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Alive and Well and Behind Enemy Lines

I looked down the road, past the puddles I knew didn't exist, to see the house at the end wafting in the afternoon heat. I was 12 years old and was mowing my neighbor's overgrown lawn with my father. I looked behind me as I made my way through a particularly thick section and noticed that I was leaving large clumps of grass. I removed the plastic chute to find it filled with wet grass. I dumped the chute's contents into the catcher, then reached into the mower to remove the remaining grass clumps. *ThmmpPANG* went the mower blade as it removed a finger just above the top knuckle and slung it against the metal cutting deck. Blood streamed darkly down my hand and arm. My father ran to me, pulling his shirt off. He wrapped his white T-shirt around my hand and lay me back on the grass. He killed the mower's engine, ran across the street to the car, drove it up onto the neighbor's lawn and lifted me into it.

I lay for some time in a bed in the hospital's emergency room. The panic and shock of my accident had passed, but what remained was a pulsation that radiated throughout my body. I longed for something to suppress the pain. I could think of nothing else. I asked my father if there wasn't anything the doctor could do. He looked at me and simply shook his head. *Was he mad at me for doing something as stupid as putting my hand under an operating lawnmower?* I wondered. My head swam. "Man, war must be terrible," I said, apropos of nothing. My father stood up from his chair and approached my bedside. He looked at me, his jaw set tight. My father is no sentimental man—his personal diary, my mother once told me, bore no mention of my arrival into this world. As a high school teacher, however, he lost more former students to the war in Vietnam than he cared to remember. I braced myself for some kind

of rebuke, but received none. Instead, he explored my eyes, stroked my hair, and departed the room to the noise of what sounded like a cough.

I recount the above story because its memory was conjured after I completed Robert E. Gajdusek's *Resurrection: A War Journey*. I will concede that there's nothing particularly novel (or arguable) in the assertion that war is indeed terrible. However, the horror of war is given a personal treatment in Gajdusek's narrative. His story chronicles his role (if it can be called that) in his division's attack on the French city of Metz in November 1944.

I must confess that I recall my lawnmower incident perhaps to Gajdusek's chagrin. "Let this time of your reading be time of your life absented from your life, a life apart as it were," he challenges his readers at the beginning of his book, a noble exhortation, yet a futile one, perhaps. He insists that all good reading is an out-of-body experience of sorts, and at some level I suppose that's true. But another mark of good reading, or, more to the matter, good writing, is that the reader cannot help but project himself into the situation being described. How would I react in this situation? Would I have had the presence of mind to do or say that? At least, these are the questions I quietly ask myself as I read Gajdusek's story. As they pertain to a conversation regarding war, however, these are questions that I admittedly eschew; they demand an honesty of myself that I'm reluctant to provide. The fact that it took Gajdusek some 50 years to write in detail his narrative reflects the enormity of his endeavor. Indeed the entire book is arrayed in such a way as to re-present the struggles with which Gadjusek has wrestled in the years since the incident: historical background, both of the battle of Metz and of other epic (and similarly pointless) battles waged on that same ground; clinical, objective accounts of incidents occurring immediately preceding and simultaneous to Gajdusek's travails; a fellow infantryman's account of the attack; and finally Gajdusek's narrative, along with earlier endeavors of the author's which tried to make sense of the experience. The elements of the book that are not Gajdusek's own serve as a foil to his story. The former are cold and passionless; they traffic in such lifeless phrases as "halted further advances;" "sustained heavy casualties;" "launch reserve formations." The account of John Loomis, an army private who attacked Metz alongside Gajdusek, is similar to the Army Department's account in its objectivity, while not as didactic. "In one fraction of a second I saw the flare of the shot," Loomis drones, "the tracers going by my head as I hugged the ground, and

heard and felt the bullets go by and crunch into my buddy, Jim Northrup, immediately behind me. I called to him. No reply. Then Santi, Knuth, and I shifted left into a slight depression to get out of the line of fire" (75-76). No more mention of Northrup; no mention of fear, despair, horror. The human condition, as it were, is checked at the door, not to be picked up on the way out.

The clinical objectivity comprised in the beginning of the book serves as an appropriate and much needed point of departure for the remaining 3/4 of the book, aptly subtitled "My Battle." Over the course of these 170-some pages Gajdusek gives the reader a sense of immediacy that is too often lacking in war narratives. When his platoon is chosen to spearhead an attack on some high ground, the simultaneous despair and excitement is palpable: "It was like having the sense of probable catastrophe (that so many had) utterly annulled and moved to inevitable necessity. It was numbing. And [. . .] it was enormously exhilarating"(47). The exhilaration stemmed not from the fact that the assignment was a thrilling one. Rather, the assignment all but annihilated the element of chance; any vestiges that remained of that element were now in his platoon's hands, not in that of the monolith's, the Army's. Finding the silver lining in this quasi death-sentence is also evidently a skill of Gajdusek's: "I actually was glad I wasn't going in the second wave," he concludes, thankful for the simple fact that at least the first element had surprise working to its advantage. "I didn't let myself think of where I might be when the second 'wave' advanced" (48).

This selective projection of the future is a prudent move by the young soldier, because what follows is a detailed description of fear, impulse, and horror. Gajdusek presents in black and white the temporal distortion that is said to occur in these types of surreal, dire circumstances. His fellow soldiers are killed and wounded indiscriminately as his platoon attacks. He himself comes under heavy gunfire and is then wounded, a few feet from cover in the woods, semi-protected by a slight depression in the field in which he lay. The hyperconscious thoughts of the wounded Gajdusek are mesmerizing:

> [The German's] guns' cyclic rate had always appalled me: while we stuttered and pattered along with our 30's at 350, they were throwing 550 at us with the sound of a ripping sail, a giant canvas sail tearing itself across in the wind; and even with the decreased accuracy, enough lead must have flown across my back

> to have sewn an intricate seam. . . . But as I lay there at last "under the guns," I found on an instant lost and atavistic senses that had been numb since my birth: every minute centimeter of my body, my flesh, was alert, apprehensive, waiting for the impact of its bullet; each pore totally sensitive to and sensing the flight of those bullets towards me, into me. It was only gradually that the mind apprehended that the mounted guns, fixed for their killing zones, undoubtedly could depress no further in their mounts, and that it was to the almost invisible, indistinguishable contours of that land that I owed my momentarily saved life. (53)

Alas, this is only the beginning of the ordeal that Gajdusek is to capture over the ensuing pages. From contour to shell hole, where, after being mistaken for a German "digging in" he's flushed out to another shell hole, only to be stepped on by an unperceiving German soldier, to an abandoned farmhouse, to captivity, to a Dantean field hospital, to liberation, Gajdusek's story is indeed an odyssey. I'm reminded of *Invisible Man*, where Ellison's unnamed narrator moves frantically from one absurd episode to another. So it is with Gajdusek, who, once taken captive by the Germans, uses his limited (though exceptional by American foot-soldier standards) German to stay an otherwise certain death. At times the effect of his German is a testimony to the transcendent beauty of language—some of his captors admire and even cherish him for his abilities which, Gajdusek elegantly suggests, allow for them to be "released to human moments" together. On another occasion, however, he is baited into a war within a war, this one of words, with a German SS officer. The exchange is a heated one; the officer demands to know where Gajdusek has learned his German. His response of "high school" fails to satisfy the officer. Gajdusek then lies, telling the officer that he'd studied a semester of German at university before being drafted, in an effort to appeal to the officer's snobbishness. "And it worked. By God it worked," Gajdusek exclaims incredulously. "I knew that I was, I would be, probably, finally safe from him," he correctly concludes.

The reader is exhausted and frustrated by the time Gajdusek is taken to the cellar room, the aforementioned field hospital. The grievous wounds Gajdusek suffered and has been nursing pale in comparison to that which he witnesses in the clinic. To this point the reader has been quietly suffering with the narrator as he's detailed his trials. But in the

cellar room the curtain is thrown back, both literally and figuratively, on the grisly horror of war that Gajdusek previously thought belonged solely to him.

> I saw the sudden hemorrhaging of a man lying before me, blood pumping out his mouth. I saw the truncated ends of torn away limbs, the torn faces where wads of cloth were held in place where no flesh was. Some were, it seems, young yet hardened veterans of the line, others old men, too old surely for the uniforms they wore, the wounds they bore. Still many, too many more, were boys, no more than fifteen at the best. (184)

The view is a revolting one. But the stares he receives are even more unbearable: "Each set of eyes was like a sharp blow." For an instant Gajdusek is "the enemy;" he bears for the entire U.S. Army the malice of the room full of wounded and dying Germans. His sense of guilt and grief is incalculable. A nun's inquiry as to whether there's anything she could do for him is almost more than he can bear.

I earlier remarked about Gajdusek's ability to find the silver lining. My instinct would tell me that with time one could only become bitter at having had to endure such a horrifying experience. Not so for Gajdusek. For him, a keen sense of and appreciation for nature is an invaluable by-product of his skirting death. "The earth had become sensualized, dramatized, and more intimate to me," Gajdusek concludes in his book's postscript.

> . . . I had dug into it, been sheltered by it, had hidden in it, had covered myself with it and rubbed it upon me that it might be both my warmth and camouflage. . . . This intimacy with gross and basic nature was for me an unpredictable gift; and no one receives such a gift without coevally receiving the gift of a certain eloquence when nature, which is the source of our imagery and language, informs and pours itself full-bodied into our abstractions and thoughts. (213)

This admission of Gajdusek's is redemption for the reader. Some meaning, as simple and perhaps out of balance as it may seem, is given to the ordeal.

I remember taking a poetry class at a university located near a military base at which I was once stationed. On occasion I'd dash from

work to class, and if time were a factor I'd attend class in my uniform. I remember writing a paper which examined the treatment of war in poetry, and how the glorification and righteousness of war, seen in full color in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," for instance, wanes as weapons of mass destruction proliferate. I offered as evidence for my inverse proportional theory the works of the trench poets of World War I. The conclusion of my paper, as I recall, was a cautionary one; the horrors of war, I suggested, can become lost in this world of advanced, "antiseptic" weapons systems. My teacher had, in general, laudatory remarks for my essay, but concluded, "Given your attitude towards war, I'm puzzled that you're in the service." A blush ran to my cheek as I read his remark. *Does he have a point?* I instinctively asked myself. But shame quickly gave way to indignation. *Who would he rather see in the profession of arms?* Would he rather see an army full of men like Tex, the foul-mouthed, Cro-Magnon roommate of Gajdusek's in the cellar room? Trigger-fingered men with mastadonic egos controlling the destiny of the human race, if they were so inclined? No; it takes former soldiers the likes of Gajdusek to give us intimate details of the grim reality of war. And it takes servicemen and women of similar sensibilities to do their very best that the realities of the past do not become the realities of the future.

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