

Field Day for a Boy Soldier · *Paul West*

I

ON MY PALM, my father's medals, dead as he, cover the so-called lines of head, heart, and life. I say medals, but there are only two; my hand is not very big, even now, and the medals feel heavy.

"He never wore them," my mother says with attenuated gentleness. Wrapped in coarse tissue paper that smelled of almonds and soot, they tarnished in a shallow little white box of glossy cardboard such as might have enclosed condoms. Once I found and polished them when playing soldiers in a peaked cap and silver-buttoned blazer buckled tight with two belts, one around my waist, the other over my left shoulder to make a Sam Browne. He let me flaunt them for an hour, then with a taut face, as if in some jubilant pain, made me wrap them up and give them back. That was during World War Two, when we pinned swastika flags to the map of World War One, *his* war, the backdrop to his four-year rise from private to sergeant, his wounding not long before the Armistice, when he was honorably broken upward.

I half-salute him with the other hand, remembering from some manual how to look him straight in the eye when at the proper distance and (how did it go exactly?) "to raise the hand smartly until the tip of the forefinger touches the lower part of the headdress or forehead above the right eye. . . ." Trying to reach him, to be in his world, I dredged up and learned by heart some peculiar things. It amused him to have a small boy, *his*, shoot him a stiffer-than-stiff salute. If only he could see me now. The full-blown etiquette of military compliments eludes me; holding the salute until he returns it—except he is no longer at the proper distance—I am frozen at attention.

The bronze one hangs from a ring. Its ribbon is red in the center, with green and violet on either side, shaded to make the colors of two rainbows; but what holds my eye is the winged figure of Victory, prim in a toga, one hand uplifted to cup sky as if testing springwater. The head looks detachable. The feet have begun to melt, I can't think why, unless the figure is standing in the mud of the trenches. The side of the face in shadow has a halo, not above but alongside.

The brass medal is all action, though, with St. George on horseback trampling the eagle shield of the enemy powers, and a skull and cross-bones (for good measure), while the sun lifts above all like an extension of the ribbon's orange watered center.

If he ever wore them, he must have had the king's head outward, so

Victory and St. George were what he wore against his heart, hard against the khaki serge. Jangling as he breathed, they were what he got for giving what he gave, and here I fall into the phrasings of Decoration Day formulas, usually spoken against the echo of crimped trumpet notes and a distant shuffle of traffic.

“At the cenotaph,” my mother begins, but loses her drift, which in my mind’s eye I complete, though never having seen him there at that concrete breechblock inscribed with the names of the local dead. *Cenotaph* means empty tomb, and I still wince at the word, at the bony whisper it seems to release; I never heard anyone say it loudly.

Then life resumes.

With a little self-conscious war-whoop (Highlander’s or Mohican’s), he launches me at the sky, out of 1937 into the never-never. I muss his brushed-back thick black hair in passing, my knee flicks his trim sharp nose, even as he sets me down to shake hands over and over again with two or three bent-over men, right there in the village street, like inbred ghosts, none of them wearing medals. Husky, distance-watching men with pawnbroked smiles and fresh-rinsed eyes. These, I knew, were the Few Survivors, and they never went near the cenotaph, except maybe during dead of night to dream and smoke.

“A big difference,” he once told me, “between medals and *decorations*. One means you were there. You didn’t have to have done much. The other’s for being brave in action. Or,” with his most fleeting sneer, “for impressing the right officer!” And these were medals only. As if it mattered. The officer who had promised to arrange his Military Medal, which was actually a decoration, via some harmless sortie on a quiet night (“I can’t have a sergeant without a ribbon”), was killed the next day. As it was, for these two ‘gongs,’ my father lost an eye, and nearly both, and took so much shrapnel from the shell-burst that he seemed in certain lights—graphite dawn when he took a stand-up bath; August afternoons when he snoozed open-shirted on the lawn or read with the hovering nods that betrayed his lack of depth perception—to have been strewn with confetti or fish-scales. And the big oval scar on the small of his back made me look for some sucker just removed. I rarely saw his body, though, and it still seemed to belong to military surgeons, ambulance men, and the War Pensions Board (who gave him two dollars a week, or so, for life).

II

Thirty paces or less is the correct saluting distance. Salutes are not as a rule given at a distance greater than that. Well, at least the wrist is straight, Father, thumb and fingers are joined; they hold a pencil, whereas you, as

you sometimes said, wrote your initials with a Vickers machine gun against sand and sandbags, walls and snowbanks, and advancing ranks of field-gray men in spiked coalscuttle helmets.

No: I cannot sustain him in the vocative, not now he is gone, not when I never listened to him properly as he told of his war's first year, of going at sixteen (he faked his age to enlist) into the terror that was Belgium, 1914. I go on saying *he* and I stay at the arm-aching salute.

Did he really riddle the sunset with machine-gun fire?

Scissor the low cumulus until rain fell from it?

Did he puncture the moon? Aiming upward as if the gun were a theodolite.

Did he ever reload? I mean, didn't he *ever* have to? Or did someone else in his gun-crew do that? I should have asked him, and I never did, although I heard him out when he launched into those hour-long recapitulations of total recall. Every town, every casualty, every advance, every retreat, the names of the grocery stores, the churches, even the map co-ordinates, and all I can do now is retrieve him through maps, annals, and the little red manual called Field Burial Service stained with his own blood. They must have let him keep it, I used to think, in case he had to bury himself. Or they let him bring it home as a souvenir, to put with his medals. *No*: it just came back with him somehow, by accident, in his kit. I once took it to church, for a joke, before my parents excused me from going, not long after I began using his old canvas kitbag to keep my toys in. How much he and I overlapped.

We carved wood together in a blizzard of shavings to make planes and galleons and submarines.

The metal bits, the flanges and hinges, he himself shaped, humming through gentle catarrh.

When we painted, at the same time sharing slices of apple we clamped between our teeth during the tricky parts, he did the whites and reds, I the blues and the camouflage colors (the greens and browns). Each left the other's areas bare.

He threw balls for me to hit: balls of leather, rubber, wood, cork, and little golf balls eviscerated. Parabolas of thin rubber ribbon trailed love all over the yard as the balls unwound.

Bat, pole, strip of floorboard, old tennis racket, I smote with them all. Swing. Wind-up. Wham. I never knew the right order in which the joys came, sometimes beginning with Wham.

"More, Daddy, more!" I'd cry, and he always could.

Games of peace, these. "Don't close your eyes," he'd say. "Watch the ball all the way in." My nose bled. He swabbed it. We played again. Then *his* nose bled and I rode the elevator of his arms to dab it. He never tired

except when I did, and it never once occurred to me, when he was putting away our childish things (standing the bat in the corner by the door, rolling the ball into its drawer among buttons, tools, and sticks of sealing-wax), that I was playing my games with a man who, as a youth, had almost been obliterated by high explosive. Yet he was intact, more or less, and that's why putting him together is even harder.

III

So follow him I must into a mud pit where he sits with three others, all in steel helmets except the corporal whose hat is soft and has a floppy peak. You sight the Vickers gun as if it's the pencil in some short-legged, lethal pair of compasses. Bound in puttees, my father's legs looked bandaged and filthy. His moustache isn't quite full enough, although surely his voice by now has broken. He is only sixteen, after all, and should be taking examinations entitling him to begin his career in accountancy. I can't think of an ancient Greek who faked his age to 'join the colors,' but there must have been at least one. How epic. Or was my father just escaping the tribe of brothers and sisters crammed into too few rooms? Swapping thin-sliced beef off the giant Sunday joint for 'bully' beef in cans, which he soon learned to use as bait for rats overgrown from troughing on the dead. In that way he stayed proficient with his revolver, perhaps while taking aim thinking, in some tender counterpoint, about a child post-war. What concerned him was not a world fit for heroes (as a slogan of the day had it), but one fit for children. Or listening to Grieg, which he loved to do, his ear hugging the radio, the other one closed off with the palm of his hand.

"But," my mother resumes about the medals, "he'd polish them even if he wouldn't wear them. He was always clean." A touch housewife-proud, she shifts abruptly into another voice, her cenotaph voice. "They went down in hundreds. He didn't need to aim, he said. Just look toward them and fired. He just pressed down with his thumbs, and it was all automatic." Then she tells me the story I remember his telling me, about the honor-mad captain who led a charge, monocle in eye, sword in hand, against the German machine guns. Ferrers of B Company, it was; his medals no doubt reached his family by registered mail, as usual. No, not medals. Decorations. Surely he got a Military Cross.

I still know, having been amply instructed when little, how to site a machine gun in the front line, siting it not on the parapet but behind the parados. Otherwise the site will be overrun, and the Huns will impale us both on already blood-wet bayonets. But what the parados is, or was, I have no idea. Could I find it, though, I'd know for certain what to do.

I promise him to be good, to behave, to do my duty, do the right thing at

the right time. Formulas all. All that bothers me now is that he loved me most when I did not know I loved him, though I used the formula all the time, and that is my salute now as I volunteer to recover him, tracking him into horrors that make my teeth ache and narrow my throat. I crawl under the barbed wire while flares splutter titanium-white overhead and the enemy machine guns whip and crack. Or they chatter. This is called memory when it isn't guesswork. We get back by Verey light to see the grass that sprouts along the parapet lift into the air as the bullets hit. The image is of summer.

There will be worse missions to come.

For now, it's only deference as I tag along after him into the craters of our memories, into the myth a child listener made from his improvised catharsis uttered (I marvel at this) some twenty years later, when the son was old enough to read a map with him, pin a flag into a salient. What did he do between 1918, then, and 1940? He kept it to himself because my mother could never bear to hear it. I ask her and she gives a glum half-shake of the head.

He did tell her, however, about the time they greased a pig and released it into a Belgian dance hall (but were they dancing there, even then? Or was it France, well behind the lines?). Next they caught it and dumped it into a well. He told me to look at the book called *Somme Battle Stories*, and, although I could read at four, lazy-eyed I thought for years it was *Some Battle Stories*, choosing an indefinite plural over a singular river, a valley, a hell. How cheerily, I wondered, did my father fight? As if taking carp or pike from a local lake with maggots or earthworms for bait? Or in steel-eyed aloofness, as when he hadn't slept well? Of course he looked, but did he see?

Sometimes the Belgians fried eggs and ham for him. He always managed to find tobacco to stuff into the pipe that was the badge of premature sagacity. The Army allowed him to send postcards home, and he deleted the phrases or sentences which didn't apply: *I have been wounded and am in hospital, I have received no letter from you*, and about a dozen others formed the pattern for a catch-all emergency statement. One man, adjudged a deserter, they tied to a big wheel for something awful called corporal field punishment, but in the end they just left him there to be derided. There were times when my father and his crew managed to get their gun really clean, as if the war were not going on when it was, which is when he or some other hoisted me at arm's length up at the smoky sky with a falsetto shout, and a rickety biplane hummed down at me. "One of ours," they'd yell, and then pretend to fling me at it as if to some aerial rendezvous of equals. Lofted thus, toward whichever sky, I smelled battle over the lettuces growing rank all over the yard in late summer, I smelled bacon and fried eggs above the trenches. When they picked me up, into their dream at their

altitude, I never knew where I was, and hardly cared. And *they* was always *he*.

Eventually I decided that this behavior was a ricochet from the war, during which he kept on persuading himself that, if he could see himself with a son, he would survive. So he saw his future through a child's eye, as it were, held out at arm's length like a talisman, to whom he would one day tell all, but not to my sister who, instead of echoing my complicitous ah's, slid beyond him fast, from dolls to cookery, heedless of the place names—Malines, Alost—which he mispronounced, as he had a perfect right to do, seeing that something of him remained buried there without so much as a poppy to grace it, whereas dandelions, Oh yes, he said, their yellow blurred the torn-up ground and the seeds wafted through the burned-out villages.

IV

It was all Somewhere in Belgium, as newspapers used to say with blatant secrecy. His regiment's name, though, The Sherwood Foresters, borrows from a chunk of boyhood myth, and even now, with no matter how much grown-up irony, I see my father as an ally of Robin Hood, clad in a war suit not of khaki but of Lincoln Green, releasing showers of arrows from behind the parados and frolicking the evening away with Little John, stave-bruised; Friar Tuck, who has just consumed an entire greased pig; and Maid Marian disguised as a Red Cross nurse. It's as if he's just been called away from court, falconry, and the occasional practice joust to a mortal tournament with the Kaiser himself. Thus my father, with his nose just a little blocked-up and a sprig of hawthorn between his teeth, becomes the figure of Victory on St. George's horse. They pound the Kaiser, nicknamed Bill, into the blood-red sludge, and ride back to protect those riding through Sherwood Forest.

The facts remain, however. One-eyed accountants are rare, although burned-out accountants are more common. My father spent the rest of his days repairing machinery for eight hours a day and listening to symphony music in between. It was as if he lived a lifetime's allotment of hell before he reached twenty, as if his life were some grand quotation learned by heart, booming at the outset only to dwindle into mere lettering: *Let there be light*, the great first use of the subjunctive, otherwise known as the mood of subordination, and it was into that mood that he disappeared as he reached forty. Daddy, Dad, Da', D'.

Oh, there was light enough, enough for him to shave one-eyed by, from the hissing and sometimes broken gas mantle in the bathroom, where he also took nearly invisible motes of shrapnel from under his top eyelid with a delicately shaved matchstick while I thought of how, in Belgium, long after

1918, bodies and gun barrels, soup vats and chassis of armoured cars, surfaced out of the earth's slow churning. Yet these hardly visible bits of 'Jerry's iron' had no symbolic value for him and were just a nuisance, to be picked off as they showed up and smeared gently on the back of his hand before he swept them to the linoleum with a minor sigh.

My father fishes in his eye, I used to think as I stood by him waiting to see the black speck leave the pointed match when he touched the vein behind his knuckle. He rolled the upper lid so high I thought his eye would fall to the bathroom mantelpiece, like a pirate's. I even used to dream that Robin Hood had a glass eye, or at least a headful of shrapnel splinters, and would rid himself of them by peering into a spring in Sherwood Forest. Breathing hard while his neatly manicured fingers groped and fished, my father loomed in the gaslight, sighing in a different key from its even hiss, and I gave him all the years of my own life, awestruck by his stance in his undershirt and the scars that peppered his arms. Every bit a Sherwood Forester who burned trunks into charcoal and hunted deer with fatal chivalry, and a St. George who rode a horse called Victory in a Grand National than any since, he was also just my Dad, with a Worthington Pale Ale in his fist, a Players Navy Cut cigarette perched unwet between his teeth, and an eye in whose iris there twirled a tiny blind fleck of something innocent and gone.

V

I have no alternative, having come this far on the wave of his *Up-you-go!* and his tireless ball against my bat, but to go after him, who is missing, into the valleys of the Meuse and Sambre, where he did his freshman year in human behavior. For here lies the key.

The wounded, as often as not, had been pinned to the soil with bayonets through their calves or hands. Several soldiers met a Belgian youth who had a bucket full of what he said were German eyes. Lighted cigarettes were found slid into the nostrils and ears of bound and gagged civilians and left, as it were, to go out in their own time.

To this tip of the iceberg he responded through lax, inclusive images of how tent pegs hold down a tent even in the strongest wind, of how altruistic nameless souls 'leave' their eyes to certain hospitals, of how often his own pipe went out of its own accord. In this way he gave himself short reprieves, long enough at any rate to make the atrocity eligible to be known as a fact. He seems to have spent half his time succoring the wounded and the maimed and (a category new to him) the newly maimed wounded or the newly wounded maimed. The other half he spent sleeping or, when only half-asleep, mowing down the enemy in hundreds. Yet he endured and, fixing his mind on postwar images of rural cordiality, prevailed over a

bloodstorm of ripped-out tongues, children whose hands had been severed because they clung to their parents (there is no ambiguity here: children in such circumstances *are* their hands).

He looked away, of course, able to note in passing that Uhlans had the device of a skull and cross-bones on their shakos; almost amused to learn that two German officers, after looting all the valuables from a house in Vise, signed a paper directing that the house be spared, pinned it to the front door, and then burned the whole thing down. Uhlans, he said (“Them again”), gave the order “*Trak*” before executing civilians. Everything postwar was peccadillo to him, even the windows I smashed with a succession of new balls, even the soot I shoved into a neighbor’s long johns out drying on a clothes line. How merciful he was. He never spanked me or my sister once, for to do so, I now see, would have made an Uhlan of him, beheading a baby in order to march along with its head on the bayonet spike.

What a mix he knew. To curry favor with the invaders, local officials staged “*fêtes nocturnes*” in the town squares, with bonfires, cheese, and hot wine, during which everyone Belgian clapped hands and haltingly sang “*Hoch le Kaiser*.” One German corporal came away from a village with a bedsheet full of cigars and pipes, evidently intending to set up as a tobacconist later on. One German officer, dead of a shot through the jaw, had a sword with a golden handle and carried a card saying he was Count Fritz von Bülow. To set a house on fire, the Germans plastered its walls with inflammable pastilles, an inch in diameter, which ignited if rubbed. I asked him which came first, the rub or the application, but he refused to say, and no doubt he didn’t know. As long as there was more to come, he needn’t get things word-perfect. And on he went, telling how the regular corps of incendiaries had the word ‘Gibraltar’ on the left sleeves of their tunics. Those assigned to the slaughter of civilians wore a small black feather about two inches long on the side of the helmet. Occasionally an unburned house bore a placard which in German said “Good People,” so the *Belgians* burned it down. If your wound hurt, he said, almost as if he’d noticed my nose bleeding, you dressed it with Iode Tintura, then applied the blue bandage, which was the First Field Dressing.

He needed every flash of non-homicidal color. Gently steering a choice potato or a morsel of lamb to the side of his plate for me to take, or my sister, as if we were puppies, he colloquially made the best of things, reporting or simply musing on a war that had had style, jargon, exotica. But, in a fiercer or less protective mood, with me at least, when he was impatient for the bath to fill and ungrateful for the splash of Imperial Leather Bouquet my mother had added on the quiet, or when four darts out of five hit the cupboard door instead of the black and yellow dartboard, he’d let a few

vignettes slip, as if to say: There but for the likes of me go the likes of you. And then we — usually I — heard about the mayor cut in half and put into two sacks, the farmer nailed across the empty doorway of his farmhouse, the mutilated priest upside down in the fly-loud earth-and-ashes outdoor toilet, the babbling peasants who roamed the roads without ears, lips, or noses, the ten-year-old boy (who made me blanch) hanged with string from the cord of a ceiling lamp. I knew to be good and ungiggling when, with mordant care, he told about the German bayonet; on being withdrawn, it inflicted a tearing wound with its saw-like reverse.

VI

Never did it occur to me that he invented any of this. Some of it was hearsay. Some of it was his own witness. Some of it came from the ongoing fund of outrage stories told one another by British and Belgian troops. He told things, though, as if he'd seen them all with his own eyes, as if he himself were the whole of the army that advanced or retreated, as if he had been a collective witness of the gruesome whole. He was beyond being hurt, I suppose, whether into poetry, pity, or piety, but he must have trembled daylong, knowing he should not quail, and maybe living out an old hymn, as ancient as modern, which exhorts us to strive and not to yield.

How far away he seems, since being cremated, as if diffused into a blue far bluer than his eyes. I am invoking a ghost, but one so friendly, so reverent of the need to be genial (except with impromptu visitors to the house), that his good will and his boyish zeal for handmade things (planes, letterholders, book ends, calendars, pipe-racks) envelops my not-so-young head in something like the aroma of fresh-baked bread, hot from its oven fug, soft from the enclosed air in the grain.

Little fragments assail me as if I had never thought of them before. During the first year of war, he began to suffer from ingrown toenails. Boots always made his heels blister and bleed. He once daubed a red cross on his handkerchief and left it, weighted down with four balls of mud, on the chest of a wounded comrade, hoping to give the murderous Uhlans a moment's pause. "Wasn't your handkerchief khaki?" I asked. "Not white?" He blustered as if found out. "The cross was still red." He once met a Belgian civilian whose name was *Oui*. I now realize that the weird, sapped smile he cast at the window of my grandfather's butcher-shop window expressed relief that it wasn't the window of just such another shop in Belgium, which had human limbs on the hooks (but no heads). Severed breasts and genitals he never mentioned, but I found them for myself, after his death, in the White Paper on *Alleged German Outrages* (1915), though he did mention the child at the window in Rebaix, at whom he waved. She did

not wave back, so he supposed it was a doll, only later discovering from the house-to-house inspection platoon that it was a strangled child, propped up to face out. Soon after that, he and a hundred others ran into a force of Germans who marched forward behind a screen of children all being made to sing the Brabançonne, and had to fire at an upward trajectory, above the children's heads. "They'd have done better," he said, "to advance behind grown-ups."

Is that what he thought I was doing? Advancing behind him? Primed with horrors so the world would never frighten me as it had frightened him? Whatever else, it's not his grimness that has worn off him onto me, but some wholly abstract indignation on behalf of all victims. "Not *bestial*," he'd insist. "It's peculiar to human beings." Several times, I heard, German officers had summarily executed both officers and men for committing outrages, so there was a little flicker of decency, he said, wherever you went. Just enough to keep the fight in you discriminate. Did he actually think that at sixteen? It seems a precocious thought; but, then, he had a precocious life. At the age when my own head was full of blank verse and the symbolist poems of the nineteenth century's last decade, he was coping with such things as the thing he told me when I was twenty, a new graduate. This time the Uhlans had done a bayonet-Caeserean on a woman six months pregnant, after which they beheaded her husband and stuffed his head into her emptied womb.

Did the top of my father's skull lift up when he first heard that? He did not know. What was past was past, or rather the response to it was over and done with, and the vile act became an abstract emblem of human potential, something to file away and warn a son about in case the Germans tried it again. As they did; but, instead of being called to the colors I was called to the map by my father, and there we defeated the Uhlans with multi-colored flags attached to sewing pins.

VII

But sometimes he was another man. Sickened by the worst of the worst, he switched into an altogether fresh mode of narration, about a quite different matter. I still see him, vivid as when he first told it, against untrodden dunes bristling with spear grass, not far from the sea, and entranced by a sky so blue it seemed to have substance (his own words). For three weeks he and his gun-crew gazed out to sea, awaiting an invader who never came, guarding the Belgian coast against (he joked) a hostile cricket team from England. By the beginning of the second week, they had begun to sunbathe in two-hour shifts and to sleep the proper number of hours. Their only diet was bully beef and fresh water fetched from a deserted villa only a hundred

yards away. I think he was never again so happy. He had found the perfection he always wanted, the thing that gave the lie to war: a coastal peace in which he strolled from the dunes to the villa to eat his corn beef alone on a balcony that faced Holland and its Hook. Nothing much, but for him it was the field of the cloth of gold purged of blood and rabble, with prosaic handy options inviting him to fish, pat a grazing horse, or scoop sand with his palm.

Only a mistake in orders had sent them there in the first place, and only a correction, delivered by a panic-ridden motorcyclist, pulled them out. The image never left him, as if it had been some deliciously alert death, and in after years he embellished it until even to him it became intolerably sweet and he reverted to the horrors. Grape arbors, roses, and carnations relieved the blank of a whitewashed wall, he said. The blossom there was of apple and pear and plum, but also of apricot, nectarine, and pineapple. I blinked, but on he went, talking of seas and oceans, beaches of smooth stones or sand either pink or white or ocher. He had seen it all.

If, since his last telling, I have yielded to sea fever on his behalf, I've never known; I do not fish, I rarely swim, I do not ride, but I do stare hour after hour at a seascape, no matter where, recouping his Belgian idyll at large, minus the Vickers gun, the khaki, the canned beef. And he is always there, averting that one good eye (though never so good really) from the sump of war to some dimpled horizon along which, in his version of a humdrum heaven as pagan as precise, blossom drifts like May snow through which outsize pike stick their pointed snouts and horses with whitecap manes gallop upward.

VIII

I sometimes wonder if he existed at all, at least in the world of the rest of us, in spite of his total recall. Who was the American surgeon who saved the one eye for him? Who was the never-mentioned-by-name nurse who, during his year at the redbrick Eye Hospital, stitched for him those samplers kept face downward by my mother in the bottom of the big cupboard that held the family's books? "All of life left," he'd say, "and nothing to do with it." He meant he could find nothing to do with it, but he also meant he wanted nothing to do with it. Others lived it for him in his dotting presence. We all did. The shell-burst, that killed at least a dozen, wounded dozens more, one of whom, later identified as a Corporal Blood, was found on top of my father, both of them soaked maroon, but my father more with Blood's than with his own. "Shielded," he'd murmur, awed by coincidence.

One vignette, gentle as an elegy, draws me past the war to him again. Wounded soldiers going about London wore a blue tunic akin, I find, to the sun-bleached blues worn by Mediterranean fishermen, laborers, and farmers. I think that link would have ravished him and sent him voyaging in his mind's eye (a phrase that always made me tremble for him), from Eye Hospital to, oh, the Camargue, Bandol, the Iles d'Hyères.

IX

My mother and I put his medals back into their tissue, which feels nothing like paper. She has nothing to say. I am supposed to inherit them and keep them by me to keep me brave, but the faint clink and the soft whisper of two folded-over ribbons tell me that I am only a voyeur in his terrain, peering beyond the empty rims of both medals into his thundering youth shot through with rainbows. What is left to me, his male survivor, I long ago received, and have stewed about ever since, trying to find his exact words, and wondering if his habitual estimate of having killed several thousand soldiers is true.

“Fire,” he says. I still do not know what ‘parados’ means, but I do duty for him as best I can. I press my thumbs against each other until the nails drain white around a tiny pink isthmus almost half-way down, and up I go again, past the black crown of hair, conjured by his zeal.