

D O N A L D A N D E R S O N

Soldier-Artists: Preserving the World

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Well, about my experience, it illustrates how you can become something you never thought you would become, without being aware of the transformation. That there is evil in you, or violence in you, or both—which you're not fully aware of—and that it can sneak up and in effect possess you, or snatch your soul.

My old editor at the *National Geographic Adventure* magazine used to be a Golden Gloves fighter in Ohio, and he was talking about the young interns they had working at the magazine. He said, "You know the trouble with a lot of these people, a lot of them have never been cut."

—Philip Caputo'

Of course war needs to be written about, and, from time out of mind, it has been. From the earliest rendition of the *Iliad* to the latest showing of *Blackhawk Down* or *Jarhead* or *The Hurt Locker*, war and art have reflected one another. War frames our lives. Look behind or ahead and war will

find you. Though war has been convincingly written about by outsiders,² I believe we turn to insiders—*combatants*—for our weightiest insights. A soldier's response to war lays claim to a special visceral authority. Tim O'Brien puts it this way: "True war stories don't generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis":

For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside.

It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. (84)

Experienced soldiers speak from an earned location. Here Paul Fussell explains what he learned from combat: "I suddenly knew I was not and never would be in a world that was reasonable or just" ("My War," 43). I should point out that when I use a term like *combatant* I hardly mean to restrict the term to uniformed troops. Consider this "noncombatant" Nicaraguan mother:

The three of us crouched in the corner of the house, trembling and crying all at once, thinking that surely we would die here as the bullets and shrapnel were destroying our small wooden home. We decided to leave and find a safe place to hide. So we went through the back, through the kitchen, my husband carrying our young daughter in his arms. A plane flew very low and seemed to be coming directly at us and firing rockets all over, striking my daughter in the back and my husband as he carried her. From where I was, only a few paces behind them, I saw only the heart and the entrails of my child. She seemed to have been blown apart, completely destroyed. My husband stumbled some thirty steps with his arms torn away, blood pouring out of him till he fell dead. There was a great hole in his chest. Part of it was still smoking, a smoking rocket was still in one leg. The other was stripped of all flesh to the bone. I wanted to pick up my daughter, but there were only pieces of her. . . . I ran and found her arm and tried to put it back on her, tried to put back everything that had spilled out of her. But she was already dead. She was my only child and it was hard for me to have her. I dressed her myself for parties. Spoiled her. I don't know what I'm going to do. (Mattison, 227)

What is this but moral authority?—a voice that merits and demands attention—a voice that *knows*.

Felt threat is a constant for any soldier, especially those on the front lines. To put it another way, in war there is the sense that one is available for death, which is a notion that will alter forever any competing notion of invincibility—the more common vision for a nineteen- or twenty-year old. War is for all soldiers, as it was for young Paul Fussell, an “introduction to the shakiness of civilization” (44). The possibility of death is something that sticks. From an interview, Tim O’Brien:

There’s a passage where Paul Berlin is going to war and he looks at his own hands, “my hands, my hands.” Love of one’s limbs. Love of their presence, because in war there’s always the proximate danger of their absence. No hands. No legs. No feet. No testicles. No head. That passage in *Cacciato* was written with a real purpose in mind: “my hands.” Those are things we take for granted. We don’t look at our hands and take a shower and say “my hands.” But war teaches you to value those hands. (Herzog, 108)

Soldiers are witnesses and there is a false belief that they should recover from what they have seen and done, and had done to them. Combat is so separate, so distant from normalcy that to expect soldiers to return easily from battle during or after war is a dreamy prospect. All to say that much of what propels a soldier’s world view and living must stem from war-learned behavior—reliance on instinct and the ugly effectiveness of violence—controlled and uncontrolled, scheduled and unplanned. In his essay “My War,” Paul Fussell quotes the poet Louis Simpson, who wrote, “The war made me a foot-soldier for the rest of my life” (40). About himself, Fussell writes, “My war is virtually synonymous with my life. I entered the war when I was nineteen, and I have been in it ever since” (40). Soldiers possess knowledge, a hard-earned and acute disillusion. Quoting Fussell:

Those who actually fought on the line in the war, especially if they were wounded, constitute an in-group forever separate from those who did not. Praise or blame does not attach; rather there is the accidental possession of a special empirical knowledge, a feeling of a mysterious shared ironic awareness manifesting itself in an instinctive skepticism about pretension, publicly enunciated truths, the vanities of learning, and the pomp of authority. Those who fought know a secret about themselves, and it’s not very nice. (48)

We hear of, say, My Lai or Abu Ghraib, and want to believe—don't we?—that our choices would have been different from those who will find their place in history as moral dwarfs. Except: as the Milgram and the Stanford Prison experiments uncomfortably disclose—humans are only too willing to obey authority, even when that authority conflicts with their conscience. As we should by now know, it is in this way that ordinary folk, by merely “doing their jobs,” become agents in persecution, “cleansing,” and genocide. Now and again during the Milgram experiments, someone would refuse to “obey,” either to start or to continue to administer what they had every reason to believe was debilitating, if not fatal, electrical shock to unseen but screaming recipients. But such forswearing individuals were always in the minority. It's Paul Fussell who wrote, “If you can't imagine yourself an SS officer hustling the Jewish women and children to the gas chamber, you need to be more closely in touch with your buried self” (*Bomb*, 113). To scorn such reminders carelessly imperils ourselves, our communities, and nations. Soldiers have much to tell us. Samuel Hynes heard a man at a dinner party suggest a solution for the siege of Sarajevo: “We could take those guns out with a little napalm.” Hynes, a former marine pilot, thought, “You have never seen napalm dropped, you don't know how it flows and spreads like a wave of fire and burns *everything* (2).” Hynes also records a French foot-soldier from the First World War who said it this way: “The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it” (1-2).

The source of a soldier's secret is what he has seen and done and had done to him. It is a commonplace that war *makes men*. “But if it makes men,” Samuel Hynes writes in *The Soldiers' Tale*, “it also isolates them from other men, cuts off the men who fought from older and younger men who did not share that shaping experience. . .” (5). In *Trained to Kill: Soldiers at War*, Dr. Theodore Nadelson,³ writes that “The soldier's privilege to kill is unlike anything most other individuals have ever experienced, and the soldier who kills is permanently changed, fixed to the death he has made” (38)—a notion Nadelson further establishes when he writes, “[The soldier] is disturbed in peace partly because he is not able to give up memories of war's wonder and of a contest survived” (78). Hynes replaces Nadelson's term *wonder* with *strangeness*—both writers aiming to get at that reaction soldiers have to war: *astonishment*. “War is . . . continually strange and unexpected. . . . When Rod Kane arrived in Vietnam, he expected a war of ordinary violence; he didn't expect to be attacked immediately by a child with a sack of hand grenades—but he was” (18-19). Hynes provides other such scenarios:

From the First World War—a soldier marches through a ruined village:

Just past the last house on the left was a small pond, whence protruded the grey-clad knee of a dead German. The water around him was green and on his knee was perched a large rat making a meal.

From the Second World War—a German infantryman is retreating on the Russian front:

We had just passed a bunker in which we noticed a body lying at the bottom. Two emaciated cats were eating one of its hands.

From the Vietnam War—a young officer remembers:

A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses—a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people. (19-20)

And Sharon Allen, an Iraq War veteran:

I'm very cognizant of the crowd when I speak about Iraq. Some stories that make veterans laugh cause civilians to slowly back away, scanning for the nearest exit. Sometimes we really just found these stories funny. Sometimes it was a coping mechanism. And sometimes it was absolutely inappropriate and we didn't even know why we did it.

A sergeant who lived in the building next to mine was first on the scene when one of my friends died. I saw her right when she got back from the convoy. She came to me to tell me what she had seen, I guess because I knew the kid. He didn't feel a thing. The IED had blown his head off.

"He was just sitting there. His head was gone. But his hair was still there. It was like his face, and his head, had been scooped out. But his hair was still there. I don't know what was holding it up. It was kind of funny."

And then she looked into the distance and kind of laughed. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I just laughed at that. I am so sorry.” Then she started crying for the first time. I told her this had *just* happened. I didn’t expect her to follow some bullshit protocol, and that I didn’t even know what the protocol would be when you see someone’s head blown off.

Then she told me about the other casualty, who was still alive, but later died of internal injuries.

“When we picked him up, his leg just . . . came off. It was like it was cut with a laser. He was missing his hand, but it wasn’t bleeding. I remember thinking that was weird. And then when we picked him up his leg just . . . fell off. I had half of his leg in one hand, and the other half in the other. And it just . . . came apart.” She laughed again.⁴

How not to recall Tim O’Brien’s soldiers shinnying up a tree to remove Curt Lemon’s bones and skin and intestines after he’d stepped on a mine, singing “Lemon Tree” as they threw down the parts?⁵ Though this example comes from a “fictional” story, we should remind ourselves that it was written by a veteran. In the spirit of “Lemon Tree,” Frederick Downs, another soldier-writer,⁶ writes about counting bodies, or parts of them, to sustain the American policy of attrition. Some Vietcong, accidentally or not, had detonated their own landmine:

There were three penises, two complete faces, which looked like masks they were so complete, five soles of feet, their hands, and few other parts. The largest body part was a section of a rib cage with parts of four rib bones connected to a small section of the shoulder. (Hynes, 191)

After counting, Downs’s men situated one of the hands into the soft ground and stuck a cigarette between two fingers. “It looked great,” Downs said.

It looked like someone lying underground had paused in the motion of moving his cigarette from his mouth to his side. Everyone took pictures of this bizarre construction. We never thought it was ghoulish. (191)

Dr. Nadelson:

Years after, veterans still find memories of combat victory and killing exhilarating. Soldiers as yet “uncooked” by combat often scrutinize the face and body of the killed enemy in wonder at their ability to create something as profound and enduring as death. Soldiers tie themselves to the dead by photographing dead enemy soldiers or by taking the possessions of the dead as trophies to preserve the moment. (37)

One of Dr. Nadelson’s patients puts it more crudely: “You could do anything you wanted—shit, I was eighteen—kill anyone or anything in Vietnam and get away with it. It was like being drunk and walking around with a hard-on” (104). As cold as such a reaction might be, it is also true, as Nadelson points out, that if soldiers “cannot be aroused to kill to avoid their own death and that of their comrades, they are a detriment to the safety of others” (43). There is a complicated cost, however, both to soldiers and their nation when they are “properly” trained to kill. In a letter to Harriet Moore, D.H. Lawrence, referring to WWI, wrote, “The war is dreadful. It is the business of the artist to follow it home to the heart of the individual fighters” (233). More important is to hear the reports from those individual fighters, and not all reports are negative.

This is from Sebastian Junger’s fine nonfiction account titled *War*:

War is a lot of things and it’s useless to pretend that exciting isn’t one of them. It’s insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know. Soldiers discuss that fact with each other and eventually with their chaplains and their shrinks and maybe even with their spouses, but the public will never hear about it. It’s just not something that many people want acknowledged. War is supposed to feel bad because undeniably bad things happen in it, but for a nineteen-year-old at the working end of a .50 cal during a firefight that everyone comes out of okay, war is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of. In some ways twenty minutes of combat is more life than you could scrape together in a lifetime of doing something else. Combat isn’t where you might die—though that does happen—it’s where you find out whether you get to keep on living. Don’t underestimate the power of that revelation. Don’t

underestimate the thing young men will wager in order to play that game one more time. (144-145)

In a different sort of positive reaction to war, here is Tim O'Brien in a recent interview:

That little tirade I gave earlier about government lying—what you just heard was a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome resulting from witnessing the consequences of deceit, incompetence, and blundering. The consequences are your friends dying, and your watching Vietnamese die and houses burned down. And it stays with you, and it affects you in ways that aren't all terrible. It's good to have a little post-traumatic stress syndrome, so you won't get stressed again, so you won't get traumatized again. It's like putting your hand in a fire. You do it enough times and you're going to be careful of fire. So although there are negative things associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome, there are positives, too, that are very rarely written about. You learn to survive, and you learn what moral behavior is. (Herzog, 112)

"It's a judgment call," a marine corporal says in *The Forever War*, Dexter Filkins's memoir of the war in Iraq. Corporal McIntosh is a twenty-year-old sniper who must decide if or when to shoot when the enemy mixes with civilians, employing women and children as shields. "Cowardly but effective," says McIntosh's partner Sergeant Schrumpf. Schrumpf is twenty-eight. As Filkins reports it, it had been a good day for the sharpshooters (90).

"We dropped a few civilians," Sergeant Schrumpf shrugged, "but what do you do?"

To illustrate, the sergeant offered a pair of examples.

"There was one Iraqi soldier, and twenty-five women and children," he said, "I didn't take the shot."

But more than once, Sergeant Schrumpf said, the odds were in his favor. One of the fedayeen fighters would be standing among two or three civilians. Usually it worked out: Schrumpf shot him. Not always. He recalled one such moment, in which he and some other men in his unit opened fire. He watched one of the women standing near an Iraqi soldier drop to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” Sergeant Schruppf said, shaking his head. “But the chick was in the way.” (91)

Filkins also reports an instance of the killing of an Iraqi family who, as it turned out, was fleeing the fighting in Baghdad. When they failed to stop at a checkpoint, American soldiers opened fire, killing six of the ten occupants of the car.

“My whole family is dead,” muttered Aleya, one of the survivors, careening between hysteria and grief. “How can I grieve for so many people?”

The marines had been keeping up a strong front when I arrived, trying to stay business-like about the incident. “Better them than us,” one of them said. The marines volunteered to help lift the bodies onto a flatbed truck. One of the dead had already been partially buried, so the young marines helped dig up the corpse and lift it onto the vehicle. Then one of the marines began to cry. (116-117)

The military, it seems to me in my forty years of affiliation, works overtime to emphasize for its soldiers the notion of *The Ultimate Sacrifice*—that is, *dying*—far more than it works to emphasize the soul’s erosion that accompanies *killing*, and certainly more than how to continue damaged when you don’t die. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman makes the essential point in his book *On Killing*:

The resistance to the close-range killing of one’s own species is so great that it is often sufficient to overcome the cumulative influences of the instinct for self-protection, the coercive forces of leadership, the expectance of peers, and the obligation to preserve the lives of comrades.

The soldier in combat is trapped within this tragic Catch-22. If he overcomes his resistance to killing and kills an enemy soldier in close combat, he will be forever burdened with blood guilt, and if he elects not to kill, then the blood guilt of his fallen comrades and the shame of his profession, nation, and cause lie upon him. He is damned if he does, and damned if he doesn’t. (87)

Grossman further confirms the burden of killing when he writes, “The dead soldier takes his memory with him, but the man who killed him must forever live and die with him” (93).

An observant 19th-century cardiologist noted that a Civil War combatant's cardiovascular system could be altered by battlefield experiences. Named for the cardiologist, "Da Costa's Syndrome" manifests a set of symptoms like those of heart disease and anxiety, though a physical examination will not present physiological abnormalities. Perhaps because of its parallel psychological manifestations, "Da Costa's Syndrome" became more commonly known as "Soldier's Heart." What with World War I's constancy of barrage on crammed trenches, the medical term for seemingly intact though maimed soldiers morphed into "Shell-Shocked," to be followed by World War II's and Korea's familiar "Thousand-Yard Stare." The term since Vietnam, of course, is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Our current war's injuries, an odd consequence of effective body armor and blasts from explosive devices, are contributing as never before to "closed head wounds"—invisible damage contributing strenuously, as you might expect, to PTSD. These are soldiers who in previous wars would have died and not become mental health statistics. Improved battlefield medicine has also preserved soldiers with severe physical damage, soldiers who might have been better off dead. A particular case is Lewis Puller, Jr., the son of Chesty Puller, the Marine Corps's most decorated general:

. . . a thunderous boom suddenly rent the air, and I was propelled upward with the acrid smell of cordite in my nostrils.

When I landed a few feet up the trail from the booby-trapped howitzer round that I had detonated, I felt as if I had been airborne forever. . . . I thought initially that the loss of my glasses in the explosion accounted for my blurred vision, and I had no idea that the pink mist that engulfed me had been caused by the vaporization of most of my right and left legs. As shock began to numb my body, I could see through a haze of pain that my right thumb and little finger were missing, as was most of my left hand, and I could smell the charred flesh which extended from my right wrist upward to the elbow. I knew that I had finished serving my time in the hell of Vietnam. (Hynes, 198-199)

Lewis Puller suffered for twenty years until 1994, when he killed himself. How to live, much less twenty years, with such wreckage?—where is the graduate course for that? John Wolfe, who himself lost a leg in Vietnam, was medevaced and

nearly died three times (surviving two open-heart massages and the infusion of 39 pints of blood) before being delivered to a hospital ship where, sometime after, he underwent the following:

Semiconscious and strapped into a wheelchair, I was wheeled down to a physical therapy room with various exercise bars, tables, and gym equipment around. Weights about the size of baby rattles were placed in my hands. Just a few feet away, a physical therapist was busy balancing something on a table that at first looked like a sack of potatoes. When I focused, I saw that it was a young Asian man, probably Korean, who had lost both arms and both legs close to the torso. No sooner would the therapist balance the torso on its buttocks than it would topple over on its face with a painful-looking impact, and then the process would be repeated.

The Korean's eyes met mine, and for a long moment the presence of everything and everybody else in the room blurred, faded out, dematerialized, leaving only his mind and mine on that spatial plane in an uninterrupted convergence, and then we both started to laugh hysterically. (109)

As former paratrooper John Wolfe well knows and has written, "Few things in this world are as unforgiving, pitiless, ungovernable, and irrecoverable as lead and steel loosed from a weapon":

The transfigurations they effect on the bodies of friend and foe alike form a permanent backdrop to all of a soldier's future visions. While others experience intervals of silence between thoughts, a combat veteran's intervals will be filled with rubbery Halloween mask heads housing skulls shattered into tiny shards, schemeless mutilation, and shocked, pained expressions that violent and premature death casts on a dead face. These images are war's graffiti. (103)

In *The Soldiers' Tale*, Hynes takes on the issue of "truth problems"—he knows that any individual's perspective, especially in the carnage, chaos, and fog of war, is limited, not only by one's place in the field (a trench, a tank, a cockpit), but by the "infidelities of memory" and the "distortion of language." But, nonetheless, the

individual's vision, confined or not, helps make up the larger, more accurate picture, the truth of war "being the sum of witnesses, the collective tale that soldiers tell":

We don't need to call that convergence of witnesses historical truth, if that seems too confident; call it instead the recoverable past of war. Such recovery is possible; it is more than possible: it is imperative. What other route do we have to understanding the human experience of war—how it felt, what it was like—than the witness of the men who were there? (25)

Though the individual soldier's vision and perspective is limited, even suspect, there is nothing obscuring the hardest truths of combat:

In the stories that Vietnam narrators tell, the killing, which was the point of the strategy, appears to be random, accidental, arbitrary, often brutal. The army printed up rules of engagement and distributed them among the troops; but in the field there were no rules. The enemy was invisible, or indistinguishable among civilians, and all Vietnamese looked alike to the young short-timers; how could he avoid killing wrongfully? Robert Mason⁷ tells of a training question that was asked of all prospective grunts: What would you do if you were the driver of a truck loaded with soldiers, traveling very fast down a muddy road, flanked on both sides by steep drop-offs, and a child suddenly walked into your path? Would you try to avoid the child, and drive off the road to certain death? Or would you run over it? Everybody knew the right answer: kill the kid. Mason tells the story to illuminate his account of flying his helicopter over a village where an innocent-looking crowd of Vietnamese is bunched around a man with a machine gun. What do you do? You kill the kid. Mason's gunner machine-gunned the whole crowd. (Hynes, 189-190)

It isn't much of a slide to move from what seems a legitimate moral dilemma to the reduction of a personal moral universe, especially when that young soldier is tired, misled, scared, angry, and armed. The real problem for surviving soldiers is to live with what they've experienced. O'Brien puts it mildly when he writes,

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth,

watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty. (77)

Doug Anderson, a medic in Vietnam and author of two poetry collections⁹ dealing with that war and violence, has just published a memoir, *Keep Your Head Down*, in which he recalls a young soldier shooting a dead man.

I see Jeter firing into a corpse with his M16. The corpse is dancing. Jeter is red-faced, like a thwarted child. His eyes are all pupil. This is the kid who most often makes me laugh, who makes me feel most protective, the eighteen-year-old whose parents had to sign for him when he joined up at seventeen. He empties one magazine and slaps in another. He fires again into the corpse. The corpse dances, arms and legs flail, the flat face peeling off the shattered skull, the pink-blue brains scattering, the ground black with blood. Jeter stops suddenly, looks dazed.

I say, "You all right?" He stares at me. Then he kicks what's left of the corpse, and it flops over like a doll. He runs toward the stream where they're still fighting. I don't see the ones begging for their lives. (104)

Upon his return home, Doug Anderson protests the war. Like many sentient veterans (in particular those who in time meet their former enemies as fellow humans), Anderson is painfully conscious that although 59,000 Americans died in Southeast Asia, some three million Vietnamese were killed, two-thirds of whom were civilians. "The reasons," as he puts it, "I have become adamant against the war hold the smell of blood and the vision of mangled flesh" (173).

Although fiction and written by a noncombatant, Ben Fountain's award-winning novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* nails the general American's naïve notions of patriotism, war, and heroism. Put another way, distorted visions of what noncombatants think that soldiers go through. So here it is: the view from the homeland, from the unmolested blue skies of our nation:

No one spits, no one calls him a baby-killer. On the contrary, people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed, yet Billy finds these encounters weird and frightening all the same. There's something harsh in his fellow Americans, avid, ecstatic, a burning that comes of the deepest need. That's his sense of it, they all need something from him, this pack of half-rich lawyers, dentists, soccer moms, and corporate VPs,

they're all gnashing for a piece of a barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year. For these adult, affluent people he is mere petty cash in their personal accounting, yet they lose it when they enter his personal space. They tremble. They breathe in fitful, stinky huffs. Their eyes skitz and quiver with the force of the moment, because here, finally, up close and personal, is the war made flesh, an actual point of contact after all the months and years of reading about the war, watching the war on TV, hearing the war flogged and flacked on talk radio. It's been hard times in America—how did we get this way? So scared all the time, and so shamed at being scared through the long nights of worry and dread, days of rumor and doubt, years of drift and slowly ossifying angst. You listened and read and watched and it was *just, so, obvious*, what had to be done, a mental tic of a mantra that became second nature as the war dragged on. *Why don't they just . . .* Send in more troops. Make the troops fight harder. Pile on the armor and go in blazing, full-frontal smackdown and no prisoners. And by the way, shouldn't the Iraqis be thanking us? Somebody needs to tell them that, would you tell them that, please? Or maybe they'd like their dictator back. Failing that, drop bombs. More and bigger bombs. Show these persons the wrath of God and pound them into compliance, and if that doesn't work then bring out the nukes and take it all the way down, wipe it clean, reload with fresh hearts and minds, a nuclear slum clearance of the country's soul. (38-39)

Well, Billy Lynn, though fictional soldier, does know that war is more than talk from safe haven. It is impossible not to note that a few years back when we were embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan (and dabbling in Lybia), that, in America, involved in 2 ½ wars, our NetFlix still arrived on time. Brought back from battle to America as part of a hero squad on a temporary PR "Victory Tour,"—a version of Bush's premature "Mission Accomplished," Billy knows that it is "a flat-out miracle that any of them are still alive" (26).

So they've lost Shroom and Lake, *only two* a numbers man might say, but given that each Bravo has missed death by a margin of inches, the casualty rate could just as easily be 100 percent. The freaking *randomness* is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace on the way to chow, choosing the third shitter in line instead of the fourth, turning your head

to the left instead of the right. Random. How that shit does twist your mind. Billy sensed the true mindfucking potential of it on their first trip outside the wire, when Shroom advised him to place his feet one in front of the other instead of side by side, that way if an IED blew low through the Humvee Billy might lose only one foot instead of two. (26-27)

Still in 19-year-old soldier Billy's mind:

No matter their age or station in life, Billy can't help but regard his fellow Americans as children. They are bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem, and no amount of lecturing will enlighten them as to the state of pure sin toward which war inclines. He pities them, scorns them, loves them, hates them, these children. These boys and girls. These toddlers, these infants. Americans are children who must go somewhere else to grow up. . . . (45-46)

He goes on, this wise child:

Don't talk about shit you don't know, Billy thinks, and therein lies the dynamic of all such encounters, the Bravos speak from the high ground of experience. They are the authentic. They are the Real. They have dealt much death and received much death and smelled it and held it and slogged through it in their boots, had it spattered on their clothes and tasted it in their mouths. That is their advantage, and given the masculine standard America has set for itself it is interesting how few actually qualify. *Why we fight*, yo, who is this *we*? Here in the chickenhawk nation of blowhards and bluffers, Bravo always has the ace of bloods up its sleeve. (66)

Billy, this kid philosopher, notes to himself later that "Part of being a soldier is accepting that your body does not belong to you" (206). This was brought home to me by my son when he was serving as a force recon marine. I had asked him about dog tags, and where were they? He informed me that for most marines dog tags were passé, and then he lifted his shirt to show me his tattooed ID info and blood type on the side of his chest beneath his armpit. I shuddered. He was a piece of meat, stamped with FDA approval.

Soldiers more than anyone know what they are capable of destroying and I believe when they write about war (or paint it or photograph or film it), they are trying to preserve the world (which I mean as the central point of tonight's address). Sadly, though, we are often forced to accept W.H. Auden's conclusion that "poetry makes nothing happen,"⁸ that nothing he ever wrote saved one Jew from the gas chambers. If art were as powerful as we might wish it to be, war should have ended after Homer. Still, art markets authority. Why else did officials at the United Nations decide to cover the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*, as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II? There is an obligation—is there not?—as Neruda advised, to "Come and see the blood in the streets"?¹⁰ It is dishonest to create art that does not reflect the world that art exists in. To ignore what we do in war and what war does to us is to move willfully toward ignorance and pretense. At their best, soldier-artists affirm the power of word and image and the human craving for meaning. And if one of the functions of such art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down, then we must welcome these disturbances. But we should never once forget the costs in blood and treasure whenever we go to war, when we send other people's children into harm's way. Sebastian Junger writing about his soldiers in the Korengal Valley:

Combat was a game that the United States had asked Second Platoon to become very good at, and once they had, the United States put them on a hilltop without women, hot food, running water, communication with the outside world, or any kind of entertainment for over a year. Not that the men were complaining, but that sort of thing has consequences. Society can give its young men almost any job and they'll figure how to do it. They'll suffer for it and die for it, and watch their friend die for it, but in the end it *will* get done. That only means that society should be careful about what it asks for. (154)

Notes

1. from an interview with Tobey Herzog in *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life*, 2008, pp. 16 & 40.
2. Stephen Crane, of course, comes to mind (*The Red Badge of Courage*). Then there is Cynthia Ozick's extraordinary short story "The Shawl," a strafing account of a death camp murder of a stick-limbed child. Though born in time to have been interned in a death camp, Cynthia Ozick wasn't; she was, at the story's fictional time, a cheerleader in high school in New Jersey.

3. Theodore Nadelson, M.A. M.D. (1930-2003) was a clinical professor of psychiatry and vice chair for psychiatric education at Boston University School of Medicine and chief of psychiatric service at Boston Veterans Administration Medical Center.
4. Sharon Allen's work appeared in *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. and the Their Families*, Random House, 2006. The text in this essay is from a personal email, March 26, 2008.
5. from "How to Tell a True War Story."
6. Frederick Downs, a Vietnam veteran, is author of *The Killing Zone*, 1978.
7. Robert Mason, a Vietnam veteran, is author of *Chickenhawk*, 1983.
8. from Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."
9. Doug Anderson's poetry collections are *The Moon Reflected Fire* and *Blues for Unemployed Secret Police*.
10. This line is repeated three times to conclude Neruda's war poem "I'm Explaining a Few Things."

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