

# A Note Before “Falling”

H. C. Palmer

I had started a story I called “Falling” in 2017. After a time, I put it aside, not able to move forward, but intending to go back. A few months ago, I thought to make a poem from an event in the story, imagining what is inside a particular war-fighter’s mind as he is dying.

Not long after writing the poem, a poet friend suggested I return to the failed story. Sometime later, I was listening to favorite songs from the World War II era and heard the Ink Spots singing “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire.” Because of the juxtaposition of “fire” and “flame” in those lyrics, I renamed the story and started revising. I researched Vietnam era Marine Corps operations and found the Morley Safer 1965 CBS report from Cam Ne on YouTube. My friend, The Ink Spots’ song, the CBS news report and my favorite short story, Tobias Wolff’s, “Bullet in the Brain” inspired this poem and story.

In 1965, I was a battalion surgeon with the First Infantry Division in Vietnam. I watched men die from war wounds. What they saw and heard during those last milliseconds of life, is speculation. For the story, I imagined a traumatic chemical super-arousal of Wills’ visual and auditory cortices.

Although the story is a fiction, something very close to it is true. The American War in Vietnam was a betrayal by at least two hubristic American administrations. They used deceit to identify and contrive an image of a new American enemy—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and their allies, the Viet Cong. Dominoes fell alright, but not neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. Instead, they tumbled down-chain, through layers of American bureaucratic and military commands. In the end, more than 58,000 dutiful American servicemen and women fell—just trying to stay alive.

# Falling

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I said, "Okay, now don't go up there." Because I could see that the NVA had cut away the brush about two foot off the ground. So that there was probably a machine gun uphill. And what they would do is they'd see the legs and they'd shoot the legs. And then you'd fall down into the-- where the machine gun fire was going."

—Karl Marlantes (Interview with Bill Moyers, 2012)

"This is what he remembered."

—Tobias Wolff

You feel the impact, the start of a descent, a falling  
so unhurried you sense dying will proceed at glacial pace.

Your boot stumbles by, foot and ankle inside, then rotors  
off the berm to the paddy below. Ripples from the splash

bend rice shoots like old priests bowing to a Buddha. Upslope,  
a low-slung clearing, the floor of the rainforest macheted

by NVA, muted muzzle flashes from their RPD, tracers  
slow-dancing over the pie-shaped fire-zone like a dragon's

green tail. You recall an eight-year-old's game, back-yard  
combat after Saturday matinée—the newsreel,

Marines Take Tarawa Beach—when you imagined you were first  
ashore, grenading machine-gun nests before Japanese soldiers

could fire at your friend, Duane Grider chest-deep in surf,  
rifle overhead; the farmer's son and captain of your father's

basketball team, who called you Kid and taught you "99 Bottles  
of Beer on the Wall," while you rode with the team

in a school bus to neighboring towns in southeast Kansas—  
games in cracker-box gyms with low-slung ceilings,

and fold-up bleachers—where you filled cups of ice for time-outs—  
and after the games, sung bus harmony again and Grider

taught you every verse of "Danny Boy." By summer, Grider  
had gone to war. Then came November, and Tarawa

and Thanksgiving Day a messenger from Western Union.  
That evening in Grider's kitchen, they called you Kid

and your father Coach, and she placed the telegram in your hand,  
and you read it and cried. So, it is not by chance you remember

Grider as you descend above the berm, sense 7.62s splash your belly,  
but no pain, as there was no pain at all when you lost your boot.

You're relieved you're not angry, believing the gunners are patriots,  
and, like Chinese and French, you're just one more intruder

bleeding-out into one more Vietnamese rice paddy. With inches  
to fall, you pray for your mother, knowing tonight,

your Captain will write her a letter, and tomorrow, a Western Union  
messenger will walk your sidewalk and knock on your front door.

It will be winter in America when a bugler blows taps  
and six soldiers fold a flag for your mother. You pray

it will not be the cemetery in Kansas, but Arlington, in Virginia,  
and not a great distance from the Tarawa dead.

At the end of your falling, you hear the start of a breath and imagine  
time to sing every verse of "Danny Boy."

# I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire

H. C. Palmer

All honor at a distance is punctilio. One dies dutifully by a code which applies to nothing recognizable.

—Jack Gilbert

This is what he remembered.

—Tobias Wolff

**B**ravo company had laagered for the night on a knoll with a clear view of what was, until a few hours before, a hamlet at Cam Ne. Delta company's search and flamethrower destruction of the little village was complete. Frameworks of bamboo huts were still burning. The largest fires billowed black smoke. Before dark, Second Lieutenant Wills had walked the circle inside the laager, looking out between vehicles, searching the perimeter for trouble. Just before sunset, a rice paddy, 100 meters east of the hamlet, lit emerald green. Except for that green, every living thing seemed somewhere else.

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Wills and sergeant Jordan had spread their ponchos under Jordan's deuce-and-a-half truck. Neither has slept. Heat from lingering fires and worry kept them awake—worry about tomorrow's search for the dead and caches of weapons and rice. Worry about booby-trapped bodies, trip wires, camouflaged punji pits and snipers.

At 4 a.m., they slide from under the truck and outside the circle of vehicles. It's pitch-dark. The fires have burned out and the sky has clouded over. Depending on the direction of the

wind, there is the stench of burnt flesh. Wills and Jordan sit side by side on their helmets, backs against the big right front tire. They are spooning C-ration peach slices from the sergeant's stash. The juice of the peaches offsets the stench in the smoke.

"There's got to be some payback here." Wills nudges the sergeant with his elbow.

"You think?" says Jordan.

"Does brigade really believe that trashing this village will make these people like us?"

"It's not about us, sir. Nothing in this war is about us."

\* \* \*

As a boy, Wills wanted to coach basketball like his father. He was six years old that Friday night before Pearl Harbor, when Grider, the best player on his father's team, broke the scoring record. The game was in a neighboring town's cracker box gym with a low-slung ceiling. The next day, Grider took Wills to their hometown gym to celebrate. He taught Wills to shoot a fade-away jump shot. But Sunday, after the bombing, scoring records were no longer important. All the talk was about killing Japs and getting even. Grider joined the Marines and 13 months later was killed in the Pacific beach landing at Tarawa.

After college, Wills enlisted in the Navy Reserve, a tribute to Grider. He figured, if there was a war, he would transfer to the Marines. In 1965, when President Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam, Wills volunteered for active duty.

Jordan is 15 years younger than Wills. He was an assistant professor of American history at a small college in South Carolina. He had reasoned, if he wanted to teach about war, he should experience combat, so he joined the Marines in 1963. By the time he met Wills, he was a sergeant with 4 months in-country.

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"We're in a serious situation here and all I can think of is weird stuff," says Wills. "Like trying to reconcile the sweet taste of these peaches with this stench from the fires."

"I can help you there, sir," says Jordan. "Do you believe the Vietnamese people are peaches or stench?"

"Meaning?"

"It's metaphor, sir."

"Well, we'd be peaches. So...."

"On the contrary, sir. In the context of Vietnamese history, we're stench."

Jordan cradles his last peach slice between his jaw and left cheek, then assumes his lecture mode. "The Vietnamese defeat one invader after another. The Chinese, the Japanese, the damn French. The common denominator is some foreign army's grunt dutifully bleeding out in a rice paddy—like the one over there by the village. For instance, one of our guys takes fire, his boot is stuck in the paddy muck and he's killed. He gets a Purple Heart. His mom gets a flag—at Arlington, maybe. Someone in the brass tells his family and all of America he is a hero. We have to believe he's a hero or we would never stomach another war."

Jordan points to a pale light reflected from the mist above the rice paddy that had reflected green at sunset.

"Too much light," he says.

Wills looks and nods. "Let's get back inside."

Just as Wills ducks his head to roll back under the truck, he hears a *smack*, then, a gunshot. Jordan makes a soft grunting sound as the sniper's bullet punches through his sternum. A second round strikes the tire where Will's head had been, releasing air with an evil-sounding hiss. Wills rolls under the truck and back inside the laager. There is no more gunfire. The tire hisses empty.

Wills saw the second shot—a muzzle flash in jungle across the rice paddy. Even in his haste, he is certain of the position—a few feet above the berm near a lone banana tree.

The captain screams, "Incoming! Did anybody see it?"

"Yes sir," says Wills, "By that banana tree across the paddy." He points between the deuce-and-a-half and the vehicle positioned behind it, an M-113 armored personnel carrier with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on top.

"It's a trap," says the captain, under control now. The sniper wants us to come to him." He turns to the gunnery sergeant.

"Get a gunner on this fifty."

"He's already there sir," says gunny.

The gunner, a corporal, had slept on the on top of the APC.

"That banana tree corporal," shouts the gunny. "Blow it up! Everything within 25 meters of it."



The corporal fires full auto: horizontal strafes starting at the berm, weaving upward—back and forth—layering the fifty's fire well above the tree then back down again until the ammo box is empty. The tree has come apart. The trunk of the tree falls forward across the berm. Jungle flora above and both sides of the tree is obliterated.

There's a long silence as the captain glasses the area with his binoculars. "Nothing," he says to Wills. "Get your squad over there and bring the sonofabitch back. His weapon too. Take the path on the berm. Thirty meters before the tree, cut up into the side of the hill. Outflank the sonofabitch—in case he's still alive."

The rectangular paddy lies in a narrow valley with jungle sloping down to the berm on the furthest side. Wills and seven of his rifle squad sprint the circuitous route along the berm, turning across the short end, and back again, heading for the stump of the banana tree. Wills checks his M-14. It's on *Full Auto*. When he raises his free hand to signal his squad up the slope, he discovers he's been running along a strip of macheted undergrowth. He hears gunfire—the *tot tot tot*. Green tracers sweep by. More rounds tear into the berm. Then, a loud *snap* and a burning below his left knee. He has missed a step. He senses he is falling—quickly at first—then a deceleration to slow motion.

He turns to check his squad. His boot, containing his detached lower leg protruding above the sock is one stride back, rotoring lazily down the slope for the paddy water. Behind the boot, his men and separate parts of them fall, slow-motion, trailing his boot to the water.

As his descent drops below the undercutting, he searches further up the slope. The low-slung clearing narrows as it reaches its apex. He pinpoints the Viet Cong machine gun

emplacement. Two rounds spiral at him. One splashes into his thigh, another his abdomen.

There is no pain. He tries to fire his weapon but can't locate the trigger.

\* \* \*

The shock of his wounds and the geometry of the clear-fire zone have triggered a series of chemical changes in Will's brain, starting with time and motion at glacial pace. At the same moment, sensory and pain neurons are numbed. Then, memory cells gather an intense focus and trigger his occipital and temporal lobes where his visual and auditory cortices accelerate to light-speed—and for a time, his brain becomes a magnificent cinema.

He is flashed back to the cracker box gym with a low-slung ceiling. It is Friday afternoon, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941. He is water boy for his father's team. During the game, Duane Grider, who has nicknamed him Kid, swishes shot after shot. At timeouts, Wills passes out water in wax paper cups, and after drinks, clean towels to wipe sweat. After the game, Grider lifts him to his shoulders. "Couldn't a done it without your help, Kid!"

On the bus ride home, he shares a seat with Grider. The team is singing *The Ink Spots'* hit, "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire." Grider is standing in the aisle, conducting. They sound amazingly like *The Ink Spots*. "Let's sing it again," he says. "You sing harmony with me, Kid. Here's our pitch."

The movie fast-forwards to December 1943—one week after news of Grider's death. It's Saturday matinée at the Tioga Theater. A newsreel documents the landing, *The Capture of Tarawa From Japan*. Wills invents a story from the film. He chooses a single Marine leaving a

landing craft, rifle overhead and wading chest deep against the silver morning surf. He names the Marine Grider and follows him until he is wading in the shallowest water where he falls to gunfire from an enemy bunker. He believes Grider was thinking about the game when he died. The bus trip too. And their song about setting the world on fire.

The final scene is just before Christmas. Wills is standing with his father in Grider's kitchen. Grider's mother's grief has turned to anger. She places the telegram in Will's hands but pinches a corner to hold on. He resents the imperfectly printed capital letters on thin strips of cheap paper glued below the Western Union letterhead. She gently tugs the telegram away. "I can't cry no more, Kid. They said Duane's a hero. He's always been that. And now, all we have of him is this little piece of paper."

\* \* \*

Face-up in three inches of paddy water, the movie is over. Wills hears water splattering as he shudders uncontrollably. He should be cold, but he is not. He has tried his best to stay alive.

"We're the stench," he whispers, but does not hear the words.

\* \* \*

As Wills was dying, there was no time to consider this: If he had lived, and after his wounds healed, he would have walked his concrete sidewalk and knocked on his wood-paneled front door and pressed his face close to the window glass. He would have watched his mother

hurry to greet him. When his father heard their voices, he would have run to them and they would have held each other, the three of them, not speaking for a long time. Later that evening, he would have shown them the Bronze Star and Purple Heart and they would not understand he was undeserving and profoundly ashamed, having betrayed his men in the most personal way, leading them into a trap where they were killed, and where he wished he had died too.

\* \* \*

And, there is this: Wills did not know the dawn backlighting Tarawa was dimmed by smoke—shelling from the 5th fleet's big guns. Nor, did he know, Grider's landing craft had engine trouble 100 meters from shore and was dead in the water, rising and falling with the roiled surf. He did not know Grider was carrying the extra weight of his Browning Automatic Rifle and two bandoliers of .30 caliber ammunition when he jumped from the bow ramp into four feet of water, where heavy swells crashed over him and pulled him under. And, Wills did not know he was dying as Grider had died: in a smoky dawn's light, in a strange body of water, weapon in hand and just trying to stay alive.

This story is a fiction of the aftermath of a search and destroy mission near Da Nang in August 1965. There are two versions of the destruction at the hamlets of Cam Ne. The official report found in *Marine Corps University* is that "...a Vietnamese thatched house was set on fire." The CBS News version was videotaped: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNYZZi25Ttg>

—H. C. Palmer

I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire

—The Ink Spots (1941)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6l6vqPUM\\_FE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6l6vqPUM_FE)

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