

Robert MacGowan

Mama's Boy

Dear Mama, I am fit and fine and hope that you are too. Mama, this country is so beautiful. The rice fields are green as river grass. And the mountains in the distance are smoky, just like ours. Mama, there's a morning glory blue sky above me, and the clouds are like lambs.

Beneath the clouds, two men are walking up the skirt of the hill, bare-chested in their open flak jackets, their helmets cocked back on their heads. One carries a rocket launcher across his shoulders, holding it with his forearms; his fingers rest lightly on the tube. The other man carries a rocket in each hand.

A fire team lays tangle-foot barbed wire along the perimeter of our base. Two of the men manage the wire off the spool, while a third man kneels, holding an engineers' stake upright, his hand low and away from the heavy sledge with which the fourth man is driving the stake deep into the ground.

I can hear Red in the company command post behind me, higher up the hill, squaring away a replacement: "This can't be right. This can't be your real name—*Johnny* Popejoy? Given names do not have belittling 'y's spliced on their aft end. I guess your parents wanted you to be their little Johnny, huh? Not here. Here we need big Johns, not little Johnnies. So what's it going to be, Popejoy: do you want to grow up or not?"

"Yessir, I do."

"Do what?"

"Grow up, sir; I want to grow up."

"No you don't! Not with that name, you don't. I think maybe you're Peter Pan—but then I guess we should call you Petey Pan, shouldn't we? Popejoy, do you *want* to wear tights and fly through the sky? Goddammit private, do you want to *never*, *never* grow up?"

“No sir! I don’t want to wear tights and fly through the sky! I do want to grow up!”

“Make me a believer—tell me your grown-up name. Tell it to me now!”

“Sir, I am Private John Popejoy. Sir!”

“No you’re not! Because I am promoting you: Private First Class John Popejoy. But we’ll call you ‘Jake’. Now, how about that?”

I turn my head to see them: the newly named Jake grinning with pride at Red, his irregular, baptizing Lieutenant, and Red, his lips pursed, his great head giving one slow, up-down nod of satisfaction. But as I turn about... there flies a zippedy bee—past my cheek—a thud felt more than heard in the sandbag behind my head—a hole in one, sized less than a penny. Sand is leaking from of it. Making a hill next to my foot. Like the spent sand in an hourglass.

At the perimeter, nothing has changed: the labor party lays wire—the sledge bangs on the stake—and the rocket team still makes its way up the hill. I can hear their labored breathing as well as I can hear Red dismissing Jake. But it’s all in slow motion, and everything is a little bit blurry. It’s as if the air has changed to water. Otherwise, not a thing has changed, except for there being a little hole in the sandbag, behind where my head would have been if I hadn’t turned it upward to watch Red and the new man.

Beyond the wire, there are still chains of rice paddies greening into hazy blue mountains. Nothing has changed, except sand leaks from the bag.

Sure, I’ve japed God before, even if I do come from a land of true believers. I didn’t realize, though, how much of what I’d been taught had stuck, until the night I first met Red. It was the night the devil spoke to me.

I was fresh off the old second war troopship, riding in the back of a deuce and a half, crammed in with other men, all of us replacement troops bound for rifle companies:

It’s hard to put a flak jacket on inside out, but nervous as I am, that’s what I do. The Kevlar plates don’t bend, leaving me with my arms spread out, as if I am surrendering before I’ve even begun my war. The men close enough to see me snigger and snort; one says, “Christ, what a boot thing to do.”

The light is gone before the truck reaches the outfit I’ve been assigned to. The other men have all been off-loaded before me. I hop off onto the road. It is snot-slick, my feet whip out from under me and I am smack on my ass, and up to my elbows in greasy mud. But nobody laughs. Nobody says a thing; in fact, I can’t make out a person, only clots of what I assume are men.

They aren't there anymore. I race forward in a panic, right into the back of somebody. He grunts once and swears twice. I follow him now as far back as I can, by the sound of the mud sucking at his boots.

After a slog of a mile, maybe two, the faceless man in front of me stops and I run into him again. He hits me in the chest with the stock of his rifle and I am sitting in the mud. Lightning streaks the sky. Bodies are lowering themselves, like cattle bedding down. I still haven't gotten a rifle. It begins to rain.

I've got to piss. I stand up and lift a foot to move forward, but the mud sucks off my boot and the sock with it. I lose balance, pinwheel my arms and fall face first into it. "Shit, I'm gaummed up with it now; a little more sure ain't gonna hurt me." I put the boot top in my teeth and high crawl onto boggy grass. I get my feet and walk into a clump of what must be banana trees, because their leaves are so big against my face. I move a step away from them and... step on something. Metal prongs. They press into my bare foot. I freeze. Time stills. A breeze caresses my face or is it my soul as it wafts away? Time moves, the prongs depress. I leap off, backwards. *Lord God Help Me, Let Me Fly.*

But He doesn't, I don't; my feet tangle, I fall to my knees. The acrid smell of brimstone fills my nostrils as a bounding mine punches through the ground. It's set to explode even with my head. Cut sideways like a buzz saw.

It whirls hot in front of my face, close enough to clasp. It's a devil's finger. It hisses: "PERDITION!"

"Jesus" flies out my mouth and "Sweet Jesus!" The bomb splutters and falls. It smolders on my poor bare foot.

"Oh Gaw..." I cry, the word cut off by a hand that clamps my throat and drags me, stiff-legged with terror, backwards. A voice whispers in my ear. "Not yet boy, just your lieutenant. You can call me Red." Then he drops me, back into the blessed mud.

Hey Harley, how are hanging, brother? Me, I am fine as frog hair. Wish you were here. Get this—there are birds here that feed at night. No, not owls, nighthawks neither. What they are is Fuck You birds. That's what their call sounds like: Fuck You! Fuck You! My lieutenant's a real nice guy. I think maybe this war is going to be okay.

Harley's my best friend. He and I grew up together, did most everything together. He'd be here with me now, except the recruiter won't take him as his skin's the wrong color.

Maybe Harley and I are as tight as we are because neither of us has a father. I have few memories of mine, who died a Marine in the Korean War, but my mother says my father and I are so alike that, "Sometimes I don't know where he ends and you begin." Though in one respect, she prays that he and I are different. I learned that the evening I came home to supper, all proudful, and told her I'd joined up the Marines:

"Go ahead, Rueben, you go ahead and get yourself killed for nothing just like he did." She cried with her face in her hands. Promising her that I wouldn't get killed didn't help one bit.

Anyway, Harley, he's back home what they call a moon colt. Or a volunteer, a honeydew melon sprung up outside the patch. Harley says his mother doesn't remember the responsible man very much, except he had the blackest hair she'd ever seen, and that he was *blue*—I shit you not: blue, as in the color.

Harley inherited both black and blue. Normally, he's the color of early morning sky, but when he's mad, his skin darkens to royal and his lips turn to plum. That's why the recruiter won't take him, because he's blue.

My mother said that when people are sad too much, too long, they turn blue inside, but that Harley was truly begotten blue. The doctor in Lewisburg said it was a missing enzyme thing, and gave Harley pills to take that make him normal, but Harley says he'll stay the way he is, so he can be like his dad.

Harley's mom didn't quite catch the name of her blue man either, so Harley was baptized in the name of his motorcycle, the exhaust pipes of which left burn scars on the insides of his mother's ankles, from wrongful riding, I suppose.

I once overheard Harley's mother and mine talking about him in our kitchen, but I won't tell Harley what was said: "Oh, but how that traveling man could make love," to which my mother rather dryly replied, "Yes, all that *practice*."

Get this Harley—last night somebody tried to crawl through the wire. When he tripped a flare, I got off a round. Drilled him right through his beady eye, one shot in the dark! Yep, I nailed Mr. Pig all right. He's a bristly old wild boar, he dressed out over 250 pounds and I am wearing his tusks on my dog tag chain right now.

The King of Darkness crosses the doorway of our bunker, turning bright morning into dread night.

"Stinks like women in here."

Gunnery Sergeant Toombs is something I've never seen before—an albinoed Negro. He's got milk-white skin, and a wine stain around his mouth. His lips are

the color of lard. But he's sure not soft. He was made rough; there's no chamfers to his edges, no fine work to him at all.

He looks like God cobbled him out of odd bits from the spare parts box: he's slab-trunked, bandy-legged and jut-jawed. He's bald as a billiard ball and the bones of his skull stand out. The men, of all colors, call him (well out of his earshot) the name that a black corporal gave him: "Our Great White Father."

His lardy lips are peeled back now. He stands in the doorway to our bunker like a bleached Neanderthal.

"That your pet outside?" he says, looking at the four inch tusks hanging from my neck, which suddenly feel heavy, cold on my skin.

"I shot him last night gunny," I say, jumping up. The tusks lash upwards and stick me. My hand goes to my cheek.

"Put your fucking hand down when I talk to you."

"But gunny, he was..."

"You get rid of that pig before it stinks."

"What should I..."

"Bury it... Or eat it!" he chortles, the sound unpleasant as gravel stirred in a jar. With that display of gunnery sergeant mirth, he turns and is gone like the evil genie he is.

One sparking chop at the flinty ground with an entrenching tool discourages the burying of the boar. None of us are going to eat it, either, that's for damn sure—nobody's going to risk getting the worm disease. So we truss him onto two engineers' stakes and, with two other guys, carry him down the hill to the village, his great head swinging, banging the legs of Jake and me.

On the outskirts of the village, a young boy side straddles a water buffalo, chewing a long stalk of grass. He sees us and spits out the stalk, slaps the flank of the buffalo and tears off. Just like a little cowboy.

He's waiting for us at the village, where his cries have brought on a crowd. We set the beast down. An old man with a bandaged leg close-eyes the tusks on me, then shakes my hand, slow and deliberate, like he's priming a pump. There are no other adults in sight; they must be out in the fields. A cluster of little girls chitter and giggle as I slice off the tail of the boar and fling it in a high arc, like a bridal bouquet. One jumps up and snatches it and runs away. The other girls scream and race after her. The old man primes my pump again, and we are off, glad to be shuck of the evidence.

"Man, that jaundiced jigaboo's got a hard-on for you," says Jake, the two of us standing in the once a day hot meal line.

“Yeah, he’s my very own hobgoblin.”

“Oh shit, Rueben—here he comes.”

Lieutenant Red is walking down the hill with him. When they get alongside Jake and me, the gunny whips his arm out and grabs my throat.

“Here’s the maggot that shot that fucking pig.”

Red laughs and says, “Education begins with the need to know. We’ll just have to teach him the difference between man and pig, that’s all.”

The gunny says, “If I got to eat that thing and get worms, then he sure as hell does too.”

“Yep, misery loves company.”

So I’m recruited. I take my place behind them. Ahead, a tank idles in the road; it’s commander’s upper body is out the hatch and twisted toward us. A squad of men are checking their gear behind the tank. Red waves an “onward” and the tank jockey pops out of sight. The tank rumbles and clanks down the road, us eating the dust it’s churning up.

He’s the centerpiece of the hardwood slab table. They must’ve scalded him to get all those bristles off. But they left the head as was, hairy, one-eyed and bloody. In the thatch hut, kerosene lamps have been lit. We and the pig cast long shadows on the walls.

The chief rises from the head of the table to greet us. He’s the color of mahogany. On his hips, he’s wearing two holstered .45’s with pearl handle grips. He’s got on a Marine Corps jacket, with a bronze star pinned to his right breast pocket. Red had told us he was the only native to have earned one. “One hell of a fighter, this guy.”

He looks Red in the eyes and solemnly shakes his big freckled hand, nods stiffly at the gunny, then turns to me. He makes like he’s shooting a rifle, then points at the tusks around my neck, then the pig, and grins. A gold tooth glints. I nod my head, embarrassed.

We seat ourselves on raised planks. Two thin old women serve up bowls of rice and large brown bottles of beer, then bowls of the dreaded gray meat. When they set one in front of the gunny, he pushes it away and booms out, “I don’t want no fucking pig!”

The chief scowls and stands up, all five feet of him, his hands ominously on the butts of his pistols. He glares at Toombs and grunts, “Hunggh!”

“Better do as he says, gunny—it’ll keep us out of the pot,” says Red.

“Fugggh,” says the gunny. He makes a show of eating some with his fingers. The look on his face is like he’s chewing leeches. “Hunggh!” he grunts at the chief, who thins his eyes back at him.

When the chief turns to Red, pantomiming “Eat, eat,” I see that the gunny has palmed his mouthful of pig and dropped it under the table.

Red digs in, says, “Might as well go whole hog.” Toombs sullenly chugs his beer, grabs for another. The chief stares at him coldly, then, unexpectedly, he smiles broadly and motions the old women to put more beer on the table. He starts to matching Toombs, bottle for bottle.

The meat is tasty, and the beers not bad either, though I feel that I ought to be eating away from my betters, at a little cardboard table, like kids at home have to do when company calls.

When we’ve all but the gunny emptied our bowls, Red stands and launches into a speech. “My fellow diners, I ask you: What is the difference between a pig and a man?”

“No diffence,” slurs Toombs.

“Ah, but a pig is only curious to the end of his snout. He roots in his own shit, and will romance his own mother. So tell me Private, how is a pig different than a man?”

“More pizzle than puzzle, Sir?”

“Hah, officer material, are you? Yes, more cock than curiosity. And he’s missing digits: has no fingers to make bullets and rockets and bombs, to pull triggers and lanyards and push buttons; to blow up the world. Gentlemen, having the capacity to destroy the world, we must exercise discretion.

“Gentlemen—I propose a toast!” He lifts his canteen cup high.

“Honorable Chief, Gunnery Sergeant Toombs, Private who should watch where he puts his big feet: Let us not behave as pigs. Let us not forget that we are men.”

The chief pulls his pistols and fires two shots through the roof, scaring the shit out of me. The gunny tries to lift his head, but his cheek seems to be stuck to the table by his dried drool. The fleshy folds in the back of his neck are smooth and hairless, like uncooked sausages in a row. “Stoo late,” he mumbles. Red throws his big head back and laughs; pulls his own .45 and shoots another hole in the roof. Two armed men appear in the doorway—a dicey moment—but they are ours, just in time to help us carry the gunny outside.

We bid our byes to the chief, who is too drunk to get up and see us out.

The moon is risen, humped and half-full. With the help of our guards and the tank crew, we lash him atop the tank, beneath the gun barrel, his flak jacket under his head. In the sickly yellow light, his skin has a tigerous glow.

We rumble our way home with him bound across the hood of the tank—a trophy, a man-eater that we have snared in an ever-darkled forest. I pray I’m not the one to loose him.

“Well, Private, shoot anything last night, anything I may have to eat today?”

It's just before dawn, wine red in the east, and Red is checking the lines. His voice is low, just above a whisper.

"No sir, I've learned not to do that."

"You trying to blow smoke up my ass, private?"

Red puts his face closer to mine and I can see he's grinning.

"Well, what are we going to name somebody who knows all about... pig pizzles? No, I won't do that to you, seeing as you are new here. Do you have any questions?"

"Yessir, um, I guess I want to ask..."

"Ask."

"Well, why are we here, Sir?"

"I guess I'd better give you a little history lesson. You know the date on this .45?" he says, tapping the holster on his hip with a big hand.

"Yes sir, 1911." It's one of those things they drilled in my head in boot camp.

"That's it, 1911, right in the middle of the banana wars."

I must have that numb and dumb look on my face. "Banana wars?" That makes no sense at all.

Red draws his pistol, drops the magazine, and thumbs out a round to hold in front of my eyes.

"This .45 round—like being hit with an eight-pound sledge swung by a two-hundred pound man. The Philippine Moros wore bamboo armor that deflected rifle rounds. This one would make them sit right down and contemplate.

'Banana wars', that's what they were called, those expeditions when the .45 was born. See, we fought the natives in Honduras for American banana growers. Dominican Republic for the sugar boys. Mexico for oil tycoons. Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, Cuba for the bankers. Oh yeah, we sure don't want to forget the Philippines and those Moros. China too: Sinclair Oil again, that and a little opium."

He's been ticking the wars off on his fingers. He's got one left; I guess it's for this one.

"It's like the Hymn says: 'From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.' We've fought them all: Moros and Berribees, pirates off Malay, bandits from Barbary, even whiskey brewing sons of Erin in Brooklyn who didn't want to pay the barrel tax. You can bet this: whoever we fight, there's money in it for somebody. Us? Why, we're the muscle men for Wall Street. Oh, it's a bad, bad world. Tell me now, private, given we must do our job, just how should good men act in this bad world?"

"Just try to do the right thing, sir?"

“Now you’re cooking with gas! Think of it like a football game with no line referees—we’ve got to do that ourselves. Okay, that was the pocket lecture—here’s the pop quiz.” He holds up that last finger. “Who are we fighting this one for?”

“Uh... Uncle Ben’s rice?”

“Oh, I know you’re bound for OCS!” Yes, Uncle Ben and... JESUS H. CHRIST!” He is out of the trench, up and running toward the machine gun emplacement, whose gunner is sending a stream of bullets into the wire. “CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!”

Dear Mama, perhaps I should not tell you this, but a water buffalo wandered into our perimeter wire at dawn today.

The rising sun reveals the beast in the wire. Still standing, it vomits gouts of blood. Red brooks meander down its flanks, pooling on the flinty ground.

But I remember you telling how your father died in a whiskey gunfight when you were seven, and that your mother had one old red mule to plow a side hill plot, to feed you and the other twelve of you kids, who broke the clods in your hands. You told me that one day that mule just laid down on his side and he wouldn’t get up, and your mother was striking its head with a ball-peen hammer, crying at it to “Get up, get up damn you. Don’t leave us with nothing!”

The mothers rend their clothing. Their children attempt to stopper the holes with the wadded strips.

You said your mother just seemed to give up when that mule died, and she died soon after, of the cancer in her breast. And how all you kids were handed out, first to kin, then to neighbors, and finally to strangers. The death of that mule, Mama, it was the death of your family.

The buffalo falls. The children’s hands are gloved with blood. They bawl at death’s victory. The mothers are keening, their own red hands upraised, into the pitiless sky.

Mama, this buffalo dying in the wire, I saw it all through your eyes.

Our preacher had been a sailor, and though our church was in the mountains, he still spoke as if on the high seas. He used to sermonize: “Jesus is the tholepin of our lives: Without Him our oars won’t sweep; we’ll soon be adrift and bound to broach; our souls will surely drown”.

Harley, I don't feel so good. We were on patrol today, going through some jungle, when an enemy jumped up and threw down his sniper rifle and hightailed it. I shot him in the back. He fell like I'd hammered him down. But he got up, so I shot him again. He got up again! I shot him in the back and he went down for good then. When we got to him, he was still alive. Exit wounds were in his chest—I'd hit him square. Harley, he looked right at me, like he was asking me why did I kill him. Our Gunnery Sergeant pulled his .45 and shot the guys brains out the back of his head.

We'd been told that the snipers were given opium, so they'd keep fighting even when they were shot up. But that didn't make me feel any better. And they don't stop the war just because you feel bad.

So we kept moving and my fire team is on the flank, in a rice paddy, when we take fire from another sniper, in a tree line, maybe 400 yards away. The guys jump for cover in the trees, but I stay put. I holler, "Fuck you, you lousy shot". His next round hits in the mud in front of me. I point down and yell, "Too low". A round cracks overhead. I point and yell, "Too high". His next shot is on the money—it creases my collar. I flip him off and saunter into the trees. The guys look at me like I'm crazy. I joke with them, tell them that I gave the guy the elevation so's he could adjust his sights, but I'd be Goddamned if I'd give him the windage too. Harley, I think I did it to even things up, to make the world right again. I think it was the dumbest, most honest thing I've ever done.

Harley stayed over at my house a lot, because his was as crazy-cracked as his kitchen floor, which was made of slabs of slate dragged out of Three-Mile mine's gob pile by one of his mom's boyfriends, who neither leveled it nor cemented the cracks, like he promised.

They all promised something, Harley said. And there were a whole lot of promisers. The ones who hadn't slid into home base yet would suck up to Harley, like to show his mother what a good daddy they'd be to him. Harley was wise to these "half-pops" of his: "They just do it to get into her underwear."

But there was one guy who thirteen-year-old Harley took a shine too, more so to his logging boots, knee-high lace-ups with screw caulks in the soles. Harley stared

so often at those boots that on the night the man got fired for being drunk on his chain-monkey job, he pulled them off and threw them at Harley, spikes and all:

Harley grabs them in mid-air. While he puts them on, his pale arm is bloody with punctures, like blue measles spots. The woodhick yuks at that. He's slouched on the couch with his knees agape, scratching his balls like he owns the place.

"Goddamn you," Harley's mama says.

"Shit, make this little pussy a man."

Beneath her faded rose nightgown, her dark nipples show. I sneak peeks at them, and feel shame. But I keep peeking. I just can't help myself.

She looks over at Harley, who has knotted a stringy yellow dishrag over his head, lopsided so as to cover one eye. Even with the tops folded down, the boots reach over his knees. He's dancing a buck and wing, swooping and bobbing his head, the hobnails clicking wildly on the cracked slate floor. His spikes scratch the slate; to the sound of fingernails across a blackboard, he makes a madman's map. His mama can't seem to focus her eyes on him. She rubs them, peers at him, shakes her head.

"Oh hell." She turns away from Harley and looks to her new man.

"Come'n here with me," she slurs, tugging him towards her bedroom. He turns and looks at Harley.

"By Jesus, look at the little blue bastard—like a fuckin' pig on ice."

Harley slides the bandana down so it covers both his eyes. He plugs his fingers in his ears and commences his wild dance.

"Come on, Harley." I grab him. "Let's go outside, look for Mars or something." He yanks his arm loose and hollers at my face: "THIS IS MARS!"

Walking back to my house, I can see him through the kitchen window of his crazy-cracked house. His fingers are in his ears; he is a blue boy dancing.

We're in a convoy, at the head of which two men wearing ear phones are sweeping mine detectors side to side, like slow moving scythes.

The prow of the tank in front of me suddenly is violently thrown up in the air... the tank driver is blown out the forward hatch... his body drapes a termite mound. Deafened by the blast, in slow motion through billowing black smoke, I try to reach him. It seems like I'll never get to him. Then I am in front of him, and real time returns, and I can hear, though my ears are ringing. He is groaning in an awful way. Blood paints his face.

I open his flak jacket, to find the wounds that are washing blood over him, and AppleBee the corpsman is there, his fingers groping for spurting arteries in the stumps of the tank driver's legs, which I only now see are missing up to the hip. Termites from the mound are swarming on his body; black on blood, insult to

injury. He is jerking. I hold him down. The ants mask his features. He shudders and dies.

The tank commander is holding the driver's head between his hands, the ants crawling up the commander's arms. He lifts his face and scans the paddies and the trees. Quietly he says, "You motherfuckers... you Goddamned motherfuckers."

The dead driver is zipped up in a body bag—we carry our coffins with us.

We move on. The mine sweepers are shaken and moving much more slowly, straining in their mouse ears to hear the ping of mines. Jake and I are on opposite sides of a tank, as distant from the tank as the width of the road allows us.

Fifty meters we make, then lightning strikes. Like a jerked puppet, Jake flies upwards, ten meters high. He seems to suspend there, his face a white blurry mask... then his body... he *crumbles* before our upraised eyes.

He *rains down* on us, his body and his blood. He is in my face, on my clothes, he gags my mouth. I wipe my face of him; I fleck him off me. A whole canteen of water I gargle and spit, to no avail. The iron taste of his blood remains in my mouth, but Jake, my friend is gone.

Around the sodden ground, all that is left of him, we cluster. One man's back is turned; he is throwing up in the weeds. He turns about, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, and he is Jake.

"I thought it was you!"

"No, he's not me," he says, "Who is he?"

No one knows who this is, this man who used to be, who turned to rain.

Harley tried taking his pills once, after kids teased him at school. So he looked mostly normal when he and I were trundling down the road one day, shooting snot-rockets in the bordering weeds:

He's got his dish rag on. He's stuffed socks in the logging boots so they'll fit better. He's stomping his spikes into grasshoppers.

"This one sure ain't gonna hop no more... whoa, here's another goner!"

Outside a tumbledown shack, a drunk in a gang of stumblebums looks at Harley in his seven league boots and genially says "Well, lookey here at Captain Big Boots." He trips down the steps and points a filthy long finger at Harley. "Hey—you know they call your daddy 'The Father of Our Country'? Why? Because of all the bastards he made—like you!" Harley's face drains to the color of whey, then fills with blue. His cheeks and lips mottle up purple. The man haws with yellow buckteeth. Spittle flecks Harley's twisted face.

"Why, he's a *colored* boy!"

I sneak behind the drunk and drop on all fours. Harley shoves him in the chest. He falls backwards over me, grabbing at Harley's arm. Harley pushes his hand away

and leaps over me. He lands on his knees in the drunk's guts. Air blows out his face with a "whoosh". Before he can draw another breath, Harley's standing above him with a nailed boot raised over his crotch. He slams it down. The yahoos on the porch slap their pants and punch each other's arms; they hoot at their yowling buddy, pressing both palms against the red poppy blooming on his pants. I headlock Harley and drag him away, because he wants to do the guy again. Through the vise of my arms, Harley's furious blue face yells, "That's one less dickhead getting in my mother's drawers!" Even the porch monkeys look away.

The wire was imbedded in her neck. From a tree branch in the woods the cat hung. She'd been gutted, I think when she was alive. I know Harley did it, because the woodhick had beat his mom and left her, and he took his big boots with him.

Damn, it's dark tonight.

"Fuck You!" goes the goony bird in the wire, "Fuck You!"

"Oh yeah? Fuck You Too!" Damn birds don't know I can see in the dark. Or will be able to, as soon as I finish setting up my grenades and pop-up flares on the parapet of the trench I'm preparing to stand watch in. The flares shoot a rocket up around 200 feet, then the magnesium ignites.

When I'm done with my chores, I'll get to look through the new Starlight scope. We got three today, and Red's letting one pass around the lines. My good luck to try it out first. Maybe I'll eyeball one of those birds.

"Fuck you! Fuck You!"

I pull the scope out of its cover and direct it toward the sound. The circular green image is filled with the sight of a man with a bayonet on his rifle, advancing on me. The scope falls from my hands. I grope for my rifle. It crashes to the floor of the trench. He's right in front of me. He pulls the bayonet back. He's going to stick me now.

I grab the closest thing I've got, a magnesium flare. I pop it at him—it punches into his stomach. The front of him erupts in blinding light. Lit up like a jack-o'-lantern. A white x-ray—I can see his ribs.

He screams, worse than a scalded cat. He falls and glows on the ground. And he stinks, stinks in an ungodly way.

I'm puking on my rifle stock, looking for his buddies, puking again, desperately looking for them. More pop-up flares are fired and they descend, brightly swinging under their parachutes. Then there is the crump of mortar illumination rounds leaving their tubes. The ground lights up like a high school night football game.

Rifle and machinegun fire erupts like a popcorn cooker; tracer rounds crisscross, making a red web across our base.

The infiltrators are sprinting away, their shadows running ahead of them. The light dies, then more rounds illuminate the men. Herky-jerky in the on-again, off-again light, they rise, they fall; they scabble under and clamber over the wire. One is shot and his body drapes the barbed wire. Another races over his back and leaps away into darkness. The shots peter out and Red is yelling, "First squad, second squad, squad's up!"

Jake is pulling me out of the trench, shaking me. The body smolders, black as a fire-gutted house. "Jesus! You do that to him?" Then we are running with our gear in hand.

"Up on the tank! Get up, get up! Hold on any way you can. Stay clear of the turret!"

The tank has a Rome plow attached to its front, like a giant horn on a steel rhino. The tank light atop the turret is three feet across. It clicks on. Its million candlepower reaches out a quarter mile, searches for the enemy soldiers, finds them crossing a rice paddy. They're making for the river.

We roar out after them. The plow shears through the wire. Trip flares pop like flashbulbs. They melt into a bamboo forest, where they might disburse and evade us. But the tank light turns the tropical night into a winter scene: it rimes the bamboo, hoarfrosts the ground; the enemy are ghosts, fleeting through the frozen trees. The tank roars after them, smashing down all in its path.

Our nightmare beast bursts through the trees. The enemy soldiers pitch down the bank and plunge pell-mell into the narrow river. Chest deep in its middle, they struggle to cross it, to escape into darkness. But our tank lights them up. Time seems to stop. They are frozen like ice men.

We leap from the tank. Fire a hailstorm of bullets down on them. Punch holes through the night, through the river, through them.

Green tracer rounds streak up, disappear when they pass through the light. Red tracer rounds stream down, are seen only entering the light. It consumes the darkness. It devours all colors.

Bodies writhe in the river. In the thunderous crossfire, the curses of the still living, their screams, their pleas are not heard. They thrash, they die in jerks and spasms, white-faced and white-handed and mute as mimes.

Steam rises from the river. It mixes with the cordite cloud from the weapons and wreaths the enemy in eerie smoke.

One of them raises an arm, as if to seize a lifeline. To the staccato of a machine gun, he stutter-steps, spins, succumbs. Another is surrendering. He is stitched through. His white hands plead above the water, slip beneath the surface.

Several dive underwater. When they come up for air, their slick heads are potted. Another man has managed to lay his torso on the far shore.

“I got that fucker!” A Marine jumps down the bank. His shadow is a giant.

“Where you going, boy?” he says. He grips his rifle by the barrel. With the butt stock, he axes the man’s head. In the calm of the cease-fire, the crack of his skull is audible. Men cheer.

In the roiled, bloody wash, a body is poked by another Marine, in the face with the muzzle of his rifle. The face sinks and fast rises, carp-mouthing for air.

“Playing possum are you?” says our man, as he presses down and holds the face underwater. A slipstream of bubbles rises to the surface, floats a bit and bursts. Someone hollers, “Way to go, lifeguard!” His face is distorted by the light. He grins like an ogre.

An Amtrac crashes its way across the river. Corpses bob in its wake. Troops jump off it and search the ground. Red wades the river. He stands beside the gunny, his uniform steaming.

Ecstatic with victory, the men around me are pumping fist-fists, high-fiving one another, whooping like they’ve won the final football game.

The gunny rubs his pale, blue-veined hands.

“A good haul, Lieutenant. Damn good haul.”

Red silences the cheering men. “Good job. Now I need two volunteers.”

“I will, Sir,” I say.

“Me too, Sir,” pipes Jake.

“Cut that light!” says Red. He turns his back on us, and on the bodies in the river. The tank light clicks off.

Feeling for bodies in the dark water, it comes to me that I’ve been here before: noodling fish back home with Harley. We’d let our bodies sink slowly into a river hole, and feel our way for fish hiding in undercuts of the bank. By blind man’s touch we’d find them, and glide our hands gently, ever so gently along their skin, until we could slip our fingers in their gills and rise them to the surface, where we’d toss them, flopping on the bank, and go back down for more.

But it’s Jake and me noodling now, for men and for weapons. The surface of the water is crisscrossed by the red-lensed beams of flashlights, but they don’t pierce the blackness of the river.

Somehow it’s impersonal: you touch a foot, a hand, a face, you get a hold and jerk him up, and float him to a chain of men who pass him up the line, where waiting hands scale him of weapons and clothes. Others drag the naked body up the muddy bank and flop it beneath a spreading tree.

Jake rises in a rush, the throat of a dead man in his hands. The voice of the gunny comes from the dark shore: "That's it Popejoy—shoot 'em, drown 'em and strangle 'em: Be *thorough*."

The last one is drifting down the river, as if he is, even in death, attempting to escape. Men are running along the shore with flashlights, lighting him up in red.

I swim hard to reach the man. I latch on to him. He rolls in the water, trapping my hand in his webbing straps, pulling me under. *Help, Harley, I'm tangled in the roots of the sycamore and it's drowning me. Help me!* With a desperate yank, I free my hand, kick to the surface. Water blows out my nostrils, I gasp for air.

The corpse seems to smirk at me: "*I almost got you, to take you with me, wherever it is I go*". I yank him, tow him by his hair toward the shore. Jake splashes in the water, reaches us just when I'm able to stand on the bottom.

"Hold this," he says, handing me a flashlight. He grabs the dead man by the collar. And punches his face. The face submerges with the blow. It rises. Jake hits it again. "Try and kill him, will ya?" He hits the face harder, faster, again and again "You're not killing him, or me! I'M KILLING YOU!"

I grab his arm. "Stop it, Jake. He's dead."

Churned by boots, the red mud bank looks like a stockyard pen, except it has no cows, just naked human corpses, lain side by side. The sun is rising behind the trees whose branches reach over the bank. Their leaves make shadow-dapples on the men's bullet-rent skins.

Their eyes are open. Some look surprised. The faces of two of them are set in a rictus of fear; the rest just seem to stare, except one whose eyes have been stabbed through. *Ah fuck*. All of them are missing their ears.

Atop the bank, five men from second squad stand in a circle. They huddle and hold out cupped hands, like we did as kids, showing off our marbles.

"A six pack for an ear at the airstrip bar."

"Fuckin' A!"

Red's voice booms from the bodies. "Who the HELL did this?" The culprits drop the ears, turn and slowly walk away, blend with other men as Red climbs up the slope.

"This is no good. No, it's NO DAMN GOOD AT ALL. WHO IN HELL DID THIS?"

The gunny, his arms crossed high on his chest, had been watching the men who did it; he probably watched them do it. He doesn't uncross his arms, just gives Red a deadpan expression.

"Could have been anybody, Lieutenant, anybody at all. Do you think maybe somebody forgot they were men?" Red glares at him.

"I'll court-martial the next SOB who does this! Goddammit, this is not the way to do things!"

"POLICE THOSE EARS." The gunny barks it like a parade ground command, as he would "Police those cigarette butts! Clean 'em up!"

One of the men starts walking back, the look of a sullen delinquent on his face.

"No." The gunny points at me. "You do it."

My face gets hot and there's a buzzing in my head. But there's no way out of the unfairness, so I bend to the task.

Up close, the ears look kind of like brown mushroom caps, muddied-up, with blood on the lobes, and on the gristle. I try not to look at them.

"We don't have all fucking day. DO IT!"

The first one's the hardest. It lays in my palm like something holy, something obscene.

There are so many ears that I have to make a cradle of my left arm to hold them all. I lean them against each other, like sliced cucumbers, so they will touch the least of my bare skin; but that doesn't work, because ears weren't made to stack.

The gunny kicks me in the ass.

"I said get rid of them!"

What do I do? Match up each ear with its owner? What if I put the wrong ears on a wrong head? I'm not going to bury them either—I'd have to set them down to dig a hole, and pick them up again. No way.

"Shitcan that trash."

Careful so they don't spill out, I wade into the river with the ears cradled in my arm.

Red's voice floats over. "That's good of you, to do that." The gunny's voice is closer.

"College Boy's gonna give you a gold star, Mama's Boy. Ricky-tick, you'll be dancin' cheek to cheek."

I got my mind on other things. Waist deep, I fling open my arm like a farmer does sowing seeds; as if whole men might sprout from ears. The river takes them. But some stick to my flesh. With a shudder, I flick them off. My right hand fingertips are red; spots and streaks are on my left arm and chest. I scrub my shaking body with the gritty mud. I rub until my skin is raw, but it is still there. *Oh God, this blood won't scour. It will always be on me, even if nobody else can see it.* But the gunny has seen all. He sneers at me like I'm a sissy.

"Well, well, lookie here. Look what my Mama's Boy has up and done: those are Buddhists up there. Buddhists can't get to heaven without all their body parts. Guess you didn't know about that, huh, Mama's Boy?"

Now I've sinned against God. I have thrown away their Hereafter.

The gunny rounds up the men who committed the atrocities. He checks to make sure Red is out of sight.

"Think I'd forget about you assholes? Like to fuck with dead men do you? Then here's a job for you: get some rope and string them up in the trees. Hang them by their heels. Get them up high. I want the villagers to see them like that, upside down."

We leave the river and the tree whose flowering boughs are weighted with corpses. On the way back to our hill, I think about God. The Bible says that lightning is the face of God, and thunder is His voice. Yet we can make our own God storm, any time we want. We just did that, with atrocities no god would do. Maybe that's the trouble here: as we get bigger, God gets smaller. As for Jesus, when he saw the first atrocity, I believe He did abandon the field.

I don't know who to talk with about this: Jake's a non-believer, Harley wouldn't care for what I was talking about, and it would scare the hell out of my mother.

The earless men were effective. That night, their comrades came to the village and barricaded the chief in the thatch hut, then burned it down. In the ashes, among his fire-split bones, were his pistols, the ivory grips broken by the heat, and his Bronze Star, smelted to a dull gray glob.

Harley, you remember that night before I shipped out, the night we went to the Owl and shot pool? Remember when you drank your last beer and turned the bottle on its side on the bar and said, "Dead soldier—don't you be one"? And how the Julie twins started yelling, each blaming the other for tainting the batch of moonshine that blinded both of them. And how they grabbed onto each other's coat sleeves and stumbled out on the gritty floor to a place where the linoleum was worn down to the paper, like the sole of an old shoe. And one hit the other full-fisted in the face; it sounding like an axe striking wood. And his brother fell back but was held upright, so he could get his shot too, while his brother held his own sightless face up, waiting for it. And them keeping at it until they couldn't raise their arms anymore and fell to the floor, gasping and bleeding and crying. Harley, them being identicals, it was like they were one man in two halves, and that for one to club the other was like to club his own self. Harley, that's the way it is here with us and our enemy—we strike each other tit for tat. Except we go further: We mutilate our human faces, we murder our selves.

Everybody and their brother is coming for the rice the villagers have reaped: the enemy, and us, who won't let them get it, and the birds.

A host of sparrows flocks in the tall spreading tree at the center of the village. Its branches are high; the lower ones were probably lopped off for firewood. You can barely see the tree's leaves for all the mass of the birds. Their feathers are burnished by the sun. As they rustle, they look like one beautiful shining, shimmering thing.

Something startles the birds and they beat upward with a roar of wings and fly as one, wheeling, swooping, turning inside out and rounding again, to light in the tree, to shimmer again.

Red's voice brings my eyes back to ground. "Mr. Mao's little red book says guerillas should camouflage themselves by 'swimming in the sea of the people'. So today . . ."

"We're going to drain the pool," says Toombs, his sleeves rolled up, a shotgun in his hand. "We're gonna turn this crummy berg into a free-kill zone."

"Put the people in the Amtracs," says Red. "Look for tunnels and weapons caches. But watch out for booby traps and mines."

Toombs picks me out with his eyes. "Yeah, you do that. Just don't forget to burn all their fuckin' rice."

The tank sergeant doesn't give a shit for the villagers or the birds, just one thing: "It's not gonna happen again. I'm not losing one more friend to a Goddamn mine."

Toombs barks, "That's why we brought the Mik-Lik." At the raise of his voice, or of the name of whatever this monster is we've brought, the birds flee the tree.

"What is it?" I ask one of the Amtrac men, pointing at the trailer they've towed behind one of the vehicles. The tub of the trailer is filled with coiled rope. Five pound blocks of C-4 are attached to the three-quarter inch rope, spaced a foot apart. Two men are setting up a tripod launcher, two others are carrying a rocket over to it. The rocket's attached to one end of the rope coiled in the tub.

"Rocket-propelled line charge. Rocket takes the rope up a hundred and fifty feet, then completes the arc to ground. Press the button and KABOOM. Clears a path through a mine field, or anything else you might want cleared. A world of hurt, that's what this sonofabitch is."

We're burning the villagers' rice with kerosene; we're burning up their huts. Maybe somebody at the other end will give them money. I don't know; I just know that the villagers are plucking at our clothing, begging us to stop, and all of them are crying.

The demo men are tossing smoke canisters in whatever looks to be a tunnel entrance. Purple smoke pops up in multiple places. "Fire in the hole!" Fire in the hole!" they yell, just like miners do back home. Then they chuck satchel charges in the holes.

One blast is so powerful that it blows a wandering pig sky high, like a cheerleader tossed at a football game, for all the boys to see her panties. Its body crashes to ground; its squeal seems to resound for a few seconds longer than its life.

The birds are confused by the blasts and smoke. They fly chaotically above the tree, their graceful oneness broken.

Jake is searching inside a large rice jar for weapons. His feet are off the ground, he's halfway in it. He throws a piece of tarpaper behind him, then yelps. Falling backwards, he sprays the jar with lead. The jar shatters. Rice is in a pile amidst the shards. From it slithers a cobra, the booby trap that nearly got him. With a blast of his shotgun, the gunny cuts it in half.

Squatting in the gloom of the hut is an old woman, dressed in white, old as I've ever seen. "Okay, grandma, time to go." She pleads with her tiny hands and her rheumy eyes. "Come on grandma. You can't stay here anymore." *Here where you've lived all your life.*

Her skin is furrowed and veined; the monsoon years have washed away her colors. Wisps of her gray hair stick to my sweaty cheek. She is light as a winter leaf in my arm. She trembles; she whimpers in my ear. "It'll be okay," I say to her, "It'll be okay." *Please don't die on me grandma. I don't think I could bear it.*

"Don't go down that trail!" a voice shouts out.

A mine detonates. It leaves a rift in the world that fills with pain.

"Fuck! I told him not to go down there."

The MIK-LIK rocket *whooshes*. It arcs over the ville... hits the top of the tree, maypoles around it and streaks to ground. Where it strikes its own C-4 blocks...

An eruption... a hurricane throws open my arms... she flies like paper in the searing wind as something slaps my face, slams me to the ground.

I'm numb all over... I can't see. *Oh God I'm blind. I'm dying.* Applebee is beside me, his hands searching for mortal wounds. "Don't move... damn!" he says. He lifts the bloody skin from my face as if it is a caul. Blood burbles from the opening that was my mouth. "Jesus!" says a voice, "they blew off his fuckin' face." *Who will love me now?* Applebee wipes my face with gauze. Through haze, like through red water, I see. *Praise God I still have my eyes. Even if my face is gone.* "It's not your face," he says. "It's Jake's."

I'm not the only one struck by Jake's skin and bones, nor bedaubed with his blood. All my squad, we look like Satan's spawn.

Burning chaff from the huts spirals upward through the rain, which has just begun to fall. The ground is littered with the little black carcasses of birds. The old woman lies far from the tree, curled up and still, like a sleeping, gray child. I kneel to pray over her. Raindrops stir wisps of her hair, and feathers on the wings of the birds.

Red is bent over the tank sergeant's head, severed by the supersonic wind. It is eyeless and it misses an ear. Hands on hips, Red is yelling at it, "You fuck... you Goddamn dumb fuck."

As if through fog, I wade to them. I push Red away, hard. He falls on his butt. What I do now, it's not hard to do, not hard at all. My bayonet is sharp. "This is for Jake and grandma," I say.

Red covers his stunned face with his big freckled hands.

"You too," he says, in a small voice. He drops his hands and looks at me. But he has changed: his skin is pale and his eyes are odd. He seems not to see me.

"Red's gone blind," says Applebee. "There's not a mark on him. He just doesn't want to see anymore."

Six men carry Red like pallbearers. They hand him up to the tank crew, who put him in the bustle rack on the back of the turret, where they stow their tarps. They tie his hands to the rails so he can't fall out. They fasten goggles over his eyes.

What little there is of Jake, we zip into a body bag, though you can't tell he's in there. Of the man who stepped on the mine, we recover only part of his torso, and that we have to bring down from a tree with a grappling hook.

Nobody wants to put the bags in an Amtrac, not with the villagers inside. Who knows what they'd do with them. Finally, Applebee puts the bags in the tank's bustle rack, one on each side of Red. We mount up on top of the Amtracs, and race away.

Our convoy is one long scream. The villagers wailing inside the Amtracs can be heard on top, as can Red, our blind seer, crying out, as if he is announcing to all our coming, as if he is a tocsin, shrieking the breakout of the beasts: "PIGS! PIGS!"

We are taking fire from the treeline to our left. The bullets smash into the Amtrac, imbed in the sides of it and the bodies of men. Applebee is crawling to them. The gunny stands, the wind rippling his clothes. Fully exposed to the fire, he uncouples the radio antenna, which is tall as two men. He whips it forward and back over us, signaling us to hug the deck. His chinstrap is taut; his eyes gleam in the wind.

We are prostrate to our high priest. He is whipping us onward. Onward to duty, in fealty to our one-eyed god named war.

The horror around me, beneath me, behind me is not real. It is a dream and I am flying beneath scudding storm clouds.

But it is no dream. The reality of it comes to me like a terrible poem. I jot it down in a lurching hand, on a scrap of cardboard ration box. It's not legible, but that doesn't matter. No one will ever see it but me:

Now I know what my father knew, that
 beneath the skin of men there lurks a beast, that
 hungers to be unleashed.
 I am my father's son and
 now I know what my father knew; that
 the beast lurks beneath the skin of me.

We have dismounted, transferred our cargo of grief, and washed away the gore. I eye the clouded sky. There are no fluffy white sheep up there for me. Not anymore. Never again will the clouds be innocents to me.

Harley, you remember the preacher saying that you could fit a thousand angels on the head of a pin? He knows all the answers, don't he? Well, you ask him this for me—how much do the souls of a thousand and one sparrows weigh? Oh yeah, the thing inside the box is just what you think it is. I know it's whiter than you might expect. But that doesn't matter. See, I've discovered that in the end, no matter our color, we're all the same beneath the skin. Don't you come here, Harley. There's nothing here for you but woe.

There's one more to write. I don't want to, but I promised I'd never fall silent to her, like my father did.

Dear Mama, I am
 Oh Mama. I am like the clouds.

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