

The Library of America • Story of the Week

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HARVEY SHAPIRO

War Stories

1.

My father read the World Telegram & Sun.
Sometimes he agreed with Westbrook Pegler.
But he never brought home a Hearst paper
except for the Sunday Journal American
because I was a kid and needed the colored comics—
Maggie and Jiggs, Popeye and Dick Tracy.
All those strips I was to see again in high school
in their porno resurrection, strips
in which even Dagwood had a big erection.
I listened to radio serials every afternoon
from five to six: Buck Rogers in the 25th Century,
Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy.
Each one had a special anthem. Later,
in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, at an army base,
I heard them all again. We were in training
as radio gunners in heavy bombers. It was
midwinter and my group was on the midnight shift,
getting up and marching to class in frigid Dakota dark.
The commanding officer issued a directive:
We weren't singing when we marched as Air Force men
should—
"Into the air Army Air Force./Into the air pilots true."—
So from now on sing! The night the directive was
read out,
I was marching in the middle of a squad
when suddenly, all around me, everyone

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began to sing: “Who’s that little chatterbox,
the one with pretty auburn locks. Who
can it be? It’s little Orphan Annie.”
And so on through all the songs of all
the serials of my childhood.

2.

These are a conquered people,
said the British sergeant,
putting his hand on my shoulder
at the bar in Foggia, Italy—
this is 1944. He was instructing
me on why I should not tip
the Italian barmaid, as I was doing.
A conquered people. I liked the phrase
because it had the ring of history,
suggested dynasty policy, put
the British empire with the Roman
down the long reach of time.
But in the real world it made
no sense. How did it apply
to the Italian kids who came
to my tent each morning to trade
eggs for cigarettes. Or to the old
Italian lady in town who was teaching
me the language. Or to the girl
in the Air Force rest camp on Capri
I fell in love with Christmas week.
They were hardly a people, much less
conquered. They were living
as I lived, on the bare edge of existence,
hoping to survive the interminable war.

But high above their cities
on my way to Germany to kill the enemy
I was part of that sergeant's fictive world,
part of the bloody story of our century.

3.

We were approaching Berlin
at 23,000 feet, our usual
altitude for bombing. P38s,
looking like flying catamarans,
had accompanied us most of the way—
little friend, little friend—from Italy.
Now, nearing the target, we had P51s.
We knew that when their auxiliary fuel tanks
were jettisoned from their underbellies
and came floating down like silver baubles,
a sky full of them,
enemy fighters would shortly show.
A clear blue light flooded my cabin.
Through my window and hatch
I could see what looked like miles
of Flying Fortresses, the big-assed birds
in their tight formations. Blue all around them,
followed by white contrails. Later,
colored tracers would connect bomber
to enemy fighter, and then the black flak
would spread in the sky, a deadly fungus.
Planes would blossom into flame
in that bewildering sky.
How to believe all that happened,
as in a movie, a tv drama, or some other life.