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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by James Michael Myers entitled "Vietnam : slipping on the green weenie." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Specialist in Education, with a major in Education.

Thomas K. Ryan, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

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Thomas K. Ryan

Thomas K. Ryan, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Robert L. Hodge

Allen Wile

Accepted for the Council:

Law Minkel

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

Vietnam:

Slipping
on the
Green
Weenie

A Thesis
Presented for the
Specialist in Education Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

James Michael Myers
August 1997

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Thomas K. Ryan
who defined mentor by example across an ocean and a gulf of
years

to
John Davenport
the best man I know
in the good guy's army

and to
the exceptional teachers who gave me their best
Bruce Wheeler History
Paul Pinckney History
Allen Wier Creative Writing
Lewis Hodge Curriculum
Tina Riedinger Astronomy
Frank Robinson Poetry
John Pritchard History
Joyce Carol Thomas Creative Writing
Yulan Washburn Portuguese
David Curtis Freshman English

each endured and survived me
though with perhaps a few more gray hairs.

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Not many truly get a second chance. As a returning student to the University of Knoxville, I have received that second chance and more. I could not have survived and endured without those who lifted me up, pointed me at a life's work, and gave me the tools to do the job.

I would like to thank the Knoxville Retired Teachers Association for their scholarship while I studied in England and Tom Ryan who was instrumental in helping me obtain that scholarship. I would like to thank the University of Manchester, Faculty of Arts Computing Unit for the two years of Assistantships which meant the difference between studying in Britain and existing in Britain. I would like to thank the University of Manchester Theater Department for two Prudhoe Grants for study in Portugal and Ireland. I would like to thank the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, College of Education for the departmental scholarship.

Lastly, I would like to thank my burgeoning family for enduring my educational process, particularly Brianna Rene, James Kevin Patrick, and Jessica for spurring me on to attempt great things.

Abstract

Vietnam: Slipping on the Green Weenie is a collection of short stories, haiku, and a haibun submitted as an original writing thesis. The elements stand alone and also link to tell a larger story. They constitute action research directly affecting teaching practice, but may not be generalisable except as an example.

Vietnam: Slipping on the Green Weenie, is a case study drawing on the memories of one man and the stories of many, each told as oral histories over the years. It is uninfluenced by books or movies released since the war ended. The author intentionally avoided material released after 1969, the latest date linked to a story source. The author looked up the Vietnam War in encyclopedia year books each dated from 1965 to 1969. The author saw *Forest Gump*. The author saw half of *Apocalypse Now*, the author did not see *The Deerhunter*, *Platoon*, or *Full Metal Jacket* or hang around with people who did.

Teaching writing relies on two underpinnings. First, it must be teachable and second, it must be assessable. Completing a writing project certainly leads to an enhanced understanding of that project's form. It also provides material with which to teach the revision and editing process. Thus engagement with writing seems the appropriate form of research for a potential writing teacher.

The simple study of literature does not produce good writers. Reading is not the same skill as writing. There are many more literature teachers than writing teachers and an exquisite facility with insight and critical evaluation of literature does not make a good writer. If it did, every candidate for a doctorate in literature would produce masterpieces on both a literary and a popular fiction level.

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Prologue

This thesis is directed at three groups of students: Students in my creative writing classes at the university level, students interested in creative writing pedagogy, and students enrolled in inner city high schools.

These stories were written under some artificial constraints. They are the outgrowth of a previous series of stories, also related to a common theme. Both sets attempt to tell the story through description rather than dialogue. Early stories in the first set have no dialogue whatsoever, some of them are disasters. As I have worked through the process of discovering a minimalist dialogue technique, the dialogue came increasingly to the front.

I began with this constraint, because I am a playwright. Plays tell the complete story through dialogue. Although some playwrights follow Ibsen and include four or five pages of description for the actors, ultimately a play works on what you see, and hear. I felt that by working under this artificial constraint while writing these short stories, I would develop and polish a part of my writing technique and also gain a better appreciation for the writing process. This seemed necessary to developing better teaching skills as a creative writer.

There were several significant literary influences in this process. Probably the two most important were *Winesburg Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, also a playwright. The second was *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. A third was *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder.

At first glance, this thesis seems intended to amplify voices from history now being lost to a new age. It appears to be about some kids with guns in Vietnam and what happened to them. A similar and related set of stories might be written about kids with guns in the ghettos and high schools. I am reaching for the archetypes and experiences common to all wars, even the undeclared ones.

Vietnam has been called the first television war. There are critics who claim that television is responsible for the combat zone in urban high schools. Perhaps today's high schools are the frontlines of the second television war? Here are the bones of an undeclared war we lost. They are presented as stories and poems. Here are the dead, the dying, the maimed and trying moments of shame we shared as a nation before my high school students were born. Here are links from the kids then to the kids now.

Like Vietnam, I just don't always know who is the enemy, but I can always tell who is dead, dying, and scarred for the rest of their lives, both physically and mentally, whether from 'try' scars on their wrists as they practice and experiment with suicide or from an environment which leads them to write, "kill your parents" on my blackboard each morning.

I laughingly define the terms optimism, pessimism, and realism as practiced in today's high school classroom as follows. Realism is the certain knowledge that at least one student is carrying a deadly weapon in any given class throughout my school day. Pessimism is the certain knowledge that if circumstances get out of control, that student will indeed use that deadly weapon to the best of their ability and training. Optimism is based on the premise that even though I am getting older, no matter what happens, I can manage my classroom in an effective and relatively gentle manner.

The kids in these stories are exactly that, kids. They have machine guns. They are still just kids. The kids in my high school classroom are also kids, just kids. We haven't yet given them machine guns. They aren't yet building the guns themselves, which I might add is a frighteningly easy proposition given a first class education and the inclination.

We can either cut out the first class education and hope that solves the problem, or...

INTRODUCTION

ONCE UPON A TIME,
Celtic bards did not kill. They
gathered on hillsides above the battle to
observe and compose their stories. Later, they
recreated the battles in songs. By firelight the pain
returned, but somehow, telling stories made reality less dark and
the heroes lived again. Everyone knew the heroes and understood heroic sacrifice
for the tribe. Everyone knew the history of their heroes. With age and
veneration the stories became epics.

There may never be an epic about Vietnam. Were there any heroes? What
happened to us as a people? Why do the songs of Vietnam all seem to be dirges
accompanied by muffled drums and distant gunfire? Why are they mostly sung as
solos? Shame? Guilt? Was it a change in society's rules while lost men who did
not yet know they were lost wandered through a combat zone far from home?

These stories began in the Celtic bardic tradition. They were recited from
memory, usually late in the evening, usually by firelight, usually only to friends,
often under the influence of spirits, alcoholic and otherwise.

Each story changed from one recitation to the next. The distance
increased between facts and stories. Then, in an instant, the stories died with the
realization that the children also listened, and worse, they seemed to understand.
Worse still, nothing had changed and there might be new Vietnams lurking in
the shadowy future, just a generation of children away, when they too were old
enough to kill and be killed. There was only one generation between World War
I and World War II, just time enough to raise a new crop of soldiers and equip

them with a new generation of weapons. Would there be only one generation from one Vietnam to the next?

The stories are no longer collections of facts, though each contains an approximation, perhaps an estimation. This thesis is a presentation of the research conducted during the course of learning to be a creative writing teacher. The stories are the results of the data. They should be viewed as process and engagement rather than as works of art or literature. It is difficult, if not impossible to determine if a story is literature within the context of its time and culture. The stories are neither required to be literature, nor must they be true, merely thoughtful and informative research.

The idea that research produces truth, with or without the capital 'T' is sophomoric. All statistical processes yield only estimates and probabilities. Claims for truth are never honestly more than probabilities approaching certainties, such claims are not and cannot be demonstrated as truth.

Yet, as research, each story should contain a full measure of estimated truth surrounded by a confidence interval with an acceptable estimated probability. Five percent and one percent are the two common levels of confidence in Educational research, but it is also important to realize that there is the truth of Vietnam and also the truth of engagement. The confidence level for truth in these stories is only for engagement. The reader must be certain that the stories represent an active engagement with the process of writing and teaching, not that the stories capture the truth of Vietnam in ninety-five out of one hundred cases. The stories are after all fiction, built around a seed of fact.

These stories are factual at the basic level. Dealing with a fact-based story in fiction is a challenge some find more difficult than creating stories from whole cloth. When writing fact-based stories, there is a constant battle to determine which facts to omit because they are unbelievable. Many writers find it easier to create stories that eschew fact totally in favor of truth derived through invention

and attention to archetypes. Such writers prefer to shape their stories with capital 'T' truth and not with simple factual truth.

These stories form a rough social history. They are composites of events that happened, might have happened, and should have happened. Most of the stories are open-ended because the Vietnam War could not be construed as a *they lived happily ever after* situation. The stories are neither a recasting of data derived from cliometrics, nor are they case studies. One could say they are the product of field notes. More accurately, they are long suppressed nightmares. At bottom, the stories should simply be viewed as research, or fiction, perhaps entertainment.

The stories began re-emerging first as a play entitled, *The Next to the Last Meeting of the KKK at the Red Bank County Courthouse*. The play deals with an incident occurring to two soldiers who have just returned to the 'world.' Two combat vets face a new enemy in an old conflict.

Next to the Last's ... protagonists, both White and Black, may also be found in *The Code*, which is included within this thesis. The play is not found here due to length and a concern for balance between elements.

The poetry started coming over the last two years. Each poem in the haiku sequence, ... *he wasn't there again today* ..., focuses on a moment. The Zen of Japanese-style haiku dictates that each poem is a snapshot, but like the images on the six o'clock news, there is something wrong with these pictures. They are in monochrome for some and dying color for others. Should we adjust our sets? Did we adjust our set? What set does Vietnam belong to? What set do Vietnam veterans belong to?

Vietnam transforms its invaders. Are these haiku more like namku? Each is less than seventeen syllables, and none is the highly traditional five-seven-five syllable style some believe defines the form. Many, perhaps most Japanese haiku are not five seven five, but none of these fit that tradition, not one. Perhaps

Vietnam touched their form as it provided material. Interestingly, otherwise literate individuals frequently saw the two groupings, each consisting of five poems, as single poems and frequently commented on the fact that they weren't haiku at all, "too many syllables." At one point, this thesis included both a glossary of terms and a definition of haiku forms and variations. Ultimately, *Dear Mom* replaced the glossary and the definition was scrapped as well, on the theory a reader provided valuable information about themselves with their comments.

Some of these haiku are moving pictures and draw on the cinematic theory of the shot. In film, a shot is the smallest element of a scene. It is essentially one camera set-up -- the view from one angle. Each image, should on reflection, provide its own caption drawn from the reader's world view. Thus each haiku is a living collaboration between the author and individual.

Many of the haiku are essentially the punch-lines, dramatic turning points, or indelible eidetic images from the old stories, the ones that used to only be nightmares. Like so many images today, the haiku often come with a sound track, again supplied by the reader.

For the writer, the haiku began resurfacing to the sound of shark music. You know what shark music is. You've seen horror films. They always play shark music just before the screaming begins, just before the blood flows. Vietnam is a country with thousands of years of screaming and blood. It is a land of shark music. What a shame that Vietnam is not just an imaginary place, a story to scare misbehaving children. As a set, Vietnam survivors are grim brothers, those who served and those who lived through the draft are children from the same family, they share an uncle. They share scars.

The name of the haiku sequence, ... *he wasn't there again today* ..., comes originally from a children's rhyme. It became a CIA joke and is not uncommon as graffiti in the Virginia area. It also accurately describes one of the many effects of shell shock or combat stress. Finally, ... *he wasn't there again today* ..., is also

about the simple absence of friends, lovers, children, once here where they could be touched and now strangers in a stranger land.

The haibun, *Teahouse With Cold Tea*, also shows a Vietnamese influence. The intermixture of prose and poetry is traditional in Vietnamese literature. In Vietnam this intermixture is a primary form, while in Japan, the haibun is simply one of many literary forms. It has not yet achieved much recognition among English language haiku poets.

The haibun provides primary indirect information from a war bride's point of view. It might be worth speculating on appropriate uniforms for weddings and also on choosing appropriate music. Does the groom ever really hear the wedding march, they are already in place and holding the high ground. For the moment, grooms are part of a fully automatic sequence, they are on rock and roll. Perhaps that sequence is longer than one imagines? At least grooms are mostly enlistees. Are war brides consenting inductees, the victims of subliminal shotgun weddings?

The haibun resulted from the coalescence of a longer haiku sequence. It allows inclusion of some short poems that are in no way haiku. There is a relationship between concrete poetry and haiku, but the several concrete poems included herein are for individual consideration and are not neigaku, shapeku, or tryku. They are brief solos and leit motifs from the stories not unlike tunelessly whistled fragments as one passes a graveyard.

The short stories came next in clumps and as shrapnel from sweating nightmares. During this buildup, it became apparent that these stories were of sufficient length and number to form the core of an original writing thesis.

The stories determined shape and structure for this thesis and form a larger story about something other than Vietnam, truth as it applies to a small sample of young men and women intent on killing each other for all the usual reasons, ancient and contemporary, trite and trivial except to the victims. Like

most human arenas for motivations and rationalizations, the Vietnam experience does not readily submit to analysis.

Each story is analyzable by quantitative methods. On reduction, each story yields a set of numbers describing its shape and structure. Some of those numbers are relatively large. For example, in a late draft of *Bird Colonel*, there are twenty-six thousand and one characters. This number boils down to five thousand, nine hundred, and eighty-eight words. These words are arranged in one hundred and forty-four paragraphs averaging three point four sentences each. Each sentence averages twelve point three words. Each word averages four point two characters. What does this tell us about the story?

Readability testing using standard tests available on most word processing software provides additional numerical data for this and indeed, for any story. The Flesch Reading Ease test yields a score of eighty-two point three. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level is upper fourth grade reading skills. The Coleman-Liau Grade Level places the story at the middle sixth grade level. The Bormuth Grade Level test returns a score of eight point two.

A standard score on the Flesch Reading Ease test centers around sixty-five, plus or minus five. Higher scores indicate improved readability based on an index of the average word length in syllables and average sentence length in words. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level score assigns it to a grade level. Seventh to eighth grade level is considered standard writing. The Coleman-Liau test uses character count in words and number of words per sentence to assign a grade level. The Bormuth Grade Level is derived from a comparison of number of characters per word and number of words per sentence.

An additional test known as a Fog Index was not performed on any of the stories. However, it is reasonable to infer raw scores will not vary significantly from these parameters. Again, what does this tell us about the story?

This data is parametric. Each story is a sample of a population. The stories are clearly not random samples, as they were opportunity samples. Publications also yield data sets. Some of the data is ordinal or nominal, but other data are interval or ratio. Higher order data allow higher order statistical analysis, but will such analysis stand up to intense scrutiny? It is worth further research to determine the effectiveness of quantitative research techniques as applied to teaching creative writing. Can a story be reduced to meaningful numbers? What can numbers tell us about a story?

A sold story can be measured in distributed copies, but is this the most important quality of a story? An unpublished story is the work of a writer, while a published story is the work of an author. It is important to consider the expansion of the word author into the concept of authority. A published writer becomes an author and subsequently gains authority. That authority is a tremendous asset to a writing teacher. It is essentially more important than many other credentials. Five published stories is a basic qualification for many writing teachers, a book length, single authored work is the next major milestone. But, the works must be in print, the product of an author.

These stories collectively approach book length. However, the stories are not merely jammed together like two slices of bread with some poetry slathered in the middle. The poetry is not simply so much mustard and mayonnaise; it's part of the main course, perhaps not the meat and potatoes, but maybe the brussel sprouts? You can either consume them or push them around on your plate depending on your preference.

Grouping these stories reveals that each story is both prospective and retrospective. Each story also stands alone. Each is positioned to vary pace and mood, build tension, or provide a climax. They are roughly chronological beginning in 1965 and ending in 1969. Some narratives resume upon their protagonist's return to the United States, others are terminated in Vietnam.

The first story, *Dear Mom*, grew out of a need to define terms for the thesis. *Dear Mom* is an attempt to avoid including a glossary. It also helps make clear that the stories are not all from one point of view. The next three stories are all linked to the triptych entitled *Red Letter Days*.

The group beginning with *Reverencing the Word*, and centered around the haiku, including the haibun, *Teahouse With Cold Tea*, and *Old Scratch* are all related except for *Too Many Cooks*.

In this thesis, *Too Many Cooks*, like *Dear Mom* is a singleton. The matching story for *Too Many Cooks* is not included because its subject matter is best considered alone and in small doses. It is unlikely that story would ever be included as part of a collection.

In the writing process, a story goes through many variations, which hopefully coalesce the important, discard the trivial, refine the language, voice the characters, create the situations, describe the characters and settings. In final form, a story is a live fire exercise demonstrating facility with materials, methods employed in refining materials, and examples of the tools that shape the final product. The exercise is repeatable, it is assessable, and it is a teachable process. It is qualitative and not quantitative in nature.

Likewise, the presence or absence of numbers is not the criteria for judging an original writing thesis. Although *se*, where *se* is *spelling error* should certainly correspond to $p > .05$. It is reasonable to assume that *se* is less than .001 in any final written graduate level project.

For example, this introduction is about three thousand words in length. It contains fewer than three misspelled words. Given that a recent Vice President misspelled the common synonym for spud, there is some room for discussion as to proper spelling of certain words. Most of those variant spelling words have been removed from this thesis simply as a matter of insurance. After all, a thesis is

intended to produce a degree, therefore in a thesis, it is safer to say spud than use the p word. Words are flexible, numbers lack flexibility to a similar degree.

For a degree program producing a creative writing teacher, numerical research is inadequate, perhaps even inappropriate. To some extent, merely reading and criticizing literature is inadequate as well. Research is most fitting for training creative writing teachers when it looks into the structure and creation of a story, of poetry, of essays from an actively engaged standpoint. A teacher who struggles with these elements in their raw and also (hopefully) refined forms at least understands the demands on his students.

Teaching creative writing is not architecture. We do not draw up blueprints, then hand them over to construction workers. Creative writing is a dirty business -- a personal engagement with the raw materials of literature.

An original writing thesis may or may not be literature. If it is ultimately adjudged literature, that is wonderful, but literary status is unnecessary to establish either a qualification as a creative writing teacher, or for that matter authority through publications. Many stories are ephemeral. They are published, they are read, they are forgotten, and are never considered much less included in the literary cannon. It is not difficult to decide a story is worth publication and subsequently confers authority. It is tremendously difficult determining that a story qualifies as literature. There is no step in this thesis that asserts these stories are literature, nor that they will be published. Each story followed a step by step development, but none of those steps produced confidence that the stories represent anything other than an engagement with the medium.

The final step in the preparation of this thesis was designed to again demonstrate that today, the act of writing is linked to computers. It may be argued that writing is changing drastically as writing changed with the introduction of movable type. Some writers discuss the differences between writing with a pen on a pad, (often a yellow legal pad) and sitting at the

keyboard. Whatever the ultimate effect of the changing medium, this is a paradigm shift that has happened several times in history as humans moved from scratching on rocks to stamping in mud, painting on walls, writing on skin, writing on papyrus, writing on parchment, writing on cotton rag paper, writing on high sulfur content yellow legal pads, or typewriters, or computer keyboards. What has changed is an ability to format the stories by desktop publication methods for dissemination on paper, or digitally on disk, internet, or CD-ROM in a manner not much different from professional publications. Soon the University of Tennessee will allow CD-ROM based doctoral theses, but currently a thesis must still meet rules originally intended for typewriters.

University of Tennessee rules restrict font usage to a single type family. Normally, one font is chosen for the body text and a second is chosen for titles. In this case, one font family must serve these and several other purposes. This thesis is the final result of many esthetic decisions, each made after the text was feature-complete and in final editing phase. Final format may be found in the colophon, which is the last printed page in this book.

Concerns were raised that a professional looking thesis might lead to a suspicion that the work had in some way been dressed up and disguised, that in fact it was not a work of research and scholarship, but simply another pretty typeface. All final document design came after careful examination and review of the contents and the defense of the thesis content.

It was a challenge to meet each university guideline and not simply give in to an ugly thesis. Drop caps, the watermarks on the recto leaf, page layout, and proportion are only the most readily discernible decisions made regarding the final appearance of this thesis.

Page layout was simply one more research and presentation problem among many. In the emerging paradigm as we transit out of the Gutenberg Galaxy into whatever comes next, it is highly appropriate to submit research that

reflects the emerging digital universe of writing. There are very few written items untouched by the binary digit. The universe may not be composed of ones and zeros, but we are rapidly learning to describe it in binary code. Many quantitative research projects depend heavily on binary code for data analysis and computer usage is organizing qualitative datasets on an ever increasing basis as well. Soon, perhaps all research will process through digital formats.

How would one set up an effective research regimen for producing creative writing teachers? Definitions of the terms teacher, original writing, effective, research, and creative writing would be necessary. Perhaps the most difficult definition would be for the term effective. Would each student be required to publish a story to earn an A grade? Given advances in desktop publishing that is certainly possible at some level. Clearly there must be an assessment, but do we assess students on professional performance?

Creative writing classes do not generally promise to produce student achievements on the professional level. In fact, a writing class that turns out published authors on an occasional basis would probably be considered quite successful. Creative writing classes seem most like music and art appreciation classes. Students are engaged in the form, shown the instruments, and assessed on their engagement and increased understanding over the semester. Creative writing teachers need both an intellectual and personal engagement with these processes, such an engagement may be obtained through action research.

These stories and poems are research. They are proof of engagement with the essential substances and are also the final products of numerous creative writing courses. They report those engagements in a form that may be evaluated and replicated. Read them, enjoy them or not. Evaluate them by your criteria for short story and poetic forms. Consider them first person accounts of a war between the brain and the keyboard, between the factual minimums and the factual excess.

Each story is an assessment of casualties, ultimately a battle lost or won. There were casualties. Some of the stories were buried with honors and others simply buried in my bottom drawer. None of the stories received any medals, honors, or awards, but they did take on life, assume personalities, and attitudes. None of the stories is my friend.

Cut the stories apart, dissect them, quantify them, they will not bleed. Only the men and women they are about bled and died. Only readers and writers die. That is the human condition. This thesis reports research into the human condition. This research reflects an intense commitment to teach writing about the human condition. Each individual element must teach. Each must show an estimated truth, the only truth in any thesis. Probability of truth equals
o
n
e.

Dear Mom:

by james myers

THE SERGEANT GRIPES US OUT if we don't write. The lieutenant gripes us out if we don't write. The US Army takes it personal if we don't write. So, how are things in Coldwater, Kansas? It is warm and sunny here in Vietnam. That is not so good. Under the current circumstances, it would be better if it were night, or raining so hard you couldn't see anything. We are waiting ...

... waiting.

I'm relaxing here between rounds in the fight to keep the world safe for democracy. I can hear the rest of the guys in the platoon. We are scattered across a field, each of us in our own tiny hole, keeping our heads down and waiting for the next installment in this afternoon's battle ... waiting.

Actually, my hole isn't tiny, that is poetic license. Mr. Deyoe always said I should get my poetic license revoked. I used to sit in English daydreaming till I got him for an English teacher. Then I sat in his class listening to long-playing records of great poets reading great poets. Once in a while we would listen to Bob Dylan and some of the folk singers too, but that always made the principal nervous. Like they weren't great poets as well. Principals should have sergeants to keep them in line. The world would be a better place if sergeants ran it.

I'm of a mind to recall a poem by Carl Sandburg, or at least I think that is who wrote it, about the Civil War and how grass was the winner. That starts me thinking about a poem by Robert Frost about committing suicide and how the guy in the poem had miles to go before he slept. No, I'm not thinking about suicide.

Mom, sometimes, I think the draft is a kind of suicide. Maybe the draft is murder and going along with it is suicide? I can't figure out why there are so many farm boys and big city ghetto kids over here in Vietnam.

I've come a lot of miles since Mr. Deyoe's class. He was the greatest. He took poetry out of the books and made it personal. The next time you run into him down at the grocery store please thank him for me. Say hi to Sheila, too. I keep thinking about what you said about Sheila liking me. I was crazy about her and I never even asked her out. If I'd married her, I wouldn't have been eligible for the draft. You'd have a grandkid. I'd be getting home from work in a couple of hours. He would have Sheila's eye's, Dad's laugh, your gentleness, my height. Please God, somebody else's brains. It is easier if you're good at schoolwork.

I was never much good at numbers, but Mr. Thornhill taught me that numbers mattered. I'm still not really good at them, but I know they matter. When we are pinned down like this, we call in our location, which is a bunch of numbers, and they fly up here to give us air support. I can do a little math and know how long to hang on. It helps to know how long to hang on.

Our problem is that today the planes are coming in from a base about a million miles away because the runways at our regular base are all tore up from mortar fire and the Cong are currently shooting the dickens out of things down that a ways too. We are having to wait our turn. It is going to be a long wait. We just have to keep hanging on. Waiting is easier if you know how long to hang on.

They tried to get us some helicopters in here to pick us up, but the Cong have a bunch of Sams. Sorry Mom, I didn't mean to sling the jargon at you. Sams are surface-to-air missiles, Mom. They are cheap, easy to make, and I guess the Cong get a never ending supply of them from the Russians. Jack has a picture of a Sam hitting a chopper. There are spare parts strewn over ten acres.

The Cong hide the Sams in tunnels, just across the border in Cambodia and then carry them down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It is one of the things we try to bomb the dickens out of. I know that fewer choppers and planes go down when

they have been bombing the dickens out of things. Personally, that is good by me.

The Cong don't seem to have any mortars here because if they did, things would not be so good and I probably wouldn't be writing this letter. They have us boxed in, but as long as we keep our heads down, they can't get at us. We'll be fine. I can hear Ralph's harmonica. Web is probably reading. We're waiting.

I can see just enough around my hole so that I know they aren't crawling my way. I think the other guys are in about the same fix. We can keep them from crawling in with us. We can't see their positions. We can't get out of the holes. We wait for the planes. The sweat is running down my glasses.

If they had mortars, this would all be different. Mortars aren't very accurate. They don't even hardly have sights. When our artillery get into action, they can put a shell into the air every couple of seconds. Each shell weighs about the same as a Volkswagen car and they can double park it next to your foxhole. Maybe you could get a ticket for parking too far from the curb? Maybe not either.

I try to get out of the way when I hear an artillery shell honking to pass. In flight they have kind of a scream, then as they hit it sounds like thunder out in the winter wheat. Mortars are fast and shrill, sort of thump, shoop, bang, over and over.

The Cong have to walk-in the mortars. The way it works is they drop a shell down a tube and it fires when it hits the bottom of the tube. That is the thump. The mortar shell flies through the air, that is the shoop sound. The mortar shell lands somewhere and it explodes, bang. They aren't huge explosions. Not as loud as when we were dynamiting stumps on the back forty.

The Cong move the tube slightly to adjust and fire another round. This one is a little closer to what they are trying to hit. They see where that one lands and move the mortar tube again, just a smidgen. In about a dozen shells, they can put

one in your hip pocket and you get to come home to the United States, simple as thump, shoop, bang. There are a lot of easy tickets out of here, better to wait.

If they'd had any mortars here this afternoon, this would all be over. The Cong use mortars a lot. They are light, easy to carry, effective for jungle work.

My sergeant worked out a deal for situations like this. He's a Black man. Mom, he has saved my life about a dozen times. I don't just mean stuff like making all the guys quit smoking either. I mean he shoots the bad guy behind you, the one you didn't even see. He has eyes in the back of his head and he seems to know what we are doing next. He is an old guy with some gray in his crewcut. He was at Korea too. You would like him. He doesn't like us to cuss. He says sheeeeeit though. I never heard anybody say the word with about eleven e's in it.

The deal is; if we are pinned down and the Cong start using mortars, they are going to expect us to hide in our holes till they get us one at a time. What they don't expect is a plan. When we hear the first mortar, we all get ready. On the count of two, after the second mortar round explodes, the first guy jumps out of his hole and starts running. On the count of three, the second guy jumps out of his hole and starts shooting at the Cong who are now shooting at the first guy. On the count of four, the third guy jumps out of his hole and starts shooting at the Cong.

Every guy has a number. We know our numbers and we know someone is jumping out of their hole to cover us. They have no way to predict which guy is jumping out of what hole next, so it gives us all a chance to get out of a tough situation. It also keeps them from getting us all one by one.

It is sort of like the game you gave me when I was a kid. The one where you have to bop the weasels as they pop out of the holes. In this case, I'm a weasel and the Cong are trying to bop us. Difference is, when I played the game, the weasels didn't shoot back. We shoot back. We are pretty good at whacking boppers. Jack especially. Everybody's got a nickname, Jack is the Big Bopper Popper.

I'm Buddy Holly. The idea is to have a plan when they don't. We have plans for everything including finding footprints on the toilet seats.

None of us squat on the john, but the Vietnamese do. If there are footprints on the toilet seat, we have been infiltrated. I bet Walter never told you that was the way it was on the six o'clock news, huh Mom?

They never talked about stuff like this in boot camp. Sergeant Web thinks about stuff like this all the time. He makes us drill and train every day. Other platoons goof off hard when they aren't on duty. Web makes sure guys who won't play along get transfers somewhere else.

I know I can count on all the guys in the platoon and they know they can count on me. If our six-man football team had ever worked together like this, we could have all had college football scholarships and I wouldn't have gotten drafted.

Our platoon is a pretty mixed group. Right now, I am the only white guy in our squad. There is a Navajo Indian and a big guy named Jack who is half-breed Seminole. Jack also says he is the runt of the litter. If all Jack's brothers are bigger, I think Columbus must have been lucky. Jack is big. He carries a rifle left over from World War Two. It shoots 30.06 and we all carry shells for Jack. Jack does a little war dance before each mission. It sort of reminds me of the Charleston, the way Grandma does it. He says it is authentic Sioux. Maybe?

Jesse enlisted when the border patrol caught him and gave him a choice between doing a hitch or going back to Mexico. Jesse sends money home. There are a couple of Black guys too, Ralph and Eddy, short for Raphael and Edifice.

These are guys I would like you to meet. I guess it would kind of upset some people in Coldwater if I brought them all home, but I'm thinking maybe we ought to be doing some things differently in Coldwater. I'm kind of thinking I am upset by the way people get treated in Coldwater if they aren't white. I don't

really know how you feel about this. I am hoping if I brought these guys home, that would be OK with you, even if it wasn't maybe so OK with the neighbors.

Some of the brothers, that is what the Black guys call themselves here in Vietnam. Some of the brothers joined the Black Panther Party. Nobody in our platoon belongs. Web doesn't like racism. Funny how a Black guy can be telling some other Black guys not to be racists. He says the only fist going down is his. He rides the Black guys harder than the rest of us, which seems racist.

Web makes us take correspondence courses and do homework and stuff. He says we will get a GI bill even if we don't have one now. The government won't want everybody getting jobs or going on welfare after this is over so they will try to send us to school. Web knows about these things. I would like to go to Emporia Teachers College when this is over. Most of our guys want to go to college. My sons will go to college. No kid of mine is getting drafted. Not ever!

The other squad has two white kids, the rest are Black. The lieutenant is white of course. All the officers are white. A lot of the Sergeants are Black.

This lieutenant doesn't pay close enough attention to Sergeant Web. It will get him dead. We will be lucky if he doesn't get all of us dead in the process. He volunteered us for today. Web tells him not to volunteer us for nothing. We already do our share without being all gung-ho about it.

It has been quiet for about an hour. Since I quit smoking, I can smell the fish sauce the Cong use on everything they eat. It is made of fermented fish heads and soy sauce and the Lord knows what else and He ain't telling. I kind of like the fish sauce the Thais use. It is much milder, both in smell and in taste. It makes some of the stuff you eat in the field possible to eat. We eat some interesting stuff here in Vietnam. Chow hound has a whole new meaning around here.

By the way, Mom, if you can send along another case of Tabasco sauce??? It's real handy for killing the taste of stuff that is easier to eat if you are busier trying to put the fire out than you are thinking about what you are eating. We used

it on the turkey they passed out at the Bob Hope show last Christmas. I don't use the whole case myself, we share. The Avon skin lotion helps too. Thanks. Waiting is easier if you aren't a mosquito buffet.

I check every couple of minutes to see if the Cong are crawling my way, but nada. That means nothing in Spanish. Jesse is teaching me a lot of Spanish. We can all count in Spanish and give map coordinates, directions, and some stuff like that.

Sometimes, Jesse makes Spanish rice for the whole squad. He buys hot peppers and makes us all eat them. He says it helps us deal with the heat better. I think it makes me drink more beer. Not that I am drinking a lot Mom. I know how you feel about that, but the beer is in bottles and you know the bottle is clean and safe if you open it yourself. The word for beer in Spanish is cerveza. Rice is arroz. Taco is taco. Isn't it neat that the Mexicans use regular words like taco?

Web says lots of the Cong speak French and more than a few speak English, but not many of them speak Spanish and it could be an advantage. I also think it makes Jesse feel like one of the team. Web spends a lot of time making everyone feel like part of the team or extending invitations to move on to some other platoon. If a guy lasts with us more than a couple of days, he is probably with us till his string is up. It isn't about being popular, it is about doing your best. It isn't the same as getting picked for a team when you play sandlot baseball. We do play a lot of ball when things are slow. Jesse is a tremendous pitcher. He says Castro is a baseball fanatic and sneaks into the US for playoff games. Maybe, but it sounds like ballspit to me. He says there is a picture of Castro in one of the line boxes. You can tell it's him, but he isn't wearing the cap and fatigues so I guess he is in disguise??? I think Jesse is pulling my leg. He teases me some, but he looks after me too. He is a good man. His real name is Jesus, pronounced hay sooose. I'm in a hole next to Jesus, Mom.

.....

Oh shit. There went a mortar round, got to go, love you

..... Uno, Dos

up,

running cramp hopping, down, up

Searching

there

ohshit! swinging around to fire, barrel climbing

new burst, starting low and raking

Jack

the mortar crew

Web

in the trees

the leaves falling

my glasses

Web

the sun

clouds

hands

the morphine

My glasses

blood

who's bleeding, who's bleeding who's bleeding

bite the dogtag, My glasses my glasses

bitedown grass

.....

.....

IT IS WITH DEEP REGRET that I inform you that your son, Jefferson died in battle today at approximately four in the afternoon, local time. We were pinned down under enemy fire and your son led a charge that probably saved the lives of every man in our platoon. Jefferson was a fine soldier and a fine young man. He was also my friend and I will miss him. He has told me much about Coldwater, Kansas, about you and your family, and about his teachers. Coldwater has lost one of her finest.

Your son had a favorite poem in *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. It is underlined, and I think he meant to have it for an epitaph. He was always reciting poems and he credits his high school English teacher, Fred Deyoe, with opening his eyes to the wonders of this world. He credits you with opening his eyes to the wonders of the next.

I am enclosing a letter found on the battlefield this afternoon. It is obvious Jeff's thoughts were with you in those last moments. Your son was truly gold that did not glitter and also truly one who wandered into this far away country, but was not lost. I can only say that I deeply hope to meet your son again in a better place, far from this place. It is my deepest prayer that we shall gather at the river in the deep by and by. God bless and keep your son. He will be sorely missed.

Sergeant Francis Moses Web

Acting Platoon Leader

United States Regular Army

A Big snake Story

by james myers

IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN A WREN. Years later a kid asked me if there were really wrens in Southeast Asia. The kid implied I was bullshitting. It might not have been a philodendron either, but it sort of looked like the plant on my grandma's back porch, except it was about ten feet high. I might have been high but not usually, not in combat, not then.

It sure as fire was a cobra, a damned big cobra. The cobra might not have been ten feet long, but it sure as hell was a cobra that knocked that wren off that ten foot tall philodendron, ate it and then slithered down the road. This was all fine with me except the cobra crawled into the only patch of heavy undergrowth for a mile in any direction. I swear, before that cobra disappeared it turned back and gave me the cobra equivalent of a come-hither look. I know the look. I've seen it on bar girls in Saigon.

I looked at my sergeant. He shrugged and went back to wiping between his toes with his dirty pair of socks. We had stopped to change socks before getting on with the afternoon's exercise in winning hearts and minds; checking out the very same potted plant heaven the snake had just crawled into. Head-quarters was certain it was clean. Frequently headquarters did not know shit. That's why God invented recon teams. We were supposed to make damned certain it was 99 and 99/100s percent squeaky clean and danger free.

The guidelines were simple: no snipers, no mortar crews, no tunnels filled with oriental inscrutability, nothing authentically Vietnamese in that klik and a half of ten foot tall philodendrons. The guys at base hadn't mentioned cobras, but they were big-picture kind of guys. They tended to overlook these minor details.

I don't have too much against combat photographers. They shoot me, I shoot at them if they get in the way. I don't aim *at* them. On the other hand, I defi-

nitely aim in their direction when they get in the way. Mines and punji sticks work on a to-whom-it-may-concern basis; soldiers, kids, little old people, and photographers. You can get dead just as fast if a photographer trips the booby trap or the point man snags the line, body-count is body-count. Combat photographers stay the hell out of the line of fire. Artsy shutterbugs go home in body bags. If we work it out before the Cong, sometimes only a guy's cameras die. It's hard to be a grown-up combat photographer without cameras. God bless the anonymity of fragmentation grenades.

One of the regular guys backed off the roof of a Quonset hut while trying to frame a shot of the wall of VC who overran the fire base two weeks ago last Tuesday. He broke both legs, which probably saved his life, because the VC made it past his position before we pushed them back again. God, what a bloody mess.

When the graves and registration guys started dragging out the dead, he was just lying there mumbling, "they forgot to smile". He shot the rest of the roll as the medics put him on the stretcher and hung his IV bag. The picture taken out the back of the ambulance made the cover of Life and won him a Pulitzer prize.

These shutterbugs were all goody-goody types from magazines like *Modern Romances*. They were on a two countries in two days tour. Their touron would take a week including flying time. First stop, Vietnam, the scent of danger in a sanitized combat zone, then, off to Bangkok, to get a little piece of the action.

If they'd been smart, they could have scheduled over both weekends and spent an extra two days of their Vietnam adventure in Thailand. They could have partied in Saigon too, but not safely. The VC would have been after their butts with little old ladies on bicycles carrying ten pounds of trinitrotoluene $[\text{CH}_3\text{C}_6\text{H}_2(\text{NO}_2)_3]$, as fast as you could say homemade TNT, probably even faster.



The ten foot philodendrons didn't look like much from the air. The chopper pilot shagged us over the patch a couple of times hoping to draw fire. Helicopters

fly farther and faster than I can run. If there was anybody in there who was going to shoot at me, I'd rather I was still in the chopper. *Nada*. No small arms, no cross bows, and no SAM rockets either. Life was good at two hundred feet.

Life was not good at ground zero. I hate snakes. I am an equal opportunity hater of snakes. I hate garter snakes. I hate bull snakes. I hate blue racers, and I hate cobras. I freely and firmly hate slithering, crawling, and sidewinding snakes.

At the jungle survival school in Panama, they taught us that snakes are very nutritious, especially if you're starving to death. They passed out cards with gourmet recipes, but that don't make me like snakes. I would just as soon have eaten monkey or dog. I hated that cobra with every inch of my being.

★★

My sergeant finished swabbing out his toejam, started putting on his socks, and threw a significant look in my direction. He's a great guy, my sergeant. First day I was in-country, he looked me up and down, obviously not too pleased to be baby-sitting an FNG weenie second lieutenant from Kansas.

"Ever been in combat sir?"

"I'm a virgin. The United States Army hasn't gotten around to screwing me that way just yet."

My dad's best friend had promised to get me a job in an embassy in Italy if I enlisted. My dad's best friend got a better deal. He bailed out into the private sector while I was still in boot camp. Good-bye sunny Italy, home of beautiful women, classical civilization, and great pasta. Hello sunny Vietnam, home of beautiful women who blew their nose with their fingers, fine literature like Australian comic books or Chairman Mao's pithy proverbs, and food that stank for a mile with fermented fish sauce.

"Where you from boy?" When a six feet two, two hundred forty-five pound black man, with a gun, calls you 'boy', the bars on your shoulder do not mean shit.

"I'm from Kansas."

"You got niggers in Kansas boy?"

"About the same as anywhere, except most of ours are white. We got sergeants too, but my mother wouldn't let me talk to them. She was afraid they would teach me bad words."

"Sheeeit."

"My scout-master was half black and half Indian. Does that help?"

"Sheeeit. You was a boy scout boy?"

"Yep. My mamma didn't like it though. She thought they were a paramilitary organization and would teach me bad things. As far as she was concerned, they did. I was willing to join the girl scouts, but she wasn't too keen on that either."

"Your mamma seems to know her way around Kansas pretty good boy. This ain't Kansas." He sort of looked around archly and nodded at the body bags on the edge of the runway waiting to be thrown on the transport and flown back.

"Yes sir, but in boot camp, my Drill Instructor, who was, of course, a sergeant, explained that I didn't need my mamma telling me nothing anymore, that was what God invented sergeants for. He said if I kept my mouth shut and let my sergeants do my thinking for me and did what my sergeants said, and signed what my sergeants gave me to sign, that I just might make it out of Vietnam alive. I'd like that sergeant, getting out of Vietnam alive."

"And you believed that sheeeit white boy?"

"Every word of it, Sergeant."

"Sheeit."

"Every word of it. A sergeant would not tell a lie."

"Sheeit."

"Sergeants are trustable, loyal, courteous, kindly, obedient, radiantly happy, thirsty, obedient, brave, floss between meals, and relevant. Did I mention obedi-

ent? That part came from Officer's Candidate School and I'm not sure they got it right. They had some funny ideas about sergeants in OCS."

"Your mamma done a good job of raising you boy."

"She had good help. My daddy was a sergeant."

"Sheeit. You sucking up to me boy?"

"Yep. My daddy was a major, but I was trying to impress you. You saw right through me, you clever sergeant you. I don't suppose you would be willing to read me bedtime stories would you? I like Dr. Seuss and Winnie the Pooh."

"Sheeit. You might make it out of here alive boy." He turned and gestured at a couple of guys my mother definitely would not have liked and whispered, "Get the man's gear." They jumped up and hurried the twenty feet across the landing strip, grabbed my stuff, hiked it over to a jeep, threw it in the back and then climbed in to lounge on it. I walked across the strip thinking about a man who could whisper and get results from a distance of twenty feet.

For the next six months, I kept my mouth shut, mostly. I let my sergeant do my thinking for me, mostly. I did pretty much what he said which was mostly, "Don't volunteer for nothing."

I didn't always do what my sergeant said, but I never volunteered for anything. Never. Well, only one time. I was signing some requisitions my sergeant told me to sign when the base commander came in looking for volunteers. He didn't like me much. He let me know he didn't appreciate guys waiting for somebody else to volunteer. I didn't tell him my sergeant wouldn't like it.

"Well, well, who do I find hanging around my briefing room? If it isn't Joe Mamma." My radio call sign was Joe Mamma. It matched my initials and you could hear it on the radio over static and small arms fire. It was my sergeant's idea. I think he was testing me when he made the suggestion. I didn't give him any static, I just logged in as Joe Mamma. You got to be something. One of the guys wound up with Easy Tango and his dance card was always full.

"I got a little something I need a volunteer for."

"What?" Never encourage them, it only makes it worse.

"Some recon up on the edge of Nebraska." Nebraska was what H.Q. called this patch of rice paddy that stretched for a long ways. They called it Nebraska because it wasn't, sort of like calling big guys tiny and fat guys slim. "There is a patch of jungle that should do the trick. We swept it a couple of days ago. Here are this morning's recon photos. You want to run up and check this out?"

I thought it over. It would definitely piss off my sergeant if I volunteered us for anything. It would definitely piss off the base commander if I didn't volunteer for this milk-run. There was nobody else in the squad room. He was going to give us the job whether or not I volunteered.

"I volunteer sir."

"Good, I'll see you get a medal. Maybe you can get one of the hookers to kiss you on both cheeks."

I collected the details and went back to face my sergeant. He took it well.

"You did what, white boy?????"

"I volunteered us to check out some jungle."

"Sheeeit!"

☆☆☆

So here we were sitting on the edge of a little piece of jungle that probably contained nothing of interest except a cobra about twenty feet long. We finished lacing up our boots, looked at the recon photos, and mapped the mission out in our heads. We drew straws for point and drag. I got point, the lead position. I shot a glance at my sergeant. He just grinned. We got ready to crawl into the jungle with the thirty foot long cobra. My sergeant kept looking at me out of the corner of his eye and grinning. It pissed me off. It was bad enough to have to crawl into a damned jungle with forty feet of angry cobra but having my sergeant grinning at me too was more than I could handle.

"Guys, come over here. Put your made-by-Mattel's on rock and roll. When I count three, shoot hell out of that jungle. Keep firing three-round-bursts until I tell you to quit— and guys, aim low."

They didn't ask me why. The sergeant would have kicked their butts for questioning a direct order. He didn't ask me why either. It would have been unprofessional. The GI's all figured he'd told me what to do anyway. He wasn't going to let them know different. I picked up the field telephone and counted, "one, two, three." To the accompaniment of small arms fire, I called base command.

"Joe Momma to Easy Sugar, come in?" No answer, those guys were supposed to be on the air all the time. You hoped they weren't taking a leak when you had a problem, or busy flirting with the Colonel's head nurse buddy. That woman was heavy duty. The way she walked was a cross between the Mamie Stover bump and the Marilyn Monroe grind. A guy could die in the field between the bump and the grind. Every grunt in the sector considered it his patriotic duty to keep that woman busy. Preferably well away from the radio shack.

"Joe Momma to Easy Sugar, come in?" Still no answer, just static and some traffic in another zone, mostly unintelligible chatter. Shit. The guys had all worked through a couple of clips now and were sort of looking at me like I was crazy. I just nodded for them to keep playing cowboys and Indians.

"Joe Momma to Easy Sugar, Hellooooooooo is anybody home?"

"Easy Sugar to Joe Momma what's your situation?"

Bingo. Life was improving.

"We've got heavy small arms fire at our position from numerous points around the objective. Could you deliver some coca cola down here?"

"No problem, Joe Momma. We've got some jet jocks hot and ready to squat about two minutes off your position."

"Well tell them to hurry and come see about me. My sergeant is soooo upset and nervous that he's doing Ray Charles imitations. Send us out some ammo too, we're running kind of low. A couple of cases of cold beer would be thoughtful and considerate. Joe Momma Clear."

"I've seen that brother. Tell him to do Wilt Chamberlain with an attitude and some hand grenades. Try patting his hand gently. If he starts to flush and go all white on you, chafe his wrists. Easy Sugar clear."

Sergeant Web snorted and mumbled something about honkies which I am reasonably certain might have been a racist remark.

"OK guys, save the ammo." Life was excellent. We all sort of dug in for a Marlboro moment, except that none of us smoked. When I first hit Nam, my sergeant had taken my crush-proof box, crushed it, and told me I had just quit.

Since then we didn't take replacements who smoked. Cussing and chewing were OK, but no smoking. It made sense. If you didn't smoke you could smell the fish sauce the VCs sweated out before they smelled you. But it was even better, because they had gotten into the habit of expecting American GI's to smell like American cigarettes. It was a bad habit. Fatal even.

A couple of months back, one of the new guys gave the sergeant a hard time about quitting. Obviously *his* Drill Instructor had failed to explain the proper function of sergeants.

"See that body bag over there?"

"Yes Sergeant."

"Get it and bring it over here."

The body bag was a little used up, because when the gooks had overrun the fire control base the night before we had taken cover behind the stack. It didn't have a body in it because they didn't want to ship the guys home in shot-up body bags. One, they leaked and two, people might fuss if they thought it was

dangerous over here. It is one thing to have old Walter Cronkite showing you in color the way it was at six o'clock, but leaky body bags are a gross escalation.

This body bag only had a couple of holes and not a lot of blood or guts inside. I had seen my sergeant looking it over earlier that morning and thinking deep thoughts. The FNG was too green to have a clue what was coming but he wasn't too happy about handling a slightly used body bag. He held it out at arm's length and brought it over to the sergeant.

"Unzip it."

He did.

"Get in it."

He just looked at the Sergeant.

"Get in that son of a bitch and I mean now."

The kid went kind of catatonic.

"Blake, Harris put this FNG in the bag." Blake and Harris had had almost a year's experience with Sergeant Web. They knew the proper function of sergeants. More importantly, they knew their sergeant cheated when we drew for point and drag. They didn't mind because the reason he cheated was so Fucking New Guys and short-timers didn't get the short straws. Your chances of dying in Vietnam were highest when you first got there and just before your tour was up. Everybody knew that—if they made it through their first few weeks in Nam. The Sergeant didn't want guys on point or drag worrying about dying. Everybody depended on point and drag to make sure that none of us died. The first couple of times I saw the Sergeant cheat, I thought about saying something. I tried to figure out if he was favoring black guys over white, or his buddies over the other guys? What? When I did work it out I was glad I had kept my mouth shut.

I was still pretty green when a short timer really screwed up. You know how kids are, and these nineteen year olds with machine guns were still kids. It was sort of a wait-till-the-sergeant-gets-home thing. Any parent knows what I mean.

The guy caught drag every day for the last two weeks of his tour. He survived. When we put him on the chopper and waved good-bye both Web and I were nervous wrecks from double covering his ass. The point got made however. It was good for the guys to know the short straw could fall to short timers, too.

Blake and Harris didn't even hesitate. They laid that body bag out, grabbed the new guy, and stuffed him in it as easy as sacking potatoes. Blake stuck a knife to the guy's throat and held him firmly to facilitate cooperation. The FNG couldn't see the flat edge of the blade was against his throat and probably couldn't have told which end was up either.

"Zip that son of a bitch in."

Blake kept the knife in place. Harris started zipping up the body bag. The kid started screaming. The guys wandered off. They didn't want to see this.

When Harris got the zipper up to the guy's chin, the Sergeant said,

"Now you listen to me you nigger son of a bitch."

I made a mental note to remind my sergeant not to use racial epithets around the men. It set a bad example. Kids pick up bad habits so easily.

"You keep smoking and you are going to get one of these for your very own, along with an early out. You want to go home bad enough to do it in a sad sack?"

The FNG didn't say anything. It wasn't defiance. He had just gone to pieces.

"Blake, get him out of there and clean him up. Clean up the sad sack too. Johnson will be carrying it in his pack."

Johnson was maybe going to make it home alive after all. He quit smoking cold and started dipping snuff. The snuff didn't make it any easier to smell the fish sauce, but Johnson now fully understood the proper function of sergeants. He carried the body bag in his pack. Once in a while some FNG would ask him about it. Johnson just smiled and said the sergeant liked having one handy.

★★★★

Shewwrrp, shewwrrp, then the crack of the sound barrier breaking as a couple of jets came flying by, loafing along at mach two. The pilots flew back fast and hard, dropping the napalm and then jerking the stick back, putting them up and out and in position for another run. The maneuver was designed to keep them from toasting their toes and also to make them harder to hit with SAM rockets.

"Joe Momma to coca cola delivery. Do it again guys. It's quiet now, but you never know what could be lying in there waiting to bite my ass. Could you maybe give them some Texas style hospitality? Joe Momma clear."

The jets came back down, again and again. It turned out they'd had some buddies looking over their shoulders. Between the bunch of them they had plenty of pharmaceutical grade napalm to spare. The coca cola went up and up and up some more. Soon that entire stretch of jungle was on fire. That suited me fine.

I'll be damned if some four foot long cobra was going to give me a hard time when I was crawling around on my belly.

Actually, I'm kind of grateful to that snake. During the night the Cong had worked a couple of thousand pajama-clad hostesses into that tiny patch of jungle. They must have been planning a big dance. They had a bunch of equipment. My guys accidentally shot several Viet Cong. They never returned fire. I never got good at figuring out how the Cong thought about things. Except I did figure out they definitely thought we should go home. That message was dead clear.

I kind of looked for that cobra, but I never did see him, barbecued or alive. I figure he didn't like all the gooks so he just kept traveling. If so, he wasn't around when the strike came. Fine by me.

I learned to take a more lenient attitude about snakes. I ate them about two or three times a week, when we'd been on long patrol and rations were skimpy. I'd even go so far as to say I prefer snake to monkey.

Bird Colonel

by james myers

WE WERE NEVER IN CAMBODIA. I swear it. I'm certain.

"Soldier, do you see that map up there on the wall?"

"Yes Sir."

"Do you see the part that says Cambodia?"

"Yes Sir."

"Stay the hell out of Cambodia. Do you understand that order?"

"Yes Sir."

"Do you see that blue line between Vietnam and Cambodia?"

"Yes Sir."

"Do not, repeat, do not cross any blue lines when you are out there in the jungle. Do you understand me soldier?"

"Yes Sir."

"If you are out there in the jungle and you see a blue line on the ground, what are you going to do soldier?"

"I'm not going to cross it Sir."

*I never saw any blue lines on that mission. We didn't cross any blue lines.
Never happened.*

Life in the army is a long series of briefings punctuated with short periods of combat. We were all clear on the role of the combat infantry man in modern warfare. I just wanted to make sure we all knew the role of the Vietnam grunt on this mission. I briefed my squad carefully, colorfully, and explicitly. I didn't want anyone wondering if it was their turn to curtsy and my turn to bow.

"OK guys, listen up. These are our orders. The chopper drops us off at a pre-determined location."

"Where are we going sir?"

"I don't know but it isn't Cambodia ... and guys, don't walk across any blue lines, the Colonel wouldn't like it."

"Sheeit."

"From the drop point, we make our way due East twenty klicks to the strike zone give or take a kilometer or two depending on if the zigging and the zagging even out. We locate the objective. Here's a picture of the gook we are targeting. We think the guy in the cage behind him is already dead, but we aren't sure. If you get a chance, check around for our guy. If he is dead, try to get his tags. If he is alive, decide if we can get him to the chopper that way."

I handed around the CIA's eight by ten glossy photo. The telephoto lens made the shot a little grainy, but it wasn't a publicity still. It wasn't going in the newspaper back in home town America either. Ric had a scrapbook. He snagged the picture.

"This picture is at least forty-eight hours old, so it is a safe bet we aren't going to find the target standing in the clearing waiting for us. The mission director told me the guy in the cage was flying opium for Air America. The CIA listed him as MIA. Maybe that is okay for them, but somebody has to care about this guy. Just don't get killed for a dead man. You guys got that? Jack? Web? You got that?"

"Yes Sir." They both snapped it out like the good soldiers they were.

Unfortunately, that didn't mean they agreed or would necessarily follow my orders. Both of them thought they were made of leather and guts, sewn up with woven steel cable. Actually, they probably were. Jack was sergeant material and I'd be prepared to bet Web was the best sergeant around.

"Sweet Jesus and Mother Mary. That is one used up grunt."

"Forgot to smile too."

"Sheeit. Listen up grunts. As long as you are alive and in this man's army, you are a grunt. If you've been through what the guy in the cage has been through, then dead or alive you are not just a grunt, you are a soldier. Is that clear?"

"Completely clear Sergeant. Thank you for clearing up this detail in military nomenclature for me, Sergeant. Permission to ask a question?"

"Ask your question."

"How can you tell it's a human being in that cage. I've seen butcher shops where the meat looked more lively."

"That's why we are going in to ace the target."

"Why us?"

"This is our third Lurp job this month."

"Sheeit, don't go turning into a bunch of babies on me. When a full Bird Colonel tells us to do a job, well then we shut up and soldier. Is that clear?"

They all rushed to assure the sergeant it was clear, but nobody thought this had much to do with some bird colonel's heart felt desire. You don't see many black flyers in Vietnam. The only two things you could tell for sure about the guy in the cage was that he was black and that he had once been wearing a flight suit. Web was obviously taking this more personally than a Sergeant should. I didn't plan on telling him that. I was just a second lieutenant. I didn't know how to shine my boots properly yet, much less know how to fill in the required paperwork for shining my boots in a combat zone. Web kept me alive and we both knew it. It was part of the proper function of Sergeants to keep shavetail lieutenants alive in combat zones.

"Any questions?"

"First we kill him, then we do the cutting or the other way around?" About a month before, Ric had lost a cousin to the VC. His cousin had been tortured to death. Ric was maybe a little too personally involved to be doing this kind of

work. On the other hand, shooting people is as personal as jock itch. I had a feeling that the longer I was in Vietnam the more personal it was going to get.

"I'm thinking we ace him and then do an escape and evasion drill. These huts behind the guy in the cage are filled with rats, roaches, and Viet Cong. I just want to do the job and get out of there. I don't want any medals. I also don't want to write any letters telling your mammas how brave you were. I get tired of writing dreck like, 'gee ma'am I'm sorry the remains of your son fit just fine in a paper bag, but you still get a whole flag to cover it with.' Do I make myself clear?

"Anybody that is planning on dying this mission just get your note home written up for me before we get on the chopper. It would be nice to tell the folks back home something original for a change."

"Yes sir." All the guys snapped off a salute. I saluted back.

Web summed up the mission. "We shoot the son of a bitch, give him a manicure and trim job, stuff it in his mouth and tuck in an Ace of Spades. We cut off the guy's right middle finger and get out of there alive. Oh, and let me remind you that Cong snipers prefer shooting officers. If you guys think you have now clearly established who is the officer in this coffeeklatch, perhaps we should move out and at least make it harder to hit the lieutenant."

I instantly crouched and moved towards cover. It must have been the briefing with the bird Colonel that resurfaced all those saluting reflexes. Line officers just didn't do much saluting in the field unless they were trying to get some jerk shot, then everybody saluted like mad, at every opportunity. Half the time the VC took the hint. The rest of the time somebody fragged the guy and they wrote it up as 'friendly fire.' Web's approach to doing his job was a combination of military formality and a home for wayward boys. I liked Web's style.

Pretty much this was a standard Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol kind of job. Nobody said Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. They just said Lurp and spelled it LRRP in the duty roster. Nobody said CIA either. It didn't matter if you could

spell CIA, they didn't want any reports written about their part in this kind of mission. If we ached the target, we always put down 'area clear' and listed our casualties. If we missed, then we put down a location for the last sighting and recommended a follow-up strike.

Nobody liked doing follow-up strikes. The target knew he was hot and that made him harder to find and tricky to ace. It wasn't just a matter of getting the guy dead. It was also about getting him dead in ugly ways. We always took away part of the body, because some of the gooks believe you cannot get into heaven if you aren't all there. If part of the target is missing, they aren't sure if he talked first. It makes them change plans on short notice.

When you are interrogating a guy, you can cut off a finger or an ear and then negotiate for its return in exchange for information. It doesn't work even half the time, but it works often enough to make it a valuable way to save lives. That is the point of interrogation, to get the information you need as fast as possible and save grunt's lives. At least that is the official explanation. I tried to believe the official explanation so I could sleep nights.

I was building up a list of reasons why I did things I didn't want to think about and a glossary of informal military jargon to say things I didn't want to say. I just hoped the list would hold up after my tour. Sometimes I was afraid that back in the states, they might seem like a list of rationalizations and evasive euphemisms.

A lot of Vietnam was going to fall between the lines of history. Maybe that is how it always is with wars and history? The unwritten, unstated parts were the most important. For example, the Bird Colonel didn't tell us we had to get out alive to successfully complete the mission, we just automatically added that part to the mission objective.

The six of us almost made it out clean. Jack was the last man on the chopper. That wasn't an accident. Jack was the first man to reach the chopper. He turned, dropped to one knee, and started his version of Custer's last stand. Jack was a

half-breed Seminole, but if there is one thing Vietnam did, it heightened ethnic awareness. The Chicanos kept track of the Hispanic leaders back in the states and the brothers were following the news on the Black Panther Party.

Indians were starting to see themselves as a national movement rather than individual tribes. Jack identified with the Sioux. I don't think Osceola's body count impressed Jack, so he went looking for role models. He liked the Apache style, but he liked the Sioux body counts. Once, we had a long discussion about the Asian migration of Indians into the Americas. I think he was trying to figure out if Atilla the Hun and the great Khans were relatives on his mother's side.

Jack carried a bolt action 30-06 rifle decorated with beads, brass tacks, and an eagle feather. He shot that rifle with iron sights. It had a scope when Jack liberated it from the armory, but Jack dumped the scope the first time he snagged it on the brush.

He didn't need a telescope. With that rifle, if Jack could see you at all, he could hit you. He could smoke through a full magazine and each shot was another dead cavalry man. Well, in this case, it was a dead Viet Cong, but it was all the same to Jack. It was fine with me if Jack felt like refighting Little Big Horn, just as long as he stayed out of Cambodia.

Right now, Custer's boys weren't doing so good. The VC started with about sixty of them against the six of us. Jack was punctuating the statement that they hadn't brought enough men to get the job done. This gave the rest of us time to make it to the chopper, bail in the door, and yell like bloody murder.

"Let's go, let's go!"

At the same time we were all trying to provide some cover fire for Jack. The chopper was already moving when Jack hit the door. It was already ten feet off the ground when we started pulling him in. It was already a hundred feet off the ground when they hit him.

If Jack had been a regular sized guy I could have hung on to him when he jerked with the impact of the bullet, but Seminoles are big people. Jack always told us he was the baby of the family. Jack also said he was the only half-breed brother and the runt of the litter to boot. Jack was six feet five inches tall and weighed just under three hundred pounds. Did I mention Jack wasn't fat? Jack wasn't fat. I guess runts run on the biggish side down in the Everglades.

I saw this ACLU type give Jack a hard time for saying he was a half breed. Jack took a Coors can and bit off the top. He held the jagged steel edge against the guy's throat while he asked him which part he was supposed to be ashamed of, his Irish father or his Indian mother? No good answer was forthcoming so Jack and Web grabbed the guy's boxers, jerked them hard enough to make him sing soprano, and ran him out the doorway into the street. We all took the hint. If Jack wanted to tell people he was a half-breed Seminole, that was fine with us. Maybe it was his way of thumbing his nose at his brothers.

Web put the final stamp on it. "Sheeit, some of my best friends are Irish, but I wouldn't want my sister to marry one. Now, if my mother shined up to a pair of Irish eyes, that would be her own business." Everybody laughed at the joke. People tended to laugh at Web's jokes. If they didn't, the rest of us would see to it that they did. We all looked after each other as best we could.

Sometimes we didn't like what we saw. We watched in horror as Jack did a half gainer with a double reverse back flip into some nice soft tree branches. He bounced from bough to bough, each bough breaking as he hit it. Jack caromed off a tree trunk and slid the last twenty feet to the ground. We all had a good view, because we never lost sight of Jack when the helicopter pilot swung that crate around.

The helicopter pilot had been a real sport about going back for Jack. He only protested once, just before Ric stuck the Ingram's suppresser up his nostril. A suppresser isn't actually a silencer. Suppressers just make an automatic weapon

sound more like a sewing machine than a gun. If you are walking through the jungle and you hear a sewing machine, you have a problem. Ric was real delicate and didn't try to shove it all the way up the nostril. That would have probably interfered with the pilot's ability to fly. The Lord only knows how nervous the poor guy must have been.

The pilot did a jig and jog with the chopper, which let the other four of us stage our own version of Custer's last stand. I think the VC may have already been kind of upset with Jack's version. It must have looked like we were coming back for scalps. They cut and ran for it. There weren't a lot of them left. We went right on tidying up the neighborhood.

We didn't have room to set the chopper down, so Johnson and Web went out the door on jump lines. The jump lines were short of the ground, so the guys dropped the last five or six feet. They ran over to Jack who wasn't doing a lot of moving, grabbed him and started dragging him towards the nearest clearing maybe fifty yards away.

Ric stayed with the pilot's nose. Harris and I continued to use up ammo faster than the rate of inflation in third world countries. A couple of Cong turned and looked like they were considering getting back into the party. I got one. Harris got the other. Black pajamas were absolutely incorrect attire for this social occasion.

It didn't take more than twenty seconds for the three on the ground to make it to the clearing. The second they were in a clear patch, the pilot jerked that chopper down and we were out. Everybody grabbed something and threw Jack at the chopper door. It was one, two, three style except we all did it on 'one'. Adrenaline is a great help when you've got a busy schedule and you're trying to get the hell out of Dodge before sundown.

Jack was breathing. Somehow we all expected that. Jack was unconscious and somehow we all expected that too, because the back of Jack's head was pushed

kind of flat and there was stuff oozing from underneath the hairline. It wasn't exactly blood, and it wasn't Brylcream either. We knew Jack needed a medic fast.

I don't know if the helicopter pilot crossed any blue lines going back to base. I never asked him where we were. I was just glad he knew which way was home. He was busy getting us there with considerable haste and dispatch. He kept glancing at Ric who was tearing down the suppresser and cleaning it carefully.

Helicopters are noisy and vibrate at high speed. We must have been pretty close to the red line because that chopper was twisting and doing the jerk like James Brown playing to the home-town crowd. You know where he wasn't all reserved, demure, and shy for the white folks, but just relaxing, hanging loose, and having fun.

One surprising thing about Vietnam was the music. The helicopters played music so you knew which one was yours. The FNGs always tried to catch the first one that came along instead of waiting for their ride. Trouble was you were taking up somebody else's place and could miss your own bus in the shuffle. That was only one of the reasons why FNG did not mean favorite new guy. The other was that the wrong people tended to get dead in these kinds of mix-ups. Nobody likes a horsethief. Since helicopters are air cavalry units, being a chopper snitch was about the same as being a horsethief. First thing you knew, guys were humming, "Happy Trails to You."

The CIA played music hoping to stun the VC into submission with the Rolling Stones. I personally always thought they should have used Perry Como or Lawrence Welk. Some of the brothers played music from short-wave radios guaranteed to pick up the BBC. Nobody listened to the BBC. There had to be some other good things about Vietnam. I'm sure there were. I just can't remember any.

The best thing about Vietnam was leaving. If Jack lived, he was out of there and headed for home. Actually, Jack had a ride back to the world no matter which

way it turned out. If he lived, he was probably going to have a permanent headache.

His brothers would probably appreciate getting their gator bait back. Did I mention his brothers used Jack for gator bait when he was a kid? He always said so. He usually got white knuckled when he talked about it. Sometimes you got the feeling Jack considered Vietnam basic training for his next meeting with his brothers. I didn't think the gators would mind if Jack had some medals and stuff, so he would probably still make good gator bait if he lost the fight with his brothers. On the other hand, Jack could go into politics.

The United States Army had certainly taught Jack the basics of politics. You carefully study the opposition. You don't shoot the main guy. You shoot the organization man who is making everything run smoothly, and you stick an ace of spades in his mouth along with some other odds and ends. I could see it now, the United States of Florida, Columbus go home. If Jack lived.

If they hadn't hit Jack, we'd have all been screaming and yelling with laughter and relief and gratitude to the United States Army for getting us the hell out of wherever we weren't. Jokes that would never be funny again would be absolutely the funniest things we'd ever heard. Laughter is Mama Nature's way of metabolizing excess adrenaline. It also covers up the shakes, which are another way of metabolizing adrenaline, but guys are afraid the shakes might be interpreted as something else. Everybody would have a hard on. Danger does that. Everybody would be thinking about getting something to eat when we got back. Danger does that too. With Jack lying there making snuffling noises and the helicopter wailing and dancing, everyone was dead quiet. We just looked at each other in exhaustion. We still had the hard-ons. We were probably still hungry, but we were also stunned. Jack was our token iron-man, substitute super-hero. Jack was our luck. In combat, like other blood sports, superstition tends to get a hold of a guy's head. If we lost Jack it was going to be tough to

keep it together as a squad. That would mean any of us could die. We knew that, but Jack let us pretend it wasn't true.

I patted my pocket for a cigarette. The habit of patting your pockets in times of stress goes on far longer than the habit of smoking. I realized I'd lost the target's right index finger. The only thing over my heart was one of P. C. Wren's French Foreign Legion novels. It was one of the last ones, where the Foreign Legion is in Vietnam.

I hated the French for their Vietnamese present to the United States, but I still identified with the grunts in the French Foreign Legion. It was the nineteenth century's version of the draft. Wren's characters had lives that meant no more than smoke to the French people. The Foreign legion was just a way of getting the dirty work done. I had a life like that too. I had a feeling that for the rest of my life, Vietnam was going to be a dirty word for a dirty business.

I didn't believe we were making a difference. Nobody here believed we were making a difference anymore. People back home didn't think we were making a difference. Shit, an actress I'd always admired was up in North Vietnam now giving comfort to the enemy. She won her academy award portraying a hooker. Maybe she was a method actor and was now working on her next big part as a traitor? Maybe I'd think it was the best movie I ever saw? Maybe, I wouldn't live to see it? Maybe, they could pull us out of here if they were going to give it all back like Korea? Maybe not.

Had we become the enemy, the American Foreign Legion? Were we the twentieth century's 'legion of the damned', the gutter trash and petty criminals who would never return home? Were we headed for one strange land after another to march and kill until we died? It was one thing to want us out of the war, but some people seemed to want us dead, too.

Steve, a tunnel rat I ran into once in a while, had just finished thirty days leave in the states. He didn't want to talk about it. Could it be worse back home in

Kansas than here in Vietnam? Has heaven become hell? Damned, I wanted a cigarette. Most guys carried their pack of cigarettes over their heart or else they carried one of the little, give-away Bibles. I don't smoke. I don't believe in hellfire and brimstone. I don't think that a book would stop a modern bullet either.

That's how the Bible thing got started. According to grunt myth, after a battle, a grunt found a bullet in his Bible. This was supposedly World War I. Now lots of grunts carry a Bible in their left blouse pocket. I know a Jewish guy who carries a Bible complete with New Testament because he says the Torah isn't thick enough to serve God's purpose. Even if Bibles don't stop a bullet, they can give comfort in time of emergency. The paper is on the stiff side for rolling joints, but not too bad. It does smoke pretty harsh, must be all the hellfire and brimstone.

"Anybody got a joint?"

I knew nobody had a cigarette. Web made it clear that smoking reduced our life expectancy in combat. Everybody shrugged. If they did have a cigarette they wouldn't admit it in front of the sergeant. However, once the mission was over, a couple of tokes of grass was OK. It was true that the chopper could fall out of the sky in the next moment and we would all find ourselves dead or fighting to avoid getting that way. However, we tried to treat pickup and the trip back to base as the job over phase of the mission. You can't stay high on nerves forever. Sometimes you just have to lower your reality quotient by a couple of notches.

"Did any of you guys happen to see where I dropped the guy's finger.?"

"Oh man. Shit. I ain't going back for it."

"What the hell they want the guy's finger for anyway?"

"It don't matter. They told us to get it, that means we're supposed to get it and bring it back to them."

"Sheeeit."

"Have you checked your pants pockets?"

"I didn't put it in my pants pockets. I put it here in my blouse pocket of my BDU's. Now it's missing."

"Check your pants pockets anyway man. Maybe you moved it or something."

I patted down all six pockets in my Battle Dress Uniform, which is the Army's way of saying camouflage knickers. But then hell, the army calls a ball point pen a reproducing medium.

"Nada."

"Check them out better. Sometimes things get down in the creases. You can't feel stuff unless you grub around in there."

"Right. Left lower front pocket. Piano wire, thirty feet of det. cord."

"Sheeit, were you planning to blow up the world? That's enough detonator cord for some serious fireworks."

I just kept on digging. "One spare grenade fuse. A pack of C-4."

"The best thing about plastic explosive is that you can mold it into an ashtray, use it all night to stub out your roaches and then blow up the evidence in the morning. We could make a fortune selling evidence disposal dope ashtrays to the hippies back home."

"Could we send them to our favorite politicians already rigged for disposal?"

Ric wasn't going to get me going. "Two bottle caps from Red Cock beer. A box of .22 shells for the Ruger Automatic Pistols. A bunch of lint. Right lower front pocket. Two pair of dry socks, a pair of shorts, three bandannas, a shortie clip for the Mattel, some lint. Upper left front pocket, a pocket knife with a fish fillet back, a spare field dressing, a dirty snot rag, and nine rounds of 30-06 for Jack."

We all carried spare ammo for Jack. He did good work and a 30-06 round is about three times heavier than the issue .223 we shot in our M16's. Actually, Mattel only made the plastic forearm guards for the rifles, but it was definitely stamped right there for anybody to see: Made by Mattel.

"A deck of cards."

"With four extra aces and two spare jokers."

"Right front pocket. Some rubbers, extra large."

"Sheeit boy, what you doing with my rubbers?"

I let that go by. I'll be damned if I was going to feed Web a straight line with a racial stereotype. Web had a way of getting on these horses and riding them into the ground. A couple of months ago he had prepared a complete requisition list for soul food c-rations that was both witty and improbable. Problem was he submitted it and then kept sending queries for his missing cases of muskrat marmalade and turnip greens quiche. Just last week he had given a supply sergeant a hard time about the officer's club snagging his fricasseed fatback and honey roast hog jowls. If I just ignored the hook maybe I'd be OK.

"Some change, another handkerchief, a paratrooper switchblade with the nifty bright orange grips that glow in the dark, a short clip of .223. Right back pocket, a banana clip and a pair of underwear, black lace, present for a sick friend."

"Pretty snazzy."

"Wish I had some sick friends that appreciated them kind of presents. Everybody I know would probably think those were a shower cap or something."

"Gourmet dinner napkin more likely."

"We could go to Saigon, make some friends, and pay them to be sick so we could give them some of this stuff."

"If were going to pay some new friends to be sick, we could probably get them to wear something more creative than a pair of black lace panties."

I ignored them and continued with the inventory. The only reason I'd started in the first place was to give them an excuse to think about something else besides Jack lying on the chopper's floor. "A pocket knife, a wad of string and a set of lock picks. Left back pocket, money, a banana clip of .223, a letter from home."

"Keeps that one close to his heart, don't he?"

"I've seen her picture. I'm surprised he don't keep it closer to something else."

"She'd get all wrinkled if he kept it there. She's too young for wrinkles."

"Left back pocket, a deck of cards."

"Those are the ones with the artsy photos that he picked up in Hong Kong."

"Hey man can I look at the ten of clubs again?"

"Pervert."

"Great treasures of the Loo."

"That's it. That's everything."

"Check your right blouse pocket."

"Memo pad, four reproducing mediums, four loose shells for Jack, a Swiss army knife and an escape and evasion kit."

"Check your harness pockets."

"Sheeit. The man does not have the damned finger. If one of you guys took it for a joke, then give him the damned finger."

Instantly I was staring at three fingers, but they weren't Vietnamese.

"Sheeit."

"Maybe they won't care if we don't turn up with the finger?"

"Sheeit. You guys shut up and let me work this out. Lieutenant. I will say one thing Sir. You do pile on the non-commissioned officer's burden Sir."

"What else are second lieutenants for, Sergeant?"

Web thought all the way back to the base. Everyone was quiet, but it wasn't the quiet of just thinking about Jack. They were all trying to figure out what Web would come up with. I had a plan too, in case the Sergeant's fell through. The men expected me and Web to take care of them. It was like being their parents on a goofy television sitcom. I was the good natured but bumbling father and everybody knew who was a mother. It was good to have a Sergeant who could handle backing up his Second Lieutenant when things got rough. Things were going to be rough without Jack. If he died then we could lose a couple of guys

right off the mark. If he lived, then we were going to be short handed but somehow still invulnerable.

I leaned forward and told the chopper pilot to set me down at the edge of the base, then take Jack on in. In about three minutes you could see the long gouges in the dirt. We'd just taken back this position. The dozers were still taking care of the VC's contribution towards making Vietnam South-East Asia's garden spot.

When the chopper sat down, our guys were still semi-comatose and watching Web. I gave a blanket order. "Get Jack to the Medics and do what Web says." Then I turned to Web and yelled "belt and braces." That's what this Australian guy always said when he meant, "back me up." I didn't want to give any orders that would be specific and awkward to explain.

I didn't need help with this part, maybe Web wouldn't need help with his. Either way, between us, we'd have the problem covered. I stooped down and ran under the chopper blades. At the edge of the first long gouge, I looked down, nothing. I wondered if the extra trench meant we were expecting a return engagement soon? I'd be damned if I was gonna walk all the way around it, so I just jumped and slid down the six feet into the trench, ran and clawed my way up the other side. I probably couldn't have made it so easily in the dirt back home, but Vietnam is stuck together with something stronger than dirt. If I'd stopped moving, I might not have made it up and out of there, but I just kept going right on up and out of the slit trench.

I walked over to the next one. This one would do just fine. I jumped down into the trench, which was not my smartest move. Stuff flew in all directions and started oozing into the perf holes in my jungle boots. I whipped my K-bar off my shoulder harness, knelt down, and started feeling fingers, looking for one that wasn't too puffy with pus.

About the third finger I hit the jackpot. I chopped that puppy off in precisely the same move used to dock a hound-dog's tail. I ripped the title page out of the

novel I was wearing next to my heart, wrapped the finger in it and stuck it in my left blouse pocket. With my boots all slick I couldn't make it up the side of the trench, so I walked a couple of hundred yards one squilching step at a time.

I decided I was throwing away these jungle boots. Then I realized I could probably sell them for fifty bucks just like they were. Rumor had it there was a major paying five bucks a pair for ears. I looked around and sure enough there were some ears missing. I decided I'd rather make money playing cards.

Back at base, I went straight to the operations headquarters for my debriefing. The other guys had already checked in and gone to get a shower. Jack was stable. The Bird Colonel at the desk asked the usual questions. I gave the usual answers. We both did some lying.

When we were just about through, he asked me if I had anything for him? I figured out that Web's idea must not have worked which kind of surprised me. I shrugged and reached in my pocket and tossed him the finger. It hit his desk with a dull plop. The fluids from the finger had already soaked through the paper. I decided to sell the blouse to the major too.

"This is the goods?"

"Close enough for government work."

"Interesting. Damned interesting. I think I know why your target was such a problem for us."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, they must have laughed when this guy sat down at the piano, look at this."

He reached into his desk and took out a kitchen matchbox. He slid it open, used a reproducing medium to maneuver the finger over to the edge of the desk where he caught it in the little box and then handed it to me. In the box were four more fingers. All of them looked fresher than mine.

The Code

by james myers

"I'M IN THE GOOD GUY'S ARMY." The light Colonel wasn't drunk. He meant it. Maybe it was just because we had been doing so damned much work for the CIA lately that he hit a raw nerve.

"That's easy to say, you're attached to the medical corps. The worst thing you people have to do is tag them and bag them. If you're in the good guy's army, what the hell army am I in?" I, of course, knew the answer, or thought I did. I was drunk.

The Doctor had a quick and ready reply. "That's easy, you're in the regular army. That's what the USRA stands for, uncle sugar's regular army."

I hate guys with facile answers. Especially when the answers are good ones.

Web put in his shiny new pennies. "Sheeit, You're in the Army of the Continental Congress, the Army of the Potomac, The Army to End all Wars, The Army to Make the World Safe for Democracy, just the same as me. The problem is all those armies had a cause worth fighting for and we can't find one here in Vietnam."

On the other hand, I liked some good answers better than others.

"So, we're in the Army of the Corruptible Congress, the Pontiac Gas Guzzler, the Army to Fund All Whores, and to Make the World Savor Democracy?"

Jackson was definitely on a roll tonight. The bar girls perked up and started drifting our way. Web waved them off. They pouted, sat down and went back to sucking on their beers real slow. Funny how they could make a beer last an hour and a GI couldn't hardly make it longer than three or four minutes.

Jackson was fast with his mouth. It didn't make him many friends. Lucky for him he was in our platoon, where the rule was 'We may shoot you, but if you belong, then we're buddies forever.'

The medic was moaning again. "I spent all day cutting and hacking."

Web and I looked at each other. "So did we."

"I'm just sick to death of the whole thing."

"So are we." The guy wasn't listening to anything we were saying. He was just babbling his thoughts aloud in the anonymity of a Vietnam bar, where nobody listens, nobody remembers, and nobody is ever going to repeat these conversations back home.

"Tagging and bagging isn't our hardest job. You don't know what it's like to have them shoot up a perfectly good surgical repair. Patching them up and shipping them back to the lines is the tough one."

"There aren't any lines in this war. At least not any real ones." Jackson was on a hot toot tonight. There is nothing like cocaine to make you hypersensitive to the word 'lines'.

"Yes there are. Every line in a letter telling somebody their bounding baby boy has met a bouncing betty, or the Vietnamese equivalent, is a real line. You ever try writing to somebody that their kid is coming home from the war in a trash bag?"

"This isn't a war. It's a police action."

"That's the difference. Police work is steady. Wars end. Cops get tired, retire, and go into the private sector. Soldiers don't have any job security. They get discharged and go home, alive, to homes where everyone wishes they were dead."

Jackson's highs were getting lower. His logic was starting to run down, too.

"Not me, I'm an orphan."

Damned. We had the whole bar in this conversation.

"The only way you go home from Vietnam is in a sad sack or in a sad state. This war is going to go on forever."

Shit, there were some Marines at the corner table.

"Nope, we are going to lose it or win it. This one isn't like Korea." Web knew about Korea first hand. That's where the army broke his cherry.

"God I hate this fucking place. I want to go home to Redbank County, Mississippi and see what I can do about the assholes there."

"Sheeit. Jackson, you ain't doing nothing about them assholes. They are the assholes in charge, the good old boys, the Viet Cong in white sheets."

"Army taught me a trade and by God I intend to use it to get some freedom in Redbank County."

Jackson had obviously read the induction center's propaganda.

"Sheeit, you're just going to wind up wearing a rope and waving to the crowd from part way up a sycamore tree."

"They don't lynch people in Mississippi anymore."

Mr. I'm-a-doctor-I-know-everything was now weighing in on the race question. Sometimes the guys with the facile answers don't know shit.

"Sheeit."

"Excuse me? Excuse me! Excuse me all to hell, they don't lynch people anymore in Mississippi? They don't lynch them any less either."

"Well, maybe, but things are getting better."

"Sheeit."

"Yo bro, you don't want to be messing with the brother of color. He is related to the bad-ass Jackson's."

The marines had landed and so far they were on our side.

"Next thing you know, you are going to be explaining all about the civil rights movement and filling me in on how it is to be Black in White Man's America, right?" Jackson was definitely going to go for it. Sometimes the guys with the facile answers step on their dicks.

"No, I'm going to tell you I'm upset at the way things are going over here and trying to make sense of it all. I obviously struck a nerve."

"You ever think about being a dentist?"

The Light Colonel stood up stiffly and marched from the bar. There are just some insults a decent man won't tolerate.

"Sheeit, why didn't you just go all the way and ask him if he ever thought about being a lawyer? If you're gonna insult a man's sense of himself, you might as well put the whole hog in the barbecue pit. Go back to your hooch and settle down. You could find yourself looking up at that man sometime when he has a scalpel in his hand and you got your dick in yours. He is a damned good doctor and you know it."

"He's white."

"Sheeit, there you go again. Joe Mamma is white too, does that make him bad?"

"It means he don't know shit. Sergeant Web, you know you tell him what to do."

"Sheeit. That's because he's been to college, not because he's white. No matter how much he may regret it, for the rest of his life, he is going to have to hang his head and admit he is a college boy. It's the white man's burden. You shouldn't give a guy a hard time about things he can't do nothing about. That's discrimination. You keep talking this trash and you're gonna talk yourself into believing racism is about black and white and then you gonna be just like those boys underneath the sheets. If there is one thing them boys hate worse than a Black man, it is a racist nigger. You better go someplace civilized when you get back to the world. Back in Redbank County them boys will string you up for sure."

That was surely Web's magnum opus. In a bar where everybody is carrying a gun there are some discussions it is good to stay out of. I hit the button on my switchblade and started cleaning my nails. There is no substitute for personal hygiene.

"So where can I go that's civilized?"

"Your hooch, till you sober up. You need to sleep it off."

"I'm not drunk and I'm not tired."

"Sheeit. You're probably right, you're young. But I am old, I am drunk, and I am tired. Now take a hike back to the hooch."

"Dammit, I..."

I slammed the switchblade into the bartop. "That was an order, not a suggestion, Corporal Jackson. Do what Web says."

"Yes Sir." Jackson left his drink on the bar, stood up and marched out. I have no doubt that he marched all the way back to his hooch. Jackson understood the proper function of Sergeants, even if he was a little vague on the role of second lieutenants.

"Sheeit. You honkies got such a delicate sense of command."

"Web, you're a sergeant. You're the delicate one. I'm the officer."

"Sheeit."

Web's voice carried across the room because everything had kind of stopped when I slammed my knife into the bartop. I nonchalantly started to pull it out and put it back in my pocket, except the damned thing wouldn't budge. I tried rocking it a little from side to side, but that wasn't happening either. By now I had an audience. I shoved hard and then jerked. That was a no go.

"Pour some beer on it."

The marines had a standard solution for most problems.

"Sheeit. That will just make the wood swell and then it won't ever come out."

Oh good. Now I had kibitzers. I got up and went to piss. When I came back, the marines were standing on the countertop. They had a bar towel wrapped around the knife, and were trying to wiggle it to and fro. Web was supervising.

"Careful, don't break the man's knife. That knife was a personal gift from the head of the Mafia."

"Ooohh."

"How did he get a present like that?"

God, it was drunk out tonight.

"Be cool." Web kind of nodded in my direction. Guys turned to stare at me with new respect. The room was thick with quiet.

I just said one word. "Omerta."

"What did he say?"

"Omerta. The Mafia code of silence."

"Ooohh."

"Leave the knife in the bar. Come on Web, were outta here."

Outside the bar, I looked sideways at Web. He was grinning his brains out.

"The Mafia, Web? How would I have met the head of the Mafia in Kansas?"

He just shrugged, grinned, and said one word, "Omerta????"

"Damn it, Web, I saw it in a movie."

The marines left the knife in the bar. The bartender cut the bottom out of a gallon vinegar jug, ground a little groove into the bar, glued the jug down over the knife, and stuck a cork in the top. It may still be there encased in a poor man's museum jar. Even Uncle Ho doesn't mess with the Mafia.

Reverencing the Word

by james myers

BUDDHISTS ARE NICE PEOPLE for the most part. If they are the meek who will inherit, then I guess that is OK with me. Buddhists are usually vegetarians and believe in the sanctity of life, all life, even worthless life, even mine. Over the monsoon season, I'd gotten to be friends with a young monk who called himself Barney probably because he got tired of hearing Westerners mispronounce his name. It wasn't such a hard name to pronounce, you just had to pay attention and practice a little, but then that isn't the Western style. Anyway, we struck up a friendship, just your basic guy in a yellow bathrobe and his sidekick, a grunt, pardon me, make that UN observer, in fatigues with the sleeves torn out and Fuck You written across the back in gentle flowing script accented with embroidered blue flowers.

Barney was Japanese, from Formosa, one of those little islands that has been kicked around like a soccer ball for centuries. Thirteen or fourteen generations ago, Barney's family wound up in Formosa and stuck through subsequent changes in ownership. What Barney was doing in this part of Southeast Asia, my aunt Hanna hadn't a clue, and neither did I. Of course, I didn't have an aunt Hanna either, but I like colorful expressions. I'm the guy that tried to teach the locals to say y'all. Barney and I had a lot in common. He wasn't born here. He wasn't a refugee, driven here when somebody torched his village. He wasn't drafted. He was just here.

Here, was a little square in Saigon. The scene was the same as yesterday's--a line of monks sitting all folded up like pretzels, chanting *om* with enough intensity my chest rattled with sympathetic movements. The monks were getting ready to die, one at a time, one a day, till the war ended or they ran out of

monks—whichever came first. There were a lot of monks, but this war was good business. In a pinch, I'd bet on business to make it first to the finish line.

It was another old guy's turn today. As it got closer to noon, he glanced up, checked the sun's fiery progress in its journey, and stood up to take one of his own. He rose gracefully, rising from a folded leg position to a standing one in a single fluid motion that was alive with inner understanding of his body's functions. He was in complete control of them and everything in his personal universe. It was the sort of move you expect at a ballet, and which upon execution, discerning members of the audience tap their programs politely against their hands in a quiet murmuring susurration of appreciation.

There was a wind-chime hanging from the eave of a small repair shop counterpoint to the old guy's choreography. He took a moment to turn slowly, one complete revolution of his world. With a brief pause, he sort of checked each of the views beginning with the dusty street at his feet, then glancing at the people and places that made up this busy crossroads farmer's market on the back streets of Saigon. Finally, he looked up to each far horizon. He scanned each quarter for a bit longer, maybe two beats. He had the look I've seen on men looking for snipers in the trees while a friend lies dead at their feet. It was like that except he wasn't crouched and hiding from whoever was looking back, he was just standing alone on open ground. I looked with him, there were no signs of the war today: no helicopters, no smoke, no distant crump of shells or tattle of small arms in the distance, sounding very little different than firecrackers on Chinese New Year. There was only a wind-chime dancing in a gentle breeze and sounding soft tones that carried to me across the hush of the square.

The old monk walked to the center, his saffron colored robe flowing like flames dancing at a bon fire. He set down, assumed the lotus posture and did it. It was over quickly, but not quickly enough for my tastes. I still don't eat barbecue.

Afterwards, Barney chanted awhile with the other monks, the sanitation and disposal people did their stuff, and I drank some gin, about a pint of it, pretty fast. I stood up when Barney did. The only difference is that he rose in that fluid, I'm-alive-motion, while I jerked erect and then fell over, out cold. It was OK, Barney got me back to my hooch. I slept it off and woke next morning with a nasty suspicion that a cobra had pissed in my mouth the night before.

There was a note from Barney to come by the monastery, as early as possible. It was written in his beautiful hand and the English was precise, just as was his accent. Barney graduated Summa Cum Laude from UCLA in California.

I staggered down the street, navigating between water buffalo and bicycles with sort of a broken field motion that would have made me the soccer player of the century if I could have done it at a run instead of at sort of a falling stumble. It must have been a market day, or why would there have been water buffalo in crowded Saigon? On the other hand, I didn't ask if anyone else saw them. I sometimes see some strange stuff when I've been bottle-fed. I didn't step in any water buffalo shit either. I'm not sure if that is a good sign.

The monks were expecting me. They let me in the gate and motioned me around towards the back of the temple. I immediately thought about an ambush, glancing left and right, checking out fire control lanes and potential kill zones, but there was no ambush. I walked past the brightly painted temple with its reds and golds to find Barney standing by a little fire, feeding it with squares of paper. When I was close enough, I realized it was calligraphy, his calligraphy. The bright crimson stamp in the lower corner was his chop. In horror, I watched the fire touch and then consume the bright red mark, the black brush strokes had already died. Barney reached for the last scroll to feed the fire.

"What are you doing? Why are you burning your work?"

I recognized the watered, blue-silk backing on the scroll.

"Stop, that is exquisite, don't burn that." I pulled the scroll from his hands before he could give it to the flames. It was a haiku with brush strokes in the Zen style they call flying white. I knew this poem, it was Buson's. Buson was one of the four classical masters of the haiku. I'd first seen the poem in kind of a cheesy little gift-edition by some greeting card company. It had a lot of extraneous capitalization and Western-style punctuation including a period, but it was still a nice haiku. I'd framed one of the best of my attempts at this calligraphy, not so much because it was good, but because it would make a good 'before' example. I had yet to produce a good 'after' example, but I was making progress with Barney. I reread the haiku I now knew well, but I read it with new eyes. It was as though snatching it from the flames added something to its meaning.

the scissors hesitate
before the white chrysanthemums
a moment
Buson

In my copies, like this one, I'd left out the punctuation and the capitals found in the gift book. Buson had certainly not wasted his life putting commas and periods into his poems. It was almost totally against the spirit of the haiku.

This poem had been one of the early practice pieces Barney used to demonstrate brush technique when I first became his student. I'd always admired calligraphy and this war gave me a chance to learn about something besides killing and death. I knew a hell of a lot about killing and death. I was good at it. I learned slowly about calligraphy. I wasn't good at it. Not yet anyway, maybe not ever. Barney was patient. He taught me to grind the ink, then load my brush with just the right amount for a stroke, then flow it out onto the paper. At first

he laughed and told me I wrote with a tiger's leap and a snake's tail because I always got too much ink in the beginnings of the stroke and sort of ran out towards the end.

"May I have this?"

"It is not a good example of my work. I was concentrating on the student when I wrote it. Watching you to see how you watched me." He held out his hand for the scroll and tilted his head questioningly toward the fire. I shook my head. "I have others for you." I tucked the scroll into my blouse. We went into the little barracks where the monks slept. In Barney's room there was a small box holding silk backed scrolls, each in the little place made for it. Each in its home. Each an exquisite example of the art of calligraphy, and thus very valuable. Each an original haiku that Barney had composed, thus doubly valuable in my eyes. There were only a dozen or so scrolls, but then the master Basho once said that you could labor a life to get two or three good haiku. These were good.

There was a second box that held Barney's calligraphy gear, the brushes and ink sticks and the stone to grind the ink, and the carved wooden mountain to hold the brushes. He handed both boxes to me.

"These are for you to hold for me. I am going on a journey and someone else will need this place tomorrow, so I would appreciate it if you would keep these till I see you again."

"When are you leaving? Why are you going away? I don't plan to stay after my hitch is up, how will I get these to you if you don't get back before then?"

"It is enough for you to hold them till I return. Please do so?"

"Why did you burn the other scrolls?"

"It is called reverencing the word. We burn scraps of paper that have served their purpose. It is a mark of respect for the word."

"You burned better work than most men could ever do. Better than I will ever do."

"No, you have the eye, you have the heart, you have the soul, you will become a good calligrapher."

"Thank you, sensei. I will work to make it so."

"Come back tomorrow, there will be someone here to continue your lessons."

I toted Barney's stuff back to my hooch. I was torn between honor over being trusted to hold these things and lust to unroll each scroll, sip a cup of tea and appreciate the poem and its execution. I brewed up some lapsang souchong. I loved the mountain tea's smoky resinous smell. I sipped slowly while looking at first one scroll then another. I think I was drifting subconsciously to avoid the realization that snapped-to-grid like a napalm-drop wrapping up a row of rice paddies.

I jumped up, scattering cup and scrolls and ran out the door heading towards the little square where the monks had been holding their protests for the last week.

The street leading to the square was choked with jeeps and rickshaws and people pushing to see. I could hear the monk's resonant buzz floating over the crowd.

"What's going on?"

"Amelican TEEVEE camera crew. Take pictures. Maybe you go home pretty soon now? Number one?"

"Number one." They didn't want us here. We didn't want to be here either. None of us believed we were winning any hearts and minds. The closest I had come was Barney and he wasn't from here either. Maybe when we went home, he would go home too?"

I shoved and pushed my way through the crowd until I could see. The chanting had stopped and then started again. As I broke through into the square, Barney snapped the wheel on my Zippo lighter. I must have dropped it yesterday.

The gasoline soaking his robe burst into flames and his saffron robe was a brighter shade of orange combined with smoky yellows and burnt blacks.

"Barney!" I ran across the square towards him, leaping over spectators, shoving my way around the television crew, who being American, shoved right back sending me sprawling full length to the ground. I jumped up and continued to run towards Barney.

He must have heard me, because he too had risen, wreathed in flames, using that fluid motion. He reached out his hand to me, then fell and the flames turned him to a blackened husk like a corn doll thrown into the harvest fire.

I knelt beside him. The flames burned out, leaving only a smear of greasy ashes and the bones. The sanitation and disposal people took him. I watched the sun with sightless eyes. White chrysanthemums danced.

“...he wasn't there again today...”

A haiku sequence by james myers

against the clock...the unread
greetings

first blood from the slit
folded paper hawk
with form-letter wings

seeing the enemy
only a smile and the already opened beer

in the pocket on jungle patrol
beau geste
and mao
close to my heart

clearing chopper pads
the jungle ripples away

far-off gunfire ...
waiting
 waiting

...watching

mortar fire—

walking

in

from

the

distance

point or drag—
short straw again

silent night

—

the first kill crying

for christmas
Bob Hope
round-eyed women
in
bathing suits

bob hope

a six-man Squad...
-this morning

your son was...
two letters
among thirty pieces of mail

at the door
in dress blues
bringing the letter home

her hands among fresh cut flowers

still alive in the slow afternoon heat
sweat on cold beer
and dancers

a spooky gentle touch
as I write your letter

marking his place with a twenty
in a black book with red letters

between each long drag –the point
–and smoke trickled from his mouth

warming the opium
against her dancer's body
your letter feels cool

sunset

waiting

with

unlit

cigarette

napalm

dying away

vanishing in smoke
the cobra
waiting waiting

rangers cooking snake
with your letter
and a coupon for
McDonalds

the wren and I
falling

ground

beneath machine gun fire
the bright green grass and bloody

napalm on wildflowers
again the scent of poppy
and again

—— faces as we count the dead
 theirs —and ours

warm winter rain ...
on cold wounds
and dead white scars

—in sensurround
apocalypse now and then

 her nervous smile
sidelong glances
 changing in the light

thorazine
no picnic fourth of july at the v.a.
hospital

the distance afterwards
on my back a map of vietnam

silent night
her scrawl
please come to the Christmas play

warm
yellow
smoke
lapsang souchong
in your old
Hall
a
n
i
h
c
cup

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who was not there.
I met him there again today
(I think he's from the CIA.)

graffiti in a bathroom
somewhere outside

Washington, DC

Anonymous

Probably taken from a children's book—

Counting Out

Collected by Carl Withers

Published 1946

Oxford University Press

New York, NY

Too Many Cooks

by james myers

I CAME BACK FROM VIETNAM hard as a hawk's toenails and meaner than a she-coyote in heat. My ex-girlfriend said I was a baby-killing son of a bitch when I asked for my engagement ring back. I wouldn't have bothered except it was my grandmother's. My grandmother would have whipped the fire out of me if I had come home without it. I asked nicely, hardly louder than a whisper in the dark. Her husband made her give it to me.

She was putting him through close order drill, before I'd cleared their front porch. I felt a little sorry for him. Only a little. She must have been pregnant before I shipped out. I would have claimed the baby if she'd asked. My mom and dad had a slew of kids and adopted three others that just seemed to need some belonging-to and belonging with. As far as I can see, kids are a yours, mine, and ours opportunity.

The little boy was black. To the best of my knowledge, the only black blood I've got was some shanty Irish and about a quart of O positive. I owe my life to a black sergeant. Maybe even more than one time. In combat, you can't always tell exactly who is watching your back, but if you consistently come out of the jungle walking, rolling, or flying low, then somebody was. We had a platoon that watched each others backs, mostly because of that sergeant. He had some strange rules, a little hard to adjust to, but they made a lot of sense as you gained a deeper understanding of the jungle and its predators.

I don't think I'll ever smoke another cigarette in my life. I used to chaw a little Red Man tobacco, but I gave that up too. Chewing over a plug, I couldn't smell the Cong's fish sauce. At least once, I might have walked the entire patrol into an ambush. Besides, the sergeant cheated when we drew straws for point and drag and I noticed I wasn't really getting my fair share of the point. Most guys

would have been glad to avoid the danger, but I was ashamed to have my buddies carrying part of my load. We just weren't that kind of a platoon.

We had mostly dangerous jobs, damned dangerous. Not more than our share, there were just a lot of damned dangerous jobs to go around. We lost a lot of men, about one every other week on average. We didn't count the ones we shot on purpose. Some guys just could not do their jobs.

It wasn't anything they could help. It was just the facts of life and death. They could not point their M-16's at the enemy and pull the trigger to save their lives, or anyone else's. Our platoon averaged an unusually large number of flesh wounds through the meat of the thigh. If you did the job right, they shipped them home with a medal and they were out of it cheap. If you screwed up and got a little too high, up a little too far into the buttock, then they were back in the jungle six weeks later. Unless they got lucky and died of an infection. It could happen. It was a better chance than they got from the VC.

Like I said, most of the guys in our platoon either died in action under circumstances where there wasn't a hell of a lot we could do about it, or they came home to face the dog shit at the end of their string. I did my string and came home to Coldwater, Kansas. Things had changed.

My mom had a scrapbook with articles about me and the war, cut out of the Coldwater Courier. You know the stuff, my picture in Class A's, my picture in fatigues with a heavy machine gun, my buddies in the barracks in olive drab boxers. They didn't print that one, but otherwise it was pretty complete, 'til the paper changed hands, and the new editor changed the editorial policy. She stopped our subscription, stopped clipping articles, and that left half a scrapbook. Mom finished it out with my letters and drawings sent home from Vietnam. The dead men seemed ghostly and distant in the drawings. In the slides I'd sent home they seemed alive and their smiles and eyes looked back at me in, I don't know, living color I guess. I burned the slides and kept the drawings.

I didn't go straight back to work. I had made a bunch of money in Hawaii on the trip back playing poker and fan tan. I had some things to catch up on. When you go away for a year, the music sounds different on the radio. You haven't seen all the latest movies, which were suddenly playing at the drive-in. You don't have a clue how Nebraska did, but you're pretty sure the game to see was them against Oklahoma. You just don't know the score.

In a small town, you can catch up on a lot of this important stuff hanging around the barber shop. I didn't mind them giving me a hard time about the length of my hair and the manicurist was nice. Some days I got a manicure and then thought about asking her if she did pedicures. I never did. She was just a high school kid and that's not my style. The guys kept telling me that getting to her would be like shooting frogs with a flashlight.

"Exactly my problem."

I did have some *mean* left to work out, but the old guys at the barbershop weren't targets. I was looking for peace-niks with attitudes and rednecks with 4-F draft-cards. I had some bumper stickers printed up that said, "Cowboys are better than sheep, ask a hippie." Those were usually good for one or two fights down in Dodge on Saturday nights. I lost a couple, but not many. It might have been better if I'd lost a few more.

I just kept letting my hair get longer and longer. That was usually good for the occasional loudmouth on the street totally unprepared for me to come swinging around hard, fast, and good-to-go. Most of them backed down. Bullies are usually cowards. One guy had the nerve to complain that I shouldn't go around looking like a pansy when I was really a hard-ass. I was stunned by his attitude. Maybe the right to bully rag is in some part of the Constitution I didn't memorize for high school civics class. On the other hand maybe dealing with bullies is one of those civic duties which good men are expected to take care of. That was covered in the Constitution.

Minerva, my niece, had mononucleosis the year I was in Vietnam and it screwed up her junior year pretty hard. Now she had to have every single credit or she wouldn't graduate on time. She was looking to marry a boy that was probably going into the army the day he graduated. Which just goes to show you how she might have made it to her junior year with very few credits to spare, and her senior year with just enough, if.

Her dad was dead, hit one night on the highway by a guy with a blood alcohol level higher than his IQ. He was good to me when I was a kid, so I'd always kind of looked out for her and her mom. Her mom was working three jobs to keep her only chick in buy-me-this and buy-me-that. That meant I went to school and talked to the principle about why he was under no circumstances going to invoke some obscure rule that would have kept the kid from graduating. It was the first time I really understood the bullshit that parents deal with from public school administrators, post-menopausal football coaches, brain-dead teachers, and other should-have-been-retired vermin.

As a school kid, on the other side of the line, I used to teepee their houses or paste wax their cars if they got too outrageous. Now the methods I'd learned in Vietnam seemed a trifle extreme. Taking the middle ground wasn't real comfortable. An inner voice was telling me, "Welcome to the adult world, soldier. Shut up and parent."

Turns out the kid needed some extra credit to make the difference between an A and a B in her home economics class. The teacher told her she could get that credit if she provided an outside speaker for the class. My Aunt Mina was the logical choice, but she is an independent old lady. She told Minerva to ask me to speak. What is more, Aunt Mina told Minerva to ask me to speak about cooking.

The week before, a cookbook had come in the mail addressed to me. As usual, my Aunt Mina opened my mail. It was a collection of recipes from guys who had

served in, or been attached to, Ranger units in Vietnam. Aunt Mina about laughed herself sick, which at eighty-two you might not think would take a lot. She guffawed over the recipe for Mouse-Si-Tongue contributed by one Ramon Flores. She chortled over Rat Roulade by Antonio Segovia. The snake recipes gave her the hysterical staccato hiccoughs. I'm not going to tell you about the recipes for insects and their effect on my Aunt Mina.

My Mother couldn't take anymore when Aunt Mina started calling out "here kitty, kitty", from the kitchen door every morning as the neighbor was backing out of the driveway on his way to work. What made this all very frightening to my family was that my Aunt Mina was a blue ribbon cook. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that Aunt Mina could whip out one of those recipes, take it to the county fair, and win another blue ribbon for her Poached Prairie Dog Parfait, Crow Carbonade, or some such critter even more disturbing, under a suitable nom-de-cuisine, of course.

Mom got the cookbook away from Aunt Mina much too late. Mina had already printed up a sample of recipes for cats, dogs, and other occasionally domestic animals and sent them to everybody in town with the Vet's, name, address, and "best wishes," forged thereon.

Mina considered the home economics class a new front vulnerable to sneak attack. She moped around the house, looking pitiful, until I agreed to her evil scheme. In honesty, it didn't take a lot of persuading. I just wanted to be sure Aunt Mina would keep Mom from taking a broom to me any time I walked into the kitchen. Grown men have been known to leap out of windows to get the hell out of my mother's way when she was in a mood to jerk a knot in someone's tail.

I dressed in my Sunday suit. I did not wear my dress blues. I'd had a hell of a time getting them cleaned up after the fiasco at the airport. I wore the good necktie that my Aunt Mina says makes my eyes look gray. Blue is Aunt Mina's favorite color. I wore my best white socks and Mina spit-shined the loafers.

I stood up in class and introduced myself as a man of the world, and master of all I sautéed. I opened my foray with the uses of beer as a cooking medium. First we talked about making home-baked breads using beer as a part of the liquid. Then we discussed the appealing results of cooking cheap hot dogs in beer. Then we moved on to homemade barbecue sauce with beer and applesauce as its secret ingredients. The kids were eating this up. The young ladies were scribbling down notes and tips as fast as they could go. They all had boyfriends who were going to approve of this new approach to their hearts and minds.

My final shot was a mimeographed handout of a recipe for monkey, suitable for framing. My Aunt Mina had already started a needlepoint of this particular recipe to hang on the kitchen wall. My mother was already planning to give it to Uncle Eddy. He was always hinting around for one of Aunt Mina's hand-stitched quilts so he could sell it to the woman who owned the Maid-Rite shop in Wichita. Uncle Eddy didn't think Aunt Mina knew. Uncle Eddy has been known to draw to an inside straight--just about every time he played poker.

The teacher, Miss Curry, was new, a very attractive older woman of 24, and aghast. She'd fluttered her hands feebly a couple of times, and then pulled out the big guns, fluttering her long eyelashes over those beautiful round blue eyes. She had also *Sir'd* me a couple of times, unsuccessfully. I had been an enlisted man. I would never answer to Sir. Finally she'd given up and sat there stunned, imagining her final tribunal in front of the school board, to be arranged as soon as possible, maybe sooner. I knew better, a couple of the old codgers had already suggested she might be my match.

After it was over she thanked me profusely and rushed me out the door to avoid a potentially even more disastrous question-and-answer period. I mentioned that if there was any doubt about my niece getting the extra credit, I would feel compelled to come back and lecture at least once more. Miss Curry paled and said, she thought "Minerva would be fine, just fine, thank you". Then

she really caught me off guard and pointed out that since I had probably just driven her to destitution and joblessness, I might at least consider taking her to church Sunday and we could discuss honorable surrender terms.

Shit, the old farts on the school board had probably conspired with my Aunt Mina to sandbag me. There was a rotten smell in Harry Truman High and it wasn't Vietnamese fish sauce.

Three weeks later, it was the home economics showdown at the bicarbonate of soda corral. Each student drew for a portion of the buffet, some got desserts, some got appetizers, Minerva drew a card that read 'entree'.

We did some beef flank in my homemade barbecue sauce with the special ingredients; the cheapest beer I could buy, and some of Aunt Mina's home-canned applesauce. We baked it all night in a slow oven in a deep casserole dish.

The next day at school there was some reluctance to try the dish at first, given Aunt Mina's now much-broadcast monkey recipe leaflet, but the allure of forbidden fruit was overpowering. After the first brave soul pronounced it "great," and ladled about four scoops onto a paper plate, there was a rush to make sure everybody else got some, too. Minerva didn't even get to try it.

When she got home Minerva was pleased and proud that her dish had been a success but she was also a little grouchy because the cook hadn't even gotten to try her own masterpiece.

Aunt Mina pulled a nearly identical deep casserole from the oven and said with a chortle, "This is yours dear, I got my little experiment mixed up by mistake last night when you were watching Ed Sullivan."

It was great. It was absolutely the casserole that Minerva and I made for her class. Aunt Mina said hers was "just the same, except for a slight adjustment of the seasoning and some small ingredients." She hummed her way around the house for a week before she suggested I invite Miss Curry for dinner after church next Sunday.

Teahouse — With Cold Tea

by james myers

AS A CHILD SHE HAD LEARNED to pick up peanuts one at a time with chopsticks, later she could pick up individual grains of rice. I couldn't use chopsticks to save my life. I learned to lean back and let her feed me. She once fed me popcorn with chopsticks, one kernel at a time. It made an exciting and rather erotic experience out of the entire process. I thought about going to a movie with her back in the states and watching people watch her feeding me popcorn with chopsticks.

On long patrol, the snake and monkey were prepared as finger foods. We took a culinary tip from the Vietnamese and prepared the rats as satay, that is, roasted on sticks. The Vietnamese built traps near their granaries and that is what happened to the rats found in those traps. Impalement or barbecue depending on your position relative to the sharp stick.

My squad usually watched a village for a little while before going in to ace the target. We learned a great deal during those quiet, watching moments. Maybe it was the adrenaline which spiked our observations with intoxicating clarity?

One of the things I learned is that rich Vietnamese married Thai women. Thai women take good care of their men. Thai women treat men like the expensive personal property they are, like cochinchina fighting cocks, racehorses or draft animals. They must have learned it from the Empress dowager of China.

Thai women are very gentle on first observation.

smoke from the forest

in the napalm her soothing scent

I began to sleep with my nose in her armpit. I began to dream of burning my uniform. I was terrified the last three weeks in Nam. I was afraid to go to sleep. I knew I would wake up and discover I had been dreaming and still had ten months to go on my hardship tour. I began to lust for the kill. The sooner I could have the moment over, the closer I was to home. I hadn't known about war before I came. Now I was filled up with it. I couldn't wait to dress in clean clothes and go home, taking her with me.

clutching
at the door
with spring flowers

The military makes it difficult to marry a civilian woman in a military zone. They don't care if we fool around, but they don't want us taking them back to the states. Not impossible—only difficult. I was already living with impossible: impossible to bring the dead around me back to life, impossible to leave here until the Army flew me out, impossible to explain the nightmares.

She told me she would give me sons. I married her and took her home to meet my mother, who insisted we get married again, *properly*.

death—

the white dress so pale

in the mirror

her dark eyes

I'd struggled to adjust to the culture shock of living and killing in her country. She could learn to live in mine. She would bring her country to my home. At least part of her country. The death and napalm could be left behind like discarded uniforms and worn out machine gun barrels.

She wanted a television. I wanted a Japanese style garden. I wanted people to watch her feed me popcorn with chopsticks. It didn't seem like such a lot to want in exchange for eleven months of smoke and fire.

turning
just one rose and baby's breath

Her English improved rapidly. Soon she sounded like a game show host. Her vocabulary grew as well. Our world turned to the guiding light of other people's children. No help at General Hospital, perhaps the V. A.

a touch
something grows
inside

I wanted to have a party to celebrate the Year of the Rabbit. I wanted to wear our Thai silks. She went shopping with a Vietnamese girl we met at the market while I was buying chili garlic paste and light sweet soy sauce.

lying still
the baby between us

Her permanent citizenship papers arrived by mail. She learned more new words from the Vietnamese girl we met at the market; community property, no fault divorce, mental cruelty.

I did
but
she didn't
I could
but
she can't
we would
but
no fault
pack

I offered her ten-thousand dollars to have the baby and let me raise it. Her attorney was pleased to learn I had ten thousand dollars. They took the money. While I was buying ginger in the oriental market, the Vietnamese girl told me what part of the ten thousand would be used for.

abortion clinic

partway up a steep hill

a garden of stones

I had learned to watch outside the villages before going in to ace the target.

two jays

outside the abortion clinic

your shrill voice

She looked small and vulnerable standing at the back door. I got her a taxi and said good-bye.

she waves from the cab

moaning low

the rain and wind

Outside the courthouse, where words have meant so much and were so often taken for granted; the Boy Scout's oath, the Fourth of July speeches, my selective service card. Suddenly I could not understand my language. There were new phrases; party of the first part, party of the second part, petition granted. Her lawyer spoke, the judge spoke, my lawyer handed me something to sign—just words.

telephone pole

on the crumpled fender

leaning drunkenly

I remembered why I always went into the jungle sober and straight.

revolving

blue light special

heal and toe

a s'tr_ai^g_ht l_in^e

The officers were gentle. One of them had been in Korea, the other was at Iwo Jima. One of them held me up and patted my back as I spewed out the poison. They gave me the advice I would have given them.

one phone call

no answer

I'm here

My mother called from Florida, and sent a bag of grapefruit.

My father called from Arizona and suggested I buy a Corvette.

only jonquils

ripple in a brown bag

a scolding jay

My lawyer's secretary called and suggested I sober up and get a job, soon.

standing upwind

her scent in the bathtub napalm

Standing on the walk with a pound of pop'n' good and a fireplace popper.
I knew I was being silly but being alive wasn't enough anymore and losing with style made parts of it feel better for a little while.

fire in the squad-car mirror

her eyes and ashes for ancestors

Old Scratch

by james myers

I'VE LOST MY CAR KEYS.

I always carry my car keys in my right front pants pocket and now my pocket's been blown away, taking the car keys with it. I brought them with me, so I'd have something to jangle when I got nervous. I've been doing it since I learned to drive. I wrapped the keys in black electrician's tape so that the Viet Cong couldn't hear them jangle.

"Medic! Medic! Stay low dude. Can you help me find my car keys? They're 57 Chevy Nomad keys. You know, the two-door station wagon that's so cool? The keys are on a little gold chain that says, *Friends don't let friends drive foreign.*

"No, don't leave my car keys. Please! I need..."

Only flesh wounds means I get some more junk to wear on my dress blues.

Only flesh wounds means I lost what feels like about a pound of chopped liver from my shoulder, too.

Only flesh wounds means I don't get to go back to the states unless I get an infection and die.

Only flesh wounds means I'm a hero. I can look forward to parades—where they throw dog-shit at us. I know about dog shit. My ex-girl friend mailed me a baggy of it from the states. My hooch-mate opened the package. He thought it was cookies. She put my ring in the package too. It was nice of her to give it back. A lot of girls would have sold it.

Only flesh wounds means I am one of the good guys. It means I get out of this hospital bed and go head them off at the pass, round up the bad guys, jump

back on my horse, hit the Ho Chi Minh trail, and ride off into the sunset singing a top 40 song. Doesn't it????

Only flesh wounds means I can look forward to a life of being hypervigilant. That's the official word for a guy who's been shot two or three times and can't break himself of the fear that it could happen again. "Everybody knows people don't get shot in the United States. Why in hell can't the guy just relax and be a sitting duck like the rest of us?" My former brother-in-law used that line to bring down the house at our next to the last family reunion Christmas.

Pathetic, an object worthy of or invoking pathos. If I become a cynic then I become pathetic. I can't become a cynic, I just can't. I think I'm becoming a cynic. I need to find something to do that replenishes me.
om.

What I need to do is stop seeing myself in young people.

What I need to do is stop thinking that there is any kind of a link at all between me and kids today.

What I need to do is stop telling them we are alike. They aren't flattered.

What I need to do is relax. It doesn't matter what people think.

What I need to do is stay the hell away from people.

What I need to do is stop explaining. The other day, I found myself trying to explain to a kid, who reminds me a lot of me, that wounds never heal. I'm not worried about my wounds, but his.
om.

The kid (who is a lot like me, though I shouldn't say that because he wouldn't be flattered by the comparison, not that I meant it as flattery, only an observation) tuned in a political debate on television. We listened to a former conscientious objector asking for support for American troops somewhere in Africa. He was running against a vet who was having a bad-hair decade.

I voted for the guy who'd been shot at. Kid "Time-Heals-All-Wounds" voted for the draft dodger. Hey, can you blame him? The draft dodger's younger, slicker, and has more hair. It was probably stupid to vote for the guy who'd been shot at. Being shot at doesn't mean the guy can run a country.

A guy without the guts to fight is now Commander in Chief of the United States military. He sends other men into combat. What happens to men who refuse to go into combat for him? They aren't ever sending me again, but I have hostages to fortune. I have sons. Only the youngest thinks his dad is worth a shit. He's still got time to change his mind.

The youngest son has more *stick* to him than the other boys. He still comes out to my tea house in the middle of a garden of stones. He still thinks life is good, sitting with dad and listening to the little stream flowing across the sounding stones from favorite rivers. He still sees value in calligraphy and in long conversations with the koi in the stream. The fish do most of the talking.

He doesn't bring his friends here anymore. He walked in through the moon gate after their last visit. He saw the broken limbs where his friends had swung on the cherry tree. He saw the wind chimes tied in knots, the discarded pop cans and candy wrappers. He was shocked. He had expected me to set my world right again. I simply could not. So he did it for me.

I wanted to, but the weather changed that day and I hobbled from place to place and job to job. I just never got time to repair the damage to the garden and to rake the small white stones back into their pattern.

He understands the pattern, including the flaws that shape its flow through blooming chrysanthemums. At the sword's point the rose is windblown. Since he understands the pattern, he may create a new one, next time he rakes the stones. Once, after meditation, I decided that I could see hundreds of possible patterns for this garden. I've tried maybe thirty-two.

om.

We changed the scroll today. He changed it. He understands the cycle. Each month, a different scroll is hung in the place of honor. The prior month's scroll returns to the sandalwood box in the tin trunk. The current month's scroll goes up. We drink tea and think about the scroll. There are no other calligraphy lessons on the day we change the scrolls. I have twelve scrolls from the master who taught me about calligraphy and about life. There are thirteen months in an Oriental lunar year.

Once a year I choose one of my haiku, back it on silk, and then hang it for a month. I burn the other haiku I've written over the course of the year. Every ten years, I pick the best of the decade and burn the others. I have three haiku for my life. The ancient haiku master, Basho, says that is a good life's work.

We created a second place of honor today. Today I hung my son's first scroll. It is a good *before* example. He stayed longer today because, for the first time, he drove himself to this garden.

Wind chimes and a distant heartbeat. I've put my calligraphy brushes and the ink stones into the tin trunk which holds my master's scrolls in their sandalwood box and his calligraphy tools in their cherry wood box. It also houses four of my scrolls wrapped in some old silk from Thailand. Maybe my son will make them a box. He has heart and the eye and the soul for calligraphy. I will ask my son to take care of the trunk while I'm away.

I'm going to look for my car keys.

"Om."

Red Letter Days

a triptych by james myers

Hard Lines

The night is filled with sweat, but it's not the sweat of passion, it is the sweat of fear. I scream. My ankle explodes into tiny pieces of bloodied bone. I've been shot for the third time in less than two years. I've been shot for the last time, but I don't know it yet, not for sure. I'm still firing. There aren't many banana clips left in the ammo box beside me.

The night is filled with burning lines of light. Lucifer's name is traced out on the dark slate of a moonless night. Somebody has scrawled all over the blackboard in glowing phosphorus, the way I used to write my name with sparklers on the fourth of July.

Tracers ignite about eleven or twelve hundred feet after they leave the gun's barrel. Every fifth round is a tracer. In reality the bullets are all by themselves, but on rock-and-roll they become one continuous fountain of flaming roses growing from my gun barrel.

I'm a little stoned. Fortunately, I'd anesthetized myself about twenty minutes before the attack started. Isn't opium wonderful? It makes maggots magnificent and death, if not desirable, then at least aesthetically satisfying. What a wonderful night to find satisfaction. What a wonderful night to die--or maybe not.

Off to the right, the Cong are walking a mortar in towards my position. They are closer with every round, *whomp*, a few yards closer, seconds later *whomp* again. The folks in pajamas aren't hiding in the closet. They are here, moving in, and making themselves at home. I'm snuggled down in a bed of palm fronds, waiting to die.

I reach into the night with the tracers. They tell me not so much where I'm shooting, as where I've shot. *Whomp*. My line of fire sweeps across a small grove of plants a hell of a lot like the ones my Grandmother Henry grew on her back porch, only these are bigger and meaner. *Whomp* and another round on the way.

I'm going to die here in a hole surrounded by the devil's houseplants. It figures. I've always had a brown thumb.

My grandmother would have known what to do. She would have taken one sharp look around and pointed out the plants infested with Viet Cong. Then she'd have whipped fire out of them if they sassed her when she told them to "git along home." She loved me with all her heart. She would scold me for some small sin, then pull me close and hug me fiercely.

The last thing she said to me was, "Child, you change your ways, or you will come to a bad end." She knew about bad ends. Her first-born boy died beside a reservoir in Korea four days before my fourth birthday. We didn't have a party that year. There were presents. There were plans for a party. There were the ruins of plans.

There was a cake, chocolate, German chocolate with salty coconut icing. I always taste my grandmother's tears when I think about birthdays. I always scrape the icing off my German chocolate cake too. Nobody believes I remember my fourth birthday. Nobody believes much of what I remember.

I remember my grandmother changing when Uncle Charles died. The devil took away the woman who taught me to play marbles. In her place he left a changeling softly singing *Barney Google with the Goo Goo Googely Eyes*. Sometimes she listened to Guy Lombardo records and watched the wall. She would let me crawl up into the rocker with her, but it wasn't the same. Part of her wasn't there anymore.

We waited for his body. The mortuary said they would call when he got to the train depot. Grandma would rock and wait, rock and wait. I asked her to play

marbles. She said she just believed she'd wait a spell by the phone. She didn't cry. They never made her cry.

They wouldn't return the body. My grandmother filed suit. They said he committed suicide. Nobody said too much about it. She just kept on waiting.

They wouldn't return the body. My grandmother filed suit. They said he committed suicide. Later, when they realized the North Koreans had arranged many suicides to demoralize the UN troops, they quietly shipped my uncle home. I was six that year. My father gave me a twenty-eight gauge shotgun for my birthday.

He bought a bucket of old gun parts for fifty cents. All the pieces were there, so he put it together and gave me my first gun. My mother had a fit. Then she sort of stood up close and chewed his ear. Then she suggested a bb gun as a compromise. My father said no child of his was ever going to own a toy gun. Toy guns were responsible for all sorts of bad ideas.

My uncle Charles got a silver star, retroactive. My grandmother got a flag and his GI insurance. She was his only beneficiary. My Uncle Charles knew about my grandfather. Everybody in town knew about my grandfather except me, till I asked him for a loan to go the land grant college instead of into the military. He asked me if I had any collateral. I went off to college on ROTC money. I studied to be an astronomer. Someday I was going to the moon.

When I told her I was enlisting, she turned her face away and watched the wall. She held my hand a long time, hard.

Whomp, nearly here. I begin screaming and crawling towards the satanic houseplants. Scream and crawl and drag the fire across the sky looking for them while they look for me. I don't crawl fast. I don't crawl far. The little pit that would have been my unregistered grave falls in on itself under the weight of a couple of mortar rounds.

Silence. They touched me—to late. I touched them—in time.

I start crawling toward the hole where the rest of the squad were sleeping.

I fade to black.

The hard lines of fire were silent, replaced by a hard line of plasma running into my arm as the medic dragged me towards a waiting chopper. He jerked me along by my right arm. In his right he carried a plasma bag. I'm not real fond of marines, but I screamed some very intimate words to the jarhead dragging me bump-along-jack, as fast as he could go. It was a tender moment. I gasped and jerked nearly upright when he shoved the morphine home. I could tell we were going to be fast friends—and then there was only the morphine.

SHORT HITCH

It was my turn to sit with him. It was rough, but not as bad as it gets—or they wouldn't have let me take a turn. Most of them still think I'm just a kid, or just a girl, even with a major's brass on my shoulders. Some of them can't get over the idea that this man's army is now this woman's army, too. They've had time to adjust to the idea, but they're not doing well. They'll figure it out in another couple of generations.

Making major isn't bad in an Appalachian hill-family whose only significant cash crop is non-coms and junior-grade field officers. Uncle John, actually he's my fourth cousin, was another exception. He made Captain. He was my good-bad example for a military career.

He thrashed, jerked, and made little crawling motions. I whispered "it's OK." I don't think he could hear me over mortar fire and helicopters. I kept brushing back his hair and telling him it was OK. After a while the fever broke. He looked up at me. He couldn't see me in the dark, but in the night-light's greenish glow, I could see his eyes wide open. He was watching dead and dying faces.

I whispered, "It's OK. You're out of there." The night-light must have reflected on the brass because he got my rank right.

"Major?" He wasn't sure exactly which Major. He passed out from exhaustion. I nodded-out beside him. He woke me with soft moaning. I crawled onto the bed and held him.

"Anne?"

"No, she's gone. It's Leanne"

"Leanne, where's Anne?"

"She's been gone five years now, I'm home on leave. You're having a rough time again. You want me to go over to the VA hospital?"

"God no, there are people who would pay good money for hallucinations like this. I can still hear the choppers. You didn't come in a chopper did you?"

"No, I came in your old Chevy. I take good care of it."

"We sure had good times in the back seat didn't we Anne?"

"Uncle John, it isn't Anne, I'm Leanne."

"Leanne, when did you get leave? You were just here a couple of months ago. This is August isn't it?"

"It's August and I was here a couple of months ago."

"You were with me?"

"I sat with you."

"You aren't AWOL are you? My kid brother is AWOL. When he went, he took \$22,000 worth of government payroll checks. Good for him, I hope those FBI assholes never find him. Be careful what you say on the phone, it's tapped."

"Uncle Otter is in Oklahoma. He isn't AWOL anymore. He got back to the states and turned himself in at Fitzsimmons out in Denver. They gave him an honorable discharge and told him they weren't missing any money. He settled out in Oklahoma, on some piece of land your grandpa repossessed during the depression. I talked to him the other day. He asked about you."

"He's crazy as a dog with a nosefull of poison ivy."

"He's doing better. Two Nam tours back-to-back would make anybody crazy. He's OK. The doll furniture and cradles and stuff sell real well. He's got a good spot at the flea market. Otter is doing good."

"Why aren't you on base?"

"I'm not AWOL either, John. Nobody in this damned family is smart enough to be AWOL. I asked for some extra time to think about things and maybe get rid of a potential minor problem. I had to come this ways and I wanted to see you."

"Anne, I've missed you so much. I was wrong. I wasn't faithful. Sometimes, when the gooks smoked one of my kids on patrol, I used to freak out all the way. I'd write the damned letter. All those damned letters. Those were the only times I cheated on you, and then only after Web ... I'd write the letter and then I'd go out and find an all- night girl and take her back to the hooch."

I didn't say anything.

"I never cheated before. Web always stuck close after a hit. He knew I had to write the damned letter. He could have written it. He would have if I'd asked him. We both knew it was my job."

I just sat and held John's hand and listened. I had some thoughts, but I didn't have any answers. John just needed to talk.

"Web had a widow woman in Alabama. He wrote her every day. She wrote him just the same. We'd get back off long patrol and he'd have a stack of mail to send and there'd be her stack waiting. I'd write the official letter, then we'd get cozy. I'd read his letter to her, then he'd read that day's letter from her. We'd go back and forth for however many days we'd been on patrol. Then we would get drunk, just us, no bar girls."

I just nodded from time to time. I knew he'd come back around when he finished saying confession. He didn't need absolution. He just needed to confess.

"Sometimes I'd get a letter. I never read my letters to you. I was ashamed about begging you to write, Anne. I'm sorry I cheated. I was ashamed, but I was glad to still be alive, too. I loved some of those guys, but I never once thought I'd crawl into the body bag and trade places, never once. Even though I knew I'd killed some of them with stupid mistakes. Field officers are like doctors, they bury their mistakes."

"It's OK Uncle John. It's OK. Anne is long gone. We all love you. I know what it's like. I look at the kids working for me. I look long and hard at their faces. I think about them dying and me writing the letters. It isn't good. My NCO always bitches me out. He says, 'How in the hell can these kids believe they will live forever, if their commanding officer doesn't believe it? In a crunch they need to believe that to do their jobs.'"

"Web was a good sergeant. He promised me he'd get me out of Vietnam alive. He carried me a pretty good stretch of the road. After he died, I kept getting shot up. That wasn't his fault. He did his best."

"Web was an old re-tread with a streak of lady-killer gray in his afro. His last five years to retirement should have been a down hill slide. When Vietnam heated up, they made him a drill instructor. He only trained one class straight. They stayed together through advanced training and then to Vietnam, that garden spot in the universe. He didn't have to be there. He was an old man. He paid his way in Korea, he shouldn't have been in Vietnam."

"Somebody always has to be there Uncle John."

"Not for a Viet-fucking-Nam. Nobody had to be there but the Vietnamese and a few water buffalo and the odd snake and some dead Frenchmen."

"Maybe not, but how do you know that? You get your orders and you go. That's the deal you signed up for, and that's the deal I signed up for. It isn't kosher to cross your fingers when they administer the oath. You didn't. I didn't. God help us, our family aren't that kind of people, and neither was Web."

"I signed up to pay for college, but they threw a war and I went to Nam."

"Sometimes the good fairy does you good, but most times, those thousands of Pentagon clerks catch her and screw you again. That's the way it works."

"How long you been sitting with me Leanne?"

"About four hours. You've raised a fever a couple of times and been a little out of it every so often."

"Uh, Major, do you think you could slide off this bed and maybe sit in the chair? We don't want people saying we're the kind of folks that go to family reunions looking for a good time do we?"

I laughed with Uncle John. His twisted sense of humor is more accurate than a thermometer.

"You want me to run you over for a check-up?"

"No thanks, they'd hit me with two billion milligrams of Thorazine, stuff me in a round rubber room, drink coffee, and wait to see if I'd pee in the corners. They wouldn't give me any coffee."

"Do you? Pee in the corners?"

"Maybe, at first, but I don't remember peeing in any corners the last couple of times. I don't go over to the VA much anymore. One of the family just sits beside the bed here, holds my hand, babies me, and I get better. I've always gotten better. What happens if I don't get better?"

"You'd probably find those corners, but I don't think it is going to go that way. You used to be worse. The family used to stand in the doorway to watch you in case you tried to jump on top of them and they needed running room. You haven't jumped on anybody in a bad way for ten or eleven years now. The spells come farther and farther apart too. I think that is always a good sign." We looked each other straight in the eye. There are some lies an officer is expected to be good at. Lying is a necessary part of the job description. We both knew he'd

taken a turn for the worse and that it was all over but the dying part, but nobody knew how soon.

"Sometimes I remember stuff after a spell, and I can't figure out if it's real or being crazy."

I thought he might be fishing. I told him a little truth, but didn't go for his bait. "Sometimes it's real John, and sometimes it's not."

He looked at me out of one eye, but in the dark, there wasn't anything to see.

"Once, a long time ago, after a bad one, I couldn't get it out of my mind that I'd shot a little girl and left her on the side of the road. For about a year I walked that stretch of road looking for her whenever I had a few spare hours."

"You find her?"

"I found just about everything else. Two billion dollars worth of coke bottles, about a ton of scrap metal, a bunch of road-kill and Bloody Mary. She was lying up in a culvert and busy giving birth to her first litter of pups. Most of the good hounds in this county have her bloodlines."

"She is a good one for sure."

"She's gonna die one of these days, fifteen is a long time in dog years. Shit, fifteen is a long time in sometimes-crazy years too."

"A long time in people years too, I'm not re-uping. They're getting ready to go play cowboys and Arabs or maybe down in South America. I'm over it."

"They own you forever, Leanne. Once you're an officer, they can call you back anytime, forever."

"Maybe when they call, won't nobody be home."

"Honey, that's no way to talk, but I understand. Most families ain't got anybody in the service, can't remember the last time they had somebody in the military, and don't want anybody there neither. Being a career military man, excuse me, Major, career military person, is common only in wealthy families and

dirt poor and dirt proud families like ours. You'd think that with Crazy John as an example, it would put this family off the military, but it doesn't. I counted up the other day and there are eleven family members in uniform right this minute. That's just going down to third cousins, course we run to big families. We got eleven in uniform, twelve with you, and at least that many more retired after twenty year hitches. Don't feel like you have to sing it at the supper table. You go expressing what others might be thinking and you're gonna root out a badger. There are some that feel the same as you, but they don't ever say it out loud. You could get your first black eye since you was in pigtails, talking that stuff."

"You aren't saying don't think it. You aren't saying don't do it. You're saying don't talk it around the supper table, right?"

"That's right. Don't talk it around. Part of me says hang on for the last five years and collect your pension. You could do good things with a check every month. Get married, have a couple of kids. If anything happens to you, the kids get your pension and uncle sugar sends them to college. The other part of me says get out now if you got the bad feeling. I got a pension check and a disability check and look what a wonderful life I've got."

"Uncle John, you're a hero. You can't hardly find anyplace left to pin stuff on your uniform if you wear it all."

"That's right, Major. I got an ex-wife that's afraid of me. I got a family that passes me around and baby sits me when I get crazy. They even feed me when I shake the soup off the spoon. I've got a college education I can't use, memories I can't lose, and no new memories that matter. Little girls jump rope with my name, 'crazy Johnny went to Nam, got a medal for killing Cong, Got some ribbons and some tin, all the gooks are killing him. Count them up one by one, how many gooks got snuffed by John?"

"It's OK Uncle John. Take it easy."

"Damned, I wish I smoked. I always thought I'd pick them up again after Nam. Shit, Web could have made a fortune running quit-smoking clinics."

I didn't offer one of mine, it would have set him off again. He didn't like it when combat grunts smoked.

"So how much leave you got?"

"Nine days and then I've got to be at Twenty-nine Palms."

"The joke used to be there was a girl behind every tree at Twenty-nine Palms. Since they started enlisting women, it's true, but they're all wearing combat boots and carrying a gun. Now the joke is that there aren't any palm trees. Kind of takes the fun out of it. I've always tried to steer clear of women who carried guns or could beat me arm-wrestling."

"That's bullshit, you like women who carry guns. It makes you feel secure. If Anne carried hardware, you'd still be married. She'd just shoot you if you got too crazy, then nurse you back to health, and make you like it."

"Maybe so kid. Maybe so. What are you doing for the next nine days?"

"I'm driving out to see Uncle Otter and pick up some stuff he's making for me. Then I'm driving on in to Twenty-nine Palms and resigning my commission."

"Why not wait out your hitch?"

"I got a letter today."

"Happens all the time. Give them a quarter for a three cent stamp and anybody can send one. So, good news from someone too cheap to send flowers?"

"It's just confirmation, not news. I'm pretty much a loner, but now I don't have to be, not for a little while anyway."

"What kind of a letter tells you that you aren't alone anymore? Some guy offering to marry you and keep your quarters tidied up? You know getting married just means you're alone, together, with somebody for a little while. It isn't anything to count on for the rest of your life."

"I'm pregnant, and I'm thirty-five. I am not alone."

"Who's the father?"

"Nobody. It was an immaculate misconception. He doesn't even know."

"You got somebody?"

"Nobody."

"Majors must marry."

"That's the way the saying goes, Captains may marry, Majors must marry."

"Could I ride out to Otter's with you?"

"Sure John, we can take turns driving."

"I'd like that. Can we call it Web if it's a little boy?"

"I've been thinking about John."

"Maybe it will be twins. They run in the family."

"Yes, John, they do."

"What if I get a crazy spell?"

"I'll just shoot you and make you like it."

Written in Stone

The kids are screaming. It's not fear, but it's not just for fun either. It has the sound of 'Momma, we are in over our heads', but probably only a mother would understand. I jerk up from the cool touch of the stone that says, 'The buck stopped here.' I spot John leaning over and reaching down into a grave. His younger brother, Web, has fallen in, probably while trying to push John.

Web is my sneaky little devil, but moms have eyes in the back of their heads, so he doesn't get by with much. Web is twenty-nine minutes younger than John and twenty-nine times more ornery.

I go to rescue my eight year old adventurer and to incidentally fan his bottom for taking stupid risks. I spank, but mostly it's the 'sound and the fury' kind of spanking. I don't think it's going to do much good, but a parent has to try to raise children with a decent respect for danger.

I don't tell old army stories. I don't keep pictures of myself or John in uniform anywhere the boys might find them. I keep the medals and the rest of that junk in a footlocker. It's locked with a stolen padlock marked US Government Property. I tell them their father died of herbicide and pesticide poisoning and that is why we aren't buying any more farms, period!

We get his check once a month. The burial was free. I fly his flag on the Fourth of July. The VFW puts little flags on soldier's graves on Memorial Day. We don't go to the cemetery on Memorial Day. We come on quiet days, like today. I send back letters marked 'Addressee Unknown'--except for Otter's.

Otter tracked me down and sent a handmade treehouse. He pre-fabbed it and sent it knocked-down and ready for assembly. There was no return address. Otter's wife must have painted the address on the crate for him, because it wasn't his handwriting. The sneaky rascal shipped it from Fort Worth, too. I hope it wasn't a special trip.

Otter didn't give me a hope in hell of shutting him out, but it was easy with the rest. I thought about how impressive they looked gussied up in their dress uniforms. I thought about *God Bless America* the way they sang it at every church social. I thought about how proud they all were when I ran away, lied about my age, and enlisted. Any member of my family would have signed my enlistment papers, but I was carrying on a family tradition. I don't want my sons anywhere near people like that. My little family is looking for some new traditions.

Shitfire, if I let them come around, the kids would already be spit-shining their shoes, making their beds with hospital corners, and keeping single-shot .22 rifles in olive drab footlockers positioned dead square and exactly three inches from the end of surplus store, iron-frame bunkbeds.

Otter made John a bed that looks like he is lying on an old coon dog. We call it the bark-a-lounger. Web wants a bed that looks like a racing car.

It was a good decision to shut out the rest of my family. I thought about my sons for a long time. I decided to do a Harry Truman and draw a line where it all stops. When John died, that decision made life harder. It would have been easy, then, to let my family step in and run things for a while, indoctrinating my kids with brass band fever.

I'm teaching the boys a cynic's version of history. The American Revolution is OK, but we are looking at all the kids who died in boot camp during the splendid little war. Georgia is full of graves. Andersonville and Korea have some points too.

The kids have an Irish setter named T. J., which is short for Tomato Juice. She was a running fool. She'd run and run, getting higher than a mouse in a beer barrel, until she'd lose her way home. I'd pick her up down at the pound. The vet said Irish setters were so inbred, there wasn't any room for brains in her distinguished Irish profile. I've got a long nose and red hair too. I changed vets.

T.J. quit running after she had her first litter. She still likes to ride in the car. She rides to work with me. I work the graveyard shift at the local stop and rob. It lets me spend time with my boys when they're awake and drag myself out of bed if the school calls because one of them gets sick or something. The money isn't great but then it mostly pays for the extra things kids want these days. You wouldn't believe the price of a cheap pair of sneakers.

I'm quitting the job. I shot a kid last week. He was fifteen, maybe sixteen years old and had a sawed off shotgun to help him with his self image problems. If I keep on working there it will happen again. I kept the sawed-off shotgun.

We go to the Friends Community Church. Quakers don't listen to a minister preach about right and wrong. They don't have ministers. They sit silently until the spirit moves them. I like the silence. There's a lot of it from my direction.

The Quakers want me to give up my gun. They're conscientious objectors. I'm not going to do it. They may read me out of the meeting, but I'm

conscientiously objecting to unilateral disarmament. There are too many creeps out there, both here at home and around the world.

Still, if my sons ever enlist, it is going to be because this country is in big trouble and not because of family tradition, some flashy uniforms, and a catchy tune.

VITA

A life, that is the meaning of Vita. It is also a document that summarizes and encapsulates a life. One school of researchers favors descriptive statistics as a means of summarizing and encapsulating lives and another favors emphasis on qualitative data to give a feel to life rather than boundaries.

I was born in Dodge City, Kansas about the middle of the twentieth century. I love Kansas and I miss the constant breezes and the magnificent masses of clouds on far horizons. I even miss the amber waves of grain.

I think I can safely say that I've screwed my life up most of the possible ways and the only reason I am not dead or possibly in jail is through the intervention of good people. Having seen the temporal nature of life up close and personal on several occasions, I've decided to become an intervention agent for others who are younger but not so very different in nature and disposition. In short, I've decided to become a teacher.

One of the things I realized while in school, was that achievements outside the academic environment were discounted and mostly denied. Fortunately, two summa cum laude bachelor degrees, election to Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi, and scholarships and grants should keep this observation from sounding like sour grapes. I am committed to bright children, particularly those with poor grades and virtually non-existent academic possibilities. That commitment means I cannot continue the tradition of discounting success outside my classroom, it may be the only way back in to a student's life. That is a vita that concerns me.

There are no numbers here. My transcripts and resume are available. There is a feel to this vita. I should mention it was composed by my teddy bear, Sabastion. I typed it because we haven't yet found a keyboard that fits his paws.