

The Homelessness of the Brave: A Meditation

J.D. Mathes

That morning, I'd hoped there wouldn't be a lot of traffic. It was an eighty-mile drive into Los Angeles from my home in the Inland Empire. Luckily, no one had collided in their hurry to get to church. No lingering crashes from Saturday night partygoers, a blue route the whole way. I checked into a small motel which sat in stark contrast to the LA skyscrapers. The place reminded me of a time when LA had more oil rigs than traffic lights. I parked between the avocado green low-rise buildings. The room barely had space for the bed and smelled of a long time ago. It was one of those rooms a person gets when just starting out in a new city, looking for a big break or ending their life on a fixed income drinking the hours away. I felt good in the room. After stashing my duffel, I grabbed my book bag and camera—an old Nikon film camera—and slung them over my shoulder. I locked the door behind me.

The Sunday sun shone into the cool streets as I began my fifteen-minute walk toward the Veterans Administration Medical Center (VA). I had driven here from Redlands, California, in the Inland Empire because I wanted to hear the stories of veterans living on the streets, tied up in the criminal justice system. I wanted to know about the military's complex role in mass incarceration, addiction, and homelessness of veterans. The California light vibrated a mesmerizing translucent gold, not made dingy by smog. That light creates an illusion we can't help but buy into. It's as if wading through a golden age. Halos glowed around everything and, at those moments, they almost made me believe in God again.

Even the guy I walked by, whose skin was burnt a deep russet and caked with grime, appeared angelic in the light as if from a mystical world. His shorts hung around his knees as he pissed in

the gutter behind a white BMW. An old woman came out of a shop and walked around the front of the car. She got in the driver's side, but not wasn't hurried or in a state of panic. California casual, just another day in LA.

Further down the block, a shirtless man sat on the curb by a palm tree. His skin was like iron-bearing earth. Lean, his dirty blond hair stuck out at all angles. A carapace had been tattooed in black ink over his entire back. I stopped to look and couldn't help but think of Kafka. He rocked and moaned as if having a vision in the gutter, and it made me think of my struggle with addiction and the places where I'd found myself in another life.

At the intersection of Wilshire and San Vicente Boulevard, people with cardboard signs, that everyone has seen, stand on the medians and at the corners. Some windows roll down and money comes out. I think of a friend who said, "I can't give any more money; I'd become broke and not solved the problem."

I crossed over.

On the corner, a wrought iron gate, known as the Great Lawn Gate, was covered in American flags. The gate was set back from the street—a wide space for people to gather, sun-



Great Lawn Gate

bleached American flags flew from streetlights—the Los Angeles National Veterans Park. Down the street I saw Veterans Row. Forty or so freestanding tents stretched like a caravan from the San Vicente entrance of the 400-acre grounds toward Wilshire. The tents

crowded the width of the sidewalk alongside camp chairs, coolers, bicycles, and a wheelchair.

Boxes filled the parking lanes which were lined with traffic cones. The tents showed the wear of months in the California sun and the marine layer that rolled in many mornings. Smog had grayed the stars and white stripes of the American flags hanging from every tent. The reds looked more like rust.



Veterans' Row

Veterans Row is in the Brentwood neighborhood of LA that boasts some of the most expensive houses in the already pricy real estate market of Los Angeles. The neighborhood had become a lightning rod about land use and the VA not supplying shelter on the property

intended for use as a veterans' home; but instead, the VA engaged in some dodgy land leasing to a private school, UCLA, and several businesses. Arcadia Bandini de Baker, an American Civil War veteran, had donated 300 acres "to form the Pacific Branch of the National Home" to provide veterans a place to find "various healthcare and support services, opportunities for purpose, amenities for comfort, and environments to heal." Advocates wanted to remove veterans from the squalor of the street and house them on the land as was originally intended and end any activity not related to veterans.

Although I knew about the land use battle between veteran advocates and the VA, it wasn't why I had shown up. I wanted to hear the stories of the people who'd served in the military then found themselves tied up in the criminal justice system. How are addiction and mental health tied to military service and how are they being addressed? The first tent I came to was collapsed and piled with detritus as if a sudden strong storm had come. I walked past two

more tents to one of the donation spots on the sidewalk. I watched people stop their cars and dump cases of bottled water, bags of clothes, boxes of toiletries and cleaning supplies onto the sidewalk.

A volunteer put out donated clothes on a folding table. A Ford Ranger with cases of bottled water pulled up. A guy got out and I helped him and the volunteer unload before asking my questions. When we were done, I told him about my project: I wanted to talk with justice-involved veterans. "Oh, sure there's plenty," he said. "Just walk that way." He pointed down the row of tents. "And they all want to tell their story." He kept sorting pants and didn't look up. Not many people moved around, and I thought it odd given how many tents there were. I wondered why more people weren't out on a Sunday midmorning enjoying the breeze. Even the casual camper knows that once the sun hits, even in the dappled shade of trees, the tents become sweat boxes. The traffic on San Vicente was light. Birds sang and chirped as they flitted among the branches. Veterans Row felt like a campground in any national park and, in a sense, was.

A blonde woman walked down the sidewalk with purpose but looked as if she had forgotten the purpose. Her jeans and T-shirt were clean. Her reddish face was puffy and round and without makeup. The woman's fresh washed hair had been swept back in a disheveled ponytail like my daughter wore when she got up late. She looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

I took a breath to center myself. I wasn't used to asking strangers to tell me their story.

"Do you have a couple of minutes?"

She looked at me perplexed. "Sure."

"My name's J.D." I offered my hand, and she shook it.

"Maggie Lyn," she said.

"I'm a writer and I want to tell the stories of justice-involved veterans."

Her eyes brightened and shifted around not focusing on any one point.



Maggie Lyn

"Can you help me get a lawyer? I can't get ahold of my public defender, and I think he doesn't care . . . I mean, he doesn't get back to me and I have to go to court, and I haven't seen my kid since they arrested me. I just want to get my kid back. I mean, they took her because they said I'm a danger, but I was only joking. I was only pretending to cut my throat in the street. I wasn't threatening anyone." She mimed holding a knife in a downward grip above her head and canted her throat toward the imaginary blade. "Does that look like I'm threatening anybody? It was just a small pocketknife and, like I said, it was a joke just to get people's attention. But still they arrested me and charged me with a felony and took my daughter. I want her back. Can you help me get a lawyer?"

The words came fast. I understood her needs were more immediate than moving out of a tent and into an apartment. Me telling her story to bring attention to her situation will not help her now, maybe not ever. A weight settled on me. What good am I doing?

Maggie Lyn lived in the eternal present. It's how prisoners live and those only concerned with surviving until the next morning. The future is unthinkable beyond the day and the past doesn't exist anymore. Addiction and starvation or being locked up removes us from the great stream of humanity and the river of time.

Maggie Lyn kept looking over my shoulder towards the donation point and then back over her shoulder as if expecting a crowd. We kept talking. She had been a sailor. As a kid she'd lived all over the world including several years in Thailand. I asked her how the VA was helping her, and she said they weren't. They had discharged her as mentally unfit for service when a genetic disease had presented itself after she'd been deployed to the fleet. She said because of the discharge, she lost her benefits.

"I don't remember what the doctor on the ship called it," she said.

"They just said I'd had it before joining so I was out and deserved no help from them."

"That's unfair," I said.

How is it they can give her a physical, enlist her, then discharge her because of a medical condition after she was already doing her job in the fleet?

"I know. I just needed some medicine and, instead, life's been nothing but this." She motioned around us. "I decided to come here to see if I can get them to help me."

She looked over my shoulder towards the donation center again. I could tell she wanted to go see if anything had come in that morning she might need. I gave her my card and asked if I could take her portrait. She smiled, said yes. I adjusted for the light and snapped a photo.

Nestled among the millions-of-dollar homes, people in tents looked for help based on the notion that, if you served in the military, you were owed medical care and a place to live if

you found yourself disabled. This line of thinking goes back to the War of 1812 and caring for disabled Revolutionary War veterans; it's nothing new. But it should be noted that, historically, veterans were ignored and many times reviled by their communities when they came home from war. Bankers foreclosed on Revolutionary War veterans rather than take their money—*thanks for the independence, now get off the land or I'll call the militia*. Veterans of the Continental Army who suffered war trauma —then called nostalgia in America—also faced the Stoic-tinged Puritan world view. Yes, what they had done was virtuous, but virtue was all one needed for well-being. If you suffered from your service, you were defective and unvirtuous. It's telling the word "hobo" is supposedly derived from the epithet "hoe boy" referring to American Civil War veterans who walked with hoes over their shoulders. They wandered country lanes looking for work after surviving the massed musket and cannon fire that slaughtered so many.

This notion changed at the end of World War II. It wasn't a sudden awakening to the sacrifice the veterans had made. Politicians had two reasons: The first was to alleviate the impact of a postwar depression when all the veterans returned home; the second was rooted in the lessons of the "Bonus Army of World War I" fiasco. In the summer of 1932, a group of World War One veterans, their families, and their allies erected a shantytown on the Washington D.C. Mall in protest. In 1924, Congress voted to pay veterans a bonus for their service in the war that still hadn't been paid out. In the face of the Depression, they needed the money; Congress had second thoughts. In response, President Herbert Hoover ordered General Douglas MacArthur to clear a camp of the Bonus army. MacArthur used troops with bayonets, tear gas, cavalry, and five tanks against the unarmed protestors. The 17,000 protestors didn't stand a chance. In 1945, in the face of over four million returning service members, Congress wanted to placate them and not drive them to rebellion. Now, looking down the line of tents, I thought about this new cycle

of returning veterans and their place in history. As if pushed against the fence by an onshore wind, they'd gone from foreclosures and fleeing to the frontier to tents on a city sidewalk.

Further up the sidewalk, people hung out as if at a street fair. The breeze whiffled over nylon and popped flags. The smell of cooking food wafted from a pop-up awning at the end of the row. Piano music filled the air. In front of a tent was a minibike assembled from spare parts. In the middle where you'd expect the motor was a boombox. The music wasn't coming from it.



Boombox Bike

Under the blue tarp with mosquito netting draped over it, an African American man sat at a small upright piano. In shadows behind the netting like a confessional, the pianist swayed. Hands glided up and down the keyboard, playing scales, then switching to a wistful

melody. The music sounded both familiar and strange as if I knew parts of it but the notes didn't connect in the way I'd remembered. The melody did not sound out of place, more like the pianist had taken off from the main melody to play around it and back again. It felt like listening to Max Richter's *Recomposed: Vivaldi – The Four Seasons*. I hear "Autumn" but not, and it brought some new joy among the familiar strains I'd so often heard. Next to this ragged tent, I closed my eyes. A Hispanic guy with a shaved head said, "He don't talk, but he's nice enough." I introduced myself. He said his name was Henry.

"You believe in the Good News?" He asked.

"What is the good news?"

"The news of Christ our Savior."

"No," I said. "I'm not religious."

Henry shrugged as his eyes darted around. He started walking toward the donation station.

I followed alongside him as he talked. "I joined the Army in 2003 and stayed in until 2010. I was in the infantry. Saw combat, you know." He paused. "I went to Iraq a few times. But the worse was being back home. At least overseas I knew the deal and had a good idea of what was expected. You get home, and friends and family have all these things they want from you or acting like now you're back you need to take more responsibility for doing things. I just wanted to decompress for a bit. I mean one week I'm raiding houses and kicking the shit out of people, and the next week I'm at a kid's birthday party eyeing the doors and windows."

"I get that," thinking about my father's hypervigilance from his war experiences.

"I just hung out with my bros and drank too much, wrecked my car. I wasn't even drunk, just exhausted from not sleeping and seeing ghosts walking around in the street. My marriage broke up. Things got worse. The wife took the kids to her parents' place in Texas. I got in trouble a lot, got Article 15s and such. So, I got out." He seemed distant and far away. "Now I'm here trying to get some help from the VA I need a place to live so I can get a job. I kicked meth and booze. I just smoke a little weed to keep it even." He shrugged. I didn't want to ask him anymore questions. He looked finished. I asked if I could take his portrait. He shook his head.

"I don't want people to see me like this."

"I can respect that."

Henry nodded and continued to the donation drop point.

I wondered about Henry's children. Tim O'Brien wrote, "Wars don't just affect those who fight them. They go on for generations." As the oldest son raised by a man who was shot down five times as a helicopter door-gunner in Vietnam, I have wondered about other children raised in the shadows of the fallen—those who occupy Achilles' stature in war stories. It is a struggle to grow up being measured against your father's dead hero friends. Yael Danieli is a trauma researcher who began her work with Holocaust survivors and their families. She has noted veterans who have not been treated for the "psychological and moral injuries" suffered during their military service tend to pass on their trauma to their families. Danieli called this phenomenon "secondary traumatization." Who knows what long-term consequences sons and daughters suffer because a parent answered their nation's call.

Henry's criminal activity isn't uncommon among veterans. The Pew Charitable Trust reports "veterans make up about 6.5% of the U.S. population, yet 31% of veterans have been arrested at some point in their lives compared with 18% of nonveterans." In my travels, I've met Hell's Angels who had been in Vietnam, and it's telling the Hell's Angels were formed by disaffected World War II veterans. I'd also met veterans who'd become addicts and turned to drug dealing. My father told of a guy he knew who said he robbed banks to get the thrill he found in combat.

I think of the mythos built around American Civil War veterans who became outlaws or fled into the frontier. In his groundbreaking book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay observed, "The painful paradox is that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen."

A few tents away, an old man with a grizzled grayish beard with a “Stand for the Flag, Kneel for the Cross” trucker’s cap sat on the curb. Around him sat three young women who looked like high-school students on a fieldtrip.

They chatted as a photographer took photos of them. The photographer looked like a volleyball coach from one of my daughter’s teams—tall, blonde, and European. The young women told the old man to show me some surreal drawings he’d done. They were dated 2011, ten years ago. The



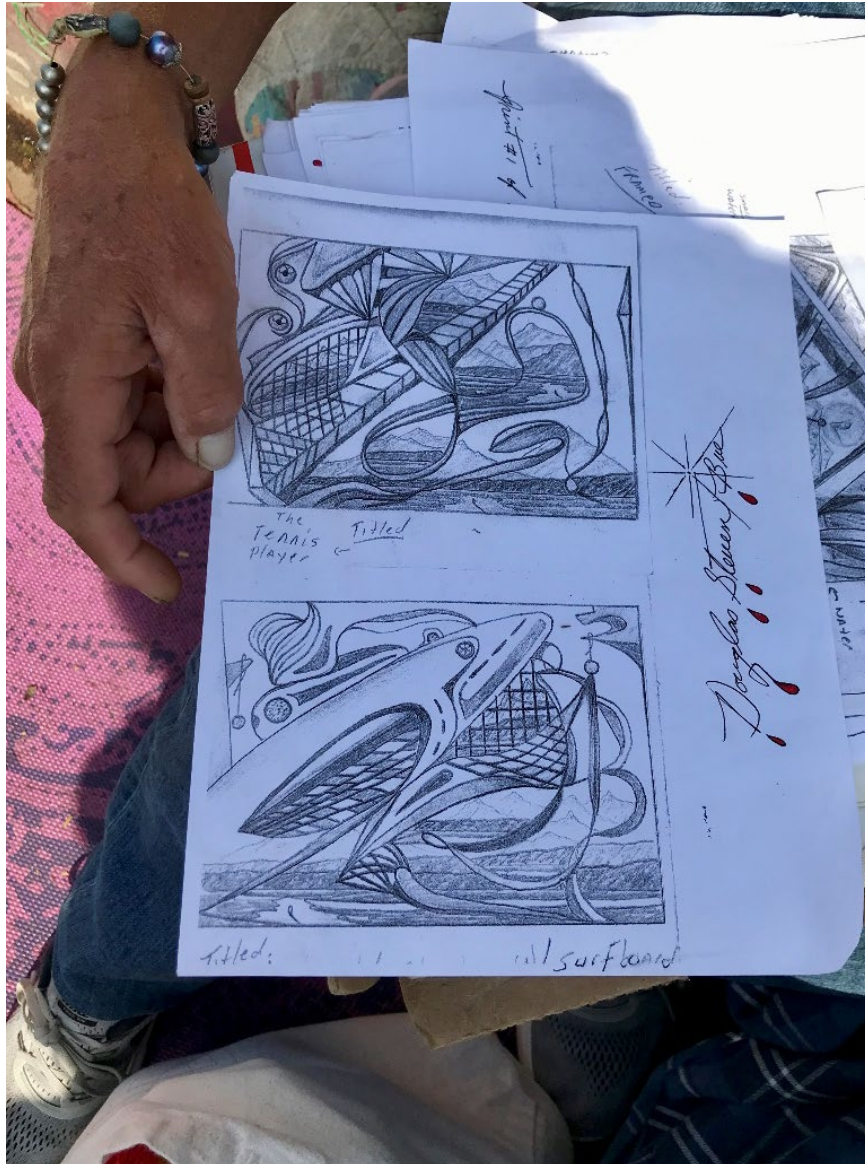
The Artist: Douglas Bue

pencil drawings were surreal visions of highways, circuses, tennis matches, surfboards, and rain.

They reminded me of the drawings of Roger Vieillard, Luis Vargas Rosas, or Wassily Kandinsky. It made sense. Dada and its successor Surrealism were reactions to the soul-shattering bloodshed on the Western Front. Guy Davenport said the twentieth century ended in 1914 with the killing of so many artists and writers. What was going to be created was lost.



“The Freeway” (top) and “Rain” (bottom) 2011



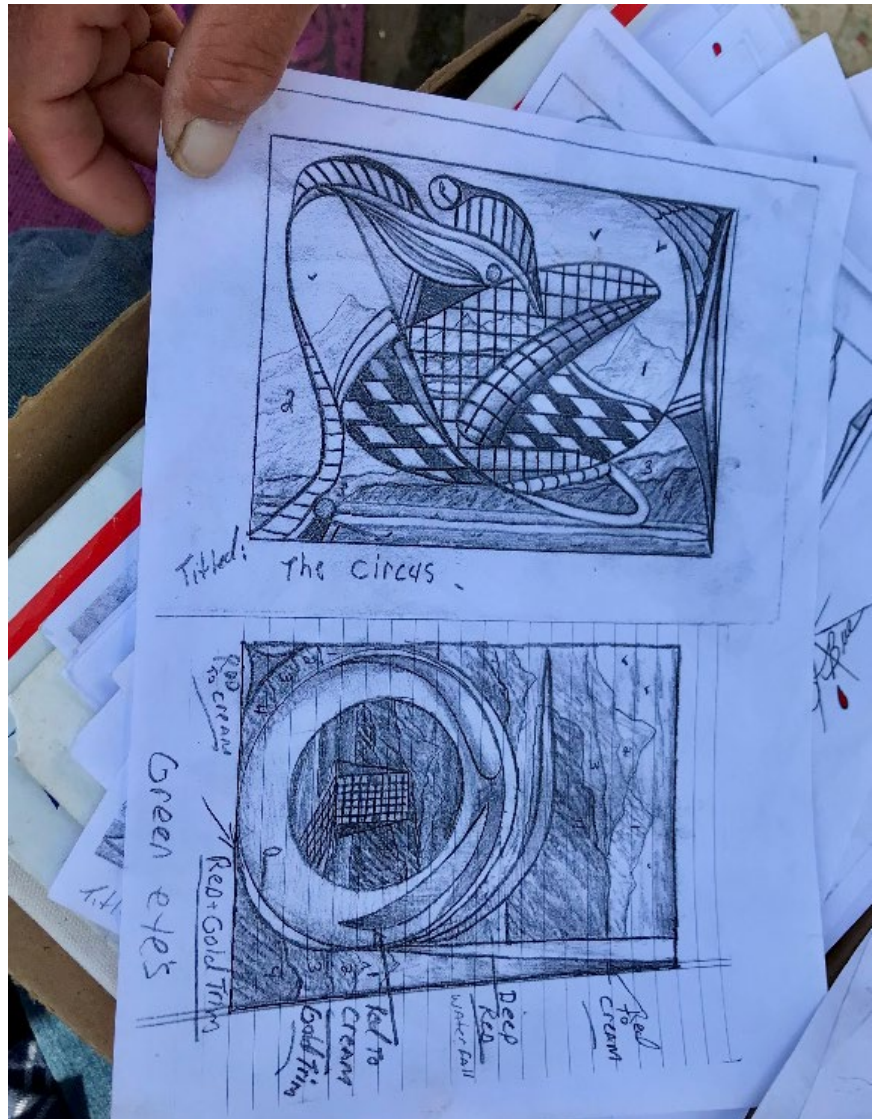
"The Tennis Player" (top) and "Surfboard" (bottom)

Something new would need to arise. Realistic imagery fell apart in the face of a generation of dead men and the nightmares of survivors. Art though gives relief. According to the National Institute of Health, "art therapy provides a safe way to approach traumatic memories through the use of symbols, which may facilitate consolidation of experiences by converting an artistic form, representative of emotions

and reactions to trauma, into linguistic communication" and "provides externalization and emotional distance through materials and processes that use mediators, such as a paintbrush, between the patient and the image. The controlled distance encourages the patient to depict trauma experiences and to view the finished image at a physical distance."

The old veteran's control of line and shading was precise. The long curving lines and blocks hovered on the page and created depth with a realistic landscape of mountains always in the background. The drawings beckoned you to travel through the distorted, hallucinatory world to make landfall in another world on the far side. A refuge?

I considered each loose page and wondered why all the drawings were ten years old. Maybe the last time he'd been in therapy?



"The Circus" (top) and "Green Eyes" (bottom)

My friend, Todd, showed up to see how I was doing. He pointed out the local leader of the American Veterans (AMVETS), Rob Reynolds, a marine veteran of Iraq. He had been leading the effort and was the media spokesman pushing against the VA to house the veterans. I had seen him quoted in newspapers and on television. I introduced myself to him and asked if he had a few minutes to talk. He said he had to take care of something, but he'd catch up with me to talk later. I wouldn't see him again.

I roamed about chatting with other advocates and veterans, just taking in the vibe and listening to stories. I reached the end of the row at the San Vicente Gate. A guy was getting a haircut under a pop-up canopy. Under another canopy, a man served hot food. We walked to the end of the row of tents from where I'd started that morning.

Todd told me about an old man in a wheelchair who had been stabbed to death the month before. He had intervened when a guy went berserk and started



End of the Row at San Vicente Gate

beating his girlfriend. A second homicide happened less than six months ago. After an argument, a vet ran his car into the other man. The victim was dragged 200 feet to his death. One veteran I talked with said fights were common. "Shit, get a bunch of desperate people together with PTSD still on hair triggers, and most likely high, and shit will fly." I asked him his name and he just smiled and walked away. Todd recommended we continue to the intersection at Wilshire where the flags had been hung on the Great Lawn Gate and talk with an activist from Judicial Watch. Todd said, "This guy started the camp and feels Reynolds stabbed him in the back for his own agenda."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and he is a hoot to talk to."

Robert Rosebrock, in his mid-70s, came out every Sunday to protest. He stood on the concrete ellipse in front of the gates, with a mousey older woman in a sunhat. She turned away as we approached. Rosebrock told us she didn't like being close to strangers.

In 2016, he had been arrested for violating federal law by hanging four-by-six-inch American flags upside down on the gate, on Memorial Day no less. The charge: desecrating the VA grounds. Later the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California found him not guilty. He told this story as he motioned to his flags on the fence as if he'd overcome a great tyranny. Although I had a hard time seeing how it was desecration, I did see how the VA wouldn't want people feeling it's okay to hang whatever they wanted from their fence. They'd probably have to pay to clean it up later. I wondered if Rosebrock would feel the same way if someone hung Pride flags in solidarity for LGBTQ+ veterans.

Rosebrock said he'd originally bought all the tents to house the veterans. He explained that he wanted the area to be drug-and-alcohol-free or they would not be welcome. However, Reynolds had the vets sign on with AMVETS saying they didn't have to follow any of Rosebrock's rules because he didn't have any authority over them. I saw the bitterness on Rosebrock's face. "That's bull crap," he insisted. "Vets who get apartments are required to be drug-and-alcohol-free, so why not start here? Some of these guys are back within a week when they're tossed out and some choose to come right back here to drink and do drugs. That other guy says it's fine. It's not fine. They've forgotten discipline." He pointed at the ground for emphasis. "They just need to stop drinking and taking drugs. It's not hard. My commanding officer had commanded a battalion in World War II." Rosebrock held his arms out and looked around as if surveying a battlefield. "He saw thousands of men killed and he didn't make excuses or whine. We were

stationed in Hawaii. He could have just chucked it all and went to be a boozier on the beach. He didn't. He got up every day, put on his uniform, and did his duty."

Rosebrock had not gone to Vietnam, but he had been in the Army in the mid-Sixties. He acknowledged many vets on the street had called him out for not seeing combat. He always countered with his C.O. who had served in WWII. He hadn't seen John Huston's documentary, *Let There Be Light*, about psychologically wounded soldiers from World War II. All the same, he was adamant that PTSD was an excuse to do drugs and alcohol, so their homelessness was on them. I suggested he read Shay's books *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* which explain the key differences between the soldiers of WWII and Vietnam. In those books, he shows evidence of higher rates of substance abuse from combat soldiers as compared to people from the same demographic who didn't serve in combat or in the service at all. Rosebrock didn't seem interested in reading anything. However, he did know firsthand the shit American military members endured returning from Vietnam. The shouts of "baby killer" or being spat on. Ignoring them on the streets was worse, though. "At least when the hippies insulted us," he said, "they acknowledged we existed." "Maybe they need to be housed in a treatment facility," I said. Rosebrock continued: "They won't stay unless they're forced to, and we can't force them to stay. Free country you know. They have to want help. The VA finds housing for them, but then they go back on the street to drink and do drugs." He looked disgusted as if about to spit on someone. "People blame the VA for not housing veterans, but they can't force them into rehab unless it's court ordered."

In *Sometimes Amazing Things Happen*, Dr. Elizabeth Ford talks about treating patients who were ordered by the court but couldn't continue their treatment when they were released. They suffered from a range of mental and addiction issues that hadn't been dealt with, so she

ended up seeing these people filtered back through the courts, Rikers Island, and back to Bellevue. If the law didn't have a claim on them, they didn't get treatment. How do you force into rehab someone who's driven by mental anguish that makes her stand in the street with a knife raised to plunge into her throat as rush hour traffic creeps by?

We often forget that poor and working-class kids, the kinds of kids who predominately join the military, don't go to therapy. Not only for lack of money, but the stigma both societal and cultural. We see it as a weakness, and we see it as something well off kids do. U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough had visited the encampment the month before. He vowed to get the homeless veterans housed within the VA campus. Spokespeople said they had been making good progress, despite the high-profile encampment making it appear as if nothing were being done. They were right. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, "the count of residents experiencing homelessness revealed a 22.9% reduction in the level of homeless veterans." The data showed a drop from 3,878 veterans living in the open in 2023 to 2,991 veterans in 2024. Nationally, according to the VA, from 2010 to 2023, "The estimated number of veterans experiencing homelessness in America has declined by 52.0%."

A homeless advocate walked over and started to talk with us. He argued that, if veterans need housing to get off the streets so they can kick their addictions, then telling them to kick their addictions first is not going to work. Nor is it as simple as saying stop drinking, stop doing drugs. Addiction does not work that way. Even those who overcome addiction can relapse. Addicts do not need to be kicked onto the street again. They need to be housed so they can continue treatment. Rosebrock said, "A Buddhist friend of mine said, 'First the man takes the drink, then the drink takes the man.'" But plenty of people take drinks and don't become alcoholics. The saying doesn't consider genetics and susceptibility, social forces, psychological

trauma, or any of the other things surrounding the issue. Psychological trauma and substance abuse are interlinked. Clinical psychiatrist Judith Herman asserts the first stage for recovering from trauma is safety, sobriety, and self-care. Without addressing these issues, recovery is almost impossible.

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum observed, “a bad-enough experience in adulthood can wreck the noblest of character.” To someone who isn’t addicted or suffering psychological trauma, it’s easy to believe in an ideology of complete free will and the notion that identity is an unchangeable bedrock. They cannot fathom the irrationality or the compulsion and how trauma and addiction changes someone fundamentally. It rewires the brain. To an ideologue, it’s an issue of just “saying no,” or just choosing not to drink or shoot up. It’s the same kind of ideological statement that the homelessness is a choice or convicts would rather be in jail. This type of thinking is not that far removed from the affirmational sayings concerning depression (e.g., *just smile and you will be fine, look on the bright side, or you choose to see it that way*) – bad self-help stoicism. There is evidence that psychotherapy can change a patient’s neural pathways, but it’s a lot more complicated than smiling at the world. Even as I explained biological mechanisms for addiction, Rosebrock’s eyes glazed over. “Yeah, yeah.”

Two hawks sailed on the wind as American flags washed out from the weather flapped from the VA grounds. A storm front built in the Southeast. I aimed my camera at the hawks against the clouds and took a photo. Rosebrock said they called the hawks “ghosts of veterans” to watch over them. I took another photo of the hawks, but I did not acknowledge the ghost comment; it made me think of homicides, violence, addiction, and the glaring homelessness. Rosebrock pointed to the flags hung by the VA “Take a photo of those disgraceful flags while



Faded Glory

you're at it." I agreed, anyone who flies a faded or frayed flag doesn't deserve one any more than people who fly flags as patriotic props.

A few weeks later, when I returned to Veterans Row, I discovered U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough held true to his pledge. Before Veterans' Day, less than a month after my first visit, tents and temporary shelters were erected within the VA grounds.

After the veterans' relocation, a backhoe and a crew scooped the tents, and anything left on

the sidewalk into dumpsters. The veterans now lived behind the fence on the Great Lawn, with security guards patrolling the grass perimeter. I wondered how many moved to the new location and who had been barred, their sin too great to enter the Holy Land. Unless the courts had locked her up, Maggie Lyn still lived on the street. I knew this from how she had been discharged from military service, through no fault of her own. Thousands of veterans are ineligible for benefits because they received a less-than-an-honorable discharge. Many of these discharges are tied to crimes or other behavior issues. How many of these veterans' troubles are linked to their service? Instead of getting the help they earned, they become like the men on the streets the morning I first walked to Veterans' Row.



Tents and Flags on Veteran's Row

On a winter's night a month or so later, I'm driving with my girlfriend a couple of blocks away from the old Veterans Row. I drive through an intersection and pass below Interstate I-405. As we pull up to the traffic light, my girlfriend points to several tents, tarps, a loaded down shopping cart, and smashed-down cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. But she's not calling my attention to them. On the edge of a lamppost's light, an upright piano slumps broken against the embankment like it had been kicked out of the back of a moving truck without regard for the music it could have made.

The author gives his wholehearted thanks to the Norman Levan Center for the Humanities at Bakersfield College and its director Dr. Reginald "Reggie" Williams, for their support of his work.

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J.D. Mathes grew up a feral child in the deserts of the American Southwest who loved to read library books and take photographs. In 2019 he was awarded a PEN America Writing for Justice Fellowship. He has worked as a screenwriter with Rehabilitation Through the Arts, three-time awardee of the Norman Levan Grant, a Jack Kent Cooke Scholar alumnus, an award-winning author of four books, arts reporter, photographer, screenwriter, and librettist. His memoir, *Ahead of the Flaming Front: A Life on Fire* (2013), about his experiences fighting wildfire, including four years on an elite helicopter rappel crew, was awarded the North American Book Award. Although Mathes still struggles with subject-verb agreement and where to put commas, his memoir *Of Time and Punishment* will be published in the spring of 2025. He loves his two daughters very much.

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