Lee Foust

THE AMERICAN CEMETERY

"Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima, rien." —Marguerite Duras

I have written and erased this opening sentence so many times now that I'm beginning to despair of ever putting anything down at all. At last I have decided to begin with a simple statement of identity, to let you know who is speaking and why he speaks in such a plain manner. I am a man of letters. I have decided upon this segment of my identity because it is true and because the pun that it makes is even truer. I am an administrator and an instructor of literature at an American university abroad. I was born in the United States.

As a sometimes teacher of literature, I'm well aware that the style of this text is rather bland. That is because I have never desired to write fiction, and, despite many years of studying the great writers of the past, I have never sought a style for my own thoughts other than what the words themselves led me to formulate in a classroom. I don't want to begin this with an apology in the modern sense, although I do feel a little like Socrates on trial for daring to put words down on paper at all.

Quite simply, I have been thinking a lot recently about the American Cemetery.

Every day on the way to work my train passes the American War Cemetery along the Arno River between the hamlet of Le Sieci and Girone, the little town nestled in the big circular eastward bend of the river just outside of Florence. I have had many thoughts as these daily trains that I take rattle around that bend, tilting uneasily into the Compiobbi station. (My wife says that it's as if the train were trying to tip us out there, roll us all down the hill, through the town, and into the river below.) The Compiobbi station is formed in the semicircular image of the Arno, a shape that is repeated in the hillside above, where the river turns back westward to flow rather hastily through Florence and into its more direct, headlong rush to Pisa and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The neat, white, rounded headstones of the American Cemetery, in their military rows on the flat and always green lawn—even lately, during the worst drought in recent memory—often make me more aware of my fellow

commuters. Mainly they are the provincial generation of the Valdarno of the eighties and nineties heading toward vocational high schools or the University of Florence. Cell phones in hand, they beep out messages to their boyfriends and girlfriends or highlight class notes in fluorescent green, yellow, or orange in preparation for their exams. They, like most of my own American students, are the first generation no longer connected orally to the war over fascism.

Since the train tracks run just beneath the hillsides of the ridge that follows the river's course, the stations on this line sit on the high ground, at the outer edge of the towns built along the river. And since Napoleon outlawed the tradition of burying the Christian dead in or around the parish churches of Italy, the Le Sieci station is flanked on the one side by the town and the river below it and on the other by a walled and gated cemetery cut into the hillside overlooking both. This modern construction sits on the slope of the ridge, above its parking lot, like a sterile little city of its own. Once, I remember, a cell phone–carrying young woman, annoyed by the train's lateness and complaining vociferously throughout the journey, added this fact to her series of lamentations: "*Il cimitero,*" she observed, looking out the window sarcastically, "*che allegria!*" Her contempt for her dead countrymen and women's presence, begrudging them even this cement tenement where they are stacked six or seven high—although it was perhaps natural for someone so young and already annoyed by the passage of time—saddened me all the same.

Although he flew mostly over atolls in the South Seas and dropped bombs on whatever looked suspicious from a military standpoint, I sometimes think that my own father could easily have ended up in the American Cemetery and that I might not be on this train at all; that, in some imaginary scenario, I too could be buried down there with my father's contemporaries. I might well have been left unborn; awash in the wake of MacArthur's triumphant return, part of a briny skeleton in a Corsair, always an unrealized part of my father, and neither of us would ever have known my mother. Or perhaps obliterated, incinerated against a volcanic island or instantaneously set aflame in the air by a burp gun over Korea where my father also flew 108 missions in defense of the American way of life in a country of rice paddies and kimchee. He did all this before ever meeting my mother, before I was conceived.

One summer I shared an apartment in a medieval fortification outside of Siena with a Korean sculptor and his family—he had come to Italy to learn to work in marble and was taking language courses at the school for foreigners in Siena before moving on to Massa Carrara for an intensive workshop in rock carving. Curious to see his reaction, I told him that my father had fought in the Korean War. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he told me to thank my father for all that he had done for a free Korea. Although the sculptor knew only a few words of either English or Italian, and we were never really able to communicate, he and his family always treated me with an exaggerated respect bordering on reverence.

This oddly reminds me of the time that one of my students asked me which side Italy had been on in World War II. Of course it depends upon what you mean by Italy and who you ask. I imagine that most of my students don't know that fascism is an Italian word. My wife's grandfathers might well have killed my own father had he been Ethiopian or the invading Fifth Army—as I assume the soldiers in the American Cemetery were. Although neither of them seems to have spoken much about the war once it was over, one of my wife's grandfathers was apparently reduced to drinking his own urine and eating his company's donkey in the North African desert—a real trauma for a member of one of the most culinary of nationalities—and I hear them now on their cell phones telling their mammas what they had for lunch today and when they'll be getting home for dinner. My wife's other grandfather was deported to a Nazi work camp in Germany. He apparently walked most of the way back to the Mugello and was given up for dead by his family long before arriving home. He carried back a deluxe radio from the ruins of the Third Reich that now sits in my mother-in-law's livingroom, a family heirloom.

Growing up, I myself was faced with the dualistic knowledge that my father was something of a war hero and the nightly vision on the TV news of protesters spitting on soldiers either heading to or returning home from Vietnam. I can still hear them chanting "Hell no—we won't go!" and see that naked, napalm-scarred little girl running toward the *Life* magazine photographer whose photo made the "Year In Pictures" number, which I

religiously saved as a collector's item. I played war like everybody else, and I don't remember having any particular opinions about it, despite the nightly news. Real wars were too far away in either space or time to really have any effect on me. I remember the kids on the school bus chanting "Nixon!" and "McGovern!" back and forth depending on for whom their fathers were voting. I went down to campaign headquarters and got a big Nixon poster and a bunch of stickers and had fun sticking the adhesives to the poster and hanging it up in my room. This advertisement/shrine was still hanging there during the Watergate scandal, and it became the emblem of my growing political awareness, my social conscience, the consciousness of how comforting powerlessness is, as I grew into high school age.

I remember my father mentioning, out of conscience, that he could probably get me into West Point if I wanted to go there instead of the dinky state university where I had planned to go to study business administration and English literature. Of course he knew that I would reject the proposal, but he didn't want me to realize later that it had been a possibility and complain that he had never brought it up. Although not much of a baseball fan, a convinced Republican, and something of a racist, my father is, perversely, a very good guy. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not rather his opposite, an a-moral son of a bitch with all of the correct political views.

As is probably already obvious from the observations and style of this text, my own life is so interior as to be practically nonexistent. I do not believe that any action I will ever take in the world will be historically significant in

any way other than statistically. Nor does this bother me. I will second James Joyce and declare, in this, my forty-first year of existence, that history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. Obviously this text belies my reliance on history as the false mother that shapes us all, as the womb against which we struggle to be born as individuals, the forgetting of which is both tragic and liberating.

Fairly recently I discovered that the patriarchal side of my family is Pennsylvania Dutch and has been in the United States since colonial days. I had a great-great-great grandfather who fought in the Revolutionary War under General George Washington at the battle of Princeton. This is amusing in a couple of ways. Obviously, because the battle happened in a town now so much more famous for its university, and since I am a university administrator, it strikes me as ironic. Also I now have a historical and biological model of a rebellious nature—which, should I decide coincides with my present self, would be so interior as to be absolutely a-historical and, in the eyes of many, perhaps hypocritical. Did I feel differently about myself before I knew of my ancestor's pseudo-rebellious and probably meager military exploit? Of course. From now on, for the rest of my life, I will in some small sense always be the progeny of a revolutionary or an anti-imperialist race, even if, like most people, my ancestors only really fought for economic and not physical or moral freedom, as the patriots would prefer to figure it.

Ah, freedom, that most misused and misunderstood of words. The word that seems to send every proud soldier to their marble white-on-green

manicured cemetery or bloody incineration, their name on an endless black marble monument in Washington, DC, or the few local names on the fading white World War I plaques that adorn the walls of the parish churches of Italy. The word that launched a thousand ships for Troy, the very launching of which cost Iphigenia her life, her throat slit on an altar like a lamb, or that naked Vietnamese girl crying and running from a rain of burning gasoline. Annually now I read and teach Virgil's *Aeneid*, a text that simultaneously glorifies and bemoans the sacrifices made to war, to the building of an empire, or to seeing one's historical destiny through to its end. We are allowed to speak for these victims because we are the children of the survivors of wars. My own son is once again the legacy of all of the soldiers who survived these many wars, whether spit on or paraded, vociferous or silently traumatized, winner or loser, drunk or sober, both American and Italian.

Passing by the American Cemetery today, I have the inevitable feeling that it is flowing outside of its manicured hedges and into the streets. My fellow commuters continue on with their family and school concerns—they neither chant the names of presidential candidates nor seem overly concerned that their country is run by a political party that exploits soccer slogans and private TV stations for its popularity. The newspapers are full of programmatically random acts of violence that seem to prove that war is really all about outmaneuvering death on a daily basis; that it is more about survival than liberation.

The American Cemetery seems to have a new, larger mission today; a global mission that alternately offers a helping hand or a bayonet point to the economically oppressed, whichever is most expedient. It's opening up its gates now to include a whole new world of struggle and sacrifice in the name of economic freedom. In its white-on-green order, its forgotten commemoration of the war for and against fascism, the rubble is continually coming down around our heads or igniting buses in public streets like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. Or just bombs, always bombs, coming down impersonally from above. Quite suddenly, surprisingly, I have a silent and peaceful—although terrifying—sensation that we're all jumping from the Twin Towers to avoid the flames inside of our own consciences, floating out into space in an exhilarating newsreel image of a weightless future.

11/26/2003
S. Francesco