

A sequence of prose poems about war, survival, and family.

Heroic Age

by Richard Chetwynd

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HEROIC
AGE



RICHARD CHETWYND

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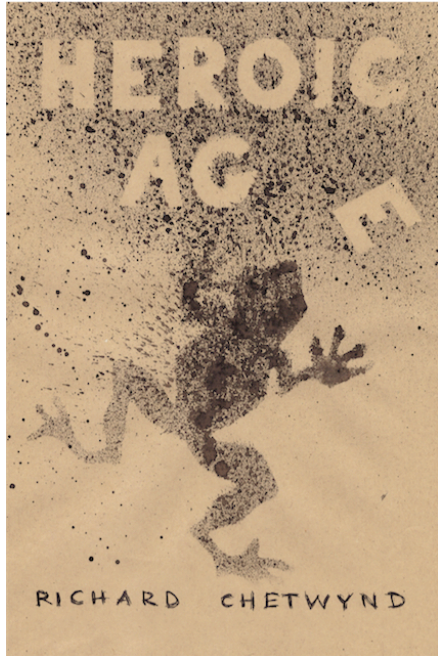
I

The rain is troublesome but appropriate. We hear the priest and lower him in the ground. We arrange the flowers, then huddle under umbrellas like the still clappers of bells. In the box, he's wearing his uniform from a lost war, his patent-leather dress shoes. Three weeks earlier I arrived unannounced, found him at the kitchen table sewing ribbons and medals to his jacket. I waited until the mass ended, until the pall-bearers had wheeled him into the corridor. For me, I said, and they opened the lid "one last time." I took my pocketknife and sliced at his decorations. "He won't be needing these," I said. They grinned and shut the lid. The rain was puddle when we scattered for the restaurant.

Deer pellets in the wood. Mushrooms hide their baldness beneath wet leaves. Curled under a branch, a lost fur cap looks like a hedgehog. He drinks creek from a canteen. He listens to whatever's not the wind. A buzzard carves a patch of blue. A young stork lowers its landing gear. He can smell death from the west. That's where the sun's heading. He follows the sun. We follow the shadow.

She stopped tending the chickens, keeping the goat from the garden. She stopped milking the goat. She took up residence in the neighbor's well like a lost frog. When it rained she felt better, like a lost frog. New men beneath a different color came to replace the black windows, speaking the language of prison. She was a frog hiding in a well. They buzzed against the walls of her mind like flies in a glass room. When they landed to rest, she sent her frog tongue to greet them. The leader put her on a train. She felt like a frog on a train. Others cried out, but she was silent as a hitchhiker. A hitchhiker frog on a train of flies.

This is it, right here. Maybe there. Yes, right over there. Or maybe here, where there's now an ant mound. Human, deer, boar, careless dog: bones to the untrained are all the same, like books. When her mother fell from the door, it was impossible to jump after her. It's not easy when the earth opens its maw, not easy to be the one who lives, the one who faces the dogs and the darkness. It was right here or right there: no sign marks the spot. Just a few dry turds and an empty bottle, stale air its only message, with a hint of hops.



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