

D . B R I A N A N D E R S O N

Soldiering

In a photo album
my grandmother has written
a list of my grandfather's jobs—

farmer carpenter
preacher printer

like a resumé of Jesus Christ
or Ben Franklin

at the end of the list: "soldier"

I ponder this word
in my ten-year-old eyes,
"soldier" squirms
and wiggles on the page.

And I imagine little men
in red coats and blue pants
matchstick men, marching across
wallpaper borders and quilted bedspreads
tapping snare drums always

while defending ballerinas
against Rat Kings with
rotten Christmas candy,
and sugarplum midnight nightmares.

The soldiers shoot muskets at the moon,
or write love letters by the light
of a dying campfire.

Soldier seems not the word
for a job, just the reason
my grandfather walks
with a bob and a swing,
his crippled leg making
him move down the lawn
like a slow-motion
Sunday place-kicker,

limping for the last sixty years,
but never talking about Germans
or heroic night-fights, only telling
my grandmother that the roast-beef
sandwich she had made him for lunch
is good stuff, tastes just right.

Powder Monkey

The powder monkey stares back
across the decades of time,
from the decks of *U.S.S. New Hampshire*
coast of South Carolina, 1864,
photographer unknown.

War is not for boys, yet
there you stand,
leaning with pride against a black
cannon on the deck of a union ship,
serious-faced 10-year-old
with baby cheeks
and fair hair,
your blue sailor uniform, looking like
soft and rumpled sailor pajamas,
complete with a cocked pancake hat.

the sepia-toned photograph serves
as evidence that you lived and fought
alongside whiskered men
with gruff voices,
yelling at you to bring them
powder, powder, more powder,

and you ran, with sacks,
quick and limber as a monkey—

maybe they called you monkey
as an insult to your manhood—

but I think it was more like
a tweak of the nose, said with a wink
and a nod, a chuckle
at your primal limberness.

So there you are, still leaning
after one hundred and fifty years
serving in Mr. Lincoln's Navy--
One leg swung in front of the other
your fingers tucked in your pants,
a juvenile delinquent waiting for a bus
jutting your chin at passersby, asking them
for a smoke or a bit of change,

and they give it to you

because you're just a kid,
after all.

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