

## Soldiers

Sunsets, Dad and I walked the dog around the block  
and he told me all about his journeys, the places  
he'd been in his life. The 'twenties and 'thirties were great  
until the Depression even then you got by, tough times all right.  
Then there was the war when the world turned to shit.  
Your war memories amazed me most, kitted out in jungle green  
how tough you had to be, diving off a sinking troopship  
when it hit a mine, sleeping with your rifle  
strapped to a tall tree above the Borneo forest canopy.  
The glory of war: weeks behind enemy lines without shower  
or latrine, the food tasted like murder and the morphine  
wasn't strong enough when they got the shrapnel  
out of your back. There was that one time you were shaving  
that one time you were shaving outside the tent, about 5 am  
before the day's heat and mugginess settled.  
Reflected in the tin shaving mirror you see a glint of metal  
in the bush that shouldn't be there, the flash from a sword,  
*katana*, or whatever they call it (you almost laughed the words)  
you kept shaving and watched in the mirror  
the Japanese soldier moving quickly, quietly towards you  
all you're armed with is a cut throat razor—it'll have to do—  
he creeps up and as he draws the sword from its hilt you spun around.  
Stunned and terrified the bastard cried *mama*—one fluid  
movement like a flattened forehead tore the soldier's larynx out  
as he fell he looked into your eyes, he was just a boy  
maybe seventeen or eighteen, did not have a blessed hope.  
Afterwards you carried the sword in your kitbag.  
The jungle heat was powerful, kind of life-affirming  
in spite of the killing, and the malaria would stay in you  
and keep these days to relive in future fever dreams, and sweat  
turned your bed into a swamp. You shouted and swore in English  
and Japanese the fury of killing and living  
it was like being back there with you in that godawful war  
as we cooled our dad's burning head with damp towels.  
Waking you'd stare and cry for the poor Japanese soldier  
and his mama. The sword lay on the wardrobe floor,  
next to a laundry basket.

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