



## The Golem and the Liar

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Wars are meant to be forgotten, the Vietnam War like any war. Memory resists them. Their reality bleeds away, surviving in fragments. The fragments are elusive, drifting apart. The mist that covers Dak To this morning covers them. They are enfolded in their own darkness.

- Robert Stone

Before America became militarily involved in defending the sovereignty of South Vietnam, it had to, as one historian recently put it, ‘invent’ the country and the political issues at stake there. The Vietnam war was in many ways a wild and terrible work of fiction written by some dangerous and macabre storytellers.

- Steven Kaplan

We should declare war on North Vietnam...We could pave the whole country and put parking strips on it, and still be home by Christmas.

- Ronald Reagan, 1965

## The Mistake

I spent the first years of my life living in The West Coast Macaroni Factory, a converted industrial building that had been taken over by my parents, a pigeon farmer, and several artists who had mistakenly moved too far ahead of the gentrifying curve into the heart of East Oakland, CA. While most American children grow up surrounded by other families or the bucolic fields of the rural states, my playgrounds were the parking lots of a Safeway milk processing plant and the Van Camp cannery. My paternal grandfather, a West Virginian logger turned MD, and his wife, who shot squirrels in her Oakland Hills backyard with a shotgun until a neighbor called the ASPCA, were hesitant to visit us. They claimed the government had been crop dusting a nearby Latino neighborhood in an effort to quell the spread of “Mexican Fruit Flies.” Additionally, my grandmother's penchant for calling my previously married mother “The Used Jew” did nothing to increase the frequency of their drop-ins.

If this garden variety anti-Semitism had been my grandparents most egregious offense against my family, it would have fundamentally changed three generations over the course of the next 38 years. At thirteen my father's back twisted with scoliosis and he spent his birthday in a full body cast. At Oakland Technical High School he was one of Tom Wolfe's Kandy Kololed kids. When it came time for him to register for the draft, my grandfather, who was also the general practitioner for the family, refused to provide the documentation that proved my father had spent six months of his early adolescents indisposed. Those six months inside a hospital, while having previously been reality, were fictionalized along the map of my father's life. I don't mean to imply that they never happened, but it was as if they never happened. They became the sad sap story of could-have-beens and missed opportunities. As a result of my grandfather's obedient, unquestioning view of patriotism, his son and my father was sent to war.

*My country right or wrong.*

This phrase, a phrase my grandfather probably heard on a barstool, or in a conversation with the mailman, or over a half head of wilted iceberg lettuce inside a cafeteria, has now shaped the minds of two generations of our family. While watching my father die, I clung to floating scraps of his thoughts and memories in the hope that somehow these shared narratives would pump life back into his decomposing body. In the scramble to absorb them into myself, to graft the hidden firing of his synapses onto my own brain, I found myself infused with fragments of fears and memories I'd now rather pretend never existed. In an attempt to valorize a dying man, in mistake, I greedily digested his anger and imperfections.

Sometimes our stories entangle in each other. My Father's anger and my elegiac lament intertwine. They form a hybrid of equal parts that I can also confidently claim as my own. It would be nice to believe that this writing exists at an intersection between these two points and our own voices. But that's not quite right. Edith Wyschogrod writes that when we “speak in the name of the other, [we] preempt the speech of the other, whereas if [we] remain silent the other is consigned to invisibility” (Wyschogrod 1998: 38). But my father, if he is the other that I report on, can no longer speak. I cannot preempt his already silenced voice. With each passing year he becomes more consigned to invisibility. Instead of speaking to or for him, I am telling his stories as a recorder and as a narrator. And although his influence on me is undeniable, there is actual distance between what was his and what is mine.

The following stories are still true, however, or as true as I can make them. When writing about the nature of truth, accepting the truth of personal narrative is often more important than fact checking, especially when listening to the stories of others. When listening to stories, objective facts are often the least important elements of the exchange. The messiness of life should not be lost in details, and I've never believed that my father only spoke to me about Vietnam just so I could know exactly what the jungle smelled like. At times we must be content to let life exist in the expansive space

between fact and fiction. Vietnam Veterans who died and killed for the fictional accounts of Vietnam propagated by Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Robert McNamara are unfortunately not lost on this concept. But it is necessary to bring this space back. Life, and the acknowledgement of it between fact and fiction, can be used for more than destruction.

It is in response to needless destruction that my project and my father's project are the same. Chris Hedges writes that "war is an inevitable part of the human condition", and Susan Sontag argues that pacifists no longer even believe that war can be abolished (Hedges 2003b: *xii* ; Sontag 2003: 5). In respect to these claims, an examination of the numbers can be disheartening. R. Paul Shaw and Yuwa Wang conclude that in the last 3,400 years, we've only had 268 years of global peace (Hedges 2003b: 1). It seems that war is a natural state, and peace is the exception to the rule of armed conflict. Yet, as Bruce Weigl says, the lie swings back again. A veteran can look at you and convey with all assurance that war cannot happen, and that through dogged strength alone he will not let it happen, no matter how inevitable it seems. This faith, this undying belief in what many would call a fictive account of human goodness, is stronger and realer than any figure I can relay. It requires obstinance, it requires strength, and it requires the choosing of sides. It is overtly political and it is inherently personal. It demands belief in the unseen.

Yet we live in a time when this faith is difficult. Eduardo Galeano characterizes our time as such:

*The moral code at the end of the millennium condemns not injustice but failure. Robert McNamara, one of those responsible for the war in Vietnam, wrote a book in which he admitted it was a mistake. That war, which killed more than 3 million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans, was a mistake, not because it was unjust, but because the United States carried on in full acknowledge that it could not win. By 1965, according to McNamara, there was already overwhelming evidence that the invading force could not prevail; nonetheless, the US government continued as if victory were possible. The fact that the United States spent 15 years visiting international terrorism on Vietnam in order to impose a government the Vietnamese did not want does not even enter into the discussion. That the world's premier military power dropped more bombs on a small country than all the bombs dropped during the Second World War is utterly irrelevant.* (Galeano 1998: 32)

As a country we don't believe that war can be abolished. We honor victory and ignore injustice. We hide the physical destruction of the enemy in long range attacks, and the humanity of the enemy in creative accounts of his dissimilarity from us. But as children of veterans, it is through stories that we fight back. Stories can be used to engage in tactics against the strategies of war making. Stories can be used to challenge destructive ideologies with common humanities and personal experiences. Or, as my father saw it, a story can highlight our similarities despite the structures of our differences. He wrote:

The first time you were under fire, you thought, "How the fuck can they do this to me? If only I could talk to the cocksuckers firing at me, we'd get along, everything would be alright." I just had the overwhelming feeling that if I could talk to these people, that they really are the same as I am, that it's not us that are doing it, it's some other system and we're just pawns in this fucking thing, throwing the shit at each other. (Childress 1981: 64)

In response to these feeling of helplessness, my father wrote. My father sculpted. My father protested. My father raised me. My father told stories. Some of those stories are included here. They are distinctly his, and they are uniquely mine.

## **My Father the Liar**

*You cannot take my son  
You will not have my son  
I'll cut off his fingers  
So he can't pull your triggers  
He will never understand why his father has crippled him  
Someday, his father won't either  
But then, you will not want my son*

- Lee Childress, 1979

My father used to demand promises of me. As an artist, he was moderately successful. I recognize that now. I remember his face peering back at me through the screen on a PBS documentary. He had a retrospective at age 30 at the Kansas City Museum of Art. While these things were part of my father's story, they were not things that I could witness or inscribe my own truth onto. To me, my father was a supermarket truck driver. He wore "playsuits," which were really mechanics overalls, but that's what playing was. People thought he looked like he was homeless. When he sat in diners and strangers tried to offer him cups of coffee, he refused politely. When they mistook his reaction for pride, he slid the money back across the table, told them that they probably needed it more than him, and went to find warmth in the cab of a 30 yard truck which was designed for the sole purpose of keeping things cold.

"You see that there? That wasn't always a pizza parlor. In 1968 you could walk through that door and there were still stairs that led to the second floor. There was a desk at the top that looked like it was on goddamn consignment, and the walls were so thin that they might as well have been rice paper. And the people were just as temporary, too. That's where you reported for the draft. That's where you went. That's where I went. That's where you go. And I want you to promise me, when I die, I want you to fucking promise me something. I want you to blow that building up. I don't want you to hurt anybody, do it at night, but I want you to tell me that you'll blow that whole place down."

I don't know what he really wanted. I was eleven at the time, and I envisioned my body entangled in dynamite and barbed wire, hurdling through the doors to avenge the death of a man who had already claimed to have died. When he did die, pain turned to conflict and the family practice of legacy-making immediately set in. With nothing left but pictures, memory invoking images turned into memories themselves and my family's warring records became warring accounts. There were stories of death, murders over stolen packs of gum, begging children, rotting jungles, near misses, direct hits, Agent Orange and Agent Blue skipping down from the sky like a rainbow crushing under its own weight, and most of all, the story of a thicket rustling to life and then to death, only to unearth three smoldering bullets and the pulsing chest of a dead, unarmed child.

I did not hear about the child directly from my father until several weeks before he died. I suppose you don't tell children about killing them. In my youth this story was saved for my mother. But I did hear about coming home. I heard about being called a faggot and a baby killer. These accusations may have hurt my father, most of all because they were true. My father loved men, maybe not sexually, I don't know about that, but as he blindly wandered through the thickets to find refuge in women, his love, passion and compassion for the men in his life (his "brothers") was undeniable. I heard about his father refusing to look at him. The same man who sent my father to war in shame because of his cowardice again rejected him. He did not reject him for a lack of heroism, heroism did not exist in 1969, he was ashamed of my father for committing atrocities. But more importantly, he abandoned my father because he came back to talk about them.

“This is what being a parent is. You're too young for decision making, and I'm going to hurt you a little bit to protect you. What would you think if I kidnapped you? What would you think if we hung out more and had more fun? I'm not going to hurt you to disfigure you, I'm going to hurt you to make sure that you're never disfigured. I'd trade both my arms to not have this shit eating me. Some people say you can just pretend to be gay. I pretended like I was a fucking fool. I got every question I could wrong on the service exam, except for the one's that had to do with auto mechanics. So of course those bastards made me a mechanic in the Iron Triangle, and that just means that you've got some bullshit wrench in your hand that's keeping you from your gun. They know, you can't pretend. They'll always know if you try to lie to them... I found a doctor who will say you have asthma. Read this book, it tells you how to have asthma. If they draft you anyway, we'll cut your finger off. It will hurt less. Maybe not at first, but at least the pain will go away.”

*“Most men don't talk, and those that do, you wouldn't understand why ”*

I first saw Ron in a college classroom. He was older, about fifty-five, and among a group of 19 year olds on an enclosed campus, that alone can make a person stand out. For the first two weeks none of us spoke to him, but it was clear to several of us who he was. He was a veteran.

Veterans, and Vietnam Veterans in particular, might as well be walking around with moonlight on them. They're muddled and cracked against the canvas. They know you're there, you can see them feeling you, but they won't look at you unless you make them.

*“The thousand yard stare  
is always there  
Behind their eyes  
and through the lies  
they drift like falling flares”*

When you are greedy and selfish enough to make a Vietnam Veteran look at you, which I admittedly have been on occasion, a bottomless well of compassion trapped inside an empty field can swallow you whole if look too long. Unsure if they've locked themselves inside you or exposed your own emptiness by looking right through you and past the faux backdrop of your life, veterans can make you feel closer and farther away from the world at the same time.

When I asked Ron about the jungle, when I asked him about the tracers, when I asked him about the Agent Orange, and the gum, and the pulsing chest of a dead, unarmed child, he told me “Most men don't talk, and those that do, you wouldn't understand why. Some men make up stories, and some won't tell any. There's no right way to do it.”

As I write this morning, I don't know if my father shot a child. I've been retelling the story in my head for over a decade, and it all seems too horridly perfect to me. It feels packaged and manipulated but I don't know why. My father might have told my mother this story so she could understand what he was feeling. Perhaps complicity was enough for him, and the only way to make her understand this was to summarize his despair in the story of a thicket rustling to life and then to death. Alternately, it might just be easier for me to assume that this never happened, that my father was strong, that my father did not make mistakes, and that at the age of twenty my father already knew how to stand in the multiple faces of injustice. If he did lie, it might be easier for me. Maybe it assuages my own guilt and my own feelings of responsibility. I really don't know if he was lying, and I can only guess why he spoke when he did, or why he always found work that allowed him to be alone. There's no right way to do it.

In my story, my father the liar deceived and told the truth at the exact same time. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien the author lets Tim O'Brien the character step back from his accounts in order to keep "good form" and be honest about the meaning of "a true war story":

*I want to tell you this: 20 years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. But listen. Even that story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, 20 years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief. (O'Brien 1990: 204)*

The truth is that my father was a mechanic in the 205 th Assault Helicopter Division in the Iron Triangle. He was a Sergeant, he was dehydrated, he was constipated, he never had enough socks. He had an M16, 88.6 pounds of gear and a fucking wrench. Over 50 Vietnamese died for every American life that was lost. My father killed them. He shit on himself. Their death provided the first good shit he'd had since basic training. He threw up. At times he thought he was the only one.

Tim O'Brien suggests that "story-truth can make things present" (O'Brien 1990: 204). For my father, it doesn't matter if it was a single girl in a bush or the unbearable weight of guilt for contributing to an entire country's irreparable loss. Instead, upon the wings of a single story, my father took his feelings of regret across the world and brought them home. When solely using happening-truth it is too easy to sanitize reality with figures. It is too easy to intellectualize the killing of war in order distance ourselves from it. This facile approach of limiting our understanding of death to abstract numbers can serve as a misguided attempt to obfuscate the actual meaning of what has really happened. Happening-truth is too often the quantitative work of policy makers, and story-truth is relegated to those who throw the shit at each other. But sometimes story-truth is more real, and the only truth that can shatter the myth of intellectual response.

My father never saw the living body of the girl he killed. He either turned too quickly, or he never turned at all. But he saw her along the paths, and he saw her in the jungle. He closed her eyes and clutched her smoking chest, or he walked right past her rotting corpse every day from June of 1967 to May of 1968. To understand this, she took a living form. A thicket rustled to life and then to death, only to unearth three smoldering bullets and her pulsing chest. She was hurt unjustly. Maybe she was Vietnam. We tried to erase her, and my father's guilt in his participation formed into the body of a dead girl. Or, he killed her. He was "one of those macho motherfuckers who kind of bellied up" when he got there, and he shot blindly at every rustling bush until he hit something. There's no right way to do it.

*My hootch took a direct hit and I was so paralyzed with fear that I couldn't move. And Bagwell – this would never be funny to anybody else – Bagwell slides up to me and with his rifle butt hits me on the side of the fucking helmet and says, "Come on, Sarge. They're writing U.S. Army in the sky. Shit, let's move." 'Cause Bagwell had his shit together in that situation and I didn't. That night I listened to a guy die for about three hours, and I was just... (Childress 1983: 63)*

A woman came over to our house the morning my father died. She meant well. She was there to make us talk about him. I wasn't ready. The walls caved in. It's been seven years and I'm 25 now and I'm still not always ready. What I'm really trying to tell you is seven years ago my father died. He died seven years ago, and he killed people.

In fighting the intellectual response to Vietnam, in challenging the neo-domino theory of victory and just-cause, my father forsook empiricism for purpose. He skipped details, or created them, to reach a conclusion that actually explains why war cannot happen anymore. To him, facts and figures were abstractions. Human suffering, depravity, fear, injustice and regret in war were true; the rest was basically filler.

### **Truth, Cont.**

As a child my father sat patiently with me while I memorized Bruce Weigl's "Song of Napalm." Although I have tried to purge it from my memory at times, I cannot.

### **Song of Napalm**

*For my Wife*

*After the storm, after the rain stopped pounding,  
We stood in the doorway watching horses  
Walk off lazily across the pasture's hill.  
We stared through the black screen,  
Our vision altered by the distance  
So I thought I saw a mist  
Kicked up around their hooves when they faded  
Like cut-out horses  
Away from us.  
The grass was never more blue in that light, more  
Scarlet; beyond the pasture  
Trees scraped their voices into the wind, branches  
Criss-crossed the sky like barbed wire  
But you said they were only branches.*

*Okay. The storm stopped pounding.  
I am trying to say this straight: for once  
I was sane enough to pause and breathe  
Outside my wild plans and after the hard rain  
I turned my back on the old curses. I believed  
They swung finally away from me . . .*

*But still the branches are wire  
And thunder is the pounding mortar,  
Still I close my eyes and see the girl  
Running from her village, napalm  
Stuck to her dress like jelly,  
Her hands reaching for the no one  
Who waits in waves of heat before her.*

*So I can keep on living,  
So I can stay here beside you,  
I try to imagine she runs down the road and wings*

*Beat inside her until she rises  
Above the stinking jungle and her pain  
Eases, and your pain, and mine.*

*But the lie swings back again.  
The lie works only as long as it takes to speak  
And the girl runs only as far  
As the napalm allows  
Until her burning tendons and crackling  
Muscles draw her up  
Into that final position  
Burning bodies so perfectly assume. Nothing  
Can change that, she is burned behind my eyes  
And not your good love and not the rain-swept air  
And not the jungle green  
Pasture unfolding before us can deny it.*

- Bruce Weigl  
(Weigl 1988: 30)

When Weigl writes about a girl “running from her village, napalm stuck to her dress like jelly”, the image is equally apologetic and disturbed. As Weigl's imagery ricochets through my mind, I am unable to see beyond one of the most famous, depersonalized pictures from the war in Vietnam. Nick Ut's photograph of Kim Phuk running naked down a dirt road has been retold in Weigl's apology to his wife. He's changed the detail of the dress, and the “crackling limbs” and “mist that waits in waves of heat before her” do not appear until his final stanza. Ut's photograph has been infused onto an amalgamation of events that would seem too trivial when Weigl tries to explain to his wife why he can't be found inside himself anymore. Did Bruce Weigl really see a girl “Until her burning tendons and crackling Muscles draw her up into that final position Burning bodies so perfectly assume”? And does it really matter? If Kim Phuk, and not the real Kim Phuk but the story-truth Kim Phuk who has been borrowed from the newsprint, is nothing more than the carrier of a message that Weigl couldn't otherwise explain and his wife couldn't otherwise understand, then maybe he's bringing new meaning to an event that would otherwise be lost in the memory of a single image.

Susan Sontag writes that “harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (Sontag 2003: 89).

The story-truth is that Weigl saw a girl “run only as far as the napalm allows.” The words disturb us, but they do not haunt us. They do not raise Kim Phuk's ghost. These things are present, they live in Weigl's words, but they extend past haunting imagery to provide a context and a meaning (however inappropriate or disturbed) for Kim Phuk's suffering. Weigl's poem allows us to understand.

If the point of truth and stories is to understand, then the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission has completed the first institutionalized acknowledgement of the real possibilities of truth making. Unwilling to be haunted by a past which would not and could not be forgotten, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission created the Human Rights

Violations Committee for the chief purpose of recording stories. Citizens of South Africa were given free voice to ward off the temptations of collective amnesia, as well as to begin the arduous process of restoring personal dignity to those who had been denied their most basic human rights.

In this process, the commission acknowledged the existence of four kinds of truth. They called these: factual or forensic truth; personal or narrative truth; social or dialogue truth and healing or restorative truth. In most instances, truth, and the most painful truths in particular, are often reduced to the “W’s”: Who, what, when, where, why. Michael Ignatieff best highlighted the importance of these W-truths when he stated that “all that a truth commission can achieve is to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse” (TRC 1998: Vol 1. Ch. 5, 33). By officially acknowledging patterned events through the retelling of individual acts, W-Truth can challenge the lies of collective amnesia, and stand in the face of revisionist historians with nefarious aims. Arthur Butz and other Nazi Holocaust deniers can be silenced because we have knowledge of the W-Truths that refute them. When Butz forwards that belief in the Nazi Holocaust was the hoax of 20 th Century (and in a rhetorical flash titles his book as such), he must rely on German census data that is easily refuted. With little effort his lies are easily exposed.

While W-Truth is invaluable in this regard, it should not be called factual truth. A fact has “the quality of being actual,” is “something that exists” or is “a piece of information.” W-Truth, while decreasing lies, cannot work alone. Bruce Weigl’s apology to his wife is largely uncontextualized, but it tells a story that is meaningful beyond raw numbers and locations. Weigl’s goal is not to share an exact recording of his experiences in Vietnam, his goal is to be understood. It is for this reasons that the commission honored the meaning of personal and narrative truth. While W-Truth can expose deceit and injustice, it is not restorative. Although forensic truth can lead to punitive justice (or amnesty, as was the case in South Africa), it does not recognize “the healing potential of telling stories” (TRC 1998: Vol 1. Ch. 5, 36). A large part of this project is scraping at the truth of my own dead father by retelling the things he told me.

Perhaps this writing is the result of 18 years of creating what the commission called social truth; truth that lived in “interaction, discussion and debate” between a father and a son who wanted know but could never understand (TRC 1998: Vol 1. Ch. 5, 40). My father’s stories are not only important because they allowed him to share things, they are important because he shared them. They are not about a thicket rustling to life then to death, and they are not about the pulsing chest of a dead, unarmed child. They are about him, and they are about me because I heard them. And because they have been passed down to me, even indirectly, they are mine. It is for this reason that my father’s stories cannot “be separated from the purpose [they are] required to serve” (TRC 1998: Vol 1. Ch. 5, 44). When discussing war, his purpose and my purpose are the same, no matter how much our stories differ.

At this point, after having elevated the multiple forms of truth, the cynic may quote Napoleon Bonaparte and claim that “history is an agreed upon fiction.” While Napoleon was trying to dismantle the assumed hallowed truth of history by aligning it with the feebleness of creative accounts, his perspective demands a Hegelian inversion. In the first order, fiction is history. It is history perfected and distilled into its most compelling elements. But like history, fiction is also messy. It is contradictory, it is personal, and it is imperfect. Most importantly, fiction, unlike much of history until this point, has the restorative powers to tell its story from the perspective of the victim.

When writing fiction, when inscribing truth onto memory, the central question is of who this truth will serve. Truth is inherently political and should never be believed too deeply; it cannot take precedent over itself. These socio-personal histories should be honored and respected, and not in elegy, but as a paean to those who have created their own truth through living. An unyielding belief in goodness is necessary when taking this position. And although it is often hard, as Christopher Newfield writes, it was the mission of my father’s personal truth to shred the dogmatic trappings of history

with “an unjustifiable optimism” (Gordon 2004: *ix* ). You must make decisions. You must take sides.

If my father is reaching for the body of a dead, unarmed child, he may be infusing her into the memories of the living with the hope that one day she will be ready to speak again. He's holding her body close to the world until she can scream out at him and lash free from my hand-me-down thoughts of her from across the world. Or, alternately, I'm holding him. I'm holding his made up story until he can rain down with a vengeance to excoriate me for my mistakes.

“That part never mattered you fucking idiot! You took too much and focused on the wrong parts!”

But I will never hear him say this. After growing sickly from waiting patiently for him to take his anger back, I've been forced to abandon the feckless, lifelong process of trying to disassociate it from myself, and him from me. I've been clutching and repelling his death and my life at the same time. I've been lambasting him for being one of the two million American's who fought and not one of the five million Americans who found a way to escape the draft. He very well could have been one of the four thousand Americans who went to jail. He could have been raped. He could have not killed. He also could have been silent, but he was not.

### **Psychomanglized**

*Old soldiers never die;  
They just wish they could.*

*He's your brother.  
He's your son.  
He's the one who humped your gun.  
Now his mind has come undone  
And you applaud it.*

According Gwynne Dyer, “women have almost always fought side by side in guerilla or revolutionary wars, and there isn't any evidence they are significantly worse at killing people – which may or may not be comforting, depending on whether you see war as a male problem or a human one” (Dyer 1985: 176). While killing certainly is a human problem and throughout history it is not unheard of for women to engage in armed struggle, when examining the institutionalized practice of modern war making, Dyer is mistaking the exceptions of war for the rule. Today, 97 percent of the military personnel across the world are male (Hedges 2003b: 1). In the US, the relationship between men and death even extends beyond the battlefield. If you find somebody awash in flesh so disfigured that it's worthy of a supermarket aisle, you are almost always speaking to a man. Whether it be the butcher, the pallbearer, the exterminator, the soldier, or even those who dig the graves - the closer you get to the rotting stench of death, the more men you'll find.

The argument is not that women are incapable of risking their life or any less proficient at killing, it is merely that women are not institutionally put or allowed in positions where they have to risk life and cause death with any of the frequency that men are. Warren J. Farrell argues that in a system that seeks to “protect” and infantilize women, the glass-ceiling is accompanied by a glass-cellar, where both the most prestigious and least prestigious, dangerous jobs are almost exclusively occupied by men. Farrell writes that “the degree to which a country is emancipated is the degree to which it frees men from the obligation to protect women and [allows] women to equally protect men” (Farrell 1993: 128). Yet when it comes to shipping bodies off to war, when we ask our citizenry to die and kill for love of country, it is still only young men who cannot escape registration for the draft.

Yet most military men (and both men and women in the general population, for that matter) don't believe in requiring combat roles for women (Farrell 1993: 157). Men confuse the lion's den of war with the exclusivity of good-old-boy bonding on the golf course and at the rotary club. It doesn't matter if you're on a sinking ship or crying, face-down in the mud while a fireworks show of tracers illuminate the sky, dying is viewed as masculine. But perhaps more disturbing, and more damaging to the psyche of the men forced into battle in Vietnam, killing is viewed as masculine too.

*Through a ten-year war it seems  
You were hatching all your dreams  
So you couldn't hear the screams  
Your own son dying.*

One of the biggest myths of war is that soldiers are effective because they are brave. Swank and Marchland, in contrast to this belief, found that 2 percent of soldiers are what they termed “aggressive psychopaths” (Grossman 1995: 180). This is not a condition unique to 2 percent of military personnel, and instead this percentage is slightly lower than the 3 percent of aggressive psychopaths found in the general population. These soldiers, who are termed brave because they do not feel regret or remorse for killing, “typically account for up to 50 percent of the killing by any unit” (Hedges 2003b: 75). They are the 1 percent of fighter pilots who account for 40 percent of air-to-air death, and they are found in the 15-20 percent of soldiers who until recently were the only combatants to even fire their weapons in war, let alone aim at their targets (Grossman 1995: 184).

As a result, many of myths of war are tied up in the misused language of bravery and heroism. Instead, the willingness to kill other humans is not typical or natural in most of us. The ability to kill does not stem from heroism, and it is not a mark of patriotism. My father used to share a remark with me that is well known among veterans. He said that “98 percent of veterans went crazy from fighting in Vietnam, and 2 percent were crazy before they got there.” It is those 2 percent who kill without coercion.

And so now we are speaking of killing, and killing is the dirtiest secret of every war. The state, according to Weber, is defined by its “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force”, and in this sense, war is nothing more than the legitimized intra-state practice of organized murder (Gerth & Mills 1946: 78; Hedges 2003a: 21). Behind the veil of this simple fact, the pluralities of demands enacted on every soldier are often melded together in legends bravery and heroism. Bravery and heroism – characteristics which are also ignored in women and foisted upon the backs of men – hide the dual nature of what we ask of soldiers. The statement is shocking in its simplicity: it is profoundly different to ask someone to die and to ask someone to kill.

Although the chemical euphoria experienced in times of danger cannot be discounted (and many of those around war describe these feelings as addictive), there is also bravery in risking your life for things which you believe in. The heroism of the anonymous student in Tian An Men square cannot be questioned, and the inner strength required to put your life at risk for your convictions should never be overlooked. But this has nothing to do with killing. The double-duty demanded of soldiers goes unmentioned when we fail to differentiate between the act of dying and the act of killing. The soldier must risk his life, and that will be traumatic, but the soldier must kill, and in all likelihood that will be unbearable.

In the otherwise excellent book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Chris Hedges is able to call war addictive because he has lived it incompletely. As a war journalist, Hedges has experienced the chemical euphoria of putting his body in harm's way for the noble cause of sharing stories. But Hedges has never been asked to kill in war, and he has probably never known the trauma of firing a weapon at a fellow human. The act of killing in war is only discussed in Hedges' book for seven pages, and recognizing his limitations, Hedges quotes the experiences of William Manchester and

Ernie Pyle, both soldiers, at length. Hedges' view of war as a narcotic explains his experience in combat zones, but it does not explain the psychology of asking a soldier to take another's life. In describing his experiences in a firefight in El Salvador in 1982, Hedges writes:

During a lull I dashed across an empty square and found shelter behind a house. My heart was racing. Adrenaline coursed through my bloodstream. *I was safe* . I made it back to the capital. And, like most war correspondents, I soon considered the experience a great cosmic joke. I drank away the fear and excitement in a seedy bar in downtown San Salvador. Most people after such an experience would learn to stay away. *I was hooked* . (emphases added) (Hedges 2003a: 42)

From this experience Hedges is able to understand why war is so shocking in its presence and how it makes day to day life seem monotonous and meaningless, but half of what we ask of soldiers in war (the demand to kill) is not a narcotic for the vast majority of them. Instead, although we fail to separate the command to die and the command to kill, danger is intoxicating, and killing is debilitating. With quotidian claims of heroism aside, the demand to kill in war costs more lives than the exhilarating experience of almost dying, as well as the frequent, unfortunate result of this behavior – death.

*He's back, put to bed,  
Alone,  
Sleeping with the dead,  
Bloated on the lies you fed.*

*For he cannot stop the popping  
Or the helicopter chopping down his brain.*

Although it went unmentioned at the victory parades, until the 1950's most soldiers chose to put their lives at greater risk by not killing the enemy. Much of modern battle was an elaborate burlesque performance that replicated the myths of war created in the minds of government officials and the general population.

In the Civil War, the average soldier using a black powder musket could load and fire between four and five shots per minute. David Grossman writes:

The hit rate would have been at least as good as that achieved by the Prussians with smoothbore muskets when they got 25 percent hits at 225 yards, 40 percent hits at 150 yards, and 60 percent hits at 75 yards while firing at a 100-foot by 6-foot target. Thus, at 75 yards, a 200-man regiment should be able to hit as many as 120 enemy soldiers in the first volley. If four shots were fired each minute, a regiment could potentially kill or wound 480 enemy soldiers in the first minute. (Grossman 1995: 19)

But this was not the case in the long lines of regimented soldiers in the civil war. Instead, from *30 yards away* , each side, represented by lines of hundreds of unshielded soldiers, would typically kill between one and two men per minute (Grossman 1995: 20). In the Civil War the process of killing with muskets involved at least three men, and killing (or not killing) required an assembly line of production. There were runners who took bodies, muskets and bullets to and from the front line, loaders who specialized in packing muskets quickly, and killers who in training were the most adroit at targeting the enemy and terminating him. But the production chain frequently broke down, and those that specialized in killing rarely did so. Battles that in field tests should have taken no more than several hours, dragged out over days and weeks, often ending because of fatigue and exhaustion instead of death.

Soldiers frequently report that the strongest urge to engage in battle comes from the sense that you cannot “let down” the men around you, but the killers of the civil war employed tactics that allowed the assembly line of death production to break down before its final product could be completed. F.A. Lord, in the *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*, reports that 27, 574 muskets were recovered after the Battle of Gettysburg. Although less than 5 percent of the time spent in battle was used aiming and firing a musket, over 90 percent of the muskets recovered were fully loaded. Twelve thousand of the recovered muskets, just under half, had been double loaded, and a just under a quarter of the recovered muskets had between three and ten rounds loaded on top of each other in the barrels of the guns (Grossman 1995: p. 22). Double and multiple loaded muskets appear to fire, to an observer they replicate the image of a destructive weapon. But for all the noise and smoke that they produce, when firing a double loaded musket, the top load merely dribbles out the barrel and falls upon the ground. For muskets with up to 23 loads piled in down the shaft of the barrel, it appears that the loaders and firers were engaging in a conspiracy of life preservation.

S.L.A. Marshall, a U.S. Army Brigadier General and the official U.S. historian for the European campaign in World War II, discovered a similarly shocking lack of firing at the enemy. In in-depth interviews with thousands of soldiers in over four hundred companies, his team of researchers found that only 15 to 20 percent of combat riflemen in World War II ever fired their weapons at the enemy (Grossman 1995: 3). In 1986, The British Defense Operational Analysis Establishment used pulsed laser weapons to recreate over one hundred battles from the last two hundred years to test Marshall's findings. After comparing their trials to the archival records on killing in war, they “openly supported Marshall's findings, pointing to ‘unwillingness to take part [in combat] as the main factor’ that kept the actual historical killing rates significantly below the laser trial levels” (Grossman 1995: 16).

In response to Marshall's findings, the U.S. government began instituting “a triad of training methods” to induce soldiers to kill. These included desensitization, conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms (Grossman 1995: 251). When Marshall was sent to Korea, he found that 55 percent of soldiers were now firing their weapons, and the persuasive tools of destruction were nearly perfected by the war in Vietnam. Between 90 and 95 percent of combat soldiers in Vietnam fired upon the enemy (Grosman 1995 251).

We frequently attribute Vietnam Veterans' inability to readjust to society to the changing political climate during their absence. It is now almost a truism to state that Vietnam Veterans left as heroes and came back as baby killers. Others claim that before Vietnam, soldiers had long boat trips to think about their experience and psychologically readjust to civilian life, where as in Vietnam the soldier could be standing in front of his family within several days of leaving the battlefield. While the political climate when returning from the war in Vietnam should not be discounted, and the incubation period of readjusting to a new life while traveling is important, these answers discount another fundamental difference about the war in Vietnam from previous. Despite their initial inability to do so, for the first time in our history, almost all of the American soldiers in Vietnam had successfully been trained to kill.

For the 98 percent of soldiers who show resistance to killing and must deal with the psychological trauma of it, the Vietnam War was life shattering. This phrase is not meant to be taken rhetorically. Within ten years of the last troop leaving Vietnam, more Vietnam Veterans had committed suicide than died at war (Farrell 1993: 426). At least 1/3 rd of the homeless in the United States are veterans of war, and 60 percent of combat veterans in Vietnam have been classified as “psychiatric casualties” (Farrell 1993: 138). The demand to kill, and the successful tools of coercion employed by the U.S. Army to do so, is surely one of the reasons why Vietcong troops were 1800 percent more likely to die than American soldiers. This speaks nothing of the civilians. Death is the only way to connect the double-duty demanded of

soldiers. Vietnam Veterans died from risking their lives in an unjust war, and they also died from killing in it.

*He's so hooked,  
He's so fried,  
Blood  
Screaming from his eyes.  
Alone,  
Psychomanglized.*

- Lee Childress, 1979

## **Clichés and vandalism**

What made my father create a word? I did an interview with KPFA for an old friend. I'm filed under "Dead Veteran's Child." They call me when they need me. It used to be upsetting, but as a sociologist, I do the same thing. I have a file cabinet of human suffering. I clip articles from the paper and categorize them. I take stories of death and human evilness and organize them for later use. Here is one of them:

At least a dozen Chinese babies in Fuyang city have died over the past two years from drinking fake baby formula. The Chinese government said that 45 companies that claimed to be selling powdered milk for infants were actually peddling starch and flour mixtures with almost no nutritional value. Hundreds of infants have suffered malnutrition and brain damage. The Fuyang city government knew of the scams, a local official who would not give his name told the Los Angeles times. "The companies bribed the local industrial standards bureau," the official said.

I've been saving it. Sometimes storytelling doesn't feel like it's enough. I lose faith in the tactics of restorative truth-making. My writing is starch and flour.

At KPFA, my friend wanted to know why my father had created a word. As the popular progression goes, in the Civil War they called it "soldier's heart." After World War I they called it "shell shock". By Vietnam that term had been sterilized to "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder", and today it has been hidden behind a string of letters as "PTSD". But psychomanglized, however, as my father would describe it, is being all fucked up. He once made a sculpture that achieved some degree of fame called the Burowski Diamond. A reporter came over to the house, and said that he had researched the word "Burowski," looking through genealogy records and investigating large diamonds with any hope that one may have passed down through a Burowski clan. My father told him that he probably wouldn't be able to find the reference in any public records. He had tantalized the reporter with the fantasy of a publishable story. "Growing up" my father said, "I had this aunt, who for some reason we all used to call Burowski. Well, she used to always complain, all the time, on and on about how she wanted a big fucking diamond. So I decided to make one for the old bitch." This is how my father told stories.

It often seems that having something to say resides in the shadows of being able to say it. My father knew how to tell stories. He knew how to keep your hopes up, and how to slowly hint at the equally unexpected and unavoidable conclusion until you realized that you had been duped right before the end. He could do this when he was angry, and he could do this when he was playful to equal effect. When he couldn't do it he made up words. No matter how he felt, he knew that he couldn't just tell someone he was all fucked up and expect them to understand. "Psychomanglized, that's what I am. I'm all fucked up. And if you can't understand it, well I wouldn't expect you to in the first place." The trick is to sandwich the real feeling between the unexpected. He was almost saying, "Here's novelty on either end, it makes the

truth go down easier.” He would start by fictionalizing a building and end by asking me to blow it up. What he was saying was in the middle: “I hurt, I intensely hurt.” He would start by threatening to kidnap me and end by promising to cut my fingers off. What he was really saying was much simpler: “It hurts. I walk around and pretend but it still hurts.” The crazed war torn beauty of the rest of it was basically filler.

They listened because my father could tell stories. They interviewed him because he could sculpt and because he could organize. At times he had a public voice because he was adept at using it. He could distill the experience of Veterans and humanist values into a single phrase. He could turn a conversation with sincerity to make sure his point was understood. Here's another way he did it. He used to say “Ho Chi Minh is the greatest gook who ever lived,” and then he would pause. He would build tension by honoring Ho Chi Minh while also dehumanizing him in the ways he had been trained to in the U.S. Army. He let you into the warring mind of the Vietnam Veteran, many of which felt closer to the Vietnamese than their own government, while still not being able to abandon the group-think of their training. After letting you digest this statement, he would continue, “but he's not just that. Ho Chi Minh is the greatest man who ever lived.” After forcing you to understand why he said “gook,” he would abandon it, knowing that the prejudice of Vietnam Veterans must be understood but should not be accepted sympathetically. But he was not finished. My father would conclude, “But Ho Chi Minh's not just that. He also happens to be the greatest human who ever lived.” For my father, it was not enough to be a man, and we spent too much time honoring men for simply being so. My father, in a final rhetorical flourish, adroitly dismissed what he called the “macho bullshit” of war making. In the end, the story never really had anything to do with Ho Chi Minh at all.

But what if my father could not tell stories? And what if having something to say truly resides in the shadows of being able to say it? We should be here to honor people's stories, and not just their ability to tell them. It is for this reason that dismissing a story with a purpose simply as clichéd is nothing more than an act of vandalism. As we struggle with words to scrape at truth, feelings are real, and not always perfectly conveyed. The need to share both pain and purpose, and the ability to verbalize these things in new ways for people who must know about them, are two distinctly different practices. In the end, it is feelings, not adroit expression, that should be honored, but this is rarely the case.

Adolescents and war veterans are daily victims of this fundamental confusion of purpose when listening to stories. In the United States, we dismiss the trauma of adolescence and the attempts at creative expression of many teenagers because they don't yet have the language to create new ways to describe old things. We dismiss their clichéd voices, and in the process we ignore the real feelings that created these socially failed attempts to share them. For adolescents in this process, we don't fully acknowledge their struggles with meaning-making or purpose, and instead identify their attempts at eloquence as nothing more than “angst.” We silence them, and we silence ourselves. The feelings fester behind this artificial curtain.

In turn, when a Vietnam Veteran, who often won't speak, shares a story about being spit upon after returning home, the point is to listen, not to dismiss the story as commonplace and probably untrue in the happening sense. There are no recorded accounts of Vietnam Veterans being spit upon, but as this urban legend circulates, it is dangerous to confuse the triteness of the tale with the meaning behind it. If my father says “I'm psycho-fucking-manglized, and you know what that is? That's being all fucked up” and his brother says “they spit on me,” the gravest and most simplistic mistake that can be made is to value the feelings of one Veteran over another. My father was honored because he could tell stories, but what he said had to be heard, and it may have just been by chance alone that he possessed a voice that could make people listen.

My sister wanted to be a writer. She stumbled into her thirties writing thinly veiled accounts of true-life stories with the details mashed up. She still couldn't let the names go. She would change a letter, maybe two. Lauren would become

Laura. Her passion for excoriating members of our family under the thin veneer of fiction overrode any otherwise constraining conventions such as flow or plot. But shouldn't this be the most celebrated writing? Why should she be criticized for writing so cathartic that she didn't have time for convention? She was angry. She was furious. Six months ago she killed herself. If she were writing this story right now it would all be different. There would be less compartmentalizing and less punctuation. It would be angrier. It would be furious. To really explain the differences, I'd have to tell you that she was raped at 13. She was raped inside our house. She was raped by a veteran.

I've borrowed heavily from Tim O'Brien. I've repeated lines for emphasis the way he does, and I've taken the title of one of his chapters, "How to Tell a True War Story," and turned the phrase into something of my own. When I cannot speak, I borrow. When my voice feels clichéd, I insert the voice of others. In trying to challenge the cycled emphasis on new words to give meaning to old feelings, I'm still not confident enough to do this myself. As Tim O'Brien writes, I'm telling you this to maintain "good form."

Here's another one. I don't remember exactly what Ron said to me. I was crying, or began to cry, I don't remember. I started to cross a bridge and I began to cry. My girlfriend couldn't understand why. I couldn't explain to her so I cried some more. I don't remember exactly what Ron said to me. I've quoted him, I've maintained good form, but I don't know what he said. I've quoted what I heard.

## **Life among the Golems**

My father died of cancer in 1997 as a result of being exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. He had tumors on his heart and his lungs and along his spine and resting against his brain. He had lesions on his skin. His cheeks had hollowed and his bones jutted out against decaying waves of skin like they were pitches for a tent. He moaned intensely, but he was inhaling. Sounds came out of his mouth while he was gasping for air. His eyes were milky and unfocused and his arms moved as if they were mechanical.

I've been told that someone in my family has a plaque from the U.S. Army thanking my father for his service. I was 17 when he died, and five weeks away from starting my senior year of high school. He was cremated. Two weeks later, random Vets from across the Bay Area appeared at his memorial service. They had read about it in the obituaries and they came because they belonged there. Nine days after that, under penalty of \$250,000, five years in jail, and a block on federal financial aid and grants, I turned 18 and registered for the draft.

Despite being cremated, it was decided that my father should have a tombstone. I don't know how decisions are made in times of mourning. Things just appear to happen, materializing out of the fog and malaise of collective grief. Within a month, I found myself sleeping in a bed in the Sierra Nevada foothills that I had slept in as a child with my father. It was on a tract of land he had purchased for \$9,000 in the 1970's. He called it The Compound. His tombstone was under the bed I slept in. I don't know how it got there. It was heavy, and someone had tried to push it back as far as they could, but its sharp edges still jutted out from the top corner of the frame. At the time, the unnecessary perversity of the situation was lost on me and I accepted it as fact and did not sleep well.

That night my father could not protect me. He haunted me instead.

My mother is an artist who is not confident enough to sell her work. Every room in our house has several of her sculptures or paintings in it. Racks of paintings are stored above head level in the laundry room. Other paintings are jammed into the closets of a guest bedroom and her office. For several years she made life-sized dolls. Sometimes I still walk into a room and see a doll out of the corner of my eye. My lungs momentarily deflate until I remember that this

person waiting for me around the corner is only made of clay. The first doll she made looks like her, it's over six feet tall, and it has a fetus on a bed of feathers in its hand. It's in the closet of the guest bedroom, and it inevitably terrifies overnight visitors who feel the need to snoop around. In these instances, the doll protects the hidden stories of our family. It is a golem.

On my mother's side of the family, my great-grandfather's last name was Karliner. It is the name of a town near Pinsk, Belarus that had a majority Jewish population until the Nazi Holocaust. In Russian, *karlin* meant "Hasid." The town was once populated by a sect of Hasidic Jews. At Ellis Island my great-grandfather's name was changed to Levy. In America, when my grandfather was 19, he was afraid of anti-Semitism and changed the name to Lee. Seventy-five years later, as a result of his decision, my mother now gets random bulk mail from Korean youth groups and Korean churches. Other Jews don't send us random things. But we have golems to protect us.

In the original Hebrew, "golem" alternately means an unformed substance or a shapeless man. While the stories vary, the majority of the modern golem myths originate in 16th Century Prague. The story is that Rabbi Judah Loew, studying his Kabbalah, made a golem out of clay to protect the Jewish Ghetto from Christian blood libels. Loew wrote the name of God upon a piece of parchment, and either placed it in the Golems mouth or upon its forehead. The Golem came to life and stalked the streets of the Jewish Ghetto, ensuring that the Jews would be safe throughout the night. It is at this point that the legend starts to vary.

In some cases, only God could grant the ability to speak, and the silent Golem was thought of as slow-witted or foolish. In some stories the Golem is unable to comprehend its orders and it floods the city of Prague after Rabbi Loew tells it to fetch some water. It is for these reasons that for some Jews "golem" can now mean dumb or unintelligent. In some stories Rabbi Loew removes God's name from the Golem's mouth and the Golem returns to ash, or alternately returns to an inanimate clay statue, waiting to be resurrected in times of need. Loew sometimes does this because the Golem has served the purpose of its creation, and sometimes does this because the Golem gains in strength and power, and turns against the Jews. In these stories, like a ghost, the Golem is angry and unpredictable, and Rabbi Loew has no choice but to destroy it.

Waiting for the golem and the resurrected dead to protect us brings nothing but infirmity. Like the dead, golems cannot be raised to serve our purposes. They are angry, they lose control, and they are never able to become fully human. The torpid state of passively waiting for golems and the dead is equally problematic. Healing and justice do not spring forth from inactivity, and are not brought about by saviors. Instead, it is my responsibility as the child of a veteran to share the stories that would otherwise slowly drift into the fog of history. Chris Hedges writes:

The military histories – which tell little of war's reality – crowd out the wrenching tales by the emotionally maimed. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionments – often at a terrible price. The myth of war and the drug of war wait to be tasted. The mythical heroes of the past loom over us. Those who can tell us the truth are silenced or prefer to forget. The state needs the myth, as much as it needs its soldiers and its machines of war, to survive. (Hedges 2003a: 173)

As the state propagates its version of happening half-truths, the story truth of veterans and their children must not be discounted or forgotten. What Hedges fails to understand is that the state cannot engage in countless wars like Vietnam, because the horrors of war, intensified by the manipulation of modern soldiers in it, is so shocking that it can poison the minds of at least two generations. For every Vietnam Veteran who committed suicide, many more had children, and as children we were raised on the horrors of war without having to take life. For every silent veteran, a veteran spoke. And even those veterans who could not speak told stories. They are cracked and muddled against the canvas, and they say

more as they look right through us than words will allow.

As allies to our fathers, our project is to do more than wait for their return. The complacency of waiting is ineffectual and dangerous. Our fathers will not return, and instead it is their stories which we must keep alive. When telling stories with social purpose and for restorative truth-making, neither golems nor liars are real. We tell our fathers' stories as narrators and as recorders, but in the process they become our own.

Yet sometimes telling stories does not feel like it's enough. Toni Morrison said, "Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable." The purpose of a war story is to convince, if only fleetingly, that the process of war making can never happen again. The words used are largely unimportant. As we reach toward that which cannot be said and is rarely believed, we are not just honoring the dead. We are honoring life. We are tightly grasping to the strands of our own humanity which is rarely observed. We courageously believe that our reach can extend beyond our grasp as we clutch faith in the unseen. Like our fathers, we speak not only to be heard, but to be understood and to understand. Unlike the myth of nation in times of war, this blinding faith in possibility is both intra- and international. When the project feels too large and it seems as if there's no right way to do it, I'll frequently begin by telling stories.

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