

Crabb's Opponent

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1

It might be said, I'm under siege. It might be said, my position is hopeless. It might be said, I'll be severely beaten in a few weeks' time. These things might be said because they seem to be true. And the others have left and only I remain.

One way or another Crabb has compelled them to go. A large bribe is compelling to a poor man. Particularly when combined with the ever present guards outside – they have a compelling gaze, *Go or else*, their eyes say on entry and exit.

Crabb's Crew is malicious. They'd like to stick the boot in, I'm sure – all of their boots. One short and wide man in particular, a man with a shaven head and a beard and two ear rings – two ear rings which don't match.

Not long now, he likes to say when I go past his hut. He says this without a trace of a smile, but those about him laugh.

A man reveals himself by his laugh – by how he laughs, and what he laughs about.

Not long now, artist.

Today he added the extra word, and the rest of Crabb's Crew repeated it.

Artist!

Artist!

Artist!

I've never heard the word said in such a way – not a friendly way – not friendly at all.

I've heard the word said with mockery, but never with such malice – such malicious intent.

Deep down I feel the intent. And this feeling draws me to the windows above the entrance. There the curtains have been sliced by a Stanley knife – mine – and I can see unseen.

2

How did it come to this?

Often I say these words out loud, but particularly here in this classroom – this former classroom – in which I sleep. And more than anywhere I voice the question at this table under this high window looking up at the sky – be it day or night.

The question keeps re-appearing.

Perhaps I should answer it.

Perhaps I can't.

Perhaps I should try.

I've written it on the walls in black paint and red. Somewhat eccentric it might be said – a question in black and red.

What colour are the walls? They were light blue, now they're peeling in places, and faded everywhere. It isn't a colour you'd notice unless you looked hard. The blue is almost gone.

3

People have told me that what I'm doing is highly principled. And in response I have just nodded – just nodded – I've acknowledged their words without provoking a discussion. I've just let them talk.

And yesterday evening I just continued heating my stew on my camping stove in the old kitchen. My admirers from the local paper didn't want any. They liked my principles more than my beef stew.

Vegetarian journalists!

God, preserve me.

4

Maura, how much of this, of us, can I untangle?

How does it lead to the end?

Untangle that!

In my mind's eye Maura puts on her duffle-coat: it's two sizes too large and red and she grabs it with both hands so that it's on her shoulders and then she throws her arms up and into the sleeves.

Why put on one sleeve at a time? So Maura asks with a puzzled brow.

I put a coat on one sleeve at a time. In my mind's eye I see her smile at my conservative habit.

5

I have three more months in the old school – legally, three more months. My contract is valid until then. But what is the law to Crabb? Of what significance to him is a signed contract?

I have my copy on the desk before me. I wanted to check the date and signature. He signed with a bold indecipherable flourish in thick black ink. I signed with a blue biro – a thin capital M followed by a sharp squiggle: first my signature flies up and down, and then it flies off to the side.

It's a contract which should bind us. Yet there's already been one attempt to rush events – to make my position intolerable. It's close to intolerable now. But then I had reason to call the police.

Crabb's crew started to break down the door – the door to the school, the street door.

After the third loud thud I began to react. I rushed down the stairs. I called out, *What are you doing?*

I shouted this despite it being very obvious. I shouted through the door, but the men with hammers didn't respond. And I found the lack of an answer particularly intimidating. Was I not even worth a few words of abuse?

But I dialled 999 and the police came quickly.

I was covered in charcoal from a long session of drawing – I must have looked much like a tramp. But I showed the policemen my tenancy agreement, and they made the builders retreat.

They had marked the door, but it was still serviceable. It protects me. The door protects me as I write these words. When I don't draw I write. It is better to be occupied than worried. Occupation keeps the worries under control.

I am worried.

I heard through the police that the attempt to get me out was *a mistake by over zealous subordinates*.

Those were Crabb's words according to a police sergeant.

But if I had been thrown into the street and locked out, I'm sure Crabb would have smiled – a wide mouthed, teeth showing smile. Yes.

Though now the police have intervened, now they've given a warning, perhaps I'm a little more secure. Perhaps.

6

If I had loved her more, if I had loved her less, would things have been better? Less worse?

Not much of a lover, was I?

7

I have defied Crabb for six months – for six months alone. The others left then – the last of the others. They traipsed away – just their legs visible to me as they went, due to their rucksacks, plastic bags and art carriers.

Since then I've had the entire school to myself – the former school.

It is a spacious studio for an artist.

8

I was born at school on Cup Final Day in 1961. Spurs beat Leicester City 2-0. I was born in a grammar school near Brixton Prison. My father was the schoolkeeper. I was born in the schoolkeeper's house with a front garden facing the street and a rear garden facing a playground – my father's route to work.

The grammar school has not survived, just the building. The schoolkeeper's house is still there, but it's empty. The gardens have been neglected for so long that they don't look like gardens now.

I've returned to where I started.

I was christened Maurice Mark Marnock. Only my family called me *Maurice*. To everybody else I'm *Mark*.

Though Maura just used my surname, but she tended always to use people's surnames. Even in bed, even as I entered her, she would say, *Marnock!*

And yet there's an exception to this – when Maura wrote to me and mimicked the style of my mother then she would call me *Maurice*. I wish she had never gained that habit.

And towards the end she called me *Maurice* when she spoke to me. It didn't help.

It was my mother who insisted on my names, as she did on the names of my brothers – Edward and Henry. But their names always seemed to me to be more reasonable.

My father just acquiesced when it came to naming his sons, so my mother said.

He was glad to – glad for me to decide that, to decide what you should all be called. He didn't say anything, didn't make a suggestion. So I assume he was glad.

Edward preferred not to be called Teddy, because our mother would phone his office and ask for him under that name and make it sound as if he was a schoolboy. Henry felt the same about being called Harry.

My father should have worked in a bank. An orderly commercial world would have suited him. The chief clerk of a central branch would probably have been his destination. When he was fourteen he left school and went to the commercial labour exchange in Snow Hill, and he was offered a job in a bank – office junior, I assume. His mother stopped him. It wasn't a trade she understood. It was beyond her horizon. He went to a factory. He hated it.

After his National Service he wouldn't go back. To get a house he became a schoolkeeper. He got stuck. He never got to a bank.

Twice people have got in to the building at night. They weren't silent burglars – they woke me up. I didn't go out from my sleeping-bag-room. My last refuge is secured by chains and padlocks. I'm not a brave man and I

suspected a trap. How could anybody get in without going past Crabb's Crew? Perhaps they could, but I suspected it was them. I suspected they wanted to lure me out of my room, and beat me savagely, and claim it was burglars.

I phoned the police both times.

Probably kids, they said twice.

10

My father made me a periscope. Where did it go? It was made of wood and was perhaps 18 inches high and varnished almost black.

He was a good craftsman.

Does it still exist?

The woodwork room was my father's delight. It was by the back playground.

Why do you lock yourself in? My mother asked.

My father didn't answer.

The tools of the woodwork room were my father's compensation for being a schoolkeeper.

And the lock on the door was another compensation – he could shut himself away, and yet not be cramped.

If I had that periscope now I could watch Crabb's Crew without being seen. I wouldn't need to hide behind the curtain.

How did it come to this? Doesn't everybody over forty ask that question? But still I'd like an answer. I'd like to write down the answer.

The question is now on the wall in orange – big orange letters.

11

The burglars didn't take a single drawing. How terrible! My studio was untouched.

12

Perhaps if I hadn't been an accident, things would have been different. I was born long after my brothers. My mother told me I was an accident.

The schoolkeeper's house has three bedrooms. My brothers had one each. I slept in my parents' bedroom until I was six. Then my eldest brother got married.

It must have been a disappointment to my parents to have their sleep disturbed. They must have thought they had escaped the sound of a baby's cry. But there I was in their room – a guest they had created unwittingly.

How did this mark me?

I can only assume.

13

Perhaps I was eight years old and I was on the underground with my parents – which was rare because we mostly stayed away from central London. Then we got off the train, and the station must have been very deep because we didn't climb the stairs, but took the lift. I remember a dark cage through which we could see iron girders, and my mother was terrified – she was claustrophobic and felt buried: she felt the cage would never reach the light. And my father was embarrassed – he didn't comfort her.

You're the sort of person who causes a panic!

You are!

So my father, so my mother.

They were as angry as they could be in a crowded place. They spoke in bitter whispers.

I'm going away, far away! My mother cried when we stood on the street.

Often my mother said that.

She remained.

Parents are the last people who should be allowed to have children.

14

Crabb's Crew have taken to kicking a football about in the playground close to where I draw. The ball is kicked against the wall, and sometimes against a window.

Thud, thud, thud.

They shout; they scream.
And again, *thud, thud, thud*.
The ball flies against glass – it cracks, but doesn't shatter.
How long will it be until I serve as their football?
What noise will I make as the boots fly in?

Playing football in the playground – I remember – as a small boy with my father and later with other boys – never more happy than in those moments – and now Crabb's Crew play football despite the ghost of the boy who was me.
My ghost looks lost.

15

If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it, my mother would say on serving dinner. And any delay in eating would be seen as evidence of dislike and the plate would be snatched away. My father was a slow, steady man – he had to guard his food.

16

When I write down my fears they become less fearful, but when I write down my memories they become more vivid – the images emerge from my memory to appear before my eyes.

17

How did it come to this?
A yellow question now.

All of the details matter – of that I'm sure, even though I'm not always sure how they matter, how they led me back to this school, our former school.

I told none of them when I moved in that I had been here before. As they showed me round my face betrayed nothing.

Memories leapt at me by the dozen. The mask remained in place.

Some of the people I found here were artists. The others had been, but are now something else. They were looking for a way out. They didn't work. They talked of work.

My practice is informed by the interconnections between the human and the animal.

So one of them said. Perhaps he thought it better than saying, *I draw dogs.* Though he had almost stopped drawing as far as I could tell. He concentrated on his *Artistic Statement.* Which made me sad because he had talent. And he had two dogs. I miss them. They were both terriers and greyish white. Charcoal tends to make even the whitest dog grey.

They were good models when well fed. They had grown fat.

A piece of glass has come out of one of the windows at the end of the corridor: a square of glass just three inches by three inches, but ample for a sparrow to fly in – and then down the corridor it goes fifty yards to the dining hall and the great window facing west.

I'd been watching the sunset and had left the window open.

I lower the sash. I block the small gap with card and tape. I draw a sparrow in flight – it's a winged blur.

18

As a child in my parents' room I could hear the ships on the Thames – their foghorns, that mournful sound, would reach me in my bed. Images would be conjured in my mind – grey and cold visions of a frightening world.

19

The pile grows ever greater of building materials, and the skips have arrived. Crabb's Crew are ever busy, ever noisy. They shout just outside. I try to fix my mind on the image before me at the easel.

At the end of the year and I'll be out and they'll begin in earnest. One more ex-London Board School will be turned into flats. A sad transformation – sad to me.

Originally it was a London Board School, then a grammar school.

And what will I have achieved? I will have delayed the inevitable by a few months. That is all.

But what else is life but delaying the inevitable? We leave the maternity ward to join the queue for the graveyard. And as we wait our turn we try and amuse ourselves as best we can.

How successful have I been at that?

Not a Christian thought. No thoughts have I of a world to come.

This one is enough, thank you.

20

The assembly hall makes a fine studio with my ring of easels in the middle and the chairs stacked high. The windows stretch up to the ceiling. From dawn to dusk there's light.

The paint on the floor would have driven my father mad. The paint on my coat would have distressed my tailor.

The only heat is in the classroom in which I sleep. Even though I draw and paint with vigour I need my coat – the coat I once wore to the office.

21

My father died suddenly. He died at school. Though that isn't quite right – he collapsed at school, he died in hospital, but he never opened his eyes again.

He went to work one morning and didn't return.

He's been overcome by fumes in the stockroom. An ambulance is coming. That's what the cleaner said when she told my mother. I remember the ambulance – I remember people looking for it and making way. And I remember it driving off. But I wasn't able to look inside – there were too many people and there was too little space around the doors. I remember the backs of an anxious crowd. And then I was by myself, for my mother was in the ambulance too.

And she still thought her husband had collapsed because he had breathed in some fumes in a stock room.

She learned the truth when a doctor walked up to her in the foyer of the hospital, *Your husband hasn't breathed in poisonous fumes. He has had a severe stroke and he will be dead in thirty-six hours.*

And then the doctor walked away.

So my mother told me.

It's strange to think of my father as a younger man than myself. But he was fifty-two when he died and I'm fifty-six. He died of a stroke as quickly as the doctor had predicted – he died in the early hours of Sunday, 21 August, 1975.

The school had just recruited a new headmaster. My father wanted to impress the man and cleaned every window. He also dug over our garden. It was a hot summer. He had high blood pressure.

He died trying to be a younger man. I still have his chest expanders. He could attach four coils to the handles and stretch them all – it was a red faced self-crucifixion.

In the army he had won medals for boxing. He must have been stronger than most men and more agile.

Three coiled springs are the most I can manage. I don't have high blood pressure, but even so I feel I'm living on borrowed time.

I never clean windows. I've never had a garden.

22

I remember telling Maura about this soon after we met. We discussed dead fathers. And even then I had resolved to avoid cleaning windows and gardening. In this at least I've been true to my word.

Where were we?

In the Students Union on a grimy day. I looked at the windows and made a comment and that started the conversation. Though it was a morbid subject she is bright in my mind's eye.

She's wearing jeans and a matching denim jacket, a white pullover and red basketball boots. And she has an old civil servant's briefcase – for the collection of notebooks she carries about. She explains that she has one notebook for each topic which appeals to her. Not just academic subjects, her tastes are wider than

that. There is one notebook on brutal modern architecture. The Students Union gave her material to fill many pages.

My notebooks are the only things I have which are valuable.

So Maura says.

I can hear her now.

I can see her now.

But soon her copious note taking made it impossible for her to carry all of her notebooks in one bag. She bought a wooden box and a padlock, and chained the box to her desk.

The cleaner told me that I shouldn't have brought my jewellery to a room on campus. I smiled and said she was probably right. I didn't want her to think me mad. I said nothing about notebooks.

So Maura said – again sitting in the Students Union. Then she pulled up her jumper to so show me the words on her t-shirt.

Normal people scare me.

She explained it was something she liked to wear, but not something she liked to reveal.

But I've shown you, Maura said and looked at my eyes.

Thank you, I said, but I think she expected more, but I didn't know what else to say. So I said, *Thank you,* again.

She wrote down *Thank you* in a notebook – *When I lifted my jumper.*

23

The school has not been cleaned for a long time. The windows are filthy now.

Yes, the windows are filthy but there's so much glass I have light enough to draw and paint. And the bulbs in the lights mostly still work, but when they die I can't replace them – my father's step-ladder has vanished.

The man with two ear rings likes to patrol around the building materials. I've sketched him from afar. I have bought binoculars. I've made my way to the roof. I unscrewed the lock on the trapdoor.

I have a vantage point by a chimney. I'm hidden. I don't need a periscope.

From the street the roof looks simple – it looks singular. But the roof is complex and only the front portion can be seen from the street. There is a series of roofs and I explore the gullies between them. And I like to lie with my back on one roof and my feet propped against another. If it's been raining the water runs down the gutter below my legs. And if I close my eyes I can think of places long ago and far away.

Come up and be dead!

Sometimes I hear Maura's words, then I look at the heavens.

On clear days when I do this I can just see a band of blue sandwiched between two bands of grey. And I have painted this. It looks abstract but it isn't – it's how it is: up above between the roofs.

24

One of my brothers is in Ireland – Henry. The other is dead – Edward died at the age of fifty-nine. Only I have remained in London. There were once five of us here, now there's just one.

Henry runs a stables – he's liked horses for as long as I can remember. He wanted to join the cavalry until he discovered that he'd spend far more time driving a tank than riding a horse on parade. And he grew too big to be a jockey.

We used to talk, used to see each other. Now we send birthday cards, we send Christmas cards – there is no hostility between us, just a gap.

My brothers were brought up with the Beatles, I was brought up with the Clash.

London Calling, Christmas, 1979 – I remember.

The boy is father to the man. Does that mean that everything was set in place before I was eighteen? That late?

Perhaps Maura and I could never have been together in any lasting fashion; perhaps we were hopeless before we met.

25

Maura never went home in the holidays at Keele. *I physically have a room, but emotionally there is no space – emotionally I'm squashed in a corner very flat.*

And she went into the corner and squeezed herself to illustrate the point.

26

Little bugger wants his bricks. That's what I said after my father called me a *little bugger*. I used the term in innocence. It amused my family, and for years afterwards they called me *Bug*.

Which made me think of an insect.

Decades later when I read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* I felt at home, in a manner of speaking.

27

I remember my eldest brother giving me Monopoly when I was a small boy. He arrived with his then wife, Edwina, in a car, and came in without the game, having promised to buy it some weeks before; and then, after half an hour or so, he went back out to his car and returned with his present. Which seemed and seems a poor way to give a gift.

Why aren't you friends with Edward? My mother asked. It was this repeated question that made me first suspect that she was blind.

When I'm gone I want you to be friends. Forty years later she was still saying much the same thing.

28

I have a picture of me taken when I was six. I'm in the uniform of Holy Trinity and I think it was taken at the end of my first school year. My father said it made me look like Tojo – who was the prime minister of Japan during the Second World War, and a general in the Imperial Japanese Army.

But our uniforms were very different. I didn't have a moustache in the picture, and Tojo had far less hair.

He was hanged in 1948 as a war criminal. Nobody else has ever confused us – never on entering a pub has a barmaid said to me, *Sorry, Imperial Japanese Generals are not served here.*

29

From one of my windows I can see the Green – the playing fields at the back of the school.

Crabb's Crew are busying themselves driving material round and stacking it on the grass. There is less green and more grey by the hour. The plans show a ring of houses around a small communal garden – where the sandpit for the high jump has been for decades.

30

The man with two ear rings likes to linger after the others have gone. How I study him! How I draw him!

31

I remember throwing a ball for Triggie – our mongrel, half retriever, half setter. It is one of my happiest childhood memories – I would throw again and again, he would run and fetch, ever enthusiastic.

Was I amusing him, or was he amusing me? The old question.

Crabb's Crew threaten the ghosts of that boy and that dog.

When my father died we had to move – a disadvantage of living in the schoolkeeper's house became apparent: death led to eviction.

A council flat was found for my mother and myself – a good flat, new, on the edge of a small estate, and with an open view towards Crystal Palace.

But we couldn't keep our dog. Our cat was run over.

You can't explain things to a dog. Are dogs similarly frustrated?

There is a distinction in my mind between the school as a home and the school as an institution. Some time each day I had it to myself. The gates were shut and I could roam about – not many boys could have enjoyed so much private space.

Space for myself and loneliness – enduring features.

1976 was the hottest summer anybody could remember. I lived in Beckenham in that new council flat with my mother. And day after day she said, *We're baking, we're absolutely baking!*

The lounge caught the sun during the afternoons and evenings and much of the wall was glass. I hated the heat then and the light; I just wanted some cool, dark place in which to hide. It was the first summer when I didn't live in a school. There had always been some corner to retreat to; now I was constricted, trapped and painfully self-conscious.

32

I can't imagine me going to Asia or South America or anywhere far, though there's nothing to stop me travelling – I might go to the Isle of Man, or perhaps the Isle of Thanet, that odd, obscure corner of Kent.

Will I ever see Henry again? Possibly not. It doesn't seem to worry him.

33

I can't remember a loving word from my father, or a word of praise. But he made me things in the woodwork. He made me a toy castle. I remember looking at it one Christmas morning. I couldn't praise it hugely because of its obvious defect. The castle walls had no platform. They didn't serve as ramparts because there wasn't a place for the soldiers to stand. My soldiers could only be stood in the courtyard, and so they would have no view over the battlements. They couldn't see an enemy approach. And I could not hide my disappointment, nor my confusion. How could my father not have realised that without platforms the walls were of little value? He had built a prison, not a castle.

My criticism was teased out of me, because I was reluctant to sound ungrateful, even though I couldn't act delighted.

And my father made improvements.

He also made a go-kart. This had no defects. It was a joy to ride down the slope from the back playground, along the side alley, and across the front playground and be flung amongst the bushes by the gate.

My father could express himself in wood more easily than in words.

Where Crabb's Crew now stack their building stuff and their tools – that's where I used to ride on my go-kart. The future is a miracle and often a sad one.

Watching with binoculars from the roof gives me more pleasure than watching from within the school. Even though I must wrap up in layer after layer. And I draw with my gloves on and a pencil wedged between my second and third fingers so that it protrudes from my fist. I draw from the arm when I can – not from the fingers.

34

When my father died my mother was finally able to open his bureau. Alive he'd kept it locked.

Everything was neatly arranged, and all his records were written out in a neat hand. Neatness permeated it all.

He should have worked in a bank! My mother said and sat down in the armchair and cried. And that phrase became her regular lament.

When her tears stopped she got up and went back to the bureau – soon it was neat no more.

Looking back, I wonder if a bank would have satisfied him. Perhaps he would only have found joy as a furniture maker.

I've repeated my mother's words without thought – previously I have. But perhaps she didn't understand the man she was married to for thirty years.

My mother was always convinced that I should have been a farmer. I have no interest in rearing animals, and none in growing crops. I've no idea why

my mother thought I should have been a farmer. But farming she was sure was fit for me.

And my family have lived in London for generations. There's no rural tradition within memory.

How the idea lodged itself in my mother's mind, I do not know. But once there, no fact and no argument could shift it.

Perhaps my father found working in wood easier than talking to my mother. Were her ears the problem? But she said he was a quiet man when they had met. Did she make him quieter?

The woodwork is now an empty shell. All of the machines have been removed. It's been years probably since anything was made there.

