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## The Veteran

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Gerri Jardine

## The Veteran

You pronounce my name well. Very well.  
A difficult name, I know.  
I'm told it can flop around in the mouth like a raw oyster.

How long till it rains? Till we need not bathe in kerosene?  
When will this basement fill with water,  
this carafe with red wine? Don't ask.  
My mother tells me when she was a child she never once  
thought of the bombs. Stupid woman.  
Here. Drink this.

What I remember:  
polka music at the hospital. Belgium, maybe.  
No. Or Budapest. A nurse who cannot pronounce a name  
on a bracelet. An honest mistake.  
In the surgical theater a doctor who performs with an icepick.  
I am out cold and counting backwards.  
Did I misinterpret a gesture? Did the hands give  
or take away? I miss everything.  
They have pumped my stomach, they say.  
Its contents are on the next gurney. Nurses console it,  
call it my given name.

Since the surgery you need only to plug me in;  
I become a thief, my handiwork graces pawnshop windows.  
Fences know me.  
I become Napoleon learning English, counting heads  
in English. I become Eva Braun cutting paper dolls

in a bunker.

I make amends, shave my head, plot to murder the pope,  
make amends, skin his head.

I am always taking things.

Hand me an extension cord, I change disguises.

I am not you.

In the distance I hear my name mispronounced.

Hear that? They say, "We need the bastard."

I go, though I am fresh out of scrap.