

## I SEE AGAIN IN MEMORY

all the old faces coming up to me out of the night. Bert and his big, bulging eyes, drowning on dry land. Red Eye Jack with his head cocked over to one side. Sam, always whistling, his smile filled with holes. I see again the white silver nights, roaring metallic rains, and hay-yellow fog drifting in sullen wisps across the mutilated land. I thought I had dropped all these things away from me a long time ago in the dead comfort of younger nights. But now it is all returning. I see and feel my old friends in their returning, and sometimes when I shut my eyes tightly and hold my breath, I can hear them singing, too, their deep voices accompanied by the earthy cadence of heavy tramping boots.

It is quiet. The nurses have gone. The lights are out. In the hallway the machines are ticking away with precision. Lying on my back in bed, I listen to the soft hiss of the others' breathing; their stupid whisperings have stopped. In the thin gray light bleeding in from the hall, I can just make out the blankets draped over their prone bodies, blue shadows seeping into each recess and fold. Crisp sheets rustle slightly as this one stirs in his sleep, or that one sucks in a sudden gasping breath. No heads or hands or feet are visible in the dark, just an endless wrinkled sweep of spectral hospital white. Closing my eyes and letting my head sink into my pillow's softness, I can hear that low hum. It is growing louder, more distinct. The singing is starting again.

The others know about this, but I've been waiting.

I've been waiting to see you lot again; to talk, maybe smoke a Woodbine, share a ration of rum. Your faces are sometimes blurred, sometimes sharp and clear. You move in slow motion, arms swinging slowly at your sides, eyes blinking languidly, smiles taking a small age to spread across your faces, slow motion hands rising up to ease cigarettes from your mouths. I see that mop of black hair dropping into your dark eyes, Sam, your face thin and chiseled, the pointed beak-like nose, red mouth puckered as you whistle some light tune. It's nice to see you again, Jack, clean shaven and boyish, short-cropped blond hair and a ready smile, and you, too, Bert, with your sleek athletic body fit snugly into khaki, brown hair parted neatly down the middle of your small head. It's good to be with you all again.

We can speak about how it was before. Like the earth back then--do you remember, Jack--remember that beautiful, torn, chewed-up world that we once lived in, the black splintered trees, dark pools of poisoned water, the jagged brown gash of the trenches? In the summer it was hard and dusty, and we had to claw like devils to work our way into it; and the dust got into our mouths and eyes, make our meals gritty and our water taste like dirt. I'll never forget those rains back then, either, slanting down in endless grey sheets, turning the earth into a soupy, sucking

brown sludge, and the shell holes and mine craters gaping like monstrous dripping mouths. And what about that winter in the line when the first real cold hit and they hadn't thought to issue us our winter kits and we had to wrap rags around our hands and feet to keep them from freezing through. Our fingers went stiff and numb, and it was hard to handle the equipment; the steel of our rifles was so cold it burned. Exhaling, our breath turned to silvery powder and dusted our mustaches and beards with a fine white crust. The only thing that kept me going at all was the rum ration which came after dinner; and we would drink it out of tin cups, the rum searing a fiery path down our throats and curling up in the pit of our bellies to lie there, glowing. Rum's what got me through that first winter; rum and you, Sam.

Christ, were you good. Always knew the latest London show tunes; "The Roses of Picardy" was my favorite. Nobody could whistle like you, Sam. Those high, soft, clean notes wavering on the brittle night's air would flow right through me, settling into all the deep, tucked away places and heating up my chest, making my cheeks buzz hot as my eyes grew heavy and I drifted away from the war. The song would pass out of me, floating down the line, touching each man in turn; and they would all be silent, listening, eyes gazing shyly at boots or at the duckboards or simply staring out across the wire into No Man's Land, hands relaxing a bit on their rifles. And when the song ended, there'd be a long, quiet pause in which you could hear yourself breathing or your heart beating slowly or the wind tugging on the wire and then someone would cough or scrape his foot on the wooden duckboards and that noise would instantly snap you back into the war again. Then somebody would call out, "Give us another, Sam," and you'd smile, start a new song and carry us all back home for a few green minutes.

Now it is late spring, and I see in front of my eyes the huge mine crater after that rain. Water had dumped out of the colorless sky for three days straight, then stopped suddenly when the clouds were ripped open and a brilliant slash of blue appeared with the sun scorching through. It was as if summer had instantaneously come, and the larks began singing and insects droned slowly in the muggy air and the earth grew hard and dry. I remember how we stripped off all our gear and stacked our rifles in official pyramids and we four walked up to the crater's edge, the murky water looking so fine. Taking off our uniforms, our delicate white skin stark against the sky's blue, our forearms and necks a dirty tanned red-brown, we tiptoed to the black water's lapping shore. Arms and legs shivering but my shoulders and back warmed by the hot sun, I closed my eyes, bent low at the knees and plunged in after Jack, becoming a boy again in the deep bracing coldness. Laughing, we splashed water into each other's faces and

had swimming races which you easily won, Bert. I can see you there still, slicing cleanly through the water, powerful, measured strokes propelling you with sleek elegance, your sportsman's body rippled with muscular vitality.

Wading off to one side, I watched you three playing, dunking each other's heads under the water, whooping and giggling like children as a slight breeze chilled my arms and chest even as the sun burned my shoulders. And then your voices faded or perhaps you moved away from me, and all at once I was aware of heavy trudging coming from beyond the crater, and I heard the sonorous tones of men's voices. Crawling on my hands and knees, I peeked over the curled lip of the crater and looked down. It was one of our battalions marching past, with full packs and webbing on, rifles carried over shoulders, officers ahead on horseback. They were heading towards the front lines, a long silent procession of tramping men being consumed by the pale yellow clouds of their own dust. And they were singing an old marching song, their voices plangent and robust in the spring's air.

I can almost smell that dust, can't you, Bert? And a thousand other smells as well: damp, rotting wood, wet earth, animal sweat under a steaming summer's sun, old leather and grease and canvas, coffee grounds in an open fire, shit and piss, dried blood and putrid flesh. Everything had a smell in those days, a richness, a meaty fullness so that every morning with every first breath, you could draw a lifetime down into the bottom of your lungs. The trick, Bert, was not to exhale. Never exhale. Never exhale.

There you are now, Bert, over by that black pool of water, looking at me with your lidless, bulging eyes. Don't stare at me that way. You know how I hate that. Close your eyes, you bastard. Close them and stop trying to scare me.

Some sounds were so tiny in those days, but sharp and clear, too, almost ringing: the stink of metal clasps and buckles, the steely grate of forks on mess tins, the sliding click of a rifle bolt. Can you lot still hear that particular tap of bayonets against our steel helmets as we marched? Christ, I can. But I can recall the larger sounds as well, and can hear a shrillness in the air, not from Sam's whistling, but from angry insects and diving black birds, tumbling through the sky with a woof-woof or a whizzing bang, each sound a number--5.9s, 75s, 8 pounders--and first there'd be that telltale snapping crack or ripping sound that took off from the other side, then the long seconds as the shell soared up, arched in an ageless pause in the sun before roaring down onto our heads in a shrieking scream, a freight train that would hurl us out of the way to burrow itself into the soft ground as we dug like rats into the walls of our roofless mud homes to hide our heads. Funny how the sky rained dirt and burning steel in those days. Funny how in all that noise, silent things would take place, deep internal rupturings of soft organs, brains compressed to mush by shock waves bending the air, jagged, burning hunks of metal sizzling into pudding-soft flesh.

I see myself now at evening stand-to, sticking my head up over the parapet for a quick look, sticking my head

up to stare out across the wire and smashed trees, looking past a brown lip of earth all prickly with bones and broken things, trying to get a glimpse of the huddled grey shapes on the other side. The night is fluid, not solid black but made up of countless shades of black and grey, shifting, drawing together, dissipating, occasionally disgorging looming shapes: the burnt angular carcass of a tank silhouetted against the starless night; endless coils of barbed wire snaking into the gloom; the broken arms of trees clawing skyward. My gaze strains to pick movement out of the night as I try to blink away the burning from my red, stinging eyes. Suddenly my breath cuts off, and my eyesight is immediately sharp and clear. What's that noise on the left? Is that a tree or a man? Are they coming over? My body is rigid as my pulse quickens, ears pricked and eyes scanning the battlefield. A long minute crawls by, then another. I blink, swallow dryly; slowly my breathing returns to normal. It was nothing, just a shimmering patch of night. I fight off a voracious urge to light up a cigarette as my eyes begin to sting again. Lips barely moving, I pray for morning to come.

That's the way it was back then. You never really saw them. You heard them sometimes, you felt them always, but you hardly ever saw them.

I'll never forget those nights along the line before the big push and all the pretty lights of the bombardment happening on the other side. The slow fall of white and red flares. The sudden booming flash of yellow against the horizon. The cascading star-arms spreading out across the sky in sparks. There was a beauty in all this, Sam, just like the beauty in your whistling that became a grin, and the beauty in Jack's scarlet eye.

And then there was that time when we crawled out from the trench onto the ridge at night with picks and shovels because the second lieutenant ordered us to extend the line. How funny it was to move across the ground, crouched low, rifles slung across our backs, these gardening tools held in our hands and how you slipped, Jack, hoarsely cursing "Bloody hell" as you hit the earth just as a flare burst overhead and we all hugged the ground. I remember my heart throbbing in my mouth and me praying "Oh, Christ, oh, Christ Almighty" with my eyes wide and straining to see their trenches, trying to figure out if they had seen us or not. And we all lying there, too frightened to move but with the ground all funny and not right. How it felt like gelatin--not mud, but like when you squish a snail between your fingers, a slippery, gooey feeling. In the icy whiteness of another flare, Jack said, "Oh bloody Christ" and my heart stopped as my eyes darted over through the wire to the German trenches; and I whispered lowly, "What, Jack? What is it?" But all Jack would say is "Bloody Christ," and then I looked down at the ground and saw that it wasn't the earth at all, but the bloated, burst and rotting bodies of the German dead, the skin on their fluid faces slipping off under our fingers, and our elbows and knees sinking through decomposing stomachs and limbs. And the smell, Jack. The smell.

The smell, Bert. Sulfured rot, the pungent stinks of

the body. It was you, Bert, who knew the smells so exactly. Especially the sickly sweet smell of that low fog that reeked of damp hay and crept towards us, a giant amoeba with thin reaching arms that grasped out at you, but you could not push it away. You knew it so well, so why did you go swimming in it? Hadn't the lieutenant warned you not to swim in it? And you swam so funny, too, not like a well-trained athlete, but all flopping arms and bulging eyes, frantically gasping for breath and clawing at your throat until your face turned blue and your voice drowned in yellow pools of fluid. You really should have known. That's what the masks were for.

I see us going for walks in the stinging metal rain, the officer out in front for a while with a sword or pistol in his hand, high, public-school voice calmly telling us to "keep the line, boys, keep up the line," and we walking into the low-slung burning red sun, mouths dry and muscles tight, boots sinking into the soft mud, ears twitching from the noise, some of us pressing forward with hunched shoulders, others lying down in the sun for a rest, nobody singing now but from the other side the staccato tak-tak-tak in rhythmic bursts. You were walking in front of me, Jack, when you suddenly stopped, turned around to gaze at me, your head cocked to the side to show me your one red eye before you lay gently on the ground and fell asleep.

Seems like everybody was sleepy in those days. Curled and twisted like earth worms caught in the sun's heat, knees pointing towards the sky, stiffened arms spread wide, they slumped over sandbags, stretched out in the mud or slipped down the sides of shell holes. I found you, Sam, recumbent like that, after the others had pushed on, and you weren't whistling anymore. You weren't whistling

anymore; you were propped up against a tree trunk, grinning with your mouth full of holes, your whole face grinning, even though you were tired enough to have thrown away an arm, a foot and most of your stomach. You were so tired you had forgotten to close your eyes. I closed them for you.

I see again in memory the white light of exploding nights, rivers of brown slime, black bread and bully beef animated with maggots, morning's silver dew dripping from barbed wire, and all the old friends marching into a slowly rising cloud of red dust. Marching and singing. Singing. They are singing.

Half a century's wastage and my failing eyesight cannot dim my memories of you.

The room is quiet, except for the soft wheeze of the other's breathing, and the purr of the machines in the hall. Already the pale yellow spikes of the new rising sun are advancing across the floor. I yawn silently; it has been another long night. I would like to sleep, but I cannot do it alone. I need help, I need a friend. Someone here must give me a hand. Somebody has to close my eyes for me. Only then will I be able to sleep.

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