



Source: Louise Roug, 'Iraq's new PM in militia balancing act', *Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times* in *The Age online*, 25/04/06.

Tags: corporeality, art, Turkey, war

Writer/s: Ross Murray

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Dear Mother and Father,

How are you? Keeping well, no doubt. Is the drought any better? I hope so. How is Nelly? I expect she's developing into a lovely young mare.

I wonder what you know of how things really are over here. I wonder if you've heard that the whole campaign here has been a complete balls up. From all accounts those first waves of soldiers were dealt with terribly by the Turkish machine guns, and although I shouldn't say it, and wouldn't mention it to any of the lads, I was glad that I was part of the later troops to land. Apparently some of the troops made it as far as the Nek on the first day, but couldn't go any further than what we call 'The Razor's Edge'. The land was supposed to be a gentle slope, but when the soldiers got up there all they found was a huge ravine which dropped straight down over one hundred feet. All the maps were wrong I heard. Chalk one up for British intelligence.

A couple of English officers came through the trenches the other day. One of them, a jovial chap, name of James Barrington, noticed my sketches that I'd pinned to the wall of our quarters. We got to talking and as it turned out he was some kind of art broker back in London. He quite liked the sketches and thought I showed potential for portraits. He mentioned that if I ever happened to make it to London one day that I should call on him. Gave me his address and all. The people you meet...

All the lads here are dog-tired. We spend a lot of time playing cards when we're not shooting or being shot at. I owe Henry, a chap from Cootamundra, ten pounds. I suppose you know what I mean. Not the ideal way to have a debt cleared. I'm not much good at cards and I know, Mother, you wouldn't approve of me gambling, but sometimes I just can't bring myself to sketch anything. My hands have started to shake now and then, which makes it hard to draw, though I do think the jagged lines perhaps say something in themselves. I've included a few rough drawings of a couple of the lads. I hope you like them.

I wonder if you will get this letter? Have you sent me a letter? If you have, I haven't got it. That's not surprising though. It's a wonder any mail gets through at all. Next time just address it care of Private Thomas Powell, seventh level of Hell. I'm sure there'll be no problems with it finding me. The more trenches we dig, the more I think it to be the truth. Please write as often as possible. It's always good to hear news from home. All the lads read out their letters to each other. It takes our minds off

the fighting for a while. The heat here is worse than oppressive, sometimes I think hotter than home. Mainly because no hint of a breeze makes its way into the trenches. We only get about a pint of water ration a day. The smell is, well, I don't think I could describe it properly. It's more than a smell or even a stench. A presence, a terrible reminder, always bringing you back to the present and where you are. God knows I try to imagine myself somewhere else often enough.

The horizon over the trenches is marked by bloated bodies. Do you remember me telling you about George from Glen Innes? We went through basic training together. George shoots the bodies to let the gas out so they don't explode on their own. He laughs every time he pops one. What this place does to a man, alive and dead, it's hard to fathom. Certainly it's no way to treat the dead, but neither is letting them rot in the sun which is what happens for the most part as it's just too dangerous to retrieve the bodies.

Two lads, Harry Tanner and Percy Wilkins, learnt some Turkish swear words from I don't whom, and they find great delight in insulting the Turks in the quieter moments between the fighting. The Turks yell right back, calling us 'British lap dogs' and 'Australian bumpkins'.

If you ask me Gallipoli has become one big festering wound that needs a thorough disinfecting. Even then I don't think they'll ever be able to clean the place properly. In some ways I feel sorry for the Turks. If war can change a man, then I don't see why it can't change the countryside where war takes place. The Turks will have to deal with the souls that remain in these godforsaken hills and valleys, and if they're a superstitious lot, like many of the lads think, then I don't envy them at all.

We've been here almost seven months and there's talk of us shipping out soon. I hope so. We're not going anywhere here and I've certainly had enough. Though there's talk too of one last push to see if we can't break the Turkish line. The Turks are dug in pretty good and whatever the top brass say, I don't think there's any way we're going to oust them.

How could any other front line be worse than here? I can tell you, I won't leave this place with any affection.

I'm sorry, Mum. I shouldn't write about such things. Perhaps I should start again with this.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.*