

The Hundred-Year Itch, or Remembering The Great War

Here are some facts about

The Great War. It started in 1913.

We know that from books.

and the scarred nobles

grandma met in the deli

off 23rd and 8th,

Ich hätte gerne eine Bratwurst

they'd say, eyes scared red.

It was my fault; I must admit,

quanta exist in different places and

in different times;

some have been in my brain,

and also in Hitler's old brain

the war's most famous vet.

Not quite Afghanistan; still, his war

and my war was the same,

A vicious trick,

Russian saboteur

made disasters, it's true,

walk with me here:

the Soviets invade in 1979.

Great Britain joins France

as the Marne collapses,

a wet snowdrift, over-heavy

in 1914. Add the numbers.

We surround ourselves with stories,

these fluid lines always converge.

Remember that line, the human

marching through town, shrive-faced,

boots laced tight, cap perched on his

kiss-me forehead, rifle shouldered,

we're gonna beat the Hun—

there's another line, now, 451AD,

Attila plundering across the plain,

stopped by whom? The Roman? No—

Aetius heads a motley crew of Frank

and Gaul, Suebi, Goth and Visigoth,

and *Saxon*! Yes, the Germans saved

the West from Hunnic rule!

Until—it always comes around to this,
that boy marched home again
some years after the great siege,
at Verdun, Ypres, or Somme;
really it doesn't matter.

Siege used to mean sit, but he won't;
not without his boots and cap,
all that chipper stuff gone,
he's been unseated, the siege lifted
his mien took on a leaner slant,
suspicious eyes for prying words
could not prepare a waiting world
for what came next.

Plenty! Champagne *avec vous*
on all the quays and ways
of Venice, Paris, Bruges;
Sur la table, Monsieur?

If you weren't there, you can't know,
and he wasn't. All there.

When will war weary of me. Woeful wight,
wailing across the width of destiny,

I sprawl comfortless in a rancid hole,
a thick cloth great-coat stiff with sweat and grist
my second skin, then, for a skull, some tin
riddle: helmet, brain-pan, will you sit still?
The unfrozen mud's alive, the stench, strong,
rat I'd say, someone's let them in. Writhing,
muse for a Rosenberg, a whole den's worth:
and that's a good day, without bullets, bombs,
or the whistling artillery storm—
the rain of steel shrapnel, cutting like wind
across Europe's newly irreligious plain—
flesh, it seems, has a its breaking point, splits wide
the human spirit spills, squandered, betrayed
amid the great gulf between my chilled hand
and the quiet, marble hand of German kin;
or British, or French—what odd clay. The flesh
grieves, parted by that vast, pitted waste,
unshrivened the filthy flesh yearns to be
whole again; compartmented, sufficient,
Unified. one man, one nation—one God.

A great civilizing wind stirs on the plains.

Leaves cast off the towns, like trees,
the Supple young men march in step
all balled fists, full of boasting oaths
they stride, ennobled by a promise
of liberation, plunder, and rape.
The best of the land! This lot's the best!
But someone's pulled a cruel prank.
At the front, the sergeant calls time
with a note pinned to his back. It reads:
"Take my wife, she's free."
Below, a crude sketch.

On a computer or smartphone,
an educated citizen
has just checked the market. It's up,
cause for optimism, and sun,
and a feast fit for all the hounds
who prowl our sordid memory,
just looking for some sad excuse
to get me back out in the fury



Heroes fighting heroically during the battle for the Meuse-Argonne, which as everyone knows guaranteed peace for generations of Europeans and was a useful investment of human life and energy. Via US Army Europe Public Affairs