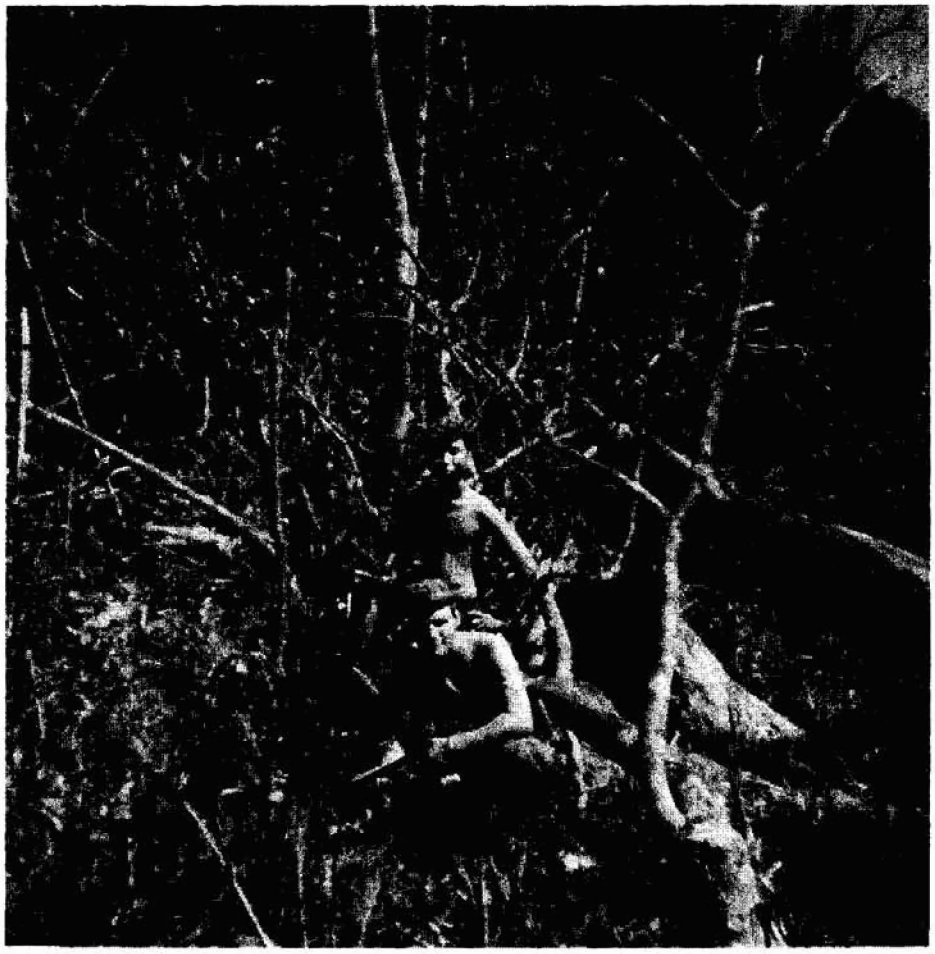


[John Wolfe with Vietnamese scout—photo taken while recovering bodies after an Air America crash]

John Wolfe

A Different Species of Time

The paratroopers of the 2/327th Infantry sometimes fought in lowland areas; however, most of our time was spent stalking North Vietnamese on the ancient game trails that weave through the jungles of the Anamese Cordillera. Geographically, these mountains lie on the Laotian border; psychologically, they seem to exist in some mystical realm. In the midst of their cloud-hidden summits one senses the restoration of something primal. Reason, sanity, and order seem remote peculiarities of a civilization from which you have been isolated, banished, and your Christian God seems a deity out of His jurisdiction.

In a way it seems appropriate that such a surreal landscape should host an event in which humans hunted other humans. It is as if, when the world was created, allowances were made for special zones, non-homogenous with the rest of the world, redolent with supernatural mystery where man could experience the full expression of his darker side. On trails that seemed to come from nowhere and to go nowhere, we moved through the fog-shrouded forests of this reverse Shangri-La.

Weighed down with sixty pounds of equipment, days of tortuous climbing would pass with no sign of the North Vietnamese. The heat was suffocating and the terrain difficult to nearly impossible to traverse. Torrential rain fell for days turning feet to sponge; under every leaf,

leeches waited to attach themselves. Dysentery was frequent and parasite infestation certain.

The sudden appearance of sandal tracks, bloody bandages, log-reinforced trails, or other signs of human presence would send adrenaline rushing into the blood of the point man and his slack. The possible meaning of hesitation at the front of a moving unit was clear to all behind, and hearts would pound all down the line.

Sometimes the fighting started and ended with a single burst from the point man's M-16, but on other occasions the forest erupted in horizontal fire storms of terminal rain; red and green tracers filled the air, and RPG rounds whooshing and exploding were answered by the thud of M-79 rounds. Squalls of deadly fire moving through claustrophobic open areas hacked at vegetation and flesh, splintering trees and bone; death danced through the forest amongst the nominated of both parties.

Anyone familiar with the "flight or fight" choices offered by the survival instinct knows both can exert a compelling and irresistible force over his actions; one primal urge sending him into shameless, panicked flight, and the other launching him on an equally shameless attack, the ferocity of which often startling the attacker more than the attacked. Training, discipline, and comradeship help insure that the latter response occurs and not the former.

It is later, nauseous and shaking, that one actually comes to conscious grips with the full awfulness of combat events. The same atmosphere of quiet sacredness that inspires silent monks to choose the mountains as sights for their temples added, I think, an extra and malignant dimension to the carnage committed there.

Few things in this world are as unforgiving, pitiless, ungovernable, and irrecoverable as lead and steel loosed from a weapon. The transfigurations they affect

on the bodies of friend and foe alike form a permanent backdrop to all of a man's future visions. While others experience intervals of silence between thoughts, a combat veteran's intervals will be filled with rubbery Halloween mask heads housing skulls shattered into tiny shards, schemeless mutilations, and shocked, pained expressions that violent and premature death casts on a dead boy's face. These images are war's graffiti. They are scrawled across the veteran's mind defacing the silence and peace that others enjoy. At times the images may seem to fade, but an unguarded glance into the gloom is sufficient to exhume them.

The possibility of being overwhelmed by such events was always one small horror away. In other wars, at such times, men probably called in desperation to their God to sustain and deliver them. In the 101st division we employed a secular technique of emotional first aid handed down from short-timer to cherry. If one felt himself at that point of saturation he chanted the mantra, *it don't mean nothing, it don't mean nothing!* If chanted defiantly enough, the phrase took on the feeling of an affirmation, almost a doctrine.

Some individuals seemed to acquire additional stamina by nurturing a hatred for the "gooks," by creating a dehumanized image of the enemy at which to direct rage. I could never see the NVA as other than our dusky companions in misfortune. I would have liked to hate them, but the scanty personal bric-a-brac found in the pockets and packs of the dead dramatized not their differences to us, but their essential sameness. We found family pictures (theirs black-and-white, ours color), a few small bills, a comb, and maybe even a bag of marijuana. Assuming the role of nemesis to poor, rice-eating, subproletariats yanked from their lives of subsistence farming, seemed ridiculous. The NVA themselves had a slo-

gan that best summed up their plight: "Born in the North to die in the South!"

A great sense of displacement existed in my unit as well. This sense of displacement was exacerbated by the constant turbulence and changes in our membership. The social structure of my platoon and company seemed inspired by the Hydra. Members killed or seriously wounded were physically and emotionally amputated from the whole. New members would eventually appear to replace them in a process of constant regeneration. Though discarded by the communal will of the unit that remained, these amputated parts of us forced us to consider what new trail the less fortunate now took and what the likelihood was that we'd follow them at some point.

My own process of introversion began on the morning of March 18, 1969. Hue had been rocketed the night before from a mountain to its west. As the closest unit to the suspected location we were ordered to proceed in that direction. It was my turn to walk point, and I was amazed to arrive at the launch site without enemy contact. In deference to the harrowing walk I had just led, I was allowed to remain on top of the mountain, to serve as a rallying point for other soldiers if contact was made, while the rest of my company split up and pushed down the sides of the hill in search of caves. When the squads had pushed a good distance down the sides, the NVA struck my position with a brief furious barrage. An RPG round threw me several feet. I felt tumbled inside a churning wave of hot dry vapor. And then I went blank.

My blackout must have lasted but seconds because twigs, leaves, and dirt were still showering down around me as I regained consciousness. Lying face down, the lower half of my body was engulfed by a nauseating numbness, and I was initially convinced I had been blown in half.

Wanting to spare myself the sight of my own bisection, I decided to confirm or dispel this suspicion by trying to kneel. Finding my right leg and pulling it up underneath me filled me with relief and emboldened me to roll over to assess the damage. Blood drenched my uniform; my left leg was shredded and my right one badly mauled. Blood bubbles were sudsing from a hole on the left side of my chest, and breathing was painful. Yet, things were better and left more room for hope than I had at first envisioned.

Finding myself largely intact, I became optimistic, almost joyous. Oddly, I next found myself singularly concerned with a sense of propriety, with responding to the situation as a soldier should. My M-16 found its way into my hands, and although I could see no target, I emptied the magazine into the face of the forest. This seemed the correct, reasonable response, a familiar and comforting bit of behavior rooted in the rational, orderly world from which I now seemed to be inexorably slipping.

Other paratroopers started to arrive at my side. Hugging the forest floor, some moved in front of my position to shield me from further harm. The top sergeant and medic began working, furiously wrapping gauze and plugging holes while I drank blood and swallowed their reassuring lies. The Captain, our Company Commander, was on the radio employing emasculating insults and threats to coax a timid chopper pilot into hovering over our position long enough to lower a rigid litter and effect my evacuation. His final menacing transmission, "Do it now, or I'll drop you out of the fucking sky myself!", ended the debate.

A cable hoisted me through the jungle canopy and into the aluminum belly of the chopper. A full-length portrait of Wily Coyote greeted me from the back of the pilot's helmet with the words, "Slicks are for Kids,"

painted beneath it. Halfway through the flight some impulse caused the pilot to turn his visored face around to stare at me. Perhaps he wanted to see if I was still alive; maybe he just felt my eyes on the back of his helmet wanting the road runner cartoon to begin. He made nothing like an attempt at communication, but I smiled him a red smile and formed a peace sign with two blood-sticky fingers. Touching down near the sea, I was jerked out into a marvelous blast of heat from the glaring Asian sun. It felt liquid on my arms, face, and chest, like being basted with warm butter.

In the Quonset hut hospital I became frigid again. Shivering, I was placed on a table. People started to surround me. To a clerk who asked me if I wanted a priest I screamed "I don't want a fucking priest! I want a doctor!"

Surgeons started to probe my legs with a needle. "Do you feel this? How about this?" Suddenly my heart started to convulse as if some rabbit-sized animal was struggling to escape, to break free from my ribcage. "Forget the goddamn legs," I screamed, "My chest—something's happening!" My heart had stopped. I fell back and then . . . silence—more of a stillness, really, a stillness that made me feel that my heart had been, since birth, pounding thunderously.

I was not unconscious. As a matter of fact, never had my thoughts seemed so palpable and lucid as in that stillness: "Oh, fucking great!" I thought. "I'm dead! Shit! Now what?"

I realized all the terror and pain were gone and that although I wasn't breathing, it didn't bother me in the least. A most pleasant sensation came over me. I felt as if I were grass waving in a slight summer breeze. It was a delicious sensation, and I felt as if I were actually overlooking such a scene: a hill covered with tall swaying grass.

Perhaps at the moment of death the mind searches the sum of one's experiences and then the most soothing all-is-well-in-the-world sensation detaches itself and rises to the surface of consciousness. I say this because I seem to recognize my death sensation as an experience I had as a child while searching for arrowheads on the grassy hills behind my grandfather's farm in Indiana. It was just before sundown when the combination of warmth, breeze, grass, and color coalesced to create such a sense of well-being in me that I had to interrupt my search to more fully surrender to the sensation.

From what I've been able to piece together from my records, memory, and a recent meeting with the doctor who saved me that day, I suffered three cardiac arrests. After performing two open-heart massages to restart my heart and expending thirty-nine pints of blood, the two senior surgeons gave up when the third arrest occurred. The junior surgeon, Captain Barton Nissoson, convinced the anesthetist to remain behind and together they postponed my death.

The rigorous leg of my inward journey was just about to commence. Like a traveler coming upon the last oasis, the last outpost before setting out across the bleak immensity of desert, I regained a final and brief conscious contact with what I accepted as reality.

Dr. Nissoson was sitting next to me. After reminding me that I had lost a limb, he joked about how I had frightened him the day before, and I joked with him about my concerns that he might be Polish.

Lieutenant Colonel Dyke, who had recently replaced Charlie Beckwith as my Battalion Commander, also visited me during that brief respite. He leaned over me, gave me a fatherly embrace, a kiss, pressed a 101st Airborne Medallion into my hand, and placed a dagger emblazoned with the division's Screaming Eagle on my stomach. He whispered words in my ear that I did not

hear, but his warmth and that of Dr. Nissoson were vital provisions that went far to sustain me on the lonely journey I was about to embark on.

The life support equipment I needed to survive was several miles out at sea aboard the USS. *Repose*. Cruising the South China Sea, this hospital ship steered a course parallel to the hostilities, drawing close at points to pick up the results of flare-ups and inland carnage. Its cargo of broken bodies was eventually delivered to Subic Bay in the Philippines. For the short hop out to the *Repose* Dr. Nissoson huddled next to me in the chopper rhythmically squeezing a football shaped bag to keep my lungs inflated. After landing on the ship, my life was officially a Navy responsibility. Nissoson, his duty accomplished above and beyond the call, stole a self-indulgent moment in the galley snacking on popcorn and chocolate milk before flying back to the war.

Liquids had begun to fill my punctured lung; the result was pneumonia and high fever. What little physical strength I may have had quickly dissipated, and I slipped into unconsciousness. When I awoke I was disoriented. I was only semi-conscious and under the heavy influence of narcotics. Slowly, bits and pieces started to come to me: the ambush, the medevac, the cardiac arrests, Dr. Nissoson. I grasped that I had been hurt badly and that I was now on a hospital ship. That's when the first devils appeared, climbing brazenly up on to the foot of my bed.

The troupe consisted of a female and two males; the males dragged a grass hut with them. They were probably ten inches tall, gray in color, with a peculiar, semi-transparent, mother-of-pearl quality to their skins. They were hairless and completely human in shape and proportion except for dog-like snouts and pointed ears.

Using the hut like a stage backdrop, the males lit it on fire and proceeded to pummel and rape the female

with exaggerated theatrical gestures. She reacted in a similar manner to the assault, employing exaggerated and stylized theatrics like those seen in traditional Chinese Opera. The skit completed, all three disappeared over the side of the bed.

Having grown up on the edge of the East Village, I was aware of the mind's capacity to hallucinate, especially under the influence of the drugs I knew I must have been given. This rationalization helped me to dismiss the event, but as the devils' visits persisted, several things began to bother me. First, they always looked the same; I came to realize this as I repeatedly ogled them, studied their bodies, and watched their muscles flex and relax as they moved. Secondly, they used the real environment, obeying the laws of gravity and physics as all real objects must. They walked on horizontal surfaces and climbed when they reached a vertical structure. When negotiating thin pipes overhead, they walked like acrobats, tightrope performers, visibly struggling to maintain their balance.

In addition, I noticed that they responded to me and other humans emotionally. Catching me staring at them, they would become angry and threatening. One male mocked my efforts to free myself from my wrist restraints. They seemed to possess heightened senses of perception and active nervous systems—they were easily startled by loud noises and would scatter when nurses or doctors approached. At times they were exhibitionists and showoffs. A lone female, wearing nothing but the faded worn bottom-half of a ballerina dress, once climbed up on my bed carrying an early-model phonograph. After starting the music, she performed a short ballet for me.

A psychiatrist aboard ship started paying me visits. Perhaps sensing unusual psychological activity, his professional curiosity was aroused. Whatever his moti-

vation, he seemed to take a personal interest in my plight. I was in dire need of communion myself. I'd have preferred a shaman, a Dantesque chaperone to help me navigate this dimension now intruding into my consciousness, someone who could posit me, sanity intact, back in my own milieu. Lacking such a person, the psychiatrist seemed my best and only bet. On those occasions, therefore, when a small part of my mind would rise up out of the underworld-like altered state to consciousness, I anxiously scanned the space for his presence. My small gray play pals had, in my mind, achieved the recognition, the status of reality, and I desperately wanted to share the fact of their presence with him.

In response to my entreaties for an opportunity to portray my secret visitors, the psychiatrist provided me with a pencil and legal pad. I worked on the task without real cognizance; as I handed the pad back to him, I saw that I had drawn not devils, as I had intended, but scores of tiny Indians and cowboys shooting it out. As a young child I had filled many hours drawing such scenarios, miniature battlefields with opposing armies forming up and facing off. I had vicariously experienced their mutual slaughter as they exchanged volleys of lethal scribbles until one side was obliterated.

Despite the difficulty I had communicating my impressions of reality to others during this period, I did, I believe, achieve perfect communion with one person aboard the *Repose*. Semi-conscious and strapped into a wheelchair, I was wheeled down to a physical therapy room with various exercise bars, tables, and gym equipment around. Weights about the size of baby rattles were placed in my hands. Just a few feet away a physical therapist was busy balancing something on a table that at first looked like a sack of potatoes. When I focused I saw that it was a young oriental man, probably Korean, who had lost both arms and both legs close to the torso. No

sooner would the therapist balance the torso on its buttocks than it would topple over on its face with a painful looking impact, and then the process would be repeated.

The Korean's eyes met mine, and for a long moment the presence of everything and everybody else in the room blurred, faded out, dematerialized, leaving only his mind and mine on that spatial plane in an uninterrupted convergence. And then we both started to laugh hysterically. Neither of us expected to meet another human in the private dream to which we had been transported. So remote was the place we inhabited that Neil Armstrong could not have been more surprised had he bumped into someone taking those first giant steps for mankind on the moon.

The nature of my visions eventually underwent a drastic change for the worse. Space itself was now becoming unstable, and the environment as a whole started to undergo kaleidoscopic transformations. Space became elastic, stretching and shrinking around me. At one point I gazed over the side of my bed and I felt to be high up in the stands of a stadium. It was dark and the playing field almost too far away to see. On another occasion every object in the room revealed its design as being sexually inspired. Anything longer than wide became a penis, and anything with an enclosure or opening became a vagina. Occasionally, the walls would open up. Once, the entrance to a long jungle trail appeared in the wall. I could see the backs of soldiers moving away from me. I wanted to go with them, but a huge black spider crawled out from the opening, straddled my bed, and began to gnaw away at my legs.

Under the propulsion of some malignant force, the pace of these kaleidoscopic changes quickened, and for what must have been a week I lived in a cubist maze of shifting agonies and disorienting absurdities. The space around me churned, forming and reforming itself into a

living torment of dark permutations, a fluid gestalt that shaped and reshaped into patterns of agonizing implication. Shortly after my immersion into this world of Bosch-like nightmare flux, I consciously decided to relax my grip and just let go, to adopt a totally passive attitude about my surreal visions. I'd resist nothing and I'd be open to everything. I literally surrendered body and soul. But, as one horror piled upon the next, the density of despair became unbearable. Shattered, I felt beyond reintegration or reconstruction, and I prayed for a speedy doom.

Annihilation was forthcoming, but in a more profound and devastating form than mere cessation. Whereas at the moment of death my mind had so effortlessly and instantaneously found a peak of bliss, it now seemed headed for the opposite pole with a vengeance, taking the long scenic route and excavating through all the layers and shades of dread that men have faced through time. Ironically, when the bottom did fall out in a kind of black satori, it was not the presence of any kind of horror that was revealed, but rather an absence. The miseries that had preceded had pressed in on me in an ever more confining manner.

Now, all confines exploded, and a gray immensity faced me. There was only the gray sterile infinity aware of its own lack of warmth. There was a particular quality of warmth it lacked. I'm tempted to use the term Divine love for the quality that was absent here.

When or how I emerged from this realm I don't remember. At some non-specific point in time the flame re-ignited, and all experience was once again charged with the "warmth" that was entirely missing in the place I'd visited. For several days I lacked the presence of mind to dwell on or articulate the experience I'd had even to myself, but I clearly knew and felt that I now housed an abyss, that I had become cavernous and hol-

low. Speculating on why these experiences—which could easily have remained an irreconcilable anomaly, an unbridgeable interval with the rest of my existence—didn't result in my disintegration takes me back to the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

As a very young child walking through the halls filled with artifacts from primitive societies, I started to suspect that these statues, masks, and totems were touching me, addressing me if you will. There was a mysterious and dark aspect to the sensation, but a kind of titillating warmth emanated from them too. Like a child raised in a puritanical society who keeps his libidinal stirrings hidden, these feelings became and remained a secret part of my spiritual life. Being a child, I may have confused an aesthetic response with a religious feeling, but from that time to this I have felt a compulsion to seek an ever more intimate convergence with the source of that noumenal presence, be it aesthetic, religious, or something other.

A devoutly Catholic youth, I, like the Haitian Hougans who add Christian effigies to their altars, found no contradiction in incorporating these seemingly pantheistic yearnings into my spiritual make-up. While the Catholicism was based on an esoteric faith, this noumenal quality I felt had the advantage of being a more tangible force, something that could actually, physically, emotionally, and psychologically "move" me.

Throughout my school life I had contented myself by filling my room with carvings from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but by the age of eighteen I wanted adventure, hands-on exotic adventure, physical, sexual, and spiritual. Disenchanted with the church, the Bronx, Irish-Catholic girls, and school, I was determined to travel to the most remote spot in the world. I didn't seek the sterile luxury of a tourist or student; I wanted to go like Sir

Richard Burton or Sabu, in Lord Jim-style, to get myself lost, go native, become enlightened, and achieve rebirth.

The jungles of Viet Nam may now seem a grotesque choice of locale in which to realize a return to Paradise myth, but, with its primeval forests, stone-age mountain tribes, and all those Buddhas with their enigmatic smiles, it seemed like a place where some kind of revelation might be encountered.

So, in a sense, I saw then and see now all that happened to me as the result of a personal quest. An unclear but nevertheless strong feeling I had pursued since childhood led me to ask a simple, mystical question which, whether by God or devil, my own subconscious, or dumb chance, was answered in vivid apocalyptic terms. I had experienced both the gray nothingness somewhere at the center of my being, which had almost engulfed me, and the unexplainable warmth which brought me back from the brink.

Understandably, as a painter, a large part of a picture's value to me is the amount of this religio-aesthetic warmth that emanates from it and the degree to which it reflects the depth of human experience. Ultimately, the many hidden structures, the overlapping gestalts that hide behind and interpenetrate with the subject matter and the passion, feeling, and purity of its execution become a metaphor for man himself. It seems to me that when confronting a work of art, a man should feel awakened in himself his capacity for complexity, mystery, and an extraordinary intensity of feeling. Only through my experiences in Vietnam, my wounding, and my recovery did I come to understand this.

Even more than in previous American wars, petty politics worked to obscure and invalidate a mother lode of human insight that lay just beneath the surface of the Vietnam War and the hard won experiences of its combatants. Intellectual fashion in the Age of Aquarius

could accommodate, was, in fact, eager to embrace, the illuminations of every itinerant guru, Maharashi, escaped Indian Chief, psychedelic mind excursionist, and howling Jesus freak. Yet, through some odd prejudice, this same intellectual fashion found nothing worthy of scrutiny in the effects of sustained trauma on its veterans. The Vietnam veteran was merely assigned the role of depraved fiend in the twentieth-century's version of the Leyenda Negra, a being fashioned out of a complicated war. What might have been an enormous collective contribution was unexplored or buried. In fact, a huge granite block that builds to a black crescendo as you walk its length was thrown on top for good measure.

With thousands of years of warfare and holocaust as history we should be as familiar with this dark human realm as we are with our own shadow, but each time our darker side intrudes into the arena of normal human affairs, it is treated as an aberration and given a new, misleading identity (shell shock, battle fatigue, post-traumatic stress syndrome). Each reappearance is confronted by a psychological community that, though perhaps more sophisticated, is less in touch and familiar with the forces unleashed than our ancestors who painted themselves blue and pranced naked in the snow before Caesar's legions, challenging the absolutism, the dominion of Rome. There is a criminal, spiritual cowardice in this evasion because in examining the effects of war, we might well discover just what inveigles man to his blackest deeds.

Through a slight inversion of logic, I have come to see my war experiences and subsequent difficulties as a positive, enabling episode. As an artist, I have a responsibility to examine human existence on all its frontiers and to discover just how deep is deep. Furthermore, if all the unfathomable desolation I came to encounter was "all," was the total matrix of human experience, if it filled

the whole circle, then man's plight would be an uninterrupted succession of Buchenwalds and Cambodias. It is not.

So I see my journey not as around the circumference of human experience, not necessarily even along the radius, but along a chord into myself, the length of which constitutes its own nourishing message as much as it does its darkness. ❑

Postscript: Following a year at Walter Reed Army Hospital, my records were sent to the V.A. hospital on First Avenue and Twenty-Third Street in Manhattan. A clerical error placed me on a ward for plastic surgery patients where I spent my last night of hospitalization along with a horribly burned and disfigured former Marine. Like me, he had experienced a cardiac arrest. He remembered nothing of the moments following the arrest but said that for a week after resuscitation, small gray devils danced on his bed, variously entertaining and provoking him.