

JOSEPH BATHANTI

Half of What I Say Is Meaningless

A few summers ago, my family and I packed up our household and moved a mere 1.4 miles down the road. Among my horde of haphazard papers, I discovered an old catalog and application from McGill University in Canada. Its envelope was postmarked *Montreal, Quebec, 22 Feb '72* and addressed to me at California State College, in the little southwestern Pennsylvania coal town of California, where I was then enrolled as a freshman. This little brown package is the only extant artifact of my brush with the Vietnam War.

For boys of my generation, Vietnam had been there all along, like some hideous lethal recessive gene, inching its celluloid way into our futures. When and how I became conscious of it I can't say. The sound and sight of its strange syllables—*Vietnam*—

infiltrated households everywhere. It seemed as though the backdrop of my childhood and early teen years was a tacked-up sheet upon which played, like surreal home movies, the TV images of the war: a dreary black and white jungle scape, dream-like chaos; soldiers in camos being dragged by buddies; machine gun fire; explosions; and an odd foreshadowing vocabulary: *Saigon, Hue, Kbesanh, TET, Danang, Camranh, Quantri, DMZ, Dakto, Ho Chi Minh*. What were these things? By the time I knew, they were indelibly napalmed into my consciousness. My future had arrived and, like most of my pals, I was politically vacuous. I packed up and went to college. My parents were picking up the tab.

The United States draft lottery for boys born in 1953, such as myself, took place during the first weeks of 1972. All 365 days of the year were dropped into the proverbial hat. The boys born on the first 150 or so dates plucked were sure to be drafted. Those with high numbers, 200 or above, were delivered. No draft. No war. No military of any kind. The ones who caught a 75 or lower could count on being sent to Vietnam. Student deferments had been abolished. I copped a 33. I was 18, home in Pittsburgh for the holidays, having successfully completed my first college semester (I had made the Dean's List). At the time, there were 140,000 American soldiers still fighting in Vietnam, half the number of twelve months before.

I was alone when I heard the news about my draft number over the radio. My mother and father were at their jobs as seamstress and steelworker. My sister was married. I wasn't shocked. I wasn't scared. I wasn't anything. But I knew I was changed, as if God had hit me over the head with this big, irrevocable random thing and I would never be the same. It only vaguely occurred to me that I could die. More than anything, it signaled in bold letters that I was no longer a child; that the charmed existence I had enjoyed thus far—that I figured would shield me forever—was a thing of the past. My mother and father, my aunts and uncles—no one could stand in the way of this. I was suddenly a man. I sat around the house and read, drank coffee—a privilege of being an adult—until it was time to hitchhike down to meet my girlfriend, who was still in high school.

On the steps of Sacred Heart gym, the gym where I had learned to play basketball, where I had taken my first shower, where I had noticed in eighth grade the first black hairs blooming out of my chest, I sat waiting for her, smoking cigarettes (I kept my smoking hidden from my parents) and listened to the hoops ringing with the girls' practice free throws. It was snowing. The sky was greyish purple. All the automobiles had their lights on, though it was only three o'clock. A gloomy day, the kind of Pittsburgh day I loved: a day when any minute the sky could unload enough snow to slow things to a crawl, then finally to a halt, and by nightfall there would be the feeling that time had stopped and nothing bad could ever happen.

The moment she saw me, my girlfriend started crying and threw herself into my arms. Like everyone else, she had heard the news. On the covers of her books were magic-markered peace signs. She wore dangly earrings, love beads and tiny skirts. She was only sixteen and fully intended to marry me.

"We'll go to Canada," she said.

At that moment, that plan suited me. I had no intention of entering the armed forces. In fact, I had no intentions whatsoever.

That night at supper my mother broke down and sobbed, though we never talked about my number. I realized how different, nearly tragic, I had become in the eyes of others. I had always wanted to be different—indeed had always thought of myself as so—but not like this.

When I returned to California State in mid-January, I received the same treatment. Reactions varied from those who offered sympathy and commiseration to those who told me I was a dead man. And there were quite a few in between who asked me what I was going to do. I had no idea.

My girlfriend and I feverishly wrote letters back and forth. Our first plan was that I would apply for Conscientious Objector status. If that didn't work, our backup was Canada. We would get married, I would enter a Canadian university, then, according to plan, on to law school where I would become a lawyer who specialized in defending the poor and downtrodden. Chiseled into the bedrock of my mind was an unyielding picture of the future. I would grow a mustache, wear three piece suits, and work from home in a giant oak-paneled study where my gleaming, cuddly children would feel free to play until my wife called us to meals in the sunroom. It could be done, my girlfriend and I assured each other.

Without delay I sent off to McGill University for a catalog and application materials. Then, on a weekend home, I took a bus downtown to the Federal Building and picked up a form outlining procedures for obtaining CO status. The clerk who handed it to me explained all I had to do was write a statement.

A conscientious objector is against war for moral reasons. I believed the war was immoral. Everyone said so, especially those with whom, at least rhetorically, I had aligned myself. I was not a violent person. I absolutely did not believe in killing. Therefore I embodied all of the qualities of a conscientious objector, and felt absolved of any hypocrisy in claiming that status. I certainly had the clothes for it. That day, I was wearing a purple shirt, white and blue-striped bell bottoms with a macrame belt, work boots, an army jacket, in the pocket of which was Sartre's *The Age of Reason*. My shoulder-length hair flowed out from under a navy blue watch cap. I brimmed with confidence. Until I read the form.

To be classified as a conscientious objector you must be opposed to war in any form. Your objection must be based on moral or ethical beliefs, or beliefs which are commonly accepted as religious. Your beliefs must influence your life as the belief in God influences the life of one who is a traditionally religious conscientious objector. To qualify, your conscience must be spurred by deeply held moral, ethical or religious

beliefs which would give you no peace if you allowed yourself to become a combatant member of the armed forces.

There were also a number of questions to addressing the applicant's "core of beliefs." It was like applying for the priesthood. To simply pen "War and killing are bad"—which in 1972 was a bit of a cliché—would not be enough. And that's all I had in my arsenal. I needed an ideology, and there in the cold hall outside the draft board, I realized, with a touch of panic, that I thoroughly lacked one.

Looking for reassurance, I caught a bus and got off at The Friends Peace Center in Oakland. There I explained to a long-haired, bearded counselor, whose job it was to coach people like me, that I had a bad draft number and I wanted to shoot for a CO.

He gave me a withering look and asked what I would do if I walked in the door of my home and found someone raping my mother. I knew what the correct answer was. The true pacifist would somehow persuade the offender, in a completely nonviolent manner, to stop his assault. As I visualized the scenario, I saw myself reaching for the big knife my mother sliced eggplant with and stabbing the culprit as many times as I had to—and maybe even a few extra times for good measure. I replied vaguely that I'd do whatever to protect my mother.

"You are probably not a CO," he said. I was still welcome, of course, to submit a statement to my draft board, but first I needed to spend some time reflecting on my commitment to peace and nonviolence.

I thanked him and walked out into the winter air. It was a dark, bitter day. Snow, wind, slush. People turned away from one another. I stuck out my thumb. No one would stop. I started walking. How disrespectful, how egotistical, to think that I could be a CO just by writing a statement. And, really, I wasn't "opposed to war in any form." The United States' involvement in World War II was crucial. As moral as it gets.

I was born in 1953, into the Republican presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, eight years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. The Korean War armistice was signed when I was just seven days old. Joseph McCarthy busily wrecked the lives of innocent people. My entire extended family, actually everyone I knew, was still deranged from The Depression and World War II, and talked about them as if they had happened but the day before. War was an integral part of my collective unconscious. After all, I was a boy—with a beloved arsenal of toy guns—who, like other little boys of my generation, adored any film with sword or gunplay. Good clean fun. Had anyone asked me just a few years before I started college who my

favorite actor was, I probably would have volunteered John Wayne. I had loved *The Green Berets*, propagandist pap through and through.

In truth, I always thought of myself, in some pit of my subconscious, as a soldier. Before I ever heard of the war in Vietnam, I had lived through The Bay of Pigs and The Cuban Missile Crisis. I'd grown up during the height of the Cold War. Krushchev, Castro—these were dirty words. My entire existence was paramilitary, my psyche pocked with trenches and foxholes. Damn it, I was a boy, and there was nothing better and braver and truer and more blessed in the eyes of God and country than a soldier. Girls had babies. Boys went to war. Period. What was it our football coach told us? *Make them piss blood.*

Apparently I was not against killing and violence. I would have loved being a war hero. The reason I didn't want to go to war was quite simple: I was afraid. As for my "belief in God," well, I realized I hadn't yet consulted Him. At the sobering announcement that my number was 33, I had prayed for miraculous deliverance, but it seemed an eternity since I had gone to Mass or received the sacraments. I had no "deeply held moral, ethical or religious beliefs." I wasn't even sure what I believed any more.

So I went back to California and waited to hear from McGill. Lurking in my mail was a summons from the draft board. I was classified 1-A and was to report back to the Federal Building for my preinduction physical. I did not tell my parents about the letter. I might even have thrown it away. I'm not sure. But what I am sure about is that I did not report for that physical.

When the materials for McGill arrived in late February of 1972, I was a month into my second semester and doing well. In addition to my classes, I was on the dorm council and the varsity track team, and had even published, anonymously, a poem called "This Disgruntled Noise" (my first ever publication) in the campus literary magazine.

Living in a welter of new theories and ideas that college offered, I began to sense what a mechanized, futile place the world was, how technology subverts humanity at every turn, how instead of souls people now had appliances. In my beloved, imagined poverty, I fueled all-nighters with instant coffee whitened with Pream. I'd even started smoking a corn cob pipe stuffed with synthetically-flavored tobacco. I'd sit at my desk, puffing by candlelight, a stick of incense imbedded in the candle wax, and write poems that, I was sure, would one day bring me fame. My dorm buddies, mostly tough, edgy kids from one-horse steel towns in the Monongahela Valley, eyed me with respect. To them I was cool, intense, a real silver-plated

egghead bookworm who would still chip in, even on school nights, for a couple quarts of Iron City beer.

My favorite teacher was a fellow named Connie Mack Rea, a former pro baseball player and direct descendant of legendary baseball pioneer, Connie Mack. A tall, enigmatic, ruggedly handsome man with a clipped mustache, he called us by our last names: “Mr.” or “Miss.” He wore elaborately knit sweaters; leather; expensive sports jackets; pointy, tooled cowboy boots. His air was wholly aristocratic, vain, wry, condescending, perhaps even tragic, as if he were nursing some secret wound, some bitter knowledge about which he’d remain eternally silent.

There was a word Mr. Rea used frequently, though far from casually, a word I had heard kicked around in high school, and which had come to embody, among my friends and me, a superficial chic: *existentialism*. I never really knew what it meant, but would mouth it occasionally as a kind of password. Even now I’ve had to consult Webster’s to get my bearings. Pinning it down is like trying to scoop Mercury. Mr. Rea described it as the primal core of individuality, the insideness of you and you alone that no one—physicians, priests, parents, lovers, no one—could get at or near because your minute by minute experience placed you in a category of one.

No wonder I had been feeling so misunderstood all my life. By God, I had been born an existentialist. And never had I felt so misunderstood than at the moment my birth date betrayed me. How could anyone know how I felt? What it was like to look into my own personal abyss? Heck, even I didn’t know what it was like, and it was my abyss.

In Mr. Rea’s class I first got my hands on Albert Camus’s “The Myth of Sisyphus,” an essay of just over a thousand words that seemed to sum it all up: Step out of line and, like Sisyphus, the absurd hero, you are given a rock that, every time you finally roll it up the mountain, rolls back down. The gods, Camus writes, “had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

Existentialism seemed the perfect posture for a fellow in my spot. The notion that life is meaningless, at best a cruel joke, made perfect sense. I was ready to sign on, though I was far from a nihilist. In fact, I was hopelessly ambitious, and rather confident. I had goals. I studied like mad so I’d get all A’s in my courses. Existentialists don’t give a damn about A’s. Absurdist heroes don’t study. Goals are mere illusions. But I also liked being different, and even though I didn’t clearly understand it at the time, existentialism supplied me with a kind of defense

mechanism. Meanwhile, sitting prominently on my dorm room desk, for all to see, was my application from McGill, waiting to be filled out and sent back to Montreal.

My year at California ended in May of 1972. The United States had mined Haiphong Harbor and stepped up its bombing of North Vietnam. It looked like the war would never end. I still had not reported for my induction physical.

I never applied to McGill. I guess I never really intended to. The enormity of leaving home, family, friends, country, and the only life I'd ever known to begin study at a Canadian university must have finally sunk in. I didn't have a car. I didn't have money. I didn't speak French. I hadn't even talked to my parents about it. What I had done is transfer my existential A's from California State to the University of Pittsburgh, less than five miles from the house where I'd grown up, the house I would begin living in again after a year of absolute freedom.

Mere days before Fall classes began at Pitt, I received another notice for my physical. This time the language was explicit: Get down there pronto or get in serious trouble. Period.

How the idea of ROTC, and the instant deferment it would furnish me with, filtered into my head, I don't know. Someone must have suggested it to me. The very thought of ROTC, what I regarded as its Mickey Mouse lockstep idiocy, repelled me. The stupid uniforms, drilling, the caricatured nauseating patriotism, the lack of cynicism—it all seemed designed to thwart existentialism at every turn. But I needed a deferment in a hurry. The Selective Service was breathing down my neck. I was close to treason. Out of this new turn I constructed yet another romanticized vision of myself: the dashing army officer and his lovely wife. After ROTC and graduation, the United States government would pay for my law school. I'd repay them with a few years of service, then retreat back to counterculture with a carload of army money I'd saved. It seemed a smart plan. I simply added this vision, with an asterisk and a footnote, to the earlier one of myself in the paneled office with the wife and kids.

My Pitt ID card, fall of 1972, shows a fellow who, with his long brown hair resting on his shoulders, looks nothing like a brand new ROTC cadet. Nevertheless, sliding into ROTC was simple. All I did was take the elevator up to one of the spooky, marble floors in the Cathedral of Learning—interestingly enough the same floor where gay men were rumored to meet in one of the rest rooms—and talk for a few minutes to the campus commander, a jolly, old, craggy colonel with medals and cigarette ashes spread all over his olive uniform. He was delighted to have me. My

grades were superior; I seemed like an honorable, serious young man. I'd make a fine officer. We shook hands repeatedly. I signed a few forms.

Then the colonel took me to an adjacent room where I met a two lean, young, handsome, cigarette-smoking officers who taught in the program: one black, one white, Vietnam combat vets, immaculately clipped, pressed, starched, and decorated. Like a magazine ad for the grand Republic's armies, their very presence denied that there could ever be a moment's mayhem on the globe while men like them stood guard. They welcomed me to the ranks, and squashed my hand in theirs. I figured I could handle ROTC. No one had even mentioned my hair. Across the Atlantic, the Paris Peace Talks languished.

Later that day, along with my two ROTC courses—US Defense Establishment and Survey of American Military Theory—I registered for African-American History, Comparative Literature in 20th Century Narrative, Seminar in Van Gogh, Dramatic Literature, and (Oh, yes) Existentialism.

That first semester at Pitt, I majored in being two people at once. Foremost, I was a fire-breathing, liberated student, ingesting books, scholarship and the world around him, frequently without even chewing. I trotted euphorically class to class, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger whispering cryptically in my ear.

Leaning out of my seat in Existentialism, coffee in one hand, a pen in the other, and a Newport dangling existentially out of my mouth, I recorded every word Dr. Nehamas uttered. A Greek with a huge head of wiry hair, he strolled the lecture hall, wreathed in cigarette smoke, lighting one filterless Lucky after another. I understood Existentialism less than I had the year before, but at least had its vocabulary down pat.

I read, I studied, I went to see Fellini movies. I made a science of the epigraph and proved that with a little synthesis one could get A after A simply by stringing together one brilliant quote after another. It was even possible to delude yourself and your friends that you had thought of these things yourself. Books were like drugs. If someone mentioned a title I wrote it down and combed the city until it was mine, even if I didn't always get around to reading it. I developed an additional vision of my future self: working in a modest little office where I all I had to do was read books and no one ever checked on me. What I really wanted was to be a writer, but I figured I could fit that in when I wasn't in a courtroom rescuing (free of charge, of course) some helpless victim—that is, after I had paid the United States government back with four years of my life.

The other me was the ROTC cadet. Though I was a model student in my other classes, I was mediocre to poor in my Military Science courses, which didn't

count toward my grade point average. I became increasingly sloppy about them: daydreaming, cutting classes, exuding a less than positive attitude. I didn't like my teachers: the white guy and the black guy. Their pedagogy tended to spill over into personal accounts of Vietnam: "greasing gooks," "dustoffs," "KIAs," and so on. In fact, my sudden proximity to the military only galvanized my antipathy for it. I didn't like my crew-cut fellow cadets either. They didn't seem like tough Army guys—more like the pasty types who sit on their porches all summer playing Risk, and paging through *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Nerdy, sexist, giggly, they were so bloody clean and unctuous and certain about everything. Not an existentialist among them.

On occasion all cadets were required to assemble at Pitt Stadium for full-dress drills. On such days, the other cadets wore their uniforms, festooned with nifty patches and insignia, around campus. I kept mine crammed into a duffle bag, then donned it, pitifully rumpled, in the privacy of the locker room before stepping onto the stadium AstroTurf for the hour and a half of marching, screaming and saluting. How idiotic I looked in that hateful uniform, the heavy officer's cap clamped over my long, flowing hair. After drills I'd hustle back to the locker room, climb into my bells and T-shirt, and wad that uniform back into the bag, tamping it down with my *Viking Portable Nietzsche*.

One day, the white officer told me that he'd like to see me in his office later that afternoon. I showed up with a copy of Andre Breton's famous surrealist novel, *Nadja*, which we'd been tackling in Comparative Literature. To cap it off, I had just finished watching, mere minutes before, Bunuel's deranged film, *Un Chien Andalou*. I was fairly thrumming with "unnatural juxtapositions and combinations." Life's decided lack of meaning had never been more manifest.

The white officer rose when I came in, squished my hand in his, smiled warmly and motioned me to sit. He sat back down, propped his feet on his desk, and lit a cigarette. For a protracted moment, he simply beamed at me, and I did my best to beam back. His office walls were spread with action photos of him and other soldiers, plaques, citation after citation. On his desk were pictures of his wife and two small sons, dressed in army uniforms. Above his head, the American flag drooped.

"What's with the hair?" he asked, still smiling.

"Nothing," I said.

"You some kind of hippie?"

"No."

"No, what?"

“No, sir.”

“Do you think you are tough?”

On his second cigarette, he still smiled, smoke now shrouding both of us. We were apparently making a surreal movie, but no one had bothered telling me. He was certainly following the format: a series of non sequiturs. I felt like the eyeball slit by the razor in Bunuel’s opening scene. In keeping with the surreal tenor of things, I considered launching into a bout of meaningless laughter. Perhaps I could get drummed out for mental instability. A permanent deferral. What they called a “Section 8” on *McHale’s Navy*. But I was too pissed to laugh. About the whole thing. My lottery number, the war, ROTC. The fact that I had to sit there and take shit from this martinet on whom I could smell the violence and apocalyptic fever of war. Maybe that was his game: to get me angry, to motivate me.

“I don’t want to come down too hard on you, but you have to get more involved. These cadets are a great group of guys, and you’re missing out on a lot of opportunities. And fun.” He stood up. “Whatta you say?” That smile was still nailed to his face.

“Yeah,” I said.

He tilted his head and kind of smirked.

“Yes, sir,” I amended.

“There you go.”

He stuck out his hand and I squeezed back as hard as I could.

“And how about a haircut?” Then he winked.

News from Paris, where Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had been tussling over an armistice for nearly three years, was by turns hopeful and grim. America, after years of fighting in Vietnam, remained pessimistic, and so did I. The only hope for peace rested with George McGovern, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1972. Like Eugene McCarthy before him, he had underpinned his campaign with the promise of unilateral withdrawal of American troops from Southeast Asia. On November 7, voting for the first time in a presidential election, I prayerfully cast my vote for McGovern, an act of high treason for an ROTC cadet. With McGovern in the White House I could quit ROTC and get back to my life full-time. With my parents, lifelong Democrats, I watched election returns as long as I could bear it. Nixon by a landslide. Absolute murder.

A few days later my parents received a letter from the Colonel informing them that on November 15, during a public ceremony at the university, I would be one of the ROTC cadets receiving an award for “outstanding academic performance.” The letter went on to say that “the United States Army possesses more complicated

equipment than ever before, and must employ increasingly complex personnel to intelligently maintain and manage these resources. It is particularly important that we find responsible young leaders for this task—men, who, like your son, have demonstrated intellectual abilities noticeably above their contemporaries. In qualifying for this award, your son has demonstrated such competence. We are quite proud to have in him the Cadet Battalion.”

My parents were pleased, ridiculously so. I wanted to attack them. Or at least point out the exquisite irony that I was not being “honored” for having achieved superior grades in my Military Science classes, but in those that championed radical politics, subversive thinking, civil disobedience, and revolution. Had I been able to intercept the letter, I would have ripped it to bits, incinerated it, spat and stomped upon it. An onionskin, what looked like a carbon at that, not even letterhead, the Colonel hadn’t even signed it. No telling who had written it. Its pompous rhetoric was precisely why I was in a pickle. “Increasingly complex personnel.” What was I? A robot? “Responsible young leaders.” Please! Who the hell was he talking about? “Battalion.” God! I wasn’t going to any damned ceremony.

Incredulous, my parents watched me flop and rant. They thought I was having a nervous breakdown. When I got around to reconsidering my position—I was being extorted, of course—I knew I had to suck it up and show up for the award. Not only that. After seeing myself in the mirror in full uniform, with the long hair, cap and all—looking more like Tiny Tim than Custer—I headed for the barber shop. By my standards, the haircut was a massacre. But by the army’s, even though the barber had chopped off a foot, it counted for little. My hair still covered my neck and ears. I was desolate. My girlfriend assured me it was “cute.” My mother said grudgingly, “It looks nice.” My father neglected to comment.

Thank God, it was an evening affair, so I had cover of darkness to conceal me in my uniform. As I walked onstage with my most unsoldierly, shaggy head to receive my award—a rectangle of heavy stock paper with “Certificate of Achievement” scrolled across its top—I imagined a hush come over the audience, their heads shaking in approbation. The Colonel, as he shook my hand, mispronounced my name (It had also been spelled incorrectly on the certificate.). The other cadets glowered at me. My inability to conform had become insupportable. I couldn’t stand much more. Yet as much as I despised them, and disdained their approval, I secretly craved it too. My unconscious still insisted that the cut of a man is measured by whether he can soldier or not.

As a photographer snapped pictures and the audience applauded—my proud, befuddled, probably embarrassed parents among them—the torrid stage lights

grilled me like an inquisitor, revealing every flaw I possessed. I couldn't make out the audience for the glare. But I knew they were out there in the black, crouched in ambush like Vietcong, and this was perhaps my last moment on earth. Maybe I would, for one searing moment, see or know just one thing clearly before the lights went down and the hall emptied forever.

But I saw nothing. Only the hollow place inside me where my soul should have been. Then that space began to fill with those boys who had gone to Vietnam: terrified, exhausted ghosts tripping along jungle trails, scared kids my age, who had stepped up for me, who had had their lives blasted to pieces, fighting in my place, so that I could remain safe. There they marched, with the grit of my forebears who had never side-stepped wars. Above all, I was ashamed. Not only was I not worthy of the uniform, I lacked the conviction to be a CO. Even as an existentialist I was an impostor, nothing more than a pampered dilettante. The applause coursed over me, wave after wave, until it finally chased me out the door. When my mother and father caught up, I was in the backseat of the car, like a child, tearing myself out of that uniform. My identity, like dandelion fluff, had blown off in a hundred directions. I didn't know it at the time, but I had achieved existentialist status. And it was horrible.

I finished my first term at Pitt with a 3.6 GPA. I ended up with a B and a C in my two Military Science classes. A week before Christmas, Nixon unleashed the most significant air attack against North Vietnam since the war had started. On Christmas day, as my family and I sat down to feast, American bombers over Hanoi and Haiphong dropped death by the ton. Even though US troop strength in Vietnam was at an all time low, there seemed no reason to believe that the war would ever end.

When the new college term began in the bitter cold mid-January of 1973, I signed up for only one Military Science course: First Basic Army. I skipped the first few classes. I never wanted to walk into one of those classrooms, or see any of those people again. I was simply stalling before resuming my masquerade, waiting to be rescued by some miracle that would never materialize.

As a second semester sophomore, it was time for me to officially declare a major. I had always listed my major as Political Science simply because it was considered an advantageous pre-law curriculum. Looking over my transcripts I realized that at the end of the year I would have thirty hours in English and Comparative Literature, nearly enough to satisfy degree requirements. I had taken an introductory course in Political Science. Nothing else. The next day I declared myself an English major. I

could still go to law school, but for the short run, I wouldn't have to torture myself with courses I didn't care about. I'd do what came naturally, with great joy and passion. Unabashed, I'd read books, and maybe even write a few someday, which is what I really wanted. I was still pushing that boulder up the mountain, but a little bit of my rock fell away when I admitted what I loved.

The better part of it, however, remained. I still hadn't set foot in my ROTC class. Ducking into alcoves and bathrooms, crossing streets whenever I encountered the other cadets and the Military Science professors, I felt like a fugitive. AWOL. I had my beloved books, but they could not protect me from the draft. Canada crossed my mind again and again. I still had the application from McGill. On Monday—it was still very early in the term—I'd go back to ROTC classes, lie and beg forgiveness, take my medicine. Everything would be okay.

Saturday, January 27, I was working for a flower shop, pulling dead flowers out of a synagogue where the Torah was exposed. I wandered up onto the altar and stared at it with absolutely no comprehension. It was a miserable, gray day: no sun, frigid, dirty snow banked high at the curbs, sickly flakes withering down. Feeling pretty sorry for myself, I turned on the radio of the 1969 Volkswagen microbus, which stank of dead cigars and funerals. John Lennon sang, "Half of what I say is meaningless." From "Julia," a song inspired by his mother. Precisely at the word *meaningless*, the song went dead, and an excited voice, clearly not Lennon's, announced that peace accords had been formally signed in Paris. The Vietnam War was over. The United States would no longer enforce a draft.

Well.

I lingered a moment, staring out the window, wondering if what I had heard could possibly be true. It was. The radio, on every band, verified it again and again. The war was indeed over, and I would not have to go to Vietnam, or be in the army, or take an induction physical, or ever go to another ROTC class again.

How strange to receive such miraculous news alone in a frozen synagogue parking lot. I turned off the radio and nudged the bus into first, skidding across the consecrated ice. Lennon's lyrics lodged in my head like scripture. Navigating my dangerous hometown streets, I sang those same seven words over and over—ringed by a chorus of snowy dead soldiers no older than I.

JOSEPH BATHANTI is the author of ten books. His latest is *Restoring Sacred Art*, winner of the 2010 Roanoke Chowan Award, given annually by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association for best book of poems in a given year. He teaches at Appalachian State University.