

Paul West

Fatherhood

“Once a hero,” said my father, who now and then mixed up his wars, “always one.” His blind eye (formerly one of a pair) and I had little in common. My only war wound was a three-fingered claw hand, the result of a recent stroke.

He used his surviving good eye as best he could, and our father-son visits transcended the traditional and formed part of the plunge into war, which we remembered for its gentle aspects: soccer-playing Germans on Christmas day; the bed makers in hospital who departed leaving behind a groomed landscape of exquisitely folded linen. There was always something disproportionate in our dreams. I kept learning from him the less gentle aspects of war, when he was least sentimental about the soldiers, those “happy few,” who saw things to the end, and even beyond.

Was that the world of my dapper father who, at sixteen, faking his age, machine-gunned down thousands of Germans for his four years? Almost. He was cut-off. Looking somewhat like A. Camus, debonair, suave; fetching no longer.

I recall the green locomotive, not for its embossed chlorophyll on the monster’s bum, but for a more distributed image of the Sherwood Forester’s motif on his cap badge (Robin Hood’s terrain, of course) and the garish-blood red and white of his postwar uniform saying: This one has been wounded within an inch of his life. Watch him fumble his tricks, you young men, and despair.

There was much more to my father than this, however, from the badge on his drum major’s sleeve to a lump of prettily decorated brocade, a sampler stitched to his cap, a pretty thing indeed made of fleece surmounted by *fleur de lys*. As if saying he has put aside the tools of war, however obliquely, stated for the symbols of peace.

Part of my father’s invisible biography he kept to himself, not something that might wound a casual observer (a wife, a son), but something that was uniquely his, what the old Greeks would call a *hapax legemenon*, the only thing of its kind to occur within a lost language. This gave my father something to live up to, to dazzle *poilus*

(French soldiers) with. He was like one of the parade of blinded men that periodically circled the Eiffel Tower. Or, in later years, with the sight restored in one eye (thanks to an American surgeon), propping up his habitual place at the local bar, Balkan *sobranie* puffing nicely away, he stood ready to bore the survivors with the exploits of his boy at Oxford long after I'd left that place of remote learning.

His mother first learned that he had been killed in action; then he resurged, still nineteen with three years of war behind him. Blind for a full year. Then repatriated, still in his red and white tunic. A yokel for civilians to peer at, for housewives to mourn. I have no inkling of how he felt during all this, how he felt when his sight came back. So much of him passed with him at seventy-five, like the presumed affair with a French woman, like going home to Eckington at twenty, his career as accountant and penman blasted by a shell.

I still view him as a professor of fragments, only too eager to quote officer's jargon of French second-hand (forty hommes, fifteen chevaux). He kept the facts dark, on purpose, rather jealous of their inscrutable caliber, but knowing what was left of his premature life could not be stored by anyone.

IT IS NO easier to steer the paper where it belongs, but I know at least wherein lies the problem and how to compromise without mangling the top sheet. It took me six months to learn this. The problem did not appeal to me in that form. You have to be interested in what defies you.

I have since become a half-decent handwriter, though with flickers of the pen to the right and left, and showers of pen-speckle as my unsteady hand begins to address the task at hand, unsteadily wavering above the moment of impact, as the full panoply of distortion fills my pen.

As penman I created a whole box of fake starts, spidery fingers ferreting out the first syllable and nervous smudges betraying the nervous exhilaration of someone perhaps who should not be writing at all. The dark-laced motif of the exercise should properly be left to those, like my father, to whom penmanship was an art, and the slower and more exquisite and time-consuming the better. He was an artist of no mean reputation in the almost abandoned field of artistic writing. War, mangling his eyes in his fourth year of it, upset his dreams of the pen forever and dealt the mortal blow.

I finally ran down my problem by attending fiercely to what went on with the envelope for half its length. The two right-hand fingers curled to the right and fell underneath, making the paper curl back on itself, irredeemably trapped and defying all efforts to free it.

MY FINAL IMAGE of him, among scores, is of him late at night, filling in the football coupon for the next day's post (petty gambling depending on the day's soccer). I see him tap his pen against false teeth in a moment of incertitude: Arsenal should beat Crewe Alexandra, but all the same. He backs the gamble and is proven wrong. But in the studied elegance of that indecisive motion I see the churchman of yesteryear debating a touch of paint, some slight finale to change someone's expression a mite. The fancy name of the soccer team, a memory of Alexandra Rose Day, a hesitation about soccer, come together under the auspices of his painterly breath. He has come though again, whatever he really wants to do.

Blood and thunder: *his* blood and *his* thunder, shedding the one while machine gunning thousands in a pointless exchange, which seems to argue that he should run out of blood a lot sooner than he did. Maybe his blood loss was huge, replenished daily by a squadron of eager volunteers, German and otherwise. Maybe he was the only gunner left, and the whole army depended on him to get rid of the Hun.

One of the many arresting thoughts concerning my father, hyperbolic of course, indicates the amount I suppressed. My own version of things was different: a bookish boy indeed growing ever more so, perhaps because it was all over before I was born, and therefore the disproportion was colossal between my world and his. It was hard to believe there had been an Oxford and a Cambridge that had not varied since the age of stone. As I set out by train from one place to the other, with my bathrobe shanked tight around my worldly goods (mostly books), it seemed both places had already been there forever, judging and passing (or failing) successive legions of the British bourgeoisie—as a drug upon the nation, perhaps heedless of war, the French and the Germans, my father's very own struggle with being sixteen years old.

I arrived, then departed, my suitcase even more ragged than when it began its odyssey of trains, headed south, then north again. And I got it, the overlap between my father and me. It had been chewing at me for years: he was sixteen when volunteering for the colors (my one

good image of that time) and I was also sixteen, voyaging to institutions of higher learning, with their own battalions and colors.

I felt for the first time vouched for, understood, recognized, as little touched by his bluff, mindless declaration (“You have all my good wishes”) as he was by my attempts to quote Victor Hugo, on his way to the pub. It was the birth of my serious recognition of what my father had gained, machine gunning mindless Huns as the last of his species on the Belgian coast. He was rescued by a French platoon after being there five days, given up for lost, and given another three years to get through.

As I said, in spite of my father’s relentless fixation on certain themes, there were topics he never went near, not even when fortified by several shot glasses of brandy. His visor stayed down for my mother too. And whereas he several times told of a beribboned pig he had introduced into a French dance hall, there was not one word about the French sweetheart who got left behind, even though I unearthed her photograph, after a successful rummaging into a heap of discarded toys. My mother came first.

I WONDER WHERE my increasing “neshness” came from, this reluctance to get to grips with things. From an overdose of my father’s war exploits? The military side of him (the tender never made an entrance)? Or was it a natural, indeed a growing, inclination to let sleeping dogs lie, especially when placarded with the warning “Verboten,” *My* warning signs were bookish, gathering strength from, say, Rousseau’s *Promenades of a Solitary Walker*, to Ernst Junger’s books on botany. I turned inwards as the natural thing to do, especially as most of my father’s reminiscences were blood-curdling, not ones to linger with, unless, in saturated moments, I decided to let him have his way with me and let it all hang out.

This is the story of how I learned, after a while, to tune him out, while pretending to listen to something else. After a dozen years he calmed down, listening to spirit ditties of no tone, but by then I was on to different pastures. But it took some skill to work this trick on him, with his frequent “Are you listenings” and “Sure I’m not boring you’s?”. Duplicity, false attention, I learned them well.

So, as he talked and grew more animated with a recital of Uhlan atrocity, I languished in a miracle world of my very own, sometimes playing with violence as well as he, but only in a mood of exclamatory

discovery, the way a novelist finds things he has to share. *Trouvailles*, some call this, when you spot something in a hole you wish to proclaim. So, my father denied the merits of *trouvailles*, kept soldiering on to a repetitious fate from which no old so-and-so is barred, while increasingly I turned to dream pastures, the likes of which he would have scorned.

I got my money's worth before deserting and changing from the boy who always met his father's train. For eight weeks at a time I missed him, which meant the rhythm was scattered to the winds. And when I did come back, it was to speak of subjects that did not concern him.

Thus began my father's great silence, like those of Andre Maurois's Colonel Bramble. The angels betrayed him just as he, for the umpteenth time, got to the point at which the Uhlans got to the pregnant women. I would cheerfully go back to him for a second or thousandth serving, just for old time's sake. But that is not allowed, even for the oldest soldier.

As for my "neshness", which seemed to summon up some hypersensitivity of the soul, I grew out of it without ever forgetting how he labored over a French church, or the pock-marked carnage of a soldier abandoned on barbed wire for weeks. He wasted these people, spires and humans alike, and felt guilty about wasting time.

In time, I assumed it came from a special dispensation accorded warriors, for which they would pay in something called the afterlife. Or not: maybe they were forgiven automatically, as the prisoners of intolerable sensations. Perhaps that explained his glassy-eyed stare, for hours at the TV, seeing little, but attuning himself somehow to the next life.