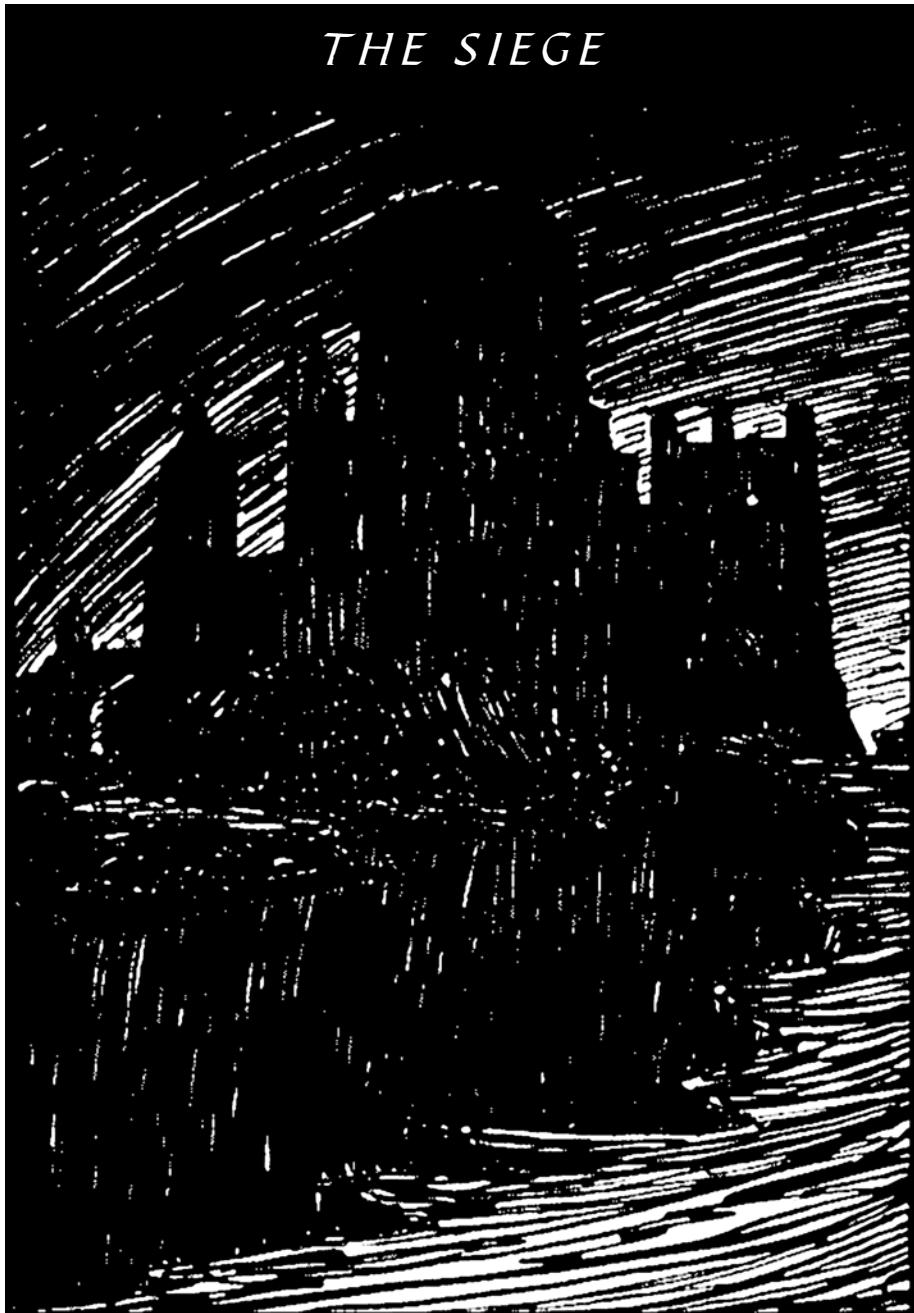
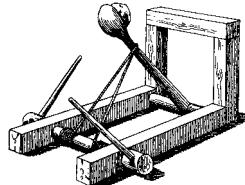


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*THE SIEGE*



Seth Fried



The men on the walls are all dead. The city is ravaged but still, somehow, untaken. Imagine, if you will, a cachectic dog limping down a street littered with corpses. Corpses everywhere. The bodies of those who've succumbed to cholera. The bodies of those who, in fits of starvation, forced themselves to eat the tainted meat flung over the walls by the catapults, mangonels and trebuchets of the impending hordes. The bodies of fighting men who, overwhelmed by the sight of our foe, the sheer size and determination and cruelty of their numbers, fled the walls in order to throw themselves

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onto their own swords. Imagine that spiritless dog as it sniffs and drools its way down the street piled high with the human filth amassed over the sixteen-month duration of the siege. Imagine as it nibbles off the nose from the corpse of a young girl, moves away, chomping, moves away, pausing to cough, a small tendril of mucus and blood dangling from its shriveled anus. Now imagine the same scene without a dog, because there are none—all the dogs in the city having been eaten a long, long time ago.

No, the last person naive enough to attempt keeping a dog as a pet, Wilkshire, the currier, kept a mutt and a litter of pups in his shop, sustaining them with rainwater and small bits of corpse. This was until a group of townsmen overheard a yelp through a broken window and stormed the shop, killing Wilkshire in the struggle, leaving themselves to fight over the litter and bitch, which were both soon reduced to a worthless pulp. Only old man Tuttle escaped with the runt, which he ate tauntingly from the safety of the chapel roof, lifting it from time to time, in mock benediction, toward the moon.

Things, we have to admit, are looking rather bleak.

Some of us gather around and help poison the wells for when the hordes will inevitably enter the city. There are those of us who are almost cheerful; the siege has lasted for so long that whatever happens, we'll gladly welcome something new. However, there are also those of us who know better. In the first month of the siege, the commander of the attacking forces led from a white tent. This signified that if the city were to surrender, none would be harmed. In the second month, the commander of the attacking forces led from a red tent, signifying that if the city were taken, all men bearing arms would be put to death. In the third month, enemy forces were led from a black tent, meaning that under no circumstances would any men in the city be spared. Thirteen months later, and the tent is now the color of an angry god.

Some say it's a miracle the city has lasted as long as it has. There were a few proud days in the beginning: our guards lined manfully along the walls, their armor glittering in the sun. The wide, clear

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sky was filled with the clatter of their spears, while the banner of our city wagged in the air with the wild enthusiasm of a fool's tongue. Though it wasn't long before the enemy's sorties to the wall, ready as they were with their countless bowmen and hundreds of mounted cheiroballistrae, reduced our forces to a pitiful pretense. Now the battlements are empty except for the occasional graybeard, who might wander up in order to move his bowels defiantly over the wall or to shake a small, withered fist.

The question now is: When will the enemy make their final escalade over the walls? This question seems to resonate within a larger question, which is: Why have they not already made their final escalade over the walls?

There are those who believe that our enemy must be preparing something unique and elaborate. There are those who expect a final stroke that will reveal our enemy's creativity to be in direct proportion to the amount of time we have, however incapably, delayed them. There are some who talk of sappers—sappers who, instead of undermining our fortifications with their deep, winding tunnels, will creep up underneath our streets, forcing up stones and finding us in the filth where we sleep, sidling upon us while we dream of hunger, removing sleek knives from their diggers' cloaks and committing us all, respectively, to our various heavens and hells.

There are some who talk of thousands upon thousands of trained birds to be released over the city. Hawks, each half the size of a man and starved to the point of madness. Others contradict this story entirely, saying it will be thousands upon thousands of a poisonous kind of butterfly, to be loosed from giant burlap sacks as the winds permit. Butterflies. It is said if they lightly touch, they will cause the victim's skin to boil, will cause the victim's innards to smolder like hot coals, the victim's blood to seep from under fingernails and out of eye sockets, up and out from the throat and down over the teeth from the sponge of wasted gums. It is said that at day's end, the victims of that deadly butterfly are not cooled by night's chill but rather touched by the fevers of the afflicted, the night burns.

We wander the city, all of us, wondering. The uncertain fears grow in us, as we expect perhaps a hand to spring from the earth beneath our feet or the sudden, violent beating of innumerable wings or the

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small touch of an ink-colored butterfly as it lights frailly on the noses of our upturned faces.

Some believe it's a miracle the city has lasted as long as it has, while others think it's just another possible invention of the enemy, another of their awful weapons. Waiting. The wretched, terrible weapon of waiting.

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In the sixth month the women evacuated the city. One morning, without explanation, they were simply gone. We see them now from time to time, walking among the enemy camps in their new, bright dresses. From the vantage of an empty tower, some small group of us will huddle over a telescope hung through the opening of a machicolation. Watching them, we often have the feeling that our former wives, in their all-too-infrequent glances toward the city, are marking us with a sort of jeer.

Our wives, once familiar to us, now seem to regard the city, across the distance, with a bitterness and amused ridicule not known to us in our time with them, as if they suddenly remember nothing of the life within these walls.

Perhaps in order to ease the guilt of leaving, they have let themselves inflate some fault or imagined slight on our part, so that for every degree they loved us, they now as quickly spite us. Perhaps the end result of the siege seeming unavoidable to them is that they have resolved to desire it.

Still, most of us can't help but ask ourselves if they never think of us, in their quieter moments. If they don't occasionally recall with regret some secret, truer happiness. There's no way of knowing for certain, but it's pleasant to think that their hearts might not be completely hard toward us. Through the machicolation, the useless murder-hole, we see their far-off laughing, their carrying on of some other life. As the sun comes down, we watch them walk the familiar path to some soldier's tent, to the dark, new privacies of god knows what. We watch and we wonder if they remember anything of us, if they are holding it dearly in their deepest places. Anything of us. Anything at all.

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It is difficult to say from where our attackers originate or what, beyond victory, is their ultimate purpose.

They approached the city from the north, where for miles and miles extend gentle pastures, still lakes and faint, sporadic sprouts of forest. These eventually give way to subtle hillocks that roll on and on, swelling in places, diminishing in others, an ancient mountain range subdued and grown over with long grass and cluttered with brush. After this, there occurs a noticeable shift in the landscape: the earth hardens, and flora is sparser, but the hardier creatures still roam. Nameless things, charged with their special loneliness. They skitter across rocks, degenerate and content. Then there is a vast gorge, beyond which is an unknowable wasteland of cracked earth, the air filled with fits of wind and lightning without thunder. A dark, savage place.

One would assume this to be the hearth of our foe. At any rate, it would certainly suit them. Though the real truth is that they probably come from nowhere, are motivated by nothing.

Their flag is a simple white bar against a field of black. There is no pomp. Every single soldier wears a plain hauberk, with belt typically at a casual slant. The chain mail covers the entire face, revealing only the ovals of their dispassionate eyes. Their movements in battle are calm, organized, emotionless. They are swift but not eager. Pitiless but without rage.

Their purpose is to destroy us, but, having offered no reason behind this purpose, the point cannot be argued. Wherever they came from, they are the *them* and we are the *us*—and there is no choice now but a conflict, however meaningless. In the relative calm of their camps, they stir. An empty flag is raised. A hollow horn is blown.

Though many parts of the city remain the same, it is all of it changed. Throughout the city, there might be any number of buildings or public works which, though untouched by the siege, are still somehow different from what they were before.

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We pass some familiar spot and find it as it has always been. Where once there was an ash tree surrounded by loose stone, an ash tree in loose stone is still there. Where once was a crenulated archway opening into a vaulted courtyard, a crenulated archway is still there. However, around each there is a new, strange air. Difficult and close. It hangs, thick as caution, near the familiar. It flowers on either side of it, looms above it, lurks awkwardly within. Where once we were happy to sit in repose on the stoop of some shop, the granite lip of some fountain, we are unsettled. In such a place, once restful and welcoming, we are now suddenly seized with anxiety and a desire to flee.

As time goes on, the anxiety grows until most of us are only comfortable while frequenting those parts of the city that have already been destroyed: a beer hall with its roof puckered in by some missile. A stable reduced to a treacherous pile of splintered timbers. A statue of a noble city father, now missing a leg.

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When the women evacuated the city, not one brought her children with her. This left us, the surviving men of the city, in a somewhat awkward position. That is to say, it left us, the ones accustomed to spending long days toiling outside the city, to become suddenly the sole caretakers of entire populations of tiny, dough-faced strangers.

When asked to account for their missing mothers, most of us did our best to provide our children with explanations designed to soothe them but also meant to be decidedly final: their mothers, who loved them very much, had been taken by an unconfirmed illness or an unknown assailant or miscellaneous act of nature. On the other hand, there were also those of us who, still bitter over the loss of our wives, offered our children, regrettably, more inflammatory explanations: their mothers, whose opinions of them we had always held in doubt, had been taken by an excruciating, disfiguring illness so contagious that they had to be hoisted over the walls with long pointed sticks; or they had been abducted by some poor, unknowing assailant or torn to pieces by a miscellaneous act of nature, a manifestation of its unerring sense of justice.

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Our children viewed our initial efforts to care for them skeptically. When the food stores eventually ran out and the occasional pigeon had to be caught, the occasional rat speared desperately in the corner, their eyes exhibited the wide, damp gaze that said had their mothers been present, they never would have been forced to suffer such indignities. Admittedly, nothing about the situation is ideal. There are many of us who, without our children, would have been content to sit purposefully without food or water until our bodies weakened. However, with our children came the necessity to survive. After all, children, too young to understand the benefits of suicide in certain cases, incapable of consenting to it, must therefore be allowed to survive. In fact, they must be encouraged, and so the insects had to be gathered, the rainwater collected, the bellies of city vermin opened and emptied.

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Other than the theory that by allowing us to linger on they intend for us to suffer, there is yet another possible explanation as to why we have been spared up to this point. It may not be, after all, that the enemy are allowing us to linger but that, at the very breaking point of victory, our enemy are allowing *themselves* to linger.

In fact, all reports from the wall suggest that the lines of circumvallation have been growing settled as of late. More and more dirt has been displaced for earthen bunkers within the trenches. Often, in the distance, we catch sight of what appear to be men shaving, men hanging laundered undergarments on impromptu lines and bathing in shallow bronze tubs. Farther back, slightly more permanent fixtures are beginning to appear: a wooden mess hall. A modest officers' club.

This, to say the least, is a troubling sign.

With the enemy having the benefit of our wives and we the benefit of our children, it becomes clear that this siege could become not a simple matter of months or even years but a matter of generations. Who knows how long? If the enemy continues to settle as they have, who's to say that the siege won't eventually become just a city encircling a lesser city? It begins with a few small buildings and a

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casual nickname, arrived at by a pair of drunken captains on some invaders' holiday: Siege Town. A trader's post might be added, a few shops established and, a century later, it's a thriving capital by the name of Siegton or Sigtion or some other unintentional contraction. And though eventually the siege might not be actively practiced, the lesser city taken in by the greater, it would in one way or another be absorbed into this new city's culture, sublimated into any number of its customs. The fact of the siege would live on in some elusive metaphor. It would affect the way our descendants talk or the way they think about talking. It would change the way they think or the way they think about thinking. In whatever language that is taken up, perhaps, the word for *desired* might be the same as the word for *conquered*. The word for *correct* the same as *victory*. *Incorrect: defeat*. There might be no word for *weak* due to the presence of the word *unnecessary*. A young girl in love might be described as a *toppled citadel*. A newborn baby as being *without helmet*. Two people in disagreement might both be said to have a *position*, which through argument could either be *attacked* or *defended*. Citizens of that city, overwhelmed with a multitude of tasks, might choose to describe themselves as feeling *bombarded*. Flowers, no longer given in *bouquets*, might then find themselves in *quivers*.

Time would exhaust itself forward, and this siege, the great sadness of our time on earth, would send out an unending ripple, creating an impossible legacy—while we, the surviving men of the city, would fade to nothing. Our side of this conflict, our thoughts and hopes and fears, would all serve as just another aborted path of fate and its lazy, meandering plot.

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Of course, for all our complaints, some might call us cowards. Why, after all, were we not among the fighting men on the walls? Why, when our wives abandoned us, did we do nothing? Or why do we now allow our children to suffer in the shadow of our own passivity? Why, even if we could by no means break the lines of the enemy, do we not, just on the most basic principle, go out from the walls to meet them, dying honorably?

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To these questions we answer only that there are many kinds of courage, ours being a quiet and personal type.

When approached with a force of change beyond compromise, this force not merely the enemy in question but destiny itself, we answer softly, to whatever its agenda: No. Even if we have no means or intention of resisting it, even if our only course is to maintain our course, even if our unwillingness to placate paired with our unwillingness to defy accomplishes nothing, it doesn't matter. Our purpose is to remain true. To what? It doesn't matter. For how long? Indefinitely.

That is our kind of courage, and in the act of fighting, we would lose it.

Our courage is akin to patience. No matter what kind of world is created for us, the mind will always be large enough to give refuge, and so our visions of the world will always have their place.

And what of our enemy's kind of courage? Certainly it will bring them victory as an army, but what of each man? City after city will be defeated, victory after victory will accrue, but eventually the lines will advance too far into some district intended for future conquest: a clot of wounded men stands in the middle of a frozen river, helplessly watching the charge of some wild, frigid race whose axes in hand and beards flagging behind them spell out, clearly, the end. What of each man? What does that type of courage win him in the end? To that man personally, it wins him the loss of all losses, but a loss which, to the forces he served, is so small as to be completely unweighable.

Each and every one of our enemies will die, just like us. All they've done is attach themselves to a type of courage that will outlive them, and if that courage is the real courage and our courage is not, then so be it: we are, every one of us, cowards, and our enemies are all distinctly brave men.

Then again . . .

Then again, maybe, if we had it to do over again, there would be a few things we would choose to do differently.

Our children, feeling playful, kick rubble to one another down the street; feeling thirsty, stand watching the sky, praying for a storm

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cloud to gather. Do we wish we had fought on the walls? No. But maybe if we had fallen asleep with our arms draped lovingly across our wives, their leaving would have woken us, allowing us to say something, even if it were only good-bye. Maybe if we knew our children better, it would have been easier to turn eating a rat into a kind of game. In short, maybe there's more we could have risked.

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But what's happened has happened. The city is ravaged yet still, somehow, untaken. Some of us gather around and help poison the already fetid wells for when the hordes will inevitably . . . There's not much left to be done. Keep the children off the corpses, the corpses off the walkways. Watch the walls. Watch the walls. Wait for the possible breach. A dull rumble and burst of men through the city.

Outside, troops wander the lines encircling the city in different states of preparedness. At various points are positioned officers on horseback. Absently, a hoof is raised and lowered. A mane is shaken. Each officer sits casually, hands loose on the reins, scanning the sky for some unknown sign that we know may never come.



Seth Fried

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