

A soldier lies in hospital bed number 8 in a recovery ward. The head of the bed sits along a brick wall, as do all of the beds in the ward, facing the middle of the room. From his bed the soldier stares out of a circular window that gives the appearance of a giant eye; a sky-blue iris that cataracts as each cloud passes and at night dilates to a solid black pupil. In total there are 16 beds, all occupied by fellow soldiers in various states of recovery or decline, suffering from assorted maladies and inflictions, each with their own window to gaze out of, pray to, curse at.

The soldier is bandaged around his right eye and he must turn his head to see with his left that his right arm has been amputated just above the elbow. The bedsheets are tucked neatly at his waist and a nurse comes around every hour or so to fill his water, inspect his bandages, apply new ones if necessary, and consider the contents of his bedpan.

The ward is possessed by competing odors. A single bouquet of flowers on a table in the center of the room does little to lessen the mingling stench of sulfanilamide, human waste, and flesh that ambush the nostrils on arrival but dissipate as one grows accustomed. For some, this never occurs. Upon his first few nights on the ward, the soldier's dreams were permeated by the smells of the bodies of his comrades—burnt, sawed, clipped and soldered—and the funereal lilies that topped the table. But, when the weather is agreeable, the round windows are opened and a breeze blows the sheer lace curtains around the bedsides, clearing the room of its foulness and stirring up the affections. It reminds the soldier of walking the red light district of New Orleans, with its sickly sweet odors of ardor, and being waved to from the windows of the bordellos with silk handkerchiefs and assorted lace undergarments. However, once the windows are closed again, as if it had retreated only to regather its strength, the stench returns anew.

Likewise, the nurse is announced and recalled by the pleasant aroma of magnolias, which also remind him of home. For the soldier, the brutal nostalgia of her scent and the billowing curtains are at times an anthem to his origins and, at others, a requiem. For, to be reminded of home while he is here, resigned to this cot, surrounded by the crippled, mangled and maimed bodies of his countrymen, few much more than mutilated torsos awaiting a violet ribbon, is a sublime sort of torture.

The soldier, in his special way, has already told the nurse on several occasions about the magnolias back home and the way the women wear them in the springtime.

“Even the streetwalkers and their garish pimps pluck the blossoms; to put in their hair or on their lapels—magnolias belong to everyone.”

Each time he relays this southern tradition to the nurse she nods and smiles amiably, as if it's the first she's hearing of these belles and the blooms nestled neatly into their crowns. She tucks the sheet beneath his legs and, calling him her sweet prince, tells him to ring if he should need anything at all.

“Oh, you are a doll,” he says.

The last time the nurse came around the soldier asked if there wasn't a way to get a radio or a victrola into the room; he's rather fond of Strauss—although he's not sure how a German composer would go over with this crowd—but perhaps some jazz, from home. Unfortunately, she tells him, the doctor feels it may upset some of the other patients—to play any music at all. So, despite his gentle protests to the contrary, the room remains silent except for the grunts, groans, shrieks and mad laughter of its occupants over the tinny hum, like baritone mosquitos, of bedpans being utilized.

Every so often in a blur of insignia, khaki and general foulness, a commanding officer enters and surveys the group: men rattled into silence, staring right through the frowning officers; boys still eager to be of service, raising what's left of their limbs to their brows with a grimace; farm boys and baker's sons and factory workers and cab drivers, all asking when they'll get to go home, they just wanna go home, back to mama and the Yankees and soda pop and Lana Turner. The officers say little, save for a compulsory word or two about their bravery in the line of fire, and quickly leave the room, holding their noses.

In much the same manner as the officers, chaplains come and go. They tend to the wounded with prayers and Our Fathers, making the sign of the cross over men who waited in line to take women against their will on bales of burning hay behind Italian farmhouses, stippled living bodies with lead until the meat of their corpses resembled the peppercorn salami lining the displays of borough delis, ran blood-rusted bayonets through ribs like mail through a slot, waiting for their turn on this side of the fire,

steel and powder. Some see the virgin enter in his noose of a white collar and fall apart—same as when the COs arrive—like spoiled children on Christmas. Much like the nurse’s perfume, the maudlin sentimentality of his roommates—their weepy histrionics and appeals for grace and Americana—stir something in the soldier, something where love and hate meet. And though he would never begrudge any of them their duties, not the soldiers nor the priests nor the COs, he waves them all away with a subtle jerk of his head. All but the nurse.

Sometimes the nurse will sit on the edge of their beds and play cards with the patients. Like children, she allows the feeble ones to win. For this soldier, she sits to his left and plays her best. Playing blackjack is easy enough, but for poker he must pull the cards he wishes to dispose of with his mouth. He has become adept at this and smiles politely when the nurse says so. She asks about home and about what he did back there.

“I wrote,” he says, the six of hearts between his teeth.

“A writer?! How lucky for me! I adore literature! What kind of stuff do you write?” she asks. “Anything I might have read?”

“Well,” he hesitates, “it’s not exactly...a lot of folks don’t find it very suitable. It’s an acquired taste,” he says demurely.

In a whisper, the nurse says, “You know, one of my favorite things about being stationed here is that I can find all the books that are banned back home.”

“Really?” he says, intrigued.

“Really.”

The next day the nurse arrives with a bootleg copy of *The Black Book*.

The soldier returns it in thirteen hours.

The following day she brings him a French pressing of *Tropic of Cancer*. He returns it in ten. He reads the whole thing with the back flap open, Miller staring up at him, returning to the author’s picture now and again to curse or praise him—generally for the same reason. This continues for weeks, on through works by Cyril Connolly, O. Henry, Richard Wright, Jack London, Balzac and Kathleen Winsor. Each book is returned as a palimpsest of furious scribblings done with the soldier’s left hand; palsied by disuse and a steady intake of morphine. Passages are underlined in an inky fervor, sometimes as many as three times.

Exclamation points and asterisks constellate the texts where the soldier was inspired, impassioned or intrigued.

Each night, after she's made her final rounds and before the lights go out, the nurse stops by the soldier's bed to discuss, debate and commiserate on the day's findings. They laugh and cry and sit together in silence, considering the joys, the tragedies and absurdities beaten onto the page by type bars, the strikers, those tiny pugilists that, putting down the pen, fight, jab genius sprung from the minds of the wretched and superlative onto parchment. Tortured storytellers that threw themselves onto train tracks from crowded platforms; dove headfirst into frozen Siberian lakes; were whisked into madhouses by their own kin, incontinent, chanced and demented by syphilis, their teeth crumbling in their mouths, urethras plugged with cork; ripped their own throats out with fountain pens; were beaten into submission by wicked minutiae; or, perhaps worse, died comfortable, fat and championed.

The nurse holds his left hand and watches the soldier's eyes sparkle as he relays his inspirations and frustrations to her, crossing and uncrossing his legs in excitement, wagging his stump in emphasis.

"Every third page or so, Miller really winds up and tears through ya! His brilliance can be frightening! He's Joyce with a hard-on!—but only every third page or so."

The nurse's eyes widen with excitement; to see the soldier flash his wit.

"Durrell might be even better! His vocabulary is astounding! Infuriating! And O. Henry—that witty so-and-so—he may be even *more* of an anomaly! I nearly threw the book across the room when I finished *A Retrieved Refomation!*" the soldier exclaims in a flutter.

The nurse smiles and nods her head in agreement as she stretches his legs, bending them at the knee, erecting and striking a tent under his sheets. "Just wait 'til you get to Radclyffe Hall," she whispers excitedly. The soldier, momentarily oblivious to his surroundings, whinnies with glee. The nurse calms him with a hand to his brow and a gentle *shoosh*, as she looks to the disapproving doctor in his starched lab coat and spectacles.

"Tomorrow I'll bring in *The Well of Loneliness* and we'll *really* have a time," she says as she dips the needle containing the quarter-grain ration

of morphine into the soldier's thigh. The soldier reclines, picks up his book of O. Henry short stories and, before long, drops it face-down into his lap as he dozes off, off into the indigo eye on the wall.

In this way the time passes.

About four weeks into his recuperation, the nurse wonders if there isn't someone back home the soldier might like to write to; maybe a sweetheart or, at the very least, his mother or father.

"There must be someone waiting to hear from you; who would really like to know you're okay," she says, concerned.

"Oh, bless your heart," he replies. "My mama passed away when I was just a boy, and I haven't seen my father in what folks from my neck of the woods call a coon's age."

"What about your brothers or sisters?"

"Well, I'm the oldest, but I lost track of 'em when I left home to go to the city."

"There's no one *there*, in the city, that might want to hear from you?"

The soldier thinks for a minute. Through one eye he stares at his right arm, at the bandage that wraps it up like a long piece of venison. He observes the place above the bandage, shiny and wet-looking like fish scales or the underside of a fingernail. He sees where his jaundiced skin meets the streaking purple of his wound; striations of pink-blue on creamy off-white, like the first stir of a berry yogurt.

"I'd rather not."

The nurse runs a hand through his hair. Then she moves from the bed.

A few days later, while the doctor is on his lunch break, she brings in a stack of stationery with a letterhead that reads *Eglise de la Trinité, 9 Rue Rollon, 14700 Falaise, France* and drops it on the table attached to the soldier's bed by a metal arm. She leaves and returns a moment later struggling with something large and heavy covered in the white cotton of a nurse's uniform. Just as the soldier clears the paper away, she sets it down with a crash, nearly tearing the table from its screws. The metal rod bends under the strain, as an arm wrestler nearing defeat.

Pulling the uniform away from a typewriter, he asks, astonished, "How on earth did you acquire this little miracle?"

“Just don’t make all my hard work go to nothing. Write me something *unsuitable*,” she says with a smirk. “And be discreet about it.”

The soldier sits for a long time looking at the keys, running his fingers over them, testing each one like a pianist before unfamiliar ivory, striking them with a clacking sound that stirs some of the other patients in their beds. After a distressing period of internal discussion he begins a letter. *D-e-a-r* he types with the index finger of his left hand. A mechanical commotion, like rifle butts on cobblestone, rips through the ward. Men cry out, gripping their sheets, shaking, whimpering, moaning. *H-e-a* he types. A cup flies at the soldier from somewhere around bed 13, just missing his head. He swats at it with his missing arm. It rattles across the floor like aircraft fire. A bartender from Charlotte cries in a high-pitched squeal like a sow sensing its own slaughter. The private in the bed to the right of the soldier closes his eyes and wets himself without making a sound.

“Frag out!” a rifleman in bed 4 yells as he tosses a pillow, before placing his head beneath one, towards the soldier. A young machine gunner with shrapnel in his neck whose chronic masturbation has become as commonplace as the groans and wails of the ward stops several strokes from spasming the day’s fourth bloody froth of ejaculate into his bedpan to wide-eye the soldier who, in anguish, looks to the nurse. The machine gunner doesn’t blink. The nurse looks across the room from a bed where she’s preparing a shot of morphine. She grits her teeth, realizing the mistake she’s made. The soldier sits there motionless, staring, afraid to move, locked in a standoff—like barbwire sunk into his retinas—with a man who has likely given this same cold gaze to an untold number of other enemies, before disposing of them. Still, the machine gunner doesn’t blink. The nurse quickly breaks the seal on the syrette, removes the wire loop pin, sinks the needle into the hip of the patient in bed number 2, squeezing the tube between her fingers. She marks the time and pins the syringe to the soldier’s collar. She retrieves another from a locked drawer and heads towards the bed of the machine gunner. After administering the dose, the nurse takes his hand in hers and, placing it beneath his sheets, sets him back in motion. The young soldier, forgetting what he was previously poised to kill for, sinks back into his bed; the

tremor in his lap resembling the familiar recoil of his hand on his machine gun. The nurse hurries to the soldier's bedside.

"Not as discreet as we'd hoped, huh?"

"It was a sweet gesture," the soldier says, trying not to sound shaken. He sits back from the table like a diner after a most unsatisfactory meal mortified at the prospect of insulting the chef.

"I got ahead of myself, I suppose. I'll get it out of here and back where it belongs," says the nurse. As she reaches for the typewriter the soldier moves to take her hand in his. Holding it and looking into her eyes he says, "Thank you...thank you for trying."

The next day, as the soldier sits staring out of the cloudy eye in the wall, the nurse plops down on his bed. "I'll write for you!"

"Beg your pardon."

"You dictate to me and I'll write for you," she says as she looks around the bed for the stationery from the church. "Where'd it go?"

The soldier leans forward and with difficulty pulls a folded stack from behind his pillows. He places the paper on the table before him. With some hesitancy he says, "You've really been a peach about this, but..." he pauses. The soldier looks down with his left eye at the arm clipped at the bicep. The nurse follows his gaze. "...I just don't think I could."

The nurse, taking a deep breath, slides the stack of paper from the table and tapping it several times to make it even in her hands, turns and walks away. The soldier sits back against the pillows like sandbags and gazes out of the greying eye. Rain begins to speckle the window.

The following week the nurse behaves coolly with the soldier. She does not exhibit any sort of malice but she comports herself much as she does with the rest of the ward's inhabitants. She is considerate, capable, clinical. There is no exchange of quotes, no shakily-underlined paragraphs or dog-eared mementos to share like clandestine hymns.

But the smell of magnolia remains; to alert the soldier of her presence and, upon her departure, leave him reeling over the profundity of the olfactory and its morbid capacity for nostalgia. Some days he feels certain he would prefer the reek of rotting men to the perfume that wrenches him back to a time before this. A time of leisure and gaiety, of electric lights and sequins and the lurid lyricism of corner boys, gesturing

obscenely to the soldier and his Quarter comrades, fists held high under gaslight, forearms flexed against their opposing hands, the engorged veins in their arms thick as soda straws; a suggestion—some men’s very being is an insinuation. “I’ve got it for ya right here, ya fairies! Thick as a clydesdale!” The soldier, not a soldier then, and his pack of compatriots would giggle, some in deep bass resonances, and throw back gestures just as winsome in their lewdness. Spit arcs of saliva like the Mardi Gras fountains, bend over and slap their asses, mimic plugging them with their thumbs, shouting back, “It’s ready when ya learn how to use it, sweetheart!” The Creole queers in the group, quicker to anger, would harangue their tormentors with a volley of Cajun slang and bastardized French, return the same *Up yours!* the colorful *Your mother taught me to suck!* and *Tu-es le chien d’un chien d’un chien!*

But now, with the nurse’s friendship decommissioned, the soldier begins to consider his position. He waves his stump, reaches for his right hand with his left, feeling where it should be; where the hands would clasp in prayer or around a trolley car pole. Now, nothing. A ghost. The phantom limb. Like the bosom of his mother, which he felt for years in the pillowcase beneath his head after she was planted under a magnolia tree on his father’s land; waxy, shining leaves the color of Cleopatra’s eyelids shading her tombstone. He wonders if he’ll ever feel the sensations on the pink nub that he once felt on his wrist or at the crease of his elbow; the brush of a feather or the sting of a tattoo gun. Or if he’ll just be a source of pity and disgust. He feels certain that he could learn to be just fine with one good eye and one arm—he’s spent plenty of time with anomalies, aberrations—abominations, people call them. But would the rest of *them*? Should he be outcast, even from his old gang—if any of them are still around—where would he turn?

He rings the bell to summon the nurse.

“Yes?” she answers, with no familiarity or favoritism in her voice.

“I’m ready,” he says.

The nurse stifles a giddy laugh that settles into a shudder down her body.

“When can we get started?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” the soldier says.

“This evening then.”

“This evening,” the soldier says.

Once the nurse completes her rounds and let’s the doctor know that she’ll be staying after hours to help with a patient, she quietly settles a chair next to the soldier’s bed and swings the bedside table around on its hinge to serve as her desktop. She wears a coat over her uniform, giving her the amicable look of a friend stopping by for tea or just to visit.

“Well? Are we writing a story—”

“A letter, we’re writing a letter,” the soldier says. “But—” he hesitates. “How do I know what’s okay? How do I know I can say..”

The nurse looks confused.

“How do I know I can say...what I want to say...to who I want to say it to?” The soldier sits perfectly still, not looking at the nurse but instead at the reflection of the black window on the hospital floor.

“Oh. I see,” says the nurse.

“The books were just books,” the soldier explains.

“The books were books. But this is real,” says the nurse, beginning to understand what the soldier may be asking of her. “You need some assurance that what you say...stays between us.”

The soldier flashes a quick look at her.

The nurse folds her hands in her lap and sits, pondering. She gets up, goes to the wall where her belongings are kept and, looking up once to check on the whereabouts of the doctor, opens her purse and retrieves something small from inside, what looks like a piece of paper. Returning to the soldier, she sits down and slides the item across the table. The soldier reaches for it but, before he can flip it over, she places her hand on top of his. “If I am caught with this, it’s for you; a patient. That shouldn’t raise any fuss. If *you* are caught with it, well, maybe all the better. Items like this are nothing new for a man a long way from home.”

The nurse removes her hand and places it in her lap. The soldier slowly turns the paper over to reveal a black and white picture of two women sitting on a Victorian sofa, naked, one with her legs spread apart and the other inserting two fingers into her, a thumb visible against a shock of black pubic hair.

“Is this—”

“It’s mine,” she says.

The soldier begins to laugh and quickly covers his mouth with his left hand. The nurse moves to cover the picture as her eyes dart to the office at the front of the ward where the doctor is obscured behind frosted glass.

“*Shhhhh!*”

“I’m sorry,” the soldier whispers.

Turning the picture over one more time and surveying it, he then looks up at the nurse, an intimate understanding in his eyes.

“Put it beneath your pillow,” she says.

He takes the picture and does as she has instructed. The nurse pulls out the folded stack of church stationery from her coat and places it on the desk. She then removes a pen from her hair and pulls the table close to her breast.

“Ready, sweet prince?”

“I think so.”

“Who will we be writing to today?” she asks as she readies her pen.

The soldier begins:

Dear Heart,

I lie here writing this,

The soldier looks to the nurse, “Well, sort of.”

She purses her lips and nods to say, *Yes, go on.*

the hospital curtains waving around me, brushing my shoulders with their lace, like a bra descending my arms, dropping down my chest to the floor.

The soldier watches the nurse, studies her face for signs of disapproval or objection. He sees none and, so, he continues on, bowing his head.

I remember, before I woke up here, seeing a black bra in the street, trampled by jackboots. I thought of you. How you filled those cups; the envy of all the boys in the Quarter. I close my good eye and see us back in the streets of New Orleans, stumbling into the bars that stink so superbly of whore piss, sailor

vomit and rum. When I come back, when you get out, won't you wave your bra at me from your window as my parade passes? I'll blow you kisses with my good hand, wink with my one eye, like the sun flashing off of a periscope.

“That’s beautiful,” says the nurse as she pauses to rest her hand, looking herself to the darkened iris in the wall.

The soldier keeps his head bowed. “Could we stop for today?” he asks, meekly.

“Of course,” says the nurse. She tucks the pen behind her ear and takes the paper. “Shall I hold onto this?” she asks.

“It’s probably for the best—just in case.”

“Agreed.” Then, in a whisper, “And you have mine?”

The soldier pats the left side of his pillow. “They’re mine now,” he whispers coyly.

“I’m going to want those back when you get out of here.”

“My pleasure! My first night with a woman and I’ve been cursed with two of ‘em.”

“Don’t gloat,” she says, pushing the bedside table back in its place. “Same time tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” he says. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my sweet prince.”

The next day is a bright, blue shiny one; the sun depositing an amber pleasantness into the ward by way of the sixteen circular windows, which really puts the ward in a mood—as it reinforces their inability to enjoy such things. The machine gunner only comes twice, an indication of his sour disposition, and the chaplain saunters in whistling a hymn that makes several of the more impious patients curse their maker, and his lackeys.

“Cool it, Father,” the typically optimistic corporal in bed 3 says as he sits upright having his wounds re-dressed. Then, pointing with his middle finger to the East: “The Vatican is 500 kilometers *that way*.”

“Yeah. You Catholic boys weren’t in too big a hurry to get in on the right side of this skirmish now, were ya?” asks the soldier in bed 7, caustically.

“I think it’s nice to have some music in here,” says the pilot in bed 9 as he’s having his face shaved by an orderly. The soldier thinks the pilot

resembles Clark Gable, but is careful not to be caught admiring him. “Oh, I agree,” he chimes in, eager to get a reaction from the pilot, who is one bed down and across the aisle from him. The pilot, his head tilted back as the orderly makes long sweeping motions with the razor, gives him a look out of the corner of his eye that tells the soldier nothing of his feelings towards his endorsement.

One bed away, an Alabaman horsebreaker new to the ward but whose constant flatulence gives off the impression he feels quite at home—as at home as in any barn stall—lets loose a steady, quaking hum of air and fans it into his own face with his bed covers.

“There’s a hymn for ya, Father! Stick around and I’ll whistle ya Dixie,” he says as he passes a high whispery one that ends with a brassy belch. The soldier can’t help but laugh—until the fanning of the horsebreaker’s sheet wafts a piece of air, foul as any wartime trench, past his own nose.

“Goddamn! You got Zyklon B under those covers, io?” asks the pilot.

“That’s mustard gas, hoss,” replies the horsebreaker.

“Aim some towards the good doctor,” says the soldier.

The horsebreaker hoots, “Whoo-wee!” and produces a laugh that only makes it to his throat before ending in a quartet of staccato hacks.

This kind of forced camaraderie amongst men held against their will—familiar in hospital wards and prison blocks—helps the day pass a little easier. Then comes the night.

Amidst the screeches, moans and whimpers, the soldier asks the nurse as she settles into her chair, “Where did we leave off?”

“A parade. A bra waving from a balcony window—absolutely picturesque,” she says, sounding pleased.

“Okay, well...”

“Why don’t we start somewhere exciting! How about here?”

The soldier gives her a doubtful look.

“No, I don’t mean *here*. What about Europe? Had you ever been to Europe before? I’d never been out of Northampton before I came here. But even in all *this*, I still find it lovely.”

“Okay,” the soldier says spiritedly. “We can start here.”

He looks out the window for some time. And then he begins.

I write from Europe, my dear! Oh, I wish you could have been here to see the sights! Europe! Where we always dreamed we'd go! The lamplit streets shining, drunk with rain, like beaming black faces. The stair steps to the train stations, burrows where lovers pass the time in embrace, parents pat their children's heads, straighten their tiny berets, old men read the news of the day in stooped anxiety—it's wonderful as long as you ignore the headlines! If I could've just balled you up and placed you in my pocket, my little rose! I'd feel you, so close to me, poking through the wool with your thorns, poking into me.

The soldier stops and politely gestures for a cup of water. The nurse pushes the table aside and fetches one from the sink. She returns and hands him the cup. She reads over what she has written, glowing. With her hand to her breast she says, “Oh, that’s just lovely, dear.”

The soldier smiles.

“You really *are* a writer!” she says. The nurse feels a sudden descent of consequence upon her. She hadn’t known what to expect—had expected nothing, really. But to be a vessel for the soldier, for a poet, is a new sensation. She looks up to the eye in the window and feels it looking directly at her. The soldier finishes his water. “Can we continue?” she asks, once he’s placed the water cup down on the table.

“Yes, I think so. Where was I?”

She reads the last paragraph back to the soldier.

“Ah,” he says, somberly. “My little rose.” Then, with trepidation in his voice:

But not this way. I would never want you to see the Old World this way—at wartime, as it descends into madness. How quickly its stones upturned; blasted into rubble, crushing horse, cart and driver beneath!

The soldier begins to speak quickly, as if in a trance; a medium, from old empires to a single soul half the world away.

And the children, shoeless in the streets! Bawling for their mummies in indecipherable tongues! Their berets carried away on streams of sewage, winding

down clogged gutters, coming to rest at the boots of men with the manners of animals! It's the cries of the children that infuriate me! torment me most!

He is speaking faster and faster. His eyes darting around the room, landing nowhere. The nurse struggles to keep up.

The bayonets glistening under a perfect spring sun! Shining over the carnage! The rattle of gunfire and the sound of bullets whizzing past your ears! Settling into flesh inches away! Into children and stray dogs and young men and old women!

He stops abruptly. Then says with stern conviction:

But I won't talk about the barbarism. No. I won't. I mustn't.

He motions for another cup of water with a trembling hand. The nurse moves quickly. She returns and the soldier drinks noisily, gulping it down, spilling some down his front.

"Let's stop for today," she says.

"No, not yet," the soldier says, forcefully. "We must end in a better place or...or I'll never start again."

"Are you sure, dear?"

"Yes. Yes, let's go on."

The nurse sits.

"Here." He begins again, slowly.

But, the little graces you can scrape together for yourself, in between the insanity. I can talk of that! Shall I?

"Oh, yes! Please!" the nurse says loudly, causing beds 6, 7 and 10 to stir.

The soldier smiles a little smile at the nurse as she hunches down in her chair, into the shoulders of her coat, and presses her lips tight together.

Of course there was champagne! That effervescent aphrodisiac! That carbonated emblem of triumph and hedonism that awaits champions at the finish

line, generals at the palais, newlyweds in the honeymoon suite! The bubbles that boil coolly in the glass and roil the gut with excitement, like first love, a navel commotion, down where the aura is said to reside.

“Oh, I can taste it!” she whispers to the soldier.

And what they do to the head! Well, they go to it, don't they, dear heart?!

The nurse looks up, shaking the feeling back into her hand and smiling at the soldier whose gaze is locked into the window. Her pause inspires him to turn his eyes towards her.

“What's wrong?! Keep going!” he says.

She dutifully descends back into the paper.

That's one thing we do have in common with these psychos! They drink to gather the courage to kill—I drink to be back with you, away from this butchery. But it takes the champagne, the wine, for anyone—sadist or pacifist—to be still, calm, rather than trembling like a puppy in a thunderstorm. Champagne, reclaimed from the fascists, distributed amongst our ranks to steel the nerves necessary to slaughter; they spill wine upon our heads so that we may spill blood upon the enemy's!

And how we did drink! Like water! They fed it to us by the barrel! Great wooden wombs full of the stuff! You drink the first glass, and then the second, a new bottle appears, the third glass passes like a gondolier singing your favorite song in a foreign tongue, the fourth comes and goes and the rest drink themselves. You're lost at sea! Smitten, jolly, daring! What a way to live! To die! And you only stop to take a picture or two hanging out of a crumbling balcony in the country that gave the world champagne!

The nurse is scribbling furiously now, afraid to miss anything or force any sort of disruption upon the soldier who is now in another fit, reeling, speaking as fast as he can think. She doesn't even feel her hand.

Oh, champagne! We've never had anything like it in the States! Not the way it is here. Something happens to the bubbles on the way—perhaps in Customs. They must confiscate a certain je ne sais quoi! Oh, listen to me, dear heart! I know you

bate when I get all drippy. But that's all I can do anymore to keep from going to pieces. Ha! Pieces! That's rich! You ought to see me! I won't spoil it for you.

The soldier gets quiet. He waits patiently as the nurse catches up. “They call me a hero,” he says. He pauses again, longer this time, staring into the blackness at the window, perhaps considering heroism, until the nurse begins to suspect that he’s forgotten her. Then, in a pinched whisper:

The tears I've shed on this letter will have dried long before it reaches you in that cold, grey place. All the better; you won't see where I've been weak.

His voice catches in his throat, causing the nurse to look up. Her hand is throbbing, aching like a rotten tooth; she can barely close it around the pen. The soldier is in tears, staring up into the blackened eye. He lowers his head when he notices her regarding him. The nurse drops her pen and rushes to his side. She holds him and rocks him, letting the tears spill onto her, down her neck, across her heart.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, let it out, sweet prince,” she whispers, holding him, rocking him until sleep comes.

For the nurse and the soldier, the next day is filled with little more than cruel anticipation. Fortuitously, the doctor has a dinner meeting one town over so the nurse distributes the evening’s sleeping aids a half-hour early. Then, after making sure the soldier is comfortable continuing on, they begin.

But, those first few weeks, I had it made, dear heart! I thought I'd weaseled right out from under that mean old judge's sentence: incarceration or enlistment. He must have really bought my story about it all being a big, humiliating mix-up! "Let me prove my manhood!" Can you believe I really groveled in front of him like that?! That demon! Well, I knew YOU would choose the former. You're such a tough one. The way you stared him down on his ivory tower of a bench! Confessed all, asked forgiveness for nothing! But you know I had no choice, dear heart! They'd have torn me apart in there. And I didn't want to force you to watch over me, be my protector—like you've always been. I guess I could've used some of your protection over here.

But I figured I'd be safe in a uniform, traipsing around the Orient or lost in a Mediterranean archipelago. And, for a while, I thought I'd done it! What a bargain I'd struck! Oh, I won't invite your jealousy as I know how you can be, but suffice it to say, between the wine and the cards and the lonely boys far from home, I was in hog heaven. I was a real Army man! Hi! Hi! Hey! I've never felt more proud to be an American! Ha! Can you imagine?! Me! We thought we had something special in New Orleans! At first I could only reason that I'd gotten on the wrong plane! This couldn't be the United States Army! It was like Ancient Greece...I know how that will be little comfort to you in there—though I'm sure you're doing just fine in that department. You must be running your own cell block by now! Just like the old neighborhood.

Anyway, all that merriment ended in a hurry once we got into some real action. Patriotism, that last refuge of scoundrels, almost had me!

The soldier stopped to allow the nurse's hand to rest. When she nodded, he began again.

"To allow another to seduce you is to seduce yourself." I will attribute this quote to General Bonaparte, that wee frog, and it will be advantageous not to question it.

But, for a brief time, I was head over clicking-heels with my little military career. Before the bombs started dropping and the bullets started flying, it was like a vacation. I'd slid right out from under that sentence! The world unfurled, balancing a diamond on its tongue. I kissed it in French. Everything was fresh and ripe. For a while. I suppose all things have their time to ripen, and to rot. But, alas, it turns out it was a romance like all the others (except ours, of course)—over as soon as the gloves came off. You won't overlook my little pun there, I hope.

I suppose where they've got you is really not so different from where I am now. Excluding the hard labor. Oh, and, as for where I am, a hospital in...well, I'm not even exactly sure. But it's a lonely, cold place. Brethren to the home of your isolation.

The other men in the ward talk women incessantly, and of course I talk about women, too...But I'm just talking about you. But I have a darling of a nurse who's helped me beyond words; with my words.

The nurse, without raising her head, smiles.

We'll probably be getting out around the same time, once I'm healed up—what's left of me. But put me in a pair of sunglasses and a Guayabera and I'll be your same old cabana boy, afraid to dip my toe in the pool for fear of the chill of the water! When you want me you can find me behind the bar mixing Mai Tais!

I suppose you must have met someone by now, to keep you company. Take comfort in knowing that the idea of this only makes me smile. Please don't fret over what I may think of the ways you pass the time—You never did. I hope that haunted castle hasn't picked your petals or dulled your thorns, my little rose.

I only say this to advise you not to grow too comfortable in your new environs. It's not a resort! And I'll be coming for you! So soon I'll be coming!

This felt as good a place to stop as any; the nurse considerate of the healing effect that ending the evening's work on a high note seemed to have on the soldier.

The next day a lieutenant comes in to alert the soldier that he has been cleared for release.

"On whose authority?!" the nurse interjects.

The officer gives her a loathsome look and waves the doctor over.

"Is there a problem?" asks the tall, bespectacled physician, his grey hair parted, greased and patted down flat against his scalp.

"There seems to be some dissension in your ranks, doctor," the lieutenant says; a man who enjoys the dispensation of cruelty but who has little desire to dirty his own hands. He watches with a satisfied smile as the doctor says brusquely, ominously, "Come with me," and leads the nurse away into the office, out of sight.

The lieutenant returns to the soldier. Perfunctorily he says, "Congratulations, Private, you'll be out of here in a few days. On behalf of the United States Army, let me thank you for your service and assure you that your sacrifice has not been overlooked." And, with that matter cleared up, he turns and marches out of the room. Several of the wounded salute him as he passes their beds, obliviously.

The soldier barely hears the lieutenant's words beyond "Congratulations." His face is fixed on the frosted glass of the office wherein the nurse is still being chastised for her familiarity with the

patients, a “pitifully feminine” trait the doctor finds “juvenile, unproductive and unprofessional.”

The next day the nurse is watched closely by the doctor and he makes sure, as she gathers her belongings at the end of her shift, that she heads out without stopping to speak to any of the patients—particularly the one in bed number 8. The following day is much the same. The next night, the soldier is told, will be his last in the ward. He has recuperated beyond the doctor’s expectations; certainly with little help from the prying, cloying nurse. The soldier says nothing and, once the doctor leaves his bedside, returns his stare to the eye in the window, purpling in the dusk—ringed, as if by a schoolyard bully—before going completely dark.

In the morning the nurse brings in a box of Swiss chocolates. Contraband. Everyone has a piece, even the machine gunner who willingly postpones his tremulous duties to partake of the rich, sweet creaminess. All those capable, thinking of the men they have watched come and go through the ward, raise the little delicacies like white flags. They toast the soldier, then, closing their eyes, take a bite in unison. They get through two lines of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” before the rifleman in bed 4 dives beneath the covers. A light mortar crewman, with great effort, flips his bed over, seeking cover, and the horsebreaker leans to one side, splaying his backside like an open book, and rips a fart that sputters like the fanning of a thousand heavy pages; loud enough to break up the song with laughter and cries of disapproval.

That night the soldier lies awake waiting for the nurse to appear. He listens to the sounds of the others passing through dreams and nightmares; snoring, whimpering, breathing, the high, quiet whistle of their nostrils hissing like cats fighting a block away. The clock on the wall marks time with its almost imperceptible ticking; boots perpetually marching towards nothing; now, always just now. Finally, around 3 a.m., the nurse slips into the room. She’s in her civilian clothes, her coat wrapped around her, her hair tied up in a kerchief. The soldier sees her immediately and she puts a finger to her lips as she tiptoes across the floor, her shoes in her hand.

“We’ve got to finish your letter!” she whispers as she removes the paper from her coat and pulls the pen out from an interior pocket. She

reads him back the last lines from the previous entry. The soldier stops her and, reaching his left hand across the desk, holds her face. “Thank you,” he says. “Thank you.” The nurse’s eyes moisten. Setting the pen to the paper she says, “Okay, go ahead.”

Dear heart,

We...are a crime.

Our love...is a crime. How we love.

So they say.

But war?

They say that war—the things I have seen, the things we have subjected our children to, our elders, ourselves—is, because of its very brutality, an elevation of our humanity. They say that by sinking to the indecency of murder that we are actually enriching our spirit; our love for each other. For our fellow man. Well, for our fellow countryman, at least. Or maybe just those that look like us, or talk like us, think like us, or pray like us. Or, maybe, really, just for ourselves. Each of us, alone, in his own foxhole.

But knowing the evil of it all, they portray war and all the suffering it generates as a transvaluation, a rising above, an ascension to a higher plane of benevolence. The terrible things we will do to each other are, in fact, the reaches of our empathy. And they claim to command these terrible things to alleviate the suffering. We gnaw off the arm to save the body.

They cast this brutality in an almost super-spiritual light, because, should we surrender to barbarism, the worst of our nature, one last time, this war will be the last war. If we just forfeit our humanity, in one final war, perpetually, we can get to the other side, where we shall be inhuman no more. This is what they say, when they deign to consider their reasons for the carnage. From their chambers and their palaces, their mansions, cathedrals and Capitols. Far away from the bloodshed. Just this one last time: Kill to show you care. Stoop to evil to rise to holiness.

Because they don’t see that their beliefs, their way of life, their prejudices and hatreds and religions and governments mean war. War forever. That they ARE war.

And I was a cog! Fodder! A pawn, to satisfy someone else’s bloodlust! And the weapons manufacturers and the arms dealers and the dictators and the generals, brutish little boys in their boardrooms and war rooms and fortresses, strategizing over slaughter tactics with little toy soldiers to represent hundreds, thousands of

men, don't care for the affections, the concerns of the private, or the seaman or the airman—to say nothing of the refugee or the orphan or the widow. But it is only from high above the suffering, nearer to their kings and their popes and their christs that they can send the orders to kill, down the chain of command. Send children, yes-men, stooges, under threat of imprisonment, marching to and fro, searching for this town or that valley, to take this hill or that one, to plunder here, pillage there! And then, in a couple seasons time, to turn around, do it all over again!

And for the poor, miserable henchmen it's all the same! The proud infantry, burdened by grief, waddling under the weight of their weaponry and woe, a pack of mules, their days burning out into nights. The weeks passing, dripping into months. And the generals watching quietly from the wings; upon all the useless misery man has wrought for himself. And you're anesthetized, your nerves shattered, to the point that you are a murderer, just like them. Only, you will see the faces of the dead forever staring into yours, when the night comes down and the curtains are drawn over the black windows, like the lids of dead eye sockets. And you'll never sleep, and if you do, you'll dream. And your dreams are your penance, your measly contrition for stealing lives for the masters in the big house. Piling up the bodies before them, like dogs returning from the hunt with game between their teeth, the necks of their prey bent at odd angles, broken, lifeless. And what peace do we carve out for ourselves? Millions starve and the corpses stack up and the veterans crawl home to be called heroes and disregarded. But the putting greens stay trimmed and lush and the markets rise like erections. The palaces may be ransacked, but only for the next despot to move in. And do we ever get closer to peace? Maybe for a short while. Until the next war.

“To allow another to seduce you is to seduce yourself.”

The soldier grows quiet. He knows he cannot go back. It is written. The nurse does not move. She still has the pen in her hand, poised to write his words.

Then, in an odd tone unfamiliar to the soldier, to many men, he says:

When I return, I will be different. In some ways I will seem worse off. Broken. But in others, maybe, maybe you'll see that I am better. I have exceeded their stilted morals and empty ethics. I have risen. I will come back with love. I still have love. I have won the war.

“That’s all,” he says.

The nurse and the soldier share a long moment of silence.

Then from her coat the nurse brings forth an envelope. At the soldier’s direction she addresses it:

*C/O Inmate 805
Angola State Prison
17544 Tunica Trace
Angola, LA 70712*

While she does this, with a shaky hand the soldier signs his name at the bottom of the letter. After folding it and slipping it into the envelope, he places it beneath his pillow. Out falls the picture of the two women on the sofa. The nurse retrieves it from the floor and tucks it into her coat. They embrace for a long time, the nurse and the soldier. He gives her his address in New Orleans and, calling him her sweet prince, she promises she’ll see him again, back in the States. Once all of this is over.

The next morning, before dawn, the lieutenant enters the room. The soldier awakens to see him standing before his bed. The lieutenant greets the soldier flatly and tells him not to worry, he will be taken care of. He’s a hero now.

The lieutenant waits impatiently as the soldier dresses. It takes him awhile. Before the soldier leaves with the lieutenant, he turns and pulls the letter from beneath his pillow. He stands, taking one last look out of the window at the brightening dawn.

Outside of the hospital the soldier surveys his surroundings and realizes the hospital is one of only two buildings in a vast stretch of bombed-out wasteland. On the other side of what must have been the town square is a cathedral; the only other structure left untouched. From his position in his bed, with just the window to look out of and no way of looking down onto the rubble, he never would have imagined the destruction that surrounded him.

The soldier and lieutenant get into an army truck and drive in silence to a military base. After the lieutenant points him in the direction

of the hangar where his plane will arrive, he asks the soldier if he'd like to have him send his letter out.

"I haven't got a stamp for it," the soldier replies.

"We'll take care of it," the lieutenant says, conclusively.

"I suppose that'd be fine. Thank you."

The lieutenant takes the letter from the soldier, salutes him, and leaves in the truck.

One week later the soldier arrives home, to the apartment that he left before the war. A pile of mail is blocking the door from being opened all the way and the soldier must push it forcefully to enter. On the top of the pile is a letter with a return address of the base he flew out of. He struggles to open it and resorts to using his teeth, nearly tearing it in two. Inside he finds his letter; the one he had sent to the Angola State Penitentiary. It has no postmark indicating it was ever received at the prison. He holds it in his left hand and sees, in large black ink, words, sometimes full lines of text, have been blacked out, censored. He drops it to the floor and notices that just below it on the pile of mail is an official looking letter from the United States Army. He opens it. Inside is a document, dated the same day that he left the hospital. It reads:

DISCHARGE

UNDER OTHER THAN HONORABLE CONDITIONS

This is to certify that

JOHN P. ZELLER 445-98-3421 PRIVATE REGULAR ARMY

has this day been discharged from the United States Army, hereby forfeiting any and all rights, duties and obligations, by reason of:

CONDUCT UNBECOMING AN OFFICER