

DALE RITTERBUSCH

**Where We Are**

On my way to class I share the elevator  
with a young man in a wheelchair,  
me an old professor, he a casualty of war,  
both legs gone above the knee,  
skin flaps folded over.  
I hold the door; he grabs his wheels  
and pushes past, saying, *Excuse me sir.*  
I want to say, *Don't call me sir;*  
*I work for a living*, an old joke  
I'm sure he'll recognize, but say instead,  
*Haven't been a 'sir' in a very long time.*  
*Take care and have a good class.* I'm tired  
of such reminders. I remember once  
lifting a vet whose legs were meatless, useless,  
little more than bone, a plastic pouch on his gut,  
moved him from wheelchair to car. He was so light,  
I thought he'd lift above the world  
if there were nothing to hold him down.

I have learned so little here  
the space I've made  
will not be noticed,  
no footprint, no touch of the hand  
that will endure—and maybe  
this too is by design,  
guided by some unseen hand  
perhaps the way my grade school  
teacher placed her hand on mine

to make the letters form, the words  
that coursed like blood  
through all the fictive worlds  
that yield such grace, such  
revelation—and yet the foolish heart remains.

I wake to this morning, try to avoid the news,  
step to the back porch a witness to the world.

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Photographic film too slow to capture  
an explosion, the fierce light blinds  
as if wearing night vision goggles  
when an illumination round flares nearby.

When sight returns a building's disappeared:  
a three-legged chair takes its place  
occupying that empty space along with  
a family portrait in a twisted frame;  
it leans crazily against a blasted  
concrete chunk, rounded like a garden  
sculpture cast by Henry Moore, rebar  
bent in profane shapes.

\* \* \*

Prayers fall like rain  
and the earth rises to meet them.

Maybe this is what she meant,  
her patient hand on my hand

coaxing the parables we need  
to live by, our own words made  
into ourselves, this teaching of the word.

Now I wonder where she has gone to  
to achieve such grace as she has earned,  
a touch I have forgotten until now.  
What did she know of the words awaking,  
years of stinging pleasure that she bred?

Now I use those words to absolve myself,  
to make others see what they don't wish  
to know, resistance like excessive current  
flowing through a wire: an editor says  
her readers won't. Why not give sermons  
on good grace instead?

So mute, not even a stutter,  
an anguished, guttering sound.  
If God is the word, if the word  
lives in the faith we cruelly depose  
why can't prayer effect a smattering of change?  
Our thoughts are foolish,  
and our language follows suit.

\* \* \*

Babel destroyed and such the Babylonian woe:  
between the Tigris and Euphrates,  
the hanging gardens of Babylon,  
the fertile crescent,  
the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve

limbs locked in strong embrace,  
where Cain killed Abel, where brother  
kills brother, where the desert blossoms with fire.

Let each man die for something  
he believes in—not an old man's  
death in bed, staring at cracks  
in the ceiling, windows curtained  
against the world.

Is this what I have learned,  
a lifetime of monsoon dreams,  
a jungle of nightmares, the waking  
to anger, K-bar at my throat?

\* \* \*

I go ballistic on a Sunday morn,  
the story on T.V.; here's how it goes:  
a remote outpost is engineered far into the hills  
of Afghanistan, loosely defended,  
within easy reach of the Taliban.  
The base is buried deep, an unscalable mountain  
at its back, a thick and heavy stand of trees  
borders on one side, no clear fields of fire,  
and a stream in front with one small bridge  
across. Every rule, every goddamn rule, is broken:  
I scream at the T.V., freeze the screen  
and yelp at all the idiocy displayed.  
We have learned nothing and the tale  
unfolds, how easily overrun,  
so many dead and for so little.

Afterwards, the base is leveled, said to be  
of no tactical or strategic importance.

\* \* \*

A moment's decency, *Madame Butterfly*  
on the stereo—so easy to leave  
such wreckage behind. Except once,  
femur shattered as my car overturned  
on an icy curve, sliding down an embankment  
slamming into the concrete abutment of a bridge,  
my head under water; I crawl out  
into the cold river current where my leg  
dances crazily in the wake.

I was saved by a young woman who heard my cry;  
she thought she heard a cat crying out in pain.  
She touched my bloody hand and went for help.

Days later the minister prays  
with me, speaks the words that  
measure all things in this world—  
*May the Lord make his face*  
*to shine upon you*  
*and give you peace.*

I look up to watch TV; explosions rock  
Baghdad, Mosel, wonders of the ancient world  
rising into the new order of things  
which is the old order, which is our  
renewal, vindication, a babbling prayer for peace,  
and the honor of kneeling to our will.

Such moments of decency as I recall  
rest in the heart of a therapist  
who made my leg work again—  
a toughness of spirit, a joy she would not  
surrender—her leg lost to the hip,  
cancer, at such a young age.

She measured the world by the matter at hand,  
focused on the guiding pressure of her hand,  
breaking the stiffness, making the joints  
work again, my muscles rebuild.  
Her hands gentle on the pins  
beneath the surface, steel screws  
holding the rod that joins two halves of bone  
bored from knee to pelvis, fragments  
of bone clumping together around the break.  
Such grace in her hands,  
a psalm and the redemption of pain.

Yet she could not understand  
my anguished fever over Tian'anmen Square  
as I'm sure the green explosions  
on the screen don't raise her anger now—  
*We do what we can* she says  
pressing her patient's knee to his chest,  
What else can we do—what else?

Her hands broke up the hard, fibrous  
tissue, the adhesions in my knee,  
forcing my leg to work again.

Six months on crutches—a joy to throw  
them away, now hardly a limp,  
muscle skinnier than before,  
but the language of desire  
returned, and the fictive worlds,  
anodynes of love and war.

And so maybe she was saying  
everything would be all right,  
the assurance of prayer, of the hand  
pressing the leg to respond, the hand  
guiding the hand beyond all things  
that matter, all things bearing witness  
as if witness were salvation in itself.

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The Pequots were exterminated:  
Massachusetts passed a law  
making it a punishable crime  
ever to mention the word *Pequot* again.

Buried deep in the news, the Yezidi  
are being hunted to extinction.  
Wallace Stevens wrote of the cry  
of the peacocks, and I wonder  
if the Peacock Angel similarly screams  
at this bloody diaspora.

Babylon the Great, under Agum,  
ruled to the Zagros Mountains,  
weakened by Assyrian invaders

hence defeated by the Chaldeans,  
burned by Sennacherib Destroyer of  
Babylon, to Nebuchadnezzar, destroyer  
of Jerusalem, restorer of Babylon,  
defeated by Cyrus the Great  
and the Persians entered Babylon  
and the people did not resist.

On the road to Baghdad resistance  
is suppressed; an officer remarks  
on the use of flintlock rifles,  
wondering why anyone would resist  
using such antiquated firearms  
in the age of Cruise missiles,  
Tomahawks launched at sea,  
Predator drones circling overhead.

It is an old argument:  
how does one defeat an enemy  
so determined he will fight  
with antique weaponry?  
In Vietnam old men fired at Hueys—  
helicopter gunships—with Arisaka 38's,  
and even, it is said, the old  
Thorvenin or Lebel 1886.

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The Code of Hammurabi  
executes justice so that the strong  
may not oppress the weak—  
Charlie Hebdo, Paris, Boston, Boko Haram;

ISIS sells sex slaves on the internet,  
the Temple of Baal destroyed last year.  
I look at aerial photographs, before and after;  
virtually every column and wall brought down.  
My anger rises, and then an interminable sadness  
settles in; my chest heaves as if an anvil  
has been dropped in place, the eternal  
sameness of it all.

In Hué, the old Imperial City, the Citadel  
is not rebuilt—initially withheld from fire  
and then hammered to ash and dust. After fifty years  
the scars of small arms fire visible  
almost everywhere one looks. I look out  
on the Perfume River wanting to find solace,  
the serenity of an old, unswerving monk. On an evening sail  
musicians play aboard our chartered pleasure boat.  
We move slowly with the current, a lighted bridge  
against the sky, an image like Whistler's "Nocturne"  
receding in the distance. Paper boats with lighted candles  
trail out behind, bobbing in the wake,  
old souls resting on their journey while the music  
sings them on their way. The singers played the Dan Bau  
and Dan Ty ba, traditional stringed instruments of Viet Nam.

In Aleppo, on the site where Abraham  
once tended sheep, the ancient Citadel has been destroyed,  
elegant portals to our past, muqarnas blown to shit.  
So goes the heritage of our world.

Lex Talionis is our code—and, of course, preemptive strikes.  
Still, our hand is gentle, finger nestling in the smooth, familiar curve

of a trigger, the curve as sweet as the underswell  
of a woman's breast.

So this is where we are:

we move on and on as is the very nature  
of all things. Lambda, the cosmological constant,  
moves in and out of our equations: the universe  
expands, expands at ever greater speeds.

ISIS recruits in Minnesota. Paris: Je ne suis pas  
Charlie. Aleppo. Fallujah under seige. Aleppo  
again, bazaars in the old city once a jewel  
of the world, colorful silks and spices,  
now a cratered land. And in a photograph,  
young girls forceably taken by Boko Haram,  
the photograph of unintended artistry:  
a defiant look on the faces of some;  
others, as if ashamed, stare down at the ground.

A frequent contributor to WLA, **Dale Ritterbusch** is author of two poetry collections, *Lessons Learned* and *Far From the Temple of Heaven*.