

Epinal

by Jay Blumenfeld, 398-C

Passing by a village here or there,
But nothing yet to take me back to one specific place,
Traveling, traveling, through Time and Space
By land and sea and air,
The mind hurls projections of its dreams,
Sets its goals.
Hope hovers patient,
Expectant almost,
Waiting for the event of my Words
The careful constructions of many moments,
Brought together joining Time with place.
Fifty-five years gone, most of a life,
While I return myself, searching for
I know not what for sure.
I am come again the same long way
By choice this time, alone but for
My eldest child and memories,
Plus the Hope. Surely it is not too much
For hope some closing sense will come
To answer questions and lay to rest
Visionless memory and complete these fragmentary dreams.

Different, though, in so many ways,
So much easier and quicker this time,
Two planes, an overnight flight
A pause by-passing sniffing Customs dogs,
Then the quick Metro ride from DeGaulle into
The heart of Paris.
No battle gear, weapons, and heavy combat pack,
But laden still with luggage for a two-week stay,
Seeking our small hotel down unfamiliar streets
Amidst the foreign language of the people
And bewildering signs.
Three days in Paris recovering from jet lag,
And marveling over tourist sights,
The Tower, Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre,
Monuments, the Art, Avenues and Boulevards,
So many slim girls, chic and boyish with
Tight black leather and hair cut short.

Another quick trip, this time South,
Swift, gliding, on almost silent wondrous modern trains,
Through cities, towns, and countryside,
Scenic postcard miles of landscape potential,
Picturesque and quaint, villages, sidetrack flashes
Of vintage small red railroad cars,
Stark contrast, those old familiar 40 and 8's,

Forty men and eight horses of older Wars,
They explained to us even way back then,
Loading us up for our journey to the Front.
Now I am ride rails again, the swift,
The Modern way, in luxury of First Class,
Past the villages, through the fields, picturesque,
Towns and cities, and open space
On to forested foothills and mountains
Toward the city where our car awaits,
For I have a mission, though my purpose remains obscure.

All has gone well so far, under blue
Skies and a bright shining sun.
The weather has been balmy, spring like,
In the middle of October.
The time of year is almost the same,
But little else to strike a familiar chord.
I flash back to the ship and convoy that brought us then,
Me one of more than 6,000 crammed in the hold,
After fourteen days stacked in bunks
In the clammy bowels of one crowded troopship,
That bucked and lunged its way through
Surging, stormy Atlantic gales and hurricanes,
Knot after knot of drenching rain,
Listening to creaking ship plates,
Waiting, apprehensive, minds ripe and
Tense with thoughts of rushing torpedoes
Fired from lurking Nazi subs,
Through Gibraltar and anchored in Marseilles,
Debarked and trudging through debris and littered
Streets of that bomb-battered Port,
Silent ghost column trudging inland through the night,
Dark and dense, and always chilling wet,
Bent against the weight of our 80 pounds of pack.

II

Not so this day. The trains, swift, silent, gliding,
Lolling comfortable on foamy rubber plush
Reclining seats, bags stowed out of sight in
Luggage racks above. No splintery wood floors
Or combat packs, cold steel barrels, cleaned and oiled,
M1's, carbines, mortars, BAR's,
Vivid, real, instant projections at transient
Sightings of the vintage 40 et 8's,
Glimpses from the past. Abandoned,
Side-tracked curiosities, moth-balled on
The side in station-yards we glide past,
Or reserved and ready, still in use?
In the clean comfort of 1999, 1st class,
My forty-two year old son a comfort by my side,
I who was only 19 my last transit in France,

No clacking wheels or lurching cars,
Only the liquid smooth joinings of today's rails.
So different, too, in every other point,
Bright, blue warmth, clean clothes, showers when we wish,
The clothes, the contents of our packs,
The very garb we wear, colored, textured,
Fabrics as desired, no khakis now,
Or forced marches in clumsy combat boots,
Cameras, film rolls, fanny packs, replacing
Web cartridge belts, ammo clips, side arms or grenades;
We carry cold cuts, cheese, and French baguettes
From patisseries, boulangeries, blossoming prolific at every turn,
Tempting with lush profusion of sweet filled pastries,
Infinity of countless fabled sugared delights.
What feeble substitutes those prized cold flavors
Of congealed grease with pork and beans
In cold drab cans of C rations, hard crackers

From those tasteless K's, dry, cold, hard,
Chocolate bars that way back then could taste so sweet.
We have seen and felt nothing but sun,
And balmy breezes.
Not the unceasing misty, gray,
Cold, constant rain, sleet, and snow.

We leave the train behind, pick up the car,
Heading out, in search of half-remembered names.
No more plan now than I remember from before,
Only the bare sense of moving East and North,
Searching through the names dredged from my Past,
Jotted from our maps and charts,
Seeking clues, hoping to stir memories
By some familiar sound. Some things do begin to emerge,
Carcassonne, Baccarat, Raon L'Etape, Luneville, Epinal,
K markers, names and numbers on signs,
Old names with a familiar ring,
Leading north toward Saarburg, Strasbourg.
Familiar names, but little else the same,
All changed with time, along with me.
The trains, this car, toll roads with rest stops,
Shopping malls, fast foods with familiar names,
Gift shops and souvenirs, convenience stores,
The blue skies, the balmy breeze and checkered fields,
So picturesque, gentle rolling hills and distant rounded peaks.
Where the cold gray skies with dripping rain?
The graveled roads and narrow, twisting muddy
Mountain trails, over gulches and lunging terrain,
The cold outdoor nights huddling in icy foxholes,
The dirt, the cold, the mud, screaming friends,
Slashing shrapnel metal rain from exploding shells,
Deadly falling foliage from tree bursts overhead,

No haven then in even deepest slit trench or hole.
No traces of what I seek to recall
On these smooth roads with Motel chains,
Souvenirs, hot dogs in baguettes,
Fast food burgers a la mode Francais,
Hybrid, global mirror images with their local touch.
On these highways what hope of finding those fuzzy
Place names from my Past.
Time to re-set our GPS, re-aim our blip,
Take a rural, local, scenic route.
Different roads these, narrow, twisting,
Following the terrain, through the fields,
Past farm houses, animals, distant workers
Plodding through their tasks,
Only in my head, wreckage and damage

From my past War.
No shattered windows, shell holes, debris,
Smoking burnt-out vehicles, pushed aside
To clear a way.
I am beginning to lose hope that I will find,
Wonder even what it was I came so far
This way to seek and see.

Fifty-five years, a long time indeed.
We have come too far, though, to submit
So easily to despair. We find a road that winds
A climbing way, snaking upward through
The darkening shadows of overhanging trees
And late afternoon sun.
We probe our lonely stretch of roadway,
No other car in sight, tantalizing
Glimmers of fancied recollection and recall,
Teasing hints of dim memories and familiar ground
In the dimness of declining day,
Enough to make us stop and leave our car,
Proceed on foot, following suggestions of a trail
Into a thicker stand of brush and trees.
More like what I knew,
I search the ground for clues, signs, artifacts,
Old debris of War, metal buckles, tools,
Rusted pieces of the past, discarded, perhaps,
In sudden rush for cover under
Intermittent bursts of enemy fire.
Not so strange if some sign yet survived,
Indentations in the ground, perhaps,
Where we had clawed away the dirt,
To burrow down below the line of fire,
Or deeper foxholes for a longer stay
If we found the time.
Nothing but the hazy memories

Resurrecting ghostly recollections
Into shifting, swirling shapes and forms,
No physical evidence, no tangible object,
To scrutinize, contemplate or give a stroking touch,
Only an unyielding sense of imminence,
Directing us back to where we left our car,

On the curving road once more into dimness and declining day,
Round one more turn,
Spell out the sign, strange in English in foreign clime:
American Military Cemetery-Epinal.
The turn, the narrow road through denser trees
Improbable phenomenon, unsuspected surprise,
Into the vacant parking lot,
A single other vehicle on a lonely paved expanse,
Visitor Center to the right, landscaped walkways left
Toward frescoed inscriptions on Commemorative walls.
Inside the office, a single attendant
To greet, offer guest book for signatures,
Late afternoon and but one other name.
Handouts tell their tale, as we wait
For the computer print-out listing names

From the unit I served with here back then.
I have arrived at the place, await my sign,
Five thousand graves and more in peace and quiet.
Maps and list in hand we leave that office,
Descend the well-kept pathways, surveying
Legends and inscriptions on the walls
Then move beyond into precisely ordered,
Still, geometric rows of White Crosses
Sprinkled here and there with pointed Stars.
I consult the list and charts, pick my way
Among the rows on soft, green sod, seeking,
Searching out foggy half-forgotten names.
We stand silent, surrounded in gray light
Among that multitude of quiet graves,
Snapping pictures, spell out dates and names.
Fifty-five years of waiting for a sign,
In the midst of those white markers,
A nineteen year old beginning my 75th year,
A forty-two year old son by my side I stand.

No mystical vision, sudden answers
Blinding bursts of illuminating insight
Only a quiet dimness of filtering light.
We depart, uneventfully as we came,
Drive back into the six remaining days
Of my Journey of Discovery to France,
Before another long flight home,
Returning with no clear, lasting knowledge

Only a calm questioning clearing in the trees
With its 5000 mixed Crosses and Stars
Stretching far in such long and ordered rows.

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