

J O S E P H T . C O X

So Badly Prepared for Life

I wonder what my son saw. Two tours
in Iraq, the loss of two best friends, in two
violent provinces, end punctuated by two months
in peaceful Kurdistan, time to reflect in relative safety.
I am sure he saw things banned
in the violence-free home his flower-child mom
and Vietnam veteran father provided.
Surely there was killing, wanton killing,
the kind of theater not allowed on the family TV.
Surely there was fear, and hate, and anger,
the kind loving parents hoped he would never see,
or feel, or cause. So badly prepared for life.

When he got off the plane, back in the world,
full of Fallujah nightmares, before being allowed to see
his parents, the psychologist asked the questions:
Did you see dead? Civilians? Soldiers? Friends?
“Where the fuck do you think I was?” No anger,
an honest answer. He was raised to tell the truth.

What did he see? What does he see in his dreams?
I know they are there. I still see the broken body of
the teenage Vietnamese girl, tiny broken bones.
Hoddack's guts in a pool of blood, with flies, and two,
neat, black bullet holes in the front of what was left
of Jackson's head, the half still intact, bled out clean.

Cold sweats in the dark, waking up buried alive.
I have not had the courage to ask him the questions.
There have to be ghosts, ghouls, gore, and images
not allowed in homes that filter electronic games.
Did the lack of video killing practice make
the pornography of blood more exciting,
more vivid in the rewind, more permanent?

I wonder what my son saw?
What he sees?

The Real One Percent

David Emanuel Hickman, the last soldier to die in Iraq,
Only fourteen when that war started, a paratrooper, one of many
Modern legionnaires defending our distant ramparts to the death,
Or perhaps a crusader. Emanuel, Hebrew for “God is with us.”
One more corpse on the altar of the IED, one more bled out brother,
Prankster, athlete, companion, one more son lost to
Vaguely defined national interests. He called himself Zeus,
But proved no match for Mars. Abandoned, too, by
Saint Michael, the patron saint of paratroopers, the guardian angel
Of the Hebrew nation, Christian archangel in chain-mail
Armed with sword and shield, protector of knights and crusades
And holy wars against infidels, symbol of Church Militant.
David, the giant slayer, the last name on some future wall,
The last blood to soak up the dust of a forgotten walled street
In a forsaken land of little consequence to the gross national product.
Unless you are his friend, his comrade-in-arms, or his mother.

A frequent contributor to *WLA*, **JOSEPH T. COX** is a Vietnam veteran and the author of the poetry collection *Garden's Close*.