

**MEMORY'S FOLLY: NARRATIVE TRAUMA IN THE AFTERMATH OF  
THE VIETNAM WAR**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

RILEY WOMACK

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Dr. Jason Harris

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## **ABSTRACT**

Memory's Folly: Narrative Trauma in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War

Riley Womack  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Jason Harris  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

This project explores the ways that narrative trauma was represented in fiction after the Vietnam War. Trauma is not only felt in the survivors of the War but is also inherited by the generations that follow. This inherited trauma is not memory, but something close to it. How does trauma manifest itself in veterans of the Vietnam War, their descendants, and how is it reflected in existing literature? Research was conducted through close textual analyses of works written by survivors of the Vietnam War and select works written by authors who did not experience the War yet take it as their central issue. Additional readings covered combat trauma, memory studies, and postmemory theory. Currently, very little material exists about postmemory in the context of the Vietnam War, however we may extrapolate current postmemorial writings to a Vietnam context. How does Vietnam manifest itself in the memories of the generations following the War? Like the descendants of the Holocaust, it is important to understand how these later generations (both American and Vietnamese) create ownership of memories they did not experience. This research culminated in a novel excerpt about a reporter who, after his father (a Vietnam veteran) dies, seeks answers in another veteran.

## **DEDICATION**

For those who have told their story

For those who still can't find the words

And

For those who are still in the jungle

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## SECTION I

### INTRODUCTION

“He thought of the jungle, already regrowing around him to cover the scars they had created.”

-Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn*

War is an issue that literature has explored since the days of Homer. Where there is war, there are those who fight it. These figures carry memories and trauma back from the battlefield. Once home, they will pass their trauma on to their descendants. A singular trauma has now become part of a “collective memory,” (Hirsch *Generation* 32).

How is the Vietnam War remembered? It is remembered in images: the photos of Larry Burrows; nine-year-old Kim Phuc, clothes burned away from a napalm strike; Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation; Jeffrey Miller’s body after the shooting at Kent State. It is remembered in the literature of American authors like Tim O’Brien, Larry Heinemann, Denis Johnson, Bobbie Ann Mason, Karl Marlantes; Vietnamese-American authors like Viet Thanh Nguyen; and Vietnamese authors like Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong. These works carry what O’Brien calls “the weight of memory,” (14).

This project seeks an answer to the question of trauma: how does it manifest itself in the fiction that came out of the Vietnam War? How is this trauma inherited by the following generations? Many veterans still struggle with wartime trauma. Narrative is a method of healing. Narrativizing trauma can help someone understand their pain, try and glean some sense from it, and work towards peace. This project views the tainted history of America’s involvement in Vietnam, combat trauma, and how one generation may inherit trauma from another.

My creative work focuses on the ways that war causes loss: physical, mental, familial, and personal. This loss is important to understand, as it gives weight to the way the following

generations are affected. This awareness is pertinent because it will help us “know how we make memories and how we forget them so that we can beat their hearts back to life,” (Nguyen *Nothing* 3). Through understanding, and by taking “guardianship” of these memories, we will understand the pain and trauma associated with them (Hirsch *Generation* 1). This work is an attempt to reconcile these needs by exploring the existing literature, analyzing it through a literary and post-memory lens, and asking how these works lend to an understanding of the Vietnam War.

## SECTION II

### COMBAT TRAUMA

“He was lost, more lost than he had ever been in his life. Lost in some kind of limbo land of the dead.”

-Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*

Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who helped start the first “rap groups” (therapy groups) for Vietnam veterans, wrote of American soldiers returning from Vietnam with a “taint” brought about by guilt associated with death. In his book *Home from the War*, he writes:

His taint has to do with guilt evoked by death. His most disturbing images are of particular encounters with the dead and dying; his harshest self-judgments emerge from these encounters and concern not only what he did or did not do but his sense of the overall project he was part of. (99)

This is a common theme amongst psychological texts concerning Vietnam veterans: often they feel that their military commanders betrayed a moral sense of rightness (Shay 11). This could be contributed to a few factors, chief among those the career officers’ desire for upward mobility in the bureaucratic institution of the military. However, even Shay points out the inherent contradiction in this line, because often those commanders “who *wanted* to stay in the field beyond six months were said to have ‘gone bush’ or ‘gone native.’” (12) Military ineptitude—or negligence—began to wear away at the soldier’s moral compass. This is one of many things that contribute to an eventual split between narrative memory—how an event occurred—and traumatic memory.

The ineffective commander was not enough to form trauma in his soldiers; it was merely the place veterans began to notice something awry with military order. Rage, Shay argues, “is

also [sic] the first and possibly the primary trauma that converted subsequent terror, horror, grief, and guilt into lifelong disability for Vietnam veterans” (21). This is corroborated by Lifton, who states that “explosive rage” was a symptom found alongside one of his patient’s guilt (Lifton 106). This hints at what Shay calls the “berserk state,” something that is triggered by intense combat experiences: the death of close friends, a betrayal of a soldier’s moral code, and a breakdown of social trust (Shay 77). Veterans are never the same if they enter this state. Shay explains: “Combat trauma destroys the *capacity* for social trust, accounting for the paranoid state of being that blights the lives of the most severely traumatized combat veterans,” (33). The berserk state signals the split between the veteran’s narrative memory and traumatic memory.

There is a clear difference between the narrative (autobiographical) memory and traumatic memory. The former is what we generally think of when we describe memories. The latter may only be summoned under the circumstances that mimic the original trauma; however, the traumatic memory may never reoccur just as it did in actuality (van der Kolk and van der Hart 163). To describe the differences between narrative and traumatic memory, van der Kolk and van der Hart describe one of Janet’s cases, a woman dealing with her mother’s death:

First of all, traumatic memory takes too long: in Iréne’s case, it took her three to four hours to tell this story. When she was finally able to tell her tale, it took her only half a minute. And this is how ordinary memory should function; it should be an aspect of life and be integrated with other experiences. Iréne’s ‘traumatic memory’ clearly was not adaptive at all. After retrieving the narrative memory, she was able to give the correct answer to the question asked by her doctor: adapted to present circumstances. For instance, Iréne told a slightly different story to Janet than she did to other people: with strangers, she left out her father’s

abominable behavior. Thus, in contrast to narrative memory, which is a social act, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity. In contrast, ordinary memory fundamentally serves a social function, illustrated by Irène's telling people about the death of her mother as an appeal for help and reconnection. (163)

Because these memories are "inflexible," only the opposite will lessen their stranglehold (178). This generally means creating alternate narratives that allow patients to exercise control over their trauma.

Some psychologists, Jonathan Shay included, wonder if healing is possible *at all*—although he does stipulate that, rather than healing, a "return to innocence" is certainly not possible (Shay 185). He asserts that narrativizing trauma may help veterans heal:

When a survivor creates fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused. (188)

Creating narrative of trauma is the act of bearing witness, something we shall later see with the works of Tim O'Brien and Larry Heinemann. This idea lends credence to the success of Robert Jay Lifton and his rap groups, and why a book such as Ron Kovic's memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* may be so powerful. Bearing witness allows for new understandings of trauma. Cathy Caruth argues that this new understanding "is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding...at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding*

may not,” (*Unclaimed* 11). The dissociation between narrative and traumatic memory has dissolved, allowing the veteran to understand their trauma through the narrative history of the event.

In my novel, we see trauma manifest in the reluctance that the Vietnam veteran, Roger Estes, has when questioned about his wartime experiences. In addition, his first-person narration will occasionally hint at repressed, traumatic memories attempting to force themselves out. He tries to fight back against his trauma, but later learns that narrative helps him understand his past.

## SECTION III

### MEMORY AND POSTMEMORY

For many people, the Vietnam War represented a loss of innocence for the United States. Entrenched for years in a desperate and confusing conflict that seemingly had no meaning, the soldiers who fought returned home carrying the weight of all they had experienced. In the ensuing years, they searched for understanding amongst their memories of a war that many did not understand in the first place. The stories in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* offers a haunting goodbye to Vietnam. The stories do not attempt to place blame or offer any sort of reconciliation. Rather, they attempt to find peace with the narrator's experiences, and leave an ode to what has been lost. Throughout his work, O'Brien is concerned with finding the emotional truth in his war stories, rather than discussing the literal truth. His stories explore truth through its emotional significance instead of history. The narrator, seemingly the author Tim O'Brien, writes these stories in an attempt to understand the war he fought in. The emotionality of a story, in the narrator's eyes, is more important than the historicity of it, and the telling of the story is just as important as its content. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's use of narrator helps him explore the intricacies of story, the emotional truths of Vietnam, and why these are more important than historical fact.

In all of O'Brien's work, the line between reality and fiction is blurred. O'Brien is a Vietnam veteran, but his work is primarily focused on memory instead of recalling particular firefights or patrols. For O'Brien, as we understand late in *The Things They Carried*, he writes to remember, and to discuss the act of remembering itself. Remembering the war in stories makes it real, more real than the actual memory of it. In "Spin," the narrator says:

“Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story, (36).”

This is Tim O’Brien the writer talking. Throughout the collection, he shifts between his time as a soldier, and his time as an older man reflecting on the war. In “Love,” we realize that Tim O’Brien is as much a character throughout the stories as is Jimmy Cross or Kiowa. We learn more about O’Brien in the novel than we do about any other character. He is a character as much as any of the other men in his platoon. We see him at different points throughout his life: as a nine year old, as a young man going off to war, as a man in the war, and as a forty-three year old after the war. Upon first reading, it may seem that the character of O’Brien is the same as the actual, living author. However, it becomes clear that the stories are fiction, and the narrator has purposefully deceived the reader. There is no malicious intent behind this act. He tells us, “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen,” (67). This is the first instance where O’Brien is separating the historical truth from the emotional truth. He goes on to discuss how war stories are not credible. O’Brien the soldier understood war stories, even when he was in Vietnam. He could detect the moral of stories told by men like Mitchell Sanders and Jimmy Cross. He hates old adages like “War is hell.” Generalizations such as that do not make him believe. “It comes down to gut instinct,” he says. “A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe,” (74). True war stories are not concerned with exact history or realistic portrayals, because “a true war story is never about war,” (81). The stories that Tim O’Brien tells have many truths, and they dig at the heart of the matter—the way emotional truths can lead to a greater understanding than does historical fact.

There are differences in the many Tim O'Briens. The soldier tells war stories; the writer comments on these stories and tells stories of his own, usually from after the war. This split personality is interested in the contradictory truths you present in war. There can be no single truth in war. "A thing may happen and be a total lie," O'Brien tells us. "Another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth," (80). True war stories are not about blood and gore. They are about "love and memory," (81). O'Brien the writer is not concerned with the exact details that may be remembered by O'Brien the soldier.

In "Good Form," O'Brien the writer tells us that everything in the book is fiction—"invented." For the writer, these stories aren't exactly therapeutic, but they are ways that he can cope with his memories. "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present," (172). In a way, this is O'Brien, as a narrator, acknowledging the pain experienced by O'Brien the soldier. It is his attempt to share his pain—his burden—with the reader. "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth," (171). Readers may not be able to comprehend the intricacies and horrors of combat. This is why O'Brien relates the war through these emotional, "happening-truths." The narrator also reflects on the contradictory nature of war in his discussion of stories. "I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again." The stories are a way for O'Brien the writer (narrator) to cope with the trauma suffered by O'Brien the soldier. Stories are transient, ephemeral, and they carry redemptive qualities that help people heal. Even though these stories are not true, they carry emotional truths within them.

"On the Rainy River" is a clear example of the ways that story-truth can be just as relevant, if not more so, than the literal truth. It is a story about the summer of 1968, when fresh-out-of-college Tim O'Brien drives north to the Rainy River, and debates whether or not he

should dodge the draft. He arrives at a place called the Tip Top Lodge, and meets a man named Elroy Berdahl. Apparently, Elroy saved his life. In the story, O'Brien stays at the Tip Top Lodge for six days. He is scared and cannot decide if he should go to Canada or Vietnam. On his last day at the Lodge, Elroy basically gives him the opportunity to swim to Canada. However, O'Brien is scared, and chooses not to. This story characterizes what many young men were thinking after receiving their draft notices. Even though this story is fiction, it represents the emotions that were present throughout the Vietnam era. It is about fear and cowardice, and the different ways they manifested themselves. This story reflects the contradictory truth that O'Brien the writer is discussing. On one hand, Tim is scared to go to Vietnam. He may go to Canada. However, when faced with that possibility, he breaks down in Elroy's boat. He becomes scared to go to Canada. In both instances, he may consider himself a coward. Although the story is not true, it reflects the emotions that certainly were true to that period in many people's lives. For O'Brien the writer, that means it could be considered as truth.

Emotional truths serve the reader by relating war stories in ways that one may understand. Many readers will never understand the thousand-yard stare, common amongst seasoned combat veterans. Many will never understand the brotherhood between soldiers, and how it can be so powerful. This is why the narrator tells these stories. The simple act of telling is not enough. They must be told in such a way that avoids generalization; the stories must resonate in a way that readers will be able to grasp the truth embedded within. This is why the narrator chooses to tell the story of Curt Lemon's death as a "love story," (81). When the reader thinks of the relationship between Rat Kiley and Lemon as a story of brotherhood, of that familial love between soldiers, the emotional impact is heightened. The platoon has not lost a soldier, but Rat Kiley has lost a brother, someone he loved. The reader may think of loved ones they have lost.

That is the importance of emotional truths. They allow the reader to understand, and the narrator to be understood. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” the narrator tells the story of a girlfriend traveling to Vietnam to be with her lover. Her experiences in the bush begin changing her in unexpected ways, until she takes on her own thousand-yard stare like the greenies she fights with. The war seeps into her bloodstream like it did for many others: “What happened to her, Rat said, was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it’s never the same. A question of degree. Some make it intact, some don’t make it at all,” (109). Mary Anne will never be the same, and she is ultimately lost to the country itself. Using this story, the narrator describes the problem many veterans faced when they returned home. Many were never the same. They carried the lingering memory of the dead with them.

Like in “Rainy River,” the last story in the novel deals with remembrance, only now O’Brien is not remembering an event as much as he remembers the dead. He steps back into his childhood, before the war. He remembers a girl, Linda, his first love. They were nine years old and in love, but Linda would die of a brain tumor. This story, the narrator says, allows her to come back to life. The act of remembering makes it possible for the dead to live again. Not just Linda, but all of the dead. “I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights,” (232). This story, aptly titled “The Lives of the Dead,” discusses the importance of story. By remembering, the soldiers were able to cope with loss. “We kept the dead alive with stories. When Ted Lavender was shot in the head, the men talked about how they’d never seen him so mellow, how tranquil he was, how it wasn’t the bullet but the tranquilizers that blew his mind. He wasn’t dead, just laid-back,” (226). Remembering is the only way to deal with the pain, and to keep the memories of the dead alive.

Through his narrator, Tim O'Brien is able to untangle the complex web of story, and explain why emotional truth may be more important than literal truth. He argues that stories, regardless of their basis in historical fact, may still help people heal. The stories are like the ghosts of the dead: ethereal, transient, and almost hallucinatory. While some are still trying to say goodbye to the Vietnam War, O'Brien seems to think that is not possible. He will always live with the memory of his wartime experiences. Even though he will never forget, the act of remembrance will enable him to heal, while he keeps the memories of the dead alive. The stories in *The Things They Carried* act as a collective elegy to what has been lost, not only by the individual soldiers, but by the United States as a whole. These stories are reminders for the national consciousness to never forget. They offer understanding through emotional resonance, rather than military history or historical fact. The stories are inclusive. Now, veterans will not be the only ones tasked with remembering. "They shared the weight of memory," the narrator says (14). This "weight" includes the memory of the dead, of war, and of the shared experiences of those who carry it.

Those past war dead resurface throughout the landscape of Vietnam War literature. In Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, dead men serve as our narrators. They are the casualties of a brutal airstrike at Fire Base Harriette. Paco Sullivan, the only survivor, is terribly wounded during the strike, and returns to the US, condemned to a life of painkillers, drifting, and ghosts. "So Paco is made to dream and remember," Heinemann writes (137). The ghostly narrators describe how they approach Paco at night as he tries to unkink the soreness from his wounds.

It is at those moments that he is least wary, most receptive and dreamy. So we bestir and descend. We hover around him like an aura, and declare (some of the townsmen have bragged and sworn they have seen us). (137)

The ghosts begin to massage Paco, making him relax under their touch, until he is nearly asleep, “*that* is the moment we whisper in his ear, and give him something to think about—a dream or a reverie,” (138). The ghosts force Paco to remember his trauma, and because they are our narrators, we become spectators to Paco’s guilt.

Although Paco never entered into Shay’s berserk state, he is still victim to the ineptitude of his commanders. His own lieutenant is at fault for the casualties at Fire Base Harriette: incorrect coordinates had been given for the airstrike. Because of the circumstances of his wounding, and the guilt he feels for his exploits during the war, and his survival, Paco is destined to be haunted by ghosts for the rest of his life. Without his ghosts, Paco may be unable to find any meaning, because his life is one big trauma; his trauma is his identity.

Many veterans have found identity in their service. Some create new identities that exist separately from their civilian life. In the decades-long conflict in Vietnam, soldiers’ morality was tested beyond its normal limits. These ideas are present in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.

Many of the stories in O’Brien’s collection discuss identity, how it differed between civilian life and Vietnam, and how the veterans were changed as a result of their service. In O’Brien’s novel, identity is created through shared experiences and memory. Two articles, one from BYU’s Sarah Bonney, and another from the University of Glasgow by Hiroaki Naito, discuss *The Things They Carried* in terms of soldiers’ identity. One article argues that identity is shaped by societal pressure, and one argues that identity is a result of the soldiers’ moral system.

In her essay “Morality and Pleasure in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*,” Bonney uses morality to define a soldier’s identity. According to the author, soldiers create a dual-identity based on the moral systems formed by their civilian life and military service.

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, morality does not exist on a spectrum, as Bonney argues. There is no duality between the morality of a civilian, and of a soldier; the two are closely tied. Whereas the soldiers' morals may change because of their time in Vietnam, their choices are informed by their civilian morality.

In the opening of her essay, Bonney illustrates the tenets of her argument by setting up the dichotomy between the civilian and soldier frames of morality:

The civilian moral system is black-and-white with strong, simple standards to dictate acceptable behavior...because a soldier's duty is comprised of immoral acts, this civilian moral code is no longer applicable. Instead, killing other human beings becomes morally upright, as long as those human beings are the enemy (Bonney 1).

She states that the soldiers' moral paradigm must break away from civilian morality because their duties are increasingly immoral. However, it is clear throughout *The Things They Carried* that no two moralities exist. The soldiers are civilians who must deal with the strange acts required of them by warfare. If there are two moralities, they are intertwined. In many of the stories, guilt is the cross the soldiers must bear. This is where their civilian moral frame meets what is required of them as soldiers. In the title story, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross feels guilt over the death of Ted Lavender. "He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war," (O'Brien 16). Soldiers, if they create a new moral system for the battlefield, would see Lavender's death as a result of war, and not place blame on any person. But because Jimmy Cross "hate[s] himself" after Lavender's death, he has not fully shed the civilian morality that keeps his love for Martha alive. Cross's civilian morals inform his identity

as a soldier. His love for Martha transforms into the love he feels for his men and the renewed commitment to keep them alive. Cross's civilian morality informs his identity as a soldier.

The biggest ethical problem soldiers face is the act of killing itself. Whereas members of society are repeatedly told not to kill, soldiers must kill in order to survive. This became an even greater issue during the Vietnam War, where incidents such as the My Lai massacre began to shape public opinion on the war on the home front. Because of instances like this, the anti-war movement began to question the violence perpetrated by American soldiers. Bonney states, "In order to reconcile their military duty and the anti-military sentiments growing back home, the soldiers of the Vietnam War are pushed to construct a new moral code independent of military ethics established in previous wars," (Bonney 3). However, there are in *The Things They Carried* that challenge the idea of Bonney's "pleasure trigger," something she believes every soldier forms (4). The character/narrator Tim O'Brien is still a kid at heart. He proves this by the way he acts. Like Jimmy Cross, his civilian morality informs his identity as a soldier. He is confused and distraught when he kills a man—a typical reaction we equate to a civilian, not a veteran who finds pleasure in killing. Kiowa tries to calm Tim down by helping him understand that it is a part of war—it was unavoidable. Although killing may be moral in wartime, Tim believes that it is an immoral act because his identity is still that of a civilian. "Civilian morality can easily label all acts of violence as immoral, but war zone morality does not allow for easy judgment," Bonney says in her paper (5). Tim is shaken when he kills because his identity has not changed from his time in the United States.

Morality can inform identity, but the latter may also affect the former. In O'Brien's novel, there are specific examples when killing is clearly portrayed as immoral. Most instances of killing are described as necessary, as in "The Man I Killed," or as a result of how the war is

fought, like when Curt Lemon is killed by a rigged artillery shell. The act of killing on the battlefield becomes the soldiers' "justice system," a moral institution that is necessary for their survival (5). Still, there are times when the violence exceeds what is considered moral. Bonney says:

However, despite the lack of clarity between right and wrong, a distinct wrong must be established in order for a definite right to exist. By the new definition of morality, immorality must be unreasonably destructive and without a purpose (6).

There are two obvious examples in *The Things They Carried*. After Curt Lemon's death, Rat Kiley becomes enraged and slaughters a baby water buffalo. He has entered Jonathan Shay's "berserk state," and lashes out because his friend is dead (Shay 77). O'Brien hints at the immorality of the event by hinting at Kiley's intention: "It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt," (O'Brien 75). The soldiers are confused by Rat Kiley's act, but they believe it signals a change. The narrator Tim O'Brien, trying to make sense of it years later, says: "We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it," (76). The importance of this event lies in the distinction, made by the soldiers, between morality and immorality. For the soldiers, this is an immoral event, something that may be rare for them to witness. It is important for them because they are able to see what it looks like. Bonney implies that this is the moment the soldiers understood "repercussions," another trademark of a violent act in wartime that could be considered immoral (Bonney 6). Whether or not an event has positive effects is the distinguishing factor between a moral or immoral act. She uses the example of Azar killing Lavender's puppy to explain. "The puppy is not the enemy and therefore the soldiers do not benefit from its death; consequently, Azar's act is

unethical,” (6). Here, Azar’s identity grants him a reprieve from judgement by his fellow soldiers, because he is “just a *boy*,” (O’Brien 35). His age prohibits him from identifying “the distinction between violence against the enemy and violence in general,” so the other soldiers do not judge as harshly as they do Rat Kiley after he kills the water buffalo (Bonney 6). The soldiers’ identities may also inform how their choices are perceived by their comrades.

In his thesis, “Vietnam fought and imagined: the images of the mythic frontier in American Vietnam War literature,” Hiroaki Naito describes how the landscape transforms the soldiers’ identity. Specifically, he uses “On the Rainy River” to explore how Tim is forced to choose between dishonoring his family and community as a draft dodger, or risk dishonoring himself fighting a war he does not believe in. Naito contrasts Tim’s characterization with the mythic characters of the American frontier, namely the Lone Ranger. He discusses “the ways in which O’Brien has his deserter-protagonist reconnected to the myth of the frontier,” in order to “revise the myth in the light of the failure of the Vietnam War,” (Naito 227). Naito begins his discussion by emphasizing how O’Brien chooses to focus on Tim’s suburban upbringing and “ordinary” lifestyle (230). He uses metafiction analysis to engage with O’Brien as an author, and points out that the use of ordinariness may be the O’Brien’s “reaction against the distressing memory of war,” (230). The idyllic nature of Tim’s upbringing in Minnesota is contrasted against the nightmarish experiences he will later encounter in Vietnam. Naito continues by comparing Tim’s passive nature as a character with “the images of conventional US masculine heroes,” (230). Clearly, Tim’s identity as a soldier is formed by the experiences in his youth, as well as the societal pressures he faced.

Naito discusses the Lone Ranger in his section about “On the Rainy River.” He begins by offering the quote from the story that references the Lone Ranger, and discusses how Tim is trying to reflect the courage and heroism so often found in heroes of the American frontier. “It is quite ironical,” Naito says, “for the Lone Ranger...represents the very tradition that the protagonist wishes to challenge,” (233). Indeed, Tim’s identity seems, up until that point in the story, to be built around his indifference to the war, and his fear of joining. His narration shows that he still believes he is capable of great feats of heroism and courage. This would align with the beliefs of his community, as Naito points out: “That is, in its unflinching confidence in the United States’ exceptional virtue and strength, the story of the Lone Ranger is strikingly similar to the types of mythic narratives that Worthington’s people identify with,” (234). Even though Tim says this, it is clear that he is attempting to save face through memory. He admits that the conflict in Vietnam was one he opposed. He supported Eugene McCarthy and wrote anti-war pieces for his school newspaper. Tim’s true identity stands in “binary opposition” to the community of Worthington (231). He does not want to bring shame onto his family, but also does not see himself fighting a war that he doesn’t agree with. As Naito states, “Young O’Brien despises the uncritical, blind patriotism of his neighbours. His own language and thought, however, are also confined within the terms and vocabulary of the mythic narrative he intends to question,” (235). Tim thinks that courage is an inherited quality, even though frontier heroes like the Lone Ranger and John Wayne did not have any sort of inheritance; they’re courage was ingrained into the fabric of who they were. Even so, we begin to understand that Tim sees the fault of courage and heroism in war. Naito states:

O'Brien casts doubt upon the dominant narratives of US frontier mythology—the courage and valour of the frontier warriors fighting in uncivilized landscapes as the inheritance for succeeding generations of American males—that works to regard Vietnam as an extension of the frontier battlefield, and that, as a great societal pressure, propelled a multitude of Vietnam generation youth to the war whose legitimacy they did not believe in (236).

Even though that may be the narrator speaking with hindsight as his ally, it is not unbelievable that this would be the thoughts of young Tim. His identity was shaped by the society in which he was raised, as well as his own beliefs about the war.

In the papers by Bonney and Naito, it is clear that morality, society, and personal values contributed to each soldier's identity in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Each of these factors may inform one another, but they all work together, parts of a whole.

Especially when dealing with such an ambiguous and widely misunderstood conflict like the Vietnam War, human behavior is not black-and-white. The grey areas are where authentic discoveries will be made, and morals will be found. However, and in the case of Tim O'Brien, there may not be any moral at all. The whole exercise may be to understand, and to heal.

It is difficult to understand how memory can belong to a certain generation, and yet also be considered “post.” Marianne Hirsch explains that the “post” does not refer to a linear, historical sense, but something that “approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects,” (*Generation* 31). Postmemory does not exactly refute history, but there is no connecting line between narrative memory of the first generation and that inherited by the following generations (33). This fact should be obvious: those who have postmemorial memories would

not have any literal connection to the source of the trauma, as the trauma is inherited; it occurred before they were born. This makes postmemory difficult to escape from, Hirsch argues, because the younger generations are “shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor recreate,” (*Projected* 8). Although they have no literal memory of specific events, those affected with inherited trauma will suffer from altering iterations of the trauma.

While there is not a large quantity of postmemorial work regarding the Vietnam War, there are a select few examples to draw from. Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American author who fled Saigon in 1975 at the age of four.

## SECTION IV

### VIETNAM AND POSTMEMORY

It is difficult to understand how memory can belong to a certain generation, and yet also be considered “post.” Marianne Hirsch explains that the “post” does not refer to a linear, historical sense, but something that “approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects,” (*Generation* 31). Postmemory does not exactly refute history, but there is no connecting line between narrative memory of the first generation and that inherited by the following generations (33). This fact should be obvious: those who have postmemorial memories would not have any literal connection to the source of the trauma, as the trauma is inherited; it occurred before they were born. This makes postmemory difficult to escape from, Hirsch argues, because the younger generations are “shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor recreate,” (*Projected* 8). Although they have no literal memory of specific events, those affected with inherited trauma will suffer from altering iterations of the trauma.

While there is not a large quantity of postmemorial work regarding the Vietnam War, there are a select few examples to draw from. Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American author who fled Saigon in 1975 at the age of four. His novel *The Sympathizer* describes a former South Vietnamese captain, now a refugee in the United States, readjusting to life after the war. However, the unnamed protagonist is also a double agent for the Communists, and so is a man split between two countries (literally) and North and South Vietnam. The narrator is in the midst of giving his confession to his Communist superiors upon his return to Vietnam. Throughout the novel, Nguyen paints pictures of refugees attempting to move on in their new home, and ultimately struggling to adapt. His narrator writes: “So it was that we soaped ourselves in sadness and we rinsed ourselves with hope, and for all that we believed almost every rumor we heard,

almost all of us refused to believe that our nation was dead,” (71). *The Sympathizer* begins with the fall of Saigon in April of 1975, an event that Nguyen says he does not remember in his own life. His writing is, by definition, an act of postmemory. Although there is a more direct line between his work and history, he recreates these memories in his own fiction. Hirsch describes this as “indexical traces of a past projected into the present, seen in the present as overlays of memory,” (*Projected* 6).

In my novel, the character of Collin Marshall is supposed to reflect elements of inherited trauma and postmemory. His father, a Vietnam veteran, suffered from severe bouts of PTSD and abandoned his family when Collin was a small child. In his mid-twenties, Collin is a budding journalist when he receives his father’s obituary in the mail. He then goes on a vacation, trying to understand his father, especially as he begins to be haunted by dreams of combat, something he has never experienced. This places him in the path of Roger. Whereas Roger is haunted by the ghosts of his wartime experiences, Collin is haunted by things he does not understand. There is no line between Collin’s inherited trauma and history.

## SECTION V

### EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

I presented my research at the Capital of Texas Undergraduate Research Conference on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, in Austin, Texas.

In the days leading up to my presentation, I was slightly nervous only because I felt unprepared. However, my past experience with the thesis-writing workshop, as well as the Aggie Creative Collective summer program, helped develop my skills both as a writer and a speaker. The Creative Collective helped me focus on my writing as a *process*, rather than just a singular *event*. That program, as well as LAUNCH as a whole, helped me follow the structure of what I wrote. This helped while writing my thesis, as I could explore higher order issues (narrative, character arc, etc.) and ask pertinent questions about how my research engaged with my fiction.

The judges at CTURC enjoyed my presentation, and I was surprised when they asked questions that focused on my writing process. They asked questions regarding the research itself (questions about postmemory theory, combat trauma, etc.) but they mainly wanted to know how I utilized that research in my writing process, and so I spent most of my time discussing my specific process instead of the research I had done.

## SECTION VI

### REFLECTION

To begin, I knew I wanted to incorporate postmemory theory into my research. However, I did not know enough about it, or understand it, to think about how the theory would engage with my creative work. I knew that my writing would be decidedly literary, and that I did not want it to just be another war story. Therefore, I knew that I could take more chances with the plot, make things a bit dense and depressing. However, I eventually realized that things were *too* depressing. That is why the first section of the artifact, “Bush League,” exists: it is a lighter moment between Collin and Roger that helps flesh out their characterizations a bit.

Because I also decided to narrate the story in two voices, I knew that I needed to experiment with the style of my writing. Collin’s voice came naturally, because his is the style that closely mimics my default voice: it is very objective, newspaper-like. However, I wanted Roger’s narration to be older, more mature, yet still retaining a certain degree of harshness that you would expect from a traumatized individual. This is where works like Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam* and Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* proved to be useful, because the former included excerpts from Shay’s own patients, in their own voice, and Heinemann’s narrative voice is very unique. Both of these helped me form Roger’s vernacular.

My creative practices are all about how things intersect or engage: characters, plot, setting, etc. This helped produce results for the research because I could see how certain pieces intersected. I saw where Shay intersected with Caruth, or how van der Kolk engaged with some of Lifton’s writing.

As for my public presentation, I was pleased with my reading at the Capital of Texas Undergraduate Research Conferene. Although I wish I had incorporated some sort of visual aid,

the judges were responsive and seemed to understand my explanations. They asked a few questions about postmemory theory, but they were primarily interested in my writing process. They asked questions about how my research was used in the fiction, and so I could again talk about the intersection of fiction and the research I was doing. I spoke at length about Tim O'Brien and emotionality. I also fielded a few questions from the audience, although these were more history-based questions about US military's standard operating procedure, free-fire zones, and war crimes. The interest for these questions was about whether or not these things would be touched upon in my work. I answered in the affirmative, since these things would help undermine the relationship between Roger and his commanders, pushing him closer to the berserk state. Based on the questions from the judges, I remembered to focus more on my writing process for the presentation report and this reflection, and I tried to incorporate some connecting information in the body of the thesis.

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## CREATIVE ARTIFACT

### Bush League

The forest speaks, but Collin does not listen.

They were on the trail an hour before dawn, shouldering enough equipment to last the entire day: hiking backpacks full of Clif Bars, dried fruit, the present-day equivalent of the c-ration. They carried bear spray, even though Collin knew to play dead in the face of an oncoming grizzly. Roger kept his Colt 1911 in the black leather holster on his hip, but also slung his Winchester Model 70 across his back. Collin didn't know if the weapons or thought of bear encounters made him more uncomfortable.

Fog lingered for the first hour after dawn broke, and gradually gave way to an orange haze that diffused sunlight around trees and warmed their faces as they sauntered up the trail. Around them, the Kawuneeche Valley woke up.

Roger started them out on the Green Mountain Trailhead, which ran alongside the Continental Divide past Granite Falls all the way to Flattop Mountain. The trail is a soft, brown dirt that grinds away in a fine dust with each step. Roger steps lightly, toes pointing down, trying to feel the earth through his shoe. Collin notices

“Is that how you walked in the war?” he asks.

Roger doesn't look at his feet. He sways from each side of the trail to brush the thin trunks of the lodgepole pine that scatter the rugged terrain of Rocky Mountain National Park. The lodgepole pine don't clump together, allowing hikers to see deep into the forest on clear mornings.

“These trees hate the shade,” Roger pats the skimpy trees as they pass. “Lodgepole seedlings have a hard time growing because of their dense canopies. It usually takes a big fire to germinate the seeds.”

“Have you always liked nature?” Collin’s shoulders have already begun to ache from his pack. He shuffles up alongside Roger even though the trail isn’t wide enough.

Almost imperceptibly, Roger quickens his gait. He lopes half a step ahead of Collin. Thinking with his hiking stick, feeling with his eyes.

“Grandparents owned a small cabin in the Big Thicket, out in East Texas. Small town called Colmesneil, an hour north of Beaumont’s big oil. Ever heard of Beaumont?”

Collin shakes his head and brushes his pant pockets. He can’t remember where he put his notepad.

“Probably a good thing,” Roger continues. “It’s a shithole—” He stops, and Collin, busy retrieving his notepad, runs into him. Roger nearly stumbles, catching himself on a downed lodgepole. He turns, and Collin expects an ass-chewing. Instead, Roger points to a tree further up the trail. On one of the lower branches sits a fat bird with black-and-white starburst feathers on its head.

“A Mountain Chickadee,” Roger says behind a wide grin.

Collin taps his notepad. “Why is Beaumont a shithole?”

“Chickadees like to nest in lodgepoles because they eat bark beetles.”

“Does it remind you of your childhood?”

The squat bird watches the hikers from its perch. Silence on the trail. Slowly, the morning haze begins to evaporate, clearing the natural lanes between the trees to offer an extended view

of the forest. Roger takes a tentative step, toe down, towards the bird. He stretches a handful of dried fruit.

“Search and destroy?” Collin asks.

Roger turns to shoot venom from his eyes, and in the same moment the fresh mountain wind pushes down the trail. The Chickadee flutters away on its short wings. Roger curses and drops the fruit into his mouth.

“Anyone ever told you how annoying you are?”

Collin pulls a Clif Bar from a side pocket. “You mean every girl I’ve dated.”

The wind picks up again, stronger, rustling the lodgepole needles and carrying the fine layer of brown dust from the trail. Roger, halfway turned around to Collin, tilts his head upwards and sniffs long and deep.

“Smell that?”

When you’ve lived on a mountainside for fifteen years like Roger has, every smell becomes memorized. Crushed Douglas-fir needles smell like citrus, and the bark of a ponderosa pine will smell like vanilla. A ranger can sniff a forest fire from a mile away and then determine which way it’s heading, depending on how the smoke drifts on the wind.

Roger knows these smells, but he also remembers the ones associated with combat: the smell of gunpowder thick in his nostrils, metallic and foul-smelling blood running out of open wounds.

“We may have some poachers in the area,” Roger says. His Winchester dances around his shoulders, and he drapes a finger over the trigger guard. “Gunpowder on the wind. Recent. And it smells like something was shot.”

“How can you tell?”

“That’s not exactly something you forget.”

Collin sweeps the trees, thinking he’ll see camouflaged figures. He tries to imagine Roger’s war, dark silhouettes in the jungle. He anticipates the crack of a gunshot, the feeling of a bullet scorching through flesh.

“Are you going to, like, go crazy?” Collin asks.

Roger looks over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised.

Collin adjusts the strap of his backpack. “You know, *PTSD*.”

“Not really how that works.”

The two start cautiously down the trail again. Roger leads, Winchester aloft in his hands. The early-morning haze has all but gone, leaving perfect visibility through the trees. Even though it is light, the sun has not risen above the Never Summer Mountains to the east. Roger keeps his eyes on the ground, searching for signs of a human trail.

“That was a good joke,” Roger says after a few minutes of silence.

“What was?” Collin holds his notepad in a death grip, trying hard not to shake. The sight of Roger stalking through the forest with a rifle gives him chills despite the warm morning.

“About girls you’ve dated.”

Collin shrugs even though Roger can’t see. “Not really a joke. Most chicks like to remind me that I’m a prick.”

“Maybe it’s because you call them *chicks*.”

More silence. The chirp of birds rises with the morning wind that rustle the treetops. Collin hears a noise—faint at first but growing steadily louder. Like the rumble of distant thunder. Then he remembers: Granite Falls. Ahead of him, the sun pokes above the summit of

Flattop Mountain. Now the sound is unmistakable: it is the three-tiered system of waterfalls.

Collin shakes to feel the warmth of the rising sun and tries to catch up to Roger.

“Have you had many girlfriends since you’ve been back?” Collin quickens his step to match Roger’s pace. “You know, lovers?”

“Many therapists have told me that I am unable to love.”

“Why would that be?”

Roger laughs. “Because it’s true.”

“But *why?*” Collin asks, almost pleading.

“Because I went to a country on the other side of the world and killed people and forgot to check my baggage at the processing center in San Francisco. That give you the answer you’re looking for?”

The water sounds like it’s in their heads, rushing in between their ears. Collin lets Roger walk ahead into the small clearing surrounding Granite Falls and removes his notepad again. He’s too busy trying to write down what was said that he doesn’t see the large, antler-less elk until Roger takes out his 1911.

## Notice

Two days before the fourth of July and red, white, and blue flags wave from the top of each fencepost on Beech Drive. The sun beats straight down the street from the west, carrying a summer wind that shakes the pine trees and has the flags dancing in their shadows. Heat radiates from the gravel that crunches beneath the wheels of my bicycle. Summer in Southeast Texas brings neighbors out into the yard, kids running through sprinklers, parents lounging on the porch with books and newspapers, radios crackling with the score from the Astrodome.

This evening, I'm the only person in sight. Even though I'm alone on the street, I can feel the eyes on my back. I see the curtain ruffle in the front window of the Bensons' home, and the dark shape moving away from the blurred, decorative glass of the Siegrists' door. I think it may be my eyes playing tricks on me; I am riding directly into the sun.

At the entrance to our yard I hop down from my bike's curved seat see a flag, fallen from its perch atop our gate. Vibrant colors. There's one wet spot where mud soaked through, like the flag itself is wounded. Looking at the muddied flag makes me think of Eddie Benson, and how he was so excited to graduate high school and enlist in the Marines. Eddie loved the flag so much he died for it in a country my little brother couldn't find on a map. His funeral had been two weeks earlier. This week would be the first Independence Day without Eddie.

I leave the flag where it lies.

#

The house is silent. I set my practice gear down just inside front door, careful not to scuff the off-white walls with my bat. One glance into the parlor: nobody. I'm expecting the bitter smell of fresh coffee, which Dad kept brewing constantly, even in the thick heat of the summer, but there is none. The annual fourth of July cookout is in two days, but I don't smell the

woodfire smoke of Dad's grill. I take my glove out of my practice bag. Dust mixed with resin and my own sweat to form small cakes along the palm. The glove slides onto my left hand and I ball my right into a fist and hit the palm a few times, *wump wump wump*. The sound fills the entryway and echoes off the hardwood floor. Opposite the front door is a small console table, lacquered brown with gold handles on the drawers. Keys sit atop the table in a small, leather basket—the keys to my dad's Chevy. There's a cough from the dining room.

My eyes wander up from the lacquered wood to a few framed photographs sitting on a shelf above the table. Snapshots of my family in its different stages: my father in the cockpit of his B-17, my parents' wedding, my sister and me on the day my younger brother came home from the hospital. I linger on the shot of the bomber and my father's sharp jawline framed in the cockpit window. He's young, twenty-four, and smiling. The picture reminds me of the flags outside, and then I think of Eddie Benson, all of nineteen years old, the kid next door who would occasionally catch for me when Dad wasn't available, and who took Katherine to his senior prom, only because she begged him, while I took his sister Jennifer to mine. I smile at those memories, but then my thoughts turn to Eddie in a jungle far away, scared and muddy and dying.

The neighborhood has changed.

#

My dad is sitting at the head of our dining room table with open mail in front of him. He's wearing a blue and white checked shirt with the top button undone and one khaki pant leg crossed over his knee. Us kids tell him the thick, black glasses he bought at his most recent visit to the eye doctor make him look like Buddy Holly, but he hates that he needs them. Pilots don't need glasses.

I'm still popping my glove when I go into the dining room. The table is set for dinner—five white plates and sets of silverware at their usual places—but we're the only two in the room. The cabinet holding Dad's record player is off to one side of the room with the top open, but there's no music playing. The only noise in the room is the ticking of a large grandfather clock across from the cabinet.

"Where is everyone?" Dad doesn't look up. Like he didn't hear me. "Dad?"

"Mom took Kat and Greg out to grab things for the cookout..." Mumbles, like he's trying to remember something important. His eyes don't move from the paper in his hand.

I shrug out of the glove and set it down on the table. Dad's eyes dart away from the mail. For a moment I think he'll chastise me about dirtying up the table. But he doesn't—he looks back at the piece of mail in his hand. I bring my hands up, feigning my pitching motion, and yawn.

"You should've been out there at practice today. Coach really thinks I could have a shot at getting big league attention if I keep working hard. I lowered my arm slot, so now my fastball has this rising motion—"

"Roger."

The stern voice catches me off guard, and for the first time I look at him: his face drawn down, holding the letter aloft in the orange light above the table. Something seizes in my throat. There is something in my dad's eyes that makes me nervous. Pride? Envy? Memory.

"Where's mom?" I tighten my fists and press them against my thighs. The grandfather clock ticks a solemn tempo—a death march. From the open window above the record player I see the flags waving along the street. I think about Eddie Benson and for a brief moment I see his closed coffin draped in the American flag.

Dad tosses the letter. It slides down the embossed sheen of the table. I flinch as my eyes catch the SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM header. Those words play in my vision while another word flashes in my mind like a fire alarm:

Vietnam.

I steady myself on the back of a chair as the room spins. A sound comes out of my mouth—laughter that wants to be a sob. My ears ring.

Dad smiles. “Congrats.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Serving your country is the most patriotic thing you can do. Remember what President Kennedy said—”

“I don’t care what he said. I won’t go.”

Dad’s glasses come off when I interrupt him

“No son of mine will go to prison over the service.”

His voice is hushed. Like the neighbors won’t hear about it anyway. I imagine him telling Mr. Benson in that dim, sparse living room, Mr. Benson looking to see the picture of Eddie in his dress blues on the mantle. I stand my ground.

“This isn’t what I want. College, baseball. I might have a real future.”

“A future someone like Eddie Benson won’t get to have.”

“Eddie is dead, and so is President Kennedy. Do you want me to die too?”

His eyes pierce straight through me. I think he’ll yell or throw something like the night he found the Bob Dylan albums hiding under my bed. My own little protest. To my surprise, Dad laughs. A soft, condescending laugh that he usually reserved for his students.

“There’s worse things than dying,” he says.

“Like communism?”

“Like being a coward.” All of the humor is gone from his face. We stare at each other across the table. I want to tell him how wrong he is or ask if he’d feel the same way if my funeral had been two weeks ago. Thinking about Eddie makes me break from Dad’s gaze. I drift down to the draft notice.

“You report on the twenty-third. I’ll take you to the draft board in Boone.”

When graduation became a reality for the boys at school, we all talked about Vietnam. We were scared about the draft. After graduation, a few of them enlisted, and some were drafted.

“I’ll go to Canada.”

I thought his eyes would pop out of his head. “Excuse me?”

“Or Mexico.”

His open palm slaps the dining room table. The plates and silverware rattle. “I served. I watched my friends fall out of the sky. My navigator got shredded by flak. He died over the channel.” His voice shakes and rattles but he only gets louder. I’ve never heard him talk this much about his war. “You *owe* it to those guys. Every one of them that came before. You owe it to me and Eddie.”

“This isn’t my war.” My face is hot and my eyes are cloudy. Through the tears I see Mom drive up the street, hear the tires on the driveway. I wipe at my eyes and turn back to Dad. “You want this. I don’t.”

Dad reaches out and sweeps the plates and flatware to the floor. Bits of ceramic fly everywhere. I flatten myself against the wall. “Who the hell made you like this?” Dad shouts and points a finger at me. “I swear I’ll kill him!”

The room is silent again. Dad fumes, surrounded by silverware and shattered pieces of china. The front door opens and three sets of footsteps hit the hardwood floor. Dad steps away from the table and shakes his head, sees the floor. His hands are balled into tight fists.

I hear the family enter but my eyes still haven't left my father. When I do look, Katherine is furthest into the room. Her hair is pulled back and she looks defiant, even though she's wearing a summer dress. Her eyes are like knives right at Dad. Mom is behind her, looking at the room, the plates, the forks and spoons and knives, anywhere but my dad or me. Like she knew what to expect. Little Greg hides behind Mom's legs, looking at me.

"What's going on?" Katherine asks.

Dad shakes his head and looks up, the fire still in his eyes.

"Your brother got his draft notice."

#

Jennifer stands on the street, watching me leave the house. She's wearing her brother's letterman. It's the size of a middle linebacker and swallows her in its faded blue front. I used to laugh whenever she wore it, the way she would flop the red leather sleeves about like tentacles. The jacket means more now.

I open the gate and walk toward her. Quickly, I look back to my house, and I see Mom and Kat in the dining room. After my dad's revelation, my little sister's defiance disappeared. She's at the table with her head in her hands, tears staining the hardwood. Mom is rubbing her neck. I've barely said a word to them, but I've caused too much pain.

"Everything okay?" Jennifer asks. She's crossing her arms in Eddie's jacket, and I pull her into a hug. We stand there for one long moment. Silent, feeling the softness of each other's body. My bottom lip trembles, and she looks up.

“Let’s walk,” I say. She glances back at my dining room. I slide my fingers through hers and turn her away, back down the street.

“Everything set for the cookout?”

“I guess.”

“Dad wasn’t sure if he could get *Shirley* to come.” She brushes hair away from her eyes in an attempt to hide the shake of her head. “Independence Day, and you’d think she would want to celebrate what Eddie did for us.”

“She’s taken it hard.”

“Hasn’t everyone?”

The Bensons’ porch light casts orange light across their yard, and I read the patches on the left sleeve of Eddie’s letterman. VARSITY FOOTBALL. JOHN 15:13. EDDIE BENSON.

“Roger? Is everything okay?” She looks up at me, hazel eyes washed out by the porch light.

“My draft card came in the mail today.” Her hands are cold. I brush the tops with my thumbs and try to smile. We stand in silence for one long moment. Her lip quivers and she looks down briefly. Her eyes glisten when she looks back up.

“When do you leave?” Her voice is small.

My father’s voice comes into my head, like an echo in the woods.

"That's the thing," I say. "I'm not sure if I'll be going over there."

She looks up and snuffles. "What does that mean?"

"You know me. I don't want to go."

"So you can get a—whatever those things are called—a deferment?"

I laugh. "Probably not. Dad's popular, but he teaches high school. He can't sway a draft board. Besides," I lean closer, as if we're being overheard. "He wants me to go. He has these crazy ideas. That it's my duty. As a patriot, or whatever."

Jennifer pulls back on her hands and crosses her arms again. I raise an eyebrow at her. "You want me to go?"

"No," she says, wiping at her eyes. "But do you have a choice? That's the deal, right? Some people volunteer, some people get drafted. You can't tell them no."

Something is buzzing in my ear. "I don't want to fight their war."

"It's everyone's war. We're all on the same side. We're all Americans."

"I should let the government decide my future?"

"Yes. Just like they decided Eddie's."

"Eddie volunteered. He did that to himself."

She takes a step away from me and buries her face in the jacket. Her tears soak into the faux-leather. I place a hand on her shoulder but she yanks it away.

"So Eddie chose to die?" Her voice isn't small anymore.

"That's not what I meant."

"Eddie loved this country. So much that he died for it. For us. He was brave."

Her words came in groups, spread between her tears. There's a few steps between us, only it seems like two different sides of the world. She's here, and I'm already in Vietnam. I'm trying not to look at the flags on the fences.

"Can't I love this country and not fight?" I take one step toward her. She retreats.

"Not if you run away. It's your responsibility."

"Eddie would want me to stand up for what was right."

"Don't talk about him like you're equals." She covers her face with the sleeves of his jacket. "He would've wanted you to not be such a coward!" She turns and runs toward the safe orange glow of her home. My shoulders slump dumbly. I flinch when the door slams.

The eyes of the neighborhood holding me in place.

#

They love their ideas. People back home found themselves drawn to the same ideas. Work, family, country. Truths everyone lived by. To go against the communal ideals would be to go against the fabric of our country itself. If you aren't in school, you work. If you aren't working, you're raising a family. And if you're doing neither, then you're serving your country. Like Dad, Eddie. Don't go against the grain. To go against your community, your family, and your country is going against God. We worshipped at the church of George Washington, and the flag was our cross.

For most of the following morning, I lay in bed thinking about the cookout. In a dream I was being chased by the whole neighborhood. My father led the other families in a wild chase through the Big Thicket, sometimes getting so close I could feel the warmth of the torches they all carried. Dad held my draft notice high above his head. They never caught me, but I knew that if they did, I would go to Vietnam.

After I wake up, I spend most of the morning going back and forth about the repercussions of my conversation with Jennifer. Would she go straight to her parents and tell them about my plan? I think of her father in their living room, shaking with rage. Who would he tell?

The arrivals begin before lunch. A caravan of families walking down the street, Texan wise men bearing gifts of potato salad, baked beans, and corn on the cob. I watch them from my

window. They're all dressed in red, white, and blue. They walk straight through the house and into the backyard, where the smell of woodfire smoke is already attached to my clothes. I slip out of my bedroom and tiptoe down the stairs.

"Dead man walking," Katherine says when I reach the bottom. There is humor in her voice, but it still shakes me.

"Not if Mr. Benson gets ahold of me," I say. Then, at her confused look, I say, "I told Jennifer I didn't want to go last night."

"God, Roger," she says. "He'll tell everyone."

"And they'll all be here today."

She smiles weakly. "Try not to worry about it."

"How is dad? Excited to watch his son get torn up by his drinking buddies? Do you think he'll pray that Jesus shows me the light and sends me to Vietnam?"

"If Dad rouses the local cavalry, I'll have your back."

"Good to know," I say, trying not to sound too harsh. "But there's a bunch of veterans out there who're going to think I'm a Communist, and they're only a short walk from their hunting rifles and pitchforks."

"Don't be stupid," Katherine says. "They aren't that crazy."

#

The backyard is full. Nine houses on the street, nine families all present. Mom always makes a flyer that advertises the cookout. The men fight over the best way to grill hamburgers. The women are all whispering amongst themselves, latest points of gossip floating around town. One look in their direction and my heart sinks.

Last time I made Jennifer upset was the time I skipped her birthday dinner to practice. Only because the pitching coach for the Astros came to town and offered free lessons. That night, Mark Benson showed up on our front porch to have a talk with me. When I see him talking with Dad at the grill, I'm worried.

I'm sitting on the back porch looking out at people with whom I have no connection. I have given up my claim to these people, or they have given up theirs to me. Everything looks unfamiliar: the kids running through their parents' legs with small flags and water guns; long tables of food topped with foil that reflects into the noon sun. Everything feels sticky and fake.

"Roger?" Mom comes to sit beside me. She's wearing her favorite blue dress, the one she saves for special occasions.

"How mad is he?" I ask.

"I don't know what you mean," she says. I crane my neck around to look at her. She brushes her brown curls away from her eyes. "Let's not talk about that right now."

"Why? You don't think he's told Mr. Benson and the rest of them?"

I expect her to say something harsh, but she doesn't say a word. I hear something small escape her, a cough to hide a sigh. Anna Estes has always been the good wife, I think, always there to back up the things Dad taught us. I wonder how she really feels, about anything. Maybe now she disagrees with him. But she doesn't say it.

"Dad is just thinking about all of the boys he served with," she says.

"Or about his membership in the Good Old Boys' Club."

The lawn chair scrapes on the wooden deck and she stands. "If that's what you have to say about your father, then we have nothing else to talk about."

She leaves me sitting alone and joins the other wives and daughters. Mrs. Benson is there, smiling but not saying much. I imagine Mom like that, putting on an act after her son dies in a country on the other side of the world.

Smoke drifts through the backyard, and I sense that people are hungry. My hands rub at the front of my jeans. There's a pounding in my ears that grows louder while I watch the fire spring out of the grill and char the slabs of beef. I begin to notice small things: sideways glances from the corner of people's eye; the obvious smirks directed my way from the grill; Dad laughing with Mr. Benson.

A sharp *pop!* breaks my concentration. I jump at the noise and turn to see Greg holding a toy rifle. It's a small, wooden thing with a slide that you pull and a cork shoots out from the muzzle. He's in a coonskin cap, laughing at my surprise.

"Gotcha, Roger!" he says, with a childish lilt that makes me smile.

#

The men are surprised when I join them at the grill. Dad gives me a sidelong hug and goes back to the more important work. Mark Benson holds out his hand and says, "Man of the hour."

"Happy Fourth, Mr. Benson." I shake his hand. He clamps down on mine and pulls me close. I can smell beer on his breath.

"Be proud, son. Proud."

I smile and clench my fingers around his.

"Always," I say.

He lets go quickly and turns away, like he remembered something. “Hey, Henry,” he says. Dad looks up. “Wasn’t there something you wanted to show him?” Benson smiles a goofy grin, but there’s something menacing in his eyes.

Dad stares at him for a moment, and then at me. He shifts weight from one foot to the other.

“Go, grab it,” Benson says and steps next to Dad. “I’ll take over for you.”

Another moment passes before Dad hands over the grill tongs. He shuffles toward the house. Benson starts flipping the burger patties, and laughs.

“Your Dad’s a good man,” he says. Flames jump up from the charcoal and I feel the heat on my face. Benson moves the meat around and the flames retreat. “Everyone around here respects him. He’s taught most people’s kids...”

I’m not really listening. Fear prickles the skin on my neck. Where had Dad gone?

“...and it would be a shame to have a son not respect the troops. I know you do, son. You’re just like my Eddie was. You respect our country, right?”

The back door opens and Dad walks out holding a rifle. My heart beats faster.

“Here we are,” Benson says. He sets the tongs down on top of the grill. “Good old Winchester. My granddad used one to clean up the Indian tribes out west. Now, I prefer the Springfield, what we used in the Pacific. But this piece is mighty fine.” He turns and grabs the rifle from Dad’s hand.

“Mark—” Dad tries to get a word out.

“Let’s see,” Benson ratchets the bolt-action back and checks the chamber. The noise fills the air, and I notice heads turn. Katherine is back on the porch, staring helplessly. Mom and

Shirley Benson are off in one side of the yard with the women. Jennifer peeks around her mother's shoulders.

Benson grabs me and walks towards the far end of the backyard, where there's less people. The wind picks up and blows his hair around his face. Dad follows.

At the back fence, Benson pulls a shiny gold cartridge from his pocket. Slightly rounded tip, probably the hollow point we used to hunt. He lays it in the chamber and slams the action home.

"Winchester .270," he says. "Eddie's preference in all the deer lanes out in West Texas. Figured I could give it to you, since Eddie won't need it anymore." He hands the rifle to me. It's heavy in my hands. Soft, wide grain stock, black scope on top.

Benson takes a few steps away and turns back to me.

"Why don't you look through the sight for me, make sure it's all zeroed in."

Dad's eyes are closed, almost in prayer. He sways on the balls of his feet like a pendulum. Everyone's heads are turned. The grill sizzles.

"Go ahead," Benson says. "Point it at me."

I raise the rifle slowly. Benson's smile grows wider, and nods when I hesitate.

The stock is pressed against my shoulder. I look down the sight, and Benson's face fills the scope. Crosshairs right on his nose. My fingers start twitching, and the rifle shakes. I try to take deep breaths, just like Dad taught me on those days in the deer blind. Benson doesn't move. The world seems smaller now, just me and him, and somewhere the ghost of Eddie floats by and breaks my resolve.

“Mark, why don’t we put the gun away.” Dad lays a hand on my shoulder. Through the sight I watch the disappointment form on Benson’s face. He shakes his head slowly. I lower the rifle.

“That’s what I thought,” Benson says.

#

The parlor is dark and quiet. The grandfather clock in the dining room hasn’t stopped its ticking. I’m sitting on the couch next to Katherine. Mom is working on a puzzle with Greg, still in his coonskin cap. My hands turn a baseball over and over, fingers gripping the laces in all the different pitches I throw. Dad’s at the corner store, probably buying all the beer that Mark Benson drank throughout the day.

I’m flipping the baseball along the seams and wondering if I can really avoid the draft. There’s something about this war that makes me pause, but can I really be labeled as a coward? I can almost hear Mark Benson and his ilk, whispering in the dairy section at the grocery store.

*You hear about the Estes kid? Went to Canada. Lived right next door to that poor family with the son who got killed over there. Yessir, in Vi-et-nam.*

Mom tells Greg to get ready for bed. He fights, but eventually relents when she says he can sleep in his hat.

I would hang over my family’s head for the next generation. Greg would ask about his older brother and Mom couldn’t tell him that he was scared.

*Why did Roger go away, mama?*

*He was just confused, sweetheart. Confused and scared.*

*Will he ever come back?*

*I don’t know, sweetheart. I don’t know.*

Tears are coming to my eyes and I hear a car coming up the street. Dad coming home. I wipe my eyes so he won't see. But, I hear the engine revving, and the car picks up speed. Headlights cross our living room as the car pulls into the driveway.

There's a muffled noise and the front window shatters. Glass erupts into the room and a small, dark shape lands on the carpet. I'm off the couch in an instant. Mom screams. I put an arm around Katherine, pull her off the couch and onto the floor. The headlights go back across the room and the car speeds away.

Footsteps on the stairs and Greg runs down, tears already down his face. He runs to Mom, who covers his head with her hands and tells him it'll be okay. I stand and walk to the busted window. It was a brick. There's a word written on it, white chalk script: COWARD.

I'm shivering, frozen in the living room, feeling the warm breeze come in from the street. One long exhale. My family won't live like this.

The guns are in a glass case in Dad's study. I grab the Winchester and sit in the parlor until he comes home.

#

I hear the Chevy on the driveway. His heavy footfalls on the front porch, unlocking the door. When he opens the door I'm in the entryway with the rifle.

"What're you doing?" he asks. His eyes take in the parlor, the glass, the brick. Understanding washes over his face. "Who?"

"I have a few ideas."

He raises an eyebrow. "Benson? He's crazy, but not stupid."

"Then it was Jennifer. Word probably got around to some of Eddie's friends."

"Christ, Roger. You didn't need to tell everyone in the neighborhood."

My fingers wrap around the stock. “Didn’t you?”

There’s a slight hesitation in his eyes. He avoids my gaze, staring at the wreck in the parlor. I don’t know what he’s thinking.

“Just forget it,” I say. “I’m not letting them do this to you.”

“What does that mean?” He looks at the rifle. Eddie goes through my head again. The flags. The coffin.

“The draft. I’ll go.”

#

Almost three weeks later I raise my right hand in front of the flag and God himself. Two months at basic, two more for advanced infantry training, and then orders came down to report to Long Binh, to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division.

But there was one more thing.

Home on leave, a quick two weeks before heading to the big muddy for a full year. Two full weeks with family, back in the welcoming arms of the community who had felt so strongly about service, faith, and sacrifice. Two weeks where nobody raises their voice, where everyone stares with quiet pride, even though in a few weeks there could be another body draped in the flag.

Imagine the last night I spend in the room I’ve known all my life. Trophies and memories on the wall that feel like a lifetime ago. The first baseball glove I ever wore. I stand in that room, with the army-issue duffel bag on the floor, all the things I’ll take to a place most people can’t pronounce.

Greg comes into the room. He’s crying. I sit down on the bed and hug him.

“Don’t worry, little man,” I say. “I’ll be back.”

But he shakes his head. "I'm scared without you here."

"Why?"

"Daddy scares me," he says.

And he tells the story of that night, when the decision was made. Mom had sent him upstairs, and so he went, coonskin cap on his head. He stopped in the upstairs hallway, watching out the window.

"What did you see?" I ask, even though the answer is already formed in my head. Something I don't want to hear.

He says that he saw a dark car coming down the street. He didn't recognize it, but when it swung into the driveway he saw Mr. Benson behind the wheel. He was especially confused when Dad jumped out with something in his hand. Greg says Dad wound up, the same way he taught us how to throw a baseball. Greg ducked when he heard the window shatter, and when he looked back up the car was driving away.

When he stops talking, I wipe his tears away. It's like I'm outside myself, a ghost already. But if that were true, if I floated alongside Eddie's ghost, would my father feel shame? Would he collapse at my tombstone and apologize to the son he sent away? Maybe it's a good thing, I think, to get out of this place.

Even if it means I'm going someplace worse.

## The Places We've Been

At night, when the ghosts come, Roger walks the perimeter in his dreams. Back and forth, back and forth, barefoot in the dark stillness of his home. He is awake, but only just. Sertraline for the PTSD, hydrocodone (occasionally) for the pain he (always) feels in his chest, right under the flower-shaped scar, just another memory he can't forget. He tells me he never mixes his drugs.

His patrols were unsettling when I began living in his small cabin on the outskirts of Rocky Mountain National Park. The first night, as I was transcribing our first interview, I heard his feet shuffling down the carpeted hallway. I eased my bedroom door open and saw him glide past and into the living room. I followed. He sat in the cushioned easy chair, and I saw the pistol in his hand. Cold steel. One callused finger stroking the safety. He wore his Park Ranger Stetson. Moonlight cut through the front windows and hit his face.

He wasn't there. His eyes were turned upwards at the ceiling, listening intently, like someone called his name from across a valley but he only heard the echo. He told me about the ghosts that night, the faces in the windows, the ones pulling him out of bed so he can continue the eternal patrol. I don't talk, I just listen. Standard operating procedure when you're faced with a man with a gun.

So I listen. And Roger talks.

#

You want to hear a war story, but I'll tell you a love story first.

Lieutenant Franklin caught malaria right before Tet. Lucky. Quick Dave stepped on a toe popper outside Landing Zone English and had his right leg blown off below the knee. He bled

out at the edge of a paddy, waiting for a dustoff. We wrapped him in his poncho and hauled him up into the bird when it finally arrived, ten minutes late.

I had a buddy. Leroy. He was our platoon's RTO. Carried this big-ass radio on his back. In high school he had been a wide receiver, so he was quick and elusive. You have to be when you have a long antennae sticking up over your head. Any smart NVA or VC soldier sees this long, twisting wire, and they know who to shoot at. Leroy always stuck with the platoon leader, as all good RTOs do, but we became close friends. We bonded over sports. Football and baseball. He was friends with everyone, even the other white guys from the South. Leroy made everyone laugh. He was a young kid from Harlem, but he was still mad as hell that the Giants moved to San Francisco. It didn't matter that he was only seven when they headed west. He always joked that, when he got home, he'd go out to California and tear-ass through the club so hard they'd wish they were back in New York.

Leroy and I did listening post duty together. Anytime one of us pulled that short straw, the other would volunteer to join. While the afternoon patrols left the wire, we were choosing the perfect spot for an LP. Leaving the safety of the wire was like moving between worlds. We would strap our gear on, jump up and down to make sure nothing rattled, and leave to dig our hole and listen.

At night, the true colors of the jungle came out. Out in the dark, crunching leaves become loud like gunshots. Leroy and I would stare at each other, trying desperately to hear. Was it a VC patrol coming up for an ambush? When a twig snapped or a branch rattled was it the enemy, or something else? I heard a story, early on in my tenure in Nam, about a grunt being dragged into the forest by a tiger. Was there some other predator in the jungle, waiting for us to fall asleep?

In the fragility of the listening post, we couldn't speak. Still, we listened to each other. We listened to each other breathe and twitch. We listened to our eyes move. Insects buzzed and zipped in our ears. From their buzz came the distinct crackle of the radio, the hourly check-in from the operating base.

“Alpha-Delta-Sierra, this is Bravo Three. Key your handset twice to report all clear.”

We listened for the enemy. We heard them in the brush, on the trail, moving like specters through a ghostly plane. Sometimes, we heard voices. We listened to their whispers.

“Alpha-Delta-Sierra, this is Bravo Three. Key your handset twice to report all clear.”

You could tell when you were about to be in the shit. The jungle felt electric right before you threw down, like it needed to charge before it unleashed.

“Alpha-Delta-Sierra, this is Bravo Three. Key your handset twice to report all clear.”

The voices—are they real? Are they the ghosts of Diem, of John Kennedy, or are they the real, true voices of some poor kid come to zap you?

“Alpha-Delta-Sierra, this is Bravo Three. Key your handset twice to report all clear.”

When they're so close, you don't report all clear. You mash the handset so much that the radio squawks like crazy on the other end. You squeeze and you throw your grenades and you haul ass back to the perimeter. If you don't listen, you're dead.

After Quick Dave and Lieutenant Franklin punched their ticket stateside, our company headed up the mountains in western Quang Ngai province. At dark we set our claymores and waited in foxholes for the NVA to move up, as they did so often at night. This night, the rain really started coming down. Monsoon season. We covered in our holes and under ponchos, but it was a damp and cold that sneaks into your bones and makes you rattle like coins in a coffee tin. When the new lieutenant made his rounds, I could barely talk.

Lieutenant Harper was a fucking new guy—FNG, we called them. Only in the bush a couple weeks by this time. Every night he checked our holes. He was wound tight, a real ball-buster. No smoking after dark, or Charlie will see you. Always wear your steel pot so it don't clink on your gear, or Charlie will hear you. Don't take a shit off the trail, or Charlie will catch you. This guy's been in-country three weeks and is talking like he's lived his entire life here. A lifer, destined to rise up the ranks no matter how many of us went home in body bags.

I heard him scoot through the brush before jumping into my hole. "Jesus Christ, Estes," he said when he lifted my poncho. "You got the shakes."

I groped about in the dark for a cigarette. They were somewhere under my poncho, next to my service weapon. My fingers twitched but I clamped down hard on the smoke and brought it up to my lips. The fingers of my left hand tried to work a lighter. The rain beat into the hole and clung to the brim of my steel helmet. My lips trembled, and the cigarette fell back to the mud.

"I'll grab the doc," he said, and disappeared into the trees.

At night, alone, you can really hear things. Even on nights like that, when the rain hitting your nylon poncho sounds like golf balls dropped on aluminum. You can sense things. When Lieutenant Harper left my hole, the world lurched and spun, and the next thing I knew someone was in my ear. I opened my eyes and saw Lieutenant Harper with our medic, who everyone called Trip (only because he was so damn clumsy). He was looming dangerously close to the edge of my hole, slipped, and ate mud at the bottom.

He wiped his face clean and touched two fingers to my neck. Lieutenant Harper had a flashlight on, and someone else covered shielded us with a poncho to protect the light from being exposed. We were waiting for an ambush, after all.

The large branches of the pine trees shook in the dark. Trip shook his head and looked up at the lieutenant. “Hypothermia, El Tee.”

Harper cursed. The rain hadn’t slowed, and it seemed like the trees helped make the din grow louder as they shook.

“Sterno?” Trip asked. He kept wiping his glasses in the storm.

“No,” Harper said. “Don’t want anyone knowing we’re here. You’d be lucky to light it in this shit anyway.”

Trip looked back at me. Trouble, I guessed. Hypothermia in the bush is no small thing, especially in the cooler mountain air. Especially in the rainy season.

“Estes, I need you to hold out until morning,” Harper said. I tried to find his face in the darkness, but my vision was blurry. I knew it was Harper from his hair. He applied this water-resistant camouflage at night, but never put enough to cover his blonde hair. Sometimes, when the light would catch it just right, the blonde would stand out and shine, like a piece of exposed skull.

“At first light we call for a Huey.” His voice sounded far away. I couldn’t speak but I wanted to cry out. The cold buried itself deep while my shakes dug a deeper and deeper hole. Trip reached his fingers out to check my pulse again. He avoided my eyes.

Above the hole there was rustling. Lieutenant Harper’s head snapped over before turning the flashlight off. The person holding the poncho had moved. A big shape slid down into my hole and I saw it was Leroy.

“Goodwin, the hell are you doing?” Harper leaned down into the hole to avoid yelling.

“He’ll just fuckin’ *die*,” Leroy said. He removed his helmet and slid past Trip. All I saw was a big, blurry shape coming toward me. Leroy took my poncho off and doubled it up with his

own. He sat next to me, wrapped me up in his wide receiver arms, and draped the ponchos over us. It was the epitome of Leroy. Gentle, caring, warm. I don't know when Harper and Trip left. Leroy just held me.

I tried to say something but my tongue felt heavy in my mouth. I wanted to tell him to leave, that I would be fine. But I couldn't. Really, I was scared, because then maybe he would have left.

He didn't move. "Shit, man. Shit."

#

Leroy was my buddy. We listened to each other. Leroy listened to the radio and they listened to him. Leroy gave, and Leroy took. He called in life: food, medicine, supplies. He called in death: close air support, napalm, the body-collectors.

After the company came down the mountain, Lieutenant Harper made Leroy a squad leader. We were set for three beautiful weeks on stand-down at some LZ south of Da Nang, along the beaches of the South China Sea. Far away from the claustrophobic trails of the jungle. Every day we watched the aircraft fly into the air base at Da Nang, resupplying the whole operation, Con Thien down to the Delta. All those FNGs, green just like Harper, come to join the party.

On the beach outside Da Nang we played pickup football. Team captains always fought to make their first pick, which always turned out to be Leroy. In those games, the offensive scheme was the easiest in all of Vietnam: tell Leroy to go long. No one could match his speed. To this day, I can still see Leroy sprinting down the beach, palm trees on one side, blue-green water on the other. Someone would take the ball, step back, say a prayer, and throw. Leroy

would catch it, and everyone would admire his grace, the way the ball seemed to float airlessly into his hands. Leroy always made the catch. He caught everything.

Three weeks on a sun-drenched beach, when all we had known was the jungle. There was no one to fight, no one to mortar. No hypothermia, leeches, jungle rot, or punji sticks. Trip didn't have to apply a tourniquet or use morphine. We slept on cots in Quonset huts instead of ponchos in the mud. Three weeks of peace. We had warm food, clean water to bathe, short afternoon rains that swept in from the sea to cool the humid air.

On that last day, the company was assembled on the beach, watching the last football game. One hundred warm, alive, breathing men in the sand. Leroy ran endless fly routes into the early morning sun. The company commander, a captain, broke the peace. A long-range recon patrol, a small six-man team, had been caught out in the bush. They were being chased by an NVA division. "We gotta get to those boys," the company commander said.

The unit piled into the helicopters. We flew low and hard over the treetops, carving through the jungle mist. Each man pulled back on the action of his M16s and waited. Ancient hills and ancient trees passed underneath.

The company commander led the helicopters into a clearing. The company followed, helicopters swooping down low to follow the contour of the land. Everyone jumped from the birds into the tall elephant grass. The LRRP team emerged from the tree line in a flat-out sprint for the company commander's helicopter. Thunder rolled out from the jungle as the enemy opened fire. Tracers arced over the clearing. They were close. Automatic fire made the air hot, acrid smoke drifted across the field, and everyone started firing blindly into the trees. The enemy was everywhere, but nowhere to be found.

Leroy probably had the coolest head in the company. It was his first engagement as a squad leader. Lieutenant Harper ordered his squad into the trees, to find the enemy. Leroy listened. He turned to his squad and motioned them into the firing line. They never heard the wet *thump* of the mortars, nor the calls—*fire in the hole!*—from the other squads. The squad was halfway across the clearing when Leroy caught and held the mortar shells like he held me on that one rainy night in the mountains. He was lifted up, angelic, arms spread wide to take the whole company in his arms. He flew, and I've never seen him come back down.

## Disengage

The platoon had been laagered in a grove of orange trees. Dug into the soft red dirt at the bottom of a hill. In the morning, fog clings to the ground like a jungle leech. Roger sways from soreness and fatigue. On guard duty for the last hours of darkness, and now he stands just inside the perimeter, waiting for the pre-dawn light to evaporate the thick wall of grey. Lieutenant Harper rouses the platoon. The men saddle their equipment—eighty pounds worth—and move up the hill.

Roger walks point. Eyes scanning the terrain, looking for movement. They follow the trail upwards, a narrow dirt path with open space on each side. He spots a dark shape at the top of the hill. He stops and holds up a fist. The platoon crouches in the elephant grass. Lieutenant Harper comes up next to Roger. Short, maybe sitting. No movement.

"Think he saw you?" Harper asks.

"No way."

"Command said this area was heavy." Harper sweeps the hill with his field glasses.

"If they knew we were here they would've whacked us by now." Harper nods. He looks back at the row of soldiers and sends the word along to get ready for a fight. The order is given, and Roger advances.

When they crest the hill, there's a small pagoda surrounded by two rickety, wooden buildings. The figure is a man, flesh and blood, sitting on a stone bench. Statuesque. Legs crossed and eyes closed. Undisturbed, like he never heard the approaching platoon. Roger leads the soldiers past the man, into the small hamlet. They search the few buildings for signs of the enemy. They overturn chairs and tables, toss bags of rice and cookware outside. In the pagoda they find a few books none of them can read.

Harper orders up a perimeter. Some of the men listen. A few go to the well and pull fresh water for their canteens. Roger leans in the open doorway of the pagoda when Harper walks up.

He motions over to the man. "Go talk to him."

Roger doesn't move. "You think he speaks any English?"

"You have a dictionary. Use it." Harper gives him a lifer's stern look you can only find in the bush.

Roger walks over to the stone bench and stands beside the man, who hasn't moved since the platoon arrived.

He is small and wiry, with wispy grey hair and sundried skin from years of work outdoors. He's wearing dark robes that cover his legs and a small pendant around his neck. The sun tries to break through the dense fog, and Roger tilts his head up, wanting to feel the warmth. He's looking away when the man speaks.

"It is good view, yes? I have been told it is best." Roger turns, expecting a gun.

The man is still, and when he speaks only his lips move. Roger looks around, but no one seems to have heard. Roger checks his compass. Looking east.

"Are you alone here?" Roger asks. He slings the M14 across his shoulder. The man smiles. Needing a dentist.

"Not anymore," he says.

"Has there been any sort of movement through here? Any other Americans, or groups from the North?"

"No movement," he says. The sun pulses through the fog, making the fog a pale, ethereal blue. "How do you like my country? Very beautiful, yes?"

The question catches Roger off guard and he doesn't respond. The man has not lost his smile. Something stirs in Roger's stomach, and words catch in his throat. For the first time in Vietnam, he feels like an intruder, rather than a soldier.

"My father was Frenchman. Missionary. He hated this country and leave while I was very small. But now I am monk, so I continue family tradition, yes?"

Roger sits on the stone bench, removes his steel pot, and runs a hand through his hair. The sun is almost through the fog, and he feels the warmth crawling up his body. "My father was a soldier. I guess I'm continuing the family tradition as well."

The man opens his eyes, revealing cataracts that look like the fog surrounding them. He is blind. "Then we are not much different, yes?"

Roger doesn't respond. He hears commotion behind him and turns. Some of the men are bathing with water from the well. Tossing water from the bucket onto each other. Trip is one of them, laughing loudly and busting his knee on the well as he ducks away. Lieutenant Harper stands in the doorway of the pagoda and giggles, probably for the first time in his life. Leroy is sprawled on the ground with his helmet over his eyes. Roger smiles at their good fortune.

The sun breaks through the clouds. Light shines from the east and Roger is bathed in sunlight. The clouds evaporate and the land stretches out before him. He sees the grove of trees where the platoon had slept through the night. The land stretches in a low plain, all flat and green. Sunlight sparkles on paddy water. Citrus trees spritz the air, creating aromas of orange and lemon.

Everything rolls away under the sun, and Roger can faintly distinguish Highway 1 where it leaves the jungle and stretches through the open highland grasses. Blue water and foamy brine of the South China Sea on the other side. And somewhere, far off in the east, lies home.

“It is very beautiful,” Roger says. Sun reflects in the grey clouds of the man’s eyes.

The warmth is in Roger’s chest. The man laughs quietly.

## In My Footsteps

In the dark, early-morning stillness of his room, Collin writes by candlelight. He scratches words with the fine end of a dip pen. The light in the room stays off through the night, through the long, endless hours sweating over his words, trying to put them together in some meaningful way. It feels like writing with his eyes closed.

He writes in the dark because he knows Roger likes to patrol at night. He hears him—has *seen* him shuffle down the hall with that downrange, thousand-yard stare he's had for fifty years. Collin knows that Roger talks at night and visits with his ghosts. Faces that slide under his door and call him out of his sleep to check the wire again. He knows about the ghosts because Roger pointed them out one night.

"I see ghosts," he had said, the black Colt 1911 across his lap.

Collin felt the hair raise on his arms and down his back.

"Do you see them now?" he asked.

"Of course." He pointed behind Collin, towards the front wall of the cabin. Collin turned, silently praying to see an actual spirit, but only saw the rest of Roger's living room. No specters stood in the windows or reflected in the mirror along the back wall. There were no ghouls seated on the carpet, or the couch, or at the upright tinkling the old, out-of-tune ivories.

"Everyone is there," Roger waved. "They visit every night. Leroy is holding the radio.. Quick Dave is there, and Harris, and Tex is laid out on the couch with his helmet over his eyes. Sure, everyone's here. Not just the Americans but the Vietnamese, too. The company's Kit Carson, Andrew Thuong, is by the piano. He's got this big hole in his throat from where the sniper hit him..." Roger's voice trailed off, but Collin wrote every word, dip pen flying. Not

only were there US and ARVN present, but Roger listed every NVA or VC he had killed. When he spoke about them, his hand tightened on the pistol, finger curling around the trigger guard.

“Those are the ones that scare me,” he said.

“Why?”

Roger’s eyes looked off somewhere, past Collin. “Because they’re mad. The spirits, I mean. My friends—Leroy and Tex and the Duke—I know they’re here because they miss me, or I miss them. They want me to finally do myself so I can join them. The spirit of Charlie is restless. He can’t be at peace while I’m alive.”

By the flickering candle, Collin tries to put it all together. He knows Roger patrols the hallway, sitting with his ghosts in front of the fireplace. The room is small and square, big enough for a desk and bed but not much else. Collin’s manuscript is scattered loosely on the mattress—he sleeps on the floor anyway.

He doesn’t know how to write Roger’s story. At times, he thinks he understands war, pain, trauma. Every night he sits down to write, but without fail he stares at the blank page, orange in the candle’s flame, and doesn’t know how to start. And if he does start, the words are laborious, slow, not at all like the things he has written before. There is something about the story that can’t be told or doesn’t want to be told. Collin imagines his brain like a blocked water hose. Words travel halfway to the page and stop. The pressure builds and builds, and he knows that if someone could remove the gunk then it would flow easily. But nobody sees the struggle. He is alone in a room, writing a story that no one wants to hear.

The candle shivers and goes out.

#

The glass doors of St. Thomas Memorial in Denver slide open with an electric whir, and Trip led me inside.

“Don’t talk about the military,” he says.

“What do you want me to talk about?” I ask. “My favorite color?”

Trip heads straight for the reception desk even though he knows the lieutenant is in Room 549.

Two days ago, a reunion with Casey Triplett, MD would’ve seemed impossible. I hadn’t heard from Trip since the 90s, when our unit met for the twenty-fifth anniversary of our trip to the jungle. Some of the guys made the long flight back over to Vietnam. I skipped that part.

Trip had always been a good medic, if not the clumsiest. When I rotated in-country as an FNG, Trip was in his second tour and on his way up to Staff Sergeant. He loved medicine so much he woke up back in the states and went to medical school. The man knows his way around a hospital. At the welcome counter, Trip smiles and nods thanks to the receptionist. He gestures over to the elevator.

Let’s get one thing straight: I absolutely hate hospitals. Nothing good happens in a hospital. When my time in Vietnam was done, I swore an oath that I would never spend another night in one of those sterile rooms. Surrounded by white everything. Long-faced doctors that poke and prod, plague-doctor surgeons in plastic masks whose faces you see in those dreams of being under the knife, that warm tugging sensation that you feel when they cut you open. The only time in your life when you didn’t want the nurses to touch you, especially not the cute ones in the soft, dawn haze of the post-op infirmary, because when they changed your dressings they would really know how broken you were.

The last time I saw Lieutenant Kerry Harper was in the middle of the jungle. It was a bright, sunny day. Wind whistled through the tree branches and rattled the white pine. Trail dust sprinkled like a fine powder over the platoon's fatigues. It had been one of the most beautiful days in the bush. I didn't know it at the time, but it would be my last.

Lieutenant Harper and I met for the final time—for a while—on a sunlit trail in the middle of the bush. I was flat on my back, gazing up the curve of jungle trees.

I was dying.

Harper was screaming into a portable radio (because his RTO had been killed seconds before) so he was the one calling in close air support. I had a chest wound large enough to bob for apples in. The whole platoon was engaged. An intimate firefight.

That was my last memory of Lieutenant Kerry Harper.

My last day in the jungle was not supposed to be my last. My orders were not due for another three weeks; there was no Huey heading to LZ English with my name on it. My last day in the jungle began like all the ones had before it.

But that's a story for another time.

Imagine my surprise when Casey "Trip" Triplett, MD calls one night and says that Harper is dying, and we have to go see him for no other reason than he's our old Lieutenant, and besides no one else in the platoon is alive or cares enough about him. It was 2011 and I was sixty years old, and I had never kept up with any of the old boys, and wasn't really keen on I didn't reliving the glory days any more than I already did in my dreams. I never even asked Trip how he found me. Could've been through the VFW, or AMVETS, or the American Legion, or the MPRC, or NAAV, or even the damn USO.

Either way, it took some convincing. Kerry Harper was the last person I wanted to see.

#

In nightmares I walk that trail again. The platoon labors with each step, just like every other step in the jungle. We shuffled between patches of sunlight hitting the soft red dirt on the jungle floor. The dreams will rise hazily out of the dark, shapes blurring the edges of my vision. But the dream is not reality; it is not the same as I remember it. Things change. Once, I will walk point. Then, I will walk slack. Sometimes when it starts I will already be on the ground, life pulsing out of my chest. Other times, I see Harper order us into the jungle, on that sunlit trail, right into the best ambush you'll ever see.

But that is reality. That's memory.