

Blood Poppies

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We were marching when we heard the plane, above us, shuddering, its mechanics grinding. The band stopped and the parade halted. Carol Ann, beside me, ran into Terry in front of her, still playing her clarinet. We all shielded our eyes and watched Jimmy Morris try to correct the old-fashioned biplane. It was something he touched and talked about in a way that made most adults in our small town uncomfortable, but we were glad to let him show it off on Veteran's Day. It was 1949. The war still coursed through the veins of the men who made it back, the parents who tended farms their sons would never inherit, the wives who bedded different men than the ones they kissed good-bye. I was a sixteen-year-old girl and knew nothing of war but what I'd read. My father had a bad heart and weak eyes. My mother quilted and grew a garden and we called small gestures our war effort. Gardening was something I found I liked nearly as much as books.

Jimmy was going to rain paper poppies down on us once we reached the veteran's cemetery, where the parade ended and silence descended like something living, and all of us, so young, our skin aflame still with newness, shifted our feet and squirmed. I was anticipating that silence, remembering from last year even as we marched in our wool uniforms and made such noise in the name of patriotism.

The sound of the crash was sickening. It makes my teeth and stomach hurt to remember such screeching, and the calamity of impact, but afterward the great oak tree seemed to cradle what was left. The plane was upside down, and poor Jimmy, the World War II hero, hung upside down, still in his seat, seemingly boneless. His face webbed with blood, his goggles askew. Held in by his lap belt. I thought someone should straighten those goggles, set them right. It seemed a crime that we'd all look at him, his outsides revealing what we all knew about Jimmy's insides—they were askew through no fault of his own. Then the poppies flew, caught by some unfelt gust, escaping the cockpit. I caught one, effortlessly.

