

# Infantry

by C. P. Boyko

*High Ground.* —Sergeant Montazo wriggled on her belly to the crest of the ridge and surveyed the valley below through her field glasses. She had never seen landscape like this before. The gaunt and ragged mountains were smoothed in spots with shelves of snow; the rolling foothills were checkered with cottony groves of trees and swaths of furze; a stream twisted like a child's scribble through pastures splashed with wildflowers; a dirt road divided cultivated fields that from this height looked no larger than patches on a quilt; and a village, asleep or abandoned, lay nestled in the blue shadows like an heirloom in velvet. The sky was slowly filling with infinitely gradated dawn—colors that, she would swear, did not exist back home—and even as she watched, a sliver of sun topped the horizon and poured its pearly warmth across the valley floor. Overcome, she lowered the field glasses, and the scene dissolved into daubs of colored light. She resolved to return here someday, with a camera, hiking shoes, a pipe, and a companion. No part of her would admit that nothing could ever again carry her halfway around the earth from home to a comfortless mountaintop at daybreak, or that for this exquisite moment she had the war to thank. To relieve her emotions, she decided to drop some shells into the valley.

She beckoned to Culverson, the new radio operator, who joined her on the ridge. She gave her a lesson in artillery observation. A good observer with high ground and a radio, she said, was more powerful than even a battalion of rifles, for she could rain down ordnance on any position in her view. "So," she asked, "if you were the enemy, where in this valley would you place your observatory?" After some thought, Culverson indicated the same unobvious vantage point that Montazo herself had selected. Montazo

grimaced. “All right, wiseass, but why?” —Culverson shrugged. “Good field of view both up and down the valley. Overlooks the village, and that crossroads down there.” —Montazo raised the field glasses again. There was indeed a crossroads in the distance. Scowling, she said, “Okay, sure, sure. Let’s assume that’s your target. What’re you going to tell your arty?” —“To shell it.” —“I mean, what are its coordinates? How far away do you think it is from our position?” While Culverson considered, Montazo added, “It’s not something you can teach, distance estimation. A person’s either got it or they don’t.” —“I’d say twenty-two, twenty-three hundred yards. Add maybe seventy elevation.”

This was so accurate that Montazo, exasperated, said nothing more. Muttering, she made some new estimations, did some calculations in her notebook, then grabbed the handset off Culverson’s back and dialed the field artillery frequency. She gave them coordinates, and requested a full concentration.

After a minute, the shells came shrieking down from the sky and landed with elegant precision, in little puffs of smoke and debris, inside the village. A moment later came the reverberant rumble of the explosions. Two buildings had received direct hits. Montazo, had she not been prone, would have placed her fists on her hips.

“Isn’t that a civilian village?” asked Culverson. —“It’s abandoned.” —“Oh. I thought I saw smoke from the chimneys. Yeah, look, there’s people coming out into the street.” —Montazo glanced through the field glasses. “This is a free-fire zone. Anyone still in that village is either enemy, or abetting the enemy.”

“Oh,” said Culverson. “Should we hit them again?”

Sergeant Montazo did not reply. She crept back down the ridge and climbed into her funk hole, where she opened a packet of curried beans and awaited the counterattack.

*Sniper Bait.* —Late in the afternoon, Speed Bumps, intoxicated with coffee for want of anything stronger, took her idea to Pschaw and Smith at the communication dugout, which had been harassed the past few days by an unseen sniper. “I’ll stand on the roof and draw fire; you watch for the muzzle flash.” —“That sounds like a bad idea.” —“Don’t worry. They can’t hit me if I keep moving.” And she was certainly moving. She shuffled from side to side, rubbed her hands, wagged her eyebrows, and rolled her shoulders alternately in a cajoling manner. Smith and Pschaw doubted whether they could have hit her at point-blank range. They agreed to the plan. It might be fun.

She climbed onto the sandbagged dugout, hollering and waving her arms. Then she began to writhe and spin and lunge about. She leered, and guffawed, and bowed, and sobbed, and hopped in place. She made ugly faces and vulgar gestures. She cocked a hip and tossed her head like a model; she flaunted herself like a saleswoman displaying an irresistible product. She soon drew an appreciative crowd; even Smith and Pschaw crawled out of the post to watch. She began to feel invincible, as if her body were composed of air.

The sniper watched too, but refused to take a shot at the crazy woman. She was, in effect, a casualty already.

Later that night, Smith was shot in the face through the loophole. The bullet passed through one cheek and out her open mouth, doing little damage. She finished the word she was speaking, but not the sentence. She’d been telling Pschaw about her parents’ upholstery business.

*Still Alive.* —Sunachs monitored her fear like a blackout warden, lest any glimmer of it be seen by her comrades. This hypochondriac self-consciousness only aggravated the inevitable effects of insomnia, malnutrition, danger, and caffeine, so that her teeth were always on edge, her heart felt strangled in her chest, perceptions poured through her like radiation, and her nerves jangled constantly, like telephones ringing just below the threshold of hearing. To prevent her hands from shaking, she kept them busy cleaning her rifle or shuffling cards; to camouflage the starts and flinches to which she was prey, she flexed her shoulders and wagged her head like a pugilist; and her trembling lip she concealed behind a sneer. No one but she suspected that she was a coward.

She coped best when under fire, because then all her idle wits and muscles were enlisted to hug the ground, or to hold her weapon still and squeeze the trigger. For this reason, she usually volunteered for patrols. She was perhaps happiest when crossing a minefield or skulking through the enemy's positions, because it was only at such times that her inner turmoil seemed balanced by, even justified by, the ambient threat.

Volunteering one night for a retrieval patrol, she discovered within herself a new, unfathomed fear—the residue, perhaps, of childhood ghosts and bogeys: she was, it seemed, terrified of dead bodies. As the patrol crept noiselessly through the moonless valley, every rock appeared to her a smirking skull, and every shrub, every log, every shadow appeared a writhen, putrefying carcass. But when at last Vrail found the body they were looking for, lying twisted and limp in a puddle, its mundane lifelessness was puzzling, and somewhat frustrating, to Sunachs. Under the pretense of checking it for

booby-traps, she put her hands all over it, searching for some justification for her earlier dread. But this thing was just clothes and cold, sticky meat. Not even the cavity in the back of the skull, nor the dry eyeball under her thumb, could explain her horror. This body was just a body—one that bore no resemblance to the corpse that poisoned her dreams. It proved, too, to belong to an enemy, so, after stripping it of its boots and its buttons, they left it where it lay.

In an effort to exorcize, or at least erode, her newfound fear, she undertook to study the dead around her—to scrutinize them with one eye turned inward, as it were, to record her own reaction. Taking advantage of a canteen halt one day, she dropped into a bomb crater where a dead peasant lay festering in the sun. This time she felt no fear or awe, but only an understandable revulsion. The stench, for one thing, though horrible, was not horrific: nothing that smelled so much like rotting garbage could be uncanny. And the blotched and bloated face, which the gases of decomposition had distended and discolored, was too garish, too inhuman, to be frightening. She peeled back the man's lips to reveal the teeth, the visible part of the skeleton; but still she experienced nothing but distaste.

Formerly she had been too squeamish to loot the dead for souvenirs, but now she began to make a point of it. Each time, the approach was the dreadful part; she trudged toward the crumpled heap as toward some inconceivably gruesome evil; but each time, the horror, like fog, dissipated as she came near. She concluded that old rotting corpses were not what bothered her—and she resolved to confront a fresh one.

One morning she heard that a member of Third Platoon had been crushed by an airdrop crate that she'd been trying to dislodge—had finally dislodged—from a tree. But by the time Sunachs arrived, the body had been carried down out of the hills by stretcher-bearers. A group of soldiers stood around the blood-splashed spot, grumbling. A piece of hairy scalp adhered to the intact crate, just below its PINEAPPLES IN OIL stencil. The sight did not much affect Sunachs—because, she supposed, she had not known the woman.

A few weeks later, when the company was back in the rearward posi-

tions, her good friend Gedge was killed by the concussion from a shell. Sunachs spent half an hour with her body in the aid-station dugout. There wasn't a mark on her, aside from some caked blood at the corner of her mouth. Sunachs felt desolate and angry but not afraid. Days later, when she permitted herself to think about it, she decided that Gedge's death had been too sanitary to evoke any terror. Whereas the other bodies had looked too dead, Gedge had looked too alive. Sunachs had been unable to see her as a corpse.

After a while, Sunachs forgot about her fear of dead bodies, and abandoned her study of them. She neither avoided them nor sought them out; she took only their banknotes and valuables; she dreamed of them only occasionally. But when Lieutenant Farl was killed, the night they attacked the enemy outpost on Hill 68, Sunachs's fear returned in a flood. Here was someone she loved, and his death was not sanitary.

Farl, standing on the parapet and shouting to his troops below, was drilled in the torso by a burst of machine-gun fire. When, ages later, Sunachs and Vrail reached him, he was screaming silently, blood spurting from his mouth, his eyes as large as eggs. He kicked them with the force of a mule when they tried to put him on a stretcher. In the ghastly, spastic light of the flares, they did not realize at first that the lieutenant had been cut in half. When his body came apart in their hands, Sunachs recoiled in every muscle, and fell to the ground retching. This was the corpse of her nightmares. This corpse was still alive.

Weeks later, Boorq came across Sunachs hacking at an enemy corpse with her bayonet. "I think they're dead, buddy." —Sunachs slowly backed away. "Just making sure," she said.

*An Epitaph.* —Fourth Platoon were removing spikes from a railroad. It was slow, back-breaking work, for which, as usual, they had been given no reasons. Presumably they were rendering the track unusable for the enemy, which meant that a reverse must be expected or a retreat planned—both dispiriting prospects. And this particular form of destruction afforded no opportunities for catharsis; it had none of the zest of burning down churches, booby-trapping basements, smashing valuables, or poisoning wells. Also, they had been provided with tools ill-suited to the task, they were constantly being interrupted by the trucks of a munitions column that continued to use the railway as a road to the main area of conflict, and it was midday, and hot.

Fidget, shirtless and sweating and cursing, had been working on a single spike for ten minutes, and had nearly succeeded in prying it free with her corroded entrenching tool when a supply truck, tired of waiting, began blaring its horn at her. She ignored it, her brain meanwhile throbbing with the compound rage of the exploited laborer, the righteous martyr, and the lowly pedestrian harassed by the lordly motorist. At last she threw down her tool and tore her pistol from its holster; she would have begun firing into the windshield, but the driver had already descended. They faced each other for a moment; then their grimaces broke into grins, and they fell to grappling and yelping. They had been at the training depot together.

Fidget and Tsetse had not been close friends, but basic training was the nearest thing to an upbringing that two soldiers could share. Each reminded the other nostalgically of home, and, erroneously, of peacetime. Smoking and teasing and marveling, they crouched in the shade of Tsetse's truck and

exchanged news, while the other drivers gunned their engines, craned their necks, and sighed.

“Did you hear about Doakus?” asked Tsetse suddenly. —Fidget laughed, at the mere mention of this name, as if an old burden had been unexpectedly shed. “Don’t tell me she’s an officer!” This was a joke; but a charming absurdity adhered to Fidget’s idea of Doakus, making the joke seem not at all unlikely. The truth, however, was more absurd, and all too likely: Doakus, of course, was dead.

For the rest of the day, Fidget groped irritably through a fog. Doakus dead. How could that be? Fidget had seen friends wounded, probably fatally; she had seen the corpses of animals, of locals, and of soldiers unknown to her; before the war, she had attended the funerals of her grandmother, a cousin, and a schoolmate; but she had never before felt so vividly the proximity and indiscriminateness of death.

Joan Doakus had been husky, robust, and good-looking, but so altogether without guile, conceit, or indeed introspection that everyone who met her liked her. Even her famous laziness was endearing, for it had no root in weakness, but on the contrary seemed the natural product of her implacable good humor. She could, when pressed, and as it were for a lark, double-time up a mountain under full kit; but it was more pleasant to lie atop one’s gear in the valley—so why pretend? There was something inspiring and almost invigorating in her lassitude; she took the path of least resistance as a sail takes wind. Because she never doubted her place in the universe, she had no need of a personal providence; indifferent to omens, curses, and godsend, she accepted both windfalls and setbacks with amused equanimity, tracking the flight of her own fortunes like a birdwatcher. Her serenity was contagious, and baffled and balked even the drill sergeants, who found it impossible, or perhaps pointless, to punish her. Fidget still recalled in amazement the only time they ever heard Staff Sergeant Haoubess laugh. Having found in her locker a contraband letter and photograph from Doakus’s boyfriend, he had berated her viciously for ten minutes, denigrating her patriotism, her intelligence, and even her taste in men; he had concluded, like a jealous parent, by forbidding her to associate with such a feeble, pimply, sloppy young



man. Her reply from any other recruit would have drawn a court-martial. “Unfortunately, sir, I doubt I’ll ever get me as nice a man as you.”

But in general, there had been few transgressions to punish, for everyone in the unit helped to cover for Doakus and to keep her squared away. She was for them like a pet, a sister, and a daughter. They made allowances for her; they were proud of her; she brought out the best in them.

Her eyes blinked asynchronously. She denied that she snored. She could throw a knife with great accuracy. She was proud of her bowel movements, which were “as regular as sheet music.” She confessed to incestuous feelings for her brother, who was a lawyer and a married father. She was a born debater, and was always playing devil’s advocate—to provoke others, but also to challenge them. “No one ever got very far on one leg,” she liked to say. She believed everything, and so could question everything—especially orders. She did not smoke, but she sucked on a pipe, and liked to punctuate her pronouncements with its moistened stem. She knew one line of poetry, which she recited at every opportunity. She was twenty-one years old. She was dead.

That night, Fidget awoke in the dark to a feeling of suffocation. She thrashed free of her sleeping bag, then lay there gasping, her mind racing haphazardly. She felt that Doakus was a problem that needed solving, but one from which she could not stand back sufficiently to even see. She slogged through a mire of repetitious platitudes: *such a shame; before her time; her poor family; a better place . . .* She was trying to glean something from her friend’s death, a lesson or a moral; she was searching for a vantage from which to view it, or a frame in which to place it. When at last, just before dawn, she fell back asleep, she had arrived at no conclusion; but the troubled part of her mind had exhausted itself, so that she felt an illusory repose, as of satisfaction. Probably everything is all right after all, she thought, and her thoughts went no deeper.

But in the morning, she seemed to be in possession of the answer. She recalled what Tsetse had said when asked how Doakus had died. “Who knows? Probably a shell, like everybody else.” Then she had offered in extenuation this fact, which Fidget now saw as the woman’s epitaph: “She

wasn't much of a soldier, I'm afraid."

That day the First/Fourth replaced the spikes they had removed the day before. No one knew or wondered why.

*The Cook-Up.* —After three days of footslogging through tangled forest concealing treacherous terrain, C Platoon lost radio contact with command. Lieutenant Ryyss called a halt and conferred with Culverson, the radio operator.

“It’s because we’re down in the valley,” she told him. —“We were in a valley yesterday,” Ryyss observed. —“Yes, but there was cloud cover then.” —Ryyss said nothing, betraying neither understanding nor failure to understand. —Gently Culverson explained, “The transmission bounces off the clouds, which extends your range.”

Ryyss looked at the sky resentfully. He had been a lieutenant, and platoon leader, for only five days, and he felt the disconnection from higher authority as keenly as a severed thumb. For three days he had received orders every eight hours to continue marching for another eight hours. Now, in the absence of new orders, was he to stop, or to go on? Of their ultimate objective he knew only that they were to rendezvous with D, E, and F Platoons somewhere near Burzgao, still two or three days away if they maintained their current speed. He could send Culverson and a squad back up the hill to reestablish radio contact, but if anything happened to them, if they got lost, he would be without a radio, without orders, several days’ march from a friendly position, and at two-thirds strength—less, in fact, for they were already seven soldiers short of a full platoon. Alternatively, he could lead everyone back up the hill, but that would mean a delay of five or six hours. If the sky were to become cloudy in that time, he would actually do better to stay put. He was reluctant, however, to order a rest. New to command, he did not feel that he was doing his job unless his troops were active—which

was why they had marched so far, and slept so little, in the last seventy-two hours.

Privates Kellek and Tolb came forward to ask permission, if there was time, to pick some berries they had spotted in the vicinity. —“You’ve identified them?,” Ryyss asked. “They’re edible?” —“Yes, Lieutenant,” said Kellek. “That is, I performed the combat-pragmatic edibility test on them.” In fact, Kellek had curtailed this test, which normally required two days and involved gradually increasing one’s exposure to the potential food source, from handling to tasting to holding in the mouth to chewing and finally to swallowing. What Kellek had done was eat a handful of the berries the day before; today she felt fine, or in any case no worse.

The request gave Ryyss an idea. He knew that everyone was fed up with the ABC rations, which some joked had not just Already Been Cooked, but Already Been Chewed—or even, in the case of the despised pineapples in oil, Already Been Crapped. Florze, their de facto field cook, had subjected the nutritious but flavorless contents of the zippered packets to a variety of preparations: she had stewed them, fried them, boiled them, cooked them down to sludge or to cinders, made soup or tea from them, and roasted them on skewers over burning plastique; she had requisitioned for spice or seasoning every available substance, including rifle grease, antifogging gel, malaria pills, aspirin, shaving cream, and the faintly perfumed antiseptic napkins from their first-aid kits; and she had combined the rations every way possible, in every permutation and in every ratio: she had mixed coffee with sausage, brandy peaches with pork noodles, curried beans with carrot cake, sugar and cinnamon dumplings with fish balls, and, on one memorable occasion, all the above fried into a massive omelette. No preparation, however, could alleviate the monotony. And the monotony had only been exacerbated by the latest airdrop, which, due to an oversight or to whimsy, had contained nothing but pineapples in oil.

Lieutenant Ryyss called the platoon together. Placing his hand on the trunk of a tree, he said, “This is platoon HQ. Be back at HQ by thirteen hundred—that’s a little over two hours. Bring back whatever food you can find. This is not an exercise. This is victualing in the field. Travel in pairs or

small groups. Remember: Leaves of three, let them be. And, uh, no toads or snakes. That's all. Don't get lost. Dismissed."

Within five minutes, the woods all around were crackling with rifle shots, and Ryyss realized that he should have imposed fire silence. He did not think that there was enemy in the area, but one never knew. Popping a week-old quid of tea leaves into his mouth, he pulled out his maps and studied them moodily, and needlessly.

After firing their rifles a few times to relieve tension, the soldiers fanned out, for the most part singly, to each pursue their own private act of foraging, hunting, or leisure. Osini spent an hour constructing a snare with communication wire, and an hour peacefully watching it. Laskantan climbed a tree and, no other prey being visible, followed the movements of her fellow soldiers through her sights. Vrail discovered a deer run, which she followed on tiptoe for several miles, knife in hand. Culverson sat in the shade and peeled a hundred sumac shoots, most of which she ate. Sunachs, Raof, and Klipton, independently, found secluded dells in which to masturbate and nap. Sergeant Montazo, a few steps at a time, stalked a pheasant all the way to its roost; then, lowering her field glasses for the lunge, she blindly seized a stone instead. Frustrated, she tossed a grenade into a pond, and collected as many of the dead fish that floated to the surface as she could carry.

Others had some success too. Kellek and Tolb returned with several quarts of berries. Sergeant Gijalfur, covered in gore, came back with some animal's antlers, in lieu of any more edible part, for there had not been time to drag the carcass back to the headquarters tree, and no mere piece of meat would have done justice to the beast's size. Solzi succeeded in netting two chatty, brightly plumaged birds, which she refused to let Florze butcher. Pannak and Boorq, grinning triumphantly, brought back nine bludgeoned hares on a string. But the most popular catch proved to be Narran and Alcott's bucketful of worms and beetle grubs, which, crushed to a paste and flavored with some of the gingerroot and laurel leaves that Florze had found, made delicious burgerlike patties.

By the time they had finished eating, it was late afternoon and the sky had clouded over. The radio was working again, and Lieutenant Ryyss re-

ceived his orders to continue marching towards Burzgao. The platoon had to admit that, though he would never measure up to Lieutenant Farl, Ryyss was not such a bad guy after all. He even allowed them to sing a little, till they began the ascent out of the valley.

“We’ve got tanks for shooting guns and guns that shoot tanks;  
We’ve got bombers that drop bombs on anti-aircraft.  
But a gun that riddles hunger I’d wield with thanks,  
Or a bomb that blasts fatigue or boondoggles daft.

Weapons galore have we got in store  
For friends and for good jobs well done;  
Imagine what fun inventing a gun  
That kills loneliness, fuckups, and war!”

At dusk they walked into an ambush.

Pannak, Vrail, Florze, and Culverson were killed.

Ryyss blamed himself, and the cook-up, which had made everyone lax and complacent.

*Classroom Ambush.* —Two Words hated new fucks. She also hated generals, MPs, KPs, and journalists; she hated husbands, cooks, civilians, and all the leprous cunts of Second/Third Platoon; and she had her trademark “just two words” to say about the air force, who were “a bunch of blind and titless brain-dead cocksucking shitpigs.” But for new fucks she felt a special contempt, as pure and consuming as fire. New fucks were repugnantly fresh, well fed, and spruce, and they made the old fucks look shabby and ill by comparison. They kept themselves and their gear clean and tidy, as if they were still on parade-ground. They were cocky and inexperienced, a deadly combination. On patrols they were loud and clumsy, and invariably took unsighted cover, from which they could provide assistance to no one. They accepted witlessly all the official propaganda about the progress of the war, the righteousness of their cause, the superiority of their weaponry, the gratitude of the locals, and the craven ignobility of the enemy. Worst of all, they knew nothing, cared nothing, about the soldiers, wounded and dead, that they had come to replace. Two Words curated a secret ledger of the members of First/Fourth Platoon, and, to her, each new name inscribed therein was an attack on history; each new arrival represented the desecration of a beloved friend’s memory.

New Fuck Nebel was a quintessential example of her class. She buffed her boots, wore her helmet in the bunker, and stood watch with bayonet fixed. She couldn’t wait to get into a firefight; she couldn’t wait to blast the brains out of some invaders’ skulls. Two Words, listening to this, gritted her teeth for a minute, then exploded. “What the fuck do you know about a fire-

fight, pussy fuzz? What they tell you at basic; what you've seen in the movies. You don't know shit about shit, so why don't you shut your fucking spunkguzzler." —To avert a brawl, Christmas Tree defended Nebel. "She's just a little trigger-horny, T.W. She's got the whore's itch. She'll get over it. Give her a break." —Two Words ignored this. "And 'invaders'? What the fuck do you know about motherfucking invaders? There are exactly two kinds of enemy soldiers you're going to see in this war: the dead ones, and the ones trying very hard and very skilfully to fucking kill you. I've got exactly two words of advice for you: stay the fuck away from all of them, and you'll be a whole fuckload better off." —Nebel objected, "But it's our job. It's our duty. We're trained, and ready, and paid to kill the bitches." —"Don't even," said Two Words. "The shit coming out of your mouth makes me want to puke out of my fucking ass." —"Aw," said Nebel, "you're just scared."

This statement was so ignorant and so offensive in so many ways that it overloaded Two Words's capacity for indignation; she subsided, deflated. "Let's just hope for your own sake that you get scared too, fuck-knuckle, and soon."

A few days later, Nebel volunteered for a reconnaissance patrol—and Two Words saw an opportunity to teach the new fuck a lesson. She recruited Winky and Pschaw to assist, and brought her idea to the other three members of the patrol fireteam. Only Sawed-Off was hesitant; she asked, "Shouldn't we ask the Corp's permission first?" —"Are you fucking kidding me?" said Longpork. "You know exactly what she would say." —Corporal Cobweb had three stock phrases: "The wherewithal and the inclination," "Drumhead," and "Waste of ammo." Sawed-Off conceded that the corporal would probably adjudge the mock firefight a waste of ammo.

They discussed practicalities. "Should we use blanks?" —"Fuck that," said Upsize. "I'm not going out on any recon without fucking live rounds." —"The area's been dead for weeks," Two Words reminded her. "Anyway, we'll never get hold of enough blank rounds. Don't worry. We'll shoot over your heads, and you'll shoot into the ground." —"What about Nebel?" —"She'll never see us." —"And grenades?" —"Don't use them." —"But



what about her?” —Two Words made an impatient gesture. “She’ll be too shit-scared to do anything. Trust me.”

They studied a map of the patrol’s proposed route. “We’ll wait for you here, where the road curves.” —“Sure, where the burned-out tank is.” —“No, that’s farther on.” —“Oh, is it? Never mind.” —Eventually everyone believed that they knew which spot Two Words was referring to. —“Winky and Pschaw will take the hill here, and I’ll be here, beyond the ditch. Any questions?” —There was a long silence, but no questions.

That night in the mess dugout, everyone got into the spirit of the practical joke, even those who had not been coached by Two Words. They gave Nebel solemn and contradictory advice, told exaggerated or apocryphal tales of their own first patrols, and throughout feigned a struggle to restrain their feelings of pity and foreboding.

“Last time I was out that way, the whole fucking area was swarming with invaders.” —“There’s about ten fucking classroom fucking ambush points on that route they got you walking.” —“Who’s the sorry saggy-tit on point?” —Upsize, Longpork, and Sawed-Off declined the lead position. —“I guess that leaves me,” laughed Nebel, but there was a catch in her voice.

“I just can’t shake this bad fucking feeling,” muttered Sawed-Off. “Last time I had a bad feeling like this, Doc Throb and Chop Top came back dead.” —In the end, they managed to spook not just Nebel, but themselves as well.

Nebel’s nervousness mounted throughout the briefing, which she scarcely absorbed, and continued to crescendo in the hours preceding the departure time, till by midnight she was certain that those around her could sense the anguish radiating from her like a stink. Her bowels were clamorous but she could not shit; her breathing seemed shallow and rapid, but any correction she imposed left her dizzy and gasping. Not until they were moving out through the camouflaged chicanes in the razor wire did her anxiety diminish, or rather find an outlet. For the first time she discovered the difference between useful and useless, active and inactive fear; and she understood why, under an artillery barrage a few nights earlier, her partner on watch had scrambled about for hours making superficial improvements to

their bunker. Now, creeping daintily across the darkened landscape, her every muscle strained, her every sense afire with perceptions, she was still terrified, but at last she was doing something: moving to meet, and perhaps to shape, her fate. She seemed to have all the oxygen she needed; the air was brimming almost visibly with it; she could sip it like wine for pleasure or gulp it like water for strength. The terrain she navigated seemed familiar to her from childhood, when in imagination and in dreams she had skulked and slid and tumbled and sneaked across fields, over hills, and through shadows and forests like these.

Their progress was slow, for Nebel tested each patch of ground before giving it her weight, insisted on crawling up any rise, and frequently motioned for a stop and drop so that she could investigate a suspicious-looking twig, or stone, or signpost, or furrow. Sometimes she left the others for ten or fifteen minutes—an eternity of lying on the frozen ground, listening to the rustling of grass and trees and the miscellany of tiny stirring noises that loomed in the silence like the sounds of a soldier being stifled, subdued, and garroted. Each time Nebel returned, often from a different direction than that in which she had set out, Sawed-Off was half convinced that she was an enemy, and had to consciously refrain from shooting her.

Shortly after checkpoint two, Nebel dropped to the ground and lay motionless for a long time. Eventually, Longpork slithered forward to join her. Nebel pointed first subtly, then with increasing emphasis, at a thicket fifty meters distant. Longpork saw only the thin black silhouettes of trees standing in a pool of their own shadow. In truth, anything could have been in there. She made a questioning gesture; Nebel replied with a gesture of irate incredulity, and pointed again. Longpork looked harder, with fixed gaze, till the whole countryside seemed to be dancing with sinister motion; she was staring into a damp, pulsating tunnel teeming with glistening gremlins, then into a kaleidoscopically shifting hallway being built and dismantled by scaly self-replicating machines. She blinked and shook her head. There was a reason new fucks were not usually permitted to take point. “You’re seeing things,” she said.

Nebel’s whisper was slow and adamant. “I saw their helmets.”

Longpork did not know what to do. She did not really think anyone was there; and if anyone were, it could not likely be Winky and Pschaw, who were supposed to be waiting past checkpoint three, and not in any trees but behind a hill. Nevertheless, Two Words might have moved the site of her ambush forward due to impatience, disorientation, or other reasons she'd been unable to communicate to the patrol. Longpork switched her rifle's safety off, and, to let whoever might be there know that they had been spotted, she fired a burst over the thicket.

Nebel started and nearly screamed. Her finger was on her trigger; indeed, the only thing that had prevented her from firing already was the warning she'd received earlier that night: namely, that the muzzle flash suppressors they'd been issued were useless, and that the only sure way to avoid revealing your location at night was by tossing a grenade. Now she squeezed the trigger, emptying an entire magazine into the thicket, with the desperate conviction that it would probably be the last thing she ever did. She intended to go on firing until she died; when the rifle emitted a hollow click, she cried, "I'm empty!" as if she had been shot.

"What the fuck?" said Upsize, coming forward.

Silence. No return fire. Nebel peered into the trees. The helmets hadn't moved. Either they were extraordinarily disciplined soldiers, or . . .

She loaded another magazine, set her rifle to semi-automatic, got to her feet, and loped, crouching, in the direction of the thicket, firing a round every few steps. The helmets did not flinch. Finally, from ten meters away, she saw that they were not helmets, but burls. She returned to the group without a word, and with a gesture resumed the patrol.

Winky and Pschaw, meanwhile, were growing jumpy. The patrol was far behind schedule; had something happened? The gunfire in the distance unsettled them further, and Winky crossed the road to consult with Two Words. —"Get the fuck back to your position. They're probably just doing some rape fucker." This was code, in Fourth Company's informal phonetic alphabet, for reconnaissance by fire—shooting at something to see if it shot back. "Stick to the plan. Everything's fine."

But Two Words was also unsettled. Several times she was on the verge

of canceling the ambush and returning to camp; and when at last she saw figures approaching from the wrong direction, and in an untactically tight group, she panicked and tossed a concussion grenade into the road.

This frightened not only Nebel, but the rest of the patrol and Winky and Pschaw too, who had not been expecting grenades. Everyone got low and began firing at once, not bothering to aim, let alone to aim over anyone's head or into the ground. No one was hit; but later, comparing stories, each of them swore that bullets had passed within centimeters of them; and this led to counter-boasts of having sharpshot rings around one another. Back at camp, some wags said that it was a miracle nobody got killed; but in fact, as the carelessness of fright was soon succeeded by the carelessness of exultation, it probably would have been more miraculous if any bullet had met, in all that black space, a body. The only real danger came from Nebel, who, believing herself surrounded, lobbed grenades in every direction.

The firefight drew the attention of two infrapodean infants lying in a nearby listening post. They radioed their commander, who decided, after studying the map and communicating with other platoon leaders, that it must be an enemy field exercise. He ordered an artillery barrage, which, even before correction, landed close enough to the mock ambush to bring it to a halt. —“That's enemy incoming!” screamed Two Words, and initiated the retreat.

Not until they were halfway back to camp did Nebel realize that there were now seven of them. To Sawed-Off, who was running alongside her, she said, “Shit, were you all in that ambush too?” —“Uh, yeah,” said Sawed-Off. —“Fuck; anybody hurt?” She wanted to hear that others had been hurt, even killed, for it would make the ecstasy she felt at still being alive even more acute. But she could not wait for a reply, and she prattled on: “I killed one of those fuckers for sure, maybe two. I saw an arm flying, and a boot. It could've been two. That was some extremely intense shit, huh? You ever seen shit like that before? I think it was two. It must've been two. Did you see? It was something else.”

Back at camp, her excitement rendered her oblivious for a long time to her comrades' laughter and ridicule. Only gradually did she realize that the

whole thing had been a joke, and that no enemy had been present. Her face crumpled and fell; she looked ready to weep. “Shit,” she groaned, “then who’d I kill?”

This question was relished, and cherished, and repeated, and soon became the platoon’s latest all-purpose catchphrase. It was used as an expression of bewilderment, of braggadocio, and of hangdog complaint. And when, a month later, Albene Nebel drowned in a collapsed trench, it was as Old Fuck Who’d-I-Kill that she was affectionately remembered. Striking this name from her secret ledger with regret, Two Words added a succinct obituary: “Mud”—the cause of death.

*Mail Call.* —A bag of mail caught up with Forty-Third Company in the village of Apillnol, where for several days they had huddled in the shattered cellars awaiting orders, munitions, and food. In the bombed-out skeleton of a cathedral, C Platoon gathered around a few smoky, nauseating heat tablets, and shared the last of Florze's illicit goat jerky. The mood, which had been dismal for days, became almost convivial. The letters were a welcome distraction from the damp and the inaction, and were savored even by those who feared, with or without reason, bad news from home—a death in the family, a debt incurred by a spouse, or a jilting by a lover. The procedure in these cases was the same as with a wound: you stared at the ceiling while someone else surveyed the damage first; then a glance at their face told you the worst.

Only Boorq truly dreaded the mail call, for each letter received from her brother was another she would not answer. It was months—she dared not reckon how many—since she had last been able to write. What could she write about? The noise, the scarcity, the filth? The dismemberment of her friends? The farmer she'd murdered? To answer Bibb's perky chatty domestic reports with a grim litany of objectives taken and lost, casualties abandoned, provisions scavenged, and landscapes and livelihoods smashed to rubble by unceasing storms of high explosives, would be obscene. Finally, she had found it no less obscene to conceal these facts behind a veil of stoic or phatic circumlocution; and so she had stopped writing altogether. Now her brother's letters, which formerly she had warmed herself by, served only to sharpen her guilt—with the result that she felt attacked by them. Of course, feeling attacked helped lessen the guilt, so she scoured his lines for

reproaches, and found them even in his avoidance of any tone of reproach. The saintly way he continued to write letters exactly as if his sister continued to reply to them was surely meant to be shaming.

Today's note was no different. Two devilishly inane pages about the weather, the neighbors, the cost of yams, and another trivial milestone achieved by her toddler niece, Milu; then a perfunctory paragraph of optimism; and finally the fatuous, hurried close: "I must stop here if I am to get this off by today's post"—as if it mattered when he got it off. Why not spend a week crafting something of value, of interest? Because, of course, it was a chore, one that must be completed in a single burst of willpower. Here, too, in his exemplary performance of an unpleasant duty, she detected an indictment.

Hiding her disgust, she allowed the letter to be passed around the circle, so that those who had received no mail could project their own fantasies of home onto the screen of her brother's prose. When the letter came back to her with compliments, she scanned it once more with affected objectivity. She thought she now perceived a crack in Bibb's sanctimony; surely here, in his defense of his daughter's temper tantrums, was an overt expression of resentment: "After all, one must be patient, for the girl struggles, as we all do, with your absence." Boorq almost laughed aloud with vindicated spite. And yet the feebleness of this jab was quite pathetic. Did he really imagine she might feel responsible for the child's burgeoning psychopathy? Besides, nothing could be easier than to turn that argument to her own use. If Milu's "struggle" gave her permission to behave badly, then how much more exonerating was Boorq's own greater struggle. Indeed, in the context of this slaughterhouse, her misdeeds were trifling. If Milu was not to blame for her tantrums, her aunt was not to blame for anything she might do while a soldier in this war, fighting, at the risk of her life, for her country against the aggressors. She had just enough strength to be a good warrior; she need not also be a good aunt, or sister, or citizen, or soul. She could steal food from the poor, destroy property, and kill with impunity. She would support her fellow soldiers; she would not run away. That was enough.

She felt a knot loosening within her, and a welling of freedom and

power. Excusing herself with a grunt, she went out into the street and picked her way through the debris, humming and chewing meat, a feral animal flexing its thews.

One parcel remained unclaimed. It was addressed to Private Popatisu, a puke who'd been crushed the week before by one of their own tanks. Raof had been nearby, and had seen the body, a flatulent, quivering slab of flesh trussed up in tattered khakis. After staring at it for a minute, she had waved another tank forward, so as to mash the horrific sight more completely into the earth. When after the skirmish she reported Popatisu's death to the lieutenant, she was vague about the location, so that the graves people would not have to rummage in the carnage for her dog tags.

Raof was against opening the parcel, but she was in the minority. —“What if there's food?” —“What if there's a sexy note?” —“Or a sexy photo?” —“If she were here,” said Osini, “she'd want us to have it. She'd want us to at least look.” No one could convincingly deny this, for Popatisu had not been well known. When the lieutenant excused himself, he seemed to say that the army had no ruling on the matter. Osini opened the package.

What they found inside was better than food or pornography: seven pairs of thick, dry, clean, hand-knitted woolen socks. Everyone stared agape at them, each basking in her own private image of the soft, warm, sheltering human being who had made and mailed them. Then Pannak broke the spell by trying to start an auction. There were jeers: “Yeah, and who'll the money go to, orphans?” Tolb thought the socks should go to Culverson or Sergeant Costitch or the machine-gun team, who carried the heaviest gear. Burnok, untying her boots' laces, said they should go to whoever had the worst case of foot rot. Osini pointed out that the parcel had only been opened thanks to her. Finally Kellek leapt up. “We'll draw high card for them, you fartholes.” —“Wait,” said Pannak, “for *all* of them?” —“That's right. Winner takes all.” —“I think we should have seven winners. Seven pairs of socks, seven winners.” —“Aw, swallow it. If you win, you can give six away.” —“Well, whatever we do, let's hurry up and draw before the other two get back.”

To her embarrassment and everyone else's annoyance, Tolb won the socks. She tried to give a few pairs away, but no one but Burnok would pub-



licly accept them. Within a few days, however, four of the remaining six pairs had gone missing from Tolb's pack.

After this prize was awarded, Laskantan plucked from the parcel the neglected letter to Popatisu, and began to recite from it. There were words she did not recognize, however, and the subject matter, when not outright inscrutable, did not lend itself well to declamation. "Here, on the matter of which particular manifestation a decision would take, I am afraid we stand divided . . . Whether circumstances will continue as they have heretofore, or whether, on the contrary, an about-face is to be expected, is not for me to speculate . . . Leaving to the side for the time being the question of responsibility, I will go so far as to say that your involvement, if pursued freely, would not be unwelcome to any party here." Laskantan groaned and let the pages drop.

"What the fuck. Was she a scientist or something?" —"Is that thing from her *husband*?" —"I think it's her lawyer." —"Look, it's signed 'Thalim.' Must be her husband." —"Must be her dad." —Everyone laughed. —Osini whistled mournfully and said, "Poor bitch is better off dead."

Sergeant Costitch alone understood that the dead woman had inherited a factory. She kept the letter, and glanced at it sometimes.

*The Minefield.* —The stream through the woods that they had been following up the mountain now led out into a grassy clearing, a dozen hectares in size. Corporal Cobweb signaled a halt, and called over War Juice, Jaywalk, and H. Crap, her section leaders. They knelt around her map. “Well,” she said, “this must be the minefield.”

The three lance corporals lifted their heads and peered at the harmless-looking glade. This morning, at this altitude, the medipodean summer was balmy. Even Jaywalk, city dweller, who hated the filth and bristly disorder of nature, was charmed. A lukewarm breeze carried glittering pollen through the air; birds and insects chattered and whirled like children’s gizmos. For a moment, the war seemed far away.

“Are they anti-tank or anti-personnel?” asked H. Crap. Anti-tank mines were deadlier, but sometimes did not explode when stepped on. —“No fucking hunch,” said Cobweb. “All the map says is ‘mines.’” She pointed at the map. —Jaywalk asked, “Are they ours or theirs?” Their own mines were shoddier, but their sappers tended to lay more of them. —Cobweb’s face expressed pained impatience. —“Definitely ours,” said H. Crap, with the conviction of pessimism. “We controlled this hill a year ago, didn’t we?” —“Can’t we go around?” asked Jaywalk. —Cobweb pointed. “We’re continuing up that ravine.” The cliffs on either side were too steep to climb. —War Juice spat. “Exactly why we put a fucking minefield just here.”

The lance corporals returned to their troops and solicited volunteers. “We just need one person to mark a route with tape.” Each section looked askance at the other two, grumbling. The Colonel, who often volunteered, was disgusted and made obstinate by the assumption that she would volun-

teer, and by the general lack of esprit de corps. Longpork prayed that no one would volunteer, or she too would feel obliged to. Speed Bumps, who loathed mines, forced herself to stand up—but then could not speak or meet her section leader’s gaze.

“All right,” said Corp Cobweb, “we’ll all go. We’ll leapfrog in file at quadruple-arm interval. A straight line is our shortest route, so let’s aim for that gap in the rockface. Stay as nearly as possible in the previous soldier’s steps. I’ll go first.”

“Wait up, Corp,” said Speed Bumps. “I’ll go.” —“It doesn’t matter who goes first. We’ll all get a turn.” —“No, I mean I’ll volunteer. I’ll go the whole way with the tape.” —“No,” said Cobweb. “Too late.” She walked ten steps into the tall grass, stopped mid-stride, and looked back over her shoulder. She nodded at Speed Bumps, who followed without hesitation. Addressing the rest of the platoon, she said, “Don’t make your LCs determine a marching order. We share the risk, and we get across this field intact. Scrunch your tits!”

Speed Bumps, her pulse sounding in her ears, brushed past the corporal, took another ten steps, and stopped. The Colonel did the same, going a few meters farther; then Jaywalk, then Longpork, then Chop Top, followed by Two Words, Teacher’s Pet, and The Professor. “All right,” Cobweb called to the troops still behind her. “No need to wait till she’s in position. Don’t bunch up, but keep coming.”

Bongo Drum was the second from last to leave the treeline. By this time, the file had reached the middle of the field. She stole from soldier to soldier, squeezing past each of them as if they shared a foot-wide gangplank. —“Stop jostling,” said Christmas Tree. —“You’re pushing me out of line, cunt-knuckle,” said Triple-Time. —But Bongo was too intent on her footing to spare a reply. When at last she reached Shitjob at the front of the file, she clung to her for a moment, then launched herself forward. —“Hey,” said Shitjob, when Bongo showed no sign of stopping, “don’t get ambitious . . .”

Then she did stop, abruptly, poised like a cat burglar. Twisting her head around, she shouted, in a deep, even voice, “I think I stepped on something here!”

Cobweb winced. So much for noise discipline. “What are you spitting about?” —“I stepped on something and it went ‘click’!” —Shitjob giggled anxiously. “Fuckbag, mines don’t go ‘click,’ they go ‘boom.’” —“Hold on,” called the corporal. “I’m coming forward. Everybody stay put.”

“I’m gonna jump for it,” said Bongo. —“What the fuck are you talking about?” said Shitjob. “You heard the Corp; wait for the Corp.”

“I can feel it under my boot,” said Bongo, her voice becoming high and thin. A shudder of revulsion moved up her leg. “I triggered it.”

“Ass-lips, mines go off when you trigger them. You probably just stepped on a fucking twig. Hey!” —Bongo flung herself to the ground.

At the sound of the explosion, Chop Top, Speed Bumps, and Helmet dove reflexively for cover—regretting it even as they fell. Shitjob was splashed with gore. Bongo Drum had leapt not off, but onto a mine.

H. Crap said, “Fuck.” The mines were enemy anti-tank mines.

Doc Throb, hurrying forward, ran alongside the trodden path. Two Words grabbed her arm as she passed and pulled her back into the line. Doc Throb, not understanding the other’s intention, shook her off; Two Words staggered back a step or two, and her whole body cringed in expectation of a blast. Angered, she gave Doc a didactic shove. Doc, exasperated, swung a fist at Two Words, which sent her reeling again into the treacherous tall grass. With an outraged bellow, Two Words lunged at Doc, and they fell to the ground, rolling and wrestling, each infuriated by the other’s recklessness.

Jaywalk and War Juice pulled them apart. —“For fuck sake,” cried Cobweb, moving back down the line, “everybody stay the fuck put.” She sent Two Words forward to join Shitjob (who was covertly swigging codeine syrup), and ordered Doc Throb to take one person with her and return to company for a stretcher. Doc nodded; she understood that Bongo Drum was dead. She gestured at Helmet, who was nearby, and together they started back towards the woods.

Corporal Cobweb then turned to Christmas Tree. “C.T.,” she said, “tell me you brought that fucking piece-of-shit metal detector of yours.” —C.T. grinned. “Sure did, Corp.” —Cobweb sighed. The detectors were notoriously unreliable on the mineral-rich medipodean soil, and useless any-

where that ordnance had been dropped. But she hoped that using the tool might restore some of the platoon's confidence. Extrapolating from her own anxiety, she imagined that the troops were on the verge of hysteria.

"Do you know how to use the fucking thing?" — "Sure, Corp. I found nearly three dollars in town last month, remember?" — "All right, lady. You got the wherewithal and the inclination to find a route across for us?" — Christmas Tree shrugged bashfully, honored by the corporal's trust. — Cobweb gripped the nape of C.T.'s neck. "Good woman. Go to."

But Speed Bumps, unable to stand still any longer, broke from the line with a strangled cry and dashed across the field at full pelt—as if she might, by sheer momentum, skim across the mines without detonating them. But it was such a relief to be running, and every harmless contact with the earth seemed such a dispensation, that soon she felt a tremulous joy swelling her throat. One course was as dangerous as the next, no step safer than another. She would either die or live, and nothing she did could make any difference. So fuck it. Half laughing, she began to leap and zigzag. She had almost reached the far side of the clearing when several things happened at once.

With a noise like sundering concrete, an unseen machine gun roared to life, and Speed Bumps fell, tumbling, into the grass; Helmet stepped on a mine, which shattered her legs and sent her torso cartwheeling into the air; and the crump of artillery fire rang out from somewhere in the hills above.

They all crouched and glanced wildly at one another.

"That's incoming!" screamed Corporal Cobweb, as the whistle of shells changed pitch and began to grow louder. "Spread the fuck out!"

Nobody moved.

*Everything Okay.* —Speed Bumps lay dying beneath the sky. She watched as a pill bug, with endearing diffidence, climbed onto a bloodied hand; the hand was as much or as little hers as the bloodied grass around it. A great buoyant relief poured through her, as if some vast intractable problem were simultaneously revealing and resolving itself. “You’re okay,” she laughed; she didn’t know whom she was talking to. Everything was okay.

*Requisition Mission.* —Florze wanted to put together a requisition detail. Lieutenant Farl, washing his hands and face with ashes from the cookfire, paused to consider. They were currently bivouacked in a hangar on the outskirts of Lucallzo, towards which they had been marching without sleep for two days. But more than exhaustion, the platoon—the entire company—felt frustration. The siege that had been expected to last days and cost countless lives was over in hours, before they even arrived. Thus the purpose of all their exertion, sacrifice, and nerve had been negated by the fleeing enemy. No counterattack was anticipated. Meanwhile, the supply column was at least a day behind, rations were scarce as ever, and many of the troops had abandoned every nonessential item on the road. Nothing would be better for morale than a good looting; but looting had been prohibited. It was going to be a long war yet, and they could not afford to alienate the medipodeans. Some soldiers in the Fifty-Ninth had even been shot for slaughtering a cow.

He told Florze to go ahead, but to restrict herself to whatever rations the enemy had left behind. —“But won’t they be poisoned, sir?” —“I doubt it. We caught them with their pants down. Bring Narran along to translate, so there are no misunderstandings with the locals. And I know our medics are short on morphine, bandages, and, um, antifatigue pills.” Farl had taken his last antifatigue pill five hours earlier, just before hearing that their attack was canceled. He was already feeling frazzled. “Ask Doc Tzu if there’s anything else she needs, and try to solicit some donations from a hospital or clinic, or another company’s aid station.” He gave Florze a score of blank and signed requisition chits, and wished her luck. “Be back by dawn.”

Despite the lieutenant’s blessing, Florze had difficulty finding helpers.

Those who were not asleep were suspicious. “We’re not supposed to loot,” said Tolb. —“We’re not. We’re requisitioning.” —“What’s the difference?” —“We’re not taking, we’re borrowing.” —“I don’t think we’re supposed to borrow, either.” —Florze scoffed. “And we’re not supposed to belch, either.” —“I’ll pass,” said Tolb. “Bring me back something nice.”

Vrail was erasing the answers from the foxed pages of the platoon’s only crossword-puzzle book; Florze decided not to interrupt this delicate operation. Montazo and Burnok were again debating whether tracers had a different trajectory from normal rounds; Florze invited neither, not wanting to risk bringing along the argument too. Winurhtry was tinkering with a dud grenade; Florze kept her distance. She would have liked to ask Sergeant Costitch, who appeared to be awake and idle, but she was intimidated by the woman’s rank, soldierly competence, and self-assurance. Laskantan was amusing herself and a few others with “psychological tactics”: gibbering suprapodean-sounding nonsense into a captured enemy radio. Though no one could understand the aggressors’ replies, their anger and bewilderment were plain, and hilarious.

Raof did not want to go; she preferred to stay hungry. She believed in a cosmic balance of pleasures and pains, and her secret strategy for survival was to remain as unhappy and uncomfortable as possible, so as not to make herself a target for nemesis. This self-denial, coupled with a natural pessimism, had made of her a surly anchorite. When cold, she refrained from wearing more clothing; she waited a week to read letters from home, by which time they were soiled almost to illegibility; no matter how thirsty, she never emptied her canteen completely; and though always ravenous, she always denied herself the last bite of every meal—and would have denied herself the first, more delicious bite, if that were possible. That afternoon, she had not even permitted herself to feel relief that the attack had been called off.

Finally, Culverson, one of the pukes, agreed to come. Though exhausted, she could not sleep; her body seemed still to be marching whenever she closed her eyes. She hoped that there would be trouble, for she had not yet been in a real, close firefight. Boorq, too, was eager to try the .31-caliber



automatic rifle she had stolen piecemeal from Thirty-Second Company and lugged all the way here. Godbeer wanted to decline, for malnutrition had made her night-blind; but she thought this condition was psychosomatic and best treated with courageous disdain. They all armed themselves heavily, to Florze's disquiet.

Narran was in her sleeping bag but not quite sleeping. Since being deafened by an artillery shell three days earlier, she had spent most of her time inside the bag, and had even wrapped it around her shoulders on the march. With her hearing gone, her skin, and especially her hands and face, had become extraordinarily sensitive, almost painfully so. A breeze now felt like ice-water, walking on gravel was like chewing glass, and shaving her head made her skull reverberate with a noise like tearing canvas. At the moment she was half dreaming, half hallucinating that her hunger was a redoubtable enemy position, that the pinpricks of sweat breaking out on her back were badly aimed shells, and that the glimmers of firelight coming through the sleeping bag's seams and zipper were falling flares and rising anti-aircraft rounds. It took Florze a few moments to rouse her, and she remained befuddled even as she got her gear together; she never felt quite fully awake anymore. She assumed that they were going on a reconnaissance or prisoner patrol. She too took all the ammunition she had.

Doc Tzurakhin had gone into town to help at a forward aid station, but they found a medic who told them what was needed. "Ethyl chloride, if you can find any, or any anesthetic, and hydrogen peroxide, or any good disinfectant." She spelled *ethyl chloride* and *hydrogen peroxide*, while Florze watched spellbound as she sprinkled maggots into a soldier's open wound. "Don't drink all the ethyl chloride on the way back," she teased. "And don't drink any of the hydrogen peroxide," she added, seriously.

They escaped the buzzing confusion of camp and began the descent into Lucallzo. After weeks of huddling in wet trenches and frozen dugouts, tramping through fields and forests, and sleeping in barns and basements, they would have found any large town magical. But the sight of Lucallzo was breathtaking, like something out of a dream, or history. Lit only by sporadic fires whose clouds of smoke were made more garish by sunset, its thousands

of exotic buildings and structures carpeted the hills around a little glowing mirror of lake. All this was open and available to them. They had to restrain themselves from running.

In the air were stone dust, the ammoniac smell of cordite, and a delicious aroma of roasting meat. Godbeer's stomach turned, slightly, when they passed a team of soldiers with flamethrowers who were spraying heaps of rubble with jellied gasoline. They were burning the buried bodies before they could start to stink. This was, she supposed, preferable to waiting till the bodies had begun to rot before burning them. Hard luck for anyone still alive under that rubble, though.

Down one dim street, Boorq spotted children kicking a ball and laughing; down another, she saw adults standing around in small groups, as if gossiping on market day. She was disgusted. "Don't they know there's a fucking war going on?"

At a makeshift roadblock of furniture, an MP captain asked their unit and destination. He could not direct them to any hospitals or aid stations, but pride in his work, inflated by a long day of chaos and danger, pressed him to offer some advice. "Hug the walls," he said. "Half the resistance we met here was from local snipers, and we haven't by any means flushed all of them out." They thanked him, and with rifles at high port, continued in single file along one side of the street, gazing up uneasily at the buildings on the opposite side.

Boorq was now angry and incredulous, and looked at the civilians in the street differently. Florze was confused and dismayed. Local snipers? Didn't they realize her army had come to liberate their town from the aggressors? Godbeer began seeing, or imagining that she saw, hostile faces at windows. Narran, who had heard nothing the MP said, deduced from her comrades' behavior that the town was still teeming with the enemy. Culverson felt an urge, as inexorable as peristalsis, to fire her weapon.

They entered a wide promenade lit at intervals by burning trees. There were more soldiers here, and they felt safer. From one grandiose hotel there escaped flashes of electric light, the thrum of generators and music, and the smell of frying fish. But a glance inside revealed that only officers were being

served here. The sight of so many commanders gathered in one place was tactically repugnant to them, and they hurried from it.

They were turned away at the door of another hotel by a private made truculent by guard duty; she too would have preferred to be inside and eating. "This is for Twenty-Second Artillery Company only," she said. "Find your own rations."

"Come on," said Boorq, and led them down a side street of shops and apartment buildings. "There," she said, pointing up at a window that flickered with what might have been candlelight or might have been the reflection of distant fires. "That's as good as an invitation." Finding the front door locked, she tried the next building, and then the next. —"We're not supposed to bother the locals," said Florze. —"Who's bothering anybody?" muttered Boorq. She began hammering the door with the butt of her rifle and shouting the medipodean word for "enter."

Culverson, surprising even herself, fired a round into the plate-glass shopfront. Narran started at the sound and also let off a burst. "What the fuck!" cried Florze. Some shards fell tinkling to the ground, but the window did not shatter. —"Sorry," said Culverson. "I heard a shot." Indeed, they had been hearing the sporadic crackle of small-arms fire all night, from afar. —"Come on," Boorq laughed. "Let's get out of here before we get arrested." —Culverson, realizing that she was still squeezing the trigger, released it with an effort. —"What happened?" said Narran, shuffling after them.

They walked downhill into a less affluent neighborhood. Night had now fallen, and the town was so silent that they could hear a truck being started miles away, could even track its course through the streets. Boorq stopped suddenly, punched Narran's arm, and pointed at some figures lurking in the shadows. "Ask them where we can find some food." —Narran slowly aimed her rifle at the group. —"What the fuck!" cried Florze, batting it down. —Narran was flustered. "I thought you said to cover them." —The figures, meanwhile, sputtered "Friend, friend!" and scurried away into the darkness. Boorq, like a predator provoked by the flight of its prey, sent a careless burst of automatic fire after them. The noise and power of her new weapon was

intoxicating, but she noted that the muzzle had a tendency to rise. She tried again with the weapon turned sideways, and now achieved a satisfying horizontal spray of bullets. Godbeer also fired a few shots, equally harmlessly. —“What the fuck,” groaned Florze.

Boorq thumped her on the shoulder and gestured at the nearest apartment block. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s reap the rewards of gratitude for ridding their neighborhood of collaborators.”

The door was unlocked, but feebly barricaded by an overturned armoire. They pushed past this into a dark, close stairwell, in which only Narran felt more comfortable. Florze clapped her hands and shouted, “Friends, friends!” Culverson produced a red-tinted flashlight, which was supposed to preserve one’s night vision, but which probably only achieved this effect by emitting little light. Boorq squeezed Narran’s elbow, and gestured her up the stairs first, because she spoke the language. Godbeer, unable to see anything, came last, gripping Florze’s tunic.

On the first landing, Boorq knocked politely at a door. “Friends,” said Florze. The doorknob turned immediately, but there was a long pause before the door was pulled open.

A stooped and wizened man stood clutching a candle in one hand, and in the other a bedsheet whose symbolism he had forgotten. The five soldiers pointed their five rifles at his chest.

He raised his arms. “We haven’t got much, but of course you’re welcome to anything you can find . . .” —“Shut up,” cried Boorq. To Narran she said, “Tell him we’re hungry. Ask him if he’s got any food.” —Florze muttered that they weren’t supposed to loot. —“All right, ask him if he wants to *give* us any food.” —The old man said, “There’s no need for guns. It’s just my wife and our grandson and I and we’re all unarmed. We’ll cooperate, of course . . .” —“Clip the gabble,” said Boorq. She nudged Narran. “Ask him!” —Narran, who thought she was being ordered to shoot, whimpered, “He’s just an old man.” —Boorq pushed the door farther open with her toe. “Ask him if there are any snipers here. Ask him if he’s shot anybody today.” —Another door on the landing opened or closed behind them; Culverson wheeled around. “Don’t move!” —“I can’t see shit,” said Godbeer.

“I’m lighting a heat tablet.” —“Guys,” said Florze, “this was supposed to be my detail.” —A woman’s voice called out from within the apartment. “For God’s sake, Solley, don’t block the door or you’ll give them an excuse to shoot you.” —The old man staggered back a few steps. —“Who was that?” said Boorq. “Who else is here?” She asked Narran, “What did she say?” —“Narran!” cried Culverson from the landing. “Tell these people to come out here with their hands visible and no clever stuff.” —Boorq said, “What are you doing? We got our hands full with this situation in here.” —“Oh God,” moaned the woman, as Godbeer began striking matches. “They’re going to burn us down.” —“What the fuck did she say?” —Narran lowered her rifle with resigned defiance. “Fuck you, Boorq. You’re not my sergeant. You do it.” —“What are you talking about? I don’t speak the fucking language!” —From a higher floor came a child’s scream: “Go away! There are no bad people here!” To the jumpy soldiers, this sounded like a war cry. —Now Godbeer managed to light the heat tablet, and the stairwell began to fill with smoke and suffocating fumes, which caused her eyes to water and blinded her further. More doors opened and closed, and more voices were heard. —“Guys,” said Florze, “come on.”

“Hello,” called a voice. “You are for wanting the booze, okay? I will show you for where to finding the booze.” The owner of the voice descended the stairs slowly with his hands held out before him. His undershirt and baggy pants, his receding hair, and his cumbrous, accented infrapodean reminded Culverson of her father; she lowered her rifle in distaste.

His offer, as it was translated and circulated among his neighbors, prompted a flurry of protest. That afternoon, the fleeing suprapodeans had urged the local populace, by radio announcement and handbill, to destroy all stocks of liquor, because there was no knowing what atrocities the barbarous and bloodthirsty invaders might commit if under the influence of alcohol. The man in the undershirt did not doubt this characterization any more than his neighbors did, or indeed than the propagandists who had in good faith broadcast it. But he did not care what these soldiers did outside this building, where his children were; and he hoped that a gesture of goodwill might placate the new occupiers, drunk or not. For the past year, he had

been meticulously courteous to the suprapodeans, and they had never given him cause to regret it.

“Booze, okay,” said Florze, matching her diction to her interlocutor’s. “But food, too, okay. More okay.” —“Okay,” said the man in the undershirt. “Food and booze okay. I’m for showing you. You will for following me.” —“Hey, Boorq,” said Florze. “Come on. This guy’s taking us to get some food.”

Boorq did not like to leave without having requisitioned something. Her gaze flailed about in the gloom; at last she snatched the bedsheet from the old man’s grasp, tossed a requisition chit onto the floor, and hurried down the stairs after her comrades. (Later that night, after much deliberation, the old couple wrote in the chit’s blank, “Twelve loaves of bread”—and added it to the stack of other IOUs, which they supposed were now worthless.) In the street, Boorq saw that it was just an ordinary bedsheet, and tossed it in the gutter.

With solicitous backward glances, the man in the undershirt led them down winding streets to the former police station. He halted on the far curb, gestured at the building enticingly, and explained that until a few hours ago it had served as a barracks and warehouse for a company of garrisoned troops. Surely it was brimful with booze.

The soldiers conferred. Was it a trap? Boorq, bridling under Florze’s leadership, professed to think so. Culverson pretended to agree; she had traveled these thousand miles to escape and appall her parents, and she resented this man’s meddlesome assistance, so like her father’s. Godbeer pretended to disagree; she was so tired and fed-up that she positively welcomed a firefight, which at least might provide an opportunity to lie down. Narran, wrapped in her sleeping bag, shrugged.

Florze fired a few rounds into the side of the building. The man in the undershirt sank, cowering, to the pavement, but otherwise there was no response. “Combat-pragmatic reconnaissance negative,” said Florze. Then she squeezed Narran’s elbow and motioned her across the street first, because she spoke the language. Narran did not argue; she was still disgusted with herself for having failed to shoot the old man. She shambled up the

front stairs, tucked the sleeping bag under one arm, and readied a grenade. Then, leaning heavily on the door, she slipped inside. After a few moments, the others followed. The man in the undershirt hurried home, regaining stature as he went.

The building, inexplicably, had electricity. After ascertaining that the windows were blacked out, they moved from room to room, nontactically, switching on the overhead lights. Had the rooms been bare, they would have been awed by the size, age, and opulence of the building itself. But the rooms were not bare.

As excitement overtook disbelief, they scampered about opening cupboards, drawers, and boxes, and calling out to one another their discoveries. There was no need to hoard anything, for there was more of everything than five of them could carry.

“Powdered milk!” —“Sweet canned milk!” —“Bandoliers!” —“Powdered eggs!” —“Dried carrots!” —“Brand-new e-tools!” —“Actual potatoes!” —“More concussion grenades than you’ve ever seen!” —“Pinto beans!” —“Garbanzo beans here!” —“Peach Melba!” —“Load-bearing vests!” —“Looks like dehydrated soup!” —“Some kind of pork jerky!” —“Plastique! Cases of it!” —“Tomato sauce!” —“Rice!” —“Boots!” —“Tuna!” —“Corn!” —“Peas!” —“Sugar! Real sugar!” —“Cigarettes!” —“Coffee!” —They shouted themselves hoarse, pausing only to plumb one another’s astonishment. “Did you hear that I said *boots*?”

They found sacks of flour, tea, and salt. They found shoelaces, and run-cible spoons, and stainless-steel toothpicks. They found mustard, and pepper, and onions. They found complete uniforms, in a variety of extra-large sizes, that had never been worn. They found crackers, and cookies, and chocolate. They found handguns, and rifle oil, and muzzle flash suppressors. They found, in drums that had never contained anything else, gallons of water so pure it tasted sweet. They found no alcohol, and did not miss it.

“Blankets,” said Narran, pulling one from a box. It was dry, clean, soft yet sturdy, and so new that its nap was unruffled. She swaddled herself in it and subsided onto a bunk, whose squeaking mattress springs sent exquisite shivers through her body.

Fading exhilaration left Culverson's nerves jangled. To keep from crying, she tried to be angry. "Why are these assholes so well equipped? I thought they were all supposed to be so weak and hungry and demoralized. Look at all this shit. It fucking demoralizes *me*." —"Not me," said Boorq. "Think about it. Would we have retreated if we were living like this?" —"We wouldn't ever retreat," said Godbeer. —"Exactly. These bitches," said Boorq, "are a bunch of chinless sissies. We'll wipe them out."

Florze lighted a stove and began tossing ingredients into a dixie. Meanwhile, outside, the locals watched the building from a distance, expecting every minute the explosion of booby-traps.



*Love on Leave.* —T.P. and The Professor lay shivering shoulder to shoulder in a bomb crater, looking up at the imperceptible but undeniable progress of the stars.

“What makes them sort of different colors?” asked T.P. —“Refraction,” said The Professor. “Like with a rainbow.” —After a silence, T.P. said, “Oh.”

Miles away, the drumfire of machine guns and artillery ceased for a minute, and the two soldiers tensed, their senses straining and groping. When the bombardment resumed, they relaxed, and T.P. asked The Professor how far away the stars were. —“What’s the longest road you know?” —T.P. named the highway passing through her hometown, which was for her a symbol of bidirectional infinity. —“Well,” said The Professor, “take that and multiply it by a million.” —T.P.’s lips slowly parted. “Gosh.” —Solemnly The Professor added, “And multiply *that* by a million.” —At this, T.P.’s imagination bridled; she felt as if she had been told that the most handsome man on earth possessed a hundred perfect faces.

Because they were on listening-post duty, they spoke in whispers, with long pauses between sentences. Consequently their thoughts had time to stray, and the conversation had a dreamy and desultory quality that reminded each of them of bedtime conversations with siblings, and which made them feel, despite the cold, almost cozy.

“Hey, Professor?” —“What.” —“Does it hurt to get shot?” —“Sure as shit it hurts,” said The Professor, who had never been shot. “It hurts like hell.” —“But sometimes it doesn’t, right? Sometimes you go sort of numb, isn’t it?” —“If they hit a nerve, maybe. But if they hit muscle, or a bone, or

an organ . . . Don't even." She told T.P. about a soldier from an adjacent company who had been shot in the guts, and whom the stretcher-bearers, pinned down by enemy fire, had been unable to retrieve for two hours. "The whole time, she only stopped screaming to catch her breath. She was begging us to drop a mortar on her . . . That shit was fucked."

This only confirmed the fear that T.P. had been hoping to dispel, namely, that anything, even death, even abrupt and total nonexistence, was preferable to certain kinds of pain. She tried another tack. "Well, what do you think is the best place to get shot?" —"I can tell you the worst place: the tits. I knew a woman who rolled onto a mine. Her right tit was literally vaporized. The pain . . . It just broke her mind. Like an instant lobotomy. From that day forward, she was just a baboon. Worse than a baboon. There was nothing there. She was gone." —"You mean, she was numb?" —"No, lady. The opposite of numb. She hurt so bad, her mind just ate itself. Her brain just went up in flames and never stopped burning."

T.P. persevered. "But sometimes you just pass out, right? If the pain is too bad." —The Professor's shrug was a kind of sneer. "Maybe in movies."

T.P.'s thoughts in recoil returned to her other pole of fascination. "But you can still fuck with one tit, can't you?" —"Sure," said The Professor, "but you only get half turned-on." —T.P. considered this. "But it would still feel good, wouldn't it?" —"More for you than for him," The Professor laughed. Then she became confidential. "The fact is, men don't care so much how big your tits are. What's more important is how hard they are."

T.P. had gleaned from conversation and observation that hers were, if anything, slightly above average in size; she now resolved at the earliest opportunity to gauge, with a man's sensibility, the solidity of her breasts. She resolved, too, with a yearning intensity that was like a supplication, to fuck at least one man at least once before she died or was irreparably mutilated in combat. With all that she had learned from The Professor, she felt confident that she would have little trouble seducing a man when next she saw one. Indeed, she felt that even without The Professor's advice, she would have had little difficulty. There was no mystery, really. Combat had enlightened her: life was too short for coyness. Though she had never been exactly shy

with boys back home, she realized that she had not been nearly insistent enough. She now knew just the tone—confident, playful, and desirous—with which she would ask a man to join her for a drink back at her place. She was not ugly; she had if anything slightly larger than average tits; men must desire her too. All the fumbling, oversensitive equivocation that had characterized her relationship with Michal seemed to belong to a previous life. She was a woman now; she must ratify her womanhood.

A thought bothered her. —“Does fucking feel better if you, you know . . . love the man?”

The Professor was a long time replying. She did not want to belittle the brusque dalliances that constituted her own sexual history, nor did she want to dishearten T.P., who was unlikely to find love on their upcoming leave. On the other hand, she was reluctant to mock her friend’s romanticism—but she felt that displaying the same weakness would be unsoldierly.

For the five months preceding T.P.’s arrival, The Professor had been without friends in the First/Fourth. At the beginning, she had been affronted by the platoon’s aloofness (which was in fact a kind of initiation that they had all been through) and offended by the nickname they gave her (which was in fact neither sardonic nor anti-intellectual, but merely descriptive: she was often seen reading books, and had been heard in unguarded moments to use polysyllables without irony). She had signed up for danger and heroism, and had been handed toil and tedium; she had anticipated pain and blood and tears, and had found only discomfort, dirt, and sleeplessness; she had expected help and camaraderie, and to her surprise discovered loneliness.

When T.P. arrived, The Professor was, unwittingly, the first to address a friendly word to her. One night together on sentry duty, she told her to switch her selector lever to burst. —“Okay, sure. Why?” —“Then you’re guaranteed a tracer.” —“Oh yeah. Hey, thanks.” —This brief exchange established the pattern of their friendship. For whatever reason, and to The Professor’s initial embarrassment, T.P. adopted her as mentor. Perhaps because The Professor was from a city, or because she was a year older, or because she wore her forage cap at an idiosyncratic slant, or because she was

not a virgin, or because she was called The Professor, T.P. assumed that she knew everything there was to know about life. And T.P.—called Teacher’s Pet by the platoon—was hungry to learn it all. She asked The Professor about algebra, and gardening, and jazz, and fishing, and architecture, and comparative religion, and world history, and electronics, and fashion—and men; and death. The Professor told her what she knew, and embellished it with what she could guess, what was plausible, and what would be best for T.P. to believe. She humored her, sensing that any uncertainty or confession of ignorance would surely injure T.P.’s curiosity.

“The fact is,” she said at last, “that from a strict sensation point of view, every cock feels about the same—that is, equally good. But the ideas and feelings that go on in your head while you’re fucking, and of course before and after, are generally, yeah, I guess, a little nicer when you actually love—actually like the man.” The treacly, burdened word that she had let slip triggered a reaction: “Of course, there’s something to be said for fucking sons of bitches you hate, too. You can get right nasty.”

“Yeah,” said T.P. But she thought, on the whole, that it would probably be best for her to fall in love. Would forty-eight hours be enough?

The night before they were scheduled for leave, The Professor gave her a caveat. “Don’t feel bad if all we can find is whores. There’s no shame in it. Lots of women lose their virginity that way.” —T.P. nodded, determined not to settle for a whore.

The two-day leave officially started at 0900, but their train did not start moving till 1030, and then stopped frequently along the way. They had not been told their destination or its distance, and the cars had no windows. T.P., like the others, curbed her impatience with alcohol, gambling, horse-play, boasting, and making plans. When at last the doors were opened, it was mid-afternoon. A staff sergeant appeared and asked what the hell they were waiting for. The train had been sitting in the siding for nearly an hour. They tumbled out, blinking in the waning sunlight, and stretched and spat and hollered and yawned. They had been looking forward to this moment for months. Freedom.

T.P. wanted to find a room with a shower in town, but Christmas Tree

and Triple-Time, with whom The Professor had been bullshitting on the train, were in high spirits and wanted to continue drinking. There were several bars nearby in the safe zone, and they would take scrip. The Professor asked T.P. what she wanted to do. It was clear to T.P. what The Professor wanted to do, so she shrugged acquiescence. "I guess we can hitch a ride into town later."

They marched from bar to bar counting cadence. They leered at the locals and saluted the staff and supply officers with sarcastic crispness; these soft and natty noncombatants made them aware of their own rough and rumpled filthiness, which they wore like a suit of honor, strutting and swaggering. Because they felt strange and vulnerable without their rifles, their talk in compensation grew more coarse and their posture more aggressive. Christmas Tree failed to pick a fight with three pilots, for whom she then devised an elaborate ambush and assassination, which only lack of a concussion grenade prevented her from carrying out. "I knew I should have brought more kit." They stole a jeep, which they crashed and abandoned at the first curve in the road. They put their fists through windows and they chewed glass. They shadow-boxed, and shadow-fucked parked cars. They howled. They laughed, puked, and passed out.

T.P. awoke the next morning wedged between two crates on a strange floor, aching with dehydration and stifled by dust and sunshine. The room she was in appeared to be a school auditorium that had been requisitioned for use as a warehouse. She stumbled outside, pissed behind a shrub, and, in lieu of mouthwash, lit a cigarette to kill the vile taste in her mouth. Her head throbbed, her skin crawled, and she stank of sweat and vomit; but worst of all was the remorse at having wasted a night. She had enjoyed herself, but she should have been looking for a man. The train back to the MAC left tomorrow at 0500. She had less than twenty hours.

She found The Professor with C.T. and Triple-Time at the post exchange, nursing their hangovers with coffee and government-issue rum. She greeted and was greeted with insults. They asked where she had disappeared to, and whether she had found any cock; she replied with a military phrase of obfuscation. When she broached the matter of going into town, The Pro-

fessor said, "Operational update, lady." There was a whorehouse nearby, within the safe zone, where scrip was accepted; they were headed there as soon as they finished their bottled breakfast.

T.P. was confused and disappointed. "Isn't it kind of early for a place like that?" —The Professor, willfully it seemed, misconstrued her. "The joint is open all the twenty-four." —"It'll be quieter now than if we wait till tonight," said Christmas Tree. "We'll have our pick." —"And if we're lucky," said Triple-Time, "they'll have just done a shift change." —T.P. could not, without revealing her inexperience to the other two, remind The Professor that she'd hoped to lose her virginity to a man. She muttered, "I sort of wanted a shower first." —"They'll have showers," said C.T. "And everything else." —"Come on," said Triple-Time. She swallowed the heeltap of rum and tossed the bottle into the street. "Let's go take some fucking prisoners." —"Yeah," said C.T., "let's entrench some fucking positions." —The Professor drew a more abstruse analogy between fucking and clearing a lane through a minefield. —Eyes narrowed and brow knitted, T.P. searched her mind and her field of view for some escape.

But when she found herself in a dim and sumptuous room, surveying five sleek and perfumed women in lacy underwear, she discovered that she had momentarily misplaced her reservations. Perhaps none of them were men, but their petiteness and their exoticness made them seem exquisite and precious. She forgot about the shower, and indeed began again to exult in her grimy shabbiness. When at last she chose the biggest woman, it was with a thrill of defiant luxuriousness, like that of a grimy laborer reaching for her master's cleanest, plushiest towel.

Sharlelle liked best virgins who needed to be coaxed. Being a whore, like being a soldier, was mostly sitting around waiting; and sometimes she could prolong the coaxing to an entire afternoon. T.P. was a virgin and a darling, but she didn't need to be coaxed.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in the street, smoking and grinning and congratulating herself for having cast off her girlhood. She had perhaps not done everything possible, but she had undeniably climaxed in the intimate presence of a naked person. Surely no virginity could survive such an

event. She was satisfied with herself on other counts, too. She recalled with nostalgic tenderness that Sharlelle, massaging her nipples, had murmured, "So hard." And T.P. had wasted little time; she still had eighteen hours to get into town and find love. Should she wait for the others? Leave a message? No, she was a woman now.

Her good mood evaporated on the bus into town, which at this hour carried only locals. No one sat next to her or met her gaze, and she remembered that she must stink. No one spoke or smiled, and she imagined that her very presence was constraining. She debussed too soon, and had to ask directions to a hotel. Although she knew and (she believed) pronounced flawlessly the local word for hotel, the old woman she addressed pretended not to understand her, and sent a son or nephew down the street to fetch another son or nephew to act as interpreter. This young man was gorgeous, and she mistook his amused curiosity for amused contempt and his offer to guide her for mockery. Half spitefully, she failed to hear his directions, and trudged for an hour through the cramped and odorous streets, feeling more and more alien and alone. She did not see another soldier anywhere. Hunger and hangover aggravated her unease, which released her latent racism, and she muttered derogatory generalizations (which would have applied equally well to her own country's cities) about the congestion and disorder. When at last she found a hotel room, its opulence and affordability seemed to confirm that, as a people, the medipodeans were both backward and decadent.

She undressed slowly and with ambivalence; she had not removed her socks or boots for weeks, and the sensation was both salubrious and unsettling, like removing grit from a wound. She scattered her clothes and belongings as widely as possible, then ran a steaming bath. While waiting for it to fill, she urinated and rubbed herself with urine, as she had been instructed, to prevent sexual disease. As she climbed into the tub, lappets of dead skin detached from her legs and floated to the surface, and the soap bubbles turned grey with scum. She drained and ran two more baths, shaving and scrubbing herself gingerly and with absorption. She was reminded of the epic baths she'd enjoyed as a child, with their splashings and submer-

sions, their discovery and intrigue, and which lasted so long that they often necessitated slippery intermissions on the toilet. At last she emerged, as taut and pink as a scar, and feeling five kilograms lighter. She loped and lunged about the room, relishing her privacy and nudity. She opened every drawer, turned every knob and latch, upended every bowl and basket, inspected every bauble, sat on every chair, and jumped up and down on the bed. She lay dozing and daydreaming awhile, then reluctantly squeezed back into her uniform, soused herself with complimentary perfume, and went looking for food, and for men.

Her mood had rebounded, and where earlier she had seen squalor and clutter she now saw vivacity and plenty. And soldiers were now everywhere; restaurants, food stalls, and fruit carts were plentiful; in many alleys were open-air markets offering new and used tools, books, clothes, cloth, jewellery, appliances, watches, electronics, and weapons. She filled her belly with fried and floury things, and her pockets with handkerchiefs, pens, rings, flasks, lighters, a magnifying glass, and a bowie knife. Then she prowled lazily through the throng, belching and jingling and staring at men unless they stared back.

After rejecting several faces or bodies on grounds that seemed preposterous as soon as the face or body was out of sight, she finally persuaded herself to follow one man doing his shopping. His gait was relaxed and his hair disheveled, and she became convinced that he was spirited, passionate, and kind. This was the man. This was the moment.

She hesitated, and played in imagination a preview of her advance. It suddenly seemed obvious that confident and desirous were not qualities that this man would welcome from a stranger. Bluntness would be an insult, insistence an assault. If only she had some excuse to talk to him, some reason to approach him! She wished pettishly for an air raid, a thief, or a hawker from which she could rescue him. Even a dropped coin!

Then a miracle occurred. Retracing his steps, he crossed the street to the very fruit cart she was pretending to peruse. He smiled, drawing a smile from her that she felt throughout her body. He was perhaps ten years older than she was, and her eyes trembled in their sockets at the thought of his



ripe and jaded libido. He began selecting oranges, cradling the finalists in one arm. She must say something, anything. *Good price for oranges*, perhaps? No. And *was* it a good price? For some inscrutable reason the medipodeans priced their groceries by the hectogram, and even back home she didn't really know what oranges were supposed to cost. Fatuously praising the cheapness of some outrageously overpriced oranges would hardly impress him. Looking closer, she was not even sure that these *were* oranges.

The man had noticed her following him and had decided to confront her. He saw that she was a mere girl, awkward and bashful and rather adorable; her diffidence, however, was contagious. "Not a bad price for oranges," he observed. — "Sorry," she grunted in her language, "I don't understand." — "I'm sorry," he said in his, "I can't understand you."

Reduced to mime, they felt shielded from embarrassment, for they had no choice but to indulge in the simple, silly avowals of childhood. T.P. indicated by gesture that oranges were yummy; the man replied by gesture that oranges were tart. They chuckled and shrugged; then he paid for his oranges, gave an arpeggio wave with three fingers, and walked out of her life.

Should she run after him? . . .

Should she have run after him?

Her mood suffered another reversal. Now the vivacity of the streets seemed garish, the abundance immoral. She felt gluttoned and spoiled, and recalled with mortification the deprivation and hardship of the main areas of conflict. She was irritated by the undisciplined congestion of the crowds; how easily one could slaughter hundreds of them with a mortar and a machine gun! She surveyed the streets with a tactical eye, choosing which walls would have to be torn down, which roofs occupied, which approaches barricaded. Yes, a single platoon could kill thousands . . .

When, an hour later, she spotted Triple-Time coming out of a movie theater, it was with mingled frustration and relief that she abandoned her crucial, degrading, desperate, hopeless search. Sneaking up to her, she punched her in the small of the back and caught the cigarette that fell from her mouth. — "Hey, cunt-knuckle. Give it back." — "Hey, saggy-tits. What the fuck is this?" It was not a cigarette but a lollipop, warm and sticky in her

hand. She popped it in her mouth with a moan of satisfaction that was feigned, then another that was not. “Where the fuck’d you get this?” — Triple-Time grinned and dug her elbow into T.P.’s ribs. “Come on, shitpig. I’ll show you.”

She too was half relieved. Agitated and unsatisfied by the massage she’d received at the whorehouse, she had left Christmas Tree and The Professor behind in the safe zone and come into town looking for sex; but she had not been able to resign herself to the submissiveness required for a quick fuck. Encouraged by Teacher Pet’s enthusiasm, and for the moment free of the First/Fourth’s atmosphere of competitive derision, she confided that the place to which she was taking them served ice cream too.

A few days later on sentry duty, The Professor, hurt by her protégé’s silence on the subject, finally asked T.P. how she’d enjoyed the whorehouse. —T.P. shrugged. “It was all right, I guess,” she said. That was all. —The Professor struggled with her emotions, and lost. “I guess you had more fun with Triple-Time,” she scoffed.

T.P. was at first too puzzled to reply.

*Six Inches.* —At dusk, Forty-Third C Platoon sat in the dirty snow waiting irritably for air support. Kellek complained that her shell-fragment wounds were itchy. Boorq said that hers ached like arthritis. Solzi's throbbed, but only when she walked. They tallied their scars; Laskantan was the winner, with twenty-five. Osini had the ugliest scar, a ragged purple excoriation the length of her forearm, caused by white phosphorous. Tolb, everyone but Tolb agreed, had received the most painful injury: a tracer round had burned slowly through her knee. Tolb, for whom nothing was quite real unless it happened to someone else, thought she'd been lucky: unlike some, she could still walk. "Anyway, the more painful, the less deadly." —This was debated. —"Anyway," said Tolb, "nobody ever died of a bullet in the knee." —This too was debated. —"Well, anyway," said Tolb, "*I* never died of it." —This was conceded. —"But look at Sunachs," said Tolb. "Show them, Sunachs." Sunachs lifted her tunic to display a thin cicatrice between two ribs. No one could see it in the darkness. "That's the point," said Tolb. "The shard was so thin it was like a scalpel—but *this* long. It just missed her lung by half an inch." —Sunachs, embarrassed, grunted.

Burnok, to whom nothing was quite real unless it happened to herself, scoffed and said that a sniper's bullet had grazed her arm the other night and slammed into the dugout wall behind her. Everyone in earshot was able to cite a more deadly and more recent incident; but Burnok persisted. "If I'd been standing six inches to the right, it'd have gone straight through my *heart*, never mind my lung." —"Sure," said Sergeant Costitch, "and if you'd been standing six inches to the left, you'd still be fine." —"Or if you'd been

standing six inches forward,” said Godbeer, “or six inches back.” —“Or if you were six inches taller,” said Kellek, “or six inches shorter.” —“Or eight inches, or eighteen.” —“Or eight feet, or eighteen.” —“Or if you were standing anywhere from two feet to two miles away in any direction.” —“All right, all right, wiseasses,” said Burnok. “What’s your point?” —Sergeant Costitch was explicit: Of the infinite number of spots she might have been standing in, only one would have been fatal. Thus her odds of survival had been excellent, and she had not, in fact, almost died.

“That’s why I’d rather be in a firefight than a shelling any day,” said Boorq. “Bullets are small.” —Godbeer agreed. “Shells are nasty.” She could not be more specific, but felt that there was something eldritch and impersonal about a shelling. “At least the bullet that gets you has your name on it.” Shells had no one’s name on them; they killed meaninglessly and indiscriminately, like disease. —Solzi disagreed. She would by preference take her chances with a shell, because splinters and shell fragments could not be aimed. For her it was the element of human agency, felt like an eye on the back of her head, that made firefights so dismaying, and sniper fire so uncanny.

Tolb brought the conversation back to Burnok’s six inches, and supported her view. “Guys, if she had taken just one more step to the right, or one less step to the left, at any time the whole night . . .” —“A fallacy,” said Kellek. “Because if she’d been in a different position, the sniper would have adjusted their aim.” —“You don’t mean to tell me that the bullet was fated to miss her by exactly six inches, no matter where she happened to be.” —“No, all I mean to tell you is that snipers do their best, and still often miss.” —“No, they often *don’t* miss,” said Burnok.

A wide range of opinions was put forward regarding the accuracy of sniper fire. They all knew that for every casualty suffered by their own forces, two were inflicted on the enemy; but whether their snipers performed somewhat above or somewhat below this average was a fine point, which they argued from anecdote and personal experience.

“Hey,” said Boorq. “If I’ve killed two aggressors, does that mean my number is up?” —Godbeer was distressed by the thought. “Shit, I’ve killed

five already. That means I'm overdue?" —"Don't be snotwhistles," said Solzi. "The more you kill of them, the less there are around to kill us. We're all better off. Your odds get better, not worse." —"The more you kill," said Sergeant Costitch, "the luckier you are." By lucky she meant exempt from probability; favored; invincible. She had killed sixteen aggressors for certain, and possibly as many as twenty-five or thirty. "It's a good thing," she murmured. —"But still," said Boorq, "for every two enemy you get, they get one of us, somewhere along the line, even if it doesn't happen to be you personally." —"So what are you saying?" asked Laskantan. "We should hold fire and all be friends?" —"It's not like a baby being born every time a cicada sings," said Solzi. "It's not cause and effect." —"I think you've been misinformed," laughed Kellek. "That's not cause and effect either." —"Aw, clip it. All I mean is, it's not magic. It's just statistics." —"In other words," said Burnok, "a bucketful of air."

"All I know is," said Osini, "if it's your time to take a bullet, then it's your time, and that's all there is to it." —There were grumbles of agreement. —"So why worry?" said Laskantan, taking off her helmet and performing a crouching dance. "Trust in God, and let Him tie up your horse!" —"Piss on God," said Boorq. —"Now hold on," said Tolb. "Let's not go asking for trouble." —"Piss on trouble," said Boorq. —Laskantan adopted this phrase as a refrain in an improvised song. "Piss on trouble, or trouble'll piss on you-hoo!" —Lieutenant Farl decided that it was time to intervene.

"Listen up, troops. Let's foreshorten the horseplay and the horseshit and look vigilant. Let's drop the God-talk, too—whether for or against. The IP Infantry Corps is a secular organization; that means God doesn't enter into it one way or the other." —Boorq said, "I thought Field Marshal Renmit was God, sir." —Laskantan said, "That's right, and he doesn't enter into this war one way or the other." —Lieutenant Farl chuckled along with them, though the irreverence galled him. "Let's also nip the insubordination, shall we? Let's not forget that it's the decisions of the CFL that are allowing us to win this war. And one more thing. Osini." —"Yes, sir." —"You know better than to talk like a fucking fatalist. The only soldiers who die in my platoon are the ones who fuck up. Don't make any mistakes, and you'll

be going home to your loved ones in one piece. That goes for all of you. A dead infanteer was a bad infanteer. Understood?” —“Yes, sir.” —“Then keep your tuft down, eyes up, tongue in, and ears out.” —“Yes, sir.”

Air support, when at last it arrived, dropped its cloudburst of hundred-pounders short; the bombs came screaming down right into the midst of Forty-Third Company. Cursing infantry scrabbled for cover in every direction across the hard and barren landscape, crawling inside bare bushes, covering themselves with snow, or stretching out in depressions so slight they could only be detected with an eye to the ground. Sandstorm gusts of dirt and bomb fragments raked over them, sparking off their helmets. Kellek rolled indecisively from supine to prone and back again, her head under her pack. Laskantan crouched motionless, her hands protecting the back of her neck. Narran’s fear had an astringent effect: she felt herself shrivel into a rigid ball no bigger than her helmet. Burnok heard the screech of each plummeting bomb grow impossibly louder, till it was right on top of her; she could not understand why she was still alive. Culverson, to vent her terror, shouted angry gibberish into her handset. Tolb, curled around her rifle, reflected that it was surely better for a self-respecting soldier to be under this idiotic bombardment than to be the cause of it. Godbeer, skittering on hands and feet toward a fresh crater, was suddenly thrown breathless onto her back.

There was a pain in her leg stronger than any she’d experienced, and which seemed, like intense exertion, to involve her entire body. She was afraid that she would scream, and afraid that she would never get the breath back to scream. She could feel something pouring out of her and was astonished at the pool of warmth it created. She was slowly steeping in her entrails; she was turning inside out. At last she was able to draw some air into her lungs, and soon was wheezing effortfully. How stupid! She should have stayed put, or at the very least waited to see where the concentration was falling. She’d fled aimlessly after the first explosion, like a stupid recruit. And now, to make matters worse, she was dying. She had let everyone down. The lieutenant would be disappointed and derisive. Godbeer prayed for another bomb to come down and obliterate her error. Clinging to her

shame as to an elusive resolution, she slipped out and in and out of consciousness.

Her body was retrieved by stretcher-bearers a day later, when the attack, so inauspiciously begun, was rebuffed, with heavy casualties.

*Strongpoint.* —Fourth Company were being shown a movie. Corporal Cobweb stood outside the theater tent, listening to the raucous enjoyment of the troops. She decided to wait till the movie had finished to fall her platoon in and brief them. She too was enjoying what she could hear of the film, and would have been as surprised as the privates, and indeed as the staff officers who had selected it, to learn that it was an anti-war film. Certainly, many of its suprapodean protagonists died, mired in filth, and for pointless or illusory objectives; but that was war. Its ugliness was its glory, for surely no one but heroes could abide it, let alone thrive in it. In fact, the troops seemed to feel that the battle scenes should have been even bloodier, and the setting even more squalid. Cobweb heard one infanteer complain, in a tone of offended pride, “There ought to be more shit and flies everywhere. How can you believe a war where there isn’t shit and flies everywhere?”

As if to prove the point, a fat fly alighted on the corporal’s lapel and began to rub its legs together thoughtfully. She reached slowly towards it with an index finger. The insect fell still, as if assessing her intentions. She had nearly succeeded in touching it, when at last, after a minute of genial communion, the fly shook itself and buzzed away.

Sawed-Off, on her way back from the latrines, smiled at Corp Cobweb in passing. She would have liked to invite her inside, but was daunted by her aura of authority. Besides, she was probably standing out here for some good reason.

On screen, a grizzled soldier injected heroin into her arm and slumped into a stupor. This incited among the audience many arguments about the relative merits of opiates, amphetamines, and psychedelics. Fidget, noticing



Parade-Ground's silence, began mocking her inexperience. Parade-Ground winced, as if a moral flaw had been exposed. She swore that she was no prig, and insisted that only lack of opportunity had prevented her from experimenting with drugs. Her friends decided to rectify this at once—but discovered that the only drugs in their possession at present were some dried leaves and snuff, sacred to the medipodean aboriginals but of doubtful recreational value. Nevertheless, Parade-Ground, for whom bravado served as bravery, declared that she would snort, swallow, or smoke any amount of anything anyone put before her. So, shortly before the movie ended, Christmas Tree fetched and Parade-Ground was given a quid of black leaves to suck and a pinch of green powder to sniff. The taste was vile, like mud and bitter cucumber. Her friends laughed and clapped her on the back and began to monitor her face for signs of intoxication, though these could not be expected to appear for an hour or two.

Everyone in First Platoon was surprised and appalled to learn that the corporal had volunteered them for a night patrol, but none more so than Parade-Ground. During the half hour that Cobweb gave them to get their gear together, Fidget and Christmas Tree took Parade-Ground to the next company's medical dugout, where a doctor had her swallow two cotton balls with a spoonful of castor oil. This accomplished, Parade-Ground sputtered, "Okay, now I'll be okay?" —"Now we send you to battalion, where an X-ray will confirm my suspicion of ulcers." The doctor winked. "Always good for a week or two of bed-rest." —When Parade-Ground explained that she was not interested in malingering but only in counteracting the drugs, the doctor shrugged and offered her a spoonful of baking soda.

During the transport ride to the MAC, the platoon was again in high spirits, roughhousing, boasting, and quoting, in character, lines of dialogue from the movie. Jaywalk, who was an actor back home, obscurely resented this trespass upon her domain. Unknown to the others, she had been these seventeen months playing a character of her own invention, compounded from several laconic and hard-bitten soldiers she'd seen in movies and in plays—and she did not like to think that this method of simulating courage or embodying valor was available to everyone. Now she closed her eyes and

inhabited that character, Lance Corporal Jaywalk, more deeply, clenching her jaw and slowing her breath like one drawing strength from within. Then she opened her eyes, and with a cat's negligent grace, lit a cigarette, took a puff, and passed it around.

In the distance, artillery shells exploded with a strange rumbling gulp, as if the earth were swallowing itself in gobbets.

Parade-Ground was nauseated, and felt a tingling tightness that extended from her jaw through her chest to her groin. Christmas Tree methodically wrapped in tape her zippers, chains, grenade pins, dog tags, and her lucky necklace made of ration can-openers, so that they would not clink or rattle. Jimjam, hidden by the dark, raked the serrated edge of her trench knife across the scarred flesh of her bicep; and although she managed not to flinch, she knew a bullet would hurt more. Shitjob wished she had cleaned her rifle.

The truck stopped and they climbed out, subdued now. While the corporal went to recruit stretcher-bearers, a parson, backlit by an enemy flare, led the platoon in prayer. Private Privates heard none of it, for she was engaged in her own pleading, wheedling dialogue with God. God reassured her. "You'll be fine, lady. Cram the whining and the worrying. Have I ever let you down before? Just stay alert, follow the woman in front of you, and I'll take care of the rest. Okay?" Teacher's Pet used the time to piously recollect the man at the fruit cart. Sawed-Off, head lolling, continued the important work of curtailing her thoughts, banishing from awareness everything but her immediate surroundings and the present minute; she contracted her body likewise, hardening it to pain and insult. Parade-Ground, studying the intricate geometrical patterns on the back of her hand, tried in vain to decide whether her vision was more acute than usual, or whether she was hallucinating.

They spread out and lay or crouched waiting for the corporal to return. When at last she did, they waited another long half hour, no one knew why, for the time of departure. —"Fifteen minutes," said Cobweb, peering at the luminous dial of her wristwatch. —"Ten minutes." —"Seven minutes." — Two Words wanted to kill her.

*SERGEANT MONTAZO BECKONED* Lieutenant Ryyss and handed him the field glasses. "There," she said. "Right in that gully. At least a squad. They dropped to the ground when the flare went up." There was smugness in her voice, for only an hour earlier the lieutenant had criticized her request for another artillery barrage—on this very spot. She had at that time only pretended to see movement, in order to check that the guns were still registered on one of the most likely approaches to the outpost. Ryyss had frowned at what he felt to be a waste of shells and of the radio's battery. Now Montazo felt vindicated, and watched hungrily for signs of her officer's approval. "Repeat the last concentration for effect," she suggested, "and we'll exterminate them."

Ryyss adjusted the field glasses—his vision was much better than Montazo's—but could not see any human shapes in the area indicated.—"They're right there!" insisted Montazo, and grabbed the glasses; but by the time she restored them to focus, the flare had gone out. "Shit! Let's hit them quick before they move."

The urgency of the situation had the usual paralyzing effect on Ryyss. "What if that's our people?" he muttered. "What if that's our relief?" But their relief were not expected till dawn—if they came at dawn: they were already two days late. Ryyss observed more aptly that the flare had been white—an enemy flare. "They wouldn't expose their own patrol like that."

Montazo saw the logic of this, but wanted to shell the spot anyway, just in case; however, she let herself be persuaded to contact by wire Tolb and Boorq, who were lying out in a listening post a hundred yards nearer the gully.

Tolb and Boorq—who had been huffing into their fists and taking turns naming all the famous people, living, dead, or fictional, that they could think of—had noticed nothing, but promised to stay alert. Instantly, they began to hear the soft, intermittent sounds of soldiers creeping towards them. Tolb contacted the outpost again, and whispered inaudibly her alarm.

Ryyss ordered Tolb to challenge the patrol for the password; he re-

minded her what the challenge word and password were. Montazo was disappointed; but Ryyss would not be responsible for the death or injury of any more of his compatriots. Four nights ago, when first occupying the outpost, the platoon had fired on three patrols and a supply column—wasting half their ammunition. Two of the patrols had turned out to be friendly, and had suffered casualties.

At the time that he had been ordered to take and hold the two blockhouses on the little hill known as The Nubbin, a large-scale enemy attack had been imminently expected. Ryyss's commanders had hoped that an outpost deep in the CFP—or contested forward positions, where the fringes of the two armies roiled indistinguishably—might check or distract the oncoming force. Though that force had not materialized, C Platoon's position was still far from enviable. The entire area, which was less No Man's Land than Everyman's Land, was constantly being shelled and strafed and patrolled by both sides; and, as one of the few prominences in the valley, The Nubbin made an irresistible target. Its defenders had renamed it The Mailbox, for all the incoming ordnance it received, and referred to themselves as number eights, after the largest targets used on firing ranges. Their only good fortune was that they had yet to suffer a direct ground attack. Ryyss doubted they could fend off even another platoon. He had decided, in the event of a fight, to abandon the position as soon as the machine-gun ammo was spent. He was reasonably sure that his orders did not prohibit such an action; but he did not search his memory or his documents as carefully as he might have; and, except to inquire about their relief, he stayed off the radio. This uncharacteristic self-sufficiency of the lieutenant's was noted with approval at the command post—and contributed to the delays in relief and resupply.

Tolb and Boorq were reluctant to draw attention to themselves, so decided that they had heard nothing. Tolb got on the wire again to say so; but Ryyss meanwhile had been called to the other side of the outpost by Alcott and Meck, who also thought they had seen something. Montazo, in a panic because the lieutenant had taken her field glasses, advised Tolb and Boorq to keep their heads down, then told Yomi, the new radio operator, to dial the field artillery net.

Now Boorq heard voices. Tolb, who was lying half under her in the double funk hole, felt her stiffen, and went rigid herself. Then she too heard the voices. With their heads pressed together, they argued, in breathless whispers and frantic gestures of the fingertips, whether the voices were speaking their own language, or another.

Then someone called out—in their language, but not their accent—this strange question: “Are you all right, sir?”

They did not know whether or how to reply. Then Boorq, who could distinguish the telltale whistle of an artillery shell falling a mile away from that of one coming directly down upon her, screamed heedlessly, “Incoming!” and covered her head with her hands.

“Keep it coming,” cried Montazo into the radio. “That’s beautiful.”

AS SOON AS they were beyond the razor wire, Upsize felt all her brimming anxiety spill out into her bloodstream, where it was quickly engaged. A feeling of relief and recognition came over her, as if some forbidding doorway had led to an old familiar haunt. Already she recalled the anxiety of a minute ago with baffled condescension. Memories of previous patrols, ambushes, and charges came back to her indistinctly, but with a sensation of confidence. She knew how this was done.

She cursed with the others when the flare went up, but did not drop to the ground with the others. She remained motionless as a tree, and watchful as an owl. She was a tree; she was an owl. When darkness returned, she crept back to where H. Crap, her section leader, was lying, and told her what she had seen.

“You’re sure it was occupied?” —“One hundred percent. I saw two heads.”

Lance Corporal H. Crap resented the surprise, which seemed to her characteristic of this muddled and ill-advised patrol. But after a moment’s consideration, and with Upsize’s guidance, she saw that here might be a shortcut to their objective. If they could take a prisoner, there would be no need to draw fire from the outpost in order to determine the size and

strength of the unit holding it; they could simply ask the prisoner. Corporal Cobweb would have to commend her initiative, if successful.

But first, it was necessary to make sure that the two soldiers in the listening post were in fact enemy; the Corp had warned them that the MAC was less No Man's Land than Anyman's Land. H. Crap was unwilling, however, to reveal her own identity by using the suprapodean challenge word; so she called out a phrase that she had heard an angry or injured invader cry out repeatedly, several days ago, while being mortared, and which she imagined meant something like, "Have mercy on us."

At first there was no reply. Then one of the soldiers in the listening post shouted some gibberish, and H. Crap gave Upsize the thumbs-up. But before they could reach the funk hole, shells began to fall exploding around them.

The only nearby cover was the funk hole. Upsize scrambled towards it, dropped a grenade in, then another, clutched her helmet, counted to five, then crawled in atop the warm, wet bodies.

SHITJOB WINCED AFRESH at each audible step. She was straining every muscle, even those in her neck and face, to lighten her tread, but the frozen earth was as crunchy as coral. The Colonel and the others seemed not to be even trying to minimize the noise they were making. The enemy must be able to hear them coming from miles away; and the rising moon was as bright as a spotlight. In these circumstances, she found that a continually renewed effort of will was necessary just to keep going, with the result that her movements felt sluggish and lumbering, like those of a giant. Her mind by comparison was dizzily swift and clear, pursuing a score of worries simultaneously.

It was a relief to drop to the ground at the sound of the artillery, and a sweeter relief to see the shells bursting on the southwest side of the outpost. Even after she realized that H section must be somewhere near that spot, she grimaced with spiteful satisfaction, glad only that it was someone else's turn for a change. Let them get theirs.

IN THE BLOCKHOUSE that served as kitchen, Laskantan and Sergeant Costitch were acting out a scene from the book of mythology that had been found among Winurhtry's personal effects. Raof, disassembling her rifle by feel, watched with mingled admiration and distaste. She was amused by Laskantan's clowning and impressed by Costitch's perfect elocution; but she was puzzled and irritated by the story, which told of the interference of fickle, peevish gods in a war between humans. Also, she had not expected a famous classic to be so repetitious. The book was tainted for her too by its association with Winurhtry, who was believed to have committed suicide. Raof herself had once discovered her handling an unpinched grenade in a wistful manner. That was before she began dabbling with high explosives—in search, Raof now thought, of a more certain death than a hand grenade could offer. No doubt she had been miserable. But Raof felt no more pity for her than for any deserter.

Lieutenant Ryyss appeared and ordered everyone to stand to. Raof cursed her luck without surprise, and began to reassemble her weapon. She supposed, as she always supposed, that this was the end. Whatever was coming, she would be the first one, and probably the only one, to die.

She found a place on the parapet beneath a useless, collapsed firing slit. She had forgotten her helmet. Lieutenant Ryyss told them to conserve their ammunition, to hold their fire till the attackers offered a clear target. To Raof this sounded like a call to defeat.

THERE WERE MOMENTS when Triple-Time loved the war. She loved to climb a mountain in the rain under full pack. She loved to watch an airplane fall blazing from the sky. She loved to sit with a beer in the refectory and listen to The Professor or Jaywalk or The Pacifist lecture, better than any teacher she'd ever had, on gardening or carpentry or poetry. She loved to leg-wrestle, and win. She loved to fire her rifle on its bipod at a moving target. And she loved nothing better than to march with impunity in the midst

of a full company across a strange landscape at twilight. But she hated all these chickenshit nighttime skulking platoon-sized missions. She longed for a good, honest daylight street fight, kicking in doors with bayonets fixed.

She vented her frustration on Teacher's Pet, thumping her and cursing her every time she came too close. "Stop bunching up on me," she hissed. "Maintain the fucking interval, cuntpig." —"All right, all right," said T.P., who found the hardest part of night patrols to be the feeling of isolation. "Fucking sorry." —"Shut your fucking spunk-traps back there," said The Colonel, who was, against all regulations, literally leading the section by walking point.

The Colonel had been seething since her promotion to lance corporal. She did not herself realize that she was angry; she did not permit herself introspection, but carried out her duties with rabid punctiliousness.

She had wanted nothing more than to be made section commander (and perhaps one day platoon commander), but somehow she had never imagined that the honor would come at the expense of another soldier's life. The promotion had been further spoiled for her by the ceremony, at which Lieutenant General Roseberry, in front of journalists and camera operators, had addressed her by War Juice's name, and conferred on her War Juice's medal of valor. Corporal Cobweb had quietly asked her not to make a fuss. So Lance Corporal Colonel, with opaque self-loathing, wore the medal, and became a more avid soldier than ever. The troops in her section noticed a change in her, but attributed this to the corrupting influence of power.

She waited, poised, for G section to start firing; then she leaped up, bel-lowing, and with a wave like a swimmer's stroke, led her ten troops forward in a short rush over the hard, uneven ground. She tossed a grenade with her whole body, then, still upright and silhouetted against the sky, let off several rifle rounds from the hip. "Come on, you shitbags! Break some fucking hearts!" She emptied a magazine before the others, taking aim from a prone position, joined in. The awe, pride, and annoyance that they felt towards their reckless leader were mitigated somewhat by the fact that there was no return fire from the outpost. Once everyone had fired a few rounds and tossed a grenade or two, they rushed back to their departure point, where



they reloaded, breathless and elated.

“That wasn’t so bad,” conceded Jimjam.

TOLB KNEW THAT Boorq was dead. The pity she felt for her friend welled over and became self-pity, which, combined with a strange, placeless pain, convinced her that she too was dying. Outrage brought to her eyes tears that were spilled in mournful impotence. Her mind clutched at memories and unfulfilled plans, struggling in this last spasm of consciousness to impose some order upon or extract some significance from her life. She thought of her mother, and of her sister, and of her boyfriend, and, imagining their sorrow, felt sorrier for herself. She thought of all the meals she would never taste, and the money she would never spend. The franticness she felt proved that there would be no afterlife.

The shelling had ended, and now she felt Boorq’s lifeless body being dragged off her, the boots scraping the back of her neck. She lay still and small, eyes closed, thoughts clamped, averting her attention from the sounds of the enemy soldiers ransacking Boorq’s corpse a few feet away. She was not here.

“Look at all this shit,” said Upsize indignantly. “She’s got a bunch of *our* shit.” —“Souvenirs,” said H. Crap, handling sadly the trench knife, field manual, and captain’s stripes. —“Well, fuck,” said The Pacifist. “They’re no worse than we are.” —“Fucking photos probably aren’t hers either,” said Fidget, taking them. —“This looks like this letter is written in suprapodean, too,” guessed Sancty, taking it. —Upsize and Pschaw bickered over which of them would get the dead woman’s .31-caliber rifle. “I touched it first,” said Upsize. —“So? I touched it *last*,” said Pschaw, touching it. —Meanwhile, Tinkerling and The Professor hauled the other enemy soldier out of the hole.

I’m dead, thought Tolb, going limp; I’m already dead. But as they rolled her onto her back, the fear of being stripped or maimed or hacked at for mementos made her leap up screaming, scrabbling at her web belt for her bayonet.

The suprapodeans staggered back, cursing and fumbling for their rifles. “Don’t fucking move!” — “Hands the fuck up!”

Tolb, shivering, slouched in submission as pain racked her innards.

“For the love of God, nobody fire,” said H. Crap, addressing Fidget in particular. “We’re in a goddamn bumpkin’s firing circle here.”

“These devious fucking fuckers!” said Upsize. “Pretending to be fucking dead like that!” — They had all heard stories of the enemy’s deceitfulness, but had not known till now whether to fully believe them. The Pacifist was most surprised; she had often argued, from the evidence of their literature in translation, that the infrapodeans were in fact more civilized and sophisticated than her own compatriots. She felt personally betrayed.

“Don’t shoot,” said Tolb. “I’m hurt.”

“Shut your fucking spewpipe,” said The Professor. — “Yeah, or speak fucking human,” said Pschaw, jabbing Tolb with her rifle barrel. — “Fuck off, you guys,” said The Pacifist in disgust. “Leave her alone. Can’t you see she’s hurt?”

“Cork your bunghole, Pacie,” said H. Crap quietly. “We’re taking this piece of crap prisoner.”

Pschaw peered menacingly into the prisoner’s face. Tolb gazed back, seeing in the protuberant brow and slack lips proof of the enemy’s bestial cruelty. A whimper escaped her, less now from pain than from shame and hopelessness. And yet there was an unconscious element of craven calculation even in her weakness: perhaps if she showed herself pathetic enough, they would leave her alone. “I need a doctor,” she blubbed. — “You shut your fucking bunghole,” said Pschaw.

A flare went up; Tolb flinched, and Fidget fired.

H. Crap said, “Fuck.”

“Shit,” said Fidget. “Sorry, LC.”

They crowded around the prisoner, who lay squirming on her back, one hand clawing at the frozen earth, the other clamped over her shattered, bleeding chin, her eyes liquid and bright with reflected flare. Tolb, looking up at their calm, quizzical faces, felt a huge and expanding panic, as of gas pressurizing a cracked container.

“I thought she was running.” —“She wasn’t running any fucking place.” —“She sure as fuck isn’t running any place now.” —“Look,” laughed Tinkerling, “she *is* trying to run away!” —Tolb, kicking out one leg, was pushing herself inch by inch along the ground.

“Someone should put her out of her fucking misery,” said The Pacifist.

The dying woman was making sticky, wet snoring sounds. Her inability to speak made her seem subhuman. She stank of blood and shit. They looked away, moved more by disgust than pity.

Death was worse than Tolb had imagined; and this was not yet the worst.

A volley of small-arms fire from the direction of the outpost recalled H. Crap to her duty. “Come on, we’re behind schedule.” —“What about this bitch?” —“Just leave her.” —“What about her stuff?”

One of the medipodean stretcher-bearers asked hopefully, “We take back casualty-casualty?” —“No.”

Left alone, Tolb rallied. The pain, once she had taken its measure, was sufferable. Perhaps death was not inevitable. She decided to live. She would not let herself become a corpse—a lump of offal, exposed to the public, un-owned, unowning, bereft of dignity and rights. She would not let death defile her.

From quickening breaths and slackening muscles she wove a dwindling braid of determination. Ten minutes later, she became unconscious. Her last sensations were of a presence like her father’s, and a smell like mown grass.

ONLY ONE GRENADE—The Colonel’s—had passed over the parapet and fallen inside the outpost. No one was hurt; but the lieutenant, leaping away from it, had dropped Sergeant Montazo’s field glasses. Montazo fussed and fiddled with them loyally, but finally admitted, after many vacillating fits of hope and despair, that they were smashed to uselessness.

“Eyes up, Sergeant,” said Ryyss, brisk and unrepentant. “That was just probing fire, but they’ll attack in earnest any minute now. Hold your fire till

you see them coming.”

Montazo peered through the firing slit, her blindness made total by emotion. She felt resentful, and guilty, and giddy, and frightened, and powerful. She felt insubordinate. The nearest she came to acknowledging this feeling was a wistful, idealized memory of Lieutenant Farl, nobly urging them on at Hill 68.

She told Yumi, the radio operator, to stay close.

“I guess this is it,” said Meck to Alcott. “Hey: I love you.” —“Aw, shut it,” said Alcott, kindly, though embarrassed. They hardly knew each other.

H. CRAP SIGNALLED that they had come far enough. The Professor lay down, propped on elbows, and readied her rifle. It was only two weeks since she had killed Winky, who, blinded by smoke, had come rushing at her screaming like an invader. She had told no one what she had done, and not even Winky ever knew; but she had vowed never again to release her safety catch. Now, the first time this vow was tested, she found herself conforming to habit and obeying orders. She could hardly do otherwise without drawing attention to herself. But she aimed harmlessly high; she would not shoot even an invader except in self-defense.

The Pacifist also aimed high, believing it a condition of her own survival that she not kill anyone in this war. The others aimed carelessly, and at H. Crap’s signal, fired carelessly at the side of the blockhouse, wanting only to fulfill their obligation and retreat.

The defenders, however, keyed up by Ryyss’s cautions, believed that at least a company was against them. Those on the southwest wall, led by Sergeant Montazo, fired back liberally—frightening themselves and startling those on the other walls, who also started firing, frightening themselves and startling others. For half a minute, Ryyss’s screams of “Hold your fire!” went unheard, and, for another half minute, unheeded.

H section sprawled wriggling and twisting beneath the onslaught. The torrent of bullets twanging and whistling over them made as much noise in the aggregate as the roar of the machine guns and rifles. The Professor

cursed in fury at what she felt was an unprovoked attack. The Pacifist was astounded and indignant. Tinkerling, a recruit, cried “Stop it!” repeatedly. No civilized person would heap such hurt and destruction upon her worst enemy; no sane person could treat even an animal this way. How could the world hold so much malice? “Look what you’re doing!” she sobbed. Sancty, the other recruit, remained unshaken. She was only relieved that this, her first firefight, was no worse. She had expected something more unspeakably terrifying than what was, after all, just bits of metal flying through the air. And for the time being, there was nothing she could do; the unusual lack of responsibility was almost cozy.

H. Crap spent one pulse beat cursing herself for leading the section too near the outpost; then she became practical, calling for covering fire and a staggered retreat as soon as they could lift their heads.

Pschaw called out to Upsize. —“What?” —“Let me shoot the .31 for a while.”

To Montazo, the enemy’s shouts sounded like battle cries, and the flash of their covering fire, when it began, appeared to be coming from no farther than the other side of the parapet. She dragged Yumi by the radio into the blockhouse, screaming grid coordinates into the handset.

The field artillery CO was bemused. “That’s your location, Nubbin. What direction and distance from you, over?” —“Zero fucking distance!” came the reply. “Put it all on us! They’re coming down our fucking throats! Give it to us now! Now now NOW NOW NOW!”

The artillery XO shrugged to conceal a shudder. “Sounds like a real shitstorm. Better give it to them.”

“NOW WHAT THE fucking fuck?” said Corporal Cobweb. “Is that our arty?” —“That’s theirs,” said Shitjob. “Those’re three-fifty-fours. Listen.” —Jay-walk agreed. “That’s enemy ordnance, all right.” —“That’s what I thought,” said Cobweb. “So what the fucking fuck are they doing?” —No one could say.

Cobweb, muttering sighs, radioed the MAC command post to confirm

that the outpost was in fact being held by the enemy. Neither of her other two sections had returned to the rendezvous, and now H section appeared to be storming the target singlehandedly. She should have known better than to volunteer for this horseshit mission with this bunglefuck platoon; but she'd decided that the only way to escape this lonely goddamn post was by demonstrating some zeal. Unfortunately, it was also a good way to get herself killed.

Staff Sergeant Ciborsck betrayed neither surprise nor uncertainty. As if it had been his plan all along to incite the enemy to shell himself, he ordered Corporal Cobweb to take the outpost as soon as the bombardment abated. "What's their strength, anyway?" —Because her troops were listening, Cobweb did not exaggerate. "About a platoon, I'd guess. At least one machine gun." —"That's what we figured. Capitalize, Corporal! This is our chance." —Through a stiff mouth, Cobweb said, "Yes, sir. Out."

For five seconds, she pondered, champing her teeth. Was there any way out of it?

There wasn't. So make the best of it.

She made a short speech, grinning grimly. In closing, she said, "I'll be honest with you. Till this moment, this was a horseshit fucking mission. But they've let us off the leash. This is it, ladies. We've got opportunity by the fuzz."

Parade-Ground was told to stay behind and wait for G section. She did not reply. She was listening in a crescendo of amazement to the twittering chorus of flying shrapnel, of which every voice was distinctly eloquent, so that the night seemed swarming with the chatter of frisky elves. Christmas Tree thumped her, and she spent a moment rediscovering her own language. "What is it?" —"If they're not here in ten minutes," said Cobweb, "rejoin us and H section. Got it?" —"Yes, ma'am. Ten minutes, rejoin us and H section."

When she began to shamble after them, Christmas Tree hissed and gestured for her to stay put. Though C.T. had misgivings about leaving her alone, she supposed that she would be safer here than in combat.

"Ten minutes, rejoin us," muttered Parade-Ground, sinking to a

crouch. "Ten minutes, H section." The words seemed loaded with importance; and their importance only loomed larger as, with each repetition, their context and meaning faded to obscurity. Soon they were only a string of syllables, an ancient incantation performing itself upon the wondrous instrument of lips, tongue, and teeth. And even when she doubled over to vomit, it was to the rhythm of those sacred sounds.

KLIPTON LIFTED WOOZILY her ringing head. There was a sharp pain in her hip which she ignored, both from squeamishness and from obstinacy. The only wound bad enough to stop her would be the one that stopped her.

Without turning her gaze from the firing slit, she called out to Sunachs on her right and Raof on her left. Sunachs was fine; from Raof there was no reply. "Raof, you all right?" — "She's done and gone," called Osini. "Let her be." — Klipton spared a glance, and saw the limp body with the top of its head sheared off, bearing now no resemblance to Raof but the uniform. — "That'll come as no surprise to her," said Laskantan. — "Cover her field with me, Osini," said Klipton. "They'll be coming any second now." — "Teach a dog to shit," muttered Osini.

Solzi was moaning and calling for help.

Elzby shouted, "Aiersbax!"; "Elzby!" shouted Aiersbax. — "You're all right, you farthole?" — "Nip it, you snotwhistle. I'm fine."

Meck was hit. "I'm hit," she bawled. Her tunic was wet with blood, glistening like oil in the moonlight. At least it wasn't day; in daylight her blood would be red. She was afraid to move, afraid to probe the damage. There passed over her a cloud of horror at her own body, as if it belonged to someone else. — "Where are you hit?" asked Alcott. — "I don't know." — "Well, where does it hurt?" — "I don't know." — "Then swallow it," said Alcott. "You're okay, for God's sake. Look vigilant."

"I'm out of tracers," cried Burnok. "Does anybody have any more tracers?" — "Forget tracers," said Kellek. "Does anyone have any goddamn ammo at all? I'm down to half a mag here." — "That's half more than I've got," said Sunachs, pumping her cocking handle in demonstration. — "Then

go scrounge some the fuck up for us.” —“Don’t move,” said Sergeant Gijalfur. “Throw a grenade. Throw rocks! Use your bayonet if you have to. Just nobody move!” —After a moment, Sunachs asked if anyone had an extra grenade. —“Goddammit,” said Gijalfur. “Here.” She slid a flare gun towards Sunachs. “Just hold your goddamn position.”

“Fuck all you fucking guys!” cried Solzi.

“Conserve your ammunition,” said Laskantan, in a chiding singsong. —“Where’s the lieutenant?” asked Osini. —“Over and out,” said Gijalfur, gesturing towards a child-sized mass of torn flesh in an adult’s torn tunic, lying like trash against the wall of the blockhouse. —“Shit,” said Kellek. “Where’s Montazo?” —“Hurt pretty bad,” said Yumi. The blockhouse they’d been inside had taken a direct hit. The concussion had knocked them both to the ground, dazing Yumi, but rupturing something inside Sergeant Montazo. Currently she lay unconscious or dead, bleeding from the ears and mouth. “Radio’s busted too,” said Yumi; this was her way of asking for orders. —“Congratulations, Sarge,” said Laskantan. “I guess that leaves you in command.” —“First of all,” said Gijalfur, “Costitch was sergeant before I ever was, and second of all, never the fuck mind who is in command right now, just keep your eyes up and tongue the fuck in, this attack is about to get imminent any fucking second now, and third of all, *stuff your fucking tuft, Solzi!* You’re not the only one hurt!”

“Fuck you, Sarge! I’m in fucking excruciation here! I’m fucking dying!”

In fact, Solzi felt pain more hurtlingly than most people. She couldn’t know this, but she suspected it, and felt bitterly sorry for herself. The conviction that her present suffering was worse than anything her comrades would ever know filled her with contempt and absolved her of all modesty. Screaming with hatred made the pain a little more tolerable, too.

H section, on the opposite side of the outpost, paused in their withdrawal, and even The Colonel, leading I section back to the fight, hesitated in her step at the sound of Solzi’s caterwauls. Farther away, Parade-Ground hugged her knees, vibrating in sympathetic agony.

“Dammit, Solzi,” shouted Costitch, “shut your face! That’s an order!” —When this had no effect, Gijalfur threatened her with a court-martial—



also to no effect. —Others began to threaten, cajole, or advise Solzi. “Can’t you give yourself a shot of morphine?” —“I can’t find my hands, let alone my first-aid kit!” —“Goddammit,” said Gijalfur, “would someone help give her a shot of morphine.” —“Can’t reach her, Sarge,” said Osini. “She’s on the other side of the parapet.” —“Solzi! What the fuck are you doing outside the OP?” —Solzi didn’t know or care, and again told them to hurry up.

Klipton made a decision. She felt only disgust for Solzi’s suffering; she dared not soften so far as to pity in others what she must not allow in herself. But she believed superstitiously that she had only survived till now by helping her comrades, especially when at her own risk. She asked Sergeant Gijalfur for permission to leave her post long enough to find Solzi and give her a shot of morphine. —Gijalfur grumbled. “Goddammit. Ask Costitch. She’s in command.” —Costitch’s own superstition was that she must kill as many enemy as possible to stay alive, and she was afraid that accepting command of the platoon would hamper her in this pursuit. Her flamethrower, too, was almost empty, and she thought that she could do more damage outside the walls, in close combat. “Come on,” she said to Klipton. “I’ll help.” —“I’ll come too, Sarge,” said Sunachs, brandishing the flare gun sarcastically. —“Sure. With one more, we can bring her back inside.” —Aiersbax raised her hand. —“Don’t be stupid,” hissed Elzby. —Laskantan whistled, grimaced, and wagged her head. “Shit mountain without a Sherpa,” she said. “I guess I don’t want to be left out of all the fun.” Her own belief was that the safest place to be was the one that seemed most dangerous, and the most dangerous place the one that seemed safest.

They climbed over the wall and dropped out of sight. Moments later, rifle fire began to be heard on all sides. —“Spread out and fill those gaps!” cried Gijalfur. “Here they come!” The de facto platoon commander fired a few shots, then retreated from the firing slit, the better to direct and exhort her troops. She shouted and stamped and waved her arms in rage. “This is it! No more conserving ammunition! Kill the filthy bitches!”

Meck reloaded her rifle, whimpering. At least she would die honorably.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, what remained of First/Fourth Platoon succeeded in taking possession of Strongpoint E15, known informally at MAC command as The Nipple. Corporal Cobweb, breathless, exhilarated, and bleeding, contacted Staff Sergeant Ciborsck by radio to tell him of their feat.

He cut her off. "Pull yourself together, Corporal, then call me back." — Cobweb was stunned. She thought she had been relating the facts calmly, in a succinct and orderly way. She closed her eyes, and for the first time in two hours turned her attention inwards; glimpsing there a clamorous chaos of anxiety, pain, and remorse, she quickly opened her eyes.

"Here," said Jaywalk, offering her a canteen. "But take it easy. Looks like they're out of water, too." —Longpork confirmed this. "They were using piss to cool the machine gun. You can smell it." Her face was stiff and unfamiliar, her voice flat; she had shot in the face at close range one of the women operating the gun. —Cobweb poured some water in her mouth and held it there without swallowing; nevertheless it was somehow gone in a minute, leaving her feeling drier and thirstier.

Upsize came in to say that a third survivor had been found among the carnage in the other blockhouse, where the defenders had made their last, useless stand. —"Okay," said Cobweb. "Thanks." —"What do you want us to do with her?" —"Does she speak any suprapodean?" —"I don't know. Since coming to," Upsize snickered, "she just cries over her dead buddy. I thought these bitches were all supposed to be so tough." —"And smart," said Longpork. —Cobweb shrugged. —"So what should we do with her?" The battle was over now; even five minutes earlier, Upsize would not have asked this question. —"She hurt?" —"Pretty bad, I guess." —"If she lives, she lives," said Cobweb. "We'll need all our first-aid gear for ourselves." Then she ordered everyone out, so that she could be frank with Ciborsck.

". . . And fifteen unaccounted for, presumed wounded or dead. We don't have enough uninjured troops to send out rescue parties." —Ciborsck sounded pleased. "You've done excellent work, Corporal. This is going to change the face of the war in E grid. Just hold on till noon for those reinforcements. In the meantime, use your stretcher-bearers to round up your casualties. That's what they're there for!"

THE PROFESSOR LAY balanced upon a rock, looking up unseeing at the stars, and concentrating on her breath. If she shifted her position or inhaled too quickly, she choked on salty blood. The pain was tremendous, but it imposed focus. She felt no resentment or fear, but rather a bemused and contingent joy. She inspected this feeling gingerly, with the occasional spare drop of attention, and realized that she was happy because she was alone. She had not experienced solitude for many months, and had forgotten how precious it had been to her. —When the stretcher-bearers arrived, she scowled and hid her pale face behind her arm. “Leave her,” said one of them. “She doesn’t want to be looked at now.”

Private Privates tossed and twisted her body incredulously. She could not find the wound, and she did not seem to be bleeding, but the pain in her chest, at the very pinpoint core of her, could not be alleviated. How could you let this happen? she asked God. How could you let it hurt this much? I did everything you told me to! —But God was silent. His silence was contemptuous, and she withered beneath it.

Shitjob lay sprawled in a ditch, cursing and shivering. She was not hurt, but did not know where any of her comrades were. She dared not call out or raise her head.

“Does it hurt?” asked Triple-Time, binding the gory, shattered shin. She was disgusted by the anxiety in her voice. —“Nah,” said T.P. In fact, it hurt like hell, but she realized that crying or complaining would make no difference; the pain would come whether she took it or not.

Jimjam was pleased almost to pride by her wound. It had stopped bleeding, but was painful enough to prevent her from walking. Perhaps she would be sent home! She snuggled into herself, and waited luxuriously for the stretcher-bearers and the medics to do their jobs.

IN A SHELL crater at the base of the outpost, Laskantan murmured soothingly to Solzi. Solzi, with two shots of morphine in her, had mellowed from

screaming rage to hissing disdain. “Fuck you, Laskantan. I’d like to see how you’d fucking bear it if you were in my place. I’m fucking dying.” —“Maybe so, but you’ll die a whole lot faster if they hear you out here.” —“Fuck them.” She lifted her head an inch in defiance. “Let them come and put me out of my fucking misery, the fucking bitches!”

Laskantan breathed deeply to deflate a rising bubble of hilarity. “What if I gave you something to chew on, would that help?” —“I’ll chew your fucking eyeballs, you fuck.” —Laskantan laughed out loud a little.

“Laskantan,” said Solzi, her eyes focusing with seriousness. “Give me a grenade.” —“Can’t. I’m all out.” —“Then give me your trench knife.” —“What’s wrong with yours?” —“All right, give me my fucking trench knife. Put it in my hand.” —Laskantan did. “All right, hero, now what?” —Solzi held the flat of the blade briefly to her neck, then let out a feeble sob. “Fuck you, you fuck. I’ll fucking stab your fucking guts out and see how you fucking like it.”

Laskantan patted Solzi’s cheek. “I guess I wouldn’t like it any more than you do, sweetheart. Now, do you think you can zip it for ten minutes while I go find someone to help me carry you out of here?” —“I’m dying!” cried Solzi. “I don’t fucking want to live anymore!”

A burst of automatic rifle fire from the parapet churned up the dirt around them.

Grinning, Laskantan pressed her face into the icy earth.

PARADE-GROUND FOUND THAT she could walk only if she let walking happen by itself. Her body, formerly solid and uniform, had crumbled into a congeries of ill-fitting parts, a disorderly stack of overlapping maps. There were maps of touch and friction, of heat and cold, of the position of her limbs, of the loosening and tightening of her muscles, and of the aches in her bones and the burbling turmoil in her guts. To collate all this data and deploy all these systems for movement would have required a staff of intent geniuses; but there was only her, and her mind was as thronged with fragmented ideas as her body was with sensations.

The river of her thoughts flowed wide and wordless, except for occasional phrases that broke like spray from the wave, became crystallized, and finally melted into meaninglessness beneath the spotlight of her fascinated attention.

Sometimes she sank to the cold ground and marveled at the symphony of light and noise crashing across the valley and sky. Even lying flat on the earth, she felt precarious and unstill, as if she might at any moment roll out of the trough of her body.

Soon, without having decided to, she was on her feet and walking again, clanking and stumbling over herself like a battalion retreating in disarray. She did not know if she was moving backward or forward. She only knew that she must not stop; there was something she was trying to catch up to, or stay ahead of. She looked behind her, became disoriented, and struck out again—and again—till she did not know if she was chasing or fleeing. “Desultory vexation,” she muttered—the term for untargeted shelling of an area presumed to be occupied by the enemy. She could taste her teeth. When she swallowed, there was an echo. Colors leaked out the backs of her eyes. Emotions poured through her, stirred by some music too rapid or refined for hearing. “Dildo vagina.” She’d better hurry. Ten minutes. H section. Desultory vagina. Scrunch your tits. Uproot those feet, soldier. No lily-dipping. Her name was Lily. “Lily.” They’d named her Parade-Ground because she brushed her teeth. Not anymore. Toothbrushes were for cleaning rifles. Teethbresh. They told me not to binge drink. I bange drank. I’m bunge drunk! She giggled, smitten with vice. What would her mother say? But the thought of her mother was one of the things she was trying to stay ahead of. Onward.

“Lily. Li-lee.” What a foolish name! Her parents might as well have called her Flip Flop or Gewgaw, or Pell-Mell or Nitwit, or Pish-posh or Hubbub or Ragbag or Flimflam or Claptrap or Knick Knack or Mishmash or Hodgepodge! Or Jimjam. Why had they called Jimjam Jimjam? Because she was anxious? What was her real name? She was reminded, for some felt but inexplicit reason, of her childhood friend Dulie, with whom she had built the Mantrap—a kind of caltrop made by nails driven through a board

and camouflaged with mud. Their parents had been livid, their victim amused. She could see his wry face.

A score of forgotten faces and playgrounds of her childhood flashed within her. She felt a bittersweet nostalgia; and the conviction that she had forgotten or failed to do something was intensified.

Her bowels were as squeaky as wet plastic. Was she hungry? Digestion seemed obscene, as exploitative as the invaders' colonialism.

She became mesmerized by a frozen moonlit puddle, rough and smooth in arabesque variegation.

When she fixed her gaze, her peripheral vision congealed into a tactile ring of marching, sliding patterns that faded to an all-encompassing obscurity; she became a watchfire in a little clearing around which danced serried hordes, citizens of a vast civilization of emotion and sensation. She laughed out loud to discover that this whole world could be laid to waste and a new one built with a flick of her eyes.

She unearthed the wisdom in every hackneyed proverb, discovered the calcified poetry in every idiom and cliché. You can't have both the bottle of wine and the wife drunk. Children grow looking at their parents' backs. Old crabs tell young crabs to walk straight. It takes less time to drench the boot than to dry it. The sinner makes the better saint. You could use her shit for toothpaste. Teethpaste.

Every returned thought gave her a delight of synthesis. Everything suggested everything else, and her associations and intuitions seemed the more profound for remaining vague.

She saw the interdependence of all opposites, how every ostensibly separable thing formed the ground of some other thing's figure.

Humility was a form of vanity. Charity was selfish.

Dissonance accentuated harmony—was in fact harmony, in the same way that sound was only structured silence.

Her shoulders supported the sky. The moon was within arm's reach; closer.

Twelve months, but thirteen moons in a year?

Empty space did not exist. The universe was gelid ether, all its gravities

balanced.

Sparks spat fresh sparks before falling to cinders.

No drop could fall out of the ocean.

The large wave swallowed the little wave and was forever changed.

The prerequisite for this little fingernail? All that ever was!

She cringed reflexively at the demented screech of howitzer shells, a sound which could not have been made more terrible by design, and which filled her more with awe than fright. The war too was a contingent miracle, every bomb a triumph of technology. Near this thought, however, there lay in wait something unpleasant, and she shied from it.

She shivered extensively, every fiber within her stamping its feet and rubbing its hands for warmth. Her body too was a triumph, even when poisoned. Indeed, every thought, however trivial—even this one!—represented the culmination of millennia of evolution.

She felt in touch with every jagged, tattered part of herself. Every cell and nerve was hollering for attention. She could feel her feet in her boots, and the weight of her rifle—no longer a part of her—in her hands. Tides swished and soughed in her empty ears. This was her true self. Reality was fevered, good health a smooth, dissembling coat of varnish. But habituation provided leverage. Otherwise one would flounder about, steeped in stimuli all day long. Nothing would get done. And something needed to be done. She tripped over a soldier's corpse—

And was flooded at once with all the discomfort and guilty thoughts that she had been skirting: She had a duty to her mother to stay alive; but she also had a duty to the memory of her father, a good soldier, to be a good soldier, and a duty to her brother, a good officer, not to embarrass him. She had a duty to Lance Corporal Jaywalk and to her section; she had a duty to Corp Cobweb and the rest of the platoon—but she had abandoned them, and ignored her orders. She had a duty to Fourth Company; she had a duty to her battalion, her brigade, her division, and to Generals Roseberry, El-rust, and Abgrusck—but had she done one heroic thing to help win the war? She was guilty of having killed, and guilty of not having killed enough. She owed allegiance to her homeland, but she owed allegiance to her home, too.

She had responsibilities to her person, and she had irreconcilable responsibilities to the planet; she had duties to the cells and nerves of her, and she had duties to God. Above all, she had a duty to her fellow soldier—and she had shirked her duty. She remembered that on the night of the long march out of Burzgao she had stumbled over such a soldier as this, lying wounded, wan and resentful, on the lip of a shell crater. She had given the woman a sip of water and had promised to send a medic for her. But she had forgotten to send anyone.

How could she forgive herself? Why, when the time came, should anyone help her?

What had she made of her miraculous life? What good had she done with her inheritance, those millennia of evolution? How had she earned a mother's love and worry? This corpse too, its face buried in frozen mud, had a mother, who was perhaps still anxiously writing it letters and baking it cakes. The acid nausea, the gob of phlegm in her throat, and the bloat in her bowels racked her like recriminations. Nearby shouts and rifle fire could add nothing to her shrinking horror, and she fled into an unbombed grove more to escape herself than to save herself.

She soon regretted this. The trees closed over her like a bog, screening the lightning and muffling the thunder of combat. But the wood was neither dark nor silent. She could hear it growing, breathing, creaking, reaching, gnawing; and moonlight dribbled through the foliage, and the very shadows swirled and shimmered like grease on water. Every plant was awful, trembling with life as with suppressed laughter. Every tree was a slow-bursting firework of branching bristles. Predatory animals and enemy soldiers crept continually out of sight. Snaking vines twined round her; venomous thorns abraded her skin; unblinking owls' eyes peered through her. She turned in circles, whimpering and clutching her rifle to her chest. She shut her eyes and shook her head, but the scene did not disappear; indeed, she could see it more clearly, and from all 360 degrees. Panic-stricken, she peeled wide her eyes, to no effect. The forest grew larger and denser, crushing her beneath its churning mass to an infinitesimal insignificance. All the weight of the universe was rolling over her; she tried to lunge free, and only threw her-



self the more fully beneath its wheels. Every good and vibrant thing was moving irretrievably away from her at an ever-increasing rate. At last the thread of her fear snapped, and she collapsed groaning in defeat—but there was nowhere to go; no drop could fall out of the ocean. Her bottom opened to an abyss, and she emerged from a nightmare into a vaster nightmare. Now dissonance subsumed harmony. War was fundamental: even light was at war with itself. The quintessence of the universe was raw terror, from which God hid in creation. Even this was not the worst or final truth: countless times that night she awoke to a worse one. Susceptible and exposed, she rode a recursively cresting wave of hideous revelation.

Thus hours passed like eras, and it was not until the first glow of dawn that exhaustion finally dulled her misery. Weeping with relief, she hobbled out of the grove (she had not penetrated it deeply) and surveyed the scorched landscape, which was softened to beauty by morning and mist. Not ten meters away, one of the strange local deer stood on its hind legs, placidly grazing. In the distance, a procession of refugees trudged across the valley, leaving in their wake scattered detritus: mattresses, broken-down carts, trunks and cabinets and cases that had proved too heavy. At this sight of her fellow creatures, Parade-Ground's heart reopened, and she started towards them, smiling tenderly.

She was back inside her skin, and the earth was again firm beneath her foot. Already little more remained of her night's ordeal than a loose and wrung-out feeling—she supposed that she had been enlarged, even improved by her suffering—and an unpleasant but unshakable conviction of a *something* lurking beyond everyday sense. However, the ideas that had plagued or delighted her now seemed mere paradoxes, or trivial, or false. Nor was she aware of any irresolvable internal conflict. She would find First/Fourth Platoon; she would write a letter to her mother; she would help to rid the medipodeans of the invaders. Her nerves and cells were again quietly working; she too would do her work quietly.

“Who are you running from?” she asked one of the refugees. —The man shrugged, and said in his language, “Soldiers.” —“Which army? Like me, or not like me?” She indicated her uniform. “Same, or different?”

—“Same like you,” said the man in her language. —She thanked him, and began walking against the stream.

THE RELIEF FOR Forty-Third C Platoon arrived at dawn.

Though surprised to meet resistance from The Nubbin, Fifty-Ninth D Platoon were well rested, better equipped, and more numerous than the suprapodean troops. They expelled the aggressors quickly, suffering few casualties.

Staff Sergeant Ciborsck and MAC command never attempted to retake Strongpoint E15, but they remained convinced that First/Fourth’s possession of it for one night had permanently improved their position in the area. Corporal Cobweb was posthumously promoted two ranks. The Colonel was posthumously awarded the very medal of valor that she wore when she died. Their mothers had little choice but to be proud.

*Grave Reservations.* —Private Shyve had again been assigned to a graves-registration fatigue—which, due to a mental snag, and with no witticism intended, she called Grave Reservations. This was, in Thirty-Second Company, an unpopular duty, and was usually handed out as an unofficial punishment. Shyve, however, though careful not to show it, relished the work. It was unsupervised, and no officer seemed to know how long it should take; no doubt they made allowances for its grisliness. Shyve found that she could drag her feet, smoke, and take rests without ever being told to hurry or reprimanded for loafing—an unheard-of luxury. And the handling of corpses did not bother her. Indeed, she took pride in her intrepid callousness—just as she had done as a schoolgirl, loitering solitary in lush cemeteries. With two plugs of garlic up her nose, she didn't even notice the stench.

But the great unspoken perk was that she could keep any valuables she found on the bodies. To date she had acquired necklaces, bracelets, rings, wristwatches, pocket watches, locket, knives, pens, eyeglass frames, a cigarette holder, a cigar cutter, a magazine loader, and other tools and devices of fine craftsmanship whose purpose eluded her. She was hoarding all these treasures in her bunk, for she was contemptuous of the local currency and distrustful of the mail service. Most of the photos and letters that she found she honored as “personal effects” and wrapped up with the soldier's dog tags to be shipped home. But occasionally one caught her eye.

“Dear Premli, This is the third time I have written this letter. The first two I was ordered to self-censor by Captain Dowz, and simply tore up. To censor one's own letters somehow seems pointlessly destructive—just like this war, in fact. Anyway, God knows what precisely in them crawled up his

ass. Nothing but my usual screeds against incompetence and wastefulness, nothing that should surprise anyone. There: I suppose this letter too is already unsendable. So I might as well get a few things off my chest . . .”

Shyve stuffed this into a pocket for later reading, and continued rum-maging. A few minutes later, she sprang upright, holding at arm’s length a notebook written in code. She had to show this to Iargus. On her way to the quartermaster’s dugout, she told two privates and a sergeant that she was just taking a latrine break.

Her friend quickly disillusioned her. “That’s not code, you farthole. That’s suprapodean.” —“Oh. Well, it could still be important, couldn’t it? Maybe it’s intelligence.” —Iargus riffled the pages skeptically. “It doesn’t look like intelligence to me.” —“What do you know about intelligence?” —“A lot more than you.” —“You don’t even know what it says.” —“I know what it doesn’t say,” said Iargus oracularly. —“Oh yeah? What’s that?” —“Everything.” —Shyve made a gesture of suffering.

But Iargus had a friend with a suprapodean dictionary. This friend, in the midst of an artillery barrage that twice blew out her candle, laboriously translated a few lines. Shyve was disappointed.

Helmet: mine.

Bongo drum: mine.

Fast bumps: machine gun.

Cut the top: hundred-pounder.

Doctor ache: strafed.

Who I killed: mud.

Winker: rifle shot.

Smith: infection.

Juice of war: hand grenade.

“What the hell? Is it poetry?” —“It’s intelligence,” teased Iargus. “Hey, take your intelligence!” —“Keep it.”

On her way back to Grave Reservations, she told the sergeant and two privates that she had been delayed by diarrhea. They stared at her in blank wonder.

The heap of corpses had received a direct hit. Bloody hunks of flesh lay scattered everywhere. Shyve drooped—not at the gore, but at the disorder, and at the responsibility of cleaning it all up.

“We thought you were in that mess!” said one of the privates. “We thought you were dead for certain.”

Shyve laughed at the idea. She rolled up her sleeves, spat in her palms, and got to work. Dead flesh was just dirt, and once you were completely dirty you had nothing more to fear. Indeed, she soon discovered that the explosion had greatly simplified her labor. There was no longer any way of identifying or even counting the corpses; she shoveled into the pit any five limbs, or any two torsos, or any three heads, or any hundred pounds of meat, and called it a person. She was whistling at her good luck, and plucking three gold teeth from a disembodied jawbone, when a section of pukers passed by her, gawping and aghast. She grinned at their image of her, and waved, as if to reassure them that war was not so bad, provided you had a sense of humor, and a little brains.