the boy who loved heaven

a parable

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Mused by Barbara Blackman

I wrote this work after a decade of focussing intensely on death and loss in the Great War.

It is dedicated to my sister, Nathalie, who has always understood, and for all those who served as stretcher bearers.
The Well

he was born into death
it was all he knew
he was not afraid of it
for him it was the door
that led to heaven

when first he fell
into the well
a tumbling stone
betraying his hands
no one saw him
fall so long, or how
his cheek glanced wall
or rusty bar impaled him
hung him stuck
till it gave way
dropping him down
deep in the dark

with cold slap he sank
coming to rest
quiet as a dream
in the silted dank

yet through the dust
came a light
bore him up

not yet my beloved
I’ve known you so long
so many lives

I have watched and waited
so long to catch you

you must not die today

you will stay and
save the lives of seven

become a great light in the world to be
The Gift

afterwards he remembered
the cold bite of water
how it bled inside him
into his tear

mainly though he remembered the light
the sound of the voice
soothing
teaching

you have been given
a gift beyond price

you will always know
the meaning of things
in the moment they happen

know what is needed
and when to do it
to be the calm within the storm

you'll see the world
its terrors and beauties
all the consequences
coming from your actions

always knowing the reason why
Growing up Different

at first the voice spoke too fast for him to decipher sounded like babble all very quick a sentence in a word hard to understand voice seemed to mock him as though he was stupid

later it changed the orchid of his mind opened like a flower the dove of peace landing speaking to him in whispers like a lover - like at the beginning

all this time a boy growing up in a French rural village a landscape of stones a vast limestone karst woven with caves the soil poor, infertile sheep, wheat and goats the forests bare the oak trees spindly

in his uncle’s inn he watched over the pigeons housed upstairs in their pigeon hotel delighting in their flying ways

he knew he too would fly until that day he’d go to school learn to read, write, count help watch the flocks aid with the milking bring in the harvest follow the seasons sing in the choir play in the band

he was small somewhat scarred somehow too bright for someone so young

this being different hurt not being the same not knowing why
**Rémy and Lucien**

the boy was called Rémy
Lucien, his friend

Lucien was tall
wiry and strong
the son of a farmer

his elbow had broken
hadn’t set straight
was slightly misshapen

they liked to play music
Rémy played cornet
Lucien the horn

they wandered the landscape
exploring the caves
that dotted the cliffs

swam in the river
that’d carved
through the stone

the other boys thought
that Rémy was strange
called him ‘the gymp’
but not around Lucien
or else he would thump them

they made a strange pair
but a deep understanding
bound them together

inseparable

villagers would say

look there they go
off on a journey
beanpole and gimp
The Church in Lauzés

the first time it came
was the church in Lauzés

Rémy saw in the
stained glass window
a shape carved in light
beckoning to him

it shimmered
shook slightly
dancing in the heat

he knew that it said

I am here and I am the light

You’ll return one day
to the place made of colours
but till then I’ll bathe you
in blue, in yellow
in green, in red

all the colours shall become you
and you become them
till there is no separation
no space left between us

we shall be joined
as if by a tube
through which will flow
the rain from heaven
in which you can play
wash yourself clean
till you are only
colour and light

a thousand goodesses
in a field of pain
Isabelle

like a deer
scared of hunters
she was beautiful
but skittish

they said of her
when she was still quite young,
a dove heard her sing
flew into the church,
landed on the altar
and sat there transfixed

the village old ladies
swear to this day
it cried at the sound of her voice

the presence of God
as unmistakable
as the silver of moonshine
that poured from her throat

Rémy loved Isabelle
but she would not have him
funny shape, scars and all

she was just too brittle for love

so he kept it all quiet,
that great lake of feeling
rippling inside him,
so the waves would not touch her
cause her to fret

he’d wait for a time
when spark could make flame
he knew that this life
was just part of the whole

time was his friend
an infinite thread
passing through worlds
where his essence
remained constant
largely unchanged

there would always be time
time enough for everything

if not in this life
then in a next
The Outbreak of War

when the war came to Lauzés
it came as a flood

Rémy and Lucien
played in the band
for the first off to war

there were flags and bunting
kisses and hugging
women pressed their breasts
against those they loved
hugged them in ways
they’d not done before

no one knew then
the war’s full impact
what the industrial revolution
had certainly started
the Great War would
assuredly finish
killing the town

when the men returned in 1918
minus the dead
carrying the broken
and those missing limbs
there were not enough men left
to farm the fields

though no one would know it
the future of the village
for the next hundred years
would die in that parade

no one else sensed it but Rémy
who stayed silent throughout

wiping his eyes
so he could read the jarring notes
spread out before him
like a terrible atlas of fate
**Bandsmen and Stretcher Bearers**

they made Remy and Lucien
brandcardiers – stretcher bearers
who played in the band
when not in the line

they were mainly musicians
taught to be medics
inside of ten weeks

they learnt about the golden hour
how important it was
to get their patient
to the Casualty Station
before they died of shock

they learnt about typhoid, tourniquets
treatment of frostbite, trench foot,
keeping hands clean
not infecting the wounds

doctors told them over and over
a stretcher bearer saves men with his hands
bandaging
carrying
comforting

their touch could pierce
the fog of war
and bring the boys back

later their hands
would play for parades
for dinners and funerals

their stretcher handles
soon became smooth
often greasy from
the mud and the blood

seven out of ten would never return
caring too much to remain
Amiens Cathedral

It was so much larger
than he had thought possible

as if the masons
had bent the world’s rules
made the stones sing
the pillars float
the roof to touch heaven itself

Remy started to cry
the most beautiful thing
that hands had made
that he’d ever seen

he lingered there breathing
that ancient sweet smell
till a priest told him “it’s closing
time to go home”

so he left, sat outside
leaning on sandbags
beneath the great door’s
statue of Jesus
one foot on a dragon,
one foot on a lion

He watched the troops pass
the horse teams and guns
the endless stream of
overloaded trucks
till he knew what he must do

he’d transcend his fear
do what was needed
not turn away

he’d accept anything
any harm, any hardship
as long as he succeeded
in his appointed task

he could never face judgement
if he was to fail
Jeanne D’Arc

She came to him in a dream
a tiny pearl
falling down from heaven
tapping his head
like a drop of rain

soft as falling snow
she entered his heart
filled it with silk

her wings extending
brushing his walls
with her feathers
causing him to moan,
shudder,
fall to his knees.

Her sword entered him
slid down the scabbard of his spine
through the triangle of his sacrum
piercing his prostate
entering the ground beneath him
and there on his knees
the peasant gymp
became forever her holy knight

facing her like this
naked and alone
unbuttoning his ribs
he lay down his bones
till only spirit remained

closing his eyes
he sang over and over again
songs of Solomon, of Mary
of blessed baby Jesus

he sang of his joy
to leave everything behind
to be able to enter her completely

never again to have face loneliness

never again far from her holy light
The Man Buried by Mud

both Rémy and Lucien
saw the explosion
the shockwave knocking them
both to the ground

where once had been
a trench full of men
a mountain of clay
rose up and rained down

Rémy trained his eye on the place
where he’d last seen a soldier
furthest from the blast
and with Lucien ran forward
digging with their hands
lest a shovel maim
whomsoever they found,
the clay still hot
from the amatol blast

Rémy cut his hand
on a sharp piece of steel
the red smearing as he
dug in the loam
neither one paused for
breath or for rest
nor paid any mind to
the bullets overhead

a three story house of soil and stones
had risen up and buried the men

it felt hopeless even to try

but then Rémy felt something
the ground was breathing
he could feel it moving

Lucien joined in,
 kneeling beside him
together they dug faster, deeper
found a hand, then its arm
pure orange,
coated in mire
a tuft of hair, a head
they cleared the nose and mouth
then another arm
finally shoulders and chest

after half an hour of digging
they pulled him from the bog
breathing though unconscious

his clothes dragged off
by the clinging mud
leaving him naked
as if someone
born from the earth
every part of him
the colour of clay
except where the stones
had pierced him red

Rémy collapsed soft on the
wounded man’s breast
pressed his ear to his chest
listening to his heart
counting the beats,
the speed
measuring the strength
while tears carved streams
through the mud on his cheeks

this, Rémy smiled,
must be what birth is like
The Man Burnt by Fire

Winter had been cold but quiet
they were calmly eating breakfast
when the liquid fire burst out

the flammenwerfers opened up
not twenty metres from their trench
burning arcs of fiery oil
bathed their trench with fire

flames took human form
everywhere was choking smoke
agony to breathe
the door to hell had opened

that ancient nightmare, fear of fire
of all the ends - to burn to death
brought terror worse than guns or shells

half-blinded by the acrid fumes
he ran towards the screams of pain
through the flaming gauntlet

when Remy’d reached the blockhouse
fire’d entered through the holes
the air was choking, bitter black
Satan’s own volcanic lair

with both eyes blinded
lungs convulsing
by stupid luck
he bumped into a man on fire
who for warmth from winter’s bite
had worn an old-style sheepskin coat

the boy stripped off the burning mass
(the wool had saved his skin)
and pulled them both out of that hell
back to the trench with sky above
where he rolled him in a muddy pool
to wet his skin, cool down his burns

grenades were bursting in the trenches
men were screaming, black as coal
but he’d saved this man from hades’ flames
and laid on top so no one’s shell
could prove him wrong - undo the act

whilst beneath the man just moaned
repeating over and over
one single word

maman … maman … maman …
for days the steel rained down on them
shells and shrapnel like nightmare hail
any break from the barrage became
surreal - the silence deafened
by the ringing in their ears
the surrounding landscapes
now unfamiliar, strangely reshaped

the world’d become yellow
the colour of sand
where’d been grass
only grew craters
one into another
no gaps in-between

at first in the dugout
men gritted their teeth
tried not to cough
as the concrete dust choked them

each day became worse
a bitter erosion of will, of courage
the strong became weak
the weak became mad
and even that was no escape

Rémy watched with mounting dread
he knew that soon he’d have to go
out onto the anvil
avoiding the hammer
which, when it strikes
turns flesh to red mist

he had sometimes found boots
a belt, a finger, even an eye
even that was enough
for a name on a cross
far better that, than
be one of the missing
the end never known

he knew that the giant
who screamed while he dreamed
would be the first one to crack
watched him for a day, a night
before he broke, raced up the stairs
back into the light

Rémy followed him into the iron rain
the burning brass fragments
the hot copper shards
that sweeping satanic
scythe of death

the giant climbed the ladder
out of the trench
made all of three paces
as a free man
before a shrapnel ball
pierced him
flattened him on the anvil
ready for the hammer

Rémy bent over him
lifted his arm over his neck
probably impossible
the man was easily twice his weight

he staggered upright - almost fell
feet betrayed by shifting soil
but heaved the giant
up on his shoulders
eyeballs bulging from the strain

he staggered forward
just three steps more
made one with a lurch
gathered himself
the second one worse
a muscle tore like a ripping sheet
the final step, now beyond him
so like a raggedy scarecrow
grabbed by the wind
he tumbled forward
hoping for the trench

then like a miracle
Lucien was there
to cushion their fall
helped drag the giant
back down the stairs
into the dugout
collapsing in a heap
with every eye on them
but with the blast door still open
no one came to their aid

Lucien gasped with the last of his breath
damn you all! the smallest one here
brought back the giant
won’t someone help?
he’ll soon bleed out
in God’s name, has no one got
the courage of the gymp?
Love, the Source of Courage

when Remy and Lucien left for the war
they promised Isabelle
they’d watch over Giles

He was her favourite brother
who’d enlisted beside them
they all trained together
working as a team
Giles’ partner Jacques
made up the quartet

they’d made it through to 1916
when during a lull
they came under attack
Remy looked at Lucien
a green shell barrage
that meant chlorine, phosgene

Giles and Jacques had gone
up to the line to take up supplies
Lucien spoke first,
tried to sound calm
don’t be alarmed
they’ll put on their masks

but Remy saw the mask case beside them
and looking inside found
Giles’s name inscribed

Lucien responded
he’ll grab a spare
but Remy knew that
no one would help him
each man’d be fumbling
with filters and straps
every man for himself
in a chlorine attack

there was only one way to keep his word
so he pulled out his mask
ran down the line
fighting through men escaping the cloud

knocked to the ground
he crawled down the sap
through two smeary eyeholes
searched for the pair
while the green gas surrounded him
heavy and thick

by now the trenches were almost empty
those we weren’t running
would shortly be dead
then he heard Giles coughing
choking on bile

it had taken two minutes
Remy had counted

he now knew the way
he’d not need his eyes

so with one last breath
he jammed his eyes shut
tore off his mask, put it on Giles
then dragged him behind
back down the sap
left, then right
his left hand for eyes

1 minute, his lungs
were starting to burn
1 minute twenty
beginning to gag
1 minute forty
chest now in spasm

then he got lost
had to open his eyes
it burnt like acid
but now he knew
right where they were
and how to cut back

2 minutes ten
his throat began closing
2 minutes thirty
he was all out of air
all out of time

2 minutes fifty
his lungs gave way
he breathed in the gas
a terrible choking
a boiling of blood
lungs wracked by coughing
but still his legs ran

at 3 minutes ten
he fell to the ground
Giles tumbled beside him
Remy gasped in but
the air was sweet
the green fog was gone
above them not a cloud in the sky
pure east to west blue

through stinging eyes
it looked like heaven
as if Mary had seen them
and covered them with her blue, blue robe
bathing them in her protecting light

Remy smiled
he had kept his word
Isabelle’s brother
would not die this day
The Drowning Man

they’d been ordered to take
an old ruined mill
next to what once was
a largish canal

the troops had surged forward
making good progress
when a crump fell amongst them
threw two in the air
another flew sideways
into the water

Rémy raced forward
bent double he ran
from shell hole to shell hole

reaching the bank
he stripped off his kit
then dived in the water

the cold water shocked him
caused his muscles to freeze
struggling forwards
he swam to the spot
where he’d last seen the man
and dived into the dark

his first search found nothing
his second just weeds
coming back up
he took a great breath
and dived even deeper
and there amongst debris
he found the drowned man

his cold fingers fumbling
as he undid the straps
dropping the weight
of his pouches and pack

with a push off the bottom
he swam the man up
dragged him to
shedering reeds on the bank
turning him over
pinched his nose closed
just like they’d taught him
breathed into his lungs
till the man erupted
in uncontrolled coughing
disgorging the water
from deep in his lungs

then both of them lay
in the lee of the bank
a moment so still
in the midst of the battle

Rémy stared down at the water
at the blue mirrored sky
and in the reflection
saw the Angel of Mercy
standing above them

silently watching
as he always had done
That night the Angel returned in his dream

I saw you today

I let myself be seen
it's time for your eyes to be opened
for all of your eyes to open their lids

something so beautiful is going to happen

I am going to die, aren't I?

you know that's not true
there is no dying, just changing

you're becoming the butterfly
you've always been

what's left behind
has served its purpose
the husk will fall
your spirit remaining
steadfast and true

remember to step without any fear
open the door and walk right inside

I'll be there to welcome you
but only you can cross that threshold
The Dead Man Walking

Rémy saw the officer
walking through the mire
there was a shining about him
he did not flinch when
the shells burst near

he just walked, walked, walked along the line

Rémy called out
Sir … sir,
don’t you know you’re dead

What’s that you say - dead?
I remember the shell
I felt no pain

the bullets all missed me
no one obeyed
the enemy didn't fight me
so I thought I'd return
to check on my men

Yes sir, of course
but first you must go through the eye

Rémy pointed to the point of light
glowing like a second sun above them

It all was so strangely beautiful
everything was lit yellow like sulphur
with a great rush of pink just like a sunset
only that in the shell bursts were diamonds
that once had been soldiers

silver clouds formed above the dead
as their souls rose up, drawn to the vortex
that bathed that fury in its all-embracing light

the boy pointed again
you must go there
you must go home
or you’ll be lost

the officer looked at him
nodded sadly
and walked up
as if climbing a staircase
far into the sky

entered the eye
and was gone
in no man’s land, searching
a machine gunner saw them
and sliced them both down
Lucien hit three times
Rémy just once

the boy grabbed Lucien
dragged him into a hole
bound up his wounds
taking good care
to keep it all clean
Lucien would live if he was
sewn up soon

Rémy then carried him
back to the line
trudging slowly
so not as to fall
crossing back through their wire
into the trench, down the line
to the Casualty Station
where he found a stretcher
laid him down and sat down beside it

It’s all right Lucien
they’ll take care of you now

you know when you go back
you should marry Isabelle
try to make her happy

he looked down
his femoral artery
had bled his pants wet

don’t worry Lucien,
I brought you in time

did I ever tell you
that there’s lots of time
all the time in the world

with that, Rémy’s head dropped
and he began his dying

his blood flowed freely
it felt good to let it go,
to cease to have to hold it in

the world’s grip had been so tight
so heavy
he released from his husk
let go of his body
returned to a thing made of
mist and vapour

told his old wound
fall to the ground
like an rust piece of iron
and with it his body
leaving him standing
over his form
the Angel of Mercy watching beside him

no uncertainty remained
everything so clear
the angel was him and he was it
they were one and the same
two halves of the same seed
one on earth and one in heaven

all his paths had led to this
lines of light converging
to illuminate this single moment
everything meeting in
this time and place

he would die without fear
leave the battlefield
be whole once again

he would become one
with the silvery light,
meld into the eternal fountain
swim upstream to the
eye in the sky

he thought the earth was falling away
but found he was floating
everything he had been
blew away
fragrance on the wind
till he was only a thought
endlessly echoing

love …

god …

home…
postscript

the Dove of Peace

Love leads us to peace
Peace embodies love
Death returns us to love

these poems are me
talking to myself
so I will understand