

The Deserter

I had already started writing before I was disemboweled by an artillery shell. Original man had by that time become my obsession. When I say "original man," I mean humanity before the dark ages of trip-wire bombs and capital-G Government. I don't mean some imagined heretical beast-man with a club under one arm and his neighbor's missus under the other. I wanted to express what it must have been, how it had to have felt to live in a time when morality hadn't been debased by ingenuity and no machine had yet been built that could clamp a man's boots onto one arbitrary square of land.

I had seen apparitions from this primordial world on the pages of books in my nursery: goblins and fair-folk and men with their faces on their palms and only the wind under their hoods. The illustrations were almost uniformly bad, drawn quickly for commission with thick lines from heavy pencils and little attention given to cleaning the edges or finessing fine details. They were more appropriate for the walls of a carnival tent than a volume of stories for children. But this shabbiness only made me surer of their authenticity. I imagined the artist hurrying to complete the sketch before the subject dissolved back into the earth or air (or before it noticed him). That was how I knew that men must have also lived in that world and coexisted (carefully) with these bigger, greater perilous others.

And I continue to know that truth, even if I haven't been able to feel it since the day when there was too much mud inside my boots and I could not run fast enough or jump far enough to make it back into the trench in time. I had been sent out to scavenge supplies from the unburied corpses that were near enough to the trench to reach on foot. Most of them were the enemy; they had survived no man's land and come so close

that they had been given a chance to see the men who murdered them. That must have been an amazing privilege, a glimpse of warfare as capital-G God intended. Sure, they were still killed by factory filed bullets, and they were never given the chance to ride or parry or draw, but they did get to see a face or hand or eye and know that it honestly was a man that killed them. At any rate, it was a privilege that I was denied.

I was kneeling over one of the corpses with my hand on the neck of a bottle of rye when I heard the retort of the artillery guns. It's remarkably easy to lose your awareness of direction in no man's land, where one patch of dead grass or muddy sinkhole looks just like any other and an abandoned spool of barbed wire often is your only landmark. Gone is the ancient understanding of space founded upon oak trees of unusual size and rocks bearing hobo signs.

So I didn't know immediately that what I had heard was *their* guns and not *our* guns. That is something, by the way, that you absolutely must know immediately. If you don't know who is shooting at the moment the guns are fired, you will die. I didn't know at the moment, or the moment after. I don't think I even let go of the bottle. So I was struck by an artillery shell—a direct hit I'm sure—and disemboweled. I must have died instantly.

I don't remember visiting paradise, or heaven, after I was killed. I didn't meet the Lord's angels or Oberon's fey. I didn't genuflect beneath the judgment seat or stand over the Seelie Court. All my memories of death are vague and insubstantial. I can only remember the edges and textures of images, the decayed middle reel of a silent film played by a projector set several speeds too fast.

Whatever the afterlife was, I wasn't there for long. Soon I was back in a world of bleached sheets, sterilized scissors and bed pans that were emptied once a day, always at noon. I don't

know how they dragged me back, and none of the nurses I asked would tell me. If they could avoid it, they wouldn't tell me anything at all. They would just give me a rehearsed smile or a fresh dose of heroine and leave me, while they went off to attend to some other moaning zombie. I never met a doctor, witch or otherwise, and no administrator or necromancer visited me. So I can't tell you about the details of my reanimation. (I refuse to say "resurrection," as that would draw a blasphemous comparison. And it wouldn't be accurate besides.)

All I can say is that I was still dead, and, worse, I was starting to rot. I could feel my intestines, which had been haphazardly replaced, decomposing under my stitches. The nurses insisted, senselessly, that I eat, and most of the food sat heavily inside me and stayed there. I began to feel like a semi-mobile compost heap. I wasn't given air or exercise. I would lay with my sheets over my face, smelling the chlorine and forcing rotten breath out of my useless lungs.

I started writing. I wrote more than I did before I died. It became a compulsion. I began where I had left off on the day that the shell had killed me, and I continued from there. I didn't feel the words as strongly as I had when I was alive, but they came a lot easier. I didn't agonize anymore. I didn't strain my reach towards other worlds, groping for phrases to interpret alien experiences. I didn't even strain my neck, looking backwards to the language-less sensations of my childhood. I just wrote.

Eventually, they pulled the sheet off of me, rolled me out of bed, stuck me inside a carriage and sent me back to the front. I don't know why they bothered with a carriage. I would have been just as comfortable if they had dropped me into a crate, nailed on the lid and shipped me there on the bed of a wagon with the rest of the ammunition. I would have gotten

more sleep too. I'm not certain if I need sleep now, but unconsciousness is still a relief.

When I got back to the trenches, I discovered that I had been reassigned to a new regiment. I had not met any of the soldiers before. Every one of them was just as dead as I was, though most were less willing to acknowledge it. Most of them didn't acknowledge much at all. They would squat in the mud with their pipes or cigarettes hanging loosely in their mouths and stare at their boots. Sometimes they would pass around a pack of cards and let the deck go full circle two or three times before anyone thought to draw. They hardly responded to the shots from beyond the lines, and rarely returned fire. There was some noise, a lot of coughing and belching, but very little speech.

When they spoke, it was mostly disjointed obscenities. Subjects, verbs and objects were carefully rationed. "Kraut" was the only noun that was available in excess, and so, like any overstocked commodity in hard times, it was used for purposes that would never have been anticipated in times of plenty. It no longer applied only to the Germans. Everyone and everything, ally or enemy or inanimate, could become a kraut if it was sufficiently inconvenient. A man who didn't go far enough from the trench to relieve himself was a kraut. Tobacco that was too wet to smoke was a kraut. The corpse that was buried in the wall of the trench was a kraut if he tripped you with his protruding leg after dark.

There were a few articulate zombies, but they were worse company. The most unbearable was Corporal Lovell, the democrat. He had read all the propaganda weeklies, and was sure that the war was about democratizing the world. He went on about how women were getting the right to vote all over civilization. He was crazy about that topic, a regular suffragette. His imagination was full of bare legged women with low blouses leaning forward to drop ballots into boxes. He

described them in detail. And on the rare occasions that he tired of that image, he would lecture me about how, soon after the war, the tribal pygmies in Africa would set aside their shrunken heads, take the bones out of their noses and line up at their state-designated polling place. That's what we were fighting for, he said. I didn't ask if he thought dead men would be given the vote too. I don't think he would have understood me.

He was the most enthusiastic soldier in the regiment. He was the only man who ever complained to me that we were not ordered over the top of the trenches often enough.

"Lord Ronnie, I wish they'd let us go over today," He would say. "To hell with no man's land. I'm going to run right across it like Christ on the water. My feet will be so light that I'll step right on top of a mine and it won't go off. Then I'll shoot a kraut in the the nuts. Then I'll charge alone into Dusseldorf and give Mrs. Kraut and all her little krautlings the vote."

He loved firing squads, even though he had never been given the opportunity to serve on one. Whenever he read about an execution in the weeklies, he would betray his undearth. In his fascination he would forget to hold his jaw closed. It would fall open, ready to be tied up by the undertaker. He would drop the pretense of breathing and let the cigarette smoke gather behind his decaying teeth. I would watch only until my suspicions were confirmed, and then I would let myself look away.

I wrote frequently after I returned to the trenches. It became routine. I would write in the morning in lieu of the bath that there was no clean or hot water for, and which would have been pointless for a man who was half-rotten anyway. I might wash off my little toe along with the caked mud, or spit out my tongue with the toothpaste. And then I would write again in the evening, while the other men ate. The process still

felt mechanical. I wondered if my writing was like the deck of cards being passed from man to man without anyone drawing. The thought didn't deter me, and my notebook continued to fill.

It was morning when Lovell caught me writing. He always woke at dawn. His sleeping habits made me surer that he was a programmed monster, only imitating humanity and life. At eight pm exactly, he would throw down his sleeping bag and fall on top of it. He rarely slept inside it, and never took his boots off. He would fall asleep almost immediately, and moved very little in his sleep. And then, when the sun rose, he would be standing with a tin mug of coffee in his hand and no trace of sleep in his eyes, looking for someone to interrogate.

He found me that morning. I was fixated on my task, and I didn't see him coming in time to hide myself or my writing. He had my notebook in his hands seconds before I realized it had left mine. My pen tried to ink a sentence on the leg of my pants, and was thwarted by a heavy mud stain. I looked up and he was standing over me, reading. His mouth hadn't fallen open. Instead, his lips were drawn tight around the cigarette and his teeth were clenched.

He looked down at me.

"Jesus, this is fantastic. How did you think of all this?"

He didn't give me a chance to answer.

"You squeezed the whole god damned war in here! The goblins are the krauts, right? And you make it all seem glorious. All of the mutineers and the Wobblies and the anarchists talk about how nasty and ugly and filthy it is. But they just see a dirty washrag and ignore the spotless kitchen. They just want to excuse the deserters, to make men feel good about being cowards. I'd line them all up and—But you get it! Look here," He jabbed at the notebook, as if he needed to

show me the words, as if I didn't see what I had written. "You get it!"

I hated him then. I had only found him obnoxious before, but after those compliments I hated him. After I got my notebook back and escaped from him, I wanted to destroy it. I looked at my words and I could only see his interpretation hanging there, obscuring everything, like the cigarette smoke trapped behind his rotten teeth.

But I didn't destroy it, and I didn't stop writing. I didn't continue out of passion, or because I was sure of the profundity of my language or the importance of my ideas. It had become habit. I couldn't stop. Maybe it was the witch doctor I had never met at the hospital, in his hut (or behind his desk) somewhere far behind the lines, driving an inky pen into a stolen piece of my intestines. Who can say.

I continued my routine of writing and rotting until the day of the gas attack. Before then, I had disliked the war, mostly on aesthetic grounds, but I had never seriously considered deserting. While I didn't have fanatical delusions about a Christian mission to democratize all the world's women and pygmies, I did believe in dutiful service. Both of those terms, "duty" and "service," have been vulgarized by the propagandists. I think that's tragic. You'll find far more about those words in scripture than you will about suffrage. Corpse or not, I still felt that those commands applied to me. And, besides, serving dutifully is one of the few virtues still available to a zombie.

I don't know what happened before the gas attack that altered my feelings. Maybe the non-commissioned witch doctor lost his bit of my intestines beneath his distinguished service medals in the back of his desk drawer, or threw them away in a fit of treasonous compassion. Or maybe it was watching the German face the firing squad.

A soldier had found the German the night before. He was behind our lines, dressed in dirty overalls, carrying a sack full of bread and beer stolen from the officers' rations. Under interrogation, he admitted that he was a private, loyal to the Kaiser, and requested to be treated as a prisoner of war. It took fifty seven minutes for the officers to decide that, since he had been captured as a thief and a civilian, he should be treated as a civilian thief under the law. Within another half hour, they had decided he would die by firing squad the next day.

I wasn't present when they caught the German, nor did I listen to the officers deliberate on his sentence. Lovell told me the next morning, at dawn. He hadn't slept the night before, abandoning his programmed routine for the first time since my reassignment. I had broken my own routine that morning as well. My page was still empty. There were still words in my mind, but they had clotted while I slept, and the opening between my head and my hands had scabbed over. So I had written nothing that morning. I was just sitting, vacant, with the empty page on my knee.

And then Lovell was suddenly beside me, talking about how they had caught a kraut stealing and how they were looking for a dozen men to send him to the devil. And this was going to be a special privilege, because firing squads usually only got to send our own men to the devil. Sure they were subversives and cowards, but it wasn't the same as shooting a kraut.

He said a lot more than that. He told me every detail I mentioned, and more that I don't need to share. He was too excited to light his cigarette, or to drink his coffee. I even forgot that I was listening to a dead man, briefly. It wasn't until he was leaving me to volunteer to join the squad that I remembered what he was. His stride was too disciplined for a man who was hurrying towards a lifelong fantasy; his steps were too symmetrical. I thought of the pistons of an internal

combustion engine, rotated by the fumes from the burning remains of a four hundred year old oak.

I didn't volunteer to join the firing squad, of course, but I did watch. The German looked nothing like I expected, nothing like the men I had seen from a distance, scurrying across no man's land and nothing like the bodies whose pockets we turned out in search of tins of meat and flasks of liquor. He wasn't just one of us with a different colored coat.

He was short; his forehead didn't reach the shoulders of the men who held him. He must have been exceptionally fit once, but weeks of malnourishment had hollowed out his stomach, and his thick shoulders and heavy arms now seemed out of proportion with his withered torso. Jaundice had yellowed his skin and eyes. His shirt was open, and he still wore the overalls that he was wearing when they caught him. He wore no boots or socks; his bare feet were yellow where they hadn't been rotted green by trench mud.

If he was a soldier, there was no trace of military discipline in his behavior. The men had to drag him to the firing line. He was howling and screaming in German. I don't know the language, and, even after months on the front, I had only heard it spoken once or twice and never by a man in such a frenzy. All the words were full of heavy consonants and coarse edges; every phrase was a curse. I remembered one of the rough pictures in my nursery books, a goblin sorcerer in a loincloth, his open toothless mouth only half darkened by the artist's pencil, singing an incantation. I felt, irrationally, that the German was from that other, earlier world, and I wanted him to live.

But, of course, there was not a thing I could do. There were twelve dead men with twelve rifles, and they all fired at once.

Corporal Lovell was with them, but I couldn't identify him from behind. He stood just like the others, and aimed just

like them and fired just like them. If he was still as enthusiastic as he was when we spoke, nothing in his actions gave it away. He was just another programmed corpse with a rifle.

And the German was dead.

I think I expected him to howl again when he they shot him, or to complete his incantation and dissolve, returning to the Seelie Court or my childhood.

But he just fell over. He was standing, and then they shot him and he wasn't standing anymore. One of the larger men picked up the German's little body and tossed it in a pit that had already been dug, and that was the end of it.

I might have watched them bury him, but suddenly Lovell was standing in front of me, obscuring the view.

"Christ Ronnie," He said, excited. "Jesus."

He was overwhelmed. I guess he must have been ecstatic. His voice was faltering, and he didn't say anything else. He just stood there, silent, like his redundant blasphemy spoke for itself. He still had the rifle in his right hand. He was holding it uselessly by the muzzle, and his hand was twitching, knocking the butt against the back of his leg. Only that hand was moving. He had forgotten to pretend to breathe again. He didn't seem interested in mimicking life at all.

I wanted to shoot him. I wanted to take the rifle from his twitching hand, and I wanted to kill him with it. I didn't care if he wasn't alive to begin with. I wanted to see him fall over, like the German, and if his hand kept twitching after that I wouldn't care.

I had never wanted to shoot a man before. That's not why I enlisted. Maybe I was the only one who enlisted who didn't. Even after the Germans murdered me with that artillery shell, I didn't want to shoot them. And now I don't want to shoot anyone at all, and couldn't if I tried. But right then, after the firing squad, I wanted to shoot Lovell. I even imagined using his rifle on myself after I finished.

I put my hand on the butt of the rifle, where it had been knocking against his leg. He did nothing to stop me. I drew the rifle towards me, reaching for the trigger with my free hand.

He was still holding the muzzle. Nothing changed in his grip or his expression. He still wasn't breathing.

I don't know if he didn't understand what I intended, if he was too blissful over fulfilling his dream to care, or if the witch doctor had dropped his commanding pin and was on his knees, searching for it among the carpet fibers. He let me turn the rifle so that it was aimed upwards, towards his throat or his chin. I took a half step closer to him. He didn't even take his own hand off the muzzle.

I could have shot him then, but I didn't. In that moment, when I had taken the half-step towards him, I thought I saw him exhale and I thought I felt warm air from living lungs on my face.

So I hesitated.

And then the sirens started and men began yelling "Gas! Gas! Gas!" and Lovell shook all over like a wet retriever and jerked the rifle back into his own hands and the opportunity was gone.

Every man's hands were searching for his mask while his feet were scuttling towards the trench. The big man who was burying the German didn't wait until his work was finished, or even half finished, before he traded his shovel for a gas mask. He was too far from the trench to run there, so he lay on the ground and buried his face inside the heap of dirt that would have filled the grave. Lovell put on his mask, but he didn't run for the trench. Instead, he slapped me on the shoulder.

"Come on. Better get your mask on."

His voice was distorted by the filter. I looked over his shoulder and saw the gas coming in. It was the same filthy brown as the mud in the trenches, and it looked nearly as

oppressively thick. It was already at the rim of the trench. I didn't say anything.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth open like that idiot kraut, Ronnie."

And that was it; that was the last blunt, tasteless cliché I was willing to take from Lovell, or the war. I turned my back, and I ran away.

I ran away from the dead men, from fever, rats and lice, from the witch doctor and his commendations, and from the gas. Only the gas caught up with me. It outran me and was on me after only a few steps. I didn't put on my mask. I didn't even consider it. What harm are toxic fumes to a zombie?

Lovell could have shot me in the back. He could have executed two cowards in one day. It might have earned him a special audience with the king, or he could have at least given a speech to the House of Lords. He still had his rifle. He had kept it in his hand, even while he was putting on his mask. But he didn't shoot me.

I looked back once, but I couldn't see him through the gas. I couldn't see the trenches or the soldiers or anything else. When I looked forward again I discovered that I couldn't see anything in front of me either.

It's difficult to articulate what happened after that. I walked blindly, one foot and then the next, without comprehension or understanding; I was very nearly unconscious. I didn't think about purpose or direction, and the only thing I felt was the solidity of the earth after each step. There was nothing emotional or panicked about my flight. Sometimes I would see a fraction of an image, the open mouth of the German or the smoke-trail of an artillery shell, without context or resonance, and all of it transposed on a dirty, insubstantial brown background. It was the decayed middle reel of film playing again. Only I was no longer in the audience; I was a character in the film now, an unconvincing monster in

cheap minstrel make-up, mistaking stumbling awkwardness for menace. I ended my performance in the basest slapstick style by tripping and falling into a closed door.

I don't know how long I was leaning forward with my face pressed against the unfinished wood of the door. I'm not sure if the fall stunned me or awakened me. When I did stand again and my eyes were open the gas had dissipated.

I was standing in front of a sod house. It must have once been the center of a subsistence farm, but it was abandoned now. Grass and weeds had reclaimed its walls. It looked more like a hill than a home.

The cowshed was empty; the cattle had been carried off by desperate soldiers, if they hadn't fled with the original residents. Otherwise there was no evidence that this house and the war had ever coexisted.

I don't know how far I was from the front, or how long I had walked. I heard no gunfire or screaming men. I didn't smell black powder or dysentery.

Inside there was a rough cut table with a single chair, a cast iron cook stove with gravy stains and very little else. On the table there was a cheap ceramic teapot with a beautiful chip on its spout and a dusty plate with hand-painted lilacs.

I loved it all immediately. I forgot, for that moment, that I was a coward and a zombie, and I didn't think about the trenches or the gas or my rotten intestines. I sat down in the chair. There was no tea in the teapot, so I fell asleep.

And I didn't leave. I'm sitting at that rough cut table now. I don't know if the war is still being fought. I don't know if there are soldiers looking for me, or if they've already gathered volunteers for my firing squad. I've made no attempt to find out.

I may be emancipated from my witch doctor, but I'm no less dead than I was before. I've been decaying faster since the night of the gas attack. The rot has spread to my skin and my

mouth and my lungs. I will be all bones and carrion beetles soon enough. It doesn't worry me. I'm just a container after all, an abandoned house.

I've heard that the ghosts of men have sometimes been seen by friends and family after dying in battle. A mother saw her son arrive in time for supper on the same night that he fell on a mine, millions of feet away. A wife found her husband in the barn, milking the cow, just as his comrades were pulling his corpse from the barbed wire.

The soul can move quickly without dead weight, and water doesn't seem to be an obstacle.

So if you meet my spirit waiting for me at home, tell him to forget me, and to continue over the ocean. They say that there is no frontier left in America anymore, but a ghost doesn't need a six hundred acre ranch, and there must still be an unclaimed redwood grove or a desert with no pioneer skeletons buried in the sand. There has to be some original place left in this world.

Tell my ghost to travel there. To hell with the rest of me.