New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Checkpoint,” “There are 4 Ways to Die in an Explosion,” “Good Friday,”

PRAY FOR THE BLAST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Checkpoint

The car came from nowhere, it came
from everywhere –

white blur and tire squall,

a four-door payload
of heat and pressure and steel.

When it is over, there is just
the tinkle of falling brass and a man
slumped
in a pool of broken glass
and coolant on hot asphalt,
calm as a corpse.

Doc cuts his shirt.
His face is weathered by years
of this. Layers
of skin and yellow fat pucker
from his open side.

He breathes.

In the trunk of the rusted-out sedan,
where the bomb
should be,

there are only two tanks,
an oxygen mask, and a box
filled with apricots and dates.

There are Four Ways to Die in an Explosion

First the blast rips limbs
from the torso. Throws tender bodies
against concrete walls. Pulverizes
bones against pavement. Those closest
to the bomb are never found
whole.

Then the fragmentation.
Little pieces of metal debris,
like the one that punched
an acorn-sized hole through the back
of Sergeant Gardner’s skull.

Heat from the explosion starts fires.
Vehicles Burn. Ammunition
burns. People burn,
alive. When a driver is trapped inside
white-hot steel, prayers
must be said silently for the smoke
to take him first.

Pressure collapses
lungs and bowels. The bleeding
happens on the inside.
It can be hours
before the skin turns pale
and the bulk of a person
drops.

None of the anatomy is safe,

so when the time comes, pray for the blast
or fragmentation. Pray for the heat that vaporizes.
Pray for the kind of pressure
that makes the world dark and silent
before the bitter taste of iron
and cold panic.

Good Friday, Udairi Range Complex, Kuwait

The first time I saw the sun

rise over the desert
it was 4 a.m.

Across miles of sand
and rusted hulks, the throbbing
of heavy guns echoed.

Over the horizon,
where the beginning and the end
meet and disappear, Friday arrived.

We saw the jeering crowds, the scourge
and spear-tip, the crown of thorns
and the crucifix, waiting.

What could we have known about atonement?
What did we know, then, of judging
the quick against the dead?

The Splintering Effect

Time is much longer when you’re sober, moments like molecules dragging into pixelated detail with nothing to dull the sharp edges. I sit quietly on the beach this morning melting into day. The river of time passes through me here. I’m new to this island and I’ve just learned of its ley lines. Some things are beginning to make sense now. It is late summer, the scorching off-season. Too hot for most, but still there is a small flock of sunlovers scattered over the shoreline. Languid in the heat, I am without my habitual bottled accompaniment. I’m learning to just be. Soft moments float by, the salt mist collecting in droplets on my skin, over the slick layer of tropical tanning oil. My heels burrow into the sand, pushing up little hills for my toes to rest. As I let go, the current of thought swirls around me, lazy carefree beach day thoughts. The moods of strangers drift through me as I allow myself to be unshielded.

Near me two women sit on a beach blanket, eating grapes and watching their small children play in the surf. A boy and two girls, they go to the same school. Their mothers chat about upcoming homework and soccer practices, the new school year to start in a few short weeks. I smile at them and they return it

easily. We are warm with sun and the lightness of this moment. *See there, I can do it; I can be with other people*. It's even nice sometimes. Then it happens; involuntarily part of me goes on alert. There is a hitch in the breeze. I feel a nearby lurking, a crawling gaze. Bristling, I scan to find its source.

A man sits in the sand, leaning back against the brick wall of the fort perimeter on the edge of the beach. He is about 15 feet from the moms on the blanket, they are his one o'clock. In one hand he holds a cell phone. His eyes flick back and forth from the people on the beach to his phone screen. He mutters erratically, as though he wants it to appear that he's on a call. His other hand is down his pants, moving.

The old sensation comes to me, the air sucking out of the atmosphere, popping my ears the way it does right before a mortar hits. I'm in the channel again, not really me anymore. My eyes zoom in on the man; I would like my second glance to prove false. I want to be wrong. *Show me that I'm wrong.*

As his lips move, so does his hand in his pants. I dissect his sightline. The moms in bathing suits? No, it is not them he is watching. His eyes are on the children. The little boy is jumping in the surf and his trunks are half a size too big. They slide down slightly whenever a wave hits, exposing the curved bridge of tanned to pale skin. Up down. Up down. The man's hand jerks in time.

Where before my blood would have roiled now it is frigid, coagulated. I am so tired. But this cannot be allowed to pass. Vaguely I sense the splintering of my consciousness. That other part of me will take over now, the part born in sand on the other side of the world. She does what's necessary. Always. My real self recedes, watching but not in control.

Quickly and quietly I walk in front of the man and drop down to his level. I let the everydayness fall away from my face.

Behind my eyes the reckoning thrashes, and beyond that a numb abyss devoid of remorse. He flinches and recoils, his hand snaking out of his pants. He tries to squirm away, but he is caught between me and the wall.

All around me are the instruments of an end. Do you see that bit of broken glass at your
feet in the sand? It could slip so easily into an artery. This beach will absorb a river of blood, just as the desert did. And I will feel nothing.

Feet finally finding desperate purchase in the sand, he skitters away. I let him go. He flees, but not off the beach, only further down it. I walk back to the blanket and tell the moms, in case he returns. Horrified and irate, they call the police. The beach patrol officers arrive quickly. I provide a detailed description: Male. Age 30-50. Average height and build. *I should have done more.* Olive skin. Short dark hair. Clean shaven, possible 5 o'clock shadow. *Why didn't I do more?* Cutoff shorts, possible khaki or bleached denim. Red sleeveless tank. Flipflops. *There must have been something else I could have done.* The spiked pit of revulsion is a lump I swallow down. It lodges in my stomach where it will stay to leach acid. I have never been able to master that physical reaction.

I watch the officers move down the beach in their uniforms, hunting over sand… Before starting their pursuit they asked me several times if the man had exposed himself. I told them no, but it was very obvious what he was doing. As I say this I watch them look at each other, these two cops. I know the silent language that passes between them. It says they won't be able to do much from a law enforcement standpoint if the man wasn't actually exposing himself on the public beach.

I trudge to my car. There is nothing left for me to do here. Rage and depression compete for me. Ancient memories slither up from my gut's acid well, burning my throat on their way

into my brain. My own and those I was made to see through the eyes of other soldiers on other sands. *Bacha bazi*… My people are tainted by the sins we were made to witness, in their seeing and their telling. Now I can't stop seeing. My radar was long embedded but their stories strengthened its signal reception. I fear the condition is permanent. *I don't want to be the one who must notice these things.* Over There I could shove a shiv into the cretin's neck and dump his body in the Tigris. One predator down, no one the wiser and that village a safer place. No, that is a lie. I could do no such thing there or anywhere else. Still, the vigilante cravings come. Rage says burn them alive in a mass pit. Bleakness reminds me even if I could, there are always more of these unnatural beasts with eyes set forward. They prey on children, our doe-like innocents. And they exist in every country the world over. Why? What is their point of origin? How can their source be eliminated? Will our species ever fix this? If only enough of us could try… *But I cannot be a sin eater anymore*. I keep forgetting to remember that I gave up my uniform.

Soldier

An homage to Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" (The New Yorker, June 1978).

Recruits with India Company, 3rd Recruit Training Battalion, repeat back commands during a Marine Corps Martial Arts Program training session. (U.S. Marine Corps/Tyler Hlavac)

Wake up at oh-my-god-o'clock on Monday and run six miles; run another six miles at the same time Tuesday through Friday; to get night vision, keep one eye closed in a well-lit area and then open it in darkness; always field strip a MRE (meal, ready-to-eat), trade the veggie omelet but never the ChiliMac; when buying your dress blues, be sure to buy two sets in two different sizes, that way you can look sharp even if you lose ten pounds after coming back from deployment; Is it true that you desecrated corpses?; always have two designated marksmen for over-watch, especially when you eat; on Sundays let your subordinates rest, don't wake them up early to watch beheading videos; don't urinate on the enemy corpses; you mustn't video record firefights, not even for your family; don't feed the pack of wild dogs – they will follow you; *but I never pissed on dead bodies and wouldn't think to;* this is how you perform an emergency tracheotomy; this is how you cut the trachea

through the second and fourth ring then quickly shove the tube through it; this is how you call for a MEDEVAC and prevent yourself from pissing on a dead body like you're so hell-bent on doing; this is how you disassemble your weapon; this is how you clean your weapon; this is how you lube your weapon, but not so much that it attracts sand and grit; this is how you construct a Burn-Out Latrine – far from where we eat and sleep, because human waste harbors diseases; when you are conducting your daily burn out, make sure to use plenty of diesel fuel to incinerate the fecal matter; this is how you clear a room; this is how you clear a whole house; this is how you clear a village; this is how to interrogate a subordinate; this is how to interrogate a detainee; this is how to interrogate a terrorist; this is how you ask for tea in Arabic; this is how you ask for tea in Dari and Pashtu; this is how to behave in the presence of tribal elders or sheikhs who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the corpse-urinater you were warned against becoming; be sure to do hygiene every day, even if it is with baby-wipes; have a plan to kill everyone in the room – you're a warrior, you know; don't drive over or step on fresh asphalt – you might trigger a buried IED; don't throw stones at IEDs, because it might not be an IED at all; this is how to call for fire; this is how to win hearts and minds; this is how to conduct an ambush; this is how to conduct a raid; this is how to kill a child before it even becomes a terrorist; this is how to conduct peacekeeping missions; this is how to stage a scene, and plant evidence and get away with it; this is how to snatch and grab; this is how to torture a terrorist; this is how you torture yourself; this is how to water-board someone, and if this doesn't work there are other ways to make them say what you want, and if that doesn't work you haven't improvised enough; always accomplish the mission; *but what if I can't accomplish the mission;* you mean to say after all this indoctrination, you are really going to be the kind of soldier who let their country down?

Artist Profile: Larry Abbott Interviews Musician Vince Gabriel

INTRO: Vince Gabriel has been making music since his high school days in New Jersey. Born in South Amboy on September 16, 1947, he learned the guitar after his father brought one home. Influenced by the rock music of the early and mid-1960's, The Rolling Stones in particular, Gabriel played in rock bands in and after graduating high school. He was drafted in 1967, completed basic training, and deployed as an infantry man, 11 Bravo Vietnam, in January 1968, arriving just before the start of the Tet Offensive. He soon found himself in the jungle, engaging in his first firefight after only a few weeks in country. He bought a beat-up guitar, and a photo from 1968 shows him in his helmet, cradling it, M60 style. He notes, though, that he never took the guitar on patrol but that it traveled with him to base camps, where he would play with some other guitarists when he was out of the bush.

Gabriel kept playing music when he returned stateside in 1969. He lived for a time in Connecticut, California, and Massachusetts, playing in clubs, working with "name" artists, and becoming more serious about his music. After moving permanently to Maine in the 1990's he rejuvenated his Blind Albert persona and formed the Blind Albert Band.

In 2000, he released the CD *11 Bravo Vietnam*, which chronicles his war and post-war experiences. Liner notes dedicate the CD to his brothers in arms Howard Spitzer, Richard Gibson ("Spitzer and The Winemaker") **1**, Nicholas Saunders, Robert Caplan and "all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and to all veterans who served." The album served as the foundation for a documentary he created a few years later, *11 Bravo Vietnam—A Soldier's Story*, which he calls "'a virtual scrapbook of one young man's experience in combat from the day he receives word of his induction to his homecoming.'" **2**

The song "Draft Card" is emblematic of his irrevocable life change, happening virtually overnight, from playing music in California after high school to receiving his induction notice and going to basic and infantry training. "Spitzer and the Winemaker" is a first-person recounting of an episode in which Gabriel is rotated off point with Spitzer taking the lead with Gibson. As the patrol moves out, with Spitzer and Gibson a hundred or so yards ahead, they hear an explosion. They learn that Spitzer and Gibson walked into a minefield, with Spitzer killed and Gibson wounded. "Homeward Flight" is an instrumental; words aren't needed to express the relief of riding home on the "freedom bird." The album concludes with the plaintive feel of "Beneath the Shelter" and the relentless bass line of "Shellshock—PTSD" (included on CD 13 of *. . . Next Stop is Vietnam*). In the former, Gabriel takes on the persona of a homeless vet telling his story. He says that "I died inside but kept on living." He realizes that there will be "no more parades with ticker tape or marching bands" and that in society's eyes "I'm just a wino." In the latter Gabriel describes the personal effects of the war: his

divorce, the inner demons, the reliance on "weed and whiskey" in order to get through the day. He sings in the refrain that "the war never ends for the soldier, you come home and it all just begins."

In 2002 he released an eight-cut CD entitled *Boyish Man* (playing off Muddy Waters' 1955 song "Mannish Boy"), on which he played guitar, harmonica, and percussion, as well as doing the back-up vocals. The album is more straight-ahead rock and blues with no ostensible references to his military service. Gabriel, at 72, continues to write songs, and perform solo and with his band. He has his own recording studio with which he produces the albums of other musicians.

- For recordings, see: https://www.reverbnation.com/vietnamcombatveteranblindalbert/songs
- Hugo Keesing, *. . . Next Stop is Vietnam: The War on Record: 1961-2008*, Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 2010, pp. 238-239.

Larry Abbott: In *We Gotta Get Out of This Place,* Bradley and Werner write, "music is a path to healing. Music can help heal psychological wounds." **1** Does your music have a therapeutic or a healing dimension?

Vince Gabriel: Well, my music was written about my experiences in Vietnam, so I don't know how therapeutic that would be. The concept for the CD (*11 Bravo Vietnam*) was to give someone an idea of what it was like without actually being there. I mean, that was the only way I could pass that information along. When I give someone the CD, I say, "You don't want to play that at a party, if you're trying to get the party going." [laughs] Because it's not party music. It's about being in combat, and it's basically about from the time I got my draft card until the time I came home. Each song is attached to whatever I was going through at the time. I do believe that music is a soothing method of dealing with stuff, but I

wouldn’t consider this soothing. It’s more of an audio documentary, I would say. You can put it that way.

LA: Your songs tell stories, as you mentioned. Do you consider yourself a storyteller?

VG: In this regard, I do. I’ve written a lot of songs from experiences, not only Vietnam, but just life experiences. Some would tell a story, but I’m basically writing about feelings, and I don’t know that that tells a story or not, you know? But the Vietnam CD is definitely a story. A true story.

LA: One thread or dimension in your songs is social

commentary, like “Land of Dreams,” “The Common People,” and “Hey, You,” which seem to reference more of what’s happening in the world today, like global warming or government lies.

VG: Yeah, I guess I could call them protest songs, about what was going on at that particular time, the early 90’s. It’s just my way of putting out how I feel without actually getting on Facebook and ranting and raving. [laughs] ‘Cause that doesn’t work sometimes. I would say I’ve got five or six songs that are similar to that.

LA: How did those songs come about?

VG: There was a period of time I was writing when I wrote those types of songs because I figured, I got to get some stuff out because it’s really bugging the hell out of me. They were just a commentary on what was going on at the time. “One Way Street” took in a couple of subjects: veterans, the oil, fighting for oil. Every one of those, my protest songs, came from a need to get those feelings out. The best way I know how to do that is to write a song about it. That’s how that stuff came about. I don’t know if anybody liked what they heard, or how many people listened, but it was important that I put it out. If somebody got something from it, then that’s good.

LA: In some of those songs you have a female chorus, “We need hope . . . we need the promise that things will change.”

VG: Well, actually, the female chorus was me. [laughs] I just sang in a really high falsetto voice. I didn’t have time to go looking for a female singer. I don’t think I knew too many at the time, so I figured well, I’ll just do it. And so, it’s kind of a joke because I go by the name of Blind Albert. I call them the Blindettes. That’s my backup singing group.

LA: On that note, how did Blind Albert come about?

VG: Well, this isn’t a really long story, which is good. I used to live in Cape Cod before I moved up here and I had a

studio in my apartment. I was working on a blues project. I was writing blues songs, and I needed to come up with a fictitious blues name for it. My middle name's Albert and I needed something in front of that. I didn't want to be Deaf Albert or Fat Albert, or any of these others. I figured Blind Albert. That sounds like a blues guy. I used it for that project, but then I didn't use it anymore.

Not too long after that, in '89, I moved up to Maine because a good buddy of mine who I had played with back in the '70s was living up here. I moved out to Islesboro, and kind of aired out for about a year 'cause I had just gotten a divorce, and I needed to regroup.

I didn't play music for about a year. I didn't play in clubs for that year. I started to gradually book stuff, and realized I couldn't stay on the island anymore 'cause I was off the island more than I was on the island, playing. I put a band together and needed a name for it. Blind Albert was in mothballs and I figured, hmm, Blind Albert. I had already come up with that. I might as well use it.

And so I started to use that. And the funny thing about it is, because of the name, everybody pegged me as a blues artist. That's still the case now. But I do play some blues, but I wasn't originally a blues artist; I was a rock guitar player and singer, which I still am.

LA: I think you're known more as Blind Albert than Vince Gabriel.

VG: Oh, that's true, because I'll be talking with people and mention that I play in a band. And they'll say, "What band do you play with?" I'll say, "Blind Albert." "Oh, I saw you guys in Bar Harbor a couple of years ago, yeah." And if I told them my real name, they wouldn't know who the hell I was. So, I'm kind of stuck with it. I've been stuck with it for 25 or 30 years now.

LA: What led you to making the *11 Bravo Vietnam* documentary? You intersperse your songs with narration and images.

VG: I was actually asked by a friend of mine, who was in college at the time, if I would mind if she interviewed me about playing music in Maine. I said sure, 'cause this was a project for her and I figured I could help her out. **2** During the course of the interview, the subject matter turned to Vietnam, and it was eventually called "Vietnam Blues." I didn't really give it much thought. She told me that she had sent the interview to a couple of radio stations. I just said, okay.

And then, about two weeks later, she contacted me and said that there was a public radio station in Idaho or somewhere that wanted to broadcast it, and I said well, that's good. I still didn't take it seriously. Then about a week later, she said, "We hit the motherlode." I said, "What do you mean?" "NPR picked it up on the Sound Print program. It will be

broadcast all over the United States.” And that’s when I started taking it seriously.

I began to get emails from people I didn’t even know about that piece. I was overwhelmed by the response. I just thought, this is her college project, no big deal. But because of the broadcast I put a live performance together based on the songs on the Vietnam CD and then I decided to put together a documentary

The band rehearsed, I don’t know, for two or three months. A buddy of mine who’s a drama teacher took snippets of notes that I had written about everything I could remember about Vietnam. I had notebooks full of notes. I didn’t know what I was going to do with it, I just wrote it. I just kept writing until I couldn’t remember anything else.

When I started to put this performance together, I figured, well, now I know what I’m going to do with all that stuff I wrote. I’ll take parts of what I wrote that are kind of connected to the songs and we’ll get a narrator and have him narrate each portion. They were only about three or four minutes long, and we’ll play the songs that are related to the narration. Then we’d go onto the next song and he narrates that. The performance continued through all of the songs.

So, I booked the theater in Waldoboro [Maine] and told them I got this thing that I want to do. I don’t know how it’ll turn out or if anybody will even care. We did some advertising and while we were at the theater getting ready, I’m thinking nobody’s showing up ’cause it’s about Vietnam. I said, who’s gonna care? And before I knew it, the whole place was full of people. [laughs] So, I said man, there’s like a lot of people here. I hope we don’t screw it up.

We went out and played. It went off pretty good. I got such an overwhelming response from the audience that it was like an emotional moment. I had thought, nobody’s really going to give

a shit about this. As it turned out I had veterans coming up to me who were in the audience who said you got to keep telling this story.

So I thought, okay. I don't know how long it was after that, I got this brainstorm about bringing the show into the high schools. But because the performance was so long, it was over an hour and a half, the live performance didn't really work in that setting. What I decided to do was shorten it and make a documentary that was about an hour long.

I started to contact some high schools, and wound up going into four or five. I went to a school in Thorndike [Maine] like five years in a row and showed the documentary, and then I would open it up to questions. I said, you guys can ask me anything you want about Vietnam, I don't care what it is. You want to ask me about the drugs, I'll tell you about the drugs. I said, there's nothing that you can't ask me. That was the best part of the whole thing because we were all interacting with the story. It was great. I loved it.

So that's how the documentary came about, the DVD version. I did the live version maybe four or five other times in different places. After I put the documentary together, I kind of slackened off with the live performance. I might still do one, but right now I'm not. But I do have the documentary. The documentary is still available to do something with. **2**

And that's how it all came about. It's kind of a roundabout story.

LA: It was a long story short, or a short long story.

VG: Yeah. A long story long, or something. [laughs] But, yeah.

LA: In "Spitzer and the Winemaker," you ask, "Why am I here and his name is on the wall?"

VG: Right.

LA: And you pose some reasons: luck, skill, karma, God. But then say, “nah.” Have you answered that question, or is that an unanswerable question?

VG: I guess it was all of those. I don’t know. I mean, it could have been any one of the guys or all of them but I still don’t know. Usually I tell people I’m just happy to be here.

That’s how I answer the question because I’m just happy to be here, man. ‘Cause I could not be here. A split second could make a difference, you know? I think it must have been all of those reasons ’cause I don’t think just one of them would have got me back home. I guess something was working for me. And I don’t know what it was, but I’m glad that it did. I’m glad to be here.

LA: You see that frequently not only in the writing of the Vietnam era but also today’s wars, the idea of randomness, pure chance. You step here and you’re okay, but your buddy steps there and he gets blown up.

VG: Yeah. I guess that’s why I ask the question why I’m here and he’s not? There you go back to the luck thing ’cause it had nothing to do really with skill. Well, some of it. A little bit of skill was involved because the guys who were there longer than I was would tell you, for example, don’t walk on the path. You want to listen to what the hell they’re telling you.

A small amount of skill and a large amount of luck, because my buddy, Spitzer, was killed when he was walking point. There were occasions when I also walked point, but not that day. You question why, why that happened. I don’t know why that happened. It’s just the way it worked out. It’s a matter of stepping in one spot or not stepping in another spot. Or being told to walk point that day but not being told to walk point another day.

I don’t know what you call that. That’s a random act, I guess, or happening, event, or something. But you’re going to stop and wonder why it was Spitzer and it wasn’t you, you know what I mean? That’s just the way it was.

LA: Do you see your songs as having relevance or connection to vets returning today?

VG: The wars are different, but I think all the veterans and those involved in the wars now are going through the same thing. You might be fighting house to house, like they do in Iraq. When we were fighting, we were in the jungle, going through hooches. It was different but it was the same. You still didn’t know if you were going to get injured or if you were going to get killed from one second to the next. You were still in combat. It doesn’t matter the place; it was combat. You play it, no matter how you look at it.

And the other thing is the problems that you suffered after you came home were the same. PTSD, suicides from PTSD, whatever. If you compare everything, they’re pretty similar.

The wars were different, but I think some of the things that occurred to each veteran who was in these different wars were really the same thing. A bullet can still kill you. That isn’t any different.

LA: To me, one of your most moving songs is “Beneath the Shelter.” It seems to be more generalized about homeless vets, but you sing from the “I” point of view. And one of your lines is, “Yes, I am a veteran. I died inside, but I kept on

living.” In the documentary you connect the song to the art of Derek Gundy. Can you talk about that connection and how that song came about?

VG: Well, that had to do with the homeless veteran situation, and it was a while back when I wrote that song. The situation is still going on today. I mean, it’s a major problem. I’ve never really been homeless. There were some times when I didn’t have a place to live for a little while, but basically I was trying to put the information out that there are veterans who are homeless, that don’t have a place. It’s a long-lasting problem. I wanted to put that information out in a song. Maybe it will have more impact than just presenting statistics.

And Derek, who is a great artist, asked me if he could do a visual rendering of the song and I said, yeah, you can do that. He did a great job.

I didn’t have any statistics when I wrote the song. But I knew there were homeless veterans out there. I placed the song in a scene, under a bridge. There are all kinds of reasons for people to be homeless. And they’re not all alcoholics.

The plight of homeless vets was something that bothered me and I decided to write about it. I guess that’s what it boils down to.

LA: What’s your general process of writing a song? Do you have a rough idea and then keep honing it until you get to a finished product?

VG: Well, for me, I need to write the music first. Some people write lyrics and then put music to it, but I can’t do it that way. I need to come up with an emotional connection with the music. The music is what connects me to song.

Even before the lyrics, I need to come up with the music. Then, I’ll write how I feel. I need to feel the emotion first

and it’s the music that I get that from.

LA: Another song that I thought was one of your best had a bit of a reggae beat, “A Camera and A Curious Mind,” where you write, “Once Vietnam gets in your soul, it keeps you coming back for more. The sounds you hear, the smell of death, the images you can recall.” And you retrace the steps in your mind, and toward the end of the song, there is the sound of a helicopter.

VG: A gentleman asked me if I could write a song for this short documentary that somebody did about him. He was a Vietnam vet and a photographer. I watched the video and took it from there. I wrote the music first and then I wrote the words.

It’s something that, after you write it, you’re not really sure how you came up with it. That’s always a mystery to me how that happens. I don’t know where it comes from. He liked the song. I wrote it and recorded it in one day, and I gave it back to him.

He asked me, “How long did it take you to write this?” “It took me a day.” And he says, “You’re kidding me?” I said, “No, it took me a day.” I said, “There’s the song. Do you like it or not?” [laughs] And he did. I did it to see if I could do it. That’s how that song came about.

LA: You have a song, “Shellshock – PTSD,” with the idea of the war lasts forever. Could you talk about how that one came about?

VG: I think what triggered that was not necessarily my experiences, but the experiences of the veterans who were in Iraq and Afghanistan. It definitely has to do with Vietnam, too.

It was probably the last song I wrote for the CD. It came a long time after I got back from Vietnam. Having PTSD, but not

suffering as much as some Vietnam vets do, I mean, mine was bad enough, and it's still bad enough 'cause I'm taking medication for it, but it was a subject that I had to write about because I hadn't written about it.

I needed to write something, I needed to write my feelings about that subject because I hadn't done that. Until I had, the CD really wasn't complete.

Before I wrote this song, I thought, oh, it's missing one thing. It's missing the residuals that come from war and that we're all, you know, all of us who were in combat, are going through right now. The residuals are part of the whole tour.

A buddy of mine made a comment, "We had no idea that our tour was gonna last a lifetime." And I said, "Yeah," and asked him, "Can I use that?" [laughs] And he said, "Sure." So I did. It opens the documentary.

But it's true. There's the coming home part which, believe me, I was overwhelmed and overjoyed to be back alive. But then, there's all the other stuff that starts coming up after you've been home.

And you deal with it every day, and that's like still being on tour. You're not getting shot at or anything, but mentally you have a lot to deal with. You've been affected by it. You know, we're all taking medication for it. Some have it worse than others. Some of them have committed suicide because of it.

So it's really an ongoing tour, mentally, and maybe even physically, too. Not in the true sense of being over in a combat situation, but you're fighting, you're fighting this stuff every day.

LA: One of the other threads I see seems to be about relationships and love/lust. "There's Always Someone Out There," "You Started Something," or "Four Alarm Fire."

VG: What's really funny about that is, I don't know what happened. My voice somehow changed. I have no idea what caused it. Well, I might have an idea about what caused it. I might have been smoking weed at the time. I don't know if I should say that, but, uh, that's what happened. And it changed my voice.

All of a sudden, I could start hitting these higher notes that I couldn't before. That's where that group of songs came from. And I can't duplicate the vocals on them now because I don't smoke weed anymore. My voice is back to where it should be.

It was just a period of time where I used that voice change and took advantage of it, and wrote some songs that I could sing in that way. It was the weirdest thing. I don't know where that came from, but I can't duplicate it anymore. [laughs]

I don't know that those songs were written about anything I had been through, but they were just, you know, thoughts.

I put those thoughts to music. I don't even know where this stuff comes from, you know? It's better not to try and come up with an answer to that. [laughs]

- Bradley, Douglas, and Werner, Craig. *We Gotta Get Outta This Place*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015, p. 2.
- National Public Radio Soundprint "Vietnam Blues," produced by Christina Antolini, December, 2004, aired January 2005, https://beta.prx.org/stories/3436
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New Poem from Nazli Karabiyikoglu: “Hymn: A Coffin at the Gates of Topkapi”

COLD SONGS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The head, decapitated,

it sits on a shore, at some corner of the world.
Desperation is what they feel as blood gushes out from the half-neck.
Death, however, has always been there,
nothing new, an enslaving event.
The name of the deal was predefined –
“flight”. It has been around since the Order of Assassins.
Part of us see the beauty in all this, even when the tortures last
till the moon starts to shine over us.
Sir!
There you lie, your frail length almost pours out from the bed.
And here I am, by your side, barren inside,
yet my mind replays a moment with you,
where you feed me freshly-picked strawberries.
My worst nightmare is finding a way into my life,
into you, through your flesh and bones
yet my heart replays a moment with you,
where you dress me with freshly-picked strawberries.
Sir!
Many calls for prayer have been sung.
And here I am, can’t look away.
My devotion may be in vein, but what I’m losing now is transcendental.
You missed most of it, as they held a mirror to your nose
and checked if you still breathed. So beautifully you lay there.
Before this fate, I was as effective as a human shield.
Here I am, bitter as rock, by the frilled duvets,
thinking how we must keep you alive
and not sickly-yellow and quiet like this.
See? I’m here by the frilled duvets, ice cold,
thinking how I crave to coil up next to you.
Sir!

We finally made peace with death. First our eyes watched the floors, then our fists beat our chests. Distances reached, horizons obtained, flasks of scarce water and worn sheaths. Almost everyone lost their sons to this war. Our sons. Our people. They believed in the protection of their shields and wanted to go as far as it got them, is that why we say our hymns for our sons, on and on for days? Is this our fate?

I decided I'll surpass fate and kismet and luck or whatever. So here I am, standing before that reckless hope. I grabbed it by the chin, pushed it against a wall and I let anger take control. I asked it, and I was quite sincere about it too, "How is it that death gets in?"

The way you put your head on my head,
lifeless, breathless, heavy.
Your word is my law, and I stand by its chime.
With largest oceans behind my back,
you were my creation, and I gave you away.
Your first steps, your first words, have been my challenge.
And the way you put your shoulders on my legs.
Sir!
Greatest storms whirled inside me, and, oh, I prayed
to the Almighty; to His holiness, I presented all of my organs,
but they pulled out my womb, or what's left of it,
and even then, all that mattered was you, sir.

Something penetrates, once, twice, my spleen watches it happen, smells pleasant, like linden, my favorite, something to go for a child is being created, from the char of my liver, my flesh puffs, my flesh grows fat,

count those things that penetrate me, arms maybe, one, two and three,
stop there, stop at the second syllable of my name, I did not do this to
me, I did not choose to carry this burden

Beings must produce, yet I’m barren inside.
Your look is my law, and I stand by its tingle.
With vastest moors behind me
you were my darling, and I gave you away.
Your first words, *my sultan, your highness,* have been my challenge.
Beings must produce, yet I’m barren inside, and you’re lovely inside.
That’s what you said

All this glory and all these gifts, what use do they serve, I pondered for
a long time and I could not find the answer. I knit for a long time, laces
and wools too, wore them in the cold maroon rooms of this palace, in
the cold of my own body, cold, songs were cold, my violin was warm,
only to me. They took me right away, and no surprise there, I was
pretty, I stayed quiet when they split my legs, but I’m known for
kicking quite hard. How funny, the way things change so much so fast,
we were a thousand and now I’m just one, do the winds always bring injustice with them or does it travel in the pockets of soldiers?

Crying my lungs out, biting my tongue, fires scorching my stomach,do these all go together for me now?
Or have I just comprehended death and broken apart while at

it?
If we can’t breathe where the dead go,
tears can flood, for the duration of the earth’s age even,
quail with rice or grape compost.
He found his place in the history books
as did I.
It takes courage to stand before a dagger; I did,
I stood still as a brick and I shed tears.
If it wasn’t for your shadow, I’d call you my child,
my life, my signature, the one that makes me get lost in those oceans.
Don’t be hurt, because I’m ordinary, I think you’ll outlive me.
You’ll have no idea though how we managed to get that life out of you.
I bit my tongue, held back at every chance, and saved the pain along my spine.
My womb dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out, but I
will not give up on your scent.
I yearn for your chest to rise up to the highest,
for you to take one deep breath.
If it wasn’t for your soul, I’d call you my child,
my flesh, my bone, the one that makes a prisoner out of me.
Don’t be hurt, because I’m ordinary, you’ll outlive me.
I think I see the blue of your eyes again, yes.
You’ll have no idea though, what getting that life out of you cost us.
I bit every part of me within my reach, saved the pain deep in me.
The nightingale dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out of me,
but I will not give up on you.
How hard it was to bring you to life!
If it wasn’t for your soul, I’d call you my child.

Sign off my sentence, my tears are my sin.
Tightly tie the rope around my neck

and tightly tie a knot to the rope that goes nowhere.

***Translator's Note**: The story, although fiction, sits in actual history, and gives us some pointers towards having an understanding of era and geography. Topkapi Palace is in modern day Turkey, and was mostly used as the emperor's residency during the Ottoman Empire's rule between 13th and early 20th century. The Order of Asssasins, Ḥashashiyan or Ḥashīshiyya, was a radical Nizari Isma'ili sect that assasined Muslim and Christian leaders before that time period. The ordeal of flight, as in the work towards enabling humans to fly by any means, caused controversy in the Muslim world in the past, since it is simply unnatural for humans to fly, but attempts are encountered in Ottoman history. The story, too, is likely placed in a time period where such attempts stir political balances.*