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Lijessenthoek

Joanna Preston

the fields of Flanders –
the rich red
of the cemetery gates

There. Red brick and white stone; an archway anything but triumphal. We wheeled our hired bicycles through the gate-building, blinking at the transition from light to shadow to light again as we stepped out into the garden. And garden it was. Rows of lilies, ranged in front of the crosses that marked the Canadian graves. The New Zealand graves. The South African graves. But not cut flowers – every grave had a flowering plant growing by the headstone, watered and weeded and tended. A garden! How must it feel, to be a gardener here?

a late baptism –
thirty four christened
'known unto god'

We found his grave. Row 21D. 4564 Corporal Stanley Coombes, 45th Battalion Australian Infantry, died 12th October 1917. I took photographs to send home, the first of our family to visit this place since he died. His full name, place of birth, the names of his parents and his home, written in a ledger almost too heavy for me to lift.

He was twenty-four when he was wounded and sent back home, only to be told that he would die of tuberculosis, likely soon. Twenty-four when he chose to

return to the front. Twenty-four when he was wounded at the third battle of Ypres – the Battle of Passchendale – to die of his injuries a few days later in a casualty clearing station in the village of Lijessenthoek.

family photos –
they say I have his
eyebrows

There were hop vines growing in a field on the other side of the cemetery. Pale green, twisting up their wires and into the sky. Fitting somehow, that beside ten thousand dead they plant and harvest each year a herb of bitterness, and comfort.

suddenly understanding
why there are no
old trees

I've read his diaries. Stained and smudged, they were sent home to my great great grandmother. He wrote quietly about fear, and mud, and missing the sound of the currawongs in the evenings. And how, one day like any other, a line of them were trudging across the duckboards, when a sniper took out the man behind him. He said he felt the grip of the other man's hand tighten briefly, and then let go.

from *tumble* by Joanna Preston (Otago University Press, 2021).

Song of the Silly Little Man

Joanna Preston

Once upon a time there was a man.
He was a silly little man.

When he looked at the sky, it felt too big.
He wanted to be big.
He didn't like the sky.

When he looked at the sun, it felt too strong.
He wanted to be strong.
He didn't like the sun.

So he took off his shirt
and rode a horse.
He didn't like the horse.
The horse also had some
opinions about the man,
but wisely kept them to herself.

He decided that bears were the way.
So he took off his shirt
and wrestled a bear.
The bear was old, with bad teeth.
But that was how
he preferred them.

The silly little man walked through a garden.
There were sunflowers reaching
way up into the sky.
He did not like sunflowers.
He preferred chamomile
which disguised the smell of his feet.

The silly little man
walked through the streets.
He liked red.
He thought streets everywhere
should be that colour.

Outside his turret he could hear a bird
sing *slava ukraini*.
It was a nightingale.
Its song brought people to tears,
even him.
He liked the shedding of tears, just
not his own.
He didn't like nightingales.
The man didn't trust bird song.
He thought that *slava ukraini*
sounded like *death to tyrants*.
He liked death,
but not the t-word so much.
He thought it might be aimed at him.

So he sent a big boat
to an island where snakes had been.
He sent tin cans of soldiers
to paint streets red
and blast away the buildings
so that he could be
the tallest thing there was.

The people on the island
declined to join the boat,
saying *Rooski vayeni iddi nahoye*
instead.

Some of the tin cans
were crushed by old women,
some of the tin cans

used children to paint the streets.

But above it all, still, the song
the nightingale was singing –
– *Slava Ukraini, Slava Ukraini*
while the sunflowers blazed
against a blue sky, weeping.

And even the sound of money
fluttering through his fingers
was *iddi nahoye, nahoye nahoye,*
Iddi nahoye Putin.