

The Blotter

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The Blotter

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W W W . C L M P . O R G

"100 shots fired from your Mauser 1898 Karabiner Kurz at the ravine called Babi Yar"

a prose-poem

You walk.

There is the march over here from the road, a brief walk through the civilized diesel-smoke of the trucks.

There is feeling comfortably full after a hot pre-dawn breakfast, fresh-baked bread from somewhere and fine greasy sausage that came by train not truck; feeling good even, even knowing something of today's task, even knowing what others said about similar tasks, even after seeing all of the people ambling on the road, herded out of the way as you passed, yet going the same direction as you, to this place, this raw edge of things.

There is the dry ground; everything is dry in this Asian place, no sweet morning dew, no rippling clear stream. The September sun has no more pressing work but to light the sky and warm the air and evaporate all water.

There is the flat nothingness of the horizon, the tree-lack, cloud-lack, the hill-lack, and then, a surprise neither pleasant nor unhappy, the jagged cut in the earth, a knife-gouge, an abrupt tear in the rock and sand. The ravine is sneaky, any fall deadly.

There is the thought rolling around in your head: that this will hardly matter. Such a private idea cycles like a stone trapped inside the wheel-well of the truck that carried your squad here, over and over: snick-chock, the sound the rifle's bolt makes. How cool it is now, but the sun is coming – this will hardly matter, though. There is no food or water here – this will hardly matter, though. What kind of person wants to live in such a place? Why do we care? This will hardly matter.

There are the troop trucks grinding their gears and growling away in small gray clouds of dust and smoke. They will return at day's end, to fetch the squads of Landsers, you gray-clad foot-soldiers. All of you have a lunch kit and your own water bottle.

And your rifle; a sound, reliable Mauser.

There is the ammunition supplied for today's exercise, in green-gray paint-dulled metal boxes, brick-stacked, and precisely counted. Later the brass shell-casings will be efficiently swept up by someone assigned the responsibility to ensure just that. If the lead from bullets can be excised and retrieved, it will be. Someone will see to it.

There are officers about, huddling together in the cool or talking, planning perhaps. Others are here to see the proceedings. They are crisp and efficient looking, with boots so clean that they cannot have marched here this morning, this warm, breezeless morning, but stand as if they just sprang from the hard earth like dark sunflowers or Jason's dragon-teeth warriors. You know to keep your own eyes straight ahead. Do the job, don't talk where anyone can see or hear you. Who needs all of these

officers? Some are here for the...fun. They have cameras but keep them hidden for now. It is not permitted to take unauthorized photographs, and even an officer can find trouble snapping pictures.

You want no trouble. Certainly, nobody wants trouble.

There, one man sits at a wooden table on a small café chair. In front of him, fragile-looking foolscap held hostage by a pebble. The officer is not leaning back on two legs, playing at work, but has his head bowed, pencil scratching, diligent with his papers. There is no telling what is so imperative, and you have no curiosity. It is an acquired skill to have no curiosity about the activities of officers.

There is no tent set up for shade. Either no one suspects that it will be hot today, or if they do, they don't want it to look like a circus. Everyone, officer and soldier alike, will share this bright burden. That is interesting.

There are rifle rounds to be distributed. A stripper-clip of five brass cartridges, the golden talons of your black eagle. One clip handed out to each man, like a medal, an award for valor. You could carry more, but there is a count to be made. You feel honored, in an inexplicable way, heat at your temples, dry-mouthed.

These rounds are special. Lead bullets, unjacketed by copper so that they compress on impact. Low-velocity, for tasks like these, portioned some number of grams less powder. They'll kill each and every time. That's efficiency for you. How many Marks shall be saved on propellant today? Someone knows this. Someone is in charge of knowing. It is our best thing, you think. To be able to plan for such an event. We will win because of such skill. No, that's not so, you change your mind again. The one that wants it more will win. That wants it most.

There is the sound of leather's scrape and the steel mechanics of loading rounds into chambers, then everything comes to life. One sergeant shouting, a football captain calling his team,

"Here! Yes, over here. One line, facing me! Un-sling and load."

The first rounds are pressed into the breech by the bolt's action. The rifle's steel barrel is still night-cold.

Your spectacles off. You won't need them here. Tuck them safely into tunic top pocket. Rebutton, and pat it twice, old habit. You tighten the sling so that the Mauser is an extension of your left arm. The Kar-Kur is heavy, but not too much. A useful weight, serious and real, like a tool in Opa's cellar, one of his big smithing hammers that he never let you fiddle with.

There are ten of you in this line. This is not a military firing squad. They will also line up by tens, and you will be responsible for the third in line from the left, every time, every shot. Third from the left, no matter what. Not so hard, not like those to your right, numbers five or six, who always have to silently count over each time to make sure that they don't double-up on their neighbor's target, leaving one standing. That would be embarrassing. So just one-two-three, eh? Easy enough.

They come.

Ready.

There is number one. A man your own age or thereabouts. With tired,

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CAUTION

The Blotter

swollen eyes, he looks up, not at you but the man next or two over. His young mustaches are lopsided, giving him the look of a half-wit. Who would grow them in such a fashion with purpose? Who would not trim them to neatness and balance? A short trip to the barber would render things right, but such a thing cannot happen. Never again to visit the barber, or talk with the butcher about the taste of fresh crushed barleys for sausages, to soak the flavor of meat and salt and herbs. The man looks up at the firing-line, at you, but his eyes cannot bear the weight, and fall to the ground.

Aim.

He compresses his eyes shut so tightly his eyebrows nearly touch his cheeks. Yours stay open. At this distance, you appropriately sight with both eyes. You squeeze the trigger. This first bullet will meet the man in the crease between his eyebrows, it will pierce his skin and part his flesh and cave in some part of the bone of his skull and all of this will mix with his brains and end him. This thought comes and goes as fleetly as a child's whisper, as mechanically as tying a shoe.

Fire.

The crack of ten rifles surprises them, and you, and the others next to you left and right. For an instant you think about a farm you visited as a boy and a cousin you used to play with. That day when your uncle slaughtered a hog, a great-grandmother of a sow with dry teats that nearly dragged on the ground. The thick bitter-beer stink of a small river caught in a bucket by Tante Eliza with which she would later make blutwurst. Though you love her cooking, the taste of a sausage on a Saturday morning with bread warm from the oven, and lemonade made from citric acid powder and lemon extract and sugar, you had no appetite that day.

Ready.

Two is a boy as thin as a whisper, sharp birdcage ribs beneath parchment skin. He holds something, then drops it to the ground. A cloth cap, it was supposed to be piled with his clothes, but no one noticed until now.

Aim.

Words leak from his lips like drool, some language which you don't know. Ukrainian, or a Jewish tongue?

Fire.

Blood and bits from his skull spatter the fallen cap. No matter, there are always more caps.

Ready.

Three is the boy's mother, or perhaps not, her being next only fortune. A pale, fat woman for such a skinny boy. Does she eat all the food she cooks, never sharing at all with her children? Pale and heavy udders point downward toward the dirt at the edge of the ravine.

Aim.

She isn't looking now. Her head is turned behind her at the great crease in the ground. She needn't bother. It is a place like any other. Convenient, for death. More receiving. Don't look, mother. She continues to look, and you mark a spot with your eye on the corner of her skull, where her neck rises to meet it. This will surprise her.

Fire.

She falls like a full sack of flour. You overhear off to the side one officer speaking to another in a gravelly whisper, "Why are we working up here and carrying the bodies down the slope, when we should have them walk to the crease? Shitbrained, I tell you." The other officer, looking at the newly fallen, nods thoughtfully. There is no one here to tell, though. No one will change this small detail today.

Ready.

Four. An old man as hairless on his chest and groin as the boy. Is that what we all have in store? Returning to our youth as we age, like a spinning tire, like a carnival ride? The old man's shanks are shiny in the morning sun. He pissed himself before he undressed, to foul his pile of clothes. Just a small payback. Can there be such foresight in this place? And does he think that his pale wet shit will stop them from using those clothes on

someone else?

Aim.

He stands and faces you, hands covering his privates, each breath huffed through slack lips, so that you might almost smell his breath from here, that last meal he had. Brown bread, volkerbrot, brushed with a small bit of bacon-grease and topped by a thin slice of sausage, and even the last of the winter-apples, dried and sweet.

Fire.

Legs want to hold the sticks and rags of the old man's body, but a poor construction will always fail in the end.

Ready.

Five is a woman and a baby wrapped in a blanket. The woman is tall and naked. An officer takes the baby from her arms. Removes the blanket, dropping it to the ground. The baby is silent. The woman held the small thing like armor, like clothing or a talisman against today's inevitabilities. You wonder if the tall woman has inadvertently killed the small thing herself. Is it what you would have done, to not let someone else do it? A question for some other day, perhaps.

Aim.

She doesn't reach out to take the baby back. The officer holds the creature by one arm, dangling it. The thing begins to squall. He heaves it over the lip of the ravine, its sound falling away to nothing. It is a deep ravine. The woman's scream is long and ululating.

Fire.

"You out-of-control bastard," says the gravel-voiced officer. "They'll need to put a stop to that sort of nonsense." The other's head waggles once again, always in agreement. For a moment you wonder who they are. Observers? Slackers, come for the entertainment? Generals' sons? Who else would want to be here? And who is the *they* that these two officers reference? Some accountant that feeds babies through the line. No babies through the line is their simple conclusion. Deal with them back there, won't you?

"Sling arms!" The sergeant leads the firing line past the table for the next stripper-clip of five rounds. When all have walked this circle,

"Load," he barks. You press them into the breech with two fingers. One doesn't have enough strength, three pinches. Index and middle fingers.

A crackle to the left, like burlap slowly torn. Yours is not the only firing-line now, there are other squads of ten; loading, aiming. Your helmet is hot now, and sweat catches in your eyebrows, drips from your nose. It does not affect your aim, and no one is given permission to remove them and wipe their face dry. God, will it ever be cold again? Maybe it won't, you think.

Ready.

Six is another young man of indeterminate age. He stares out of dark eyes at something invisible between you and him, an ineffable place that apparently keeps him calm and complacent. Home. Heaven. A quiet place to sleep. It does not matter.

Aim.

You find the point between the two black, tired circles of his eyes, the joining of his black, furrowed brows.

Fire.

With a snap of lightning, he drops broken and blind, despite a third, quite new, eye. All of them go to black but remain open.

Ready.

Seven is grandmother, in a handholding column of grandmothers. Their skin is loose on them, and their hair silver

The Blotter

flyaway in this breezeless morning. You want to look away, but an officer watches for just this sort of behavior, the averted glance, the frown, the grimace.

"Keep your hands to yourselves," another officer barks at the old women. They do not let go. They may not understand him.

Aim.

Their hands do not let go, but the officer has already turned away to tend to other business.

Fire.

They fall as one, not a hand releases. This is something. An officer fetches his Leica to photograph the scene of the paper grandmother dolls on the ground.

Ready.

Eight is a woman whose child has already, efficiently, been taken away from her. She rends her bare arms with her fingernails and moans softly, "My baby. My baby."

Her hair is short, looks roughly shorn from her head. Someone has cut it with shears, to sell or to have made into a wig. There are marks where the shears scored her scalp. Or is it that she has cut it herself, in some odd ritual you cannot discern? What is left looks like brown weeds left in a mown field.

Aim.

She bites the heel of her hand, bloody spit stains her lips and chin.

Fire.

Ready.

Nine is a handsome man with a withered left arm. Depending from his shoulder, someone else's arm, someone weak and wasted, a prisoner inside his shell, a child-man, deficient and failed. The handsome man uses his other arm, the right one, to push back his hair, defiantly it seems. What a proud haircut, expensive, oiled like the Romans do it.

Aim.

You wiggle your trigger finger. It slips into the spot, familiar, warm now. The half-arm, the false arm, lifts slowly despite its deficiency across the handsome man's chest, doing what it can to protect modesty, to guard him. It is a futile gesture.

Fire.

Ready.

Ten is a frail girl, bent over her stomach, covering her just-budded breasts. Lips pulled back from teeth, doglike. She wailed her way up the hill, but on the death-line goes silent, staring at you and the others, and she makes you afraid, as if she might leap out and snap, biting, rabid and frenzied. Her hair covers nothing, even her ears stick through, as her head is turning left and right and straight. You blink. One round left in the Mauser's breech, it might not stop her. There are tales of Nipponese soldiers that charge bayonet or sword flashing and waving and cannot be downed with mere bullets. They are wild, uncontrollable. The bolt. Snick with your thumb. Chock with your opposing finger. It is warming and loosening, same as it would be at target practice.

Aim.

Her head rotates back and forth faster, fit-like, and it is not possible for you to get a bead on her. Aim for the neck, then.

Fire.

She jumps into the air, a deer, and you jump yourself. "My God," mumbles the one next to you. "That bitch was a damned werewolf." You do not reply that this was precisely your own thinking. The firing-line officer gives you

a brief sharp look from under his peaked hat and unsnaps his holster. It had to happen eventually. The first kill that isn't clean. You didn't want to be the one who *broke the ice*, and of course there is no smiling on the firing-line. The officer delivers the coup-de-grace with a crack of his pistol, and steps back from the wild girl's body, still fountaining blood out of an artery in the throat. You can smell it over the cordite and the unsettled Ukrainian dust. You bite the inside of your cheek, like a penalty for your mistake.

Now there is the circle-march back to the table. The solid KarKur does not recoil like your grandfather's shotgun, the one only for boar. But it is tiring shooting by the manual. The weight of the rifle is real. Your stock-shoulder is stiff and you give it a wiggle, turn it with small circles. With practice, no one can see you do this, no self-respecting soldier would be caught stretching on duty. Pick up the next five rounds. A straggling line of naked creatures shuffles along; a pale snake, a caterpillar. You are back in your place. There are ear-plugs in your tunic pocket, but no opportunity to reach and insert them.

Ready.

Number eleven is a cur of a man, with welts on his pale shoulders from a recent beating. Was it at the hands of police or storm-troops, or his own people, finding his skittering hand in the pantry.

Aim.

His head droops, face obscured. The top of his head is tonsured. A priest, perhaps. A bible scholar. No, there is no such thing here, the lack of hair is a coincidence. Most of these are country Jews. Farmers and tailors.

Fire.

Ready.

Twelve. Another woman, old, with her back turned over on itself. A witch by the look of her. She isn't weak, she isn't weeping, and she won't go easy. She points with an accusing finger, at you, as if for all of your sins, for your bullets, for crossing borders. She points at you for hating and for not caring at all what you do and for not giving a damn what you don't do.

Aim.

She tilts back enough for the morning sun to flicker in her eyes. Her lips compress. Her face turns to stone, impregnable.

Fire.

The morning is balmy now. The waterless Ukrainian air heats so efficiently. The sun is bright-eyed now, clear and vengeful. The sun will come out and cook you all, not yet, but soon, someday. And the ice. Ice and fire, indiscriminate weapons of a blind and monstrous god. You think that everyone senses this, but no one speaks about it. There are no whispers about this type of stuff in the ranks. But everyone knows what is so, what is possible. This Slavic land is too big, too full of arbitrary pain. There should be a lesson book, in every officer's duffle bag, to teach them. Never go to war with people who are used to being hurt. How much more can you do to them? These ones, these Soviets, keep running away. How far back will they fall? Can Russia fall back on itself indefinitely, then, like an animal, will it leap out for the throat for the unwary hunter. That pounce. You tell yourself that you don't want to be here for that. But your few friends, the ones from home, from your grandparents' town, are there. You would be there too, if such choices were yours to make.

This isn't war, this thing today. It's something else, and officers have talked about it, with brief explanations about how this helps. You cannot leave such people behind the lines, always looking over your shoulder for them. One by one the territories will be cleared of such people. Cleaned.

Ready.

Thirteen, unlucky thirteen, is a thin woman with a weal on her cheek; a birthmark that his own grandmother might have claimed was a place where the woman was tapped by the finger of God. But that will not save her.

Not today.

Aim.

The Blotter

She falls to the ground. You lower your sight, because it seems as if she was hit by someone else's bullet, a mistake. No command follows. The other targets look at the fallen woman. The other executioners look at the fallen woman. It is quite a mess, that is for sure. Fouling the works.

This time the firing line officer comes to you. You lower your rifle and come to attention.

"What happened," he asks. You don't know. You don't shrug.

"Is there something wrong with your rifle?" he asks, as if it were a wounded comrade, concerned. You explain that you did not fire, have not yet fired, but the woman fell anyway.

"Ah. Yes, yes," he says softly, knowingly. Perhaps this is something common. There is now a third firing line working, somewhere nearby. The shots ring out with precision and regularity. There is wailing and occasional screaming. Shouting in the distance, near the road. There is much happening all at once. You stay at attention. The firing-line officer once more unsnaps his holster. For a fleeting moment, you believe that it is intended for you. But the officer turns and walks up to the fallen woman. Prepares to give her the coup-de-grace. She looks at him, unwounded. She has only fallen. She has not yet been shot.

"Get up, please," he says softly, conversationally, to her. His words are an invitation. But the woman will not move or is beyond hearing and understanding and anything of this world and this place.

Surprisingly, the firing-line officer doesn't shoot her then and there. Instead he stalks back to you and shrugs. It is quite odd. "Carry on," he says.

Aim!

Everyone is in line again, prepared. You look at the woman's face, at the mark that will not save her today. You draw a bead on the woman's head. Her temple. It will do.

Fire.

Ready.

Fourteen is another old man. What a place this is, with so many old men. A town of old men. Certainly not one that could have been a soldier, for a soldier would not have walked to this place and taken off his clothes and stood here, waiting patiently for a bullet. A soldier would have run to fight another day. But run where? This is a great gutted nothing of a country, with only these scars in the ground, gouged by terrible cold winters and awful hot summers. Where would a soldier go that he could catch his breath and find a meal and others like him? Stop thinking, you tell yourself. Work the bolt. *Snick! Chock!*

Aim.

Or is it something else, you wonder. Could it simply be that in this summer of war there are only old men left here? The young ones gone to fight with the Reds, fodder for the great machine, or scattered to the winds, or captured and plodding to the west and their cages.

Fire.

This old man collapses to become handfuls of dust before your eyes, dust drifting down to join the eternal dust beneath everyone's feet. One thing that there is no shortage of is dust. Scattered to the winds. No, you reflect, there are actually two results of weather here in the East. Mud. Dust.

Today it is dust.

Ready.

Fifteen is a crying child. Not as young as she first looks, not a toddler but her rounded belly odd with all of these hungry-looking people. Small as a puppy, you think. The smallest so far, because the babies are not being shot. Not here, not that you can see, anyway. It is the tears that make her look younger, younger than a schoolgirl. For a moment you are transported as swiftly as wind to home, to the seaside town where you were born. Where Father had a fishing boat, taking it out storm or calm. Your mother would not walk to the iron quays, would never tell Father good-bye or wish him luck, but you would trail along behind him carrying his rubber coat and the brown

wool sweater that stank of lanolin and the ocean. You, however, never worried about him until the day he didn't come home. Later you learned that his boat had sunk and your mother was not the same and suddenly there wasn't as much food on the table, where before then you were never really hungry. Your older sister cried often for Papa, always looking younger than she really was, as if not growing up until his impossible return.

Aim.

Her eyes light on yours, she cannot possibly see you through the mist of her tears, but you can see her. She becomes your sister, your ever-saddened sister who waits for Father. The weeping of a little girl becomes all of the weeping in the world; the oceans' salt flavored with the tears of every creature torn.

Fire.

Attention. Left turn. Return to the table for next five rounds. Back into line? No.

"Sling arms! At ease!" shouts the sergeant, the football captain, his voice like the lion's roar. Everyone holds their positions, this is just a break, a chance to openly loosen your shoulders and rub eyes. Pops and cracks continue from the other firing lines. Nothing at all like being in a battle. Permission granted to drink from water bottles. The water is already tepid, waxy. Sour from the chemicals used to purify it. The Romans used vinegar. Vinegar in the water held up to wet the lips of Christ on the cross.

Ready.

Sixteen is a short man with dried mud on his knees. Where did he find mud? How on this dust-day, this sun-warmed, arid day? Is it the thirsty trickle of piss, the fear of dying that mixed with the dry Ukrainian air? Did some Samaritan try to help, some Roman legionnaire offer him a sip from a sponge on a spearpoint? And is that fool in line now as well?

So many questions. Work the bolt. *Snick! Chock!*

Aim.

Fire.

Ready.

Seventeen cannot see without his own spectacles. He massages with his fingertips the place where his eyes meet his nose, rubbing out the years of wearing glasses, to see whatever it was that he chose to see, the fineness his work, his babies, his wife's softness. He taps his pocket, where they might have been before he made the walk here, when he was told to take them off and set them in one of the wooden crates with the other spectacles. No, fellow. Keep them tucked in your pocket. Better that you don't see what happens now.

Aim.

He hears the word and clamps his eyelids down, like armor, like a shield.

Fire.

Ready.

Eighteen is a woman with a white scar atop her left breast. A mark, something like a wipe of a finger in dust. Was this a wound of torrid passion, a knife taken to her by a lover or a lover's wife? Was it something else, a doctor's work to remove an abomination to her beauty, or a cancer that threatened her? Perhaps she has survived something only to end here. A tantalizing irony.

Aim.

She places a fragile hand over the scar, over her heart, and stares at you. Was that what was removed? Her fearful heart? There is no time for you to discover. This secret will travel well.

Fire.

Ready.

The Blotter

Nineteen. Grandmother, doughy and limping in her bare feet. Her face is clear, there have been no tears while coming to this place. A patina of the roadside coats her like face-powder and she pushes loose hair out of her eyes. Her terror finally overcomes her as she pisses in the dust, standing at the edge of the ravine, and then, oddly, she blushes pink, as if this were some sort of dinner party, and, already in her cups she had lifted the wrong glass or spoon and a friend who should have known better, who should have been more of a friend, noticed this and gleefully brought it to everyone else's attention. Look who should stay away from the sherry. No more for you, my dear. Someone inform the bartender. In that calculating way that is neither warmly funny, nor enough to coldly kill a friendship, but still creates a wound that can never heal.

But, before the rounds can be sent on their way the young woman next to the grandmother faints dead away. She turns, legs locked but twisting at the hip so that her head falls away from you, towards the ravine, her back and hips and rump now facing you. Over she goes, groaning; you nearly pull the trigger.

"Halt!" shouts the firing-line officer, his voice ringing clear as a horn in an orchestra. He is neither irritated with the delay, nor does he seem surprised. He waves and the sergeant joins him to step over to the fallen woman. The sergeant slaps her face, and she shakes. Strange, not fainted at all. Simply afraid to die? Just trying to hide from the man with the black cape and the bony hands? Why? Today, has she not seen enough? How easy it is? And, certainly, in the end, before the finish of the world, everyone dies. And who cannot guess that today, everyone dies. Too late to pretend, too late to argue, or offer alternatives, propose recompense. These men have no ears to hear, no hearts to sway. They lift her by the shoulders and suddenly she rediscovers the strength to stand on her own. Grandmother will not turn to face you, but no matter.

Fire.

Ready.

Twenty. Not a face but a place on the face, a point centered between two sights.

Aim.

The barrel of your ninety-eight KarKur radiates warm against your face.

Fire.

He spins like a coin on a tabletop.

The day's dance calls you back to the table for a new stripper-clip. The metal taste in your mouth. On a long march one holds a small coin or even a pebble on your tongue to keep saliva flowing. A blister stings your thumb. When have you ever gotten a blister from shooting? Never before. You ask yourself what am I doing differently? Think about it. Something is sliding to cause a blister, one that will be quite painful before this day has ended.

Ready.

Twenty-one.

Aim.

The target's eyes close. A prayer? Here? Now?

Fire.

They pop open. Surprise! Like someone blowing out candles. Birthday candles, on a chocolate torte, with sweet cherries nestled inside, hidden, for the tongue's surprise. Birthday cake. Little silver forks laid out on the table arranged as carefully as flowers. Candles on the mantle and on the table, glittering, sputtering in the breeze of skirts and party-talking and the youngest children trying to sneak a peek, snatch a small treat and run for the nursery. Blow out the candles. Whoosh, and the waft of sweet smoke and also the scent of good, real coffee. Death-day candles. Surprise!

Ready.

Twenty-two.

Aim.

Fire.

Ready.

Twenty-three.

Aim.

Fire.

Ready, aim, fire. Ready, aim, fire. *Snick-chock*. Your ears whine with each shot, each explosion of gunpowder, hot gas pushing the lead, spinning the projectile. The top of the ravine sounds like a battlefield, rattling and raging there and back again. How many guns are here by now? How many platoons of infantry? Is the entire regiment now stinking up the air with the copper-bloody fog, and the burnt-brick odor of gunfire. When will you be permitted to clean the piece, run the barrel with oil rag and steel brush and more oil until it comes out slick and clear, wipe the outer barrel? Remember to oil the wood stock, wipe hard, buff it dry so that it doesn't crack because of cold and heat and cold again. All of that tonight, by sunset's light, then lamp. This evening you wanted to send letters to Oma and Tante Nez. *Aunty Nose*, who always caught you if you sneaked sweet jam pastries from the kitchen. Like a hunting-hound she is; knowing inexorably what was on a child's mind and catching you and your little brother and your cousin with the broken foot, singing out. No one can run fast enough to get away from Tante Nez! And everyone falling down with laughter because you didn't know that Tante always knew her nickname, but of course she did, she knew everything, like an angel knows. She knew where was the best place to tickle, and where all of the hiding places were, and how to do an American Indian-burn on someone's arm, and how to pinch so that it hurt but not badly, and how to kick a ball, and she certainly knew to let you keep the pastry, because for little boys pastry was always, quite simply a matter of life and death.

Reload. Five more shots. Everyone falls. Reload. And five more. They step up in their tens, walk into a soup of bloody mud. Your blister is forgotten. Quiet is forgotten.

Reload. You are bored. The air stinks and will not clear. For shit's sake, there should be someone else to do this. You are finished. Make someone else do this! Assign it to ten of the young men, there were at least ten young men that stood in line here this morning who could have taken up a rifle. Put them back in their clothes and shoes and promise them life, officers standing behind them, pistols pointing to their skulls. They could be taught to shoot. Take a day to plan it.

What is one day, more or less?

It is certainly such a good idea that an officer could never think it. Instead all of the young men stood in line to be shot, took their bullet. You would have told them here is how to hold the rifle, and here is the way to sight down the barrel. You are number three. You are responsible for the third one. Count over from the left one, two, three. Shoot her. Shoot him. That, at least, is better than dying. So long as your shoulder hurts so, you are still here. Or tell them something like that.

Anyone can be a shooter. Your chums are up the road to the east. In the real war, they are soldiers, fighting against, who? Against what?

Against.

Not everyone can be a soldier. How many bullets? One for each. Don't think beyond. When does the day end? When does this line end? When you are told so.

Your shoulder is like a rotten tooth, throbbing to the rhythm of your own breathing, beating heart. O-ho! This will be bad tomorrow, when you want to sleep an extra five minutes, when the sergeant kicks your cot with his boot, and calls you out. When he gives you punishment, on top of your aches and pains. When you get shit tasks as he remembers how lazy you were a week, month, a year along.

Reload. Before the next clip, a short break. Water, or apple juice from bottles. Everyone wants the apple juice, it is tart. You swish it around in your mouth, to take the cordite taste off of your teeth and tongue. There are not enough bottles, so your slurp will have to do, turning and handing the warm stuff to the man behind, so that everyone gets a good taste. The water is also warm, and of course it has road-dust in it, but it is wet and a small amount on a handkerchief helps with your eyes. Leave off your spectacles, keep them in your pocket, just rest

The Blotter

your eyes behind the cool cloth. No one talks. No one squats to give their back or knees a change. There are too many officers about, and the guns still rattle around the ravine – the refreshment breaks are staggered so that the lines still move. Someone else will sip juice while you are killing a one-eyed old man with nary a hair on his shining-pale pate. Or a squat mother who will not let her sister's hand loose, even when a round snaps her head back as if her neck is a wind-broken twig. Or a reed-thin girl with her back sickly twisted like the letter S. Or a boy with a nose bent and broken, blood-crust caked dark on his upper lip like the Fuhrer's own mustaches.

Sweat. Think about cold then; maybe that will help. Once, on an afternoon when you were a boy, you took your wooden sled to a snow-covered hill, simply too tall for boys your age. Be brave, you told yourself. What is the difference between bravery and fool? You asked no one. There was no one in the cold and cloudy-dark to share the moment with you, no chum to bolster your courage or promise to follow down the frozen incline. The snow, soft during the day, soft but very cold, was crusted over now, every step you took towards the hill your galoshes broke through the snow's thin crust, sending it tinkling like wineglasses dropped by happy party-goers. That noise and the near-dark and the cold waged war against you as you walked, counting to yourself; one, two, three. Again and again and again. A chugging locomotive clacking up the track. Like a waltz. One-two-three-now go. But then, there, you couldn't force your stinging cold feet to step up to the slope's edge, look down, sit on the sled's sill, and kick off into the unknown. The slope grew impossibly high, terrifying, more treacherous with each minute you didn't move. The last of the day slipped behind a cloud, evaporating the crisp shadows. The wet of your sweater made you shake. That was what you finally told yourself. There's nothing to it. *One-two-three-now go!*

You've lost count.

Well then, someone knows how many, that's all that matters. They never lose count, never mislay, never forget. Your eyes sting when you close them, ache when open, puffed with the granular particulate of smoke. You didn't want to lose count, because there was something happening here that may never happen again. Keep sensible, keep engaged and aware. That is something to tell children that haven't yet been born, not even thought of except in that way that you consider finding a wife, a partner who can share you and herself in a satisfactory way, along with all of the work that such partnership brings. Having a family, yes, someday. Boys. And girls, because this you can imagine, even see in your mind's eye, curly soft brown hair bouncing on shoulders, nightgowns at the foot of the stairs, squealing *here comes Daddy, Run! Run!* Finding your own end-of-day energy to bound up the stairs, hands clawed, roaring at the thrilling screaming, to be the Daddy Bear, the great roaring one whose tickles are unavoidable and irresistible, who must be brought down and stabbed fatally by a brave knight with the umbrella or the twig-sword once pulled from the cherry-tree in the garden.

Having a family is a good dream. Daddy the hero is a good dream. At night, alone beneath your blanket you enjoy it. A dream about a wife that smells nice, soft skin, with sweet breath against your face. She whispers in her sleep, "Are you alright? Be still, my dear," when your tired legs twitch too much. She takes your hand, as if you were going for a walk in the night.

This is beyond understanding. Who would do this, walking to the firing line? Why do it? Why not just sit, make them carry you, drag you? Who walks up here, without a sound, a fight, without a stumbling run, without spitting a curse. Without tossing a stone, or a handful of sand, or wiping the dust of this place from their hands? Who cares so little for living? Who cares so little for themselves?

It must be almost sixty. Your number. Your count. You imagine that this is quite the contribution to today's effort. Nevertheless, the ringing in your ears is annoying, but beginning to muffle even more than the be-damned ear-plugs would have, if you could think to put them in during reloading.

But you cannot recover with exactitude that quantity of bullets spent. Of faces. A grand total. Ach, so. You think of other measurements. This one. The fourteenth, or fifteenth is it? Grandfather, that is. He goes easily, almost pulls the trigger himself. Suicide. Here, shoot me, if you please.

Your twenty-third woman standing naked in the now-warm-enough sun. What percentage of all are so shy as to nearly bend double even when instructed to stand. What number so thin as to look childish there, and what number with broad bellies full of bread and gravy and pastry? How many old women with mustaches. How many with straight hair. How many with dark curls. Large eyes. Squinting brown, or blue in the unkind sunlight. How many beauties and how many so asymmetrically shaped as to be off-putting even to the most undiscerning eye?

This, your seventh young man, standing here, healthy if hungry, one who could be a soldier in anyone's army

excepting yours, staring bravely through reddened eyes at the black, silent, iron eyes staring back at him. Which will it be, which one, which one for him? Arrogant he is and then not.

The child, this one, you cannot say. How many children? How many nits on each precious pointless head? How many smiling at you, because even now, even in the heat and dust and smoke and muddy blood they don't seem to know what is happening? All very good, very pertinent questions. Maybe fifteen, now, maybe fifteen bullets spent on lives too young to count for much, no danger, no use to anyone.

You think, is it truly seventy? My God. Your shoulder reminds you it's probably true. Your shoulder keeps your brain from easily playing that old arithmetic game – there are ten with you and each of you has had seventy shots, and there are one-two squads to your right and, how many now, one-two-three-four to your left, that you know about, that you can hear, and if they've kept pace with you then they've each had at least fifty and that makes three thousand two hundred and some odd bullets? It could be said by a sergeant, by an officer, a good number. You cannot keep track of the other chattering, grinding mills, but it is rather like a fair-sized battle. Some sweating-in-his-field-gray-uniform officer does this count, one who rolls together all of the ammunition accounts and body counts and sends the report with all details examined, so that someone later determines that this is the most efficient killing method? Or is it even a matter of efficiency, despite what everyone says when they talk about it. But enough with such questions; they are a small pounding behind your grit-swollen eyes, a headache that cannot be wished away.

But the questions don't just go away. How many living infants flung into the crease? Your line hasn't seen another. Surely a sergeant down the line has responsibility to ensure that no bullets are wasted on them. No, no. Here, give it to me, he must be saying, running around the ravine from squad to squad. Remember! Then into the ravine like small sacks of weevil-spoilt flour. Those that don't die at the bottom, that fall inanely, somehow, to some soft landing place will not dwell there. They won't come forth later from the earth, sprouting as next spring's daffodils. But does he roll his eyes and mop his troubled brow at such miracles, fearing the night of their hungry, broken crying? *Who left them alive*, someone will certainly ask. *Where is that sergeant, that irresponsible dumbass? Someone should wring his neck, toss him over the edge.*

Thoughts return for further consideration: who would live near a place like this, a wound of a place, a gaping nothing? Who put a town so close, not able to grasp that eventually someone would fall in? On quite another hand who would imagine this place as a grave; recognize the potential for piling in the dead, and in such a quantity, making a notation in a ledger for later? Who could have anticipated a loathing of others so great? A mathematical antipathy.

Or else it is always like this. People group together, in each other's faces, in each other's business until they can no longer stand it. But they will not blame themselves for their frustration, for their barely suppressed anger, so that anyone else will do. If it weren't these...walkers to nowhere then surely it would be someone else. So why not these?

Enough questions for now. There will be no stopping for lunch. The sun is past its zenith, but it is not the sun of home, so you cannot say with native precision what time it is. It is time for food. Your stomach can say all it wants, but no one is listening. It is time for more fresh bread, as black as smoke, sweetened with bacon-fat. Or butter, from Copenhagen, thick smears of it, bread rolled around it, and *flaumen* plum jelly from home. It cannot change this dusty sun, this unrecognizable star, but you can assuage your belly. Something you've learned not to take for granted. Tomorrow you might eat sawdust. Tomorrow you might drink mud.

There is that thought again: that this will hardly matter, that it doesn't matter at all.

You would like to rest, to let your KarKur rest, let it cool naturally in the afternoon sun, the dependable steel barrel shrinking back evenly and carefully. A good tool, a reliable tool, deserves to be well-treated. Not surprisingly, there is even a book on this, a manual that marches the soldat through how to care for the Mauser rifle. How to clean the barrel inside and out, how to cure the metal bits, the springs and locks. How to oil and smooth and wipe to perfection. It would be reasonable to clean it now, you have a kit for such things, with gray rags and wire brushes. A tin bottle of sweet-smelling oil. Perfume for your best girl. Everything as reliable as when it was born. Truth: you would like to be treated so well, permitted to cool naturally, buffed and oiled and put to rest each night in a safe place. You wish that you could feel no pain, feel nothing at all, but were left only to do your job without complaint and without fail. You would like to be such a fine instrument of single-function. Truth: you need to be done with this and go brush and scrape and oil everything clean.

The Blotter

Yes, it's time to go, but you don't. Instead you load your next clip, clear the last empty casing and prepare the first new cartridge to be fired. You do what you are told. You don't argue about it.

You are just like them.

Each one has a face, each one a place, something they did, something they want to do right now but cannot. A man who cuts meat when the housewives order, a man who kneads the dough into loaves, a man who sells fine scented oil for lamps and soaps and even perfumes, a woman who trims children's hair and a man who keeps milk separate from meat, a mender of the soles of shoes, a bender of silver wire, a shaper of glass into lenses. A writer of books. A reader of books. A man who can make violins from what looks like bits and pieces of wood, kindling, firewood. A cross-eyed girl who can play Schubert like an angel. A white-faced old lady, who walks slowly, who cannot make herself cease from crying, who wipes her eyes with the heel of her hand like a child does, who baby-sits for the children of her neighbors and enjoyed brushing their soft hair. A man with a broken nose, a spot of dried blood on his shoulder, who replaces broken window-panes. Here is a man with a curious birthmark on his cheek the color of Hungarian wine who was the sauce-maker in a restaurant in a city before he ended up here in this city, this city to be emptied. Here is a boy who stares through you with a face of stone, past you to the sky. He is a good student in a shul, reading and listening to the men talk about God. A scholar, his mother would brag to anyone that would listen. He whispers, mouthing words. Praying or damning, it makes no difference. Just there, really, a target for a soft piece of lead, a cause of your shoulder's pain, an image for your eye to see but maybe not for your mind to capture and keep. Here is another grandfather with a useless leg. A woman the same age as your mother, wearing a crooked smile. What does she know that you do not?

Each one has a face and a place and leaves behind a trace. But when you are hungry and tired, they are the faces of the enemy. So you stop the enemy before you become hungrier and more tired, while you still have strength, while you still can. This is the doctrine you have been taught, how resilient of your brain to draw this up from memory's depths.

Something interesting, a moment of note. Perhaps number seventy-one looks like your brother. It is not possible, for you have no brother, your mother and father are of purest blood, perfectly good Germans, Grandmothers and Grandfathers back into eternity all perfectly good Germans. Excepting of course that your perfectly good German parents had but the one child, you, and that is not what Germany needs. It needs more perfectly good Germans than ever before.

Number seventy-two resembles a girl that you once knew, who once let you hold her hand as you walked her home from school. She had dark stockings and her hair was clean and smooth like a helmet of softest gold.

Number seventy-three could be her little brother, the playful one who could whistle Mozart so well it would make you smile every time.

Number seventy-four is no one you know. Or perhaps an old teacher. Or the man who rented toy sailboats to use in the pool in the town's market square. Or the locksmith that talked with your father. The dentist's helper. The man who also ate pickles in the restaurant that time. The one who folded boxes onto a barrow in a high, balanced stack. Yes, that one. Or not.

Number seventy-five has an odd blue scar on his hip, in the same place as you, where a piece of broken bottle glass sliced you when you were a boy.

So number seventy-one sinks without blinking, without thinking.

Seventy-two falls after she calls.

Seventy-three would seem in a dream, and does not scream. His legs lock and don't want to let him rest. No matter. He falls. Everyone falls.

Number seventy-four is no more. Number seventy-five...not alive.

Seventy-six. They say – you don't know who the ubiquitous *they* are, yet isn't there always someone that says such things? - that humans desperately hold on to life.

Seventy-seven. They fight for it, every breath, clinging tooth by nail.

Seventy-eight. They are wrong. You could tell them that, now. *They* are wrong.

Seventy-nine. To stop breathing, to have your heart stop pushing blood, for your brain to no longer hold a memory isn't hard. Not difficult at all.

Eighty. The horror of death is when it becomes ordinary.

Eighty-one. Death is such a small thing.

Eighty-two. It is a trifle, actually, to stop seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five lives.

Eighty-three. You can try to count them all, think back, keep track of how they were extinguished, in a way that no one counts anything else, not like policemen and their arrests, firemen and their fires, fishermen and their catch.

Eighty-four. But eventually you give up because, and this is the great surprise, numbers change from things of import to bits of pointless flotsam.

Eighty-five. Their meanings, seventeen, thirty, ninety-six, are stripped away by a chemical wind created by the bullet's speeding, pushed ahead of propellant's exhaust and lead projectile like a town-crier's warning, *Here! Here, now, is death. Death is coming. Welcome it!*

Eighty-six. Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight. Eighty-nine. Ninety.

Ninety-one. And what you don't know, will never know, is why this is so, but it is. That it is easy for those lives to walk to a place like this. Or maybe you are wrong.

Ninety-two. Not a death place. Just a place, this arbitrary crease in the earth, a pale geological anomaly.

Ninety-three. Still, you remind yourself that it is a matter of numbers. Just arithmetic is all.

Ninety-four. How many perfectly good Germans are there?

Ninety-five. How many does it take?

Ninety-six. How many of these walking, these standing these staring these shocked these screaming and toppling does it take to fill the ravine?

Ninety-seven. There is the Ukrainian sun settling into the dust, faltering, as red as a fresh bruise. Ready-aim-fire. You are surprised to be so hungry. Ready-aim-fire. Ravenous, really. The train will bring more sausage. Ready-aim-fire.

Ready-aim-fire.

Tomorrow you will march to the east, so very sore-shouldered. Someone else will shoot here, until it is finished. Someone will cover the bodies with shovelfuls of lime. Always, always someone will count the bullets. Someone will sweep up the brass.

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