

Thinking about Home

Everyone did it. Talked about it. *Say, these toy trains wouldn't get you anywhere back home, would they?* Or, *They do have funny notions about breakfast here, don't they, nothing like back home.* After all, what was there to talk about here? The dead, the rain, the rotten food. Rumours, of course. Germans here and there, we were smashing them, no we weren't. It was a balance, thinking about home; it was necessary. To remind yourself, keep on reminding yourself who you were. That you had not always gone for three days without combing your hair. That there was another kind of life, that you had lived it.

No one talked much about going back after; there was a superstitious reluctance to do that. But stories, memories, most of us young enough to have school pranks fresh in our minds. It was something to hold on to, too.

Try to imagine this. A refugee train unloading at a station, the noise and the smell and the smoke swirling and rising, drawing your eyes for a moment to the cavernous dark roof, girders and blackness and malevolent foggy steam - don't want to look there, like looking into a nightmare under a child's bed. Now, say you look down again and see a young girl, nine or ten maybe, who looks around and around but seems to be alone in that crowd. She is wearing a dress that might once have been blue, might once have had a pattern, tiny white flowers maybe. You know that someone must have made her this dress, that it was a pretty thing; you know from the age of the girl that she probably loved it, tried it on and twirled around a warm kitchen. Probably there was a swing outside, and you can see her swinging on it, see her toes pointing in neat black shoes. What's on her feet now may be shoes, tied round and round with string to hold them. Her legs are streaked with mud and dried blood, as is every bit of her that you can see. She's clutching a baby in her arms, wrapped in bits of someone's coat; a green button winks for a moment as it catches a stray bit of light. What you can see of the baby's head is also bloody and muddy; it is very still, and you hope that it is sleeping.

The child scans the crowd, her head moves back and forth, her eyes flick here and there, but you can tell from those eyes that she doesn't expect to recognize anyone. So as you make your way to her, as you bend down so that she can hear you, as you bend down to take a closer look at the bundle she is carrying, which is now making tiny mewling sounds, as you, still stooping, put an arm about her narrow shoulders and feel what you couldn't see, the way her whole body trembles as if it will never stop, as you move her with her sleepwalker's stumble toward the big red cross and whatever can be done - as you do all that, you find you are remembering a doll you had once, after Ophelia, the way you took it everywhere with you, fed it and talked to it just like a real baby. And that makes you remember green grass and the feeling of sunlight on your skin, someone's voice singing, a host of things. If you couldn't do that, it's hard to know what would happen. Probably you would just die for sorrow.