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The Ashes

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were in my team? Did they ask me who among my comrades was planning to escape? Did they force me to sign a bogus Red Cross form saying that I was being treated humanely? Did they film it? Did I crack? Did I cry? Renounce my country? Throw myself at the mercy of my tormentors? Ask to be released from training?

About the only thing I can tell you is that it didn't much matter that SERE was a simulated prisoner-of-war camp. It was real enough to me. I was a young man and I possessed a promiscuous imagination, unanchored by the weight of experience. Drunk as I was on the visions of war that had inspired my childhood, my mind embraced the illusion of prisonerhood with little resistance. I had seen all the movies, read all the novels, had cultivated visions of being a resident

of the Hanoi Hilton. I had piloted a jet over the waters of the Tonkin Gulf, dodged flak over my target with great aplomb, laughing, delivered my payload, watched the surprising beauty of the anti-aircraft fire as it swept like blown rain towards my craft, felt the shudder of flight departed, parachuted right into enemy hands. On some level I wanted to be a prisoner and so I became one. As Rimbaud said, "I believe that I am in hell, therefore I am there." This much I understand now. But the older, wiser man can give no help to the young lieutenant. He is still there, trapped behind the wire.

When I got home a week later, a friend asked me how it went. I told him that I would commit suicide before I allowed myself to be captured in combat. ■

## PABLO NERUDA

### Epoch

Here it does not rest, a past  
I summoned with a bell  
so that things awaken  
and the rings gather around me,  
which have separated from fingers  
obeying death:

I did not want to reconstruct  
the hands or the sadnesses:

after everything,  
once and for all  
shall die this century of agony  
that taught us to assassinate  
and to die of survival.

—Translated by William O'Daly

### The Ashes

This is the age of ashes.  
Ashes of burned children,  
of cold trials of hell,  
ashes of eyes that cried  
not knowing what was happening  
before they were turned to ash,  
ashes of gothic virgins  
and small wire windows,  
ashes of raucous cellars,  
crumbling shops,  
ashes of famous hands.  
And to recount and close  
the ashen chapter  
in the victory of Berlin,  
the ashes of the murderer  
in his own ashtray.

—Translated by William O'Daly