

Children's Stories

The War was popular, with alluring cruelties:
at bedtimes, pressed, he might manage
some grim anecdote, small and
strangely lacking in heroics or apparent purpose:
the cold or some long dead soldier's rotten luck,
the terrible grinding of an engine
that promised death or
the Sten gun's many failings;
nothing any kid would ask for
and all of it given reluctantly.

But that head of his was full of stories
though we only got them later, told by
other mouths than his, mouths not stopped
in turn by reticence and earth:
the great sheds packed with tiny shoes,
the railheads and fences and him,
his weapons jammed and his tongue tied
while ghosts in legions, little groups, wagons
and rusty garments followed him down roads
and occupied the corridors he had to be in,
pleading in babels and when he woke
to smoke a sweat drenched cigarette,
lined by the bed, their fingers trembling,
reproaching him for lateness, for his failure
to fetch their children safely from the gates
of schools he couldn't name in streets he couldn't find,
in towns that tanks had ploughed away
and left to rot beneath the rain and failed harvests,
schools whose keys, in any case, were melted,
or crumbled in his fingers as they closed
around his nightly promises of rescue.

Meanwhile we dug garden camps, liberated Normandy,
fought hard at Arnhem, died over and again to overthrow Berlin
and made him join us in our victories, dragging at his sleeves
to make him come

until he sat and watched, fag on, tab end cupped for snipers
and commented on military technique
as you'd speak of something vain or sinful:
the forms of pride, perhaps,
or some vast gluttony.

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