

Grandmother Rosa

by Rhonda Pettit

A week before his induction notice arrived
 Gorie was one of six grandsons who carried
 his Grandmother Rosa to her grave, a weight
 he bore for the first time, its silence a wall
 taken down by scripted prayer and the meal
 that followed, leaving his thin frame exposed.
 Step by step, what had flashed across
 his mind like gunfire, thanks to his thick
 European history book from college:
 the black lines of Holbein's *Death and the Ploughman*—
 its white spaces filling out the old farmer,
 endless rows to be tilled, and boney Death
 who drove six horses, the closest one
 crapping as in stillness they lurched toward
 a steeped horizon glowing with unknowns.
 Gorie's hands and knees quivered from the dance.
 Fried chickens released from kitchens relieved him,
 but the chatter he heard between mouthfuls resembled
 claws scratching bare dirt, pecks at stones.
She lived true to the teachings of Christ, said one.
She's gone on to receive her glory, said another.
 As if Rosa had set down her last war
 coupon to collect her due ration of sugar
 for rhubarb rising along the white fence.
 Both she and Gorie had lived their childhoods through war:
 hers The Civil, his The First World, and for Gorie
 those battles took place on pages, real in mind
 alone on his path from farm to Modern Manhood.
 Countless millions buried in his college books.
 What was it like to feel your life dissolve
 like sugar into rhubarb pie, the sweet
 and the bitter boiled down to fill a crust?
 Green leaves poisonous. *The death angel came
 and called her home*, the minister said.
 Gorie saw it another way: her suffering,
 like his hunger, over and tasteless. Holbein's
Death and the Soldier was in his book, too,
 where he had written, *To Here*

Wed. He knew
 the world's fathers were watching him, stalling
 him, soon to be calling and he would follow.
 Another war was in front of him, and in front
 of that was this day, this piece of pie,
 his Grandmother Rosa's debarkation.