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Pair-A-Troopers

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Pair-A-Troopers

Rose Hoelzle

I stood at the front of the church
To read the short Bible verses
About rejoicing in loss or some such crap,
Staring at the coffin,
Adorned with stars, stripes
 - A World War II paratrooper -
And Grandpa, you were so brave.

If only I could speak here,
Frozen in this church,
Fixated on your casket,
My numb feet afraid to jump,
The Catholic ceiling fan
Rotates steadily above my head,
Its dull swish like roaring chopper blades
In this silent battle.
I accepted this mission two days ago,
Two days ago I was fearless.

Now I tremble,
Dressed in my best jumper's gear—
 A pinstripe suit dress with new cheap shoes,
To perform my hallowed duty.
My thick tongue sticks
And granite fingers clutch
This wrinkled piece of paper
Like a heavy chute strapped to my back,
 What if I can't pull the cord?
I trained for this day,
Last night in front of the mirror

After we finally left the funeral parlor,
I rehearsed my technique:
Two feet, big breath, SPEAK.
Nothing.

The angry tropical winds beckon me
To the edge of the chopper door,
Testing my courage
As the congregation fans itself
With a thousand fluttering programs.
Lush, violent Philippine jungles wait below,
Pew upon pew of mourners,
Their salty drops fertilizing the stale blue carpeting.
Japanese man-serpents raise their
Oval heads
To lick my flesh with bullets.
 You would later cuss "Damn Japs"
 At slanted eyes on TV, Grandpa.
 I was embarrassed for you then
 But I had never parachuted into war,
A church filled with rifle-cocked eyes
Aimed at me,
My mute 15-year-old form
Locked in their red cross-hairs,
I'm sorry, Grandpa.
I can't do it.

A calm hand reaches out,
Pulls my shaking form back from the chopper's edge,
Off the church podium,
A light arm rests around my shoulder
As the verses are read for me.

Defeated, I sit down,
Embarrassed by my useless jumpsuit and pack,
My goggles steamed with futile anxiety.

I'm glad you can't see me, Grandpa.
I'm glad they closed the lid.
Your granddaughter
Isn't a jumper
Like you.