

Joseph T. Cox

Purple Hearts

In late gray light, you slide from the truck,
grimace, scowl, grimace, grimace,
dragging the bloody boot through the wet snow,
limp and limping up the back stairs.

Half your foot and four toes literally flattened
by the cast-iron stove and Uncle Al's clumsiness.
Without flinching you soak the bloody pulp
in steaming Epson Salts, red tendrils coagulating
in your stoic's soup.

No house call, of course,
nor stitches, nor splint, just six more weeks
of stubborn bad temper. The usual shadow.

I almost felt the thaw of pity, maybe
even forgiveness for bruises hidden under cotton,
even the dislocated shoulder we couldn't hide from her.

No, what I felt was a cliché, "What goes around . . ."
A cold Calvin confirmation, that shared stock company
of pain, Melville's universal cuff come home,
a sense justice that shamed us all.

Mostly she blamed the war: their last offensive
over the frozen sheaves of the Hurtegen Forest,
your unit's cowardice, you left for dead,
found by Earnest, later blinded, your only ally
to this day.

We all inherited the austere silence,
and the stubborn defiance that let you live.
The foot healed, and we hardly noticed your limp.

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