New Nonfiction from Per-Olof Odman: “Mystery Mountain”

In the remote and forgotten northwestern corner of Vietnam looms the vast, rugged and rain-drenched Hoang Lien Mountains. Here, Vietnam’s tallest summit, the 10,326-foot-high Fan Si Pan, towers above the rest. On the cold morning of March 30, 1994, from the mountainous village of Sa Pa at about 5,000 feet above sea level, I could discern in the distance row after row of the ever-steeper mountains, but dense clouds obscured the higher peaks—among them the mysterious Fan Si Pan.

Shouldering our backpacks and leaving Sa Pa, Ngyuen Thien Hung, my mountain guide, and I set off for our ascent of this surprisingly little-known mountain. Passing the stark ruins of a French villa, we descended into a deep valley and passed terraced rice paddies plowed by Hmong tribesmen. The breaths

of the water buffaloes rose in small clouds. A passel of black pigs scattered as we approached.

East of Fan Si Pan at the bottom of the valley, altitude 4,100 feet, we balanced our way along a swaying bamboo bridge above a bouldery rushing river. My guide led me up the other steep side. His backpack and trousers looked familiar; I was later to learn why. After two hours of steady climbing, following a narrow, slippery trail through the low rainforest, and crossing several rapid streams, it was quite evident that Hung was stronger and in better shape than I was. My improvised bamboo walking staff had made the climbing less difficult, though I was glad when we took our first rest stop.

Until now we had not said anything—we could not speak each other's language. We sat in a cool bamboo glade. I was 50 years old, and Hung was 47. He was courteous, but also private, reserved. Hung was muscular, of medium height; at six feet, I was considerably taller than him. I saw in Hung, as I did in most Vietnamese, a strength I found intriguing.

Hung lit a cigarette, and he started to "talk" using the pencil and paper I had handed him, doing gestures and bodily movements, and uttering sounds. I learned what I had hoped for all along: I was climbing Fan Si Pan with my former enemy, a North Vietnamese Army combat veteran; an NVA. Hung drew a map of Vietnam, wrote place names, dates, and units, and started to "tell" me that he had spent eight years fighting the Americans and the South Vietnamese, often while sick, cold, and hungry. Starting in 1967, he had humped supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail. From 1971 to 1973, Hung, then an infantry soldier, had fought the Americans in the Central Highlands, and then the South Vietnamese Army. As a junior lieutenant, and a tank commander, with the 12th Regiment, 312th Division, he took part in the final rout of the South Vietnamese Army, and on April 30, 1975, victoriously drove his tank into Saigon. Hung was never seriously wounded. The war was over, but Hung was ordered to continue to serve in the mountainous

northwestern part of Vietnam where he was from. When he was discharged in 1984, Hung moved back home to Sa Pa, a small, picturesque trading town near the Chinese border. To me it seemed quite evident that Hung was proud of the fact that he had fought for his country.

Using the pencil and the paper, and my more expressive way of "talking" I tried to inform Hung that I had been born in Sweden in 1943 and had grown up there, that I had dropped out of high school and worked in mines, and that in 1965 I had been drafted into the Swedish Army to serve the usual ten months. I told Hung that I had really enjoyed my life in the military. For the first time in my life, I had been the best at something: assault rifle marksmanship. Shortly before my discharge from the Swedish Army in April 1966 I had decided, solely for adventure, to fight for the United States in the Vietnam war. That I did not foresee much of a future living in Sweden added to my decision.

By drawing a simple world map, writing months and years, and using gestures I told Hung that I had put my war plans on hold when I was offered an exciting job in West Africa to do work with a few Swedish geologists and prospectors in the triple canopy rainforests of the mountainous part of Liberia. In March 1967, after close to one year of colonial style exploits in Africa, I committed myself to fight in Vietnam. I visited the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia, the capitol of Liberia, applied for, and easily obtained an immigrant visa.

My Swedish coworkers in Liberia had tried to talk me out of going to Vietnam; they thought I was crazy. To this day I still carry some of that craziness within me. It made me stubbornly continue to communicate with Hung.

I tried hard to let Hung know more about my life. My impression was that he pretty much understood that in late May 1967 I had flown one-way from Monrovia to JFK. On the same day that I arrived in New York, I went to the Times Square

recruiting station and talked to the Marine recruiter about a two-year enlistment. Three weeks later I swore to serve two years in the U.S. Marine Corps. At 3 A.M. the following day I was “welcomed” to Parris Island.

Following six months of boot camp, and infantry and jungle warfare training, I finally arrived in Vietnam on Christmas Eve in 1967. I was assigned to serve as a rifleman with 2nd Platoon, Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines in the remote Khe Sanh Combat Base. My regiment and additional Marine and Army units endured the North Vietnamese Army’s death-dealing siege of Khe Sanh which lasted from January 21, 1968, to well into April that year. Hung let me know that he had carried supplies in support of the siege. He acknowledged that the NVAs had lost more than ten thousand killed. I told Hung that the Marines and the US Army had lost close to one thousand killed.

After the siege, my battered battalion fought the NVAs in depopulated areas in the northern part of South Vietnam. At 10 in the morning on June 7, 1968, my platoon walked right into an NVA ambush. Two of us were killed instantly, one third of us were wounded. I wondered what Hung, my “enemy,” thought about the siege and the ambush. Horror? Revenge? I kept in mind that Hung and his army had won the war.

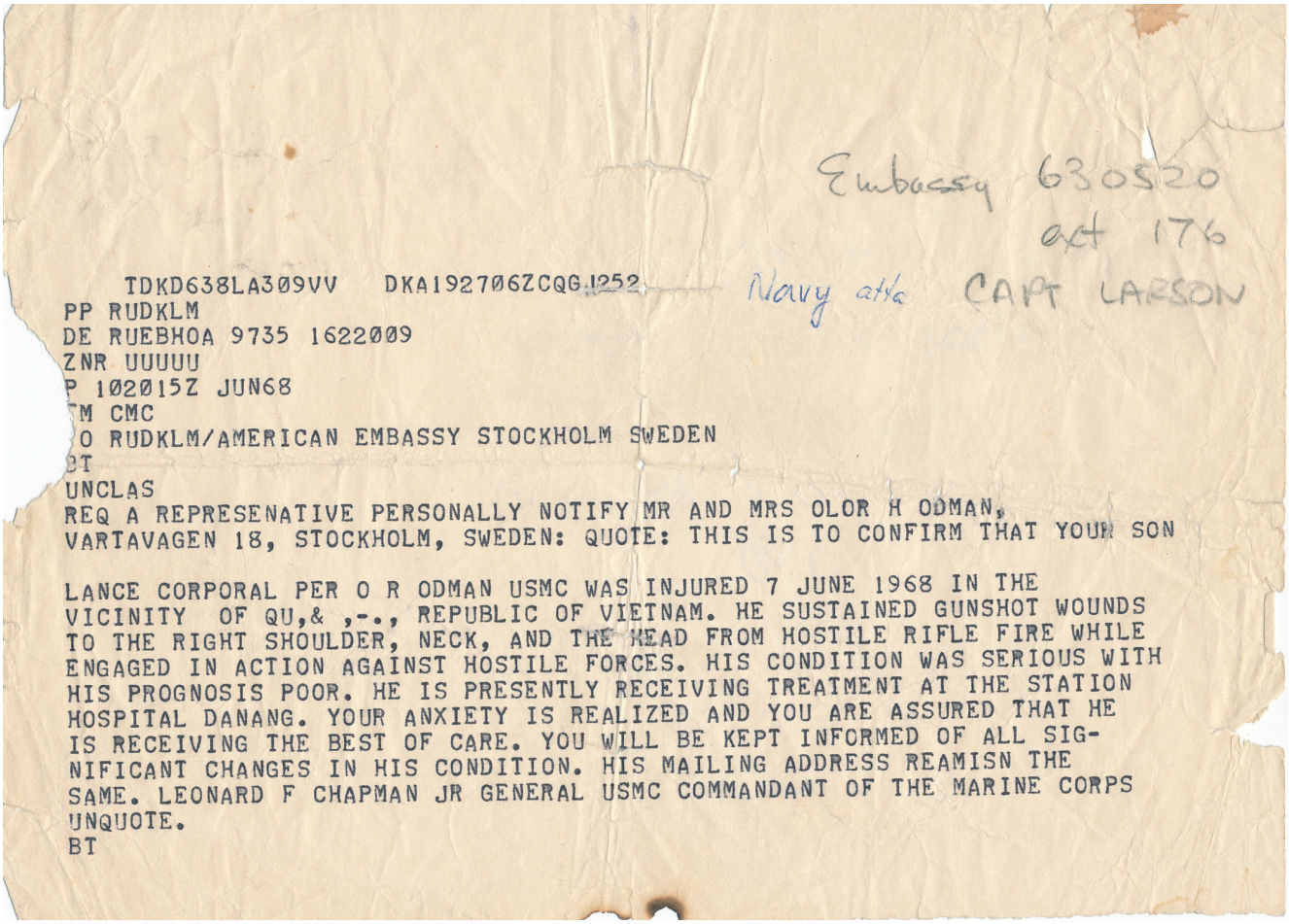
By gestures, body language and uttering sounds, I “explained” to Hung that when the NVAs opened fire I had thrown myself on the ground and rapidly fired my M16 on their muzzle flashes. After firing several rounds, my body was struck extremely hard three times in quick succession. I collapsed, feeling that I was dying. I tried to yell, but soon lapsed into unconsciousness.

I pointed to where on my body I’d been hit, and I think Hung understood that the whole right side of my body had been paralyzed due to seven to ten 1⁄8- to 1⁄2-inch pieces of shrapnel which, with the force of a sledge hammer, had torn

open a large hole in the left temporal part of my scull, and penetrated two to three inches deep into my brain. One AK-47 bullet, which had lost velocity when it ricocheted against something hard entered the left front of my neck and punctured my left jugular vein. The profuse bleeding was life-threatening. Other ricocheted bullets had penetrated my upper left chest and pierced my left lung. Nine pieces of shrapnel tore into the back of my neck lodging nearly an inch deep in the traumatized flesh.

Covered in blood, ashen-faced and lifeless, I was dragged next to our two dead Marines. My life was saved by someone who saw that I still might be alive, the crew of the medevac chopper on the fifteen-minute ride to the Naval Field Hospital in Danang, and by the surgeons who operated on me.

I was medevacked back to the United States, and after a good deal of physical rehabilitation during the summer and the fall I managed to regain much of my physical strength, and I continued to stay physically active in spite of the somewhat weakened right side of my body. The Marine Corps retired me due to disability, and the VA rated me 100% disabled. To challenge myself, in late 1970 I began parachuting. In the 1970s and the early ’90s I did extensive backpacking trips, sometimes solo, in arctic wilderness regions, as well as in mountain ranges at lower latitudes.



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LANCE CORPORAL PER O R ODMAN USMC WAS INJURED 7 JUNE 1968 IN THE VICINITY OF QU,& ,-., REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. HE SUSTAINED GUNSHOT WOUNDS TO THE RIGHT SHOULDER, NECK, AND THE HEAD FROM HOSTILE RIFLE FIRE WHILE ENGAGED IN ACTION AGAINST HOSTILE FORCES. HIS CONDITION WAS SERIOUS WITH HIS PROGNOSIS POOR. HE IS PRESENTLY RECEIVING TREATMENT AT THE STATION HOSPITAL DANANG. YOUR ANXIETY IS REALIZED AND YOU ARE ASSURED THAT HE IS RECEIVING THE BEST OF CARE. YOU WILL BE KEPT INFORMED OF ALL SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN HIS CONDITION. HIS MAILING ADDRESS REAMISN THE SAME. LEONARD F CHAPMAN JR GENERAL USMC COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS UNQUOTE.
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During three weeks in early 1992 I travelled on my own from the south to the north thru the peaceful, picturesque country of Vietnam. Khe Sanh, which I had survived 24 years earlier, was not picturesque; the abandoned American combat base was overgrown and unrecognizable, and, as I had promised my wife, I never stepped on the scattered unexploded ordinance.

Hung nodded his head; the way he looked me in the eye made it clear that he had gotten the gist of my life. I surmised that to Hung, as well as to myself, it was clear that we were not just a poor local guide and his rich Western client—we were two former enemies who shared a violent past, and now fought together to conquer a mountain.

The idea of climbing Fan Si Pan, and the journey to it had attracted me for several years. Its ascent appealed to my love of wilderness and sense of adventure, and it would help me to deal with my physical disability. In the early 90s I had started to get spasms at night in my right leg. To climb Fan

Si Pan would also help me to come to grips with my Vietnam war experiences. I became convinced that the ultimate reconciliation between me and Vietnam would be to climb its highest mountain, ideally with a former enemy. In Hanoi in 1992 I had met an English- speaking NVA combat veteran who, sponsored by a group of Vietnam veterans, had visited the United States. He thought that I should try to do the climb.

Four days before Hung and I had set off from Sa Pa, I was resting up in a hotel in Hanoi having just finished a two-week-long, very demanding job in the northern parts of former South Vietnam with a Swedish television crew making a documentary about my war experiences.

I could now begin planning the ascent of Fan Si Pan. Due to weight limitations when traveling from the United States, and while doing the documentary film, I had brought with me only certain necessities; a 1:50,000 US Army non-colored topographic map, a compass, a medium-sized backpack, a Gore-Tex jacket, tough canvas boots, long johns, and a 32-oz. Nalgene bottle. Even though I knew that the nights would be cold I did not bring my summer sleeping bag, figuring I could buy a thick blanket in Vietnam. The blanket I bought was a bit heavy and somewhat bulky, but it sufficed.

One plan was to climb Fan Si Pan solo, under the presumption that I could find a path that would lead to the summit. Did that path exist? If so, how could I find it? What about food, water, and shelter? The ascent from the lowest point located to the east of the peak, based on my reading of the map in1994, would be the most logical approach, but more than 6,000 vertical feet and eight steep miles was not a realistic solo climb. Instead, I visited in Hanoi Vietnam Veterans Tourism Services, which was owned by former NVA officers. They put together quite an expensive trip from Hanoi with an unrealistic itinerary. I continued to figure out a workable ascent.

On the morning of March 28, the day I had decided to depart for Sa Pa, I met with the world- renowned ornithologist and environmentalist Dr. Vo Quy in his office at the University of Hanoi. Two years earlier he had climbed Fan Si Pan with a small team of scientists. Dr. Quy encouraged me to try to climb the mountain but warned me that the weather at the peak

could be terrible. He told me that the government forestry service in Sa Pa could almost certainly find me a guide. Finally, I had a rational plan for my ascent of Fan Si Pan.

Before my departure from the Hanoi railroad station, I sat at a table in an outdoor restaurant beneath the green leaves of tamarind trees together with a Marine Vietnam veteran who lived in Hanoi. I dined on a large bowl of pho and drank excellent local tap beer before boarding the overnight antiquated steam train that would take me 140 miles to the stop where my adventure would begin.

At dawn, the train stopped about three miles before the city of Lao Cai on the Chinese border. There were no platforms. I paid a young man to give me a short, slippery ride on his motorcycle, and then, after a ferry ride across the Red River, and after much haggling, I secured a ride in a jeep for the remaining 30 miles to Sa Pa. The battered road climbed through a verdant river valley and into the mountain range which the French called the Tonkinese Alps, and the Vietnamese call the Huong Lien Mountains.

From the moment I arrived in Sa Pa, the surrounding mountains were hidden by dark clouds. By late afternoon, Sa Pa itself was enveloped in a very dense fog. With great difficulty I found the office of the government forestry service. A woman official who spoke some English encouraged me to climb Fan Si Pan, and matter-of-factly sent for a guide. I was soon introduced to Hung.

We decided to leave early the next day, and to try to make the ascent and descent in four days. What a relief; I felt gratified—finally I was going to do the climb I so much had longed for. The woman sold me eight packets of dry noodles with shrimp, four small bags of Chinese cookies, and two one-liter plastic bottles of water. Hung would bring our camping gear and more food.

We agreed that I would pay both Hung and the forestry service $15 a day—a lot of money at that time.

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By pure luck Hung had become my mountain guide. What we had told each other during our rest stop made me feel even more gratified to do the climb. We agreed to spend our first night at a 7,496-foot crest which was marked on my map. As Hung led our climb up a steep, at first somewhat open valley, I recognized his NVA-issued backpack and trousers which, I presumed, he had worn during the war. In 1968 I had seen my share of fallen NVAs. And now I was climbing Fan Si Pan with a very alive NVA combat veteran wearing the same uniform, carrying the same backpack as those killed soldiers. How bizarre—but before long I got used to Hung's outfit.

The trail which Hung and I followed went after a while straight up to a densely forested ridge. The tree canopy on the mist-shrouded ridges went on uninterrupted, but the lower, more accessible areas of the mountainsides had been harvested by native Hmong loggers. Thanks to the ruggedness of the terrain, only the most valuable trees had been felled, sawed into short logs, and then carried down to Sa Pa.

Earlier in the morning Hung and I had met a Hmong family, clad in their vibrant indigo homespun clothes, carrying their heavy burden on their backs down the steep, sodden trail. They were the only people we were to see on this haunted mountain. No native people had ventured much higher up than where we met the Hmong—to them Fan Si Pan as well as the higher parts of the whole Hoang Lien Mountain range was evil. The Viets, the ethnic Vietnamese, who make up most of the Vietnamese population, are equally frightened by the same mountains. Hung is a Viet.

In 1991 Hung was the first Vietnamese in modern history to conquer Fan Si Pan. In 1985 a Soviet team had ascended it. Before that, the last ascendants had been French—in the 1940s. During most of the 1990s Hung was the only guide of Fan Si Pan. I was his first individual client. Before that Hung had guided about half a dozen, mostly foreign teams, up the mountain.

The higher elevations of the Hoang Lien Mountains were among the few areas in Vietnam still covered by old-growth rainforest. The very tall broadleaf trees, fallen tree trunks and branches, smaller trees, brush, and thickets of bamboo, through which Hung and I were forcing our way up, hid two of the world's most elusive animals, the saola and the giant muntjac, two deer-like mammals discovered in 1993 and 1994. These beautiful animals as well as the Indochinese tiger, the Asiatic black bear, scaly anteaters, civets, macaques, gibbons, flying lemurs, and other mostly threatened, indigenous mammals, eluded us.

The only birds Hung and I saw were hill munas, a dark, medium-sized bird. We saw no reptiles, amphibians, or big insects, and practically no flowers. Did the lack of wildlife signal the suspected evil spirit of this mysterious mountain? Or were the animals simply anxious to keep their distance from us? Following the narrow, sometimes invisible trail through the dense vegetation made it impossible for us to walk quietly. Often, we could not see farther than ten feet ahead. Only rarely did I get a view of our surroundings—the beautiful, but steep and forbidding, dark green mountains. Mist evaporated off the ridgelines; the sheer peaks were hidden by dark clouds.

To follow Hung up the steep mountain I often had to use the utmost of my balance and strength; a slip could have grave consequences. At times we clambered up almost vertical, ladder-like root systems, some twenty-feet-high. Bamboo, tree trunks, vines, and roots all provided grips to pull myself up. The cuts in my hands multiplied. The smell of rotting leaves was pervasive. Hidden by the dense forest, nearby cascades tumbled and roared down the mountain.

It started to rain and Hung and I were hungry. By now we had attained considerable altitude and had reached a surprisingly gentle slope. We stopped to refill our water bottles in a brook and shared bread and cookies. Only our smacks and grunts broke nature’s silence. The colors of the surrounding rainforest were not only myriad shades of green but also white and yellow, as well as the purple and red colors of the few flowers I spotted.

I never knew what occupied Hung’s thoughts as we climbed ever higher up this mysterious mountain. I conjectured that like most Vietnamese who had lived through some of the war, his memories may often have been tortuous, unspeakable. My own thoughts often went back 26 years to those thrilling, frightening times hunting, and being hunted by the enemy. In a way I missed those times. I was glad Hung could not read my

thoughts.

Just before dusk, on a small, forested rise about 600 feet below the mile and a half high crest, Hung signaled a halt and began to set up camp. The rain had stopped, but we and everything else was wet. However, the core of some of the fallen branches were dry, and with his battered, but sharp machete Hung cut enough wood to start a fire. He left his wet and only clothes on, while I put on dry ones. For his socks and worn-out sneakers, and my wet clothes, he quickly fashioned a rack of bamboo stems and tree branches which he placed by the fire.

While the rice cooked in Hung's blackened and dented aluminum kettle, we cut more firewood and small bamboo stems which we laid on the wet, uneven ground to form a somewhat level place to sleep on. Hung had brought a few sheets of worn plastic, and with my help he built a roof over our "bed." On it we spread the remaining plastic sheet and one of our two, by now damp, blankets.

In addition to rice and bread, Hung had brought a few pieces of bony chicken, tea, a battered cup, and a spoon. The cap of his well-worn four-liter plastic water jug leaked. Tied on to his backpack Hung carried a torn imitation-leather jacket lined with synthetic wool; there was not enough room for it in his relatively small backpack. Steam rose from the cooked rice; its delicate aroma more enticing than any feast. After sharing the rice straight out of the kettle, using his spoon, Hung cooked noodles with shrimp. The taste of the food really comforted me. I knew that Hung could see on my face how satisfied I was. My belching was further proof of that.

Although I was an experienced backpacker, I realized that I had come to Fan Si Pan not prepared enough. However, I trusted Hung; he might have quite simple camping equipment, but he was an experienced and deft outdoorsman. A war corollary strikes me now. Armed with simple, common infantry weapons the NVAs

had often defeated heavily armed American troops.

In the pitch-black night, in order not to freeze—it was 39 degrees Fahrenheit—Hung and I had to sleep belly against rump, under the damp blanket. It felt weird, but I soon fell asleep, until my leg spasms woke me several times, and as I turned my body, Hung turned his. Our damp wool blanket barely cut the freeze. As a human being I felt compassion for Hung and that he responded kindly. We certainly had not been brothers in arms, but that night I felt that Hung was my friend.

When we woke up the next morning the rain had stopped. Dark clouds hung low, and it was wet and cold. Soon Hung had our campfire going, and our breakfast of hot tea, noodles and bread tasted delicious. Before long we were on our way, ascending ever higher through steep and gradually changing habitats. There were now more mosses and ferns. Rhododendrons and conifers were mixed in with the lower, broad-leaved trees and bamboo. Sections of the barely visible path had been cleared with a machete.

That gray NVA backpack, those green NVA trousers moving in front of me, the fact that 26 years earlier I had almost ended up in a body bag; all that, and not being able to convey my spontaneous feelings of bewilderment to Hung frustrated me. And I could not shake the contradictory thought that I was struggling up Fan Si Pan together with my trusted “enemy.”

The vegetation and the air up on the ridges are always wet, but to find drinking water we had to clamber down slippery, steep, rock-and-root-tangled slopes, and then struggle back up. Steadily ascending, mostly along steep ridges, we reached a grassy subsummit surrounded by steep, mist- shrouded ridges and peaks, and swirling clouds. Up in that white void lurked the summit of Fan Si Pan. Continuing upwards we traversed below and around several tall cliffs which were too steep to climb.

Nightfall was quickly approaching when Hung found a ledge on which to set up camp. We were now at about 9,600 feet; it was one degree above freezing. Through most of the day the air had been saturated with fine rain, leaving us very wet. Getting a fire going now was crucial. Hung prepared the branches, but we could not find any kindling. The late Lewis Puller, a Marine who had fought in Vietnam, came to our help. I used the first 68 pages of his book, “Fortunate Son”, as kindling. Puller’s Pulitzer Prize winning book is a difficult and graphic description of his devastating combat wounds and his will to live. The book was my travel literature. Hung’s matches were wet, but I had brought two cigarette lighters. The first one failed, and I let it drop among the prepared branches. The second lighter sparked a flame. As we knelt close to our fire, which rose up through the pitch-black night, the precious flames illuminated our faces and warmed our bodies. We savored our hot rice and noodles by chewing in small mouthfuls.

Suddenly! Boom! Incoming! The embers of our fire flew like whizzing tracer bullets. Having reacted as if we were in combat, Hung and I roared with laughter. The lighter I dropped in the fire had exploded due to the heat. It was the first time Hung and I laughed. It was also the last time.

Partly overhanging the steep, rocky slope below us, our uncomfortable bamboo “bed” somehow served us well. Like the previous cold night, we lay huddled in all our clothes beneath the damp blanket, belly against rump. Several times my leg spasms woke me up.

The early morning of April 1 was dark and the mist thick and wet. I heard a strong wind above us. After a quick breakfast in the dark (my flashlight did not work), Hung and I shouldered our backpacks and began the ascent up a rough stony ridge. As usual Hung went first. The height of the vegetation got lower. Suddenly Hung stopped. Had he lost his way? He turned around and motioned me to descend. What was wrong? I felt disappointed—why didn’t we continue upwards?

Hung bounded downhill and disappeared. Obediently I followed him down the steep, barely visible trail. I was confused by this unexpected turn, but I was not afraid. I instinctively knew that Hung understood that I could descend Fan Si Pan on my own. Even so I was constantly on my guard—the sometimes hardly visible trail was slippery, and at times nearly vertical. It began to rain sporadically. I continued to descend. Actually, I preferred this solo descent. On all my previous non-solo wilderness trips I had, as much as possible, tried to experience nature alone.

As the hours passed by, I had the feeling that Hung was far below me or maybe just far enough ahead to be sure that I made it down the steep mountain unharmed. Eventually I got very tired— on some sections of the trail I slid down on my butt. At one point while walking down the steep trail, I fell headlong and badly hurt my chest.

When I finally did encounter wildlife—it tried to trample me. Suddenly coming towards me at a turn of the narrow trail, the leading bull of a small herd of banteng cattle charged. I threw myself backwards into the bushes off the trail and kicked at the bull's front legs smelling its hot, moist breath. The bull retreated; the herd quickly passed by. Like combat, it was scary, but also exciting. Back home in New York I read that the banteng is a rainforest-dwelling, elusive, almost mystic, bovine.

That evening, exhausted by the downward climb, in a small clearing at about 4,400 feet, I arrived at a Hmong loggers' shed where Hung was waiting for me. What a relief it was to see him. I sure wanted to "talk" about why we had not continued upwards, and my seemingly endless descent of close to 6,000 vertical feet, but I could not. I did not even try to communicate with Hung—I was dead tired. However, I felt gratified with what we had accomplished in our difficult journey. I was proud of what I had achieved. Had any other Vietnam veteran, combat disabled or not, ever done what I had?

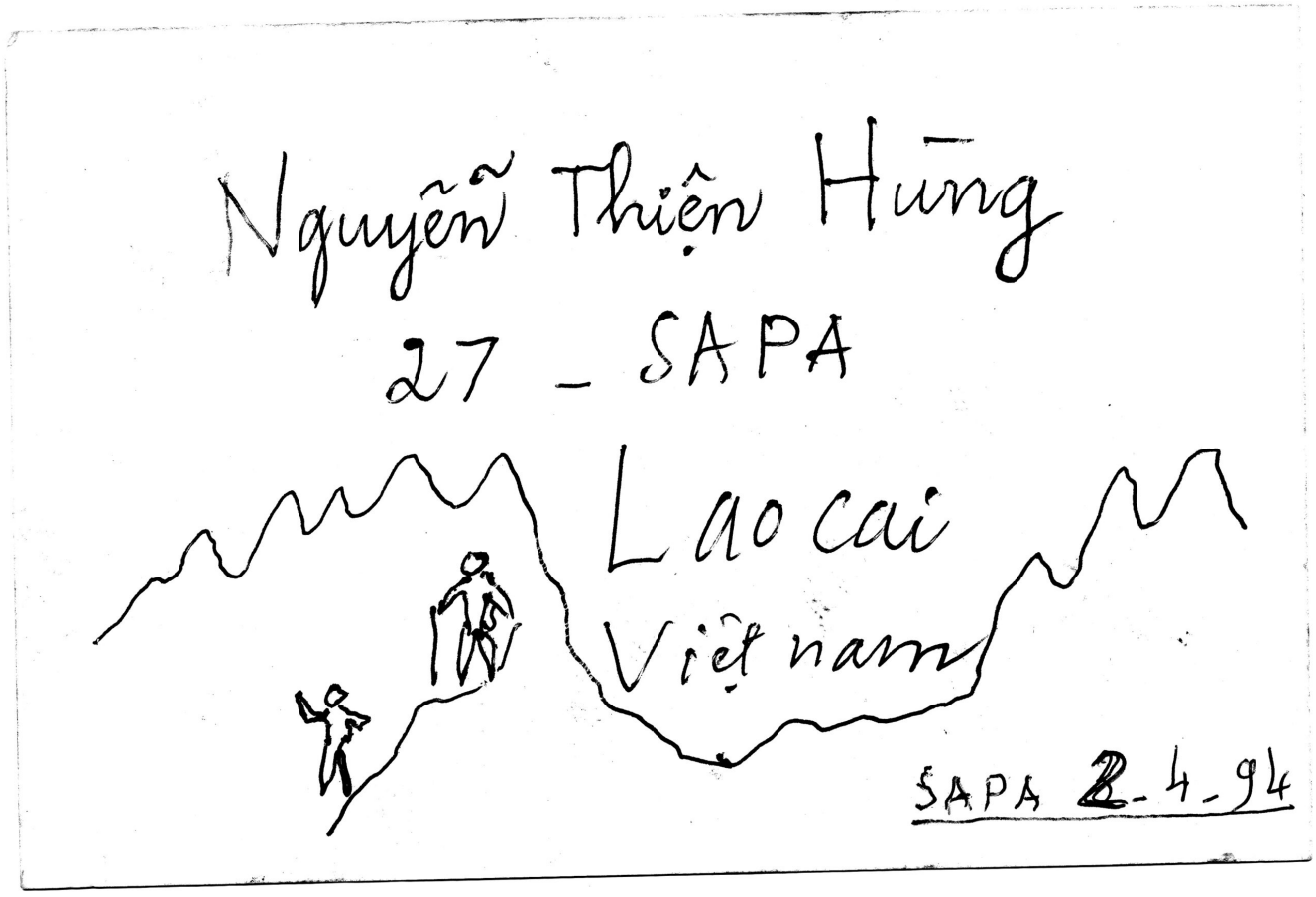
Hung and I ate a good dinner and slept inside the shed on an old musty animal pelt. The next morning, we had an easy, but rainy, two-mile-long hike down into a deep valley, then two miles back up to Sa Pa.

Courteously Hung invited me to his simple home where I met his family. Hung's son took a photo of him, his father and me; I wore Hung's NVA pith helmet in celebration of our successful climb. (The NVA soldiers who had almost killed me had worn same pith helmets.) Hung gave me a drawing which he had quickly sketched; it depicted the two of us on Fan Si Pan. I then bade Hung and his family farewell. Hung is a private man, but I could feel that he would miss me, and I would certainly miss him. Would we ever meet again?

Later that day I left Sa Pa for R&R in Hanoi. Despite having been badly bruised and lacerated, and having cut, swollen hands, I felt good about my adventure. To play it safe I saw a former NVA doctor. I had one fractured rib, and the doctor dispensed an antibiotic cream for my inflamed hands.

In time, I came to the following conclusions about our abrupt descent 300 to 500 vertical feet from the summit of Fan Si Pan. At that time of the year the summit can be hit by severe storms, and I had heard strong winds above us. My belief is that Hung had realized that continuing higher would have been dangerous. Hung, my guide, my former enemy, felt responsible for my life.

I could not help but feel that my arduous journey had been more important than its glorified destination. Whether or not Hung and I achieved the summit, together we had climbed Fan Si Pan. It was this partnership of mutual trust and sharing that mattered most to me. Perhaps to Hung as well. Whatever the case, I know that Vietnam is a country, not a war, and that our enemies, then and now, are human beings, just like us.



New Poetry by Shawn McCann: “All I Can Do Is Watch” and “No Way To Fight Back”

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New Nonfiction by Larry Abbott: The Photographic Self-Portraits of Ron Whitehead

There Is No Such Thing as an Unwounded Soldier

Ron Whitehead works in a variety of photographic series: *Eye of the Storm* are impressionistic visions of war to give a more dynamic view of combat than a strictly documentary approach. One work shows a flaming parachutist plunging toward the ground; another shows a jet fighter in a lightning storm; a third shows a helicopter and tank silhouetted by flames; *Looking Back* focuses on the impact of the past on the present, specifically the transition from his military experience to civilian life; *My Lighthouse* was inspired by a song by the Rend Collective and expresses his commitment to the Christian faith and how his commitment can calm the inner storm and offer a sense of healing; *Art of Healing* expresses the ways that art can be instrumental in the post-war healing process but also that this process is tentative; the images in *Fight for It* reference the brutal nature of war; *American Dream* is ironic in that the photographs show more a problematic re-adjustment rather than a return to a perfect life.

Although his oeuvre encompasses a variety of imagery, including some where the camera itself is the subject, Whitehead's reflexive self-portraits are the predominant images in his work over his career, not in an egocentric way but as an artistic mediation of how he negotiates the past and the present. The photographs suggest that, post-war, Whitehead is "in pieces," no longer a unified whole, but also that he is searching for ways to re-establish an integrated self. The self-portraits negotiate the space between the past

of war and the present of job, home, family, community, and the larger society. His work objectifies the inner conflicts between "the face of war" and "the face of after-war." The photographs express T.S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative (1921), in that they represent Whitehead's emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The self-portraits appear in many forms, some literal, some abstract, some surrealistic, some humorous, but each expresses the effect of his return to post-war life and provides the viewer with an insight into these perceptions. He occasionally blends text to complement the image. In her discussion of the ways that the arts, particularly poetry, tell us about war, Janis Stout (2005) writes that "literature and other cultural products offer an indispensable means of gaining impressions of war . . . not only are such cultural products ends in themselves, they are also means to the end of gaining insight into how the war was experienced and perceived by specific human beings" (2005). Whitehead's self-portraits reveal how *his* war, and *his* return, were experienced.

One of the themes that emerges from the self-portraits is that of the split self. There is a schism between the self that went to war, the pre-war self, and the sense of self after war. Whitehead began exploring this theme photographing a colleague, Harry Quiroga. In "Still Serving" (2013), an early work from the *Art of Healing* series, Whitehead's photograph of Quiroga's face is split (the same image appears in "Love a Veteran," which includes a quote from Welby O'Brien: "It takes an exceptional person to love a warrior/especially a warrior whose war will never cease"). In the photograph Quiroga, dressed in a business suit and tie, stares into the camera. One side of his face is "normal," representing the apparent seamless transition back into the world of work and formality. The other side of his face retains the camouflage paint from the war, suggesting that even back in "the world" the soldier retains the indelible "paint" of war. In another iteration of this image (2013) the

photograph is “torn” down the center, with the “now” side in color and the “war” side in black and white. The idea of the split self appears in a number of other works. “Smoke and Mirrors” (2014) takes another angle on the split self. Whitehead’s face is in profile, enveloped by wisps of smoke. Superimposed on the profile is an image of his smiling younger self in his Army uniform. The past is never far from the present. In a 2018 work from *My Lighthouse* Whitehead is centered in the frame. On the right-hand side a lighthouse beam brightens half of his face. On the left, his face is darkened by the smoke of battle in the desert. The photograph highlights the stress of living in two antithetical worlds. In “Two Face” (2013) there are mirror images of Whitehead’s face looking at the viewer. Half of the face on the right is “normal,” while the other half is in camouflage. The face on the left is again split, with the right side of *that* face in camouflage; Whitehead adds a twist with his “normal” face in profile on the left side. “Two Sides” (2017) extends the theme of the split self. In the photograph there are two identical and connected faces in partial profile looking in opposite directions. Razor ribbon coils around the faces. The expression of duality emerges with some variation in such works from the *Looking Back* series as “Mask,” “Mask 2,” “Façade,” and “Façade Mask” (each 2018). In these Whitehead places a mask of his face on or near his “real” face. In “Façade 2” Whitehead is in black and white, while the mask he is putting on and the hand holding it is in color. In “Façade Mask” Whitehead is looking at the camera while, ambiguously, pulling a mask over his face or, perhaps, removing it. Is he removing his “face to the world” to reveal his authentic self? Or is he in the process of pulling down the mask to hide that self? Superimposed on the image is a scene from Desert Storm with burning oil fields. Likewise, in “Mask,” oil fields burn in the background while he holds a mask in front of him. Each of these “Mask” portraits speaks to the tension between the memories of the war which affect the present and the need to forget the war and reintegrate into

society. As the text in “Remembering” (2014) states: “Remembering Is Easy. It’s Forgetting That’s Hard.”

Other portraits are more abstract but still reveal the psychic dislocation he felt after his discharge and return to the States. “Looking Back 2” (2017) borders on the surrealistic. In this work Whitehead creates a distressing and baffling effect by using horizontal strips to break the image of his face into incongruous components. Each “strip” is a different part of his face that do not align connoting, again, a sense of psychic disharmony. The same effect is seen in “Parts” (2017). In this work the strips, smaller but more numerous, re-arrange his face. “Torn” (2018) is a variation on the use of the strips. In this work Whitehead’s face, in black and white, is facing the viewer, superimposed over a desert scene. However, a strip is “torn” across his eyes, revealing eyes, in color, staring at the viewer. This creates a contrast not only in the blend of black and white and color, but also an opposition between past and present. “Ripped” (2018) also uses this motif. There is a close-up of Whitehead’s face in grainy black and white. A strip is torn off to reveal his eyes, in a horizontal panel, in color. This smaller panel is superimposed on the desert scene of burning oil wells. He is looking out from the war, and that only the war provides any color. (In “Rear View” [2015] the point of

view is from a driver looking out of the car's windshield. The road ahead and the surroundings are in black and white; in the rear-view mirror is a group of Whitehead's fellow soldiers, in color). "Bullets" (2017) is another variation on the use of the strips. In this case the strips are bullets, and his facial features are on the shell casings. "Broken 1," "Broken 2," and "Explode" (each 2018) use the same image of his face. In "1," part of his face is shattered, looking like exploding shards of glass. In "2," the image of the exploding face is superimposed over a tank. In "Explode" the impact of the war is more explicit. Whitehead's face is on the right side of the frame; the exploding shards are smaller, and as the image gives a sense of movement from right to left the shards blend with the smoke and flames of burning oil wells.

RW 1

"Picking Up the Pieces" (and the related numbers "2" and "3," each 2018) are similar to the portraits using the strips. In each of these Whitehead's face becomes a jigsaw puzzle with pieces detached from his face, making his appearance enigmatic and fragmentary. In the first work part of Whitehead's face in black and white is dimly seen behind other parts that are in color. Two jigsaw pieces of his eyes, in color, are where his eyes should be. But are they to be placed into the puzzle of the face, to make the face whole? In "2" Whitehead, holding a hand in front of his face, stares at the viewer through eyes that are jigsaw pieces. There are empty spaces in parts of face where the pieces are missing, revealing blue sky and clouds in the background ("Hands 6" [2018] is a variation on the motif). "3" references the war more directly. Whitehead stares at the camera and reaches toward the viewer with a jigsaw piece, on which are an eye and a

scene of battle. Other pieces have desert scenes, with a burning desert in the background. By handing the puzzle piece to the viewer Whitehead may be trying to bring the war out of his consciousness and share his experience. "3" is an attempt to put all the pieces of his life back together and to represent in these photographs Lois Lowry's words that are embedded in another photograph, "Sacrifice" (2014): "The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It's the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared." Art is a way of sharing painful memories, a cathartic process. By offering the viewer the puzzle piece Whitehead shares his memories.

RW 2

"Just Another Day" (2018), from *American Dream*, is a portrait that reveals by what is *not* shown. There is a figure in a medium shot, dressed in a suit and tie, representing the "uniform" of the civilian world of work. However, in place of the head is a white cloud (perhaps smoke from a battle). The headless figure "wears" a tanker's camouflage helmet on which is perched dark goggles, symbolizing the military world. The title suggests both the repetition of the civilian world of the "daily grind" and also that the memories of war uneasily co-exist with the civilian world. The absence of the face, replaced by the smoke, suggests that these two disparate worlds somehow neutralize one's identity. Whitehead was an infantryman in the 1st Armored Division and became a Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) driver in Desert Storm, and a particular vehicle, nicknamed "Terminator," is pictured in some photographs, like "Driver's Eye" and "Globe 2" (both 2018).

RW 4

There is a humorous undertone in some photographs with Whitehead in the pose of Clark Kent ready to take off his civilian clothes to reveal his real identity. In "Still Serving Office" (2018) Whitehead is dressed in suit and tie (with tie "blowing in the wind"), with a city scene of office buildings in the background; opening his suit jacket reveals an image of his smiling teenage self in his army uniform. *SM_BDU* (2018) uses the same image of Whitehead in suit and tie, but the background is a lightning-flecked American flag. He opens his suit jacket to show his army uniform. Whitehead is conveying the idea that the formal dress is a type of camouflage; underneath the suit and tie, hidden from the view of the civilian world, is the most meaningful self. On a more serious note, Whitehead in suit and tie also appears in one of the works in *My Lighthouse*. An image of a lighthouse is revealed on his chest when he opens his jacket. Whitehead is superimposed on a battle scene with a map of Kuwait. The lighthouse represents the delicate balance of hope and stability while the war still rages in his mind.

RW 5

Eyes and hands are an important part of Whitehead's self-portraits. In a number of photographs eyes and hands are disembodied, existing on their own. In "Hands" and "Hands 4" (both 2018) two hands with open palms are centered in the frame. The skin and lines on the hands have been replaced by images of Whitehead's fellow soldiers from Desert Storm. Behind the hands is the familiar desert scene with smoke and flames from the burning oil wells. Similarly, in "Hands 2" (2018) his hands are crossed, and on the palms is an image of

a tank in battle; the background is a desert scene resembling a maelstrom or a tornado. The memories of the war are literally imprinted on the soldier's body. The flesh, the "reality" of the hands, is erased; the memories and perceptions take over. In "Hourglass" (2018) two hands hold an hourglass. The sand in the top bulb creates an image of a tank in a burning desert. The sand passes through the neck into the lower bulb; in this bulb an image of Whitehead's face is gradually formed by the sand. The war "sand" creates Whitehead; the two bulbs are symmetrical, each connected to the other. The war is being poured into Whitehead. In "Contain" (2018) Whitehead grips a glass globe in his two hands. (On his left wrist he wears a bracelet he made from his Combat Infantryman's Badge). Inside the globe is desert scene of war. The photograph suggests that Whitehead is attempting to "contain" or control the forces of war in which he participated. "Hand in Mirror" and "Mirror" (both 2015) are similar. In the former, Whitehead stands at a bathroom mirror and extends his hand toward it. However, his image is not reflected; the image in the mirror is a scene of war, and part of his hand seems to disappear into the mirror image, again suggesting that memories and perceptions of one's war experiences are inescapable, and that there is a desire to reach back into that experience. In the latter, he stands at the same mirror. This time, the reflected image *is* Whitehead . . . as a teenager dressed in fatigues, seeking perhaps an impossible connection between past and present. Whitehead follows this search for connection in two untitled 2022 works. In one, he stands in front of a brick wall with an image of a war scene, as if on the other side of the wall. He is reaching through the wall toward the scene. Utilizing a similar image (without the wall), a crucifix is suspended over the war scene. He is reaching toward the cross. Taken together, the two photographs reveal the tension between the desire to reconnect to the war experience and the desire for peace which the cross evokes. Can the two desires portrayed in the images co-exist?

RW 6

The eye as a subject in itself becomes an important part of the self-portrait, as the eye both looks out while at the same time takes in. Like a photograph, the eye records, and this visual document can be permanent. "Paper Eye" (2018) shows a scene of a desert aflame with burning oil wells. A strip torn from the image reveals an eye staring back at the viewer. "Eye" (2018) shows an extreme close up of an eye. Superimposed on the pupil is a tank, and smoke and flames blow through the sclera. In "Looking Back Flame Eye" (2017) the pupil emits a large flame. Within the flame is a disabled tank. A similar image is in "Looking Back Flames" (2018). In this work the pupil is engulfed in flames while an invasion map of Kuwait emerges from the flames. In "Pop Out" (2018) there is a close-up of an eye in profile superimposed on a burning desert. The eye explodes outward in fragment that resembles a map of Iraq. Imprinted on this fragment is an image of the teenage Whitehead in his Army uniform. "Eye Lens" (n.d.) is a variation. Again, there is a close-up of an eye with a scene of a burning desert. But in a twist, the pupil is a camera lens, suggesting that the images of war become permanent photographs in the mind. "Broke" (2018) shows a close-up of a pupil shattered like glass; inside the pupil is a tank. Surrounding the broken pupil is a length of barbed wire. In "Camera" (2018) there is a close-up of a Canon Eos. In the camera's lens there is a human eye with images of captured enemy soldiers. The scene of death is so powerful that even the camera lens explodes, sending pieces of glass toward the viewer. The uneasy relationship between war and post-war lives emerges in a work in the *My Lighthouse* series. On the right side of the frame a cross is superimposed on a close-up of an eyeball; on the left is a lighthouse casting a beam of light on the eye. The lighthouse rises from a war

scene in the desert.

RW 7

It might be unusual to consider a skull as a form of self-portrait but this image appears occasionally in Whitehead's work. "Skull" (2017) is one of his more disturbing, yet more powerful, self-portraits. Whitehead is in medium shot framed against the background of burning oil wells. However, most of his face is a skull with a vacant eye socket and clenched teeth; superimposed over his neck and part of the face is an American flag. There is an uneasy relationship between life and death. For the combat soldier the line between life and death, living flesh and the fleshless skull, shifts by the minute, by the second, by feet and inches. The skull also figures in three untitled works from 2023. Two of the photographs use similar imagery. Whitehead, in jeans and t-shirt and carrying a backpack, is on a highway, moving toward a skull in the distance, set in a desert of smoke and flames. Is this a rendezvous with death even after thirty years? In another untitled photograph a skull is in profile with its top and lower jaw missing. A burning desert is superimposed. The empty skull holds a dozen small paintbrushes. Whitehead suggests that death and war could be transformed by, and into, art.

RW 8

Some recent untitled work takes a different approach to the self-portrait. Three photographs from 2021 show him facing the camera or in profile, and what looks to be a primal scream

emanates from him. The smoke and flames of a burning desert are superimposed around his face. In two photographs Whitehead seems to be on fire. In another close-up the screaming face, with a reddish tinge, is speckled with black flecks, giving the appearance of ashes. In another work he stands in the desert like a colossus. In one work from 2022 Whitehead looks up at a sky of smoke and flame; in two others his body is partly composed of Polaroid One Step 60-second snapshots, creating an ambiguity of who is the "real" figure and who is a disembodied group of snapshots (another photograph shows the camera printing a photograph of his younger self in the Army). In a more surrealistic work his head is tilted forward over a desert scene. His face is not flesh but comprised of the browns and greens of camouflage, which drips into a sinkhole in the sand. It is as if Whitehead's identity is melting into the sand.

RW 9

A 2021 untitled photograph shows Whitehead, with a philosophical, thoughtful expression, against a backdrop of a Desert Storm scene. The text embedded on the left side of the frame reads, as if Whitehead is pondering the message, "You Live Life Looking Forward/You Understand Life Looking Backward." This phrase reflects one of the major concerns of Whitehead's work. The bulk of his photographs explore the interaction of past and present, and seek, through the artistic image, an understanding of the past, especially war, and its continuing impact on his life today. It is an on-going search for unity and coherence. His art is a type of bulwark against chaos, and attempts to recapture memories and make sense of the past as it impacts the present, and to commemorate that past, although painful in certain aspects, to make permanent the evanescent, and to reconcile opposites in

that search for unity.

Ron Whitehead joined the Army right out of high school, serving for four years as an infantryman. He was initially stationed at Fort Polk in Louisiana and then to Bamberg, Germany. He deployed to Iraq in 1990 and fought in Desert Storm with the 1st Armored Division. After discharge he joined the Maryland National Guard and entered Messiah College in Pennsylvania. He has an undergraduate degree in Art Education and a Master's degree in Instructional Technology from Western Connecticut State University. He has been teaching high school art in Ossining, New York, for almost thirty years. He continues to work with veterans whenever he can. One of his passionate endeavors is to bring students to the VA hospital in New Haven, CT. The students listen to the stories of vets and turn those stories into art as a way to honor the veteran.

A selection of Whitehead's work can be viewed here: https://sites.google.com/view/ron-whiteheads-portfolio/home

Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood*,1921. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. https://www.academia.edu/796652/Hamlet_and_his_problems, p. 4

Stout, Janis. *Coming Out of War*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005, p. xiv.

New Nonfiction: “One Woman’s History of Sexual Abuse in Prison” by Patty Prewitt

Missouri inmate Patty Prewitt has been in prison for almost 40 years. She is serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Bill, in 1984. The conviction, however, is problematic. The prosecution’s case relied upon slut-shaming Prewitt and questioning her fitness as a mother based on relationships that took place five and more years before the murder, a time when the Prewitts were separated. The prosecutor did not share with the defense evidence that established a strange car was seen parked around the corner, a significant omission. A pathologist, brought on only weeks before trial was discredited in a number of trials where he served as a witness for the prosecution.

Prewitt is not eligible for parole until 2036, when she will be 86 years old. Maintaining her innocence, she declined a plea bargain that would have made her eligible for parole after just seven years. Had she taken the deal, she would have been released many years ago.

As the longest-serving inmate at the women’s prison in Vandalia, Prewitt has been a model prisoner. Former Missouri Department of Corrections Director George Lombardi who, during his 41 years in corrections, has never recommended anyone for clemency supports Prewitt’s release. In light of “the long sentence she has already served, the total support of her children and grandchildren, and her unprecedented contribution to the culture of the prison and to her fellow offenders,” he recommends that “Missouri Gov. Parson take the just, responsible and compassionate action and grant Patty Prewitt clemency.” Warden Brian Goeke identifies Prewitt as a woman best suited for release.

In May of ’86, 20 days after I first came to the prison near Jefferson City, I was shackled, chained, cuffed and shoved on a state bus to the prison in Chillicothe. Upon arrival, a male corrections officer caught me alone in my cell and strongly suggested, threatened, that I would be his sex slave with no choice in the matter. His words and manner were horrifying to this newbie, but his prediction did not come to fruition, because my new guardian angel cellmate, Theresa, made it her business to protect me. She was a large no-nonsense heroin-addict biker chick who had done serious time in Florida where she acquired absolutely no love from prison staff. She also teased me about being a scrawny country gal, a rube, but we both agreed that the perv was not going to get his hands on me, so help us, God.

In August of that year, after Theresa was paroled, word came down the prison grapevine that a federal court declared that male and female corrections officers are to be treated equally with the very same duties and rights. That sounded only fair until we realized that it meant that male guards could frisk and strip search us. A bit of panic ensued, but the officers I spoke with swore they didn’t plan to jump into that trick bag fraught with unforeseen and seen problems. But it only takes one.

As Carol and I exited the chow hall, this particular guard, a stout big-bellied greasy man, motioned for Carol to turn around and assume the position with feet apart, arms outstretched. Prior to this we’d only been patted down by females. To our shock and surprise, that man stepped close on Carol’s backside with his face buried in her hair, then reached around to cup and squeeze her breasts. I stood frozen—the next in line. The color drained from her face as he roughly moved his beefy hands over her buttocks, then reached between her legs to feel her pubic mound. Color came back to

her visage with a scarlet vengeance, while he retraced his steps from buttocks to breasts. I couldn't stay to witness the rest because fear kicked my rabbit legs into gear, and I found myself running, racing up the stairs to hide in my cell.

After I calmed down, felt safe to come out since he hadn't come after me, and shift change was over, I found poor Carol, a tall, handsome lady with considerable intellect and two teenage daughters who adored her. But her husband was abusive. During one violent event, as she attempted to leave, he chased after her like the maniac he was. He yanked open the car door but slipped while grabbing at her. She inadvertently ran over him. To ensure he wouldn't kill her and the girls as he had promised, she slammed it in reverse and backed over him which earned her 25 years for second degree murder. After 20 years of horror at her husband's hand, she did not deserve this guard's sexual assault in the name of penal security. From that day on, if that guard was on post, we'd miss a meal. Sometimes the chow hall would be nearly empty except for a handful of masculine inmates whom he never bothered.

A few months later, on December 14, I was called to the visiting room to see my parents and five kids. To my dismay that guard stepped from the side and in front of the female officer as he motioned for me to assume the position. (In those days we weren't strip searched prior to a visit, just frisked. They rightly reasoned that we wouldn't be bringing drugs *out* of prison to our visitors.) I quietly appealed to his inner gentleman, "Please, sir, I'm a rape victim. I beg you. Please allow the female officer to search me." Trembling in trepidation, I saw and felt his rage explode like atom bombs within his gray eyes.

My five young children and parents watched this exchange while trying to figure out exactly what the hold up was. The pat search prior to a visit had always been quick, so to them this was suspect foot-dragging, but my protective father got the picture, narrowed his eyes and set his jaw. Attempting to

sound like a grownup who's in charge, I sternly advised the officers, "If you're not going to allow me to visit, give my family the big box of Christmas gifts I made for them." Both stared blankly at me, so I bravely added, "Do you understand?"

By this time every husband in the visiting area was asking his wife if that particular greasy-headed fat man had run his hands over her. I was not alone in my indignation and could feel the energy shift. The guards exchanged looks and silently decided the female would frisk me and allow me to visit. But the moment all the visitors left the area, I was escorted to the hole for "creating a disturbance and disobeying a direct order."

In May of '87, that same man sent me to the hole again for the same transgression—refusing to submit to his sweaty hands on my body while huffing his sour breath on my neck. This was the last straw. A group of us dug around in the law library and successfully sued the Missouri Department of Corrections in federal court. On September 30 of that year, seven of us rabble-rousers found ourselves shackled, chained and sitting in court testifying to not only the abuse of officers, but, for some, the years of abuse by husbands and boyfriends. The kindly older federal judge was visibly shaken to hear a lady tearfully explain that a male guard had felt her sanitary napkin and interrogated her about it. Another lady had a double mastectomy, the result of cancer, and was torturously embarrassed when a man made fun of her "flat-as-a-pancake" chest. We and the officers also explained that the searches were targeted to find cookies—cookies that were served to us on our trays at chow. That particular guard stumbled through his testimony as to why he must thoroughly search our breasts, buttocks and inner thighs to keep America safe, while his fuming wife glared from the gallery. Because of the fuss we caused, the Missouri Department of Corrections was mandated by the federal court to create a method for officers to cross-gender pat search without fondling and grabbing certain body

parts, but of course no one can make rules by which everyone abides. I've had issues since with both male and female guards who can't help but take liberties.

In December of '89, a large group of us trouble makers were shipped back to the prison north of Jefferson City. While there I ran into several minor sexual skirmishes and wrestling matches, but nothing I couldn't handle until a new education supervisor was hired. Unfortunately I was his clerk. This persistent little man thought it was his duty and right to have sex with me, so he literally chased me around his desk. Our warden got wind of this problem and asked me if it were true. I explained, "If I tell you that he is inappropriate, I will go to the hole under investigation. Right? Well, I will not do that and miss visits with my kids." And I didn't. But I had another plan. My lecherous boss was friends with a recreation officer, and I let it be known that my brother would do bodily harm if I told him that a black man was abusive to me. Everyone had seen my big handsome brother visit, and evidently my boss believed my lie, because he nearly ignored me after that. The truth is my sweet brother was a peaceful preacher and never fought anyone in his life, but these people didn't know that.

The Great Flood of '93 ruined our prison and sent us packing to a men's prison called Church Farm. I was so accustomed to unsolicited, unwanted sexual encounters that those years seemed pretty mild—nearly peaceful. For example, one maintenance man quickly lost interest in me when I harshly kneed his groin. Then in January of '98, we were transferred to a brand new prison in Vandalia with all new guards. During a count time, one COI, who resembled a bloated Elvis impersonator, knelt at my chair in front of my other three cellmates and sincerely inquired, "What do I have to do to get you to suck my big ole dick?" My friends inhaled in shock, but after he disappeared, Donna remarked that the reason he jumped up and exited quickly was the lightning quick drop-dead look I

shot at him. As if!

During the next couple of years, more than several staff persons were caught with their pants down and lost their jobs. One sergeant in particular had a type: petite, pretty, young, white. One of his targets, a lovely twenty-year-old with a soft bootheel accent, asked me for advice as to what to do. I counseled her that if she tells what he's up to, she will go to the hole. Her only safe recourse is to never get caught alone around him. But this panicked kid confided in a grandma-like officer who slammed her in the hole just as I predicted. The girl rotted down there for months until she "admitted" she lied and then was transferred to another prison. Standard operating procedure.

Years of his terrorism passed by until this sergeant met his match. His final victim, who was beautiful in a mean way, spit his semen on her sheets and called her lawyer who called the cops. I never found out what became of the sergeant, but this gal sued and settled for millions and freedom. I thanked her while telling her that we'd been trying to get rid of him for years. With her hands on her slim hips, she leaned back, cocked her head and plainly told me, "Ya weren't tryin' *too* hard." With a chuckle, I had to agree.

For years we were terrorized by a guard who loved to grope us and call it a routine pat search. Not only did he pull up close on a butt, he'd grind his hard little penis on the butt and whisper nasty words in an ear. If you protested in the slightest, he cuffed you and hauled you to the hole, the original walk of shame. Everyone, including staff, knew about him, but staff turned a blind eye. Every hour he was on shift was torture. My friends and I were repeatedly in trouble over him, and he took down too many good women. He would still be employed here, except he was arrested for a pervert-related crime in the free world.

In 2010 I heard about a federal law called the Prison Rape

Elimination Act, which was designed to prevent vulnerable prisoners from being sexually assaulted by either staff or inmates. A few years later, as I exited the chow hall, a male lieutenant called me over to assume the position for a pat search. In my smart-ass way I casually commented, “So much for PREA.” PREA must have been a sore subject, because he yelled at me a long tirade about how they don’t have to follow laws and can do anything they want with us and to us because we have no rights and nobody knows what goes on in here because we are hidden and nobody cares about whores. He was so angry that he didn’t even see that a crowd had gathered around us. That’s how crazed he was with neck veins bulging and snot and spittle flying. He finally noticed his audience and gruffly ordered us to disperse. A few more years passed before our prison was forced to abide by PREA and stop cross-gender pat searches, but by that time I had grown old and gray, so guards and other staff ignore me as an object of desirability. I may be the only woman ever who is thankful for wrinkles and white hair. Prison staff still yell at me and treat me like a stupid slave, but none want to have sex with my scrawny old body. Praise the Lord.

New Nonfiction: “A Bridge” by Kent Jacobson

Take me to the alley

Take me to the afflicted ones

Take me to the lonely ones that

Somehow lost their way

Gregory Porter

The twelve-foot chain link capped with concertina wire said, *Whoever you are, you aren't welcome.* The penitentiary sprawled on a barren hill in a forgotten tract in Connecticut, far from houses or schools or the next town. It was 1990, the dirt and rutted parking lot empty. Maximum security didn't pull many visitors, and this would be my first time inside. I recognized

no fear, not at first.

I remembered waiting as a boy in a lot outside another penitentiary. I perched in the passenger seat of the state car my father drove, the black 1950 Chevy with the siren and flashing light. Dad exited the facility smiling. The men inside fashioned signs for the Rhode Island Forest Service and were likely paid very little. The work, Dad said, was always good, always professional, and always on time.

Great oak trees surrounded that old place.

Here, there were no trees, no flowers, not a planted bush. A twilight overcast pressed down as I made my way to a squat, concrete-block building that appeared to be the welcome center, beyond which crouched the penitentiary, a low mean spread of menace which housed two thousand inmates. I explained to the officer hovering behind dark, inch-thick glass what I was there to do. He grunted.

He asked for a driver’s license and peered into the worn briefcase Dad had gifted, checking for anything an inmate might want as a weapon. He dropped the license into a drawer and extended a laminated pass through a small hole in the glass, and with the sweep of an arm, he motioned to a steel gate through the chain link.

Dad had been a hard man. While he never came clean about his earliest days, I realize now he was aware a ghetto kid like he had been, loose with brawlers on a drunk through Providence speakeasies, could have landed in a prison making signs. Possibly he smiled as he left that Rhode Island penitentiary because he felt lucky.

He’d floundered as a student and dropped out at sixteen to do piecework in a factory where he poured out work with speed. A threat to more senior men and making hardly any money, he turned back to finish school. And throughout the Depression, without support except an immigrant father’s scorn, Dad bulled

a path through college. He worked a year and enrolled in school the next.

He died a decade before I entered Osborn Correctional.

I flinched as the steel gate clanked shut behind. I crossed a dirt yard on cracked asphalt to an officer in a head-to-toe black uniform, and I flashed my laminated pass.

“Wait here.”

His glower said, *Forget it*. *We have more to deal with than you.*

“Screw ‘em,” Dad would say, “whoever the hell they are, whatever the bastards do. Sometimes, you’ve got to stand and be counted.”

Black uniform ordered me through a second, heavier steel gate where more guards lurked behind more dark glass. My Harris tweed jacket, the worn briefcase, and the evening hour said who I was.

I’d been warned about the guards.

The second steel gate clanked shut behind me. My stomach churned. Will anyone open these doors when I want *out*?

There seemed to be no laughs in this dwelling, only these cold mothers and their freaking gray walls.

“Why you here?” a voice barked from behind the glass.

“I teach in the college program.”

Books won’t help thugs, Mister, I was ready for him to say.

He gestured down the wide hall.

“Take a right down there and go till you find a guard.”

Still no waste of words.

I did what he said and took a right into an enormous, extended corridor. Voices blasted off the walls and concrete floor. Inmates exited a room far ahead, most of them bulked up bodybuilders in identical tan shirts and tan pants. They thundered toward me four abreast, one pack after another. I stepped faster and avoided eye contact.

They ran over 225. I was an Ivy League poster boy in tweed and corduroy. Their faces said, *Who's the punk? Who invited him?*

What had I expected? I'd joked the inmates might have two heads and keep cobras as pets.

A woman at a party asked why anyone would teach in a prison. Wasn't the place dangerous?

I said teacher-pals declared prison the best experience they'd had in a classroom and didn't say more. Their conviction was absolute and I bit. They'd crossed a bridge they hadn't supposed was there and learned something, though they didn't say what.

Bedlam grew as more streamed from what was maybe the dining mess. Masses of them, and too many to count. They howled.

What am I doing in this place?

I showed my pass to a guard I found. I said I taught the English course. He smiled and proceeded down one more hall to a room assigned to Jacobson.

"Is this experience new for you?" he asked.

The guard seemed curious, not at all prickly. He wished me the best.

Inmates passed and nodded to the new guy. They smiled.

I thought, I must be in a different institution.

The room that was mine had an immense oak desk and a matching

oak chair. I wasn’t going with that; I wanted no barricade. I took a plastic chair-desk from the front and turned it to the other chair-desks in neat rows facing the front, the oak desk and chair and the blackboard behind me.

I tried not to think what men had done to end in maximum security. Murder, pedophilia, armed robbery, rape, the worst crimes were the most likely. A section of my brain spat images of fiends.

Get a grip. You can’t teach fiends. Dad drank with Tommy Pelligrini, a man rumored to be in the Providence mafia. Tommy wore a navy suit and a modest tie. His memory seemed to quiet my mind.

I understood little, nonetheless, about the actual men I was teaching. I’m certain I looked grim. I picked fingernails and fooled with the marriage ring on my finger. Men were finding seats. I rooted in my briefcase for a pen, a pad of paper, for nothing. My back had a knot the size of a golf ball.

Would I recognize anyone? I scanned the roster.

An inmate asked a question and I gave a too brief answer. I didn’t initiate conversation like I usually did in a new class.

I glanced at my watch and a voice inside chirped, *You’ve crossed scarier roads than this, boyo.* A buddy remarked once on my cool in a crisis and my son, Morgen, cracked: “Dad’s good in a crisis. It’s ordinary life that gives him trouble.”

He was ribbing, though I hoped tonight he was right.

I counted twenty-three men in all. Half, I would learn, had killed someone. Most had spent their childhoods in fractured homes, abandoned by fathers whose savvy might have pointed to a better pathway.

The men sat in four straight rows, seats directed at the

teacher like we had in grade school. I didn’t ask them to form a circle because I planned to hog the talk tonight. They were black men except one, everybody in a tan uniform with a buzz-cut. White people can’t tell one black person from another, a smart observer said.

The single white sat in a far corner. Outside, darkness had fallen and inside it wasn’t bright. He wore deep-ink shades. What lay in wait there?

I’d memorize their names and offer that much consideration.

Now. Let’s go.

I called the roll and scribbled a note when a man responded. One had red hair. A coffee-colored inmate displayed freckles. One was Goliath, a second a featherweight. Another wore a bandana. Still another had a sweeping scar on a left cheek.

I went one by one, up a row and down the next. I used the scribbles and named each inmate correctly. Bodies straightened. The room perked. Two mentioned how little respect they received in Osborn and others nodded.

The next would be easier, I thought. I would describe in general terms what we’d read and their writing would analyze in coming weeks: American writers from Irving to Twain to Baldwin to Tobias Wolff, with a handful of accessible poets.

I started to speak and couldn’t get the words out. My hands shook and my voice fluttered. Fear had taken a public walk. I stopped. I couldn’t teach like this.

A hand shot up three seats away. The Goliath, maybe in his twenties and close to three-hundred pounds, a football player once, I bet. He plowed holes for running backs.

Head down, he waved a hand, hesitant.

“Can . . . can I say something?” He spoke with a stutter.

“Sure,” I said.

He held a beat, reluctant to say what he wanted to say.

“You . . . you seem nervous.”

“You got that right.”

The room exploded. Laughter, every single man, belly laughter, even No Eyes behind the ink shades.

Without a prompt except my fear, the men spilled their first hours in Osborn, last week or years before. The shakes, the diarrhea, the sleeplessness, the stares into the dark, the dread, the guards, the threat they might not live.

They did their best to talk me back from where I’d shrunk. They’d been there. They understood. Don’t be ashamed. We managed. You can too.

***

I’m old. I forget names. Days are shorter and they fly too soon. I admit it was a tiny episode in a prison, years ago, hardly worth a mention.

The moment stays.

We are you, they said. We are you. These men who were like the mill kids I grew up around, only older, and in more serious trouble. Men who brought me back to my brawling father.

They weren’t foreign. They weren’t strange. For a moment, they saw me as I was. Like them, afraid. They were me.

I came from no fractured home, I hadn’t been abandoned by my father, I hadn’t ever been so continually disrespected. Yet

here I was, at a bridge my father knew.

And there they were too, waiting.

New Poetry from Virginia Schnurr: “Touchstone” and “Valentine for Lewis Carroll”

VALENTINES IN ME / *image by Amalie Flynn*

TOUCHSTONE

My child’s fairy-tale quilt is frail:
the wizard ripped, the prince bald,
the fairy’s wing clipped.
Only the wishing well and frog prince survived
camp, college, the conception of my grandchild.

My eldest daughter wants the irreparable
repaired for her daughter, Maeve Arden,
named after a Shakespearean forest.

No longer willing to stitch painted pomp
I sketch a new quilt: a forest where the snake waits,
the dark trips, death lives behind every mushroom:
reality feelingly persuades me what I am.

My cataracts removed, I have a grander vision for Maeve’s covering.
I add the fool with his
books in running brooks, tongues in trees.

Absolute in my giving
savvy to the darker side of things
my needle pokes the sweet uses of adversity.

VALENTINE FOR LEWIS CARROLL

Purchased by an old woman
for her grandniece
I’m a blue plastic Valentine bag.

I have on me
a rabbit from Wonderland
whose creator liked
little girls without pubic hair.

I sit all year

on a doorknob
awaiting the day of hearts.

I’m singular,
not a carelessly covered box
but reusable.

My child places
her carefully labeled
valentines in me.

Unfortunately, this year
will be my finale.
My rabbit will hop off
offended by the onset
of hair.

New Fiction from John P. Palmer: “Lasting Impacts”

Johnny felt the oak floor tilt sharply below him. He had no idea what was happening or why, and he was frightened.

The tilt was steep, so steep that he felt himself sliding, then falling. He wanted to cry, but he was so terrified that he couldn’t make a sound. Suddenly he fell right off the floor and landed on the next oak floor right below the one he was falling from.

As he was landing on it, that floor tilted in the opposite direction, and he began sliding again, uncontrollably in that direction.

He fell again, to another floor, and that floor tilted back.

His fear intensified. Finally he was able to cry out, but the see-saw tilting and sliding wouldn’t stop! Worse, the room began to spin, and Johnny was totally disoriented. The falling and sliding and spinning sensations were new to him; he wasn’t hurt, but he was more terrified than he had ever been. He couldn’t stop crying.

As he slid downward from level to level across the tilting, sloping floors, Johnny looked up and saw his father laughing, and that frightened him even more. This man was his father; he wasn’t supposed to be a man who made floors tilt and who made Johnny fall from one tilted floor to another. But there he was: Johnny was falling from sloped floor to sloped floor, and his dad was laughing while Johnny was crying.

*

The memory of this trauma haunted Johnny for years. When he was a toddler, he woke up after having nightmares that his crib was tilting and he was sliding back and forth on it.

When he was six years old, Johnny woke up at 4AM from a completely different nightmare. In this one, his dad was grinning at him. That was all – it was just a grin, but in his dream Johnny saw it as menacing, and he couldn’t get back to sleep. It rekindled the old nightmares from his infancy.

When his mother woke up, she saw his bedroom light on. “Johnny,” she asked, “Why do you have your bedroom light on,

and what are you doing up so early? What happened?”

Johnny knew his mom loved his dad, and so he didn’t feel free to say anything. He knew she would pooh-pooh the nightmare. After some hesitation, he mumbled, “I had a nightmare.”

“What happened?” she asked again.

Johnny wouldn’t tell her.

*

Johnny’s dad died at the age of 43; John was only 15.

John missed his dad, but not a whole lot. They had never been close. His dad was a respected man in the community, and he did many of the usual fatherly things with John, but there was always a barrier between them. John had always been a little afraid of him. John didn’t think about the nightmares of his infancy or childhood very often, if at all, but they had affected him.

One day shortly after John turned thirty, he spent an entire day closeted in his office at work. He didn’t answer knocks on the door, he wouldn’t answer the telephone, and he didn’t go to lunch with his co-workers. He just sat at his desk all day, talking with his dad, trying to imagine a day-long visit and conversation. It wasn’t until then that he realized his dad had grown up the middle boy in his own family, not particularly well-loved and maybe even half-rejected by the rest of his family. Only then did he begin to understand that his dad was shy about showing emotions and had never learned how to give or show love to his son. And John realized, finally, that his dad had loved him deeply but didn’t know how to do it. He felt at peace with his dad.

At least he thought he did.

Many years later, his older sister and he were talking among some friends when she mentioned that alcohol had been banned

from their house as they were growing up. She and John laughed about the religious conservatives in their neighborhood, but his sister added, “No, there was another reason. Dad had some men over one night and they all got drunk. Mother threatened to leave him and said he was never allowed to have alcohol in the house again.”

That night John understood. And felt sad. And missed his dad… again.

He understood that during that drunken party, his dad had been tossing him in the air and laughing with his drunken friends. John’s nightmare of sliding on tilting, sloping floors wasn’t a nightmare at all; it had been real. Up and down, up and down, and around and around. The world really had been spinning and falling away from him.

John tried to talk to his dad again that night. He tried to forgive his dad, “I know it wasn’t malicious, Dad. I know.”

And he wept silently.

New Poetry from Alita Pirkopf: “Roadkill,” “Sounds of the Past,” “Spring,” and “Unhealthy”

BLOOD IN BUCKETS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

ROADKILL

I bring you blood in buckets,
a heart that I hear, a palsied hand.
It has been eight, ten
years, my issue.
The same as twenty years ago
when your father felt
about me as you do now.
I felt the world shrink
but I thought something,
not necessarily the world,
would end. I had not thought
the world lay flat, as Renaissance
cartographers mapped it.
But now, like an automobile tire
not only flapping, flattening,
parts of it, or me, lie on the shoulder
of my road with dead things and dirt.

SOUNDS OF THE PAST

She thought she had found

soft music and warm dialect,
a sunny sort of near-Italian soul,

But surfaces surprise.
She found out. She found
that underneath pounded
a martial drumbeat
vibrating still

from Vienna’s center,
his childhood years
under the Third Reich,
a father fighting
occupying Yugoslavia
with others
missing
the village polkas,
his son.

A burst of marches,
explosions, still resounding.
All of us hearing
pounding steps and hearts.

SPRING

Shreds remain—
unraveled weavings
of brown grasses and mud—
in branches a bird eyed
for her family tree.

The rest, the nest,
that we had watched
through last week’s window,
fell.

The dog found
blue broken eggs

in the grass.

Families, all of us
consider seriously.
Upsetting winds
come to nests.
It is spring
and windows
open views
and dooryards fill
with the ambiguity
of lilacs.

UNHEALTHY

I loved my doctors
until one
played sick games,
touching and taunting,
and knowing of rules
I didn’t know.
Telling jokes
I didn’t understand.
Dismissing me
for my naivete—
stupidity.

The years passed,
and he operated
on me appropriately,
savingly. Later he
mentioned dining
together or going out
for coffee, but didn’t ask,
and got angry for reasons
I didn’t know, saying
I hadn’t said I’d go.

New Poetry from Jesse Frewerd: “Symphony”

OUR TARGETED HEADS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Ballistic medleys project ambition, while
dancing tones find their pitch. There is
unexpected buoyancy in our youth. March,
advance, train, drill, prepare, disseminate.
It’s the 4am ensemble, time to crescendo
awake for guard duty. Report to post, front
gate, alert and ready. Hours, minutes,
seconds, tempo depends on the action.
The symphony begins with an RPG flying
over our targeted heads. Return fire.
Bullets staccato the enemy location.

A cappella commands over the comms.
Write the counterpoint, execute. Threat
neutralized, they retreated. Though my
heart is playing allegro, via adrenaline.
Dynamics decrescendo the scene, bringing
it to normalcy. I return to my life as it is,
my new normal cadence amid syncopated
pop-shots, RPG’s, mortar rounds, and IED’s.

New Poetry from Ron Riekki: “my”

WET ASPHALT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

my

brain was left back in the war, the burial
of civilian-normality, how my amygdala
kicks out the ladders in my head, falling
decades, erasing exes, fought for my nation
and now, hibernation, isolation, chairs
stacked in front of my bedroom door when
I don’t sleep at night, the end of the world
in my head, the tingling headaches in my
head, my head in my head, the dead that
lullaby me every night, stormed around
my bed, the hole in my head, how I smell
corpse and I’m medical now, delved into
Detroit, elated when the night is slow,
the moon is shrunk, smoking out in
the parking lot, a doe tiptoeing across
the wet asphalt, a northern red oak’s
branches waltzing behind it, and how
oak is so often used for caskets, how
beautiful they look only when empty.

A Brief History of an Apology

Here are questions. How is it possible to engage in a process of healing for the evils of history? Who has the right to ask forgiveness for historical crimes? Who will be chosen to represent the perpetrators? Who is qualified to bring a spirit of contrition that is commensurate with the gravity of the occasion? And by whom will this person or delegation be appointed?

I have in mind, specifically, the centuries of violence committed against Native American peoples by the United States.

Of whom should forgiveness be asked? Would the request be tendered at official ceremonies, or in private, person by person by person? Who will represent the survivors of the victims and the violated, and how will these be chosen? On the point of reparations, how will historical trauma be quantified? What is the algorithm of loss, and how is loss to be tallied? In land? In memory? In boarding school rosters, on prison rolls? Along the Powder River, or the Washita? At Acoma? Near Sand Creek, in the Great Swamp, at Zia?

Other questions. What about the relocation and assimilation policies of the federal government that persisted into the 1970s, and led to incalculable destruction of culture and life? Or the poisoning of tribal land and water, which continues to this hour? The full effects of generations of uranium mining cannot be assessed, as cleanups remain unfinished and cancer rates continue to rise.

Who will determine the amount of restitution—will there be restitution?—or the protocols of apology? And if forgiveness is refused, what then?

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?

Bartosz Brzezinski/Flickr

*

In 1990, the one hundredth anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, members of the United States Congress drafted this expression of official regret.

HCON 386 IH

101st CONGRESS

2d Session

CON. RES. 386

> *To acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the tragedy at Wounded Knee Creek, State of South Dakota, December 29, 1890, wherein soldiers of the United States Army 7th Cavalry killed and wounded approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot's band of the Minneconjou Sioux …*

It is unclear why Congress felt compelled to "acknowledge" a well-documented event. The statement confers no added legitimacy on historical truth, but only raises questions about the legislature's prior understanding.

> *Whereas, in order to promote racial harmony and cultural understanding, the Governor of the State of South Dakota has declared that 1990 is a Year of Reconciliation …*

Reconciliation is not unilaterally "declared" but, to fit the definition of the word, must be jointly and freely entered into (con, with) by more than one party.

> *Whereas the Sioux people who are descendants of the victims and survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre have been striving to reconcile and, in a culturally appropriate manner, to bring to an end their 100 years of grieving for the tragedy of December 29, 1890…*

Here, the word "reconcile" has no object, which confuses the matter. Grammatically, the statement implies that the Sioux have been trying, since 1890, to make peace among themselves.

> *Whereas it is proper and timely for the Congress of the United States of America to acknowledge, on the occasion of the impending one hundredth anniversary of the event, the historic significance of the Massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, to express its deep regret to the Sioux people and in particular to the descendants of the victims and survivors for this terrible tragedy;*

The writer prefers 'regret' over 'apology'. It is uncertain to what extent the writer or writers debated the distinction. Regret is sorrow for some past action or failure, but it contains neither an implicit admission of personal responsibility for that action or failure, nor a commitment to right a wrong. An apology assumes prior agreement, by all sides, on the terms of the issue at hand, but such an agreement has been neither demonstrated nor even mentioned.

Regret is not apology. It is as if I say, “I am enamored” to a loved one, instead of “I love you.” The former sentiment is self-centered, literally – not to say imprecise, and touched with timidity. Regret, like a hedge, is commonly a measure taken with an eye to the preservation of one’s self-interest. An apology, on the other hand, is an implicit and total disavowal of all self-interest. Its sincerity demands the courage of vulnerability. Apology cannot be faked, at least not for long; the slightest false note rings like a cracked bell. Human beings are highly attuned to dissimulation. Insincerity, whether in tone or word, is something most people are fluent in.

At this point, the resolution once more, unnecessarily so it seems, “acknowledges” the event, expresses regret yet again, and commits one further obfuscation by identifying the crimes at Wounded Knee as an “armed conflict.”

> *Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That– (1) the Congress, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre of December 29, 1890, hereby acknowledges the historical significance of this event as the last armed conflict of the Indian wars period resulting in the tragic death and injury of approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot’s band of Minneconjou Sioux and hereby expresses its deep regret on behalf of the United States to the descendants of the victims and survivors and their respective tribal communities*

But the word “conflict” denotes a fight or a battle, which this was not. The resolution did not make provision for reparations to descendants of the victims.

*

Eighteen years later, the United States government tried

again.

Joint Resolution 14 was introduced on April 30, 2009, during the 1st Session of the 111th Congress, and was easy to overlook, for it appears, oddly, two-thirds of the way through the 67-page Defense Appropriations Act of 2010. This resolution was intended to "acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes." Though it does officially "offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States," there seems to have been no mechanism for Native peoples to officially accept or reject the resolution.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

April 30, 2009

Whereas the ancestors of today's Native Peoples inhabited the land of the present-day United States since time immemorial and for thousands of years before the arrival of people of European descent;

As with many such documents, the antique and ungrammatical "whereas" is again in use, in an effort to confer a degree of authority on the pronouncement.

> *Whereas for millennia, Native Peoples have honored, protected, and stewarded this land we cherish;*
>
> *Whereas Native Peoples are spiritual people with a deep and abiding belief in the*
>
> *Creator, and for millennia Native Peoples have maintained a powerful spiritual connection to this land, as evidenced by their customs and legends;*

Here, the histories of five hundred separate nations and discrete cultures, spanning twenty millennia, vanish in an undifferentiated haze of condescension. Then the reader

arrives at ‘real’ history:

> *Whereas the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples;*
>
> *Whereas while establishment of permanent European settlements in North*
>
> *America did stir conflict with nearby Indian tribes …*

The writer – perhaps a young attorney with a couple rules from Freshman Composition class still fresh in his mind – acknowledges the legitimacy of the opposing side, with an emphatic “did” that *does* reveal the speaker’s fair-mindedness (because demonstrating objectivity enhances a writer’s authority). This brief concession accomplished, the writer reverts, within the same sentence fragment, to his thesis:

> *… peaceful and mutually beneficial interactions also took place;*
>
> *Whereas the foundational English settlements in Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, owed their survival in large measure to the compassion and aid of Native Peoples in the vicinities of the settlements;*
>
> *Whereas in the infancy of the United States, the founders of the Republic expressed their desire for a just relationship with the Indian tribes, as evidenced by the Northwest Ordinance enacted by Congress in 1787, which begins with the phrase, “The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians”;*

The quotation here is from Article Three of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. Known as the “Good Faith Clause,” the passage concludes with these words: “their [the Indians] lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars

authorized by Congress." As events were soon to prove, "just and lawful" wars were by no means difficult to conjure. Good faith notwithstanding, the 1787 Ordinance established provisions for carving states from the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes regions, and a legislative procedure for admitting those states into the union. The expansion of the nation's boundaries, not Indian relations, was the primary focus of the document.

Native peoples are mentioned only once more in the Ordinance, in Section 8, which grants the governor of each future state the power to further divide his territory, as he sees fit: "and he shall proceed from time to time as circumstances may require, to lay out the parts of the district in which the Indian titles shall have been extinguished, into counties and townships, subject, however, to such alterations as may thereafter be made by the legislature."

The wishes of the land's first and present inhabitants concerning these matters were not solicited in the drafting of the document, nor were they reflected in the final product, nor were its provisions ever acknowledged by the tribes. At any rate, the issue of land ownership was decisively resolved by the American victory at Fallen Timbers in 1794, the attendant destruction of Shawnee and Miami fields and towns, and the subsequent forced removal of Indians from the lands in question.

In his selection of a single anodyne phrase to support his claim, the author of the 2009 Resolution commits the fallacy of suppressing evidence, cherry-picking from a document intended to set the legal groundwork for the expulsion of the region's first inhabitants.

No matter. By alluding to the "Northwest Ordinance," the young attorney has made a logical appeal and provided concrete details to support his claim, which is the first rule in college essay writing. The irrelevance of this ordinance to

the events at Wounded Knee went unnoticed, apparently, by the committee. He may have safely assumed that few people would bother to check.

> *Whereas Indian tribes provided great assistance to the fledgling Republic as it strengthened and grew, including invaluable help to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their epic journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Coast;*
>
> *Whereas Native Peoples and non-Native settlers engaged in numerous armed conflicts in which unfortunately, both took innocent lives, including those of women and children;*

The second assertion is misleading. The phrases “engaged in armed conflict” and “both took innocent lives” imply an equivalence of power, a condition that ceased to obtain as the nineteenth century wore on and the United States doubled in size. By 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre, according to estimates, fewer than a quarter million indigenous people remained alive within the present borders of this country, while the US population exceeded 60 million.

By the time of President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830, the eastern tribes could not mount any lasting resistance to American expansion. Prior to 1830, it was possible for confederacies of tribes (notably under Pontiac and Tecumseh) to face the westering Americans on roughly equal military terms, and even at times to prevail in battle. The First Seminole War (1816-19), and the decisive victories by the Ohio Valley tribes over Harmar’s army (1790) and St. Clair’s army (1791) attest to this. But by 1830, hopes of effective resistance had faded. The victories of Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, and the defeats of Fetterman and Custer, all lay in the latter half of the century, but these events could only postpone the inevitable. The wagon trains and railroads and mining outfits would not be stopped for long.

By the time the Apache and the Nez Perce were making their final stands, in the latter half of the century, American strategy had settled into a grimly effective process of eradication, dispersal, removal, internment, and forced assimilation, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands by exposure and disease. Accurate mortality figures are not known. Genocide may not have been the explicit or official goal, but it was the effective result, of a century of US policy.

> *Whereas the Federal Government violated many of the treaties ratified by Congress and other diplomatic agreements with Indian tribes…*
>
> *Whereas Indian tribes are resilient and determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their unique cultural identities;*
>
> *Whereas the National Museum of the American Indian was established within the Smithsonian Institution as a living memorial to Native Peoples and their traditions; and*

Now, because his pretenses are beginning to sound like excuses (a museum?), and because the attorney must fill the rhetorical hole with something, he invokes the only phrase from the Declaration of Independence that he can recall from high school …

> *Whereas Native Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:*

… in an weirdly improper context, before proceeding to recapitulate the main points (English 101: "How to Write an Effective Conclusion") of his Resolution:

> *Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

SECTION 1. RESOLUTION OF APOLOGY TO NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES.

(a) Acknowledgment And Apology—The United States, acting through Congress—

(1) recognizes the special legal and political relationship Indian tribes have with the United States and the solemn covenant with the land we share;

(2) commends and honors Native Peoples for the thousands of years that they have stewarded and protected this land;

(3) recognizes that there have been years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes;

(4) apologizes on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native Peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States;

Finally, we arrive at the true purpose of this Resolution, which, it turns out, is not to express contrition, but to abjure responsibility and to preempt future claims for reparations:

(b) Disclaimer.—Nothing in this Joint Resolution—

(1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or

(2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.

The apology "was never announced, publicized or read publicly by either the White House or the 111th Congress," observed Mark Charles, spokesperson of Navajo Nation, who wanted to highlight the "inappropriateness of the context and delivery

of their apology.” In view of the document’s dull-witted insolence, Charles’ response is restrained. It would be difficult to find a more shameful mess of inanities than S. J. Res 14. Its mock-sonorous patronization is appalling. The arrogant tone serves only as a cheap mask for the writer’s laziness and ignorance. It is an embarrassment to any thoughtful citizen.

*

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?

It was at this time, on November 7, 2019, as our list of tough questions lengthened, that an article appeared, with all the punctuality of the universe, on the Reuters news wire.

> EAGLE BUTTE, S.D. (Reuters) – For the last 50 years, Bradley Upton has prayed for forgiveness as he has carried the burden of one of the most horrific events in U.S. history against Native Americans, one that was perpetrated by James Forsyth, his great-great-grandfather.
>
> This week Upton, 67, finally got an opportunity to express his contrition and formally apologize for the atrocities carried out by Forsyth to the direct descendants of the victims at their home on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. …
>
> During an event on Wednesday on the reservation, Emanuel Red Bear, a teacher and spiritual advisor, told descendants that they deserve Upton’s apology.
>
> “Only one man had a conscience enough to come here to ask for forgiveness for what his great grandpa did,” he said. “There needs to be more.”
>
> Upton’s journey to forgiveness began when his great uncle sent him photographs of the carnage when he was 16 years old.

> “I knew immediately that it was wrong,” he said. “I felt a deep sadness and shame.”
>
> Two years later, Upton became a student of a Buddhist mediation master.
>
> “I prayed for the next 50 years for forgiveness and healing for all of the people involved, but particularly because my ancestors caused this massacre, I felt incredible heaviness,” he said …

The event was reported by news outlets as far away as Taiwan. Not long after his apology, National Public Radio interviewed Dena Waloke, a descendant of Ghost Horse, a Lakota killed at Wounded Knee. “I think our kids have to know,” Waloke said, “our grandchildren, that it was a massacre but still cannot be going on with anger because it happened, you know? We need to forgive and heal from all that. That way, you know, this nation, the whites and the Lakota, we can all be together, have a better world for our grandchildren. That’s what we think about is our grandchild, not us.” I do not know how widely Waloke’s sentiment is shared.

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The Book of Exodus speaks about inherited guilt. The Commandments of the twentieth chapter are found chiseled on plinths and erected in town squares all across the United States. Often, these are engraved on concrete slabs formed into the shape of tablets, like the ones Charlton Heston carried in the movie. The words are usually printed in a faux-Gothic script (whereas antiquity sheds a sort of legitimacy on even the meanest pronouncement). If the Reformed Christian numbering system is followed on these public displays, you will see, for the Second Commandment, some version of this: *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*

The remainder of the commandment is usually left out. Here it is in its entirety.

> You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.
>
> (*New International Version*, 20.4-6)

To a modern sensibility, there is something distasteful about punishing the children for the sins of the parents. But we see that the effects of evil do persist, passed down from parent to child, as a sense of shame, or worse. This shame may be adequately buried – even for a lifetime, even from oneself – or it may mutate, and manifest as some new form of malice or self-abuse.

Evil is viral, and those possessed of a fragile or warped sense of identity are most susceptible. It pollutes across space and down generations, infecting oppressor and oppressed alike, even unto the third and fourth generations. Some, like Upton – by some alchemy of grace and introspection – manage to heal themselves, transmuting an inherited evil into a good.

This conception of guilt serves as a reverse image of the Seventh Generation principle espoused by many Native American cultures, which holds that every decision I make today should be determined by its impact on my descendants, down to the seventh generation. To my mind, these two ideas represent two sides of one coin. Both proceed from an understanding that the past determines the future.

Journalist Ernestine Chasing Hawk writes the story of Upton's apology for Native Sun News. Unlike the reporters of the Reuters article, Chasing Hawk – knowing the pathology of evil – is careful to detail her subjects' lines of descent.

> Bradley C. Upton and his two sisters are fifth generation descendants of Forsyth and fourth generation descendants of Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon. Forsyth was the commanding officer of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment and Bacon served as a lieutenant under his command during the massacre at Chankpé Ópi Wakpála.
>
> “We have observed and experienced vividly in our family histories both past and present, the very dark shadow of the massacre and its karmic effect,” Upton said.
>
> Upton said for years he and his family members have been praying in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths asking for healing, not only for the Lakota Nation but for his families “karmic debt” of commanding the Wounded Knee Massacre.
>
> Upton, a professional musician and music teacher who resides in Longmont, Colorado, said he and his family have struggled with this “dark shadow” for more than a century.

Like a secret, or like a story the children must not overhear, the evil of the past infects the air I breathe; it is diffuse and ever-present, as elemental to modern American life as electromagnetic radiation. Evil demoralizes. It overshadows the life of a nation just as abuse overshadows the life of a family, or an individual. Left untreated, it makes a person anxious and unwell, judgmental and self-destructive, querulous and suspicious, and leads to spiritual death. Bradley Upton tells the reporters from Reuters of his belief “that the impact of the massacre can be seen throughout his family tree, which has been plagued by alcoholism, abuse and betrayal.” A case history in trauma, endlessly replicable.

[Northwestern Photo Company/Flickr]

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The story of Bradley Upton's apology begins, not at Wounded Knee, but at Blue Water Creek, near the Platte River in present-day Nebraska. There, in 1855, during a punitive expedition against the Sioux, 600 US soldiers (including elements of the 2nd US Dragoons, forerunners of the 2nd US Cavalry Regiment, which begot the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, a unit in which I served for two years, 1989-1991) under General William Harney attacked an encampment of 250 Brulé Lakota, killing eighty-six women, children, and men and capturing seventy more. Harney Peak, in the Black Hills, a range sacred to Lakota, was named for the commander.

In 2016, after years of protest and petitioning, the US Board of Geographic Names re-designated Harney Peak as Black Elk Peak. At the renaming ceremony, where tribal members gathered to commemorate the return of the Wakinyan Oyate (the Thunder Beings) to the mountain, one of the speakers was a man named

Paul Stover Soderman, a seventh-generation descendant of General Harney. Chasing Hawk covered this event as well for Native Sun News. Her story appeared on March 28, 2019, under the headline, "Ceremony welcomes Thunder Beings back home."

> "I am a direct descendant of General William Selby Harney," Soderman said, "who was the general who commanded the army that committed an act of genocide at … Blue Water Creek and attacked the Little Thunder village. He was also the third signer of the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty," Soderman shared.

The 1868 Treaty set aside lands for the Lakota, including the Black Hills, but contained many onerous conditions inimical to Lakota sovereignty and traditional practices and beliefs. Following George Custer's illegitimate expedition to the region in 1874, and the gold rush that began later that same year, the treaty was, for all intents and purposes, broken.

> "I found out about 15 years ago who my ancestor was and we started to take action toward anything we could do to honor that 1868 Treaty when it comes to the Black Hills and Paha Sapa [the Lakota name for the Black Hills]," he said. "One thing that we thought would be good was to make an attempt to take his name off this mountain."

Bradley Upton of Colorado learned of the Black Hills ceremony soon afterward. In the November article, Chasing Hawk writes:

> While visiting with his neighbor … [Upton] happened to mention the healing his family must do.
>
> "She told me about the ceremony that Mr. Brave Heart had performed, a ceremony to not only rename Harney Peak to Black Elk Peak but the ceremony of forgiveness of the carnage that Harney caused at the slaughter at Blue Water Creek," Upton shared.
>
> Upton was brought to tears and said he immediately set out to contact Soderman and Brave Heart.

> “A couple of days later I was fortunate to meet Paul and his wife Kathy who shared the power of Mr. Brave Heart’s ceremony with me and invited me to their sweat lodge as both new and old family,” he said.

Upton contacted Brave Heart.

> The Lakota elder comforted him by telling him he was carrying a dark shadow that was not his to carry.
>
> “He couldn’t stop crying and he told me he was a descendant of Major General James Forsyth and Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon,” Brave Heart said and told him, “You came to a place to heal.”

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The English historian Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975) made an observation about these matters, and I don’t know whether his contention is valid, but it is often in my mind these days. He identifies the destruction of Carthage (146 BCE) at the end of the Third Punic War as a sort of moral inflection point in the history of Rome. The war with Hannibal had ended and Carthage was no longer a threat, but Rome, on flimsy pretexts, sent an expedition to besiege the city. Roman forces destroyed Carthage and scorched the surrounding lands. Some say the soldiers cast salt into the fields, and trod the salt under with their horses’ hooves, to sterilize the soil and ensure that the place might never again be inhabited.

Rome had debased itself, the historian argued. It had betrayed long-honored principles of justice and of clemency toward defeated foes. Thereafter, the empire drifted through centuries of dictatorship, foreign wars, oppression, and the extortion of conquered peoples. Cicero would describe Rome’s destruction of two great cities — Carthage and Corinth — as “gouging the eyes” from the Mediterranean. As Roman imperial power apparently waxed in magnificence, Roman crimes in fact polluted the heart of the social organism. Cultural and moral

decay set in and social life gradually degenerated until Constantine's soldiers, with crosses sewn onto their tunics, put the empire out of its misery at Milvian Bridge (312 CE).

The Athenian destruction of Melos (416 BCE) may illustrate the same point. Strategically unwarranted, the siege ended with the execution of the island's adult men and the enslavement of its women and children, and coincided with the beginning of the decline of democracy at Athens.

A nation rooted in atrocity will bear noxious fruit. Unless it be transplanted in good soil, how can it do otherwise than yield corruption?

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Basil Brave Heart, teacher and healer and combat veteran, lives on the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Reservation. In a *Rapid City Journal* article (December 27, 2019), he was asked whether forgiveness is possible, 129 years after Wounded Knee. "Forgiveness has its challenges," he said, "but it is possible."

> Many Lakota relatives are suffering from the trauma of these actions and wondering – how can we forgive when we are still hurting and angry?
>
> Recently, historic apologies for the Wounded Knee Massacre have been shared with the communities of Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge. These apologies have taken the lid off of something painful, like doing an emotional surgery. The displacement, abandonment, and lies that denigrated our way of life are coming to the surface. Anger, anxiety and depression all arise as part of the process of forgiveness. These feelings come from the trauma that has not been worked through yet…
>
> Forgiveness is one of the most profound and difficult things we can do. It takes prayer and commitment. Going

> through this process does not mean that the original difficulty goes away. As a Catholic boarding school survivor and veteran with PTSD, I know this to be true…
>
> Back in 1938, my grandma taught me about the power of forgiveness. Her teachings have been with me throughout my life. The meetings and ceremonies of apology and forgiveness that happened in the last year are a spark to ignite a long journey of intergenerational healing. By connecting with our breath and asking for spiritual assistance, all people can return to our original human blueprint of compassion, love, and equanimity. Our challenging work of forgiveness will create wholeness for ourselves and the future generations. Forgiveness is the password to our divinity.
>
> *
>
> The crisis is one of values. It can be met … only by a radical shift in belief, a profound realignment of thought and spirit.
>
> — Elizabeth Ammons, *Sea Change* (2010)

There is a movement afoot these days. Good-hearted people, singly at first but in ever-increasing numbers, are setting about a great work. We are in the midst of one of those sea changes of sentiment, I believe, that sweep through history at times, quickening human consciousness. These changes arrive like the rogue winds that wander desert places, descending with a swiftness to rattle the walls, and leaving in their wake a landscape trembling and bright. They are watershed events, dividing everything that has come before from everything that will come after.

One such change must have occurred in the 5th century BCE, when Moses, Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius lived and taught. Two millennia later, the telescope and the microscope inaugurated

another great shift in the feeling for things. Henry Power, in his *Experimental Philosophy* of 1664, proclaimed that

> This is the Age in which all mens Souls are in a kind of fermentation … Me-thinks, I see how all the old Rubbish must be thrown away, and the rotten Buildings be overthrown, and carried away with so powerful an Inundation. These are the days that must lay a new Foundation of a more magnificent Philosophy.

Now I hear similar words spoken today, calls from every side for destruction of old modes and habits.

The change this time, unlike previous transitions, does not concern humanity in relation to physics, or to god, or to the cosmos: it has to do with humanity in relation to itself. I see proof of this in the altered trajectories of individual lives. Soderman and Upton are only two examples among many, individuals committing acts of healing, in ways unthinkable only a short time ago. Their paths to the Pine Ridge reservation were long apprenticeships for a single agonizing encounter with themselves, an encounter in which they were met—not with hostility and mistrust—but with compassion and forgiveness, almost as if they had been expected all along.

The place of this encounter—the "furnace of the truth," as bishop and theologian Rowan Williams calls it—is where one comes face to face with oneself, often the last person in the world we care to see. To "come clean" is a common idiom, one that nicely figures the refining power of the truth's furnace. It is painful, bitter, but the burden that awaits me on the other side is lighter, much lighter than the one I've carried till now. A good deal of religious truth turns on this point. Freed of that burden, I am better able, mentally and physically, to be a faithful helpmate to my brother and sister. Until that occurs, I am only a burden to myself and to the world.

Until there is a reckoning for historical evil, this nation cannot hope to steer clear of the crash pattern of exploitation of human life and of nature, too. “Here,” Linda Hogan writes in *Dwellings* (1995), “is a lesson: what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing.”

That the work of peace and justice is hopeless and lonely, all of history bears witness. “It sounds silly to say *work without hope*, but it can be done; it’s only a form of insurance; it doesn’t mean *work hopelessly,*” wrote the English war poet Keith Douglas, only a year before he was killed in Normandy at age twenty-four. They are difficult words, and they take on added weight every time I think of them.

*

The better part of my childhood was spent reading histories of the Eastern Woodland nations: the ill-starred uprisings of Pontiac and Tecumseh, the doomed alliances with the British and the French; canoe flotillas convening for the trading days at Michilimackinac, the seasonal dispersal to the hunting grounds. I was riveted by the tough freedoms of their existence, the harsh tuition of war and weather, and a talent for woodcraft and watchfulness that are mostly lost to this world. The harvest celebrations, too, and the somber winters of scarcity, and a relentless sense of humor that survived all of it. To wander the stacks looking for books on Indians was happiness. Shawnee and Erie, Wyandot and Delaware: I revered their stories like living things, because they are living things.

By the time I was old enough to walk alone to the library, the people in the books had been gone from that part of Ohio for nearly two hundred years. The trees and animals that they had known remained, however, though much diminished in kind and number. Nevertheless, the woods around the neighborhood—somewhat ragged and littered—were the only connection I had to the first inhabitants. I spent a lot of

time there. I remember, when I was nine or ten, setting off on a walk one early Sunday morning. I kept on for several miles, through unfamiliar neighborhoods, until I had passed well out of the suburbs, and came to a little valley where a thin black stream flowed through icy grass.

I sat at the edge of the woods and kept watch, fearful of trespassing, but all was calm in that beautiful place whose existence I had never suspected. In the black branches of a tree, a squirrel's tail flickered like an oil lamp flame. A bird perched on a broken stalk and sang, and in the winter cold I could see the tiny puffs of breath from its beak—a puff for each string of notes—backlit by the powder blue sky. Indians were on my mind that morning, as they were most days, and I imagined a band of women and men and children, Shawnees or Miamis, filing out of the treeline and down toward the stream. No doubt, they knew the place well, I thought.

Expectation faded to a nameless absence that spread across the little valley. Forty years on, I recall the stream and the sky clearly.

I could not have described on that morning the sense of something that had come and gone. And though days and months might pass in unawareness of it, still to this day that feeling has not left me. I never returned to that place.

*

It's funny how a difficult truth has the power to single you out. Others have noticed this. "What you look hard at," Gerard Manley Hopkins observed, "seems to look hard at you"—and has a way, I would add, of making a person feel alone. Not that you cannot forget it, but that it will not forget you. In my mind, something is watching the boy who is sitting on a hillside, waiting for people who will never return. But it was only me after all.

There are other times when I've stood looking at myself, it

seemed, through someone else's eyes. One time, when I was very ill. Once, when I was beaten by several people on a street at night. Again, when I watched the desert skyline blaze with oil well fires. And again, as I sat at a table, alone in an efficiency in a midwestern city, writing a letter of apology to someone I had wronged.

Why was it, I wonder, on these occasions that I drifted out of myself, a stranger looking on with, it seems, a kind of pity?

Illness, violence, forgiveness: these three. They have long memories.

Wounded Knee Massacre Burial Site/Wikimedia Commons

Artist Profile: Singer-

Songwriter Jason Moon

Jason Moon served in Iraq with a combat engineering battalion. He returned to the States in 2004 and was eventually diagnosed by VA psychologists with depression, insomnia, and adjustment disorder. Despite medication his condition worsened, leading to a suicide attempt in 2008, which resulted in a diagnosis of PTSD. This diagnosis started his healing process, which actually led to his creative resurgence. Apart from his own music, Moon founded Warrior Songs **1** , with the goal of using music to help veterans integrate and transform their military experiences into song. To date Warrior Songs has produced two CDs. The first, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), features fourteen cuts by Army, Air Force, and Marine vets of Iraq and Afghanistan, with a little help from Vietnam vets Raymond Cocks and Jim Wachtendonk. The second CD, *Women at War* (2018), contains fifteen cuts by a variety of women vets.

Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs that I'd begun when I returned from the war but had been unable to finish." As the title suggests, the album expresses Moon's attempt to regain a sense of "home." However, the return is problematic due to feeling disconnected and alienated, as the title track indicates: "The child inside me is long dead and gone/Somewhere between lost and alone . . . It's hard to fight an enemy that lives inside your head . . . ." "Alone With Me Tonight" continues the theme of the inability to reconnect to others and to society. He recalls "the mystery and marvel of a smile on a face" but this has been replaced by "broken dreams and empty bottles." All he sees are ghosts. "Happy To Be Home" takes a bitterly ironic tone when he writes that "all this 'welcome home, we're so

proud of you, good job' bullshit is wearing thin." "Thank you for your service" from well-meaning civilians only goes so far until the phrase becomes an empty cliché. Other songs discuss his psychological numbness and need to self-medicate. The album ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Although the effects of PTSD are overwhelming he tells himself to "hold on" as there is always the chance that tomorrow, or the next week, or the next month, will bring him relief.

As Moon's music developed it became more optimistic. Although *Love & Life* (2014) reveals some of the same themes as the earlier work, there are more hopeful signs. While the title track and "Railroad Song" touch on loneliness and alienation, in "My Child, My Boy, My Son" Moon finds joy in the fatherly role, giving his son "life advice" to help guide him through life's ups and downs: "Now what can I say except, somewhere along the way, You may find yourself on a road that you had never known. And this road may be rough, and this road may be long, So keep with you always in your heart this song." "Family Song" tells the story of his family when he was growing up and the importance of home and family to him today.

His newest album, his fourth solo CD, is entitled *The Wolf I Fed* (2020). Again, there are undertones of isolation and loss but out of those arise a growing sense of hope and reconnection. In "Wisdom of the Wound" Moon writes that because of the war "that person I once was, is now a distant memory." The memories of his war experience "brought him to his knees." However, the song takes a positive turn when he realizes that in order to be free from the burden of the past he (and by extension, all veterans) has to tell his story, and that civilians need to listen: "And if you share our story then our healing can begin. Now the next chapter can begin." That healing from trauma can emerge from sharing one's story and starting a "new chapter" is seen in other songs on the album. In "You Didn't Say Goodbye," Moon looks back from a twenty-year vantage point at a failed relationship. For most

of the song he is wistful and rueful, writing, “sometimes late at night I still hang my head and cry, when I think back on the day that you didn’t say goodbye.” However, as the song ends, Moon is happy that the relationship ended because he is happy with a wife and family. “The Sweetest Little Thing” is a whimsical lullaby to his daughter, revealing his joy in getting her to sleep. **2**

Jason Moon and co-performer.

Another aspect of Moon’s healing journey is *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, a live presentation in which he uses songs

and narration to discuss PTSD. Having given over 200 presentations from 2010 to 2015, Moon made a video of a 2016 performance at a jail health care conference in Wisconsin. About *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran* he writes that "unable to keep up with the ongoing requests to give this presentation, I offer this DVD with the hope that it will serve to equally inspire and educate. PTSD is not a weakness, you are not alone, and we do not leave our wounded behind." In the film he tells his story as a way of educating the civilian audience about his post-war experiences and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Using his songs from *Trying to Find My Way Home* as a counterpoint, he tells of his cycle of depression and drinking, isolation, and inability to sleep. He discusses the physical and psychological effects of trauma generally, and war trauma in particular, which led to his suicide attempt in 2008, which he says was an attempt to "eliminate the threat. I am the threat." The film ends with seven statements that the well-meaning civilian should not say with six points that are helpful. His overall message is to share the burden and share the story as a way to heal oneself. **3**

1. www.warriorsongs.org; info@warriorsongs.org; jasonmoon.org; fullmoonmusic.org
2. Liner notes, *Trying to Find My Way Home*, Full Moon Music, 2010; all lyrics quoted from fullmoonmusic.org
3. *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, 2016, produced by Julie Olson, distributed through warriorsongs.org.

***

Interview with Jason Moon:

Larry Abbott: Just to start with, what were your musical influences?

Jason Moon: Growing up, the most influential was Bob Dylan. Then I got turned on to John Prine. Another big influence was kind of an unknown songwriter named Jason Eklund, who my

friend Little Rev from Milwaukee turned me onto. Lil' Rev **1** was like a musical mentor who I knew locally. He actually taught me some chords and notes and a lot of what I know about music and performing. But the big one, Bob Dylan. That was when I understood that you could do something with words.

LA: How would you say your music has evolved? You've been writing and performing for over 20 years.

JM: When I started out I just wanted to write songs because I wanted to be like Bob Dylan. Then I started writing songs to express emotions, and they became like a musical diary to me by the time I was in college. Then the war happened. I wasn't really able to write songs for a while. And now they've become a tool to help others have that catharsis of hearing your feelings and story in a song. It's a release from trauma.

I started learning music for fun, writing songs for fun, got into singing for my own life trauma, then went to war, started using music to heal myself from more serious war trauma, and now I use it to help others.

LA: Do you see then your songs as stories?

Singer-songwriter Jason Moon

JM: Yeah, almost all my songs are stories. They're almost always stories. If they're not, then they're just snapshots of a story. But they're almost always a story.

LA: What would you say are the key themes in your songs/

JM: Healing, self-discovery, transformation, and truth in terms of looking at the human experience and trauma we all go through.

LA: What would you say is your songwriting process? You've written, what, 50-plus songs?

JM: It depends on what type of song you're asking about. The

type I write for warrior songs, I have a different process than when I write for myself. Generally, with the warrior songs, I help other veterans turn their trauma into song, and that's usually a collaborative process. Normally, I'll do it with a group. I was just at a retreat with thirteen women veterans who had been raped in the military, so I listened to all their stories and we threw a bunch of words up on a whiteboard about who they were before they were traumatized and who they were afterwards.

And then I took those words and what I had heard of their testimonies of their trauma and crafted that into a song. There's a process that's creating a story, an arc, and making sure that you're using everyone's words. The hardest part is when you sing it back to them, the thirteen of them, and then ask them honestly: "Did all of you hear your truth in this song?" And then all said, yes, they had all heard something, something unique to them in the song we wrote. The new one I just wrote is called "See Me" **2** from that retreat.

That's the magic, listening to those traumatic stories and then finding the light and arc and the theme, and making sure everyone's voice was included.

LA: So, you would say music, as well as the other arts, is instrumental, no pun intended, in the healing process?

JM: Absolutely. The way it works with war trauma, what I'm seeing . . . you have to remember, I don't have a degree in this; I just healed myself through songwriting and then started healing others, and through my music I've prevented thirty-three suicides. What I do is purely based on what's working. The trauma that is caused by the military is so large and so outside the ordinary. The average person just doesn't experience what someone who's been to war or what some of these women who were victims of MST. It's beyond normal comprehension, so it is, of course, beyond normal verbalization through standard language, because it's outside

of the contextual norm of our civilization.

When war trauma happens to people, they have no way of expressing it to their peers, so they're forced to carry it internally. The arts provide a way to bridge that gap between our unverbalized emotions. It's like, I hear a Christmas song by Bing Crosby, and I get a warm feeling. There's a memory attached to a song that I wouldn't be able to really tell you about. It's the same concept.

Veterans who've had traumas beyond explanation, they have to carry that alone. But when you give them a tool to explain it to their peers, to their community—we use the arts for that—it does two things: it allows the community to hear it. It's easier for people to listen to a song or look at a painting or hear a short poem than it is to listen to a testimony of a gruesome, traumatic event. That's easier on the civilian side, on the community side.

As for the veteran's side, it's also easier to use the arts because if I start talking about times and dates with you, I'm going to have an onset of PTSD symptoms, and it will cause me to stop talking, because I recall the memories. But when I'm allowed to just recall pain from a memory, or the sadness from a memory, or the fear from a memory, which you can do in the arts, and just say "paint your fear," then I don't have to necessarily touch the linear, fact-based triggers that would be normal in a therapeutic setting, where I would tell you about the time and the date and the place of the trauma. That'll cause the veteran to be triggered and have PTSD, which is why so few of us want to talk about our shit, because it hurts us to allow that process to happen.

The music, the arts, can heal the veteran. The veteran can express the trauma, the civilian can hear the trauma. I actually think it's one of the most important things for healing, for trauma, and probably all trauma, and I wish I had a better way of proving that scientifically.

LA: So, you would say then that the song or the artwork or the poem is able to transform the trauma or the pain into something that is easier to express?

JM: Yeah, so it's more digestible, I guess, is one way to say it, easier to carry, because the veteran has discovered that the trauma that she couldn't talk about in normal words now has a way to be expressed. It kind of lives outside of them to some degree, and they feel a little lighter. I actually have testimonies from the veterans who come to our workshops that say those exact words, "I feel a lot lighter," because they put their trauma into the art.

When the civilians see it, they actually carry a little bit of it. But it's a lot lighter now and it's easier for all of us to look at that. That allows the individual who, by nature of that trauma is outside the normal context of our cultural realities, they get to come back now into the community. That's what happens once they express themselves through the arts, once they talk about that horrible thing that they've never been able to talk about, once they express that and civilians hear it, then all of a sudden they start to get back into community.

When they start to heal, that's where most of our suicide prevention and most of our success stories happen. Someone was frozen. They were in the darkness—it was PTSD, drinking, self-harm—and we teach them to self-express. We show them they have the power to speak. They put it out there. It's outside of them. Civilians have heard it, and then they start to heal. They start to move back towards the light.

LA: In a way, the arts are a bridge from the veteran world to the civilian world, but also the civilian world into the veteran world?

JM: It's the point where their trauma separated them from their community. They are no longer home. They may come back

to the USA, but until they are received back into their community, they are not home. And that does not mean integration into the community, that means received "as they are." It's a necessary step. All of this is based on the work of Dr. Edward Tick **3** from Soldier's Heart, who had this idea, partly based on Joseph Campbell, about healing from war trauma. But, yeah, it's that bridge between those two, and that bridge is the final piece of all those veterans coming home, really coming home, where they get to stand before their community and say, "Hey, I went to war, and it was more horrible than anything anyone in their room has seen, but I need to tell you about it or I can't really be home because then I'm just carrying it alone."

But when you put that experience into art, now it's easier for the veteran. It's not as traumatic for them. It's not as triggering. And it's easier for the civilians. You've heard some of the songs we've written, right?

LA: Yes.

JM: I think most people would say it's easier to hear that and for me to say, "Listen, I've heard…" If you go on our webpage now under "unreleased songs" and look at "See Me," you listen to the stories of thirteen women who were raped in the military. You've heard their truths. That was four and a half minutes for you to do that. It took them lifetimes to do it. But it's the easiest way to get those two things. Each of the women had ten minutes to tell their story of MST at this retreat, and it took four hours. That's four hours' worth of truth on sexual assault in the military distilled into four and a half minutes and made palatable—as palatable as it can be. I mean, they're right to be cautious. It's not easy, but it is easier.

When I'm staffing a retreat, I'm sitting there listening to these horrible stories. But I can tell you it's much easier to listen to that four and a half minute song than it is to sit

in that room with an open mind and open ears and a heart and hear how these people have been hurt. But know that these four and a half minutes come from four hours spent listening to thirteen women who have the collective wisdom of over 100 years of recovering from military rape trauma. Songwriting is distilling 100 years of collective trauma and wisdom into four and a half minutes of raw truth.

LA: You did *Women at War*: *Warrior Songs: Volume 2* (2018). What led you to do that?

JM: As I was collecting stories for volume 1, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), I was hearing a lot of these stories from women that were similar, that I wasn't hearing from the men. The women were being passed over for promotions and not being respected, having someone see a veteran sticker on their car and ask, "Did your husband serve?" or "Who's the veteran?," always assuming their husband. It made me angry and I thought it should be addressed, but there were just so many that spoke to MST and sexual assault, being assaulted, being harassed, being punished for reporting. It was so many, so many of them.

And then I started to look into it, and the more I got involved and learned about it and talked to women veterans, the more I realized it was worse than most people imagined. That's when I just thought, we need to talk about this. So, we finished up volume 1. We began working on volume 2 while we were finishing up volume 1. That was our first CD, and I got a lot of criticism for it. Most of the veterans were men. It was very male, very white. So, that's generally how I answer criticism, by addressing it.

So, we did volume 2 with women. Volume 3 is with Vietnam veterans. Volume 4 is veterans of color. We're talking with the Native American music community, maybe do one on Native voices. I think I want to do ten volumes total.

LA: Are volumes 3 and 4 in the works or are they out?

JM: Volume 3 is just beginning. We have it mapped out. We have the songs assigned. Some of them are done. One's recorded and it'll be about a year and a half. The fundraising is in progress, and we have to get all the participants in the studio. Volume 4 we just announced, so we're starting to think about what stories need to be told

With each volume we learn how to make them a little faster and a little better, and figure out what needs to be done.

LA: Let's look at some of your albums. Your first album, *Naked Under All of These Clothes*, came out in '96?

JM: That was my first one. That was a big deal back then, to have a CD.

LA: It struck me that at least one of the songs, "American Dream," was an expression of anger at society and the plight of the underclass.

JM: Yeah. I was 16, I think, when I wrote that, and my older brother and his friends were all excited to go off into the workforce. We were all a little bit on the poor side, so a lot of them were dropping out and doing manual labor. It just started to look unfair to me, growing up pretty poor and wondering what it was all about.

And facing that, at least at that time, the reality was that I would probably have to join the Army if I wanted to go to college. That was something that, even as a 16-year-old, I started to realize, "Hey, this world's unfair, and I'm not gonna get the same shake as the other kids in the town. And, oh look, those kids with the brown skin, they're gonna get an even worse time than we are. I've gotta join the military to go to college. What do I get out of that? I get to work for 40 years."

LA: Was your second album *Poverty* from 2006?

JM: Yeah, that was the second one that was officially released. It wasn't done in the studio. Once I started trying to be a full-time musician, it doesn't pay well, so it was always hard to be in the studio when you need the money that you're making from your shows to pay the light bill.

I think that one was after I got back from Iraq in 2004. I had been struggling to write new songs, and one of the things I thought was, maybe if I released these old songs that were supposed to be on a CD that I could never afford to fully produce, put it out as a bootleg and kind of clear the palate. Maybe if I had a bunch of blank pages, I'd write some new stuff.

I didn't really know what was going on with me back then. I had been home two years. I just released it. I was broken from the PTSD. I called it *Poverty* because I was too poor to ever finish all these songs. And now I've actually had a chance in

some of the most recent CDs to redo some of those songs.

LA: It seems like “Catch a Ride” has a satirical edge to it. “St. Thomas Blues” seems to be more about disconnection, alienation. “Let’s Be Passive” is an attack on complacency.

JM: Yeah, although it was a little more of an easier time for me back then. Those are the pre-deployment songs, so they’re kind of a younger protest. I was kind of disillusioned. I went to college. I left that small, ignorant, kind of backwoods town of Eagle River, white trash, poverty—we didn’t live in a trailer park, but we were poor and ignorant.

When I got to college I was expecting it to be a lot of people really wanting to do important things, change the world things. Instead, it was just a bunch of people partying, getting drunk and getting ready to be cogs in the machine. So, I was a little disillusioned by that whole experience. I’ve always been a little disillusioned by that “go to college, work, die” script. What’s it all about? I guess that’s what happens when you have a philosophy degree!

LA: In your documentary, *The 7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, you have the song “Trying to Find My Way Home,” which is also the title of the other CD. That song seems to be more explicitly about PTSD. You sing, “It’s Hard to Fight an Enemy That Lives Inside Your Head.” What were you were looking to do in that song?

JM: So, I got home in ’04, and I couldn’t write. Something was clearly wrong with me, and I didn’t know what it was and nobody told me. It was PTSD. It affected my songwriting. I wasn’t writing songs. That’s why I released *Poverty*, all these unreleased old songs, because I didn’t understand why I couldn’t write any new songs. It had been about five years not writing, except this song I had written, “Trying To Find My Way Home,” and that was heard and shared, and then it was heard by Olivier Morel, who did the documentary *On the Bridge*

(2010). **4** He asked me if I had any more songs about the experience of going to war.

I had started a bunch, but it always led to the same thing. I'd have some emotion that I'd want to purge through a song. I'd try to write it and it would make me really sad and symptomatic, and then I'd drink or avoid thinking about it for as long as I could. I had all these notes and half-started songs about the experience. So, finally I sat down and wrote that whole CD. It was about that five years of coming home in 2004 and then just not having any idea what was happening to me. That's what I was going for.

LA: In *On the Bridge* you were featured as one of the seven participants. Toward the end of the film you sing "Hold On." You mentioned that you wanted to stay away from the song; it was screaming and ranting. But it was also about holding on for one more day.

JM: I had been working on finishing that one about five weeks before I attempted suicide, so that was always a difficult one. That's the song that affects the most people because that's not specifically about PTSD; it's about depression and sadness and suicidal ideation. I get the most emails about that one from people who aren't military. They say that listening to that made them understand they're not alone and got them through a tough time.

LA: Some of your songs are about PTSD and the military, but they can expand to trauma or depression.

JM: Yeah, and oftentimes those are emotions that overlap. Insomnia or depression is something that people with PTSD suffer from, but people without PTSD suffer from it. And sadness, feeling like you want to end it all, is something that, unfortunately, a lot of people have felt to varying degrees and for varying reasons.

The goal now, as I write new songs, whenever possible or as

I'm producing the CDs, I always try to make them as vague as possible to reflect as many situations as I can. But that song really was just about sadness. I didn't have a lot of thought into the other songs back then, as I did with "Trying to Find My Way Home." That was just pretty much raw emotion. I just opened my mouth and "hold on" came spilling out.

LA: Maybe we can talk about the CD *Love and Life*. You have some songs about loss and disconnection, but others are a little more hopeful.

JM: *Love and Life* was 2013, the one after *Trying to Find My Way Home*, and that was when I started traveling the country. *Trying to Find My Way Home* came out in 2010. I start traveling the country and doing all the work with Warrior Songs and helping veterans, and I'm hearing all these stories and collecting all these stories for volumes 1 and 2, and it's just a lot to deal with. I'm not trained in PTSD or trauma work. And I'd just survived a suicide attempt in '08, so it got to be a bit much.

I was trying to separate my work helping trauma recovery through Warrior Songs and my own Jason Moon stuff. Where's the line between the fact that I write songs about traumatized veterans for a living? Am I still entitled to write a song about smiles for fun? Where do I put the fun songs, or the funny songs, or the love songs? And I actually found myself writing more of those because I don't need to deal with sad topics, because I do that at Warrior Songs. So, my songs that I was writing personally were becoming more and more happy.

That CD, *Love and Life*, was intentionally an attempt to take a sharp break from Warrior Songs, and I just made a CD of positive songs. They're not all happy, but they're not sad.

LA: They talk about family and relationships.

JM: Yeah, and it's essentially supposed to be, "here's what you get. Here's why you do all the hard work." *Trying to Find*

My Way Home is about pushing through all the horrible shit you suffer from after a deployment to war. Well, why would you want to push through that? Well, you get what's on *Love and Life*. "Rise Up" is on the new CD that comes out this February.

LA: What's the title of the CD? Is that *The Wolf I Fed*?

JM: It's a personal album. It's a Jason Moon album, but it's the first time I've tried to integrate the veteran side with the personal. It's not released through Warrior Songs, but on my personal label, Full Moon Music, but it's got some stuff about the work I do with veterans. For the first time I tried to integrate the whole experience. The individual Jason Moon is not like *Love and Life* where I'm all happy. I'm inundated in veterans' work all the time because of what I do at Warriors. I was trying to figure out, I don't know, where I stop and where the work begins.

That's how it's different. This is the first time I've integrated the healing work I do with veterans into my own person music and not kept them separate. And I've also tried to take an honest look at like: how did I go from a young man who just liked to party and play guitar around a campfire to someone who runs a nonprofit that's helped some thirty-three suicide preventions? What's the road you walk to go from a poor kid who has to join the Army and isn't really going anywhere fast to nationally recognized veterans advocate known for preventing suicides? That's kind of what the song is. The CD is an exploration of how I got here.

LA: I really appreciate your time to discuss your work.

JM: Yeah, no worries. I thank you for looking into it. I'm hoping that more of the world will wake up to the understanding that we can do a lot of good healing trauma through the arts.

- **See https://jasoneklund.com/ and https://www.lilrev.com/**

- https://warriorsongs.org/track/1906473/see-me
- For example, see Edward Tick, *War in the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2005) and *Warrior's Return*: *Restoring the Soul After War* (2014)
- Olivier Morel, *On The Bridge* (https://www3.nd.edu/~omorel/jason.html)

New Fiction from Lisa Erin Sanchez: "Signatures of Ghosts"

He had one scar when I met him, a single blow to the back of his neck in the soft fleshy space between head gear and body armor. He liked to say, I'll tell you this for free. I'd move in close and listen. His voice was a lyric tenor. A murmur, a whisper, sometimes a songbird's call. In the medic's kit were the trappings of his profession: butterfly clamps, a triangular scalpel, and three items for clearing a blocked airway. He packed these into a metal case the night before he left.

Another case was filled with antibiotics, antifungals, and the antimalarial drug Mefloquine, which caused one soldier to have a psychotic break and go on a rampage in Qandahar. In the third and final case, he kept morphine, oxy, and a handful of drugs whose names I can't recall.

That whole case was reserved for pain. He was constantly having to refill it.

The medic had a silver star, a purple heart, and an enormous pair of jump wings. On his neck, he had one scar. I wasn't his wife or life partner. I was just his girlfriend but I loved him. For six blissful months I loved him. In the Carolina woods, on the Roanoke dunes, under moonlight and firelight, in oceans and cars. We had our own special places, our own secret codes. We had summer and sand, and autumn and wind. We had indigo and sepia, and waves and retreats.

By Thanksgiving I learned to play first-person shooter games. *Left 4 Dead*—his favorite.

I'd get shot or lose a limb. He'd pick it up and replace it. After that, he packed his metal cases. The first month of his tour passed quickly. He called to say his team had arrived safely somewhere between Kabul and Khost, but soon they'd have to move. South, I figured, then we lost contact.

I spent the next few months feverishly knitting. I didn't know how to knit, but I couldn't think or stop thinking, so I taught myself to knit and I made three sweaters. By the time he called, I had started an afghan blanket. It was the color of a storm cloud, between black and white.

Mela? he said.

He drew out the vowels in his sing-song voice. He knew not to say Philomela. My parents had been cruel to name me after the bird-princess who lost her voice, and let's face it, I was no princess. Still, I felt some affinity with the bird-like qualities of the fallen Athenian. I admired her metamorphosis and had chosen for myself a perfect match: an airborne army medic who could heal people and fly.

I could hear the medic breathing and pressed my ear to the phone.

Mela, he said. Can you please pick me up?

I drove to airborne headquarters, parked my car, and ran to him. We crashed into each other like dive-bombing birds tangled in flight. He cut his lip on my kiss; I tasted his avian blood.

Yes, I did pick him up, but we didn’t quite make it home. We stopped at a co-op for migratory creatures where we loved for hours on end. He brushed a lock of hair from my eye. It caught on an eyelash, which was thick with mascara and fairy dust and moonbeams and tears. I mirrored his motion, sweeping his brow. That’s when I noticed a fresh scar. I ran my finger along the jagged edge. It fell from his face but I caught it. I was cradling his wound in the palm of my hand. I wanted to mend his cut, put everything back in order, but I couldn’t.

Leda and the swan, from ruins at Argos.

For the next six months, we tried to remember. We took long walks in the steel blue fog of the Great Smoky Mountains, but only the ravens and the falling leaves spoke. We drove to Roanoke Island and waded in the sea foam, but the cold bit our toes and a massive cloud formed, dumping hard wet rain atop our two heads.

By spring, the medic started train-up. All the things a smoker loathed: running, climbing, jumping out of planes. Schlepping his shit through the Carolina swamplands. For weeks, he was a tortured, exhausted, sweaty mess.

Then came the desk sergeant with the paperwork.

Death preparations, the army called it. Where was his property? Who was his beneficiary? Who was his next of kin?

The closer it got to go date, the more detailed the process became. What type of casket would he like? What song should be played at his funeral?

He came home furious that day. He'd picked a tune by Alice in Chains, it was my favorite, too, but the admin didn't know it, so he told her to play Bad Romance. Lady Gaga, he'd said. Play fucking Gaga.

Nowhere on the forms was a place for my name. I wasn't his wife or the mother of his child. I was just his girlfriend and that's the way the army liked it. Stateside commanders had learned a thing or two since smiling housewives were used to sell war bonds and make hungry young men think they wanted to fight. Girlfriends, they reasoned privately in their secret quarters, were cheap. Why buy the bird when you can rent the feathers?

I didn't care about any forms. I held my lover's wound in the palm of my hand.

When it was time for the medic to redeploy, I drove him to post, went home, and picked up my afghan. The thing was ten feet long by then, witness to my waiting.

I thought about giving it to a family member or friend, but what would they do with a woolen blanket? I considered this for several minutes before deciding I would send it to no one. The blanket was a harbinger, more salient for the absence it signified than the object it had become. Each stitch echoed the promise of return, and even though the medic had left voluntarily, I felt like he'd been taken.

Halfway through his second deployment, the afghan had grown

another ten feet. Why hadn't he emailed or called? Was he sick? Was he hurt? Had he lost his men or his mind? I scoured the internet for information. If you can estimate a soldier's whereabouts within a fifty-mile radius, you might get some information. You might find a newswire about a firefight or an ambush. A special missions team can usually survive those. What you don't want to find is an accident like a Humvee over a cliff or any kind of explosion. What you don't want to find is a roadside bomb planted by a starving Afghan who's been paid ten times as much to blow up your boyfriend as the Afghan National Army can pay him to guard bases.

I sat at the computer with coffee and cigarettes, digging for an Associated Press report or two sentences from a military embed. All I could find were things like, *Predator drone kills twenty civilians in South Waziristan*. Or, *Suicide bomb kills eight U.S. soldiers in Khost*, followed by, *A spokesman says the attack was waged in retaliation for the death of twenty civilians killed in South Waziristan*.

With no further contact from the medic, I decided to take action. I purchased the sequel to *Left 4 Dead*, threw myself into the zombie apocalypse. When I could fight no more, I went back to my knitting: knit two, yarn over, slip slip knit, knit three. I had altered the pattern midstream and now half of the blanket had the tightly-woven look of knit stockings and the other half was an intricate lace with empty spaces forming the shape of inverted wings. The transformation had come about quite by accident. I had slipped a stitch and decided to work in the mistake. It was pleasing to see the little holes, I wanted it to be more transparent. This is what I was thinking as I held the afghan to the light, and when I did, I realized I could see my way through, and I felt a charge in my body, a quiet yearning followed by something more vexing. The sensation was overwhelming. It had a distinctive taste and smell, a clean, utilitarian scent with an aura of hand wringing and finality, of having been useful to the entire

enterprise.

The medic would understand this, I thought. For, he had been utilized too. Except, I never told him anything. When finally he called, I had traveled very far and had reached the state of Catatonia, overcome body and soul by a force with the strength of an entire army.

Still I picked him up. This time we didn't go to any hotel, co-op, or Outer Banks beach. The medic was exhausted so we went straight home. He stumbled through the door and fell on the bed, a heap of defeated manhood, nothing but feathers and bones. I took off his Danner desert combat boots and his jacket. He was still wearing his bird tags: name, social security number, blood type, religion. All the important stuff.

I removed the tags and set them on the nightstand. I'm not going to tell you his name but I'll tell you this for free: somewhere downrange, his wings had been soldered to his armor and he'd converted from Catholic to Holy Order of the Jedi Knights. Said so, right there on his tags.

I removed the rest of his clothing—his army gray t-shirt and ACU combat pants with the pixilated universal camouflage pattern, a mix of desert sand, urban gray, and foliage green, which made him invisible in any battlefield, all contingencies covered.

His feathers came off last. That's when I saw the scars. Every inch of him was marked, and there was a deep black gouge beneath the skin, on his soft, fleshy heart, which was barely beating.

I reached for a salve and rubbed it over his body, counting the scars, dividing wounds over time. There were exactly three thousand scars, a thousand a year for his travels, each one concerning a distinct war story. How could his commander have missed these? I decided I was the only one who could see them

or the only one who cared.

Another season changed and it started again. Fourth deployment for him, third for me. The medic dragged himself to train-up, this time coughing and hacking, sweating alcohol from his pores.

Did I forget to mention his drinking?

He came back nine months later. Families were gathered in the parking lot of the great airborne fortress, waiting for their beloved songbirds. Some came home walking, some were sitting in wheelchairs, others were missing entirely.

I stood beside my car as the medic ambled toward me. A line of cars extended behind me, each one with a lone woman sitting in the driver's seat. The line wrapped all the way around the garrison and out the gate to Bragg Boulevard, a yellow ribbon of girlfriends all the way to the

Atlantic Ocean, not one of them crying because, let's face it, who would hear?

The medic got in the car.

Paddy's? I asked.

He nodded. I drove.

We walked inside and sat at the bar. He motioned the barkeep and then he looked at me and then I looked at him.

How was your tour?

Not good.

I missed you.

Me too.

I sent you an email.

The internet was down.

Where were you?

Can’t say.

Did you receive fire?

We had an accident. And the team hit a roadside bomb.

The bartender stood before us, arching his brow.

Straight up, the medic said, and knocked twice on the bar.

The man poured two glasses of whiskey and the medic downed them both. You should find someone else, he said. He had nothing left to give.

I cleared my throat but I couldn’t speak. *He* had nothing to give?

He put his hand over mine. He was staring into an empty glass like he wanted to dive in.

What’ll you have, he asked.

He drank another shot before I could say beer then knocked once more on the bar.

My eyes traveled the room. Photos of fallen team guys lined the walls, their names carved for posterity like signatures of ghosts in the great mahogany countertop.

The bartender poured another whiskey and the medic turned to me. Light or dark, he asked.

I knew which one I wanted but my vocal cords were frozen, and as I watched him swallow, I thought about flying away.

Your beer, he said. Light or dark?

New Fiction from John Darcy: “Sorry I Missed Your Call”

An hour before the drive, Bubs finds himself sucking down an edible. A big blowout blowtorched dab of a brownie. He could feel it stonerizing his insides the second the swallow went down, that ashy grass-stained aftertaste staking a claim on

his tongue

Been doing a lot of things like that, lately. Ill-advised things. Bubs' best guess pins the start of it back to February. March at the latest. And he didn't know where the hell this getting out of bed problem came from. The brownie was the prize he'd promised himself for completing the task this morning. Bubs has even stopped spying both ways when crossing the street. He just kind of steps out off the curb.

The weed thing's, like, not a big deal? is the argument he tries to make to Omar, his driver's licenseless trip mate and his best friend, hopefully, still.

'Why the whole thing?' Omar asks. His jaw is doing that thing it does when he's not happy. 'Why not just a bite?'

Bubs sags his shoulders in a sort of shrug. He does, however, feel Omar's disappointment as if it's parental in origin, a weathered, rock-like thing, barely shining in the clear bluish glimmer of this dazzling late-May morning, a steely cold shamewave of the someone-expected-better-from-you variety.

Omar says, 'You do remember what we're doing here, yeah? Let's try not to forget.'

Bubs does remember what they're doing, thank you very much, but he gets to thinking about the purpose of the trip, about how Germ might feel when he understands that Omar and Bubs are not just saying hello, are not just passing through with their sights trained on simple catch-up, that their actual mission is to complete a very serious and sober welfare check.

'No snacks in that bag by chance?' Bubs says in his best McConaughey.

'Seriously?'

'There's this side effect of THC called the munchies. Familiar?'

Omar’s face says he isn’t having it, isn’t going to have it, today. Head to toe, Omar is one smooth motherfucker. A good six inches taller than Bubs, he’s got that chill studied coolness of a hipster high school teacher, the dark haired young socialist you could probably call for a lift after getting blind on UV Blue. It’s a first impression thing, impossible to miss.

Bubs can still remember when he had the experience. Fresh off zero hours of sleep, Bubs was getting his face melted off by the acid rain spittle of a Ft. Benning drill sergeant, a walking little napoleon complex who still shows up in nightmares from time to time. For taking too long to get his ass off the bus, Bubs was sentenced to a viscous fucking tongue lashing and a hip toss up the aisle. When he finally made it down the rubber-ribbed steps up front, he saw the formation of new recruits caught in a chokehold of screams and he went to join them in the full nelson, this new clan, his first tribe. Some were doing pushups and it was hot, hot as Bubs could ever remember feeling, and mainly his brain told him, Might have messed up here, Might have made the wrong choice. Then he saw what would turn out to be Omar, front and center, not a drop of sweat even thinking about trying him, not a screaming campaign hat anywhere near, as if a memo had made the rounds before the shark attack, indicating one young soldier in particular it would probably be better not to mess with.

‘Okay then,’ Bubs says, ‘coffee it is. Java. Brain fuel.’ The high still hasn’t hit fully. He is looking forward to its blanketing caress, the slow juicy haymaker of it.

Strapped in, tunes on, shades perched smooth on the oily bridge of his bony nose, Bubs pulls out of the dashed-off fire lane in front of Omar’s building. Bubs wouldn’t call himself handsome, exactly. Especially not next to Omar. Adequate, maybe. Passable. His lips are on the thin side, pincer-like where they curve into each other. On his head an orchestra of

dark black hair sits crazy and unbrushed, the texture of very fine straw. A spiraling tattoo of ones and zeros on his left forearm spells out BINARY CODE in binary. There is an efficiency to his composition. His dad used to say, *It's like you were made on an assembly line except with the brains God gave a dog.* Ignoring that last part, Bubs is thankful for the proportionality, though if anything he feels it makes him look calculated, indifferent, lame.

That said, Bubs comes alive behind the wheel. The inside-out knowledge he has of his machine, a stock Impreza with more miles than he'd care to admit, makes him proud as an honor roll dad. It takes some foreplay to shift from second to third, but timed properly the latent torque is enough to shove his heart against his ribcage. It's two make-and-models away from being a full-on rally car, and Bubs loves to remind himself of this fact. He basks in it, the low-level ladder rung of his vehicle, its impossible potential.

'Can I get one of those?' Bubs says. Omar has a cigarette rappelling from his mouth. He smokes a snooty, hard-to-find Turkish brand. It's the kind of thing that'd drive Bubs up the wall with anybody else.

Omar says, 'Always hanging with the smokers, never has any smokes.'

'Come on,' Bubs says, and Omar lights one up for him.

Bubs rolls down the windows in reply.

A rush of air and motion.

Before long they're gaining speed.

The wind blasts a racket through the nicotined interior. Sunlight is just absolutely pouring down, swallowing them up, threatening to swallow them whole.

Bubs says, 'What I didn't expect is that it'd be Germ.'

‘Not really about how someone looks or acts, you know? Germ’s been through a lot.’

‘I mean who hasn’t?

‘I think the divorce puts him in a higher tax bracket.’

‘I get that,’ Bubs says.

‘And his mom’s cancer stuff.’

‘I really get it. But sometimes it is the biggest fuck up——right? It’s the king of the fuck ups, who, you know.’

‘Fucks up?’

‘Nailed it.’

‘Sometimes,’ Omar says. ‘Maybe sometimes.’

‘Not that Germ is one of those guys.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Just generally speaking. You see my water bottle anywhere?’

Omar says, ‘What happens when that shit hits you too hard and we have to pull over?’

‘Not even on my radar. I like driving high anyway. There’s this thing about it, yeah? There’s this way it makes you feel.’

Omar had wanted to hit the road at ten-thirty, introduce themselves to Chicago traffic no later than one in the afternoon. Bubs makes no bones about the delay being his fault. Rolling from his sheets today, phone flashing a harsh nine thirty, it was about the earliest he’d mustered all year.

Omar, on the other hand, has really got his shit sorted. Bubs thinks he should run one of those schemey self-help seminars. Only with Omar it wouldn’t be sleaze. It would be blue-suited

and colognged, sharp, deathly fucking sharp. When Omar was enrolled on the GI Bill, he did some day trading on the side. He came out of college well in the black, psych degree in hand. Bubs had signed up for a few certificate courses at the technical college in Janesville, decided not to go.

There is a possibility, Bubs sometimes thinks, that his closeness with Omar finds its bedrock on their uneven terrain of accomplishment. That it's a necessary condition for their continued buddy status, a cornerstone from the start. He supposes there are worse foundations for a friendship, although it seems to him like a fuel source that'll eventually burn itself out. Bubs prays it does not. While it collapses his heart to imagine life without his best friend, Bubs is pleased that he struggles to picture the full bleak immensity of it. It is a good sign. Like checking your own pulse, surprised to feel the beating.

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Bubs curves the car through the interchange and hauls them onto I90. He asks Omar to remind him about the plan. 'The plan,' Omar says, 'is to just see how he's doing. Snag a beer. Check out where he's living. Face to face stuff.'

Bubs is glad about the beer. He is also glad his eyes are on the road, preventing Omar from seeing how bright they flare at the sound. That's another thing about Omar. He's never tapping on his phone during a conversation. He'll even say, like, *One sec, let me just pop this off, don't want it interrupting us*, and leave it clear in the other room.

'I'm excited to see him,' Bubs says.

'Yeah.'

'Honestly I am.'

'Okay,' Omar says.

Unsure of what Omar’s deal is today, Bubs keeps focused on the southbound highway. The straightness of the road. Its continued reappearance on the far edge of his sightline leads Bubs to think that it wasn’t so much built as dreamed, less engineered than imagined, plopped right into place from way up above, signage and all, aligned just so. If there’s a single cloud in the sky Bubs cannot for the life of him find it.

‘Germ is a good guy,’ Omar says, apropos of nothing Bubs can gather. ‘He’ll be glad you came with.’

He asks Omar, ‘How many guys we lose this last year?’

‘I think it’s three. Three or six. I can’t remember which. But it’s one of those.’

‘How come we didn’t go to any of the funerals?’

‘I don’t know,’ Omar says. ‘How am I supposed to know?’

‘The war back home.’

‘What?’

‘That’s what it’s getting called,’ Bubs says. ‘The war back home.’

Omar rockets around, real intense with the motion. His dark eyes are little discs of deep set stormclouds. ‘Why does everything have to have a name? Why can’t it just be people trying to figure stuff out?’

‘I mean it wasn’t me that came up with it.’

‘Sure,’ Omar says, slinking his head back, turning it to look out on the sectioned squares of farmland around the road. It’s the only thing a person could look at on this stretch of federal street. Bulky portions of agriculture and landmass, barbed and divided, flat yet somehow still rolling, rippling, flowing. Cows out to pasture whiz by in the distance, lifeless

specs against the green.

It’s no surprise to Bubs that Omar took the reins in planning the check-up on Germ. What he can’t figure out is why he himself was enlisted for duty. Bubs doesn’t think of himself as a great instiller of confidence. Not really a compelling life-affirmer. But he is happy Omar asked him to come along, and he is happy he’d said yes since it would have been so much easier to say no. It’s gotten so simple——and Bubs isn’t sure why——to do nothing, nothing at all.

Germ is still an hour and a half away, but Bubs is getting the brunt of it now, getting socked by a storm of monster waves. A high tide of heady realizations. He has stepped up and done the right thing by coming along. This much he knows. He is doing what he is supposed to do: you help when you’re able, you do what you can to endure; you carve out as much space as the world allows and if the world doesn’t budge you gotta get yourself real low and push back, push hard, knowing it might not come to much. Bubs feels swaddled in something bright and endlessly comforting, wrapped and entwined, tight as granite, in the grand silky fabric of it. With a kind of worldwide tenderness moving through his body, the mot juste of existence takes shape on his tongue. For the first time in his life, Bubs sees the answers to his questions dead ahead. He’s got them dead to rights. And it’s just as he reaches out to grab them, to give them a healthy once-over, that a sweet lemony haze washes over the frontside of his horizon.

***

Bubs, higher than he has been in his entire life, sits in a patch of tall grass near the picnic area of a rest stop south of Rockford. Omar is on the phone.

Here, knees tight to chest, Bubs recalls with a good bit of nostalgia the appearance of Germ in his life. Jeremey Heck Jr., known as Germ, got his sticky nickname due to the

astounding biohazard dirtiness of his Ft. Bragg barracks room. More than the room itself was the way Germ managed to clean it up on inspection day. Bubs couldn't dismiss the possibility of little animated birds swooping through the window to help tidy up the filth. Bubs and Omar, bunkmates through basic training and airborne school, kept their lucky streak alive when orders came down sending them to the same platoon. The two of them learned early on that they had both grown up in Madison, had lived on opposite sides of the isthmus and attended opposing high schools, had both frenched Anna Cloverman and gotten the same tight slap of rejection when they'd tried to slither a hand down her jeans. And though they'd never directly met before boot camp, they sort of got the picture that this strange lifelong proximity meant they had most likely been at the same place at the same time——Eric Daniel's historic Halloween banger, most likely——and that this was as close to a sign from the universe as anybody was going to get. Unscrambling the source code, they figured it meant they oughta have each other's backs, ensure the other's safe return to the selfsame home. Germ and his petri dish lived straight across the hall from Bubs and Omar, and, according to Germ's account, got snatched up orbit-like in the pair's friendship. Bubs' nickname has an origin story, too. His last name is Bubsmiester. People just chopped off the suffix.

Bubs sees Omar standing above him. The grass is barely wet against his pants, coolly warm, smattered with leftover dew. Straight to his twelve o'clock, making a rug of shade for which Bubs is super grateful, Omar says something kind and reassuring.

'I'm really sorry, man,' Bubs says.

'It's all right.'

'I am really high.'

'You said that already.'

‘I really am, though.’

Omar says, ‘It’s all good. Don’t worry.’

Bubs likes the phrase, recommits it to memory. How many times has he told someone not to worry? Not enough.

A spray of shade over Omar’s collar. It passes quick. Bubs sees, understands, makes note of and comes to realize that he is happy where he is. Soothed. His best friend is a stone’s throw. The weather is stupid calm. Exposed out here, sun on his skin, Bubs wonders if he might be able to undo all the damage he’s done, unwind his own hurt into a manageable enough thread. He imagines constructing a kind of personal murder board for his own personal fuck ups. With enough hard work, he thinks he can do it. Because here’s the thing: It’s all bullshit anyway. So why not try. Failing that, he would settle for a glass of water. Sometimes he worries about having an unsuitable brain.

***

Sunlight. Slow breeze. Lulling hum of the interstate. Omar is out of sight now. Bubs knows he is arraigning things, talking with Germ, fixing what Bubs has broken. Impaired, definitely still impaired, Bubs stands up, wobbling, and goes towards the main a-frame building.

He passes the huge towering map of the state and the free-standing little dusty cubicle of waterpark brochures. The bubbler inside is broken; the vending machine doesn’t take debits; the sink in the bathroom is automatic, and Bubs waves and waves his hand at the sensor but nothing comes. He is as thirsty as he can ever remember being, and fucking saying something, that is.

He decides to make himself stay with the discomfort, lets it ride through him like a train or a skateboard or some other thing that rolls and glides and breezes.

Inside the building, he slips out a side door. He makes his way over a field of mown grass into a thicket of sick-looking trees. Bubs keeps the trucker's parking lot on his right when he moves into the bramble. When he heads back, he's just gotta keep the blacktop on his left.

Now he is here, alone, standing at the mud-slathered edge of some kind of retaining pond. A nasty spot, about the size of an above ground pool. The water is dark, murky. A kind of loose film of grime covers its surface. The water buzzes with tiny bugs, the swirling gray leftovers of vehicular exhaust. A few branches hang over the water at uncertain angles. Bubs pulls out his phone, sees a missed call from Omar.

He feels the sun on his back, feels it lowering against his spine. His surroundings are summer and sky. He stares at the pond, dirty and calm, the color of old dryer lint. He watches its surface do things with the light. Bubs bends down, brushes away a layer of dirt and gristle, cups his hands, fills them with water, and drinks.

***

When he makes his way back from the water, a silvery trembling thrashing in his stomach, he tells Omar what he's done. Omar, without a change on his face or a clue in his eyes, balls his left hand and hits Bubs on the side of the head and Bubs hears the tinnitus in his right ear, always present, spike like a line on a chart and he is on the ground; the pain is hot and tender, but its heat is concentrated, boxed, not overwhelming him, and he groans a little mainly from the shock of it, the power of the strike and the unforgivingness of the ground.

Omar offers down a hand. Bubs takes it.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'It's all right,' he answers.

‘I shouldn’t have done that.’

‘I shouldn’t have, either.’

The silence in a way becomes to Bubs like a kind of song, rhythmic and brassy and tempo-heavy. A few birds fly sorties along vapor trails in the sky. Part of Bubs’ gut feel like it’s at a rolling boil.

‘You know what you have to do, yeah?’ Omar says.

Bubs does know, thank you very much. He stares a patch of prickly grass, mainly at the space between blades. He says to Omar, ‘Alright, alright. You know I’m a real retcher so plug your ears.’ Bubs bends down and aims his middle finger to the back of his mouth.

***

They move to a different piece of real estate after Bubs’ hurl. He flips his middle finger, the slimy one, at the mess he made. This makes Omar laugh. With the last of the high still dribbling out of him, Bubs recalls with a fondness bordering on sorrow when the three of them——himself, Omar, and Germ——timed their terminal leave and Army departures for the same day. Piled into a younger version of Bubs’ beloved whip, together they drove off Ft. Bragg for the final time, flipping the bird to the gate guards on their way out, sticky pre-rolled already sparked, two or three extras stinking up the center console. For Bubs it’s a source of serious regret. What good does it do to give your past the middle finger? Talk about a waste of time. It’s the only thing that remains, sure as the resin on the inside of a bong——nothing is forever except your past. But Bubs knows they were different then, on the far shore of that four year lapse of time: Germ, down half a finger from a faulty .50 caliber spring, marriage on the rocks but hopeful for a rescue operation; Omar, newly purple-hearted, lost in a lagoon of survivor’s guilt, dreamily hearing at all hours the deep metallic click of the pressure

cooker bomb whose fuse tripped but ordinance didn't; and Bubs——bias as he might be for knowing more about himself than his friends——coming off a less than honorable discharge for pissing hot, testing positive for an amphetamine they didn't mind him taking down range, driving too fast towards middle America with his two best buds, ripping huge and unholy tokes from the joint and feeling more than anything like he was alone, cheated out of some promised purpose and belonging, a sort of cancerous growth of dejection sprouting tendrilly in his guts, as lonely leaving the Army as he was going in.

'You can't worry about that stuff anymore,' Bubs hears Omar saying, either somewhere in his head or right there in front of him. He isn't entirely sure. 'The stuff you wish you did different? I think that'll eat you a-fucking-live.'

***

Back at home, three days later, Bubs snoozes his alarm only four times. It is Friday, and through the slats in his blinds the day broadcasts a teaser trailer: cloudless, bright, disturbingly blue. It's been like that for a stretch now. Bubs knows the rain will come, is coming soon, but it isn't here yet. Before leaving to pick up Omar, Bubs decides to call his father, himself a veteran. 'It's not so much the bad stuff staying with you,' his father tells him, 'as it is the good stuff that you miss.'

Germ is driving up for lunch. After the rest stop, Omar said it might be better if Germ made the jump north to Madison. Bubs agreed.

When Bubs sees Germ outside the restaurant, he is surprised to see a person that looks exactly like someone who does not need help. Healthy skin, clipped nails, sweater crisp like hospital cornering. A damn near pregnancy glow.

'This is the place you picked?' Germ says. He has a small nose, short sandy hair. The smile might burst off his face.

‘Nah, no way, this won’t work. You know what we need? Tall boys and a secret spot. You guys know a secret spot?’

‘This fucking guy,’ Omar says.

‘I know one,’ Bubs offers. ‘I know where to go.’

Doubled up on six-packs, Bubs leads the way. It served as his go-to toke location in high school. They weave down the downtown one-ways and steam towards the lake. The stocky city skyline is a jagged EKG in the rearview. They park near the bike path trailhead. Exercisers stretch their calves against car tires, dressed in tight cycling attire. The air is warm and still, a breathy room-temperature bubble. It isn’t a long walk to the clearing. Bubs hears Germ pop a preliminary can.

The spot hasn’t changed. Set into a downslope, peeling towards the water, it’s a dewy little outcrop shaded by oaks and maples and shrubs, a few logs and damp boulders for sitting. There is even a metal folding chair, a new addition. The memories Bubs has of the place come back in a clattering stampede. Starlight. Music. Older-brother-bought booze.

‘This,’ Germ says. ‘Much more like it.’ The water is so still Bubs can barely believe it. Doorway-cracks of light drip down through the trees. Beers are passed around.

Omar says, ‘You know what I was thinking about the other day? Adkins and his fucking trains. In the arms room, remember?’

‘Jesus,’ Germ says. ‘The trainset. He had the fucking little trees and conductors and everything. The whole floor, covered with his trainset.’

Bubs goes, ‘And then the suits came in to inspect the arms room? You remember that guys’ face? Like he had to control-alt-delete himself because he had no idea what he was seeing.’

‘And the chickens,’ says Germ. ‘You remember the chickens? We show up one morning, and it’s pretty early, we were going to a

range or something, and what's-his-name had a fucking kennel full of chickens.'

'What was it that he said again?' Bubs asks. The lapping of the lake fills the gaps between his words. Omar hands each of them a cigarette.

'I said to him, like, basically, What the fuck? And he goes, Well, I couldn't keep them *outside*. As if that fucking answers my questions?'

'Man,' Omar says. 'What the hell was that guys' name? Apple-something. Something with fruit.'

'*Something with fruit*,' Bubs says. 'Helpful.'

'It's good to be here with you guys,' Germ says. 'We live pretty close, you know, relatively speaking, but we don't see each other enough. That's my fault.'

'Shut up. Nobody's fault,' says Omar. 'We all have stuff going on.'

Bubs, feeling like now is the time, says, 'It wasn't Germ we were going to check on, was it? If you wanted to do a little intervention or whatever, you didn't have to drag me down to Chicago.'

'You didn't actually make it,' Germ says. 'Just to be clear.'

'You guys could have just told me though.'

'Probably true,' Omar says. 'Guess I was worried you wouldn't come, you know?'

'I get it.'

Germ goes, 'How often would you say you're getting blitzed and driving, though?'

'Follow up,' Omar jumps in. 'How often would you say you're

drinking, like, industrial runoff?’

‘Choke on it. That was a one-time thing.’

Germ now, ‘Doesn’t seem like it.’

‘I’m figuring things out,’ Bubs goes.

Omar, his eyes jumping from the lake and back to Bubs, asks, ‘Should we head out?’

‘Not sure. What do you think?’ Bubs says.

Germ says, ‘What, nobody wants to ask me?

Bubs takes a drink, then a drag. Sitting there with his friends, Bubs sees the moment as pound-for-pound one of the better ones he’s had in some time. He is also proud of himself for noticing this——the pleasantness, the ambient joy——while still in the middle of it. Not much feels like it’s changed, except for maybe everything. His stomach still gives him a pang or two, the side of his face faintly red.

They toss a few smiles back and forth. The summer daylight shows no signs of retreat. Omar, stubbing out his cigarette, looks over to Germ and says, ‘Okay then, what now?’

‘No idea.’

But Bubs has one. He polishes off his beer and slips his feet from his shoes. He aims his body at the shoreline. Moving towards it, he sheds his belt and his pants and his shirt. There are only a few yards left before the land gives way. He crashes into the water and strokes out into the blue. A chill comes over him in layers but before long it’s gone and he feels himself floating, sinking, floating again, drifting, and the silence surrounding him is broken by the sound of two splashes somewhere behind him.

New Poetry by Aaron Wallace

Blackhawk

Truck 2 is hit,
and they’re calling
for the medic,
and I’m out of my truck
kneeling next to the driver –

I could hold his organs in my hands.

At the top of Stanley Road
Tim the Chip Man sings
steak and kidney pie,
steak and kidney pie, oh my my,
I love steak and kidney pie
to the deep fat fryer.

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as the rifles tap-tap-tap
like the pen in my hand signing the mortgage
to the only home I've ever had
and Cole is tap-tap-tapping a magazine
against his helmet to knock the sand out
before he reloads.

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as my wife
breaks the crest of the dunes
backlit by a burning ball of hydrogen on her way
to our altar on the beach,
while the driver bleeds in waves.

The lieutenant is mouthing words over
the radio while the VA doctor explains
that the war will kill us now
or some other time so I stick the driver
with too much morphine.

I walk with my wife and son
in Central Park. Trees are chirping—
the bird is on the way, the bird is on the way.

War Porn

After mission he sits covered
in sand, sweat, blood, then boots
up his laptop – listens to the whir of the hard

drive as he goes through folders and picks
his favorite girl, blonde with globular breasts
and gapped teeth, who bounces
her ass on the floor and looks up at him, her hands
braced against him while she moans

"*Do it Daddy, give it to me, I need it*."

He turns away, uninterested, and thinks
instead about the woman from the village,
her supple voice babbling and crying
while he kicks over pots and furniture—
she eventfully falls—reaching
for anything, everything, to throw at him,
cursing him, his family, his country, and he hears
Bucky outside urging him to do it, *just fucking do her* — so he reaches down,
undoes his fly, spits on his hand, thinking
how lucky am I?

Photo Credit: Basetrack 18

New Fiction: "Plink, Rack" by Steven Kiernan

There are many moving parts in a gun. There's the trigger, which most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They're the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you. Sometimes not.

***

Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn't hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands. Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack*. *Plink, rack*. Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen comrades. For a few days after the bricks were lain, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring

the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack*. He swiveled towards the other soldier. *Plink, rack*.

"Doing alright up there, Hal?" J asked from the driver's seat.

"Just great," Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I fucking hate pulling security for 1st platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound," J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

"Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer."

"I got ya, bro," Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG

on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn't yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

"This is just getting ridiculous." J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

"You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted." J said.

"No shit?"

"Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I wanted to be." He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. "Then I got this great fucking idea, *I'll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film*," he said in a nasally voice. "Even told my recruiter about it."

"I bet he fucking loved that," Hal said. "Why didn't you go combat camera? He get you with the old 'Infantry is the only slot open right now' line?"

"Guilty as charged."

"So, how's your 'epic war film' working out? I bet it'll be realistic as fuck."

"Don't you worry, I got it all planned out. It's gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic."

"Yeah. But those ten minutes though…"

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

“My grandfather fought in World War II,” J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. “Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn’t until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what’s it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

A man kicked his brother down the street.

A policeman shows up and says, “Hey, why are you doing that? You can’t do that.”

The man turns and says, “It’s alright, he’s dead anyway.”

“I didn’t get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it’s pretty fucking funny.”

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side

of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see him."

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, shit. He's got an RPG!"

"What?!" J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. "Shoot him, man. Shoot him!"

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

“Shoot him!”

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn’t really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn’t breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He

exhaled. *Plink, rack*. There was a knock on his door. “Hey, Hal, ya in there?” Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack*. “What are you doing, man?” *Plink, rack*. It’s alright, Hal thought. It’s alright.

Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps