Because I had been living away from England for many years, and because I recently moved home; because this word “home” has acquired a worrying political resonance over the last decade, of homeland security and patriot missiles; because I wanted to speak with people who are comfortable making grand claims about what they believe their home to be, and because this same group had been in the news recently, I took the train from London to Newcastle on a sunny Saturday morning to see the English Defense League. The EDL are a rough and popular nationalist movement, famous for their vocal opposition to what they see as the spread of Islamic law across England, and this Saturday they were holding their long-planned annual demonstration. They call it their “homecoming.”

Two days before I went north, something inconceivable happened in London. I am, by my profession, concerned more with the representation of events than with events themselves, so I will here quote from the account given by the Daily Mail. This is the EDL’s favorite newspaper, and the lead story began:

Clutching a bloodied meat cleaver after executing a soldier on a crowded street, he delivers a chilling message of hate. ‘You people will never be safe,’ he declares in a clear south London accent. ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’.

Like all extremist groups, the EDL traffic in nightmares, and the particular fear they trade in is of dark-skinned, swarthy men in robes quoting the Koran and killing and child-abusing their way across England under the guise of multiculturalism and toleration. This day, in Woolwich in south-east London, a couple of dark-skinned men had killed a British soldier named Lee Rigby in the street with knives and then explained their actions with
Like everyone in England, I have now seen a short video of the immediate aftermath of this murder. Two things are shocking about it. First, the obvious: a man with bloodstained hands holding a meat cleaver and a carving knife is standing over a body, in broad daylight, in a street in London. Second, and perhaps as terrifying: this was being filmed. Someone holds her cameraphone up and straight at the man, recording while he speaks. In the background, people walk on: a woman with a shopping cart wearing a turquoise scarf steps by him, indifferent. “We swear by almighty Allah we will never stop fighting you,” he says to the camera. His pronouns are very clear but the Arabic words sit uneasily in his mouth, and he speaks in a London accent.

In the days that follow the murder it emerges that this man is a Nigerian with a Christian family background, which perhaps explains why he is quoting the bible. In the video he appears confused about what he means by the “homeland” he mentions. The only country where British troops are currently serving is Afghanistan, and this man certainly isn’t an Afghan, but this does not prevent all of the newspapers for sale in Kings Cross station on Saturday morning from leading with the same word: “hate.” This does not sit well with the day, for Saturday morning is clear and blue. I take the 9 o’clock train north, and on board there is a festive atmosphere, for this is a Bank Holiday weekend, with no work on Monday. The train is punctual and crowded, and the passengers carry unlikely, holiday-ish things: a bright yellow fishing net, hatboxes, overstuffed greasy bags of sandwiches. The train runs fast through the mild English landscape, like rolling up a great green plain, and we pass power stations and cathedrals, York, Durham. As we approach Newcastle there is a slight roll of hills.

At Newcastle, there are police in bright yellow riot gear waiting in the station, flashing neon safety vests and shin pads. Nobody knows how many EDL demonstrators are coming, and I see several types of police, some with badges on their backs: “evidence gatherers” and police on horses, “transport officers” and men all in black. Between them, also arriving at the station, are hen parties. One group of women, pulling suitcases behind them, catches my eye, for they too are wearing bright
vests, except that theirs are pink and on the back announce “Bridal Support Crew.” Newcastle is an old city and its cobbled streets are full of pubs, so it is popular for hen parties and stag nights. It is accustomed to brightly-colored revelers.

Opposite the station, the EDL are gathering at a pub called Gotham Town, with eagles on the top and a sign saying “Live DJs every night.” They are easy to spot: shirtless, heavy men, with their shoulders thrown back and their arms up in the air, carrying flags. This is the red and white St George’s Cross, the old flag of England—not the flag of the United Kingdom, but only England—and they have painted slogans on. “This is England,” says one, and the men chant: E-E-EDL! E-E-EDL! I wait in the shade of the station for a while, watching as others arrive: journalists with big cameras, more bridesmaids, malnourished boys smoking cigarettes.

The people watching are on one side of the street, and the EDL are on the other, and at first it is easy to tell them apart. But the carnival feeling is common across the city today, and as cars pass honking their approval and as the chants rise it becomes harder to escape getting caught up in all this. Now they are chanting, “whose streets? Our streets!” The most thorough study of the EDL was carried out by a think-tank called Demos, and their report of November 2011 notes that the group “does not have members in the conventional sense.” There is no formal membership list or procedure for joining; they don’t sign a pledge or pay dues, and apart from a vicious distrust of Islam they have no binding or coherent ideology. “The central organizational apparatus of the EDL is the internet,” the report notes, so being a member of the EDL is simply a question of following them on Facebook and turning up at their marches. A demonstration exists to be seen: by watching it, from the station side of the street, the bridesmaids and the journalists and I are making it happen.

I ask a policeman what time the demonstration is supposed to begin. He explains that in theory the march will start at 1.30 and end at 3. Then he rolls his eyes and adds, “these things don’t always go according to plan,” but at exactly 1.30 the demonstrators unfurl their flags and finish their cans of lager and start to shuffle. They turn left up a wide Georgian shopping street, guided by the police on horses. I wait while they go by, and then, once I consider that a safe ideological distance has passed between
us, I start to follow. The trouble is that I walk faster than they do, so that I soon catch up. For a while I worry about the pronouns here, whether my I has joined this we, but this soon strikes me as foolish, precious. We curve up a light hill, past shops and more onlookers, and then turn right down a pedestrian mall, through a narrow lane and into a sloping square. It is 2 pm.

The leader of the EDL is a man whose photograph I’ve seen many times. His name is Tommy Robinson, and he is short, with a bland face marked only by a scowl. This week, an interview with him was briefly the most-watched video on YouTube, and today he keeps his sunglasses on as he steps up on a platform. There is no way to avoid this: he is an astonishingly good public speaker. His voice rises and dips; he speaks in repetitions, with the emphasis upon odd parts of the words; the crowd cheer and boo exactly when he wants them to. He speaks of the death threats he receives each day, and says he often thinks of his own murder at the hands of a fanatic. “It is honorable to oppose terrorism,” he says, and he repeats that word “honorable” like Mark Antony in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. He alliterates “soldiers suffering in faraway fields, fighting the forces of sharia,” and he demands, again and again, “when did truth become hate speech?” This is perfect classical rhetoric in the English sunshine.

He speaks for exactly fifteen minutes, and when he is done and the crowds are at a peak of elation he calls for a minute’s silence, “for the armed forces who have died.” As the crowd falls silent we can hear, for the first time, a chant coming from a rival demonstration a couple of streets away. “EDL—off our streets” comes the refrain. At the end of the minute, everyone in silence raises their right hand, with the fingers in a V for victory.

There are other speakers: the head of the EDL’s local chapter, and then the LGBT representative whose single and slightly unconvincing speaking point is that his existence proves the EDL are not homophobic. The crowd begins to thin out into the surrounding streets and pubs. I stay and listen to the speeches. I hear that this great nation of ours is sick under the weight of immigration flooding in, and that we are a Christian nation, and that Muslims want to put homosexuals in concentration camps like
the Nazis did. It all ends with a couple of rousing rock songs played over loudspeakers, and I try to catch the words: one is about sharia law, and the other rhymes “EDL” with “infidel.” At 3 P.M., the demonstration is done.

This punctuality is the sign of a movement trying to be serious—a movement aware of how tantalizingly close their moment seems right now and yet how easy it would be to miss that moment. Today, in the sunshine, it might be easy to think—just for a minute—that the world is turning in their direction. Today, their faith might be vindicated. According to the Demos report, EDL supporters tend to combine pessimism with an unusual belief in democracy: 81% of those polled answered that voting does matter. What this means is that they believe things are bad but that change is possible.

I walk back to the station, past men dressed in flags and neon policemen and bridesmaids in their 1950s make-up, and I am in time to catch the 4 o’clock train back south. I find it impossible to take a train anywhere in England without thinking of a particular poem. “The Whitsun Weddings” by Philip Larkin is a great poem about something the English pride themselves upon, which is indifference: the capacity not to care too much, to remain aloof from passion. In the poem, the speaker is aboard a train on an English holiday, and as he watches out the window he sees at the stations newly-married couples, the women dressed for their weddings “in parodies of fashion, heels and veils.” They ride south, towards London:

And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give.

Outside my train window the fields are in lines and in order. The poem for a moment imagines some change, some other England, but it never quite arrives, nothing so radical as this. The poem ends as the train nears London:
We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

My day with the EDL was sunshine, and I got home just at dusk.

* * *

In the days and weeks that follow my trip to Newcastle, two comments I heard that day stay with me. I’m a terrible reporter, always too shy or too polite to ask any questions—I’m not sure, to be honest, that people ever reveal themselves in reply to a direct question—so I prefer to listen and to overhear. The first of my speakers was a late teenage boy with dark hair who answered his phone as I passed him in the street. I’m at the EDL march, he said, and then he paused. Just watching, he said. The second was quicker, one bridesmaid to another, faced with the flags and the shaved-head men in the streets in front of them: it’s to do with religion, she said to her friend.

In the days and weeks that follow my trip to Newcastle, I read the newspapers, like everybody in England, and I watch the evening news. Tommy Robinson appears on the BBC, and Channel 4 runs a special feature: who are the EDL? Tommy is invited onto Newsnight, one of the glossier and more contentious English news shows, but then they cancel his appearance. There are silent marches across the country: at Wolverhampton, Dereham, Wigan, Derby, and towns with little old fashioned names men lay flowers and flags at war memorials. A magazine of men’s fashion, usually more concerned with suits and sportscars, prints an interview with an imam who suggests that all Muslims need to do is to offer a cup of tea and a biscuit to the EDL, and this strikes me as a perfectly English response.

Like a smaller subset of the English population I also watch the Facebook page for the EDL—the number of “likes” reaches 145,000 and then slows down—and I join Twitter solely in order to keep up to date. Twitter’s conception of allegiance is even more coercive than Facebook’s,
and I become one of Tommy Robinson’s 58,000 followers. Tommy offers
to do a sponsored walk on behalf of a charity for English soldiers, but
the charity refuses to accept his donations. Increasingly philosophical, he
tweets: a country that does not know its history has no future. The charity
then publicly accepts a donation from a strip club in central London called
“Spearmint Rhino” and Tommy is sardonic, worldly-wise. He tweets a
photograph of himself with a black eye and a busted lip. He retweets the
threats that others have sent to him, promises of death and sexual violence
visited upon members of his family. He watches the football.

A kind of hollow confusion falls upon the country, like fog or a
sleeping curse from a fairytale. Someone writes the word “Islam” in red
paint on a war memorial in central London: this must be either a deeply
confused Muslim who couldn’t spell “Allahu Akbar” or, more likely, a
troublemaker, but it is one more gesture in the mist. The man accused of
murdering the soldier at Woolwich goes on trial, and requests the court
to refer to him by his new Islamic name, not his old Christian one. I hear
a genteel old lady being interviewed on the radio. She doesn’t like to go
into London, she explains, because it feels like a foreign country.

All populist political movements have one thing in common: a
belief, bordering on paranoia, that the mainstream media are either ig-
noring them or distorting their words. They hang upon the possibility of
coverage in the New York Times or The Guardian like a wild-eyed teenage
lover and then when it comes they scorn it. This is as true for Occupy Wall
Street as it is for the EDL. When Newsnight cancelled Tommy’s scheduled
interview, they were only confirming something the EDL already knew.
But it is not only the EDL who have these pre-existing storylines. I read
in The Guardian, Britain’s most-respected and leftwing newspaper, that
since the death of Lee Rigby the EDL “has held three major demonstra-
tions—all of which have been marred by violence and running battles
with the police.” I know this is not true, for I was at Newcastle, but I also
know the appeal of conformity. That the EDL should fight the police in
something colorfully called a running battle is simply part of the orthodox
liberal belief about the EDL, and so here, in newsprint, they do.

I go out, to housewarming parties, to book launches. When I tell
people that I’ve been to an EDL demo, they are taken aback. Just watching,
I say. I’m writing a piece about it.
In 1932, a disaffected politician and minor aristocrat called Sir Oswald Mosley resigned his government position—he was a member of the Labour Party, Britain’s left-wing party—and founded the British Union of Fascists. It seemed like a good time to start a fascist party. That year, the Nazis won the general elections in Germany and in Italy Mussolini had recently banned all parties but his own. As the historian Robert Benewick writes in his book *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, “Britain was sharing in a depression affecting the older industrial nations and seemed on the verge of collapse.” Unemployment rates were rising: twenty-three per cent of British men were out of work by the end of the year. Mosley’s supporters, dressed in black shirts, looked in step with the times.

But the crisis never came. British political institutions did not break down, and after a fight broke out at a demonstration in Olympia, Parliament passed the Public Order Act in December. This Act banned the wearing of political uniforms in public, and the BUF collapsed soon after, as if without their uniform they had nothing more to offer. In trying to explain why fascism did not take hold in Britain—as it did across Europe, under very similar conditions—Benewick concludes by quoting George Orwell’s 1941 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn.” These animals are the heraldic symbols of the United Kingdom, and in the essay Orwell calls for a democratic form of English socialism. Totalitarianism would not work in this island, Orwell writes, because “the gentleness of the English Civilization is perhaps its most marked characteristic.”

I have always been wary of appeals to national characteristics, but this summer in London everybody seems to be drawing from the same pool of symbols. The question is, which England do you want: tea and biscuits at the mosque or men in football shirts? Nowhere in the political conversation is there any trace of something outside this. The Demos report includes a short but fascinating section on why people choose to support the EDL, and it explains: “Respondents referred to a love of England, commitment to preserving traditional national and cultural values, and belief in representing the interests of ‘real’ countrymen.” And those who march at Newcastle, and those who condemn them on the evening news, all appeal to a vision of England.

Because I understand history and politics only by starting with literature, I think of Shakespeare. His *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the great
play of misbehaving in the sunshine: of the old rituals and customs of the English countryside, and of the license given to working men to disobey the political order for a while. This is how Shakespeare understood the logic of comedy: that the capital city is a place of corruption and legality, and that you can leave it and head out into the woods, though in the end you must return. In the end you are a member of this nation, despite any ambivalence you may feel; in the end ambivalence is what makes England. Shakespeare’s most nationalist play, the rollicking French-bashing escapade *Henry V*, is simultaneously his play which is most skeptical about any claim that there is such a thing as an English nation. In that play, the English army is made up of Irishmen and Welsh, and they scarcely speak the same language.

In England, the borders are unclear, because this is a country that also shares an island. This is why we have a history of both toleration and racism. On the EDL Facebook page, one comes often across the claim that Islam does not belong in this country because it does not derive from here, but this would be equally true for Christianity. The point is not that the EDL are ignorant of history: their George Santayana-quoting leader would scoff at that. The point is that they are historical, the heirs of an English tradition of ideas about itself. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised when I discovered, a few days after my trip to Newcastle, that Tommy Robinson’s parents are Irish immigrants to England.

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