

Dale Ritterbusch

Daisy Carbine Mantra

I

The BB jammed in
under the nail of his thumb—
a perfect ball of copper
buried in the pink swell of his flesh;
he yelled, ripping the nail back
as he teased it out
in a bubble of blood
and we stopped shooting,
crawled out from behind
bales of dry hay
stacked three deep in the old barn—
The swallows had taken flight,
the barn owl hidden or flown
from our game of immortal combat:
Good training, we would have said
years later when it mattered.
We climbed down
to look at the wound,
felt the hurt, the damage
one BB could do:
The smell of hay nestled in our lungs,
barn dust filtered through the light,
blood dripped on the wooden floor.
We rode home on our bikes
to supper and homework,
Daisy carbines cradled
across our handlebars
like a brother.

II

First time I fired a twelve gauge—
 warned of the punishing recoil—
 I held the stock four inches away
 from my shoulder, figured I could
 hold it there, prevent the hard slam
 into my chest: the bruise—
 size of a waffle—lasted for weeks, but I learned
 to absorb the shock of whatever hit,
 to not resist any overwhelming force
 as in wrestling, to use the opponent's
 force against him, turn it to my
 advantage—hard to do when you're
 bull-headed, convinced you're most often in the right.

A Browning 12 gauge, an over-and-under,
 are in the closet, along with the pistol
 my fisherman father used
 to shoot muskie before they tore up
 the boat, and a .30-30 leans
 against the back wall of the closet as well,
 unused for years: Better to get a deer
 with your car than go out in the woods
 with all those crazies, the ones who smear blood
 on the faces of their children
 after that first kill. Once I tailed
 a deer I'd shot through the lungs,
 trailed it into the pines, heard another shot
 and found a man leaning over it—
 said it was his, but you could tell he'd
 shot it after it was already dead:
 The .44 magnum in a holster across his chest,
 the look on his face, I just walked away;
 wasn't worth it, didn't mean that much anyway.

III

Students sit in the warm autumn sun,
 listen to the peace activist
 tell us of the new millennium's need
 for a new way of seeing, a new way
 of thinking. War, we're told, is as outmoded
 as a four year old computer,
 nobody runs a 486 anymore;
 there is a hunger for change...

Our drill instructor's name,
 SSGT Calar E. Trutt, is on a plaque
 affixed to the barracks, indicating ownership—
 he owns us and preaches his sermon
 of the rifle:

*The M-14 is a shoulder fired,
 gas operated, magazine fed, semi-automatic
 military weapon which fires a copper
 jacketed 7.62 mm round with an
 effective range of 400 meters. It
 was design' to kill a human bein'
 an' it do a damn good job of it.*

We stripped it down, cleaned it
 put it back together, put it back
 together faster than the time before,
 did it again in the dark
 and did it again—One night
 the barracks guard went to the gun rack,
 pulled all the triggers of all the weapons—
 rule was you're not supposed
 to leave a weapon cocked
 all night; a round in the chamber
 bored through the floor above, the left lung
 of the trainee in the bottom bunk,
 the heart of the guy on top.

Once, the sergeant told us, he'd gone
to Louisville to pick up a prostitute.
When they were done she asked to be paid;
he took \$50 from her purse, told her
she'd got it wrong, *You pay me*, he said.

A simple reversal, certainly not anything new.
In wrestling, in high school,
we practiced reversals every
afternoon, until by now I should be used to it—
two points, an exile in one's own country:

Love and death, wives and lovers,
war and peace
all one and the same.

A new order:
The other cheek turns to vengeance,
beatitudes as distant
as a live fire exercise in Georgia.

IV

He was the Chaplain's assistant:
On one arm the tattooed cross
and the words *Let us Pray*—
on the other a grinning skull
and beneath it *Let us Kill*.
He knew the Eucharist in Latin,
knew why the Catharists had to die.
Authority without wealth
is not possible, he said—
a belief as profound as faith.
Good works or faith, it doesn't matter.
I got through graduate school
pumping 200 rounds a day—pellets and BB's—

through a phone book, shot cans
to study ballistics
of pellets shredding tin.

V

We'd sight in those M-16's
on anything that moved
or didn't—water buffalo,
jackfruit grinning like death masks,
anything out there salvaging the trash,
all those ghosts at night
playing in the wire, whispering
Listen up now, we're here,
we're over here—
still playing, still whispering
so no one gets any rest
any rest at all.

VI

My old cat is hurting
and it is more than age,
more than all the years spent
on my chest staring into my eyes
as if anything could be discerned
looking that deep into whatever
the world might offer.
X-rays show a BB
embedded under the skin,
worked deep in the muscle
of his left hind leg.
It's been there a long time,
more years than the cat remembers,
or maybe not, maybe he recalls
the armed kids next door,

the sharp sting, the pain that lasted
 for days until a dull ache
 became something to live with,
 like remembrance, teasingly
 just under the skin. Old cat, your eyes
 change like the moon; the tide of years
 pulls at us both. You can't trust anyone
 is about all that we have learned.

VII

In Viet Nam it's all
 karaoke bars and billiards,
 resorts on the South China Sea.
 We are forgiven and the
 younger generation
 doesn't care at all about the hell
 we put them through. And I
 shouldn't care either
 so many years after Tet; even
 their scholars who should know better
 say Viet Nam would be just
 another third world country, like Laos,
 if it weren't for the colonial powers.

At night I look down from the balcony
 on the broad tree-lined boulevards
 of Saigon and think for a moment
 they might be right—and then the anger
 swells—all those deaths for nothing,
 night sweats, the lies we've told ourselves,
 the history buried, the wheelchair friend
 with his plastic pouch over the scars
 where his guts had been—he's dead now
 and his name's not on the wall. I walk down
 Ham Nghi Avenue, have a few 333's for old time's sake,

get hustled by a young man who says
 his father was killed by the VC.
 He doesn't want any money—I give him some
 all the same, a gesture maybe, an easy way
 to walk out into the dark night of the city,
 away from the lights, the motor scooters, the bars.
 It will be hours, long hours before
 I find my way back.

VIII

Vietnam—our first post-modern war,
 a field day for the deconstructionists,
 the semioticians, the province of meta-fiction
 but what it comes down to
 is the escape from Kuwait City,
 wreckage past the horizon,
 oil fires that burned for weeks
 visible from the heavens—
 and the bombing of Kosovo, ethnic
 cleansing, the Taliban saying
Deconstruct this as they fire
 rockets at Buddhist statues
 in Bamiyan, near the old Silk Road,
 Buddhas 170 feet tall—
 a millennium's worth of reverence and worship.

Perhaps I could pray if I had to
 but it's hard to recapture
 that long ago feeling in church, the benediction:
*May the Lord bless you and keep you,
 may the Lord make his face to shine upon you
 and give you peace*—unattainable
 peace, past all understanding.
 I visit temple after temple—a Chinese
 temple that venerates the whale,

whale bones jumbled under paintings
of the great whale breaching the sea—
And the Cao Daists, how easy
it would be to worship their venerable
pantheon: Victor Hugo, Christ, Charlie Chaplin.

When I leave the temple I learn
of birds bought to send prayers
to the heavens on their release,
and they always come back
to be sold again, prayer after prayer
rising into the cloudless sky
whispering with each wing beat
the joy, the love, the war ended at last.

IX

Our minister gave money to a homeless
woman who walked into church
with her ailing child and asked for help.
The church fathers stopped that cold:
Send her to social services,
they commanded, like Moses
bringing down the law—the answer
to all our foolish prayers. Since then
I've stopped recycling cans and jars.
Bundles of old newspaper,
phone books from the last three years,
lean heavily against the wall.
Already I can feel the stock
pressed into my shoulder.
Already, I can hear the sound
of glass breaking.

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