Ping Pong with the Nazis

for Leo Jesurum

Bored couriers have kicked off boots and set their pipes aside, a Dutch interior. The slapped ball clacks over the table like a telegraphic code, or trickles like faint hope across the marble floor. How quickly he bends to retrieve it and puts it back in play, the Jewish boy living with false papers in a villa owned by his mother’s Gentile friends, and now commandeered by retreating Germans as divisional headquarters. The young blond soldiers, deferential to a social better, muss his blond locks like the kid brothers back in the fatherland, like big brothers steeped in genial menace. He begs another game, so they relent. As the ball resumes its chatter across the no-man’s land strung with a net, he calculates the risk that each shot brings. And so do they. He holds his pee and serves.

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