

CHRISTIAN KIEFER

Golden Silence of the Heart

The realization that he was free of it, free of it all, had come to him so slowly that had he not lived to the age of ninety, year of our Lord 1880, he might not have understood it at all, the memory in some ways still stronger than anything to come after and yet the sum total of those years of peace and relative happiness ultimately outstripping the grim violent time to come before, those ten years that started before Austerlitz and ended at Waterloo, a period of time so distant to him now that in some ways the whole experience seemed but remnants of a story he had been told by someone else, someone who had been there and had survived and had returned home, scarred and shaking, already an old man at the age of twenty-four, breaking down in odd moments for many years thereafter even though everything about his life had changed, first through the fact that the war itself was over and then through marriage and children came and later grandchildren and even greatgrandchildren, the long incredible genealogy he had fostered presenting itself as a kind of marvel even more striking than the changes to the land itself, changes that he could never have imagined, not even as a young man filled with dreams about what he might become or in the storm and tumult of Napoleon's speeches, for despite everything, his dull hatred for the man who had taken him from his home to fight in a conflict against people who spoke not the emperor's language but his own, despite this and the hardships and privations of an army ever on the move, he could not help but feel his embarrassed and recalcitrant heart swinging up into the rhetoric, from the sulfurous dirt in which he stood with his companions to some bright starlit future, and yet now he was in that future and the emperor was not, his own ability simply to *not die* having outlived the tiny tyrant

by fifty-nine years, eight years longer than that man had himself walked upon the surface of the earth, a thought that gave him some sense of accomplishment at least, that he had outdone the very creature who had threatened his life by dint of a war that even now he could hardly understand, a war that did not, in the end, take his life, but took instead the lives of his brothers, the first going to ground in the days just after Austerlitz and the two others, older than he himself had been, although that point seemed moot now, killed on the battlefields of Raszyn so that he returned to Waldkirch an only child, making for the small home in which he had spent his childhood because he did not know what else to do, his entire life having seemed, now, a waste of time, drafted when he was fifteen at the behest of their new king and told to fight for Napoleon and then told, in the fall of 1813, that his country had switched sides and was now allied with Prussia and the Austrian Empire so that his three brothers had now, by royal decree, perished fighting for the enemy, a decree that felt like a hot knife held to his heart but which his parents seemed to take in stride, telling him, simply and quietly, that God giveth and God taketh away, words that did little to douse his anger and frustration in understanding that he had been born into a world that felt not like what Jesus promised but instead like the upturned stump upon which his father, and later his brothers, and later still he himself, had slaughtered various small animals—wood grouse and hare and the occasional fox—its surface black and slick and buzzing with flies, that world a world in which he could not find the hatchet but knew it was always there, hanging just above the killing stump and that there was nothing he could do about it at all, the years passing and his occasional homecoming during brief respites offering only a sense that something else besides war was still possible in the world, although the crackle of gunfire and the low thump of the twelve pounders seemed to ride in his chest even when they were silent, the days and nights punctuated then by a strange desire to hear them again, as if in hearing them he might somehow silence their ghosts, so when he was called up again and again and again, in his secret heart there had always been a thread of relief, although he knew it could not go on forever and when at last it did, indeed, come to a close at Waterloo, he returned to his parents' home in the forest feeling as if the ghosts of those guns would crackle and thump forever in his dreams, and yet even that was not to be, for time passed and although he was not a young man anymore—fifteen in 1806 at Austerlitz and twenty-four at Waterloo—he was experiencing what he thought of as a young man's desires, for he had met, in the French city of Troyes, in 1814, a young woman who, like the low thumps of the twelve-pounders, he could not seem to forget, and so, in the winter of the year he had returned home he left it once more,

setting off for the French countryside, an errand he knew would be fruitless, for how could she possibly remember him after all that had happened, not only to him but to her, and in his heart he knew that she would likely have married another, for how could she have done otherwise when there was no world in which he was cared for in any way, the whole of it malevolent and heartbreaking from first breath to last, and yet when he arrived in Troyes, his resources already having dwindled to crumbs, she was waiting for him, had been waiting for him, in her way, for a full year, especially after word of Napoleon's defeat had come from the capital, for she knew then that his return to Troyes was at least possible, although she also understood that he would need to cross most of the known world to reach her and yet he had come and she was there for him and they were married soon thereafter and soon enough the first of their children was toddling about the town, speaking not German but French, since in the end he settled there in her village rather than bringing her back to his, it seeming easier that way for he was, after all, already present in Troyes and her parents and family were there and while he lamented leaving his parents alone back in the Schwarzwald, he knew that after everything he had done and been through and survived, he could hardly return to that shadowy forest with its staggering trees and dark pathways, the thought of it alone bringing his skin to gooseflesh which his new bride, young and pink and as lovely as the French sunshine, kissed away, something she would do for him even as the years passed and their brood increased, the children coming and growing and taking wives and husbands of their own, the fact that he raised, after everything that had happened to him, a French family continuing to be a kind of marvel, something he was both embarrassed by and proud of, as if in changing their nationality he had changed himself, and maybe, in fact he had, for at some point during that long stretch of years he realized that the ghost sounds of that war had faded from his dreams until they were hardly audible at all, a fact that he learned only after his beloved took her last breath at the age of sixty-eight in the year 1856, that day so bright and warm that the salt of his sweat mixed with the salt of his tears, the sense of absence so great that he might have tottered into the hole after her had his oldest daughter's arm not come through his own, and his oldest son's on the opposite side so that when he looked up it her eyes staring back at him, her gaze in all of theirs, filled with despair and loss but also with love and with a silence he could use fill the gap she had left behind, a gap which he knew had once contained the guns and the twelve-pounders and which he could feel, even now, even standing at her grave, was being filled by his family in a moment which he thought would last only a few months or years but which seemed to stretch on and on toward the

end of the century, not one year or two or ten but twenty four, a number of years to match the age he had been when he had first come for her hand sixty-six years before, and although those last decades of his life—near two and a half of them—held occasional moments of terrible loneliness, what he remembered most of all, at the end, was that he was surrounded by her memory in everything that remained and continued to remain, not dying but living with all the shine of those mornings when he had awakened with her by his side, oh oh oh God how he would have loved to tell her such a thing, that she had saved him and that she was saving him still, that all he had ever needed was silence and she had given it to him and had given it, in trust, to their children and their grandchildren and their greatgrandchildren, a kind of golden soundlessness that he might not even have been able to identify but which, he knew now, was like a kind of boat to buoy the heart over the biggest of the waves.

CHRISTIAN KIEFER earned his Ph.D. in American literature from the University of California, Davis, and is on the English faculty of American River College in Sacramento. He is an active poet, songwriter, and recording artist, and lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Northern California with his wife and six sons. He is the author of the novels *The Animals* and *The Infinite Tides* and the novella, *One Day Soon Time Will Have No Place Left to Hide*.