



12-15-1994

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James Whitehead

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Recommended Citation

Whitehead, James (1994) "For My Father at Eighty," *Westview*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol14/iss2/13>

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For My Father at Eighty

by James Whitehead

For years he never talked about the war
Except to name some places he had been,
Le Havre, Remagen, moving on Berlin.
I wanted him to tell some outright fear

He'd suffered in his bravery, the roar
Of German eighty-eights, the flinch of pain,
The dead, some hatred, a severe *God damn*.
For years he kept his peace, and he's never sworn.

Mother told me not to trouble him.
Maybe or not he'll somehow find the time,
And if he does, then leave the man alone.
You've no idea what the man has seen.

One afternoon, when I was married, grown,
A good time in the best of company,
He joined our easy talk of history.
Miller and Ward and Gen were there. He'd seen

The armies' soldiers, frozen, torn-apart,
And, worse, a death camp, thousands naked and starved,
In five great pits, enough to break your heart.
We did our best. Only three survived.

His story was five hundred words, no more.
He told it well. He'd told his war.
My father's a gentle Presbyterian.
At eighty, thoughtful, he believes in hell.

James Whitehead's poems are from *Near At Hand*, University of Missouri Press, 1993.