

ANTHONY R. LUSVARDI

RELICS

TOM ATKINS COULDN'T SEE why the price of whisky had doubled since his last time in the Salient. It seemed that the ungrateful French were determined to wring every last penny from their allies before the war ended. Another drink didn't matter that much anyway, and not just because whatever it was they were calling whisky was by now half water. He already felt like he was tight—not the swimming in his head or the warmth or relaxation, but the way his will seemed to float at a distance from his body. His hands still trembled a bit, but the movement was unconnected to any real feeling—to the terror he'd felt the night before an attack at Somme.

As he stepped out onto Poperinghe's main street, he saw that the little town was swollen with bodies and munitions to be hurled against the Hun in the morning. The evening air was taut, like current through a wire.

"Tommy!" someone yelled. He was too exposed in the thoroughfare to pretend that he hadn't heard, and the voice soon caught up with him. It was Cuthbert Gordon, a private who followed him from the tavern. "I'm sorry, sir, I meant Corporal Atkins, sir."

"What is it, Gordon?" he said and stopped so that the boy, coming at a jog, bumped up against him awkwardly and then grinned just as awkwardly, the gaps in his teeth reminding Atkins of a child waiting for permanent incisors. The boy had been at Messines but was still green. After the Durham Light Infantry had been moved back into the Salient around Ypres, he'd been assigned to Atkins' platoon, where they'd realized that they'd known each other passingly as children—though Atkins was six years older—and their mothers were cordial acquaintances.

"Well?" Atkins said. He felt irritation, but the syllable came out softly.

"Tomorrow, sir—"

He started to walk again. He knew what the boy was going to ask.

"Tomorrow—" Gordon tried again, then grinned painfully.

"You were at Messines?" Atkins asked.

“Mechanical transport, sir, supplying drums for the Livens Projectors.”

Messines hadn't been like the other battles. Their sappers had begun tunneling mines under the German lines a year before and packed them with five hundred tonnes of explosive. When the mines blew, Atkins and his squad, in a dugout a mile away, felt like dice in a pot being shaken. As they stumbled out of the earth, gasping and coughing, the artillery bombardment began again, like a false dawn in the east. When they reached the Hun lines, there was nothing left but a thousand-yard gash. The largest piece of German he saw was a foot still snug in its boot. It was the only time he'd ever felt safe walking upright into battle.

“Feel like going to Talbot House?” Atkins asked. “They might have a picture in the barn. Charlie Chaplin, maybe.” Talbot House was a kind of social club run by a pair of army chaplains. It was open to all, irrespective of rank, and he hoped there was a picture because he didn't feel much like talking about the next day's offensive.

“That's a fine idea, sir,” Gordon said, suddenly garrulous from whatever whisky he'd downed before following Atkins from the tavern. “It's nice to be in a house with wallpaper, and the padre there's a good sort.”

Atkins nodded noncommittally. They paused for a pair of mules dragging a broken eighteen-pounder and a sullen troop of Chinamen who'd been shipped in to build munitions depots.

“Feels like the dockyard at Hartlepool, doesn't it? All the activity, I mean,” the boy said. Atkins nodded again.

They turned onto a side street, from which they could hear one of Talbot House's pianos. A key was out of tune, giving the instrument a jangly, raucous sound. As they entered the front garden they could see that the house was crowded that night.

“I'm sorry, sir, it's just, I—”

“Tomorrow? Going over the top?”

The boy breathed a deep, relieved sigh. “Well, how do you do it, sir?”

The question sounded almost quaint, as if Atkins were an elderly immigrant hearing some snippet of a childhood dialect after a lifetime in a far off country. He almost smiled. “You either keep going or face the firing squad,” he said.

Gordon shifted, unsatisfied. What did he want—a speech about the sanctity of Belgian neutrality? Two years ago someone with Atkins' same name had been moved by newspaper accounts of the rape of Belgium and

the certainty that the war would be short, right, and patriotic. No one who hadn't served would be able to find a wife after, one of his mates had said, going off to enlist. Good men would teach their sons about that autumn.

"One of the chaps here said something about seeing angels at the battle of Mons," Gordon said, breaking the silence. "You suppose it's true?"

"I wasn't at Mons."

"They say they found arrow wounds in the Hun soldiers after the battle," he persisted. "But no arrows."

Atkins pivoted abruptly to face him. "You know what's inside those thermite canisters you delivered to the Livens Projectors at Messines? Aluminium powder and iron oxide. When the two ignite in the air, they burn at two thousand degrees—like the sky itself turned to fire. Ground's still too hot to walk on an hour later, barbed wire and helmets and guns all melted together. The men—husks. Just ashy husks."

The private stuttered. Atkins felt bad, shrugged, and walked silently from the garden.

"Whatever you do," Ricketts was advising Gordon on the train, "don't sit on the ground." The Durham Light Infantry was packed onto open rail wagons for the short, slow trip into the Salient, men hanging indifferently over the carts' low wooden sides. They reminded Atkins of the trolleys the miners used to haul coal outside Durham. "The Hun stuff is heavier than air, so the vapour pools in the trenches and sinks into the ground. It soaks into your clothing if you sit, which is worse than breathing the stuff in."

Ricketts, a lance corporal, was the longest surviving of their unit after Atkins. He always managed to adapt to his surroundings, like a chameleon. There was even something triangular and lizard-like about his face and his quick, darting movements. He wasn't a bad chap by any means—not reptilian in any other way—though there was something in him of the primeval survivor. He seemed genuinely to delight in the crude pleasures of their brief leaves in the French frontline towns, and he was always winning bets that kept him flush with cash. When they'd first arrived in the Salient, he'd bet Atkins that in two years' time the front would not have moved ten miles, and he'd won. Still, he was an easy talker, which helped occupy the men's minds at times like this. Atkins wished he'd have come up with something reassuring to tell Gordon the night before, but he still didn't know what that might have been. The boy had squeezed into the car next to Atkins that morning,

mumbling a shy greeting.

The train idled for a while. Atkins didn't like the exposure, though they hadn't seen any Hun planes yet. Their own observation balloons floated peacefully above, plump sausages dangling loose strings from both ends.

Gordon was asking about angels again. "It's in the papers at home," he said to Ricketts. "They say even the Huns saw them."

"I never saw no bowmen—angelic or otherwise," Ricketts answered, "but I did see the Huns crucify a Canadian."

"You never said you'd seen that before," said a private who'd lost repeatedly to Ricketts at pontoon.

"Well, I knew a Canadian who saw it right here at Ypres." He pronounced it "Wipers." "Huns captured a barn filled with forty wounded. They bayoneted all but one, then stuck him up on the barn door. Canucks took the ground back and found him hanging there, bayonets through his hands and feet, body all riddled with bullets."

"I heard they took the body off a crucifix in one of these Belgian churches and put him up on it instead," interrupted another soldier.

"Still alive?" asked Gordon.

"Of course."

"That's why the Canadians won't rescue Hun wounded," Ricketts explained. Then he turned to Gordon, holding up an instructive finger. "It's better to let Fritz collect the wounded—if they're wounded badly enough—than to finish them off. The more men they use tending the wounded, the fewer there are shooting at us."

A clanking shuddered through the train, and the wagons lurched forward. The men seemed in surprisingly good spirits, Atkins thought as a howl of bawdy laughter rose from the wagon ahead of them.

"The papers say Fritz is running low on food and ammunition on account of the blockade," Gordon offered. "They've only got turnips to eat in Berlin."

"Low on food maybe, but not so low on bullets," someone answered.

"They're using bodies to make bombs now, you know," added another. "No need to import those."

"They can get six pounds of glycerin from one corpse," Ricketts confirmed. "Not a bad resource at all."

"That's barbaric," Gordon whispered.

Ricketts shrugged. "The factory's in the forest just over the Rhine, sur-

rounded by an electrified fence.”

The boy looked hesitantly towards Atkins, who simply shrugged. “The bodies are only going to rot otherwise.”

The rumbling from the German lines was like the sound of a train coming through a station at full speed, but somehow Gordon was still prattling on about the history of Durham Castle or some such thing. “...English Sion... never been breached...” Ricketts indulged him, occasionally interjecting something about Cromwell massacring Scots or the relics preserved in the cathedral. Atkins was grateful—conversation distracted everyone from what was coming—though on another day Gordon’s nerves might have provoked resentment. Since new men tended not to last, the veterans often held them at a distance. After the Somme, Atkins calculated that his company had suffered three hundred and fifty percent casualties—the sort of result a civilian might have dismissed as mathematically impossible.

“It seems a bit absurd now, doesn’t it? The relics, I mean,” Atkins said. Every time they dug new fortifications they turned up skeletons; sometimes green-brown mummies wriggled from the walls of their trenches like worms pushed by the rain and shifting earth.

Ricketts changed the conversation to the great round doorknockers on the front of the cathedral doors, which were meant to look like lions’ faces. They looked like the PH helmets they issued after the Huns started using gas. “They were these flannel hoods, you see, with two round goggles for the eyes. They looked like the portals of a ship and an exhaust valve with a faucet for a mouth. Bloody awful things.”

White and orange flashes stabbed the air behind them, while ahead of them the creeping barrage methodically undid the work of creation, splintering what remained of trees and churning metal and mud into a moonscape of craters steadily filling with rainwater. From the lip of one of the craters a cross projected sideways, and they passed close enough to read the inscription on a strip of tin—*Soldat Anglais, Inconnu, 1 julliet 1916*. They were in the second wave—a mopping-up party—and so far they’d moved as quickly across No Man’s Land as in any battle except Messines. The attacking company, not wanting to fall out of sync with the timetable and walk into the bombardment, was still lingering at the Blue Line when Atkins’ platoon reached the objective. The air in the trench was thick with cordite.

“We had to throw a couple of Mills bombs into a bunker down that way,” the lieutenant of the attacking company explained to their sergeant. “Now it’s a mess inside. Fritz built these bunkers so you can’t throw the grenades straight in; you have to reach around the wall and risk having your hand shot off, so you best be quick about it. Not many Huns otherwise.”

The lieutenant checked his wristwatch and ordered his men forward.

Mopping-up meant using their bayonets to make sure none of the Huns they found were playing dead. The sergeant wanted to put a dressing station in the bunker that the lieutenant had just indicated, and he ordered Atkins and his squad to clear it out. Gordon had stayed on Atkins’ heels since they’d gone over the top, but after putting his head through the door of the bunker Atkins turned him away. “Go help Ricketts clear that blockage.”

Gordon looked at him, his eyes wide like a schoolboy more hurt by rejection than terrified of Hun shells. The memory of the boy’s somber mother suddenly came back to him. She had married an older man, a widower who needed someone to take care of his children. Gordon was her only child—his siblings were all half-brothers and half-sisters—and the youngest of the family. He must have been around ten or twelve when his father died. Atkins’ mother had visited Mrs. Gordon not long after her husband’s death and remarked on how meticulously she had maintained all of the dead man’s effects. She even kept his place set at the dinner table.

“Help the lance corporal take care of those blockages before the rain makes them worse,” Atkins repeated. There’d been at least a half-dozen Huns in the bunker—it was hard to tell—and they’d have to scrape them from the ceiling and walls.

There was little mopping-up in the trench outside the bunker. Fritz had left his forwardmost line sparsely defended, which made Atkins nervous. If they were to maintain the advance, their engineers would need to get their howitzers and eighteen-pounders up to these lines by the afternoon, and that would be difficult if the rain kept up.

When the timetable called for it, they began advancing carefully again using Fritz’s communications trenches. The trenches zigzagged to diffuse the effects of explosions. Around one turn Atkins came face-to-face with a perfectly upright German corpse, the body wedged stiffly into place by a vertical support beam on one side and another beam that had fallen about waist height on the other. As he stepped closer he noticed that a helmet had protected the boy’s thick, straw-coloured hair from the mud, but the front

of the body had been shorn away so precisely that the organs remained as neatly in place as in an anatomy book diagram. He paused, fascinated. He'd enjoyed anatomy in school and could pick out the intestines, liver, and even gall bladder. He tried to remember the name of the membrane that held it all together, which by some strange chance had remained unruptured. It was something like "pericardium," but that wasn't it because the pericardium is the sack that holds the heart.

"Poor bloke," Gordon said as he came up behind him and extended a sheepish hand to Atkins' elbow, as if comforting the bereaved.

"Peritoneum," Atkins said.

The attack was stalled at the Black Line. The rain had picked up, and Atkins could see from the ridge they'd captured that their own artillery would not make it far beyond Ypres. A runner came back and reported that the bombardment had not touched a string of pillboxes at the Green Line. After conferring with the captain, their lieutenant gave orders to reverse the trenches and prepare to hold the position.

The Hun trenches were well-built and more elaborate than their own, but there were blockages where they'd taken hits and spots where the water was already ankle-deep. Atkins and two others were assigned to clear the major blockages and shore up the walls as best they could with whatever timber they could find. Gordon was twenty yards away on the ridge of the trench, absorbed in shovelling, throwing up a parapet on the Hun-facing side. When he noticed Atkins, his lips twitched upward into a grin that seemed absurd for someone ankle-deep in slime and bits of exploded Hun. He'd stripped down to his shirt to dig, and Atkins had the impulse to shout at him to cover up. Soaked through with rain and outlined against the livid sky, his spindly arms and shallow chest made him look like the frailest boy he'd ever seen.

He hadn't detected it—the faint whine of an incoming shell—until the screech that meant it was already descending. Their own bombardment had diminished, but the warning noises were still obscured. This one passed overhead into the formless wasteland between the captured German trenches. Fritz didn't seem to be targeting specific positions or softening them up for a counterattack just yet, only making it difficult for them to settle in. Still, it meant his artillery had survived, and he was now confident enough to risk exposing its position. They'd pushed the Salient forward, but there

would be no breakthrough—at least not as long as the rain continued.

“Dig, men!” their sergeant shouted and joined Gordon’s party filling sandbags for a machine gun nest. When Fritz counterattacked, he’d have the advantage of striking at the rear of the fortifications, covering ground already swept free of barbed wire, facing troops worn down from the day’s advance.

A quarter of an hour later, another shell fell far to their left but closer to the trench. Ricketts heard it a split second before anyone else—he’d been at the front long enough to judge the size and trajectory of incoming rounds by ear—and when he yelled “Down!” they all dove into the mud. Gordon—bloody fool—was still shovelling when Atkins plunged into the water. Then there was more thunder, another screech, and more cacophony as three or maybe four shells fell in such rapid succession that it was hard to distinguish the ringing in their ears from the incoming projectiles. Atkins couldn’t tell where they’d fallen, and it was a full minute before he dared to stagger up. He ran his hands under his helmet and then over his limbs and torso. He was slick with mud but whole.

“No—” The machine gun nest that Gordon and the sergeant were constructing had been blown back into the trench. Gordon’s body was lying in the water like a crumpled tarpaulin tossed against a fence.

The boy was talking quietly to himself, and Atkins slid down to his knees beside him. “Are you one of us or one of our enemies?” he asked, and then recognized him. “Oh, Tom—Tom, do you see—” He lost the sentence in a wet cough.

Atkins wiped mud from his lips. “You’re hurt,” he said. He ran his hands over Gordon’s limbs and head. An arm was badly broken, and the mud around his mouth and nostrils was mixed with blood. Atkins called out for the sergeant, but there was no response. “Stretcher!” he yelled, but he knew the stretcher-bearers hadn’t made it that far forward yet. Blood had soaked through Gordon’s shirt as well, though it was hard to gauge how much because of the viscous layer of mud over everything. “Stretcher!” he yelled again, then said, “It’s just a small wound. Don’t speak if it hurts. Might be in a lung.”

The boy’s rheumy eyes focused on something in the distance, and the corners of his mouth twitched upward into that stupid, grateful smile. Atkins fumbled for the first-aid kit sewn into a cotton envelope inside his shirt, emptied an ampoule of iodine onto Gordon’s chest, lifted his upper body

gently off the ground, and wrapped the bandage around his torso.

“We need to get you to the dressing station,” he said.

Ricketts approached from behind and gave Atkins a deliberate, skeptical look. “No sign of the sergeant, sir,” he said.

“The lieutenant?”

Ricketts shook his head. “What should we do, sir?”

Atkins calculated the probabilities in his head—the distance through the communications trench, the blood Gordon had already lost, the piece of metal in his chest—but then felt a warm tightening in his own chest, like fingers wrapped around his heart, squeezing until he gave in.

“Keep low.” He gestured towards the cave-in. “Clear some way through. No one up on the ridge, but you have to get a machine gun into position. Fritz is sure to counterattack now.” He glanced around, as if hoping the stretcher-bearers had simply been misplaced. “I’ll get him to the dressing station.”

“Tom—” Ricketts began.

“Go!” he shouted.

He first tried to pick up Gordon in his arms, but when that didn’t work he managed to swing him over onto his back. He wasn’t much heavier than the packs they were used to carrying.

“Can you see?” Gordon whispered.

Atkins was trying to keep his feet on the boards in the bottom of the trench, so he wouldn’t lose a boot in the mud or sink under the extra weight. “See what?” he hissed.

“Open your eyes,” Gordon whispered, but fainter now. Atkins could sense his body slackening.

“What is it you want me to see?” Atkins asked, concentrating on his footing.

Nothing.

“Not much farther now. We’ll get you to the dressing station. You’ve got a blighty one, you do. Your ticket home for sure. Just a few more—”

He was interrupted by the sound of another shell descending. He knew he should duck, but it was already too late. He cursed himself for not paying attention, but there was no explosion. A dud.

Atkins took another step forward, nothing else to do. Just like this war.

He heard another shell, but this time he lowered himself to his knees and balanced against the side of the trench so Gordon wouldn’t slide. Again,

no explosion. Two duds in a row?

Then he smelled horseradish—gas. He fumbled for the mask around his chest, and Gordon slid. Gordon's hood was buried with the rest of his kit in the mud, but part of him knew that it didn't matter anyway. He was still fumbling—the hood snagged—and his eyes—oh, God, his eyes—he'd never felt such a sting—that wasn't even the right word for it—a thousand times worse than lemon juice on a burn—hot knives stabbing inside and out, pain radiating through his head.

He staggered getting up, couldn't see, didn't want to collapse in the trench, pulled the hood down, and finally got the respirator in his mouth to save his lungs at least. He had to force himself not to gasp, but to concentrate on pushing air in and out. It felt like he was suffocating in the dark, a searing scar being carved just below his brow.

He managed to get the hood tucked into his shirt and was breathing and upright, but it was still dark. He couldn't call out with the respirator in his mouth, so he felt for Gordon's body, which was there somewhere slumped against the side of the trench. Then he saw streaks of red and black—the pain creating colours in his mind—everything shadowy except Gordon's body, laid neatly on a pile of ammunition boxes, and the man leaning over him, powerful shoulders straining under his cloak, wiping the mud from the boy's face with radiant hands. And all those sad, radiant faces looking down at him, like the glow of the moon through the yellow-brown vapour, rain glistening off their silver cloaks—military somehow, but neither their own nor the Hun's.

He reached to remove the respirator from his mouth to ask, but one of them placed a hand on his arm, strong as a vise. He strained under the grip, trembled, and let go weakly as they pulled him up onto some bits of board at the top of the trench, their stern, sad faces blurring into blindness.