

W . D . E H R H A R T

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## Redipuglia

—for Adi, who brought me here

What once had been a ramshackle  
cemetery dotted with the detritus  
of battle—barbed wire, battered helmets,  
trenching tools, broken rifle butts—  
Mussolini in his fascist grandiosity  
recreated as a pristine staircase  
of the dead: twenty-two giant steps,  
each one-hundred-forty meters wide,  
twenty feet deep, and nine feet high,  
rising to the crest of Mount Sei Busi,  
three giant crosses crowning all.

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Twenty-one steps are faced with small  
brass plates, 1900 plates per step,  
each plate the name of someone dead:  
Fabio Bernardi, Terza compagnia,  
Ventunesimo battaglione del Bersaglieri,  
3<sup>rd</sup> Company, 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Bersaglieri;  
Mario Bottino, Sessantottesimo batteria,  
Artiglieria del mulo,  
68<sup>th</sup> Battery, Mule Artillery;  
Paolo Barbieri, Primo Reparti d'assalto;  
Ottavio Cavallo, Sardo granatieri, Gruppo Pistoia.

Behind each plate, the dead man's bones:  
Marco Esposito, Ottantatresimo compagnia  
di assistenti tecnici,  
83<sup>rd</sup> Company of Engineers;  
Allesandro Forni, Nono reggimento  
di fanteria chiara di Bersaglieri,  
9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Light Infantry Regiment;  
Carlo Selvaggio, Quinto reggimento del Alpini;  
Pietro Allecreti, Arma dei Carabinieri.

Many plates are incomplete, containing  
only what could be recovered of the man:  
Luigi -----, Fusiliers;  
----- Trovato, 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Pavia Brigade.

The bones and names of 40,000 dead.

The twenty-second step contains  
the bones of 60,000 more  
whose names were taken with their lives.

The hill contains, in all, 100,187 dead.

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Across the top of every step in huge  
block granite print a dozen times  
and more: a single word. PRESENTE  
Silent roll call of the dead:  
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Emilio Morelli, 6<sup>th</sup> Company,  
142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, Catanzaro Brigade;  
Roberto Pappalardo, 132<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment,  
Lazio Brigade, 29<sup>th</sup> Division;  
Vittore Maggio, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion,  
58<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Abruzzi Brigade:  
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:  
Stefano Tenaglia, 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment,  
4<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Brigade;  
Giani Caltibiano, 75<sup>th</sup> Alpino Division;  
Umberto Testa, 22<sup>nd</sup> Arditi:  
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:  
Cristiano Martelli, 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Brescia Brigade;  
Battista Grassello, 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Ferrara Brigade;  
Claudio Conti, 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Pavia Brigade:  
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:  
Raffaello, Firenze Brigade;  
Leonardo, Novara Lancers;  
Gino, 52<sup>nd</sup> Alpine Infantry Division:  
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

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If you stand at the base of the steps  
looking up, the steps are so arranged  
that all you see is the single word PRESENTE  
rising out of the stone  
over again, and over and over again,  
marching up to the heavens,  
mocking the *Duce's* own design,  
mocking the millions who come to worship here,  
mocking the empty promise of salvation,  
whispering, murmuring, muttering:

PRESENTE Present. We are here.



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