

NELS HANSON

### **The Ride Back**

The blue long-sleeved starched J.C. Penny's shirt  
my grandfather wore I wore like armor to school

to feel his strength and bear the sadness of his  
passing. His father was born in Lund so the child

spoke Swedish until six, quit study at ten, worked  
in the town stable where he learned everything

about horses, their needs and proper care, early  
symptoms of disease and homemade medicines

for harness sores, cracked hooves. Later he drove  
a 12-horse team on the valley's West Side to scrape

the sage for what became Big Cotton. The oldest  
unmarried young man in Kingsburg at 27 he was

drafted, denied a chance to harvest his crop of corn.  
At Fort Lewis in Washington on night sentry duty

he disobeyed the order to shoot anyone who tried  
to cross a picket line without the password, assume

them saboteurs, spies stealing secrets. He held his  
fire on a drunk and grateful captain who promised

transfer to the cavalry but his marksmanship made

him a gunner, not a horseman. The 91st Evergreen

Division wore helmets painted with an emerald pine  
and fought in France and Flanders, endured trench

warfare, poison gas, St. Mihiel Drive, Argonne  
Forest, Chateau Thierry. For 13 days of rain in

awful battles he didn't remove his boots and got  
trench foot. One time his position was overrun, he

and his feeder couldn't retreat fast enough with  
heavy gun and ammo they'd been warned never to

abandon. The platoon covered them with brush, three  
days they hid down a shell hole until his company

retook the ground. No water, enemy everywhere, they  
ate from an open can of meat tainted by falling clear

chlorine mist that burned their throats and stomachs.  
He liked the Germans, farm boys like himself, better

than the French and English and with his Swedish  
could speak to captured men he led to prison camp.

At Christmas he and friends walked into No Man's  
Land and shared cigarettes and chocolate, wine with

opposing soldiers. Sad day he aimed eight hours until  
the barrel of the Lewis gun melted down and bodies

piled six-feet high traced the crescent of his field of  
fire? At the end, the Americans saw the coat hems  
  
of retreating troops dragged the ground and realized  
they were fighting children, all the men in Germany  
  
were dead, and so refused to advance. Sick with bad  
bleeding dysentery he was lucky a friend from home  
  
found him and bought him for a bed a clean gold bale  
of hay, straw as a child he'd fed by hand to horses to  
  
make them well. Seventy pounds lighter than when  
he'd left California and America, took ship to France,  
  
he stood six hours in New York City snow as General  
Black Jack Pershing reviewed cold ranks back from  
  
“over there.” As a kid I wore his helmet and examined  
his gas mask, big yellow lenses like a monster's eyes,  
  
played army, admired his service photo on the chest of  
drawers. During Vietnam he wanted me to use his little  
  
money to escape the mad crime of war, flee to Mexico  
or Canada. Chill fog-bound winters for heat he opened  
  
his oven door, on the wall a framed picture clipped from  
a magazine, 50 horses grazing green pasture among pines.

## A Language

What could they think, the grandparents  
born in Sweden and come to Kingsburg,

California, as farmers? Their oldest boy  
fought all through World War I and by

some great miracle survived. His son, my  
father, flew 36 missions over Japan, two

thirds of the B-29s shot down. His cousin,  
Vic Junior, whose mother died giving birth,

was raised by Nels and Emma and fell with  
the Marines at Sherri Castle on Okinawa.

The grandmother never spoke English words  
again. Do you know if there's a language

with no names for war and if you do would  
you teach me to speak and understand it?

**Nels Hanson** grew up on a small raisin and tree fruit farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, *Sharkpack Review's* 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.