

Three Poems

Ceridwen Hall

Making School for Danger

*Jacqueline Nearne 1944
RAF Film Production Unit*

After my circuit's blown, I play myself—my own stunt girl—
in black and white, where dangers pop up on schedule,
in stilted dialogue. Ridiculous to cast spies as movie stars;
trained to shed attention, we read our script like schoolchildren,
let the soundtrack evoke terror on the streets, and in the farmers' fields.

S.O.E. selects all the details, which seem to reveal more
than they do. Handlers pull labels from our coats,
search pockets for stray coins. I'm given lipstick,
told for the camera that it contains lethal tablets—
dangerous things to be caught alive with, facts glossed
between weapons training and propaganda-laced banter.

We recreate war by the full moon. Silk mushrooms bloom
as we step through the floor of the plane, into French skies
and English subtitles. The London Symphony makes a ballet
of our descent—ropes dance in a rush of wind; then strange hissing
creeps under the music as we coil risers, whistle our signal. Run.

As directed, I learn to perform a borrowed role:
radio operator receiving orders and folding them
in newspapers for our courier. I'm a gray silhouette,

a manicured sketch of a sidekick speaking mostly Morse,
or asking convenient questions for the audience's education.

At night, the Germans knock, but I'm listening to music,
my wireless hidden under the record player; we pretend
I'm shocked and idle—a young widow, knitting. Alone,
I tap at the wireless and words dart across the screen:
les lions sont terribles. Signal for a supply drop.

Then various sabotage attempts on fields and factories,
worshipful praise for the air force, British resolve etc.
If this spy movie has any hint of plot, it's Felix's search
for landing sites so the RAF can swoop in to rescue
downed pilots. I'm left in the field, an afterthought, shouting
as we part, *don't forget my wool*; over the engine's roar,
it sounds like work.

Study in Moon & Silk

*RAF Base, Tempsford
to _____ France, 1942*

I.

The engine's so loud you can't hear
your thoughts; then you adjust. We've adjusted
to much these past few months. Pearly light

on the airfield makes winged beasts of machines;

it's bright enough for navigation across
the Channel and to help our pilot find the French
farmers assembled to guide us.

The moon determines when we'll drop

—visible silhouettes, racing
pulses. She gives our enemies equal illumination,
a schedule: expect parachutes under the full moon
and bridges blown in the new dark.

Our bodies recognize this hour. Soon,
is whispered, and we test our harnesses, stretch
numbness from our legs. We sense
the plane lowering, seeking guide lights.

II.

Already, we've surrendered our names and family
photographs, even bus tokens and spare coins.

We've dressed ourselves as French peasants,
put on wedding rings to become widows; tucked

medicine and death within reach. Our lives have ceased
to exist on paper. We're nameless Janes to our pilot,

live weapons, trained to listen and to resist.

III.

Our door opens and the plane shrinks—a tin can
in a sky full of wind. The signal light's a long red

wait. Then green. We leap, one woman, another,

and fall

IV.

and count three long seconds until silk blooms
overhead—full and pale as the moon; we drag
our veils earthward. We're puppets now, pulling

our own strings to steer away from trees, swaying
like pendulums. There's time for a brief scan
of the flare-lit field before our legs absorb

V.

the shock of landing. Tumbling backward,
we free ourselves and coil the risers, run
circles to spill the air from our parachutes,

which our allies will bury or burn or risk
turning into sheets. We gather our dropped
weapons and rations, must vanish by dawn

into new boarding rooms, new lies.

How to Return Once Burned

*Virginia Hall **
March 1944

When they offer you a new face, refuse
the scalpel; your friends will betray you
before your chin or your nose. To go back,
spin the clock forward, age from view, dye
your hair grey and learn from Hollywood
how to draw on wrinkles. Grow ugly. Obsess
over every detail of your dress—down to buttons
stitched not crisscrossed, but parallel. Change
your stride and your height with a hunch.
Hire a dentist to roughen your teeth
and stain them yellow. Vanity kills
in the field. Be quiet, let others presume
to know what you are capable of—shuffling along as
if the radio you've learned to operate
(a death warrant) is a heavy sack of clothes,
as if the invaders' language is just guttural
nonsense. Be insignificant on moonless nights
and by day, herding goats and selling milk
to officers who spill their plans over your head.

* Virginia Hall (no relation) was an American-born spy who helped to build resistance networks and conduct sabotage operations in Nazi-occupied France.

Ceridwen Hall is a poet and educator. She holds a PhD from the University of Utah and is the author of *Acoustic Shadows* (Broadstone Books) and two chapbooks: *Automotive* (Finishing Line Press), *fields drawn from subtle arrows* (Co-winner of the 2022 Midwest Chapbook Award). Her work has appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Craft*, *Poet Lore*, and other journals. You can find her at www.ceridwenhall.com.