

# **The Polo Field**

**By**

**Robert Degama**

From the oak tree, where my parents' ashes are not yet scattered, you can see our back gate, which is now the Chowdrey's and before us, it was the Sillitoe's, and before them, just a slope up to the road, that leads to the cattle market and the school and the abattoir and the shining offices in a town of hopeless causes. Sadness permeates many spaces in my childhood, but in these twenty-five-odd council-maintained acres, there is some light. It appears first pink and cold over Liddington hill, having come all the way from China to the chalk forts and barrow downs, from where it streams into our commonplace, illuminating the gossamer, shimmering in an autumn morning and dandelions in spring and daisy's and buttercups and small blue flowers whose names I never learned, that flourish for a few weeks before the mowers come and fill the air with the scent of sweet cut grass, to leave behind clumps of soft green, that dry into something like Shredded-Wheat, when the days grow long and warm. Here are the rings of mushrooms and pet dogs and the runner in a blue tracksuit who stops to lie back with legs aloft to do what we have come to call "bicycle kicks". And my own children rolling snowballs with their grandad (though it still seems strange to call him anything so familiar), their hands growing red with cold and breath forming steam clouds around their heads. And here, too, is the dry baked earth and dust of '76 and endless summer and freedom and the mournful distant howl of the hooter from the railway works. And the place where John blacked my tooth and, where we invented the game of Pea Ball and where Marcus took us for rides on his purple Fantic motorbike and was afraid of nettles and spiders and where his sister showed us her pubic hair and where we sometimes ventured to the far end and where Mr Dobson told stories of the first war and Mr Fisher gave us rides in his wheelbarrow and where I wheeled my own father home after he broke his ankle in a rabbit hole.

In 1912 a plane made of wood and paper and gum is landing in front of a crowd of women in long dresses and men in hats, come to marvel, oblivious to the destructive potential of the new machines. And in peacetime, there are gymkhanas and dog shows and fireworks in November and country fairs and once even a flat-out horse race. And the military tattoo comes every year, bringing tanks and the smell of burning engine oil and orange smoke and thunder claps and the Red Arrows and the Red Devils and the motorbike display team, who jump through fire and make moving pyramids, and marching bands with the drum major throwing a silver mace high into the air and catching it, and cordoned off arenas where we spend far too long waiting for something to happen behind the rough brown ropes. And the Tannoyed voices and piped music fills the summer afternoon.

And here are the marquees left behind for days, that we climbed and slid down until one ripped and I fell through, hanging for a few moments by my feet, before falling straight onto my head and nearly breaking my neck. We watched the rip grow for days, caught by the wind, becoming bigger as the weather turned and saw it flapping like a sail and none of us would dare go out for fear of being blamed. And here are men appearing with shovels and boots to put out the fire my brother started in the stubble field by the quarry, where I smoked my first cigarette with Timmy House, whose father played football with his sons, and I remember thinking it odd that a grown man should play with children. And Jacquie De Creed, who jumped fourteen cars in a Ford Mustang and came to our house to change into her leather jump-suit, who admonished me for mentioning death and was killed in a plane crash a few years later in the mountains above Monaco. And the funfair, with the Big-Wheel and the Octopus and the Waltzer and the stalls where you can win a living goldfish in a water-filled plastic bag and the caravans and gypsy kids, and their dogs and generators and the smell of candyfloss and diesel fumes.

And here is our cricket pitch, up against the back fence, where the ground rises to make the ball bounce straight up into your face and which to this day is blamed for our poor technique, where Duncan was caught and bowled by me and where Richard is now delivering medium paced seam up and it is our last summer before he leaves for university, and where a dark fissure is already growing secretly inside me, that I will soon fall into and who's sides I will spend the rest of my life learning to climb. And the crimson disk of the sun is casting our shadows way out beyond square leg, and I am stepping towards the ball to catch a half-volley in the sweet spot so that I can barely feel it as I swing through the shot and the ball rises way up into something like myth and memory and disappears into a curve of radiant air.