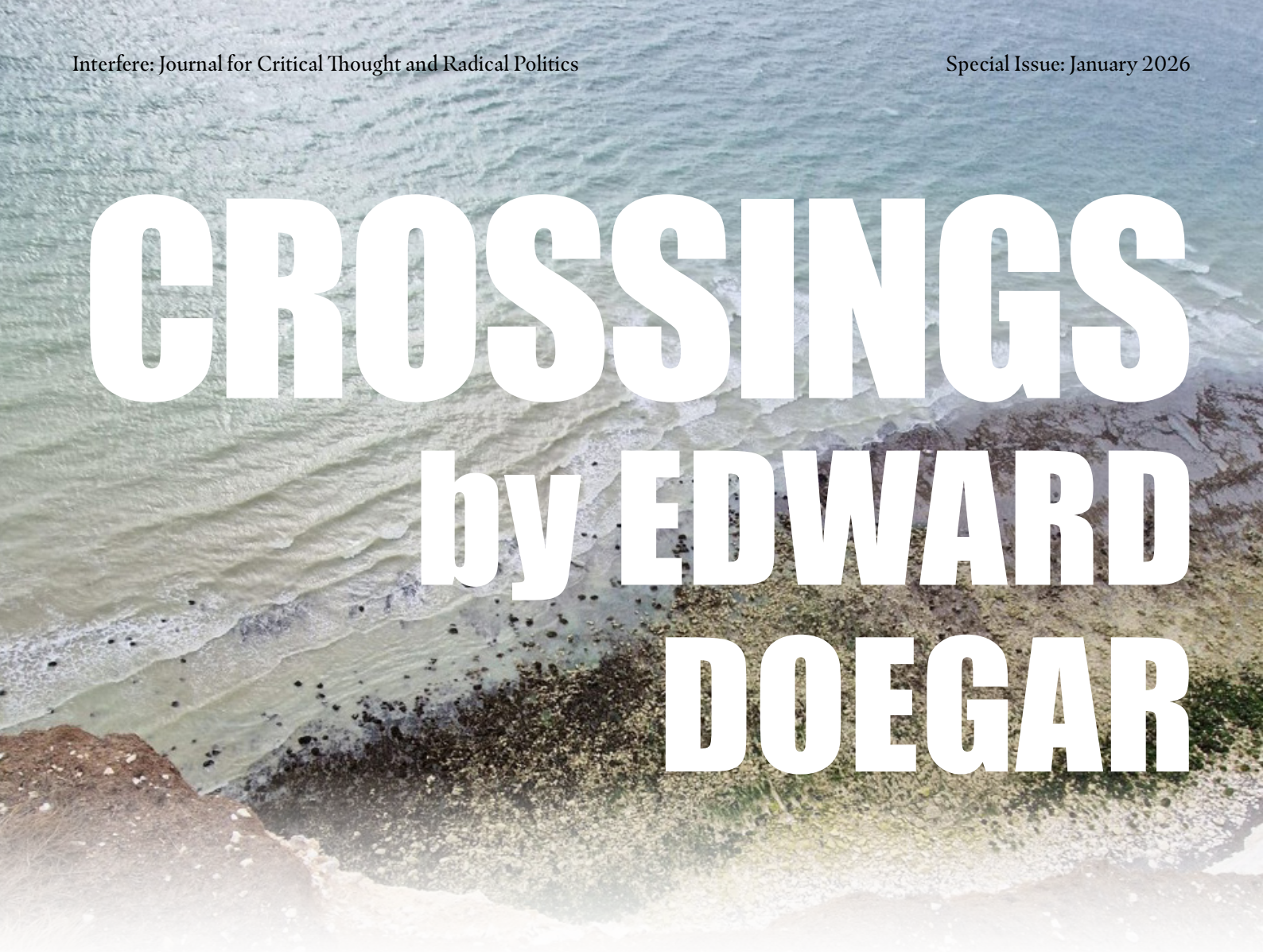

CROSSINGS

by EDWARD DOEGAR

I lean in to look at his phone. They are all men, all dark-skinned. They're wearing life-jackets. All of them have life-jackets. I don't have time to count, but there must be over a dozen people in the dinghy. It sits low in the water. Through one short run of photos, like a flip-book cartoon, a man holds up his arm in greeting. He is excited, hopeful; the majority are impassive, perhaps they are concentrating on keeping their balance, holding on to the rope. Perhaps they already know that these people are not here to help them. My friend navigates through the photos, back and forth through the sequence of time. He uses his thumb and forefinger to zoom in on their faces. In most of the photos they look cold. The dinghy is Liverpool red, against the grey brown sea. The images have a grainy quality to them, a poor resolution. One of the last in the sequence shows the dinghy from further away, like a badly taken family photo, the holiday snap not even interesting to those who were there. His thumb slides over two, three, a dozen photos at once, and we glide into today: a photo of his wife, my friend, modelling an outfit in a shop. They must have been on their way here. – *Sorry for that.* He swipes back through to the final image of the dinghy, pausing on it briefly, before pocketing his phone. In it, the dinghy is a small red mark, barely registering its colour; something, perhaps, in an image that is otherwise of nothing, only the sea.

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– *It was one of the best days of my life.* I look up at him. – *Professionally.*

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It is earlier, we are on our way, walking to meet our friends. My wife thinks we're going to be late. She's pacing outside, opening and reopening the automatic doors, while I edge forward in the queue, observing the small prescribed journey from one 'Be Smart / Stay 2M Apart' sticker to another. If I stand with my heels together, awkwardly upright like a boy scout, my feet don't quite fit inside the round discs. I scratch at the rhyme with my foot. The stickers are surprisingly resilient. They're still here, still legible, after months. My wife is miming her frustration at me from outside: the exasperated on-stage shrug, the 'what-the-fuck-are-you-doing' foot stamp. Her face contorts with clownish anger, over-articulating morality as she would to a toddler. We're going to have an argument. I turn from her now to the cashier who asks a second time if I want a receipt. – *No. No, thank you.* I pick up my pack of Benson & Hedges; they are indistinguishable from any other brand. I feel a quick, passing elation at the scare photo: the grieving mother and child and not the abscess on the tongue. As I turn towards the exit, my wife is already walking away.

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Half of me is listening to my friend the journalist as he tells me about his week, and half of me is trying to decide what I want to eat. Despite the pandemic the street market thrums with people. We squeeze past our wives as they join the end of the Ethiopian queue. We have split off into the old order: men and women. I loosen the grip of my anger. – *I don't know about you but I'm so hungry.* My friend offers, trying to coax me out of my mood. – *This looks so good but is practically 100% garlic, I think. Sorry for that.* He is allergic to garlic. I don't notice the smell so much, can't profile a cuisine by its scent as he can. We reach the end of the alley and turn back, decide on pizza. I like that my friend would say if he preferred something else.

– *It's so good to see you.* I echo the same phrase back at him, but, prompted like that, it sounds banal, false. My friend doesn't seem to notice. He resumes his story. – *The fisherman who took me out was quite unusual. Quite sympathetic, I mean.* I'm struck by my friend's care with English, a care only possible, perhaps, in a second language. – *We were maybe eight miles, and the sea is huge.* In the dropped 'h' of huge, I hear Germanic emphasis. – *You cannot believe how huge it is to be honest until you're in a small boat like that.* I think of my childhood, of summers spent with my first best friend, visiting his ex-Navy grandparents. Learning to water-ski: the chug and spew of the outboard motor: the diesel and salt perfume. I think of the sudden aloneness of being left in the sea, as the boat edges away from you, before the rope stiffens, before life goes taut in your grip and pulls you back into the ludicrous reality of trying to stand on water. – *France is not so far when you look at a map but even so, only a few hundred metres from the harbour, the sea is massive. It is unbelievable.* I think of sculling my feet and that sudden sense, as the sun clouds over, of nothing beneath me. The two directions, to shore and not. – *And I am thinking: yes, ok, this will make an interesting story, listening to the fisherman, what he has seen and knows, I can write up his experiences. And then we hear over the radio that there might be a dinghy.* My friend stops, struggles for purchase on the word. – *Do you say ding-ee in English or din-jee?* I have to think. For a moment I don't know. – *Dinghy. We say dinghy.*

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We are in the restaurant now. We had ordered our pizzas standing out there in the street, meaning to take them to a park or eat them perched on a wall, but we changed our minds as we waited and chose a table inside. The waiter asks us if we'd like anything to drink. – *I'll have a beer, I think; yes, a beer.* My friend opts for a coffee. – *It's a relief to be off my feet.* I sigh for emphasis as the waiter leaves. My friend agrees, resets his chair between the joins of floorboards. The restaurant has the feel of a pop-up, turned permanent. The table has a slight wobble, it sinks and surfaces from the slightest pressure of my wrist. A train lumbers overhead, approximating atmosphere, reminding us we're in a converted railway arch. He pulls his phone from his pock-

et, checks it quickly, places it face down. Then he picks it up again and says he'll let the girls know where we are. 'Girls', is that his expression or mine? My beer arrives in a Belgian glass on its own polished-chrome salver, half froth.

His thumb darts over the screen as he types a message. I try to recall the men in the photos. Already, I can't remember them. I didn't look closely enough, didn't register them properly. Did they look African or Middle Eastern? What would it mean to be able to pronounce the country they came from, and not their names? I notice I'm starting to describe them to myself, making them into words, features, turning them into a poem. Their expressions are becoming my thoughts. I think about asking my friend to show me the pictures again. He places the phone back on the table, politely face down. He breathes out, smiles warmly, his attention returning to what's in front of him, to me.

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I tell my friend I've been watching videos of Nigel Farage online. He nods, offers the cautious encouragement of raised eyebrows which turns into a frown as he declines his lips to his espresso. Its scum decorates his stubble for a moment. – *I am researching a poem.* He glances up, reacquainting his eyes with mine, leaning back in his chair, listening. His left ear is slightly pitched towards me, his mouth away. – *I'm thinking about using his words as found text. His interviews and speeches. Fashioning them into a series of sonnets.* The frown complicates, then resolves. – *But it's toxic, I think, subjecting myself to that, taking in all that bile. I feel full of it afterwards, the hate. Not* his *hate, not thinking* his *thoughts exactly, but still hate.* – *I know.* The table tips as he sets his cup on its saucer. He leans back, clarifies: – *I know what you mean.* – *They really use words like 'invasion'.* – *They do, absolutely.* – *And it is* all *about language, that's the insidious part, their method, the vocabulary of intolerance, always immaculately maintained.* He nods again, a clean precise gesture. I go on: – *Always 'economic migrants', never 'refugees'. And there is always this implicit threat that these are* men. *Men in all their maleness, men because men are violent, men harm. There is an invasion of young men.* Another waiter, a woman in her twenties, interrupts discretely to set down our pizzas. She asks us if we want anything else. She has a southern European accent. Her hair, part-shaven part-dyed, provides a mildly shocking contrast to the trained courtesy of her attention, to her brasserie-style apron.

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He appreciates the difficulty. My friend tells me how hard he found it interviewing right-wing activists earlier in the week. He was glad to be able to, had wanted to balance his article and was pleased to find them there in Dover when he came back down into the town. – *They're nutters but they're well-informed nutters. They can quote facts. They're happy to debate. They have their facts, and I have mine.* He is looking round for someone over his shoulder. He wants some cutlery. The pizza has a thin base, its flavours pool in the centre, staining the chopping-board platter an oily red. – *They have their own world: their own figures, their own authorities, research they can cite.* The first waiter returns with a glass tumbler filled with little wooden knives and forks. My friend hesitates. – *Ah, ok, thank you.* When the waiter leaves, we mirror each other's expression: 'the world gone mad'. He smiles, shakes his head. Resumes: – *This is a huge part of the problem, I think. How few facts we have in common now. There was a time when we agree on the problem and argue about the solution. Now, we discuss the problem and we are not even talking about the same thing.* This is something we have discussed before, something we feel similarly about. – *Sometimes we do not agree there is a problem. I am talking about refugees, you are talking about economic migrants.* I flinch at my role in the analogy, but meet his eyes, nod. My friend sits up. Two thirds of his meal is still untouched. He indicates his plate, holds his palms out open either side of it, like a priest receiving a new-born into the church. – *I say this is a pizza and you say no, not at all, this is our Kentish flat bread.*

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More photos, from later in the day. They got a tip about where the site was. A twenty-minute scrabble up the hills behind the town. Through brambles and bushes into the back end of an industrial estate. My friend scrolls through to find the best examples, I'm thinking about protocol, about what is required to write, as he does, within the obligations of proof. How these images are documents, sources that serve the story he's crafting. So I am thinking about poetry when he shows me the high concrete wall to the compound and how it's topped with razor wire. – *They don't want you to see this. There are two walls about twelve feet high, which we found a way to climb.* The 'we' he means is himself and a photographer. The photographer, arranged by his office, sourced by his assistant, has taken another series of photos, professional photos parallel to these, that will serve my friend's writing in another, different, way. He zooms through the unfocused foreground blur of razor wire into the yard below. It is filled with piles of dinghy carcasses. There must be hundreds of them, the confiscated materials of crossings: dinghies, life jackets, make-shift rafts, paddles... This steady accumulation has been preserved and catalogued; many of the dinghies remain un-deflated, as if ready for future use. On screen in a single shot, there are the remains of at least two hundred crossings. Evidence, to be denied or deployed at the right moment. They are a fact. A fact made of so many other facts, as lives are made of facts. As each of the lives alluded to in the image is also an attempt at a life, at something closer to my life. In an industrial estate in Kent the evidence accrues, evidence that will become – that already is – the fuel of rhetoric.

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As we are settling up, waiting for the card machine, he shares what he was told but couldn't print. It exists for him, but unsubstantiated, only as likelihood, only as a single source. – *They know more are dying. There are bodies that are not being counted. This is what the fisherman who took me out says.* I notice that construction again, the full epithet: the fisherman known as the fisherman who-took-me-out. An awkwardness that is normalised in my friend's speech, his part-foreign part-professional formality. The card machine arrives. Everything is simple: the bill halved, the tip included. I still have most of my second beer to finish. My friend checks then pockets his phone. – *They're coming now. But no, no rush.* He smiles, then remembers what he was saying. He tells me that when one of the fishermen found a body in his nets the police confiscated his equipment. For three months they held it as evidence. – *This is his livelihood; so, of course, it is like killing them.* – *Jesus,* I say, and then the obscene metaphor intrudes internally: I will make you fishers of men. I think of the only dead body I have ever seen, my grandfather's, and how quickly it became lifeless, congealing into a thing. I see my wife outside squinting in at us from the bright sunny day. She is happy, her earlier irritation gone. She is calm, neither hurrying to find us nor hoping not to. Behind her I see my friend's wife, notice the dress from the photo. I wave them over. – *The authorities make them choose between their living and this horrible silence. This is what happens when we don't let people speak.*

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We carry our wine glasses through to the front room. A month later. The meal was a success. I place our guests on the better sofa, as they would us, and turn my desk chair to face them. Conversation has lulled; here in the living room, we have arrived somewhere else, awkwardly satiated. But the setting comes to the rescue: the new curtains offer a topic. I'm pleased they noticed them; pleased, particularly, for my wife, and file the compliments away to share with her later. I can hear her in the other room, taking things out of cupboards, setting the dirty plates in a pile. I want her to come through and join us but she doesn't like to go

to bed with the kitchen a mess, and she knows we won't have the energy to tidy up once they're gone. We think of hospitality differently, she and I. I put this down to her being American. I mention my theory to our friends and then have to stop my friend's wife joining mine. – *Really, honestly, she'll be back in a minute. It's a pernickety North American thing, she'd rather you stay here. I'm always trying to get her to relax. We live in this permeant culture clash.*

The conversation drifts to safer shores, to the grand theories of our time. 'The Clash of Civilisations' replacing 'The End of History'. My friend doesn't like theories. He distrusts such total explanations. – *But the fisherman who took me out, that day in Dover that I was telling you about, even though he was sympathetic to the refugees. He was pretty much on their side but...* My wife finally comes in with a plate of chocolates wrapped in tinfoil, places them on the table between us and takes a seat opposite. The chocolates are acknowledged with courteous delight. The interruption annoys me. Now we are talking about the chocolates, about the deli where they were bought. It's the oldest Italian deli in Soho. – *You were saying?* I try to bait my friend. – *You were saying something about the attitude of the fisherman?* The conversation halves. – *The man who took you out? – Oh, yes, that's right. He was sympathetic. But he sees that every time when there's not enough life-jackets, then it's the men wearing them. And the women and children are going without.* What am I uneasy about? Is it that 'every time'. Or is it the fact of it. – *This is the mindset difference. In Arabic culture, I am the head of the family of course I wear the lifejacket.* Where is my discomfort coming from? – *As a British man, he thinks the opposite. It is always the women and children first.* What is it that's not right? – *But the fisherman sees it again and again and so he becomes, in some way, less sympathetic.*

My wife stands up to offer us tea. Both our friends accept and I decline. The conversation closes up over the top of what was just said. We have been reabsorbed in to the larger conversation. My friend is listening to his wife tell me that she's applying to convert a parking space on their road into a pop-up garden for the day. She wants to invite neighbours to mingle, to meet each other, in the space usually reserved for cars. Cars are her bête noire. She has a petition to send us about building more cycle lanes. She's furious at the pace of change here. – *In Berlin, we discuss it and the next month they are building.* I listen to her precise English, the careful footprints she makes with it – like a cat in snow. I think of how she volunteers to lead English practise sessions for asylum seekers. How rarely I hear her praise her homeland. I think how German this is, how German she is, to me; how almost interchangeable the two things are in my mind.

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Another six weeks. We leave them at a vintage shop, head to the corner to get a drink. No, they can't let us in. It's table service only and all the tables are in use. The empty one on the pavement is reserved. My friend suggests heading back to their house. As we turn onto his street, he remembers a bar down by the canal. The steps remind me of stairs in York Minster. Here, they lead down to the sunken, secular garden of the tow-path. A route overhung by successive canopies of willow and turning silver birch. We make our way through a stilled waterfall of autumn. Under a bridge, the bar comes into view. It is just past the lock, where the canal opens out to admire the converted warehouses, the new flats. In the building opposite, below the waterline, a lone worker hammers away at her iMac, the last to leave the office. This is how I imagine Copenhagen: clean, productive, keen to glorify nature through exact, angular frames. It is becoming dusk. We hover over of a table near the path. The waiter nods for us to sit down. He brings laminated menus and an A4 sheet with the Track and Trace QR code. We sign in.

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I tell him I'm writing a poem about what he's told me. I'm nervous. The piece is delicate but already exists; it's fragile but worth saving. I'm grateful for the overpriced bottle of London Pride that's placed before me. I

begin somewhat formally. – *I guess, in a sense, it's about what's sayable in poetry. Or what's implied by the unsaid. How the English lyric is sort of culpable or inflected or tainted by nationalism somehow.* This isn't untrue, but it's not what I need to ask him about. – *I want to talk to you about that day, again, to go over some of the things you mentioned.* I want to see the faces he showed me; the faces I've forgotten, that I forgot almost at once. I want him to show me the men's faces again, not on his phone but through his words. I want him to tell them to me. – *And I want to learn a little more about journalism, in general. The morality of writing about real events, about people.* He is interested, encouraging. He leans in a little, a knot of folded arms, crossed legs. His eyes strain to focus across the canal, sliding off the glass surfaces. – *I was awake thinking about this the other night: I couldn't sleep. I can remember only two maybe three times before when I failed as a journalist.* He interrupts himself with a familiar tic: – *Did I tell you this already?* I don't know. I say that he called it one of the best days of his life, professionally. – *Yes, that was cynical, no? But it was; it was, it's true. Everything went so perfect from a journalistic point of view. Actually, finding a dinghy in the sea must be something like two-thousand-to-one chance; then this storage facility where they hid the dinghies; and even meeting these right-wing nutters as we come back to the station.* I set my beer down, conscious that his is barely touched. – *And the photographer, I liked him too; this is also not always the case...* His eyes won't steady, they jolt back and forth like someone looking out of a train window. – *But, then, out on the water, actually there, I stopped being a journalist.*

I notice the urge to halt, to console him or give him space. I feel it prickle under my skin like embarrassment. – *The fisherman, the one who took me out, hears on the radio that we are in fact perhaps very close to one of the dinghies. They have these radios that are not exactly legal so I can't mention them in my story. But he says that a dinghy is very close and he asks me if we want to try and find them. And, of course, I said yes. 'Yes, of course! This is why we're here!'* He's emphatic without raising his voice, acting his own part well. *But when we came up alongside them I couldn't and I stayed inside. – Inside the cabin? – Yes, behind the glass. The fisherman, he was out on deck and spoke with them. Told them where the coastguard was. That they were nearly safe. The photographer was also there, taking photos, getting close. But I couldn't go out there.* Thoughts strobe through his eyes. – *I failed,* he repeats. – *As a journalist? – Yes, I stopped being a journalist. I couldn't be out there. I couldn't exploit them, I knew that's what I was doing. What we do, as journalists, when we come to look at them. But I couldn't go out there and interview them, ask them questions only for an article, not as a human being. Where are you from? Why are you here? What is your story? I couldn't exploit them like that.*

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I am thinking 'I must remember this, I must remember exactly how he said this'. I hear my own thoughts intrude on what he's saying. But he has stopped speaking. Already the moment has started to pass. The confession is scabbing over. His eyes have come to rest. He lifts his beer up, towards his mouth, then places it down without drinking. He tips the bottle slightly, tests the feel of gravity in his palm, smoothing out the creases at the edge of the label. I can't think what to ask him, what to say to stop him from coming back, from becoming my friend again. I want him to tell me what he could never write. What it felt like to see those men and then refuse to see. To testify without witnessing. I am looking at him hard enough for him to feel my eyes. He meets them, tries a smile, unsure. A reflex in me reciprocates. It is enough. He is himself again, composed. He is looking round for the waiter, wants to settle the bill, for us to return to the 'girls'. We both offer to pay for the drinks. He insists. We are back in the circumstances of our lives.

A Note in Three Parts

Looking back through the files on my computer, I can see that I started writing 'Crossings' in October 2020. I wouldn't have known this without the date-stamped drafts. Still less would I have known that I worked on it steadily, fiddling with the punctuation or else completely revising it, until mid-January 2021 when the piece reached its current form. Knowing these facts alters how I feel about the piece, how I reflect on it. It helps me notice both the pandemic's immediate hindsight and its ongoing concerns as tangible undercurrents in the writing. COVID-19 had a tidal quality; death counts rose and fell more than once, and with them the social reactions, the anxieties and fixations of that strange time. The slightly worn quality of the experience is already showing in the writing – the paraphernalia of 'Stay Safe' warnings scuffed by many feet, the 'Eat Out to Help Out' policy already part-digested.

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It is strange how, having written something, it can be transformed in your mind afterwards. I have come across poems that I wrestled over which, when I rediscover them, remain nearly foreign to me. Other times, I've reread something and find the next line arriving in my ear before my eye catches up with the flow of the text. 'Crossings' is particularly unusual, in that the details and facts from which it emerged – the real-life experiences that I transformed into the text – are more pressingly memorable to me than the construction of the sentences. Writing usually tends to overtake its subject matter, for me at least. But here the tension of real life and fiction, of prose vs. poetic thinking, and of my own experiences set against that of a friend's, remain an obstacle of anxiety – just as they were when I tried to write the piece initially. 'Crossings' sits uncomfortably between genres. I had wanted it to acknowledge and explore different forms of responsibility, to celebrate and question a boundary I'd lived by – the distinction between artistic and journalistic description. The exact nature of any such difference still troubles me.

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Since 'Crossings' was written the pervasive nature of COVID-19, its totalising and encompassing quality, has largely evaporated, the pandemic's insidious presence in our minds seems to have waned too. The many who died must be mourned, but that is largely a private affair now. In contrast, the political discourse and lived reality of the channel crossings – whether discussed as the journey of migrants or refugees – has only grown in consequence. More and more people have died crossing a short stretch of sea, whether named and recorded as individual tragedies or speculated as such by the guesswork of interested parties. These peoples' deaths reckon the scale of our collective failure. Whoever 'we' are, we are measured in part by these crossings. It is not only the deaths we should be shamed by, but also the failure to successfully embrace and enhance the lives of the people who have arrived. There is much need for subtlety and nuance – for the unease that literature allows us to examine – but there is also need for clarity and compassionate action. In this sense, as a literary text, 'Crossings' is a failure, but I hope it allows its readers to imagine their own position more clearly and encourages them to act on it.

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