

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

Winter 2020
Volume 8 Number 1

On the cover:
Acrylic painting of
Gunnery Sergeant John L. Canley, Hue City, Vietnam,
by Staff Sergeant Elize McKelvey, USMC.
Presented on September 26, 2018.

SSgt McKelvey painted a portrait of Canley,
and the cover painting depicting him in action
based on interviews with John Ligato, who served with him
in Hue City, Vietnam, 1968.

President Donald J. Trump awarded
the Medal of Honor to Sergeant Major Canley
during a White House ceremony on October 17, 2018,
for his heroic actions during the Battle of Hue City.

Staff Sergeant Elize McKelvey, a native of Ohio, has served in the
US Marine Corps since 2012. Her assignments have included
training at Parris Island, SC; Camp Geiger, NC;
and Fort Meade, MD; multimedia production specialist
assignments in Camp Pendleton, CA, and Quantico, VA;
and as a combat photographer and combat camera production
noncommissioned officer in charge while deployed with the
15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. She currently serves as the
reprographics senior noncommissioned officer in charge and as
a combat artist with the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Table of Contents

Non-fiction

The Words I Didn't Say <i>Casey Cromwell</i>	11
Bill <i>Francis A. Doherty</i>	15
Dog of Da Nang <i>T.K. O'Rourke</i>	23
Colors of the Fall <i>A. Rabaduex</i>	29
Protestant <i>Robert Silverman</i>	37

Fiction

Beyond Green Ramp <i>Maggie DeMay</i>	45
One Outta Four Ain't Bad <i>Stuart Phillips</i>	51

Poetry

Passing Through Another FOB <i>D.A. Gray</i>	59
War Bride <i>Andy Pérez</i>	61
Two Droughts <i>Andy Pérez</i>	65
The Sniper's Sight <i>Joseph S. Pete</i>	71
Rice Harvest <i>George Thomas</i>	73

Interview

A Conversation with Tim O'Brien <i>Jim Mathews</i>	77
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Editor's Note

We're back after a hiatus.

The last year was a time of great personal and/or professional change for most of the editors at *O-Dark-Thirty*. We needed to step back, take stock, review our progress, and consider how best to hit the “reset” button.

What hasn't changed is that after eighteen years, America is still at war. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are still deployed to conflict zones and hot spots around the world; their family members still wait for them at home. Lives are still being lost to war, or changed by it forever. Stories remain to be told; deep feelings still demand expression through prose, poetry—and song. And so, we at *O-Dark-Thirty* remain committed to helping those who serve this nation get their stories out into the world.

In 2019, the Veterans Writing Project began offering songwriting workshops in addition to our writing seminars. We'll be making some changes at *O-Dark-Thirty* as well. But we'll still be bringing readers the best of the work that servicemembers, veterans, and family members send us. You'll find some of that work in these pages.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

The Words I Didn't Say

By Casey Cromwell

It's a week after you came back from Iraq, and I'm an eleven-year-old standing in the kitchen when I hear your footsteps. And the footsteps—equally paced, dull slaps of socks against wood—*are* yours, I know that right away. After all, Mom wears slippers and Hannah has yet to learn how to not throw her full weight into every stride, so that only leaves one person, one possibility: you, Dad.

And the best part about solving this logic puzzle is including you in the equation, something I haven't been able to do for over a year, since Al Asad Airbase is too far away from North Carolina for me to hear your combat boots crunching on dry sand . . . though some of those nights, while I lay awake and listened to Hannah snore across our bedroom, I swore I could, if only I wrote enough poems or sent enough letters or spent enough hours juggling the soccer ball just like you taught me before you went away.

Today, those footsteps bring you to our small kitchen with the cracked blue laminate counters and tan linoleum floor. To me, in the middle of making a peanut butter sandwich. And there are so many things I could say—“How'd you sleep?” “Does it feel good to be back?”

“What are you doing today?” “I missed you.” “Having you home feels kinda weird.” — that I say nothing.

I just look up. Give a small smile. Think back to the tiny landing strip a few miles away.

Three hundred and sixty-five days ago, we drove there in our gold Honda van to drop you off and watch your Marine platoon load into a bus that would take you to a plane that would fly you more than 10,000 kilometers over sea and sand. When we drove home, your seat was empty, Mom and Hannah were crying, and I stared out the back window through blurry eyes until the airport and the bus and you faded into shapes. Dots. Nothing.

Then, one week ago—reverse *déjà vu*. Same gold van, same wet faces, yet when we left the airport, our car was full of sandy duffel bags and combat shoes and stories and laughs and a sun-tanned, wind-roughened version of you. Our own Christmas in January—but like all holidays, it passed too fast. And what does “getting back to normal” really mean when a yearlong family of three suddenly expands back to four?

Standing in the kitchen, I still don’t know . . . but I do know that I like it when you flash me the grin I haven’t seen un-pixelated in ages. Years later, I’ll realize that grin is what kept me from hating you—though you’ve told me that’s your greatest fear—for choosing a job that uprooted us every two years. Because that grin separated you from the uniformed Marine in the stern photographs in your office, and from the large, abstract Marine Corps I blamed for all the moves and time you spent away.

That particular day, your smile is also what I see when I twist open a new jar of Jif smooth peanut butter. You spot the plastic seal under the cap. You ask, “Should I get your sister? Does she still—?”

And I can guess what you want me to say: that, yes, Hannah is still obsessed with getting the first scoop of peanut butter from a fresh

jar—not to eat, but for the simple joy of marring that perfect factory-made swirl of peanuts and oil.

But I don't say any of that. Can't. Because that obsession and those nine- and ten-year-old girls are gone, just like the teeth lost and the classes passed and the family dinners eaten while you were away. And that truth hurts too much to say.

After all, before you left, we sat on my pink-blanketed bed and I gave you my lucky blue marble to keep you safe. Do you remember what you asked me to do next? To watch over Mom and Hannah while you were away. I did that. And now that you're back, I can't just set that mission aside. Instead, I expand it. I want to protect, you too, Dad. To let us all pretend we haven't lost more than just time.

So in the end, I just shake my head—once, short and sharp. And I return my focus to one of the constants in life: making myself a peanut butter sandwich for my packed lunch.

But after my knife slices through sealed plastic, it feels like, no matter how hard I've tried, more than just the clean ripple of peanut butter has been broken.

Casey Cromwell is an MFA student, a people watcher (because observations are often the best writing inspiration!), and a successful blogger at Casey the College Celiac. When she isn't writing about her Marine brat upbringing, living with two chronic illnesses or other adventures in her life, Casey enjoys long walks with a good podcast, experimenting in the kitchen and reading all the mystery books she can get her hands on.

Bill

By Francis A. Doherty

July 10, 2019

“A war, decades ago, again in the dark, where nightmares are made.” –Francis A. Doherty

New Canaan, July 10, 2019: My friend Bill Sansom died last week. On the Fourth of July, in the middle of the day. Long before the fireworks. He died at the VA Hospital in Northport, which is out towards the eastern end of Long Island. It is a dismal place in which to die, but it's even more dismal when one is struggling to live.

Chu Lai, Vietnam, September, 1969: Everything in Vietnam eventually gave way to jungle. First the warm ocean, then the perfect beach, and then the myriad greens of the jungle. Chu Lai, a Marine base camp and airfield, close by the sea, built on sand, edged with jungle, usually conjured up a mental image of Bill, whenever I had flown down from Da Nang to land here, or had flown over from Da Nang heading south toward someplace else.

Somewhere to the south of this was where Bill was shot. In 1967, among the sand dunes. Sand dunes, not jungle. A funny place for an

ambush, I thought. What must that have been like for Bill, here two years before me, I wondered? I still saw my childhood friend as a gangly red-headed kid with glasses sliding down his nose. Not a Marine caught in a firefight. Not a Marine whose platoon was decimated among the sand dunes, near the beach, south of Chu Lai.

Brooklyn Naval Hospital, July, 1967: I was looking for the hospital's exit. I had just left the flight surgeon's office. A Navy doctor had failed me on a flight physical that would have allowed me to transfer as a second lieutenant from the Army to the Marine Corps (the Marines were part of the Navy). I wanted to fly jets, which the Marine Corps had and the Army didn't. I wanted to wear a Marine Corps officer's uniform, which was so much better looking than my Army uniform. And I wanted a sword. Marine officers carried swords when they wore their dress uniforms. Army officers didn't have swords. I had a deviated septum, which disqualified me from Marine aviation. But not the Army, because the Army didn't have jets.

As I walked down a grey corridor trying to find my way out of this hospital I glanced into a big ward full of wounded men. I looked right at Bill. I had no idea he was a Marine, that he had been in Vietnam, or that he had been wounded. He had been here in Brooklyn for more than a month. Bill Sansom, who so beautifully played Simon and Garfunkel on his acoustic guitar, who was at Coe College in Iowa when I saw him last, who was a soft-spoken bookworm when we were growing up together in Fiddlers Green, almost died just south of Chu Lai, among the sand dunes. As we began to speak to one another an orderly told me that visiting hours were long over and I had to leave. So I left Bill there, in pain, in sweaty, twisted sheets, his right leg in a sling, and alone.

Seoul, Korea, February, 2011: Snow was swirling outside my ninth floor window. Big flakes tumbled in the gusting wind. They moved

sideways, and sometimes they even fell up. My room in the Novotel looked over Doksan, a busy street. I had been working for Boeing since 2005 as an A320 Airbus instructor pilot. I had already taught my students for six hours, spent an hour and a half in traffic to and from the flight training center, and sweated out in the gym the frustrations of instructing kids who barely understood English.

Facebook. It was something to do to fill the remains of this day. I had discovered a page that had gathered people, some of whom I knew, who had grown up on Lloyd Neck. I found Bill there. He was sixty-five years old, a year younger than I was. His red hair now snow-white, his face still long and narrow and his eyes a great but slightly faded blue. I studied his picture and decided that I didn't look nearly as old as he did. I needed to make sure, so I went into the bathroom and peered at the mirror to check.

All of our conversations were tentative because our pause between words spoken to one another spanned over forty years. Revelations were slow in coming, admissions carefully revealed. Bill and I tiptoed up to the events in our lives, sharing a little about the places we worked, the women we loved. Our histories were clouded in small talk, minimized by tangents. We were carefully peeling back the protective onion skin that men use to hide in. We carried on like this for the next several years, never venturing communication beyond our laptops or our cell phones.

Chu Lai, 1969: I looked down at this place each time my airplane flew south toward Qui Nhon. Where would someone take cover? There were no fallen trees to hide behind. Jungles have fallen trees, depressions in the earth. Places for men to squeeze behind or crawl into. Not sand dunes. It didn't seem like there was anywhere Bill could dig, hide, or burrow in to escape the bullets. Where could he go? The truth was that there was no place he could go. He couldn't escape them.

Northport Veteran's Hospital, Early September, 2015: I don't remember how I came to know that Bill was here, in this old brick building. His room had a window that looked out over trees. This is where I found him, confined to a wheelchair, tethered to one of those coat racks on wheels that was decorated with clear bags of fluid. Tubes ran from the bags to and from his right ankle, delivering antibiotics and painkillers, suctioning away God knows what. At least he could see trees.

Bill said, "Come sit down. You'll have to move some of that stuff off of the chair. How did you find me? What's in the bag?" I brought him a sandwich from an Italian deli. I cleared the chair and sat. I said, "Finding this place was easy. Here, I brought you a sandwich. Prosciutto, mozzarella, tomatoes, arugula and pesto. What in the world happened?" These were the last words I said this day. Bill talked, in between huge bites of his sandwich, nonstop for almost two hours. Then a different batch of pain medications made his eyes flutter and then close. I sat for a moment, then left.

While Bill explained the state of his ankle I not only listened but studied him. His snow-white hair, his narrow face shrouded in a week's worth of beard, a ratty bathrobe over a stained sweater, flannel pajama pants, and a right ankle that looked like a science project. He looked tired, and he looked scared. The story he told me was horrific. An AK round almost blew his foot off during that ambush south of Chu Lai. All but six of his platoon were dead. His right foot was attached to the rest of him by slivers of tissue, by what bone remained after the bullet crashed into it, after he ran on it trying to find cover. After he crawled from one dead Marine to the next, trying to find ammunition for his rifle because he had run out. How, at what he was sure were the last seconds of his life, a company of Marines, who heard the chatter of small arms fire, arrived to save him.

Bill thought his ankle was put back together at the Brooklyn Naval Hospital, where I first found him, in 1967. But osteomyelitis,

an infection, hid in the bone, dormant, waiting. And then, in the early spring of 2015, a team of NVA soldiers dressed up as doctors came to Huntington, where he lived now, in the middle of the night. They grabbed Bill and strapped him to a gurney. One of the soldiers waved a bayonet. Bill woke up from the nightmare. His hand grabbed at his ankle so hard that his fingernails tore the skin that covered the ankle bone, that hid the infection. The infection, osteomyelitis, woke up too.

Northport VA Hospital, Fall, 2015: Surgeries followed surgeries, and bedridden days marched through spring and summer to fall. Dead tissue was removed from Bill's wound site. Then bone was transplanted, replacing the infected bone. Later healthy tissue the size of a small boneless loin of pork was removed from his left thigh and stitched into place to fill the divot taken out of his right ankle. Four procedures in all. Antibiotics and pain medications by the gallon were pumped into Bill. The antibiotics combated the infection. The pain medications made him sometimes loopy and almost always drowsy.

Just before leaving Northport Bill told me that an old friend from school was coming to visit. Francee. I remembered Francee. Stunning. She had lived in Norway for years, and now she was coming to see Bill.

“Okay, Wil-I-Am, you need a little help here. Before she arrives you need to shower. Not two days before. That morning. You need to comb your hair, floss and brush, wear clean clothes with no stains on them, and straighten up this room.”

He started to protest. “She’s just coming to visit. It’s not like a date or anything.”

I laughed. “She’s coming from Norway! To see you. Get cleaned up. Shave. And no matter what else you do, talk about her. Not about your favorite subject, which is you.”

Francee entered a tidied-up room and met a tidied-up Bill. They hadn’t seen each other in years. It didn’t matter. Not a beat was missed.

Francee travelled back to Norway when she had to. She held Norwegian citizenship. Visas and rules were involved. But mostly, she folded herself into Bill. And he into her.

I followed him around from the surgeries at Northport to the surgeries at Brooklyn VA hospital, which shouldered up to the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Bill could see it from his room. Next came the last surgery and rehab at the VA hospital in St. Albans. My Italian grandparents used to live in St. Albans. I found their old house. And on Facebook I gave Bill's Lloyd Harbor friends periodic progress reports. They e-mailed him with messages of support. Best of all, I saw Bill and Francee in love, a love that didn't require a mentor, an assistant, a cheerleader. So I stepped away. When Bill finally left the VA hospitals and moved into his own apartment with Francee, I went back to how Bill and I used to be, to the laptop and cell phone.

New Canaan, July, 2019: I can't tell you much about Bill's life after Vietnam and before the Northport VA. His history between then and now is better told by those who shared those years with him. I didn't. What little I know is filled with so many blank spaces. Not much about where he worked or what he did, about who he loved, or who loved him. I never pried. I believed that what he wanted me to know he would tell me. So no guessing, or taking shreds of information and speculating on my part. I would say that we talked about all kinds of things. That's not exactly true. Bill talked and I listened. His thoughts were like a field full of butterflies. Random, meandering flights of wondering. About whether birds could hover. Whether teleportation was possible. Whether there was a more profound meaning to the *The Walking Dead* television program.

Fortunately Bill was prolific in his writing, and he shared his fears with a group of us. From his frequent emails I learned that his body was breaking down. Of course the timing was perfect. He found

Francee close to the end of his life. That seemed so unfair. Just when he got free of hospitals emphysema knocked on his door. Breathing became a struggle. And his heart was weakening. Then Time reached back through years and years to the sand dunes south of Chu Lai. It found his shattered ankle, his splintered bone, his osteomyelitis, and brought them back to now.

The last weekend of June brought a message from Francee that Bill was entering a crisis stage in his battle with emphysema. His breathing was so labored due to his compromised lung efficiency that he was only able to communicate for short periods of time. The surgery required to rid him of osteomyelitis from the AK-47 wound to his ankle could not be performed because of his breathing and his heart. On top of that his kidneys were not working hard enough to cleanse his blood of impurities.

I spoke with Bill (he had returned to the Northport VA hospital) that last weekend of his life. He could barely carry on a conversation of short sentences, even though he tried. Because he didn't want to stop talking. Maybe because he wanted to use up as many of the words he had left as he could. I heard a desperation in his voice that I had never heard before. The struggle not just to breathe, but to not die.

This wound, this red badge of courage, which Bill carried with him for fifty years, finally exacted the last measure of war. Among the sand dunes south of Chu Lai there was no place for Bill to burrow away from the bullets. The AK round that found him intended to end his life. It just took its time.

Francis A. Doherty served in the Army as a reconnaissance pilot in Vietnam. He left the service in 1972 as a captain. He is a graduate of the University of San Francisco, an airline pilot of 32 years with Delta Airlines, and a member of the Westport (CT) Writers Workshop.

Dog of Da Nang

By T.K. O'Rourke

It's illegal to bury a dog in a backyard in Minneapolis. Jim carries a hickory-handled entrenching tool and the corpse of Pig in a patched Duluth pack. He steps over tree roots crisscrossing slick mud, past springs gurgling from limestone outcroppings, and down to Ho Chi Minh Trail along the riverbank below Franklin Avenue Bridge.

Careful not to throw out knees, he finds a spot in the woods behind an abandoned hobo camp and sets the Duluth pack among empty White Wolf vodka bottles. Jim snaps open the spade and glides the coupling over the folding joint.

He chops a shallow grave, slides the pit bull from the pack, tugs at stiffened legs, and arranges the thin tail.

Jim places a chewed Frisbee like a warrior's shield on Pig's battle-scarred flank, and a new rawhide bone between front paws.

"We've been brothers fourteen years."

Earlier in the day, when Jim brings Pig to the veterinarian, the doc says, "Pig has an ear infection, but let's x-ray his hip."

The negative, clipped to a backlight board, shows mush of bone. Jim wonders how long Pig has been in pain.

“End it now,” Jim says.

The vet injects pentobarbital into a vein. Pig stops breathing.

Shattered slabs of limestone from the bluff above the bank lay scattered along the water’s edge. Jim covers Pig’s grave with a cairn against coyotes, then sits on a cottonwood drift log, smooth and gray, washed up the bank during high water.

Jim weeps. “Goodbye, buddy. You’re my last dog. Goodbye.”

When homeless, Jim always keeps six dogs, his dog patrol, and they warm him as he sleeps in his van parked among hill-high heaps of plowed snow on the streets of Minneapolis when it's thirty degrees below zero.

When cab business thrives, he rents an apartment, and asks the landlord if it’s okay to put a kennel in the yard and a pigeon coop on the garage roof.

The landlord says yes at first. Then the dogs bark, the yard stinks, the grass becomes hard-packed dirt. The working girls in the apartments below and above send children to rob him. The mentally ill roommate eats his food and pilfers for meth.

It seems like Da Nang, 1969.

The landlord evicts Jim and releases the pigeons from the coop.

The army discharges him in 1969. He flies to Detroit to visit his mother in Corktown. Not home anymore, he pays old man Monaghan for two pairs of long-flying pigeons. Monaghan taught Jim everything about doves when he was a boy. He buys a used pickup and drives to Minnesota to join a Vietnam vet hippie commune.

Jim figures pigeons can fly recon and hook up with a platoon. They’re loyal to each other and mate for life. In Laos as a nineteen-year-old grunt, he weighed one-sixty in hills where Montagnards lived in wooden huts, kept gardens, and hunted the NVA. The Montagnards’

way of life looked simple. They raised chickens, quail, pigs, and water buffalo. Dogs roamed as respected as men.

The commune purchases fifty acres in Wisconsin and they live in huts—shabby compared to the pegged post-and-beam and hand-hewn lumber of Montagnards—and try farming and gardening in spite of the stone hillside too dense to dig an adequate shit-house hole. Nothing simple about it. But Jim keeps dogs and pigeons. Dogs watch your back, don't abandon you in battle. Pigeons return alive from recon in the bush.

Jim parks his cab by the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul. He stops in for a meal or to speak with a social worker or sit outside and drink coffee from a styrofoam cup. He crumbles bread to the pavement and studies pigeons landing at his feet. Jim recognizes descendants of his long fliers by the high sweep of a wing, brown and white among the gray and iridescent blue, red eyes and scarlet feet.

He weighs three hundred and thirty pounds and his hand trembles when lifting a glass of water to his lips. Jim attempts to lose weight as knee joints wane. How can he walk, or bike on the exercise machines at the VA? Doctors pump him on meds for Parkinson's, depression, skin disease, all of which Jim figures come from exposure to Agent Orange. Ninety percent disabled, he receives \$1,800 a month.

Two women at the Vietnamese Christian church flirt with him, but they're crazy.

One black-haired beauty asks him, "Do you want to fuck me do you want to marry me do you want to eat my pussy do you want to have my baby?"

"Sure," he says.

If he marries, the VA will shell out another \$1,800 for his wife. He can buy a house and keep dogs again. Problem. He doesn't cope with

paperwork or government bureaucracy. The VA will quit on him in a fight. His therapist, a lieutenant, has never walked point or recon, never kept watch in the bush covered with mosquitoes, never pulled a leech from his anus at o-one-hundred hours, never cleaned Laotian mud from his M16.

When Jim mentions suicide, a shrink prescribes meds. Jim sees a medical doctor, a thirty-something Vietnamese American woman.

“My last dog died,” he says. “I’m on a waiting list for sober vet housing.”

She reduces meds and writes a script for a therapy dog.

“Apply for Section 8.” She adjusts her stethoscope.

“I’m not crazy.” Section Eight means the psych ward, to grunts.

“This is non-military. Section 8 is subsidized housing, not over thirty percent of your adjusted gross income. Let the social worker fill out the forms. Inhale. Exhale.”

Pig, he thinks. Born on that farm. At seven months, the pit bull gorges himself on sow’s afterbirth, hence his name.

When Jim moves into the garage behind the biker commune, Pig protects women who cook at the hippie restaurant. The closing cook grills a burger and puts it on a Kaiser roll with mayonnaise. Pig escorts her home, and she pays him. Then Pig goes back to the garage, takes a break on the movers’ quilt folded on the concrete floor by the wood stove. Alone, Jim fails women. With Pig, he’s a whole man, sort of. Pig would protect this woman doctor, daughter of a lucky dad.

In Minneapolis he attends the Vietnamese Christian church to search for his lost daughter. He imagines descendants like released homing pigeons.

Jim panics when the Vietnamese preacher reads the Gospel story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane while the disciples sleep and let Jesus get arrested.

Afterward he joins others in the basement, sets up tables and folding chairs. The two women, twenty years younger, bring coffee and cookies. A massage parlor owned them until they paid their debt. The Army owned him until he squared his. They sit one on each side and argue who gets Jim even though he weighs three-thirty and sores from skin disease itch on his legs.

He knows them from driving a cab. They had worked their way free in ways he didn't like to think about. He remembers this isn't Da Nang, but he never left Da Nang, where dogs live and die in the street.

At night, he drives a cab, a red and white Crown Vic recycled from old squad cars from the third precinct, static of the old CB like the radiotelephone he humps on long-range recon in the Laotian hills. It's like sleepwalking.

"You're on recon," the sergeant says.

So six grunts head into the bush with M16s, grenades, claymores, an M79 that shoots grenades, and ammunition for a week. Jim dumps his M16 and picks up a Czech-made AK from a dead NVA regular. AKs never jam. They stay out a few days, make camp, keep half-assed watch, and sleep.

Jim receives orders to rotate out for a week of R&R in Da Nang. In Da Nang he picks up an issue of the antiwar *Grunt Free Press* and reads that five guys in his patrol got killed in action, and the sixth might not make it.

They made base camp, kept night watch the way they always did, dozing.

How is it, Jim wonders, that six armed soldiers from Charlie Company get wasted? Walk the jungle, twigs break underfoot. But a tiger kills five of them in a minute and mauls the sixth, who blasts it with a grenade gun. What kind of creature is a tiger, that it hunts and kills soldiers? Is it pissed? Seeking revenge?

When command orders Jim back to Charlie Company, he says no way. There are tigers in the bush! People get killed!

He vanishes into the alleys of Da Nang and meets a bar girl. They fall in love and rent a hooch. When MPs nab him for AWOL, they put him in Long Bien stockade.

Dogs soldier better than men. They stand by you and chase the monkeys away. A dog listens better than therapists who never walked patrol and barks a warning before the tiger can sneak up.

Men sleep like Jesus' disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. Men send you stateside, away from your Vietnamese wife and daughter. If I raise her, we'll go up the mountain and keep dogs to chase monkeys from the garden and warn us when tigers sneak around the goats. My daughter will never work as a bar girl or in a massage parlor on Washington Avenue. She rides a water buffalo and I send her messages by a homing pigeon with high-swept wings, brown and white feathers among the iridescent blue and gray.

T.K. O'Rourke is a retired barge worker and military family member. His poems have received international and national awards, and are published in Blue Collar Review, Ireland Poetry Review, and American Journal of Poetry.

Colors of the Fall

By A. Rabaduex

I'm cynical now.

I look at the autumn trees turning colors and I think “How dull.” I remember the falls of my childhood, the leaves seemed the most vivid shades of scarlet and gold, as though nothing had ever been so bright. But these leaves—it’s as though their last gasp has been muted before letting go. They are trying to die unnoticed. They’ll float down and gather into inconspicuous piles that we will step over without ever realizing they’re gone. I can’t help but think that maybe it’s me—my eyes. I read somewhere that color is created in our own eyes, in the photoreceptor or cone or some other term. Maybe my vision has dulled and not the autumn colors.

We used to stare out into the ocean. How blue was it, really? I spent so many hours dreaming of California. I never imagined it would be so, so cold. There were no white sand beaches or Caribbean blues. Instead, purple flowers carpeted clifftops, and cold dark waves caressed golden sand. We would sit on the beach and listen to the pulse of water in silence. These moments, I thought I had found ultimate peace. Eighteen years old, with a sea echoing my wandering breath, whispering to salty air, *You will be my new home*. A broken woman-child trying to plant roots on waves.

I came to California and I learned all sorts of things. I learned that there are two blues in Russian, one word is used for lighter shades and one for darker, while for ancient people, there was no word for blue. Blue did not exist. Perhaps it faded into greens and violets, and the sky melted into the horizon for our ancestors. I, myself, fail to see the sky sometimes these days. But back then, it was often painted with clouds. I wasn't in the California I had expected—the one where it is always warm and palm trees and surfers are around every corner. I learned that the world was much different from what I'd anticipated. The central coast was chilly and often foggy. There were differing hues of gray which descended upon us from day to day, yet we were immune to the melancholy that seeps into older bones. We were young. We spent our days in classrooms with teachers from exotic lands speaking to us in foreign languages, and we spent our nights walking around Fisherman's Wharf listening to the seals bark. Or sometimes we just sat outside our rooms at picnic tables smoking Marlboro Lights while McDaniel strummed his guitar. But first, we had to earn the right to be outside, to smoke, to be out of uniform. I learned things usually happened in inconvenient ways.

I had chosen the Air Force. The Marine Corps seemed entirely too difficult for a short “medium bone-sized” girl, as the military doctor had written on my medical form. I expected the Army would also be too difficult. I couldn't imagine myself marching around with an M16 glued to my side. I spoke with a Navy recruiter who was quite charming. He almost had me convinced to become a seaman, but then he informed me I'd have my long hair cut off at boot camp, and any time my mother was around he couldn't help himself but to smile and flirt with her. I decided not to join the Navy. My mother was thirty-seven. I realize now how young she was to have a daughter my age, but I think all children see their parents through the same lens: old. I thought thirty-seven was old. And why was someone flirting with

my old mother? I remember the smile that crossed her face whenever she was carded for cigarettes, or when someone commented that we looked more like sisters than mother and daughter (which was quite often). My mother smiled with her whole face. It was magical. Her eyes brightened and her cheeks scrunched up until the deep blue of her eyes was almost hidden, making her look slightly of Asian descent. Her happiness radiated when she smiled. Years later, when a native Korean insisted I looked like her granddaughter, so I *must* be part Asian, I knew I had my mother's eyes. Yet she was blonde-haired—a woman of English and Irish ancestry. My father, from the few times I had seen him, was sandy blonde with some variation of light eyes from his German stock. I was like a European mutt of sorts, which didn't bother me until my early twenties when I became friends with people of Latin American background. They had lively music, spicy food, were often dancing and laughing, or passionately crying; and could claim literary magicians like Gabriel García Márquez. Their culture made my background of mellow country music and meat and potatoes seem dreary. I inherently wished I'd had some Latina blood in me. My hometown seemed colorless after those salsa beats danced into my ears out west.

I don't remember the first time I saw California. But I do remember leaving my mother. It was in the Air Force recruiter's office the day before I flew away from Ohio. I left as though I'd be back. Dirty clothes in a pile on the floor, tubes of Avon lipstick samples and small cases of cracked eyeshadows scattered along my dresser top gathering dust next to the large black stereo system, left turned on, which I'd gotten for the previous Christmas. Even my bed was unmade, as though I'd walk back into the room with the lavender paint my stepfather had shown me how to roll over the walls years prior and settle down for a night of dreaming. But I would never live in Ohio again. Our world would forever change—not that we knew it at the time. I think neither my

mother nor I realized how permanent my leaving was when I hugged her goodbye in my recruiter's office. His name was Kevin, and he usually spoke with his slight Southern drawl, leaving us to listen curiously to this outsider way of speech. Yet this day, he stood silently, uncomfortable behind his desk. My duffle bag was on a chair, packed with the permitted items—a change of clothes, undergarments, hair ties, a comb and brush, toothbrush, soap, and forms of identification. My mother made our goodbye quick. She hugged me, placing her chin upon my shoulder and squeezing me hard against her. She wished me luck with tears brimming in her light eyes and her bottom lip quivering before leaving the office. I knew that she was going to break down once in her car. Yet I had no sadness in me. I felt as though I was embarking on a great adventure. I was Peter Pan headed to Neverland, young and soaring the blue yonder amongst the clouds. The adrenaline kept me up late.

That night at the hotel, I formed a small group of friends who were also heading into various branches of the military the following day. We sat up into the midnight hours talking excitedly about what to expect. Rumors swirled of "stress cards" in Air Force basic training that we could pull out if things were getting too harsh for us and we needed a time out. I laughed at this notion. It was obvious that many of us knew little about the adventure before us. "I'll tell you what it's going to be like for you," I declared over a dinner of french fries and soda. "I can read your tarot cards." It was a skill I'd learned through my aunt and uncle's books. Their love of metaphysics had intrigued me, and as a thirteen-year-old girl I sat in the living room which had once been my home, and before that my grandparents'—an old garage turned living room with shaggy black and orange carpeting under which one could still feel the coldness of the garage concrete seeping through. My aunt and uncle were the first in our family to have internet. I would spend countless hours at their house, and after dabbling in America Online chatrooms, I'd peruse their New Age library. I learned

of invisible fairies, the magic of numbers, and the way cards can represent predictions for the future. While I was apprehensive if there was any truth to the practice, I liked the idea of being able to know what was coming. I quickly bought my own deck of tarot cards and practiced readings on my friends, becoming skilled enough to elicit shock. Whether I was reading the cards or the people, I do not know, but I made a believer out of many, and on this night—out of a few more. One by one, each sat quietly in front of me while I flipped card after card over into the Celtic Cross spread. A friendly girl heading to the Navy gazed fearfully when the first card I flipped was The Devil.

“This isn’t bad,” I insisted. “It means that in the present you are doing what you want.”

She relaxed, as I explained the meaning of each subsequent card. Tears filled her eyes as I related how they told of past struggles and little love. I knew I had touched upon some sort of events in this stranger’s life which released intense emotion. Isn’t that how it is drawn out of us? Sadness is never fully digested by the heart. It is always there, like a cavity which aches when the cold air hits it. I had briefly opened her wound, and for that I shared a small portion of her sadness. But things took a turn on her final outlook card. “The King of Wands. Your final outcome is going to be success. This is a really good card to get for this spot. Great things are coming!” I smiled at her.

I was curious as to what the cards held in store for my own fate, so I shuffled them and explained to my curious new friend what my own future had in store. “Two of Coins, have patience . . . The Fool as my immediate future. Interesting, it means to embrace spontaneity. It’s saying, like, I will have no control of the way things happen.”

The Final Outcome card was The Hanged Man. The exact phrase my aunt’s book listed for the card came to mind: “Accept the consequences of your actions. You made your bed, now lie in it.”

What did this mean for the future? I worried that I was making the wrong choice by going into the military. While my classmates had

been touring colleges and applying to their schools of choice, I had already made up my mind to join the military. I refused to start off my adult life in college loan debt. I would come to find many others with similar background stories. We were the kids of middle and lower classes, and we were soon to be tasked with enriching the military industrial complex with our sweat, and sometimes with our blood. Yet the politics of the institution I was about to join did not hold sway upon my mind that night. I did not worry about the direction of my country. To me, the U.S. was like an improved version of the *Titanic*—sailing along its course, and regardless of whether a person was first class or third class we would reach our destination together and remain unsinkable. The apprehension the tarot card drudged up was personal—based upon my own fears of the unknown. What would happen in my life? I was leaving everything I'd ever known.

It wasn't the first time I had second-guessed my decision to enlist. My reluctance stemmed from young adult desires. Once I'd graduated, I spent most of my waking moments that summer with my best friend, Adriana. We liked to drive around, listening to music, and to make silly videos with my new video camera. And there was my new boyfriend. He'd pick me up in his convertible and we'd play games at his uncle's pool hall. Afterwards we'd sit in the coolness of the summer night and look out at the black lake reflecting starlight. We talked for hours about all things existential. We were in a crisis, looking for meaning in our young lives; kindred spirits lost in a vacuum of meaninglessness created by the culture of consumerism. We felt there was more. God? Almost certainly. A conscious god? Possibly. Souls? "It feels like it, doesn't it?"

And it felt like I wanted to stay that summer. Those nights of nothing to do but hit white cue balls and figure out the universe. It could go on, couldn't it? I could stay in Ohio. I could try to go to community college. It would be a lot cheaper than a big university.

Yet my mother argued otherwise. “You’ll end up in a factory like I did.” The mantra she had beaten into my head throughout my childhood—that I had to be more successful than she had been. I had to make better decisions than the ones she’d made. She had ended up a teenage mother. She had married young and watched her savings squandered away on her husband’s alcohol habit. And now she was tired and insistent that I not follow in her footsteps. That her sacrifices be for something more than a small existence. My boyfriend, who had dropped out of high school, had no ambition but to live in the moment—like a contemporary Jack Kerouac. If I stayed to be with him, I’d end up like my mother. And like the women the Beats loved and left behind—raising children by myself, abandoned and poor. I had to get on a plane to Texas to distance myself from a fate which paralleled these nameless women. Texas for basic training, followed by California for language school—these were my escape routes from falling into the trap of so many women before me.

So why, then, did I toss and turn in the stiff sheets of the Holiday Inn that last night in July before I was set to step foot onto the plane? What consequences was I creating for my life? Whatever they were, I thought they had to be better than living in a small run-down Ohio town. In the summer of 2001, I didn’t know that there were things worse than stillness. That change rains down everywhere I look, and drenches every moment which existed before it with a tangible sadness. Not realizing that September leaves would never again be a cause for joy, but rather, awaken a dull sadness for the long static days of my childhood—I left before the fall that year.

Amanda Rabadueux is an Air Force veteran and wife of a retired Marine. She holds a BA and an MA in English, and currently lives in the mountains of Pennsylvania on a small chicken farm where she works as a college adjunct instructor.

Protestant

By Robert Silverman

After the first few weeks of basic training, Alpha Company, Third Battalion, First Basic Training Brigade, A-3-1 in Army-speak, went to chaplain's orientation at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It was July 1969, shortly after Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon and left a plaque declaring they "came in peace for all mankind," even as the Vietnam War raged on.

A-3-1 looked forward to chaplain's orientation because the drill sergeants told us we could leave our rifles, helmets, ammo belts, and backpacks in the barracks. It was so hot and humid that several A-3-1 trainees were hospitalized with heat exhaustion the day before. We were ordered to un-blouse—pull our pants legs from our combat boots and roll them up above our ankles, pull our jerseys from the waistbands of our trousers and roll up our jersey sleeves above our elbows. My feet and ankles still itched inside my woolen socks inside my black leather combat boots, which were not intended for the American South in summer.

We marched down a dirt road, kicking up red dust as we went, to an asphalt parade ground and stood at ease as Senior Drill Sergeant Boone, a short, broad black man with a large head, no neck, and a belly

starting to hang over his thick web belt, began barking. “You men see those buildings over there?” Boone pointed to two white clapboard structures built for temporary use during World War II twenty-five years earlier. “The bigger one is for Protestants, the smaller one for Catholics,” shouted Boone. “On my command, fall out to the correct building.”

Boone paused, looking right and left at A-3-1 standing in four squares of four rows each.

“Ten-hut! . . . Fall out!”

Thirty seconds later, six members of A-3-1 still stood on the parade ground where one hundred sixty trainees stood before. It looked like the end of a hard-fought chess match.

“What the fuck’s the matter with you people?” Boone said, turning up his palms.

A trainee standing near me glanced around and said, “I don’t know about the rest of these guys, drill sergeant, but I’m Jewish.”

“Me too,” I said, and the others said the same as Boone looked at each one in turn.

Boone grabbed the broad brim of his Smokey-the-Bear hat with both hands. “Damn,” he said. “Stand at ease!” Boone turned and quick-stepped toward the company commander and other drill sergeants smoking cigarettes in the shade of a tree about a hundred feet away, while we six stood at ease broiling on the blacktop. Rivulets of sweat ran down the small of my back and soaked the waistband of my trousers; salt from the tablets I took an hour earlier leached from my skin, leaving white blotches on my jersey.

I could not hear the theological debate among the company cadre, but I could see them waving their hands in the air excitedly for a few minutes, then putting their hands on their hips and kicking the ground with their boot tips, a sign they had reached a decision.

Boone walked over to us, his jersey damp with sweat. He stared at us for some seconds, choosing his words. “The captain says if you’re not

Catholic, you're Protestant. You men fall out with the Protestants! . . . On the double!" The solution struck me as expedient, not intentionally anti-Semitic, but who knows. The captain was a wounded Vietnam vet who rarely appeared, a mystery man. One rumor had it that he was recuperating from his wounds, another that he had been passed over for promotion and was waiting for the day he could leave the Army. Command of a basic training company was not a career-builder.

We Jews trotted to the Protestant building and arrived just as the chaplain, a black captain with several rows of decorations on his khaki shirt, finished the last few bars of *It Ain't Necessarily So*. The chaplain's voice was melodious and deep and his diction clear, a preacher's voice that reminded me of Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated the previous year. The chaplain stood behind a wooden podium on a small stage, his shoulders back, chest out and chin high. On the front of the podium were two wooden tracks. The top track held a cardboard strip that read "Captain Bloodworth" and the lower track held a cardboard strip that read "Responsibility." The chaplain paused as we Jews entered the auditorium. "You men take a seat on the front row," he said welcomingly. The blast of air conditioning was wonderful.

"Soldiers must take responsibility for their personal actions," Chaplain Bloodworth continued, walking back and forth across the stage, swinging his arms, almost strutting. "You must be truthful. When you get to Vietnam, don't lie about body counts. If you have killed two VC, don't report four. Attrition, search-and-destroy, and body counts will be your holy trinity over there."

An enlisted man, a Specialist 4, entered the auditorium from a side door, walked onto the stage, and whispered to the chaplain. "I understand we have some Jewish personnel with us today," Bloodworth said, folding his arms across his chest. "Jewish personnel should report to the Jewish chaplain's assistant at the rear of the auditorium."

Some of the good old boys in A-3-1 made it a long walk from the front row to the rear of the auditorium.

“Never seen one before.”

“They don’t look no different.”

“Yeah, they do.”

“They look almost white.”

“Must be from New York.”

The Jewish chaplain’s assistant, the same Specialist 4 who had whispered in Chaplain Bloodworth’s ear, who was from New York, led us to a tiny office in another building nearby. “Coke?” he asked, opening a small refrigerator. While we guzzled ice-cold Coca-Cola, the chaplain’s assistant explained Jewish life at Fort Bragg.

“There is no Jewish chaplain at Fort Bragg,” he said, leaning back in his squeaky swivel chair, clasping his hands behind his head. “It’s the second largest US Army base in the world, but there is no Jewish chaplain. I have a deal with a rabbi in Fayetteville. If you want to attend Sabbath services, I can make it happen, but the drill sergeants will have you make up the duty time on Sundays. They don’t like exceptions . . . and we are exceptions.” I had not been observant since my bar mitzvah some eight years before; Fort Bragg seemed the wrong place to start again, so I said nothing.

By Labor Day, after eight weeks of basic training, I had learned a lot—how to march, salute, spit shine my black boots and shine my brass belt buckles; how to kill someone up to two hundred yards away with an assault rifle; how to kill someone standing right in front of me with a bayonet; how to kill a small group of people an arm’s throw away with a hand grenade without killing myself; how to clear gas from my mask; how to keep going on five hours’ sleep night after night; how to swing through an overhead ladder if I wanted to eat in the mess hall; how to swallow what was served in the mess hall; and how to slip away to the post library on Sundays to avoid raking gravel and picking up cigarette butts and to nap in the air conditioning.

All that was left of basic training was graduation—listening to hollow speeches and marching to John Philip Sousa tunes; never mind

that Sousa was a Marine. I received a message from the Jewish chaplain's assistant, the guy with the refrigerator full of Coca-Cola. The message was delivered in person by Senior Drill Sergeant Boone. Graduation fell on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Boone pronounced it something like "rusha shunza."

"Jewish personnel who wish to be home in time for the holiday are excused from graduation," Boone told me, reading from a piece of paper, his face a foot from mine.

"I'd like to leave early, Senior Drill Sergeant . . . be with my family." "You'll miss the big parade," said Boone. There was something about the way he said "You'll miss the big parade" that made me do something I had learned in basic training never to do—look directly at his face instead of somewhere to the right or left of his face or at his chest or over his head. To look him in the face was to "eyeball" him, to test him, and in basic training things went badly for trainees who tested drill sergeants. Our eyes locked for only a few seconds, but I could see that he wanted me to say I would stay for graduation, to show that the Army was more important to me than some religious observance he did not understand, more important than seeing my family, because for Senior Drill Sergeant Boone the Army was his religion, was his family. Then, too, we were both minorities—a black man and a Jew in a predominately white, Christian Army. Maybe he felt some connection, some bond that found its source in a shared history of oppression.

The Army, I guessed, was a better life than the civilian life Boone had left behind. He liked the Army's tidy world of uniforms and ranks. Everything was chosen for him; everyone dressed the same, had the same haircuts, ate the same food, and marched to the same cadence. Boone knew when and how to speak and whom to salute and everyone else knew when and how to reciprocate. Boone was a black man in an army that gave him more respect than the civilian world he had left behind. As a basic-training drill sergeant, Boone's task was to pound

the individuality out of civilians and turn them into conformists, to teach them that the Army cared more about the uniform than about the color of the man wearing it. Sure, the Army had too few black officers, too many black infantrymen and too few black military policemen, but the Army struck me as less racially prejudiced than the de facto segregated neighborhoods and public schools of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in which I came of age in the 1950s and 1960s.

Boone and I both saw graduation as theater, but Boone saw it as a drama; I saw it as a farce. “I really would like to leave early, Senior Drill Sergeant,” I said again. It was at that moment he understood I was still not a believer. He had trained me but failed to persuade me. I looked at his face one last time and saw his eyes water.

“Dismissed,” was all Boone said, raising his chin.

Robert Silverman served in the U.S. Army from 1969 to 1972, most of that time as a military police investigator in West Germany. His essay “Looking for Germany” is forthcoming in the Michigan Quarterly Review. He is completing a book charting his experience with Germany and its legacy, from his childhood as the son of a Jewish-American WWII combat veteran to his own military experiences, and to his years exploring Germany before and since reunification.

Fiction.

Beyond Green Ramp

By Maggie DeMay

She awoke to the sound of jet engines being throttled back, the sensation of near weightlessness as the big plane banked to the right, and the memory of an Elton John song echoing through her brain. She opened her eyes to the soft glow of low wattage red lights.

Everything hurt.

From the top of her head to the bottoms of her feet.

Everything.

Hurt.

A woman in a flight nurse's uniform appeared at her side.

You're doing fine, she said. We will be landing soon.

Landing? She didn't remember boarding a plane. There may have been a helicopter. Her memory was fuzzy.

She tried to sit up, only to find she was in restraints.

Whatdafuck?

Those are for your safety, the woman said, as she filled a syringe from a small bottle and injected it into the tube that snaked into her arm. Just relax. We'll be on the ground in Germany soon.

Germany? That couldn't be right. The last thing she remembered was waiting at Green Ramp. Hot sun beating down on the tarmac, the humidity turning the atmosphere into a sauna.

Someone had wired an iPod into the com van's speakers. Elton John and a metric crap ton of music from the sixties and seventies set on shuffle.

The younger soldiers were complaining. *Hey, Sarge, you got anything from this century?*

The song was about a yellow brick road, probably somewhere in Europe where it was at least twenty degrees cooler and humidity was something that only happened to Americans.

The road to Green Ramp was neither yellow nor green nor made of brick. It was asphalt and concrete. Heat waves rose from the surface. North Carolina in August was hotter than hell's half acre. Why in the name of everything holy did command insist on full combat gear for the load out? To look good for the video cameras and the photo ops? To prove the military had body armor that would fit women, even if the vest she was wearing flattened her breasts painfully against her chest and was at least four inches too damned long. She was one of the lucky ones. Mother Nature had been sparing in that department and she could at least find a vest that halfway fit. The better endowed women had to make do with whatever they could find that fastened.

She wasn't trained for combat, although it felt like she'd been at war with command and every soldier with a dick since she'd enlisted. She was two years from retirement and was supposed to have been assigned to Fort Huachuca as an instructor. Until the day in September when the world changed. She found herself at Fort Bragg, a non-airborne soldier assigned to an airborne unit, wondering why in the hell the army was trying to turn a bunch of analysts, intercept operators, and assorted other chairborne rangers into field troops. The training was brutal. Two of the older women had been injured and reassigned, leaving her the senior female noncom.

You get to babysit the split-tails, the first sergeant had said.

By then she didn't like very many people, and the first sergeant with his double entendres and a habit of 'forgetting' to announce himself when he entered the women's barracks had put him at the top of the list.

She would never forget the motivational speech he gave the night before they left. *You know why they're sending chicks to the sandbox? Your primary mission will be to keep American men away from the local women. The towelheads hate that shit. That's why Uncle Sugar is sending you split-tails over.*

She watched the skinny creep as he schmoozed one of the local reporters, a simpering suicide blonde with the IQ of tree sap and a look that said wake me up early for hair and makeup. He was telling the reporter how much he was looking forward to working with female troops. The same troops he had all but called whores in uniform the night before.

More like looking forward getting away from his overweight, nagging, dependopotamus of a wife and his passel of bratty kids. The wife he told everyone had better not be pregnant when he got back because he'd had a vasectomy without bothering to tell her. Such a trusting soul. She was wondering if he was going to work that bit of information into the interview. From the look of disgust on the reporter's face, he probably had.

She was beginning to think fragging the bastard would be well worth the brig time.

They had flown in C-17s, first to Rhein-Mein in Frankfurt, Germany, and then on to Afghanistan. It was like flying back in time or to another dimension. The windows of the mud and stone hovels surrounding the airfield and the base camp had been painted black or boarded up. To prevent men from being tempted by the sight of female flesh. Groups of burka-clad women moved silently through the streets,

always in groups and always accompanied by a male of some sort, be it a grandpa, an old uncle, a husband, or a four-year old. They didn't speak to the American women, just silently stared through the crocheted lace square that screened their view of the world, lest they be tempted to learn to read and write or some other deadly sin.

She couldn't decide if the local men were offended by female soldiers or frightened of them: women without veils who told men what to do. Women who weren't subservient, who walked unafraid through the village with M4 carbines equipped with laser sights. Women in fatigues and boots, in charge of their own destiny. Educated women who were not afraid to speak their minds or hide behind veils.

The Taliban started strapping women into suicide vests. How better to get rid of disobedient wives and unwanted daughters? Strap them into a vest they can't remove, throw a burka over their head and send them into the Americans' camp. The process was ever so much cheaper than divorce or providing a dowry.

She felt the big plane shudder as the landing gear dropped and it began the slow descent into Ramstein.

Whatever was in the syringe was doing wonders.

Then she remembered why she was on the plane.

The girl couldn't have been more than fourteen.

The frightened child had thrown off the burka and was pleading with them not to shoot in a language no one understood. She was wearing a vest made of dynamite and nightmares, with blasting caps wired into a cheap cell phone that would activate the bomb.

The bomb would be triggered by a call from a man hiding in a safe location, more than likely her father or some male relative.

The squad had the girl surrounded, trying to keep her as far away as possible.

She had the lethal red dot of her rifle's laser sight pinned to the girl's forehead as she kept one eye on the phone, waiting for the fatal call.

She was the only woman in the squad and older and maybe that was the reason the girl ran towards her as the phone screen lit up.

She would never forget the look of terror in the girl's huge brown eyes as she opened fire. The girl fell to the ground, dead before the explosion turned her into red mist, her body absorbing most of the shock wave and shrapnel.

Most of it.

She remembered flying backwards against the side of a communications van before everything went dark.

She'd been in country two months. Two months of pure undiluted hell, trying to do her job while staying as far away from the predatory assholes with a testosterone overload. Not all the men were like that, just enough to make it more dangerous inside the camp than out.

I killed her. I shot a kid in the head with an M4 carbine loaded with NATO-approved 5.56 steel-jacketed bullets.

She kept telling herself it was a mercy killing, quicker and less painful than death by explosion.

It didn't help.

She could vaguely remember the first sergeant standing over her at the aid station while the docs were prepping her for the medevac chopper.

Mighty fine shooting for a split-tail, he'd said.

If her throat hadn't been so dry, she would have spit in his face.

Maggie DeMay is an Old Cold Warrior who never saw combat. She enlisted in the Army in 1978, and was in one of the first co-ed training companies at Fort Leonard Wood.

One Outta Four Ain't Bad

By Stuart Phillips

I am driving my father halfway across Mississippi so I can watch him die a little more. He's doing his part, sitting next to me with cancer eating his insides. We pass the new cemetery hard by the pecan orchard on the outskirts of town. My mother and her people lie in Belzoni, deep in the Delta, but my father's family is buried here; he'll join them soon.

Every doctor with options had already left Clarksdale, so each week we make the one-hour drive to the clinic in Oxford. For six months we've looked at the cemetery; we never say a word, but we both know that regardless of how many drips they push through the IV, this is the real end of the trip.

After three generations of dirt farmers, my father had scabbled his way through law school. Out of his four boys, I was the only one who didn't escape Clarksdale. One brother is a doctor in Tupelo, one a professor at Starkville, and one is gay, which was apparently enough to justify shaking the dust of the Delta off his feet. I headed off to Ole Miss for a degree and stuck around for law school. That's what my father expected, and I didn't have a good reason not to go. After I graduated,

finding a job seemed like too much work, so I headed home to his practice.

He's pulled his old Coahoma Electric jacket up around his neck. He represented them in the eighties; now he wears the ratty blue windbreaker all the time, even in the house.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine." I turn the heat up a notch.

He started getting dizzy in late spring. Basic panels were akilter. The specialist confirmed pancreatic cancer, and our journey began. The fields were so heavy with cotton we drove through clouds until we hit the bluff at Batesville. Then, thirty miles of rolling hills unfolded until we reached the clinic in Oxford, where he lay back in an oversized armchair with his IV. We'd spend an hour watching Fox News, checking in on cases, and avoiding talking about why we were there. Each drop was like ordering soldiers to fight for territory already ceded by a secret treaty; they kept sending them over the top, and we kept coming back.

We reach Marks in about ten minutes, slowing down for a four-way stop the town doesn't deserve. He turns in his seat.

"You ready for that deposition Monday?" Our conversation revolves around the practice because it's easier that way.

"Yes, sir. Got my outline done, exhibits copied. Ready to go."

His gaunt cheeks turn up with a half-smile and he looks back out the window.

After two months, his home health care insurance ran out, so I moved in, bringing my dog, Martha. I spent nights on the couch in his living room listening to Hannity bleed through the half-open door in case he needed me. Despite his professed aversion to dogs, Martha knew better; she curled up on his bed, only leaving to eat or go outside. He slept with one arm draped across her flank.

We quickly reached the point where the old man grunted in pain

when he sat down on the toilet. I would take his hand and help him sit up, feeling the fragile bones and thinking of how he arced me over the bank of the Sunflower River, pretending to toss me into the muddy water.

A steadying hand on the shoulder for balance soon turned into a fireman's carry to get the old man to the bathroom. Done, I'd back up to the mattress until his knees hit, then give a slight stoop so he could lie down. A quick check on his socks, covers up, and Martha moved back to spoon him.

I had brief hopes that my brothers would step up. It'd also be nice to say they came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but that would be a different family.

I got irregular phone calls from Eli, the doctor. "Missy hit me with temporary alimony, but I'll see if I can send you something. We really appreciate you taking care of Dad." After a minute pretending to listen, he'd promise money that never came and hang up before I could ask him to take our dad to his next treatment.

I hated to even let Bryant talk to the old man when he made his monthly call of vague promises. "Amy and I might come over this weekend, take you out to lunch at the Ponderosa." He never came, but I still shaved my father every Saturday before we sit down to watch football, just in case.

James, the third one, never called back.

As I drive, I listen to his breathing to make sure he's not in pain. It catches when he needs a pill; he gasps when he needs a new patch.

We've been coming over so many months that the fields are dotted with bare stalks that jut from muddy shallows, remnants of a sodden fall. On the far side of Batesville, a semi cuts me off just as my phone rings. I let it go to voicemail and stifle a curse at the trucker, who rumbles on toward I-55.

By the time we pass the Water Valley exit, I've settled down enough to listen to the message.

“Will, this is Bryant. Amy and I were wondering if y’all still have those barrister bookcases in the front office? We’d like to come get them sometime. Give me a call.”

I want to feel angry. Instead, I feel like pulling over and retching.

“Who was that?”

“Bryant. He was just asking after you. They might come over this weekend.”

He looks out at the waves of brown grass streaming by at sixty-five miles per hour. “I’m sure he’s busy.” He absently smooths his jacket under the seatbelt. “You’re all good boys. I’m proud of y’all.”

He knows. But he fights the truth as much as the cancer. I feel my seatbelt tug as my chest tightens with understanding.

We pull into the new medical factory that’s sprung up in south Oxford, twenty acres built of craggy concrete blocks that sparkle in the sun. I’ve learned which one is the cancer clinic by now—two rights and a left.

He swings his feet out of the car and sits a moment, hand on the door jamb.

“Do you need a pill?” I reach into my pocket, where I always keep a couple wrapped in aluminum foil.

“No, just catching my breath.” He pushes himself up and puts one hand on my shoulder as I close the door. “Thanks.”

Inside the office, the staff checks him in and guides him to his orange armchair. They love him here. “He’s so brave,” they say, not knowing that the stream of jokes is how he’s always deflected all emotions, not just fear. The CNA is putting a line into a vein on the back of his hand when a nurse in blue stops her.

“Dr. Jackson wants to see them first.”

Dr. Jackson’s exam room doesn’t have a clock; time doesn’t matter when you’re this close to the bone. I stare at his diploma from Vanderbilt while he gives us the uncomfortable, expected news.

I hold the door open for my dad as we leave with two boxes of Fentanyl patches. He walks with a stoop and his chambray shirt hangs a little bit. I help him into the car.

“Do you want me to call the boys?” There’s not a lot to say, but we still have to fill our days somehow.

He stares out the passenger window, eyes seeming to reach the pecan trees, husks split and heavy. Shells dot the row next to the fence line, mixing with the Yazoo clay to stain the headstones ochre. His eyes glisten for a moment.

“No. Let’s go get us some lunch.”

“Do you want to stop at Cracker Barrel?”

“I do like their fried okra.” He uses his thumb to rub the IV site on the back of his left hand. “And this’ll be the last time I have it.”

“You’d better get two servings, then.” We smile at each other for a second.

“I may do that.” He clicks his seatbelt, leans back, and closes his eyes. “Wake me up when we get there.”

Stuart Phillips is a former Army officer, expatriate Mississippian, and recovering lawyer, now pursuing an MFA at Fairfield University. He strives to bring a sense of place to his short stories while he works on the Great Southern Novel and tries to master the semicolon.

Poetry.

Passing Through Another FOB

D.A. Gray

Darkness sets and the day's last prayer
seeps from a distant speaker, twisting
through chain link and accompanied
by generator hums. Light. Just enough
to see each trailer looks the same.

The sun you thought you'd survived
radiates, invisible from the T-Walls,
the concrete barricades. And a Turkish
café sits on the edge of the row
the scent of seasoned beef drawing

you up metal steps. An older man
sits in the corner on a metal chair
playing the Oud—none of the dark
rooms, just straight American
white-washed walls and flickering
fluorescent bulbs.

The old man's son,
a teenager you guess, writes your
order for doner kebab, an added touch
of American fries, and walks away.

The flickering is straining the eyes
this late. You close them and it's you
and the pear-shaped Oud, fingers
walking up and down its
fretless stem—letting yourself be caught
in the amber of the moment—each

untempered interval sinks one into the next.

You're in a song as old as the dirt,
notes rising, forced up by what
falls from the sky, the sinking
back to the earth. You hand
the son a twenty for a three
dollar meal and say 'keep it'

and on the way out, nod to the old
man. A few years later you'll see
him again mutter *Shukran* under
your breath. But tonight you disappear
in the shadows between the barriers
ashamed you never learned
the Arabic word for Thanks.

D.A. Gray's poetry collection Contested Terrain was published by FutureCycle Press in October 2017. His work has appeared in The Sewanee Review, Appalachian Heritage, Rattle: Poets Respond, Still: The Journal, The Windhover, and War, Literature and the Arts among other journals. Gray holds an MFA from The Sewanee School of Letters and an MS from Texas A&M-Central Texas. A retired soldier, he writes, teaches and lives in central Texas.

War Bride

Andy Pérez

WAR-BRIDE

is what they call me
at the bar, neck-deep in my Corona.
I have married my grief, brought it
to the altar, kissed
its rotted gums
and taken its skeletons
to bed, held the bloody and pulsing
heart
in my teeth.

To the boy who buys me drinks, calls me baby:
If I cannot be the man you want then at least
hold me like I am. Twist your face when entering
my body as though someone's put a bullet
in your back, which is to say become
the foreigner between
the bulls-eye and me,
the Iraqi sky stretched blood-burst
and blinking above us.
God closes his eye
as I pull the trigger,
as I pull you inside me.
A hundred yards, but in my head
I see the whites of his eyes,
crawling veins
as the bullet enters his mouth,
the spray of blood-spittle.
Orgasmic death-rattle in his throat.

A soldier, blinking through climax,
is the closest we come
to surrender.

The boy at the bar, who has eyes like light
through a green bottle, who I will finger
like a filthy glass— he licks his lips,
lays a hand on my arm and says
military man, huh? *Hot.*
He takes me home and we have a good life,
for a while. He puts his hands on me
like he's writing a ransom note,
kisses like he's trying to pull out my ghosts.
Stops one day and says *how many?*
How many *did you kill?*
In answer I pull back my lips, bared
teeth. *Cry havoc and let slip*
the dogs of war.

Lay down your children,
Iraq. We're not through with you yet.
When does it come to an end?
When you deep-throat
my bullet?
When the bleeding sky,
the foreigner on the building, comes
back like the ghost of everyone
I've fucked?

Iraq, I've always wanted
to be held
like I'm dying.

Two Droughts

Andy Pérez

You are standing
in a cone of light, confessing
everything, renouncing everything
and I am watching,
loving you from a great distance.

*Dear A: There is nothing in war I have wanted more than the intimacy
of knowing you undressed beside me.*

The apartment comes alive at your absence,
walls turned flesh. I live inside a body that is not
my own. When I say I crawl inside you,
I mean I have become the bible over your heart,
the one that halts the bullet and leaves the silence
between your ribs undisturbed. There are a hundred
different types of war and only one type of peace but every one
of these things needs a hush. A spark. All through the night
I sing your breath into my ear, close my eyes and see you
burning. About to burn.
Running towards me, blazing,
a man with his head on fire.

Dear E: Come home in one piece and I'll think about the undressing.

When I say come home in one piece I mean peace.

I mean you laying down the rifle and never picking it up

not even in dreams, I mean you with a belly full of doves.

I mean a rifle pointed at the sky, I mean you saying SURRENDER

I mean you throwing your hands to an emptiness I mean no one

coming home in a box I mean 50 stars will never be enough,

50 pieces of fire even plucked from the sky will never

consume me as wholly as the heat cupped between your hands.

Dear A: You think I'd be thirsty in a desert. Guess not.

I lock you in a place they can't reach,

make my hips a graveyard, find pieces of you

in this skin you left behind. I'm thinking

about your plants (dead), my hands (dry)

and the fridge (empty). I can't keep anything

alive in here, the sun laid low and thirsting

over the cracked ground, us in a corn field,

us in a field of light with stalks splitting around

us as you put both feet on the gas, the field aflame

outside your truck. I have no more water left for plants

in this drought, E, I know how much you loved that tree.

Plums, lemons, olives, figs- I've made a list of all the fruit

it didn't bear. But just think of it:

an olive branch.

Wouldn't that be nice?

*Dear E: I'm sorry but I've decided a flag would be a shit replacement
for a husband.*

So what if you have enough to drink? There's still a drought.
Don't pretend the thirst doesn't still claw its way up your throat
the same, don't pretend you don't wake up every morning
with a tongue dry and parched and a mouth full of sand. At night,
the room is so still, so flesh-warm and close I sing you
falling into my arms, love you tender as I can stomach
with the hollow eyes and the skull and the skull
and your ribs holy fuck, you were never supposed to be so thin.
You touch my neck and put your lips on my jaw and you're so cold here,
pecked out eyes two X's for eyes, your eyes.
Every time you come home, there's a little more sadness.
A little more silence, a little more of a stranger
when I lay you down on your bed,
yours not mine and you set it ablaze,
the headboard crumbling to ash
as I rock you into a little more
quiet.

Dear E: I can't look anyone in the eye. I keep having these dreams.

I'm sorry I made a scene in the airport, I know.
I had three seconds to fit all of you in some part of me
and I'm sorry, I don't think I have enough room
for any more dead people here. I'm sick
of being a graveyard and I'm sorry I smashed all your plates
and I let the plants die and I skipped work to think about
your hands on my face on my chest covering my eyes my hips,
I'm sorry you sleep with a knife under your pillow.
When I say I want you to gut me I mean
if I have to see my insides dragged out and desiccated
I at least want it to be literal and I at least

want it to be you. I'm sick of the fucking metaphor, E.
I really am.

Dear E: if you have to go at least take me with you.

You are standing in a cone of light making a mockery
of everything I've given you and I've tried very hard not
to love a man made of so much silence, I've tried very hard not
to make us a tragedy but you have both feet
on the gas and no one knows what's at the end of this field,
corn stalks splitting around us. I wear my wedding ring
around my neck or not at all because I'm sick of the questions,
because I'm widowed in the body of someone
very close to being dead. E, there are a hundred different types
of war and you wanted to live through all of them just to die
at the end of the last one. You said that wars never end.
You said that you are tired. Here's a riddle for you:
if the wars never end and you die at the end of the last one
how do you know when the war you're fighting is the last?
How do you know when to surrender?
(Answer: you don't. You don't you don't you don't.)

Dear A: I'm bringing the entire desert back in my boots.

I am giving you
everything. Confessing everything.
Turning myself holy, turning myself in,
setting myself ablaze
at the stake.
Isn't this what you wanted?
We are beautiful until you wake up

and smell the smoke, the scorched flesh
and you turn your face to me,
two X's where your eyes were
and say:

Dear A: I am home in pieces, one peace.

Dear A: thank you.

Thank you.

Andy Pérez served in the Marine Corps from 2002-2011, including service in Iraq and Afghanistan. When he was eight, he moved from Cuba to the United States. He now lives with his partner and his surplus of dogs.

The Sniper's Sight

Joseph S. Pete

A sniper zeroed in on the Iraqi in the sweaty dishdasha perched on the dust-swept street by the disabled Opel.

“Don’t do it, don’t do it, by God, please don’t do it, just don’t do it,” the sniper thought with swelling desperation.

But the Iraqi with the darting eyes pulled an AK-47 out of the car. “Don’t do it,” the sniper pleaded to himself.

“You don’t realize how close you are to death,” he murmured to himself. You don’t realize, you just don't realize what it is you’re doing.”

Right as the sniper pulled the trigger, squeezed it evenly home, snuffing out the Iraqi in a red mist, he questioned everything.

“Damn, why’d you have to reach for that rifle? Why the hell did you do it? Why’d you have to do it?”

His relentless second-guessing and internal monologue drowned out the roar of the shot in a deafening way

Joseph S. Pete is an Iraq War veteran, an award-winning journalist, an Indiana University graduate, a book reviewer, and a frequent guest on Lakeshore Public Radio. He was named the poet laureate of Chicago BaconFest, a feat that Geoffrey Chaucer chump never accomplished. His work has appeared in O-Dark-Thirty, As You Were, Line of Advance, Rat's Ass Review, The Grief Diaries, Chicago Literati, Dogzplot, shufPoetry, The Roaring Muse, Prairie Winds, Blue Collar Review, Lumpen, The Tipton Poetry Journal, Euphemism, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Pulp Modern and elsewhere.

Rice Harvest

George Thomas

Green, the lowland crop
In the water growing strong.
Red, the helmet rusts.
Close, the village maidens sing,
Sweetly they sing,
"I am looking for a man,"
Combing back their hair,
"I am looking for a man."

Soft, these moon-faced women sing
Until the harvest swells
When scythes in hand, the old men come,
Walking step by step.
Now the village maids fall dumb,
Bright scythes, singing in the sun.

George Thomas is a veteran of the United States Navy and holds a Master of Arts in English and an MFA from Eastern Washington University. He has cofounded and edited three literary magazines: Willow Springs, Heliotrope [western version] and George & Mertie's Place. In 2017, his work was included in the anthology WA129, edited by Washington State's Poet Laureate Tod Marshall. His poetry has appeared in Aberration Labyrinth, Work Literary Magazine, Willow Springs, Bellowing Ark, Crab Creek Review and Chiron. His two books of poetry can be found on Amazon: Grayhouse By Cold Mountain and Tenderfoot.

Interview.

A Conversation with Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien is the award-winning author of such renowned works as *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*. He spent most of his youth in the small town of Worthington, Minnesota and later graduated from Macalester College in 1968. From February 1969 to March 1970, he served as infantryman with the U.S. Army in Vietnam and elsewhere, after which he pursued graduate studies in government at Harvard University. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, and *Ploughshares*, and in several editions of *The Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. He is the recipient of prestigious literary awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He has been elected to both the Society of American Historians and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. O'Brien currently holds the University Endowed Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University and currently lives in Austin, Texas.

O-Dark-Thirty Senior Editor, Jim Mathews, caught up with O'Brien to discuss his experiences as a military veteran, an author and a literary luminary.

O-Dark-Thirty: It's such honor to talk to you today. It's also somewhat of tradition here to kick off our interviews by asking about the circumstances of your military service which is probably well-known to most but maybe not to some.

Tim O'Brien: Well, I was drafted in the summer of 1968 into the Army and went to Ft. Lewis, Washington. After training, I went to Vietnam where I served as a grunt in the Quang Ngai Province, in I Corps. I was in the field as an infantryman when I arrived in February of '69 up through late October/early November of that year. I spent the rest of my tour at a forward fire base. So I was in the field for about nine months or so.

ODT: And you never thought about making it a career, huh?

TO: Just the opposite! I was thinking, how the hell do I get out of this!?

ODT: So this is a bit of a chicken-egg question, but did your desire to be a writer precede your time in Vietnam? Or did it develop during or after your military experiences?

TO: Oh, definitely before. I wanted to be a writer since I was a kid. In fact, since I was eight or nine years-old. I didn't do anything with it over those early years, but I always dreamed of being a writer. Of course, I also thought that writers only came from places like Philadelphia and New York, not from little cow towns in the middle of nowhere. But it was really the collision with Vietnam that made me not just want to write, but *have* to write. After that, I basically could not *not* write. So during my time in Vietnam—when I was in my foxhole or while other guys were horsing around or whatever—I began to write out little paragraphs about things that happened that day.

ODT: *Would you describe it as journaling?*

TO: Journaling in a way, yes. But it was a little more formal than that. I tried to write good sentences and I tried to write them well. I didn't know at the time what I'd do with it. I'd carry these scraps of papers around in my ruck sack and finally the war was over for me and I got home and I had anywhere from thirty to fifty pages or so. And with that, I started crafting my war memoir, which was called *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*.

ODT: *So that was published in 1973, not far removed from your return. Yet *The Things They Carried* didn't come out until 1990. Was that distance needed or where there just other things going on?*

TO: Well, I had to write my first book, *If I Die...* It was a compulsion more than anything else. I was just home from the war and I was still hurting. And I just had to write it. So in that sense, distance wasn't needed. It was more like going to a shrink and pouring out what had happened to me. But it did take time and distance to do it well. With *Going After Cacciato* first, which came out in 1978, and then later with *The Things They Carried*. And both of those books I'm very happy with. I think they are two of my best books. They're very different kinds of books, but they both tell the story about war and what you think about and carry with you. And to do it in a better and more organized and more disciplined and comprehensive way does require distance and time, I suppose. Because both books are a way of making sense out of horror and brutality and death.

ODT: *And were you studying the craft formally then? I believe you were at Harvard shortly after the war and in the mid-1970s.*

TO: I was there, yes, but I didn't study writing. I was studying political philosophy. But part of *Going After Cacciato* was written while I was at Harvard. And it was written from about two o'clock in the morning until four o'clock in the morning. And then during the summers, and I didn't really become a full-time writer until I was about halfway through with *Cacciato*. I remember calling up my editor and asking, 'Do you think I should quit school to become a writer?' And he told me he couldn't give that kind of advice to anyone. So somewhere in the middle of that, I could sense that he wasn't against it and I took that as he wasn't saying "Don't do it." And so I did it. I was very close to getting my Doctorate at that time, but I decided that I was going to finish *Cacciato* because honestly, my heart was never in the academic world. As I said before, I just always wanted to be a writer since I was a little boy. And, looking back, I'm glad I did it.

ODT: *One of your most famous books is, of course, The Things They Carried. I first encountered it while at Hopkins in '95 and it was the first time I had read a story collection that included stories that were "linked" for lack of a better word.*

TO: You know I've never really known what to call that book. Sometimes I think of *The Things They Carried* as linked stories. Other times, I also think of it as a novel, precisely because the characters are linked throughout. If I had to describe it today, I'd say it's simply a work of fiction. Because it really does lie somewhere in that blurry world between a novel and a story collection. And I intentionally wrote it that way—partly because I *had* to write it that way. Life—especially during war—can sometimes come at you in such a way that you can't tell how you got from where you were to where you are. That's all lost time and it probably happened to you and to so many others who have been to war. You sit around and can't remember all the down

time and all the horseplay and conversations. It all sort of vanishes. But certain things, you do remember. And not always chronologically, but in a way that's scattered. So I tried to write the book in that way. Not for any literary reason, but because my time in Vietnam had come at me that way. And I'm sure it was that way for many who served.

ODT: What are your thoughts about the concept of 'war lit'—again for lack of a better term—in its current state?

TO: Great question. I guess, for me—and I don't know how other veteran writers feel—but I really don't think of myself as a "war writer." I think of myself as a "people writer," a "human heart writer." Granted, on the surface, many of my stories take place during a time of war, but they're not really about war. My stories aren't about bombs or military maneuvers or tactics. They're what it feels like to be afraid. They're what it feels like to kill someone. And the jolt that you get in your heart—even though the someone you had killed was an enemy soldier who was trying to kill you.

ODT: And that's a jolt stays with you?

TO: Exactly. You carry forward the memory of a dead sixteen-year-old kid lying there. He doesn't look like an enemy soldier anymore, but just a dead sixteen year-old kid. And so, it's not really war that I'm writing about. It's the emotions that we can all relate to. Love for our friends, buddies, hometowns, moms and dads and girlfriends. And how all that is accentuated and amplified by proximity to death. It all feels more intense. There's another thing that occurs to me that's going on with respect to the term "war writer." To be called a "war writer" is like Herman Melville being called an "ocean writer" or Toni Morrison being called a "black writer" or Salman Rushdie being called

a “Muslim writer.” It’s ridiculous. It’s part pigeon-holing and part diminishment of something by labeling it or filing it away in a category. It’s like being trapped in an alleyway with a big sign that reads, “War Writing Only.” And there’s something else that’s important in that I do feel a sense of satisfaction and pride in trying to articulate stories about what human beings go through when we’re told to kill people. By their drill sergeants, by their lieutenants, by their country. And what it’s like to have to bear that with you for the rest of your life.

ODT: And did you find some release or relief in the act of writing?

TO: So when I write, I feel I’m not just speaking for myself, but for other people like me in those similar situations. Not just in Vietnam, but even in, say, Caesar’s columns centuries ago. You know how veterans are. The subject comes up and they fall silent. They don’t want to talk about it. Close their mouths with their families and bottle it up. I don’t speak for them. They have their own voices, but I feel satisfaction in getting at what I think are real portrayals of war and killing and dying in the sense that these may be things that others can’t or won’t say. So I’m pulled both ways. On the one hand, I object to the term ‘war writer’ and on the other hand, I don’t object. So that’s the long way of addressing that question.

ODT: In the classes that we teach, I’ve noticed that many young and older service members or veterans just dipping into creative writing have a difficult time moving beyond just the war or military setting in their work and to really focus their attention on the broader human experience that the literary canvas can invite.

TO: That’s understandable. They just need to write about it without writing about it. In other words, create a civilian world or romance

world or sci-fi world or a family world and portray experiences that draw on their war service without doing it in terms of the war.

ODT: *I know that you've talked about the idea of "story truth" vs. "happening truth" in terms of your experiences and your writing. I wonder if you could expand on that for our readers.*

TO: Well, I'll put it this way: there have been many times in my life that I wasn't sure I was even in a war. I mean, I look at my hands sometimes and think, did these hands hold a rifle, pull a trigger? Did these legs march through rice paddies or climb hills or cross rivers? It just seems impossible. How could I have done that and how could I have not gone insane? But I know it happened. So when you go to write about those experiences and you feel the way I do, the whole issue of what's "true" and what actually happened gets muddy. And the older you get, the further away the war gets, and the muddier and foggier the memory gets. And in the end, the stories in *The Things They Carried* and *Cacciato*, even if they are invented, are real and true to me. It's fiction, of course, but it feels more real than what actually happened. And I've heard from friends and I've read in biographies that a lot of writers feel that way. That when you objectify a thing, take it out and change it around, do all the things that fiction writers do, then it becomes more real than the real deal.

ODT: *It seems that your work connects so much with the emotional feelings of readers—as opposed to the cognitive—that lends it such great endurance.*

TO: It does stick with you. And I think back on works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Heart of Darkness*, all of the stories we've read and remembered. They were real to me—I mean, I know they're not,

intellectually, but when you're in it, you consume every page. You don't stop and say, "Well, that never happened." You believe it as you're reading it. The same way you believe your dreams when you're dreaming. That's the best answer I can give you regarding story truth vs. actual truth. Of course, in the end, who gives a shit? A thousand years from now, your novel will be a tiny footnote in history. Ten thousand years from now, even the footnote will vanish. I mean, what do we remember about the Battle of Hastings? Unless you're an historian, and even historians don't know all the details that were known and immortalized in the decades after the battle. It's erased over time and all you're left with, assuming one was written, is a story.

ODT: So much of the work we do at the Veterans Writing Project revolves around our free writing workshops for service members and vets. I'd love to pass on any advice you can offer to them and our readers, especially for those just beginning their writing journey.

TO: There are only really two pieces of advice I can give. One is to be stubborn. Be a mule. Sit down and write every day. No exceptions. That means sitting down to write on your birthday. On your wife's or husband's birthday. On holidays. On travel. Don't find excuses. Even if it's only for an hour or half hour. Even if it's ten minutes. But every day. You have to be dogged and willing to sacrifice. You can't write when you're bowling or goofing off or whatever. You have to be disciplined and determined about it.

ODT: And the other piece of advice?

TO: Read like hell. Read a lot. Read outside your interests. Read stuff you think you'd hate. Just read, read, read. And these are hard things to do. It's hard to read a book you think you're not going to like. Just

like it's hard to sit down and write every day. But that's the only way, in the end, that you're truly going to be able to write something worth reading.

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