

WRITINGS

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Requiem for a Funeral Home

For months, if I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds blasting through my open windows, I could imagine I was in a war zone—there is construction constructing all through the neighborhood. Buildings crash down; drills make noisy deep holes in which to bury cables, and always the scream of sirens. I'm not sure of their cargo.

Empty holes like tooth extractions replace brownstones and pizza parlors that inhabited civil-war era homes.

Even the funeral home down the street collapsed under the persistent swinging of the wrecking ball. Where do the caskets go now? Where will the dead rest before their final destination? Where will the Gold Coast limousines line up? Their somber promenade is now at risk.

Every morning for nine years I stood in my high-rise bay window and stared south. A block away, the sign identifying the funeral home's provenance also alternately blinked time then temperature (in Fahrenheit, thank goodness). It was always a joke: why would dead people care either about the time of day or the temperature? I cared, about the temperature mostly.

If it was too many degrees below 20°, the temperature lights didn't always work—my mood *exactly*. Below 20° is too much to expect proper work from anything but heaters, snowplows, and salt trucks.

At times, the funeral home was not visible at all—fog, heavy downpour, or blowing snow rendered the temperature a guess on my part. Despite the unreliability of that sign, it was a constant in a neighborhood that overnight began changing. And still, the dead came and went as the time and temperature changed.

I checked it yesterday morning, as usual, and, with its blessing, dressed for my run along the Lakefront.

Last night as I passed by on my way to a meeting, I automatically looked up to see if I was on time.

The building was gone, the sign dark. The emptiness prominent.

Sometime during the day, as I worked, a dentist had done his extraction.

I hadn't even heard the cry of pain.

One's Cycle

At the faint sounds of *Taps*, I jumped off my bike. Oh, I didn't have to; no one was around to see me. But at *Taps*, every person on Post who was outside at 5:00 p.m. stopped and faced the music--even third graders on shiny bikes. So I stood next to mine patiently waiting for the last note that meant I should climb back on my bike and race home.

That year, my family lived at Ft. Leavenworth, actually we lived on many Army Posts over the years, but this one was special. I was almost nine, the Post was self-contained, and I had a brand new blue Schwinn. Freedom was mine. My bike was transportation to a world all my own. I could go anywhere in this citadel as long as I came home right after *Taps*.

It's not important where I went. Even freedom has confines, but on my bike I could touch its edges. Back then, Ft. Leavenworth was still a Cavalry assignment--many soldiers rode horses. And I had mine. I peddled my steel steed to clarinet lessons, the post swimming pool, and Sunday School. On most days, homework complete, my bike and I traversed as much ground as we could, at times chasing Indians, at times the cowboys. One day I thought I'd have to shoot the Schwinn; I overfilled my back tire and it exploded.

As I galloped around, secure in my emancipation, I didn't know yet that the coming years would bring the freedom to become a success in business, a photographer, an alcoholic.

But now it was time to head home.

This was before electric guitar lessons, Scouts, and softball.

Before Vietnam, the Gulf War, Kosovo, and now Iraq

Before my first car, my first lover, my first drink.

Through the years, I kept steady company with a bicycle. In my twenties, there were the hilly “centuries” in central Texas--100 miles in a day. I’d realize that I’d reached a hill’s peak and for a moment my childhood exhilaration would return. I’d stand up on my pedals and race the wind--this time my mount was Italian and red. The momentum ripped the breath from my mouth as we galloped together again.

In my thirties, I spent a week cycling the Oregon coast, when the only things that made me stop for the night were hunger and the sounds of the Pacific as it accepted the sun. I was free--physically and emotionally--from the rest of the world. Or, was I still just chasing Indians, this time within self-imposed boundaries?

In my forties, from a gallop to a canter to a trot, there came slow and easy rambles along the Eastern Shore. Still mobile and still accepting whatever the elements could bring me, the need to return home was imminent. My confines no longer set by my mother, but by my body.

Now, as I balk and rail against the sound of my own *Taps*, high above a populous city, I am protected again, this time by steel and glass and a 24-hour doorman. I overlook a lake that blends blue into the horizon, and remember and feel, and sit and pedal my stationary bike, legs turning in familiar circles. And wait for *Taps*.

5 for \$1

I received a postcard from my friend Michael this week. Every time he takes a trip he sends me a postcard—sometimes more than one. They arrive in Burma-Shave sign progression; their message revealed only when all have appeared.

I have a postcard collection dating from 1963. The collection just sort of happened. The basket they got tossed into after arriving and spending some time on my refrigerator door got fuller and fuller; before I knew it I was asking people to send me postcards when, and wherever, they travelled.

Friends, who never write or call, send me postcards. Laurel, whom I had not heard from in two months, sent me a card from Norway. I didn't realize my sister, Borden, had a business trip planned until I received a postcard from Indianapolis. I have postcards from Matagorda Bay, Antigua, Egypt, and places in between. One of my friends lives on a sailboat with her husband, two kids, and dog. Her computer is often broken and my only knowledge of her whereabouts comes from postcards she hurriedly sends from the General Delivery in Paris, Gibraltar, the Azores, or Palma—that one said: "Have new son. Name Cooper. Love Cherie."

When my mom first moved to Florida, in 1977, she would buy postcards on sale—the really geeky ones (circa 1965). This one from Weeki Watchee Springs: bathing beauties showing their underwater prowess by eating a banana and drinking a Coca Cola while seated 10 feet deep. Or the card with the scantily clad coed on the beach holding a high heel explaining, "Sand in my shoes." What about the one with the Bardot-wannabe lying on the beach, smiling enticingly, cuddling a baby tiger: "Greetings from Sunny Florida." (What? No tiger in my tank rhetoric?) She would send me one every week or so, so that I didn't miss her too much. Now she gets the generic seascape

(obviously studied by writers of I-like-long-walks-on-the-beach personal ads) stock-photo postcards, five for a dollar, and sends them to her granddaughters. I wonder if this practice will survive my nieces' newfound ability to send email?

It wasn't until my collection materialized that I came to understand there is something about postcards that is important to me. They provide me with an essential link to travel—not my own, but of the people who matter to me. They travel as I wait at home. But then, I, too, travel. Even as I wait at home. The movement in my life is my extraction of foreign landscapes—the landscape becomes the canvas upon which I can place old photographs.

I have a photograph of my family taken by the ship's photographer as we were getting ready to board the *U.S.S. United States* for our move to England. I'm wearing a car coat, plaid skirt, white anklets and loafers; in my right hand is a train case, my left shoulder supports an army-green laundry bag. My mother walks with her head down, my father's stride is purposeful. My three siblings share a load of briefcases and handbags. Like relics transported from city to city, the Army and my dad moved us every couple of years.

When I began making postcards I took this 10-year old girl, complete with laundry bag, and placed her on landscapes of her childhood. She first traipsed across the oldest postcard in my collection—one my father sent me from Cyprus where the British paratrooper group he was attached to had sent him on maneuvers. He had to leave quickly when the Cypriots had a falling out with the "Cherry Berets" because it wouldn't have looked good for an American to be involved.

Actual postcards became backdrops for some of her travels; in other cases, old photographs were the stage. In one such card, my young traveler walks across a

shooting range. In the background are three men pointing their revolvers at white targets that appear to be cemetery crosses. My father is dressed as I'm sure he was during most of his Pentathlon training, in droopy sweat pants, no shirt. The photographer caught him in such a way that he appears gaunt like a prisoner. The girl looks at the photographer and wonders who is really being shot.

In the last of my series of postcards, the girl walks through a gate onto a plaza. Her scale, for the first time, has become larger than life. Perhaps she has outgrown her 10-year old self and is ready to travel as an adult. She is about to interrupt a Vietnamese couple sitting for their portrait. Their photographer has his back to the postcard viewer as he focuses. The girl, if she averted her eyes from us, could see his expression. Is it concentrated? Bored? Do his eyes flicker to the right as he sees her? I would ask her, but I'm sure she doesn't remember.

If it Wrinkles it's Real

Mom handed me an iron when I was five and she instructed me on its proper usage.

Collar.

Cuffs.

Sleeves.

Top right front, back, and left front.

Side right, full back, side left.

My mother's mother had taken in sewing and ironing as the oldest of eight children to help support the family when her father died.

My father took a knife to his khakis each morning; sliding the knife between the starched creases of each pant leg in order that he could don the fabric of his life—a military uniform.

Perhaps my mother thought she was giving me directions for life: keep it unwrinkled . . . if you can.

But, I have discovered that life is like linen: if it wrinkles it's real.

Where's the wrinkle in my white female fabric?

"Dive, dive, dive!"

Awooga, wooga, wooga!

For someone who, up until a year ago, refused to see any movie with a body count, I've always had a fascination with WWII submarine movies; especially the black and white ones—shown on late-night T.V.

Run Silent Run Deep, and I'm channeled. I did take a 15-year hiatus when I threw out my boob tube, but once The Boyfriend moved in, I allowed its reappearance "for sporting events only." My addiction returned stronger than ever.

There aren't body counts in submarine movies—the killing is swift and anonymous. A single sanitary explosion that sends a metal tube crushing upon itself is all I witness.

I chalk up body-count disdain to a dislike of gratuitous violence. But truthfully? I feel manipulated. I resent someone else screening for me his or her scrutiny of death.

I much prefer my own images—mind-panoramas from years of "listening" to stories told through someone else's voice.

I love thriller killer novels with lots of, well, lots of gratuitous violence. Anything by Peter Straub—he combines demented Vietnam vets with bizarre scenes of death—the best of both worlds page after page. Yes, both worlds: Vietnam and death.

I've never lived in Vietnam and I've never been dead. However, my father did and is. And while I can't bear to collect those specific psyche-scenes, I can and do construct my own version with the help of authors anonymous to me except for the face on the back of a book jacket. The crazier their creations the better; I worship Tim O'Brien, but he comes far too close to reality to be read more than once.

In my perpetual quest for externalizing the internal, I've assembled images of myself on the Vietnamese landscape.

I must remember to tell Mom that in one, there's a photograph of me ironing.

Tin Can Alley

My grandfather wrote in his journal that a can of fish cost him \$1.62; it fed five men. I wonder if that can of fish, once emptied, was the same one he buried his journal in.

In 1947, a developer seated in a bar in New York City told his companion about the tin can he found while clearing land for his latest project in the Philippines. That tin can contained a diary; the pencil writing was faded, but the developer determined it had belonged to “Zero Wilson.”

“Zero Wilson? Did I just hear you say Zero Wilson?” a stranger on the other side of the developer leaned over to ask. “Zero Wilson is my best friend.”

My grandfather was a POW for three years in Cabanatuan, a camp in the Philippines. Everyone interred had not only an “official” work detail duty, but also an “unofficial” task: my grandfather was the morale officer—it was his duty to oversee The Cabanatuan Orchestra and Art Players. He directed such camp hits as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Gone With The Wind*.

Appointed Morale Officer Group I—Last job on earth I wanted—
But might be able to do something—1st show—Death of
Pocahontas, et al. . . . First show to Hospital—unbelievable
emaciation, starved wraiths of men with jaundiced parchment skin
stretched over rack of bones, covered with bed sores, filth and
vermin, staring lifeless eyes, parted raw lips showing blackened
yellow teeth—how long it took us to get 1st laugh—watching them
warmup—leaving a group of cheering skeletons—the backwash of
war—no romance here. . . .

I know these things because of the handwritten journal, begun the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor and ended 5 May 1944, a short time before the Japanese herded him and his campmates onto the *Oroyko Maru* bound for Japan. My grandfather put the

small and tattered notebooks, containing his pencil-written thoughts on life in the camp, messages to his wife and children, bridge scores, and recipes for bootleg gin, into a tin can and buried it.

I learned of the journal and its first protector in the summer of 1994; I was the same age as my grandfather had been in POW camp. That journal and the story of its survival made a 50-year journey to reach me; I have the diary—I do not have the tin can.

The forces of fate that guided these elements into my life compel me to tell the story of the tin can, and in a fashion tell of my grandfather who lived and my father who did not. This particular work detail duty is one I take willingly.

As the debris from the first global war was being cleared, remaining scrap metal was collected, crushed, and bundled. The bundles were loaded onto a ship and transported back to the United States for recycling. The delivery system of my grandfather's lowly means of sustenance found its way to a factory where it became one can in a box of rations meant for Korea, a conflict that erupted in June of 1950.

Ted Lilly, one of my father's childhood buddies in the Philippines and West Point classmates, upon finishing his "C" ration or one of the cans of beer air-dropped along with ammunition, stored the empty in his pack to be disposed of when he got out of his foxhole on the Pusan perimeter.

That metal, again back in the United States, regenerated. The container that had saved a life in 1943 was reborn as an artillery cartridge bound for Vietnam.

It found its target in 1967.

Vietnam is currently the world's largest supplier of scrap metal. Common scrap includes steel shrapnel, spent artillery cartridges, rockets, shells, and bombs—dealers pay about 7 cents a pound for that military scrap.

Before I knew of the journal, the essence of my grandfather's tin can had made its way to Chicago where I had been engaged in making rubbings, with graphite on rice paper, of tin cans. The rubbings are made as I imagine myself rubbing my father's name on the Vietnam Memorial. They are as mementos from a gravesite. My rubbings pinned to the wall in long rows appeared as ribbons across the battle jacket of a soldier. I made 39 of them from 39 different cans. The tin cans I purchased for my rubbings cost anywhere from \$.67 to \$.89. Not one of them contained fish, but all contained a bit of my grandfather's story.

Dog Tags and Scapulars

At my AA meeting, a woman asked all those who were or had been Catholic to raise their hands—popping up all around the room, like corks from Champagne bottles from which we are no longer allowed to drink, were hands. Soon after that, a woman in my writing group asked the same question. Again, almost every hand went up—waving a pen or pencil (as opposed to corkscrew?).

I'm neither suggesting that all alcoholics are Catholic writers, nor that all writers are drunk Catholics. That logic approaches a word problem and short of trying to figure out when Train B on Track A will crash into Train D on Track F, when and if the water in the bathtub, which is draining at the rate of a gallon per minute, while the non-ecological faucet drips at a rate of 3 gallons per hour will be emptied, it got me thinking about comparisons. Simply, Catholicism and anything else.

For example, how many people in both rooms could add Military Brat to Catholicism? It was enough to rouse me from my bed at 6:45 a.m. a couple of Sundays ago. And all because of a silly movie I saw the night before. A hotshot pilot loses his nerve after his best friend dies in an air accident. He then uses the friend's Dog Tags as his own personal good luck and spiritual charm.

As Catholic youngsters attending parochial schools, we were readily identified by the uniform we wore and in some cases by a hidden emblem—the Scapular. Our Lady's Brown Scapular, with the prophesy, "whosoever dies wearing this shall not suffer eternal fire," is a ribbon-like necklace with a brown felt and cotton image of Mary attached at either end. In richer parishes, the images were laminated. Apparently the Scapular, throughout Christianity, has worked as armor. It protects both our back and front from the perils of Satan.

As Army Brats, a link chain holding Dog Tags joined the Scapular around our necks. Two tiny pieces of metal held all the identifying information the military needed to know: name, date of birth, blood type, and religion.

Our modern day squares of tin had begun life as scraps of fabric pinned to the collars of Civil War soldiers. Soldiers' bodies were not transported home; they were buried near where they fell; the only hope they had of their families knowing their fate, was by their names attached to their person. If the name was known, their gravestone was so designated. If they died, unidentified, with members of their unit, the stone might read, "3rd Pennsylvania Regiment." Those scraps of cloth offered little salvation—eternal or otherwise.

Growing up as a Catholic Army Brat did cause confusion. Did I wear the Scapular? Did I wear the Dog Tags? Wearing both often caused them to mingle in a braid-like effect; or simply tangle like my hair. While living in Germany, I had no choice, in order to enter the P.X., attend the movie theatre, or go on Girl Scout field trips, my Dog Tags were a requirement.

Taking Dog Tags off and putting them back on presented no ethical dilemma for me, no sir. Come the safety of my home, that particular chain was removed. The Scapular on the other hand bound me more tightly. By taking it off, even to shower, I risked losing eternal life.

We came as Crusaders to the Infidels. We came as peacekeepers during the Cold War. Both times we carried shields to identify us.

At 14, after my father was killed in Viet Nam, I began withdrawal from direct contact with the military. I gave up Catholicism at 18. My recovery from alcoholism began at age 45. Recovery is a slow damn business.

And I'm still constrained by these icons of identity. Recovery is from a life that intertwines and binds parts of me together that I would have wished gone a long time ago. Pieces of me are preserved as if pressed between the pages of a book.

I can pin point, exactly my three attempts at recovery—three blips on the continuum of me. But, instead of remaining attached to the spot where it occurred, each blip stretched, parallel to my lifeline—over time, becoming thinner, but never quite snapping. Although my body recovers, my mind does not.

I wonder, even now, if the East Germans had stationed agents near my Girl Scout campgrounds. There they waited to lure the young daughters of Army Officers, certain the girls harbored their fathers' military secrets.

Nails

Who gave manicures and pedicures before the Vietnam War?

I ask because it seems that 90% of the plethora of nail salons that have grown, well, like nails, seem to be owned and run by Vietnamese—male and female.

Oh, there have always been Houses of Beauty—Elizabeth Arden’s Red Door famed for the total body makeover—but now, in every strip mall, in every city, *and* on every block in my neighborhood, there are storefronts espousing Nail Art, Nail Design, Gold Nails, Silver Nails, Solar Nails, Fake Nails, French Nails. What’s with the Vietnamese and nails?

To walk into any one of these havens is to enter a small, but acoustically perfect symphony hall. The orchestra—tiny, bird-like people, predominately women—chirps in quiet tones playing off each other. I barely hear the sounds, but, amazingly, across the salon, a laugh or response equally muted, but still bird-like, indicates the transfer of harmony. Occasionally a technician noticing my bemusement explains the joke or comment. I laugh, usually not getting it; I guess you had to have been there. I understand that there are but seven letters in the Vietnamese alphabet; in this case it is how you say it that composes the score.

You can identify the women—gosh, I want to call them “girls”—who have been in the U.S. for a while. They wear tiny black dresses with nose-bleed-high heels. I’ve been to a shop in Chicago—run by Vietnamese—that sells these shoes; all black, all very very tall. The women new to capitalism are generally chunkier, have self-cut hair, and fast-food skin. They get the cruddy jobs—cleaning peoples’ feet. But, if you go to the same

salon long enough, you see them evolve into well-dressed, well-coifed, manicurists.

Though, their hands are always older than their faces.

They choose American names: Vicki, Tami, and Lisa. Monikers that to me evoke children born and named in the 70s—exactly the time their parents fled from Vietnam.

You always know who's in charge. The eyes, again usually female, but maybe a boyfriend's or brother, dart from client to client, manicurist to pedicurist. And the owner always answers the phone regardless of her current position at someone's hands—the owner never does feet.

In my salon, everyone knows everyone else; there are lots of referrals and the salon has been in the neighborhood a number of years.

The women talk of return trips to Vietnam; almost all are married or engaged to Vietnamese men in Chicago. Family ties are strong and trips abroad are planned well in advance and talked about for months. Patrons become interested and the cacophony increases—Midwestern accents meet subtle sounds—as questions about “home” are asked and answered.

At times the music is muffled, like a bird whose cage has been covered against the chill. The manicurists don masks, not to protect them from defoliants as was the case with their parents, or, at this point in time, grandparents, but against the noxious chemicals that women insist on putting on their nails to make them longer, stronger, talon-like.

In my salon, the patrons are self-important people—multi-tasking women and men—talking constantly on cell phones. It's near crisis when the phone happens to be in

a purse when it rings. First of all, whose phone is it? Second, perfectly painted nails are endangered.

“Vicki, will you get my phone out?”

“Hello? and the chatter of personal lives in English invades the nest-like insulation in the room.

I my salon, my entrance is acknowledged: “Hello Miss Scot, pick your color.” I select my shades from shelves, full of colored bottles, lining the walls like notes rising and falling on a scale as hues deepen then mellow.

Post-prettiness—my toes flash Chick Flick Red, while my nails shine Ballet Slipper—I just sit and watch—never wanting a phone or a magazine—there’s too much going on in this ongoing performance.

To a person, they comment on the jade ring I wear on my right hand and never remove, not even for a manicure. I don’t tell them it’s my grandmother’s engagement ring—a West Point miniature. To me, that sanctions talking about the army and then the war and then my father. I suspect these young men and women, if not born in this country of refugees, came of their own free will long after my father was killed in their country. It’s so long ago now, almost 40 years, but it still haunts me. Can’t they tell when I walk in?