

EDWARD DESAUTELS

The Rapture of Sorrowful Things

Some assert the suicide of Dadaist Jacques Rigaut on November 5, 1929 drew the curtain on that movement's French manifestation. André Breton wrote of him, "At around age twenty, Jacques Rigaut condemned himself to death and waited impatiently, from hour to hour, for ten years, for the perfect moment to put an end to his life." Finding sympathetic company among Mouvement Dada, whose proponents espoused a "theoretic suicide," Rigaut declared, "Suicide is my vocation" and "Try to stop a man who goes around with suicide pinned to his lapel." Determinedly pursuing his career as dandy, hedonist, seducer of wealthy women, drug addict, and suicide in waiting, Rigaut produced few works in the final ten years of his life. Rather, often under the assumed persona "Lord Patchogue," he made himself into a walking expression of Dadaist rebuke. The Great War left its survivors wounded in ways grotesque and elaborate. Though flesh intact, Rigaut suffered wounds on the battleground at Lorraine that would ultimately claim him a decade later.

What bothered corporal Rigaut most was the way the aroma aroused his appetite. Not quite as sweet as his mother's *tartelettes aux fraises*, it nonetheless caressed the hairs in his dusty nostrils and lured him, if only a little, back to himself. His empty stomach marched in place. His stale mouth wrung phantom saliva from empty glands. And despite the occasional flare launched to deny him the small comfort of absolute night, green flares illuminating the mute with whom he shared his crater, Rigaut turned a handy trick, swapped the fragrant memory of macerated strawberries simmering in their juice for the sloppy cascade of the mute's useless organs. All of it sinking, like Rigaut himself, in the ruddy gutter of Lorraine.

Under circumstances like these, the mind is capable of the most astounding hoax. And in need of hoax, he worked his mind hard in that hole, heedless of the subway line carrying his waking dream, his shaky grip on trigonometry for field artillery, its technical death language of grad and azimuth and nomogram, *those smoke tinsel altars with stale incense strew/flowers before the chasm, gaping wide ...* (why Verlaine?), the articulation of Musidora's wrists as she posed in black body suit, the lovely Vep attuned, ready on the fire escape of Louis Feuillade's stage set Paris night (Oh la la! "Les Vampires!"), heedless of any destination promised by any of these petrified musings other than *le bout de la route*. End of the line, Monsieur. All passengers off, please.

He cursed the rain. He removed his cap and massaged his sweaty, itching scalp with high-strung fingertips. He worked his mind, feared not working it would solicit death. After all, though the night shift had taken charge of the combat the booms and blasts persisted, erupting above him, about him, palpating the battleground, feeling for another pulse to still. Against his numbed face, he rubbed his palms, savoring in them the rousing scruff of grimy stubble. (Ha! Poilu! The unshaven—those heavies wouldn't suffer an artilleryman among them, not even a Rigaut fool enough to beat back a raiding party across the No Man's Land.) With ragged fingernail he mined dirt, blood, and wax from his ear when he might have done better to leave it all in place. Curious, he placed a nugget on his raw tongue and found the iron-tainted polenta no substitute for the dish made with corn, the kind he once sampled with a side order of hot Italian sausage in a sweaty bistro called Provini's a couple blocks off the overcrowded beach at Biarritz. No matter. It stoked his hunger just the same and provoked a fancy brainstorm, a dream gadget to forge memory—of Provini, of polenta and sausage, of Biarritz—into an device clever enough to extract him from his hole and deposit him in the lap of a tawny Biscay Venus. Then he gulped air just to be sure his lungs hadn't turned to wax, but the effort wedged his diaphragm into his throat. And so self-sabotaged, he blacked out.

For how long he could not later determine—he'd smashed his watch weeks ago shoving his 75mm into position. It remained on his wrist a talisman of the familiar, a dead mechanism wound faithfully every morning in the stubborn hope such ritual might revive it. Not that he could read it in the gloom. Certainly, the day had not yet risen. So, unless he'd been on dream patrol for twenty-four straight, he surmised he'd lost only a matter of minutes, at most a couple hours. 2300 hours? 0300 hours? Hard to tell. No matter: his immediate situation remained unchanged and he felt come to think of it, a bit refreshed. For what, he could not imagine.

Then he derided the thought anyone could be “refreshed” under circumstances like these, marooned in the No Man’s Land, his only company a German corpse, squat in a bomb crater filling with rain. Swallowing him. At the front.

Once again Rigaut cranked the handle on his brain, got it purring. Here, he thought, rest comes only with loss of consciousness, permanent or otherwise. Every conscious moment crams the mind with too much, and even sleep is reduced to a kind of consciousness. No rest but in the passing out or the passing on, and shell shock lurking one atrocity away. You can never tell when the spasms and shaking and blubbing and self-soiling would wreck you, but he suspected most are immune. How else explain the many lads who get along from one punch-up to the next, those thuggy poilus who nest in their ghastly trenches until the next cue to traipse the baroque ring of meat and thunder. Astonishingly few came down with the shakes. And, what about me? thought Rigaut. Don’t I seem to be cultivating this immunity? Here I am, center of the storm, holding my own. A bit bored, no? The thought dismayed and invigorated him. Bored, maybe, because I’ve done exactly what was expected of me. Eternal coward, I unholstered my sidearm, rallied the other cowards around me, and together we beat the Boche raiding party off our emplacements and back across the No Man’s Land. But what if I had handed my Lebel to one of the Boche and motioned for him to pop me in the nut?

Under the fresh light of a newly launched flare, Rigaut sized up the ruin beside him and felt nothing. I am not moved. Yes, this German I have every reason to hate, this stand-in for the Kaiser himself, for the noisy machine dashing our old fashioned dreams of the kindly lamplighter. But I don’t hate. I have every reason to celebrate—or pity—his death, sing a tribute to the Hotchkiss gunner who so skillfully cut him in half, or recite an elegy over another son funneled into the grinder. But I don’t celebrate. I don’t lament. I pun English on Hotchkiss et Cie: hot kiss for thee. Another way: This dead stooge is me, tangled in the logic of this spectacular abattoir, his having-been reduced to a pithy notation: “missing and presumed dead.” Someone in the regiment, I’m sure, has already categorized me thus. So what? The inoculation is not without side effect, eh? The vaccination destroys as much as it preserves. One more: he is a poem unto himself. So much the better the poem he makes has nothing to do with will. The way his head declines, tucked a bit to his shoulder and shrouded in that great coal scuttle of helmet—that is a line, no? That is a line no poet tethered to language could conceive. Just look at the right arm draped across his chest; it opens at his thick biceps in a stilled fountain of blood, muscle, and a morsel or two of shiny white fat. All of it has leaked and congealed into the wool of his tunic, waterproofing it. What poet could

could compose a line of such exquisite languor? And the other arm lying in the dirt beside him, connected to the torso by a rope of sinew, the hand chewed and missing the thumb, the pinky. How the symbolists would fuck that slack trinity to kingdom come. Baudelaire, my Baudelaire, you have nothing on this kid, these impromptu lines unwritten, spilling vitals from the hem of his tunic.

The crimson that had pooled underneath his companion he estimated fresh; it could not have accumulated any earlier than late the previous afternoon when the day's final "engagement" (the higher-ups can be so dainty) crested, the tide of survivors retreated to their trench lines, and the battleground's sour beach fermented in the flotsam of a roiling surf. And not a sun-burned bather to be seen. This corpse, this *German* boy no older than himself, silenced in his tattered gray tunic, this *meat* had only just begun to turn. But by way of its tartelette bouquet it achieved for Rigaut a gesture of life. This, he suspected, was the daily bread of survival: to contort yourself in a gesture some might remember as having, if only once, freed you from the walking talking meat you are.

Overhead, doughy clouds remained on duty and made damn well sure the green light held the No Man's Land in steady state. Detonated munitions saturated the atmosphere with the sear of ammonium nitrate, the sour mash of toluene and sulfuric acid. It fouled the abused wool of Rigaut's tunic and smuggled itself under his skin; he could taste it, a spoonful of Besozzi grenade filler shoved into his mouth. Hearing, which he'd temporarily lost during the melee that landed him in this place, came back to him slowly, like a diver in his bell returning to the surface after a long promenade along the seabed. And he was far worse for it: the moans of the battleground above began to search out his hole. Some of the wounded clung to enough wit to turn their agony on a bitter phrase or two. Sometimes the dry, rasping supplication came in German, which he had difficulty translating but not understanding. Other times it arrived in French. Enough of Rigaut remained to find the bravado disturbing: *Finish the job, sweeties! Me, too. One bullet to the brain, please.* Sometimes these appeals were followed by single gun volleys, which to Rigaut sounded as though offered from an entrenchment flanking his bomb hole. He wondered whether it wasn't the French trying to do their countrymen a favor, the Germans theirs—not an unheard of practice on nights like these when a truce could not be arranged for removal, in whole or part, of the maimed and done-in. And to think of the weeks spent lounging in the sunny reprieve of Live and Let Live, the calm that prefaced this latest uproar. Spare the poor souls the anguish, the pain, the advance of rats already bloated on soldier. Spare them a death by drowning in the sucking mud. Spare the survivors from having their ankles

snagged in the desperate clasp of the dying, a living barbed wire, during the next day's rush. Rigaut listened to their cries and contemplated the term his old chum Max had coined for those wounded and stranded in the No Man's Land: the not-yet-dead. Max converted it into a suitably military acronym: NYD. Day's tally: 317 dead, 26 MIA, 182 missing and presumed dead, 49 NYD. "But Max," Rigaut told him, "we're all NYD."

Bravado, certainly. But also a fatalism that had crawled up all their assholes to root in their guts and blossom in their brains. Gallows humor. The lever that moved them off of one moment and onto the next. In his letters to Max (Maxim), he sometimes called him "my good old Brattatat," playing the name Maxim shared with the heavy machine guns the Hun used to make the poilus dance. NYD, thought Rigaut, is my *designation*. I should have it stamped on all my official documents. Short enough, there should be no trouble fitting it upside down on the inside of my lower lip, that is, if I can find a tattooist fit for the job. On leave, should I live to see a leave, corporal Rigaut his very self will trot home to boulevard Raspail and acknowledge the welcome and well-wishes of neighbor and stranger alike. I'll doff my field cap and flip the lip to reveal my grand achievement. Yes, it's me. Not yet dead! To mother Maddie, greeting me at the door: I'm home! Not yet dead! And then, with a flourish, the grotesque lip-flip. Nothing, he thought. She knows nothing of me now. Should I return, she will know me by my face, and perhaps even kiss it. That is the custom: cheek, cheek, cheek. We would haul up all the clichés from the basement of Imagination and Cruelty Perceived, manufactured by the machine of Discomfort to obliterate the Beauty of Silence and ratify the droll equilibrium of Family Chit Chat. Then I'd crash the old alma mater, patrol the halls of Lycée Louis le Grand, treat the current crop of Magnoludoviciens to a glimpse of their future, replace professor Amiot at the head of the class and, with the flip of my lip, show them what their class in poetry begets.

So many gestures the corpse-poem's tone, arrangement, and fragrance recalled. In a nocturnal reverie of Luneville or Nomeny or Champenoux or whatever now-vanished town was lending its superfluous name to the sodden waste in which Rigaut lay, he imagined he was not the misplaced artilleryman accidentally fallen into a shell hole to keep company with half a corpse and attend the lonely serenade of the wounded begging for release. No, he was the Sunday putterer in his garden, harvesting the largest, reddest strawberries from this very patch of earth. Once, the blossoms had bewitched him with their fragrance, so now he scuffed along on knees wrapped with newspaper swatches meant to keep the fabric of his trousers from wearing through. He plucked the swollen, pimply bulbs from the low vines

and tossed them into a woven basket the bottom of which was moistening with the liquor of bruised fruit. Cool beneath the lingering dew, the earth clung to his fingers and caked his nails as he worked among the rows of the strawberry patch. Before long, he was loping back to his cottage with a basketful, soil drying on the skin of his knuckles and palms. Pausing a moment to examine it, he delighted in the pink rivulets formed by the creases of his love line, life line, telegraph line, Seigfried Line, sangfroid line, interminable line, what have you. Then across the fields he gazed, out to the *property* line formed by a long, frail row of waste-high chestnut saplings flaccid in the late-morning sun. Beyond it was a null landscape: a geologic expression of the desolate: an abandoned golf links hard against the ugliest Celtic seacoast, lacking even a postage-stamp sized putting lawn: an ancient burial ground on the very plains of desolation. But it was his landscape, he'd bayoneted, strangled, and decapitated with the business end of an entrenching tool for it, and now it yielded no small measure of fruit. But of course he had done none of these things. He was an artilleryman who murdered at sanitized remove. A German raid, and inflamed temper, a cruel imagination, a fetid curiosity—all of these drew him out, drew him in, urged him on toward the No Man's Land. He remembered that now. The sun in these parts burned quickly, killed slowly. But there was no sun. It was night.

Rain began to pool in Rigaut's shell hole, a rain he could feel but only just barely hear beyond the ringing in his ears. It was the same rain that had accompanied every recent attempt at advance; impossibly neat, mud-making rain. So-called generals and their so-called meteorologists, so-called field marshals and their so-called mediums: this was the brain trust at work behind the internal combustion albatross, thought Rigaut. It was an image that almost managed to delight him, much as did that of the pneumatically operated turtle neck sweater he'd conceived in the mental fog of his former Louis le Grand life. Truly, reincarnation exists: life as a series of incarnations. So many lifetimes between then and now, thought Rigaut. Purposeful, yet without forethought, he'd begun scooping a bricolage of mud, gravel, coal, shrapnel, leather, blood, bone over the splayed guts of his crater mate. Another soldier with an empty gut, another soldier for whom appetite had become extravagance, hunger absurdity. For the moment, his own demanding gut stifled itself as Rigaut buried the torn ends of the Boche. Pierre Poilu packed a peck of pickled Prussian. Enough English to pun, thought Rigaut. My lessons were not in vain. Strange there's no shit. None I can smell, anyway. Were the German's stomach split, would an aroma of cheap lager taint the crater? If the Hun fortified its minions like every other tribe involved in this sham, a beer would likely have

constituted the last mouthful down the sluice. He'd heard about Brits queuing up for their ration of rum, whiskey for the truly blessed, just before the next god almighty stab. Rigaut himself had seen the poilus flock to a rancid, cloudy measure of liquid manure euphemistically passed off as *le pinard*. You took your tinful, then contemplated a gizmo by which to manufacture immortality. The limit defined by this murky sacramental cup was that clear. No wonder it took so many rounds to find the range. No doubt Bacchus cracks a numinous smirk over this sanguine orgy in which the soon-to-be-gutted so variously perfume their innards with the distilled and the fermented. It was true he'd seen some unapologetic and devout poilus attending a dismal Mass *al fresco* before an advance, and he marveled at the power ritual and superstition held over them. No metaphysics of the Roman Church, in his book, could match that of a tin cup of liquid manure ladled out of a gasoline vat by some ornery Bretton much too old, and with wifey and kids and home no less, to be pulling canteen duty on the fringe of stalemate. Even here in Lorraine on the so-called forgotten front.

With another handful to cover the worst of it, Rigaut finished his lax internment of what now, coining not-so-clever terms of self-delusion, he referred to as the "crater meat." If the sun should rise tomorrow, the stink will be bad, but the stink will not kill me and what doesn't kill me only allows me time to consider another trite expression. Tomorrow was fast approaching.

Yesterday, however, would not leave him. It established itself on the nape of Rigaut's memory, knotting at the base of his skull. The mortar shells had landed with hollow, forlorn thumps. Screams. Abrupt barking in both French and German. Fascinated in the chaos, he'd watched one of the adjacent gun crew, Charbonneau, crawl right out of the small crater made by the blast, uniform in ribbons, face opened and running. "Charbo" had staggered in a circle, arms held out, beseeching, blood flowing in streams from each of his ears. The one eye left to him focused on Rigaut and just as Charbo seemed about to speak a burst of machine gun fire ripped his throat, decapitating him. On the verge of panic, Rigaut fell to his knees and elbows and began to crawl, hoping what he'd seen really wasn't true, that Charbo's body had not stood motionless and upright even as his severed head began to disappear into the soft earth.

Meeting up with Bauchene and Mynatt, Rigaut marshaled a few of the artillerymen around him. They held their own with small arms, firing angrily in the dark at German words and blinding muzzle flashes, while Cloutier scrambled up to the trenches to fetch as many poilus as he could. When these arrived, a firefight ensued and Rigaut, caught up in the sport, found himself among the brutal,

indignant poilus who'd quickly gotten the upper hand on the German raiding party. He marveled at his indifference, icy in the province of poilus who shot the standing, opened the lying with bayonet, and slammed rifle butt to the head of everyone they knocked off, just to make sure. When they'd beat the surviving Germans back over the edge of No Man's Land, Rigaut came upon a dozen or so men in sky blue sprawled along the barbed wire in grotesque attitudes. Most were dead. Several, badly wounded, looked at him with startled eyes, their silent faces yellow. One of these men was completely involved in the barbed wire, stomach laid open, entrails stretched up over a splintered tree limb anchoring wire to ground. He smiled with what to Rigaut seemed embarrassment, even as he tried to stuff his guts back in. Churning smoke hung in the air, obscured Rigaut's vision, allowed him only truncated glimpses of the cursing, the whimpering, the filleted, the laughing, the sardonically remorseful, and all the others ushered into this impossible tableau. Alone and alive, utterly turned around and befuddled, out of his depth and wits, Rigaut was desperate to high-tail it back to his gun emplacement. But what constituted back? Cocking an ear, trying to listen through the din of a combat zone winding itself back to red frenzy, he could make out neither French nor German voices; neither the burp of Hotchkiss nor blat of Maxim. As far as he could see, which wasn't far—ten, maybe fifteen meters—rifles, grenades, packs, gas masks, papers, and personal effects were strewn like the refuse of hell's careless picnickers. Forced to the limit and resigned to fetching a bullet sooner rather than later, he rolled onto his back to welcome the cold unzipping. But, unaware of the makeshift topography to which he'd been clinging, he only succeeded in dropping over the lip of the shell crater inhabited by a dead German over whose fearsome wound he would so meticulously scoop handfuls of wet Lorraine.

With false dawn came an intensified quiet. To Rigaut's best estimate, the last of the flares greened the night clouds some twenty minutes ago. Now day approached bituminous and drear to the circle of sky observable from the bottom of his pit. Boredom, it seemed, was spreading with the dawn: even the burps and blats had about them a tuckered-out, lackadaisical quality. What a lazy battle this had become, once again running out of steam before either side had a chance to seriously penetrate the other. What a big half-hearted, impotent, imbecilosexual encounter this war was turning into. So believing, Rigaut began to pat his pockets for his tabac, but the pouch was missing. He squinted in the direction of the crater meat. Its pockets were bulging.

Gingerly, and not without a vestige of what passed in him for guilt, Rigaut reached out and patted the bloody meat's tunic. Habit is habit. At the moment,

habit was buying him a mucky feel-up of an anonymous Boche, one who just might have bought it with a pouch tucked safely away in one of the many pockets sewn into his war rags. He knew this was in no way noble. But since when did it become a question of the noble? Allowing, of course, that the noble could not be rendered through mediocre gestures: the ones for which you received training and were expected to execute: the gesture, for instance, in which you defend your shitty, rat infested ditch by placing the sharpened end of an entrenching tool under the chin of your attacker and shoving for all you're worth. There's no noble in that. Better to feed your desires, even if it means passing up on an easy shot, or a slight indiscretion regarding the so-called respectful disposition of the dead. Too many dead anyway, and precious little respect to go around for the NYD. Take what comfort you can, Rigaut.

The spendthrift's pleasure is the loot of his friends. Remember that one, he thought. I suppose down here a dead Boche passes for friend. How, he thought, the soothing aphorisms bubble up at just the right moments. And me without pad and pencil. What did La Rochefoucauld say about ideas flashing in our minds more complete than can be made with much labor? But how quick I am to lose my bright ideas.

March, 1918. No fairy tale could be this grim, he thought. But that wasn't his pun, was it? That one belonged to a nameless Brit met somewhere in the endless to and fro. And *voilà*, what have we here? Finding the hoped-for package, shaking with cold and wet, he just might have lifted the helmet and kissed the slack lips. Or Frenchified his dead German guest, not with tongue but with cheek, cheek, cheek.

Prize in hand, he pressed himself down into the crud and examined the packet. Wrapped in the leaves of what appeared to be the salutary page of a letter, then what appeared to him the salutation of a second letter and, finally, a curious handbill composed of numerous typefaces in both French and German, the packet, to Rigaut's delight, did indeed contain a small ration of *tabac*. It invited Rigaut to another calming ritual, to the fingerwork of tobacco and paper that would grant him a bit of peace and the lucidity to hatch a plan. Time groaned down on him: The war was shaking itself out of its slumber. Soon enough it will have wiped the crumbs from its eyes, taken its morning dump, and burst through the door into another fine day fit for manufacturing corpses.

Rigaut tore a piece off one of the letters, then hunched over his work to keep it out of the drizzle. He folded the paper in half to form a crease, then carefully filled the crease with a liberal dose of tobacco. Working with the thumb and middle finger of each hand, he began to roll the paper around the tobacco, forming it into a decent cylinder. As he did, the paper softened and he was able to tighten the

cigarette. Satisfied, he ran the uneven edge of the paper across his tongue, intending to seal the cigarette with his saliva, but his tongue was dry and the spit would not come. So, sheltering the cigarette under his palm, he lifted his face and tried to catch a few drops of rain on his tongue; it wouldn't take much. He considered his pose, then thought that, no, it wasn't absurd. The absurd was a currency that had lost all value. Besides, he was getting what he wanted; so much so he repeated the act several times, savored the feel of wet rain on parched tongue, and collected enough to refresh his sordid mouth. Then he applied himself to his original task, moistened the paper, and did his best to glue it along the overlapping seam. The whole business would work, he thought, as long as he cradled the cigarette carefully in thumb, index, middle, and ring fingers. He'd manage, that way, several good drags. Fumbling in his tunic, he fished out his box of matches, extracted one, and got it lit using only one hand—a nifty trick he'd perfected in the mystifying months of inactivity passed in the military automobile service depot in Paris (mystifying because he'd been inducted—like most of the smart Alects from the posh schools—into the artillery). He put the lit match to the cigarette's tip and inhaled, only reluctantly letting go of the smoke. Remarkable, he thought, that such lousy tobacco could bring such pleasure. Rigaut watched the smoke rise from his cigarette and momentarily contemplated the consequences, but had it been the dense plume of a burning ambulance tire he couldn't have cared less: I will have this pleasure and I will get out. Or, I won't.

Taking another drag, Rigaut forced his thoughts toward a next move. Certainly, climbing out of the trench in daylight was out of the question: There was a reason they called it No Man's Land. Even the dead weren't exempt during lulls in the fighting when some jackass or other decided to hone his skills with rifle or machine gun. Perhaps the best play would involve a matter-of-fact climb out of the crater. Not only would he rise in full view of either line, he would take care to meticulously dust himself off, straighten his cap, button his tunic. Then, arms folded over puffed chest, chin thrust arrogantly forward, he would turn first to one side, then to the other to ascertain which was the French. Having done so, he would stroll toward his line like a man taking the Sunday air in the Jardin de Luxembourg. Stupefied, German and French snipers alike would ascribe the specter to battle fatigue and lay their heads down for a long neglected nap. Not much of a plan, Rigaut. An amusing image, nothing more.

The tip of his cigarette burned ever closer to his fingertips, and he felt the walls of the crater shift. He remembered what he'd been told by a disgusted looking infantry sergeant: In soft, muddy earth, the walls will begin to collapse on

themselves, especially in heavy rain, and if you're wounded or exhausted, the mud will embrace you and pull you under. Not a pretty picture: me and the half-Boche interred in an impromptu grave, missing and presumed dead. In several year's time we'll be fertilizing the grass of a cow pasture and the milk those cows yield will be curiously sweet. Got it: I can wait for the next rush, hope the boys push out this far and crawl up to join them. That's it. That's the plan. Agreed? Agreed. You're talking to yourself, Rigaut. So what? Alright. And if they don't make it? I take a little walk.

Resolved, Rigaut gathered as much of himself as he could out of the deepening puddle in the bottom of the hole. If need be, he thought, I can climb up on the Boche. He tucked the pouch of tobacco into his tunic, along with the letters and the handbill. He resolved, if he made it, to translate the German, a tonic for passing the time. The regiment, after all, had its supply of French-German dictionaries and phrase books. If he didn't make it, they'd be a puzzle for whoever cleaned his corpse, were there a corpse left to be cleaned.

Several hours he waited, occasionally drowsing and awakening with a start, but there was nothing this day but the idiotic dialogue between Monsieur Burp and Herr Blat:

"Still there? Burp!"

"Yep, still here. Blat!"

No rush. No battle. The heavy clouds overhead made it difficult to determine the time, but it seemed to Rigaut to be well past noon. What had been a drizzle in the morning was now a steady downpour. The water pooled over his ankles and he eyed the corpse. As the afternoon wore on, the sky deepened from bituminous to a anthracite, the rain from downpour to storm. Eventually, even Monsieur Burp and Herr Blat shut themselves hell up and the only thing Rigaut could hear was the drum of raindrops on his companion's helmet. That and the chatter of a mind working at the limit.

The first is a question of timing, he thought. I almost missed 1898, but they slipped me in with 46 hours to spare, practically a New Year's baby. Good to be born in an even year, don't you think? Better luck. And in another century, yet. No one could know back then the baptismal fonts would one day be fashioned from gas masks, the holy water from gasoline. So christened they send you out with a smashed wristwatch fixed to twenty-seven minutes past two o'clock. 0227? 1427? It seems I'm always coming into the world, and now my baptismal font awaits me somewhere outside this hole, so if they let loose with the mustard I'm not only a goner, but a goner deprived of one last check of the time, though maybe not one last *riгоlet*. Haha! No matter, it's not really so much a question of timing as it is of

lighting: just enough by which to navigate the mud, not enough to draw a spray of lead. Still, there is the question of timing. Timing is the right-hand-man of chance. Every moment is dominated by chance, which is why we bounce around the earth like billiard balls, colliding, connecting, finding a pocket, hopping off the table. Not quite twenty years getting along this way. Every act of planning is a well-dressed random act, even a plan as modest as the one hatched to get yourself out of one hole in the ground and into another hole in the ground, a long, winding hole in which you can buck up a bit, commiserate with your fellow NYD, a sad bunch not even up to the standard you found at school. Timing, chance: we were all born just about the same time and all our roads chanced to converge here. Now it's a question of which one will get it with bayonet, which one with bullet, which one with shell, which one with grenade, which one at his own hand, which one gone home mutilated and wishing himself dead, which one slaving and living in fear of his own shadow. Name? Jacques-Georges Rigaut. Term of enlistment? Duration of the war. I was an eager one. They didn't even have to recruit me. Me, not yet eighteen. I was making my escape. I didn't realize then that each man's duration is a matter of chance. I saw a beginning, a middle, and end in which everyone played his part. Perhaps not quite that innocent, I did nonetheless think in terms of orders and campaigns and flanking actions in which objectives were taken or lost, stratagems worked out to some sort of resolution. I harbored no dream of the shell hole. But now it is a question of timing. It is a question of lighting. Pick the right light-time to make your move. But it's nothing more than guesswork. Light-time outside the hole is likely different than light-time inside the hole. Stop talking to yourself. No, you don't understand. It's not like that. There is no "stop." I talk, you listen. I talk, I listen. Are we in agreement? Good. The second is a question of direction, which is relative. Let's assume four possibilities: toward the Boche, toward the French, between both going vaguely north, between both going vaguely south. No sun, no stars, completely turned around, I've no idea which is which. Had I jumped in I might recall. Having flopped the way I did, like someone falling out of bed and into a stranger's dreams, I'm left to chance and to what clues may come my way. I will orient myself by rubbish and hope.

Vexed, he found himself not only playing the role of the condemned, but also that of the guard implacably ushering his charge to the gallows. And since there was no right light-time, all light-time was right. He placed his left foot atop the helmet of the half-German, who had become for him now a piling in the crater mud. "Sorry," he said aloud. Don't mean to be rude, but consider this the last favor you'll ever do. I think you know this, somehow. And, after all, who's to say who benefits

from your kind support. Me? Or your mates eyeing the wasteland through the site of a panting Maxim? With that he grasped the crater's lip and pulled himself out of the hole.

Up in the watery mud, he had the sensation of swimming. Chin trenching through, he raised his eyes to shadowy, immobile forms—the dead—and the waves of rutted, soft earth: still-life ripples in a killing ground sea. Had he the training in physiology, he might have deduced the pounding his ears had taken was the cause of this phantom buoyancy, a trick of his abused cochlea. Either way, the technique by which he began to propel himself over the battleground, though grotesque, could rightfully be called a butterfly stroke. But there was no dipping below the surface. Exposed as he was, each meter he crossed seemed to clutch at him, cling to him, draw him toward an inevitable blat of Maxim release. Or so he feared. In fact, the war had exhausted itself for the moment and was drifting into catnap. It couldn't be bothered with potshots at a stray Frenchman crossing the No Man's Land like Blériot crossing the Channel. At ease in its own ubiquity and confident there was time enough to snuff the likes of a Jacques Rigaut, the war luxuriated in the contented sleep of the industrious, leaving the byproducts of the day's labor to soften him up a bit until the time was ripe. And so it was that one of Rigaut's awkward strokes drew the better part of what had been someone's lower jaw into his hand, the teeth fascinatingly clean, bits of black flesh—like gills lining the underside of a mushroom cap—clinging to the bone. He tried to flick it away, but only felt a sickening, phantom bite on his knuckles. A few meters further, rats agitated by this new rival, only mildly wary of his relative size, made way for Rigaut as he pushed himself through their neighborhood. They cast him looks of perturbed surprise that seemed to say, "Well, well: That one's moving." Or so it seemed to Rigaut. Had he really watched two fat ones crawl from the recess of a boot that wept the bloodied tatters of a trousers leg? How long ago had it hammered in parade on polished cobbles? The rats had hollowed it into a low-rent flat by gnawing its contents. Their home a meat locker, Rigaut imagined the fickle tenants would take up some new residence long before it came to anything so gauche as a toe-knuckle portion.

On he paddled, swimming the mud, keen to the changing light-time, to the morning sky grown brighter despite the clouds. Brighter to the left, he thought, the sky to his right a bit dour with the last murky vestige of night. Unsure whether it was still possible to make two and two come out four, whether there was room for logic in this otherworldly territory of mud, decay, evil, and hardness of hearing,

Rigaut, having no choice, reckoned his best, worked his way left in the hope that left was indeed west and that west was indeed the way he wanted to go.

EDWARD DESAUTELES lives and works in Pittsburgh, PA. He is author of the novel *Flicker in the Porthole Glass*, published by MAMMOTH Books in 2002. His short fiction has appeared in *Haydens Ferry Review*, *The Pennsylvania Review*, *Stolen Island Review*, and *The Little Magazine*. The excerpt presented in this issue of WLA is from his current project, *Housebreaking the Muse*, a novel.