On 7 June 1935, eighteen-year-old Denton Welch, a slight, bespectacled, curly-haired young man who was studying art at the Goldsmith School of Art in New Cross, decided to cycle from his lodgings at 34 Croom’s Hill, a neat Georgian house in Greenwich, to spend the weekend with his aunt and uncle in Leigh, Surrey.

Setting off on his trip that bright Sunday morning, Welch packed his bag. Like everything else in his life, it was assembled with a certain precision, if not fussiness. ‘I took very little with me, only pyjamas, tooth-brush, shaving things, and the creamy-white ivory comb which I had bought with my grandfather’s present to me. I was very fond of this comb, so I wrapped it carefully in the pyjamas and stowed it with the other things in the shiny black bag that was fastened on the back of the seat.’

He pushed his bike up the hill, on the western side of the park, a street he knew well, with its houses shouldered together as if to stop themselves from tumbling into the nearby river. He looked over the park and its Spanish chestnuts to Greenwich’s grand naval buildings, the winding Thames and the Isle of Dogs. Then, having reached the top of the hill at Blackheath, where the land levelled out into a scrubby common, he got back on his bike and rode down through south London.
He enjoyed the sense of escape from the city, with the prospect of the open country ahead. He cycled on towards Bromley and Coulsdon, where suburbia seeped into commuter belt and where the city’s psychic casualties were housed in sprawling water-tower asylums. As the cars and lorries sped past, he remembered how his father used to call him ‘Safety First’, because he was so wary about crossing the road.

Moments later, his world was overturned. A motorist ran into him from behind, throwing him off his bike and into the verge. As he lay there in the grass, he heard ‘a voice through a great cloud of agony and sickness’. It was a policeman, asking over and again, ‘What is your name? Where do you live? Where were you going?’ ‘I could hear the fright in his voice.’

He was in a new, transformed world of pain. ‘Rich clouds of what seemed to be a combination of ink and velvet soot kept belching over me, soaking into me, then melting away. Bright little points of light glittered all down the front of the liquid man kneeling beside me… the earth swung, hovered, leaving my feet in the air and my head far below. I was overcome and drowned in waves of sickness and blackness…’

What follows is a series of dream-like episodes in which he is sucked into the medical system of the nineteen-thirties, a tyrannical regime. He is helpless, supine, submissive — a patient because that is what he must be, the price he must pay for his care. In turn, he is subject to the whims of nurses too bound up in their routines to consider the subject of their work. ‘I was caught and could never escape the terrible natural law’. In this new world, he even has to learn to speak again. ‘The words came out of my mouth. Some of them were slightly incorrect, others a little fantastic.’

His body is invaded, uninvited. A catheter is fitted; he is fed from a pap bowl, bathed, or sedated, or stripped of his dressings; this is how it will be from now on. ‘It seemed to me that something
had happened which I had expected all my life… that I ought to accept the horror as something quite ordinary’. The art student is surrounded, not by beautiful, self-selected things, but by instruments of penetration and excision and absorption: gauze and forceps and boiled linen and kidney dishes, which I always believed were shaped to receive human organs.

The pain is so great he feels his skin will burst with it, as if he were a chrysalis in the process of metamorphosis. Only when a pair of student friends come to visit does he see what he has become. Taking a make-up mirror from one of the women, he sees his new face for the first time. His eyes are reduced to slits, an Ahabian forked cut ‘like red lightning’ from his forehead to his nose, his hair cut away in parts, or standing up in ‘isolated curls and jagged tufts. The parts of my face that were not purple or red were dyed brilliant sulphur-yellow… I felt made up for some stage performance’. But it is a performance for which the only audience is himself.

When it first happened, time stopped still. Or perhaps it went into reverse, spooling back to excise the moment of impact from my memory. My life stopped, and restarted, dissolved in adrenaline. Spaces fell out of my brain. I was in a foreign place, I didn’t know where. I knew I had a good friend in the same city, but I couldn’t remember her name or even her face. But just as I had no memory, neither did I feel any pain. I stood there, over a dark pool of blood in the gutter, asking for water. When it came, I used it to try and wash the stains out of my favourite shirt. I worried that I’d missed my last train home. Most of all, I worried about my bike, lying abandoned on the kerb where it had skewed beneath me. Someone promised to take care of it.

The darkness of the summer night seemed to swallow up the scene. I don’t know how I got to the hospital, although I do remember someone called Adam, a security guard, being at
my side, and wanting to be hugged by him, as if to arrest the momentum of the crash still reverberating through my body. As I waited on a bed to be seen, the geriatric woman opposite me had taken off her blouse — it was one of the hottest nights of the year — and had exposed her yellowy breasts. She cried, ‘Why won’t someone come and help me?’; like a line from a war poem whose author I couldn’t recall. I thought of my own mother in intensive care, wired up in a darkened ward, instruments beeping out the sonic fathoms of her descent like a submarine.

Before his accident, he was a young man, capable of anything. Now his life was mapped out in a dwindling inevitability, driven by illness into extreme self-analysis. He delights in his selfish, unworthy thoughts, as though shocking his more proper, prim, whole self.

From his London hospital, which can do nothing more for him, Welch is sent to the desultory resort of Broadstairs, at southern England’s easternmost edge. His bed is pulled up to the window; he feels surrounded by sea and sky. He now weighs less than five stones; barely a bag of cobbles from the beach. The expanse of sea becomes an extension of his terror and loneliness, its emptiness ‘the negation of everything living. The suck and mumble of the waves on the beach, licking and slithering and eating, filled me with a wry, fearful pleasure’. He sings to himself, not so much in consolation as in despair.

Later in the morning, his nurse will take him up to the roof where, propped up on a deckchair with a windbreak tied behind it to protect him and covered with an eiderdown, the February sun becomes warm enough for him to cast off his covers and even his pyjamas, exposing his pale flesh, acquiring a superficially healthy glow. At night he listens to the ‘washing and whining’ waves which have become an extension of his own body, ‘the wonderful, booming, wriggling skin of the sea’. The quiet
suburban houses sit back from the cliffs. This is a place where people are sent to recuperate or die. Once, a whale was washed up on this same beach, groaning and writhing as its great body lay hoicked out of the water. Someone walked into its mouth.

‘There’s not much of you’, Sue the nurse says in her Bristolian accent, altogether too breezy for three o’clock in the morning. She talks and laughs out loud with no concession to the hour or a ward full of sleeping patients. Lying prone and in pain, I do not hold it against her. Still less so when, once the lights come up — in the same way as they do towards the end of a long overnight flight — she brings two rounds of toast, marmalade no butter, my reward for having survived the night. My arm is still connected to a drip, my body sustained by saline pumped into it, filling me with the sea inside. We lie in our beds, the bycatch of the life going on outside. Ours is a temporary surrogate society to which anyone might belong in their degrees of misfortune. Everything strives to appear normal. Everyone is pretending.

I’m wheeled into the darkened x-ray room to be spread out on a table, unetherised, examined for whatever might have happened within the sack of my skin. In a matter-of-fact, sympathetic voice, the radiographer tells me my left hand, with which I write, is fractured, and will require a cast. Later, illicitly open the envelope containing the disk on which they are preserved, I will look at the images, as if I were spying on my own inner self. Sliding it into my machine, I see the shadowy me, ribs and phalanges in the mist, clouds and bones flickering and floating in the depths like the luminous skeleton of a whale threaded and fissured with skeins of ghostly coral.

Pronounced fit to live unsupported, albeit in a state of semi-invalidity, Welch moves into a kind of rural suburbia in the Home Counties. He is well enough to get back on his bike,
although the reality is that his body will never recover. Riding around the Kentish countryside one afternoon, he sees some teenage boys by the river, diving from the locks and lounging in the sun. He observes their dark wet hair and the V-shaped tans on their chests. They seem to perform for him, these boys.

‘Quick, Ginger’, his friend yelled unnecessarily to him, ‘get your clothes off and come and dive off the high platform’.

Ginger disappeared into the long grass by a mound, and I caught glimpses of clothes being pulled into the air, and the sudden dead whiteness of his shoulders. He rushed out of the grass, dead pearly white except for his freckled face, with little, lumpy, rather over-developed stomach and pectoral muscles. A rather broken up, not pretty, surface fussiness. Different from his friend’s smooth lazy-looking body.

Pulling his mouth back and showing his teeth in a wild, mad, excited gesture, he rushed at the water and dived, going so deep and straight down that his legs almost turned a somersault.

‘He dives too deep,’ I said to the friend.

Afterwards the boys lie on the grass beside him.

The first boy lay flat on his back and half shut his eyes. He looked charmingly coarse and young-animalish now, with thick brown neck, smooth arms and hairs round each brown-red nipple. Ginger turned his extremely white and knobbly back to me and almost bent over his friend, talking to him about his work, and how he had been late because he had been staying at home, pressing his trousers for the dance that night.
I found Welch’s book, *A Voice Through a Cloud*, at a jumble sale in a suburban church hall when I was a teenager in the nineteen-seventies. I’d never heard of him, but his writing spoke to me, out of a place in which beauty might be preserved, and yet slowly decay, wasted and lonely, where what one used to be and what one might become were one and the same thing.

Welch invents himself out of that world. In his private theatre of elegant, confined interiors, embellished with crystal lustres and carved angels, he dresses in a cassock, his thin limbs poking out of its cuffs and hem. He paints and draws entwined shells and wide-eyed cats, mermaid-like sea creatures impaled on thorns and disembodied hands holding vases, all floating in an amniotic world of their own.

Faces sprout from cone-like shapes or stare as blind-eyed as statuary; landscapes become dreamy, disturbing stage sets of follies decorated with emblematic, anthropomorphic trees. These fantastical images were an alternative to the apocalyptic war going on over his head, the clouds dealing death, indiscriminately, from above. They feed into his writing like his dreams. The right people read his work. He is published, and, for a few short years in the nineteen-forties, achieves a certain sort of subtle fame.

Wreathed in the glamour of illness in a neo-romantic manner, he is photographed lying on a fur rug, surrounded by shells, looking languidly, half dead, back at the camera, seeing saw himself as if in an out-of-body experience, as if he were back on the road, back broken, or in his hospital bed, ‘two eyes looking down on my empty room, on my silent velvet bed, on all my pretty things, and knowing that I shall never use them again. I think of them floating into other people’s homes and being used for a hundred years from hence. I think of wars and torture and the blackest sins of power. I think of babies and all the screaming life of eternity. This is the horrible, beautiful immortality that we’ve been looking for. The never-ending of our race on earth.’
I walk down to the sea wall and defying advice, climb over, pull off my clothes, and wade into the sea up to my waist. The water is warm, surging around my body. It wants to bear me up and away. Enticed, I attempt to immerse myself more, then realise my folly. My cast would quickly become a soggy mass; I imagine my broken bones flopping out of it, flapping uselessly like an unhomed hermit crab. Maybe I’ll be like this forever. What if someone removed my skeleton entirely, or replaced it with that of a dog, or of a dolphin? Perhaps this just another transformation.

Back at home, I photograph myself in the mirror, through the mirror, cropping the image of my cracked face to my right forehead, temple and eye. My pale eye looks out through the lurid bruises as they ripen and blush the way a piece of fruit decays. Stitched in electric blue, my face changes over these days, in a filmic sequence, from bright red to magenta and green, developing as it seeks to repair, to return me to me. I think I look like Aladdin Sane. I see my skin blush unnaturally pink, methylated purple and iodine yellow, an exquisite decadent flower, blooming beneath my skin. I ache with sympathy for my teenage self. It is the last time I looked beautiful.

‘I was hard and bright and uncontaminated’. At night he hears dogs barking and birds singing like ‘sad future souls’. When he looks at what he has written, ‘something was wrong with it. There is always something wrong with writing’. Like his body.

Semi-paraplegic, impotent, and in constant pain, Denton Welch died on 30 December, 1948. The last photograph shows him wearing a tweed suit and polo-neck jumper, his cherubic face now preternaturally lined, a chronic frown on his choirboy brow. He is sitting outside, his arm around one of his baroque wooden angels which he is cleaning. It is almost as big as he is.
Its wings arch around him, as if it were his own gravestone. It is the last time he looked beautiful.