

Veteran Writers Group

Annual 2010

Writings from the year's quarterly gatherings.

Volume 1

Numbers 1-4

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Veteran Writers Group

Quarterly

Some of the writing from the March 13 gathering

Expectations

Volume 1, Number 1

Spring 2010

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March 13th Prompt

Keith Mather

Spring expectations.

When spring comes, expectations can be realized in gardens, blossoms, flowers and all the young creatures. It's the renewal. A hopeful and bright time. Right?

The process of renewal happens each time we write or sing, play, act, paint, work, and love.

It seems we vet writers may be in a new phase. Let's shine some light on it. As Spring does to us all, inside and out.

The intuitive nature of our group/ groups has always touched me and because of that the "prompt" is to please share your single expectation or set of expectations for this Spring in your life. Not necessarily strictly Spring, the future will do.

I think it might be a good subject for us to look at.

thank you for each day we have spent together.

Transitioning

Jack McClure

Spring is a time of awakening. Of Birth. Of Renewal. At least, normally. This Spring, for me, is a time of Transitioning.

The first time Elizabeth left, over 7 years ago, was The Interregnum. It's a word that encapsulates, for me, that period of several months which lasted 5 years. At least.

One of the things that happened for me during The Interregnum was growth. Rapid growth. Huge growth. Growth of multiple dimensions. In so many ways, it was a Gift.

On this side of The Interregnum, I am Bigger. Elizabeth is even more of who she is. The other entity—us—has been way better.

This, now, is not the Second Interregnum. I was wrong in looking at it that way, in the early weeks.

Now I am clear. This is a Transition. **The** Transition.

I have been through other Transitions in my life, brought on by war, by death of a parent, by circumstance—by choice.

My experience is that on this side of each transition, I have become Bigger.

It is as though each of these was a Gift—which looked like a huge cliff before me, or a deep canyon in my path. At first.

Now, looking back at those cliffs and canyons, I can see the Gifts they were in my life.

Sometimes their “Gift-ness” became apparent soon; other times it took years until I could see their true nature, their great contribution to my life.

This one may take a while.

And yet—and yet—I can see already some facets of the contributions coming to me from this Great Transition.

One is freedom. I can choose to change my mind, to alter my plans, to shift my schedule—without checking with anyone. Without concern that she might be disappointed.

Another is my alone time. There is never too much of that, for me. Except, of course, when there is. Then I can choose to be with others. And do.

And by far the greatest gift, the facet of this Transition that benefits me the most, is my own growth.

When, during the early weeks, I asked God, “Why?” He answered immediately. “So that you can each be better.”

I didn't understand that, then.

I still don't. But I'm beginning to. I can sense some elements, some aspects, emerging from the mist. And the entire fog bank is refreshing, uplifting, embracing.

I am a Bigger person now.

I am a better person now.

I am Becoming.

Again.

I like who I am now. I liked who I was, too. But even more, I like who I am Becoming.

In a dream last night, I met an attractive woman in the gym. Very attractive. Yet another one.... And I was open, somewhat anyway. As we talked about our experiences of working out, I said, "My appearance is not my best feature."

She raised her eyebrows, and said, "Oh. What is?"

I had to think a bit. Then, all of a sudden, it came to me what so many have told me. "My depth."

I awakened. I knew it was true. Is true. And I realized that I want to expand this aspect of who I am.

I want to expand, and extend, my depth.

I want to reach deeper down, and farther up.

I want to expand in both directions—in **all** directions.

It is who I am Becoming.

Choosing life

Miki Kashtan

Spring is about choosing life. Every year I have a chance, again. I turn it down, again. I watch the trees bloom. A spectacle of pink flowers. Plum trees. Beauty provides fuel. I know. Meditating on pink blossoms sounds great. I'll write about them when I come back.

9 days later. I am back from teaching. The flowers are mostly gone. Other plums are now in bloom. Delicate, white flowers. Nothing flamboyant. I am still not writing about them. Life is still happening elsewhere. I am still waiting. It doesn't get much more now than the beauty that's here for only a few days. I missed it entirely, again. Still not choosing life.

So much work, so much effort, an entire year of it, for beauty that is so short lived. Blossom is such a small part of life.

Despair is not attractive. Truth is. What if truth is sometimes despair?

Life takes endless, ceaseless effort to keep going. To defy the relentless march of disintegration, decay, breakdown, death, formlessness.

Planting seeds. Watering. Weeding. Watering. Thinning. Watering. Pruning. Months and years. Only to be harvested in days, hours, minutes.

Making food. Chopping. Rinsing. Cooking. Seasoning. Hours and days. Only to be eaten in minutes, seconds.

Choosing life. Choosing effort. Choosing life. Choosing truth. Choosing life. Choosing gratitude. Choosing beauty. Despair. Truth. Life. Again. Each spring. Each day. Each moment. Now.

Pain to work as Compost

Shomriel Goodman

I read an article yesterday about toilets that keep the urine and the excrement separate, so that each with its nutrients can be put to good use, so that what we term “waste” does not in fact need to be wasted. Its proper use can result in rich and thriving crops. Some countries have been doing this for years, but here we are so used to dismissing that which is foul and ugly and which reeks of frail humanity, flushing it away for anonymous others to deal with, forgetting that all of it can serve a purpose.

My mother died last summer and I wished then that I were in a society that honored grief and death far more. I wanted to scream and wail and keen and thrash but felt at liberty to none of the above. When my niece was born in the fall, three months later, my joy was as muted as my grief had been.

To turn pain and death to compost—therein lies the challenge, and also, the power—the integration of all of it. The damage is done in the covering up, in the division. If I wish to overcome, I must live in love, not fear, love of all my hidden, dank and darkest parts.

I want the strength to not run from pain but to submit to it, let it carve out deep places from which joy and compassion and creativity can arise. I want to live with depth of feeling and expression, speak words that convey truth, encourage others to dig, to root around in the depths until something real emerges. Our pain, individually, collectively, can be hoed and tilled to create rich black loam crawling with life, growing roots to reach deep down, extracting nourishment from decay, becoming food that will nourish nourishing.

I want to live a life where the shit is woven in with the sacred, where all is deemed valuable and where the hidden darkest depths are encouraged to reveal themselves. I want to use my excrement to grow my food and that of my community. I want to look on what is, teeming as it may be with hurt and filth and death, and say “This is good” and help it be so.



Remembering Leaves

DonEdward Morris

Remember
the icy winter day
we walked in the woods
the only sound like
delicate bones snapping
under our heavy footfalls
on the remains of leaves.

Remember
the gauzy autumn day
we walked in the woods
to the sound of leaves sighing
in their last days of life
rustling as they changed into their brightest colors
before giving it up to the earth.

Remember
the steamy summer day
we walked in the woods
hearing the song of bees and birds
hidden behind deep green leaves
spread wide like Japanese fans.

Today
remember
to throw open the windows
run out the door
sing along with the chorus of hums and pops
as green springs out all over
remembering
that all memory comes back to this.

Grandpa's Seeds of War

Unknown

I vaguely remember the sound of his voice -- he served in World War II and his stories were always filled with laughter and this sense of hope I still somehow cling to. I think back and wonder if my grandpa knew he was the real reason I enlisted into the Navy versus, say, the Air Force or even, god-forbid, a student loan. I wanted nothing more than to be just like him. I think back to before the war, the Iraq war (some refer to it as Operation Iraqi Freedom, although honestly, I don't get it; but it makes light of the destruction of war, or the idea...who knows.)

I spent 18 years living "the dream": this huge plan for my future, complete control of who and what I would be. I somehow knew, in my pre-pubescent years, that I was good enough for UC Berkeley.

Then, in 2003, I deployed in support of this war and for 9 months, there was no thinking about tomorrow, just if I would make it through this day -- the here and now.

It's hard to admit you no longer live for the future -- of what "great things may come." Every day, every waking moment, I deal with this war inside my head that too few people know about. I silence it by silencing myself -- convincing myself that either no one wants to hear it or who am I to burden someone else with something I don't even understand myself and that which is slowly killing me.

I'd like to think that most people are familiar with MacBeth...the "blood on his hands" and trying, so desperately, to wash it off. While this idea seems so commonly used in today's society, I often wonder if people actually "get it" in the same way we [medics] do. How in the world do we wash the blood off our boots?

I remember coming back from Iraq, I just wanted to get home and see my family (consequently ironic because I spent my entire life trying to get away from them.) On our descent back into reality (as if to say war is surreal) we had to stop and make a few guest appearances -- yes, parade ourselves in an attempt to clear our names of the evil we were: Australia, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, Hawaii and, finally, we would return to San Diego; where our families would deem us still worthy and greet us with "Welcome

Home” signs, only to step off base, to escape the military mentality, and be greeted by anti-war protestors who still don’t get how much we didn’t want to go.

...Even as I write this now, I realize I am holding back from writing about my time in the “sandbox” -- another term that we use, ironically, to make light of where we were. I don’t know if I’m ready to face the truth in what happened -- I often wonder if I will ever have the right words to properly honor every life I couldn’t save.

There is a huge sense of failure that besets me when I think about my time in Iraq. Back in the States, now, I witness the financial hardships and burdens placed on many taxpayers and I think to myself: “All those taxpayer dollars went to my training, months of my training, and I couldn’t do my job...I couldn’t save them.”

I think of their lives, lost, still in the prime of their innocence. I relate to the pain of a loss of innocence at too young an age -- but at least I had a chance to recover. I could never give this to them.

As I think about my future , I think of theirs: could they have found the cure for cancer, been the next Albert Einstein or even, possibly, the next Joe Montana or Michelangelo ? And who am I, in this world, to have played a part in denying them their opportunity to live and breathe?

It was the last few months of my grandpa’s life that he began to speak of his stories as a sailor in World War II. While he held great honor in being the signalman who handed the first flag that was flown on top Iwo Jima to the PFC, he held just as much honor in holding onto the stories of triaging casualties from the flight deck of the USS Missoula. He had to choose, with no training, what lives could be saved and what lives couldn’t. I know he “gets it.” I just wonder, now, how much a part of his life I want to reflect in mine...do I really want to hold onto these stories for 60 more years and tell them in my dying months?

I, grandpa, am planting our seeds of war...



“. . . HOLD YER HATS FELLAS . . .
 HERE COMES ANOTHER ONE OF THE SIGNAL BRIGADE'S
 'MODERN, SOPHISTICATED COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS'. . ."

TJ'S FIRST WALK IN II CORPS

Tom Harriman



TJ's mountain signal base lay huddled in a ragged oval atop a ridge overlooking a tea plantation, cresting the last high ground before Viet Nam's Central Highlands disappeared south toward Saigon and east to the South China Sea at Phan Rang. A natural spot to relay communications north up the coast, upcountry to Pleiku, and west to Thailand, one day the brass stuck a pin in the map on the highest point near a road. The Engineers bulldozed red clay walls around the high ground and signal vans and plywood hooches popped up behind the walls like a Gypsy encampment.

Socially, the base was as stratified as a Victorian English country town. The Signal Corps men, at least college drop outs, filled the role of the gentry and could fix electronics and talk in radio geek speak. The "working class" was the forty infantrymen of the United States Signal Security Force, who either cursed their bad luck not to be sent to a kickass infantry outfit like the 173rd Airborne or who secretly thanked their lucky stars that they got to sleep in cots under a roof and guard the geeks. The serfs were the 100 montagnard troopers of the 408th Independent Scout Company, ARVN 23rd Infantry Division, and their families, who lived in a squatters' village within the mud walled perimeter, and who guarded half the circumference of the compound.

TJ slept better at night knowing the montagnards, the original tribal people of the hills, had their women and children inside the barbed wire, as he figured that they would be more motivated to keep Victor Charlie from slipping through the mine fields and rows of concertina wire to cut his throat in his sleep if their own families' lives were on the line.

It made less likely the common practice of the South Vietnamese soldiers to flee at the first shot or negotiate a sweet deal for themselves where they got to walk, at the cost of their American counterparts' scalps.

During his first weeks in country, TJ walked around the compound, perhaps the size of a light cruiser, and learned the lay of the land. Signalmen like TJ didn't mix much with the infantry guys, who occupied themselves with cleaning their weapons, playing poker, and bitching about guarding college boys. But Pete Romano from Connecticut saw TJ playing chess and took him under his wing. "How about these fucking hicks I am in with?" he asked TJ in his best street smart Italian accent. Pete affected a black turtleneck under his fatigue, highlighted with a tight gold crucifix, to set himself apart from the Okie Baptists. He must have learned his chess in jail, as he played the aggressive style TJ had seen in Washington Square in Greenwich Village being pushed by black ex-cons.

One day Pete probed TJ: "What the fuck good is it, you being in the Army, if you just hang out with these wirebenders with their soldering guns in their holsters? Why don't you go on a recon patrol with us?" TJ didn't want to burst Pete's balloon, but he had joined the Signal Corps only because of the iron-clad guarantee the Army recruiting sergeant had given him that his job specialty existed only in some of the finest wine growing regions of Germany. TJ was still looking for vineyards in the Central Highlands, but he was pretty damn sure that he wasn't in the hills above the Rhine. But Pete's logic had some appeal. TJ wondered what the piney forest surrounding the compound looked like up close and what it felt like to go for a walk out there. Besides, what if he found a vineyard out there, after all? Pete sensed TJ's ambivalence and set him up for the kill. "So, it's set then, just tell your section chief that we need you on a patrol tomorrow." TJ discovered his insignificant place in the scheme of things when he told his staff sergeant that he would have to absent himself from digging the ditch to the new septic field, and his sergeant asked, "Are you in my section?"

TJ felt pretty tough, toting up around his wimpy sidekicks in his hooch, who were more likely to strap on a slide rule than their web gear. He had his own gear tricked out, his father's hunting knife hanging upside down on his flak jacket, his canteen perched just so, and his name written on the back of his camouflage helmet cover. He humped up to the orderly room to form up with the recon group. Pete saw him coming and sprinted down the hill to him. "Ah, TJ, you trying to make me look bad? Go back to your hooch and lose the flak jacket and the steel pot. And leave half your ammo there, too, we are going for a walk, not invading Ho Chi Minh's private whorehouse." TJ attempted to preserve his macho image as he slid back into the darkness of the hooch to unload half his gear. He came back wearing a camouflage ersatz Aussie bush hat, one side snapped up, just a few clips of M-14 ammo, and his knife rerigged off his belt. Four GIs and eight montagnards lounged around by the command post and TJ joined them as casually as he

could. The security NCO looked at TJ in disbelief, but Pete gave him a quick look, and said, "He's with me, Sarge." Arching his eyebrows as if he were doing face yoga, the sergeant slid the topographic map onto the hood of a jeep. Anh, the weasly Viet interpreter, insinuated himself too close to the sergeant, and translated for the montagnards. "You know the drill, drop off the ridge here, parallel the logging road, and work south to these coordinates. If I were a gook mortar team, that's where I would set up, lob in some rounds, and didi before we knew what hit us." He turned to the 'yards and barked "You biet?" in pidgin Vietnamese. The montagnards were fooling around like junior high school girls, but they turned to face the sergeant and tried to look military. The contrast between the much larger Americans and the stocky montagnards reflected more than just their physical size. The 'yards had only recently discarded their crossbows and carried a veritable military history lesson from the First and Second World Wars. The biggest guy, maybe 5'6", but built like a nose tackle, carried a 1917 Browning Automatic Rifle that was damn near as tall as him and weighed a good twenty pounds. The smaller guys, all with calves rippling with muscle from running up and down mountains since childhood, carried long M1 Garand rifles from 1940, while Anh styled with his WWII folding-stock tanker's M-2 carbine, a useless fucking popgun, but tiny and light. The GIs all had M14s, except for Wilson, a big old Texas boy, carried an M-60 machine gun, new to the US Army, but an homage to the WWII German MG42 that kicked ass from Moscow to Normandy. TJ couldn't help but think that the old weapons required different rounds than their modern weapons, so he hoped Pete was right about this just being a walk in the woods.

The security sergeant gave TJ another look of disbelief, and waved them all off to the gate. "All right, do your radio checks and get the fuck out of my sight." The littlest American, a black guy from Chicago who TJ didn't know, carried a PRC-25 backpack radio, which TJ knew he would stay away from, as apparently Charlie thought that shooting the radio man first was a good plan. TJ wished they had about four Phantom jets flying cover, with a big ol' tank backing them up, but he reckoned that you wouldn't find much in the woods with all that big an outfit.

They cleared the front gate, passing by the biggest sandbagged bunker, and then without an order, all the men locked and loaded. There were subtle differences in clicking sounds from the different generations of weapons, but it all meant the same thing: they were ready to rock and roll. TJ had been on truck convoys before, but he had never walked out in the open on his own two feet, and he noticed that he was sweating inappropriately and really needed some chewing gum to cut the cotton in his mouth. Pete looked cool and tied up an olive drab "do rag" on his head. "Just follow me," he whispered to TJ, as the first montagnard jumped off the ridge. The 'yards disappeared like parachute jumpers, and TJ realized he was supposed to run full speed down the slippery red mud in his Stateside combat boots. He was not going to fall in front of this crew, so he called on his best ski moves and slalomed down the hill. The 'yards were not even heavy breathing as they started to disappear into the forest. "Fuck this," TJ thought, "I don't want to be out here by my stony lonesome," and he double timed to keep up. Once they got into the cover of the pines, the montagnards silently slid through the forest like coon dogs, even sniffing the air, and made hand gestures at the grass as if they saw something. They made good

time, keeping an old logging road in sight, but not walking on it. Pete had explained that you tried to stay off roads and obvious trails, as they might be mined, so TJ kept looking suspiciously at any disturbed earth for trip wires and kept looking up in the trees for booby traps and snipers. This wasn't fun, TJ thought, you couldn't just enjoy the smell of the sap and listen to the insects, and he could see every fucking pine needle in exquisite detail and he saw man shapes behind every tree. He sweated through his fatigue shirt, and drops trickled down from his bush hat, even though it was cool in the shade. The montagnards rotated point men, the M-60 man stayed near the front with the B.A.R. man, and TJ kept looking around to make sure the radioman was nowhere near him. For a city boy, Pete moved effortlessly, easing by pine boughs and setting his feet just so. TJ was never so self-conscious of every sound, every scuffed pebble, every heavy breath, as Pete would look around at him with a sharp look if he made noise.

After about ninety minutes without a break, the patrol pulled up in a little glen. The 'yards broke out string hammocks, Pete threw a poncho liner on the ground, and every one fell out. The radioman quietly reported their position and that everything was normal. The men settled in, which made TJ wonder, as he assumed they were just taking a breather, which only he needed. Pete came out with a little ball of C4 explosive and burned it smokelessly under a billy can to boil water for coffee. They all had drawn a box of C rations, and the 'yards were using the cardboard from the boxes to make a little pine twig fire to heat up the cans of pork loaf or turkey roll or ham 'n' limas. Pete gave TJ a coffee and then lit up a joint, hit on it like a Rasta man, and handed it to TJ. The last thing TJ needed was smoke in his heaving lungs, but he sucked down a big drag and figured it would help his nerves. He whispered in a thundering tone, "What are we doing?" Pete took the kind of hit a condemned man would on his last cigarette and whispered back, "We're going to hole up here and cop some z's. We'll do hourly situation reps up to the command post that we are checking out the mortar site, and then we'll walk back around the time we should." He gave TJ a wolfish smile and went back to the joint. TJ said, "But what if there were a mortar crew out there?" Pete wrinkled his eyes in a grimace and held the smoke in. When he exhaled, he said in a wheeze, "We'd all be fucked." All but one GI and one 'yard racked out as best they could, and Pete rolled over onto his poncho liner. He looked at TJ's disbelieving face and said, "Hey, man, we all pulled at least four hours of guard last night, and we all will tonight. Gotta sleep some time." With that, he scrunched his "do rag" over his eyes and checked out. TJ didn't need sleep that bad, so he sat up with the montagnard and shared what he didn't like from his C rations. The montagnard woofed the stale Korean War pound cake with peanut butter smeared on it and snapped up the cigarettes in the little olive drab box. On the hour, the guard would wake the radioman, who would call in his script: "We are at the checkpoint coordinates and are looking for any mortar pit construction." The afternoon heated up, and all the troopers dozed.

Pete woke up as the sky started to fill up with big clouds, and whispered, "Here's the tricky part, to get back before it rains, but taking long enough to make it look good." All the men policed up their cans, rubbed out any sign of a fire, and formed up to walk back. The montagnards set a fast pace, as they could walk uphill faster than TJ could walk on the and TJ found himself lagging to the rear. They took a slightly different route, which

Pete said was in case the gooks booby trapped the way they went in. He wasn't about to spend the night out there, so he kept steady humping not to lose sight of the patrol. Just as the big clouds were getting ugly looking, they crested the ridge in a different spot than they had jumped off and double timed down the road to the gate to beat the monsoon rain.

As TJ stripped off his sweaty fatigues back in his hooch that evening, he knew sure as shit that if all the GIs were mailing it in like today, this war was lost. He hit the shower and never volunteered to recon ever again.

About the Author:

Tom Harriman attended Swarthmore College, flunked out of the University of California, Berkeley, joined the Army in 1966, and served in the Republic of Viet Nam from March 1967 to October 1968. He returned to Berkeley after the war and got his B.A. and J.D. law degree there. He wrote this story in Maxine Hong Kingston's Veterans Writers Group.

Veteran Writers Group
Quarterly

Some of the writing from the June 12 gathering

Air Currents

Volume 1, Number 2

Summer 2010

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May 16, 2010

Dear friends,

As I started to think about the writing prompt for our Saturday, June 12, meeting, I was handed an unexpected gift. After a perfect day on the North Fork of the American River, I was sitting on a hillside watching clouds form, vultures soar, and hawks circle (you know me, can't take my eyes off the birds!) My kayak buddy, Steve (the "fine teacher" of the kayak lesson poem that sprung out of the March meeting, those of you who were there might remember,) began to explain the winds in the valley, how and why they change direction, how cumulus clouds form and break apart. I was enchanted. Although I had heard explanations before, I had never heard it like that. I could see it. Currents in air took on form and life that I had never experienced.

I thought about being at Marg and Bill's home – the broad valley, the eucalyptus grove, the distant hills, the hawks and vultures and birds that always seem to join us (and often seem to fly into my poems, no matter how hard I try!) I could take what my fine friend had shown me in the Sierra foothills and transpose it to our valley.

Then I started thinking about the currents that have brought us all to Marg and Bill's, how they resemble the currents in air, the currents in water (which I had been learning about all day on the river – reasonably successfully, I guess, since we didn't end up upside down in the river.) How they swirl, change, come together, move apart, cross and create disturbance and power and waves.

So my suggestion is today, look more closely at the currents that move in the valley, examine them as you look off the back deck, feel them as our walking meditation moves out of the eucalyptus grove. Feel the breeze rustling grasses as it goes one way or the other along the hill. Let this extraordinary natural phenomenon be a springboard for playing in our writing with currents in our lives that have led us to one another, to Marg and Bill's, to the stories and poems that we share during our exquisite days together.

I have permission to share with you Steve's story of air, wind, and clouds, which he kindly wrote down for me when I was trying to remember the names of the upstream and downstream winds. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have. Take a few minutes now and again when you're standing outside on Saturday to feel and "see" the currents in the air:

The upstream wind caused by solar convection is Anabatic flow.

Catabatic wind is the evening/afternoon subsidence. Both can be valley winds. Picture air wanting to rise directly but managing only to trickle uphill, clinging until it reaches a cliff, or a hilltop. Or maybe the trickle is sucked towards a patch of dark rock baking in the sun.

A continuous stream of super-buoyant air makes the break. If the air is humid enough, a cauliflower cloud appears as the air mass cools to dew point. The cloud grows. Along with its thermal umbilical cord, it tilts in the prevailing wind. That wind meets the cloud and the thermal, swirling around and over them as if they were a rooted tree. Finally, the cloud's tether stretches too thin; the thermal breaks and the cloud becomes flotsam, slowly disintegrating (or maybe not depending on other factors.)

Back on the ground, maybe there is a little protected hollow. As the day matures the air puddle slowly warms until it reaches critical mass. The whole bubble lifts off, pulling air from every direction, but mostly from downhill. It's gusty midday in the mountains, isn't it? The bubble is depleted for now, but it's early enough to pulse again and again.

Late in the afternoon some of the dark rocks lose direct sunshine and stop producing their energetic, sharp-edged plumes. Meanwhile, the forests have slowly heated. The trees don't get very hot in the sun, but as the ambient air cools, the trees also reach criticality, and bleed off their heat: much slower than the rocks, but more continuously. The uphill wind is still strong, but it's steadier for awhile, as the forests slowly deplete themselves. The heating stops, but it takes awhile for the upward, westward moving mass to lose its momentum. Finally it does. Hotter topography averages out the cooler, but locally the winds are light and variable due to differences.

The slack tide is a prelude to its change. The momentum of all that hot air lofted high in the sky made a hump in the atmosphere. The hot plumes mixed and yielded their heat into the atmospheric ocean. Convection stops, and gravity levels the hump. More air moves down now than up, and if global wind patterns don't oppose it too much, a gentle downward breeze materializes. The coldest, heaviest air finds its way to the most direct, unobstructed routes downward. Maybe we're lucky enough to be sleeping there with water and air in harmony. Eventually the big bump in the sky flattens. The air is still: all the better for hearing a slight murmur from the stream.

— *courtesy of Steve Rock*

Wads of oil spilled from Cosco Busan
still wash up on beaches near San Francisco,
three years later –

I get in my car, fueled by refined product,
feel superior about my low emissions
high mpg transport –

what is the cost of not loving the earth
enough to walk with bare feet
on soil, sand, grass –

today, aerial photos of the Gulf show
dark smears spreading out, following
paths we could have predicted –

I will try, I will try to love,
really love now, trusting forgiveness of geologic time

Untitled

Shomriel Goodman

June 12, 2010

High in the eucalyptus, the wind moves through the leaves. They dance, sigh, and murmur in response, moving into it as it passes through and around, over and under.

I watch the interplay and am surprised, somehow, when the same breeze lifts my hair. I too am being asked to partake in the dance, though I am not as responsive a partner as the eucalyptus. My timing is off; I stumble and step on feet. I speak when I should be silent, and have no words when they are undoubtedly necessary.

Here and now has seemed more and more out of reach the older I get, approaching 30 and wanting to have a story to tell. I try to link the present moments to the past and future, attempting a coherent narrative about who I am and how I fit in. But this moment is unique and constantly renewing, as am I and my relationships.

Can I be in this moment, listening to it, dancing with it, responding to its particular exigencies? Do I need to have a story to tell about it?

Maybe there is a story that, looking back from the other side, will be visible, woven in with other stories to make a beautiful pattern. Or maybe there's only the story of now and what was done in it, with and to whom I encountered. Maybe my desire for a relationship with one whom I can claim as my own til death do us part is a false one, when what I should be paying attention to is those alongside me, my fellow wayfarers and potential comrades.

I'm sitting and searching for words now, not dancing. The trees haven't ceased, rooted and yet in full motion. Birds soar on the drafts, possibly looking for food, possibly enjoying being buoyed by the way air. Sweat pools in my elbow creases and trickles down my sternum. My back aches a bit. I should do more yoga, increase my ab muscles, improve my posture. More meditation. More writing. So much I should do.

The wind comes again, cooling the sweat, cooling my mind. "Be here now," it says, except there are no words, just a gentle insistent beat. It is not threatened or concerned with my slowness, my deafness, my lack of rhythm. It waits patiently for me, the pulsing below the surface, promising to break open and cascade into music. I realize suddenly that I am being asked, not simply to dance but also to offer myself as an instrument for the music as I let the wind whistle and echo and moan through the dark crevices and constricted places.

berry season

Dennis Fritzing

just thinking about
boysenberries
makes me want to go out
and pick some,
makes me want to taste
their sweetness on my tongue.
the rest of the year
we live on other foods,
but summer's berry season.
it's almost as if
the sun's looking for them,
rising higher in the sky
each morning,
lingering longer each day.
in truth, the summer
has many pleasures--
camping one of them,
the beach, outdoor movies,
fireworks--but let's not forget
it's also berry season.

Untitled

Zoe Sheli Sameth

The artist is re-emerging
the tears, water her
revive her
awaken her
Out of a crystalline dream
Tears stream

letting go
of control
is possible

Solo,
I emerge.
my aloneness
my loneliness
bring forth my deepest darkness
my deepest lightness
my own witness

I hang on the precipice
excited, scared
What will happen when I enter the abyss?
am I prepared?
Will I find the release, the peace,
that I'm longing for?
I'm so bored, with this war
I want to surrender
to render helpless
the armor that keeps me
from me
how can I believe
And let go of all that I believe
Simultaneously,
free

Beach Days Escape

Kathleen A. Taylor

Forty years ago the eucalyptus stands in their prime
 creating a tunnel of expectation as the city gave way to the sea
 us, a group of five siblings and their mother
 all born within three point three years
 - you can do that with twins
 lined-up in the rear of a ford wagon
 the unlucky child leaning or jammed against the spare tire
 to be sure, a tight fit but we had our own rules
 the middle seat would be raised
 its puce vinyl bench filled with pots and utensils, blue melamine plates,
 cans of beans, towels, torn sneakers,
 large “I promise you kids, that’s not really mildew” smelly old canvas tent
 and a single row of rolled fat forest green cotton sleeping bags
 their plaid linings worn thin – always shoved on top
 providing the final barrier to keep the peace for my mother
 sanctuary from the shrieks and the screams as we twisted the highway curves
 through shrub dappled hills edged in the glow of late afternoon light.

The morning would break, its dew clinging to each purple thistle
 of course, first thing, race to the beach every child on his or her own
 weather, no matter, we swam
 collecting sand dollars, abalone shells and starfish
 for hours on end to be placed with the freshly
 harvested kelp garlands meant for the queen
 drawn-out performances of intricate ceremonial burials
 only to have the dead come alive!
 sandcasted completely, thick matting of hair, they staggered forward
 arms raised wide big body posture

chase a living victim into the water
then dive through each foamy white wave.

When the tide came in we turned east
moving campward
mother sitting there reading
in an aluminum chair partial webbing
behind her, the meadow, where Plain Jane tan cows lowed and meandered
sometimes rubbing their backs against the edges of green industrial pit toilets
rocking them from side to side – but never over
stop, eat a plate of whatever, then dusk
perfect time for cow-patty baseball – Arabian style knee deep in the sand
get distracted, find tiny spotted toads in the brush
frogs, the boys did insist so we girls closed our eyes and would kiss them
our pursed lips larger than their miniature gray heads
compliant we were though hardly believing
in the boy's fantastical stories set in faraway kingdoms.

Back in the car, the hours home would be quiet
in spite of our sardine-like composure dirty legs all in a tangle.

Untitled

Rachel Hairston

17 months old
your frail body
in my hands
I hold you close
the heat outside
sears my skin
but does not
warm you.
how
how do i breathe
my life
into you
as a medic
i know i cannot
as a human
an auntie
a niece
a daughter
a cousin
a friend
i want nothing more
than to
give you life
what you've lost
what you never
got to experience

i hear the cries
the pleas for help
but stuck
fixated
on you i stay
you
my first casualty
of war
the one
i will write about
and focus on
while
i pull limbs
from the rubble

the aftermath
of a bombing
a war
i somehow support
because
yes
i am here.

blood
 covers my eyelids
 no escape
 the memories
 sear my mind
 the heat of your image
 your lifeless body
 my failure
 dries my tears
 before they fall

i am sorry.

Dear Grandpa,

I spent the days before your burial-at-sea praying for perfect weather -- okay, maybe not "perfect" weather, but weather that would permit us to charter the boat out to the Alaskan-Pacific current. I knew, grandpa, that you wanted nothing more than to be back in Japan. I, all to well, know this feeling.

I know the currents of the Pacific Ocean and the beautiful tour of the sea these currents would have brought you -- with this final tour ending off the coast of Japan thanks to the Kuroshio, a current so powerful, it often detours typhoons from a head-on collision with the main island. As your granddaughter, I felt I had failed you when I woke up that morning and the rain was pouring down and the winds gusted. As I drove over the Golden Gate Bridge and saw the whitecaps, I knew there would be no way I could give this to you -- despite just how much I truly believe you deserved it.

And, as we boarded the boat, the rain fell harder; I couldn't help but think you were crying [then] because you knew that you were not going back to the one place on Earth you truly loved. However, as the boat pulled up to Yellow Bluff, just off the shores of Sausalito, and as we stood there with your ashes in hand, the rain stopped, the clouds parted and the sun was shining down on us -- filling us with all the warmth your life embraced us with.

I can't say i really understood that magnitude of this day until recently, when I went sailing in the bay and watched the fog role in. Just as I was pointing to friends where we had dumped your ashes, the sun beamed through and lit up the water -- as if to say, "Despite all your pain and disappointments these past months, my dear, I am still here."

The currents of life took you away from me physically, at a time in my life when I was beginning to plant my seeds of war -- a pain so deep I often wonder when the digging will end. But now, I realize, grandpa, that for the past 28 years of my life, I have forced myself into currents -- deciding where life was going to take me, clinging to this false sense of control -- only to wind up completely miserable in the end.

And, in the past few weeks, I have found nothing more beautiful than in letting go -- letting life take me where it decides I need to be; taking in those deep breaths, allowing myself to FEEL the pain, letting the tears fall freely and allowing my heart to experience the multitude of pleasures this world has to offer -- a far cry from the girl who hid behind her weapons and uniform with the facade of "holding it all together."

Thanks grandpa -- even in your loss, I learn from you.

Love,
 Rachel

THE GAME OF BONDING - A Story of Plastics

by Chun Yu, Ph.D.
www.chunyu.org

What are plastics
but the same materials made of
You and me?
Hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen...
What are they, but like us
of life longing to come into forms
that can be seen, touched, used, and appreciated
through bondings –
bondings sometimes too intimate, covalent, and long lasting
according to our ever so particular human needs?

Nature/God made, or man made
can both sustain or destroy lives.
But in essence, as matter,
there is no increase, no decrease,
no creation, no elimination,
as the Heart Sutra says and
as the physical law reveals.
Thus no liking, nor hating
shall be applied
towards the same matter made of you and me.

The human, curious child of nature/god,
discovers a small secret of nature/god,
designs a game and plays it too far.

Now we have waves, waves that are man made,
of plastics, of covalently bonded forms,
coming into being –
for a few seconds or hours or days or years
of usage in every living space of our lives.
Then discarded
into every other space we might still like to leave open,
to form waves of sheets, beads, chips, chunks
of plastics,
on top of the lands,
on bottom of the oceans...

We're nature/god's
failed students,
who are punished by our mistake of
not being able to learn the total truth, the way,
before trying our hands on alchemy.
Because we thought and think we can,
because we sold our soul to Satan
who said "Yes, yes, you can!"
without mentioning the consequences of our own action.
Satan is no devil but the partial truth

- which appear to be the thing we know and insist as total truth all the time.
What makes anything evil, often, is
our own inability to bear its consequences.
Yet, in nature's time/god's eyes everything is degradable,
including the consequence itself.

Buddha says,
all things are emptiness;
they are without defining characteristics;
they are not born; they do not cease;
they are not defiled; they are not undefiled;
they have no increase; they have no decrease...

Jesus says,
Love your enemy –
Your enemy is yourself.

Laozi says,
All is one –
The plastic is you,
Your are the plastic.

We must all generate, use, degrade, and bond,
redegrade, and rebond into each other
at a rate
mutually acceptable,
with an understanding
of consequences and our abilities to bear them.

Then we can say to each other:
I am sorry,
I apologize,
I thank you,
and I love you.

David Harris: The Tortured Encounter of the Lion and the Eagle

Lee Swenson

It is a real honor to introduce David as our friendship goes back to the mid 1960's in Palo Alto and East Palo Alto and Stanford University. I had left Stanford in 1961, a young draft resister just as the country was stirring with the civil rights movement, from the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to 57 and the nonviolent sit ins through out the South in 1960.

In the late 50's there were the anti-nuclear bomb fall out shelter actions, which broke the spell of the cruel hoax of a "safe" shelter under your house with a barrel of water and a tin of biscuits after a nuclear holocaust. These were some of my first organizing days. The Quakers and other pacifists were sailing out into the nuclear bomb test sites the Pacific Ocean in sailboats called The Golden Rule and The Phoenix. We staffed the sail boats Everyman I, II, and III to sail out of San Francisco to the test zones, but they were seized and hauled back by the Coast Guard under the orders of the San Francisco Attorney General, Cecil Poole.

There was the San Francisco to Moscow Peace March in 1960 and 1961. So the leaven was rising and Palo Alto was rousing. The great Wallace Stegner was teaching creative writing at Stanford and in the late 50's, and his students included Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtery, Wendell Berry and Robert Stone. We were all young then, I think.

And music was in the air, from the teenager Joan Baez, later to be David's wife and mother of their son, Gabriel, and the kid musicians Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir, soon to be of the Grateful Dead, were working out songs, over and over, in back of Keplers Books in Menlo Park. Roy Kepler was a World War II conscientious objector and after starting one of the first paperback bookstores in America, Keplers Books in 1953, he helped a fellow conscientious objector, Fred Cody, to start Codys Books in Berkeley, while Lawrence Ferlinghetti launched City Lights in San Francisco. All this in the quiet and mundane 1950's. And if I remember right, David worked part time at Kepler's while he was at Stanford in the mid 60's.

So Palo Alto and Stanford was fertile ground then. Stewart Brand was soon to start the Whole Earth Catalogue, and Fred Moore, another draft resister who did prison time, was a key part of the nascent free or open computer group called Home Brew.

So into this heady brew came a teenage Boy of the Year, David Harris, from Fresno, California to go on into civil rights actions in Mississippi in 1964, in the time of Freedom Summer and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, with quiet though eloquent leaders like Bob Moses.

I say all this to share a bit of the amazing creativity, imagination that was pouring forth; we stood on the shoulders of perhaps too few, but none-the-less giants ahead of us in the 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps you weren't born yet, or yet to be on your way, perhaps involuntarily, coming into exile, in America.

But David was emerging as one of those giants with his great eloquence and passion. When David was faced with the intensifying Vietnam War and the channeling system of military induction, he took his stand and refused the draft. And he organized with others, David traveled up and down the coast, and across the country, building The

Resistance, and do note it was modestly called The Resistance, person by person, talking long into the night with other young men, about this horrific American war that was eating up Vietnam and the moral center of America. David helped organize the Stop the

Draft Week in October of 1967, and having returned his draft card- and losing his student who loved one deferment – David refused induction into the armed services and was tried and sentenced to three years in Federal prison.

And here a moment of perhaps subtle distinction, David was not a draft evader but a draft resister, along with 5,000 other resisters who went to prison rather than to kill people who lived half way around the world. Meanwhile others brave souls who also would not kill went to Canada or went AWOL from within the military.

David was living in East Palo Alto then, part of the Peace and Liberation Commune, some of whom lived across the street from my little bungalow which I had bought in 1966 for \$6,000, yes it was a different time then, my little house where I lived the next twenty years. Meanwhile, David had met and fallen in love with Joan Baez who had started the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence in 1965. And there were demonstrations, especially in the October 1967 Stop the Draft week where David was picked off the sidewalk by the Oakland cops and hustled off to jail as a leader of the demonstration. That historic and catalytic week of daily large scale demonstrations at the Oakland Draft Center, where inductees were gathered to be shipped off to Viet Nam, began with nonviolent sit ins and turned into a police riot and street fighting – while on the East Coast there was the March on the Pentagon, with a action to levitate the Pentagon, that House of War. So much was going on, as sung beautifully in the classic Marvin Gaye song, “What’s Going On.”

We organized a nonviolent demonstration that Christmas of 1967 and over into the New Year of 1968 and Martin Luther King and Andy Young came across country to visit Joan Baez in Santa Rita Jail, just over the Berkeley/Oakland hills. While we were in jail, Dr. Spock and others were arrested for aiding and abetting the draft resistance. In February, the Tet Offensive of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars drove deep into South Viet Nam, bringing the American War right into Saigon and shifted the mood of America, cracking open Middle America to the disturbing question what were we doing there relentlessly killing Vietnamese along with thousands of American youths.

Martin Luther King, who had so eloquently saw that there was no possibility of ending poverty in America while wasting billions of dollars being poured down the rat hole of the American War in South East Asia. And Dr King was killed two months later in April of 1968. America was splitting in half, as was the anti-war movement. Some of us nonviolent activists opposed the upcoming demonstrations at the 1968 Convention, and it’s movement destroying “Days of Rage” rather than focusing on resistance to the war itself.

I had just come home from hitch hiking through Latin America, Europe, and Africa through the explosive times of 1968 into 1969 and meet David and Joan at a speech David was giving in San Francisco, and we took on moving the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence from Carmel Valley to East Palo Alto/Palo Alto. David was on his way into Federal Prison for two years, first **down to** Safford Prison in southeast Arizona then to a maximum security prison in El Paso, Texas, called La Tuna, where if I remember right, the pig styes were air conditioned but the men’s cells were not.

We would make monthly trips to visit David and Randy Kehler and the other resisters, and my ears still ring from the 1000 mile trip in a Volks Wagon Bug. But you can read about that in David's books: *I Shoulda Been Home Yesterday*, and his fine searing book *Our War: What We Did in Vietnam and What It Did to Us*.

And David had honed his considerable writing skills into brilliant storytelling in books like *The Last Stand* on the logging and hedge-fund driven clear cutting of Northern California redwoods, and *The League*, a sharp-eyed fan's story of the National Football League. David crafted his non-fiction books with careful wide ranging research and clear writing as in the book that brought us together here today, *The Crisis: The President, the Prophet and the Shah – 1979 and the Coming of Militant Islam*. His next book followed his passion for American style football, called *The Genius: How Bill Walsh Reinvented Football and Created an NFL Dynasty*. That is the N F L, the National Football League, not the N L F, the National Liberation Fronts of the Viet Cong.

So you can see David takes on big and important times and writes them into penetrating discussion of the moral and creative parts of our daily life. And I understand his next major book to be is on the Dalai Lama and the death of the Tibetan people. But that is still a few years in the making.

So I am delighted to give this rambling introduction to one of the most eloquent voices over these past forty years and look forward to the dialogue with all of you.

Israel vs. Israel

Michael Wong

Israel is defeating itself, one battle at a time.

The May 31, 2010 Israeli attack on the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla” - particularly on the Mavi Marmara - is a microcosm of Israel’s steady march to self-defeat. Six ships laden with supplies and international peace activists - including parliamentarians and other prominent figures - headed toward Gaza with the stated aim of breaking the Israeli blockade. Israeli ships, helicopters, and elite commandos attacked the Flotilla.

Reports from both sides were conflicting, but some facts are not in dispute. The Israelis attacked at night. The attack was illegal because it occurred in international waters. The lead ship, the Mavi Marmara, was a Turkish flagged ship. The Israeli commandos, for reasons in dispute, fired live bullets that killed nine activists and wounded scores more. An international furor erupted, in which several nations - including Turkey - pulled their ambassadors from Israel. Egypt relaxed a border crossing to Gaza, weakening the Israeli blockade.

In short it was a disaster for Israel, weakening it’s blockade, increasing anger against it, raising the morale of it’s enemies, further isolating it in the international community, and generally endangering it’s already precarious position in the Middle East. In return, Israel gained nothing of value, since it could have achieved the goal of stopping the flotilla without all this.

In the past Israel had stopped other such other ships without any deaths and without an international furor of this kind. Indeed, only a week after the Mavi Marmara incident, Israel stopped another “Gaza Freedom” ship, the Rachel Corrie, without similar bloodshed or international furor.

So why did Israel trade a tried and true formula that worked in the past for one which led to such disaster? The question points to much deeper issues within Israel, issues which are inevitably leading it to self-defeat.

This is not the first time Israel has engaged in military actions which resulted in loss of civilian life, a strengthening of Israel’s enemies, and a weakening of Israel’s position.

In 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon with the stated goal of dealing a major blow to Hezbollah. Over 1,200 civilians died, many more were wounded, and about one million people were displaced. Israeli forces conquered and occupied the terrain they choose, but Hezbollah was not knocked out and actually emerged stronger due to the anger generated by Israel’s attack and the resulting popular support for the Hezbollah

resistance. An international furor erupted. Israel “won” militarily, but lost politically. Hezbollah became more entrenched. Israel became more isolated.

What’s puzzling is why Israel invaded in the first place. After all, it was clear even before the invasion that this would be the logical result of using a conventional army against an entrenched guerrilla force backed by popular support. Israel had only to look back to 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq, defeated Saddam’s conventional army, then proceeded to get bogged down in a guerrilla war which it could not win by military means. By 2006 the U.S. war in Iraq had become a major disaster, with American troops fighting against a rising insurgency, a situation that was strengthening Iran, promoting Al-Qaeda recruiting, increasing anger against the U.S. in the Middle East and around the world, risking destabilization of the Middle East, and draining American troops from the pursuit of Osama bin Laden. Yet Israel decided to use the same type of conventional military attack against a guerrilla force in Lebanon. Did Israel not learn anything from three years of watching the American failure? Apparently not.

Beyond the American war in Iraq, recent history is filled with the carcasses of powerful conventional armies laid low by guerrilla forces (“insurgent” in today’s terminology) native to an invaded nation. Examples include the French in Viet Nam, the Americans in Viet Nam, the British and the U.S.S.R. in Afghanistan, the French in Algiers, the list goes on and on. It doesn’t take a general to know this, but all generals should.

Even more astonishingly, after it’s failure in Lebanon, Israel repeated the exact same formula again by invading Gaza in January of 2009.

Once again, Israel used a large conventional attack sure to result in heavy civilian casualties, with the stated aim of delivering Hamas a serious blow. Once again, the predictable result was immense human suffering, a continued strong Hamas, and a weakened Israel.

Lebanon, Gaza, the “Freedom Flotilla.” Three defeats in a row, all based on the principle of using overwhelming Israeli military force against a target militarily weaker, but with firm underlying native and substantial external support. Why keep doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results?

Looking at their actions, one cannot escape a comparison to their closest soul mates, the American Bush administration. Both of these were right wing administrations who shared several traits in common - an arrogance of power, a religious belief in their own absolute righteousness, a perception of their enemies as absolute evil, and a magical belief that sheer military force can somehow solve any problem. Such a simplistic world view inevitably leads to unrealistic actions which are bound to fail eventually.

If Israel continues on this course, it places itself in great jeopardy in a very dangerous part of the world.

At this point Israel has painted itself into a corner in which it's primary friend is the United States, and it is absolutely dependent on this friend for military aid and backing.

But what would happen if the political winds in the U.S. should shift? What happens if the oil runs low in the Middle East and the region's geo-political value to the U.S. declines? What if the U.S. economy melts down and the U.S. can no longer afford to support this friend (and proxy)?

Israel may suddenly find itself cut off, the way Cuba was suddenly cut off when the U.S.S.R. fell.

However, the fate of the Bush invasion of Iraq also points to the way out for Israel. Israel's 2009 invasion of Gaza came after watching the U.S. try to extract itself from Iraq by buying off the Sunni insurgents, cutting deals with other anti-American elements, and moving for a political "solution" that allows a face-saving American withdrawal, even with the long term future of Iraq still uncertain. In the process no major native opposing force was defeated militarily by the Americans (Al-Qaeda in Iraq is not native, and practically defeated itself by alienating the local population). It's a very messy, risky extraction for the U.S., yet it's still better than remaining stuck in Iraq. It also presents at least some hope of working with former enemies, who have more to gain by working with the U.S. than against it. Consider the current American - Viet Nam relationship, in which Viet Nam now actively seeks improved relations and trade with the U.S.

Israel needs a vision of a future in which it is not dependent on only one friend but takes part in friendship of a comity of nations. It needs to move toward a future in which it is not always surrounded by enemies. It needs to learn from it's repeated failures and realize that it cannot survive if it goes on this way. The Israeli leadership - and it's supporters - needs to realize that while force is sometimes necessary, it is not a magical solution to every problem.

If Israel wants to survive long term, if it wants to have any real hope for the future, it is essential that Israel make many more friends than it has enemies.

It can begin by refraining from military actions which gain Israel nothing and increase its opposition.

On Enumerating

© Scott Morrison

The past six weeks have been an interesting patchwork of nostalgia and reflection. I took a job as a census enumerator. It was, my first time working for someone else in, what, twenty-eight years?

My wife and I had moved back to the Russian River area about six years ago. We had both lived out here in the 70s, though we didn't know each other at that time. I moved to Petaluma about 1982 and for over two decades had lived there and, after I got married, in Marin.

My first assignment was my old neighborhood in the Summer Home Park area of Forestville, where I had lived from 1975 through 1979 while taking writing classes at Sonoma State and living on a combination of summer jobs, unemployment, and the GI Bill. I hadn't been back in that out-of-the-way neighborhood in over twenty years, and almost nothing had changed. Among the addresses I was assigned were two of the riverfront cabins I'd lived in. As the areas name implies, these were summer vacation homes which the owners rented out between Labor Day and Memorial Day but which had to be vacated during the summer.

It was early April, so less than a quarter of the cabins were occupied. As I wandered around knocking on empty cabin doors I ran into three guys about thirty years old who had grown up in the area. They escorted me around the park in a golf cart, and greatly helped in identifying the unoccupied seasonal houses. Riding with them also gave me the opportunity to recount old memories of my time in their neighborhood before they were born, and they were an eager audience.

I told them of the time my first year there, during the drought of 1975, when my first landlord, Earl, a tugboat worker whom they all knew, showed up one day a few weeks after I'd moved in just to say hello and, though he didn't say it, to make sure I wasn't trashing his cabin. He was with a friend and they were on their way home after a fishing trip to the Eel river. I got three beers from the fridge and we sat on the deck as they complained how bad the fishing was and that they hadn't caught anything.

As we were talking we watched an osprey circling over the river, then it suddenly dove like a torpedo, straight down into the water, coming to the surface a few seconds later with a huge fish, which it struggled to pull the beach on the opposite shore.

"Jesus Christ, did you see that!" shouted Earl's friend.

Earl bitched, "We just spent two days in waders and get nothing. Fuck!"

Just then half a dozen turkey vultures flew down and surrounded the osprey. It tried to fly off with the fish, but it was too heavy. For a few minutes the osprey tried to fend off the vultures and protect its catch, but there were too many of them. So it went to the fish, and with a few strikes of its beak, bit it in two, took one half in its talons, and flew off for its nest in the redwoods up the hill., leaving the other half for the vultures to fight over amongst themselves.

Having a rapt audience reminded me of another incident, during the flood of '78. There had been a rare snowfall in '74, the year before I came, which had brought down huge numbers of redwoods and Douglas firs, whose shallow root systems could not support the added weight of several inches of heavy wet snow.

Now these gigantic trees were coming down the swollen river, one after the other after the other, in far greater numbers than came down the river in succeeding floods. My cabin was safely above the flood level, but the electricity was out and the road was inundated so we couldn't leave, creating a party atmosphere with everybody sharing their best weed.

I was with a friend, looking out the picture window of my cabin at the river's awesome display of power when, directly in front of us, the tip of a giant redwood caught on something underneath the surface and the force of the rushing water pushed the tree upright, like the roots were a pole vaulter. The root structure rose straight up until the tree stood upside down, completely vertical, the roots towering at our eye level at least a hundred feet about the water. It would have been the photo of a lifetime, but my camera was in the other room and I was too frozen with jaw-dropping astonishment to think about getting it. After balancing on its tip for a few seconds, the redwood toppled into the water and continued, roots first, on its way to the sea.

My next assignment took me to yet another area of Forestville, to a road near the Hacienda Bridge, where I'd lived from 1979 to 1983 in a wonderful cabin with a view of the valley that I didn't have to move out of every summer. I was to enumerate the house across the street, and took the opportunity to climb the steep stairs of my old cabin and look around.

It was there that I'd had the brainstorm that would change my life. I had been at the Woodstock Music Festival in 1969 and as I was leaving had bought its famous promotional poster of a dove perched on a guitar neck as a souvenir. It was full of thumbtack holes after numerous moves in the previous decade and was hanging on my wall next to some guitar chord charts and music theory tables. My GI Bill was about to run out, and I was in the throes of deciding whether to apply to law school. I was taking a guitar class that semester and had been trying to play for only a few weeks when, on my thirty-first birthday, I was trying to learn some chord from a chart next to the Woodstock poster when I thought, "What if there was a poster of a vertical guitar neck with the notes of the neck on it? It would make it much easier to learn to play. Plus you could put all kinds of other guitar information on it."



Clickity-click-click. It was a revelation, almost like a cartoon with lightbulbs switching on all around my head. Was this the better mousetrap? Had I just had the proverbial get-rich-quick, million-dollar idea?

I went around to tall the music stores and learned there was nothing like what I was visualizing. I did some library research and learned that, according to the Gallup Poll, there were fifteen million guitar players in America. If I did it right and only one in ten bought one I could work it for a couple of years, sell out, and write the Great American Novel while lounging on my yacht off the coast of Acapulco. Screw law school!

So I put together a team of people who were as google-eyed at getting rich quick who were good at things like art and graphics and music, subjects about which I knew almost nothing. After a year's work, we'd done it, and the first Guitar Poster rolled off the press. That was June 13, 1980, thirty freaking years ago tomorrow!

I'd had the idea at thirty-one, and I'm now sixty-two, so it was half a lifetime ago. It's been an interesting ride and I haven't had to work for any bosses, but I never did get very good on the guitar, and I obviously didn't get rich, quick or otherwise, or I wouldn't be working for the census.

Untitled

Nancy Veiga

Once on a hike on the Shotgun Trail, I sat high on the rocks overlooking the Valley of the Moon and watched vultures teaching their young how to fly--how to catch the currents and use them--how to ride the waves of air so they almost never have to beat their wings but can soar with seeming ease, without burden or weight.

I thought of that flying lesson as I remembered a dream from last week. In the dream, Roberto came to my classroom, swirled into my subconscious on the night current. He had that faraway stare they talk about, as if he were searching for himself in the mountains of Afghanistan or the Iraqi desert. Dust sat heavily on the shoulders of his fatigues and his face was dark under the shadow of his heavy helmet. The weight of war kept him cemented to the chair, back against the wall. He was not the same, and I realized in my dream consciousness that he would never be. The weight of war was upon him.

When I awoke, I wondered if the many words I've read lately about the war, the terrible confluence of confusion, noise, heat and fear, have weighed me down as well, or if words, like currents, can lift us, support us for a time and ease the burden for a minute.

So much weight.

One young (are they always young?) marine wrote that the dead were the lucky ones because they escaped the burden of visions, of dreams, of nightmares. He wrote that when he was half-dead, he felt light, almost weightless, and he was tempted, so tempted, to soar off and shed the burden. "Sometimes I wish I had," he wrote at the end.

Another writes that he cannot shake the unmasked fear and hatred in the eyes of Iraqi civilians when he and his patrol burst through the door with guns and voices raised. He writes that each time he hated himself for creating such fear and each time he feared that he would die there on that dirt floor.

And still another cannot shake the vision of a tiny hand reaching through the rubble of a bombing gone bad, a tiny hand, all that was left of a child who also bore the weight of war.

Like tattoos, these experiences take shape in their consciousness so vividly that even the simplest of soldiers writes beautiful, eloquent and terrible detail about every moment, every ounce of weight upon them. And because I cannot teach them to fly as those vultures teach their young, I bear witness to their stories, bear witness to this defining moment in their lives that defines us all if we are human, and help share the burden by reading their words, honoring them, so that they may, for a moment, soar with ease and without fear.

Once I was

DonEdward Morris

Once I was an albatross
drifting wheeling hanging
on hands I could not see
that kept me floating above the endless waters
so I never had to float on those endless waters.

Once I was a sapling tree
or was I a blade of grass
swaying bending dancing
to the mood of someone I never saw
that kept me from the curse of stillness.

Once I was a snail
craning my neck to watch
the birds and trees above
and I could never understand.

Once I read a poem --
"I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song."

[There is sensitive stuff in here. This is sure VWG eyes only.]

Misinformed by Our Stereotypes

Gregory Ross

It had been a long time and as always it was unnerving. Two counselors and I had our lives threatened. Actually, the person we were dealing with threatened to “take out” anyone who got in his way, staff or client. As he put it, “We all gonna be on the news.” The story is cliqued but, none the less upsetting: abusive sort-of-ex-boyfriend of client is asked to honor confidentiality and leave; any limitations are perceived by him as disrespecting his concept of manhood; all reasonable conversation comes to a halt; County Sheriffs are called as he saunters away spewing threats and epithets. I have always taken these declarations seriously but, lately more so. I am sure I don't have to explain, you watch the news. The Sheriffs couldn't find him; it is a big campus: five buildings, constructed over eighty years, strangely connected, affording many exits. The sort-of-ex-girlfriend “forgot” his new address. I wanted to know how many and what kinds of weapons he had. She replied, sheepishly, “I don't know; I don't think he has any.” Right! The three blocks I had to walk to my truck after work, I was hyper-vigilant.

The first violent incident I had to deal with at the hospital program was within the first year of my employment. I helped the lead counselor break up a physical altercation between two female clients. Blood was drawn by both participants. I was the only staff to respond. I brought up this lack of response in the staff meeting and the first major “cultural” issue surfaced between me and the rest of the staff. I am the only Caucasian on the staff; have been for 17 of the 18 years I have worked in the program. I brought up the fight as an agenda item and asked what the program policy was around violence. I was surprised to be met with mirth. The rest of the staff found it to be acceptable behavior. Just something that happened in a drug and alcohol program; no one got seriously hurt, so why was I making such a big deal. One female staff actually said, “What's the matter; is the white boy afraid?”

I indicated I could bring in my “Violence Resume” if necessary; starting with the working class gangs that roamed some of the neighborhoods where I grew up; then there was Viet Nam. I suggested I could go on if necessary. All I wanted to know is what we as a staff were willing to do to protect each other and the clients until “authorities” arrived. The issue never got resolved to my liking. Almost everyone on the staff was in recovery, many had done time on the street and/or in jail and had considerable “Violence Resumes”. Most thought getting the police involved was not a good idea.

Don't get the wrong impression; real violence didn't happen that often, not even threats were that common but, I wanted to know what would happen if, to clean up a euphemism: fecal matter hit the fan.

The present staff, most of whom do not have a personal history of struggle with chemical dependency but, came to their jobs through the social services or criminal justice systems, did not respond all that differently. While no one accused me of being culturally paranoid; most, from my point of view, went into denial mode, even one of the counselors he directly threatened. Out of frustration with the nonchalance, I suggested we all get whistles and work out a signal system. I got the following responses: "Why don't you buy a bunch of whistles and we will reimburse you." Or the more honest response: "If I hear any whistles or gunshots, I am going the other way; you all are on your own."

Before being hired at the hospital clinic, I worked at a community clinic. The community clinic offered detox services to a poor, working class and gang ridden neighborhood. This community clinic is roughly two miles from a housing project. About half way through my time at the community clinic, we set up a satellite clinic in one of the project apartments. Thursday was my rotation. The first day I was to work the project clinic, a few of the clients took me aside and offered me a map of how to get to the site, which was almost a straight shot up the street from the main clinic but, they had me making lefts and rights and going significantly out of my way. I protested until one of the older clients said, "You guys are getting people off drugs and the dealers don't like it; it's costing them money." Thrusting it into my hand, he said, emphatically, "Take the map!" They explained that their route bypassed all the dealer corners. The dealers knew what we looked like and out of necessity were armed. I took the map and all future maps. In about six months the satellite clinic closed: attempted and successful break-ins at night; practitioners locking themselves and clients in the clinic for protection; not enough clients willing to go for treatment; too many eyes reporting to dealers; ultimately, too dangerous for everyone. But, the staff thought it had been worth a try.

Shortly, after the satellite clinic closed for good, a very nervous, very young man, around 18 years old, came in carrying a metal briefcase. There were about 10 or 15 clients sitting with needles in their ears. Everyone's attention went to this man. An unsettling silence ensued. Later I found out most people knew him and what drug dealer he worked for. We had two small armless wooden chairs at the far end of the large room where clients got their ear needles before moving to more comfortable high backed chairs. He walked the length of the room with a juvenile determination on his face; came up to me, placed the briefcase on the chair to my left, opened it and said, "Look inside". I very quickly did just that. He then asked if I knew what it was. I nodded my head without taking my eyes off him and he snapped up the briefcase and quickly left. The room came back alive as soon as he got out the door. I had never actually seen an Uzi before, but I knew what it was. Why he turned and left I don't know but, I am thankful he did.

In the nanosecond before he turned, instinct had formulated a plan, which only became evident to me after he left but, unconsciously my left foot had already moved to

kick the weapon away as my right hand, my dominate hand, had grabbed the other chair to beat him down. As it was, I just sat down and lost a struggle with rebellious stomach Qi.[for you non acupuncturists, I threw up]

The diversity amongst the community clinic staff was more balanced than at the hospital clinic. In the 2.5 years that I worked at the community clinic the ratio of Black and Latino acupuncturists to Caucasian acupuncturists fluctuated but remained close to 1:1. About three of each most of the time. The counselors were more skewed toward Black and Latino. The clients were amazingly diverse: Black, Latino, Pacific Islander, Native American, Asian, Middle Eastern and Caucasian. The ratio was about 75% Black and 25% the rest of that list.

Everyone is misinformed by their stereotypes and there are those embracing stereotypes that reinforce our ignorance. When Rodney King got pounded by the L.A. Police in 1991, I had been working at the community clinic for less that two months. When the not guilty verdicts came down in 1992 and no police officer served any jail time, I had been at the community clinic for a year and at the hospital clinic for less than a week. The first day that Los Angeles and other cities rioted, it was not clear what was going to happen. When I got to work at the community clinic that morning one of the counselors said, "I didn't think you would show up today." When I asked him why, he replied that if he was me he would have stayed home. Then he said, "But, you are not going to work at the hospital this afternoon are you? That is a bad neighborhood." I shrugged my shoulders and started treating clients. That afternoon, when I got to the hospital, a counselor said [you guessed it], "I didn't think you would come in today." then quickly added, "But, you didn't go into work this morning, did you? That is a dangerous area." Everyone is misinformed by their stereotypes.

Veteran Writers Group

Quarterly

Some of the writing from the September 11 gathering

The Body

Volume 1, Number 3

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September 11 Prompt – Fred Marchant and Chris Arnesen

Veterans Writing Group Members:

The other day I wrote a little reflection on the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster, and in it I noted that in the beginning of the “spill,” the “live-feed” images from the ocean floor, with that roiling fountain of oil coursing upward, both fascinated and repulsed me. I found myself unconsciously shaking my head back and forth, and sensing at the top of my spine an almost physical desire to say no, no, no, to try to turn it off by turning my head, as if I myself were the well-head if you will. My body in effect had internalized both the image and my deep desire to stop this ecological abomination. I was not in denial about the event, but I was surprised at how my own body responded to what I felt was an image that represented so much that was wrong with our time, our society, our nation, our lives, our minds, and our own bodies!

It just so happened that a few weeks ago Maxine had written to me and asked what I thought of focusing our next meeting on the body. Chris Arnesen, a body work practitioner, with a focus on movement and mind/body awareness, would be coming to our session, and might I find some poems that also focused on the body, and make some writing prompts based on that topic. And so I have indeed done just that. There is a document attached, and it consists of ten poems that focus on the body. I don't know if you will want to read them all, but I have composed some writing prompts based on them. As always, you may find your own promptings elsewhere and so on, but take a look at the poems, and see what you think of this handful of suggestions below.

You could write a piece (poetry or prose) in which you:

--focus on your hand or hands, or some other completely ordinary part of your bodily being, and you could pay enough specific attention to it so that it become extraordinary. See Keats, Whitman, Clifton, for examples.

--focus on your aging body, all the signs and manifestations of time, and your responses to that body. You could also imagine all the elders who have come before you down this aging pathway. See Paley, Clifton, and Marchant for examples.

--focus on the wounded body, the body in pain or illness, or the body that is missing some element it had before. This could belong your own body or that of another. See Clifton, Hass, and Levine for examples.

--focus on the body in balance or joy or transformation or just being itself. See Whitman, Paley, Wright, and Stafford for examples.

--focus on the body as it appears to you in dreams or other altered states of mind. See Levertov's poem for instance.

Now I know this reading sounds like a lot of “homework,” but I think each and all of the poems might actually help bring us to more awareness of the body in general, even if none actually prompts a specific piece of your writing. I also think also that the “inner” preparation of reading these poems might also provide a helpful harmonic to the body-focused exercises that Chris will bring to our meeting.

Chris has written a letter to the group, introducing herself and what she has in mind as possibilities for our meeting. It, along with the poems, accompanies this letter.

For now, and with all this in mind, let us just see what the schedule might look like for the day. If we do all that reading in advance, for instance, the “writing prompt” part of our day will be more compact, and that will make more room for Chris to work with us. So, here is what I propose:

9:30: Arrive and settle in.

10:00: Opening Meditation and Check In

10:45: Writing Prompt

11:00: Body Work with Christine Arnesen

12:00: Meditation and Writing Time (in silence)

1:15: Lunch (first half in silence, lunch is potluck and vegetarian)

2:00: Sharing of writing

3:30: Walking Meditation

4:15: Sharing responses to writings and day's activities

5:00: Announcements

5:20: Meditation

5:30: Cleanup and Departures

See you all soon. As ever, yours, in peace and friendship.

Fred Marchant
August 16, 2010
Fjmarchant@aol.com

Dear Veterans Writing Group Members,

Hello everyone. My name is Christine Arnesen and I am a body work practitioner with a focus on movement and mind/body awareness. I will be joining you on September 11th and I wanted to say a bit about my approach and what I might suggest we do during the day to more fully focus your attention on the body as you do your writing.

Fred's response to the "live feed" images of oil gushing forth in the Gulf of Mexico illustrates the way an event, even one that is outside our immediate experience, can impact us in quite profound ways. Each day, every day, what is going on around us is recorded in our bodies, sometimes with quite a visceral response, sometimes below our awareness, but still with potential to affect us. What registers from our response to our surroundings becomes a part of our bodies- our mind-body. Tapping into that mind-body awareness can enhance our understanding of ourselves, can generate more ease in one's body and spirit, and can be a potent fuel for personal expression.

What I hope to contribute to this writing group session are opportunities for increased awareness of the body and what is stored therein. To facilitate this, I am suggesting that we might do some chi gung (movement meditation); some guided dialogue with one's body and possibly a paired sharing about this with another person; some awareness and/or relaxation exercises; and possibly some very gentle hands-on massage. We might even form a conga line of giving and receiving shoulder and/or hand massage as a way of focusing on the body.

All of this will be done with an aim toward bringing your awareness and focus on the body to your writing and hopefully finding some lightness and enjoyment in the process. And of course, anyone can opt out of any activity or suggest some of their own.

In preparation, you might begin to bring your awareness once or twice during the day to the way your body responds to different situations or news events, or anything else.

I look forward to meeting you all,

Christine

Ten Poems about the Body
For the Veteran Writers Group Meeting in Sept. 2010

Assembled by Fred Marchant

1. This Living Hand

John Keats

This living hand, now warm and capable
 Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
 And in the icy silence of the tomb,
 So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
 That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
 So in my veins red life might stream again,
 And thou be conscience-calmed—see here it is—
 I hold it towards you.

2. from Song of Myself, section 24. Walt Whitman

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am
 touch'd from,
 The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
 This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of
 my own body, or any part of it,
 Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
 Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!
 Firm masculine colter it shall be you!
 Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you!
 You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life!
 Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you!
 My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
 Root of wash'd sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded
 duplicate eggs! it shall be you!
 Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
 Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
 Sun so generous it shall be you!
 Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!
 You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!
 Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
 Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounge in my
 winding paths, it shall be you!
 Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd,
 it shall be you.

3. Hand-Me-Downs**Grace Paley**

My love rests on the couch
in the sweater and bones of old age.

I have stopped reading to look at him I take
his hand I am shawled in my own somewhat
wrinkled still serviceable skin

No one knows what to do with these
hand-me-downs love them I suppose

weren't they worn in and out of
dignity by our mothers and
fathers even our children in
the grip of merciless genes will
wear these garments

may their old lovers greet and
touch them in the bare light
of that last beauty

4. poem to my uterus**Lucille Clifton**

you uterus
you have been patient
as a sock
while I have slipped into you
my dead and living children
now
they want to cut you out
stocking I will not need
where I am going
where I am going
old girl
without you
uterus
my bloody print
my estrogen kitchen
my black bag of desire
where can I go
barefoot
without you
where can you go
without me

Muslim 5. A Blessing***James Wright***

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
 Twilight bounds softly on the grass,
 And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
 Darken with kindness.
 They have come gladly out of the willows
 To welcome my friend and me.
 We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
 Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
 They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
 That we have come.
 They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
 There is no loneliness like theirs.
 At home once more,
 They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
 I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
 For she has walked over to me
 And muzzled my left hand,
 She is black and white,
 Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
 And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
 That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
 Suddenly I realize
 That if I stepped out of my body I would break
 Into blossom.

6. A Story About the Body***Robert Hass***

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, "I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy," and when he didn't understand, "I've lost both my breasts." The radiance that he carried around in his belly and chest cavity-like music-withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, "I'm sorry. I don't think I could." He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl-she must have swept them from the corners of her studio-was full of dead bees.

7. *Annals of Tai Chi: "Push Hands"*

Williams Stafford

In this long routine "Push hands,"
one recognizes force and yields, then
slides, again, again, endlessly like water,
what goes away, what follows, aggressive
courtesy till force must always lose,
lost in the seethe and retreat of ocean.

So does the sail fill, and air come
just so, because of what's gone. "Yes"
in all things, "Yes, come in if you
insist," and thus conducted find a way
out, *yin* following and becoming
by a beautiful absence its partner *yang*.

8. *The Horse*

Philip Levine

for Ichiro Kawamoto, humanitarian, electrician, & survivor of Hiroshima

They spoke of the horse alive
without skin, naked, hairless,
without eyes and ears, searching
for the stableboy's caress.
Shoot it, someone said, but they
let him go on colliding with
tattered walls, butting his long
skull to pulp, finding no path
where iron fences corkscrewed in
the street and bicycles turned
like question marks.

Some fled and
some sat down. The river burned
all that day and into the
night, the stones sighed a moment
and were still, and the shadow
of a man's hand entered
a leaf.

The white horse never
returned, and later they found
the stable boy, his back crushed
by a hoof, his mouth opened
around a cry that no one heard.

They spoke of the horse again
and again; their mouths opened
like the gills of a fish caught

above water.

Mountain flowers
burst from the red clay walls, and
they said a new life was here.

Raw grass sprouted from the cobbles
like hair from a deafened ear.
The horse would never return.

There had been no horse. I could
tell from the way they walked
testing the ground for some cold
that the rage had gone out of
their bones in one mad dance.

9. Palm Reading

Fred Marchant, *The Looking House*

Mine are the delicate hands of my mother.
The little finger reminds me of a snapable
chicken-wing. My knuckles ache, a nerve
is damaged, and my daily labor is soft,
sedentary, and devoid of callous.

When I was a student I shook the hand
of a poet I admired. It was soft, and I felt
significantly superior to him, I who knew
the world of hard men and heavy-lifting.
Now my hands are the same as his.

Even my penmanship has no firmness,
as if I lacked clarity of purpose.
Keats sometimes separated each letter
in a word, as if he wanted even the silences
within the words to be heard.

That haunting hand of his floats me
toward that final Roman room,
him staring at the wood grain of his bed,
falling into the swirl of age-lines,
feeling that nothing had ever quite gathered

into a hard-edged perfected form. Think Frederick, *freid-reich*, free and peaceful ruler,
son of the sullen working-class. Think
of how little time your delicate hands have left.

*10. Intrusion**Denise Levertov*

After I had cut off my hands
and grown new ones

something my former hands had longed for
came and asked to be rocked.

After my plucked out eyes
had withered, and new ones grown

something my former eyes had
wept for
came asking to be pitied.

SERE School 1968

Matt K. Wathen

I was on my hands and knees in a serpentine line of fellow prisoners, sorting rocks into piles according to size. Flight suits and boots without socks was our only protection from the Maine winter. Icy cold, occasional sleet and a steady drizzle only worsened our hunger and exhaustion in the prison compound. The dark days melted into moonless nights as we continued our rock sorting without rest. This routine was interrupted when a soggy airman was randomly selected for some new torture. I could only guess how long this endless succession of physical and psychological punishment had lasted and would last. Conversation between prisoners was prohibited and strictly enforced by the brutal guards. Any thought of escape seemed hopeless as our sad and demoralized group of POW's grudgingly continued forced labor, working in the freezing mud.

Suddenly a strange and welcome smell wafted throughout the camp. It was unmistakable. The meaty fragrance of hot soup replaced the damp musty stink of filthy flight suits and unwashed bodies. As everyone looked up, a huge cauldron steaming with that delicious mixture was heating over a fire in the corner of the compound. The guards screamed to get back to work as our mouths involuntarily started to water in anticipation of our first nourishment in many days. The agony of waiting followed as the soup was heating, and our appetites were coming to life. Thoughts of food trumped all the misery of the recent days and nights as our stomachs awoke, crying for sustenance.

At last we were slowly organized into an anxious line of ravenous men. We had to wait as tarnished ceramic bowls in dirty wet cardboard boxes were unloaded from a nearby shed. Then garage sale-looking unwashed spoons were rolled in by wheel barrow. The guards meticulously counted each bowl and spoon as if they had some intrinsic value. All eyes were on the cauldron as we awaited anything we could use to contain the precious soup and transport it to our mouths. It became obvious that our captors were intentionally delaying distribution of these needed items with the intent of causing more tension and painful waiting. Eventually we were handed utensils and bowls, however the soup was not yet ready so a further delay was thrust upon us as we stood patiently like circus animals waiting for the trainer to feed us.

Time was now our enemy as the guards handed out individual spoons and soup bowls only after each of us gave our name, rank, and serial number followed by twenty pushups. Two guards were carrying out this punitive ritual in the slowest possible manner. Some pitiful men were having difficulty completing the pushups causing a further delay. Anxiety rose as one roadblock after another prevented us from putting that rich smelling liquid into our mouths. All thought the soup must now be ready as the last man completed the mandatory harassment before receiving his utensils.

The pathetic line of ragged souls stood now with bowl and spoon wondering when we would be allowed to eat. The guards were just standing there, as if one more event must occur before the food was served. Finally one stationed himself behind the cauldron, ladle in hand as if ready to serve. We stood there with growing impatience as we awaited permission to approach the soup cauldron and gulp down whatever we could.

We then saw what the wait was all about. A senior officer with three stars on his cover was striding across the camp to the cauldron. I think most of us thought he was going to make a big production about feeding us our first food, probably spouting off about how generous and considerate they were to prisoners. What a surprise we received as he marched over, lifted his right leg up high in the air and kicked over the cauldron of delicious smelling soup. The delectable smelling liquid ran over the frozen mud and rocks, steaming on the ground. In a loud German-accented voice, the officer declared that we didn't deserve such a reward for the puny amount of work we had accomplished.

How can I describe the feeling that each of us had at that moment. We had all suffered physically and psychologically during this time, but this hit us harder than all the other abuses. Gumby shoulders with heads hanging down, we dropped our useless containers for the soup we would not receive and returned to our hands and knees, to once again sort rocks.

A RELATIONSHIP - MY LEGS AND I

Matt K. Wathen

Sixty seven years we've lived together, mostly in harmony. We resisted the polio that crippled our neighbor up the street when I was five. At the time, I couldn't comprehend that I might have to depend on a leg brace for the rest of my life like my cousin Larry. He was a random victim of that dread disease in the late 40's and early 50's; dodged that bullet.

The next challenge we faced was that nasty accident during second grade when I scraped the skin off my right side as my little scooter careened along the cement wall. Burning like all get out, I didn't want the methiolate, but that's what we got and it eventually did the trick-healing without infection.

Those teenage years were quite a challenge for you and I. First was the varicose veins; they were prominent but caused no pain. So why did Dr. Ivy say I needed them stripped? You had no complaints then, and despite some unsightly bulges they've never caused us any problems in all these years.

Then we had to endure that needless hospitalization in the surgical ward for our hip pain. After four days good old Dr. Ivy was informed by a physician who had a little more expertise that it was only bursitis-go home and rest for a week and you'll be just fine he said.

The last year of high school surprised both of us-growing six inches in a year! Our shared leg pain at night couldn't be relieved as the bones kept getting longer and longer. Of course we couldn't have been more pleased when the sudden growth spurt finally propelled me to normal height. I still have the stretch marks on our hips from that crazy year.

The early college years were painful for both of us-stinging sunburn on the back of our small but strong ambulatory limbs. I wasn't any happier than you after getting drunk, sleeping in the middle of the day on the beach with our poor legs roasting. I will say that it was worth it that time Bobbie, the head cheerleader, offered to rub Noxema on them to relieve the painful burning.

Those Navy years were when we really started to get it together. The skinny but strong nature of our legs became an asset for running, especially the obstacle course and the cross country trail in Pensacola during Officer Candidate School. It wasn't until our early twenties that I could wear shorts without feeling embarrassed as our legs gained muscle and bulk. Now we were more of a team, supporting each other. I was taking better care of you with exercise and you were helping me perform in the athletic realm. I realized my earlier antagonism toward you for being so skinny was not warranted. Now there was comfort, cooperation and mutual respect in our relationship.

For many years we've continued to work together: running, both trails and marathons, cycling, backpacking and hiking. You've never let me down, allowing me to always finish the race or event we started. We did have a little problem five years ago when the medial meniscus was torn and repaired, but we came back stronger than ever.

Now I have to wonder how long can we keep up these physical pursuits; pushing and pushing. Will you start to falter first or will my heart and lungs finally balk at the exertion I keep demanding. I have noticed you've gotten skinny again although you've lost little strength. I won't hold it against you as I did when we were young. I still appreciate all you've done for me over these many years. You are the finest pair of legs anyone could have wished for!

ear school

Dennis Fritzing

i think
i'm going to send my ear
back to ear school
to be educated--
it hears these birds
and can't tell me
which ones they are.

and these eyes
need to go to eye school
to learn the names
of the flowers.

leg school
is an appropriate choice
for my legs and knees--
it seems they have forgotten
how to work together,
and i find myself
stumbling
or else plodding along.

belly school
for my round belly.

arch school
for my flat feet.

yes, all the parts
of my body need to go
to some school or other,
to be whipped into shape
and returned to me
tanned and fit,
and twenty years old
again.

Tipping Toward Asunder

DonEdward Morris

Before I could be me, in fact before everyone could be anyone, a *hieros gamos* or heavenly marriage had to be performed which brought together the three animating forces of human life: the Mind the Body and the Soul. The Great One's booming command was not heard because nothing, like ears, were working yet those Words were etched forever into the Mind-Body-Soul's archetypal memory, "WHAT I HAVE JOINED LET NOTHING TEAR ASUNDER."

The three of us, all wrapped into one trinity, were whisked off to begin our journey of a lifetime.

There is much about the story that I will leave out. Suffice it to say that all of us matured into a happy healthy male human being.

During the time of maturing, the Mind took precedence in my troika followed closely by or sometimes even surpassed by Soul. I speak primarily from the voice of Mind with intermittent input of Soul. Body is essentially nonverbal but has its way of speaking up nevertheless. In retrospect, Body is like the wife who feels taken for granted and who suspects her Mind loves Soul more than her.

It should come as no surprise, then, that on one hot summer day in July when I woke up in the best of moods Body was heading out the door. It's not uncommon that when a couple separates one party has been quietly planning to leave for a long time. For the other partner the announcement comes as a complete surprise and can a met with great anger. In my case, which is also typical, the response was denial. "Oh, it's nothing. Body will be back after it gets over its little snit."

Nevertheless, Body didn't come back. Slowly, over years, starting with a small limp as the left leg went passive aggressive and wouldn't keep up, it kept pulling further and further away. "What's going on, Body?" I went to see a medium, the person who knows the language of the Body and can translate its message, a medical doctor. The first one said all tests were negative. The second one mumbled something about lead poisoning (Soul thought this was very funny since I have an introverted saturnine nature, lead is the element associated with Saturn). The third medium-doctor opined that my condition was hysteria (Mind couldn't stop laughing about this one since it had studied psychology and knew its personality was the furthest thing from hysterical). Finally, a doctor decided to have an MRI machine do the translating for Body. "MRI says you have mild MS."

What the hell is MS? Multiple Sclerosis is only an irrelevant label in a dead language. I (meaning Mind) wanted to know why Body had moved out on me. Did I do something to piss it off? Had I been inattentive? After all, I had played football, gone to gyms and pumped iron, swam, ran, road bikes, took hikes, eaten right and didn't smoke. What more did Body want?

True, of our triumvirate Body was always "getting the hindmost" Mind and Soul were always "over here". Body was "over there". So what if I didn't do yoga or meditate? So I didn't listen to you, Body. Is that a divorcable offense? Remember, nothing is supposed to tear us asunder.

Soul, since it was the one of our threesome that animated and gave us meaning stepped up. Rather than leading through movement Soul thought mythology and poetry would be a more appropriate route.

After the medics named my condition MS, I focused on my gimpy leg. Then I learned about the Greek God Hephaestus who also had a wounded leg. He was a God or the archetypal pattern for the wounded creator and artist (and, for my purposes as a Jungian psychologist, the wounded healer). I now had standing among the archetypes. Temperamentally, Hephaestus was a peacemaker. Gentle and introverted, he was sensitive to conflict, and often took the role of peacemaker and facilitating the union between the masculine and the feminine. If I had to have a debilitating condition like MS at least it was a relevant one.

I also found a poem by Rilke which I called "The Poem of My Life" titled "The Men Watching". The closing lines are:

*Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows
by being defeated decisively
by constantly greater beings.*

There was much more in mythology, folk tales and poetry that brought a certain amount of light and serenity into my life. I often sat alone in my attic room gazing out the window watching the kids playing on the street and the leaves waving and trees. I started remembering how I played so freely as a boy. I could go anywhere as a man. I was nothing without Body, my partner that I missed so much. Then an image or a line of verse would mercifully come to mind and I no longer envied the outside or grieved for Body.

Body, however, was not far away. When we separated we stayed in the same house. Body in the basement. Mind in the attic. Fortunately, Soul lived everywhere. Finally Soul got fed up and demanded that the two of us come together for a mandatory meeting.

Soul: This is ridiculous. You two are sulking around like kids who didn't get what they wanted. You pretend that you don't even live in the same house. You've stopped communicating.

Body (looking at Mind): Looks exhausted, lonely, desperate, angry.

Mind (looking at Body): Looks exhausted, lonely, desperate, angry. Probably angry at me. What did I do, anyway? It's always the Mind's fault, always "in the head".

Soul (after long periods of silence): Mind, what do you have to say to Body?

Mind: (looking on the verge of exploding) OK, here goes. Why did you leave me? Now I can't do anything. I'm stuck in this wheelchair all day. At least when I had enough of your legs to walk with a cane I looked cool. You embarrassed me in front of people like that time I fell over or melted down at the poetry reading. I did everything I could to take care of you once we got MS. I went to the gym, I went to a special swimming class. I went to Physical Rehab. I went to MS Society meetings and looked on their website. I even went to a body worker. You stopped me from driving. You even stopped me from doing something as simple as writing. I can only sign my name with an X. I used to love hot weather and now heat turns me to jello. What are you doing down in the basement? Having your friends over for wild parties? You're a worthless piece of shit. You don't know how hard it is been for me. Let's just split up for good.

Body (sitting up straight looking lovingly at Mind) I remember the day that MS invaded me, it was like a knife stabbing me in the back. I didn't have any real defense against it and I still don't. What I do have, however, thanks to what I've learned from you by the way, is the ability to fool him with my words. I'm in constant negotiations with MS. He is a greedy bastard and wants to take all the functions but I charm him and sweettalk him into taking only little bits. I tell him he can have this small function now "for free" and I'll make sure he gets a lot more later. He's so dumb he believes me. That's why your disability has progressed so slowly. What he lacks in brains he makes up for in a determination. He's always in my face and I'm always on guard having to change the subject and distract him. Our confrontations get loud and crazy sometimes so I moved downstairs to preserve your sanity at least.

Mind: You're not so bad after all. You are on my side. I thought that when you moved downstairs with MS that you two were together. You really have a lot for me. Thank you.

Body: Thank you too. We have both done the best we can do.

Mind: Do you think we could live together again?

Body: No, that's not possible. We just have to know we love each other and not even MS can tear us asunder.

My Ornament

Ben Bac Sierra

Like all of us, I have not only loved my entire body, but also I have lusted through and over my body. I have imagined it as a strong and heroic body and continue to shape it as such. Little boy dreams never die.

Regardless of whether I was fifteen or whether I will ever be forty-five, I challenge my body to live. Now, however, by writing about this, I wonder about the purpose for all of this.

I am vain. I am selfish. I excite myself. I like to be an I, and I know that it is my body that first and foremost represents me as an “I.” Yes, I may be short and spiky, brown and bullish, but my body, the way I have trained it, guards me from warring eyes. And because I have loved and lusted to create what it is, it rewards me with a special style and stance. Straight neck, round shoulders, the prowl of a panther.

It is because of this confidence and love of my muscles that I can be free and bold with my ideas. It is because of my dancing on the streets that I can more freely open up my mind. Nietzsche said that a day without dancing is a day that is wasted. I believe I must be in tune with my body in order to be in sync with my soul.

My love for body then helps me to open up to you—to give to you. I want you to take pleasure in the ornament before you. I pay respect to you by offering you my art, an art that does not require us to speak or search for words or abstractions. I offer you my body as a substitute for drawn out discussions and uncomfortable silence. My body tells you this story:

I manicure my hands so I can touch you softly.

I shave my face so I can kiss you with grace.

I strengthen my legs, arms, and shoulders so that I can lift you to your destiny.

My lungs are here to breathe your breath.

I am strong for your desires. I am built to be your house.

Allow my bones to smile your smile.

December 4 Prompt

Miki Kashtan

November 15, 2010

Dear friends,

Winter is upon us, the days are getting shorter, soon it will be the longest night of the year. This is a time of drawing inwards to reflect and prepare for the light coming back.

To support our work together, I am calling on two poems that have inspired me. The first is by Hafiz. It speaks to me of the opening inwards to ourselves.

Don't surrender your loneliness
So quickly.
Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you
As few human
Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
Has made my eyes so soft,
My voice
So tender,

My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.

The second is by Dawna Markova. It speaks to me of reaching out to life, coming out to encounter the possibilities, to make our mark.

I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
Of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
To allow my living to open me,
To make me less afraid,
More accessible,
To loosen my heart
Until it becomes a wing,
A torch, a promise

I choose to risk my significance;

To live so that which
 Came to me as seed
 Goes to the next as blossom
 And that which
 Came to me as blossom,
 Goes on as fruit.

The interplay between inner and outer, the courage to be exactly where we are, to cultivate our fullest longing, and to emerge and play our part in full in the world – that is the playing field I am hoping us to enter on the 5th.

The schedule as I am familiar with it is below to help orient us.

9:30 – 10:00	Morning schmooze
10:00 – 10:15	Opening, meditation
10:15 – 11:00	Introductions
11:00 – 11:15	Announcements etc.
11:15 – 12:45	Writing
12:45 – 1:45	Lunch
1:45 – 3:00	Sharing our work
3:00 – 3:20	Walking meditation
3:20 – 4:45	Responding to writing
4:45 – 5:00	Closing meditation

I haven't been to the last two meetings, and I look forward to the magic arising again from our coming together.

Miki, steward of the day

Gloria In Excelsis Santa

DonEdward Morris

2000 years since he left us,
ascending to eternal life.
Jesus Christ, Savior, Prince of Peace,
only 33 when he passed
in the prime of life, fit, robust
towering above the multitude
at 6 ft. tall. Weighing in at 143.

What has He done with His everlasting life?
How has He passed the time?
A man who would never die,
but a man nonetheless, like all of us
through the years He grew rounder in girth
and bigger behind. His flowing locks
had turned white as snow and He let
His beard go wintry as well.
His sandals fell apart and His robe
turned to tatters. Yet being the son of God
He was never without something to wear.

He had outgrown everything except
the last thing hanging in the closet:
a great redcoat with ermine trim,
ballooning a red pants to match, a pointy
little cap with cute white puff at the tip
and shiny black boots leftover from the Russian Army.

Though planet Earth was His favorite domain
somehow His people's will had gone its own way.
No one was interested in Peace because it didn't make money
and the only Salvation humans cared about was personal.
Christianity had lost out to Capitalism.
He saw folks climbing Jacob's ladder
throwing off those ahead in the spirit of me first.
He heard them grunting with big bags of money
they couldn't live in heaven without.

His original reason for being forgotten,
Jesus looked for a new kind of work.

If I can't bring Peace and Salvation He said
maybe I can bring Presents to the children instead.

In that instant the Messiah became the Santa Claus.
He traded in His disciples for reindeer.
Instead of walking He flew through the air
in a sleigh.

And the people sang:

Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus, Santa Claus.

Untitled

Michael Parmeley

I sit quietly on my deck and
watch the sun track across the sky.

It's almost winter now.
The sun is low and when I can see it at all,
It offers me little heat.

Darkness seeps into my body.
I'm getting old.
Loneliness seeps into my body too.

But still, I'm not yet ready to die.

So, I move, make a fire, have something to eat,
And try to get warm.

"Go deeper," she says and adds,
"Maybe that will help."

Not A Typical Flight

Matt Wathen

I'm in my jeans and T shirt, as I pass through the rear gate to the Alameda Naval Air Station. The security guard salutes, seeing the blue officer sticker on the driver's side of my windshield. I'm not in uniform, since that is only required on the monthly drill weekend. This was something I always loved about the reserves; arrive in my Wranglers, throw on the flight suit, fly the hop, change back to civvies, head out. I've arrived an hour before my scheduled low level flight with my wingman, Ken Johnson. It is a quiet Tuesday morning as I climb the ladder (stairs) topside to the Officer spaces. The operations yeoman tells me that Mr. Johnson was called in by his airline and will not be on the flight, so I will go out as a solo aircraft.

The mandatory call to meteorology for weather has been made, and it is forecast to be clear the entire way with light winds. It should be a beautiful day to fly. The route is preplanned or as we say "canned", so I only need to sign the flight plan as I check for any notices or changes that would affect the flight. Next I pick up one of the low level charts that have been cut and annotated by us on one of our drill weekends. In the small room next to the paraloft, I don my "shit hot" flight suit, custom made in the Philippines with the Golden Eagle squadron insignia on the chest and the Commander silver oak leaves embroidered on the shoulders. I zipper up the G suit, fit into the survival vest, and pick up my custom helmet with my name on the back, my nomex gloves and my old salty knee board. The transition is complete from casual civilian to military pilot.

Now properly attired, I stroll over to the maintenance department to check the log book for the airplane I'll take today. After six years flying these same aircraft, I know the individual idiosyncrasies of each one of these birds. Today I have side number 304, which is a little slow to accelerate to military power and has had hydraulic leaks for quite some time. I check back two weeks in the log to make sure there are no new problems. It looks clean, so I sign for the airplane, as one of the maintenance chiefs kids me about my non regulation haircut.

Exiting the maintenance shack, I look across the tarmac at the unobstructed million dollar view of the San Francisco skyline and Bay Bridge, silhouetted against a baby blue sky. The plane captain stands by as I preflight the A-7, pylons clean, no ordnance. I climb the three steps to the cockpit, safety the ejection seat, before the plane captain helps me strap in. Take off checks have been completed, as I taxi south for Runway 31. Positioning for takeoff to the northwest, I see the Bay Bridge straight ahead, reminding me of the good old days when guys flew under the bridge without losing their wings. Just as Departure Control vectors me over the Sacramento Delta, the sun is in the perfect position to project the shadow of my airplane over the water as I climb out. The sleek dark jet in the water becomes smaller and smaller as I gain altitude.

Flying over the Sierra, my thoughts drift to a mind game I've played many times, usually in this same area on solo flights. I'm east of the mountains and well above any

vertical terrain. There are no other planes around. I close my eyes. I hear the low roar of the jet engine. I can barely hear the persistent rush of air from the pressurization system. The radio is silent. I feel the light weight of the snug- fitting helmet which was molded for my head. The oxygen mask is dangling off the right side of my helmet, slightly pulling on that side of my face. The smoked visor of my helmet is down, muting the light on my closed eyes. I can feel the pressure of the shoulder straps, even as I sit motionless with the lap belt holding my body firmly against the ejection seat. My right hand is lightly wrapped around the control stick, and my left hand is resting on the throttle. My feet are barely touching the rudder pedals in a neutral position. I put all thoughts out of my head. I am present, heightening my auditory and tactile senses without any distractions of sight. I do this for perhaps 20 or 30 seconds, not even thinking that anything could happen to me or the aircraft in that space of time, as I fly without sight.

I open my eyes without any idea how to fly the airplane. It is as if a different person was transported into the cockpit with no aviation experience, needless to say no idea how to fly a high performance, single seat military jet. All of a sudden it is not me who is strapped into the cockpit seat. I have exchanged identities with that poor inexperienced guy who has found himself trapped in this strange machine without a clue. I am now that other person with no idea where I am. I'm confined in this sophisticated aircraft with all these instruments staring me in the face, and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to operate the radio. The plane seems to be moving along at a high speed, and I don't know how to control it. I don't see any airports around, and even if I did, how would I slow this thing down and land? I can even start to feel the panic as my face is heating up and there is a pressure building in my head.

Suddenly I'm back to myself. The fantasy ends. This non ordinary reality probably didn't last more than a minute, but it seemed so real. Without drugs, I've managed to do a pretty good job of bending the actual into another realm. I'm no longer that panicked soul caught in another reality. Now I'm once again that Naval Aviator with over 1500 hours in this aircraft. The A-7 Corsair II is like an extension of my body. I intuitively know just how hard I can yank on the stick during air to air combat. I can feel the slightest change in airspeed during a carrier approach. I can rendezvous and maintain perfect formation at night in the worst weather. I have flown combat, dodging anti-aircraft fire while delivering ordnance on target. I am a senior pilot in a squadron of combat seasoned aviators.

Oh My Brother

Claire Morris

You were born into the Great Depression, though not into its poverty. Your poverty was your mother's illness. Her milky food, the juices of her fruits, poisoned her, covered her body with hot, itching hives. Hungry as you were, you could not nurse. She could not hold you, sing to you, rejoice in you, her firstborn.

Weeks passed before the swelling subsided, before you could recognize her as the one whose face you were born knowing, the one to whom you were bound as your your own mother, your first other.

For three years you lived as prince of your realm, only child, center of all love and concern. Then I was born. Your kaleidoscope turned. Your life had to be shared with a newborn, a girl-child whose eyes didn't work well, a sister who stole your parents' attention.

You played alone.

Later, like many young boys, you sneaked outside at night to meet a secret club of classmates. Over and over, you climbed down the apricot tree outside our parents' window, unaware they watched you disappear into the midnight jungle of our backyard creek. "Don't you ever tell anyone about this," you warned me more than once, for you knew I knew what you were doing.. "If you tell, I'll drown you in the creek."

I believed you. I haven't told till now.

You ran away from home one time, with a loaf of bread and me. We traveled six blocks north, till you got hungry, rang the doorbell of Mother's friend, Charlotte, asked for a snack.

As you grew, you stayed up in the night, took radios apart, put them together again, sent for Heath Kits, let me find radio reception on a crystal, told me I could play with little balls of liquid mercury In my hands. No sport or friend or hobby meant more to you than math, physics, electronics, the philosophy of science—subjects our family didn't know about, subjects you could speak of for hours, forever. I marveled at your mysterious language, when you tried to describe an oscilloscope, a condenser, a unified field theory, relativity.

You talked. I listened. We didn't talk. We argued. You judged, were certain of what was right, wrong, important, trivial. All that you pronounced to be of no consequence, you scorned. I stayed away. You stayed away.

Farther and farther away. Away and away.

One day, when I was forty-seven, I needed you. I was ill, in transition, facing loss. I needed you to take me to our family cabin to heal. You were a pilot. You had an airplane. You could fly me to our mountain place of beauty, rest, re-creation. Mother asked if you would. You said yes.

On a summer afternoon, we climbed into your Cessna, with your knowledge and your expertise, with my shredded heart and my ignorance of what might be my life's next turning. With a practiced sense of order, you prepared for takeoff, informed the control tower of our flight plan, and lifted us from the ground of our realities. After arcing over the San Francisco Bay, we headed south, winging low over the Tahachapies.

I knew you would soon interrogate me on issues you could use as venom—nuclear weapons, nuns, mystical experience, pacifism—endless possibilities. True to your habits, you began. “I suppose you think nuclear weapons should be abolished.” I opened my mouth to say “Yes!” but heard another voice, the sound of my own questions: “Why answer? Why speak at all?” You altered your course, saying, “I can't stand pacifists—their ridiculous protests, their silly, theatrical displays.” I said nothing. You tried a third time: “And you, a nun! What a cushy, secure life you've had. Do you know anything about life in the world?”

Over the motor's rage, through the wind's howl, I heard you, heard you through all the years we did not speak to each other, heard you through the shouting we had called debate, heard you wanting something else, heard myself wanting something else.

So I said, mysteriously, found words to say, “Secure? Cushy? In some ways, yes. In other ways, my monastic years have been deeply wounding. I've been in psychotherapy for seven years—and I'm not finished.”

You began to cry. I began to cry. We wept all the way to Ontario.

When we disembarked, we embraced. You said, “We've wasted years of time and energy, staying away. Who knows how long we have left? How do we want to live it?”

True Nature

William Larsen

It does not matter if you are born of vampires
 or a virgin birth
 suckled on the milk of human kindness
 or a raging father's drunken cum;
 your goodness precedes you
 it cannot be lost or found,
 bound,
 or given away,
 so don't believe the world's lies
 based on doubters' fears
 they are meant to keep you small,
 yet before ether formed to house the stars
 you ARE the universe unfolding within itself

no god can deny you

why break your bones in useless acts
 of sad contrition?
 make peace with your sins
 they mark the pathway to your liberation,
 better to fuck yourself blind
 than doubt the vision that brought you here
 remember,
 your goodness precedes you
 and once you realize your true nature
 there's not one fiber of your being
 that can be broken
 or
 made whole

The Present

I

There's no one to blame,
 the young, the old,
 phantoms in the sky, demons below,
 fair weather friends, evil-minded foes;
 refugees all, who is not a casualty
 of life's war upon itself?
 little wonder then, our need
 for enemies

on which to hang our failures
and our grief

II

enough already,
let's finally admit it
that face on our voodoo dolls
is our own
the fiend of our worst nightmare
glaring at us not through a window
but a mirror;
and that's just the good news,
for with blame goes hope,
so don't run your meter
waiting for a last minute cavalry charge
pray as you will but understand
one thing--
your sin-absorbing saviors may save you
from hell
but never from yourself,
life is a transaction and the bill
must be paid

III

listen, can you hear?
the game has begun, and
there is just one rule:
if you want to live
raise yourself from the dead,
don't wait for the droppings of
some wayward stork,
or a Christmas elf
in the ashes of your fireplace,
the gift has already been given
it was opened it at birth
as you unwrapped yourself from the womb
howling in celebration;
your present is your presence
"Oh, look, a shiny new bike.
It will take us to places we have never been
now all we have to do is learn
to ride."

The Returnee

Michael Wong

Somewhere in the '90's, I took a job with the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. Among my duties was contacting local organizers around the country to help them start local campaigns against JROTC military training in their local high schools. Thus it was that I happened to be talking on the phone to a young man, actually a high school teenager, in the Midwest.

“Oh, I'll definitely start a campaign against Army JROTC here,” he said. “I hate the Army! I hate the officers, I hate the politicians, I hate them all! They're assholes. They don't give a shit about us, they don't care if we die, they just care about themselves.” He went on and on in this vein, with very little prompting from me. Something about his rant felt very familiar, but I couldn't quite fit the picture together.

All at once I realized; he sounds just like us! He sounded exactly like a Viet Nam era anti-war vet! Not only that, his anger sounded fresh, like we did during the war. Even though this was peacetime, when he spoke about dying and betrayal by the politicians, he spoke in the present tense, as if the war was happening right now.

Being the career social worker that I was, I asked him about his anger, where it came from. He repeated his feelings about officers and politicians, but didn't exactly say I was black who'd been in the military? Friends? Had he heard personal stories about war that influenced him? No on all counts. More probing produced nothing.

Finally I just came out and said it - “The reason I'm asking is because you sound exactly like us. Specifically, you sound exactly like we did during the Viet Nam war.”

There was a long pause. Finally he said, “From early childhood, I've always had flashbacks to a past life as an American soldier in Viet Nam.”

I was stunned. Although I believe in reincarnation, the thought that our soldiers killed in Viet Nam could return and be here now had never occurred to me. Yet, 20 years had passed, and here was a young man who vibed exactly as we had, and claimed to have come right back immediately to do what he had not been able to do in his past life - protest against the war that he hated so much.

He said that his most vivid memory of his last life was when he had been shot and was lying on the ground dying. His last thought was not of the enemy or of his family, but of how much he hated the Army and the officers and the war and the politicians, and of how he blamed them for his dying and everything else. Then he died.

This young man told me that his driving passion in this life was to grow up and be old enough to somehow protest the war and the military and get back at the politicians who made him and everyone else suffer so much.

After that phone call, the young man indeed went on to organize an anti-JROTC campaign in his high school.

A few months later, I left that job and never had contact with the young man again. But given the course of national and world events since, I have no doubt that this young man has had plenty of big opportunities to fulfill his dream.

Eulogy for the Holocene

Joe Lamb

Armed with nothing but the arrogance
of my humility, I sit with my daughter
on the root crown of our redwood tree
and mark the passing
of the Holocene.

As epochs go
it was a great one,
the Goldilocks epoch,
not too hot, and not too cold,
for 12,000 years
the temperature was
just right.

Because we were blessed
with just the right mix
of sun, rain, and snow,
our tribe of big headed apes
wandered from savanna to cave—
to everywhere on Earth.

Under the benevolent indifference
of Nature's reign
we muddled our way
from wattle and dab

to megalopolis

to space station.

Our number swelled
from scattered clans
to this almost conscious
super-organism,
counting on its 68 billion fingers
and looking around
with its 13.6 billion eyes.

It's not clear how,
be we've arrived
to dawn of the Anthropocene,
the Epoch of Man.
The rules are changing
now that Nature is no longer in charge.
From here on out
there exists no meaningful boundary
between self and other.

In this the Epoch
of the mind of man,
all wars—including the war
against Nature—are waged
against our self.

With no where to run
from the gathering battle
against our collective hubris,
arm yourself with a quiver
of unanswerable questions,
steal the sword
from Orion's belt.

Names have been changed to protect....me

Making The List

Gregory Ross

Tuesday, July 13th. It started with Dr. Dandelion, Chairman of the Department of Medicine. We talk, what I have come to call a "Hallway Meeting." Issues are discussed quickly, statements are made; nothing happens: hospital politics. Dr. Dandelion asks if I have met Dr. Patch, an Acupuncturist and M.D who is starting an Integrative Medicine Clinic. The other doctor with him, who I have never met and won't make eye contact with me, smirks and says, "She studied in China". I have no idea why he seems both hostile and intimidated. Dr. Dandelion says he will connect Dr. Patch and I. Nothing comes of it, although I have a name and a possibility. I ask around. No one seems to know of a Dr. Patch or an Integrative Medicine Clinic.

Sunday, July, 18th Celebrate my sixty third birthday with Peggy and Nick. Went to see an animated feature. At best Peggy tolerates them, Nick is ambivalent. It was a true present.

Monday, July, 19th I actually turn sixty three. I take the day off work and Peggy and I drive to Calistoga for a soak.

Tuesday, July, 20th I remind the program director that my evaluation is overdue. It is supposed to happen in April. She sets up a date later in the week but cancels for an administrative meeting.

Friday, July, 23rd I remind her again. After a few more false starts, the meeting happens. As usual she gives me good marks. Nervously, she says, "I am sorry, Greg, but you are on a lay off list." I find myself saying, "I am not surprised. Whatever happens I want you to know this is the best job I ever had and I have enjoyed working for you. No matter what happens it has been a good run." She seems surprised by my reaction. I am surprised by my reaction.

Monday, July, 26th I learn that two counselors and two case managers are also on the list. Five people out of a staff of 14, not a good sign.

Friday, August, 20th I convince the woman who keeps my long hair neatly trimmed that I am serious about cutting it off. She is more upset than I am. She braids my hair; cuts it off and trims up the remaining hair. She is even more upset when I tell her to do the same to the beard. I leave with ten inches of braided head hair and four inches of braided beard hair. I go home and affix them to the top of a coat hanger and hang them from my rear

view mirror. Most people at work don't notice. A couple ask if I got new glasses. One saw it right away.

Friday, September 10th, I talk with the Human Resources Job Development Specialist, to find work somewhere else in the Medical Center. Problem here is that I am the only Acupuncturist. I have all the seniority and no place to bump. When she finds out that I have been unable to get into the retirement plan in 18.5 years of work she says, "Well, that is not right!" I like this woman. She asks if I am willing to take a cut in pay. I tell her that to get into the retirement program I would take a job filing, sweeping floors and doing windows in the Newark clinic for minimum wage. She smiles and says, "I certainly hope it doesn't come to that."

Saturday, September 11th I miss the Veteran's Writing Group because I am working on reports to various department heads and other powerful people.

Wednesday, September, 15th a young woman walks into my clinic and introduces herself as Barbi Matell. No wonder I couldn't find Dr. Patch. We discuss the Integrative Medicine clinic. She tells me it is to be staffed by volunteer acupuncturists. Not just any acupuncturists; the first two names she mentions are famous state wide. I try not to glare at her when I say, "Well, I am on a lay off list." She actually says, "That concerns me, how will you support yourself while volunteering." Once again I restrain myself. Clients start to come in and she exits quickly. Why pay me when she is doing it for free. My wife reminds me that as a doctor the hospital can bill for her services. My Sicilian genes scream: she kneecapped me.

Friday, September, 17th, One of the two acupuncturists she mentioned calls. We know each other peripherally, although he is prone to act as if we are long lost friends. He wants to come by and talk. We set up a meeting at my clinic for a week later.

Friday, September, 24th. The well known acupuncturist stops by. Before he leaves I impress upon him how much Dr. Matell and the impending Integrative Medicine Clinic could not have come into existence without the work I did. He agrees that it was me who worked for three years to get the Policies and Procedures changed to allow treatments beyond just Chemical Dependency; to allow both inpatient and outpatient acupuncture treatments. It was me who got treatments allowed for all staff. It was me who struggled to get referral and billing processes set up and put into the Medical Center's computers. He heard and acknowledged it was me who went before the Medical Executive Board to present the possibility of these changes. I was not without friends; I had Doctors, Nurses, P.As, O.T.s, P.T.s, even administrators supporting me. He acknowledged that took a lot of hard work.

Friday, October 22nd I pass out forms to clients and ask them to write what they think about the closing of acupuncture if I am laid off. I tell them that Tuesday, November, 30th the Board of Trustees meets and that it has a public comments agenda at the end of the meeting. Thirty people fill out the form by the 30th. I call a graduate who has gone on to become a nationally known speaker on the African American Community and AIDS. He

claims the program saved his life. He is a very powerful speaker, reasonable and articulate.

Friday, October, 29th I get an email from Ramon “Bud” McLeod[real name], Editor in Chief at Acupuncture Today. He states that he has submitted my work for “Best Commentary” in the Jesse M. Neal Awards; what he calls the “Pulitzers” of the business to business trade publications. I look them up. They are a big deal. He goes on to say he submitted them because, “yours is an authentic voice and an important one.” They are down 90 given out in New York City in March of 2011. Evidently in the arena of competitive writing, I am a good sprinter; long distances, not so much.

Tuesday, November, 16th at the staff meeting Dr. Platinum, the medical director of our program, speaking about the organizing that some of us are doing; [that would be me, the other people seem paralyzed] goes on a rant about how “We” have to be careful, that it is like a war “up there”, meaning upper level administration, and if “We” come down on the wrong side “We” will suffer. I think; What!?! Does he have a mouse in his pocket; what is this “We”. I find myself saying to him, “Dr. Platinum, I’ve been in a real war so this analogy is not one I am happy with but, to stay in it, here is my situation: I am trying to cross a mine field, with snipers in the trees, in broad day light, in my underwear, my only weapon a plastic fork with one tine left unbroken. I got nothing to lose”.

Wednesday, November, 17th I return to the woman who cuts my hair and get a closer hair cut and my beard turned into a goatee. I hate it. Most people tell me I look a lot better, younger, cleaner. Someone wonders if I got new glasses.

Monday, November, 22nd through Friday, November 26th I write and rewrite and rewrite until I whittle it down to a one page missive addressed to the Board of Trustees and the Medical Executive Committee. It gives a short version of the 18.5 year history of Acupuncture at the Medical Center: MY HISTORY. It quotes three studies that show how acupuncture has saved other hospitals money and mentions there are hundreds more studies. It lists other hospitals nation wide that have acupuncture available. It quotes a New England Journal of Medicine article that estimated one in three adults used “unconventional therapy” to the tune of 10.3 Billion dollars in 1990. It sights an FDA study that estimates 9 to 12 million acupuncture patient visits in 1993. I email a copy to all the members of the Board of Trustees and the Medical Executive Committee as well as to Dr. Matell. It will help her more than me but, I want acupuncture to remain at the Hospital, even if I am not doing it.

Friday, November, 24th I email the head of Standards and Development of the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Health Organizations, an organization that can close down a hospital and ask for a copy of the standards and criteria of treatment for Integrative Medicine, if such things exist. I suggest that if they are in the works I would like to be considered for the panel and give an abbreviated resume, including my national standing as a columnist in Acupuncture Today. What have I got to lose.

Tuesday, November, 30th I go upstairs to the meeting room and sign up to speak. One notable item of Board business is brought up by the Chief of Human Resources; she

suggests that the lay off notices be postponed until after the holidays. A couple of Board members have a problem with that.

Open session starts. The first person to speak is our Union Rep. She give the party line, then urges the Board members to go down to the clinics and talk to the workers and clients. The graduate speaks. He is eloquent, focused and powerful. A client speaks. In her three minutes she uses the words acupuncture or acupuncturist 17 times. I get up right after her and introduce myself as “The Acupuncturist”. This gets a big laugh. Maybe because it was the 18th time they heard the word in 3.25 minutes. I remind doctors on the Board that once they used to send patients to me as a last resort for pain. I remind people on the Executive Committee that they themselves have come to acupuncture. I sight all the studies and reports I talked about above. I tell them I make less than a nurse and that acupuncture needles cost five cents each. I tell them that I am here to make an audacious suggestion; that I am not here to try to save my half time job but, that in this time of lay offs, I want to suggest that they have underutilized acupuncture. I suggest they would be better served to hire me full time and parse my services. The three minute clock shows one second left. I thank them and return to my seat, feeling 50 pounds lighter. The meeting adjourns and every body leaves. My wife, who came to the meeting, drives me to my car. When I get home I t stop laughing and crying. I sleep well though.

Wednesday, December, 1st. Client and staff both, ask me how it went at the meeting. A client who hasn't come for acupuncture in over two months asks if I got new glasses.

Friday, December, 3rd Dr. Robert Wise [real name], head of Standards and Development of the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Health Organizations has his assistant contact me to set up a conference call. I obsess over the words “conference call”. They imply more than one person involved. His next available date is Thursday, December 9th. I am to call him at 10:30am, Pacific Standard Time. The Joint Commission is in Illinois; it will be 12:30pm, a lunch time meeting. I am hoping they are not like “Hallway Meetings”.

Thursday, December, 9th After playing phone tag with Dr. Wise's assistant most of the day where in she used the phrase “conference call” each time to explain why he was not able to take my call, she said he would call me from his car phone while driving home; that it had been a very busy day. Never happened.

Hi everyone,

This is jimmy joining you from New Mexico. I always write with you when you're at Marg and Bill's. Below is what i wrote this last time.

Love Story

Jimmy Janko

How are you? he asks.
 Fine, she says. And you?
 He smiles and looks away.
 Fine.

*

Birds seen through fog are angels or ghosts.
 What is he?
 Who is that dragging his chains through the dust?

*

History.
 Born in a backseat, he was wingless and white.
 And all he ever wanted was to be as round as the sound
 of a great bell and to soar in a circle of light.

(He plays the rhymes in his head.
 Round as sound. White as light.
 I'm fine, you're fine. Every time.
 How many rhymes for a kiss?)

*

The next time he sees her he grins ear to ear.
 How are you?
 Fine, she says. And you?
 Superfluous.
 Her laughter makes him dizzy with happiness and hope.

*

He sees her as only a lover can see her. She is as enigmatic as an egg or a drop of his own blood. Does something marvelous happen every moment? Look how pretty her teeth are when they dent her lower lip for the f of fine.

—jimm

Nobody Listens

Scott Morrison

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhuiXNixHVg>

Nobody listens, nobody listens
Nobody listens to me

I been thinkin' real hard how to make the world better
Most days it feels like there's no hope
Tryin' to bring people together
Is like tryin' to change the weather
The chances are near zero

No no no...nobody listens, nobody listens
Nobody listens to me
I could fix everything
From Mexico to China
If everbody listened to me

You know my dad, my mom, my sister and my brothers
We were a big family
But we had personal problems
And constant squabbles
They never listened to me

No no no...Mom didn't listen, Dad wouldn't listen
My family never listened to me
Same with teachers and professors
And no good politicians
Nobody ever listens to me

So I took up writin' novels 'cause I get to play God
I create the reality
My characters obey
Or they don't get to get laid
They damn well better listen to me

No no no...nobody listens, nobody listens
Even I don't listen to me
Eat your veggies do your pushups
Quit your smokin' and your drinkin'
I don't even listen to me

No no no...nobody listens, nobody listens
Nobody listens to me
I could fix everything from Mexico to China
If everbody listened to me
I could fix everything from Mexico to China
If everbody obeyed me

Risking pain to honor war's fallen comrades

Bonnie Bonner

All the friends from flight school tried to get Mike to go see the Wall. He didn't want to go. For years he declined. He'd get close to it, get up there, he'd go by it, but he couldn't walk in there. On Memorial Day 1978 during a private 10-year flight-school reunion, Jon read a passage about the Wall from Maya Lin, the architect. "Only when you can feel the pain can you accept the death and begin to heal."

Six pilots and their wives took the pilgrimage to the Vietnam Memorial, and Mike gave in. Jon Lee's home, tucked into the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, provided a reunion respite, but the group took the trip to Washington, D.C., on the first day, Memorial Day, so there'd be nothing left to dread. Each pilot had a list of the names he wanted to find. Each found his own face mirrored in his buddies' names, knowing it might have been the other way around. They laid mementos at the base of the powerful slab: a flight-school Green Hat with aviator wings, a worn class photograph and roster, a green T-shirt picturing a silhouette of helicopters in formation that read "1968-12 US Army Aviation Ten-Year Reunion." Almost everyone in the group wore the identical T-shirt, and the pilots, no longer fresh-faced in their faded Green Hats, fingered the names of their friends on the black granite. Mike wore a three-piece business suit in respect and admiration. He found all five guys who died in his helicopter. No one held back tears.

The last evening of their reunion, everyone lazed on Jon's porch leafing through old photo albums, watching the sunset. Mike brought out a copy of Life magazine dated June 27, 1969. Life published not only the names of the American soldiers who died during the week that included Memorial Day, but also the pictures of all 242 men who arrived home in body bags. Eleven pages of young American eyes, looking as earnest and hopeful as in a high school yearbook. The faces said it all, but Mike read the brief article aloud. "When the nation is translated to direct anguish in hundreds of homes all over the country, we must pause to look into the faces," it said in part.

Jon gazed out over the rolling Blue Ridge Mountains and spoke softly from memory: "And since they were not the ones dead, the American people turned back to their affairs."

I am not a Contradiction

Miki Kashtan

I walk toward conflict with love. I tell the truth. I ask for what I want. I offer what I have. I listen to another. I am nourished by intimacy, laughter, depth. I do not distract myself. I do not need down time.

I love heart engagement with ideas and intellectual play with care and commitment. Practical exploration of theory and political understanding of the ordinary. Personalizing the structural and finding social context for the individual. Authentic contact with the other and deep sinking into kinship with the similar. Allowing emotion in the formal and bringing order to the inner chaos. Connecting while working and efficiency without control. Wanting fully without attachment. Deep bonding with full autonomy.

I practice a secular spirituality. I thrive on vision and attend to detail. I open to despair and delight in little pleasures. I have major goals and projects and throw myself to the flow of the moment. I am comfortable with the technical and scientific and adept at attending to the human psyche.

I am a woman and my role models are men. Jesus. Gandhi. King. Fierce, uncompromising, world-embracing, visionary love. I embrace the path of vulnerability without protection, secrets, or anything to hide, and I am afraid of people being upset.

I love a lot and am willing to disappoint people. I have endless care and remarkable obliviousness. I live a dedicated life, committed to transforming the legacy of oppression and separation into a future of collaboration and care. I have faith without personal trust, clarity about possibilities without patience to attend to seeds.

I experiment with leadership without coercion. Power without domination. Inviting without demanding. Teaching others and learning from and with them. Knowing what I want and letting things happen.

I burn with passion for change and aim for acceptance of what is. I cultivate humility and confidence. I flow with intensity and access tenderness. I am rarely angry and often helpless.

I am porously sensitive to touch, smell, taste, sound and sight, and I can withstand and endure much. I get hurt easily and stay present with strong feelings. I know and see so much pain and suffering and I tune out news and the media. I am a social critic and I have compassion for all. I know of interdependence and I hold it all alone.

I live in loneliness.
I risk my significance.
I am not a contradiction.
Will you come meet me?

