

Crossing Over and Fatal Light
A Conversation with Richard Currey
Krystal McGuinness

It is that living, while it goes on, can seem like light itself, a perpetual slide of morning out of dawn's rare edge of perfect watery blue, light that leans and spills from a space in the sky between mountains and a roof of storm cloud, light escaping a doomed past to live again above our heads in passing glory.

—from *Fatal Light*

" **A** *nd the story begins like this.*" Richard Currey deployed to Vietnam in April 1970; he was twenty-one years old (Currey, *Fatal Light* 3). He served in a Marine combat unit as a Navy Corpsman, a combat medic, operating out of Da Nang, Vietnam with the 1st Medical Battalion. His family was living in the Washington, D.C. area when he was drafted in the fall of 1968. Currey shared his pre-enlistment thoughts: "Thinking the Army offered few options, I opted to enlist in the Navy." He was sent to combat medic school at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and in his own words from a National Endowment for the Arts interview, he "never looked back." While at Field Medical Service School, he was issued a Marine Corps uniform and would never again wear a Navy uniform during his enlistment. Currey's training included combat casualty care, weapons training, physical conditioning, and small group tactical exercises. In the same NEA interview, Currey shared that "the exhilaration that can be experienced in war is always one of the problematic aspects of the experience." His two Vietnam-based books, *Crossing Over* and *Fatal Light*, attend to that individually experienced and jarring reconciliation between a sense of one's self *during war* and *after war*. *Fatal Light* was short-listed for the PEN/Hemingway Award (for best first novel of the year) in 1988, and the

novel routinely appears on “best of” Vietnam war literature lists. Currey is a celebrated author, and has received numerous awards and fellowships in both poetry and fiction.

Crossing Over is a reengagement with a manuscript once left unfinished, and as described in a 1993 Clark City Press printing, came to fruition only after “unexpectedly recovering the lost pages.” In the author’s note to this edition, Currey writes:

My plan was to simply incorporate the lost sections into the original manuscript, but when I sat down with the material I found myself again in the grip of the war itself, inside the fields of memory, interacting with words I’d put on paper as long ago as 1972. The result is that fully half of this book is entirely new ... It is a palpably different work from its namesake, reflecting not only my sense of these vignettes as stories—with each section serving as a chapter of a single narrative—but the long and hard shadow that Vietnam has continued to cast in my generation’s life. (*Crossing Over* Author’s Note)

Crossing Over leaves readers with the experience of fractured moments, feints of light, and the many ways it felt to be “over there.” In an Air Force Academy Literature course, my students interacted with the 2018 Santa Fe Writers Project publication of *Crossing Over*. For many cadets, this was the first time they had discussed the Vietnam War in a classroom setting. I imagined my students would resist *Crossing Over* as mere fiction. However, during our class discussions we questioned the *happening truth* from the *emotional truth* after reading Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story.” This frame opened my students to a new willingness to understand the slippery nature of truth, especially in combat settings; they savored *Crossing Over*’s rapid cut rate, and the general feeling that the floor is moving as readers move between short, vivid

vignettes. Each page serves as its own world, a micro-flash of a war that resists neat summary.

My students had never read anything like it.

I often feel that our modern Air Force is sterilized from the muck of *true* war. And yet, my own lived experiences “over there” resist this neat conclusion. When preparing a family member for his upcoming trip to Basic Military Training at Lackland Air Force Base, we met with a Security Forces Master Sergeant who relayed that as recent as 2018, he and his team’s feet were so cold in Iraq, they resorted to placing sand bags over their feet to sleep. In today’s glamorous and technology-fueled Air Force, we ask humans to dig into subterranean compounds in northern Iraq and sleep with *sand bags over their feet*. There is no distance from the muck of warfare: it is always here for us.

In 2019, and only after stifling my nerves, I initiated a volley of communication with Richard Currey. I worried that I had not bled enough to demand his time, feeling that my status as a military member required a commensurate sacrifice to engage with his Vietnam stories. I persisted; I was drawn to Currey’s perspective as an author who was once a wartime medical healer in Vietnam. What emerged from this initial contact was a rich, year-long conversation conducted primarily by email, and an opportunity to carry Currey’s collection of linked flash fictions, *Crossing Over*, and his novel, *Fatal Light*, as a physical weight in my day-to-day life, work, and travels. Currey’s words serve as a reminder of my promise to listen to the voices of Vietnam’s veterans.

Crossing Over reads with the staccato urgency of a heartbeat; *Fatal Light* rips you under. I was anxious to hear from the human behind the prose who lived in the Vietnam Era so powerfully rendered in these two standout works. I find it important to read both works together, a set of sorts to dive deep into a powerfully written field of memory. Together, these

stories resist glamorizing a team or group's events in Vietnam. There is little nobility in the soldiers we read about in Currey's *Crossing Over* or *Fatal Light*. In place of our perhaps expected wartime hero, we instead find: drugs, sexual violence inflicted on shadowy women, vibrant fever dreams, and tormenting explosions that rend humans to pieces. We also find love, beauty, and memories of what once was, emblazoned in the artifacts of home the narrators carry. Currey spins the story of individual survival amid desperate attempts to create a human existence of consequence at such a young age. In *Crossing Over*, the combat medic narrator, "restless amidst the sleep of the wounded," comes to the harrowing realization that "it is impossible to do a good job at war and expect to stay alive" (32). Currey's writing demands an attentive reader, a listener willing to confront the complicated engagements with Vietnam and our current lust for military action. *Crossing Over* captivated me; *Fatal Light* made me uncomfortable. Renewal, loss, the jungle, and the mind-melting madness of malaria dreams flow seamlessly with horrific events obscured by the cover of a beautiful Vietnam night. A sense of belonging and desire reverberates across the pages and "home" beckons for the return of its once children.

Fatal Light and *Crossing Over* are connected; the perpetual beat of these stories is marked by the brevity of each image of war. In many ways, *Crossing Over* reads like the preparatory space for the expansive world crafted in Currey's longer novel, *Fatal Light*, where we witness the fractured arc of the narrator's life. In *Fatal Light* we are enamored by the young narrator as a child, struck by the simple joy of a pre-draft family dancing in their living room, and we are pinned to our seats by the force and speed of Vietnam's draft. The narrator's life is fenced in by the Vietnam War. The first chapter, "Mortal Places"—the working title for *Fatal Light*—begins by marking a quiet moment between narrator and grandfather:

My grandfather kept an album. Photographs, newspaper clippings, yellowed squares pasted on black rag pages. An occasional letter folded into the spine ... The old photographs seemed always to conceal—shadow days, winter faces—sturdy women watching children or looking away, girls in cottony taffeta, men staring hard and blasted, big-nosed, and tobacco-stained in antiquated suits or huge farmer’s overalls; every picture an event. (*Fatal Light* 7)

This framing moment marks the connections between the narrator and his family, the ties that bind him to such mortal places as his hometown and his grandfather’s house. The novel does not linger there; instead, we are thrust into the disruption of recruit training, the first looks at Vietnam, and the bone-chilling aliveness of being in-country.

The narrator, like the author, is a combat medic, a wartime medical healer involved in a combat landscape teeming with death. Early in the novel, the narrator writes to his former love, evoking what it might feel like to return to Vietnam “ten years from now, twenty years from now.” He writes:

I will remember the smell of this rain as clearly as I am breathing it now: this is the way it is with ghosts. We look at our own hands and even in this fog we are real as ever, veins branching, tendons rising and moving, fingers clenching and spreading and feeling, simply alive with a whisper of rain and the hours rolled into a map. (*Fatal Light* 60)

Already the narrator imagines a desire to return to Vietnam and to recall the days of his existence as more than a pawn in a government’s war machine. As readers we are struck with the weight of what it means to serve and to be ready to submit your memories to the landscape and teammates around you. Later in *Fatal Light*, the brutality of warfare strikes fast and brutal

through the lens of malarial fever, an alternative experience of war. The narrator succumbs to the futility of attempting to heal while in the face of war: "Dreams careened, haunted, collided, and I was always forced to look: the double amputees, incinerated faces with lips burned off and teeth locked in satanic grins, bodies in decay and distended with gas, fingers and noses and ears rat-gnawed ... I saw a dog eating the body of a man" (96). Currey captures the way war melts the mind and bends the experiences, conflating reality with horror; the toll of a preventable illness like malaria hits hard. Recovering from his fever, the narrator marks the beauty of the scenes around him. While flying over "the river in Saigon ... a drift of fruit peel and vegetable waste floating to the sea," the narrator remarks:

A Marine Corps helicopter ... crossed and faded and under it, on the far shore, a group of schoolgirls rode bicycles, filmy white dresses adrift behind them like wings in the river wind and black waterfall hair swaying across their narrow backs, the high music of their voices traveling the haze and oily water as they rode, passing on south like a flock of mythical creatures in the fresh light. (*Fatal Light* 108-109)

Currey's artistry is the light he brings to Vietnam as witnessed in the young eyes of a medic. Each chapter in *Fatal Light* serves as a confrontation with the multiple realities of combat, the loneliness of violence, and the confusion at still wishing for beauty in the world. At its conclusion, *Fatal Light* weaves back to sharing photos between grandfather and grandson, a painful rendering, photos of Vietnam too beautiful and also too searing to be widely shown:

"Listen," my grandfather said. "Tell me something. You plan to show these pictures...to anyone else?"

I blinked. "Haven't really thought about it."

"Don't do it. Put these in a shoebox somewhere." I stacked the pictures, returning them to their envelope, and he kept his eyes on his coffee cup, pushing his spoon back and forth on the saucer. The spoon made a small empty sound against the high ceiling.

"They're too damned hard," he said. "Too...I don't know. Too true." He looked up at me. "I'm glad I saw them. But I don't know that anybody else would be." Shifting his gaze to the window he said. "Nobody's ready. You know what I'm saying?"

I watched his face for a moment.

"I know," I said. (*Fatal Light* 153)

The experience of reading *Crossing Over* and *Fatal Light* will not leave you unaltered. Currey marks the journey of young recruits finding themselves in the harshest of external realities. His writing asks us to awaken to the world we temporarily inhabit. When I finally connected with the author over the phone, I was quickly eased by the sound of his deep, appreciative laugh. Currey's voice conveyed a decision to delight in life and the art of writing. We conducted our phone and email conversations between Colorado Springs and his current residence, Washington, D.C. What follows is my conversation with Richard Currey.

Krystal McGuiness (KM): What are you reading?

Richard Currey (RC): I'm an eclectic reader. I typically have two or three books going at any time—fiction, of course, both popular and literary, and nonfiction including politics, history, and

science. I started my writing life many years ago as a poet and still regularly read poetry.

Relevant to writing and war, in the last several months I've read three superb books, two of them histories of the Vietnam War and its era – Max Hastings's *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy* and Max Boot's *The Road Not Taken*. The third, Andrew Bacevich's *The Age of Illusions*, is one of the most important books I've read in the last few years. It's an excellent guidebook to the animating Cold War assumptions that have driven our military and political history since the end of WWII. Bacevich, a West Point graduate and retired Colonel, believes these assumptions and ideas, including the basis for going to war in Vietnam, were outdated and outgrown long before Vietnam, have chronically failed us as the world has moved forward, and bear directly on this very fraught time in our country's politics and cultural life.

KM: Did time, distance, and space make you more *comfortable* or perhaps, *capable* of writing about Vietnam as a place?

RC: Both—more comfortable and more capable. I didn't write a word referencing Vietnam for six years after I was discharged from the Navy. I was happy to be done with that period in my life. The prevailing national mood supported my perspective—Vietnam was anathema in American life at that time. Many Americans were morally and spiritually exhausted by the war, in some quarters ashamed of it, and its veterans—the walking symbols of the debacle—were, at best, misunderstood, and at worst openly and publically castigated. Given this attitude throughout much of the country, Vietnam was not a subject that very many people wanted to read about. There was no real literary market for Vietnam-related work. But in 1978 I started writing poems and fictional prose sketches that explored Vietnam as a place, a time, an experience. The pieces

were not autobiographical in any conventional sense but rather impressionistic, dream-like, emotive, arriving on the page almost fully realized. While I never attempted to actively suppress any inclination to allow the Vietnam experience into my writing, it seemed to take the passage of time and some psychological distance to open that doorway in my imagination.

KM: What draws you to fiction?

RC: As a writer I didn't start with fiction. I launched my writing life as a poet and published some fifty poems in numerous literary magazines through the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1982 I found myself struggling with a long narrative poem, or at least what I thought was a poem. I couldn't make it work, and at some point I stepped back and looked at the piece and realized ... it's not a poem, it's a short story. After some revision I submitted the piece to a literary magazine, it was accepted, and somewhat suddenly I was a fiction writer. I continued to write poems, but also actively wrote fiction from that point forward, and have ever since been drawn to fiction that has the lyrical aspects of poetry, that operates with some of the same qualities of concision, brevity without compromising the story, density without weighing down momentum. Prose that embodies these qualities can be found in every genre of fiction, including sci-fi and crime novels. Citing only a few writers I admire and enjoy for their abilities to bring poetic qualities to their work are Bernardine Evaristo, Jamaica Kincaid, Michael Ondaatje, Charlie Smith, and Tim O'Brien.

KM: There is such a hesitation (at least among my family and friends) to share war stories, especially from the Korea and Vietnam Eras. I find there is a similar shyness towards sharing

stories of Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly operations post-2009. How did you tell your family about your time in Vietnam?

RC: Reticence among vets to talk about wartime or military experiences is of course a time-honored phenomenon and certainly not confined to our more recent wars. This hesitancy ranges widely, I think, from the discomfort in invoking old ghosts and hard memories, to wanting to avoid difficult and often unresolved feelings. Often it may be as simple as not wanting to shock or offend, particularly if a veteran is among folks with no personal experience or knowledge of war or military service in any context. As for post-2009 vets of Iraq and Afghanistan, I think they're dealing with what is essentially a "Vietnam syndrome" in that interest in or national approval for our foreign wars has declined and people just don't want to hear about it. So even in "safe" settings (within families, with friends, even with therapists) vets can be quite hesitant about sharing their stories.

As for my family, Vietnam was never discussed, so I was never faced with avoiding anything about my experience. Or talking about it at all for that matter. My parents were glad to see me home safe and sound, but that was the end of it. They asked no questions about any aspect of my military experience. Yes, my family was likely more dysfunctional than most, certainly more repressed. But their disinterest did not stem from any feelings they had one way or another about Vietnam or war in general, per se—for them, *any* subject that risked drifting into difficult emotional territory was a subject best avoided.

KM: What draws humans, again and again, to retellings and reimaginings of war? In essence, why do we crave war stories?

RC: In the sense of pure narrative, it's hard to beat war as a potent framing device for storytelling. War stories are classically structured, operating where human conflict is at its most stark, with antagonists locked in mortal struggle. Danger and risk are built-in and require nothing extra from a writer—from the moment a war story begins we are, as we used to say in my Navy/Marine days, "in a world of shit."

So, at a kind of neurological level, war stories are magnetic, compelling, frightening, and, yes indeed, entertaining. They speak directly to our human need for tales that echo and retell and constantly reframe our darkest fears, greatest clashes, most devastating defeats and stunning victories, all driven by courage and heroism. All the ingredients are in place that elevate a story to mythic levels. Even in war stories that are not epic in scope, that are more narrowly focused (for example, *The Red Badge of Courage*), simply unfolding the story during a war or in the context of a war uses that base of elemental human conflict to fuel the tale and give it its ambience and texture. "War stories are the oldest stories" is how I put it in *Crossing Over*.

On other levels beyond the elements of narrative, on the psychological and emotional planes, the undergirding of war stories is, I think, foundational for humans. Like it or not, we are a warring breed that, in the aftermath of every war, gazes out (literally or metaphorically) on the battlefields and are simultaneously stunned by our capacity for wholesale violence and deeply saddened by war's bitter legacies. War stories are our meditations on this painful and inescapable aspect of the human condition, told by Homer (and certainly storytellers before

him), all the way to Kevin Powers in his very fine novel *The Yellow Birds*. It's the story we all know and cannot stop telling, always different and always the same.

KM: Why do you think that writing can be so powerful for those grappling with their experiences downrange?

RC: I've led several writing workshops for veterans over the years. The participation surprised me—all available slots filled within hours of the workshops being announced. The workshops themselves were not hard to lead as the vets were very active, very interested in writing as something that might help them gain insight, all of them eager to use writing as a tool to help them understand what had happened to them and how it changed them.

Here's how I put it in a 2017 piece I wrote on this subject called "[Writing to Heal](#)":

"Writing [for many veterans] felt like therapy. It seemed to many of them that, in some way, writing addressed their emotional pain like nothing else quite managed to do." As it happens, there's some interesting research that supports this that I reported in the article. VA researchers published a paper on what they called "written exposure therapy," about a three-month program in which seven vets, all suffering with severe PTSD, were asked to write about their wartime trauma. At the end of the three-month study period, the improvement in the seven participants was profound. In fact, five of them no longer met clinical criteria for PTSD. Writing—simply the activity of self-expression—clearly carries great power for people struggling with the impact and meaning of very difficult experiences.

KM: I would like to discuss *Crossing Over* with you. Can you describe your revision process for *Crossing Over*?

RC: Most of the individual pieces in *Crossing Over* tended to arrive fairly quickly on the page (yes, written in longhand!) and more or less as they would later appear in print. But they did not emerge in any particular order, so much of the revision process was in threading the pieces together with some degree of narrative logic. This involved a bit of rewriting, and it also spurred the writing of new pieces.

Not directly related to the revision process, but possibly of interest: before I started writing *Crossing Over* I had been interested in narrative poetry and how it might function as a kind of hybrid between poetry and prose. A very influential book for me at the time was *A View of Dawn in the Tropics* by Gabriel Guillermo Infante, a Cuban writer. *Dawn* is a short book built out of vignettes, vivid “snapshots” of moments and images in the history of Cuba. It’s a beautiful book, emotive and image-driven, and it tells the history of a place from a completely different perspective than a conventional history. It has an ethereal, dream-like quality—I had never read anything like it, and saw it as a model for a sort of storytelling I’d been thinking about but had not yet discovered. *Dawn* offered an example of how to structure a book like *Crossing Over*, using implication and inference and the power of small moments in the service of a larger portrait.

KM: We struggle with the concept of emotional truth in our Air Force Academy classrooms when teaching war literature. Fiction enrages some of our students, especially if the author has not been “over there,” or when writers do not retell *exactly* as it happened. What words would you

offer to those students who find fictional elements in war stories infuriating? What defense of fiction would you present? Along with these questions, can fiction be more “true” than reality? For these questions, I am drawing on the concluding narration in *Crossing Over*:

Plain truth seemed fantastic, frankly unbelievable. Or simply brutal without good reasons. Everybody’s life, I told myself, was hard enough already; they had no need to hear how I spent the last years of my boyhood, high-strung with weaponry in a distant jungle. I knew that after the war nothing in my life would feel true for a long time to come, except perhaps my imagination, the private life my imagination might carry, aside from me, beyond me. (46)

RC: I have certainly heard from annoyed vets and service members, going back many years, who are upset to learn my Vietnam-related work is not the bedrock truth of what I personally did or where I personally served in the Vietnam years. I was initially confused by these comments, received in letters or online or at readings and talks, because I write *fiction*, which is, by definition, prose that describes imaginary events and people. My work is *creative* writing, storytelling, not autobiography or history, and neither of my Vietnam books states or suggests otherwise.

I was talking about this a few years ago with an old Vietnam vet buddy (we served together as Navy corpsmen in a Marine combat unit), who gently reminded me that many vets out there may not know or care very much about books or writing, per se, but they remain fiercely proud of their service and the sacrifices of comrades. They’re offended by a book that, by not hewing hard to events as they actually happened, they believe dishonors those who served and sacrificed. They might feel the same as some of your students who, in your words,

are “enraged by an author [who] has not been ‘over there’ or ... do not retell exactly as it happened.” I get it—many vets feel a kind of protective ownership of their personal wartime experience and how it’s rendered in print. As I’ve sometimes been told, to offer anything other than documentary truth is to somehow insult the wartime experience itself.

But the real problem here is that the debate quickly runs aground over fact vs. fiction, very particularly in war writing. In war writing, at least, it’s very often difficult to truly tease out the two. Certainly in war *fiction*, most authors with any personal military experience tap those experiences, not to try for documentary truth but to mix and match elements of their experience to enhance their stories, to make their points, to render impact. They might compress three soldiers they knew into a single character. They might describe a battle where they were not, but heard about from friends who were. They will definitely leave out many of the more tedious pieces of their actual experiences, because ... nothing happened. And nobody wants to read about nothing. Perhaps the larger point here is that it’s important to remember that fiction is a narrative art form that strives for *emotional truth*. In other words, different individuals will go through the same general experience but come away with two very different perspectives, neither of which can or should be seen as historical fact. Reading *The Things They Carried* I have a visceral sense of what it was like to serve in Vietnam for one trooper in one setting in the war. But Tim O’Brien also toys throughout the book with the nature of a “true” war story. At the outset, the narrator is “Tim O’Brien,” but it rapidly becomes clear that the O’Brien narrating the stories is not literally Tim O’Brien the author—a device to remind us (in my opinion) of the residing power of imagination in crafting our stories of war, but also to interrogate the entire notion of “truth” in war stories. As I recall, Tim O’Brien (the narrator of the stories) says at one point “sometimes the truest war stories never happened.” Another slant on this comes,

interestingly, from Ulysses S. Grant, who wrote in his autobiography “that many war stories are fictions that are told so many times they become true.”

So, what words would I offer to your students who find fictional elements in war stories infuriating? What defense of fiction would I present? I will offer this: I understand and respect that many service members and vets are sensitive about stories depicting war by an author who either has not directly experienced war or lifts fragments from his or her experiences to enhance a story’s impact. But attempting to require a novelist to conform to some sort of external factual template misses the point of what fiction is and how it operates as an art form. Fiction means exercising one’s skills to craft a story—not simply recounting the unadorned truth. (Which, in itself, rarely has much narrative power.) Anger about encountering imaginary events in war fiction, or discovering the novel or story one has just read is not the author’s direct experience, misunderstands what the purpose of fiction is.

All this points to your follow-on question: can fiction be more “true” than reality? Yes—in the emotional sense. Tim O’Brien agrees, as does Ulysses Grant. As one of my old writing teachers liked to say, “the real test of fiction is how true it is.” If a reader wants a documentary account that strives to educate and inform, then it’s time for biography or history. But if a reader wants to discover emotional weight, to find or share in some form of psychological truth, it’s time for fiction. (And, by the way, I’ve read plenty of history and biography that rises to lyricism and carries a great deal of emotional weight, so these kinds of nonfiction can still have great power. Still, their primary purpose is not to imagine anything but rather to tell it as it happened.) In many ways the lines you quote above from *Crossing Over* (“Plain truth seemed fantastic, frankly unbelievable. Or simply brutal without good reasons...I knew that after the war nothing in my life would feel true for a long time to come, except perhaps my imagination, the private life

my imagination might carry, aside from me, beyond me.”) sums up my position on the primacy and necessity of the imagination’s role in an effort to understand just what the hell happens to us humans when exposed to the chaos and conflagration and apparent meaninglessness of war.

KM: What does fiction offer our memories? Is fiction the same as imagination?

RC: It seems to me that fiction operates in a different territory than memory. Would it be better to ask what memories offer our fiction? Personal memories (virtually always selected, shaped, edited) certainly contribute to a fiction writer’s ability to bring verisimilitude to a story. For a reader, it may be that, at least in “realistic” fiction like I’ve written, scenes or settings or situations might merge in some way with a reader’s own memories of similar such elements in his or her life.

I know this question—the role of memory—has more resonance in the world of war writing than other topical areas in fiction. War novels, unlike, say, science fiction, or historical fiction, tend to draw more readers who want to believe they’re reading a documentary account even if the words “a novel” appear below the book’s title. In novels written by vets of more recent wars it’s safe to say the author’s personal memories of wartime events experienced or witnessed inevitably contribute to the world of the story, but we can also safely assume those memories are arranged, compressed, expanded, or altered to serve the needs of the story.

This moves to your second question: is fiction the same as imagination? Not precisely, but fiction cannot happen without human imagination. Maybe it’s more useful to say that fiction is an expression of *structured* imagination applied to the creation of a story.

KM: I would like to move towards questions about your novel; tell me about your decision to use light as an element in *Fatal Light*. It's a haunting choice. When I was reading, light became a sort of fog that surrounded my sense of your narrator's ability to recollect details with precision; at other moments light and darkness felt like a magnifying glass that allowed access into vivid details that felt more real than reality. Flashes of light and darkness in *Fatal Light* melted into my personal memories of tracer rounds, of muzzle flashes, of seeing my first grenade, of the most beautiful stars I'd ever seen above a pitch-black Iraqi sky. What inspired this choice? How did you select your title, *Fatal Light*?

RC: Light: The uses of light as imagery—kinds of light, shades of light, gradations of light—in *Fatal Light* was not a conscious decision during the writing process. It was only after finishing the book that I saw what I'd done. I do seem to have a predominantly visual imagination and also tend to recall events from a visual angle, so I think that contributed to my reliance on that kind of imagery. But it's also like you beautifully put it: light and darkness can sit in the memory as both a magnifier and a filter on events. It's an irony that tracer rounds at night are so beautiful, those flashing lines of light cutting across the black—but they are deadly, of course. For some, it was the last beauty in this world they would see.

The Title: My long-time working title for the novel was *Mortal Places*. That was the title when the finished manuscript went off to the publisher. About a week later I got a call from my editor. There was a problem. They were releasing a paperback edition of James Carroll's novel *Mortal Friends* around the same time my novel was scheduled to be released. The publisher didn't want to release two "Mortals" with all the opportunities for confusion, particularly in promotion and orders. Since Carroll's book had already appeared in hardcover there was no way

his title could be changed. I was at a complete loss. I'd never even contemplated another title. I talked with some folks close to me who knew the book well at that point, and one remembered one of her favorite phrases: *fatal light*, which occurs toward the novel's end. Bam! There it was. And, of course, it's a much better title than my original one. And, as you've noted, it resonates with the recurring imagery of light throughout the novel.

KM: Your narrators in *Crossing Over* and *Fatal Light* appear to remain unnamed; why? What did this offer your stories?

RC: I was looking to evoke everyman, just another kid from somewhere in America who had become a soldier in that fractured war, whose name was an unimportant detail.

I didn't actually start writing with this idea (an unnamed narrator) in play, but as I worked along and had not yet named my protagonist, I started to see that he did not need a name, that he was telling us his story in a very personal way. A friend once told me that reading these books was as if he was hearing the words whispered directly into his ear. Again, an effect I wasn't conscious of when writing, but I realized an unnamed narrator, in these particular kinds of books, could offer greater intimacy for readers.

KM: You do not shy away from graphic details: drunk soldiers pissing on a bar floor, porn magazines, a "dog's head turned inside out." Why include these particular flashes of war?

RC: I wanted stark realism, veracity, a gut-punch. I wanted readers to really get it, to feel the whole sad tapestry. But I should also note that an early draft of the book was softer, a bit

gentler. The tough stuff was there but described more obliquely. Leslie Wells, my very gifted editor who helped me a great deal in developing *Fatal Light*, asked why I was pulling my punches. She correctly advised me that I was describing war, and, so, I needed to *describe the war*. Leslie was right, and I believe it's a better book for not shying away from graphic details—just as my narrator could not.

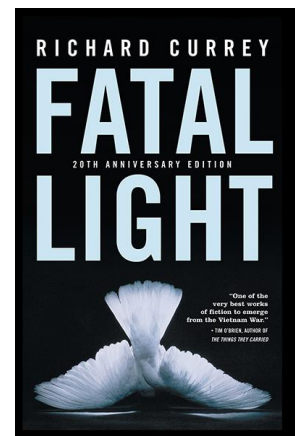
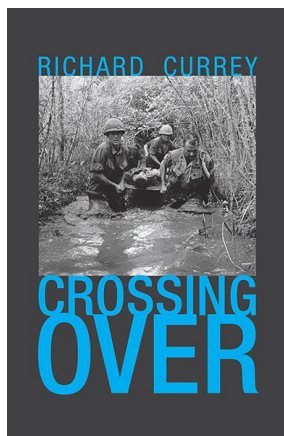
KM: I am interested in the moment Mary's photo disintegrates in your narrator's pocket. She seems to haunt the story's arc.

RC: Mary does indeed haunt the novel's arc. She's a narrative anchor, where the story starts and where it ends. Mary represents the "original world," one of innocence, although an innocence that's already fraying in the first few pages of the book as Vietnam casts its shadow. Once the narrator's in-country, Mary becomes more idea than actual person—an idea he can hang onto. He needed her in this way, a talisman in the chaos, as it were. Her photo is the physical representation of that talismanic power, but like everything in the war it disintegrates and slips away. After the narrator returns home, he goes looking for Mary to find that she has essentially disappeared for him. She's moved on, and he knows that part of his life is over. War changes everything. Old relationships are altered forever.

KM: Discuss the final scenes in *Fatal Light*: your war veteran returning home to share stories with his grandfather. During our phone conversation, you mentioned that the emotional truth of these scenes had been impactful for readers, and also that this was wholly imagined. Is there

something common in the experience of returning home and sharing our tales with family? Why are these conversations important?

RC: Over the years, reader feedback has consistently told me the final section of *Fatal Light*, the “grandfather section,” is a favorite part of the book. I like it, too—the narrator finally returns to a safe haven after the brutality and dehumanization of the war. Echoing some of the things I’ve said to your earlier questions, yes, this is fiction—wholly imagined. I did not return home and go see my grandfather. I would love to have done so, but my grandfather died in 1961. The grandfather as depicted in *Fatal Light* is an imaginative reconstruction of the man I remembered, what I think he might’ve been like and how he might have related to me as a veteran. To your point about returning home and sharing our stories with family, as I mentioned earlier that wasn’t in the cards for me, but I wish it had been because I can only assume such sharing would be very therapeutic, very healing and reassuring. Perhaps this final section of the book allowed me to get a taste of this in a vicarious, fictionalized way.



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