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Dan Gerber

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My Father's Fields

September 1918

They looked like blackbirds, my father said.
that first burst of shrapnel,
spiralng up in autumn flight,
and at first that's what he thought they were,
their glossy wings catching the sun
as they wheeled in the morning sky.

There was that moment of beauty,
the glint of it.
in that first day on the Meuse-Argonne
before the Earth came off its perch.
as if they had offended it somehow,
or that's the thought he had, he said,
the Earth rising up over every stored transgression.
and what had they done to bring this on?

Later it was all the dead horses.
the field before the river strewn with horses.
and his friend, Carl Johnson,
sleeping off the numbness of battle.
at peace almost,
but for the way his leg wrapped up behind him.
and the too-wide smile
of the bloody mouth across his neck.
Carl playing dead among the horses; he thought
of Carl with his Belgians at the county fair.
90,000 horses moving up the roads at night.
He'd never imagined so many horses
in the history of the world.
or so many men in their silent march,
imagining no longer, the September morning
as they looked out on the manicured stubble
of the burnt-gold fields
and the still green trees in the haze
along the river.
These few things he noted in his journal, 
though he spoke to me only of the horses, 
the things people said, and the newly shorn fields.

The trees along the river are what I see 
when I think my father's thoughts, 
not the fiery sky, the tangled wire, 
the splintered forest or all the dead horses, 
but those fields shorn of wheat, 
as his father's fields would be in September.