

Garden of Rot
By Pierre Demery

*“A garden of rot,
Our brothers dew drops,
The winnower mourns,
Silent cries of the crop.”*

The worst part is waiting for the fighting to begin. Anxiety builds and blood rushes through the body, soon to cover the dirt beneath us and fill the trenches we huddle in. Time slows and waits while we grip our rifles a little tighter, and peer down the barren wasteland a little harder. It doesn't creep, but drags itself through the dust, and the cold, and the empty copper casings.

Private Carroll— nicknamed “Tiny” because he stood two heads higher than the rest of us— would say, “If I fell, you lot would get to stand on the shoulders of giants. Maybe then you'd see those fuckers”.

Carroll didn't see the grenade that blew off his legs. By that time, enough fallen soldiers littered the area that it became a suicide mission to even attempt to drag his body back, let alone

anyone elses. We ended up shoving him into a nearby pile of the dead for cover, like all the other mounds that dotted our side. We got the idea from the enemy.

By the third month there had to be a temporary ceasefire to clear the bodies from the field; I hadn't noticed, probably due to the exhilaration, or terror. Whatever it was distracted us enough from the death we trampled over day in and day out. Whether it was a semblance of humanity or an ignorance to our current state of affairs, a few of the fresh soldiers hadn't developed an iron stomach against the pulp littering the battlefield and opted to dig the graves. That left the retrieval of bodies to the rest of us. Any soldiers who weren't ours were hauled to the front line where their side would claim them, and where we could claim ours. Some of our own that we retrieved were more roughed up than others, but who were we to blame—a majority of the bullets in them were from us.

It was on that day I saw him.

It wasn't out of the ordinary to see another soldier who'd completely cracked, standing frozen, donning the thousand yard stare. It wasn't until later that night that I realized the peculiarity of it. Other than our issued fatigues, every inch of his exposed skin that wasn't covered in jacket or pants was wrapped in soiled bandages. The gauze around his face had three slits cut in its fabric: two for his eyes, one for his nose and mouth, like a children's mask. His eyes, set in hollow obscurity, followed me as I went back and forth, collecting and retrieving body after body. The thought of it sent a chill up my spine, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. The feeling was familiar. The same as the first time I gave a man a bullet in exchange for his life, and endlessly wondered if he would ever come back to claim it.

Dread.

One night on watch, a young private helped himself to the adjacent wall of dirt across from me, his eyes still heavy with sleep but fighting against it, for a handful of nights it seemed. He mentioned difficulty getting any rest, and I, wanting to wait out my watch in silence, didn't engage. It wasn't until he mentioned an apparition that my thoughts were invaded by the bandaged soldier, so I coerced him with a cigarette and asked him to tell me more, looking to gather any information to ease my own mind.

He laughed as he spoke, but there was no merriment behind it, as he recollected what troubled him. The young boy said his watcher was a man with cracked lips who shivered naked and blue on the ground beside him as he lay on his sleeping bag, unable to move, frozen in fear.

I gave him a moment before asking more about his dream, but a crack of gunfire echoed in the distance, offering a brief pause between the young soldier and I, and a welcome distraction for the former. When he spoke again he told me other men talked about seeing odd things; sometimes similar, but never the same.

We remained quiet after that for the rest of the night.

I was able to find an outcropping of trees near the coast that became my own personal retreat, when I found the precious minutes to steal away that was. The sound of the wind on the waves rushing through the branches drowned out the sounds of fighting that seemed far from my hidden place.

I snuck off to the trees one night to relieve myself. The turbulent waves were calming, and I closed my eyes, trying to remember another time before all this, before the war itself.

The snapping of a branch stole me from my short lived respite; apparently this private sanctuary was more popular than I had thought. The thicket was dense, more so in the darkness, so I called out to alert to my presence assuming it was a friend; what I was armed with, as it were, would do me little good should I be required to engage in a fight. Whoever was there took no heed of my calling out, and the rustling continued, closer now.

I quickly finished and peered through the dark to see a shape standing behind a nearby tree. Irritated, I kicked the brush in their direction before turning to collect my rifle beside me.

Whoever watched remained still.

The moon peeked out from the clouds it hid behind to cast phantom beams across the leaves of the trees, revealing the bandaged rorschach-mask stained a sickly red, yellow, and black, frozen in a silent wail. The wounded soldier extended his gauzed hand; fingers missing their full length, but protruded out from the wrapped knuckles like the heads of earthworms breaking dirt after an autumn rain.

Panicked, I fired into the night, knocking myself flat on my backside. When I recovered, I was alone. The moon's eye had gazed upon the soldier and vanished him with a blink. With my gun still at the ready I checked the area. I thrust the barrel into nearby bushes, but found no evidence of there being anyone standing in the trees, besides myself.

I was stopped on my way back by a pair of guards inquiring about a shot heard, In my response I asked if either of them had seen anyone heading back this way. They replied they hadn't, and repeated their question. I dismissed their annoyance with a conjured-up answer, happily agreeing to relieve a watchman of his nightly duty as punishment.

As they walked me back to the trench I remembered the young soldier and the story he had shared with me. I'd be damned to let this thing find me in my sleep, too.

We were successful in pushing the front line half a mile east and holding. That was the furthest we've gotten since the invasion began 10 months ago. Our reward? An increase in fervor as we fought; our renewed bloodlust helped keep us focused on the fight—and not on the ever-creeping smoke on the horizon, filling the skies.

Adrenaline and fear fueled me forward, and I felt driven by the thought that if I killed more men further from our newly acquired position, there would be less work hauling their bodies back to it afterwards. All around, bayonets and bullets accompanied cries, both invigorating and final, as I let the spirit of war overtake me. I became its war machine; my body its vessel, its undying warrior. I felt my soul surge; its light so powerful it filled my vision. I yelled. War, the beast that it was, roared back, erupting all around me, and then...silence. I felt myself being transported, somewhere else; away from the battle and taken to—

—home.

It was Christmas morning and the excited noises made by the ones tearing through wrapping paper sounded downstairs. I could smell the breakfast being made: roasted tomato, blood sausage, bacon and eggs, and morning tea. The smell of cooked meat filled the entire house, and as I made my way downstairs I heard the kettle start to whine. It was winter, but cold mornings were greeted with hearty food, warm drink, and smiles that still had time to bask in the carefree light that childhood offered. I smiled, knowing I would see them, their rosy-cheeked faces.

I reached the last step and walked into the kitchen to find...no one. Smoke was rising from the pan, and something bubbled within, popping a piece of fat and sending its spray onto

the stovetop. I called out. The kettle hissed and another smell hit my nose. Gas? I made my way into the other room, to find my family—

—and saw the tip of the nozzle as the soldier raised it up towards me. The hiss reached its climax as a plume of flame vomited out. I was engulfed completely. The kerosene sprayed my eyes and I could feel them running down my face like hot yolk as I tried to wipe away at them. My skin bubbled and dripped; its popping the only other thing I could hear in the roar of the flames.

It's quiet now.

Had the fighting stopped? Who won? I'd shielded my face against the bright light in front of me, but now it was above, and further away. There were others around me, but my vision was unfocused and obscured. The sounds and smells pieced together the blurred images I could make out: soldiers were hauling men into carts or carrying them like fine silk held carefully between their arms.

No. Another ceasefire?

I tried to call out, but my voice scratched the walls of my throat. I reached up and felt bandages rake the skin of my badly scarred neck.

What had happened? My mind raced, but I felt no panic. I felt nothing. I didn't even feel the need to move, nor did I want to.

A soldier made their way towards me. I watched him, thinking to get his attention when he drew closer. He passed me, only briefly looked my way, barely a glance. I don't think he saw

me—but I saw him. His walk, his face, and the way the void had replaced the light in his eyes—our eyes.

It was in that moment now, and then, I suppose, that I stood transfixed by where I was.

I continued to watch, hoping he'd see or feel my presence through this gauntlet of death, as I did. And as time passed, I thought. On everything.

What would become of him now? His fate was set, and I could not divert him from the path that was laid before us. Will he be cursed to watch as I do? Which version does he watch? Which version was I? What of the soldier returned from war who woke from his bed? Does he know what awaits him downstairs should he turn that corner?

Oh God, cruelty is death masked as hope and expecting to find salvation in its prayer.

Now—

I no longer reach out.

I no longer part the trees.

But the smoke continues to creep over the horizon, growing thicker and thicker.