

DALE RITTERBUSCH

After a Reading of War Poems, the Signing of Books

I've never been asked this before,
asked to inscribe a book
for someone who's dead.

I can barely deal with death
in the backyard, voles preyed on
by cats, a squirrel caught in the rain barrel:
late, late fall and water as cold
as the gnarled hand of death;
my hand freezes as I pull out
the ice-stiff remains of squirrel.

It would take a month
of intense contemplation,
serious philosophical and theological
speculation on what would be done
with the book after it's signed

before I might come up with something
appropriate to say; I'm not a priest, not
a philosopher, not even human
half the time except when consumed
by anger, dreams of a holy vengeance.

Yes, the sacrament of revenge
defines me best and would give
this woman whose husband recently died

from wounds suffered in Vietnam,
wounds from decades ago, wounds
eating away every day of his life—solace?
A semblance of peace? Rectification
of wrongs? There is nothing I can offer:

anger and retribution a poor
compensation for loss such as hers.

Loss, it's been said, is the new poetic
philosophy, but that entails remembrance,
and therapists say
looking back is a time distortion,
a displacement of events,
a danger, self-destructive,
if one stays
for more than a fleeting moment,
causality just a jumble of debris.

Time is an art choreographed
by memory. This woman is beautiful,
lovely in her sincerity. I'm a flippant

SOB; I have to work hard at being nice
in a world where the bastards
always win. I want to write something,
anything,
that will somehow ease or make sense
of her loss, but I know so little:

the world spins from one war to another
as the gods play out their wrathful dreams.
I provide platitudes, nothing more,
hoping the small words will help.

I know what I wrote;
I can't say it to you.

Fort Benning, Off-Base, Summer 1967

He was a master sergeant, E-7
when I met him, recently retired,
sitting on his front porch
watching patterns of clouds,
a burgeoning summer storm.
I had stopped—a young lieutenant
with orders for Southeast Asia—
to put the top up on my MG,
the car filling with a sudden, southern rain.
I was driving home after my work as OIC
of a rifle range was done for the day:
my uniform, fatigues freshly starched
and stiff, wilted in the slight chill
of a pattering rain.
So he walked down off his porch,
offered to help, and when we had the top
secured, he invited me to sit and talk
for awhile, to wait until the rain let up,
to have some lemonade.

And then he told me
of his military service, of Korea, of Pusan,
of attacks along the Yalu,
A police action, he said,
like a traffic cop giving out a parking ticket,
human waves, hordes of Chinese,
the yells they made coming out of the hills
and saber jets, F-86's, dropping napalm and HE
on waves of Chinese infantry, incinerating
one line of attack after another.
A police action, he said.
And then he put the glass of lemonade

to his lips and set it down again slowly
without taking a drink and looked out on the rain.

It's probably not like that
in Vietnam he said, a bit later.
*Can't hand out parking tickets when the scofflaws
won't come out of the brush*—and then he laughed.
Just a conflict he said, *like my wife
wanting to watch one show on TV
when I want to view another.*

We watched the rain together,
our voices quiet in the heavy hour before evening.
Rain gusted, slowed,
dripped off the roof, the eaves,
puddled in the flower bed,
the brick pathway to the street.
Skies clearing, no reason left to stay,
I rose to leave. He invited me back;
I could tell he wanted to talk,
or not, perhaps just share the silence,
one war as good as another
for staring at the rain.

Kneel Until Your Knees Bleed: a Fable

Diodorus records a paradigm shift
of some importance, no importance really
if you were a person of little consequence,
a poet perhaps, but if a king your life
would be longer and more prosperous. Ergamanes,
King of Nubia, disdained the divine recall
of the gods, refusing as was custom
to take his own life when issued
a nullification decree by priests of the highest
standing, those few allowed to enter
the inner sanctum of the temple, their holy
of holies, practicing the daily rite of water
worship and sacrifice to the sun, given
the word of god that the king, his time,
his reign, finished on this earth, must
dispatch himself and give way to the next,
a sycophantic heir favored thus by god.
Ergamanes, risen from his marriage bed,
a brace of wives content to a point of satiation,
feels no compunction to obey the priestly
emissaries at his door. He declaims his
god's command, assembles an army
by mid-day and rides to the forbidden place,
the golden temple, and slaughters all
the priests, both high and low; their marrow
yields to sand. You would likely do the same:
the golden calf or lamb pulled down
and turned to trinkets, statues pummeled
to powder and shard, columns pulled
apart and down, and the whole place
burned. Now a king shall live
forever and the poet's word,
the historian's hand, burn with obsequy
long and long and long into the night.

Human Terrain

—*And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited . . . with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.*

Isaiah 28:6

The proper translation
isn't *All is vanity* though
such is found everywhere—
belief in hegemony among nations,
the necessity of imposing one's hegemonic will:
consider my neighbor manicuring his lawn,
a pungent odor of fertilizer, herbicide,
permeates my clothes as it wafts through
the window. I can't concentrate
even on the silliest TV; I think of stiff,
impregnated uniforms harder than starch,
bulwark against VX, GB, HD, and laugh
wishing I had my old protective mask.
My neighbor bends over, stiffly, slowly,
presses a multitude of small signs
into the grass, signs required by law
warning, **Danger! Herbicide & Pesticide**
Application: Do Not Walk or Play
on the Lawn. No, the proper translation
I'm told, explained by a studious seminarian
who almost took his vows but quit
choosing a secular life instead,
reads *All is pfff*, a sound like the last breath
of air pressed from a bicycle tube

as it's compressed when removed from the rim,
the sound of everything, one time or another,
like the theory of everything, this the sound,
everything vanishing, *plfff*; the sound we've all heard
taking our breath away, present always,
background noise to the cosmos as evidenced
when the Religious Program Specialist—
what used to be called a Chaplain's Assistant—
tells me of being on patrol, long hours
penetrating deep through stone portals,
along rock ledges, landscape of scarf and scree
treacherous as any promise made
by faithful and infidel alike. A soldier
stops, kneels and *plfff*; gone, vanished,
all ears ringing in the silent rain
of dust, blood dry as rock and sand,
as a pebble placed in one's dry, cottony mouth
to cure a desiccated tongue
to allow speech, but there is none,
all vanished in the heat of vaporization
as he saw his Christian friend
disappear, an IED that could slash
and gut a Humvee,
turned just at that moment
to see him kneel and *plfff*
nothing left because all is vanity,
and what stays is the nothing that is there
and is not there; his face recedes, his name,
not even a replacement because time is short
and the mission, the prayer, *plfff*,
an image not an image staying
and staying because where else the scripture
that explains *plfff* . . . *plfff* . . . *plfff*.

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