

# THE ISTHMUS

By  
Robert Fieldsteel

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## CHARACTER AND SETTING

### Character

WILLIAM - 28 years old - American Southern gentry. Accent not required. Still has a chipper collegiate energy, leavened a bit by disease. As disease progressively ravages his body, his mind loses the filters of civilization and the thoughts and words flow without measure.

### Setting and Time

A military hospital in Panama, 1906. A hospital bed. The author recommends hanging strips of clear or diaphanous material next to and beyond the bed. Some may be close enough for WILLIAM to hold onto. Borders and boundaries - of the flesh, of the land, of morals, of time - become fragile and fluid in this play - and, ideally, the set should reflect that. That being said, a simpler arrangement should suffice.

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A military hospital in Panama, 1906.

WILLIAM, age 28, sits propped up in an old-fashioned, iron-backed hospital bed, stage center. He is dressed in a simple white hospital gown. The sheets are white.

Surrounding him on the stage are hanging strips of clear plastic, roughly 8" wide, interspersed at varying intervals. The presence of other people -- in the hospital, in memory -- may be sensed moving in and out of these strips, but should not be lit directly. Two strips hang on either side of William's bed. The actor may grasp hold of these, pull himself up, even swing, but may not stand of his own accord.

William is composing a letter (Note: the actor need not actually engage in the physical act of writing.) His demeanor is chipper for a man in a hospital bed.

WILLIAM

April third, nineteen aut six. Panama. Dearest Judith, Your Natty Batty Bumpo has done it again and been felled by minutia, this time in the form of a common mosquito. Or, shall I say, not so common, as it made me the not so proud recipient of a whopping fever, sweats and all, which has landed your more batty than natty braveheart on his bum in the infirmary. As with everything else here, our medical quarters are but superficially removed from the raw jungle -- specifically, in this case, by oiled tent flaps. My fever has subsided considerably since the first two days and I'm still a bit weak and woozy-brained, but have been allotted a dollop of luck -- my physician, one Lieutenant Orville McCloud, is, yes, a Washington & Lee graduate, class of aught one, he knows several '99s and caught me, of all things, in one of the theatricals there, a bit unfortunate that it was Hostess Quickly in Henry the Fifth, but he assured me it was a memorable rendition of the death of Falstaff speech and not the least effeminate. Perhaps he is not the seasoned country physician one would hope the corps to provide far from home, but a tonic for my spirits nonetheless and apt as apt I suppose for this venture of very adventurers of the new new new new new.

(MORE)

## WILLIAM(cont'd)

(brief pause)

Despite the relief of my fever's subsiding (my membranes felt swelled as ticks on a hound in July) I cannot rest completely assured, as a second stage can hit after a seeming respite, far more pernicious than the first. But I've responded well to the quinine and Doctor Orville feels that my exposure to advanced medicine from infancy should make me far less susceptible than the average native to the ravages of the mosquito messenger. Which is fortunate, for even the brownest local has a tendency to turn the most unsightly yellow, conjuring up, yes, yes, here it comes, your turn on the boards in Webster's *The White Devil*, the association a salve to my soul, my sweetest feisty one -- you, as the bold Isabella, poisoned at the portrait of her love (I can hear you now crying 'Stop, you're awful', yet I know you'll read on), yes, dauntless Isabella, passionate Isabella, felled by pressing her lips to the oil canvas that held the image of her love, the image of his lips, smeared with arsenic by the dastardly villains and how you kissed that painting, it was as if that thin stretched canvas could spring to full flesh and then, my god, a scene later, with yellow paste smeared 'round your deathly face, first authentic female in the theatricals no less, how your father allowed it is more than impressive, and my heart did leap at that bold little girl on tiptoe kissing that canvas as if it were life itself and smearing her face with yellow paste. That alabaster face of yours, no, no, I'm not being a silly romantic, it is truly alabaster, that is in its neutral state, for right now I'm sure it is the brightest crimson, but you must humor me in my reverie, as I'm an infirmed and mildly inflamed Bumpo on a log and the bloom is off the rose from the ceremonial first break of ground.

(Brief pause)

I can hear the digging outside my window, if you can call it a window, a foot by foot square of, yes, mosquito netting, and our gloriously narrow isthmus is seeming infinite in the heat. The canal is of an excellent design, of course, an excellent plan and lord knows Teddy's given us no shortage of labor, but now the job's begun, our destiny is suddenly more laborious than manifest and the prospect of a completed waterway more an abstraction even than it appears on paper. Would that your father could select a scribe of his choosing to turn the joining of Atlantic to Pacific into something more elevated than we get from the Hearst brigade. Dare I say we deserve it. If I am grumpy, my love, forgive me, but the fever's left all forms of flotsam in its wake, not the least of which is my ache that you're not with me. Would that you could transmute yourself through air with the ease that you metamorphose in the theatricals, my dearest love. My fondest to your father, *vox clamantis in deserto* and all my love, William.

SUDDEN LIGHT SHIFT:

as William changes position on the bed.  
Feverish.

WILLIAM (cont'd)

April sixth, nineteen aut six. My dearest dearest, you may read or you may not or you may gently touch this paper I wish to send to you to touch for the fever has hit and you may read or you may not. To follow the ink from my head through the pen without staining is sustaining to the lifeline, the lining plump and taut, the ticking overstuffed, and on the map, as a little boy if you broke those lines the countries purple and green and orange and all would spill out and make a terrible noise. My brother and I, I made a map of paste, a relief map they called it, a relief map, with mountains and valleys and it took a long time to set, much longer than pudding and my brother, with his finger, it seems a premonition now, the isthmus, this very isthmus he scraped with his nail, broke it through, the thinnest piece and I yelled and yelled, the Americas broken and he laughed and laughed and it does seem funny now, my love, so irresistible, that little piece, a boy's instinct to break it through and Teddy our Teddy our Teddy our Teddy riding on the cusp of the bullet through McKinley's membranes, roughriding the cusp of the century mark, that tiny bullet passing through tissue, and here at the gate to join two worlds I giggle I confess from Washington to Lee to McKinley to Teddy master of our manifest destiny, "a strategic center" he said and we shall link the empire through the jungle and I still giggle, my love, my brother's fingernail passing through the piece so irresistible. A toddler's joyful gibberish, Panama, Panama, Panama, Panama, Panama, Panama, Panama, giggle with me my love when the sluice gates open and the mighty oceans rush into one, Doc Orville giggles not, sees the rude mechanical hag perhaps, Hostess Quickly, false floppy dugs hanging in the lap of the plucky '99, Falstaff's entrance eternally suspended, " *'a parted just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide,*" our tercentennial presentation, and I to sound the comic death knell, said your father, a hope to be better received than Shakespeare's, said your father, killing Falstaff before his entrance, enter King Henry, no more Hal, they hated it at the Globe. Would that I were cold as any stone like Falstaff it would be a rare relief, my love, as I am feeling more gelatinous and of heat, the moistened membranes hemorrhage says Doc Orville and thus the yellow tincture, far less sweet than thine, and I, the body just a casing for the soul said my mother of my grandfather, so let my soul seep out to you as I take respite in the basin.

SUDDEN LIGHT SHIFT:

as William changes position on the bed.  
He grasps the plastic strips that hang  
by his bed.

WILLIAM (cont'd)

At Dawn. My dearest dearest,  
At a point of bright blinding, as in the eyes when  
translucent plates of stereopticon are yanked from the magic  
lantern and the bare electrics unadorn. Going back to the  
moment, the bare moment, nature's tiniest needle breaks the  
toughest skin, a moment, of a swarm, swarming, like the  
zygotes under the microscope, one breaks through, one  
fertilizes and I, coming out knowing and not knowing, through  
the brush, still strong, crease in the trousers in the damp  
still creased, to the brown girl in the brush and the sense  
of beginning and end, drives the machete in crowning arcs,  
wider and wider, slicing through the isthmus, slicing onto  
the paper you touch, my love, they tried to pry it from my  
fingers, my love, Let him be said Doc Orville, a medical  
miracle this pen to paper, this parchment flying off to you,  
such a thin slice of this forest holds so much, all the trees  
felled in this sweet damp forest may they be sliced to  
thinnest parchment that I may fly to you my love. Dearest  
Judith, do not turn the paper on its side, promise me you  
will not turn it on its side, the thinness is blinding, can  
slice your eye, a quick pull on its side, from one side to  
another, pass it through the retina it barely leaves a trace,  
just the wispiest slice from side to side but do not do it my  
love, promise me you will not.

(Pause)

My dearest Judith, do not.

(Pause)

I can hear them digging outside my window. Through the  
isthmus, the Gatun lake, the Culebra Cut, the machete  
sweeping to the brown girl in the brush, skin cured soft as a  
coin purse, she, lifted up by the roots, toppling down, a  
swath cut through the brush, and bites breaking skin, claws  
scraping dirt, beneath the nails sliver black moons, a  
photogravure negative of nighttime and, passing through,  
passing through the membrane, *Named in heaven and earth the  
Cyprian Aphrodite, from east to west, from the Euxine to the  
Atlantic Gates, over all that see the light of the sun my  
rule extends. Oh Hymen, Hymenides, to those who reverence my  
power I show favor and throw to the earth those I find  
arrogant and proud,* your father would be proud I remembered,  
remember me to him, I think, verbatim, Classics 201.

He begins to lift himself upward from  
the bed.

## WILLIAM (cont'd)

Doc Orville, Doc Orville, let down your long hair, that I may  
climb to you, my love, bathed in bunting on the observation  
deck, climbing up black ironsides waiting in the lock,  
cannons and bands and presidents, the completion of the cut,  
the day of reckoning, my hands, clean, wrapped around your  
narrow waist as I lift you to the sky and the sluice gates  
open, cannons firing, the vessel sinking in the locks as we  
glide through the passage, through the Miraflores, sinking,  
sinking and passing through, your face a silhouette framed by  
the sun as I lift you, my baby . . . my sweet yellow baby . .  
. my sweet yellow baby . . . my sweet yellow baby . . .  
lifting you as we float along the cut, passing through . . .  
passing through . . .

A moment of suspension.

BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY