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East of Paris

September 1944

He finds the girl outside a church more ash
than stone. Three blasted walls about to fall
embrace a nave whose flock is roof and glass.
It still fares better than the rest of town.

She fares the worst. Bald as a new-born soldier,
she rocks before the remnants of a fire.

From pew and prayer books he rebuilds the fire.
Her eyes flare with it, charcoal hoared by ash,
then fade as she unholds the blaze some soldier
laid in her belly. He can see her fall:
favors for food, her German flees, a town's
stark penalty, her head shorn raw as glass.

She frees a slab of grit and bits of glass.
He nods and sits besides her by the fire.

"Some years ago," she says, "this was my town.
It's no one's now. Or anyone's." An ash
drifts from the fire, floats for awhile and falls.
She catches it. "When I arrived, a soldier
was here, although he looked less like a soldier
than a professor, with his notes and glasses.
I startled him and saw his pencil fall
into the rubble. 'Please,' he said, 'the fire
can only light the windows, not the ash.'
Of course, there's not a window left in town,
but I said nothing and obliged. The town

has no more people either. I told the soldier,
'You could collect the shards sown through the ash.'
and gave him several with his pencil, glass
that used to turn the sunlight back to fire.
He nodded, satisfied, then let them fall
and left. So strange." She lets the ash flake fall,
gets up and gazes west beyond the town.
"I should go too," she says. "Thanks for the fire."

So strange indeed. Had she just seen her soldier?
And why believe the windows had no glass?
He takes his notebook out, swipes off some ash
and sketches one, the fall of Joan, God's soldier.
It shows her drawn through town like forming glass:
fire animates her, but she leaves no ash.