

Operation Rhododendron

We tie our sisters' red ribbons around our heads and wear the garlands of the spent cartridges as ammo. On our shoulders, we carry the rhododendron branches as rifles fitted with letter openers for bayonets. Some bring rotten potatoes to hurl as hand grenades. Because the forest is booby-trapped, we play at school. All the teachers became Those-Who-Walk-at-Night or dead. Each side has a sniper who aims through the bullet holes in the walls. If you get hit, you cannot breathe for a full minute. If you do, you're declared wounded and taken prisoner. When you get killed, we coat a layer of cow dung on your face and place a rhododendron petal between your lips. The stink is unbearable, but it's better than being taken alive. We can't touch the captive, but we get to tie you to a blasted telephone pole and be creative with our interrogative techniques. Once, the leader of Those-Who-Make-You-Disappear shat right in front of the prisoner and made him watch the whole thing. The boy puked all over himself and couldn't eat for a week. The victors' faces are smeared unrecognizable with the vermilion our mothers used to color their parted hair with. We get to keep all the weapons for the next battle. The losing side carries home the martyrs on their backs. On the cow path, we sing:

*Father's knee-suckers! Father's knee-suckers!
Where's your rifle, where's your grenade?
Tomorrow we will recruit your sisters.
But only those with ripe pomegranates.*

Every time, someone ends up crying, and we gather around him. *It was only a game. We wanted to have some fun, that's all. And you're not really dead. I mean, look at those tears! So sharp. So warm.*