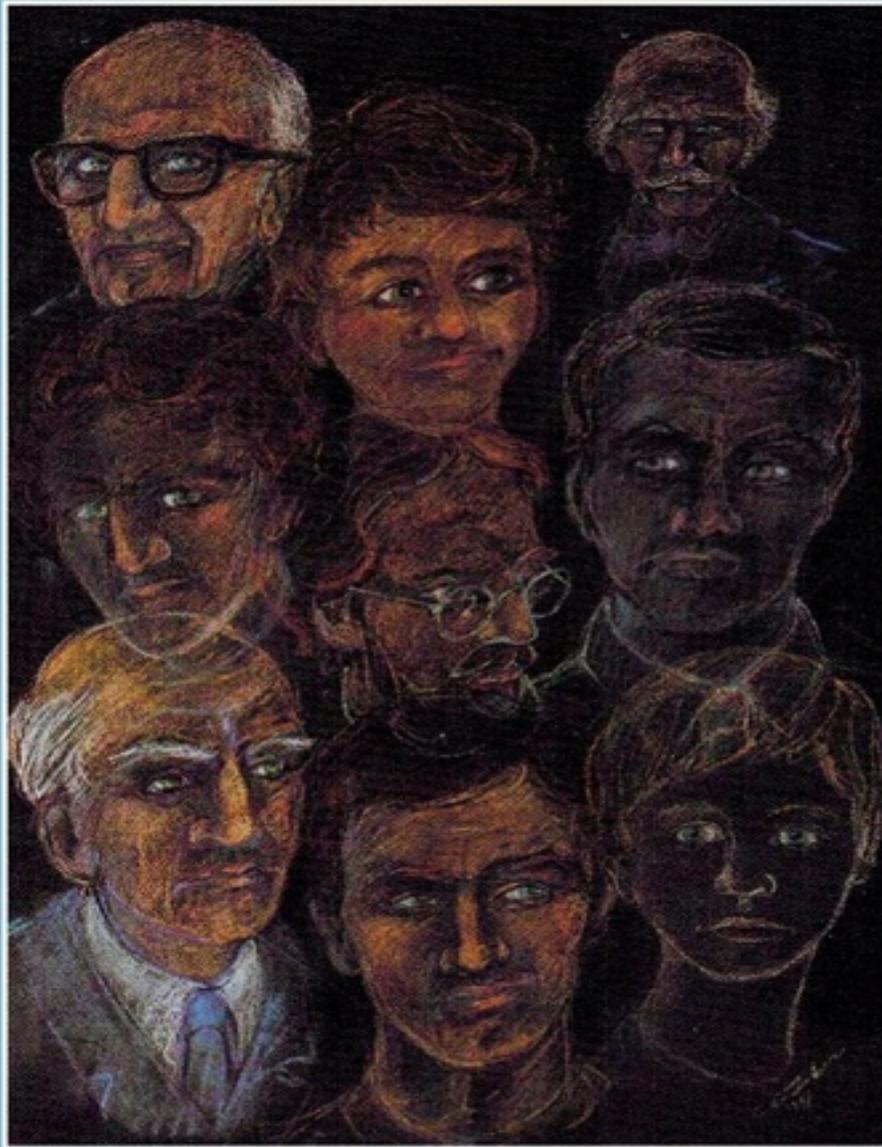


THE WOUNDED

AND OTHER STORIES
ABOUT SONS AND FATHERS

"Always engaging, always challenging both the intelligence and the moral sensibilities of the careful reader."

-Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*



"These finely crafted stories explore the dark recesses of the family psyche that exonerates violence and mutilates personality."

-Jonis Agee, *The River Wife*

IAN GRAHAM LEASK

While the subtitle implies a book about men, it is as much meant for women who might want to read more about the debilitating fissures, seldom revealed, which sometimes distort the lives of their men.

THE WOUNDED

**AND OTHER STORIES
ABOUT SONS AND FATHERS**

IAN GRAHAM LEASK

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All the characters in these ten stories are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is a coincidence.

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THE WOUNDED

She woke and found him not beside her.

It was unusual. Henry's clothes — the threadbare gray cardigan, old woolen trousers, white shirt — were not draped over the chair. His cigarettes were not on the bedside table. She listened. The house was still, not a sound, and neither could she hear anything outside; there was just her own breath and the buzzing in her ears.

Her watch said two o'clock. She yawned and the yawn produced a roar in her ears as if someone held sea shells over them.

How stupid of me, she thought, he must be waiting up for the boy. She lay back and pulled the eiderdown up to her chin. Every Saturday for a month the boy had been coming home later and later; for the first time in her life she thought Henry might be truly worried about him. Last week was the worst so far. She didn't know how to handle it, he was just a boy and he came home drunk, very drunk, paralytic.

Alone with him next morning at the kitchen table, sipping tea, he told her — it astounded her that he remembered anything at all — that his so-called friends had sent him home in a taxi and given the driver the wrong street number, so he was dropped two hundred yards down the road. He tried to explain to the driver but he couldn't make his mouth work. The driver pulled him from the car, saying, "Come on, you disgusting slob, get out of my car," and left him lying in the gutter. He crawled home. Glaring into his tea, the boy said, "I'll find that bastard and rip his face off."

She had replied that if he ripped the face off everyone who told him the truth he'd be doing a lot of ripping. That put him in a big funk. He went out and slammed the door.

No, she'd never forget that night: she and Henry were watching a late night television show. It was an awful sound, hearing the front gate bang back against the wall — when you live with drunks, sounds like that have their own unmistakable grammar — Henry turned down the volume of the television. Standing in the center of the lounge, they heard the slow progress of a half-conscious body, dragging itself along the path. Then came a thump against the door which made the windows rattle.

Then, after a minute's quiet, an unearthly animal-like wretching in the porch-way, followed by the clatter of scattered milk bottles.

She never saw Henry's face with such a look of horror. With melodramatic coincidence, the grandfather clock in the hall struck midnight. He put down his whiskey glass and went to open the front door. The boy tumbled in, filling the hallway with the smell of beer and vomit. His knuckles were split, his face bruised — he'd been fighting again.

She helped Henry get the boy into his room. They pulled off his clothes and got him into bed. She bathed his face with a flannel while Henry went to get the bucket, just in case he wasn't finished being sick.

The boy hiccupped and moaned, thrust his head from side to side on the pillow. Sighing, Henry sat down on a stool beside the bed, and with his left hand, palm up, took hold of the boy's right hand, rubbing his thumb over the split and bloody knuckles. She stood beside him, looking down. She knew she shouldn't have said it, she knew he was already thinking of it, she knew he was in agony, but she said it anyway:

"You know this is all your fault, don't you?"

Henry turned his face up to her: she'd never seen the blue of his eyes seem so pale. After all that she'd been through over the years, after all the wasted words, it made her sick to see him so sorry for himself. Pathetic, she thought, bloody pathetic. Then he looked back down, and closed his right hand over the boy's fingers.

She said, "I'll bring in your scotch."

"No, Judy," he said. "A cup of tea, that's all."

She knew she shouldn't, but she said:

"A cup of tea? Well, certainly. A little late though, isn't it?"

Henry put his forehead onto the pile of hands and closed his eyes. His shoulders shuddered in a series of quiet spasms. The only time she'd seen him weep was when he was dreaming, which he did often, but this was different. She left the room, swinging the door so that it closed itself as she walked away. When the door was closed, she tiptoed back and listened to him crying. She made him a cup of tea then went to bed. Henry stayed up all night, holding the boy's hand.

She thought: what a lot of things the poor devil must have thought about.

Yawning, she got up from the bed and put on her dressing gown and slippers. She went downstairs, looked in all the rooms. He'd left the kitchen light on. Two-thirds of a bottle of Black and White stood on the counter. The dog was gone, too. She looked outside and saw the parked car. The boy was still out.

"Guilt," she said, "he's walking off some more guilt."

She used the toilet and went back to bed.

She woke and found him not beside her.

Something had woken her, her blood was in alarm, but she didn't know what.

A clatter on the kitchen floor — scissors, it sounded like. Sitting up, she said, "What on earth is the fool playing at? I hope to Christ you haven't polished off that bottle. Please God, don't let him be stinko, not tonight."

She heard the old dog, walking calmly on the parquet flooring of the hall; it shook itself awkwardly — this alerted her to the fact that rain was patting against the bedroom window. She turned on the light. She thought she heard Henry's voice, but it could've been her own thoughts echoing in the silence. If he was stinko at least he wasn't shouting.

She thought perhaps the boy had come home and they were having a chat. They had never really had a good talk, only rows; Henry never talked, he lectured. And the boy was now too much of a know-it-all himself not to insist on his own opinion. Of course, Henry thought no one of sixteen should have an opinion. Neither of the fools had learned anything from having drunks for fathers.

The way his liver was, Henry wouldn't live much longer; his lungs were bad from smoking; his heart was suspect: it was essential for the boy's future that Henry make an effort to communicate.

She listened. Indeed, there were voices, murmuring.

She wondered what they were talking about.

She switched off the light and tried to sleep.

Suddenly she thought: they're talking about me.

She sat up, turned the light on, and said, "They better not be talking about me."

She put on her dressing gown and slippers and quietly crept downstairs. She'd give them what-for if they were talking about her.

The kitchen light was on; Henry moved around rapidly in there. The boy's clothes were outside the kitchen door, thrown in a wet pile against the wall. The grandfather clock ticked softly. Restless and whining, the old black dog wandered into the lounge and back into the hall. She hurried forward and stood in the doorway.

The kitchen table was pulled into the middle of the room and on it lay her son, dressed only in white underpants and blue socks. He was lowering the whiskey bottle after having taken a swig. He stared vacantly at the ceiling and said:

"This isn't working, dad. I can feel."

Blood was smeared over his torso, and lines of it, burgundy colored, as if dripped from a paint brush, ran along the linoleum from the back door to the table. The massive expanse of his right rib cage faced her. Henry was bent over the boy's left side, attending to something.

Her hands covered her mouth, all sensation left her face, and when sensation returned, it was in the form of prickling skin, all over her body. Henry looked at her across the boy's chest. He looked down again, saying:

"Now don't make a fuss. It's imperative that you stay calm."

"I'm not making a fuss," said the boy.

"Not you, fathead, your mum."

"Oh, good old mum's arrived," said the boy, glancing at her. "All right, mum? I'm afraid I was involved in a bit of an altercation, a fucking great frac-arse." He took a long swig from the bottle.

"Altercation?" said Henry, "This was very nearly an alteration, old chap."

The boy laughed, slurring, "I'm sure that was their intention, father-man, old dad-dads,

old baldy.” Then he winced with pain.

“Don’t do that, son. It makes the blood run.”

She wasn’t going to faint, she fought it off. She came around to the left side of the table and looked at the wound. It ran diagonally, an oozing jagged rip, from the top of his hip bone to his bottom rib. At its deepest, white fat globules showed against the torn red insides of the boy’s flesh. Henry was sewing up the wound with white cotton that he’d boiled in a saucepan. He’d smothered the wound in iodine.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I know how to do this, it’s under control. I didn’t want to worry you until the worst was over.”

“How very considerate of you. Why didn’t you take him to the hospital? This isn’t a battle station, you know. The war’s over.”

“It was the dog that found him,” said Henry, starting to sew the last part of the wound, the deepest part. “He sniffed him out. We went up the alley behind the cinema and the dog found him in among the dustbins. I knew it was him.”

“But I don’t understand, why you...”

The boy banged the base of the bottle on the table:

“No fucking hospital, do you hear me, bitch! No fucking hospital. Dad’ll do it, let dad do it for once.”

The house echoed with the boy’s shout.

“Don’t do that, son. It makes the blood run.”

She took the sponge mop out of the cupboard, wetted it in the sink, and cleared blood off the floor.

GLOSSARY

OF UNFAMILIAR TERMS

A13 — a highway from East London to Shoeburyness (“Piggybank”)

“Ach Mensch! Das hat mir gerade noch gefehlt. Hesta, bitte, bitte...Mein Lieber Mann, noch eine Katastrophe!” — “Damnation! That’s all I needed. Hesta, please...for the love of man, another catastrophe.” (“Hesta”)

“Ach, Scheisse. Hesta, bitte sei sehr diskret.” — — “Oh, shit. Hesta, please be discreet.” (“Hesta”)

aggro — aggravation; violent trouble (“Bottles and Bricks”)

“Ahhhhh, le Boche!...Va te faire foutre!” — “Oh, the krauts...go fuck yourself!” (“Hesta”)

Amor fati — an annoying Latin phrase meaning love or embrace your fate (“Bottles”)

Anobiid — a grub that eats its way through dead wood for a number of years before emerging as a beetle during mating season, then dying (“Anobiid”)

Anobium punctatum — the common woodworm (“Anobiid”)

army greens — army surplus trousers (“Bottles”)

bairns — children

“Bis spater, Hesta. Tchüss.” — “Until later, Hesta...goodbye.” (“Hesta”)

Black and White — a rather sweet, blended Scotch whisky, very popular with alcoholics (“Bombay,” “Wounded”)

blarney — Irish bullshit (“Anobiid”)

bleeding — from “bloody” (God’s blood) or “bleeder” (a woman) (“Bottles”)

bleeding good pasting — a damn good hiding (“Bottles”)

Bloodynora — a meaningless exclamation (“Bottles”)

Bobajee — the cook (“Bombay”)

bollocks — testicles, sometimes spelled “ballocks” (“Bottles,” “Greenacres”)

bonce — head (“Bottles”)

bonkers — insane, nuts (“Bottles”)

bonnet — hood of a car (“Piggybank”)

boot — trunk of a car (“Piggybank”)

borstal — a corrective establishment for young offenders (“Bottles”)

bumf — stuff (“Bottles”)

bundle — juvenile word for a flight (“Piggybank”)

Boudicca — Queen of the Icini, a powerful tribe of ancient Britons who defied the invading Romans (“Piggybank”)

Brentford Football Club — a usually unsuccessful soccer club with very mild supporters (“Piggybank”)

bristols — breasts, from rhyme-slang: Bristol Cities = Titties (“Bottles”)

burra-sahib — the boss of bosses (“Bombay”)

caff — Café (“Bottles”)

cha — tea, usually with milk and sugar (“Bombay”)

Charles Laughton — a fat English actor with pompous pronunciation (“Bombay”)

charpoy — a little collapsible bed (“Bombay”)

chavvy — guy, fellow; probably from “chappie” (“Greenacres”)

chips — French fries (“Piggybank,” “Bottles”)

clapped out — referring to a run-down car; a beater (“Bottles”)

Cockney — someone from East London; the dialect originating in that area (“Piggybank”)

“Contrôlez-vous, Nanette. Pensez aux enfants. Vous n’avez aucune renue!” — “Pull yourself together, Nanette. Think of those children. You’re a disgrace.” (“Hesta”)

coreblimey — from “God blind me” (“Bottles”)

crisps — potato chips (“Piggybank”)

cunt — derogatory term, nearly always aimed at men; among friends, a meaningless put-down (“Bottles”)

Cutty Sark — a old clipper, dry-docked in the East End of London (“Piggybank”)

dander rising — a tantrum coming on (“Bottles”)

“Dann bis spater, Hesta.” — “All right, until later then, Hesta.” (“Hesta”)

dhurri — a rough cotton rug (“Bombay”)

dirk — a little knife carried down the socks of Scotsmen (“Anobiid”)

dosser — someone who “dosses down” at night; a tramp (“Bottles”)

do you in — kill you (“Bottles”)

“Du! Halt mal, oder ich rufdie Polizei.” — “You! Shut your mouth or I’m calling the police.” (“Hesta”)

“Elle devrait manger un peu en attendant.” — “See that she eats a little something.”

(“Hesta”)

faece — the excretia of wood-boring grubs (“Anobiid”)

fags — cigarettes (“Bottles”)

fishing fleet girl — middle class Englishwomen who sailed to India with the intention of finding husbands (“Bombay”)

fried egg rolls — slit open a fresh crusty hard roll, spread it with butter and slip in a hot fried egg — much better than those boring Oriental things (“Bottles”)

Geordie — someone from the industrial northeast of England, famous for their funny accents (“Bottles”)

git — slightly offensive term deriving from “whore’s begat” (“Bottles,” “Piggybank,” “Greenacres”)

gob — mouth (“Bottles,” “Greenacres”)

going spare — getting frantic (“Bottles”)

goolies — testicles (“Bottles”)

Gordonbennet — a meaningless exclamation (“Bottles”)

gormless twats — stupid fools; brainless, unattractive (“Bottles”)

got the hump — depressed and taciturn (“Greenacres”)

governor — the boss (“Bottles”)

“*Grosser Gott...Wie geht’s?*” — “Good day...how’s it going?” (“Hesta”)

groyne — a tide breaker, breakwater (“Piggybank”)

Guardian, The — famous for its bad copy editing and a more middle class newspaper than *The Daily Mirror* or *The Sun* (“Bottles”)

gymkhana — a sports festival, mostly for Europeans, usually with pompositives like polo and croquet (“Bombay”)

Hackfleisch des Ottos — Otto’s Hamburger (“Hesta”)

“*Hesta, hor mich an. Papa ist tot...ein schrecklicher Unfall...*” — “Listen to me, Hesta. Dad’s been killed...a terrible accident” (“Hesta”)

high cockalorums — originally, getting crazy in the officers’ mess; partying with alcohol-induced extroversion (“Bombay,” “Piggybank”)

hob — top of a stove (“Anobiid”)

hod carrier — a laborer, specifically assigned to a gang of bricklayers, who carries bricks and mortar in a hod (“Bottles”)

Home Counties — the posher counties within commuting distance of central London (“Bombay”)

honk — to vomit (“Piggybank”)

Howa-khana time — having a rest (“Bombay”)

juldi — hurry up (“Bombay”)

karsi — the toilet (“Bottles”)

knackered — tired out; emptied or bruised testicles (“Bottles”)

krait — a very beastly little snake (“Bombay”)

Laurence Olivier — an overrated English actor with pompous pronunciation (“Bombay”)

lemonade — lemon soda pop

Liebchen — darling (“Hesta”)

maisonette — a two-storied apartment above a shop (“Anobiid”)

mali — the gardener (“Bombay”)

Marathi — the predominant language spoken in Bombay (“Bombay”)

masala — a kind of curry (“Bombay”)

“Mein Gott, seine französische Hure.” — “My God, his French whore.” (“Hesta”)

memsahib — lady, from “madam-sahib” (“Bombay”)

Millwall Football Club — more famous for its unruly supporters than for its success on the field (“Piggybank”)

motor — automobile, from “motor car” (“Bottles”)

muck — wel mortar (“Bottles”)

nattering — talking incessantly; rabbiting (“Bottles”)

navvy — a Irish ditch digger, derived from “navigator” (“Bottles”)

“Nein...Es ist die aus Genf. Aber sie ist genauso schrecklich, ganz schrecklich” — “No... it’s the one from Geneva, but she’s also terrible, absolutely awful.” (“Hesta”)

“Nein! Unmöglich.” — “No! Impossible.” (“Hesta”)

Newcastle United — famous old soccer team, the pride of Geordie land

nicks — steals (“Bottles”)

nig-nogs — derogatory for Blacks or Asians, or in some cases the population beginning at Calais (“Bottles”)

noggin — drink of liquor, dram, peg (“Bombay”)

nutter — a “crazy,” someone who gets violently irrational during conflict (“Bottles”)

office-wallah — a minor bureaucrat; anyone who wallows in paperwork (“Bombay”)

old bill — the police (“Bottles”)

“Oui, Madame Schulte, nous reviendrons a deux heures. Elle se sentira mieux. Eh oui, vous comprenez...elle est tres émue.” — “Yes...we’ll return at two o’clock...you understand, she’s very overwrought.” (“Hesta”)

“Pauvre Otto, tout le monde se Varrachait. Il en a fait des heureuses! Seigneur, il va bien nous manquer...” — “Poor Otto, everyone wanted you. You kept everyone happy. My God, how can there be no Otto?” (“Hesta”)

peg — measure of liquor, dram, noggin (“Bombay” “Piggybank”)

pillock — an idiot (“Greenacres,” “Bottles,” “Hesta”)

Players — British cancer sticks (“Bombay”)

plimsolls — the original tennis shoes (“Bombay”)

plonk — to plunk something down (“Anobiid”)

plonker — a big penis, someone who does not need brains (“Bottles”)

ponce — a mild insult; a pimp; someone who gets something for nothing (“Bottles”)

pong — usually a bad smell; in the case of “Bottles and Bricks and Walking Sticks,” an inappropriately good one (“Bottles”)

pratt — not quite as stupid as a “plonker”

prop forward — front right and left positions in a rugby scrum requiring players of some heft (“Anobiid”)

punters — the paying public

purse — specifically, a woman’s billfold or coin purse (“Piggybank”)

Queens Park Rangers Football Club — not famous for anything (“Piggybank”)

rabbiting — talking incessantly (“Bottles”)

ramjani — dancing girl; prostitute (“Bombay”)

“...Reveillez-vous, bande d’abrutis...” — “Wake up, [loosely] you boring, goosestepping squareheads” (“Hesta”)

Roedean — the most prestigious British public school for girls about which numerous songs and limericks have been composed (“Bottles”)

rumble-tumble — scrambled eggs (“Bombay”)

sahib — sir; any European; boss (“Bombay”)

scarper — runaway (“Piggybank,” “Greenacres”)

scoff all that nosh — greedily eat all that food (“Bottles”)

scorcher — hot; hot day; nasty argument *et cetera* (“Bottles”)

shandy — mildly alcoholic drink, consisting of beer and lemon soda pop (“Piggybank”)

shufti — a quick look (“Bottles”)

singlet — sleeveless undershirt (“Anobiid”)

skiving — inventing ways to avoid work (“Bottles”)

Smoke, the — a regionalistic term for London (“Piggybank”)

snogging — kissing (“Greenacres”)

sod — meaning has derogatory expression deriving from sodomy but is considered a mild insult or curse (“Bottles”)

spunk — semen; courage (“Greenacres”)

stick the nut on him/Glaswegian kiss — a head-butt

stone — fourteen pounds (“Anobiid,” “Bottles”)

stroppey — belligerent, pissed off (“Greenacres”)

susses — from “to suss out”; to figure out (“Bottles”)

take the piss — to ridicule or razz someone (“Bottles”)

teapoy — a portable tripod table (“Bombay”)

trainers — tennis shoes, plimsolls (“Bottles”)

truncheon — a policeman’s night stick, billy club (“Piggybank”)

try — a touchdown in rugby where the ball actually has to touch the ground in the end zone (“Anobiid”)

tum soor ka butcha — you son of a pig (“Bombay”)

turps — turpentine (“Anobiid”)

“Une fois de plus, ma’deesse...J’ai noyé mes problèmes dans le vin et l’amour. Et voii comment on setue á coups dbrgasmes!” — “Once again, my goddess...I have blotted out my troubles with wine and love. And we kill ourselves with orgasms, don’t we?” (“Hesta”)

vindaloo — a meat and potato curry, spicy enough to give you hiccoughs and make your head sweat (“Bottles”)

“Vous arrivez trop tôt. Pour l’instant, seule la famille est admise. II vous faudra revenir á deux hemes” — “You’re much too early. Only family are admitted at present. Everyone else has their turn at two o’clock.” (“Hesta”)

wally — someone who is conspicuously uncool; a buffoon (“Bottles”)

wanker — someone enervated by excessive masturbation (“Piggybank,” “Bottles”)

“Was...was sagst du? Was?” — “What...what did you say? What?” (“Hesta”)

wazzock — who knows? Probably something sluggish and useless; a gormless pillock (“Bottles”)

Xestobium refullosum — the Death Watch beetle. (“Anobiid”)

yobos — backslang: boy, then pluralized normally from “boyos” (“Bottles”)

yomp our clobber — carry our equipment (“Bottles”)

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