

*Jack Vian*

## **American Triptych: War**

### **Everyone Loved the Apple Pie**

**T**here are some parts of the sky that have never been named. They exist only because we do not see them lying there like mountain peaks without bases, spirits without bendings of the shell.

X thought about this as he began to dig the hole. The enemy soldier lay at his feet, his hands balled into rigorous fists, white against the grey ground, like chalk equations ground into slate.

The soldier should have been dead, he was the enemy after all, but he occasionally mumbled something gurgley and indistinct, usually when the sun peeked out from behind the moldering puffs of grimy smog and fire. He spoke German, or maybe Italian. It could have been French, too. Even Cajun Appalachian. It was always hardest to tell when they were dying or dead, their tongues wound like snakes around the blade, writhing till sundown without control, without idea, beyond the poison of need.

The spade hit the soft earth and turned it over. Beneath the rimy grey crust it was black like loam except for a lack of worms. Deeper maybe, but not as deep as he would go. Not that it mattered here, in this place. The body would still decay, putrefy, bloat and stink, liquefying beneath a palimpsest of moldy skin. The two lead balls in its chest would be forever trapped like a pair of unsexed seeds, never growing, never sprouting—not with sun and not with water, not even with a prayer squeezed from a harvest moon.

The worms didn't matter either. Not out here, not in these fields, not in this place among these things, not even had it been Beltane, nor had a laurel crown been thrown by a goddess whore. The worms couldn't help the seeds to grow, not in this chest. They could only sit in the brain like maggots never flying and dreamless of writhing free.

The flies were the only animals he could see. They were the only live animals he ever seemed to see. They never died; never shied. They were fat and lazy and flew like slow, crooked cartoons of themselves in love with the world

and all that it offered. The soldier groaned but did not breathe. Blood stained his woolen coat and made it black as betel nut. There was no wind or passing song, and the sun was but a bleary eye descending behind a caudal mask.

X finished digging without thinking. He paused once to roll a cigarette, but didn't smoke it, just chewed it till it worked apart and floated down into the hole like sawdust from an unmendable childhood friend.

X's breath was raspy as a rusted chain and his skin prickled with sweat despite the common cold. The land was pockmarked and bare and he might have thought it like the moon, this land, except he was not thinking, and the moon, to him, was not a place to be thought of even when left alone.

X finished the hole and grabbed the body by the boots. They were old and muddy like his own, unshined and much maligned. There were holes in the soles patched with strips of stiff rawhide. He did not remove them. He would not have removed them even had they been shiny and new, even had they been his size. X did not like the idea of being buried barefoot, as he knew he would one day be once they got him home and in a box to call his own. They always laid you out in your good clothes and barefoot like a Sunday pauper. It would be better to go naked, he always thought, without shame, than to go barefoot, forever hiding your toes from the living and the dead with neither obol nor ghostly home.

The soldier barely fit in the trench. His knees bent up a little, like a ridan or salient, his chin tucking to his chest. He stared blindly, eyes unclosed, as X crossed his enemy's lifeless arms across his chest. X was delicate in his movement, careful to keep the blood from his own hardened hands. The soldier's hands were still balled, curling at the wrists like talonless claws. And they were still the only white things in sight. The clouds were dark and smudgy. The soldier's face was ashen, his eyes yellowy and moldering, a mirror of gelid coals.

X took the soldier's gun and fixed the bayonet. He laid it with the body so that the blade caressed the cheek like a lover's hand. He said no words, observed no prayers, no silence except his own. He took the spade and worked the earth, covering the body, covering the bones.

Soon the trench was filled and the earth was smoothed, the spade tossed away. X rolled a cigarette and smoked it without worry as he unzipped his pants and took a long, unbridled piss. He watched without wonder as a feathery trace of spiral lines splattered the earth with tumuli clots and muddy rainbow rain. He didn't bother to clean his boots nor wipe his hands.

Then he picked up his rifle and walked away. He was hungry. It was the Fourth of July.

**June 17**

The smoke cleared, smelling of cordite, and the sound of weapons fire was replaced by an uneasy calm. Excited breaths tattooed the silence in personal reveilles.

X peered out from his position. The earth was grey around him, grey like the clouds and the smoke all mingling in one endless shade from horizon to horizon. The concertina was a duller grey, tangled and distant, with neither rusted stains nor lambent glares to tempt and beguile.

The coast was clear, only the bodies remained. Shells. Uniforms. Scattered parts. Blood turning to mud. All of it grey and greying.

The men patted themselves superstitiously, checking their pockets it seemed, as they inventoried their extremities and vital parts with carbuncle thoughts of talisman and prayer.

X looked to his right and noticed a soldier leaning face first into the earthen wall of the trench, his helmet tilted back to cover his dirty neck. He shook the soldier's shoulder tentatively, as if awakening a napping child on a train. But the soldier did not wake and X could only watch as the soldier slumped backwards into the mud and ooze and stinking trench rot. A blossom of red decorated his breast like a misplaced medal. It was the only color that showed through the washed-out day, even his skin was greying like dwarven stone in the wastrel light.

X said, "Who the fuck is this?"

The squad gathered round, keeping low, shoulder to shoulder, peering out from beneath their helmets like a tale of wizened trolls.

"Isn't that Gullet's replacement?"

"Can't be. Gullet's replacement bought it yesterday."

"You're sure?"

Gullet's replacement got here Monday and bought it on Tuesday during the shelling before lunch."

"He the one that lost both arms?"

"What day is it anyway?"

"Fuckin' A."

"Wednesday. And he was the one that got blown in half. The one who lost both arms lived."

"Motherfucker."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Who was he?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"I gotta shit."

"You sure it's Wednesday?"

"So he was the one that kept trying to stay out of the mud?"

"I thought he was Samson's replacement."

"No, I'm Samson's replacement," piped in an apple-assed kid, his face still smooth and unweathered and able to smile around the eyes. His voice glimmered with a schoolboy lilt, like a shooting star not quite burned to dust.

X looked at him with what might have been disbelief or incredulousness, or maybe it was simply the look he always gave to UFOs and foreign objects never named before.

"He's Samson's replacement?" X asked aloud, his voice as brittle as a smoker's at the break of dawn.

"That's him."

"Yes, sir. Gunther, Pfc. sir."

"So who's this," X said, pointing to the corpse in the mud with the red bloom staining its chest, its eyes open and staring up into the sky like unsent letters home.

"I think it's Gullet's replacement's replacement."

X looked down. "I'll be damned."

The stain was small, too small, really more like a bud not a blossom, not a bloom. Shrapnel. Lucky as death can be, just enough steel to pierce the heart and to stop it cold. Painless. And so little blood, not enough at all, not to warrant so much fuss and confusion. Yet here it was, over and done with, as noiseless and neat as war can be.

"I guess you're right," X said and leaned over to close the dead man's eyes with his fingers. Everyone else turned away, even Gunther, Pfc., although he couldn't have told you why.

"Joe, get the ghouls and tell the Lieu we need a replacement for Gullet's replacement's replacement."

"Fuck."

"I know. But you can't always get the fat girl, Joe."

"That ain't what she told me last time."

But X didn't hear what Joe said, he was looking at the corpse, listening to other things. The dead man had attracted his first fly, and the fly crawled across his pale and greying lips like a hungry spy unmindful of X's denatured gaze.

X added an afterthought. He sounded faraway, like a father's ghost. "And take Samson's replacement with you. He's got to learn to fuck sometime."

The squad laughed a tired little laugh. The kind of laugh you find at the bottom of a bottle after the bars have closed. Joe slithered off in silence, Gunther, Pfc., mucked after him, trying not to fall on his bayonet.

The squad wandered away leaving X almost alone. He flicked his Lucky at the fly and missed. The fly sat on the soldier's lips like a scar. X took his own fingers, the same fingers, and kissed them like children before the front; they tasted grey, like earth mixed with mustard rain and spit in your eye.

### **Like Lavender and Rouge**

He gets up before the dark can fall, walking home, letters still to write and not enough lies to fill the page.

The clouds drift above and his head feels like the shrinking trim of a child's balloon: tempting yet forgotten as it settles into an obsolescent feather fall.

There is no blood when he wakes, no scars, no scratches on flesh or bone, just bruises and a headache and a complimentary 3-day pass. But no one left to share the laugh.

He closes his eyes and lets go, waiting for the nails to come alive and split his palms and pierce his side, to rive like life atomized beneath an unforgiving silver flamed sky.

There is a whistle like Heimdall's clarion call, and he knows the dead have died.

Looking out across the human line he has gone as high as he dare, standing lonely in the crux of trunk and limb, his poncho draping around him like a future shroud. The wind rides up beneath the heavy folds and makes him cold.

There are three of them, soldiers all, watching him climb, watching his boots scabble against the battered tree. It has arms instead of limbs, this tree, all blasted and piebald with neither twig nor leaf alone at the edge of no Man's Prize, a serpent's post or gallows's roost, a gibbet from the prophet's home. It is bleaching white like an imagination of bones from another time, its truncated limbs lifting to the sky like the arms of Essene in ecstatic prayer.

All the grass is dead and gone, forgotten, as he lays the tags upon his brow, twin talismans of guilt and shame. He forgets they are there though the metal once was colder than skin. His rifle is lying beside him, anointed with oil and gleaming, clean despite the spent and clattered earth.

He lies on the ground looking up at the sky, looking for clouds that do not

belong, the ones with faces and skulls that dream and laugh like bloody gnomes flying slow as molasses on a stick, turning eyes to Jell-O, and lungs to glue.

X sits down, head abuzz and tired from his evening stroll. He can't remember why until he finds a pocketful of names. They jingle in his hands like a pocketful of bones, like coins lost all the way from home.

**Jack Vian**, AKA #623190 is a current resident of the Texas Plantation System. He has been known to tell stories, write poems and play a mean game of Scrabble. His poems have appeared in *Many Mountains Moving*, *Curbside Review*, *Colere*, *Potpourri*, and *Bear Creek Haiku*.