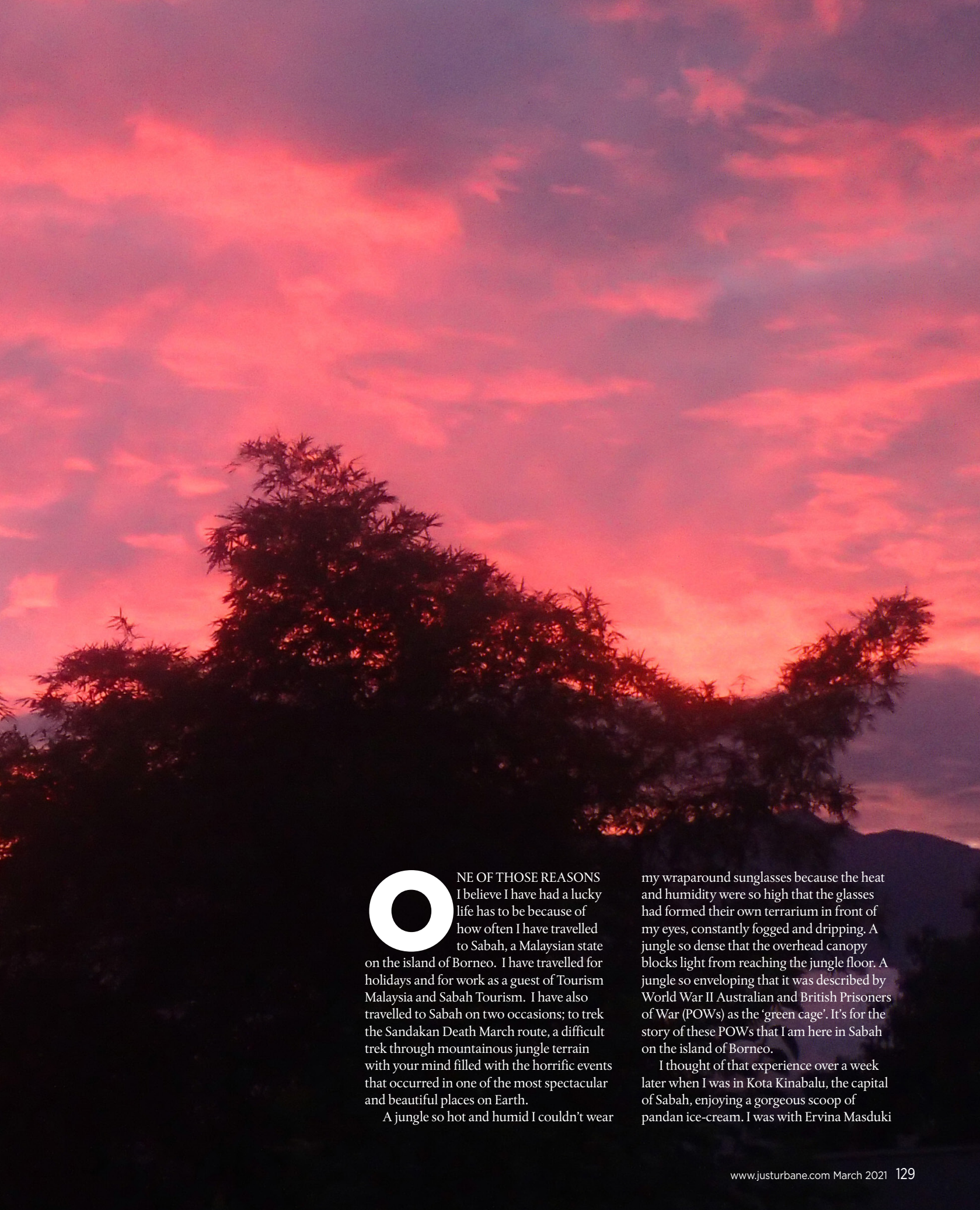


FOLLOWING THE DEATH MARCH ROUTE

Trekking the Sandakan Death March in Sabah on the Island of Borneo was emotional, for there are deeds that should not pass away and names that must not be forgotten

WORDS CHRIS PARRY



NE OF THOSE REASONS I believe I have had a lucky life has to be because of how often I have travelled to Sabah, a Malaysian state

on the island of Borneo. I have travelled for holidays and for work as a guest of Tourism Malaysia and Sabah Tourism. I have also travelled to Sabah on two occasions; to trek the Sandakan Death March route, a difficult trek through mountainous jungle terrain with your mind filled with the horrific events that occurred in one of the most spectacular and beautiful places on Earth.

A jungle so hot and humid I couldn't wear

my wraparound sunglasses because the heat and humidity were so high that the glasses had formed their own terrarium in front of my eyes, constantly fogged and dripping. A jungle so dense that the overhead canopy blocks light from reaching the jungle floor. A jungle so enveloping that it was described by World War II Australian and British Prisoners of War (POWs) as the 'green cage'. It's for the story of these POWs that I am here in Sabah on the island of Borneo.

I thought of that experience over a week later when I was in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, enjoying a gorgeous scoop of pandan ice-cream. I was with Ervina Masduki

from the Hyatt Regency Hotel, enjoying the comfort of luxury accommodation at the end of a gruelling trek on both body and mind. Ervina knew about the trek and some of the history. She has seen trekkers, nearly all of them Australians, stagger into the air-conditioned lobby of the Hyatt, muddied boots and trekking poles making a mess of the polished, tiled floor of her hotel.

It was in 1942 that the Australian and British Prisoners of War (POW) were transferred to Sandakan from Singapore. They were there to build an airfield, but by 1945 it was clear that as the allies advanced the airfield would never be operational. Fearful of an invasion at Sandakan and not prepared to release their prisoners, the Japanese forced them to march to Ranau, at the foot of Mount Kinabalu, a distance of 240 kilometres. Over three marches, the horrific conditions for those who remained at Sandakan camp and those who made it to Ranau, only 6 survived from a total of 2,434. The final 15 were killed on 27 August 1945, 12 days after the war had ended.

Those that died on the track weren't to know it but it had been cut by locals who had been instructed by the Japanese to make it. Thinking it must be for Japanese soldiers, the locals made the track as difficult as possible; up and over difficult mountains and avoiding flat ground, rivers and villages where food could easily be obtained. When locals saw the POWs on the track they were distraught and many risked their lives by passing food



whenever possible to the men as they walked past them.

For those who want to trek this route and learn more about the Sandakan story, the terrain will test you physically and mentally. There are opportunities to visit memorial sites, listen to locals and walk at your own pace in the footsteps of men who, for the most, didn't survive. The trek is designed to allow participants to learn and understand not just the loss of life to POWs but also recognise the sacrifice and bravery of many local Sabahans who provided assistance anyway they could.

Before the trek commenced in Sandakan we visited the English Tea House for dinner. This colonial inspired restaurant sits high on the hill overlooking Sandakan town and harbour. Choosing to sit outside on the grassed terrace I adopt the atmosphere and sip a gin and tonic while reclining in a wicker



lounge. 'Click'. It's the gentle sound of wood on wood. I watch as others in my group play a game of croquet while being attended by a waiter with a drinks cart.

I turn away and focus my attention down below, past the lights of Sandakan town and out to the darkness of Sandakan Bay. It was from out there that the POWs had slowly steamed into the harbour on the dilapidated steamship Ubi Maru in July 1942. Just months earlier the Japanese had taken possession of British North Borneo after the fall of Singapore.

The next day we visited St. Michaels and All Angels Church. When the POWs arrived in Sandakan in 1942, many spent the night in the church before being marched off to the camp. It's a beautiful stone church that was one of the few buildings to survive the air raids in World War II.

In recent years, the addition of the stained glass 'Windows of Remembrance' by Australian stained glass artist Philip Handel has added a remarkable tribute to the Sandakan story. The windows show St. Peter, under sentence of death. The windows are abundant with representations of flora, including Australian Bottlebrush, Banksia and Everlastings, British Shamrocks, Thistles, Bluebells and Roses and Borneo Orchids, Cordylines, Hibiscus and Vines.

The main window consists of 2,500 pieces – one piece for each POW sent to Sandakan. Each piece of glass was fired up to three times in Philip Handel's own kiln. A small area at

the front of the church commemorates the POWs. There is a banner with the following words from Lord Byron; "For there are deeds that should not pass away, and names that must not be forgotten."

After St Michaels, we visited the Sandakan Memorial Park. Evidence of the past is here in the present. The boiler and a train locomotive alternator that was part of an intricate process to generate electricity sit upright and defy all attempts by the rust to topple over. Nearby, the Ruston Bucyrus excavator that the Japanese thought would speed up the job of building the airfield sits with its bucket resting on the ground. It's doing about as much work as it did then, thanks to some subtle acts of sabotage by the POWs.

A little further on are the concrete remains of the Japanese kitchen and quartermaster's store. One of the six survivors, Private Keith Botterill described what it was like: "The cooks would feed the dogs with swill, the kitchen rubbish. They'd pour it in this trough. We'd all hit together, the dogs and all of us. If you've ever tried to pull a bone out a starving dog's mouth you'll know what it is like. The dog would fasten onto your wrist to take the bone off you and you'd still be putting the bone in your mouth."

There is also evidence on a hill, now populated with pine trees, of the trenches that contained many of the bodies of POWs who died at Sandakan. The last prisoner alive at Sandakan was Private John Skinner

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ESCAPE PLAN

Covid-19: Malaysia is the one of the best performing countries in South East Asia and is likely to introduce international travel in 2021. Check with Malaysian tourism and health authorities before travelling. Sabah is a state of Malaysia on the island of Borneo and the east coast has experienced infiltration by pirates from islands in the Philippines. It is advised to follow the travel warning advice about any travel to the east coast of Sabah.

GETTING THERE

When international flights resume, there are regular flights to Kuala Lumpur which then connect to domestic flights across to Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan in Sabah. A full range of accommodation styles from five star resorts along the west coast around Kota Kinabalu to traditional long houses at the Sabah Tea Plantation and luxury island resorts on many islands, including Mabul, which offers diving adventures to nearby world renowned Sipadan Island.



from Tenterfield in New South Wales. He was beheaded on the August 15, 1945, the day Japan announced its unconditional surrender.

As we leave the park there are children enjoying trying to catch dragonflies that flit among some lilies. Newly married couples position themselves in front of flowering gardens for photos and joggers make their way around the various tracks. It's a peaceful, happy place that sits on ground with a tragic past. So long as we don't forget the past, I think it's wonderful that the land has found new life that is maintained and nourished by the people who visit it.

The trek began early the next morning. There's no way of easing us into it. This is a jungle that is impenetrable without the sharp parang of our guides. This jungle hasn't been trekked for nearly 8 months and in that time it has completely regrown.

It was one of the great problems for the War Graves Commission when they returned to retrieve the bodies of the fallen after the war. The jungle reclaims itself so quickly that even with the experience of



locals who had walked the track and with Bill Sticpewich, one of the six survivors, it was difficult to determine where the original track was. There are steep short ascents, steep long ascents and descents that are sometimes easier to slide down than walk (well, that's what I kept telling everybody). There is mud, there are rocks and there are massive trees that have fallen across your path and depending on your dimensions you need to make a decision how you're going to go over, or sometimes under.

There were water crossings wherein we had to cross the rivers, the water level being quite above our knees. Then there were one-at-a-time suspension bridges that looked and felt like they should have been a part of an Indiana Jones movie. There were also leeches, ticks, flying lizards, rhinoceros beetles and the best named creature in the world, the macrolyristes imperator, or giant long-horned grasshopper.

Each evening was spent debriefing the days walk and then briefing everyone on the next day. Everyone was keen to know how many water crossings there will be. More than ascents and descents, it's the fuss of water crossings that caused irritation. The process of ensuring your feet are dry when

you put your socks and boots back on is a routine you have to get right. If you don't, your damp feet will easily cause blisters. Most evenings were fairly short. After dinner there's gear to be sorted for the next day's walk, bruises and scrapes to be attended to, then a restful sleep.

Mid trek, we stayed at a bamboo long house at the Sabah Tea Plantation. With each step sending a domino effect of creaking through the long house it was a difficult late night walk to the toilet.

Along the way, each day, we stopped to talk about the lives of Australian POWs who are known to have died at particular locations on the track. We talked about their pre-war lives. We even sang for those who, its known, loved a bit of country music.

Our trek finished at Ranau and we conducted a ceremony at the Kundasang War Memorial. We searched the memorial walls for the names we have learnt, we looked up at Mount Kinabalu. The locals believe that Mount Kinabalu shrouds the souls of the dead while for the POWs they came to hate the ever present mountain that was always there, watching them from above. As I looked at Mount Kinabalu's long, jagged peak I am proud to have reached the end of this



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trek and even prouder to know more about a story that unfortunately remains unknown to most.

Before I walked away, I took a look out to the jungle past Ranau and imagined Private Keith Botterill hiding in the jungle with Private Nelson Short after escaping from the final camp not far from here. He hears a trampling on the undergrowth, big heavy footsteps that don't mind revealing their presence. He thinks to himself that he's had it, the Japanese soldiers have found him. His head slumps down as the footsteps stop in front of him. He looks at the boots and something is not right. Over two and a half years of captivity have taught him what a Japanese soldiers boot looks like. He looks up, and up, and up. It's a great big Australian soldier, Lofty Hodges, who looks at him and his mate and says, "How ya going boys? Would you like a cup of tea?" They were safe. They had survived.

While our trek was complete, our journey was far from over. We now needed to travel to the Labuan War Cemetery on Labuan Island where the graves of the Australian and British Prisoners of War from Sandakan are to be found. Labuan Island is a territory of Malaysia off the western coast of Borneo and to the south of Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah. It's accessed easily by plane or ferry or if you're slightly more adventurous, by speed boat. Electing the speed boat route takes 20 minutes from the mainland and you motor past islands, shipwrecks and red hulled offshore drilling ships waiting for their next job.

Our accommodation on the island is at the Dorsett Grand Labuan. I arrived before our group and I soon found myself standing in the lobby amidst a crew of Dorsett Grand Labuan staff. They are about to perform their



welcome song for my crew. I've been pulled into the group and handed the song sheet which is in English and Bahasa Malay. I kept up reasonably well even though I didn't know the tune and spoke very limited and badly pronounced Bahasa Malay. The one image I will always have of this experience is looking up from my song sheet across to the singers alongside me as they belt out the line, "We welcome you to Dorsett Labuan!" and they're singing with smiles on their faces. They're not embarrassed and there's no reluctance to show their pride and enthusiasm for their hotel. My group of trekkers are spellbound. Many are well travelled and it's the best greeting any of them have received in a hotel.

The Dorsett Grand Labuan is the only five star hotel on the island and just minutes from the airport, waterfront and the busy town centre. The hotel receives regular awards for its customer service and with their singing staff I think they also have a good chance of winning Malaysia's Got Talent.

While most tourists come for the shopping there is also a very good museum with free entry located at a five minute walk from the hotel. The colourful history and cultural themes of Labuan is well documented with many interesting and

interpretive displays.

We've come to Labuan to bind this trek together. Every step we've taken and the stories we have talked about have led us to Labuan War Cemetery, the final resting place for the few whose remains are known and the many who are 'Known Unto God'. As we walk the lines of memorial graves we think about the Australian and British Prisoners of War who perished at Sandakan and Ranau and on the three death marches in 1945.

We stand in front of Private Richard Murray's grave. He stepped forward from a line of men and said he alone stole rice, knowing he would be killed. Stealing rice was a capital offence and he sacrificed his life so that others may live. We stand in front of Captain John Oakeshott's grave, a doctor who had the opportunity to escape but decided to stay with the sick. He was one of those killed 12 days after the war had ended.

As a fighter jet from the Royal Malaysian Air Force flies over the Cross of Sacrifice at the cemetery we also remembered the sacrifice of so many locals who were killed during World War II and the bravery of those who provided assistance to the prisoners. It is a beautiful war cemetery, well maintained by Labuan authorities and staff are on site



Monday to Friday from 7am to 4:30pm.

While the trek was physically exhausting the walk through Labuan War Cemetery was emotionally exhausting. Before our departure to Kota Kinabalu on the mainland, our group is quiet. For each of us, in our own way, we find the space to reflect on our journey. I've cried during this trek but for now I am smiling.

As I remember the staff who sang to us yesterday and the kids playing at Sandakan Memorial Park right at the beginning of this journey, I know I have to come back and continue to share this experience with others, for the history of the past and for the friendships of the future.

Far from the wartime horror of what was then known as British North Borneo, the Malaysian state of Sabah is beautiful and the people are friendly and polite. They may laugh at my use of Bahasa Malay words I've picked up along the way but they laugh not to make fun but to make friends.

The island of Borneo, of which Sabah is the northern most region, has been described as the 'Land Below the Wind', taken from the title of a book, first published in 1939 and written by Agnes Keith who lived in

Sandakan. It's a description that tells you where Borneo is but not what it is. It tells you Borneo is below the typhoon belt of the South China Sea but doesn't describe the near impenetrable jungle that blocks light to the jungle floor. It doesn't describe the vast network of rivers that twist through deep rainforest valleys and gorges.

There's something else missing from the description, the 'Land Below the Wind'. It doesn't make you smile. Despite the difficulty of the trek, despite being far from home and tending to blisters and an aching back, you can't take the smile off my face. The challenge this land presents, the locals you meet and the opportunity to be in real jungle has given me a desperate longing to come back.

Weeks later, I pull on my boots to start preparing for another trek in another part of the world. I cross the laces and pull on them sharply and a small cloud of dust puffs up and drifts over my face.

It is the smell of my footsteps in a place now far away. It is the smell of the jungle, it is the smell of leaves both fresh and fallen, it is the smell of my emotions, often faltering and falling. I am home and I weep that they, the truly brave and fallen, are not. 