

**Anthony Cartwright** was born in Dudley in 1973. His first novel *The Afterglow* won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for several other literary prizes; his second novel *Heartland* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and was adapted for BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime*; his third novel *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize and was a Fiction Uncovered 2013 selection. His collaborative novel with Gian Luca Favetto, *Il giorno perduto* (*The Lost Day*) was published in Italy in 2015. His short novel *The Cut*, written in response to the EU referendum, is forthcoming from Peirene Press. He worked as an English teacher in schools in London and the Midlands for over ten years and is currently a First Story writer-in-residence at two schools. He lives in London with his wife and son.

#### Praise for *Iron Towns*

'Cartwright's pacing is expert, restrained and skilful – he runs the game from deep, knocking raking passes into the right areas of the pitch . . . This is not a book that yearns for relentless tension, but the subtler pleasures of texture and flow . . . visionary' *Guardian*

'Wonderfully vivid, gritty and compassionate' *The Tablet*

'*Iron Towns* is one of those rare things – a book that lives up to its ambitions, and those ambitions are big. It's a dense but tender portrait of a world that few bother to notice, much less write books about. I loved the layering of the mythic and the prosaic, the intimate and the broad. An impressive and distinctive novel' Catherine O'Flynn

'Ambitious and involving . . . a threnody for a lost England . . . provocative and perceptive, the novel depicts a country where the industrial past exists only in paintings hanging in the local town hall' Jude Cook, *Review 31*

Praise for *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher*

‘A bittersweet elegy to Britain’s battered working classes . . . mournful, moving’ *Metro*

‘An impressive novel redolent of a more tender David Peace’ *The List*

‘Brilliant . . . an angry, unforgiving novel’ *Independent*

Praise for *Heartland*

‘This is what fiction should be and what readers want it to be: passionately engaged. The ambition and achievement shine forth from every sentence’ David Peace

‘A writer with a wonderful ear for dialect and an unblinking sense of Britain as it is today. Anthony Cartwright’s patient, attentive storytelling shines a glowing light on areas of our common experience that the English novel usually consigns to darkness’ Jonathan Coe

‘This impressive novel succeeds in giving voice to a part of the country that is more frequently spoken about than listened to’ *Guardian*

Praise for *The Afterglow*

‘Anthony Cartwright’s first novel depicts modern life in the Black Country and shines brightly for British regional fiction’ Zadie Smith

‘A painfully honest and accomplished first novel’ Philip Callow

‘Combining sharp social observation and compassion with the compelling narrative focus of Jon McGregor’s *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, this is a most impressive debut’ *Guardian*

# IRON TOWNS

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# IRON TOWNS

ANTHONY CARTWRIGHT



We come through our black labyrinths, massed shadows. The fires are all out now. We are the smoke that patterns the brick. We are the iron roar that you thought you'd silenced. We sing to twisted metal and down long, flooded tunnels, across empty water and fields of rubble. We sing of better days.

'Dee Dee, that you?'

She knows who it is before he speaks, with what she takes to be the line's prison hiss, in the energy of a phone ringing when it shouldn't have. All these years spent willing it not to ring.

'You know it is,' she says, and walks down the hall, through the empty bar, chandeliers catch the morning light through a half-closed curtain, out into the yard. Red sky at morning over dead cranes at the Lascar docks.

'I wanna see her, Dee Dee.'

'Where are you?'

'I wanna see my baby.'

'You can't.'

'I wanna see my girl.'

'There are people here who'll kill you. You know that, don't you? Understand that?'

She thinks of her uncles, the way they used to sit around a table in the back room. She'd watch them through the blue smoke, the half-open door. There has always been a look that comes when people find out who she is, the people she is from. Their power has long gone. There is no one to kill him. He knows that full well, wherever he has been. And she has no intention of conjuring up a vanished world now. Back at school there'd been kids

who'd said she was a witch. There have been plenty of times since she has wished it true.

'I'm gonna see her.'

'Where are you, Goldie?'

'I stayed away, Dee Dee. I kept away.'

'You stay away then, you hear, you keep it that way.'

It is hard to breathe. She thinks of the rattle the asthma pump makes as you shake it, the fizz of life as your lungs open. The pump is in the bathroom cabinet, feels a long way off.

'I'm already here,' he says, and she steps forward with a jolt into the rosy brightness of the yard. The smell of bleach rises from the concrete, a sense of things wiped clean. She looks at the jagged glass stuck in concrete atop the wall, half expects to see him come over it, his face, spiteful and handsome, across nearly twenty years, counting.

'You try anything, I'll kill you myself, I swear to god.'

Then comes the old manic glee in his voice.

'I'm already here Dee Dee, I never went nowhere. And I'm coming now, you mind that, darling, eh.'

Upstairs, the bureau is open in the spare room, dark wood against the yellow wallpaper. A square of sunlight comes through the net curtain and onto the wall. The furniture in here is all her nana's relics. Alina works at the bureau sometimes, sitting in the high-backed chair, face illuminated by her electric pad's screen, some art thing she's carried on with even though she's finished at college now. Dee Dee wants to ask her about it, holds back.

There is a photograph on the desk's green inlaid leather. There are photos stuffed in all the drawers, snapshots from when Dee

Dee was a kid, a posed portrait of her great-grandad wearing a turban and salwar kameez, with a waxed moustache, in sepia, is propped against the wall. She has intended to get a new frame for years. Alina told her that they made the colour by grinding little sea creatures into a paste.

She pauses for a moment. A passing lorry rattles the window-frame, she sees the roof of the 29 bus slide by, and is startled to see herself twenty years ago in the picture on the desk, though she has never made any effort to hide these photos. She sits with her arm in Sonia's. Their hair touches as they lean into each other. They wear identical outsized T-shirts, Dee Dee's yellow, Sonia's blue, which fall off their shoulders. The boys are standing, moving. Mark Fala and Goldie lean in the same direction, each with a foot raised as if to run or dance. They grin, the edges of their bodies blur with movement, a little out of focus, as if they are not fully there. Liam is caught in the act of rising, unfolding his long arms and legs, his skin unmarked. He looks at Dee Dee.

She looks away. The flyover in the distance creates a bar across the window, a horizon. In the mornings there is the dark shadow of the hills beyond. The afternoon sun dissolves them. She looks back.

They are on the roof at the flats, you can see the Lascar cranes in the background. The Falas' flat was in Stevedore House. She could lean out of the window now and probably make out this same block, this roof. *Is*, not *was*. They used to sunbathe up on the roof; it would be a good day for it today. She hasn't been down there for years, a distance of a mile, no more.

There was always the five of them back then. Who took

the picture? A shadow cuts across the frame. It is Mark's mum. Within a few months of taking this she will be dead. Within a few years, Sonia too. Goldie is looking somewhere off the roof. She is struck by how he and Liam look so similar in this picture, like her and Sonia. Her hand shakes. She wants to push Goldie, to send him running over that low wall and down to the ground below. Everything would be different. Everything is different now. His cracked voice across the years has changed the light in this room. If she had pushed him Sonia would be here. Alina would not be. Dee Dee considers this. This is why she does not look at old photographs, tries not to answer the phone. Everything would be different.

. . .

The Anvil Yards football ground. Irontown Football Club. An empty dressing room, the middle of summer. Out of season, out of luck. The sun shines through a narrow open window, onto the wooden benches, the bare treatment table, the tiled floor. The room smells of fresh paint and disinfectant, but linger, and underneath that is the smell of ancient liniment and sweat and thick winter mud that has soaked into the wood through the years.

The thin window shows an oblong of pitch. Gulls peck at the centre circle. They think it is a beach, perhaps, miles inland. They are the descendants of the birds who would follow the boats up the estuary and river and canal to the Ironport. Now they live on the council tip out towards Burnt Village, under the motor-

way. They hang in the dust that rises from the middle of the pitch. The club has opened the iron gates at the Greenfield End and run a car boot sale every Sunday since May. The sun has baked the mud.

The handle of the dressing-room door turns and turns again. From behind it there is a bang, a grunt, a sigh.

‘Ted, Ted,’ calls a voice. ‘He’s only painted this door shut.’

‘What?’

‘The door’s slammed shut and the paint’s dried. I told him to wedge it open. It won’t budge.’

‘Give it some iron.’

‘I have. It’s tight shut.’

The door handle rattles again.

‘Jesus. The lads’ll be here in a minute. The gaffer’s here already. I’ve seen his car in the car park. He’s got to meet them Portuguese. They’ve got that kid with them, the triallist, he looks about ten years old, I swear to god. They’ll have him for bloody breakfast. I’ve got to get this kit laid out. We can’t look any more of a shambles than we already am.’

‘Liam’s here somewhere. He’s signing shirts in the Players’ Lounge. Liam’ll save us.’

In the empty room the men’s voices fade as they move away down the tunnel. There is the occasional rattle of a seat in the grandstand above. Footsteps sound along the walkways. There are the ghost sounds of thousands of feet in the aisles, the ghost cries of great crowds, echoes of old songs, the clang of metal, the roar of a furnace, rattle of a tram, a siren across the docks.

Silence.

A clock ticks and then more voices come, clear now from behind the door.

‘I’ll have to force it.’

‘Do what you’ve got to do, mate.’

There is a thud and the wood around the door handle splinters. The door is locked. The bolt twists and shreds the wood and the door bursts open into the room. Liam Corwen stands there in the light, rubs his shoulder, blinks.

Two men, half his size almost, crouch and haul the kit baskets into the room across the splinters.

‘I thought you said it was stuck? You just needed the key.’

‘Ah, well.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Liam. Thanks our kid.’

‘Thanks Liam. You’ve saved us.’

He shrugs.

‘You playing today, Liam?’

The big man shrugs again.

‘Up to the gaffer. He says I need to rest, my age. I tell him I ain’t got much time left, Ted. He might as well play me.’

‘Good lad, Liam, good lad. Enjoy yourself if yer get on.’

Liam Corwen’s is a face from a cigarette card, though they have not made them for forty years. They had something similar in boxes of teabags for a while when Liam was a kid, went the same way as the Austin Allegro and Saturday teatime wrestling.

In the dressing-room quiet Liam flicks back and forth from the magazine’s cover, *Human Animal: People, Culture, Places, Trends*, to the pictures of him inside. He sits under his number 5 shirt on its peg, captain’s armband slung on the hook. He doubts that he’s

starting, but sitting here, in his usual spot, will put him in Ally's eyeline and that might remind him to get him on at some point. It is possibly a good game to miss, all triallists and kids against a team of part-timers.

*In image and biography, he is the acme of the modern footballer, Liam reads. Body art, brushes with the law, two ex-wives, his first, Dee Dee Ahmed, former rebel in girl band Aurora and backing singer for nineties bands such as Massive Attack and Ocean Colour Scene, the other a Scandinavian underwear model. A career that failed to live up to its early promise (he holds the record for the shortest ever international career: less than a minute as an England substitute when he was eighteen). Now he's playing out his last days at Irontown, after returning from the obscurity of FC Kalleve, of the Finnish Veikkausliiga. His hometown club, for whom he has made more appearances than anyone in their proud but luckless history, and for whom he has the extraordinary record of converting thirty-nine successive penalties across nearly twenty years, has fallen on the hardest of times.*

*Look closer at those tattoos, though, and a different picture begins to emerge. Not the gothic script or Native American warriors of his contemporaries, but an entire history of football inked on his impressive frame. Great figures from the sport's golden age, such as Alfredo Di Stéfano and Eusébio, sit alongside more personal choices, from a chipped penalty that made Czechoslovakia European Champions in the seventies, to now obscure greats from before the First World War.*

*Why do it?*

*I'm a football man. I wanted to show myself as that, to celebrate it. It's been my life.*

The photos make him look good, he gives them that. The

words don't matter. No mention of Tony, though. Tony has done every one of the tattoos except the one of Jari Litmanen. He got that done in Finland. Tony added the other Ajax players later. Edgar Davids autographed it after he'd played against him last season. Tony went over the signature that same night to make it part of the piece.

The piece. The work. That's what it's become.

'It's a piece of work, that,' is all his dad had said when he'd gone swimming with him at the Heathside Lido when Greta and Jari were here in the summer.

He wonders for a moment what Greta would make of being described as a Scandinavian underwear model. She'd probably just shrug. I did model underwear once, she might say. He doesn't know. She might have. She is hard to read. She is not his ex-wife. They are still married. He doesn't want to think about this right now. Dee Dee never sung for those bands either. Finland isn't even in Scandinavia. They never get it right.

As for brushes with the law, one driving ban and a caution for indecent exposure after pissing in a plant pot at the Hightown casino the night they won the old Division Three – a hundred points, a hundred goals – does not make him Ronnie Kray. It does not even make him the Ahmeds or Goldie Stone. And how has that memory drifted into his thoughts? He spends a lot of time not thinking about things. He stuffs the magazine under the bench out of sight. All reading material is banned from the dressing room.

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