

The Lighterman

A short story by

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Boilerplate Stuff

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The sky is different here, a vast slab of mortician's concrete relinquishing not a slit of blue. I had imagined that the six week purgatory I had been forced to endure, cramped and sweltering in the belly of the wooden beast with the huge smoking lungs, with just the arhythmic chop and slap of cold salty water for company, would be rewarded with a glimpse of daylight, but no.

The vessel that has brought me hence from the place of my cultivation has stopped now. Hooks and chains and ropes have hauled me above deck and brought me out into what cannot be called sunlight, for its illuminative qualities are too bleak, too despairing.

So I am not yet upon land.

Swinging from the ropes and pulleys I can make out my bearings a little more easily. We are upon a wide, silty river cutting a strip through a great, grey city.

The tramp steamer that bore me here is a slender but mighty beast. I have not seen it from the outside for six weeks. When first I saw it, it bobbed proudly in the shining blue sea, its masts glimmering magnificently against blasts of golden sunshine as I was hauled on board, alongside others that looked like me, but whose contents cannot be deduced from without. Now it looks grim and terrible, no longer a billowing furrower of adventure, but a blasted beast of trade and utility under these iron skies.

The ship is populated and worked by brawny, suntanned tars who chew tobacco leaves they keep in pocket-sized tins. They laugh and josh and push each other as they move me across to my new vessel. Pulleys squeal as my great weight tugs me towards the earth, and I swing from one vessel to another. This new boat is flat and wide, with no sails, nor any hold. If my maiden vessel was a great beast,

this is altogether a runtier affair, more suited to this dull, brown water. Only two fellows man it, one of whom seems content to sleep by the stern. Both are wearing baggy, flat caps and coarse, thick clothing.

I land with a crunch. The man removes his cloth cap and waves it with some irritation. He is balding, and past middling in years, though his neck, shoulder and arms are still powerful. He wears a dirty white shirt, rolled up to the elbows, beneath a green tank top.

"Watch it, ye daft get!" he cries to the sailors handling the pulleys. "There's good baccy in there!"

A topless black man with a Caribbean accent hangs languidly from one of the ropes with a grin, his great chest heaving with the strain. "Naw, Sidney, fuh we keep all dementia-stricken res' baccy for us sels, right yaw!"

Sidney grins. It's a crooked grin, a half-grin one that creeps up one side of his face but leaves the other untracked, ossified. He comes up to me, inspects me for damage, pats me on the corner where my stamp is, and returns to his work.

The last of the crates are unloaded, and the wide little barge is full. Sid uses a large paddle to push off from the clipper and begin the journey upriver.

Upon the banks of the river we move away from the cranes, leaning over the water like mourning sentinels. Upon the barge, I am as closely packed as I was during those ghastly six weeks spent cooped up in the darkness, but at least here, having been one of the last out of the steamer's belly, I am situated aft, and though I cannot see where we are headed, I can see what we leave behind, and I can see my captain, Sid, as he stoically steers us onward.

He may not look like a sailor with his heavy, ugly uniform, but I soon learn he has a keen sense for the more delicate thrum and lollop of this river's current. This may not be fickle Neptune's domain, where precious cargo and men could be cast to smithereens at a moment's whim, yet below us I can feel the inexorable tug that wrestles any body of water. One must be steady in still waters, lest one is dragged away to sea without noticing. And then, one is lost forever.

Sid navigates with half-closed eyes, the roll of the river inked into his mind as are the anchors on his forearms. A half-chewed cigarette hangs from between his teeth, and he moves his paddle in long, graceful arcs, a roughhouse swan knitted from sinew.

For some time we progress in dim serenity, as a fine mist settles from the air, cloaking us and all about us, an augury of uncertainty, but Sid's course deviates not a mite.

Yet, after some time he stops and peers ahead with a screwed up look on his face. With his heavy boot he gives his snoozing mate a dig in the ribs.

"'Ere, Wally, wake up," says Sid. "Come on, 'ave a butcher's at this!"

Wally, more slender and younger than Sid, snorts, lifts his cap and rouses himself.

"Bleedin' eck, Sid, whatcha wanna go and wake us up like 'at, eh?" Wally gets to his haunches, stretches, and at last makes it to his feet with a scratch behind his neck.

Sid ignores his mate's protests and points towards whatever he's seen in the river ahead. "Look, Wally. There's a fork in the river."

I can only imagine that there is supposed to be no fork here.

Wally laughs and pulls his cap on his head. "Some mist at's landed, eh?
Where are we?"

"Dagenham," says Sid, before adding, "I think."

Wally humours his mate by straining into the fog. "I can't see no fork. You must be goin' loopy."

"Look, there. There's an islet in the river."

Wally strains, shakes his head, and then his eyes widen. "Bugger me. Look at that. Can't be a fork, though. Might be an overturned lighter looks like a strip o' land. Whatever it is, go round it, Sid. 'Ere, I'll lend you an 'and. Go portside around it, like."

He grabs his own paddle, and together they drag the barge portside of whatever they think is lying in the river. Once we pass, even from my limited vantage point I can see it's no boat, but a strip of land jutting out of the water, bifurcating the path. Along the river not taken, we continue to move with the upstream tidal movement. Wally and Sid exchange looks of puzzlement, but continue to paddle themselves up steep water.

"Must be a little lea we ain't seen before," says Wally. "Maybe it's the Gores."

Sid throws him a caustic look. "I been a London lighterman all me life, Wol. I ain't never seen a stream or lea this big come off the Thames. And you know the Gores is on the norf side o' Dagenham. And we's just taken the saaf side. So ow'd you explain 'at?"

Wally leant on his paddle for a moment, looking lost. He peered over to the north in bewilderment, looked as though he was going to say something, and then just kept on paddling.

#

I don't know what's in the other crates around me. I can only speak for myself; I am full of dried and cured tobacco leaf, the most coveted jewel of my home country, more so than life, or liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. Vast fields of tobacco are grown in the Americas for consumption for men and women of all classes, castes and status all over the world. It is truly a marvel that the lowliest beggar and the wealthiest prince can both enjoy exactly the same product. Tobacco is the great unifier, the wonder of the modern age; more than anything it powers the gears of the world.

I remember growing in balmy Virginia fields, being topped and suckered by flinty-faced men full of hard lines and lonesome voices that sang sad songs. Parts of the tobacco plant, like any other organism, are lazy and unproductive, and do not want to work, so the farm workers sucker them off, to let the precious energy of the Sun be fed upon by leaves like me who want to grow and flourish, who want to see the next phase of our life's journey. And as we ripen, so we are cropped, pulled and primed from the stalk to the top, and the juicy leaves, plump with nicotine, are strung together into stacks, then taken away to large barns to be air-cured.

Primers, pullers, croppers, stringers, harvesters, curers, smokers, horsemen. There's a name for every job that involves growing me, nurturing me, and making sure I'm fit to consume. It used to be slave work, of course, but no more. It's still hard, though. Back-breaking, mind-numbing work, with every day bringing a bleak cocktail of risk; injury (from knives and industrial equipment), insect bites (though

the croppers always seemed to get away with not being bitten, on account of the nicotine. It seems the bugs don't have the same appetite for it as men), and heat exhaustion (the harvesters carried water butts around with them to try and prevent this). The men did some of the work, the women and children others. Most had black faces, but not all, these days. I never noticed any difference between when they were slaves and when they weren't. I suppose there's a piece of paper somewhere that says they're free. A man's free if he believes he is. It stands to reason that the same applies if he doesn't.

#

"Lumme, Sid, wouldja look at that," said Wally, pointing starboard, his jaw hanging agog.

Sid strained through the mist, and shook his head, and shivered. "Somethin' ain't right, Wol. We should be right under the new bridge, and we're 'eadin' away from it."

It wasn't until we'd passed that I could see an enormous stone bridge of bright blue and beige, veiled in spidery scaffolding, stretching across the other branch of the river, the branch not taken. The centre part was a bascule, its arms aloft in proclamation, whilst proud parabolas swooped down from two enormous central towers to the northern and southern shorelines. The bridge carried a wide road rent into by the river, but I could not see where the road headed, for the mists obscured it. Further along the other branch of the river a pointed, holy dome juttred proudly over the rooftops, its very apex topped with a spire threading a needle into

the sky with unwavering precision, its presence absolute, a hard rod of adamant in a forest of fog.

"What the bloody 'ell is going' on, Sid?" cried Wally. "Where the bleeding' 'ell are we?"

Sid couldn't find words. "Let's keep rowing. We'll join the river again soon. We'll get back to the straight and narrow."

Wally shook his head, and headed down to me. "I dunno, but I'm gaspin' for a fag."

He reached for a crowbar upon the floor and took it to my lid, when Sid hollered at him, "Oi! You get yer hands off o' that baccy. The factory gets a whiff of tamperin' an' it's my wages as well as yorn that gits cut. You want a fag that bad, I'll roll you one."

Wally's hand wavers, and he drops the crowbar sulkily. It lands with a dull clunk, and he goes to sit by the edge.

Sid paddles on silently, looking keenly for some way back onto the main river, and soon he shouts to Wally again.

"Look, Wol. You ain't gunna believe this, but there's another fork in the river."

"Yer pullin' me leg!"

But it transpires to be true, and after some argument about the incredulity of it, they take what they perceive to be the northern branch, hoping it will reunite them with their true path. After punting upriver some more, I can't tell if they've managed it.

"Do you reckon the geography of the city's changed, Sid?" asks Wally, leaning on his paddle.

"You don't 'alf talk some nonsense, Wol."

"I'm serious. You 'ear about strange fings 'appenin' every now and then. This is an old city, ain't it. And weird stuff's been 'appening of late, ain't it? What with the Ripper, and Spring Heeled Jak."

"Spring Heeled Jak ain't nuffin' but a fairy story."

They take a break and Sid rolls up a fag for each of them.

"I ever tell you about me great uncle?" asks Wol.

"Not that I can recall," replies Sid, with an air of apathy.

"I never knew him. But the fam'ly legend goes he was a murderer. George Havershaw, his name was. Story goes he shot a man over a rigged game of cribbage."

Sid gives him a nonplussed look. "'E shot him durin' a game of cribbage?"

Wally snorts out a laugh. "No! George reckoned his opponent was mis-counting. 'E weren't a bloke to take slights well, me great uncle, by all accounts."

Sid pauses. "You reckon?"

"The game had eight pound ridin' on it, Sid! So some time afterwards, a body was found in the Norfolk Broads, and me great uncle was nowhere to be seen. When the police searched 'is house, they found that the old Spanish miquelet he kept weren't there. Where 'e went to after that, who knows? No-one in my family saw 'im again."

Sid took a long drag on his fag and then chucked it in the river. "Every family has a black sheep."

"It ain't that," says Wally. "I just get to finkin', 'ow does it get to that, to shootin' some poor bark over eight quid? You fink of all the decisions, the little choices that led to them two blokes sitting' over a game o' cards, for one of 'em to set to cheatin', and for the other to shoot 'im dead. I just can't work it out."

I find this an interesting observation about the flow of human life. Humans move in such strange paths. But then, I am a mere vessel, and the trajectory of me and my contents is well worn and rigidly adhered to. I am sown in the earth, and I grow. I am clipped, and strung, and dry-cured. I am sheafed, and stuffed into crates. I am driven, hoisted into cargo holds and am sailed across the sea, where I alight upon a lighter barge (such as this one), upon which I am taken to a factory, at which I will be subjected to modern manufacturing processes, after which I will become a perfectly cylindrical cigarette, ripe for smoking. I will finally end my life fragmented, subsumed into ash and smoke. I suppose my beginning and end are the only similarities I share with these humans. Everything in between is utterly different. The way for me is unwavering and resolute. But the paths of these humans are beyond prediction. They buzz around like flies, taking a billion different ways and paths and means to get from one firmament to another. Life throws them in different directions, like a rudderless boat in a tempest. But they will arrive at the shores of ash and smoke, as will I. Were I human, I imagine there would be a certain comfort in that. As it is, I do not possess such faculties, and I must accept things just the way they are.

#

The river has forked many times now, and I have lost count of how many times Sid and Wally have bickered about where exactly they are in this great, foggy metropolis. Each time the brutal, slow pulse of the river has forced them into an inexorable decision, but they cannot seem to find their way back to the main branch of the river. Beyond the steep cliffs of fog rolling up the silty, grotty banks protrusions of brick and iron grapple with the dead sky, clawing their way into visibility, unreachable beacons for the increasingly fraught lightermen.

I see Sid's eyes widen, and he grabs a nonplussed Wally by the arm and shakes him wildly while looking further up the river. "Look, Wol, look mate! Another barge. What is it?"

Wally steps forward and peers into the gloom. "It's a waterman!" he cries. "I can see folks on the barge, and the waterman at the front."

"Let's pull up alongside and ask 'im what the bleedin' 'ell's goin' on."

They give their paddles the heave-ho, whatever that means, and pull up alongside the new barge, which is headed in the opposite direction to us. When we are level, I can hear voices, and eventually see a good portion of the other vessel. It is flat, like ours, but instead of crates and cargo it carries a few dozen people, hunched and seated, pulling their collars and scarves around their necks. Their eyes are dead and blank, and none of them are speaking. It looks as though there are people from all parts of society here: some appear well-heeled, and some seem barely more than vagrants, yet all carry the same haunted look about them, as if they are under the spell of the waterman, the one who is bearing them hence.

"Who are you, then?" asks Sid, when they pull up. "I ain't seen you down the docks before."

"I'm the new waterman," comes the reply. The other man is dressed all in slightly grubby white clothes, and his hands and face are dirty and black. "Ain't been here long, but will be here long enough, if you catch my meaning."

Sid gives Wally a nonplussed look. "Not exactly. 'Ere, you know what's goin' on with the river? We just come off a fork in it. I don't know where we are."

The other man simply laughs. "There's always been a fork in the river."

"Look 'ere, you," says Wally, getting agitated. "What's goin' on? Where'd you pick up them passengers, eh? Which boat? Where's they headed?"

"They're going where they need to go," says the white waterman.

"Hi! Hi, you!" cries Wally to the passengers on the white waterman's barge. "Where are you headed?"

A couple of the passengers look towards Wally and regard him with empty, mournful eyes. Not one of them utters a word.

"What you done to 'em?" asks Wally.

The waterman shrugs. "Nothing. Everything they suffer is visited unto themselves by themselves. I am merely the waterman. Like you, mine is an existence spent 'twixt sea and shore. These souls know not the great expanse where we ply our trade."

"Why'd they look all gaunt and thin?" asks Sid.

The waterman inspects his passengers again, just like Sid and Wally had inspected me and the other crates. "They are fit for purpose." He then turns to Wally and Sid and gives them a wide, humourless smile. "As is your cargo, I'm sure."

Wally and Sid glance at each other, and Sid said, "Look, we won't keep you. Do you know anything about where we are?"

"What do you mean?"

Sid fidgets, like he's uncomfortable about what he's about to say next. "What river we're on?"

The waterman laughs, but it's a joyless laugh. "This is the Thames, of course."

"Which bit?"

"We're at the part you reach when you take the turns you took."

Sid and Wally look nonplussed. The waterman says, "Perhaps I could give you a lift?"

Sid grabs Wally by the shoulder and spins him around so he can talk to him out of earshot of the waterman. "I don't like this fella. He gives me the willies. What say we just paddle on?"

"Don't be such a bloody poof," says Wally, shaking free of Sid's grasp. "'E might know more than he's letting' on."

"He ain't to be trusted," says Sid, irritably. He wipes his face and looks agitated. Humans are slow to recognise powerlessness in themselves. "Come on, it's my lighter, I say we paddle on."

"Piss and shit," spits Wally as Sid heads across the barge to retrieve his paddle, and he strides to the edge of the barge and calls out again. "Hi there. You say you can give us a lift?"

"I can, sir. Anyone is welcome upon my boat."

"Then I'm game. I don't know how we's done it but we've got ourselves arse about tit and got completely lost. 'Ere, get closer."

As the waterman pushes his barge closer, Sid spies Wally's insubordination and cries out, "Bleeding' 'neck, Wol! Get back 'ere!"

As Wally tries to hop across the proximate barges, Sid gives the lighter a mighty heave, making Wally misjudge his hop, and he almost tumbles into the river, crying out blasphemes as he does so. He manages to cling onto one of the ropes threaded through the eyes around the gunwale, and after a great deal of huff and puff, and some eventual help from Sid, he hauls himself back on board. When he's back on board, Wally grabs Sid and throws him to the ground.

"What the bleeding' 'eck you doin', Sid?"

On his back, Sid puts his hands up in protest of his innocence, and says, "Wol. That bloke weren't right. We gotta stay on our barge, and get it to the factory."

Wally threw his hands into the air and spun around in exasperation. "And where the bleedin' 'ell is that, then? We're lost! He knew the way!" Wally turned to find the waterman's barge, but it was almost gone, its stern disappearing into the thick mists. "Jesus H Christ, Sid, we're lost! How the bloody 'ell are we lost on the Thames?"

Sid sits up, looking a little forlorn. "I 'ad to keep you on our barge, Wol. Like I said, that fella didn't look right. Let's crack on, eh?"

Indeed, the two men had to crack on, for another fork approached them in the river, and once again they were forced to choose a path in this labyrinth of meaningless directions.

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of faces swelter under an unscrupulous sun, hazy and indistinct against the heat and time. I thrive in the hot weather of this new world. I can feel myself growing strong from rhizome to bud, and even after my leaves have been sheared and harvested, the sun and smoke mature me even more. Even in death, I continue to grow, to change. But the people who help me thrive, though they are inured to the Sun's great heat and time's great cruelty, do not change. The fungibility of their labour means their individuality is all but subsumed by their work; in effect, by me. They are both producer and product.

The piggy eyes of slavers and drivers watch over them, sweating, rednecked, as they too swelter, but without the backbreaking efforts of the black workers.

Time has its cruelties, it's true, but it also may express a type of philanthropism, if it is allowed enough room to breathe. Looking back, I can see in the faces of the people working those fields of tobacco that they expect or brook no change in their circumstance. The field is their beginning, their end, their all. But time shifts the ground. Now the fields are more mechanised, in some ways. True, the workers still populate the background, but the work seems not so crippling, and the drivers and slavers are gone. Machines assist with aspects of work, and the sense of doom has gone.

Across the water, in London, the place of my destination, there are also black faces. These ones belong to folks working the docks. They don't possess the same haggard resignation of those I have seen in the past, and instead of being at odds with the sunstricken white folks in the new world, these ones share a laugh and a joke with their paler-faced counterparts. I wonder why the people of these two

worlds, separated only by a strip of brine, ought to be so different from one another, and act so differently towards one another. It's as though they are quite alternate worlds. I don't understand.

Some things are similar, of course. Almost all of them, down to the very last man, smoke. Some folks smoke factory-made cigarettes, perfectly cylindrical little pipes of baccy. Others roll their own with yellowed fingers, the ragged, baggy things hanging from their lips as they laugh and banter and growl. Some of them smoke pipes, some smoke cigars, others favour kreteks which fill the air with notes of dark clove and drop hints of other worlds with which I am not acquainted. I feel no sadness at not knowing these other worlds. In a sense I know them, because I share a lung with them.

#

Wally pulls his baccy pouch from his inside pocket and rummages around inside. Meanwhile, Sid pushes the barge on, stoically. We have passed through the city they call London now, and are headed towards the Estuary.

"Hell's bloody bells," grumbles Wally, as he rolls up a cigarette. "That's the last of me baccy."

Sid doesn't respond. He just offers the distance a lost, forlorn look while Wally wanders over to me, and begins to jimmy away at my lock. Sid hears the rattle of the lock, and jerks his head over to Wally with a look of disgust.

"Get the away from the bleedin' cargo! What did I say?"

Wally turns and looks at Sid with a look that is both resigned and frustrated at not being able to pick my lock. He throws his arms up. "What difference does it make? Honestly, Sid, what bleedin' difference does it make?"

Sid grunts, perhaps satisfied that Wally won't be able to get into me, gives him a grunt. "S'bad form, that."

"Ain't breaking' no laws."

"Don't matter. S'bad form."

"You're full of old bunny, Sid. We're bloody lost. I don't know 'ow you managed it but we're bleedin' lost and I'm outta baccy and I'm 'avin another fag. Bloody hell 'ow do you get this bastard lock off?"

Sid walks across the barge, grabs Wally by the shoulder and spins him around. "Watch your bloody lip, boy."

"Oh yeah? Old man? What are you gonna do about it? Eh?" Wally squares up to Sid, puffing out his chest like a gibbon, and jutting his stubbly jaw out.

Sid curls his lip up and shakes his head, before noticing something beyond the barge, and he walks away. "We're in the estuary," he says.

They both seem to have forgotten about the argument. Wally looks to where Sid's pointing, away to a distant shore. The river is now wide, and strong. This cannot be where the men had intended us to be. "How can we be in the estuary? We were going towards London!"

"'Ow the bleedin' 'ell am I supposed to know?" Sid says with a snap and another sharp look. "Summink's off. We've got to turn around. Grab your paddle."

"I ain't paddlin' no more, Sid."

"We got a job to do. We got to go back. The mist's gettin' thicker. There might be more forks in the river. I'm getting tired. Paddle."

Wally turns and says, more slowly this time, "I ain't paddling no more. What's the bleedin' point?" He must think about squaring up to one another again, but this time they don't, and Wally breaks their staring contest by gazing out to the river.

"This river is taking us to wherever we're supposed to be. This ain't London no more. London's a place where men make the rules. Just think of all them men over the years what built it, all them men who built the markets, the buildings, the 'ouses of Parliament and all that, all them gentlemen in the City. London's where men make the rules. We own the city, we run it. This don't feel like London any more. It's like the city's makin' the rules up, like it got too big for men to keep an 'andle on, you know?"

Sid looks puzzled. "What you talkin' about, you soppo sod?"

Wally looks aggrieved. "Like the city's alive. And it's changed somehow. I mean, whoever heard of a dozen forks appearing in the Thames?" Suddenly Wally looks afeard, as if the terror of hopelessness has just burrowed its way deep into his heart. "What if we're stuck 'ere, Sid? What if we're stuck 'ere forever? What the bleeding' 'ell we gonna do then?"

Before he gets agitated, Sid grasps Wally's arm and points a thick finger at him. "Calm yourself, boy. Help me paddle."

But Wally just sits down and looks wearily out at the river. His face has gone white. It's a rare moment of insight on his part. Sid's strength is flagging, and he cannot prevent the barge from drifting down another fork, which he did not intend.

He curses malevolently when it does. There is no telling where the barge is headed now.

#

"I wish I could see me family," says Sid. He looks pale, and has now resigned himself to sitting on the gunwale, his legs limply dangling over the edge.

"Shut up, Sid," says Wally, who has not recovered from his foul and edgy mood. "At least you got family. What've I got? Nuffink. Nobody."

"Well I do, right? I wish I could see Victoria. And me girls. I mean, they're grown up now, but Christ I miss' em. I can just imagine bein' 'ome, puttin' me feet up beside the fire." He shakes his head, shivers and spits into the river. I don't hear the gobbet of spit hit the water. He looks ill. "All that at 'ome, and I'm stuck on this bleedin' boat!" He holds his head in his hands, and his shoulders shake. I do believe he's sobbing.

Wally shakes his head, and shows little sympathy.

"Grow up, for Gawd's sake, you mumbling old cove," he mutters. Perhaps he means it to be out of earshot, but it's not, and Sid hears the insult.

He gets to his feet, somewhat clumsily, and staggers over to Wally. He is still shivering, but finds the strength to jab a finger into Wally's chest. "Don't you call me a mumbling cove, not after all the pigeon-livered horseshit you been spoutin'."

Wally screws his face up. "Me? Pigeon-livered? I ain't the one weepin' on the gunwale. You really are a broken old goat. A mumbling old cove!" He laughs at Sid.

In spite of the cold bite in the air, Sid grabs Wally by the lapels and pushes him hard. Wally grabs him back and they go tumbling to the deck of the barge with a thump. They roll over, locked in a violent embrace. As they roll this way and that I lose sight of them behind some other crates. I wonder if they can see and hear them, too.

"We're lost, Sid," I hear Wally say.

I hear punches being exchanged. I cannot tell who is being hit. There is a strangled, squirming noise coming from at least one of the men. All I can see are the kicking feet of one of the men lying prostrate. The man's leather heels click savagely against the slick timbers of the lighter. He is being strangled. As the other man sits atop him and squeezes the breath from his throat, the legs thrash in spasm, a final convulsive shock firing through the body in a vain, instinctive attempt at preserving life. It takes a surprisingly long time for the lighterman to die.

For all the time I have spent with Sid and Wally, their death means nothing to me. I do not care which of them has been murdered, and which one survives. I cannot see. The murderer sinks to his haunches on the other side of the crates, out of the line of my sight.

I do know death. I have seen people with black faces drop dead in the fields from exhaustion. An excruciating death. I have seen white faces struck down by fever on ships amid the ocean, with little recourse to medicine or treatment. An excruciating death. I have seen a lighterman strangled. An excruciating death. I will see workers smashed to pieces or fatally maimed in industrial accidents in modern factories. Excruciating deaths. Finally I will see blackened flaps of tissue growing in my final resting place, the lung. I help them grow. It's beautiful, in its own way.

Something of my very own creation. This, then, is the final resting place of us all. A slow, excruciating death. Perhaps the category of agony into which we must all fall is unimportant. Perhaps how we arrive there is more of our concern.

Outside, there is a gentle crunch as the lighter bumps into something. The shoreline.

We have arrived.

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