

2017 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Poetry Category

Honorable Mention: “The Silence” by Reed Warnke

Tup. Tup. Tup.

The sound echoed like distant heartbeat, drawing closer and closer toward me. Closer to my darkness. My safety.

Tup. Tup. Tup.

I began to crawl, ever so slowly, not to stress the boards that lay beneath my hands and knees. I needed to get to the tunnel. Our tunnel.

Tup. Tup. Tup.

I reached for the wall, my fingers hunting for the knothole in the plank. My pinky had found it, like the U-boats that had torpedoed my brother’s ship. Their boots were still audible in my ears.

Tup. Tup. Tup.

I stopped for a moment, feeling a low rumble approach. I began to intensify, beginning to knock dirt clumps from the roof of the shoulder-width tunnel. *A Panzer*, I thought to myself, knowing that things had just gotten worse. Behind me, I heard the recognizable snap of wood being broke.

“Ein Jude!!!” he yelled. I heard Emilie’s scream, a volley of gunfire, and then silence. That eerie silence. Now I wished for the boots to sound off again. The silence was not normal. It gave me chills, as my insides shivered. The insults, taunts, and scrutinies were everyday occurrences from this harsh world. This newly found silence was unnatural, like the gray-uniformed soldiers that marched in the streets after the invasion.

As I kept crawling, I let my mind stray. Every time it brought about the tragedies, I would think of the plan. The Resistance. I must stay strong, not only for me, but for my brother Charles, my favorite cousin Jean, who was one of the first to die in the fighting, and Emilie. Oh God, Emilie. I could have helped her, saved her, done something to stop them. No, I was acting rash. If I had returned for her, my arse would have been exposed for those Jerries. I would have killed us both, and that would be a waste of my life. I now had more to fight for them more than ever. I would keep crawling for what seemed like an eternity. That was the only way to avenge those horrible deaths.

I began to see it. The sun shining through the boards above my head. I halted, said a quick prayer of thanks, then listened for the familiar click of the brilliant black boots of the enemy. Yet as my ear strained for sound, all it found was silence. With that, I knew I was alone. Our plan had gone astray, leaving one out of the thirteen resistance fighters at our rendezvous point. I pushed up on the wooden surface above me. As I did, it gave way almost immediately. It had begun to rot due to the months of spring rain. The hole in the roof of the small shack didn’t help matters any. Outside the broken window, the leaves had morphed into their annual autumn shades, and their rustling in the breeze had given way to something soothing: noise.

After basking in the sound of the wind for a moment, I turned my attention to my right. There, next to the rusted metal of the collapsed roof, sat a wooden crate. On the side was stamped *PROVIDENCE*. Something from America. Lazy Americans. Always waiting until others have suffered. I pulled the lid off the old box. Inside lay my father's Lebel rifle from the Great War, along with Emilie's small sidearm. I picked up both, along with the ammunition that lay underneath.

As I clutched the rifle I began to walk back toward town to meet up with other Resistance fighters. Through the woods I began to hear gunfire sound. I was late, I must now hurry to provide help to my compatriots. My feet began to pick up speed, breaking twigs and crunching leaves beneath them. The silence was drowned by the beating of my heart. It echoed in my ears like the bombs that fell from the Heinkel bombers on those dark nights. As I entered the town, I found myself running from alley to alley, side street to side street. Yet with every street I crossed, the gunfire became farther and farther away. My sprint had slowed to a jog, and then to a walk.

I found myself in the small town center, by the shops that adorned my childhood memories. Yet the colors were replaced by the greys of the occupation, killing any joy that this place once had. Windows were broken and boarded up, and some doors had been pulled off their hinges. As I wandered the square, the distant firefight faded into silence.

I stopped, standing next to the Bourges' Drug Store. Something began to buzz, yet the streets around me were barren, like the candy jars in the window behind me. I glanced around the corner, clutching the rifle. Not a soul was wandering down the street. As the buzzing grew louder, I realized where it was. Not ground level, but above. I raised my head and saw it. A buzz bomb as my friends called it. The Jerries called them V-1s, and this was headed for me. Before I knew it, the rocket struck Bourges' and there was a blinding light.

And then silence.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS:

This story employs interior monologue to create the immediate sense of danger faced by the sole character. References to Panzer tanks and U-boats establish the World War Two setting. The character is a resistance fighter who's now free-lancing because of a rendezvous gone wrong. Despite the setting, the most important conflict is not with the enemy; it's within the protagonist, who's desperate to survive. As such, the story's effectiveness depends on its ability to create the sense of desperation the protagonist feels.

Dr. Joel R. Brouwer is retired from teaching English and Communication for 47 years, the last 21 on the faculty at Montcalm Community College. During that time, he taught creative writing and mentored numerous aspiring authors. He also coordinated the statewide LAND Creative Writing Contest for many years. For an example of his writing, consult his travel blog, <https://hippieroadtrip.wordpress.com>