

STEVE ORLEN

The Years between Wars

The border river is just as measly on one side
As on the other. You can see a teenage girl
Tying white strips of cloth on the lowest branches of an oak,
Which spreads its leafy shadows half-way across,
And only the falling leaves
Remember the rest of the way. On the other side,
A girl stops on a path and knots
A string around her thumb, and that's
The only difference anyone remembers because
The boundary was drawn three wars ago
By an emperor who never set foot here.
Which people he gathered into his empire,
Which he left out, doesn't matter because
There are no people on maps,
And because there is no empire anymore, and those
Who moved away are already American dust.
When my great-grandfather traveled
For the first time across an ocean to lay flowers
And prayers on some graves, he didn't have to ask
Which cemetery. When he stepped into the river
To cross to the grave of his great-grandmother,
An old woman with a pitchfork waved him back.
On both sides, the brandy is made of plums,
The emperor's name is mud, and the women,
When they are pretty, are just as pretty,
And any man who would claim otherwise
Can go to the river and shout out a name.
Upstream, men without titles
Are studying the maps, and making plans,
With the usual unimaginable consequences.