63°52'0" North. This is where it ends. Near Eyrarbakki on the south-east Icelandic coast, just after dawn on 8 September, 1942. The river Olfusa debouches into the North Atlantic here, in a wide triangular delta. A bar of black lava-sand extends across the delta from the north-west, almost closing it off, such that the shape of the river-mouth resembles an A, with the cross-bar of the A not quite complete. A part-closed cuneiform, then, and a natural harbour. In this way its form is familial with other northern structures: opening outwards, but protective of the interior – Birsay Harbour, Maes Howe….

Just after dawn, and a man is walking the bar, as he always does after bad weather, to see what the storm has cast up. Pace, pace, pace. Footprints on the lava-sand. Over the inland mountains is an oak-coloured rain scarp: a sky-memory of the storm recently gone. The sea is settling, now, close to docile. Gluey combers fold up and in and over.

Pace, pace, pace. Then he stops, stoops. An aeroplane wheel, its white hub as big as his head, and the tyre still plump with air, draped with seaweed. Twenty paces further on, he finds an oleo. Rock-dented and buckled, so that its innards are visible: a gleaming spring, spiralling like a narwhal's horn.

Together the two objects, wheel and oleo, make a sea-rebus; a war-rune. The man glances out westwards, as though he can puzzle an answer to what has happened here. The gluey combers fold up and in and over.

50°45'0" North. This is where it begins. On the chalk of England's downlands, on a clear night in the summer of 1919, when a young man called Eric Ravilious, who likes to be known only by his surname, is lying in plush grass on the eastern slope above the mouth of the Cuckmere river, where it debouches into the English Channel, next to the white sea-cliffs of the Seven Sisters. Next to him lies his friend and companion James, who is disturbed because Ravilious is laughing out loud, up into the warless sky.

What is it, Ravilious? James asks, sitting up, pushing at him; I'm trying to sleep. Ravilious keeps on laughing, happiness at being in that mysterious place at that mysterious time welling up in him and belting out as laughter, and suddenly James realises that Ravilious isn't awake, that he's laughing in his sleep. And at this, he lies back, and starts laughing too.

And between these latitudes, what lies? No way of knowing now, unless we improvise.

Eric Ravilious (1903–1942), watercolourist, engraver, muralist, follower of old paths and tracks, one of the best-known English artists of the 1930s, lover of whiteness and of light, dreamer of remoteness, visionary of the everyday. Strangers called him Eric. Friends called him Ravilious. Close friends called him The Boy: a Peter-Pannish nickname; a charm against ageing; a chrism against death (weak magic). Handsome: an angular face, large dark eyes, a sloped nose, dark hair, long fingers always holding brush, pen, or cigarette. Liked: tennis, billiards, propellers, winter, the shadowlessness of sea-light, northerliness, ceramic, boxwood, crystal and ice. Fastidious, but also impetuous: he had a habit of putting his head out of train windows, and losing hats to the wind.

Ravilious was brought up on England's Downlands, and before he fell in love with the ice of the north, he loved the chalk of the south. The Downs, with their soft and equalising sunlight, their ancient pathways and their loneliness, primed his imagination. Through them, he grew to cherish certain landscape characteristics: crisp flowing lines, an aura of remoteness, a detachment from the lived world. For most of his life, he found these qualities in sufficiency on the Downs. The Downs, he wrote once, shaped 'my whole outlook and way of painting…because the colour of the landscape was so lovely, and the design so beautifully obvious'.

Ravilious's childhood was spent in Eastbourne. Up behind the town billowed the eastern Downs. In the town was his father's antiques' shop. Veneered hush, the ticks and chimes of walnut-burr clocks, the tinkling bell of the door. On weekday evenings and at weekends, his father pored over the Old Testament, developing his own annotations to the texts – an intense and private exegesis that lasted most of his adult life. Ravilious began to explore the surrounding countryside. He made expeditions, slept out (tucked under hedges or with the stars for a ceiling), and walked for hours, following the beckoning lines of the Downs: the eye-leading ridges, the meandering rivers, and the chalk paths which curl across that landscape, glossy after rain, some of them first trodden into the land during the Neolithic.

This was his England: placidly visual, radiant and even. This was the terrain – with its combination of human workedness and ancientness – that shaped his temperament and his sensibility. It bequeathed him his shades of melancholy, it bred in him a rural nostalgia, and it also induced the dissociation that tinged both his art and his personality. He possessed, in the phrase of one friend, 'a kind of wariness against all allegiances and personal involvements'. Another observed that Ravilious 'always seems to be slightly somewhere else, as if he lived a private life which did not completely coincide with material existence'. This out-of-kilterness is what distinguishes his painting. Viewing his work, one has a sense of viewing two overlaid acetate sheets, imprecisely matched.

He studied at the Eastbourne College of Art, and then at the Royal College of Art, where in 1925 Paul Nash arrived as a tutor (another lover of the chalk, another follower of the old ways). From the late 1920s to the late 1930s, Ravilious painted deserted fields and Downland hillsides, abandoned farm machinery, waterwheels, fences. Scenes heavy with the magic of a very English genius loci, but also with 'hints of haunting and infiltration', as Peter Davidson has put it in a brilliant essay on Ravilious. Later – during the war – he painted empty docks and decks. Unpeopled military control rooms, with strategy maps pinned on their walls. Convoys steaming away to engage an off-canvas enemy. When people do figure in his paintings (marines, soldiers, airmen, farmers) their heads are often featureless and coloured the pink of healed skin – as though they have been face-scalped.

Part of the sense of disengagement that attends his paintings has to do with the images of tracks, prints and paths that he repeatedly used. Footprints on snow or in mud, left by since-vanished pedestrians. Walkerless paths, enticing the eye and the imagination out of sight; promising events and adventures over the horizon. Ravilious was fascinated by tracks and paths. He read deeply in the work of Edward Thomas, who spent much of his life following what he called 'the old ways'. 'The long white roads are a temptation', wrote Thomas of the tracks of the Downs. 'What quests they propose! They take us away to the thin air of the future or to the underworld of the past.' Paths worked on Ravilious's imagination in a similar manner. He revered Samuel Palmer, who walked the footpaths around his Kent village by dawn, dusk, night and day. He absorbed Alfred Watkins's influential, maniacal work on ley lines, *The Old Straight Track* (1927), with its vision of a concealed network of powerful tracks and routes spreading across the English landscape.

Ravilious walked the chalk paths, and he also made art of them. In 1929, he engraved The Wilmington Giant on boxwood, for a zodiacal almanac in which the giant featured as Taurus: a large glowing white figure crowned by a full moon. In 1934 he painted his own garden path. In 1935 he painted 'Chalk Paths', in which three tracks compete to lead the eye away, while a barbed-wire fence snags the gaze. A 1936 canvas shows travellers' caravans stopped by the side of an old road. An undated canvas, 'Eastleen Road', gazes down a Sussex green way. Dozens more canvases, early and late, show paths: glimpsed behind waterwheels, out of house windows, from trains; paths passing over cross-hatched fields, along cliff-edges, or up to the great chalk figures of the Downs (the Uffington Horse, the Cerne Abbas Giant, the Wilmington Giant). In 1937, Ravilious visited Gilbert White's Selborne, at the Hampshire end of the Downs, and walked the holloways or sunken roads of which White writes his third letter, before making an engraving of them. Ravilious's engraving – itself a kind of track-making or incision – shows a deep lane, over which the trees are leaning and locking, the entry to which is guarded by a barn owl in flight. The owl's head is turned out towards the viewer, its eyes quizzical behind its knight's visor of feathers.

The paths of the Downs compelled Ravilious's imagination; so did the light of the Downs, falling as white on green, and evoking 'the strange downs magic' of which Angus Wilson once spoke. The light of the Downs is distinctive for its radiance, possessing as it does the combined pearlescence of chalk, grass blades and a proximate sea. If you have walked on the Downs in high summer or high winter, you will know that Downs' light also has a peculiar power to flatten out the view – to render scattered objects equidistant. This is the charismatic mirage of the Downs: phenomena appear arranged upon a single tilted plane, through which the paths burrow. In these respects the light of the Downs is kindred with another flattening light, the light of the polar regions, which usually falls at a slant and is similarly fine-grained.

The light and the path: the flattening (the light) and the beckoning (the path). These are Ravilious's signature combinations as an artist. Together, in his work, light and path create a unique dissonance. He produced scenes that feel suspended almost to the point of stasis, but that also allude to some future or simultaneous action. The effect on the viewer is one of extreme cognitive dissonance: the sensation of occupying a space between two worlds, or even two entirely distinct geometric systems coevally. Angles shimmer into angels, comprehension into apprehension. Ravilious was an empiricist who viewed his worlds so intensely that they dissolved into the mystical.

For most of Ravilious's life, the Downs answered his landscape needs. Especially in winter – when the beech hangars stood out like ink strokes in a Chinese water-colour – they embodied his aesthetic ideal: crisp lines, the fall of pale light on pale land. But as the 1930s wore on, he began to desire an elsewhere, an otherworld. He located that elsewhere in the high latitudes of the far north – the envisioned land of the Arctic circle and the midnight sun. By the time the war began, he was restless to travel, hungry to swap chalk for ice, and south for north. His chance to do so came with his appointment in late 1939 as an official war artist, which gave him some control over his postings. In the last three years of his life, as Davidson has finely written, 'the snow and the snow light on bare hills drew [Ravilious] steadily northwards'.

23 December 1939. A letter arrives at the Ravilious home in Castle Hedingham, Essex, from the Admiralty. 'Dear Ravilious,' it begins, cordially. It is the news he has been hoping for, above all others: the War Artists Advisory Committee has recommended his appointment. He is wildly excited, and promises Tirzah, his wife, that he will bring back 'parrots and monkeys' for her from his journeys. He feels like throwing his bonnet over the moon with delight.

To that point, his war has been low-ebb. At the empty vicarage in Hedingham, he has fitted gas masks onto the villagers. One woman asks him, as he's tightening the straps, if she'll have to wear it all war. No, no he reassures her, only when you hear the siren, and he smiles as he imagines her emerging, after five years under the mask, owl-eyed and pale.

Otherwise, he has spent most of the autumn on a hill-top near the village, posted to the OP there as a look-out. Long, empty days of waiting. Sitting on green park chairs that are hard as nails. Or filling sugar sacks with wet earth, then heaving and kneeing them into place to bolster the walls of the post: the sacks are as heavy as pigs, and as uncooperative. He wears life-boatmen's oilskins when it rains, and keeps his binoculars in hand. Well, binoculars, or a cigarette, or a pencil. So the days and nights pass: smoking, talking, sketching, letter-writing. Waiting for the enemy, who rarely comes. The air-raid siren sits there on the table: one hand on top to hold it down, one to crank the handle, as eagerly as if you're starting a getaway car. It's a warm clear autumn, and the Essex light is aquarium-like, green-tinged, for reasons Ravilious can't quite puzzle out.

Full-moon watch is his favourite shift. Clear but cold, and with the highest chance of a raid. Old light falling from the stars. Though he likes the sunrises too, the great bellying clouds at 5 am, which turn thin and ripped by 6. Twice, barrage balloons break loose, and drift overhead, pushed on northerlies, trailing their heavy tether-ropes across pylon wires, fusing lights for miles around. He watches them drift over, shiny as sixpences at 8000 feet in the zinc sky, and they tug his imagination upwards and northwards, prompting daydreams of high altitudes and high latitudes. Once, when German Heinkels do pass over their post, he feels briefly as though he has been transformed into a tube of glass, cylindrical and brittle. Something to do, he thinks afterwards, with being viewed from above.

In the early autumn, the men take turns to leave the post and go out foraging for blackberries and mushrooms. One of his sergeants knows how to trap hares, which they jug and eat. One good night they have an oyster party, with shells brought up fresh from the Colchester beds, eaten on bread and butter and washed down with brown ale. It is, Ravilious thinks, all nonsensically wonderful, a toy-war: a Boy's Own Paper story, with spies and passwords. Time goes along in a special way, up there on the post. Ideas and feelings eddy a little, but do not flow. He feels distant from the general mess that's going on. Is this how his war will pass, he wonders, on an Essex hilltop, pivoting slowly in this eddy?

No. The letter arrives, and pitches him into the real war, or at least into the observation of a real war. He leaves the hard green park chairs behind, and before his first posting comes through, spends time back on the chalk, painting outside in uncertain, wintry weather until he has rheumatism in his shoulders.

He is made acting captain in The Marines, which he soon learns to call The Royal Marines. He tries on his new uniform and gets Tirzah to take a photograph of him, standing in front of a box hedge on which fresh snow lies. The khaki uniform makes him look gaunt, the stiff material accentuating his thinness, and the Royal Marines belt – thick as a weight-lifter's truss – cinching it in above his skinny hips. The tree branches around him are weighed down by the snow.

The winter that closes in during the New Year of 1940 is exceptionally severe: the most sustained period of cold since 1894, the BBC reports. To Ravilious – winter-lover, pole-dreamer – it is marvellous. There is skating on the village ponds and in the creeks and swatches. Dusty fen-skates, with their long metal runners and curled-up tongues, are taken down from barn corners and the backs of doors. Men from the villages near Earith race each other, making the long, swinging strokes of the East Anglian skater, arms swinging too, sliding six or seven metres at each push, sugaring the ice. Ducks slap-stick on the ice of the Castle Hedingham lake. The fish have all died, and hundreds of them are encased belly-up, an inch or two below the surface, like silver fossils.

In early January he goes to Furlongs, the lonely shepherd's cottage in the mid-Sussex Downs at which he has done so much painting over the years. The scene from the windows is exquisite: the land a wonderful tea-colour, with frost on the ridges, and the mud of the old paths frozen hard as iron to the foot. What could be finer – his beloved north weather has come to his beloved south country. True, the exceptional climate does make for difficulties. Pumps and water-butts are out of action. He has to go up time and again onto the roof of the vicarage to clear the snow from behind the parapets with brooms and shovels. The milk freezes. The soda water freezes. Ravilious, writing a letter at his desk, opens the ink bottle to dip his pen – but the pen bounces off the surface of the frozen ink. Tirzah and the children make a snow cat in the front garden to keep warm.

Finally, spring comes, and finally, Ravilious gets his first serious postings. Northwards, satisfyingly northwards, to Grimsby in April 1940. The weather remains cold, especially out in the cutting wind of the east coast. He works offshore, sketching and painting lightships and wrecks. He cycles around on a brilliant red Royal Navy bicycle, hitches lifts on various vessels. Learns the difference between a boat (small) and a ship (big). Wears a Ruritanian greatcoat, and a whistle on a blue lanyard, of which he is absurdly proud. Naval bulldogs are all around, hoarse as rasps. He drinks gin in the mess with them, eats mulligatawny soup. smokes naval tobacco, with its heavy rope-like twist, and feels himself becoming, to his amusement but also his pride, quite the naval man. Quite, but not entirely. Where he drinks gin, the Navy men drink Red Biddy: a small port served in a large glass, which they mixed with meths and knock back. Then they go outside to piss, and set light to their urine, in a high-risk firework display that they make Ravilious watch. One morning, he is taken out in a paddle steamer, and there is a gibbous moon lying opposite a sun with six rays, hanging together in a coppery sultry sky. On another occasion, he paints from the bridge of a destroyer, resting his sketch-book above the trumpets of the speaking-tubes, that blossom like peculiar lilies from the woodwork.

Then, in May comes the posting of which he has dreamed. His quiet lobbying has succeeded. He is to sail with HMS *Highlander* to Norway and across the Arctic Circle. *Highlander* will be supporting the Allied assault on Norvik.

30 May 1940. 'Goodbye Tish', he writes to Tirzah, 'I'll come back as soon as I can but it is all out of my hands as you can see.' Easiest to think of it that way, at any rate. Ravilious has never been further out of Britain before than Normandy. There'll be no culture shock, though, as it appears he will be travelling abroad aboard an island of Englishness. HMS *Highlander* is ridiculously clean, swept and painted, like a new pin. In the wardroom, there are even flowers on the table and print-pattern curtains; it makes Ravilious laugh to see gingham and fine cottage chintz in the belly of a destroyer. He quickly learns the complicated geography of the ship, and its even more complicated rules. Everyone on board has to wear a rubber life-jacket at all times, even in bed, and to keep it partly inflated. The result is that everyone – even Ravilious – presents a chest like a guardsman.

They sail north for days, over good seas, up through the latitudes, the day-lengths growing as they plough on, escorting the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*. Ravilious sits up on deck for hours, almost days at a stretch, watching, painting. Or leaning on the rail at the stern, coatless in the northern sun, watching the wake curdling the sea into cream and green – the foam visible for miles behind them. A white glossy track, a chalk path, enticing him to step from the ship's side and stride out along it, back south. The days leave him sunburnt – who'd have thought it, sunburnt near the Arctic Circle! At first he finds it hard to paint given the movement of the ship: he can't keep edges, can't control the pencil. Then he learns how to time his strokes to the roll, and succeeds in getting the lines off. He sketches and paints *Glorious*: Walruses and other aircraft leaving and arriving from its runway decks. Within days of the canvas being finished, it has been sunk by a German battle cruiser. All that mass, all those men.

For hard sea battles are taking place. Attacks on *Highlander* are made by plane, mines, and submarine. But Ravilious barely refers to them in his letters home. He hardly seems to notice the violence, there in his northern dreamworld, working away, often past midnight in the long boreal sunshine. The attacks are off-stage events to Ravilious. More important is that the sun never falls below the horizon. At its lowest – he measures on a sheet of drawing paper – it is about two inches from sea level. At 70 30'00", he paints the midnight sun, poker-orange above a sea so blue it almost expires into black.

The new art he produces during these strange weeks is perhaps his finest, certainly his strangest. The images are full of action but devoid of people. The decks he paints are deserted: there no one to load the torpedoes, or prime the depth-charges, though these tasks are urgent. They have a lonely watchfulness, these images: Ravilious the sentinel. The silvered bleakness of the Arctic seems to have entered them, infusing them with a stillness. They are at frost point.

His letters, too, assume an even more entranced tone than usual. He sounds ethereal, heliated, by not seeing land, women or darkness for so long. Everything strikes him as 'remote and lovely'. When they enter fogbanks, it is as though they have passed into 'some unearthly existence'. The air is like bees wax, or turps. Arctic terns scoot past in number. Dolphins scull beside the ship, and bottle when they at anchor. Once, they pass an empty upturned lifeboat. Always, their wake furrowing the solid sea.

They moor off Finnmark, and Hammerfest, the northernmost coasts of Norway. The hills there appear to him strangely Downs-like. Rounded, like so many things up here: smoothed hills, smoothed swells, smoothed hulls. They appear pale, almost ghostly, as if painted with a starved brush. In a letter to Tirzah he calls these coastal ranges 'the hills of the Chankly Bore'. 'Chankly': a portmanteau word by Edward Lear, formed out of 'chalk' and 'lank', and used by Lear in The Jumblies, his fantastical poem about a 20-year journey from which no one returns unchanged.

And when Ravilious returns, from 7500 miles and four weeks at sea, having witnessed many deaths and many marvels, he finds himself changed. Finds it hard to reconnect. Everything seems even more spectral, more spacious, less consequential than before. In June and July of 1940 he works at Gosport on a submarine base: blue gloom with coloured lights, the submariners in shirts and braces. People sleep or slump in odd positions across tables: dead or asleep? He paints more military interiors – control-rooms, map-rooms – devoid of people, lit by a kind of northern light.

In September he returns to Eastbourne, which has become a front-line town, now that the German invasion is imminent. The pier has been sawn in half. Trees have been shattered by bomb- and shell-fall, windows broken, buildings slumped into slip-heaps of rubble. 60,000 people have been evacuated, and as he walks its streets the town reminds Ravilious of Pompeii after the explosion. He feels at once 'awful, romantic and nightmarish'. He stays at the once-grand Elmwood Palace, which has been dust-sheeted and moth-balled. The gardener and his family have stayed on, resisted evacuation, but they have retreated to the cellar, from which they emerge as Ravilious enters, like another species. He wanders the streets – the tin hat heavy on his head, cramming his neck into his coat like a tortoise; the naval-issue pistol like a rod in his pocket. – pries into empty houses, and feels, of course, 'curiously at home'. Few people could be more constitutionally suited to the evacuated atmosphere of this town, the sense that its life is now being lived elsewhere.

The north is still drawing him back, though. He is longing to return, and begins a slow campaign of letters to the relevant authorities. He wants to get to Iceland, then to Greenland, to paint the planar snow and mountain landscape of that country's coast. Then Arctic Russia; Novaya Zembla, perhaps….

In October 1941 he travels north to Rosyth on the Scottish east coast, to stay with John and Christine Nash in their cottage at Crombie Point. The night before he arrives, a big gale blows seaweed to a depth of half-a-foot on the road, and so as he drives up to his old friends' cottage, his arrival is saluted by the pop-guns of kelp pods. Using their house as a base, he paints a convoy of merchant-ships seen against a track-marked foreshore on the Fife coast. He goes up as an observer in the tail of sea-planes, queer flying machines, from which he views Scotland laid out as a land map. Then he hitches a ride on a destroyer, which takes him out to some of the east coast islands

20 October 1941. Ravilious is dropped on May Island in the Firth of Forth, where he stays for weeks, made happy by its remoteness and its light. The island is rocky and wild, and rolls in great folds down to a tumbledown monastery. In its centre is a beacon which doubles as a dovecote. When the big waves strike the east of the island, the spray goes up like a cloud. It's cold. He wears all the under-clothes possible, including the thickest pants he could find in Greenoch, and practically bursts his uniform. The turf is rabbit-cropped but lush, and feels underfoot like a pile carpet. Hoodie crows and goldcrests are the charismatic birds here: black and gilt, big and small. There are no terns, his totem birds, because the sailors who were barracked here the previous year ate all their eggs. The light around the island here is so clear and reflective that the ships which pass by appear to be without shadow, as if they have been lit from every side at once. By 17 November, the leaves on the island's trees have turned yellow, and begun to fall, and the Firth can clearly be seen through the apple trees.

A month later, he is back in Essex. The WAAC proposes that he paint the concealment of the White Horse at Uffington, which is being turfed in – millennia after it was turfed out – to prevent German bombers using it as a landmark or a target. They also want him to paint the fire engines that have been deputed to spray the chalk roads with black ink, again to prevent them being used as navigation aids by bombers. Ravilious is fascinated by both actions, but he can't think how to make art out of the scenes. He is also distracted by thoughts of the north. He wants to see the midnight sun again, and reach what he has come to think of as his 'promised land'. He travels to Admiralty House, located appropriately enough in Northwood, and asks for a posting to Russia. 'Going to the Northern parts again', he writes hopefully to a friend.

And then he is. A posting to Iceland. The timing is far from auspicious. Poor Tirzah has had to have an emergency mastectomy, and leaves hospital only a week before he is due to depart. She has the children to look after, and her own convalescence to manage. Shall I go, he asks her, unsure. Yes you must, she says. He seems relieved at her answer, and enthusiastically repeats all the familiar reasons for the expedition. He buys a copy of his second favourite book, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (his first favourite being *Huckleberry Finn*), and cuts it in half, using a serrated knife to hack down the centre of the binding. He gives half to Tirzah, and packs half himself: proof that they will be reunited.

From Essex, he travels to London, and spends the night with his friend JM Richards in London. Richards thinks that he seems 'more tranquil in his mind than he had been throughout the preceding years'. He detects in Ravilious 'a sense that he has come to the end of what he had to do.' Ravilious speaks to Richards of the trip to Iceland as the fulfilment of a long-held desire to explore some kind of furthest limit in the physical world.

From London to Prestwick, the airfield to the south of Glasgow, arriving on 25 August. He buys a new drawing bag: white, of course. 'I shan't paint it', he tells Tirzah in an excited letter. 'White canvas is just the thing for Iceland.' The weather is calm and fine at Prestwick, with no wind. While he is waiting for his flight to get clearance, he goes to the coast, and finds a beach scene like pre-war Eastbourne.

What a sight as they fly in to Iceland! Mountains that, viewed from above, look like craters on the moon. They cast shadows that are very dark and striped like leaves. He has glimpses of the ice in the island's interior. The rivers are like inlaid wire. The light lies like an immense bar on the sea. When they land at Reykjavik, there are none of the mosquitoes about which he has been warned, but the clouds of fine black dust – whipped up by the katabatic winds that rush down from the glaciers – make up for the absence of flies. Then rain comes, and lays the dust. In a Reykjavik market he holds and nearly buys a narwhal horn. He collects flowers and shells to take back to the children, tokens of the north. He sleeps in sheetless beds. From Reykjavik a thumping road journey to Kaldadarnes, the Anglo-American airbase on the east of the island. Breeze-blocks barracks, green corrugated metal roof. A swell of low mountains behind.

He has only been there one night, when on the evening of 1 September a report comes in of a missing aircraft out of Kaldadarnes, one of the 269 Squadron Coastal Command. A Hudson Mark III, it has disappeared off the coast while engaging a U-boat.

At dawn the next morning Ravilious is shaken awake. A search is happening: three aircraft, three more Hudsons, will fly out and co-operatively sweep the area in which the first plane disappeared, 300 miles to seaward. Does Ravilious want to fly as observer, paint the mission, possibly the rescue?

Even as the three Hudsons take off, it is clear that a storm is brewing. The sky ahead black as lithography ink, greasy and thick. Sprinkling rain and rumbling wind. Thunderheads gleaming. They make their search, find nothing, run for home, stiff wings bucking already in the turbulence and the wind-gouts. Radio contact becomes sporadic between the planes, then non-existent.

Only two of the Hudsons land again at Kaldadarnes. Ravilious's plane, FH 363, does not. Pilot, navigator, wireless operator, gunner and artist do not. All five men, lost in a plane looking for a lost plane.

7 September 1942. At Castle Hedingham, a letter arrives for Tirzah from the Admiralty, signed HV Markham. 'My lords desire me to express to you their deep sympathy in the great anxiety which this news must cause you…'. Tirzah stumbles over the grammar first time through.

The next morning the postman brings a letter addressed in a familiar hand, and there is a momentary flare of hope. No, of course not. It is dated 1 September, and written in pencil. 'We flew over the mountain country that looks like craters on the moon', he tells her, 'the shadows very dark and striped like leaves….'

The same morning, just after dawn, at Eyrarsbakki, and a man is walking the bar, as he always does after bad weather. A wheel. Twenty paces further on, the oleo. The gluey combers fold up and in and over.