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Ghosts of the Vortex

I

You feel the need to go back and honour them, take on board their *sacred duty*; lap up *Glory* like news from home and sit down with their sacrifice, as real to them as the waste seems to us. At their most modern, they took the selfies of their day, addicted with good reason, to the ever-present now: poses held in the camera's funk, diaries of the deep-drowned ditch. Later come the memoirs and their small fictions of memory, the versus habit hard to kick. Today you can get all this in the palm of your hand. The foreground is different but the background's up for grabs. They are our ghosts.

II

What's trending today near Loos is that football, snuck up to the line, inflated at zero hour and punted towards the slag heaps north of Lens. A tan Casey bulked with rain, lace arcing to split the brow when you mistime that header. It all ends up as Great War cliché, riven and wheezing its last on the German wire. Scar tissue like this you get in one of two ways, from ball or boxing glove, today we go for a third. Some East Surrey's will steal our thunder at the Somme and this game gets all but forgotten, good luck to them. But the London Irish got there first. Men fight for the Loos Ball, going to ground at the slightest touch.

III

If you've a minute, Tweet this: the car-struck badger you've driven past these last two weeks, *pikelhaube* snout irate in death, body bloating with foetid air, hind-legs rigid in surrender. *Kamerad*, emptied of essence, this is the boy from your home village; that snotty kid with a terrier whose Dad liked a drink, the one who pissed himself when Miss Manning caught him with a rat in his desk. Him: always the last to put up his hand, always unlucky in love. His losing streak continued over here and now that's him rotting away to your left, hung on the brambles of a B-Road: a passing stain in no man's land, fuel for the coming spring. He'll walk no more on Cotswold.

IV

Legacies of the War to Describe All Wars: my mother *in no need of surgeons*; the hunched old woman bent into an Atlantic gale, looming out of the Connemara rain that time; my own knackered hips; me urging your pram through a hail of blossom this Spring on Miller's Lane. A national diet of wistful glory and time out of joint, no story more crooked than this, the Leaning Virgin above a town square; gilded with myth, burdened with meanings that tilt it past the horizontal. As if the random shell-damage cannot be left to lie, as if some outcome depends upon a third-rate miracle. Just press 'download' and Photoshop™ them all back to vertical.

[Born in West Hartlepool, Martin Malone now lives in Warwickshire. A winner of the 2011 Straid Poetry Award and the 2012 Mirehouse Prize, his first full collection, *The Waiting Hillside*, is published by Templar Poetry. Currently studying for a Ph.D in poetry at Sheffield University, he edits *The Interpreter's House* poetry journal.]

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