

1917

Grandad died badly: drowned
in a sucking, claggy trench at dawn,
face down, lungs burning
as they strained and failed to fill.
Grandma maybe had it worse; she
might have lived, but something
in her broke the day the village fell,
and she was raped too many times
to count. She slit her wrists, and then –
impatient, maybe – cut her throat.
Their neighbour made it through all right,
unharmd and sitting on a tidy profit
from the sale of bayonets.

1943

Dad died badly too, I'm told: roasted
as he struggled to escape his tank,
lungs seared with smoke and superheated air.
Mum almost made it, joined a group
of refugees that straggled down a road
all overhung with willow and with
Old Man's Beard that hid them from the
strafing planes — but they were found
by soldiers from one side or the other, all the
women raped, then shot and left to lie.
Their neighbour spent the war in Switzerland,
and ended up a millionaire:
munitions and black-market booze.

2014

My body's lain here underneath the rubble
for a week or so. My wife was at her mother's
when they shelled our house; I heard her
when she came back looking for me, but
my mouth was shrivelled up with thirst,
my lungs collapsed, I couldn't call,
not even when I heard them find her
and my little daughter, when the two
were raped and raped again, then casually shot.
Still, B.A.E. and Hewlett Packard and the rest
will have good news for shareholders this year.