

Paul West

My Father at War

One

aving been taught in school about ancient alchemists who changed base metals into gold, or “mufkuzt,” or were supposed to have, I naturally thought of my father as an alchemist too. Part of his working day, he dealt in white-hot iron in white-hot ladles, but sometimes he also had to deal with brass. The iron, once cold, was dumped outside as “pig iron,” awaiting collection, but whatever he did with brass remained unknown, maybe on its way to transmutation into gold. Filing a piece of brass one day, he got some brass filings on the skin of his legs, and so began a saga of skin trouble in which the outer layer kept peeling and he had to stay at home, fuming, with special wet bandages arrayed around his calves. He itched and squirmed just like, as he said, someone from the trenches with dermatitis hidden within the puttees they wound around their calves. Sometimes, I could tell, he was in a special state, not quite knowing where he was and whence his trouble had come, from the trenches or from brass. Imagine, having been spared trench-rot only to undergo the caress of filed brass. Doctor Crawford, affable, garrulous Scot, visited him almost daily, and they invariably settled down together for a straight Scotch after the daily dressing with penicillin. I shall never forget my father’s characteristic semi-crouch from those days, when he reached forward almost like a water diviner (minus twig) and groped for some part of his leg that was itching and perhaps paining him as well. Pain he could assimilate, having become a past master at that dreadful tryst, but the itch subdued and vexed him, requiring more and more Scotch, especially when Crawford was present. In fact they were cordial drinking buddies, and our Gaelic doctor was one of my father’s new-found friends. With him, my father became more voluble than with me, his child, or with my mother, and from a distance I attuned myself to the rhythm, the give and take of their exchanges, punctuated by what I supposed was bawdy laughter (at that stage, I thought most laughter was bawdy). Crawford had been in the army too, but had not seen action,

so it was likely that my father was airing for the second time stories of mud and glory that had kept me countless times from my sleep.

My father's leg never healed, although the physical sensations diminished, and I had the impression that Crawford's visits would go on forever, and my mother sniffing the Scotch-laden air with mild censoriousness. Clearly, the things my father and I did together, pretending or embellishing, would not figure in his recitals for the good doctor; I felt like their jealous protector, unable at that time to do much about preserving them, but already beginning to regard my father as a man of mystery who told different listeners different pieces of his epic, and possibly none of them all of it. Did the pieces hang together, as if in the mind of some sublime, omnivorous overseer? To an extent they did, but I never conferred with Crawford, not about my father anyway, but only enough for him to wash out my ears or diagnose spondylitis in my neck. Some people, I thought, came into the world to baffle others, who tended to think of their fellow-creatures in clichés or archetypes, allowing little scope for chronic idiosyncrasy. We were surrounded by enigmas of weather and chemistry, so why not enigmas that were people, even people you knew well and, knowing them well, credited with predictability? Whether my father had set out to puzzle us, I never knew, but I always assumed he thought of himself as a minefield grafted into a sweet-smelling garden in which place-names and names of battles sat uncouthly beside the names of women or even lost friends, that remained permanently under the surface as the property of a man whose vocation was to keep the most volatile parts of himself under lock and key.

Sleep is tyrannical with even the meekest of us, subduing and enslaving until we can stand no more. My father, however, after retiring at eleven, would often be up again by four, downstairs, poring over erudite histories of his war or relaxing with a racing story by Nat Gould: Linklater's *Impregnable Women*, or some harmless drivel put out in orange binding by a publisher called Herbert Jenkins. He would read until dawn, or so my mother told me, she who had now and then crept downstairs to see what he was up to. Yet to ask my father what else was in his mind while reading was like bear-hunting with a piano. What seemed to appeal to him was the indecorous availability of life, as found elsewhere in the licentious prose of André Gide. I myself had read somewhere about how the ancient Egyptians used to think of the Nile as one thing, something they could lift up bodily in their arms, from end to end, and hug, not as a series of waterways and canals, but a huge breathing baby river. My father would have understood this, and when I told him about it I suspected he began thinking of the war in much the same way, more in a flowing, intact sweep than Captain Liddell Hart, one of his favorite historians. He did not sleep much, no doubt waiting for the

next opportunity to—do what? I never quite knew, but sensed in him a blithe expectancy.

Was that it? I discovered that the reasons for someone's secretiveness had nothing to do with logic, as with my own. There were parts of human beings, even to a boy in his early teens that remained unquantifiable or were quiddities of a special stamp. Their presence in the human gamut enlivened the stuff on the surface, providing what etymologists trying to pin down the source of the word, "absurd," identified as a twisted or irrational root. Absurd, they said, means irrational root in Arabic. That was enough to feed me for ages, culled from the least visited appended pages of an obsolete dictionary that came as a free gift with a subscription to some war magazine. I myself was finding gold among the ruins of language. I told my father no such thing, but was tempted to, having noted in his blithest performances a certain skill with words culled not from his beloved history books, but whipped into an agitated, teasing froth deep inside him that remained mostly for his own delectation but sometimes edged out just for the fun of it. "Imagine," he said once in boisterous tones, "Oxford and Cambridge decide to stage a boat race between the millionaires and the billionaires, with skiffs and coxes or coxwains, all the rest. Now, what's the difference between the millionaires and the billionaires?" How would I ever know something like that? His answer was brief: "Millionaires row." A double pun? In my father's darkest depths, neither blood nor brass, neither rusting pig iron nor fluke penicillin held sway, but only some unrecognised word-hoard gleaned from years of solitude, a gift given back to himself in the midst of disaster. A man floundering in several quicksands, ocular, vocational, and parental, my father chose to see the sludge as protective coating for his vital spark.

Two

Wartime as I write this. I am an old boy restaging an old war while remembrancing an even earlier war's warrior. How the wars pile up, annihilating so many people in the interests of some politico's rabid whim. The imagery remains much the same, though the weaponry mutates. The bloodletting does not alter much, except for getting easier, and one wonders if the hypothetical observer on Planet X finally dismisses us as suffering from some form of lethal St. Vitus's dance: helpless killers of themselves, he notes in his cylindrical spacetime. On the increase, there are even those who do not covet life itself; if not their own, what reck they of the lives of others? We will never get taken up, adopted, turned into pets, which I recall was the comedian Johnny Carson's abiding cosmic fear. Life is frail, which is why

we quell it with such abandon; if it were almost impossible to wipe out, would we take the trouble? I doubt it.

My father, sometimes reducing his glance to a pair of shoes he had decided to repair, saw nothing beyond them, but only the rim of the sole, the tiny heads of nails driven in. He did this with shoes to achieve a certain invulnerable calm, and I envied him his indolent *laissez-fair*. There he would crouch, legs splayed wide to accommodate the last and his clutter, at ease by the spluttering fire, putting those neat, Byronic hands to work on something pacific. He would almost vanish into a cobbler's trance, firm in his belief that, if you gave someone something firm to tread on, their life improved. It was very much a manual workman's point, but it ranged far and wide beyond him, from the explorer to the drill sergeant, from the ballerina to the sentry. He had learned this kind of thing in his teens and was unlikely to forget it, even as he remembered that long walk to his dinner in Market Street, a walk he could roll up into a ball and hold close to his chest, like the Nile. It was what he had been allowed to keep at the cost of an eye, and it never wore out. He would have walked it barefoot, if required to, such was his sense of reprieve; indeed, he was the saint of any humble chore, having at his command a host of savage comparisons drawn, say, from the salient at Ypres, or the London hospitals. Reconstructed as a jack of all trades, he was a home-made man, as certain American poets have been, and was in some ways a match for John Clare, who walked in search of the horizon, except that my father knew what lay beyond it.

In a photographer's studio I saw an imposing display of corners for decorative frames, the rest of the frames cut away so as to draw attention to the corners. In fact the corners were so mounted, in tall tiers, that I had a fleeting impression of being next an immortal sergeant whose good conduct stripes reached far out beyond him. All those chevrons made me almost hallucinate, wondering if any NCO could have served so long and distinguished himself so much. It was quite moving. Then I regained my bearings and the sergeant faded from view.

"You're far away," my father said, or something like that.

"I am dreaming," I answered, "a dream of soldier's stripes."

"Never mind those," he said, "just a bauble. The real good conduct's in how you manage to control your breathing when the game is up."

"Like taking an examination."

"No, never. Blood on the moon, my boy, and no questions asked."

Was he being literal? It usually took a chat such as this to expose how far we had wandered away from one another, each from the other's suppositions about life and death, and it took some effort to manage to overlap with him again.

The English are a sentimental people, and very much ashamed of it, but the Irish and Scottish strains in his make-up steadied him no end, as did his profoundly irreligious outlook. One day, apropos of nothing, he said, "Human beings, trapped in the playground of life, are like children at a birthday party, wanting magic tricks, from no matter who." Of all the devout forces afflicting soldiers, only one, the Salvation Army, earned his praise, ever on hand during the worst bombardment, he claimed, always toiling with the worst of the wounded when the rest of them, chaplains and other godbotherers, had fled for the rear. Talk of the Salvation Army and a catch would form in his throat, a tear in that omnivorous eye. He held very little holy beyond the memory of his father, smashed up in a mining accident and restricted thenceforth to rolling and plaiting bellropes for the local church, and his incessantly busy mother beating her offspring with a short cane, then plying them with food to make up for the onslaught. There was an old wartime friend who had gone on postwar to Iran to work in the oilfields, and to whom my father wrote regularly, in reply receiving photos of the oilfields and derricks. This fellow, at least as long as the correspondence endured (until his marriage), seemed to give my father a leaning post, a serious confidant who had been through the same ordeals, as had the two local men, with whom his relationship was less earnest. Somewhere in my father's spiritual background, if that is not too overblown a way of putting it, there were saints and lairds, to whom he extended a perfunctory, haphazard nod for at least providing a dimension of sorts, but he never lingered on his heritage. His new standing, not so much mutilé de guerre as grandee of survivorship, depended on doctors he had known, including the American from Pittsburgh, of whom he spoke glowingly, and locally Dr. Crawford, one of the many Scotsmen who figured in my father's life, whether in the firing squad at the Tower of London or as authors, whether as army officers or as doctors, the last of these visible echo of the local myth that saw England overrun with the brilliant sons of poor Scottish crofters who sent them south to make a living Scotland denied them (there were no doctors in Scotland; so said the myth). Indeed, even at Oxford there was an offshoot of the same myth, claiming that Balliol College, where Scots roosted, was the intellectual powerhouse of the university—was that why a recent Master of Balliol turned out, on his death, to have been a Russian spy?

There was a pagan dependency in my father that squared little with my mother's sketchy piety (she took flowers to the altar in the local church, but refused to do anything else, including playing the church organ, which, since she was an outstanding pianist, she was often begged to do).

Concerning the afterlife, if any, he stamped out all rumors. There was nothing there, he just knew it, except perhaps his father rolling bellropes and his mother doing endless washing, or himself at last using the scholarship he had won long ago to attend grammar school. Flowers he adored, but not the standard pieties of everyday, or the lip-service accorded men in dog collars, whom he saw as frauds. This time around, he was not going to miss the main chance. In other words, he was a disappointed man who made the best of what he had.

Other times, between four and dawn, he would finish one of my mother's crossword puzzles, or pretend to, screwing up the result into a mangled twist of paper to hide his doubts. Or, with peeping tongue, and a good deal of sighing, he would inscribe in copperplate hand his football coupon, on which he gambled against next Saturday's scores. When his weekly coupon arrived, the envelope addressed him as Esq. for Esquire, thus installing him among the nobility, barristers, and members of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. This arrant promotion pleased him in a minor way, much more than the rank of sergeant had, and I think it summed up the pretensions of the Crusader figure who crouched in red beside the *Daily Express's* headline. He was certainly fastidious enough to be a man of quality, with a shield bearer (me) at his side; indeed, Esquire itself descended etymologically from "shield bearer," from Latin *escutarius* and French *escuier*. He knew nothing of any such word story, and was better off without it. The mild and noble greeting on his weekly coupon was more than enough for him to linger on, and he might have been tempted into adding the title to his friends' names on greeting them each day. Would any etymology have helped him to polish off those crosswords? I doubted it, and words like "bane" and "saw" were best left to my mother to tinker with. Had I been awake when he was, I might have been able to read aloud to him when his eye wearied, though he would probably have protested that such reading was unfit for somebody young. He was exaggerating; there was worse in Shakespeare and Dickens than he would ever have found in his middlebrow reading.

In another sense, however, each was the other's child. Having had little enough of childhood, he was having a second one, and certainly we were having an adolescence together, he mine, and I his. We learned together how to cope with the industrial strength yahoos we ran into: his officers, my freshmen. Yet he was ambivalent about both, sometimes commending the good breeding of the first, the earnest ignorance of the second. He did not feel obliged to give final verdicts on any one or anything, contending that everything was in flux, though he didn't use that word. If he was a born survivor, then he had escaped only by the skin of his teeth, an expression he disliked for its inaccurate melodrama. He was always waiting for life to improve, but reluctant to give it a helping hand; he had done

his best for life, he felt, and now it was up to the Herbert Jenkinsees, the Nat Goulds, the Eric Linklaters, and other men of letters to see things through. If he was a meliorist, he was a lazy one; with more sleep he might have been busier, less inclined to say live and let die. His joke, that a one-eyed man needed only half the usual amount of sleep, was a poignant excuse for a bad habit, but I do declare, after all this time thinking about him, he got out of bed when he did because he wanted extra time to be left alone in. He had suffered a lifetime's bother in his teens, and wanted no more of it, which is to say he treated almost all he met or who came to see him with the same cordial condescension, excepting only his wartime pals and Doctor Crawford, just possibly Constable Swain. For a man with a huge memory, he was oddly absent-minded. You might call him altruistically indifferent if that made any sense at all, but he was also mercurial beyond any of Elgar's enigmas and, minus his mustache, bizarrely juvenile, as if his face had decided to follow his mind back into the teens he'd missed. Trying to follow him as he zig-zagged amid the phenomena of a new century already ancient to him, I sometimes became blurred with protean sympathy as I felt my natural personality beginning to shear away from his, less and less able to empathize as I almost casually discovered the self I wanted to have, growing gradually away not from him but from where he had situated his remaining life, and feeling guilty about it, as it were abandoning him in his durable routine.

We would have been more useful to each other marooned on Elba.

We would have been more father and son had I been more of an engineer.

We would have shared more experiences had he been more open and I a better listener.

In one sense, he held himself captive, no doubt in the company of certain ecstatic events, but these were epiphanies wrapped inside abstractions torn away from primitive phenomena. Asking him why, why, I kept running into Liddell Hart, whose elegant military trajectories he had more or less memorized as if he were going to be tested. Somewhere in those elegant summaries stood my young father wishing he'd stayed at home for the beef and mustard sandwiches his mother plied all of us with. A lover of maps, he was an oddly homeless man, polite but like certain zones of war unoccupied.

Three

My father did not live long enough to discover how grains of sand, fiercely spun by the rubbery throb of a helicopter's seething blades, turn into sparks like prim iotas in the early visions of philosopher Democritus. Nor did he ever hear, as the

voice of the laptop was heard in the land (*vox laparæ*), the anemic, subdued cry of the machine's voice: "Not my fault." But, thousands of times, he heard the sounds of one of those infiltrating, note-taking rains as he squatted unsheltered amid mother nature's indiscriminate husbandry, wondering if he would survive until tomorrow. I often think of him thus, cornered in his shrunken, fatal world, in the end arriving at his own accommodation to the facts of life and death: You live not for the moment, but for the nanosecond, whose resident dwarf, *nanos* in Greek, he had never encountered in his schooling for war, though maybe some of his officers had. He remained interested in words, however, as did my mother, in his case regarding them as some parallel frieze to the world of violent things, much as my mother saw them as failed adjuncts to the joys of theory and harmony evinced on her piano. *Sporadic* and *shrapnel* interested him no end, as did *hosierey* and *fedora*, and there I was, the maven, explaining Ali Baba's etymological cave to him as if I were ripping off the lid of the placid world, along with *muscular* (which had a Roman mouse scuttling through it) and *cape* which in escape gave us the escapist's vital motion).

"You mean shrapnel," he said, "comes from the name of a British army officer? I wouldn't have believed it. He must have had some special interest in bits of flying metal. Like me. Do you think the likes of me could give his name to the cartridge cases as they fell, emptied out?" *Sporadic*, merely from the Greek, he found a little bit lacking, inferior even; why *spor*, he wondered. How did *its* sound, rather than all others, come to reflect intermittence? *Hosierey*, from a maker of stockings, socks, also seemed to him insufficiently theatrical whereas *fedora* amazed him, commemorating the play *Fedora* by Victorien Sardou. I could tell he liked the wild notion of wearing a fedora among flying shrapnel, in other words impersonating an army officer in a soft felt trilby with a crease along its top. Indeed, words, with some disappointments, came to seem to my father a street of gaudy brothels, all striped awnings and lolloping bosoms, and who was I to deny him his latter-day revels? They merely matched my own, that had a more donnish aspect.

All through the war he had kept in his silver-tinted booklet his favorite or most stunning words, to which in the long run I added my own before running out of space and eventually devoting an entire thick book, *The Secret Lives of Words*, that I think he might have enjoyed dipping into.

To these parochial allusions he would add squibs drawn from practical affairs. "The forsythia is up. The towel rail in the bathroom has snapped. The letter-holder you made with your fretwork saw has come unglued. The letter box needs oil. They have begun serving cold beer at the Duke." I could fathom most of this. If you have gone down with the Lusitania, you know the names of the fish. I tried to respond in kind, aping his staccato clicks to attention, but unequal to the

task because my own tendency has always been to unveil the full envelope of the phenomenon, while he reduced all to chevrons. In the end, though, more for my own convenience than for reciprocity with him, I amassed a word-hoard of things I would have loved to tell him: new football players with such unusual names as Trésor Lua, Lua, Macaroni, Sommeil (*slumber* in French), and Henry, whom they pronounce Awnree., One team, full of foreigners, had become known as Sam Allardyce's Continental Chocolate Box. Was that a tribute or a rebuke? Language was still being mangled: Cockney for Heathrow was *Yfra* and for the pianist Angela Hewitt *Anjlaooit*. Had he ever seen a rocking horse with jaws of glass?

If he ever in the trenches played poker, what was a Montana Banana? Was a trombone burner really a kind of stove? A diploma was a paper folded in two, Da-Di. Did he remember, at Manchester Airport, his one and only round trip by air, the men who parked the Viscounts with their pink pistoleros? What on earth was Bartholomitis? A disease of mapmakers? Who were Turnbull and Asser? And Steiner, Dalby, and Brown? Did he know them? How did astronomers know that the Boomerang Nebula was the coldest place in the universe, at minus 272 degrees Celsius, just one degree above absolute zero? And what about the wasted degree? Had he noticed how one TV presenter's top pocket had a rearward panther in it, a crumpled gray hankie achieving stupendous bestiality? Did he know yet that a sponge left stranded in the body after surgery had been named a *gossypiboma*, from *Gossypium* (cotton) and the Swahili word *boma* for place of concealment? It had happened so often. There was a whole universe to tell him about, an avalanche of particulars fit to justify anyone eyeing unemployment as the way to go. I would get back to him.

I would not, but, true to the style of our lives together, I mean their almost Luddite primitivism, I renumbered pages by daubing liquid paper on the old number and held the corner up to the hot bulb of 150 watts to dry it out, almost like roasting lice alive in a tin can in the trenches. None of this linguistic fascination appeared in his letters, most often cryptic appendices to my mother's cursive, pianistic runs of tender euphoria. "Fine day, but dull so far" was one of his runes, unfitting you for whatever followed, as if you had run into a bit of Beckett while reading Jane Austen. There would, often, follow a string of allusions, exact and hunched, about village life as he had seen it. "Sharman going soft on the brilliantine these days. Race got a cough. Colin was here, begging, with his sheaf of knives wrapped in brown paper, just like Jack the Ripper. Raymond is repairing motor mowers. Mabel is back from Blackpool, worrying about that young lad of hers with the undescended testicle. Only the other day, Raymond told me, driving a jeep in Italy, he fell asleep along the edge of a ravine. Not heard from Culver, I think the oil derricks in Persia have swallowed him up. In the hotels, make them change the

blankets too. You never know who's been sweating into them or been sick. Love, Pa." This was weird, embedded stuff, requiring me not only to read between the lines, but to animate present faces he himself recalled with censorious economy. Most of them I knew, including the uncle whose mustache was too thin, the only redhead daughter among his sisters, and the cabinet-maker who had actually built himself a coffin with a mail-slot.

PAUL WEST is a frequent contributor to **WLA**. He is the author of over 40 books, the most recent of which is *My Father's War: A Memoir*. The preceding is an excerpt from that volume.