

New Fiction from Kena Ramirez Dillon and Francisco Martinezcuello: “Veterans Motorcycle Manual”

[2022 Veterans Motorcycle Manual](#)

New Fiction from Peter Obourn: “Wild Horses”

Lee Harkness was supposed to meet this guy Smitty at a bar called Marty’s on 14th Street at a specified time. Lee was late because it was his first time in Dallas. He had trouble finding the address.

“You’re late,” said Smitty.

“No shit,” said Lee.

“Relax, have a drink.” The guy backed right off, told him to relax—it was okay to be late.

Lee sat in the booth across from him. Lee had never seen a real gangster before. Smitty had a flat wooden face. His expression didn’t change, even when he talked. Smitty got up and walked to the bar. He was short—a lot shorter than Lee—not short like a dwarf, just short. Smitty got them each a shot and drank his in one swallow. Lee sipped his.

Smitty handed Lee a photograph. “Keep it,” he said. “That’s

Reggie. His real name is Reginald. Sounds like he's some smart guy that went to college or something, doesn't it, but he's not. Well, actually, maybe he went to some college for a while, but he's stupid. His name should be Judas. That windbreaker—he'll be wearin' that.

"He ratted on my brother, Tim, just to save his own skin." According to Smitty, Timmy got his knees broken—never been the same. They called it *capping*, and Smitty didn't know then what it meant, but he did now. "Reggie says he saved Tim's life—kept them from wasting him. That's bullshit. Timmy kept a little money out of his collections. Reggie found out about it. I told Reggie I'd take care of it and he said OK. Then he ratted. Nobody does that to me.

They had six shots of bourbon each, then a few beers. They both got drunk, but Lee felt good—together.

The guy Smitty was all broken up about his brother. Lee had a brother—ten years older—sold cars—pretty wife, very pretty, and a little girl—took Lee in for over a year after his first arrest, then threw him out, for nothing.

They never discussed the job itself. He thought this guy Smitty would ask stuff like had he done this before or go over the plan, the details. Lee was prepared for that—prepared to tell about his experience—but he didn't get the chance.

* * *

Lee did have the necessary qualifications. He was trained to kill and he had. When he was on active duty in Afghanistan he didn't see a lot of action but had seen some. There was one horrible time when his unit got ambushed and he lost three of his close buddies. Somehow, he got through it. His unit was attacked, starting with rockets fired at their unit. At first, all Lee and his buddies could do was defend themselves and try to stay alive. Most of them did. The enemy just kept coming, but the unit was in their station and had a lot of powerful

stuff to fight back. After it was all over, they went out to make sure the enemy was gone. They found twelve bodies, which to Lee looked just like his buddies. They didn't have uniforms or anything, but they were all just young guys like Lee.

After the battle they could have some counseling and Lee signed up for that. He told the chaplain that the worst part was when they had to go out and look for bodies. The chaplain asked him if he thought he had done anything wrong and Lee had said, "No, I believe in everything we are doing and what our country stands for and how important it is for the people in Afghanistan to be independent and free, but it was still hard to take."

It was necessary to park his car at his mother's trailer in Albuquerque. She made him nervous, talking all the time.

"You need to call your brother. Talk to your brother. You look tired. Are you taking drugs? Why are you here? Why do you need to leave your car here? You never call; then, all of a sudden, you show up and expect me to be glad to see you. I don't even know where you live." She went on and on.

He looked away. She looked older and tired, yet somehow she was holding it together. Like today she had lipstick on, but it ran into her new wrinkles. She was actually wearing a dress, white with lumpy shapes of random sizes. The pattern reminded Lee of the side of a cow. Apparently she had a job somewhere now. He tried to imagine who would hire her.

"Are you listening to me?" she said. He looked up. "I'm telling you about on the bus yesterday. I saw her get on and kept my eye on her the whole time. She wasn't even sitting near me. I knew she was one of them. She didn't move, but I forgot to watch her reflection in the window across from her seat. That's how she did it. I should have known. She got off the bus and I looked down and my purse was open. I never leave

my purse open, and twenty dollars was gone. Those Puerto Ricans can do that. They don't even have to be in the room."

She'd straightened out a little. It seemed there was no man around; she wasn't drinking, but she still talked too much, and she was still crazy.

His mother said that Rosemary had been asking about him. "Tell her I can't see her right now," he said. "I have to go and do a job. I'll call her as soon as I do the job."

"What job?"

"Never mind. Just tell her what I said. She won't ask."



photo by Andria Williams

Rosemary never asked him anything. That's why he liked her. She just talked about herself and he didn't listen, but the sound of her voice calmed him. He liked to lie next to her and shut down so only the sound of her voice was left.

From the trailer park he took a local bus into Albuquerque and then another bus to Dallas, arriving in Dallas by Greyhound, as instructed. The Greyhound was supposed to be AIR-COOLED. "Doesn't that mean," he asked, "that, perhaps, it should be cooler inside the bus than outside?"

"That depends on the outside temperature," said the driver, who had a bad attitude.

Lee knew he couldn't push the driver's face in; he couldn't even argue with him. "Keep a low profile," the guy who hired him had said, and Lee needed the money. So he had to sweat it out, which literally meant he had to sweat on the bus all the way from Albuquerque. He stayed in the motel in Dallas for two days watching television until Smitty called.

He didn't even let the maid in. "Suits me," she said.

Reggie Johnson was putting on his white windbreaker. "Will you be warm enough in just that?" asked his wife.

"It's just a short meeting with some guy," he said, giving her a quick kiss. "It's still summertime, for Christ's sake. I won't even be out of the car. Be home in time to tuck the kids in."

As agreed, Reggie parked his black BMW under the third streetlight on Oak Avenue north of Lincoln and waited. He had told Smitty to set up a meeting with the assistant police chief. He hoped Smitty hadn't screwed it up. If all went well, they would control the whole east side, with the cops in their pocket. He shuffled his newspaper to study the standings in

detail. The Yankees were three games behind Boston with twenty to play. They would make a run for it. If the odds were right, he liked the bet. Personally, he gave New York an even chance. Boston always faded.

Lee had the pistol in his left hand, hidden under a coat draped over his right arm. The guy Reggie was just sitting in the car, in his windbreaker, reading the newspaper. From behind the car, Lee walked casually up to the driver's side window until the gun was pointed at Reggie's left ear. All he had to do now was pull the trigger.

Reggie turned suddenly. "Where the hell did *you* come from?" He looked at the coat over Lee's arm.

"Um," said Lee, "Could you tell me the time?"

"Yuh, sure. It's seven-thirty. Jesus, you scared the shit outta me."

Lee walked away from the BMW. He left Reggie to wait for a meeting that would not happen. In the middle of the bridge, he stopped and looked around, then he dropped the pistol into the river. He watched it fall and make a small splash. He wouldn't be getting the ten grand. He would be getting nothing. His gun was gone. The bus was late and it was hot, but he didn't sweat on the ride back to Albuquerque. He relaxed, watching the desert go by. One time he saw wild horses, off in the distance—at least he saw the cloud of dust they made. He decided it was definitely wild horses.

When he got back to his mother's trailer, the first thing she said was, "I got to feed the squirrels." They sat on the front step of the trailer and held peanuts out. Squirrels came and took peanuts out of Lee's hand. Nervously, they would take three each time, putting one in each cheek and then somehow stuffing the third one in their mouths.

He looked at his mother. She smiled. She had the same black

and white dress on. He decided it looked okay on her. She even had on a necklace, just a silver circle on a chain, which sort of matched her soft gray hair.

A squirrel grabbed a peanut. "Funny critters," he said.

"Sure are," she said. "What put you in such a good mood all of a sudden?"

"Nothin'" he said. It was dusk, that time when the birds call each other. "It's been a rough week—but it's over." He handed a squirrel his last peanut. "Mind if I stay here a while?"

"Suit yourself," she said.

"I'll protect you from those Puerto Rican women."

"Who?"

He took the photo Smitty had given him out of his pocket. "See this guy?" He handed it to his mother. "I thought maybe he looked a little like my father."

"What are you talking about? You never even seen your father."

"I know, Ma, but you know, he looks about the right age to be."

"Yeah, well, your father did have a jacket like that, but he didn't look anything like this guy."

Lee took the picture back and tore it in half. "Well, anyway, yesterday, I saved this guy's life."

"Really?"

"You could say that."

* * *

He went to see Rosemary. He lay next to her and listened to what she had been doing since he saw her. It took a while.

“Are you glad I’m here?” he said.

“Yes,” she said.

“You know, I couldn’t do that job, so I’m broke.”

“That’s okay.”

“But I saw wild horses and found out something important.”

“What’s that?”

“I found out who I am. It’s not the person I thought I was.”

“That doesn’t make a lot of sense, Lee.”

“Yes, it does, Rosemary. It makes sense.” He reached for her hand.

**New Poetry from Jeffrey
Kingman: “Matriarch,”
“Josephine Marcus Earp,” and
“Marching: Sophia Duleep
Singh”**



OCCASION THE BELLY / *image by*
Amalie Flynn

MATRIARCH

ninth great-grandchild
spits up peas
seventh and fourth
declare themselves winners

I bundle the children into categories
high-shouldered daughters gobble minutes
trikes in the hallway

my sidwinding wisdom
laughs into a hanky

why is it I depend on the perpetual
tweed skirt

try reading
a mother
nursing triplets

attagirl

I suppose getting it right doesn't matter
pull the flowers from the earth
an isolated pea is a tiny thing

JOSEPHINE MARCUS EARP

cowboys were the bad guys
one cow hides behind the last one
it was a bad sum
inaccuracies plus chickens

instead traded on horse hooves
kicked up dust and stray dogs

she wanted to be
taken seriously
staked instead a vagabond

her husband's posture straight to the sky
pointing now to the headboard
the tombstone didn't think of her

left with her own version
they rifle through the undergarment drawer
for the sheriff's girl

MARCHING: SOPHIA DULEEP SINGH

voice rattles
a high window

the lyric ricochets
then straightens
 to the upper register

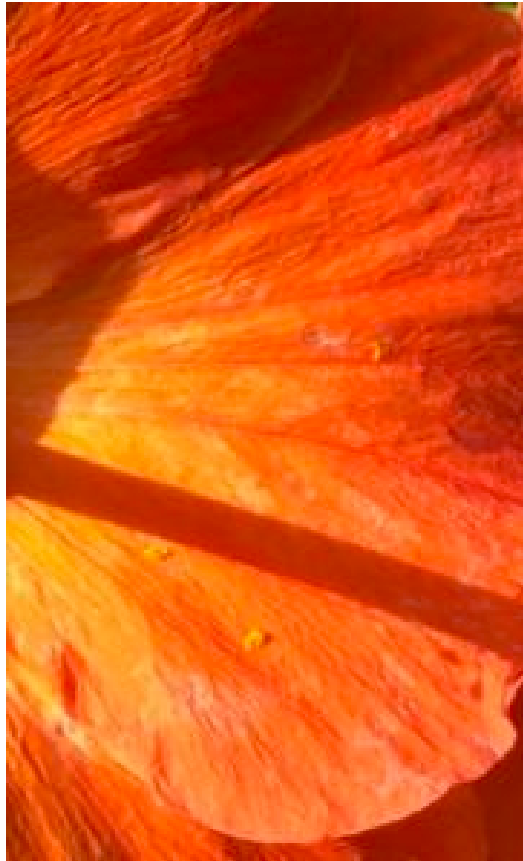
breath comes
from the diaphragm
for the belters
on occasion
 the belly

trailing skirts out of fashion
wives sing wild
wrapped in bedsheets
to jump from a crawling baby
 is not a dance

talk of a women's parliament
words are for lemmings
feet do the work
until the pointlessness is stiff limbed
dogged bobbys
the street scuffle an avant-garde
 ballet

she fell down during the struggle
mud on her dress

New Poetry from Laura King: "Orange"



MY ACIDIC PAST / *image by*
Amalie Flynn

ORANGE

It's June, and a few stubborn ones
still hang on the trees.

We stand on the back of the pickup to pluck one—
so easy to peel, this old girl the sun has sugared
since December's sharp tang.

Now it's sweet as honey, sweet as candy,
sweet as that boy child
who wrapped himself up in his binkie,
his raw thumb firm against his upper palette,
who sat on the stairs facing the wall
because I'd snapped at him again.

Why was I upset all the time?

Though everyone forgives me, no one forgets

my acidic past; bright orange, raw rage.

New Nonfiction from Leah McNaughton Lederman: “Man of Steel”



There’s a solid history of stupid when it comes to fireworks at our family cabin at the corner of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and—as Dad called it—West by-golly-stand-up-and-smile-when-you-say-it Virginia. When we spent weeks of our summers there

in the eighties, Dad developed his own sort of bird call: "Careful!" The mountains put him on edge.

In his defense, between the creek, the pool, the fire, the road, the wasps, the bears, and the cottonmouths—and being completely off the grid, forty-five minutes from the nearest emergency room—there was a variety of creative deaths and injuries available. We knew where Dad was when we heard "Careful," and headed in the opposite direction with our handfuls of bottle rockets.

He always showed up a few days in, and we knew without asking he wouldn't stay long. My grandmother and uncle had both lamented, over the years, that his trips to the cabin had become less frequent since his return from Vietnam and, back when he still drank, he drank more when he was there. He explained it in simple terms: "I went camping for a year, once. That's enough for me."

On her own in the Appalachians with seven kids, Mom used to hand out packets of gunpowder snaps just to get us out of her hair, and we set to snapping them on each other's bare skin or combining several snaps into one giant snap and throwing it in the fire. My cousins liked to play "who can hold the firecracker the longest," a game with no discernible winner.

We hadn't grown out of it and weren't any smarter three decades later, in the summer of 2010. Our extended households arrived by the carload in the days before the Fourth of July each year, turning the yard into a parking lot. We were there not just to blow things up but to rebuild the cabin, on account of snow having caved in its roof.

Children spilled out from their hours-long imprisonment and sprawled into the surrounding woods to make sure everything was still there: the creek, the pool, the fire, the road, the wasps, the bears, and the cottonmouths. Inevitably one of them discovered an unsuspecting toad and the cousins all fought

over who was going to “rescue” it. I joined my siblings barking orders to leave the thing alone so that it could limp away gratefully, albeit bedraggled and panting. Our aunts and uncles had said the same thing to us when we spent summers there leaving hapless amphibians in our wake.

In the midst of all the unloading, my brother Asher crouched near the fire he’d somehow already built, lighting bottle rockets that would flash across the creek. Grandchildren materialized from behind boulders and dropped down from trees, leaving behind half-erected tents and protesting parents, toppling themselves and each other in their frenzy to see which uncle was going to do what next.

The extent of pyrotechnic safety was a quick headcount to ensure the littlest kids were accounted for and seated behind a boulder. Asher and the oldest nieces and nephews took their places behind the behemoth slab of sandstone we’d always called “Grandfather’s rock,” and began their assault. One after another, bottle rockets zipped across the creek and burst, miniature contrails marking their trajectory up the opposite slope and crisscrossing through the trees like a stringboard.

Each explosion drew more cheers from the younger children, and competition between the bottle-rocket-lighters led to the epic discovery that bottle rockets did in fact explode underwater. The submerged blast made a “thworp” sound like a muffled whale fart followed by a satisfying “bloop” as bubbles burst to the surface. Cheers exploded from all directions, each time.

The smoke bombs were next. The grandkids lined up, each year another one old enough to light their first, and tossed a different colored ball into the rushing waters. Tightly coiled smoke unraveled behind each one, releasing a stream of color. The air in the valley was heavy with moisture that had nowhere to go, so the purples, yellows, reds, and oranges mixed and swirled together, creating a sunset you could walk into.

Those first few days, we filled that valley with gunpowder and with the noise of power drills and hammering. The cabin got a second story and the new roof's trusses were up. Then on July Fourth, my oldest brother Jim started preparations for his annual fireworks show in the field across the street. With nieces and nephews fetching him tools and beers, he installed an impromptu fence, muttering to himself about safety precautions as he adjusted scraps of lattice fencing and particle board.

There couldn't be a repeat of last year, when a mortar zipped over the heads of a dozen-odd grandchildren, over the cement pool, and exploded directly above the cabin's front porch where Grandmother was seated. She'd clapped her hands and asked, "Have the fireworks started?"

This year, Mom planned to sit with Grandma in the relative protection of the car to watch the show.

Dad showed up at dusk and immediately harangued a group of feral grandchildren charging past, "Careful!" My nephew stopped to give him a quick squeeze around the waist then zipped off just as quickly. Dad's arms were still raised in a startled half hug as he looked down at the little-boy-shaped stamp of mud across the front of his khaki shorts.

"Welp, that didn't take long," he said, brushing away the mud.

I snagged a baby wipe from my sister-in-law's diaper bag and offered it to him. "It's Maryland. If you're not dirty in the first five minutes, you're not doing it right."

"You know, a little mud never hurt anybody." He took the wipe and dabbed at his shorts. "We'd spend weeks in the jungle in Vietnam. You know, ate there, slept there, shot and got shot there. Got to a point where the only difference between us and the mud was that we had skin."

He laughed and handed back the soiled wipe, which I held by

the corner and dropped in the cabin's garbage can before joining my little boy for the fireworks. He and most of the kids were on blankets on the ground, trading glowsticks.

Dad situated himself on the bench just as Jim lit the first of the cakes and occasionally during the show he'd let out an appreciative "Whoa ho ho!" More often, though, he was signaling passing cars to slow down, or repeating "careful" to any grandchild who moved.

The truth was, he didn't much care for fireworks. He'd seen enough of them for a lifetime during the Tet Offensive, a period of time that supplied a great number of his regular nightmares and the piece of shrapnel from a mortar lodged "Forrest Gump style" just below his butt. He'd stayed in the field the night he was wounded so as not to leave his men. Together they watched the fireworks displays and shot back with their own.

The morning after the Fourth of July, I was washing dishes when Dad came into the cabin. Outside, grandchildren shrieked with glee while bottle rockets discharged at random intervals. Here and there something bigger would go off, and neighbors up and down the road answered with their own explosions. Dad didn't speak but groaned quietly as he eased himself on to the musty couch and opened his bible, spreading it across one knee. It was a familiar pose. This time, though, he didn't run his hand down the length of the page while he read. He stared at the book, but he never turned the page.

He'd been on patrol with his platoon north of Quang Tri when there was a tremendous boom. He told me it was like "a thunderclap on steroids." The earth shook beneath their feet and a gigantic fireball plumed in the distance. They were sure it was a nuclear bomb, and spent the next few hours in the dripping, humid jungle convinced they would never see their homes again. A few hours passed before they learned it was the explosion of 150 tons of munitions at the ammo dump in Dong

Ha, about eighty miles away. They were in the clear. Still, Dad didn't much care much for abrupt, random explosions.

Unless he was the one doing the exploding. Later that afternoon, I joined him back by the fire with my sister Cori and brother Peter. Grandkids swarmed, all waiting their turn to light the next thing. My niece Channin batted at the military-grade mosquitos and groaned when she found the can of bug spray empty.

Dad grinned. "Eh, just chuck it in the fire." He crossed one arm across his chest and with his other hand, he smoothed his moustache. Starting with his thumb and forefinger pinched in the middle, he ran them towards the opposite ends of the handlebars.

Channin, wary but obedient, tossed in the can. Immediately, we all took backwards strides and found cover behind trees or rocks. Cori shooed the younger grandchildren towards the cabin, promising them bubbles.

I locked eyes with Peter, the man who'd once put leeches on his ears and called them earrings, and the look on his face reflected mine: *This is bad. Also, There's no way I'm going to miss this.* Dad stood off to the side of the footpath, the same amused look on his face as when he watched me parallel park: something was about to go wrong and it was going to be funny when it did.

When the can blew, about a quarter of the fire went with it, exploding logs into ember-riddled splinters on a ten-foot trajectory towards the creek. The mini boulders circling the firepit were dislodged and lolled aimlessly in the surrounding sand. After checking ourselves over for shrapnel, we erupted into frenzied cheers and applause. Dad laughed so hard his face was one big crinkle, and then he let out another one of those "Whoa, ho hos!"

Across the fire, I looked at Pete. He was grinning, and when

we made eye contact again, he clenched his teeth and raised his eyebrows in a “Can you believe that just happened?” face. We were relieved when Mom rang the dinner bell.

On the day after the annual fireworks show, we blew up watermelons. Why we had declared that war, no one knew. As with most of my brothers’ absurd, and generally-just-plain-stupid ideas—like “Bottle Rocket Badminton”—it was a collective effort.

The boys would huddle together with screwdrivers, hatchets, and cordless drills in hand, discussing geometry and the laws of buoyancy. It took a lot of planning to stabilize the fruit on a makeshift platform so that, after they’d bored holes into it and stuffed it with mortars, it could float downstream without turning over and extinguishing the wick. We couldn’t do it in the yard on account of the exploded bits attracting wasps—a lesson we’d learned the hard way.

“We used watermelons for bayonet practice in Basic Training,” my dad said to me once when I was a teenager. I was doing my best to cut up a watermelon, struggling to pull the blade through its reluctant innards. His arms crossed, he leaned back against the counter and watched with his head tilted to the side, those bushy eyebrows raised, assessing my work. He told me to be careful and then continued, “They mimic the suction of a human body. In the movies, they show ‘em just hacking away at someone with a blade, but it’s not like that. There’s a lot of pressure to pull against.” He snagged one of the pieces I’d already carved and took a bite. “That’s why they use watermelons.”

Once my brothers had constructed the watermelon-stabilizing platform, we began our procession back to the creek, an assortment of cousins and siblings and grandchildren, all of us rating our favorite explosions from previous years. Whoever’s job it was to set the thing in the creek had to get away real fast, which is why we usually left it to Peter. The

wick hissed in response to his lighter and we held our breath while he skittered back to shore like a water spider.

The mortar ignited, and the blast lifted the bulbous fruit into the air for a dazzling moment before the rind ripped open and fleshy pink innards plopped all over the stream and the opposite slope. We lost our damn minds. Jumping and hollering, belligerent high fives everywhere. Jesse threw back his head and shouted, "I hate you, watermelon!"

I loved the watermelon war as much as anyone else, for the pure absurdity of it and because blowing up fruit is surprisingly satisfying. Every time, though, I'd watch the chunks of watermelon careening downstream, swirling with the current, and I'd think about the suction of a blade through watermelon, just like the suction of a blade through a human body, exposing pink flesh.

The next morning, my two-year-old son, RP combed the yard for spent bottle rocket sticks, yelling "Boom!" all the while. It was his first word. Even when I stepped inside for coffee, I knew where he was from his onomatopoeic shouts.

Blankie in hand, he marched over to my Dad, bellowing, "BOOM!" He threw his arms in the air for emphasis. Dad's eyes lit up and he repeated the motion, answering with his own sonorous "BOOM!" much to his grandson's delight. Finally, someone who understood.

"I've seen that gesture before," Dad said, smiling. He leaned in a little closer to my little boy. "Means something's about to go 'boom'."

RP stared up at him, grinning, and proffered a handful of spent bottle rockets.

"No thanks," Dad said.

Unfazed, RP toddler-stomped off in search of someone willing to make things explode. I lingered near Dad, waiting for the story I knew was coming. It was so good my siblings and I often retold it to each other.

“So this one time,” he began, taking a step closer to me and already smiling at his own story, “I was getting dropped off to deliver supplies to some South Vietnamese troops. The pilot sets me down in this little field and the second we land, the guys on the ground start jumping up and down, yelling and doing this”—he repeats RP’s signature movement—“you know, ‘boom.’ Turns out, I was standing in a minefield.”

This was the point in the story where I would raise my eyebrows in surprise.

“I try to get back on the chopper,” he went on, “but the SOB pilot has also put together what’s going on, and he takes off.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I couldn’t stay out there in the open, it was getting dark. They’re all just watching me, the South Vietnamese guys.” He crossed his arms. “So, I take out a cigar, light it, and walk out of the minefield.”

I scoffed in disbelief and delivered the wows like it was the first time I’d heard it. Dad had even included the story in his letter to the VA requesting compensation for his PTSD and asked me to look over the whole thing for spelling and grammar. I was sixteen at the time.

Every time he told it, at this point, a shadow passed over his face. “The pilot came back to pick me up the next day and I told him I’d rather walk. I guess I can’t blame him for abandoning me in a mine field, but I do. I hitchhiked back.”

The story was finished but Dad lingered, looking at something

on the ground and scratching his face in thought. "They all figured I was some kind of man of steel, those guys." He chuckled on his way past me towards the fire.

No matter how many times he told us that story, he always left out what he'd admitted to the VA in that letter: "I still wake up shivering from that one."

He stopped about halfway down the path and turned. "You comin'?"

By about the third day of being in the mountains, it was time for a resupply. Most of the grandkids went with my mom and sister to get the Amish Coffeecake and sage sausage in Grantsville, plus a stop at the candy store. My husband and older brothers had driven to Morgantown for lumber to install the cabin's new stairs.

I stayed behind to get RP down for an overdue nap, then busied myself tidying the front yard, clearing away random tools, old juice boxes and the damp, discarded clothing that I found everywhere—were any of the children wearing clothes? I gathered the towels littered around the concrete pool and began folding. The jumbled terrycloth carried the sun-warmed scent of uncut grass and campfire that was Maryland.

I loved the quiet moments here more than anything, this rare off-the-grid place that allowed me—perhaps forced me—to be nowhere else. The trees were the same trees my father and uncles had climbed; my great-grandfather's feet walked through this same grass. The valley enveloped me with a sense of belonging.

"Hello there, Sugar Wee," Dad said, coming out of the cabin. He held a can of pop in one hand and with the other he batted away a loose slab of insulation hanging above the door. He walked slowly towards the wooden bench out by the road,

stopping to give me a squeeze around the shoulders. The uneven ground hurt his leg, and with that chunk of metal wreathed in scar tissue, he did a lot of groaning when he moved around. It wasn't unusual for me to see him stiff-backed in his chair at one or two in the morning when I came in from having campfire beers. He took Vicodin when he was in Maryland.

My brother-in-law Doug and three nephews came rounding the bend in the road, returning from one of their fishing trips at Youghiogheny Lake just down the road. A little town, Guard, sat at the bottom of it after being flooded by a dam. In dry years, you could see the foundations of old buildings rising out of the stinking mud like crustacean braille. Apparently, it made for good fishing holes. The late morning sun glinted on the poles slung over their shoulders. Their tackleboxes, swinging like pendulums, marked the air with invisible grins to match the boys' happy faces.

Dad didn't greet them. He whirled around and took quick, choppy steps back to the cabin. Every muscle in his face was taut as though holding fast whatever was inside him, threatening to spill out. He disappeared inside and moments later, through one of the loosened tarps, I caught a glimpse of him seated on the second floor, his head in his hands.

When the fireflies came out at dusk, the kids, pockets filled with candy, made their way back to the fire for s'mores. Dad was seated once again on the wooden bench, looking out at the street. I tugged on a jacket and brought his McNaughton-plaid scarf out to him. Even in the summer, valley evenings were cool.

He acknowledged me by scooting over to give me space, though the bench had plenty, and he thanked me for the scarf, which he spread across his lap so that he could rub the edge between his fingers. We sat quietly together. Eventually he spoke, and his words had a soft, rounded edge to them that I wasn't used to.

“You know, my whole life I used to go fishing with my dad. Almost every day when we were here. When I first got to Vietnam and saw the streams out there, I thought about him, how nice it would be to have him fishing with me.”

I hardly remembered my grandfather. I used to stare at his waders hanging from the basement ceiling at grandma’s house, suspended in the air like some disembodied fisherman, and wonder how someone could wear boots that were taller than I was. No one had the gumption to take them down.

“I didn’t like streams so much anymore, after Vietnam,” Dad continued. “No cover. And I saw a lot of dead bodies floating in them.”

A truck went by with a boat hitched to it. We waved, and the driver raised his hand in casual, relaxed acknowledgement. I studied the rolling gravel disturbed by the heavy tires. I knew the story from dad’s VA letter. He had been on the radio and didn’t know a VC was creeping up behind him. His platoon sergeant shot the enemy soldier and the body tumbled into the nearby creek bed. *I often remember this young VC floating face down in the water with his hair streaming,* he wrote.

I stayed silent, giving Dad his room to speak. Another car had driven past, this one earning a “Slow down,” before he finally said, “When I saw those boys coming down the street with their dad and all their gear, I went upstairs and wept. I just—I don’t know. The thought hit me like a ton of bricks: I haven’t been fishing in fifty years.”

Laughter bounced around the campsite, but the weight of his statement settled heavy in the air between us; the space between his words steeped in grief, some sense of loss he hadn’t recognized before and was confronting for the first time.

It made sense: Fishing was being surrounded by nature, waiting for the bite; war was being surrounded by nature,

waiting for the bullet. Sitting silently in the outdoors would be torture for him. My mother told me that while hiking along the creek together, early in their marriage, Dad had looked into the dense forest and whispered, "This is a good place for an ambush."

Another car drove by, and even though the guy waved, Dad kept his hands folded in his lap. His head was tilted up and his gaze lingered where the sky met the trees. His eyes were glassy.

He'd never hidden that he only showed up at the cabin during our summers out of obligation and that he'd rather be anywhere else. Some years he didn't even come. I didn't know what Dad's childhood there in the mountains looked like and, to my memory, he'd never said a single positive thing about the place, this parcel of land that had been in the family for a century, and never tired of telling us about the time his cousin dunked him in the pool—"I almost drowned!"

But we'd all almost drowned each other in the pool, fought like cats and dogs as children. Hell, a few times even as adults. It didn't stop us from loving the place.

The image of Dad as a little boy fishing with his father rolled around in my thoughts for the rest of the evening. It was like getting a peek at the little town of Guard when the lake was dry—it was still there, had been there our whole lives, but it had been covered over.

I had sometimes wondered what it would be like if he came to the lake with us or dipped his feet in the creek; what it would be like to take a walk with him down the road where the sun peek-a-boomed through the crisscrossed fingers of trees a hundred feet high. Maybe it would release something in him, a cache of fond memories would flood back to him and he'd recaptivate the self that had explored the forests and hiked through the creek, turned up rocks to find salamanders and

crayfish. But he didn't do any of these things, and I mourned for an irretrievable part of him that I had never known.

The next morning after his cup of coffee, Dad announced that he was leaving early to beat the traffic. For most of us, packing up meant an hours-long ordeal of haranguing children, overloading trunks and backseats with soggy clothes and rumpled sleeping bags, stuffing cans of bug spray and kitchen pots in odd corners. Dad dipped into the cabin for a few minutes and emerged carrying his red overnight bag in one hand.

A few kids had unzipped from their tents and shuffled around in the grass waiting for their cousins to wake up. He kissed their heads on the way to his truck and placed the crisp-looking bag in the spacious, empty backseat. It seemed lonely there. I wondered if he'd think about fishing on his way home, or the things that kept him from fishing. With the driver side door open, he raised his hand in a generic wave to anyone in the vicinity, then started up the truck and drove away.