim leaves the shell-hole and runs partly crouched through the chaos until he finds—to his great joy—Bobby Cleese, who joins him in running for safety. Eventually, the two men find a group of others in another ditch. One of them is an officer, though he looks young and inexperienced. Still, he takes control, telling the group that they're going to venture forth. "It's a mistake," Jim thinks. "This kid can't be more than twelve years old." Nonetheless, he follows the boy out of the ditch and watches as the officer is shot in the belly.

After Jim leaves Wizzer trembling in the ditch, he comes upon a true friend: Bobby Cleese. Although Bobby's presence does nothing to protect Jim, it warms his heart to see a familiar face. Unfortunately, this positive feeling fades when Jim watches the young officer get shot in the stomach, a reminder not only of the violence surrounding them all, but also of the fact that this war is snuffing out the lives of mere children.

After the officer dies, Jim and Bobby Cleese find cover in another shell-hole, and this is when they wind up trapped for an entire night and day. Bobby tells stories about Deception Bay, and the two men listen to the Germans move about in their trenches, which are only twenty feet away. In the daytime, **birds** fly overhead, and Jim identifies them. Later, the two men fall asleep. Having been able to "put to one side the notion of the danger" they're in, their sunny afternoon feels almost "idyllic." In any case, both Jim and Bobby survive this episode. Bobby doesn't die until June, and by then Jim is a weathered soldier and "a third of the battalion ha[s] disappeared and been replaced."

Malouf has already mentioned Jim and Bobby's time in the shell-hole in Chapter 9. Now, he gives readers a more detailed account, suggesting that both men find a way to "put to one side the notion" of "danger." This, it seems, is what comradery can do: enable a person to set aside their fears. Still, though, friendship doesn't actually protect a person from danger, a fact that becomes evident when Malouf notes that Bobby dies three months later, when "a third of the battalion" has already "disappeared and been replaced."

Bobby doesn't die a swift death. Instead, he is poisoned with tear gas and phosgene, which takes several days to finish him. By this point, Jim's company has returned to their old post in the support lines. On the day that Bobby dies, Jim visits him in the hospital. On his way through the trenches, he comes upon a group of soldiers crowded around something that has been unearthed: "the fossil of a prehistoric animal, a mammoth, together with the flints that had been used either to kill or to cut it up." By the time Jim sees it, the fossil has been fully excavated. As Jim looks at it, he reels at the fact that it is "thousands of years dead" and yet has been lying in the ground "among the recent dead."

When Jim looks at the mammoth, he's forced yet again to admit the inevitability of death. Here, lying "among the recent dead," is an enormous reminder that death claims all, no matter how powerful a creature is during its lifetime.

Looking at the mammoth and the flints used to "kill" or "cut it up," Jim feels as if time is "meaningless." When he finally enters the hospital tents, where the dying are "kept apart from the rest," he is horrified to see Bobby Cleese's "fevered" eyes, and he watches his friend until the man takes a turn for the worse and begins his last moments amongst the living. That night, Jim's company goes to the frontlines for five days before returning for another eighteen.

Like all humans, Jim is unable to stop the slow march of time, which brings each living thing closer to death. Having watched Bobby Cleese die, he doesn't even get a moment to mourn before setting off for the frontlines once more, where he must confront mortality in an even more immediate sense. His entrance into the hospital tents also foreshadows his own out of body experience at the end of the novel.

"Half-crazy," Jim and his fellow soldiers dig through the ground, their shovels scraping against corpses and bones. It is around this time that Jim begins to feel "immeasurably old," since almost everybody in his company has been killed and "twice replaced" by new soldiers in clean uniforms. He feels as though he has been "living through whole generations," as even "the names they had given to positions they had held a month before had been changed by the time they came back."

As the war progresses and more soldiers die, Jim's emotional health deteriorates. He feels "half-crazy" and realizes that he has outlived two "generations" of soldiers. As such, his perspective takes a turn for the worse, becoming pessimistic and even disoriented as "even the names" of various positions change around him. Simply put, he has no control over his circumstances and no optimism regarding the future.

CHAPTER 14

Jim realizes he's been living, until now, "in a state of dangerous innocence." At the same time, though, he did experience violence in his previous life—he just " had believed it to be extraordinary." Once, when Jim was fifteen, he saw his younger brother fall into the blades of a grain harvester. When he ran home, he was unable to describe what had happened. Instead, the experience sank down into all that was "unspoken" between him and his family.

Before the war, Jim thinks violence is "extraordinary." This means he believes that, although violence and horror can influence a person's life, they are rare and anomalous. However, his experience witnessing his brother's death has in some ways prepared him for the unspeakable atrocities of war. Some things, he knows, simply can't be expressed with words.

Watching his brother die isn't the only form of violence Jim has witnessed outside of the war. Once, when he was birdwatching, he found a kestrel whose leg somebody forced through the rusty tin of a sardine can. Pitying the **bird**, he freed it even as it slashed at his hands. Once he got the metal off the bird's foot, the kestrel was hardly able to do anything but "flop about in the grass." He reflects on the bird's flopping about now, wondering how anything can "stand against" all the violence in life. He used to think that "a keen eye for the difference, minute but actual, between two species of wren" might help him "stand against" the horrible things in life, but he no longer believes this.

It becomes clear in this moment that Jim has lost his ability to see the good in life. Having seen so much death, he understands that violence isn't "extraordinary" and that the things he used to think were rare occurrences of bad fortune are actually part of the nature of life itself. Whereas he used to believe that using language to name birds—thus calling forth a thing of beauty—might help him see past life's horror, he has now lost faith in the power of language to counterbalance sorrow and misery.

Feeling the "annihilating" sorrow of life, Jim walks into an area that has been "utterly blasted," the land made into a "vast rag and bone shop." Looking for firewood, he finds an **old man** digging in these desolate woods with a hoe. Jim thinks the man must be digging a grave, but then he sees that the man's actually planting a garden. For a moment, he is reminded of Miss Harcourt, as something about "the old man's movements" seems to reflect a "refusal to accept the limiting nature of conditions, that vividly recalled her." The thought of his friend makes Jim briefly feel better. In the weeks to come, he wonders what the man planted, but he can't check because "he doesn't even know where it was, since they never saw a map." After this experience, Jim takes pleasure in watching **birds** again.

Unlike Jim, who has recently given himself over to a pessimistic worldview, the old man planting this garden refuses to "accept the limiting nature of conditions." In other words, he sees death all around him but still strives to make the world a better place, working to bring life into even the most dismal circumstances. Seeing this reignites Jim's passion for beauty. What's more, it's worth noting that Jim doesn't even know where this transformative experience takes place, yet another indication from Malouf that some boundaries simply aren't as important as the lives that play out within them.

CHAPTER 15

Ashley Crowther looks at his company of men as they rest on the side of the road on their way to the frontlines. Not long ago on their journey, they passed through a group of "blasted farms," where Ashley saw **an old man fixing a hoe**. Ashley had wondered if the man thought "the coming battle was the end and that he might soon have need of the hoe," but his company moved on before the old timer had even finished working on the old farming instrument. Ashley reflects that there are simultaneously "so many worlds," all continuous with each other, that it's impossible to know what's happening in each.

Given that Jim has recently had a transformative experience after watching an old man plant a garden using a hoe, it's reasonable to assume that Ashley is now observing the same old man. In this way, he is connected to his old friend, though he doesn't know it. This, in turn, aligns with his idea about simultaneity, in which he conceives of each person's life as "continuous with" everybody else's, forging a sense of interconnectedness in a time of war and division.

CHAPTER 16

Having come up to the crowded frontlines in a massive battle, Jim and his fellow soldiers wait for the whistle that will tell them to move over the ridge of their shelter and charge forward. Leaning against the ditch's wall, he looks at the men around him and notes the misery and exhaustion in their faces. Yet, he thinks, "The bodies were not all here. His own wasn't." In their minds, the men are in different countries or time periods altogether—some are in the past, some are already in the future, "out in the firestorm"; still others have already leapt past the battle, "to some calm green day on the other side of it."

In his weariness, Jim thinks of his fellow soldiers as unbound by the conventional trappings of time and physicality. When he thinks of himself and his comrades as "not all here," he frames them as withdrawn from the experience at hand. Rather than existing fully in the trenches, these men fantasize about their past lives and project themselves "into the future." By putting this cognitive process on display, Malouf shows readers the power of the mind to transcend boundaries that are both physical and temporal.

When the whistle blows and Jim climbs onto the battlefield, he feels as if he's watching himself from above in Bert's **biplane**—watching as he makes his way across the field with bullets whizzing by and men beside him "springing backward or falling slowly from his side." Jim sees everything, "himself a distant, slow-moving figure within it: the long view of all their lives, including his own."

Jim's ability to shift his perspective is even more pronounced than before. This is most likely because he needs to find a way to remove himself from his current environment in order to continue on. Desperate for some kind of escape, he withdraws from himself and takes "the long view" of his life, choosing to look at this moment on the battlefield as just one small experience in a succession of many experiences that make up an entire lifetime. His ability to see from above, here, further echoes his ability in the beginning of the story to envision the landscape both from the ground and above it.

CHAPTER 17

Jim finds himself blinking up at the sky from the ground. He watches clouds pass, diaphanous and wispy as they melt one into another. He tries to mark his position for the stretcher-bearers, but his hand feels as if it has "dissolved," followed by his arm and shoulder. He then tries to wrap himself in the bandage he always carries, hoping to stop his entire body from "dissolving," but he doesn't know where he has been hit, and the bandage seems too long to handle, as if it could unfurl and roll "halfway round the world. To the Coast. To home." As he tries to handle the field-dressing, a "slow shadow" comes down upon him, "blurring the shape of things."

Malouf's use of the word "dissolve" in this moment—after Jim has been injured on the battlefield—brings to mind the idea of impermanence and transience. Although Jim may be on the verge of death, the language Malouf uses speaks of transition and transformation more than it denotes a sense of finality. As Jim fades away, his mind returns to Australia, proving once again that the human psyche is unbound by physical limitations.

Jim blinks and finds himself staring at the top flap of a canvas tent. The tent is crowded with men who are "maimed and crudely bandaged, each with a white label tied to a button of his tunic." These men have what Jim identifies as "an air of eternal patience," of "having given themselves up utterly to a process of slow dissolution." Nearby, a man wearing a bloodied butcher's apron works at a "block," which Jim thinks he can smell. "*I am in the wrong place*," Jim thinks. "*I don't belong here. I never asked to be here. I should get going.*" All the same, he understands that he must wear the same expression on his face that all the other men have in the tent—after all, they are "a brotherhood" and always have had been "a foot from the block and waiting, even in safe city streets."

Given that the men in this tent have tags on their tunics, it seems likely that they have died. This would also explain Jim's feeling that they all have "an air of eternal patience" on their faces. However, Jim's consciousness is still active, suggesting that he hasn't yet fully passed into the world of the dead. When he thinks of the people in the tent as "a brotherhood," he suggests that all humans are united because of the fact that they are always nearing death, eternally growing closer to mortality's chopping "block."

Jim closes his eyes and hears a voice calling his name. The voice, he knows, belongs to Ashley Crowther. Opening his eyes, Jim finds Ashley by his side, "also in the shambles." Like the others, Ashley is wearing a white tag. Apparently, Jim and Ashley have seen each other twice since coming to France. The first time, their companies were "in the same line," so they stood next to each other for a moment and smoked. The second time was a month later, when they found each other in an abandoned château where some other soldiers had set up a bar of sorts. When Jim woke up in that château the next morning, it was to the sound of Ashley playing the piano.

When Jim sees Ashley during the war, his two lives—past and present—meet up. Although he feels as if there is a demarcation between his prewar existence and his life as a soldier, Ashley's presence provides him with a strain of continuity in the same way that the birds flying overhead connect him to his past days in Australia.

Back in the tent, Ashley asks Jim if he can hear him. When Jim confirms that he can, Ashley says they need to leave this place, revealing that he knows the way out. Looking at his friend, Jim notices the small mark of a cross on his forehead but doesn't know what to make of it. Once he manages to stand, Ashley helps him out of the tent and leads him to a stretch of moonlit woods. "Here it is," he says, and when Jim looks around he realizes that he has been here before—this is the place where he saw the **old man** digging in the garden. The "blasted" trees, he observes, seem to have "renewed themselves with summer growth," and several **birds** sing in their branches.

Malouf never clarifies what, exactly, Ashley has on his forehead. If Jim is correct and there is a cross drawn above his friend's eyes, then the mark is perhaps the same sign that Christian worshippers draw on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, a day of prayer and repentance. Importantly, priests repeat this line as they smudge ash on a worshipper's head in the shape of a cross: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Although Fly Away Peter *doesn't deal explicitly with religion, the message of impermanence that comes along with Ash Wednesday reminds readers of the novel's engagement with death, change, and ephemerality.*

Jim lets go of Ashley's arm and moves toward the garden, where a number of men are on their knees and digging. The earth smells good, with "a smell that belonged to the beginning of things." Jim gets on his knees and puts his hands in the ground. "That's it, mate," says Clancy Parkett. "That's the style! Dig!" Startled, Jim looks up and is disconcerted to see his old friend, who died almost a year ago. "I thought you'd been blown up," he says. "You just disappeared into thin air." Clancy responds, "not air, mate, Earth.

With the appearance of Clancy, it's clear that Jim has either already died or is on the verge of death. The act of digging, it seems, is what will take him to a new plane of existence, where people like Clancy will join him. Clancy's assertion that he disappeared into the earth itself suggests that people don't simply vanish when they die. Rather, they become part of the natural cycle of life, returning to the earth. As Clancy encourages Jim to dig, readers come to understand that in death he will fade into the earth. As such, the boundary between life and death becomes nebulous and ill-defined.

Clancy tells Jim that he and everybody else in the garden are "digging through to the other side." When Jim points out how long this will take, Clancy simply laughs, saying, "There's all the time in the world, mate. No trouble about time." Jim looks around and sees hundreds of digging men with long beards and tattered uniforms, a gentle morning light accentuating the subtle "curve of the earth." Since so many others are digging, he decides it must be the right thing to do. And anyway, Clancy wouldn't steer him wrong. He begins to "dig in earnest." When he looks around to find Ashley, he discovers he's no longer at his side.

Jim is still considering one of the most fundamental problems of mortal life: not having enough time. In death, though, there is "all the time in the world." Knowing this, he can dig at his leisure to "the other side." It's important to note here that Jim doesn't know anything about this "other side," and yet he still digs. In other words, he's not afraid of crossing the boundary between the living world and the world beyond, perhaps because he no longer feels as if the distinction is significant. On another note, Ashley's disappearance suggests that he isn't ready to cross this threshold, indicating that he will survive his injury.

Jim digs with the rest of the men, feeling the "rich" earth, which is "warm" in his fingers. However far he must dig, he knows the "direct route—straight through" is best. Having thought this, Jim turns to Clancy, and his friend returns his look with a "humorous gaze." As both men smile, Jim goes back to digging, thinking that this, perhaps, is what hands "were intended for, this steady digging into the earth, as wings were meant for flying over the curve of the planet to another season."

Jim looks up at Clancy because of something Clancy once said to him before heading to the frontlines. "The straight way through never got a man nowhere," Clancy said, urging Jim to tip-toe around the rules preventing them from leaving their company to go to a bar. In retrospect, this sentiment seems incorrect, since in this context Clancy and Jim must dig "straight through" to "the other side" because it is "the direct route." However, it's worth considering that Clancy's original advice may still hold true for people living in the mortal world—the ways in which a person travels from one place to the next or transcends a boundary have to do with the surrounding context. What made sense in life might not make sense in the afterlife, where Jim must learn new ways of perceiving the world. This aligns with his sudden realization that hands are perfect for "digging into the earth," since this thought reframes something ordinary and lends it new meaning.

CHAPTER 18

Miss Imogen Harcourt walks to the beach with her camera equipment on a nice day in October. She puts her gear in the sand and sits down, not planning on doing any actual work—she only brings the equipment out of a force of habit. Gazing out at the Pacific Ocean, she asks herself, "What am I doing here?" She has asked herself this question time and again since moving to Australia, but now she finally answers it: "I am doing," she tells herself, "what those gulls are doing. Those oystercatchers. Those terns." She has already heard of Jim's death and has even run into Jim's father, who said, "I lost my boy" in a somewhat accusatory tone, though he had never before spoken to her.

When Jim lived in Australia and befriended Miss Harcourt, the middle-aged woman suddenly had something to focus on: her interest in birds. For a brief while, Jim helped her feel as if she was in Australia for a reason. Now that he's gone, though, she's unsure why she has stayed. However, she resolves to allow herself the pleasure of simply existing in the world in the same way that seagulls go about their lives without posing existential questions to themselves. On another note, when Jim's father says that he "lost" his "boy," he confirms Jim's previous suspicion that he merely wanted to be able to participate in this current event. For him, losing Jim is more of a badge of honor and a way of tapping into the changing world than it is a sorrowful loss.

After watching the waves' rhythmic patterns, Miss Harcourt is about to leave when she sees somebody surfing in the wake. She has never seen anybody do this, and she's captivated by the sport, finding it breathtaking. The surfer rides "rapidly towards her" before falling off his board and paddling to it again. She savors the image of the surfer's body poised "against the sky" as he rides the waves, "an image she would hold in her mind." Then, suddenly, she thinks of Jim and hugs herself. She begins to walk away, starting up the beach's dune. At the top, though, she stops and looks once more, unable to resist. Everything appears changed and new. "The past would not hold and could not be held," she thinks, though one day, "she might make a photograph of this new thing."

Miss Harcourt feels two things at once when she sees the surfer. On the one hand, she marvels at this new sport, feeling excited and surprised by its unfamiliarity. On the other hand, this newness reminds her that time is marching on and, as a result, leaving Jim in the past. As everything changes, the past slips farther and farther away, until nothing can "hold" it anymore, not even memory. Recognizing this, Miss Harcourt resolves to embrace the future by taking a picture of "this new thing" whenever she finds herself ready to do so.

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