

T H O M A S M C G U I R E

Heirloom Photograph

If you are interested in scars I can show you some very interesting
ones but I would rather tell you about grasshoppers.

—Nick Adams in “A Way You’ll Never Be”

I.

In a reprint of a photo posted on my laptop screen
struts my grandpa, a raw recruit just sixteen.
Note how he stands smart and stract
in a uniform stylish yet oversized
and by the ladies prized
(despite its common medium-brown drabness).

See how he smiles shouldering the gravid rucksack
that he’ll bear across the Western Front
from Belleau Wood to St. Mihiel.

It’s the jaw, though, that always numbs
my nuts—see how it juts
as if to say to the demon Hun,
“Bring it on Gerry boy, I dare your sorry ass.”

2.

Later in the labyrinth
of the trenches he'll
shed the rucksack
from his back
as he runs & pronks
about the redoubt
dodging minatory
five-nines & corpses
bloating in the sun,
hopping like
a hunted hopper
who somehow
always scores
some shade.

Oh lucky hopper
slips his ass
just beyond the reach
of Mower's lethal blade,
a sickle mowing
so much hay.

3.

But the photo doesn't show his fright—
that's the face of battle that almost always gets forgotten,
the oh-shit face that says he's crapped his knickers
as he carts dead-end dispatches day & night
from colonel to captain, then back again.

In the photo he just smiles smiles smiles.

Should fresh recruits look otherwise?

What good's a greenhorn grunt who foresees his own demise?

4.

Absent from the photo too is grandpa's brother,
age fifteen, a courier who wears the same
drab uniform, the usual medium-brown affair.

But for the dogtag stats stamped upon the rim
of a few paltry medals awarded postmortem
(760599 PTE E.T. Taggart)

I know next to nothing of this phantom kin.

I want grandpa's and his brother's rest
to be more than silence though
so I'll sing their song of suffering:

One day as gramps trailed
his brother he blinked not once but twice
as a five-nine fragment sliced
clean through parapets & gunny sacks.

Until gramps died from the disease called slow suicide,
the curse of working men & gutted soldiers,
a pyrotechnic trauma show of haywire synapses fired
near every night in the minefield of his neuralpaths.

* * *

Here's the nightly horror show he saw
till his liver finally caved
like a fish rotting in the head:

first a flame-red flash
quicken the retina
as a smooth shrapnel

axe scythes all
within its path;

then a white-hot
fragment crops
the shaved carrot top
of little brother's
patriotic head—
and of a sudden
little Edmund
sweet, sweet Edmund
is oh so dead.

And in that vision smooth and clean
as a mower glides through long grass green—
a nightly déjà vu of a shrapnel blade that felled for good
sweet Edmund in the mud of Belleau Wood—
Grandpa's photogenic jutted jaw unhinged forever.

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