

John Dos Passos's

"The Body of an American"

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THE BODY OF AN AMERICAN

Whereasthe Congressoftheunitedstates byaconcurrentreso-
lutionadoptedon the4thdayofmarch lastauthorizedthe Secretary-
ofwar to cause to be brought to theunitedstatethe body of an
Americanwhowasamemberoftheamericanexpeditionaryforcein-
europe wholosthislifeduringtheworldwarandwhoseidentity has-

not been established for burial in the memorial amphitheatre of the national cemetery at Arlington, Virginia.

In the tarpaper morgue at Chalons-sur-Marne in the reek of chloride of lime and the dead, they picked out the pine box that held all that was left of

enue minie minie moe plenty other pine boxes stacked up there containing what they'd scraped up of Richard Roe and other person or persons unknown. Only one can go. How did they pick John Doe?

Make sure he aint a dinge, boys,
make sure he aint a guinea or a kike,
how can you tell a guy's a hundred percent when all you've got's a gunnysack full of bones, bronze buttons stamped with the screaming eagle and a pair of roll puttees?
...and the gagging chloride and the puky dirt-stench of the yearold dead...

The day withal was too meaningful and tragic for applause. Silence, tears, songs and prayer, muffled drums and soft music were the instrumentalities today of national approbation.

John Doe was born (thudding din of blood in love into the shuddering soar of a man and a woman alone indeed together lurching into

and nine months sick drowse waking into scared agony and the pain and blood and mess of birth). John Doe was born and raised in Brooklyn, in Memphis, near the lakefront in Cleveland, Ohio, in the stench of the stockyards in Chi, on Beacon Hill, in an old brick house in Alexandria Virginia, on Telegraph Hill, in a half-timbered Tudor cottage in Portland the city of roses,

in the Lying-In Hospital old Morgan endowed on Stuyvesant Square,

across the railroad tracks, out near the country club, in a shack cabin tenement apartmenthouse exclusive residential suburb;

scion of one of the best families in the social register, won first prize in the baby parade at Coronado Beach, was marbles champion of the Little Rock grammarschools, crack basketball player at the Booneville High, quarterback at the State Reformatory, having saved the sheriff's kid from drowning in the Little Missouri River was invited to Washington to be photo graphed shaking hands with the President on the White House steps;—

though this was a time of mourning, such an assemblage necessarily has about it a touch of color. In the boxes are seen the court uniforms of foreign diplomats, the gold braid of our own and foreign fleets and armies, the black of the conventional morning dress of American statesmen, the varicolored furs and outdoor wrapping garments of mothers and sisters come to mourn, the drab and blue of soldiers and sailors, the glitter of musical instruments and the white and black of a vested choir

—busboy harveststiff hogcaller boyscout champeen cornshucker of Western Kansas bellhop at the United States Hotel at Saratoga Springs office boy callboy fruiter telephone lineman longshoreman lumberjack plumber's helper,

worked for an exterminating company in Union City, filled pipes in an opium joint in Trenton, N. J.

Y.M.C.A. secretary, express agent, truckdriver, ford mechanic, sold books in Denver Colorado: Madam Would you be willing to help a young man work his way through college?

President Harding, with a reverence seemingly more significant because of his high temporal station, concluded his speech:

*We are met today to pay the impersonal tribute;
the name of him whose body lies before us took flight with his
imperishable soul...
as a typical soldier of this representative democracy he fought
and died believing in the indisputable justice of his country's cause...*

by raising his right hand and asking the thousands within the sound of his voice to join in the prayer:

Our Father which art in heaven hallowed be thy name...

Naked he went into the army;
they weighed you, measured you, looked for flat feet,
squeezed your penis to see if you had clap, looked up your
anus to see if you had piles, counted your teeth, made you
cough, listened to your heart and lungs, made you read the
letters on the card, charted your urine and your intelligence,
gave you a service record for a future (imperishable soul)
and an identification tag stamped with your serial
number to hang around your neck, issued O D regulation
equipment, a condiment can and a copy of the articles of war.

Atten'SHUN suck in your gut you c—r wipe that smile
off your face eyes right wattja tink dis is a choich-social? For-
war-D'ARCH.

John Doe
and Richard Roe and other person or persons Unknown
drilled hiked, manual of arms, ate slum, learned

to salute, to soldier, to loaf in the latrines, forbidden to smoke
on deck, overseas guard duty, forty men and eight horses,
shortarm inspection and the ping of shrapnel and the shrill
bullets combing the air and the sorehead woodpeckers the
machineguns mud cooties gas-masks and the itch.

Say feller tell me how I can get back to my outfit.

John Doe had a head

for twentyodd years intensely the nerves of the eyes the
ears the palate the tongue the fingers the toes the armpits, the
nerves warmfeeling under the skin charged the coiled brain
with hurt sweet warm cold mine must dont sayings print
headlines:

Thou shalt not the multiplication table long division,
Now is the time for all good men knocks but once at a young
man's door, It's a great life if Ish gebibbel, The first five
years'll be the Safety First, Suppose a hun tried to rape your
my country right or wrong, Catch 'em young, What he dont
know wont treat 'em rough, Tell 'em nothin, He got what was
coming to him he got his, This is a white man's country, Kick
the bucket, Gone west, If you dont like it you can croaked him

*Say buddy cant you tell me how I can get back to my
outfit?*

Cant help jumpin when them things go off, give me the
trots them things do. I lost my identification tag swimmin in
the Marne, roughhousin with a guy while we was waitin to be
deloused, in bed with a girl named Jeanne (Love moving
picture wet French postcard dream began with saltpeter in the
coffee and ended at the propho station) ;—

*Say soldier for chrissake cant you tell me how I can get
back to my outfit?*

John Doe's
 heart pumped blood:
 alive thudding silence of blood in your ears
 down in the clearing in the Oregon forest where the
 punkins were punkincolor pouring into the blood through the
 eyes and the fallcolored trees and the bronze hoopers were
 hopping through the dry grass, where tiny striped snails hung
 on the underside of the blades and the flies hummed, wasps
 droned, bumblebees buzzed, and the woods smelt of wine and
 mushrooms and apples, homey smell of fall pouring into the
 blood,
 and I dropped the tin hat and the sweaty pack and lay flat
 with the dogday sun licking my throat and adamsapple and the
 tight skin over the breastbone.

The shell had his number on it.

The blood ran into the ground.

The service record dropped out of the filing cabinet
 when the quartermaster sergeant got blotto that time they had
 to pack up and leave the billets in a hurry.

The identification tag was in the bottom of the Marne.

The blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of
 the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly
 swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies,
 and the incorruptible skeleton,
 and the scraps of dried viscera and skin bundled in khaki

they took to Chalons-sur-Marne
 and laid it out neat in a pine coffin

and took it home to God's Country on a battleship
 and buried it in a sarcophagus in the Memorial
 Amphitheatre in the Arlington National Cemetery
 and draped the Old Glory over it
 and the bugler played taps
 and Mr. Harding prayed to God and the diplomats and
 the generals and the admirals and the brass hats and the
 politicians and the handsomely dressed ladies out of the society
 column of the *Washington Post* stood up solemn
 and thought how beautiful sad Old Glory God's Country
 it was to have the bugler play taps and the three volleys made
 their ears ring.

Where his chest ought to have been they pinned
 the Congressional Medal, the D.S.C., the Medaille
 Militaire, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the Italian gold medal,
 the Vitutea Militara sent by Queen Marie of Rumania, the
 Czechoslovak war cross, the Virtuti Militari of the Poles, a
 wreath sent by Hamilton Fish, Jr., of New York, and a little
 wampum presented by a deputation of Arizona redskins in
 warpaint and feathers. All the Washingtonians brought flowers.

Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies.