New Fiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Marche-en-Famenne

The following is an excerpt from Jennifer Orth-Veillon's work-in-progress, The Storage Room*. Here, she intersperses real letters from her grandfather (italicized), an American soldier who fought at the Battle of the Bulge, with her own imagined accounts of the stories behind the letters.*

The Battle of the Bulge, which ended 74 years ago on January 25, 1945, was the largest and deadliest battle fought by Americans in WWII and the second-deadliest battle in American history.

All photos provided by the author. — WBT Editors

Three American soldiers in Europe, WWII, taken by the author's grandfather. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

January 12, 1945
Somewhere in Belgium

My Darling,

You are probably sore at me as you read this. I'm sorry. I write as often as I can, and even then, Uncle Sam doesn't handle the mail service over here like he does at home. I admit I laughed at the way you gave me hell in one of your letters. In fact, I read the letter to the boys.

To bring you up to date: we are fighting with the 7th Corps in the north who are using the pincer maneuver. "Pincer" is just like it sounds—a military tactic that actually "pinches," meaning we flank the enemy on both sides and press in. We pinch them. It works beautifully. We are planning to trap some Jerries in the drive.

I hate missing holidays with you. Did I ever tell you about our Thanksgiving Day in Geronsweiler, Germany? It was Roosevelt's best T-day yet. Jerry had an artillery observer in the town, and we hit him hard. Still, we took a pounding for the several days we were there. We were stationed in a central building that the Jerries bombed so regularly we timed our trips to the john according to their schedule.

Often, I daydream about you. Sometimes it's so real that I can almost feel you in my arms. Dreaming of you is one of two things I do other than work. The other is dreaming about good food. Incidentally, the Christmas cookies and peanuts arrived in good shape.

The November wave of muddy battles around the Siegfried Line that carried Brillhart and the Railsplitters, the 84th Infantry, east in December 1944 turned to ice at the Belgian border. They had to blink to keep their eyeballs from freezing, but the cold muted the smell of rotting. A few Christmas lights hung in some little town squares, softening the browns and greys tracks from tanks that stained the new-fallen snow. Frozen mud and dirty snow, brown and brown-grey stains dominated the colors of the Bulge landscape, blurring the contours of quaint villages with pointy church spirals and red clay roofs so they almost looked intact after the intense bombing.

Unfrozen mud could swallow bodies and fill holes, but against the backdrop of snow that spanned the flat fields and streaked the Ardennes, nobody could completely disappear. The cold preserved the dead in seconds, the look of horror or peace

seemed almost chiseled on their faces by the precise hands of ice. The bodies reminded Brillhart of sculptures he saw in the Paris Tuileries Gardens and he caught himself studying corpses as the snow dusted their bloodied clothes. Wounds frozen in time. The snow would never stop falling, blanketing the bodies, until spring turned the statues into fertilizer, humus for revitalizing the battle-ravaged soil.

Brillhart and his men shuffle-kicked and stomped their way through the Ardennes forest moonlit snow towards a Belgian farmhouse in the distance. Translucent smoke poured from its great stone chimney. The more the soldiers pounded the ground, the less likely that Brillhart, the battalion surgeon, would have to cut frostbite away from their feet, with amputation the eventual outcome. The thermometer registered thirteen below Celsius. They had to find a warm place for the night or freeze to death by morning.

I am sorry you cried at Christmas. I felt a little low myself. I can imagine the menu and it must have been wonderful. You should see me – I look like a coal miner, judging from the slack in my pants. But don't worry. It won't take long to get my figure back once I start eating your cooking.

Snow! When I was a kid, I always loved the snow. It's nearly a foot thick in the fields here. There's less in the forests, which are beautiful but show battle scars. Belgium is a beautiful country. The Belgian people are simple and homegrown. They live quiet lives and never seem to be in a hurry. All along the way they gave us delicious apples. You want to fight to help these people. Already, they have been invaded twice by the Boches – we are here to prevent a third.

Over their thick wool uniforms and insulated helmets, Brillhart and the other Railsplitters were still wearing the long white winter underwear to camouflage themselves in the

snow. During the past few days of the Bulge, wearing long underwear on the outside of their clothes became protocol. The disguise had helped them win the last yards of the town of Marche-en- Famenne, a three-day fight. The story told through the ranks was that, a few nights prior, the Railsplitters, wearing the outer layer of long, ghostly underwear, spotted two Germans cowering behind leafless trees in the winter forest lit by the full moon. Hunching over in the dark, the GIs first thought they were frightened bears. "Hände hoch!" one of the battalion sergeants had called, apparently mangling the German order with his strong Texan accent. The Krauts must have heard them coming but made no effort to run or fire. They raised their hands without protest as the Railsplitters surrounded them. Both Germans—now prisoners— had officer status. What were they doing alone in the woods in enemy territory? Rumors surmised that Krauts were tired and wanted to get caught by any ally before they had to confront the Russians again— American POW camps were said to be more humane. The two captured Germans had led the entire ghostly American battalion unnoticed away from five enemy squadrons and into the heart of a strategic Belgian village.

The rest of the Krauts didn't see the GIs coming at them from all sides and were forced to capitulate. Brillhart tried to get the American generals who implemented the rule to honor the insignificant private from his company who came up with the idea, but his superiors refused to admit that a boy who hadn't been to military school or even college was that smart.

White soldiers on white snow. A small town, big victory. A thousand men lost. The Bulge was far from over.

My birthday, Jan. 6, was spent in a town that I can't name — but I had French-fried potatoes (with salt!) and fried chicken (with salt!). I also heard a Kay Kiser radio program. What a treat! Kelly — the guy I told you about before — is still a Lieutenant. I found out why he wasn't promoted to Major: apparently, he hasn't got the guts, brains, foresight or

desire. Personally, I have no respect for Kelly, but I play along to get what I want. Then there's the translator, Urban – we call him "Burpin Urban"—who asks to be evacuated every time he has some damned minor ailment. The whole regiment will rejoice if he gets really injured and leaves.

We get decent food from time to time, but what we really want is a bath, clean clothes, and a shave. I am glad to hear you are working on a scrapbook of our relationship. I wish I could send you something for it.

Brillhart and his men reached the farmhouse with the chimney. As he prepared to knock at the door, he realized that the orange light of the hearth would illuminate the blood and dirt stains on the white underwear covering their uniforms. They would look like murdered ghosts rather than American saviors. Brillhart instructed the men to shed the outer layer, then knocked. A toothless man with a hollow, dark-stained mouth answered. He uttered something Urban couldn't understand and slammed the door shut. Brillhart's stomach squeezed with hunger at the brief blast of heat and glimpse of the stove. He ordered the men to put their frozen C rations on the ground in front of them as a peace offering.

A string of obscenities rose from the men. *Goddamn frog. Goddamn Belge.*

Goddammit, there was booze in there. Brillhart kicked at the door with his boot. Urban was a wiry nineteen-year-old with chronic indigestion and a Canadian mother. He tried to talk to the Belgian man when he re-opened the door, but the man shouted, waved his hands in the air, and slammed the door again. Brillhart kicked harder, shoving Urban in front of him. The Belgian opened again and gestured wildly. He held up all ten fingers, made fists, held up two more, and pointed to his crotch. Brillhart looked at Urban, his eyebrows raised. "What in the hell is he saying?"

Urban, useless, shook his head. “I can’t understand this accent, Doc. I get one word out of ten.”

The Belgian man held his hands to his chest in the shape of a woman’s breasts. Still speaking quickly, he pointed to his crotch again and thrust towards the door as if he was taking a woman from behind. Then ten fingers, fists, and two more. More thrusting.

Oh! And I’m glad you like the perfume I bought you at Guerlain. Tell Aunt Bessie she’d better stay away from it, that cow!

The further along you get with the pregnancy, the more I wonder about whether you are taking care of yourself and if you are being careful. I wish I could have seen you at Christmas. We would have had so much fun together—shopping, packing, mailing presents.

Belgium at the present is wrecked with war. I don’t know what kind of Christmas they had, but the people don’t seem to mind. They realize that there must be some destruction in liberation.

“What’s he saying, Doc, that he’s a woman?” shouted Lt. Kelly, the short redhead Irishman from Chicago. “He wants to fuck us? What the hell? Tell him, sure! We’ll make sweet love to him in exchange for a bed and some booze.”

Brillhart turned around and drew his finger across his throat, looking at Kelly and the others. He shoved Urban forward to the door again. “Ask him to speak slowly. And ask it slowly.”

“*Nous comprenons rien, Monsieur. S’il vous plaît, nous comprenons rien. S’il vous plait, parlez plus lentement.* We don’t understand you, Sir. Don’t speak so fast, please.” Urban held up a can of C rations and a pack of cigarettes. He knocked the can against the house’s stone wall to show that it was frozen. The man held up his palm and said slowly “*Att-en-*

*dez. Stop.”*He pulled the door partly closed but left it open a crack. Brillhart moved closer to the sliver of heat coming from the house.

“Wait, he says wait,” Urban said.

The Belgian man appeared at the door again, offering Brillhart a framed photograph. Twelve somber-eyed children dressed in white stood between a younger version of the man and a plump woman in black. Her lips were pressed so tightly that Brillhart wondered if they could soften into a kiss.

“He has twelve children sir,” Urban said, “*Douze enfants, c’est ca, Monsieur? Pas de place, c’est ca*?” The man nodded vigorously and smiled, revealing several brown teeth lingering at the back of his mouth.

“Doc, we can’t stay here. He’s got twelve kids. No room. No food.”

“Thank him and let’s move out,” Brillhart said. All twelve were probably sick and undernourished. He had dealt with enough depressing scenes over the last days and couldn’t fathom caring for anyone else without a few hours of sleep.

Brillhart felt his men’s disappointment and reminded them to keep rubbing their hands together to keep blood flowing.

“Son of a bitch.”

“*Merci, merci Monsieur. Au revoir. Bonne nuit,”* Brillhart said, mangling the few French words he learned.

“*Et merci. Merci à vous, nos sauveurs. Que Dieu soit avec vous jusqu’à la fin*,” said the man, bowing his head and then saluting.

The door closed. The emptiness of moonlight in the snow silenced them. Their hunger deepened, but they left the C-rations for the family in front of the house. *When you talk*

about buying diapers for Junior, I wonder about the name we should choose for him when he's born. I'm at a loss. I have considered every single name in and out of the family, and even some girl names just in case. Belgian names like Colette, Therèse, Jeanne, but I still can't hit it. I think about cigarettes, too. I've got more than a carton left, but I give so many to civilians. They need them more than I do.

Still stomping and kicking at the snow, Brillhart felt the heat at the bottom of his veins dwindling. His blood was slowing. Little knives of cold dug in. He was minutes from frostbite. Nothing could stop the necrology of frozen tissue.

When the Railsplitters first arrived in the region, he found the rolling mountains of the Ardennes comforting. They brought back pleasant memories of snow-covered hills in Kentucky after football practice when he would walk home to the wood stove and hot food. As the star of the team, he ran miles, back and forth on the practice field, crushing himself against other players and smelling dirt as he hit the ground. After practice, he stayed in the hot shower longer than the others, feeling the gentle pull of his muscles recover. He knew that he wanted to spend his whole life studying the body's power. Back then, all he knew of war were the medals his grandfather won in 1917 from the Meuse-Argonne. His grandfather was strong and quiet although he cried at odd times.

While poor, he was a nobleman in the coal mining town. Everyone respected him. Before the Bulge, it had never crossed Brillhart's mind that his grandfather saw things like uncoiling intestines.

But within days of the Battle, the Ardennes appeared squat and bulbous under a gray sky that faded or darkened according to the amount of smoke rising from arms fire and shelling. Only at night could Brillhart see a few stars. Now, in leading his freezing men in search of another house, Brillhart decided he wanted to live in an isolated, beautiful place like pre-war

Belgium, alone with June and Jr., away from everyone, away from the cities and people. He would build a beautiful Belgian stone house from the rubble.

Since you always ask, I'll tell you about the old farmhouse in Belgium we stayed in. It was typical of Belgian farmhouses in that the barn and house were located together, but the Belgians are very clean people. It was clear that Jerry had used the house as an aid station a few short hours before we arrived. Fresh piles of dirt indicated that a few dead Jerries were buried outside.

The men almost passed by the next farmhouse. There were no lights, and no smoke rose from the chimney, but it was quiet. Brillhart switched on his flashlight and shone it across the stone walls. Bullet marks dotted the façade, but no other sign of significant structural destruction was visible. He knocked on the door, prepared to wait, but the it swung open. The men stepped inside and swept their flashlights across the rooms.

A Belgian farmhouse during WWII, perhaps the one mentioned in these letters, or another. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, they saw soiled gauze, empty morphine ampoules, discarded scalpels, and shards of disinfectant tubes littering the floor. Sofas, chairs, and a piano with missing keys had been pushed towards the wall and the large kitchen table had been dragged into the center of the living room. The top of the table was slick with frozen blood and icy bits of flesh.

"All clear Doc," called Kelly from the kitchen. "Not even any dead ones lying around. Think they're all outside already, buried and frozen, so they won't stink us out. God, I love

German efficiency.”

Though it was a hygienic disaster, the house would do for the night. Brillhart and his men decided to light a fire in the stove, eat, sleep a little.

The soldiers found enough logs stacked in the small barn adjoining the house to make fires in the kitchen stove and in the living room fireplace. Slowly, their hands and C rations thawed. A few portraits hung on the wall, but the subdued eyes and high-buttoned collars inspired little empathy from the hungry men, who were more concerned about the unpleasant taste of canned rations. The flames revealed details of their physical condition– all the fat chiseled from their cheeks, chins peppered with dirt and stubble, eyes like dull moons. They looked to Brillhart like the coal miners limping into a diner in Loyall, Kentucky after days underground. Brillhart remembered thinking that no amount of sunlight could erase the miners’ ashen pallor as they drank coffee and ate toast with pork gravy. The color was stain, not dust.

Every meal for Brillhart and the medics had become a guessing game since the labelling disintegrated in the wet snow. Tonight, they opened three cans of meat and potato hash, two meat stew, four meat and beans, and five cellophane-wrapped fudge bars. They added two instant coffees and nine pressed sugar cubes. Except for the chocolate and sugar, all had the same soft, morbid taste of over-salted metal. They had eaten the same range of things for almost two months. It calmed but never vanquished their hunger.

Kelly stubbed his cigarette out in the viscous film of meat hash left in one of the cans. “Well, that was disgusting, as usual. Anyone want to go with me to find the cellar? They’ve always got something stored away in those basements. Maybe even booze.”

Urban followed him. Brillhart stayed upstairs and smoked one

of his last cigarettes.

Kelly's trip to the basement reminded Brillhart of Christmas when he and some other Railsplitters had spent the holiday with a Belgian family in the town of Comblain La Tour. During the meal, Monsieur Colson, the father, recounted the town's proud history. It was famous for its picturesque houses along the quais of the river Ourthe, and for its steep granite cliffs, called Le Rocher de la Vierge. After dinner, when Brillhart thought he had eaten and drunk everything the family had to offer, Monsieur Colson stood up and announced he was going to the cellar for the rest. He disappeared and then re-emerged with one arm full of dried sausages. In the other, he carried a bucket sloshing over with a thick dark red liquid. "*C'est du boudin*. *C'est du sang. Pour le nouvel an.*" He set it in the middle of the kitchen, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled out strings of sausage links. "Blood sausage. For New Year's.

As he stared into the bucket of blood, Brillhart his eyes swirled. In the messy pail, he saw intestines spilling out of downed men. Blond curls belonging to a private he lost back at the battle at Geilenkirchen in December swirled together with the intestines. His vision blackened and he fainted, falling off of his chair to the floor. He came to as Kelly pinched his cheeks and announced to everyone that Brillhart had never been able to hold his liquor. He hoped that Kelly would come back from the basement in this deserted house with something more appetizing than blood sausage.

In the basement of the house, we found two girls– one around 18 and the other 8 – and a smaller brother who was blind and badly crippled. Jerry had locked them down there. They hadn't eaten for four days, it was very cold, and upstairs, the parents had been shot dead. The mother and father were still in bed under the covers. We brought the kids upstairs and gave them food and hot coffee and blankets.

“Doc, you’d better get down here,” Kelly called from the top of the basement stairwell, breathless. Urban panted behind him.

The soldiers’ flashlights made a flickering kaleidoscope of yellow dots as they thundered down the stairs, then formed a bright circle around three children, two girls and a boy, propped against the far end of the basement wall. Pale and shivering, tears traced lines down their fear-pinched faces, but they didn’t move. The younger girl whimpered as the men moved closer.

Brillhart pointed to the red cross on his sleeve and then to the sleeves of all the other medics as he approached. He motioned to Urban, who said, “We’re doctors. We’re here to help you. Don’t worry” and then, “*Nous sommes médecins. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Ne vous inquiétez pas*.” Despite their tears and dirty faces, he noticed the two girls were beautiful, with heart-shaped faces and thick wavy brown hair. They huddled around the boy. Brillhart elbowed Urban in the back when he fell silent. “Keep talking, Goddammit. They need to know they can trust us.”

Urban jumped and repeated “We’re Americans. We’re allies,” several times.

Finally, the girls unlocked themselves from around the boy and the young girl looked at the men with a faint smile. *Nous sommes Américains.*

The eldest girl began to get to her feet as if to move toward them, then fainted, her hand sliding down the wall as she hit the floor. The other two children bent over her, screaming, *Germaine, Germaine!*

“Sh, shhhh. It’s ok.” Kelly moved forward and gently slid his arms under Germaine, while Brillhart took her feet. Despite the fullness of her face and lips, her body was almost emaciated. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. Together, they

made their way up the stairs. Urban stayed with her as she recovered in the kitchen while Brillhart and Kelly went to get the other sister and the boy, who could barely walk.

Brillhart put more C rations on the fire and melted clean snow for drinking water. The children brought the food and water to their mouths in swift, jerky movements, and it was gone in minutes. The men searched their bags for more cans. Brillhart saw a bit of color return to the childrens' faces and realized they were more beautiful than he thought. With a bit of regained strength, the girls looked tearfully around their devastated house.

Brillhart felt grateful when he learned the boy was blind. At least he couldn't see the blood and dirt covering his family home, or how the lace curtains had been torn from the windows, probably used for tourniquets.

The younger girl, Colette, sprang up from the table and ran toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Non!" Germaine cried. She lunged forward but teetered and gripped the table for balance. "Please, stop her. She's looking for my parents are up there. She can't see that."

Brillhart caught Colette and lifted her up as she kicked her legs in protest. He set her by Germaine, who enveloped her sister with her arms. Colette shuddered and buried her head in Germaine's shoulder.

"*Maman, Papa,"* she sobbed.

Germaine, who had begun to cry again, dug her lips into Colette's hair and muttered quick, soft French until she calmed. Brillhart dug in the rations and pulled out all of the pressed sugar cubes that the men used to make the terrible coffee somewhat drinkable.

"Look," he said, holding a cube up to Colette's face. "It's

magic.” He stuck out his tongue and placed one of the white squares. He pulled his tongue back in, scrunched his face for a few seconds, and stuck it back out. The square had transformed into a smaller, rounded lump. He stuck his tongue back in again and repeated the process two more times. Finally, the sugar cube disappeared and his clownishness had drawn a weak giggle from Colette. He offered the box to the girls, who mimicked him. He gave one to the blind brother, Jacques. He had steadied them enough for now. He would give them the chocolate at the next outburst if necessary.

While Jacques and Colette sucked and played with the pressed sugar cubes, the older girl, Germaine, who spoke excellent English, stood in a corner out of earshot of her siblings and quietly told Brillhart the story of the last few days. The Jerries had arrived in the middle of the night, kicking open the front door, waking the whole family, but it was too late for them to hide. The children ran to the room where the parents slept, and they hugged each other in fright as the soldiers climbed the stairs. The soldiers kicked the bedroom door open, ordered the children out, and shot the parents. They made the children take them to the cellar. The Jerries were tired of their own rations too. When they found nothing, they locked the children inside. That was four days ago.

According to Germaine, the cellar had done little to muffle the sounds of battle that raged around them and of the makeshift hospital the Germans had made in their home. Shelling shook the house for hours at a time and the children were sure they would be buried alive when the walls caved in. The screams they heard came in waves, followed by silence. “Either they died, or the morphine kicked in,” Brillhart explained. Germaine had heard someone calling for his mother.

The scene was a tear jerker. Unfortunately, I’ve seen things like it several times.

What can you do? Curse Jerry and carry on. When we left, we

notified civilian affairs and made sure the children had some food. And then we looked to our next job.

Brillhart made a bed out of the Army blankets next to the dwindling fire in the stove for the children, who had barely slept while locked in the cellar. Germaine sung to Jacques and Colette until they closed their eyes.

“It’s a miracle,” Germaine said. “I can’t believe they’re sleeping. Thank you.”

“You should sleep too. We’re not going anywhere right now. It’s safe.” Brillhart handed her the blanket he was going to use for his own bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. Colette whimpered in her sleep. Germain placed her hand on her sisters head to soothe her and then closed her own eyes.

Once the children were all asleep, curled in their blankets next to the stove, Brillhart went upstairs, harboring the stupid hope that the mother and father had somehow suffered only surface wounds, and were still alive. When he found them, he understood why Kelly overlooked the scene. He was surprised to find the parents’ room neat, untouched, except for minimal bloodstains on the floor and the pungent odor of decomposition that they had all gotten used to. Under a pristine white blanket two figures, a set of shadowy lumps dappled with moonlight appeared to sleep.

Once, when his father had rare a day off from the railroad and slept the whole night at home, Brillhart woke before sunrise and tiptoed to watch his parents sleeping. They snored in soft, cacophonous bursts. His mother’s snore was deep and throaty, while his father exhaled shrill, nasal blasts. He watched them hopefully, willing his father to get up and go outside to the pond with him to catch the early-biting fish.

That morning, his mother awoke to her young son standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Instead of shooing him away, she lifted the covers, and Brillhart crawled over her into the

warm space between his parents. He pressed his back into his mother and let the snoring lull him back to sleep.

When he pulled back the blankets on the bed in the Belgian farmhouse in Marche- en-Famenne, Brillhart was relieved. The gunshot wounds on their heads were dried. The blood had drained from the backs of their heads into the pillows and mattress. The Germans had made a perfect, thorough shot. Madame and Monsieur Jacques Bourguignon. A mother, a father asleep with the knowledge, Brillhart hoped, that their children had been spared.

It had only taken a few months of combat for Brillhart to understand what he now called German logic. Unlike the French, the Germans were exacting, methodical. When he checked German medical bags left on the field, he found them to be impeccable, well- stocked, with clean instruments. The tanks, the weapons, the burp guns fired precisely. The Germans spared no one, not even animals got in the way of the mission or the order.

Few traces of life sprouted back after their destructive path. The rumor was, though, that they were also tired. Americans were fresh from two decades of peace. It was their main advantage.

Brillhart couldn’t understand why the Jerries had let the children live. This bedroom looked like someone had tucked the parents in. If the parents were trying to protect the children or vice versa, some kind of struggle must have ensued. Sheets on the floor, nightstands knocked over blood and brains everywhere. Someone had taken care to clean up, to recreate a peaceful diorama. Given his take on German behavior, the scene both dumbfounded him and made perfect sense. He placed the covers back over the couple’s head, went downstairs, and ordered Kelly and Urban to take the bodies to the barn outside before the children woke up.

I read your letters over and over to make them last longer. It is darned nice of you to write so often. Mother never writes, but I guess she is busy with her sister and can't find time. I should be in bed right now, but I wanted to write to the dearest person in my world.

A few hours later, in the kitchen, they were awake, hovering over the stove to keep warm. Jacques plunked away on a piano with a few keys missing. Colette was the only one still sleeping. Brillhart and his men talked intermittently with Germaine.

In 1914, the girls' father had stopped trusting Germans after losing his entire family to the first World War. As soon as Hitler annexed Austria, the father dug a hole in the basement floor, barred it with a wooden plank, and covered it with dirt. Day after day, he filled it with his hunting rifles, ammunition resistance, yards of dried sausage, pork fat, dried potatoes, jars of apples, bottles of beer, and candles. He was determined to see his family survive the second coming of the Germans. That's why, at first, the children weren't worried when the Germans locked them in the cellar. But when they tried to get to the supplies, they found that the ground was hard and frozen. They didn't have the strength to dig all the way through.

"Why didn't you tell us when we were serving you that horrible army crap?" Kelly cried.

Germaine shrugged her shoulders and blushed. "It wasn't that bad."

In minutes, the GIs were chopping away with axes they found in the barn. Within two hours, pork fat and potatoes sizzled in a heavy pan. Apples bubbled beside them. The soldiers drank the thawed beer and gnawed on the sausages, giddy that they outsmarted the Germans with this treasure trove of food. Thanks to their father, these children would survive on the

surplus through the rest of the war. Colette started to cry again and run to the stairs, but Brillhart brought her back and gave her chocolate, which she had never tasted. The novelty quieted her briefly.

For the second time, Brillhart entertained the idea that June, his wife, might give birth to a girl. If so, he would name her Germaine. Jacques felt his way to the piano and played a song resembling Yankee Doodle Dandee on the remaining keys. Blind and crippled, he seemed the least affected by the parents' death or perhaps he was just used to other people taking care of him so he trusted the soldiers. Brillhart, Kelly, and Urban laughed as the boy sputtered the words to the song. How did he know? they asked. "Papa taught it to him and told him to play it as soon as the Americans got here," Germaine explained.

"Well, shit," Ramsey, a medic from Georgia said, "Your Pops had his damn head too far up north. Shove over boy, let me play you the real song." Ramsey sat next to the boy and pounded out Dixie. Even with the missing keys, Ramsey managed to render an accurate version. After hearing it that one time, Jacques replayed it perfectly.

"He's a goddamn Mozart," Ramsey said.

His sisters smiled shyly "He can do it with almost any song," Germaine said.

The GIs all sang the southern hymn of Dixie together and then returned to the food.

After more apples, potatoes, sausage, beer, and coffee, Brillhart sat down and talked to Germaine again. Germaine told them how Monsieur Bourguignon had put away money for at least one of his children to go away and study something other than farming. Since his only boy was blind and crippled, he decided Germaine would be the best educated of his two girls. The schools nearby didn't have a spot for her, so instead, she spent six months in Amsterdam studying to become an English

teacher, which explained why she hardly needed any translating from Urban. She had a second cousin in Amsterdam, who lodged her in exchange for housecleaning and goods from the farm in Marche-en-Famenne that Monsieur Bourguignon brought once a month.

The mention of the Netherlands made Brillhart remember the package nestled under his coat. He had been carrying a slightly-torn Dutch comic book that he found in another house weeks ago. He understood none of the words – he just knew it wasn't German – but the pictures of the animal characters made him smile. He ruffled Colette's hair and pulled it from his leather satchel, spreading the pages out on the newly-clean kitchen table. Colette seemed transfixed by the critters jumping over the pages and giggled when Brillhart snorted like one of the pig characters. When she pointed to a horse, he neighed and stuck his upper teeth out. She giggled again. Germaine leaned over the table, too, smiling at the comics and at her little sister.

Brillhart announced that he would return in a few minutes. Germaine nodded and waved. He heard Jacques still puttering away at Dixie on the piano. He couldn't see the children's faces when he said goodbye. Perhaps the first overwhelming stirrings of fatherhood. Germaine, Colette, and the boy almost felt like his children, as if he owned them, as if they owned him. If he could wrap them up and send them to June, he would. They would love America. He envisioned a bustling household full of the adopted French-speaking children and his own. Germaine could be the nanny and go to school. He pictured the crippled boy sitting in the sun by the pool he hoped to build one day. Water exercises would be good for atrophied legs. If he stayed with them any longer, he might stay forever. Brillhart kept walking.

When he reached the main road, he saw the line of surrendered German soldiers, many carrying litters of wounded. They filed past Brillhart as he went to the battalion station in the

center of town. Kelly would have yelled obscenities at the prisoners, but Brillhart kept his head down.

That afternoon, the Railsplitters moved on to another town, another battle. A few days later, they came back through Marche-en-Famenne. Brillhart had let civil affairs know about Germaine, the two younger children, and the dead parents. Brillhart walked into the center of Marche-en-Famenne taking photos for June, though few of the buildings rising out of the icy rubble remained intact. The Town Hall with its Romanesque and Gothic facades, the Mosan church and belfry, made of red brick with ornate white trimmings, and the classical columns of what had been a bank, represented Old Europe. This was what June would want to see. This was where she dreamed that Brillhart ate and slept each night. He tried to aim the camera so that it didn't capture the hungry townspeople or piles of broken homes. Sometimes, without taking pictures, he let the camera linger in front of his face to hide his eyes that searched everywhere for Germaine and the children.

He paused in front of a modest, partially-caved-in church and observed a small cemetery with a group of civilians gathered by tombstones that had been knocked sideways by shelling. A priest crossed his hands over the bodies of the dead before closing their makeshift caskets. Brillhart recognized, among them, Germaine's mother and father. Next to them was a hole that Brillhart knew had taken hours to dig in the hard ground. He looked into the crowd for the children but still didn't see them. He hoped they were drinking Red Cross hot chocolate and eating doughnuts under warm blankets.

Today, I saw townspeople burying bodies in a churchyard. Amid the rubble and ruin, a small group surrounded a priest who was quietly conducting the ceremony. Some of our boys helped to dig the graves. The parents from the farmhouse were among the bodies.

There is so much ruin. It's hard to imagine the Belgian people

regaining the quiet lives they once had. And at the same time, it's easy to see how this destruction feeds all our hatred of the Germans. It makes us want to kill more, and take fewer prisoners, to grind every German deep into the soil. Sometimes I am afraid of how you will react when I return. I hope and pray that you'll still know me, but that the memory of this ruin will stay vivid enough that we will never let the German or any belligerent nation get a foothold again.

We thoroughly enjoyed the cookies and the Readers Digests you sent, as well as the tuna fish, knackers, sardines, and saltines. Thank you. My darling, I must stop now. I have a big day ahead of me. I will try to write more often, but regardless of how busy I am, I'm never too busy to remember you and the things we've done together, to think about our plans for the future. I love you more every day. Brillhart.

Brillhart's wife upon the birth of their first child, a girl, in April of 1945. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love – it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate

them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: "*9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something.*"

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say

thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he *was* exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: "*They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it*." As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: "*In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the*

air were being shocked." He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next life,* Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is

quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: "*Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles…*" The primary antagonist, on the other hand, "*looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before.*" The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary

here), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou's proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. "*What makes the world go round,*" she says, and Skinner answers: "*War… Actually, I'd say money first. Money and then war*." America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn't here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and

in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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