

Rag-Rug Wars

H.C. Palmer

*... for there is her mother, among
the bird cries of the porch swing, reading
a letter from a small island in the Pacific.*

—B. H. Fairchild

*Officials in American coastal cities were
well aware of their vulnerability to air attacks
from Japan. On March 8, 1941, Seattle became
the first American city to test blackout procedures.*
—*The Anchorage Daily News*

December 7, 1941: A small town in Southeast Kansas

In the kitchen with dinner dishes, she turns to watch
through the living room doorway—her husband on his back,
their son's head on his father's belly, between them,
the *Admiral* table-top radio—play-by-play football
from New York City. Beneath them, the woolen rag-rug,
braided-round from strips of an olive-green army blanket
and two drab dress uniforms left by her brother
killed in The Great War. She turns back to the sink,
but pauses for a news bulletin—*The White House*
announces a Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

She recalls stories of her brother's war, him sailing
to Saint Nazaire, trucking to a forest called Argonne,
landscapes shelled bare, last breaths frothing blood-
stained trenches and a fortnight's corpses dangling
from coils of razor-wire strung across *No Man's Land's*
poisoned soils.

She was seven when news came of his death—
when their mother announced, *Better his uniforms*
warm the feel of a winter floor than pockets stuffed
with mothballs and stored in my cedar chest.
We'll braid this rag-rug together.

The broadcast cuts away. *Japanese planes have torpedoed*
Battleship Row. Pete, her only brother now, ten years
in the Navy, is sailing with the Pacific Fleet. *Give it some time,*
she reasons. *Mother will know if he's safe.*

Now, *Japanese planes have bombed the Philippines.*
She searches her Britannica Atlas. Five-thousand miles
from Pearl Harbor to Manila and less than four-thousand
to Chanute, Kansas. *We'll blackout,* she announces,
like on the West Coast. She places a blanket below

each window and a box of thumbtacks in her son's hand.

When the windows are covered and tacked, they sit
at the kitchen table. She lights a candle. Sets it in place
of the bowl of sugar.

Mother should have news from Pete by now, she says
as she lifts the receiver from the phone-box on the wall.
She listens, stretches the cord so they can hear—
neighbors on party-line, weeping, praying, speaking
the language of war. She covers the mouth-piece, holds
a finger to her lips, then lowers the receiver to swing
on its cord—farm friends sowing fear and disbelief
across her kitchen floor.

It's dark when the line goes quiet, when she stands
at the phone-box again, lifts the cord, cradles
the receiver to her ear, turns the hand-crank to ring
the operator, imagining what seems inevitable—
a presentation of war clothing in ceremonial fashion.

We'll braid Pete's Navy Blue into the border,
her mother will say, certain this will not be the end.

H.C. Palmer is a retired physician. Following his first year of residency in internal medicine, he was drafted, along with 1500 other American doctors and eventually served in Vietnam as a battalion surgeon with the First Infantry Division. His poetry collection, *Feet of the Messenger*, was published by BkMk Press and the University of Missouri, Kansas City, Kansas.