

Dodendraad
Fiona Stanton

I've always reminded my mother of German shouting and the smell of smoke. Though she took care in my childhood to avoid this fact, to spare me that pain, old age has begun to unravel her kindness. Her words are sharper, her memory betrays her.

Ungiest, she whispered once under her breath when she woke to find me sitting at her bedside. *Demon*. She held her thin hands to her sternum, grasping the bluish skin. I watched the fear fall from her face when she realized it was me and not the ghost she sees in the structure of my bones. Someday that fear will settle within her like an organ, bloodless but thick.

Throughout my childhood, when her mind was a little firmer and her body stronger, she was never scared. Only furious. She kept a knife hidden beneath her mattress, and spat if someone brought up the Kaiser Wilhelm, or, later, the soldier Adolf Hitler. She told me about the day it happened many times throughout my childhood. *I hid beneath the house and they found me*, she said. She said they found everyone eventually. She said the other soldiers watched when he brutalized her.

In the past decade, her rage has given way to a deep-seated fear. . This is why she lives with my widowed cousin rather than me—Ella, who is sweet and fond of children. I offer my cousin money nearly every week, but she only takes it very occasionally. She thanks me profusely and says *it's not necessary, Lina, really*.

My boyfriend (I hesitate to call him anything else, *partner* feeling so complicit; *lover* so Byronic) is German. I do not bring him when I visit my mother; I leave him with our daughter, Hanne, for the weekend, and I take the train alone back to Verviers. I buy flowers or chocolates or sourdough bread for her on the way. My mother puts the flowers in a vase unless her arthritis is too bad. My mother eats the sourdough with smears of margarine as she smiles at me and asks after Hanne.

She's doing well in her classes. She's beautiful. She looks like you.

In truth, Hanne looks more like her father than either me or my mother. Brown hair darker at the roots, eyes too-light. I think it's lucky she looks like him and not me—she is the handsome kind of German, good blood.

I know nothing of my father except his nationality, and I only use this information to badger my husband. *We could be related*, I joke to him despite our dissimilar looks, my eyes wide and worried, and he scowls a little until I laugh and break the spell. He appreciates the depths, I think, to which I will go to disconcert him.

I did something similar back in University, when I told the other students of my Belgian mother, how she was part of that terrible, non-existent statistic during the war. Most lowered their eyes. Some maintained that what had happened to the Belgians was a terrible thing, and that the Belgians were very unfortunate to have brought it on themselves with their snipers and citizen armies.

No revolutions for you then? When someone marches over the border you just put up your hands? I sneered once in response to a towheaded boy with a thick neck.

If they are strong then we will follow. The trouble with Belgians is that you misunderstand order, was his short reply, and I turned away without a final retort. I didn't want to argue with him, and didn't think I could, really, and win. I didn't think he would believe me if I told him that there were never any snipers, nor conspiracy by the Belgians to antagonize the German soldiers. I knew he wouldn't believe me if I told him what my mother had told me: *the Germans turned their guns on themselves in the dark, Lina. Like dogs chasing their own tails. And then they burned everything.*

And I knew that he wouldn't understand what had happened when the soldiers were left alone, after the burning, after the looting and murder. Women's bodies and land, of course, being invariably connected, those rapes were a kind of battle being fought. And if that is true, then what am I? A war memorial, I think sometimes. The ashes of a library, the grave marker of a brother.

My boyfriend explains all of this to me differently, and quieter, and usually late at night when I am prone to starting arguments (his composed nature prevents their continuing, which I suppose is for the better).

"It's like this, Lina." His voice is soft. I trace patterns in the dark above our bed.

"Germany.....we, I think, just wanted to show everyone that we were strong. That we would win. That they should be scared, too scared to fight back. We thought it would be over faster that way."

But it wasn't, I tell him silently, *I'm still here*. I think of my mother and the boning knife stowed between her mattress and the bed frame. I turn away from him in the dark and pull up my hands so they're nestled between my jaw and my collarbone—they still smell like the sourdough I handled earlier. The words of the tow-headed boy run through my mind, cold and unwieldy. *Order*, I think. *You misunderstand order*. I should have told him I agreed. That I misunderstand everything.

Bibliography

Horne, John N. and Alan Kramer. *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*. Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

Lipkes, Jeff. *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914*. Leuven University Press, 2007.

Klinkert, W. "Review of *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I*, and: *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*." *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 4 (2006): 1149-1151.

Milne, Nick. "The 'Rape of Belgium' Revisited." *World War I Centenary*, [ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/memoryofwar/the-rape-of-belgium-revisited./](http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/memoryofwar/the-rape-of-belgium-revisited/)

"The 'German Atrocities' of 1914." The British Library. January 20, 2014. [\www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/civilian-atrocities-german-1914#\](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/civilian-atrocities-german-1914#)