

Elaine Bander

On the Western Front

1. Passchendaele

Now it's a cheese. We buy it in the Nopris.
It is mild, like the cows which graze this sweet plateau,
and rich, like this soil drained by dyke and ditch.
Barn and copse, field and lane, all preen
in the bright sun. Nothing stirs except our car,
paused at a crossroad, puzzling out directions.
The midday heat clamps down. We want a beer.

Back in Ieper we sit in the Grote Markt
with plates of pâté sandwiches and beer,
watching the townsfolk go about their lives:
that woman walking home for lunch, those men
paving the square to make a larger car-park,
these young boys revving up their motorbikes—
a pleasant Flemish scene, quite Breugel really,
no sign of the Bosch hell which crushed these stones
to rubble eighty years ago. This
was the Salient: Ieper, Ypres, Wipers, one
with Carthage, Troy, the Cities of the Plain.

Eighty years ago it must have been
this peaceful and this prosperous, the ancient
Cloth Hall and Cathedral tower rising
solid and serene, the nearby fields
fertile and green, not yet raked and cratered,
not yet blasted into mud and blood.
(We know that story well: the infernal din,
the stink of rotting flesh and rusting iron,
and the pitiless drowning of the dead.)

The new Cathedral flaunts the tower Ieper
could not afford six centuries ago.
A thin skin of grass covers corruption
where unexploded shells await the plow,
and the canals which drain the sodden land
once more hold the waters back—for now.

2. Vimy Ridge

For every tree, a body smashed and rotted
beneath our feet. This wooded hill's a graveyard
for twenty thousand dead.

The larks know nothing of the dead. Their songs
spill and trill above us, foreign music
here amid familiar birch and maple.
Like the larks, the visiting school-children
sound foreign to our ears. Their French
is not our French, their English not our English.
Their youthful voices are subdued, respectful,
as long as teachers hover within hearing,
but out of sight in grassy shell-holes they
consume their bags of chips and talk in giggles.

A guide from Winnipeg conducts us down
beneath the flower-spangled grass: we enter
the chilly labyrinth where once young men
prepared to kill or die. Like Orpheus
we will ascend again to sun and sky,
but those boys climbed up into Hell and Death.

Tenderly our fingers brush damp walls,
tracing their names carved in the porous chalk.
Later we read those names incised upon
the limestone monument which crowns the Ridge.

A few more years and this site too will be
as strange as Agincourt, Thermopylae:
the victory, as always, meaningless,
but not the lives, never the bleeding lives.

Leaving, I pass our guide, boots off, relaxing
with the local *flic* who guards the car-park.
I hear him say in sturdy Prairie French,
"Nous sommes un peuple très discipliné."
That's all I catch, but it's enough, I find:
a fitting epitaph for butchered lads
metamorphosed into silent pines.

3. Beaumont - Hamel

She's sick of monuments, our daughter says.
She's staying in the car. But sullenly
she follows us along the gravel track
to stalk the brazen Cariboo, which stares
with blind eyes down the valley of the Ancre
where seven hundred Newfoundlanders fell
in twenty minutes, first day of the Somme.

"Fell" doesn't really tell this story, though:
bearing their heavy packs and staggering
across a churned-up trenched and cratered plain
that brimmed with bodies of the first wave's dead,
converging on the one gap in the wire
like pins for the machine guns to knock down,
those boys were felled like cordwood to the ground.

Today the valley's green. A young man riding
high upon his tractor mows the grass
in clean concentric circles, scything poppies
as neatly as the German guns cut men.

Our daughter climbs to see the Cariboo.
I lean against a trench wall, watch a few
tourists walking down to No-Man's Land.
Beside me an old man smokes a cigarette.
He says, "I hate these places." He fought hard here
in '44 and knows something about it.
After the war he took off for Australia.
He's touring Europe with his son this summer.
Let the young visit these battlefields,
he says. He's had enough. He's stopping here.

Our daughter's reached the top now, waves hello.
I photograph her by the Cariboo.

4. The Chemin des Dames

Golden fields of barley. Green fields of beets.
 A few scarlet poppies splashed like blood.
 A ruined sugar factory. A tasteful mausoleum.
 The wind rules this ridge between the Oise and Aisne.

Sun shines on Champagne, cloud-shadows blow
 across the valleys. Laon rides the horizon
 on the north, her towers not quite visible.

Along the crest of the Chemin des Dames
 this road runs straight and true. Here Buonoparte
 stood to watch the Battle of Craon,
 and here the *poilus*, angered by Verdun,
 their Spring Offensive stopped by German guns,
 mutined in 1917.

Within a year some luckless British Tommies,
 survivors of the Somme, were sent to rest
 into this quiet sector of the Line.
 That last big German push took care of them.

The Germans came again in '39.
 Thousands stayed behind in '44,
 their graves set high on the Chemin des Dames.
 Only winds contend now where green beets
 and golden barley host the scarlet poppies.

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