

God Bless Strawberry Jam

I take my seat in the canteen, a voluminous reconstituted space. Antlers and crests adorn the walls in an almighty number. It's large glass windows permit an unnecessary heat. Yet the echo of its former grandeur is easily drowned out by a gentle, elderly simmer. It's abundantly clear I'm the youngest person in the room, excluding the small gentleman in the corner being breast fed. This new found youth gives me a momentary jolt of swagger. *Ah to be young again.* It dissipates instantly as the cream tea I've ordered is a stark reminder of my imminent decent into middle agehood. One Fruit Scone. One pot of Cornish clotted cream. One serving of Jam. I've taken the jam. I have no intention of using it. I'm a purest when it comes to these matters. Jam can be an unnecessary decadence.

On the table adjacent to me, four elderly women are sat in deep conversation. They're discussing the apparent ineptitude of a temporary exhibition installed in the Eastern wing of the building. *"Lack of respect", "No talent", "Clearly no understanding of history"*. I keep quiet. That's not why I'm here. I'm here for ha-ha's* and the hillocks. The private art collection is just an extra. A bit like the Jam.

Their guffaws are palpable, bordering on hysteria. One of the women becomes so animated she begins violently coughing. I think she's choking. She rises to her feet and hocking with such vigour she dislodges the culprit and delivers it with a splat onto the table. We're all looking at this half-gnawed piece of beef. I can't help think Roast beef is an excessive companion on a mid-summer's day. Especially in a room that has a constitution perfect for vine ripening. As I try to avert my eyes, I realise they're all at it. They're all eating it, giant joints of beef, dripping in gravy, pools of the stuff, one per person. I glance around the room eager to catch the wandering eye of a simpatico to acknowledge this peculiar moment, I can't. Every single being in room is eating the same thing. Table after table propping up joints of grey brownish meat.

- Dominic Watson

* A ha-ha is a type of sunken fence that was commonly used in landscaped gardens and parks in the 18th century