



# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as Aftermath of Close Encounters in War

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## Introduction

By the editors

### **An issue for traumatic times**

The present issue of the Close Encounters in War Journal deals with trauma and in particular with one of its technical declinations called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, a label that was introduced to the scientific community by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. When we decided to focus on this topic, in early 2019, we were miles away from imagining that our lives would soon change so quickly and profoundly. 2020 is being an extremely challenging year for everybody. The Covid pandemic is striking hard worldwide and our life-style, economies, health, and mood are at stake. The disruption caused by the sanitary crisis on all levels, in all countries of the world, has been triggering traumatic response not only in those who have been directly affected by the virus as patients or relatives and friends of patients, but also healthcare staff and a vast number of workers and citizens who have lost family members, friends, colleagues, and too often their jobs to the restrictions imposed by politicians to deal with the staggering figures of the contagion. Traumatic experience and stress have become a reality for many, which makes this issue of the CEIWJ in a certain sense topical.

Speaking from our perspective of editors and scholars, we cannot help but notice the growing difficulty in which academic research is struggling. Scholars all around the world used to rely on the availability of research facilities at home and abroad, which could be easily reached by traveling short distances by bus, train, or airplane. However, since March 2020, everyone had to accept the unexpected and dismaying new reality of a world where libraries, universities, research centres, and archives are shut until further notice, or running on very restricted standards of service. The sudden difficulty to access sources has impacted academic research dramatically. Nonetheless, we have managed to collect original contributions of excellent quality, for which we do thank our contributors and the external peer-reviewers, who have provided us with their more than ever precious support.

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This issue will furthermore appear somewhat different to our readers, if compared with our previous ones of 2018 and 2019, because for the first time it combines heterogeneous kinds of contributions. On the one hand, in line with our tradition, we propose scientific articles devoted to the investigation of PTSD in different fields, including literary studies and philosophy of language; on the other hand, we had the rare opportunity to publish original contributions from practitioners and actual veterans who have worked and struggled with PTSD for decades. This multifaceted composition of the issue aims to provide our readers with the most complete approach to such a topic as PTSD, which is an object of academic scholarship as well as (and above all) of field-work carried out by practitioners, who work to tackle the enduring and crippling effects of war trauma.

And finally, due to the heterogeneous nature of PTSD and of the different approaches adopted to understand and heal it, we also decided to enrich this issue with something special and perhaps unexpected: an Appendix, in which we have collected contributions ranging from poetry to prose, which may – this is our wish – remind that dealing with PTSD first of all means to deal with the unfathomable universe of the human, emotional mind. Understanding PTSD means to look into the multifaceted legacy of war as a hidden and subterranean river of disturbing memories, feelings, thoughts, and suffering that veterans have to cope with, often for years or decades. Now, before moving on to introduce the contributions, a few words about PTSD are due.

### **The monster with a thousand faces**

We start by rephrasing the famous title of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, although parodying it: in fact, we are not speaking about a hero, which with Campbell's words is "the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (Campbell, *The Hero*: 18). The object of our discourse is, on the contrary oppositely, the villain, the shape-shifting foe that haunts and torments with subtle and cruel tricks. PTSD does have a thousand faces, not only because it designs a condition whose symptoms are numerous and varied, but also because such a condition can affect anyone who has gone through a

traumatic experience. Since the first attempts to identify and classify post-traumatic conditions, not only in the field of the military, the very notion of such disorders has been elusive as far as – in the words of Pierre Janet, pioneer of post-traumatic clinical studies, – “the different stages of post-traumatic syndromes as constantly shifting and returning, requiring different treatment approaches at different times” (Hart and others, *Pierre Janet’s Treatment*: 9).

The definition of PTSD has gone under a series of revisions since its conception in 1980, each of which was aimed at adjusting the range of definition of traumatic experiences in such a way that the description of symptoms might allow clinicians to diagnose the syndrome more precisely. However, despite the attempts to be as exhaustive as possible, PTSD turns out to be just one possible aspect of the multifaceted universe of post-traumatic conditions.<sup>1[3]</sup> Each new definition of PTSD provided by the APA over the years maintained one firm point though: that PTSD is entangled with the notion of “personal experience”. This means that to trigger PTSD, the traumatic event must, first of all, involve the individual in a close and direct way, even though the actual events may concern other people (relatives, friends, comrades, etc.) (DiMauro and others, *A Historical Review*: 775).

As for combat-related PTSD, the first psychiatric attention was given to the phenomenon during the American Civil War, when the expression “soldier’s heart” was coined (Crocq and Crocq, *From Shell Shock*).<sup>2</sup> At that stage, the state of shock observed in some combatants was explained as some form of “faintness”, “softness”, or “weakness” that made the soldier’s heart palpitate in the face of fear and danger. Such a stigma remained for long, even though the clinical description and definition of post-traumatic syndromes were given new names, such as “shell shock”, “combat fatigue”, “combat acute stress”, and eventually PTSD. The explanation of the syndrome as a consequence of personal weakness or “softness” remains still today one current trend in the military, which represents a major hinder in the attempt to understand the relationship between traumatic experience and its possible treatment.

It is worthwhile to note that this mentality conveys the idea that a soldier should always be strong and indefatigable, if not even immune to emotions. The acceptance of such a model brings combatants to build a conflicting relation with their limits and weaknesses, as well as to repress their emotional

responses, which might eventually lead to denial. In fact, a warrior labelled as “soft” would very likely see their career collapse. PTSD is a pathological condition that is often triggered by the inability of the soldier to cope with human frailty, combined with the unwillingness of wider society to accept the idea that a warrior is and remains a human being, whose emotional mind is vulnerable.

“Shell shock”, and later on “combat fatigue”, were commonly labelled as psychiatric syndromes rather than medical, and their origin remained for long connected with the prejudiced idea that only weak soldiers would suffer from such syndromes.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, these diagnoses were absorbed in the greater category of trauma (under the label of “gross stress reaction”) as temporary conditions.

It was only during the 1960s that psychiatrists began to believe that traumatic experiences could cause long-term symptoms. Because PTSD was introduced after the Vietnam war, it was strictly marked as a combat-related syndrome, although the symptomatology was equally recognisable also in non-military personnel, which represented a breakthrough for psychiatry. However, such narrowing of the definition as a psychiatric condition also raised concerns. On the one hand, PTSD, not unlike other all-catch definitions and diagnoses commonly used one century ago, undergoes criticism concerning the viability of its diagnostic value (DiMauro and others, *A Historical Review*). On the other hand, the not-so implicit association of PTSD with war and angry veterans, suggested above all by media and cinema (consider for example the gallery of traumatised veterans depicted in Vietnam movies such as *The Deer Hunter*, *First Blood*, *Taxi Driver*, and the recent *Da 5 Bloods*),<sup>4</sup> led the broader public to believe that PTSD always implies violence and outbursts of antisocial rage, which is not true at all or at least not always. According to Roger Brooke, the diagnosis of PTSD leaves the veteran with no other option than undergoing psychiatric therapy with professionals, because it is a label of mental illness. However, what veterans really need is a community that may help them look into their distressing past from a new perspective, which is precisely what Gustav Jung meant psychotherapy to consist of: facing the neurosis, rather than fleeing from it (Brooke, *An Archetypal Approach*).



Brooke's point of view is particularly interesting for our investigation because his approach builds upon Jung's theory of archetypes. These are codified structures that recur in human thought and imagination as the very fabric of our unconscious, and they are so basic that their deepest roots sink directly into our phylogenetic inheritance or, to say it with words borrowed from the cognitive science, into our "embodied minds" (see Casey, *Toward an Archetypal Imagination*). Archetypes are narratives compressed in very compact and codified forms, which makes them look like symbols (often images) although they are structures.

### **PTSD between mind and body**

The human mind is by no means utterly rational, but rather emotional (Damasio, *Descartes' Error*; and LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*). In the course of its evolution, our mind went from the animal status, in which immediate reaction to sensory stimuli and execution of phylogenetic hard-wired "tasks" aimed at increasing the chance of survival, adaptation, and reproduction was what mattered, to the rational stage of the conscious mind. This later stage of our evolution coincides with the expansion of the prefrontal cortex of our brain, which is the area devoted to the elaboration of language and thought. Here, the sensory stimuli coming from the body, once they have been processed by the reptile brain and the limbic system (two primitive forms of our brain), are organised into a coherent image of ourselves in the world, so that we can shape our "selves" in the form of a story. It is shared conviction among some scholars, that relevant things that our ancestors learned via experience (e.g. fire burns, in darkness we are defenceless, a coiled shape might be a lethal snake, sunlight is necessary for life, water purifies dirt and infections, and so on) over millennia have become solid knowledge upon which our species relies for survival since ever.<sup>5</sup> Such knowledge has grown in our imagination in the form of a vast gallery of images upon which we have built narratives, stories, and myths.<sup>6</sup>

An archetypal approach to PTSD is interesting first of all because it implies a holistic understanding of the human being as a complex reality, the totality of which is always greater than the sum of its parts. From such a perspective, trauma is no mere mental illness but a complex condition that sees the body *and*

the mind interact in a dysfunctional way when the individual comes to grapple with their most haunting memories. This disables the risk of reductionist explanations of PTSD as a merely psychiatric disease and therefore prevents us from forgetting that the traumatic experiences affect the minds *as well as* the body (See Tick, *Warriors' Return*).

The impact of trauma and stress on the brain, and consequently on the cognitive and emotional health of people, is entwined with emotions and their body-and-mind interconnection: the individual response to trauma is a matter of *adaptation* rather than a passive state of illness (Wastell, *Understanding Trauma and Emotion*: xvi-xi and 60-61). PTSD has been investigated, in fact, not only by psychiatrists but also by cognitivists. The latter have been particularly interested in understanding the effect of stress on the brain,<sup>7</sup> and thanks to decades of field-studies today we know that exposure to stress can influence our ability to reconfigure our traumatic experiences into organic and contextualised memories (Porter and Peace, *The Scars of Memory*; Roozendaal and others, *Stress, Memory and the Amygdala*).

Excessive exposure to stress can prevent the limbic apparatus (where the hippocampus organises memories into a continuum, as it were, and therefore builds new knowledge) from processing the traumatic experience properly, which could eventually trigger PTSD (Isserlin and others, *Acute Stress Responses*: 426-427). "Glucocorticoids, stress hormones released from the adrenal cortex, are known to influence memory processes" (de Quervain and Margraf, *Glucocorticoids*: 366), and as stress builds, those hormones disable the limbic system until it becomes dysfunctional and ceases to frame memories within a meaningful context (see Bremner, *Traumatic Stress*; and Rachel Yehuda, *Stress Hormones and PTSD*). This causes the counterpart of the limbic system, the amygdala, to get the upper hand on our memory-building processes (Shin, *The Amygdala*).

The amygdala represents the most ancient part of our reptile brain and is designed to activate our sense of danger and therefore to quickly process sensory information in critical situations, activating the so-called "fight or flight" reaction (Adolphs and others, *Fear and the Human Amygdala*). Our ability to respond to danger and to survive largely depends on the amygdala (Dębiec and LeDoux, *The Amygdala*: 24). On the other hand, our ability to turn

experience into learning, and therefore to expand our knowledge and to adapt and improve, largely depends on the hippocampus and the limbic system. When one of these two systems ceases to work properly or even becomes dysfunctional, we have serious problems with processing experience and building memories. As a result, the kind of information that the “primitive” systems provide the prefrontal cortex with will determine what our story is going to look like (Sarid and Huss, *Trauma and Acute Stress Disorder*: 9). PTSD appears when our memories of traumatic experience remain scattered and decontextualized: simple sensory stimuli that recall the circumstances under which we experienced the trauma may arouse those memories that, lacking any connection to a wider context, burst out as vivid and raw as they were in the very moment of their original consolidation. This is the reason why some scholars state that traumatic memories are “special” and different from non-traumatic or emotional ones, in that they are scattered and fragmentary and can easily emerge as psycho-physical symptomatology when triggered by certain stressors that recall the traumatic experience (Sotgiu and Mormont, *Similarities and Differences*: 454). PTSD is a condition of stalemate in which the body and mind re-enact the same event and produce the same reaction to it. As a consequence, tackling PTSD means to allow the traumatised person to recall their haunting memories (by sensory or verbal stimulation) in a harmless and peaceful context, so as to allow those memories to be reconsolidated within a new context. When the person succeeds in embedding the traumatic memories in the broader continuum of their story-life, the trauma becomes just another experience (however bad) among many. The person, thus, reconciles with their past and accepts it as a part of what they are.

Roughly said, PTSD is the observable set of symptoms revealing that something went badly wrong in the elaboration of traumatic experiences and the related emotions. Pharmaceutical therapies may reduce some symptoms of PTSD, but only the deconstruction and reframing of the traumatic memories eventually disable PTSD. Such deconstruction can be carried out through art therapy (among other forms of therapy) and by pursuing a special form of intervention, namely the archetypal approach. This consists in focusing on the symbols, metaphors, and rhetorical/narrative structures that the person uses to tamper with or to mend their traumatic memories. In such a framework, art

therapy has gained much credibility upon a larger and larger number of practitioners and scholars over the last decades (Talwar, *Accessing Traumatic Memory*: 23-26).

### **From private to public. PTSD and its meaning for society**

As far as coming out of the cage of haunting memories, guilt or hatred implies the achievement of atonement and healing on an individual plan, the dimension of PTSD is private. However, the private dimension of healing from war trauma should be looked at from a wider perspective in order to answer the question: how does the private sphere of PTSD impact the public domain of history? Our main objective is to reframe the human experiences mentioned in the following contributions in a wider context, to understand how and why PTSD is – alongside war – one rather pervasive element of our culture. The veterans' quest for healing and recognition as worthy members of their community, as well as their attempt to overcome hatred, is such an ancient need that it has eventually become an archetype in every warrior culture (Brooke, *Veterans' PTSD*: 3; and Id., *An Archetypal Perspective*: 5-6).

Western civilisation, despite its paramount attainments in the field of peace-making, has been for thousands of years a warrior culture. Still today, war is one of the most intense experiences that constitute our cultural heritage. War supplies our language with a great deal of metaphors and transforms our hard-wired drive to aggression into a cultural structure, in which humankind pours the best of its knowledge and intellectual potential, no matter how destructive the aftermath may be (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *The Biology of Peace and War*).

Such omnipresence of war all around us urges us to understand PTSD in the broader frame of the public sphere, as narratives about war-related trauma are influenced by collective narratives and at the same time participate in shaping the same shared narratives. As Karl Jaspers stated in 1946, one people cannot be blamed as a whole for the crimes that a limited number of its citizens have perpetrated in war (Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*). However, when a nation loses a war its entire population has to pay for it. Thus, the private need for atonement and reconciliation is mirrored by the collective quest for public

atonement and reconciliation that unfolds on the plan of history. Personal narratives play a paramount role in connecting the two spheres.

In war and culture studies, particularly those conducted on prisoners of war, trauma is often represented as conflicting with the elevated model of masculinity that war requires from men of fighting age (Twomey, *Australian Nurse POWs*: 255-274), and this was the main reason why traumatic experiences were not part of the shared memory of wars before the mid-twentieth century. Certain experiences challenged not only masculine identities but also racial hierarchies and national myths of wars, such as the myth of the “soldier hero” (Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*). The “memory boom” that occurred in many western democracies in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to developing new understandings of the traumatic experiences of soldiers in war, and it was a key step to find a way to make sense of events that were painful for the individual or social groups. The creation of the clinical diagnosis of PTSD in the 1980s was instrumental to this process leading to the legitimization of traumatic memories of veterans, which were now no longer shameful and hidden. As Christina Twomey notes, PTSD is “a product of culture as much as science” (Twomey, *POWs of the Japanese*). In fact, before the creation of PTSD as an acceptable diagnosis, it was presumed that only those who were somehow predisposed to weakness, illness, or incapacity, could experience war-related trauma. PTSD removed that assumption, thus liberating the idea that events, rather than innate weakness, could be the cause of traumatic responses in otherwise healthy individuals. This model of trauma subsequently began to influence the way in which war veterans interpreted, remembered, and narrated their experiences.

Alistair Thomson famously conceived the idea of “memory composure” in his work on Australian First World War veterans, which explored how changes in the collective memory of the conflict influenced the way veterans constructed their memories of war-related experiences and narrated them in oral history interviews (Thomson, *Anzac Memories*). This notion of “memory composure” relates to the way we construct or compose, our memories in a way that makes us feel comfortable and in alignment with our past, present, and future lives, and it explains why traumatic memories of war were resurfaced after the development of clinical recognition of PTSD.

The journey from the hell of war to the “awakening” in a peaceful, higher state of awareness that veterans recount, ceases to be a private matter as soon as it is made public in the form of a book of memories or oral history interviews. As the individual story of the veteran struggling to overcome their PTSD becomes public, that discourse begins to involve a broader community and eventually the whole nation. And when the number of published personal narratives grows to become an entire segment of the book-market, something special occurs: private stories merge into one broad collective story in which the whole community can mirror itself to face its ghosts and haunting memories.

Once the private journey from PTSD to healing has become public, the legacy of war begins to transit toward new actors and groups that had no direct connection with war at the beginning. Novels, movies, drama, and other forms of fiction begin circulating. The discourse on war trauma transcends the private sphere and expands to include different characters and contexts, with gradual updating of the discourse following the agenda of public concern. What was at first a private matter has become a public tradition and sometimes this tradition survives for centuries of millennia thanks to the worth of some classic works. One example for all: we still read Homer’s *Odyssey* in awe, in which we recognise the story of the traumatised veteran who struggles to find his way back to normal life in his homeland.

Veterans’ accounts provide an invaluable source of truth about war, even when their authors tampered with their memories for the most disparate reasons. As Carlo Ginzburg once stated, one falsified or inexistent fact is by no means unusable: it must be considered for what it is, viz. a testimony capable of revealing much about the reality that produced it (Ginzburg, *Il giudice e lo storico*: 20). PTSD is one possible aftermath of the close encounter with war, and it might endure and change form so far as to turn itself into a component of collective identity. We should not, therefore, limit to thrive on traumatized veterans’ individual healing, without asking if their suffering was inevitable. Actual reconciliation can only be achieved if an entire community (no matter whether local, national, or international) succeeds to understand that war-related PTSD, despite its being apparently private, is *always* collective because war is humankind hurting itself.

### The contributions

This present issue n. 3 of the CEIWJ includes three kinds of contributions: three scientific articles authored by scholars; two personal narratives provided by a practitioner and a WW2 veteran and practitioner; a collection of creative writing, short essays, and a letter addressing the topic of PTSD from different angles.

**Andrea Roxana Bellot** authors the article *“During a period of total despair, I picked up a pen”: A Soldier’s Song, Ken Lukowiak’s Falklands War Recollections*. Lukowiak was a member of the Second Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army deployed to the Falkland Islands for the 1982 British-Argentinian conflict. After suffering for a long time from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the private’s creative drive pushed him into writing down his memories, to help him overcome his war traumas. He needed an organized, written account of his daily experiences during that time to make sense of the war, to understand what he had been through, and to heal and move forward. The paper will discuss how these recollections addressed major topics such as fear, the dead, and the enemy. Bellot embeds her interpretation of the memoir in a broader historical understanding of the context of the Falkland war, as an unexpected conflict fought by the British nation against a people almost unknown and for the possession of a tiny portion of land thousands of miles away. The author focuses then on the language and style of the book, as means by which Lukowiak expresses his emotional states of surprise, disappointment, and anger, as well as his need for being part of a group, namely his comrades with whom he shared the paratrooper-jargon. The article investigates the relationship between the encounter with the unknown in war and the following traumatic aftermath by focusing on the practice of writing as a way out of the depressive syndrome from which Lukowiak suffered for years. Bellot writes, “when he began writing, little did he imagine that writing would come to signify so much in his future life. Writing became his only way of making sense of the world and of understanding the war; writing saved him from a life of misery. Not only did writing help him recover from PTSD – it actually saved his life” (*infra*, p. 27).

**Stefano Bellin** is the author of *The Crux of Violence: “Unheimliche” Encounters and PTSD in Santiago Roncagliolo’s Red April*. This article

explores how *Red April* analyses the experience and the consequences of a traumatic conflict, showing how close encounters in the context of war can lead to PTSD and how PTSD shapes the way human beings encounter each other during and after violent events. In his discussion, the author investigates the link between PTSD and the concept of the “uncanny”, as articulated by Freud in the homonymous essay. In particular, Bellin examines how uncanny encounters bring into the open feelings, experiences, and behavioural patterns that had been kept hidden or that remain largely unacknowledged, thus blurring and calling into question our conceptions of selfhood, identity, and violence. With this aim in view, the author proceeds first by analysing the development of the armed conflict in Peru, showing how the killing methods and operating procedures of its actors turned several face-to-face encounters into deeply traumatic experiences. He then discusses *Red April*, focusing on how the novel establishes cross-referential relationships between close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny. At the core of this article lies Freud’s theory of the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*), which is connected to the psychological process of repressing traumatic memories, thus allowing them to endure and to re-emerge in the form of symbols, nightmares, and psychoses. Bellin argues that “close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny thus form a sort of hermeneutic triangle in *Red April*. Each of them can be interpreted as a result of the combination of the other two factors. The encounters are ‘close’ not just because they involve coming up face-to-face with something, but also because they bring into the open things that are strangely familiar to Chacaltana [the main character of the novel] and that affect his own psyche. The PTSD he suffers is not due to just conflict-related stressors, but also to the fact that the latter reveal something he had repressed about his own past and self.” (*infra*, p. 60-61). In other words, Bellin interprets this novel as an example of how the literary imagination can deal with the mechanism of repression of trauma, insofar as the poetic work on symbols, images, metaphors, and archetypes leads to face the “uncanny” content of the traumatised mind. Roncagliolo’s exploration seems to be in line with the idea that traumatic experiences can trigger PTSD in people who previously – especially in their childhood – suffered from severe trauma that remained hidden and repressed. Chacaltana’s exposure to violence as a child and then through his job as a policeman is the fertile ground where the horrible violence of civil war can plant the seeds of PTSD.



After two contributions focused on PTSD, war, and literature, **Patrizia Piredda** authors the article *Reality vs. Propaganda. PTSD among Civilian Healthcare Staff and Patients and the Rhetorical Invention of the “War on Coronavirus”*. Starting from the assumption that PTSD is not only related to war and conflict, the author argues that “the recent Coronavirus-pandemic offers a remarkable case study of how the application of the notion of PTSD to civilian healthcare staff was framed within a media campaign that described the struggle with the epidemic as a war against the virus” (*infra*, p. 71). After politicians and the media in many European countries used the metaphor of the “war against an invisible enemy”, healthcare staff were depicted like “soldiers” and “heroes” fighting bravely in the trenches on the frontline, and the communities were encouraged to support the effort of these brave professionals who risked their lives to protect the lives of many others. Such rhetorical “call to arms” was aimed at triggering an emotional response among the public, based on fear, and at encouraging the “patriotic” formation of a “second line” backing the “frontline”, where the healthcare staff were deployed. By focusing on the critique of language and rhetoric, Piredda analyses the reasons why the media in the UK and Italy talked about the traumatic experience of healthcare staff involved in the treatment of Covid-19 patients by recurring to war-metaphors. As they did so, she claims, they blurred the condition of civilian healthcare staff with that of military medics who come back from combat zones, thus overlapping two different kinds of PTSD. In fact, despite the extensive similarity of symptoms, the causes of PTSD in military medics remain different from those of civilian medics. Therefore, the author claims that it is correct to talk about PTSD for healthcare staff involved in the treatment of Covid-19 patients, but that it is misleading and wrong to compare the epidemic to a war.

After the academic articles, we offer a different set of contributions, namely the insightful personal narratives by two practitioners who have worked for decades to help veterans affected by PTSD to deal with their traumatic past and to heal. **Thayer Greene** was an American infantryman enrolled in the 5th Army of General Patton during WW2 and fought in Germany in 1945. In his *My “Close Encounters” in World War 2 Combat* he recounts, after many a year, some episodes that re-emerged to his memory that testify to his state of mind as he was deployed in Europe. Among these, one, in particular, appears to be so

traumatic to have triggered severe PTSD, which lasted for about thirty years. The episode was a violent artillery shelling that Thayer had to endure in April 1945 for about one hour, during which he waited for his death in a state of utter helplessness. Thirty years later, Thayer attended therapy with a professional and for the first time found the way to let the traumatic experience emerge (*infra*. p. 104). After that experience Thayer understood that he could move on to help others to recover from their traumatic memories and became a therapist himself, an expert in Jungian archetypal therapy. What strikes in Thayer's testimony is that PTSD keeps people apart from being themselves in full. It is a sort of alienating state of mind that forces the traumatised person to remain stuck in the repetition of an event that has lost all connections to other events of life, no matter how deep does it remains buried in the unconscious mind, as a burning ache.

The last contribution is *The "Manchu" Comes Home Narrative of An Early Psychotherapy with a Vietnam Combat Veteran* by the Jungian therapist, healer, and poet **Edward Tick**, who recounts his first "close encounter" with war, occurred in the form of therapy sessions with a young traumatised veteran from Vietnam, in 1968. In Edward's own words,

the narrative demonstrates several types of encounters. It shows the encounters and impact on a poorly raised young man relentlessly overexposed to combat trauma. It exposes the extreme hardship of daily living for such a man struggling to return home from war. It portrays a young psychotherapist striving to learn the ways of war and warriorhood and undergo a transformation in his personal and professional identity. It lays bare the extreme stress caused by harming others that society foists upon its veterans to carry alone. For both veteran and therapist, these close encounters over war and in the therapy experience opened worlds. (*infra*, p. 106-107)

This powerful testimony provides insight into the perilous practice of psychotherapy aimed at healing war veterans affected by PTSD, for at least two reasons: the first is mentioned by Tick as the need for the therapist to engage the veteran in dialogue and to accept the fact that such an experience will change not only the patient but the therapist as well. In a way, Tick's narrative could be read from the perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of

dialogue as a “fusion of horizons”, in which the respective views of the world and prejudices encounter one another and change. The second reason emerges from the precise description that Tick makes of the veteran’s dreams, which accompanies the readers directly into the core of archetypal therapy. And finally, Tick’s contribution advocates a humanistic approach to the treatment of combat-related PTSD as a complex practice that includes therapy, reconstruction of social bonds, dialogue, and above all radical critique of the “popularized mythic image of the warrior hero who can endure all horrors” (*infra*, p. 121). Until we will keep on thriving on such a false myth, soldiers will risk falling prey to PTSD as wasted people, who are neglected by their own communities.

The Appendix includes short prose by **Kate Dahlstedt** about her father, an American private who experienced the aftermath of the destruction of Hiroshima in 1945 as a member of the occupation force. We then publish a selection of poems by **Edward Tick** and by Vietnam veterans **Charles “Sandy” Scull** and **Brent MacKinnon**, followed by the letter that Vietnam veteran **Patrick Guariglia** wrote as an act of atonement and reconciliation (introduced by Pat’s friend and former therapist Edward Tick). The last contribution is a short story about PTSD by **Gianluca Cinelli**.

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- <sup>1</sup> "Traumatic events that can lead to PTSD include: war, rape, natural disasters, kidnapping, car or plane crashes, assault, terrorist attacks, sexual or physical abuse, sudden death of loved one, childhood neglect or any shattering event that leaves someone feeling helpless and hopeless" (Dankiewicz, *War in the Mind*: 133).
  - <sup>2</sup> For a brief review of the history of post-traumatic diagnoses, see also Wastell (1-27).
  - <sup>3</sup> Such demeaning definition was in particular connected with hysteria: see Bourke (*Effeminacy*); and King (*Recovering Hysteria*).
  - <sup>4</sup> As for the movie by Spike Lee, some criticism is due. This work proposes once more the misleading, yet dramatically effective, idea that PTSD is related to violence and homicidal madness. This is not the case in general, because veterans affected by PTSD mostly suffer from depression, substance abuse, emotional detachment, and social anxiety. Many veterans do not express their PTSD by harming others, but by harming themselves, sometimes up to committing suicide.
  - <sup>5</sup> See by Scalise-Sugiyama: *On the Origins of Narrative; Food, Foragers, and Folklore*; and *Lions and Tigers*; by Carroll: *Evolution and Literary Theory*; and *The Human Revolution*.
  - <sup>6</sup> See Frye's classical work about the presence and meaning of archetypes in the literary imagination, *Anatomy of Criticism*.
  - <sup>7</sup> One of the most relevant and pioneering scholars in the field was Robert Sapolsky, among whose most relevant contributions on the effect of stress on the brain we recall the groundbreaking monograph *Stress, the Ageing Brain, and the Mechanism of Neuron Death*.

## "During a period of total despair, I picked up a pen": Exploring Trauma, Writing and Healing in *A Soldier's Song*, Ken Lukowiak's Falklands War Recollections

By Andrea Roxana Bellot

**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the connections between textual expression and traumatic recollection in Ken Lukowiak's Falklands War memoirs, *A Soldier's Song* (1993). Private Ken Lukowiak was a member of the Second *Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army* deployed to the Falkland Islands for the 1982 British-Argentine conflict. After suffering a long depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the veteran's creative drive motivated him into writing down his memories, to help him overcome his war traumas. He needed an organized, written account of his daily experiences during that time to make sense of the war, to understand what he had been through, to heal and move forward.

**Keywords:** Ken Lukowiak, *A Soldier's Song*, Falklands War, military memoirs, war literature, PTSD, autobiographical writing, scriptotherapy.

### Introduction

*A Soldier's Song* is a war memoir written by a former member of the British Army, Ken Lukowiak, first published in 1993. The book describes the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the young private as part of the Second Battalion Parachute Regiment (2 PARA), sent with the Task Force to recover British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands following the Argentine invasion in April 1982. After disembarking in San Carlos Bay, the regiment made its way towards the settlement of Goose Green, winning an important victory to then move towards the capital, Port Stanley. Other decisive battles followed until the eventual surrender of Argentina.

*A Soldier's Song* is one of the three best known personal accounts of the Falklands War written by veterans, together with Vincent Bramley's *Excursion to Hell* (1992), *Forward into Hell* (2006) and John and Robert Lawrence's *When the Fighting is Over: Tumbledown* (1988). These memoirs shift from the traditional war stories of military officers, historians, and politicians to those of the people who actually fought and suffered on the battlefield. Personal narratives like

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these, Begley argues, "deliberately undermine sanitized abstractions of the war by reinscribing the terrifying immediacy and absurd singularity of combat experience [...] into disordered narratives of combat fatigue and brute survival" (*The Literature of the Falklands/Malvinas War*: 235).

This paper is an attempt to explore Lukowiak's memoir as a work of traumatic recovery and personal "scriptotherapy", a term coined by Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects* (1998). Scriptotherapy refers to the therapeutic treatment in which writing is used as an instrument in the process of healing – the re-enactment of the traumatic memories on paper provides a valuable discursive space for overcoming psychological wounds.

### **War memoir writing and trauma**

In *On Military Memoirs* (2014), Esmeralda Kleinreesink studied war memoirs from soldiers deployed to Afghanistan during the 2001-2010 period in order to analyse whether there has been an evolution in the characteristics of such memoirs over time. Her main findings are that war narrations bear a primary component of disenchantment in twentieth-century memoirs, including those from the two world wars and the conflict in the Falklands, while memoirs from the nineteenth century contain more accounts of personal growth (272). Soldiers adopted the role of relating the crude reality of war from former kings and noblemen, shifting the point of view from a mere description of facts to the expression of emotions. War used to be interpreted according to the concept of honour, which was linked to the interactions with other citizens. This perception of war declined sharply, and memories then tended to focus on the personal being and inner reactions and experiences (Harari, *Military Memoirs*). Negative narratives regarding war recollections structured around personal degeneration, shattered ideals, and disillusionment, became a common feature in traumatised veterans. As Shay reveals, these damaging memories show the consequences of "betrayal of what is right" on the part of the soldier, which seem to attain a moral category of psychological injury (*Achilles in Vietnam*: 11).

In the context of a progressive decrease in tolerance about the acceptance of violence, the personal experiences of the soldiers shifted towards a progressive disillusionment, which was revealed in their narratives. A classic example,

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despite it being a novel rather than a memoir, is found in Remarque's work – *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), which illustrates the onset of disenchantment, as opposed to the romantic idea of war, with the difficulty of returning to normal life. Another text, Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier* (1971), recounts the devastating experience of the Eastern Front in the WW2 and provides an example of the incommunicability with the author's father while on a short leave in Berlin in 1943. Remarque's text is recurrently referred to in *A Soldier's Song*, as a basic work of reference for Lukowiak: "We were taking turns to read aloud from a book called *All Quiet on the Western Front*" (*A Soldier's Song*: 3).

Kleinreesink grouped war memoirs into three general classes according to topics: pure "action" memoirs, "growth" memoirs, and "disenchantment" memoirs from a model previously created by Norman Friedman in his *Forms of the Plot*. As transformative experiences, the personal journeys of the soldiers may also have a positive, growth-like outcome, and texts from the period studied suggest that, especially in historically war-involved nations like Britain (Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*), positive outcomes, in terms of personal maturation or lessons learnt, definitely carry important weight in the published accounts of the professional soldiers of our times.<sup>1</sup> Even personal disappointment is often channelled into positive debate and action, rather than a loss of control (Kleinreesink, *On Military Memoirs*: 268-269).

War is an utterly transformative and life-changing experience, and in Samuel Hynes's words: "No man goes through a war without being changed by it, and in fundamental ways" (*The Soldier's Tale*: 3). This totally transformative and traumatic experience produces deep affectations in the combatants' mental well-being. As Raghu Raman puts it, "there is no switch in the human mind which can periodically convert a kind soldier, who rescues victims from natural disasters, and then back again [to the battlefield], without affecting his mental state" (*The Psychological Toll of Being a Soldier*, para. 12). The profound changes a combatant frequently undergoes when returning from the battlefield are not always openly disclosed. Some veterans struggle to find the courage to share their war traumas. Many are confronted to a diversity of factors that contribute to the development of painful emotions, such as guilt and shame, which prevent them to openly disclose their true feelings in the framework of a group

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culture that prizes self-reliance and stigmatizes help-seeking, as most societies do (Farnsworth and others, *The role of moral emotions in military trauma*; Nazarov and others, *Role of morality in the experience of guilt and shame within the armed forces*).

One way of releasing the pain is through writing. Writing as a form of cathartic expression and self-help has been practiced for years. Personal narratives are full of disturbing elements that reflect the authors' traumas. According to Yuval Harari, modern war memoirs aim to re-connect authors to their lives after having been disrupted by war (*Martial Illusions*: 68). As Jenkins and Woodward illustrate, the focus of the war memoirs written by soldiers is "on the individual's experience rather than on broader reflection on the rationale for a conflict and its progress through time" (*Practices of Authorial Collaboration*: 339), and this also relates to the primary function of such reflections. It has been suggested that war memoir-writing and publishing are equivalent to, or similar to, a recovery by clinical means (Baines, *Memoir Writing as Narrative Therapy*). A model of narrative analysis has been proposed to address how the form and content of the stories serve the purpose of reconciliation with general life stories, that is, achieving "harmony between past, present and future" (Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*: 117). The existence of a fragmented, disrupted life narrative and threatening flashbacks forms a fundamental part of the clinical definition of PTSD. The same negative self-conscious emotions mentioned above, such as emotions of guilt and shame when it comes to admitting the war traumas, also seem to trigger the development of PTSD symptoms (Brett and others, *Proneness to Painful Self-Conscious Emotions*). Therefore, reconstruction, harmonization, and the creation of coherent memories are considered by psychologists to be essential for recovery.

The benefits of writing to overcome traumatic experiences have been described as a process of "active coping" with trauma (Harber and Pennebaker, *Overcoming Traumatic Memories*: 372). Writing, by concentrating on the structural rules of grammar, both restricts and channels the emotional flow, thereby transforming the victim of the narrative into the author whose task is to render the events in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, sharing or publishing memoirs may come into its own as an important factor for alleviating personal

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suffering, as the recovery process may then be considered within the context of rebuilding social and political relationships. As suggested by Herman (*Trauma and Recovery*), this is a process that joins the victim and the witness into a common alliance. Sharing personal experiences with a community instead of one-to-one treatment between a single patient and therapist has also been proposed as critical in alternative approaches to PTSD healing. The relationship with the community results in broader benefits to the group as well as relief of collective pain (Tick, *Warrior's Return*).

For Lukowiak, writing was not previously part of a medical procedure that he had been advised to follow by therapists or counsellors to find a cure for his PTSD. In the foreword to his 1999 edition, Lukowiak explains his creative process regarding the creation of his book. For him, writing was more of an impulse and not something that he had considered doing previously with a specific purpose in mind; he became a writer by accident: "One day, during a period of total despair, I picked up a pen and began to write down my memories of Goose Green" (*A Soldier's Song*: xiv).<sup>2</sup> Writing was not then conceived as a treatment but was a way of expressing himself and of sharing his inner emotions, his artistic drive, and personal creation. Moreover, it was a salvation from the unpleasant, chaotic, and painful life he was leading: "And that despair, which I now look back on as emotionally the blackest period of my life [...]. I was a fine description of broke in every sense of the word" (xiv-xv).<sup>3</sup> In fact, when he began writing, little did he imagine that writing would come to signify so much in his future life. Writing became his only way of making sense of the world and of understanding the war; writing saved him from a life of misery. Not only did writing help him recover from PTSD – it actually saved his life. He explains, in the book's introduction, how his life was a complete disaster and how he was unemployed and living back with his father in Cornwall after having been through several broken relationships; he could not cope with the madness inside. At that time, he had been working intermittently as a painter. A painter's job is to repair, redecorate, and cover ugly, old, and rundown buildings with layers of fresh, new paint. This can be interpreted as a metaphor of what he needed to do with his life: to heal the inside wounds caused by the war and to cover them with something to mend the pain. That "something" became writing his war recollections. He felt a need to write to

overcome his trauma: "The shelling had stopped, we got to our feet and continued moving forward" (xvii). Writing became a refuge, a source of happiness, and soon he became addicted to it, and he needed to do it to keep sane; it was like a drug:

I couldn't stop writing. The only description I've been able to come up with to explain the feeling, the absolute click of the fingers change in me, is that it was like a drug had been injected into my veins. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Couldn't stop. If I was sleeping, I was writing [...]. As my war poured out, I relived memories that had torn me apart. One time I even remembered the fear [...]. Once I finished putting down a particular memory, I always felt some sense of achievement, pride in myself. (xvii-xviii)

Lucy Robinson (*Soldiers Stories of The Falklands War*) points out that the origins of Lukowiak's text are precisely related to, or are to be found in, the therapeutic actions mentioned above to address his PTSD. By the time of the Falklands War, an important amount of knowledge had been gained. The development of this distress, as well as the procedures of diagnosis and consequent treatment, had begun to be established, resulting in the official inclusion of PTSD on the list of recognized mental disorders by The American Psychiatric Association (1980). The Falklands War was, therefore, a well-suited example for the early application of the model to explain post-war experiences and behaviours in terms of this disorder. This present case has been presented as especially meaningful because the Falklands War is regarded as having been highly traumatic for the troops involved.<sup>4</sup>

Several Falklands veterans have incorporated the writing of memoirs as a valuable part of their recovery process, although not without setbacks, since the generation of written content, often controversial, also induced a less than desirable permanent attachment and identification with the past. In the cases when writings came to be published, the authors were at risk of being easily identified as Falklands veterans, and thus, some of these veterans would become involved in undesired arguments and perhaps would be obliged to make political statements or confront accusations that they possibly had no intention of getting entangled with. One example of the author in question illustrates this phenomenon when, in 2014, during a reconciliation and

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remembrance trip to Argentina, Lukowiak describes a confusing and perturbing incident, involving a group of veterans and family members of dead combatants, where he faced demonstrations and accusations of war crimes<sup>5</sup> in relation to the shooting of Argentinian soldiers, allegedly when the cease-fire was already in force. One of these events, in the aftermath of the Battle of Wireless Ridge, was precisely explained in one of the chapters titled "One less to feed." The controversial effects of this crude account of the on-the-field facts gave rise to public debates and even legal action, as well as creating suspicions that some British soldiers could be liable for war crimes.<sup>6</sup> This even prompted an official investigation in 1993. The author did not manage to avoid the controversy and, referring to his Argentinian experience, explained:

Over the noise the translator tried to explain that I am a murderer, a war criminal. That I executed an Argentinean soldier after the cease-fire [...] I had just been accused on national television of committing war crimes and the first thing I was asked was whether I believed the sinking of the Belgrano had been a crime against humanity. (*A Soldier's Song*, xxix)

### **Narrating the memories of a mythologised war**

*A Soldier's Song* is divided into 53 short sections, each introduced with a title and a loose geographical position. The titles are not strictly descriptive, but rather evocative of some idea, or an association, or a resemblance particular to the author. The account follows a chronological order mostly, though there are some time digressions, such as flash-forwards and flashbacks. There is, generally, a noticeable distinction between simply descriptive or anecdotal information versus personal considerations, dreams, and thoughts, although the two are interspersed within the same section. The author marks the beginning of these digressions from the main chronological events with the phrases "*I time flashed...*" or "*I time flashed again...*" (italics in the original), which helps the reader situate and distinguish action from thoughts or memories. Language is central both for expressing and healing trauma, and communication is a key factor in PTSD treatment. In this sense, the overall

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organisation of the book seems to recall the therapeutic work on dreams carried out by therapists with traumatised veterans.

The book is, on the one hand, strongly emotive since it includes deep personal feelings and thoughts, and on the other, full of military-style anecdotic or trivial facts, which give readers a glimpse of military life during combat. The writing style is sometimes harsh and direct, while at times it shows a remarkable literary and aesthetic density, with clear transitions from one style to the other via divisions of thematic chapters though often also intertwined within the same section. The use of dark irony is another distinctive mark of the text. The register is far from being the formal speech of military history texts; as a personal account, it intends to reflect the direct slang of the soldiers. The language of the actual actions is harsh, direct, and mostly colloquial.

The use of military slang shows the key role that language plays in constructing and maintaining the cohesion and identity of the group. The use of martial jargon is another element of deliberate military training, aimed to separate the soldier from their former life and language, and make them focus on this new universe (Parr, *Our Boys*). The "group" represents a major psychological reference for any combatant, and even after the war, the "group" often remains the only admissible community with which the veteran feels free to share their memories. Language is therefore specific to the group but also critical to the process of re-elaboration of traumatic memories, and also to the ability of veterans to express them outside their own restricted "group" of fellow veterans.

The outbursts of the so-called para-speak constitute a mixing of syntax and "f-words" for everything, which confirms the role of language use as an identity marker. The following quote provides one of the many examples of the harsh language used in the book. On being asked by a general whether he liked the Falkland Islands and if he was enjoying it there, this is what Lukowiak thought but did not dare to utter aloud:

"Well, sir, I'm 8,000 miles from home, in a place that has already proved itself to be the *arsehole* of the earth. Four of my friends are dead, I'm up to my neck in *shit*, mud and water, the killing is still going on and just to top it off really nicely it's started to snow."

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How the *fuck* do you think I feel, *shit for brains?*" (*A Soldier's Song*, 128-129, emphasis added)

Swearing and profanities, additionally, serve as a mechanism for group identification, since loyalties and references, under combat situations, rapidly reduce to the immediate comrades. The use of offensive language and swearing can also be interpreted as a strategy to cope with anger and helplessness, and as a way of releasing frustration.

Its rich composition has led *A Soldier's Song* to be considered to have literary merits beyond the simple, crude veterans' accounts. McGuirk regards the book as "by far the most literary of combatants' memoirs" (*Falklands-Malvinas*: 101) and worthy of attention in the field of literary analysis along with novels, plays, and poetry. In fact, the book has been taken onto the stage. In 1998, Guy Masterson adapted, directed, and solo-performed the theatrical piece, and, in 2012, the show was revived but this time with Lukowiak on stage, performing his own memories. The story captures the reader from the very first moment with the initial shock of war and its prominent reality – the dead. The book opens with a description of the sensation of unreality that is represented by the sight of the first corpses. Along with the unreal vision of some "department store dummies" (*A Soldier's Song*, 1), the way in which Lukowiak refers to the dead combatants, the reality is brought to life through the names of the first known deceased. In this part, the reader can feel here how combat situations deviate from standard situations in a desirable "normal" life, and the author chooses the most dramatic icon for this purpose. This incongruity is announced and described to us, readers, in a way that asks for our understanding and forgiveness. This suggests that the soldiers, no matter how well-trained they are, feel lost and react at critical moments through estranged and alienated identities, which are not too different from how a civilian would behave if faced with an extreme situation. This may be seen as an attempt to establish an empathic connection with the reader. However, it appears that the next step is to immediately downgrade or undermine the experience and move on, thus avoiding a paralyzing shock, which becomes a survival technique or trained skill, rather than a kind of narrative strategy. From this point on, the story carries the reader into a world of fear.

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Fear is perceived as a frequent and recurrent feeling in the entire work. Some form of fear or panic is mentioned in almost every chapter, although mostly where combat action is supposed or implicit, from the moment of the disembarkation until the Argentinian surrender. The Royal Navy was heavily bombed by the Argentine Air Force in San Carlos, and the ground forces experienced frequent shelling and mortar fire. The author dives, hides, and suffers panic attacks, mostly during artillery barrages and air attacks, but we have no account of him coming under close range fire (e.g., machine guns or direct fights with the enemy). The closest thing to a man-to-man fight is depicted in the section sardonically titled, "One less to feed thanks to me (Wireless Ridge)" (150) when Lukowiak explains how he killed an Argentinian soldier unexpectedly found in a trench but how this happened once the combat operations were already over.

A particularly representative point in terms of degeneration and despair appears when the author realizes that nothing valuable was learnt, that no maturation process occurred, that his only ambition was to get out alive, and that "we behaved in the way that we had been conditioned to behave" (88). The frustration is eventually replaced by a necessary indifference and disillusionment, well reflected during the killing of a badly wounded enemy: "I felt nothing, we moved on" (36). This may be interpreted as not really being true; there were feelings, emotions, and visions, but they were often presented in the form of "time-flashes" and post-event reflections, sometimes developed during the actual writing, years later, but we can assume undoubtedly that they came into being at that time. As Shay points out, the blocking-out of further thinking is a survival strategy, as it is also the destruction of time. In combat, past, future and one's own values collapse, in a contraction of the temporal and moral horizon: "only getting through *now* [Sic!] has any existence" (*Achilles in Vietnam*: 176). Lukowiak's apparent lack of feelings relates to the above-mentioned contraction of time, values and references, a phenomenon experienced by soldiers in the battlefield during the most dramatic moments.<sup>7</sup>

The nature and tone of Lukowiak's disillusionment pattern transcend his personal experience in the battlefield to reflect broader cultural and psychological circumstances of the Falklands War, such as the patriotic militarism that coloured the whole conflict and the public mythologisation of

this "small" and unpredicted war. The Falklands War was, when compared to others, a brief and straightforward conflict, but it was also a war fought by improbable enemies, and this reveals what was a failure of politics, diplomacy, and military deterrence (Beattie, *Conventional Deterrence and the Falkland Islands Conflict*).<sup>8</sup> Although it took place in a remote location, largely unknown until the day of the Argentinian invasion, the Falklands War was strongly supported and popular in Britain, after a brief period of disorientation (Robinson, *Soldiers Stories of The Falklands War*). Crowds gathered at the ports to say farewell to the expeditionary forces and warmly welcomed their heroes who returned home. For many, the war represented the opportunity to show the world that Britain was still a major world power, able to project military force thousands of miles away, like the United States. Moreover, it provided a chance to overcome years of perceived decline and retreat, economically, politically, and militarily, marked by the economic crisis. It signalled sovereignty sharing in terms of its accession to the European Common Market, and the withdrawal of military forces "east of Suez" due to budget cuts, to the point that, by the end of the 1970s, it was believed that the role of Britain as a global military power was over (Parr, *Our Boys*: 24). It is widely acknowledged that the Falklands victory boosted the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's popularity and helped her win the general election of 1983: from being considered by many as the most unpopular of British prime ministers, she managed to become one of the most popular. She was re-elected in 1983, successfully channelling the strong public support from this reawakened nationalist mood into the polls.<sup>9</sup> As Pearce and Stewart argue: "The dark days of the Falklands War were over and the country could rejoice in its recent victory, and feel that Britain's prestige had risen under the stern and unyielding leadership of Mrs. Thatcher" (*British Political History*: 525).

Kevin Foster argues that Thatcherism was embodied in a narrative framework of an epic account of a heroic vision of the nation and a return to Victorian values. Foster terms these dominant narratives about the Falklands war as "fictions", or "myths" that were appropriated by the British government and the media to instil the belief that the campaign to retake the islands has been a moral and political crusade and that the war was fought in the name of the public good (*Fighting Fictions*: 156). When the Prime Minister came into

power in 1979, she was determined to halt Britain's decline and to restore the nation's pride. According to Foster, Thatcher believed that the role of the Task Force in the defeat of Argentina was a direct consequence of the application of Victorian values and national greatness: "She identified the primary cause of Britain's victory in the South Atlantic with the same rigid hierarchies of rank, class, race and gender that has provided the functional and ideological focus of the empire" (*To Serve and Protect*: 236). In a similar vein, David Monaghan observes how these "official myths" were put forward by the Thatcher Government to promote a national rebirth in British identity, one by which the Falkland Islanders were considered "British in stock and tradition", an "island race" that deserves to be protected (*The Falklands War*: 25-26). These claims of "authentic Britishness" implicitly exclude minority groups living in Britain, while at the same time justify the use of violence by dignifying the war and making it look like an honourable crusade. Military myths were also invoked. The nation has found itself again in battle and its strength has been reborn. Thatcher announced that the "spirit" of the South Atlantic should be applied at home. According to Barnett, "the example of the task force was its professional leadership and its clear hierarchy of rank" (*Iron Britannia*: 63), and this good example set by the Task Force and by all those who contributed in the battle should be followed – the "commanders in the field" should be imitated at home.

### **A gendered war**

War has traditionally been constructed as a masculine domain, promoting references to masculinity with a glorification of violence in the name and honour of the country. The discourse of war is gendered, marking a sharp division in the different roles sexes play: men go to battle while women stay at home caring for the home and the family.<sup>10</sup> Genevieve Lloyd explores in *Selfhood, War and Masculinity* the connection between war and gender in Western society. She argues that sacrificing one's life in battle is a sign of masculinity. Women, in turn, stay at home to prove that they are good caring mothers or spouses, ready to provide support to the returning soldiers, the healers who stay at home taking care of the family, producing more offspring for the nation, and mourning the dead.

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The Falklands War and its media representation have been studied as an example of the maintenance of gendered categories. In *Empire's Fetish*, Zoe Anderson argues that the media perpetuated the nationalist sentiment during the Falklands War by placing sexuality as central to the nationalist project in which British women were positioned as symbols of national pride. Anderson notices that women occupied three main representations in the tabloid media during the conflict – they were national boundary markers, good girlfriends/wives/mothers, and participants in the war effort through sexualised patriotism. This conventional narrative of the suffering women denotes a nuclear heterosexual unit which is a traditional way to perceive nations. Lucy Noakes also highlights the gendered representation of the war:

The Falklands War was a war in which gender divisions were seen in very sharp relief. Men went away to battle whilst women waited at home. The male soldiers seen in the media and spoken of in Parliament were active, fighting for their country; the women at home were seen as relatively passive, able to do little except wait for news of their men. (*Mass-Observation, Gender and Nationhood*: 1)

Patricia Holland's research on the representation of gender in tabloids during this war suggests that women's femininity existed as complementation of men's masculinity and at the service of it (*In these Times when Men Walk Tall*: 22). Holland points out that the images of women appearing half-naked in the papers could be taken as a way of offering their support to men and as a way of showing their commitment to the national campaign. The tabloids were eager to report those girlfriends or wives who proudly showed their breasts to greet the returning troops. In opposition to this, the prime minister successfully epitomized this battle over gender differences with her assertive masculine leadership.

Male soldiers have widely regarded women either as comforting, psychological anchors or as sexual commodities or rape targets. Far away in the battlefields, the memory of loved women, as a key part of strong family bonds, present or past, represents a link with a previous, safe life. In Lukowiak's book, women are idealized and placed within surreal contexts. One example of this is the dream about his Aunt Lettie, where the author describes, as if it were a real

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event, a warning given by his old aunt as if she were on the battlefield. Women have traditionally played the role of nurturing and caring for soldiers, while also improving their morale by means of admiration and support. The presence of female companions performs a crucial assisting role in the recovery of injured combatants (Goldstein, *War and Gender*). For younger men, like the author at that time, the mothers embody the caring aspects that allow them to distance themselves from the realities of war. It has been noted that dying soldiers often call for their mothers on the battlefield: "Wounded man kept crying, Mother, Mother! Help me!" (Goldman and Fuller, *Charlie Company*: 237; Parr, *Our Boys*: 140). Even though subalterns have traditionally been associated with performing paternal caring attitudes towards their privates, Loughran points out that in fact the roles and responsibilities that officers take in the battlefield,<sup>11</sup> such as "ensuring the physical comfort of men, keeping order and maintaining a balance between discipline and sympathy" (*A Crisis of Masculinity?*: 729), mimic those of a mother.<sup>12</sup>

There is no account in *A Soldier's Song* of such an extreme situation as the one described above of combatants on the verge of dying, crying out for their mothers. There are, however, several scenes about "time-flashes", "dreams" and "visions" involving women which frequently appear when Lukowiak and his fellow comrades are under attack and stress; for instance, a time-flash during an air attack triggers a story of his partner moving a mattress intermixed with the description of the attack (23). After a church service in Port Stanley, Lukowiak admits that he would have thought of his mother if he had been closer to death. From the information the writer provides in the foreword to the 1999 edition, he had a tight bond with his father after the war. During many of his crises – the separation from his girlfriends, unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction –, it was his father's house in Cornwall where he sought shelter. This narrative technique often appears in the text, with the author matching or reproducing the actual confused flow of thoughts and events. An example of the caring mother role can be found linked to the onset of another episode of fear, using the same time-flash method, in a scene with mother-and-baby photographs (86), which triggers a more complex chain of conclusions, and once again starts with a caring female figure, which prompts an immediate feeling of attachment and compassion among all the soldiers present. Partners, wives, mothers, and sisters appear again in dreams, when the soldiers are coping with mortar and artillery fire, in one of the most poetic episodes that appears and disappears like a dream inside a dream (135-139).

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In connection with gender stereotypes but as an example of the deconstruction of masculinity, a figure of high relevance to the whole battalion of 2 Para is that of "Wendy", a homosexual who worked as a steward aboard the MV *Norland*, whom Lukowiak depicts as "one of our war's leading characters" (170). Wendy was an affectionate and talented "gay civvy" (172) who played the piano and sang to raise the morale of the troops. Lukowiak's first encounter with this character is narrated in the following way: "The corridor broke out into various calls of 'Hello, darling' followed by wolf whistles and offers of unmentionable sexual favours" (172). After an initial rejection and aggressive attitude from the soldiers, everyone grew fond of Wendy and he became to be considered as part of the gang, "our fucking queer" (173). The writer explains how nowadays, years after the war, whenever he speaks with soldiers of the battalion about the Falklands War, "Wendy always gets a mention [...] and no longer is Wendy referred to as an arse bandit, or a turd burglar or a dirty fucking queer. Gay boy's about the worst you will hear and it's always said with a smile, it's always said with affection" (173-174). Wendy plays a key role in asserting the masculinity of these soldiers.

Enlisting has always been, for many young men, one way to prove their masculinity, as argued by Phillips: "Placed in a constantly renewed insecurity about their status, men must scramble to amass "proofs" of masculinity. If a society also convinces its citizens that men love to fight and women hate to fight (or cannot fight), then that society can manipulate men to go to war, simply to verify that they are not women" (*Manipulating Masculinity*: 2). Becoming a soldier has long been entwined with notions of youth-male behaviour in a rite of passage to attain complete manhood. After the war, a boy came home a man, ready to assume full responsibilities. It was, therefore, the best way to be tested as a man; to see how to measure up in difficult circumstances, since "combat often validated masculine identity" (Parr, *Our Boys*: 268). Rachel Woodward places gender at the centre of the construction of soldiering: becoming a soldier involves the creation, negotiation, and reproduction of gender identities. She uses the example of Ken Lukowiak to prove her point: "the identification of a certain type of masculinity with the soldier was a prime motivator to his [Lukowiak's] joining in [the Army] to become a 'real man'" (*Locating Military Masculinities*: 43). In Woodward's view,

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military masculinities encompass features such as physical skill, aggressive heterosexuality and homophobia.<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion**

War poses several representational challenges. Such a complex phenomenon is difficult to describe and explain using language, which may prove insufficient due to the nature of the traumatic experience. When one reads of "heavy casualties," "fierce fighting," or "intense shelling," it is not easy to understand or imagine how these experiences, in an immediate or delayed way, impact human beings. Other forms of expression, such as literature and art, can attempt to reflect the true human side of the war ordeal, at the risk of being too subjective, somehow incomplete, inadequate, or futile; yet, this emotional dimension is a fundamental part of the story, which cannot be fully addressed by historical, fact-based texts.<sup>14</sup> War memoir authors often claim that their accounts are true, but when their purpose is to present facts, they can often be debated and contested.

*A Soldier's Song* provides a poignant reminder that the horrors of war are the same and equally devastating even if the action was relatively limited geographically and temporarily. Only feelings of someone who has actually been on the battlefield are indisputable because they belong to the individual and their own suffering. This is the best contribution that works like Lukowiak's can deliver. The readers discover that war has been for him, for a long time, a "job to be done" through thorough training that creates automatic killing routines, erases questioning, and focuses on the "hows" and prohibits the "whys." But eventually, at that moment or later on, the human side always reappears in the form of compassion, but also as madness and a lack of self-control.

The overall style, tone and themes in Lukowiak's work suggest disenchantment, with scarce room for learning or personal maturation. However, writing his war recollections was, for Lukowiak, a vital way to cope with the traumatic memories of war. After a long period of depression and instability, this Falklands war veteran seems to have been able to redirect his

life course through writing, journalism and collaborative experiences in war-affected countries, as he explains in the foreword of his book.

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- <sup>1</sup> For a theoretical approximation about archetypes as structures that provide patterns and *topoi* on which war-memoirs often build symbolically, please see Cinelli ("Viandante, giungessi a Sparta...").
- <sup>2</sup> All the references to Ken Lukowiak's *A Soldier's Song* were taken from the 1999 paperback edition by Phoenix (Orion Books Limited).
- <sup>3</sup> One example of a similar urge to practice storytelling as a means to ease the pain of traumatic memory can be found in Holocaust survivor Primo Levi. In the Author's Preface to *If This Is a Man*, Levi writes: "the origins [of this book] are [...] the need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it [...]. An immediate and violent impulse [...]. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation" (15).

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- <sup>4</sup> It has been claimed that more veterans have killed themselves since 1982 than were actually killed in action (Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*: 731-732). Concerning the British side, this has been downplayed by recent studies, such as that of the, Editorial in the British Medical Journal (*Suicide among Falkland War Veterans*: 346). The same claim is also sustained in Argentinian media sources (Galak, *No cesan los suicidios de ex combatientes de Malvinas*).
  - <sup>5</sup> Blog *Warrior to Worrier*: <https://kenlukowiak.wordpress.com/2014/05/17/ambush-in-argentina-a-falkland-veterans-trial-by-television-pt-3-of-3/> (accessed 16/12/2020).
  - <sup>6</sup> One of these controversial cases is the well-known episode related to the Argentinian soldier, Oscar Carrizo, which is often cited as a British war crime that occurred following the Battle of Mount Longdon. In Carrizo's account of the incident, he was "executed" by two British soldiers as he tried to surrender after the battle (Macintyre, *Falklands "War Crimes" Claim*; Tuohy, *Britons Divided by Probe into Alleged Falklands Atrocities*).
  - <sup>7</sup> There are several examples during which the writer seems not to experience deep feelings in the face of tragedy: "Death, polystyrene and me" (*A Soldier's Song*, 36); "Who's dead? He's dead" (50) (about Colonel Jones's death); "Cigarette smokers in black plastic bags" (99); and "Headless, legless, lifeless smokers" (147) (vision of a dead Argentine), to mention but a few.
  - <sup>8</sup> Excellent accounts of the military, political, and mediatic aspects of the conflict have been produced, and they often highlight that the British victory came as a consequence of the superior quality of its troops but that it was also achieved by a narrow margin (see, for example, Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*; and Bicheno, *The Razor's Edge*). It has been reported that success was due largely to section commander and private initiative and determination (Parr, *Our Boys*). Perhaps if Argentina had attacked a few months later, when Britain's already decided on defence budget cuts had been made effective and had depleted its forces' projection capability, it would not have had the capacity to deploy troops to such a remote location (Jenkins, *The Luck of the War*).
  - <sup>9</sup> The Conservatives were 188 seats ahead of Labour and had an overall majority of 144 constituencies. The Labour Party recorded its worst performance since 1918, obtaining only 27.6% of the popular vote (Pearce and Stewart, *British Political History*: 526).
  - <sup>10</sup> There are, however, notable exceptions to this patriarchal nationalist discourse such as world wars, when women took over men's jobs in the factories, agriculture and running the industries.
  - <sup>11</sup> The WW2 movie *The Thin Red Line* (1998) offers a good example of a sharply gendered way of talking about the way military life reshapes sociability and roles. In one of the last scenes (from 2:37:46 to 2:38:13), Captain Bosche (George Clooney) speaks of his company as a "family": he is the "father" while Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) is the "mother" (soldiers are of course the "children"). He eventually adds that "father's the head, mother runs it". In the same film, Captain Staros takes care of his soldiers in battle, saving them from being slaughtered in a frontal assault, and he later on calls them "my sons" (2:05:00 to 2:05:12).
  - <sup>12</sup> In *A Crisis of Masculinity?*, Tracey Loughran's main contention is that throughout history but especially in WW1, several cases of post-war trauma in women and non-combatant males had been overlooked. This has happened because shell-shock was regarded as a masculine disorder, a condition solely suffered by those who had been in the battleground: "By accepting contemporary evaluations of shell-shock as a masculine disorder, historians have colluded in the exclusion of other groups from the claim to trauma" (734).
  - <sup>13</sup> The transformation of civilians into soldiers is expressed through body and clothes for it is the uniformed body that is trained to become a soldier. The "squaddie" or "squaddy"

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(military slang for ordinary soldier) is the British cultural stereotype that embodies military masculinity (Woodward, *Locating Military Masculinities*).

- <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, we can find good war histories that have been written that focus on people's experiences while maintaining factual accuracy. See, for example, the history of WW2 in Hastings's *All Hell Let Loose*.

## The Crux of Violence: *Unheimlich* Encounters and PTSD in Santiago Roncagliolo's *Red April*

By Stefano Bellin

**Abstract:** This article explores the connection between close encounters, PTSD, and Freud's concept of the "uncanny" by analysing the internal armed conflict in Peru (1980-2000) and offering a novel reading of Santiago Roncagliolo's *Red April* (*Abril rojo*, 2006). Focusing on how the novel establishes cross-referential relationships between traumatic encounters and repressed parts of our selves, my reading shows how *Red April* calls into question the identity position from which we tend to look at war. By eliciting what I call a "positional identification" with the narrative of war and an "ironic identification" with its main character, I argue that *Red April* foregrounds our implication with the structural forms of oppression that feed conflicts like that which struck Peru in the 1980s. In doing so, it reveals our compromised positions and *unheimlich* proximity to the violence of war.

**Keywords:** *Peruvian civil war, Sendero Luminoso, PTSD, the uncanny, Santiago Roncagliolo, Abril rojo, fictional representations of war*

### Introduction

A famous short story by Julio Cortázar called *House Taken Over* describes a brother and a sister living a calm and untroubled life in their large family home in Buenos Aires. When unnamed others infiltrate the house from the rear, the siblings retreat in the remaining half and seal it off. The identity of those who are taking over the house is never revealed, nor how or why "they" are doing that. The brother and sister seem to acknowledge the danger, but their reaction simply involves accepting and withdrawing into smaller and smaller parts of their house. Eventually, further noises signal that the entire house is being taken over, and the owners flee, lock the front door and toss the key down a drain, not wanting any poor devil to enter the house that has been "taken over".

This uncanny and puzzling story could be read as a metaphor of Santiago Roncagliolo's *Red April*. Like in Cortázar's story, in Roncagliolo's novel something "takes over" the protagonist, pushing him outside of what is familiar. In both stories, the reader is left to wonder what kind of beings are

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advancing in the house, why a house that has been taken over is being locked, and what are the reasons and effects of such an act. But in the case of *Red April*, the “house” is the protagonist’s own self while the intruder is the violence of the internal conflict in Peru (1980-2000).<sup>1</sup> The novel presents war, indeed, as a force that takes over our lives and questions who and what belongs to the “house”, causing deep distress as a result.

Santiago Roncagliolo was born in 1975 in Lima, but he spent his early childhood in Mexico where his family was exiled. Roncagliolo’s parents were left-wing activists who had to temporarily leave Peru two years after the military coup of General Francisco Morales Bermúdez (29<sup>th</sup> August 1975). As Roncagliolo recounts in an article (*The Dogs of Deng Xiao Ping*: 148), his first image of Peru is that of dead dogs hanging from the lampposts in the centre of Lima in 1980: “Their lifeless bodies were wrapped in posters that said, ‘Deng Xiao Ping, Son of a Bitch’.” Sendero Luminoso,<sup>2</sup> a Maoist revolutionary organisation at war with the Peruvian state, had killed and exhibited the dogs to showcase its power in the country’s capital and to denounce the “revisionist” economic reforms of Deng Xiao Ping, which were distancing China from the thought of Mao Zedong.

Since Roncagliolo’s family settled back in Lima during the war between Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian state,<sup>3</sup> Santiago grew up in a time in which terrorist attacks, kidnappings, torture, power cuts, and car bombs were frequent. Roncagliolo’s father, Rafael – a well-known academic, journalist, and television presenter – was periodically threatened by the police. All this fed into Roncagliolo’s novels, which feature fear as their central subject. In this article I will focus on *Red April*, a political thriller set in Peru in 2000, when the war between Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian state was coming to an end, and the corruption and human rights violations of Alberto Fujimori’s government were exacerbating Peru’s political crisis.

Wars, military occupations, and other traumatic historical events are often followed by an initial period of unfinished mourning, in which the actors of the conflict bracket off or struggle to address the trauma of the conflict in which they were involved. Later on, with the coming of age of the children of victims, perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders, there is usually a “return of the

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repressed”, during which the conflict and the thorny questions related to it are discussed more openly.

In the case of Peru, the governments of Valentín Paniagua and Alejandro Toledo established an independent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that investigated, between 2001 and 2003, the development of the internal conflict and the human right abuses perpetrated during the 1980s and 1990s. The work of Peru’s TRC rekindled the debate over the crimes committed in the war and provided substantial new content for discussions about collective responsibility, historical memory, trauma, political representation, and social justice. The commission has been widely praised for its scrupulous endeavours, which resulted in fundamental findings that clarify the number of victims, the facts of the conflict, and the responsibility of the different agents involved. The data, evidence, and testimonies it gathered enabled a better understanding of the sociological and historical contexts of the conflict, persecuting the leading perpetrators, and providing recommendations for a national transition to a democratic era. Yet Peru’s TRC has also been critiqued for being timid in its treatment of the ethnic dimension of the conflict, for framing its discourse of transitional justice within “a national project very much rooted in neoliberal aspirations of modernisation and economic prosperity” (Lambright, *Andean Truths*: 12), and for coding indigenous experiences of affliction according to the western category of trauma (Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*: 24-53), giving little weight to local epistemological frameworks.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the commission’s findings stimulated public discussions and cultural explorations of the *sasachakuy tiempo*, the “difficult time” of the internal armed conflict. A sign of this is the flourishing of cultural productions and academic investigations that explore different aspects of the conflict. Works like Alonso Cueto’s *La hora azul* (novel, 2005), Claudia Llosa’s *La teta asustada* (film, 2009), Iván Thays’s *Un lugar llamado Oreja de Perro* (novel, 2012), Lurgio Gavilán’s *Memorias de un soldado desconocido* (memoir, 2012), or José Carlos Agüero’s *Los rendidos* (hybrid text, 2015), to mention but a few, address the armed conflict from a variety of viewpoints, emphasising both the deep roots and the moral complexity of the violence that emerged in Peru. Roncagliolo’s *Red April* – which won the prestigious Alfaguara prize in 2006 – fits within this trend, but it is more apt to discuss the themes of the current journal issue because it places

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close encounters in war and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the heart of its narrative.

From *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to today, literature has been a vital medium for coming to terms with the traumatic memories of war (Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*: 1-31; Crocq and Crocq, *From Shell Shock*: 47-48; and MacMillan, *War*: 251-281). On the one hand, writing is a useful method for confronting the traumas that haunt our psyche. On the other hand, literature helps us to develop an understanding of the violence of war in many ways: by providing examples of how soldiers and civilians cope with such an experience; by exploring the causes and meaning of people's actions and suffering; by processing traumatic recollections; by opening vistas on how people in other times and cultures deal with war traumas; and, finally, by creating a moral filter that discloses our capacities for empathic recognition and self-reflection. Indeed, "trauma research has demonstrated the importance of developing a narrative or story about the traumatic event" (Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*: 162).

Using literature as a vehicle for probing our relation to war, in this article I explore how *Red April* analyses the experience and the consequences of a traumatic conflict, showing how close encounters in a context of war can lead to PTSD and how PTSD shapes the way human beings encounter each other during and after violent events. In my discussion, I investigate the link between PTSD and the concept of the "uncanny", as articulated by Freud in the homonymous essay. In particular, I examine how uncanny encounters bring into the open feelings, experiences, and behavioural patterns that had been kept hidden or that remain largely unacknowledged, thus challenging our conceptions of selfhood, identity, and violence. My reading of *Red April* shows how Roncagliolo's novel calls into question the identity position from which we tend to look at war. By eliciting what I call a "positional identification" with the narrative of the war and an "ironic identification" with its main character, I argue that *Red April* foregrounds our implication with the structural forms of oppression that feed conflicts such as the one that struck Peru in the 1980s. The "we" to which I allude here includes first and foremost the citizens of the Global North and the global "privileged"<sup>5</sup> classes that probably constitute the primary readership of *Red April* and this academic journal.

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With this aim in view, I will proceed by first summarising the development of the armed conflict in Peru, showing how the killing methods and operating procedures of its actors turned several face-to-face encounters into deeply traumatic experiences. I will then discuss *Red April*, focusing on how the novel establishes cross-referential relationships between close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny that reveal our compromised positions and *unheimlich* proximity to the violence of war.

### **The historical background of the civil war**

Located in the southern-central Peruvian Andes, Ayacucho is the cradle of Sendero Luminoso and the setting of Roncagliolo's *Red April*. Badly connected to the rest of the country, Ayacucho was one of Peru's poorest cities. Many people in its region lived under a feudal agricultural system where exploitation, illiteracy, discrimination against the large indigenous and Quechua-speaking community, and the phenomenon of *gamonalismo* (a system of power in the which landowners and state functionaries exert a bossing and corrupt authority over the impoverished and disenfranchised population) were widespread. Sendero's roots grew out of this environment. Their leader, Abimael Guzmán, *alias* Comrade Gonzalo, a professor of Philosophy in the San Cristóbal of Huamanga University in Ayacucho, gave form to the hope and the anger of "the people who always had to keep their heads down" (Cueto, *La hora azul*: 203), but that form was a monstrous one.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, two movements were shaking the foundations of Ayacucho's classist society: the peasant movement, that claimed a fairer distribution of land, and the student movement, whose objective was free public education. The latter was particularly strong in San Cristóbal of Huamanga University, which Guzmán converted in a centre of indoctrination and the motor for his political project. Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL), which emerged in 1970 after a series of scissions with other Marxist-Leninist parties, was able to channel the grievances of Ayacucho's youth and peasant population. Yet, unlike other parties, it did not run in the elections after Peru's return to democracy in 1980 and went underground to prepare its revolution. The PCP-SL characterised Peruvian society as semi-feudal and semi-colonial

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and, blending Mariátegui with Mao, believed that the revolution should start from the peasantry (Taylor, *Shining Path*: 9-26). The goals of its anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolution were overthrowing the state and taking the power through armed struggle. Guzmán shaped the party into a tightly-knit organisation and traced the political line in a dogmatic fashion. The party's ideology aimed at suppressing every inkling of individualism and demanded its members "to carry their lives on the fingertips, ready to hand them over" (Roncagliolo, *La cuarta espada*: 106). Indeed, over the years Guzmán's power increasingly acquired theological and totalitarian traits, so much so that the party line will be called "*Pensamiento Gonzalo*" (Gonzalo's thought).<sup>6</sup> To gain independence Guzmán rejected any external funding for his armed struggle and taught his fighters that any tool or object could be turned into a weapon. In this fashion, with low funding, emboldened by an extremist ideology, and articulated into the party (led by the Central Committee in Lima), the popular army, and a series of support groups composed of workers, teachers, students, and peasants, Sendero went into war against the Peruvian state.

The conflict started on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1980 in a district called Chuschi with the burning of ballot boxes. This symbolic act was followed, in the ensuing months, by attacks to agricultural estates and small police stations in the regions of Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurímac. Little by little, Sendero crossed the Rubicon and began to "*batir el campo*", a tactic that consisted in attacking rural villages, institutions, and state figures and replacing them with its own people. In this way, the organisation started to gain power, weapons, and territory in the central highlands. In the first two years, Sendero's actions and discourse found support in a good part of the country's marginalised and impoverished population. After their violent operations, Sendero's popular committees were able to impose order in the occupied Andean communities, thus gaining authority and feeding the hopes for social justice. The conflict, however, was brutal from the outset. For Guzmán, the revolution demanded a "*cuota de sangre*" (blood fee), and Sendero was ready to make its soldiers and innocent civilians pay. What is more, after the first year the "blood fee" became an intrinsic part of its strategy. The Central Committee wanted to "drive the state mad and provoke a genocide that would yield political results for the insurgents" (Zapata, *La guerra senderista*: Kindle location 1276).

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The initial reaction of the state was clumsy and ineffective. The ill-prepared police units first sent to face the rebellion were followed by counter-insurgency squads called *sinchis* who, unable to distinguish between the civilian population and *senderistas*, carried out slaughters and abuses. In 1983-1984 the Armed Forces entered into the scene and the number of deaths spiked. Their initial approach was to weed out Sendero by wiping out the whole field. If Sendero's methods involved kidnappings, selective killings, seizures of food, weapons and dynamite, torture, terrorist attacks, and the repression of civilians deemed uncooperative, the army's involved arrests, torture, rapes, disappearances, and arbitrary killings. The rural civilian population bore the brunt of the conflict, but it was not a passive, homogenous agent. Rather, as Theidon shows in *Intimate Enemies*, the conflict played into local conflicts and rivalries, creating a volatile social landscape characterised by internecine violence and shifting roles and allegiances:

One particularity of civil wars is that foreign armies do not wage the attacks. Frequently the enemy is a son-in-law, a godfather, an old schoolmate, or the community that lies just across the valley. The forms of violence suffered as well as the forms of violence practiced matter greatly and influence the reconstruction process when the fighting subsides. The fratricidal nature of Peru's internal armed conflict means that ex-Senderistas, current sympathisers, widows, orphans, rape survivors, and army veterans live side by side. (Theidon, *Intimate Enemies*: xiii)

The fact that Peru's civil war frequently involved people who lived in the same community or neighbouring areas made close encounters particularly distressing and precarious. Many people became "two-faced" (*iskay uyukuna*), showing one face to the army and another to the *senderistas*, one in private and another in public. In many villages, people found themselves forced to share spaces with the murderers of their father or brother, with their rapists or walked streets that were recently scenes of lethal violence. These traumatic aspects were exacerbated by the killing methods. While technology tends to play an increasingly central role in modern warfare, often creating a "distancing effect", in Peru's theatres of war killing was typically intimate, low-tech, and crude. Enemies were frequently murdered face-to-face, with guns, rocks,

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knives, slingshots, or bare hands. As a result, the *sasachakuy tiempo* created a strong connection between close encounters and trauma,<sup>7</sup> turning the house and the community (the loci of safety and familiarity) into places of distress, ambivalence, and estrangement.

By the mid-1980s, the material and death tolls exerted by Sendero on the local population turned many Andean communities against it. Locals began to organise peasant patrols (*rondas campesinas*) and self-defence committees (*comités de autodefensa*). Yet, despite the dwindling support from highlands communities, between 1985 and 1990 the insurgent organisation expanded its political and military influence over an ever-widening swathe of territory. After its 1988-1989 congress, the PCP-SL declared that it had reached the “*equilibrio estratégico*”, that is, a balance of power with the state. This was a miscalculation that nonetheless led Sendero to engage in a head-on confrontation aimed at seizing power. The organisation thus moved its focus to the urban areas, concentrating especially on the capital. Hence the killings, kidnappings, industrial sabotages, armed strikes, destructions of electric pylons, and car-bombs that form the backdrop of Roncagliolo’s *La noche de los alfileres* became more and more frequent. The war reached its turning point on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1992 when Abimael Guzmán and other key members of the PCP-SL’s Central Committee were captured in the well-to-do Lima neighbourhood of Surco. Given Guzmán’s pseudo-religious influence on the organisation, this was a severe blow for Sendero. After “the capture of the century”, as it has been denominated, the intensity of the conflict progressively waned.

According to the estimates included in the TRC’s *Final Report*, the number of victims of Peru’s internal armed conflict adds up to 69.280 and that of internally displaced people to between 600,000 and one million people. Sendero is deemed responsible for 46% of the dead, government forces for around a third, and village militias, paramilitary groups, and other agents for the rest (*Informe final, Anexo 2*: 13). The TRC calculates that 75% of the people that were murdered or disappeared belonged to populations whose mother tongue was not Spanish. In the region of Ayacucho, 90% of them were Quechua speakers. For the most part, the victims of the war were *campesinos*, indigenous, and poor, and lived in areas that were geographically and socially distant from Lima (Degregori, *Qué difícil es ser Dios*: 35-36). It is indeed telling that before the work

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of the TRC the number of deaths was estimated at ca. 25,000, much lower than the figure calculated by the commission. This gap and the surprise generated by the “discovery” of the magnitude of murders, disappearances, forced displacements, and destructions betray how indifference and “the differential grievability across populations” (Butler, *Frames of War*: 24) had facilitated the catastrophe.

### **The shadow of the war in *Red April***

The fraught reality of close encounters in Peru’s civil war, the violence of “intimate enemies”, and the differential distribution of precariousness and grievability play a crucial role in *Red April*. The novel narrates the story of Félix Chacaltana, the Associate District Prosecutor in Ayacucho, who attempts to solve a series of gruesome murders that occur during the celebrations surrounding Holy Week in 2000, when Sendero had seemingly been largely neutralised. The events take place against a double backdrop, political and religious-symbolical. Roncagliolo situates the story twenty years after the beginning of Sendero’s insurgency, in a period of transition, when Fujimori’s Peru, plagued by corruption and political scandals, was trying to overcome the trauma of the conflict and prepare for the general elections. At the same time, the context of the Holy Week charges the story with transcendental significance. Together with Seville’s in Spain, Ayacucho’s *Semana Santa* is the most traditional in the world, staging vivid re-enactments of the Passion, Jesus’ path to crucifixion, and the resurrection. This celebration of death, with blood and sorrows exhibited in the streets, bestows a symbolic meaning on each of the murders investigated by Chacaltana. The latter indeed follow the schedule of celebrations that go from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day.

The story begins when Justino Mayta Carazo, a peasant, discovers a body in his neighbour’s hayloft. The following day Chacaltana goes to the Military Hospital to look for the forensic report. Chacaltana is originally from Ayacucho, but since he grew up in Lima he avoided the worst years of violence in the highlands.<sup>8</sup> He is introduced as an honest, patriotic, and punctilious paper-pusher, who talks to his mother as if she were alive and seeks in the penal code a refuge from his personal insecurities: “He had done nothing bad, he had done

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nothing good, he had never done anything not stipulated in the statutes of his institution" (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 11). When the prosecutor sees the body in the morgue, he is shocked. The corpse is charred, it misses an arm, and it is marked with a cross on the forehead.

During the following days, the image of the body flickers continuously in Chacaltana's mind (18). He re-experiences the encounter with the carbonised body in distressing recollections and nightmares. Daily life stimuli back the memory of the corpse and affect his sleep and meals. Yet the charred corpse is only the first in a series of five gruesome murders Chacaltana must investigate. The main plotline focuses on the protagonist's investigations of the killings and on his attempts to decipher their marked symbolism. Each body found has been killed in concomitance with a religious event: Ash Wednesday, the Friday of Sorrows, Holy Wednesday, Holy Thursday, and Good Friday. As in the case of the first body, there is a close connection between the method in which the five victims have been murdered and the date of their death. All the bodies have been brutally mutilated and are missing a specific part. The sequence of findings seems to suggest that the murderer(s) are composing a body made up of the dismembered parts. This is an explicit allusion to the Andean myth of Inkarrí, the Incan King. According to this legend, the Spanish Conquistadors tortured Túpac Amaru and buried his dismembered parts in different areas of their empire, as a punishment for his rebellion. The Andean *campesinos* believe that those parts are growing and will eventually rejoin. When this will happen, the Inca will rise again and restore their empire, crushing those who destroyed it. Father Quiroz, the priest who is explaining the legend to Chacaltana, draws a connection between the Inkarrí and Sendero: "At times, when I see the Indians so submissive, so ready to accept anything, I wonder if on the inside they aren't thinking that the moment will arrive, and that someday our roles will be reversed. [...] Sendero presented itself as the resurgence. And it was always conscious of the value of symbols" (196). These words reinforce Chacaltana's suspicion that the murders are an indication of Sendero's return. While the prosecutor pursues this line of investigation, the government's officials obstruct his work. There seems to be a wish to deny Sendero's resurgence, especially on the verge of the new elections and at the height of the Holy Week tourist season in Ayacucho, which should mark the establishment of a new era of peace and

development. As Commander Carrión tells Chacaltana: “In this country there is no terrorism, by orders from the top” (32).

The clues left by the murderer and the identity of the victims (a *sinchi*, a peasant, a *senderista*, a priest, and a woman Chacaltana thinks he is in love with) lead the prosecutor to formulate alternative hypotheses. Little by little, he notices that the new victims are people whom he recently encountered and realises that he is being framed. Chacaltana comprehends that he is supposed to be the sixth victim, who will provide the heart to the modern Inkari. The architect of the project is Commander Carrión, the head of the military forces in Ayacucho and Chacaltana’s key interlocutor within the government. Carrión gradually emerges as a character affected by PTSD, who “began killing in order to protect the governmental pact of silence: his first victim was another military member who could not stop talking about the massacres during the armed conflict. The subsequent killings were a consequence of his strategy to leave no trace of his undoing” (Chauca, *Mental Illness*: 74). On Easter Sunday, Chacaltana confronts and kills Carrión, yet not before the latter reveals a secret that sheds a retrospective light on the many signs of disturbance that the prosecutor manifested throughout the novel. When he was a child, Chacaltana accidentally killed his mother in an attempt to punish his father for his abuses. Both parents died in the fire caused by the young Chacaltana in the family house. The revelation exposes Chacaltana’s own PTSD, which becomes increasingly prominent as he progresses in his investigations.

The novel concludes with a report from the National Intelligence Service agent Eléspuru who attributes all the murders to Chacaltana and praises the work of the armed forces and the intelligence services for keeping the facts out of the press and removing all the files related to the case, adding that the accused, Félix Chacaltana, has been seen in the region of Ayacucho “on the occasion of his attempting to organise ‘defence militias’ with intentions that remain unclear” (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 270). The prosecutor “displayed evident signs of psychological and moral deterioration, and [...] he still retains the murder weapon, which he flourishes constantly and nervously at the least provocation, although it lacks the appropriate ammunition” (270-271). Having covered up the truth and created a fictional account of the events that backs up the official narrative of success with regards to the countersubversive struggle,

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Eléspuru (*él es Perú*, he is Peru) – the “figurative embodiment of the nation” (Lambright, *Andean Truths*, 49) – considers that “the Intelligence Service has fulfilled its mission of safeguarding the peace and security of the region, at the same time that it has directed information to channels most suited to the interests of law and order, thus collaborating in the future development of a nation like ours” (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 271).

*Red April* could be read as “an important critique of transitional justice processes, where procedure and craft can take precedence over more important purposes” (Lambright, *Andean Truths*: 50). If Chacaltana’s *modus operandi* underscores the prevalence of form over content (“I also want to close this case as soon as I can, Captain, but your report has to reach me because procedure demands it”, 54), Eléspuru’s concluding report represents the national willingness to advance a political and economic agenda at the expense of truth and justice. The detective novel structure allows Roncagliolo to interweave many themes connected to the internal armed conflict and TRC’s *Final Report*. The novel exposes questions like the corruption of state institutions and the Church, the politics of language concerning the armed conflict and its memory, performances of melancholia as acts of protest for the disappeared (Celis-Castillo, *Loss, Emotions, and Politics*), debates and popular beliefs on the origins of violence (De Vivanco, *Postapocalipsis*: 144-146; Lopez, *Magna violence*).

For the purposes of my discussion, I want to address some critical points highlighted by recent scholarship. The first concerns the fact that *Red April* has been written decisively with an international audience in mind. For Víctor Vich, “*Red April* is a novel that is highly influenced by a set of demands that global market currently imposes and that in its case crystallise in specific representations of violence, religion, and the subaltern” (*La novela*: 249). Chacaltana “discovers” the corruption of Peruvian institutions as if someone who had developed his professional career within those institutions could notice structural malfunctions only at a late stage. The treatment of indigenous people could be described as “orientalist” insofar as it creates a superficial and stereotyped account of Andean culture and people. Adopting the perspective of the outsider and positing Spanish as the proper language, the narrative represents the indigenous population as obscure, unfathomable, and backwards:

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The Indians were delighted to attend Mass, and at Mass... They prayed and learned canticles, they even took Communion. But they never stopped worshipping the sun, the river, and the mountains. Their Latin prayers were only memorised repetitions. Inside they continued worshipping their gods, their *huacas*. They deceived the Jesuits. (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 40)

[The street vendor] mumbled a couple of phrases in Quechua. The prosecutor understood that “not too far” could mean “two days away”. He remembered how difficult it is to question Quechua speakers, especially if they also do not feel like talking. And they never feel like talking. They are always afraid of what might happen. They do not trust anybody. (47)

The *limeño* characters in the novel often depict the indigenous population contemptuously, using racialised derogatory terms like “*cholos*”. Andean culture is represented as “alien to modernity”, as an obstacle that needs to be shed or removed if the country wants to achieve modernisation. There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the dominant, metropolitan (read: western) culture and the radical indigenous otherness. As Lambright points out,

constructed as peripheral to the socio-political and cultural progress of the nation, in [*Red April*] indigenous people, and even, for the most part Andean mestizos, are consistently denied voice and agency. [...] Their subjectivity in the novel is constituted exclusively through their interactions with the main character, and through interpretations of their culture proffered by members of the dominant culture (government representatives from Lima, or the local priest). (*Andean Truths*: 51-52)

This form of “hermeneutical injustice” (Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*: 147-175), an identity-based marginalisation that keeps whole groups of knowers from shaping social understandings of human experience and history, also determines the novel’s portrayal of violence.

By weaving into the narrative stereotypes about the *campesinos* and the *senderistas*, representations of sacrifice and collective purification charged with religious symbolism, ancient legends about the Inca and the Wari, and an image

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of an Andean culture characterised by archaism and incomprehensibility, Roncagliolo's novel seem to advance an "indigenista" interpretation of the internal armed conflict. According to this interpretation, "[Peru's] political violence should be understood as a ritual practice rooted in the deepest essence of Andean tradition" (Vich, *La novela*: 253). This position is explicitly voiced by Commander Carrión who, at the beginning of the investigations, reminds Chacalatana of the *cholos'* intrinsic violent nature and of the Uchuraccay massacre, a tragic episode of the war in which local *campesinos* slaughtered eight journalists they mistook as *senderistas*. The reference recalls the Vargas Llosa Commission's report on the massacres, which built its interpretation of the events on a radical separation between a modern Peru and an archaic one, uncivilised and characterised by primitive violence (Vargas Llosa, *Inquest in the Andes*; Franco, *Cruel Modernity*: 56-76). Considering these aspects, Lambright argues that *Red April* and other novels by Lima-born writers like *La hora azul* and *Un lugar llamado Oreja de Perro* "commit their own sort of violence. Indeed, they participate in and further a sustained project of symbolic violence that begins with the Conquest and, that, it could be argued, is the very root system that gave birth to and sustained the war itself, and they offer no viable alternative, discursive or otherwise" (*Andean Truths*: 59).

### ***Unheimliche* encounters with the past of violence**

Vich's and Lambright's analyses are convincing, but I disagree with the idea that *Red April* offers no viable alternatives. I contend that it is possible to read Roncagliolo's novel differently, as a narrative that through the connection between close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny foregrounds the involvement of the privileged classes in the violence that struck Peru in the 1980s, thus calling into question our common self-conception as innocent and peaceful subjects, alien to the violence fictionalised in the novel. Global novels are not passive victims of the world literary market; rather, they are often "acutely conscious of their position as part of a world system" (Kirsch, *The Global Novel*: 24) and can use the global as a medium to analyse how human experiences communicate across borders.

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While *Red April* brings up many issues related to war – torture, state-sanctioned violence, guerrilla tactics, the disappeared, “extreme masculinity”, and “expressive crimes” (Franco, *Cruel Modernity*: 15-21) – a question that stands out is that of the relation between close encounters and PTSD. As we saw above, the nature of Peru’s internal armed conflict made face-to-face killings and encounters with intimate enemies prominent. This is reflected in the narrative of *Red April*. Having to investigate the murders, Chacaltana comes face-to-face with brutally mutilated bodies, a mass grave, members and sympathisers of Sendero, state officials traumatised by the war, and dogs strung up from the lampposts in the village of Yawarmayo. These encounters have an ever-increasing impact on its psyche, as many passages reveal. After seeing the charred body in the morgue, Chacaltana has continuous distressing recollections and nightmares about fire, death, and the years of terrorism. The cases he investigates “inflame his memories” (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 45-46) and generate intrusive flashbacks that translate into somatic symptoms of PTSD. Noticing how people he recently met are found dead he tells the priest: “All the people I talk to die, Father. I’m afraid. It’s... it’s as if I were signing their death sentences when I leave them” (194). What frightens him most is knowing that “there was something he could not control, something inside him” (124). Indeed, Chacaltana’s outbursts of anger increase as he progresses in his investigations. Eventually, he becomes so violent that he rapes Edith, his love interest.

The encounters Chacaltana makes are particularly distressing because they bring back something he had repressed: “I’m afraid. I don’t sleep well. This... all of this is as if I had already seen it. There’s something in all this that has already happened, something that speaks of me” (195). He gradually realises that the dead bodies “have something to do with him more concretely than he had imagined” (120). The narrative repeatedly connects the prosecutor’s dreadful findings with fire and the death of his mother, which the conclusion reveals as Chacaltana’s childhood trauma. The events that are traumatising the protagonist of *Red April* thus acquire a further dimension. They are not simply stressors that generate Chacaltana’s PTSD, but also *unheimlich* encounters, situations that are linked to “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud, *The Uncanny*:

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124). The German word “*unheimlich*” (uncanny, eerie, unhomely) seems to indicate the opposite of *heimlich*, what is known and familiar, and thus safe and comfortable (from *Heim*, “home”). Yet, as Freud shows in his 1919 essay, there is a shade of meaning in which *heimlich* merges with its formal antonym, “so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*” (132). According to Freud’s analysis, the uncanny effect has to do with phenomena such as the constant recurrence of the same thing in combination with particular circumstances; the experience of *déjà vu*; the idea of the “double”; odd coincidences and the sense that things are fated to happen; situations in which what is inanimate is given attributes of life or, conversely, living beings that display the features of an automaton; circumstances in which what is not human appears in a pseudo-human form; “anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” (148); severed limbs, especially when they are credited with independent activity; “the idea of being buried alive, only apparently dead” (150); “the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfilment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead” (154). In sum, the uncanny “concerns a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar, or else a sense of familiarity which appears at the very heart of the unfamiliar” (Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction*: 34). Freud argues that this troubling experience is due to something that has been repressed and now returns, for the uncanny – according to Schelling’s definition – is something “that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (quoted in Freud, *The Uncanny*: 132). By revealing the ambivalence of what we considered familiar, close to us, and dear, the uncanny introduces a fundamental disturbance at the core of what we feel and think. This can have traumatic effects on our psyche for it disrupts our sense of self and identity.

*Red April* shows how a series of traumatic encounters in a (post)war context may generate a qualitative change in the mental state of an individual once a certain threshold of traumatic exposure is trespassed upon. The case of Chacaltana suggests that such a threshold may be connected to the degree in which we uncannily identify with the events, images, or behaviours that are traumatising us. Close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny thus form a sort of hermeneutic triangle in *Red April*. Each of them can be interpreted as a result of the combination of the other two factors. The encounters are “close” not just

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because they involve coming up face-to-face with something, but also because they bring into the open things that are strangely familiar to Chacaltana and that affect his own psyche. The PTSD he suffers is not due to just conflict-related stressors, but also to the fact that the latter reveal something he had repressed about his own past and self. Finally, the uncanny effect is generated by traumatic experiences of *déjà vu* (fire, carbonised bodies), the vision of dead bodies and severed limbs, strange repetitions of events, and by the fear of being buried alive and the instantaneous fulfilment of certain thoughts. The intersections between these three elements become more and more apparent as the story develops, opening important avenues for the study of the psychological consequences of war and the nature of violence.

Like in Cortázar's *House Taken Over*, in *Red April* an unidentified force gradually disrupts an apparently calm situation. Both stories end with a "house" locked and a "key" tossed away. And both stories raise questions on the nature of such a house, revealing that at the heart of the *Heim* there lies the *un-Heim*. The story of Chacaltana shows that repressing the trauma of war and one's relation to violence makes it difficult to recognise how violence can flare up, and that ignoring the parts of the self which are connected to violence makes it difficult to identify the parts that can control it. Indeed, Chacaltana and his initial myopic reliance on the penal code represent our widespread self-serving biases toward violence. We tend to present our self in a positive light, to observe traumatic events from the standpoints of the victim and the moraliser, and to conceive evil as an external force that penetrates our "house", ignoring that "most of us – including you, dear reader – are wired for violence, even if in all likelihood we will never have an occasion to use it" (Pinker, *The Better Angels*: 582). This does not mean that we are bound to visit violence on each other, nor that we cannot distinguish victims from perpetrators, but rather that for evolutionary, psychological, and social reasons human beings accommodate both motives that impel us to violence and motives that impel us towards peace and cooperation.

In several interviews, Roncagliolo explained that in his intentions Chacaltana represents our naïve and moralising attitude about war and horror.<sup>9</sup> *Red April's* exploration of violence is sustained a subtle mix of irony and identification that challenges readers to continuously negotiate between proximity and distance

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with the protagonist. I would argue that Roncagliolo's wager is to create "ironic identification" as a mode of narration. On the one hand, the detective novel structure draws us close to Chacaltana and invites us to look at the events through the prosecutor's gaze. On the other hand, Roncagliolo's irony creates a distance between us and the protagonist. Like Chacaltana, we *tend* to approach violence from a perspective of self-assumed innocence. We hardly ever imagine ourselves as perpetrators, and yet many historical crimes are committed by ordinary people. On the other hand, Chacaltana is to a large extent a caricature of this position: his focus on rules, procedures, and the law is too pronounced to be believed, his guileless ignorance of corruption is too bizarre, and his lack of street knowledge is at times embarrassing. Identifying with a character is a messy and unpredictable business, and should not be conflated with the question of identity. Identifying is not synonymous with "sameness": contrary to what some scholars seem to assume, centring *Red April* on Chacaltana's perspective is not to endorse that perspective. As Rita Felski writes, "glimpsing aspects of oneself in fictional beings involves a volatile mix of the familiar and the different; to recognise is to know again but also to see afresh. As I recognise myself in another, I also learn something about myself. And I might be startled or discomfited by what I see" (*Identifying*: 101). The ironic identification elicited by *Red April* is premised on this short circuit of recognition and disassociation. The reader is drawn to Chacaltana, yet also estranged from him. This double movement invites us to put ourselves in Chacaltana's shoes and, simultaneously, to look at his (and our) conduct from the outside, calling into question our relationship to violence.

The Vietnam War veteran Karl Marlantes argues that we all have a "shadow", that is, an opaque part of our self that we despise, that can be violent, that we do not want to see. We cannot defeat the shadow. The more we deny it, the more vulnerable we become to it, especially in war and in delicate post-war situations. Recognising "the repressed and despised parts of our personalities" that under ordinary circumstances "manifest themselves as small human foibles or weaknesses in character" but that in the crucible of war can lead to consequences of great horror and suffering is "a form of heroism not taught in boot camp" (Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*: 80). *Red April*, I submit, can be read as a novel that pushes us to come to terms with our

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“shadow”. It does not offer definitive answers, but it bids us confront our *unheimlich* proximity to war, “society’s dirty work” (184).

### Conclusions

Such proximity is not only connected to our inner demons but also our subject position. The “ironic identification” analysed above also applies to the narrative at large, that of the novel itself. *Red April*, scholars have underscored, addresses an audience rather unfamiliar with the Andean culture. It is written from a Lima perspective, middle-class and dominant, principally for a metropolitan and global audience. The novel thus creates an uncomfortable “positional identification” that highlights “our” (readers of the “privileged” classes) implication in the violence suffered by the subaltern and in the differential distribution of grievability. I would argue that the dialectic of irony and identification that we saw above structures the whole novel. The stereotypes about Andean culture and people, the haughty or implicit discrimination of Quechua language and local categories of knowledge, the fantasy of the enclosed nation (Ubilluz, *El fantasma*), and the fact that the government official and dominant classes in the novel portray the *campesinos* and the indigenous population as primitive and intrinsically violent, are so marked that can be read as a way of ironizing on how the criollo elite framed the conflict. There is indeed a distinctive vein of black humour and “sociological” irony in *Red April* that parodies the mentality of Lima’s upper classes. For example, when Chacaltana protests against the electoral frauds and misconducts he has witnessed in Yawarmayo, Commander Carrión – who was visiting the village – responds: “What law? There’s no law here. Do you think you are in Lima? Please...” (Roncagliolo, *Red April*: 88). And the journalists who come to check the conduct of the elections – “all white, Limenians or gringos” (100) – are completely out of touch with the problems and reality of the Andean highlands and easily fooled by the corrupted local police:

“As you can see”, the police officer continued: “A good climate, a peaceful countryside, people freely exercising their right to vote... What else could you ask for?”

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"You are right", said the journalist. "I ought to move here. Lima can be an unbearable city." (101)

By representing the state and the privileged classes as historically disinterested in or ignorant of the condition of the populations living in the Andean highlands, *Red April* brings into relief our responsibility as "implicated subjects", that is, as subjects who contribute to, inhabit, or inherit complex systems of domination and violence "without being themselves direct agents of harm" (Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*: 1). Indeed, as Chauca has argued, Chacaltana's pathological Oedipus complex "mirrors the governmental pact of silence" and his denial of his childhood crime "allegorises the state of denial of those who benefit from the [the structures of power that alienate Andean communities and their territories]" (*Mental Illness*: 75-76). In a country where exclusion is so embedded that "the disappearance of tens of thousands of citizens went unnoticed by the dominant society" (69), the privileged need to acknowledge and take responsibility for propping up and propagating the structures of discrimination and social, political, and epistemic injustice that made possible and fuelled Peru's civil war.

By narrating the unfolding of Chacaltana's PTSD within the larger context of the trauma of Ayacucho's society, *Red April* prompts us to examine the constitutive ambivalence of our self. The stressors that may cause our anxiety disorder are maximally traumatic when they mirror past experiences, character traits, behavioural patterns, or subject positions that we perceive as uncomfortably familiar even though they have been estranged from our psyche through repression, habit, or lack of self-scrutiny. Literature demonstrates the importance of narratives for probing the heavy contradictions and consequences of war. Roncagliolo's literary articulation of the interplay between close encounters, PTSD, and the uncanny could indeed be read as an invitation to unlock the house that has been "taken over" and explore how the violence of war "assault psyches, confuses ethics, and tests souls" (Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*: xi).

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<sup>1</sup> After 2000, there have been occasional resurgences of violence attributed to *senderistas* (or small groups that claim a historical affiliation with Sendero). However, given the local nature and the low-intensity of these incidents, the armed conflict between the Peruvian state and Sendero is generally considered to have taken place between 1980 and 2000. See Ríos and Sánchez (*Breve historia de Sendero Luminoso*: 133-154).

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- 2 While it has become commonplace to use the name “Sendero Luminoso” (Shining Path), which derives from the slogan “by way of the shining path of Mariátegui,” the actual name was Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL). José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) was an influential intellectual and the founder of Peruvian Socialist Party.
  - 3 Several authors, including Roncagliolo (*La cuarta espada*: 218-219), Agüero (*Los rendidos*: 24, 29-30, and 49), and Aguirre (*Terruco de m...*), point out that there is no neutral language to refer to the internal conflict in Peru and its protagonists. According to the speaker and his or her interpretation of the events, the former can be referred to as “*conflicto armado*” (armed conflict), “*guerra senderista*” (Shining Path’s war), “*lucha armada*” (armed struggle), “*guerra popular*” (people’s war), or “*revolución*” (revolution) and its protagonists can be called terrorists, soldiers, comrades, “*senderistas*” (Shining Path’s fighters), “*terrucos*” (a colloquial term, used as a substitute for terrorist and as a frequent insult to stigmatise sectors of the Peruvian population), “*presos políticos*” (political prisoners, if in jail).
  - 4 Following Theidon, Pedersen and Kienzler (*Exploring Pathways of Distress*: 253-257) have shown that in the region of Ayacucho there are “local idioms of distress”, such as *llaki* (sorrow, grief), *susto* (fright), *pinsamientuwan* (an inner feeling of increasing and persistent worries, combined with the embodied experience of “worrying thoughts throbbing inside your head”), *tutal pinsamientuwan* (excess of worrying memories), *ñakary* (a collective form of affliction, induced by unfortunate events), and *llaki* (individual affliction, sorrow and sadness emerging from the inside).
  - 5 I am fully aware that *Red April* and this journal may also be read by other people, but in specifying my use of the first-person plural in the above passage I want to call attention to our position concerning structures of violence that we do not originate or control, much in the spirit of Bruce Robbins’s *The Beneficiary*: “Who is a beneficiary? You are, probably. If you had not benefitted from some ambitious higher education, it seems unlikely that you would be dipping into a book with so earnest and unpromising a title as this one. The education that has prepared you to read this paragraph may not guarantee much in terms of job opportunities, income, or security, but on the global scale [...] it makes you one of the privileged” (6).
  - 6 While earlier accounts of the PCP-SL emphasised the pseudo-religious conviction of many of its members, recent investigations and memoirs portray a more nuanced picture of the different motivations that led people to join its ranks. See, for example, Gavilán (*Memorias*: 38-44); Agüero (*Los rendidos*: 55-58); and Degregori (*Qué difícil es ser Dios*).
  - 7 According to Pedersen and Kienzler’s study of PTSD in the region of Ayacucho (*Exploring Pathways of Distress*: 252-253), the violence-related stressors that affected the locals included witnessing the violent death of family members, friends, or close neighbours, lack of opportunities for proper bereavement, forced displacement, torture, material losses, being threatened with dying, being physically or sexually abused, and being forcefully enlisted in the army or as watchmen. Based on their survey data the authors conclude that “among the highland Quechua and after more than a decade of being exposed to political violence, one in four adults (24.7%) reported symptoms compatible with the diagnosis of PTSD” (262). Their research shows that “exposure to political violence created most of its ill effects in specific vulnerable groups, such as those unable to earn a living (unpaid domestic workers, aged, illiterate), lacking sources of emotional or material support (weak social networks), or unable to reciprocate economically (as in the case of widows)” (262).
  - 8 In my analysis of Chacaltana, I also consider *La pena máxima*, a novel published in 2014 but which constitutes a sort of prequel to *Red April*.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Santiago Roncagliolo: 2015 National Book Festival*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OAvcdfqwJg> (accessed 01/11/2020); and *Santiago Roncagliolo: La pena máxima*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WCQefelzwY> (accessed 01/11/2020).

# Reality vs. Propaganda. PTSD among Civilian Healthcare Staff and Patients and the Rhetorical Invention of the “War on Coronavirus”<sup>1</sup>

By Patrizia Piredda

**Abstract:** As the coronavirus pandemic broke out in March of 2020, many countries’ healthcare systems were overwhelmed by the sudden increase in the number of hospitalised patients and deaths. Not only hospitals but the healthcare staff struggled too, who faced unprecedented stressful work conditions for which they often had no training. Politicians and the media addressed the sanitary crisis using the metaphor of “war on coronavirus”, calling the national and international communities to an emotional “call to arms”. However, the article argues that the use of war-metaphors was misleading and incorrect because PTSD triggered in civilian healthcare staff by the harsh work conditions during the crisis was not entirely comparable with PTSD in military medical staff deployed in combat zones. The ethical burden and the exposure to risks of physical injury and death made the conditions of these two groups comparable. However, the technical and professional preparation of the military and the civilian healthcare staff diverge and make their operational contexts incomparable. The author thus argues that the “war on coronavirus” was a wrong metaphor used to divert public attention from the actual state of the inefficiency of the national health systems in such countries as Italy and the UK.

**Keywords:** *Coronavirus, PTSD in civilian healthcare staff, metaphor, rhetorical manipulation and propaganda*

## Introduction

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a syndrome that occurs in subjects who have gone through traumatic experiences such as dreadful and dangerous events that have threatened their physical safety. PTSD symptoms can vary from mild to severe and studies have demonstrated that a vast number of people suffer or have suffered from PTSD.<sup>1</sup> PTSD is not only related to war and conflict, although the stressors should be sufficiently intense to trigger it: “some events such as bullying, divorce, death of a pet, and learning about a diagnosis

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Fikret Ozturgen for his suggestions and help with the revision of the text.

of cancer in a close family member are not deemed extreme enough to precipitate PTSD” (Bisson and others, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*: 1). Therefore, this syndrome does not appear whenever one goes through a traumatic experience but might occur as a consequence of experiences that do not imply extreme violence, injury, or death. PTSD can break out in someone who

directly experiences the traumatic event; witnesses the traumatic event in person; learns that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend (with the actual or threatened death being either violent or accidental); or experiences first-hand repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (not through media, pictures, television or movies unless work-related). (Rizzo and others, *Expansion*: 334)

The recent Coronavirus-pandemic offers a remarkable case study of how the application of the notion of PTSD to civilian healthcare staff was framed within a media campaign that described the struggle with the epidemic as a war against the virus. Especially during the worst moment of the crisis in Europe, i.e. between early March and late April 2020, politicians and the media of many European countries used the metaphor of the “war against an invisible enemy” to mean the mobilisation of resources to tackle the spread of the virus. Healthcare staff were depicted like “soldiers” and “heroes” fighting bravely in the trenches on the frontline, and the communities were encouraged to support the effort of these brave professionals who risked their lives to protect the lives of many others. Such rhetorical “call to arms” was basically aimed at triggering an emotional response among the public, based on fear, and at encouraging the “patriotic” formation of a “second line” backing the “frontline”, where the healthcare staff were deployed. Despite the emotional mobilisation, neither politicians nor the media said anything about the actual conditions of the national health systems in countries such as Italy, UK, France, or Spain (not to mention the USA), in which years or even decades of cut to expenditure have put the systems to their knees. As a consequence, doctors, paramedics, and nurses were forced to work in conditions of high pressure and stress, not only due to the sanitary emergency and the following impact on hospitals, but above all due to the inefficiency and lack of medical structures and equipment, such as

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Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), scarcity of beds in Intensive Care Units (ICUs), and inadequate supply of technical equipment (ventilators). Moreover, healthcare staff had not received any specific training to face such an emergency, which is one of the reasons why psychologists state that the stressful experience could spiral out and result in PTSD or burnout.

In this article, I am analysing the reasons why the media in the UK and Italy (which I chose as relevant case-studies) talked about the traumatic experience of healthcare staff involved in the treatment of Covid-19 patients by referring to war-metaphors. As they did so, I claim, they blurred the condition of civilian healthcare staff with that of military medics who come back from combat zones, thus blurring two different kinds of PTSD. In fact, despite the extensive similarity of symptoms, the causes of PTSD in military medics remain different from that of civilian medics. Therefore, I claim that it is correct to talk about PTSD for healthcare staff involved in the treatment of Covid-19 patients, but I also claim that it is misleading and wrong to compare the epidemic to a war.

### **PTSD in civilian healthcare staff deployed against Coronavirus in Italy and the UK**

Not one month after the outbreak of the epidemic, and two weeks after its spread across northern Italy, on March 8 the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a document that declared the state of “health emergency”. Each paragraph of that document conveyed one precise political message: the first addressed the broader population by inviting all to be empathetic to those who had fallen sick, because “people who are affected by COVID-19 have not done anything wrong, and they deserve our support, compassion and kindness” (WHO, *Mental Health*: 1). The second paragraph was also important because it urged people not to call the infected patients “victims” or “diseased” but rather by using the paraphrase “people who have covid-19” (1). One further message was meant to reach directly the healthcare workers and concerned about the serious stressful and mind-affecting conditions in which they were about to be deployed:

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Feeling under pressure is a likely experience for you and many of your colleagues. It is quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak. Managing your mental health and psychosocial well-being during this time is as important as managing your physical health. (2)

The advice provided in that paragraph would soon reveal itself ineffective for a great number of doctors and nurses: "Try and use helpful coping strategies such as ensuring sufficient rest and respite during work or between shifts, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity, and stay in contact with family and friends" (2). Prolonged tiredness without recovery, lack of food and water during the shifts, and the separation from family and friends would eventually result as the major causes of mental breakdown. Insofar as these causes also feature among the stressors that might trigger PTSD in military medics, it is clear that PTSD "is not only associated with exposure to combat and traumatic events, but also to increased stress in one's home life, such as frequent moves and family separations" (Pitts and others, *Effect of Hardiness*: 279). By acknowledging such risk-factor, the WHO document went on to address the managers of health facilities, no longer by "urging" but rather by "commanding":

Keeping all staff protected from chronic stress and poor mental health during this response means that they will have a better capacity to fulfil their roles. Be sure to keep in mind that the current situation will not go away overnight and you should focus on longer-term occupational capacity rather than repeated short-term crisis responses. (WHO, *Mental health*: 3)

Little further on, the document went on recommending:

Ensure that staff are aware of where and how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services and facilitate access to such services. Managers and team leaders are facing similar stresses to their staff and may experience additional pressure relating to the responsibilities of their role. It is important that the above provisions and strategies are in place for both workers and managers, and that managers can be role-models for self-care strategies to mitigate stress. (3)

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Since the beginning, it was evident that the emergency would put great pressure on healthcare staff both physically and spiritually. Anyone could develop symptoms of psychophysical stress, anxiety, emotional breakdown, or burnout. The most dangerous moments were those in which doctors and nurses were not in action, because the accumulated emotional stress would then emerge abruptly. Many witnesses admitted that during the breaks, as they remained alone, they released the tension by crying. Once distress, sadness, and frustration were overcome by willpower (Lee, *Coronavirus*), they could resume their job.

The main symptoms that appeared in healthcare staff during the two months of the Corona-crisis in Europe were discouragement, helplessness, weariness, and fear, all symptoms that could lead to the diagnosis of PTSD, whose triggering causes include

(1) exposure to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, (2) reexperiencing that event with distressing recollections, dreams, flashbacks, and/or psychological and physical distress, (3) persistent avoidance of stimuli that might invite memories or experiences of the trauma, and (4) increased arousal. (Victor and others, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*. 284)

To prevent mass-burnout, which would eventually cause not only healthcare staff but also the whole health system to collapse, by the end of March the Italian authorities began to consider deploying psychologists in the hospitals. On March 24, the action "*iniziativa psicologi online*" started: over 8000 psychologists were deployed to support anyone who was affected by the psychological effects of the epidemic, be they staff, patients, and families who had someone in critical conditions or even deceased (CNOP, *Una banca dati*). On April 6, the national institute for the insurance and safety of workers (INAIL), in cooperation with the national association of psychologists, published the official document "*Gestione dello stress e prevenzione del burnout negli operatori sanitari nell'emergenza COVID-19*" (Di Tecco and others, *Gestione dello stress*), which pointed out the possible causes and psychological

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consequences of emotional and physical overload, determining what the health system was supposed to do in order to prevent such events. The document did not mention PTSD but rather replaced this acronym with the word “burnout”, or a work-related chronic-stress syndrome characterised by a “feeling of impoverished energies or exhaustion, increased mental detachment and negative or cynical feelings toward work and other people, resulting in reduced professional capacities” (*ibid.*).

In the UK too, the problem of stress in healthcare staff was promptly tackled. On March 28, the WHO and the International Labour Organisation launched the survey “Global Health and Safety of Health Workers in COVID-19” to monitor and prevent the major risks which healthcare staff were exposed to. The NHS established a mental health hotline soon after to provide support to healthcare staff because experts had warned that the risk of developing PTSD was high. However, only on May 12, a team at the University of the Highlands and Islands started to project an app capable of monitoring the mood and the anxiety level of NHS workers (Editorial, *Coronavirus: Mental Health*).

Italy was the first European country where the virus spread fast and aggressively: here doctors and nurses were confronted with a highly stressful experience, especially in the most seriously affected areas in Bergamo, Cremona, and Brescia, where at the end of March ICUs were on the brink of collapse, due to shortage of beds and equipment to treat the increasing number of admitted patients. The staff had to work in hard conditions of stress, fatigue, danger, and frustration due to the fact that a great number of choking patients were beyond their ability to help, which forced the medical personnel to sort those who were to be treated from those who could not be saved. David Lazzari, president of the Italian national association of psychologists described the dire conditions of work in an article of March 28, in which he mentioned extenuating shifts of up to twelve hours, during which doctors and nurses remained wrapped in insulated PPE that did not permit transpiration (Mazza, *Coronavirus*).

Many a witness confirmed such description, for example in the letter that one 39-year-old nurse from Senigallia addressed to Italian PM Giuseppe Conte. In her letter, the woman explained why she refused the proposal of the Government to raise the healthcare staff’s salary by 100 Euro, a measure which

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she considered offensive. During the shift, she claimed, she could not drink, nor did she dare use the toilet due to the fear that the least distraction could cause her to contract the virus. And in the evening, when she went back home with her face bruised by the protective mask, she could not even sit and eat with her family (Editorial, *Coronavirus, la lettera di un'infermiera a Conte*). One further testimony of the extent to which healthcare staff were exposed to exhaustion was the picture of Mrs Elena Pagliarini that was taken on March 8 in the hospital of Cremona, in which the nurse was portrayed asleep over her desk after a devastating shift and still wearing her full PPE (Editorial, *Coronavirus, l'infermiera sfinita*).

Healthcare staff in other nations were confronted with the same problems. In the UK, on April 14, Louise Wigginton, a specialist respiratory nurse working in an intensive care Covid-19 Red Zone in central London, told the BBC that she worked in 13 hour-long shift often without breaks: "I was so hot in my PPE – she said – that I thought I was going to faint. My eyes felt funny and my legs felt like jelly" (Lee, *Coronavirus: Covid-19 Nurse*). *The Guardian* reported on March 25 that doctors and nurses were "worr[ied] about carrying the virus into their homes where their children, partners and parents could be exposed" (Frangou, *Coronavirus Heroes*).

Stress was both physical and mental. On the one hand, there was fear of being infected and of spreading the contagion among families, not to mention the preoccupation of committing mistakes at work due to tiredness. On the other hand, the staff had to endure physical strain and fatigue, as the PPE caused skin-rashes, blocked the transpiration, and left bruises on the face. The most serious cause of stress, though, was – according to the President of the national association of psychologists – the lack of "individual and general safety conditions" (Mazza, *Coronavirus*), followed by fatigue and the sense of helplessness in the face of many a patient who died away alone and without the comfort of their families.

The extreme conditions of medical staff in these two countries were well depicted in two articles, respectively written by a doctor in the hospital "Papa Giovanni XXIII" in Bergamo, and by medical staff in the tertiary care hospital in North Midlands, Royal Stoke University Hospital. The former described the appalling conditions of the hospital during the peak of contagion:

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300 beds out of 900 are occupied by Covid-19 patients. Fully 70% of ICU beds in our hospital are reserved for critically ill Covid-19 patients with a reasonable chance to survive. The situation here is dismal as we operate well below our normal standard of care. Wait times for an intensive care bed are hours long. Older patients are not being resuscitated and die alone without appropriate palliative care, while the family is notified over the phone, often by a well-intentioned, exhausted, and emotionally depleted physician with no prior contact. (Nacoti, *At the Epicenter*: 2)

The witness went on describing the conditions in other hospitals in Bergamo on the brink of collapse, where “medications, mechanical ventilators, oxygen, and personal protective equipment [were] not available” (2). The hospitals were so overcrowded, that “patients lay on floor mattresses” and basic services, from maternity to oncological treatment, had to be reduced or even suspended.

The English article openly revealed the inadequacies of the NHS that in those chaotic moments released confusing guidelines that caused mayhem, for example, those concerning PPE. Only on April 2, the NHS released one official set of guidelines, albeit

probably a month too late for the staff that had either died or had contracted coronavirus by that time only to succumb to it later. By the 5th week of this pandemic reaching the UK, although the government only confirmed 49 verified deaths of NHS staff, sources claim the number of health care fatalities to be more than a hundred. (Chaudhry and Raza, *Covid 19*: 2)

Despite that, British healthcare staff had to face the epidemic “wearing thin plastic Aprons and short gloves, leaving the whole of [their] arms exposed, despite studies clearly indicating that corona virus survives on skin and cloth” so that the constant exposure to threat produced “an adverse impact on staff morale”. Both articles mentioned the danger of burnout as one of the most feared consequences.

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**Sharing and acknowledging traumatic war and/or pandemics experiences:  
from group frailty to social strength**

Scholars have demonstrated that PTSD can also be triggered by the impossibility of sharing traumatic experiences. In this case, the traumatised person tends to share it only with other colleagues or comrades who have experienced something similar, which causes them to feel isolated and frustrated by the lack of moral and psychological support from their social environment. Concerning this aspect, the experience of healthcare staff involved in tackling Covid-19 resembles that of war-veterans. One of the most acute reasons for suffering for these people consists in being under the impression that their society fails them, refuses to listen to their stories, and is just eager to reintegrate them into civil life as if nothing happened. Even worse suffering is finally caused by the existence of individuals or groups that openly blame veterans for the evil that they have committed in war. Whenever trauma remains unelaborated, it produces suffering. When PTSD derives from untold and repressed suffering, its origin is not only psychophysical but cultural: when society refuses to cope with pain and suffering and rejects or stigmatises traumatic experiences as something merely to hide and forget, people who have endured pain and suffering will eventually risk developing PTSD.

While the epidemic raged in Europe, medics and journalists wondered whether it was acceptable for healthcare staff to show frailty and to cry openly in front of patients, families, and colleagues. This question recalls one diffused problem among veterans affected by PTSD, for military personnel is expected to be brave, resilient, unemotional, and capable of enduring physical strain and psychological stress. When soldiers begin to perceive that they are not so strong as they “should” be, they are afraid of being called “weak”, “cowardly”, “too soft”, and of being discharged. As a consequence, they tend to suppress that feeling, which is likely to trigger PTSD. Where social support is not provided, such a reaction could cause the traumatised person to self-isolate in the so-called “paradox of silence”:

Combat veterans want to be understood, but they do not want to talk about their experiences or how they're feeling, or what they're thinking. Combat veterans want those who have never served in the military to understand what serving in the military means,

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and what it takes to survive in combat, yet do not want to talk about their combat experiences, or what it is like to kill someone. Most combat veterans become extremely annoyed when someone, especially strangers, ask them if they have killed anyone. In fact, the more one talks about their combat experiences, the less likely they are to be believed by other combat veterans. (Castro and others, *The Combat Veteran*: 304)

Such a spiral of reticence can jeopardise the difficult process of acknowledging the traumatic experience, thus pushing the traumatised person more and more into a pathological state of mental distress (Ko and others, *Creating Trauma-Informed Systems*; Kuhn and others, *Multiple Experiences*; Langlois, *Influence*; Litz and others, *Moral Injury*; Lloyd and others, *Comorbidity*).

During the first peak of the epidemic, which also made the moment of most acute fear and collective anxiety, when ICUs were no longer able to admit new patients and graveyards had to pile the coffins due to shortage of land to bury all corpses, a number of solidary demonstrations took place. People saluted healthcare staff from homes and public institutions acknowledged their sacrifice officially. Doctors of the Royal Stoke University Hospital wrote:

The public response towards NHS staff has been heart-warming. On leaving the hospital, we see numerous messages of support displayed on walls and windows. Every Thursday people open their windows to clap and cheer to express their gratitude for the health workers. People are keen to help and support the NHS and nearly 1 million have signed up as volunteers. (Chaudhry and Raza, *Covid 19*: 4)

### **After the crisis**

However, no sooner had been the emergency called off than healthcare staff returned to be the object of intolerant attitude. For example, on April 28, in the city of Anzio in Italy, the family of a 32-year-old patient who died from Coronavirus reached the Covid-area in the hospital and assaulted one doctor, accusing her to have caused their relative to die (Pistilli, *Anzio*). Still, in April, nurse Damiana Barsotti came home after a long shift at the hospital of Lucca only to find a note from her neighbours that read: "Thank you for the Covid

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that you bring to us every day. Remember that elderly and children live here. Thank you” (Gasperetti, *Coronavirus*). Mrs. Barsotti told the journalist: “It was like being stabbed in the back, I felt betrayed and threatened, like a plague-spreader. I felt so depressed that I could not even get angry.”<sup>2</sup>

After the crisis was over, attention was quickly drawn away from the precarious work conditions of many a member of healthcare staff. And no sooner had diminished the fear of malady and death than the general tendency to forget and move on became quite evident. This caused frustration in healthcare staff in Italy and other European countries, where doctors and nurses organised demonstrations. They asked for respect and acknowledgement of their sacrifice, instead of being called “heroes” and rewarded with ridiculous alms of a few hundred Euros. They felt unjustly mocked at, exploited, and betrayed. This gap that suddenly split the corporation of healthcare operators from their social environment could be one cause of PTSD.

And finally, also patients who had survived developed PTSD. Several cases were acknowledged in the UK and Italy: people who had been treated in ICUs were haunted by nightmares and hallucinations similar to those that commonly affect veterans. These patients were haunted by monstrous visions, anxiety, and hyper reacting response to danger. For example, one of the early Italian Covid-patients, a policeman in Rome who remained in a coma for several weeks, after his awakening remembered recurring dreams of being sitting in a helicopter on its way to the frontline, where he was abandoned in the trenches dug in a desert, perhaps in Iraq or Afghanistan. There he saw his friends and comrades die and for long he continued hearing their voices calling for him (Marani, *Coronavirus*).

Another example is that of nurse Sadie Hallett-Chambers, who “hallucinated she was in a Spanish convent under attack by the IRA”, as she recounted after recovery: “I’m getting flashbacks most days, mainly of the delirium, my brain is really trying to figure out what was real and what was not” (Editorial, *Nurse who had coronavirus*). One further example is that of Claudia Brondolo, who said: “Nightmares wake me at night. I jump up and scream. I dream of being choking. Sometimes I lie in a cave, covered under the leaves that press me

down. Other times, I lie on a stretch and crave for breathing” (Mondo and Sola, *Dalla rianimazione*).<sup>3</sup>

These examples present many similarities with the symptoms of PTSD that can be observed in military medics and soldiers after their return from combat zones. However, the similarity is mostly formal because the specific contexts in which PTSD occurs in civilians and military personnel are quite different. What I am going to discuss next is how the public debate on Coronavirus, much unfortunately, was linguistically based on the will to comparing the medical emergency with a war, which blurred the two contexts and, as a consequence, the problem of PTSD.

### **PTSD in military medical personnel**

Before starting to analyse the linguistic and ideological abuse of war-metaphors made during the Coronavirus-pandemic, I would like to consider the specific problem of PTSD in military medical personnel. The majority of studies devoted to this theme concerns American veterans. A great deal of experimental studies demonstrates that many veterans, both soldiers and medics, developed PTSD after their return from overseas. One cause was an exaggerated sense of vulnerability due to the fact that “they are then deprived of a sense of control, a flow of information regarding their surroundings and status, sophisticated equipment to which they are accustomed, and physical comfort” (Baker, *Preventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders in Military Medical Personnel*: 262), as well as “witnessing death and serious injury to others” (Carson and others, *Psychophysiological Assessment*: 890).

Factors that may contribute to triggering PTSD in veterans are numerous and affect them in non-systematic ways. The studies highlight, in fact, that these factors are more or less effective also depending on the individual personality. One notion that is often used is that of “resilience”, a faculty that permits the person to absorb the trauma and not to develop PTSD or burnout. The lower the resilience, the likelier that a veteran will be affected by PTSD: this inference does not limit to understand the human response to trauma in the sphere of the military. This phenomenon has been defined through the metaphor of “hardiness”, which indicates the individual quality of being “hardy”, i.e.

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“strong and able to cope with difficult conditions”.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have argued that the harder we are, the more resilient to PTSD we are (Bartone and others, *Norwegian Adaptation*). What does that mean in moral and psychological terms? Is it some form of numbness or indifference? Does it imply a lack of empathy? In the works that I have consulted concerning the connection between PTSD, resilience, and hardiness, I could not come across any conclusive definition, and it is probably very hard to precisely tell how these three conditions interact.

Scholars often use the term hardiness by taking for granted that its possession would protect from exposure to traumatic experiences, as though it was some sort of amulet. For example, the authors of the article *Effects of Hardiness and Years of Military Service on Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in U.S. Army Medics* assume that medics in a combat zone are exposed to trauma like other combatants because they too are involved in dangerous and potentially harmful actions. Medics must not only take care of wounded and ill soldiers but must they ensure their own safety, as far as they are exposed (unlike civilian healthcare staff) to the danger of being harmed, injured, or killed. Thus, the authors state that being trained or having qualities “such as hardiness that protects against posttraumatic stress may be valuable for better supporting this high-stress military occupation” (Pitts and others, *Effects of Hardiness*: 279). And yet, what the relationship between hardiness and PTSD consists of remains obscure. It is only assumed that “psychological hardiness is a personality factor that describes individual differences in commitment, control, and challenge” and that hardiness improves with job satisfaction, “perceived social support and lower self-reported strain and illness, in high-stress business managers” (279). This seems to suggest that the more someone gains and achieves from their professional activity, the more will their hardiness benefit from such self-confident intoxication. Conversely, the more one experiences suffering, frustration, and discouragement, the less will their hardiness develop as a protective shield.

In the article by George Bonanno *Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience*, the notion of resilience is used as though it was perfectly clear what we mean by it. From the perspective of language, though, the notion of “resilience” is not different from that of, for example, “taste”: everyone knows what it is, but if one tries to describe how it works and how differently it affects the individual

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perception of the world, it becomes difficult to define such notions clearly and unequivocally. Both resilience and taste are abstract notions that convey some practical meaning as we use them in a specific language-context, which is a practical context. These notions are blurred because the premises on which their meaning rests – and the variables that make that meaning consistent and evident – cannot be established in advance. This causes resilience and taste to be largely dependent on the ineffability of the “individual” personality, which is moreover influenced and shaped by experiences (breeding and education), often those very same experiences in which resilience and taste play a crucial role in determining our responses. For all these reasons, it is almost impossible to determine in advance which people, in given stressful environments, will develop PTSD and why. One can only state, as common sense suggests, that hardier people will resist better to trauma, a conclusion to which also the authors of *Effects of Hardiness and Years of Military Service* arrives by stating that “having a hardy personality may protect those with extensive military service from experiencing posttraumatic stress” (282).

The point is therefore that the most reliable source of protection from PTSD is not so much the mysterious and absolutely subjective quality of hardiness or resilience, but rather prevention. The article *Professional Stress and Burnout in U.S. Military Medical Personnel Deployed to Afghanistan* starts by assuming that a dearth of resilience increases the risk of developing PTSD and burnout, but also argues that there are several ways of reducing the statistical probability of being affected by PTSD through self-care, team-care, and appropriate training that prepares the medical corps to cope with difficult conditions. The Geneva Convention states that military medics have no combat duties. They must preserve life through their medical expertise. However, in given circumstances, medics are supposed to use weapons and lethal force to defend themselves and their patients: “medics are required to cope not only with the emotional burdens associated with maintaining the health and wellbeing of their fellow soldiers, but also with their own potentially life-threatening situations resulting from combat operations” (Pitts and others, *Killing*: 538).

PTSD in military medical personnel is therefore different from that of civilian healthcare staff. Pharmacological therapies used to deal with PTSD may be similarly effective in both cases, but the approach to their specific context-

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related origin remains substantially diverse. For example, civilian doctors need no training to deal with the possible event of killing for self-defence (which is by no means traumatic) or to cope with the threat of remaining injured or killed in action. In general, civilian healthcare staff are not exposed to such forms of stress. Nonetheless, medic staff involved in tackling the Coronavirus-epidemic were exposed to a high risk of falling ill and dying. Moreover, they had to apply strict triage to sort the patients to treat, like combat medics who have in combat zones. The moral burden implied in such decisions is therefore common to both categories, and the risk of developing PTSD makes their cases similar but not identical. However, the Coronavirus-epidemic was “narrated” like a war, with doctors in the trenches of an imaginary “frontline”, which created a distorted perception of the emergency as a false close encounter with war.

### **A “made-up” encounter in war: war-metaphors and the pandemic**

On March 8, about ten days after the Coronavirus outbreak in Lombardy, which later became the most disease-stricken region in Europe, *la Repubblica* reported the words of the Italian PM Giuseppe Conte, urging all authorities to tackle the virus’ rapid spread. In the first of a long series of releases to the nation, Conte said: “During the last few days, I have thought of old readings on Churchill, it is our darkest hour, but we will make it” (Cappellini, *Coronavirus: Conte*).<sup>5</sup> With this metaphor, Conte compared himself to Churchill and our times to wartime, when the British government and people were called to respond firmly and bravely to the Nazi threat. Conte’s appeal actually sounded like a “call to arms”. Two days later, the paper *il Mattino* reported the words of virologist Roberto Burioni, who said: “A tyrant has turned our lives upside down, and it’s called coronavirus. We shall resist and fight everywhere, in homes, in the workplaces, by helping our most fragile fellow citizens and sacrificing us for a better future. Then we’ll be rewarded. Coronavirus, you won’t win. We have chased much worse ones” (Ajello, *Coronavirus come la guerra*).<sup>6</sup> In this case, the virus was depicted as a villain and a tyrant, which should force people to welcome any restriction of their freedom to be protected. Thus, the message read that in order to restore a “better” free society tomorrow, people should resist, sacrifice, fight the enemy wherever it is<sup>7</sup> and believe in Burioni’s last words, who briefly addressed the tyrant-virus directly and in the form of a slogan, warning it that it would not prevail, because the Italians already demonstrated their ability in chasing worse tyrants/viruses (like

Mussolini, polio, and smallpox) in the past. On March 17, France lays in the grip of the epidemic. All French and foreign newspapers reported the war declaration of President Emmanuel Macron, who stated “we are at war” (“*nous sommes en guerre*”), implicitly citing Minister of War Georges Clemenceau’s speech of November 20, 1917, before the National Assembly,<sup>8</sup> as several journalists pointed out (Berdah and others, *Confinement*; Chazot, *Macron*; and Fressoz, *Le combat*). The pandemic being in full expansion in all European countries and America, Macron’s sentence was borrowed two days later, on March 19, by American President Donald Trump, who by “describing himself as a ‘wartime president’, has vowed the US will achieve ‘total victory’ over the coronavirus” (Editorial, *Coronavirus: Trump*). The meaning of this metaphor is clear: the effort made by the health system to cope with the pandemic emergency is a war between humans and the virus, a war that will lead, in line with the propaganda language typical of American conservatives (Steuter and Wills, *At War with Metaphor*), to total victory.<sup>9</sup> As far as the problem of PTSD in medical staff is here in focus, I should like to carry out some analysis of how metaphors were used to describe healthcare staff and their deployment by referring to the semantic domain of war, i.e. as soldiers and heroes:

- 1) The concept of enemy and “invisible and insidious enemy” (Santarpia, *Coronavirus: Conte alla Camera*)<sup>10</sup> and the metaphor of the virus as a “bullet”, which was coined by the lieutenant paramedic and vice president of the Fire Department of New York’s Emergency Medical Services officers’ union Anthony Almojera, who said: “In wars you see the bullet, you know who your enemy is. This is a war with an invisible bullet – everyone you come into contact with is a bullet who could get you” (Cuddy, *Coronavirus in New York*);
- 2) The concept of trenches and front line to describe hospitals and ICUs: on April 5, the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* published the article “Coronavirus in Rome, the trench of GPs” (Angeli, *Coronavirus a Roma*); on the same day, one article of *The New York Times* reported: “Nurses and doctors treat patients on the front lines” (Stavis-Gridneff, *The Rising Heroes*); on April 11, *la Repubblica* published an article titled “Claudia alone in the trench, forced to decide whom to save”, describing the solitude of the medic in the “trenches” of the ICUs, where health care staff had to sort out via triage the patients to treat from those who could not be saved. On April 20, *The Guardian* published a photographic

reportage, whose title read “On the frontline: meet the NHS workers tackling coronavirus” (Editorial, *On the Frontline*);

- 3) the “atom bomb”: the chair of the Welfare Department in Lombardy County Council, Giulio Gallera, described the epidemic effect in Lombardy by saying: “We cannot compare what happened here with things occurred in Veneto or Emilia: in Lombardy, we have had an atom bomb, the virus has spread unchallenged for at least twenty days before we grew aware of it” (Editorial, *Coronavirus, in Lombardia*);<sup>11</sup>
- 4) “voluntary army” in the UK, where “more than 750.000 people signed up to join the ‘volunteer army’ to help relieve pressure on the NHS”;<sup>12</sup>
- 5) “the bunker”, used by Gallera to describe Lombardy County Council during the lockdown: “I have been in the bunker of the County Council for a month” (Colaprico, *Gallera*).<sup>13</sup>

These figures are “resemblance metaphors”, whose structure “X is Y” (“Achilles is a lion”) is the same as in logical propositions (e.g. “the house is white,” “London is a city,” and so on) that, according to the truth table, might be either true or false. It is quite obvious that the metaphor does not belong in the truth table as far as it does not represent a factual state of affairs. However, because in its structure the verb “to be” is used as a copula (Piredda, *The Deceptiveness of the Verb To Be*), a metaphor can convey metaphorical meaning as well as pragmatic messages that from the point of view of rhetoric can direct or manipulate opinion through persuasion. All metaphors convey pragmatic messages that influence our practical choices (Gibbs and others, *Inferring Pragmatic Messages*) since their meanings derive from the connection between two linguistic domains: this connection transfers one part of the characteristic of the first domain (war) to the second (the cure of Covid-19). Because metaphors influence opinions, judgment, and action,<sup>14</sup> it is important to understand if a metaphor is being used ethically or not and if it leads reasoning toward clarity or not. In other words, it is necessary to understand whether someone is using metaphors to manipulate emotions and desires (Citron and Goldberg, *Metaphorical Sentences*; and Erva and others, *Metaphors and Emotions*) to divert opinions toward the ends of propaganda.

### **The need to differentiate**

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The war-metaphors used to describe the sanitary crisis are inappropriate because they build on a few and feeble connections between the domain of war and that of the epidemic. If we consider the definition of “war” as provided by the website *Lexico*, we read that it means “a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country”, or “a state of competition or hostility between different people or groups”.<sup>15</sup> War is no natural phenomenon but rather a social one and does not, therefore, belong in the domain of necessity, for it concerns human agency, i.e. the sphere of liberty. In the case of a pandemic, instead, the struggle does not occur between two human entities but between humans and a non-human organism that does not aim to kill other forms of life as enemies but to reproduce and survive by using other living beings as hosts.

As for the metaphor of healthcare staff as “heroes”, I would say that it is the only appropriate one that has been invented during the crisis. In fact, the definition of the hero is basically the same in all dictionaries: “A person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities”.<sup>16</sup> However, although adequate, it also had controversial collateral effects: on the one hand, it fed feelings of profound admiration and gratitude for medical staff among the population; on the other hand, it contributed to diverting the public from considering the real state of disorganization in which years of expenditure cuts have left the national health systems. This caused many members of health care staff to grow frustrated and to reject the metaphor. Their testimonies speak against the abstract and mythical image of medics that heroically sacrifice themselves for the nation’s sake, as it was proposed by politicians and media.

On April 2, *la Repubblica* published the testimony of a freshly graduated doctor who had just started his career as a “Covid-19 medic” and said: “We all agree and have a message: we don’t want to be called heroes” (Strippoli, *Il neoassunto*).<sup>17</sup> On April 10, *La Stampa* devoted the article “Coronavirus and the anti-hero doctor” to the testimony of a physician who stated: “I think I’m a good doctor, but without any attitude for heroism” (Ercole, *Coronavirus e il medico antieroe*).<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, therefore, we see the language of politics that through the metaphors of war conveyed public opinion towards the idea of the necessary sacrifice and heroism of the medical soldiers; on the other hand, we can see that healthcare staff had to deal with real problems that nonetheless



remained neglected. To see one's own suffering underestimated and to feel that society fails to support and care for one's own sacrifice is often one triggering cause of PTSD.

Over the whole month of March, several Italian papers denounced that health care staff were not receiving an adequate number of swabs to check if they had contracted the virus (Zanotti, *In Piemonte*; Evangelisti, *Coronavirus: il dramma*). The newspaper *la Repubblica*, on March 27, reported about the work conditions of GPs: "We have been in close contact with infected patients but received no swabs and were ordered to keep on working" (Pucciarelli, *Coronavirus in Lombardia*);<sup>19</sup> and eventually, a number of papers focused on the shocking news from the Milanese retirement house Pio Albergo Trivulzio, where dozens of senior guests died and the healthcare staff were forced "to remove their masks not to frighten the patients" (Editorial, *La denuncia*).<sup>20</sup>

The BBC denounced the same situation in the UK on April 14, in connection with the decease of Mrs. Roberts, a nurse in Cardiff, in the video called "Coronavirus: "Nurse's PPE 'like soldier without combat gear'" (Editorial, *Coronavirus: Nurse's PPE*). Again on April 28, the BBC published two articles: the former read "The son of an NHS doctor who died with coronavirus has called on Health Secretary Matt Hancock to say sorry for mistakes in the government's response" (Editorial, *Coronavirus: NHS*), and the other was a report called "The government failed to buy crucial protective equipment to cope with a pandemic, a BBC investigation has found" (Editorial, *Coronavirus: UK Failed*).

These are just a few examples that show how the metaphors of war represented a huge emotional capital used by politicians to manage the emergency because they permitted to depict the sanitary emergency as a war, which urged the population to get ready to endure restrictions and unpopular policies in order to manage the crisis. The Coronavirus-pandemic was a "close encounter in war" only rhetorically, as politicians and journalists created the war-scenario with words. In a time in which collective imagination is deeply influenced by the idea that heroes (and superheroes) protect society from threats thanks to powers that make them almost invulnerable, the metaphors of soldiers and heroes provided a distorted perception of the real condition of healthcare staff. To deny their physical vulnerability and psychological frailty

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was a dangerous path towards misunderstanding and consequent lack of support, both practical and empathetic. As this is often one triggering cause of PTSD in veterans, also civilian healthcare staff could develop PTSD, if their suffering and sacrifice were mistaken for the “heroic” deeds of soldiers who answered their call of duty.

### Conclusions

The experiences of doctors and nurses engaged in war missions and the experience of civilian healthcare staff engaged in tackling Coronavirus surely share many aspects and the symptoms of PTSD surface similarly in both cases. However, distinctions are due: if preventing and healing PTSD requires the desire to understand the suffering of those who have endured traumatic experiences, and to make sure that they do not feel that their sacrifice was in vain, then it is crucial to acknowledge the specific context where PTSD can develop and what cultural implications are involved.

PTSD is a pathological response to trauma, which also depends on culture, ethics, and morals: one of the gravest dilemmas for doctors in ICUs, in the geographic areas where the epidemic was more severe, consisted in deciding which patients they should save because there was not enough medical equipment for everyone. This dilemma concerns both the moral status of the person and the moral status of society: is it right to decide to save the young man and let the elderly die? What if the young man is a mafioso, while the elder one is a benefactor? Who is wise enough to decide? Similar dilemmas confront combat medics in war zones when they have to sort the treatable wounded from those who are not going to survive. Doctors make their decisions, in both cases, based on clinical evaluation. Nonetheless, they may develop guilt or suffer from the stress of making such a difficult decision constantly. It is of fundamental importance to remember that these traumatic choices were made necessary, in the case of civilian healthcare staff involved in the Coronavirus crisis, by the lack of adequate medical facilities, which was in turn due to austerity policies and cut expenditure in public health.

Combat medics face similar moral dilemmas, however in a very different context. We, as a society, are much more inclined to accept the fact that in war people die and kill, regardless of whether this occurs in a just or wrong war. Such a question, in the case of a pandemic, does not make sense at all. Combat medics are armed and ready to use weapons to defend themselves. They are aware of the conditions of danger in which they work as well as of the fact that

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they and their colleagues can be injured, captured, or killed. These possibilities are completely alien to the work condition of civilian healthcare staff. This is what made it possible that the Coronavirus-epidemic swiped away their expectations, for the hardness of the crisis stretched beyond their imagination.

Military and civilian medical staff, like veterans and patients who have recovered from Coronavirus, may have developed the same symptoms of PTSD as a consequence of exposure to trauma. However, the stories they tell about their discomfort and their suffering are very different and society must understand their traumas by setting the appropriate cultural framework. Warriors must be healed as such, but an epidemic is no war.

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- <sup>1</sup> An estimated 3% of the British population, for example, shows PTSD symptoms. See McManus and others, *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity*.
- <sup>2</sup> “È stato come una pugnata alla schiena, mi sono sentita tradita, intimidita, trattata come gli untori. Da quanto ero depressa non mi sono neppure arrabbiata.”
- <sup>3</sup> “Di notte mi svegliano gli incubi. Sobbalzo e urlo. Sogno che sto soffocando. A volte sono in una grotta, coperta di foglie che mi pressano. Altre su una barella e non riesco a respirare.”
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hardy> (accessed June 12, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> “In questi giorni ho ripensato a vecchie letture su Churchill, è la nostra ora più buia, ma ce la faremo.”
- <sup>6</sup> “Un tiranno ha sconvolto la nostra vita, e si chiama coronavirus. Resisteremo e combatteremo ovunque, nelle case, nei luoghi di lavoro. Aiutando i più deboli e sacrificandoci per un domani migliore. E poi ci rifaremo. Coronavirus, non vincerai. Ne abbiamo cacciati di peggiori.”
- <sup>7</sup> This is a further reference to Churchill speech of 4 June 1940, which was also quoted in the movie *The Darkest Hour*: “We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/> (accessed July 12, 2020).
- <sup>8</sup> “Dans les circonstances actuelles, c’est que nous sommes en guerre, c’est qu’il faut faire la guerre, ne penser qu’à la guerre, c’est qu’il faut avoir notre pensée tournée vers la guerre et tout sacrifier aux règles qui nous mettraient d’accord dans l’avenir si nous pouvons réussir à assurer le triomphe de la France.” <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/grands-discours-parlementaires/georges-clemenceau-8-mars-1918> (accessed July 12, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> The formula “total victory” gloomily recalls the Nazi slogan of “Endsieg”.
- <sup>10</sup> “Un nemico invisibile e insidioso.”
- <sup>11</sup> “Non si può fare alcun paragone tra quello che è successo qui e quello che è successo in Veneto o in Emilia: in Lombardia c’è stata una bomba atomica, il virus ha girato indisturbato per almeno venti giorni prima di essere individuato.”
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/04/nhs-volunteer-army-now-ready-to-support-even-more-people/> (accessed July 05, 2020).
- <sup>13</sup> “Da un mese sto dentro al bunker della Regione Lombardia.”
- <sup>14</sup> What Aristotle merely conceived as a philosophical thesis was confirmed in 2013 in the field of cognitive science by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2).

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- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/war> (accessed June 12, 2020).
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/hero> (accessed June 12, 2020).
- <sup>17</sup> “Siamo tutti d’accordo e abbiamo un messaggio: non vogliamo essere chiamati eroi.”
- <sup>18</sup> “Credo di essere un buon medico. Ma senza alcuna attitudine all’eroismo.”
- <sup>19</sup> “Siamo entrati in contatto con pazienti infetti e non siamo stati sottoposti a tampone con l’ordine di continuare a lavorare.”
- <sup>20</sup> “Togliere le mascherine per non spaventare i pazienti.” An inquiry was opened on the case of Trivulzio retirement home. Although the number of deceases among the guests remains unknown, on April 19 the figures were 199 deaths out of 1200 patients.

## My "Close Encounters" in World War 2 Combat

By Thayer Greene

**Abstract:** As a 19-year-old young man, Thayer Greene had his "close encounter" with the great world conflict at the end of winter of 1945, as he was deployed as an infantryman to Europe and took part in the battle for Cologne. In this article, the author recollects a few of his relevant close encounters with war and with the emotions that characterised those moments, from fear to hilariousness, up to sheer terror that eventually haunted him for decades as PTSD. This long-suppressed spiritual suffering urged him to train in Jungian psychotherapy in the 1960s and finally to deal with his traumatic memories in the late 1970s. This text tells the story of that journey from trauma to healing.

**Keywords:** *personal narratives, Second World War, Jungian psychotherapy, holistic healing, PTSD*

Now that I am in my 95<sup>th</sup> year on the planet, I welcome the opportunity to reflect on traumatizing wartime experiences that I experienced in my eighteenth and nineteenth years. While it is hard to remember the minute details of my formative years in World War II combat, even after nearly a century of life certain images and feelings never leave.

As a young man of the World War II generation I was drafted. I was hoping to be assigned to a military government unit as I had studied both French and German at my New Hampshire preparatory school. But at my induction the bored corporal at Fort Devens had another idea. "Do you have flat feet, bud?" he asked. "No," I replied. "You're in infantry then," he barked as he stamped my admissions papers.

I had the peaceful personality of a preacher's son; the death dealing tasks of an infantry soldier did not seem where I belonged. But you don't get to choose, and we have less control over our fates than we might wish. "it is what it is" is one of the main lessons of military service. Accepting this lesson helped me survive during my most difficult times in combat. Though the army is a huge organization that successfully coordinates the actions of all military personnel, in fact the archetype of an infantry soldier is a solitary experience.

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My boot camp was abbreviated from 13 to 9 or 10 weeks because of the immediate need for "grunts," infantry soldiers on the front. Thus I had little time to prepare for the life-and-death determining experiences I would soon face. The casualty rate was astronomical for all contenders and there was an overwhelming need for more bodies at the front even after the Allies had gained the upper hand and I joined the fight. I did not, perhaps nobody could, grasp the intensity, enormity, darkness and terror of the situation I was being trained for.

I became an infantry soldier in the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division. Our first mission was to secure control of Cologne. Riding in a troop truck from Belgium to Germany I heard 155 howitzers exploding in the distance. With every yard of chewed earth we crossed, war became more real and concrete. We heard the sounds of battle in the distance. We passed dead and mutilated bodies on the sides of the road, both American and German. The late adolescent bravado that I had felt at the beginning of my war journey was quickly draining from me. Seeing corpses and large artillery holes in the landscape rendered the magical war movie images from back home obsolete. A wounded vet returning to the fighting in the front with us newbies said, "OK, boys, it's no longer make believe, it's real. You're in a war where Germans want to kill us. Wake up. Take it seriously." This warning from the tried warrior propelled me into the survival mode that I then maintained at all times.

In Cologne the Western Allies controlled the west side of the Rhine and the Germans the east side. Once there we received two days of "safety" training, subjecting us newbies to limited enemy firing. We rode on the back of tanks behind the turrets as bullets whistled by us, but we were safe as long as we stayed put. We bivouacked in a safe bunker on the west side of the Rhine. We greatly outnumbered our adversary on the East. I pulled guard duty every other day along the river, but there were plenty of downed buildings to protect me from the occasional spray of German bullets.

We remained in Cologne for a few weeks as the attack of the Ruhr pocket was being set up. The Western Allies had captured the Ludendorff Bridge in Remagen. The Germans had done their best to destroy it, but it remained intact. We used it along with pontoon bridges to get our massive numbers of troops across the Rhine. As soon as I crossed the Rhine, I approached an older infantry

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man, not part of my unit. I said, "You don't seem to be scared." "Boy," he replied, "Are you mistaken. You don't understand. I've survived three months of fighting unwounded and I'm scared shitless."

My combat duty lasted about two months. I had close calls of German gunners spraying bullets a few feet from my heels while I scrambled behind abandoned deserted jeeps or large rocks in the field as we advanced. During one particular advancement of my squad I had scrambled behind a large boulder. The shelter of the stone house I needed to get to was 30-40 yards away. The Germans knew I was there. A large artillery shell landed about 50 yards behind me. I stayed put. Shortly thereafter a shell landed about 50 yards in front of my boulder cover. I was being bracketed. Move soon or die! With my 65 pounds of radio and other military gear I made a beeline for the stone house. Luckily the German gunner didn't see me for the first 25 yards. By the time he got a bead on me there was only a spray of bullets at my heels as I got in house. I didn't feel invincible but had the strange impression that it did not seem that hard to survive if I kept my wits about me.

Another close call I witnessed was of a humorous in nature since no one was physically hurt. A 30ish redheaded West Virginia hillbilly was in my platoon. He was well liked and appreciated by his fellow younger infantry soldiers. "Red" as we called him was a true character with his cultural uniqueness. He thought and talked much different than us city folk. He was everybody's friend and buddy.

Our squad was safely ensconced in a sturdy German house, offering good protection from the bullets a random German sniper was shooting our way. Red had a large handlebar mustache that he immaculately maintained, and which was an immense source of pride and identity. We often enjoyed him enjoying his creation. A German sniper had a bead on a glass window of the house we were in. Red walked by the window. A split second later a bullet flew through the window and sheared off half of his beloved mustache but did not touch him. His mustache was his achievement that helped to define him. He had escaped a sniper's bullet by a razor's edge, but that was low on his level of concern. Losing half of the finest handle-bar mustache we'd ever seen was all he could think of. He pontificated about it with colorful hillbilly swearing, the likes I'd never heard before. He elaborated about several different ways he

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would like the sniper's mother to suffer and die. We sensed his insecurity for losing his claim to fame. "A fucking "catastrophe," Red said. Our whole squad felt his psychological hurt from the loss of his perceived identity and validity. We let him know that we were glad he survived unscathed. Our support made a great difference to him even though he knew it would take years to regrow his beloved mustache.

In another close call I was saved by accidentally oversleeping, through no fault of my own. I was assigned to carry the radio for our new platoon leader, a Second Lieutenant, but the higher-ups decided that no radios were to be used to prepare for our next mission. Along with other company messengers I was sent to headquarters. We slept outside and were to be awoken at 4:00 am to get back to our units. I found a secluded tree to sleep behind before our wakeup call. I woke up at dawn with the sun shining on me. I looked around. Everyone was gone. No one had found me curled up in the dark. I made my way to the company HQ office and told a clerk my problem. He said "Well I wouldn't call it a problem. It's your liberation today, Greenie, because your lieutenant stepped on a mine and was killed." He realized as did I that I would have likely been standing next to him when that happened. Somewhat dazed I asked him "What do I do now?" He said, "Find an ambulance heading to the front and get a ride to rejoin your unit." That's what I did. My teenage brain still couldn't fully comprehend how close I had come to dying with my officer.

My worst traumatic experience that registered at the time occurred about a month before the end of the war. It was a blessing that it did not come earlier because it was so profound in its terror and power compared to the other close calls I'd had shortly before. At the time I could not recognize or acknowledge how this shelling experience would affect my very being for over thirty years.

The Germans were getting rid of their heavy artillery in a final ditch effort before surrendering. Their artillery was comparable to our 155 Howitzers, giant shells producing huge holes and violent explosions. At the time I had only been in combat for a month and a half. We were in the woods in a large stone house. I felt a false sense of safety in there. This was my only time subjected to heavy German artillery fire landing in our immediate area. Each explosion created a large foxhole while anything within fifteen yards was obliterated to powder. Though in a sturdy stone building we were not safe. I completely dissolved

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from an adult male into a shaking, anxiety-riddled little boy. I fell into a major regression from the increased level of terror and vulnerability surrounding me. Overwhelming fear paralyzed me. I was scared shitless. I felt irrational, not functional. Thinking about it now three quarters of a century later I can still feel the vibrations and tremors. I lost my adult sense of control and maturity. I had been able to cope with near-misses of enemy gunfire, but not devastating artillery shelling. It lasted about an hour but seemed like an eternity.

I had other close encounters during my service – liberating the Nordhausen concentration camp and encountering freed inmates; guarding captured SS officers overnight knowing they might overwhelm me. But these events seemed to go underground for decades, only to surface and be excavated and cleansed in later life. They were an additional clue to how traumatic events from combat can become lodged so deeply in our psyches that they only leak out over long periods of time like psychic shrapnel. The artillery bombardment was my source of traumatic wounding that got stuck in my unconscious.

I didn't deal with the helpless rage trapped inside me from that shelling until I went to a healing center in California some thirty years later. I attended the retreat thinking on a conscious level it would be good for me learn something while staring at the Pacific Ocean and relaxing. My unconscious had a totally different agenda. It turned out I was in the hands of an excellent therapist specializing in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. He knew it was time for me to release the unrecognized traumatic explosion trapped inside me. I had intense archetypal dreams the first three nights I was at the retreat – one night a hurricane, another a huge obliterating explosion, a third an earthquake unleashing tidal waves. Archetypal dreams go beyond human capacity. These three overwhelming dreams each had a tremendous amount of affect connected with them.

The therapist realized I was about to explode. He pulled the cork when I got on the hot seat. He got me talking about my artillery shelling experience. I unloaded layers of affect that had been blocked in my rational world. I screamed and yelled and cried, unloading years of repression of my true feelings. Boy did I unload!

I released paralyzing terror that I had repressed for thirty years. Only then did I start to become my real self again. We had only been bombed for under an hour, but my reaction lasted much longer, my psyche successfully burying the trauma for decades. After that release I easily dealt with any "mini-terror" that life threw at me. I took that opportunity to acknowledge and release the past.

Hundreds of my clients are glad I survived. I'd been to a dark place they needed to go, and they had to find somebody who had been there. I wouldn't have been there if the Board corporal had put me in military government where I thought I belonged. His primary need - and it turned out to be my need too - was for infantry soldiers. I didn't have flat feet; my fate was sealed. God didn't want or need me to be a government man; I needed to be where I was sent. The cumulation of my war experiences and learning how to process them made a positive difference in lots of peoples' lives. I feel blessed to have been able to help them make sense of their own lives. I loved helping people get beyond their trauma. Some could return to themselves after dealing with a lot of loss and pain. It's what God trained me for.

# The “Manchu” Comes Home. Narrative of An Early Psychotherapy with a Vietnam Combat Veteran<sup>1</sup>

By Edward Tick

**Abstract:** As the war in Vietnam entered its crucial, bloody third year, the author of this article began his long journey and career as a Jungian therapist assisting the veteran Rod, who had come back from overseas with severe spiritual injuries. This article tells how the author built a gradual interpersonal connection with his patient through the exam of his dreams, in which symbols and archetypes played a relevant role as structures able to elaborate the trauma buried deep below. For the therapist too, this journey was a challenging endeavour insofar as he had never come across the horrors of war and Rod's crude testimonies constituted his “close encounter” with an unpopular and bloody conflict. This article thus offers an insightful view from the inside of the therapeutic approach to PTSD from the holistic perspective of a Jungian therapist, who worked on the archetypal content of his patient's dreams to tackle trauma.

**Keywords:** PTSD, Jungian psychotherapy, holistic psychotherapy, Vietnam war, veterans healing

## Introduction

This is a narrative of one of my own early “close encounters”, my first psychotherapy with a Vietnam War combat veteran. It occurred early in my psychotherapy career more than forty years ago in Troy, N.Y. This therapy was with Rod, a man who had been through such severe war trauma that he was assigned to a doomed unit and not expected to survive.

My first psychotherapy with a combat veteran demonstrates one form of *close encounter in war*, the encounter of a young non-veteran therapist with a ravaged combat vet. The narrative demonstrates several types of encounters. It shows the encounters and impact on a poorly raised young man relentlessly overexposed to combat trauma. It exposes the extreme hardship of daily living for such a man struggling to return home from war. It portrays a young psychotherapist striving to learn the ways of war and warriorhood and undergo a transformation in his personal and professional identity. It lays bare the extreme stress caused by harming others that society foists upon its veterans

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to carry alone. For both veteran and therapist, these close encounters over war and in the therapy experience opened worlds.

### **Christmas**

I was introduced to my combat veteran patient Ron by a representative from Vietnam Veterans of America. I was volunteering to serve as a post-war therapist. The veteran representative was trying to rescue Ron from endless empty days on a day hospital ward and endless doses of medications that he took, as he said, "to keep the raging beast under control."

Though Rod hardly talked during our first meeting with the outreach worker, he had not yet had "civilian psychotherapy" and agreed to see me again. Next time, and for as long as I could make it work, Rod and I would meet alone. No intermediary would help Rod approach his civilian therapist. No one would help me, the civilian, approach this war-ravaged soul. The representative, a vet himself, had carried in his wounded comrade. He was off again, not into the jungle but to hospitals, bar rooms, apartments where other vets lurked alone. He had done his job. Now it was up to me to do mine.

Built like a bull, Rod looked taller than his short-medium height. His face and frame were squared, short dark hair stiff and unkempt. His thin mouth seemed frozen in a straight line across his thick jaw. Sitting like a mine whose trigger he held in place, he spoke in soft monotones, never raising his voice. His large hands constantly played with his lips or an earlobe. His small, dark eyes, avoiding mine, would focus on the floor or far wall.

At the day hospital, "I go to films and discussion groups to learn how to handle my war neurosis", Rod explained. "They keep my rage under control" through heavy sedation. At the cost of depression Rod downed a dozen pills a day to squash his rage and a second dozen to counteract the depression. "I'm a zombie", he said, "but it keeps the psychotic killer inside all locked up."

Rod had had numerous counselors in his years at various Veterans Administration hospitals. I was his first civilian healer, approaching therapy with different goals, values and expectations. His VA counselors had worked to adjust him to a permanently war-disabled condition. I recoiled at the thought

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that his useful and active life was already over. Rather, I gently challenged Rod's acceptance of the identity of psychological cripple. I hoped for at least some healing. That scared Rod.

I was scared as well. I was Rod's first therapist not relying on medication or locking away all dangerous emotions. Rather, consistent with psychodynamic theory as it has evolved since Freud, I believe it is not events themselves, but the repressed and denied feelings about those events that emotionally *trouble us*. The road to health is in large part the rediscovery of the honest, raw responses we originally had to various events. The more traumatic the events, the more painful and difficult the recovery. But recovery is necessary nonetheless. Expression of the original responses provides us with purgation, release, and purification. It also tells us the truth – what we actually saw, felt, knew at the time but could not admit if we were to survive. When we have recovered our original responses we can honorably rebuild our identities based on the truths we have experienced.

I did not know if this strategy would work for Rod. I feared the rage, pain and terror locked inside him. It was not only the popular media image that warned me away. Rod said, "Don't get close. I'm too dangerous. Inside, I'm a crazy, wounded wild animal. I have to be drugged – or else." I, too, was frightened of meeting what the media at the time called a "tripwire vet" or, worse, of creating one.

Rod lived in a small apartment in a dingy blue-collar neighborhood with his chain-smoking stepfather. He spent his days on an open hospital ward where lonely veterans watched television, engaged in small talk and received medications and lunches. At home, Rod lived in front of his TV. He spoke to no one but family.

Rod had been raised in similar neighborhoods where he learned to fight well to survive on the streets. Of French Catholic background, his church had been around the corner from his home. A few streets away were the Polish, Irish, and Italian Catholics, each with their church. Whether with fists, in sports or through pageantry, Rod and the French were constantly at war with the Irish, Italians and Poles.

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Rod's father was an alcoholic tavern keeper. His parents divorced when he was eleven. From then on Rod cared for the house and his younger sister. His father installed a permanent, personal beer keg in one end of his bedroom.

A formal education was not for him. Rod wanted to work with his hands and could not keep out of trouble. At 17, he dropped out of school and enlisted. He expected the military would pay him a small but decent salary while providing training as a wireman that could lead to a career as a radio technician.

This was Rod's version of the American Dream: safe service in the armed forces with vocational education and lifelong benefits. Honorable discharge and a secure job that paid decently and had a future. Establish a family, purchase a home, and raise kids to be decent, patriotic and safe from alcoholism and street violence. This dream seemed promised by American ideals and the advertising campaign waged by the armed forces. It was 1967, the height of the Vietnam War, yet Rod discerned nothing that might derail his dream.

By December, four months after we met, as if putting pennies in a treasure chest, Rod was entrusting me with the details of his sad life. I appreciated how different were our fates, determined not just by choices made during high school. Rather, I had been shaped into "college material" as certainly as Rod had been shaped into "army material". When Rod was a high school junior dropping out to enlist, I was a high school junior protesting the war. At the same time that I was awakening to the carnage across the ocean, Rod was unaware there was a war on that threatened his dream and would nearly take his life. It was not only the draft, but who became educated and who did not, who remained ignorant and who was shocked into awareness, who marched off to the slaughter and who agonized trying to avoid or stop it – ultimately, who lived well, who barely survived, and who died – all were doled out by some huge, invisible, macrocosmic lottery system. Fate was not democratic. Our country was not equally fair and nurturing of all citizens. Rather, opportunity was determined by socioeconomic status and doled out in arbitrary and unfair fashion. I felt foolish that, in our youths during the war, these differences had been lumped together into the single question: are you for the war or against it?

To be attached, Rod believed, only led to unbearable pain because your comrades would inevitably be killed before your eyes. Other veterans called me

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"brother", Rod never. His eyes hardly ever met mine. Yet I patiently, steadily accompanied Rod no matter what story he told. I let him know that I wasn't scared, I wanted to know what he had seen and done, I would never judge or condemn him. Slowly, from a terrible darkness, Rod reached tentative fingers toward mine.

I wanted people to know of Rod's ache and despair, feeling forever different because of his participation in the war. If the public was going to know about the plights of men like Rod, it might not be the vets themselves but others who came to understand them who would speak. I felt a growing anger that much of our society did not know about the countless vets like Rod. The suffering we had caused during the war was not the only moral outrage. So was ignoring the suffering of both veterans and victims that resulted from the war.

Christmas arrived. Rod wanted to give his three children, living with his ex-wife, a happy holiday. But his unrelenting gloom made him wish the season would speed by. Alone, Rod wandered gaily-decorated shopping malls, staring at children on Santa's lap. He dragged his feet beneath the tinsel stars and hanging bells, a stranger in a land that did not see or know him. Rod retreated to his apartment to sit in darkness and silence. I wrote my first article on our veterans. My editorial, printed on Christmas Eve Day, read:

*As I sit in therapy sessions with Rod during this holiday season, I count our blessings.*

*Rod's blessings and mine are not the same. I can work; he cannot. I can sleep peacefully at nights; Rod is haunted by nightmares. I can travel wherever I want to; Rod can only drive back and forth between the hospital and his home. I have many friends; Rod is terrified of loving and trusting others.*

*Still, Rod can count some blessings... Rod did survive two tours of combat. Unlike thousands of vets, his body is whole and strong. He suffers from deep depressions, but unlike more than 50,000 other Vietnam veterans to date, he may prove stable enough to resist suicide.<sup>2</sup> He has his own apartment and is not a permanent resident of an institution. He is compensated for his disability; the VA pays him \$18,000 a year in benefits. Unlike many others... Rod will never go hungry, never be short his rent or fuel money, nor, on this holiday, funds for Christmas gifts.*

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*In this season of hope, Rod is hopeless. Every night he closes his eyes, his dreams return him to combat. While in Viet Nam, he learned a killing rage. Now he is afraid of people because he fears this rage will surface and he will hurt someone he cares for. Worse, he lives with terrible guilt for having killed... innocent Vietnamese people. Fired at from a village hut, Rod's squad fired back.*

*Later they found the bodies of women and children that the enemy had used as barriers and he had unknowingly shot. Rod's worst enemy is this guilt for committing crimes he did not choose and could not help.*

*Christmas is the holiday on which we celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. Rod is working for a new birth out of that land of nightmares. But when one has seen such destruction and death as was rampant in Viet Nam, it is hard to imagine daily life or Christmas ever being normal again. And what is peace? It is not merely the absence of war but is a state of mind Rod may never feel.*

*We all wish Christmas would bring comfort, the New Year hope. But many veterans, the poor and destitute... the lonely and troubled feel turmoil, isolation and loneliness rather than peace and comfort, despair rather than hope.*

*It is for all of us... to reach out to these people with a Christmas offering. We must make ourselves a little less comfortable by giving of our hearts, skills, homes or finances. Out of love for humanity, the Prince of Peace was willing to suffer. In order to bring a bit of hope and comfort to our community, country and world, we must do the same.*

### **A year of dreams<sup>3</sup>**

Rod and I were a patrol of two prowling the shadowy alleys and dripping forests of his night world.

In sleep, Rod relived the battles he had fought twelve years earlier. He saw himself killing again, his friends killed again. He awoke trembling, in a cold sweat, staying in bed until birdsong, traffic noises and clanging pots in the kitchen proved to him that he had not unleashed the raging monster from its cage.

Or Rod dreamed of battles in other wars or the Bible, of family or neighborhood accidents or disasters, of nuclear holocaust. There were two

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protagonists in these dreams. Rod was always there, as each of us is the protagonist in our own unconscious world. But another was with Rod, appearing as a soldier, a fire, a dog, a funeral, a judge, a river, a bomb. Rod was its instrument, its antagonist, its intended. Its name was Death.

Rod's nightmares were haunting and brutal, and he had no means for interpreting them. I heard his story and anguish as the warp and woof of his dreams and help him decode them. Rod hated his nightly nightmare wanderings and also hated remembering what he had done. I could witness it, not change it. We could, however, use his dream images as revelations. He might use them like the biblical Joseph to shape a new future or like Oedipus to collapse before his past.

Convinced that his story was repugnant to humanity and his dreams as dangerous as the bush had been, Rod watched my face and words. He was afraid to put me on the mountain, in the cave, swamp or prison camp from which he could not escape. Combatants had used the buddy system to help them survive in Viet Nam. Rod made me his buddy. His survival in America depended on my watchfulness and care, so he believed my survival in his inner Viet Nam depended on his watchfulness of me. On the home front, we were guarding each other's backs.

It wasn't easy. While guarding, watching, guiding and interpreting Rod, I, too, walked through muck and gore. It took weeks or months to squeeze the fragments of battles or childhood memories out of Rod's blasted, medication-dulled and reluctant memory. Months of sorting through dripping shards until I could piece an entire battle puzzle together. More months identifying the shards and fragments as they appeared in his dreams. And there were no guidebooks for this effort.

I felt honored and cursed, uplifted and disgusted, curious and repulsed. I was led through infernal regions the way Virgil led Dante through the Inferno. Every shard was a piece of witness to cleanse, preserve and bless. I could not help but carry the stink and shock of pollution so that my days and questions became ponderous.

Rod's days were boring and lonely, but his nightly flashflood made dreaming his nearest experience to combat since returning home.

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I remembered Chuck, an alcoholic patient I had worked with. Chuck had weaned himself from alcohol and high-speed night driving on back country roads. He graduated to marijuana. Smiling, he said that getting high was better than boozing, night driving or having sex with his wife. She left him.

Chuck needed a fix that would provide the thrill he craved. He graduated again – to sky diving. Hurtling through empty space, he had found the ultimate high. By the time he could free fall a mile, he left therapy. Though he had broken his arm, leg and several ribs, he was clean of drugs and alcohol, maintaining his job and a new relationship. And he was happy.

Even the clatter of falling bowling pins or the clack of colliding pool balls could trigger Rod's rage. He avoided them. At my urging he took brisk walks. Later, he sometimes felt safe enough to beat his pillow. That helped, but he despaired of weaning from his heavy drug dosages. He called it "my Catch-22". He craved and feared his highs and craved and feared his drugs. Aching for relief, he took me walking through the shell holes and caverns, firefights and floods of his nightmares.

Nov. 19: Rod was a bedraggled Union soldier of the Civil War, slogging through mud, leading and protecting a wagon laden with a black family fleeing the white hooded Ku Klux Klansmen pursuing them on horseback.

Nov. 23: Rod was Christ entering the sprawling orgy of classical Rome, chased by Roman soldiers. He could hear their pounding footsteps drawing closer.

These two dreams, occurring months after we started therapy, marked the first times Rod saw himself as moral and capable of doing good. Rod had gone to war as a soldier of the Union striving to liberate the oppressed and enslaved, as a soldier of Christ fighting evil. Not me, Rod said, but the KKK and the Roman soldiers – society's white and powerful representatives – were "evil and vicious". One lesson of Viet Nam was that "America is a vicious society, passing the blame for its cruelty onto its veterans." Rod feared he could not escape his oppressors.

December 10: Rod was fishing for trout in a big lake. He kept running to the store for lures and trying each new one, but none worked.

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Water – depthless, fluid, filled with strange creatures – often represents the unconscious. Since becoming disabled, Rod had tried numerous medical and psychiatric doctors to help him go fishing in his unconscious. “That’s it!” Rod cried with rare glee, pouring forth a memory stream about military doctors and his frustration at his unsuccessful work with them.

Early in his VA treatment, Rod had been injected with sodium pentothal, truth serum, to help him discuss his battles. Not trusting his doctors, his self-control was strong enough to resist the drug. Instead of talking war, he talked about Shirley Temple movies. A psychiatrist labeled him paranoid schizophrenic. “But I knew what I was doing. At the cost of being labeled insane, I beat the shrink at his own game.”

I feared Rod would try to beat me at the game too. Ignorant of the ways of the combat zone, I feared I might not recognize it if he tried. My best hope was to not leave Rod’s side as he told his battle or dream tales. That meant that, no matter how, I could not deflect or avoid or scream or run in fear or run away in disgust. It was the strategy that demanded the most. It is easier to erect defenses than to let ourselves see and hear what nobody should. For endless hours Rod and I were taking me to war in my imagination.

Dec. 15: Rod was playing hockey on a frozen swimming pool. The dream brought back pleasant memories of playing hockey on such a pool as a child.

It might occasionally be possible to skate atop the inner depths and have fun. But the waters, like his feelings, were frozen. Frozen and numb- his hope for sport.

Dec. 17: Rod was one of eight eagles soaring over skyscrapers, becoming weak from starvation and frightened of the heights. The city below announced it would feed the starving eagles. Its army pushed tortoises off the skyscraper roofs. Rod and the other eagles dove to feed on the carcasses.

Rod said that the eagle was the symbol of America, his dream eagles American soldiers. Soaring represented his ideals. The city was our government promising to provide for its soldiers. Instead, it transformed the eagles into vultures, feeding them on the deaths of innocents to save themselves. I learned later that tortoises, the sacrificial food in Rod’s dream, are one of the four sacred

animals of Viet Nam – our army killing turtles – the American military slaying the spirit of Viet Nam.

Dec. 21: In a recurring dream, Rod relived the battle at Nui Ba Den, the boulder- strewn Lady Black Mountain in the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon. Rod asserted that his unit had been pinned down under heavy fire for two and a half days and were almost out of ammunition. At one point, he and ten others retreated into a cave. They could not get to their wounded but only listened to their helpless screams.

Early in the battle, Rod had stacked up the bodies of two fallen friends to use as a shield against bullets raining down on him. He feared the men might have still been alive. "It was the worst thing I ever did except for killing women and children when I was ambushed from a hut and returned fire." Rod could not forget the sound of the bullets thwacking into his comrades' bodies.

I mentioned this brutal image to another combat vet.

"No", he yelled, "never! He's mixing up different battles." Dreams can condense numerous events into one, but the second vet was defensive. Was he upset because the story was true and he was terrified and his honor offended? Was I hearing the dream battle or an actual field report? Was my question a way to protect myself against the thwacking, thwacking, thwacking in my mind?

January 6: In a church basement, Rod built a reinforced wall and survived two missile attacks. After the attacks, he walked through the bombed city and saw his ex – wife with both legs amputated. He said, "Good. Good."

Dreams sometimes allowed Rod to picture what he could not feel when awake. Here was his rage toward his unfaithful ex-wife as well as his happiness in surviving war with his body intact. But he never wanted to see himself shout or strike out. He could not unleash his severely controlled impulses even in dreams. Instead, "let God take his course. He'll get revenge."

Jan. 12: During a nuclear accident, Rod circulated among the panicking people telling them that there was no war and the world would not be destroyed.

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This night Rod again fought the battle at Nui Ba Den but in the dream that followed he helped while others destroyed. Not since Viet Nam had Rod experienced himself to be a helper. He had not imagined that he might finally help others after having been an instrument of war and destruction. His dull eyes brightened a bit with hope.

Feb. 4: Rod built a church and watched the North Star.

Feb. 4: Rod was a gorilla, as towering and mean as King Kong. He climbed a huge tree and growled.

Feb. 4: "They" were going to bomb a beach. Rod was trying to clear it of civilians before anyone was killed.

Feb. 4: Rod was a hit man killing innocent people while being pursued by the law. "An ordinary, everyday guy" he used his M-16 from Viet Nam. "In Nam, I was never separated from it."

He still wasn't. "I'm struggling between the viciousness in my unconscious and my search for tranquility and peace."

Feb. 9: Rod was on "Star Trek" with Kirk and Spock, who were on life support units. Others had put them to death, but Rod brought them back to life. Then "I destroyed the force."

Rod had killed in hand-to-hand combat. "I was sudden, quick and deadly. The first time I killed a man, I cried. After that, it became routine, just habit. I had no more feelings. I was empty and numb." Like Spock, "I'm a zombie. I don't have feelings and can't risk any." Yes, it is possible to save, "but only my own kind, and I still have to destroy to save." This man who had wanted to do good had only destroyed. He had had to kill his heart in order to kill another. Now he had to keep it in its coffin in order to live with it.

I sat softly with Rod, not shocked away but feeling like I was with a frozen man before a frozen gray tidal wave of grief. The might of the terror and the grief counteracted my fear and humbled me.

Feb. 11: Rod beat up his commanding officer and fought three battles. In one, most of his unit had been wiped out by machine guns. He talked with buddies who were now dead, especially "one very likable kid in a bunker".

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Many men of Rod's unit had been killed two days after he left Viet Nam. They came back as hazy memories and dreams awakening in the graveyard of his unconscious. "The day they stopped the war I cried and said, 'All those lives wasted...'" After just a few months in country, Rod stopped believing we had any cause worth pursuing. "I wanted an American victory simply to justify the deaths of my friends."

Rod recalled faces of men left behind, but only a few names. One was Joey, who had been with him a year and a half. His death had left a crater in Rod's heart and confidence. Rod felt Joey asking him to bid goodbye to his family. But Rod could not recall Joey's last name and was afraid to search service records.

As a squad leader, Rod stopped getting close to his men "after I realized I would lose them all. I was in the bush for one and a half years. I lost 30 to 40 men in that time. All their deaths are my fault. Mine."

All the more reason, I believed, that I must not lose you.

All the more reason, Rod would have countered, that you should.

Feb. 15: Rod was in a canyon with a flying horse. The only way out was to fly but there was not enough wind. The horse fell sick. Rod took it to a barn where he built a fire to save its life. The barn turned into a warehouse. His brother appeared. They walked down the hill away from the warehouse. Cement pylons tumbled down the hill behind them, almost killing them both, but finally only blocking a river.

The horse, Rod said, was a chopper and the canyon was the war he was trapped in. The gallant horse was ill and could neither save Rod nor be saved by his best efforts. The barn, a shelter for horses and growing things, had to be dismantled for fire. But it was a warehouse for equipment that could kill Rod and his brother.

This dream revealed the stages of Rod's disillusionment. The war had started out personal and hopeful but turned into something life threatening and mechanical. It had not killed him but had blocked the flow of his river – his mind, his life. "When I went to Viet Nam I believed in what I was fighting for but not when I came back."

I had never believed in what Rod had fought for. I had been hurt and baffled that boys like Rod agreed to the bad deal. I had once hoped that enough of them would see the war was wrong and stop. I was sure that a few of them refusing would be worth thousands like me. Now, finally, a few survivors were whispering their remorse and the collapse of their belief in home. I only saw more victims wounded by the same American violence that had perpetrated the war. I had never spit on them. I tried to welcome the wounded home.

March 4: Rod was a prisoner of war captured by the Russians. He had to clean up bodies that had been gassed. Then he was on a train carrying him to the gas chambers. He escaped and ran for his life.

At the time, American military intervention in El Salvador seemed imminent. Rod was frightened that El Salvador would become the next Viet Nam. A world war, he said, was being waged between the United States and the Soviet Union. But fighting in Viet Nam taught him that we were not the Good crusading against Communist Evil. Rather, his service taught Rod that the cold world war "was like the Holocaust. All of us caught in it were holocaust victims. Both superpowers are like the Nazis. Soldiers like me are only their Cold War pawns, used, then discarded."

March 11: Rod was chased by a car full of tar. The tar blackened Rod's shirt but he outran it. Then his yard oozed and exploded and tar spread all over his neighborhood. A repairman appeared and led Rod out of the tar by following telephone lines. When he was safe, Rod met some happy clowns.

The tar was "my unconscious – dark, sticky and mysterious. It's always oozing, always chasing me. It can explode at any time and swallow my neighborhood." I was Rod's repairman, leading him out of the tar by following communication lines. At the far end of such talk, Rod hoped for clowns – happiness. And I hoped the repairman would be able to maintain these telephone lines no matter how bad the weather.

April: Rod's alcoholic father died. Rod became depressed. He "died too young and in a terrible way" from a ruptured larynx.

For weeks Rod neither dreamed nor thought of suicide. He did not grieve; that would have meant losing control. But he did remember some happy

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childhood moments. He relaxed too, as though finally accepting his father's fate as inevitable.

May 28: On a yacht on the ocean, Rod called a man, "Hick!" An arsenal exploded and eight "hicks" began a gun battle. Rod was outnumbered and terrified. Then his father appeared, neck swollen and larynx ruptured. Rod cried for help. His father answered, "No, son. I can't help you. I'm dead now." His mother appeared with the police to rescue him.

"The hicks are gooks and the arsenal is the war." Rod wanted protection from his guilt over the atrocities he had committed. Rod had wanted his father to help him, but the man could offer nothing. His mother as well as "police", society's representatives tried.

June 9: Rod was at his father's funeral. It was gloomy. His father, body bloated, was wearing a military pilot's cap. His coat was split down the back. Only Rod and his father were standing. His father, who looked like Frankenstein, was dead but leaning against a wall. Rod said to him, "I love you. I miss you."

While Rod was in Viet Nam, his father had feared for his life. Now that his father was dead, Rod feared for his afterlife. He believed that his father must be in purgatory or hell because of his drinking and womanizing. Rod now reversed roles with his father. Now the son worried and prayed nightly over his father's soul fighting for survival as it purged in fire. Only, he feared, his father's battle was eternal.

July 28: Rod saw three children sinking into the sewer and then surfacing.

"I don't know who the kids were, but I have three myself." The sewer? "My mind. Viet Nam. This whole crazy world that we turn our kids lose in."

August: During August, Rod's house burned down. He might have been killed had he been there, "just like in Nam." In Viet Nam he had transferred bunks. Two days later a rocket landed on his former hooch, killing the occupant of his bunk. He believed he should have been dead instead of the man he hardly knew.

Sept. 7: Rod and other Americans were guerilla soldiers fighting the French. Rod was enraged at the French for starting the Vietnam War. Identifying with

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the Vietnamese, Rod saw himself fighting a guerilla war against the colonial power that first started the problem. Of French ancestry, Rod was also angry with his people and his childhood for giving him this fate. Rod's disability was an internal guerilla war against his own existence.

Sept. 14: In a world war, Rod again fought the French. His brother fought the Germans. After four years they were reunited on the front. Then the war ended.

Rod and his brother had been separated during Viet Nam. On the far side of the world, Rod fought the French war while "on another front" his brother fought the family war. Rod's brother became his fishing companion and only friend. Their monthly reunions temporarily rescued Rod from his own endless war.

A year passed. Rod was thawing. "Before I couldn't speak unless spoken to." Now he was less cold toward others, not as preoccupied with the past. He played pool with an old friend and felt his first attraction to a woman, a VA nurse, in years. "But I still have to get more trust in order to keep my sanity."

Black tar, dingy swamp, salty ocean full of sharks – these were Rod's pictures of his own mind. Nuclear and conventional warfare, rape, accident and disaster – these were the state of our world. Indifference, threat, ambush, betrayal, attack, explosion - these were what Rod expected. Then was healing possible? How much? How could you come home to such a world? Were men like Rod indeed wasted, not because they were unworthy but because they had been ruined by the lethal combination of childhood neglect and Viet Nam combat?

Rod relived the screams of the tortured and dying at Nui Ba Den often and with enough detail so that I saw the battle in my mind and later dreamed it too. And I dreamed of Rod trapped in a cave while dying friends screamed his name. Each time I bolted awake in my bed, pain like a bayonet piercing my chest. I was terrified of what I saw and what it did to me. It didn't matter how strong or secure my background. It didn't matter how much professional training and experience I had had. There were limits to anyone's capacity to experience horror. It seeps into the psyche. It is a cancer. It survives by sucking the life of another. "It is a black crab feeding" (Hasford, *The Short Timers*). The battle at Lady Black Mountain was coming alive in me.

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Yet I was at home, safe from physical harm, able to rest and refresh from weariness. I studied my dreams to learn what happened to a mind at war. The relentless bombardment of brutal, world shattering images and experiences overwhelms anyone's defenses, no matter how healthy and stable. The unconscious is poisoned and reconstituted. The personality becomes a fortress under siege. After enough warfare, within or without, our defenses collapse and slaughter begins.

Studies in military psychiatry reveal that a predictable and steady emotional breakdown occurs once a person has been exposed to enough of the stress and trauma of war, no matter what the emotional predisposition. Traditionally, to avoid a massive and debilitating collapse, a soldier must be evacuated from the combat zone for rest and rehabilitation no more than five or six weeks after his first exposure to battle. The Vietnam War's protracted jungle combat and year-long tour of duty in-country under conditions of unrelieved threat guaranteed massive numbers of psychiatric casualties.

This was not unique. In every American war at least since the Civil War, psychiatric casualties have far exceeded physical casualties.<sup>4</sup> This may be an inevitable result of the horrific degree of slaughter perpetrated during modern technological warfare. Military experts knew these factors during Viet Nam, which was a testing ground for America's most deadly and destructive military hardware. Yet the country still sent troops into the kind of combat that far exceeded the stress limits people can endure. It was inevitable that the young men sent to war would break and that the elders would be their betrayers.

Against this eventuality, the culture offered young men the popularized mythic image of the warrior hero who can endure all horrors. Why was there such denial about the reality and extent of shell shock, battle fatigue, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder? Why did veterans find their claims so hard to prove? Why were our vets, from whom we had extracted all that gives life value, treated like refuse?

Again and again I reminded myself that I wasn't Rod and could learn to tolerate these glimpses of hell. My family was intact. My education had given me time and training to examine life before plunging into its sewer. And

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experiencing war for several hours a week and in my imagination was nothing like being a teenager fighting for my life in a steamy jungle.

Meanwhile, Rod continued to dream.

October 18: Rod was in a bathtub. Instead of water, he was covered with blood and guts, soaking in torn and broken human sinews.

October 25: Rod put a magnum in his mouth and blew his head off.

### **Poor boys**

Rod dreamed of suicide. Helpless, despairing, he believed the only way out of his inner bloodbath was through death. He craved death not to end his life but to relieve his pain. He feared that if he opened his heart the pain would kill him. But if therapy was unsuccessful and his pain remained in its prison, it would be unbearable and he would want to commit suicide. Either way, death would be at his own hands.

For more than a year Rod and I lived in his nightmares. Previously Rod would never speak about Nam. Now he slept better, felt less angry and trusted me. And he allowed me to track a path that revealed his buried stories and how they had twisted him into a wounded beast-man.

I thought that if Rod might cry, wail, moan, beg, or rage, we might thaw the frozen waste inside him. Recovering memories and their associated feelings was essential to healing. But every story was like a sniper's muzzle pointing toward deeper grief and anguish. Every memory seemed to bring Rod more inexorably into the unredeemable darkness of the inner jungle.

Rod could not forget Nui Ba Den. His unit patrolled the boulder-strewn mountainside that had been reported secure. But Viet Cong soldiers seemed to sprout from every crevice. While their unit was slaughtered, Rod and nine companions hid in a cave listening to agonizing wails of pain. GIs were often tortured in order to bait their comrades for the kill when they attempted a rescue. Rod could only defend the mouth of his cave and listen to the screams. It took days for the evacuation helicopters to fly in. Finally, as their chopper

hovered amidst flying fire, Rod and his nine companions sprinted for safety. Only he and two others made it.

I searched for any crack. "What did you see?" "How did you feel?" "How do you feel this minute telling me?" "Did you know any guys outside the cave?" "What did you say to each other in the cave?" "Can you remember their names now?" "What would you say to them if they were here in this office?" I tried using an empty chair so Rod could speak to those missing. I had Rod breath into his frozen heart. But my tools fell with a thud. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells of the sorrowful condition in which words are heartless and abstracted, unattached to the world. Rod answered with words; his heart would not move.

In Nam everything had come and gone with tracer speed and napalm intensity. Our pace was a relief, a luxury. Rod could examine events slowly and watch me closely. Fearing he might lose me in the retelling he set a pace he believed both could bear. He walked point for me, the FNG, the fuckin' new guy, to protect against pain and further loss.

Rod's combat narrative ran like detached scenes from a plotless movie. Each scene stood out in stark relief, brutal but having no continuity with other stories. The binding that made his life a continuous reel had been blown to shreds, leaving behind scattered yet unforgettable fragments that we labored to reconnect.

Rod stepped through a tree line bordering a secure village. Suddenly sniper fire burst from the window of the nearest hut. Rod and his squad hit the ground, blasting with their M-16s "until the walls looked like Swiss cheese." Then they charged. Rod reached the window, threw his gun muzzle over the ledge and peeked in. In the middle of the floor was a trap door. In the corner lay a child, chest red peppered with bullet wounds. Rod ran into the hut, placed one arm under the child's neck and bent over his face. He brought his lips to the child's, trying to breathe life back into his heart and lungs. The chest rose, but the wounds pumped blood over them both. With one hand under his neck, the other on his heart and his lips on the child's, the boy died.

Terror, then rage, then anguish coursed through me. Tears pooled in my eyes. What could I do for this frozen man, that dead boy? I let my tears show so

Rod could see them. If I cried maybe he could. But he sat stone-faced and said nothing.

Rod was in a secured jungle camp. His lieutenant went for a short walk. This officer, unlike other West Pointers, did not seek victory or mythic glory. He wanted his men to survive and go home. Protecting his men, he was loved by them.

The lieutenant did not return. Rod led a scouting party through the bush. Just out of sight of their camp, they found their officer stripped naked and hung by his outstretched arms between two trees. Rod looked at the ground. Between his legs lay his LT's severed head.

"That did something to us", was all Rod could say. No feelings or thoughts. It just "did something." Rod and his squad went marauding and returned to their camp only when each GI wore a necklace of ears.

"How did you get the ears?" "From whom?" "How did you feel taking an ear?" "How do you feel telling me?" "What is it like to wear a necklace of ears?" "Can you see yourself wearing that necklace?" "How do you feel now about what you did then?" "Put your lieutenant in that chair next to you. What would he say? What do you want to say to him?"

No anger, no guilt, no sorrow. Rod would not grieve.

Rod's patrol was ambushed. Rapid fire from all sides, from the trees above. They hit the ground, but bullets were everywhere, thwacking by his face, arms, torso and legs. He needed cover. The grunt in front of him was down, not moving, bleeding. Rod crawled to the crumpled body, hid behind it. He heard bullets thudding into the torso. "When I took cover, I didn't know if the man was alive or dead."

"If he were sitting here, what would you say?"

Expressionless, deadpan, automatic, "Thanks."

Rod re-upped for a second tour. "I hated it there. I wanted to go home. But I was a squad leader and knew the jungle better than my boys did. I had to stay to help them survive. But I couldn't. I lost everyone before my year was up."

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The horror never abated. Rod became wild, enraged. He wanted to kill every Vietnamese, even the friendlies who crossed his path. Returning to base, he made a perimeter around his squad, telling them, "Get as much beer as you can. Stay inside the perimeter. Get stinking drunk. I'll stand watch." His boys tore into the beer like men on the desert dying of thirst. An officer ordered them to stop drinking, clean up and "act like real Marines." Rod aimed his M-16 at the officer's head and ordered, "Leave or I pull." He left. "Lucky for him. I would have gladly pulled the trigger. No sweat."

Rod was evaluated by a board of military psychiatrists. The panel concluded that he had been in the jungle too long and had lost his regard for human life. His mind was "no longer Western". Rather he thought, felt, and acted like an Oriental. "I'm fighting their war in their jungle on their terms. How else should I act?"

Instead of R & R or being sent home, Rod was reassigned to a company in and near the Demilitarized Zone. It consisted solely of men who had "crossed over" and called themselves the Manchus. They worshipped death. Given the most brutal patrols, no Manchu had ever returned to the States alive.

"Your commanders were supposed to be like fathers, helping and protecting you. But they sent you out to be killed. They didn't want you coming back alive. How did you feel about that? How do you live with that today?"

Rod shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know", he said.

Rod survived and flew the Freedom Bird home. Within a few days he was off base trying to relax in a local bar. A man next to him looked at his uniform. "You one o' them baby-killers?" he sneered. "You helpin' us lose for the first time?" Rod went blank. When he awoke, he was in jail for murder. At his trial, his war trauma was not admitted as evidence in his defense. He was sentenced to a year in the stockade for manslaughter. "But all I remember is that I thought I was in a firefight."

Rod is not supposed to be alive. He was not supposed to carry back his stories. He and they were supposed to be blown up, burned or buried in Viet Nam. But Rod did return. One unacknowledged consequence of taking massive doses of medication was that the drugs did not just control his rage and

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depression but put him into a stupor so that he could not tell his stories. Was there some systemic conspiracy – nobody's plan but the inevitable result of our values and interventions? Did this conspiracy ensure that vets would not remember and the rest of us would not know? Americans use massive quantities of alcohol, legal and illegal medications and uncontrolled consumerism to maintain a dull and contented surface while storms rage below and in private. Rod was still far away from the rest of us. His stories were not supposed to infiltrate us in our shopping malls and offices. I could bear the stories but not the silence. And I could not stop seeing war's blueprint bleeding through all our endeavors.

After two years of therapy, Rod looked up an old pre-war pal. The friend was happy to reunite. It helped a little to realize that there had been life before the war and there could be life after. Rod and his friend went bowling once a week, in the afternoons, when the lanes were empty and noise levels low.

Therapy was still voluntary. There were neither fees nor contact with the VA and Rod was afraid they might stop our meetings. "I'm a Manchu. I'm not supposed to be alive, even to other vets." Without anyone knowing, it was just the two of us. We had the buddy system in place – a necessity for survival in the bush. But we did not have a squad – a necessity for action.

A second fire in his apartment flicked his final switch. Cities were too noisy, too populated. He felt vulnerable, exposed, endangered. He moved to a small village near the Canadian border. He was happy to leave his daily VA attendance behind and felt a little more normal. The hospital had depressed him. He wanted to continue our therapy but could not manage the drive of several hours to see me. I referred him to veteran's outreach program near him and encouraged him to call. Instead long before the age of teletherapy he begged me to continue over the phone. It was the best he could manage. Though I felt inadequate trying to touch his heart over a machine, we continued for another year.

In three years of therapy Rod never once moaned, groaned, yelled or cried. Sometimes my own tears trickled. I left them in my eyes, hoping to be a model of grief and tenderness. Rod stayed numb as his best defense against overwhelming feelings of grief and despair. I understood why he did not want

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to feel and was grateful that the VA hospital provided him with 24 pills a day. "I have a rage inside me. If I ever let that rage out, I couldn't control myself. I might kill somebody near me. But I don't want to hurt anybody ever again."

There was more than rage in his frozen heart. Once he had thought the necklace of ears was justified, even funny. Now he was ashamed, guilty, full of grief, what we now call moral injury. He had never told that story. It was hard to tell me. He was surprised that I understood and did not condemn him.

The dead child would not sleep. After he sprayed the hut with his M-16 Rod's first impulse had been to save the child. His sleepless eyes stared through black nights wondering if it had been his rounds that killed the child. He hated the Viet Cong for using children. He hated America for putting him in a situation where he was forced to shoot children. He seemed to grieve that child but could neither cry nor rage. Rather, the slaughtered child became his indelible mark of Cain, never to be forsaken, never removed. The child was also Rod, the young man who lost his innocence and had killed and been slaughtered as well. Unable to save either child, Rod was both Abraham the slaughtering father and Isaac the bound son.

Rod fondly remembered his dead lieutenant. He had wanted that man to make it back. The LT was not just dead but profaned. And Rod's response felt profane. "It made us crazy", Rod said over and over again. Shakespeare's King Lear said, "This grief hath craz'd my wits."

I thought that if I could just stay with Rod long enough, touch him deeply enough, he might finally burst into rage or a flood of tears. He might mourn his lieutenant, the child, the friends he left behind. But over time, phone therapy became unwieldy. Rod was isolated somewhere upstate, maintaining minimal contact with a few people and sleeping better. Relieved of the burden of carrying his story alone he refused to re-enter the human flow. He lived near the border of the country, of the demilitarized zone, of human existence. That's where he wanted to stay.

I, too, felt grief at not bridging the gap between this peer with whom I might have gone to high school, who flew to war as I bussed off to college. I felt like I owed him a debt that could never be repaid. Why? Because he took my place? Because I had not been drafted? Because the pull of a number should not allow

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us to slide past danger while those next to us did not? Because this fate was universally unfair. Because Cain was wrong and I am my brother's keeper. And later Abraham was wrong and never should have raised the knife to his son.

The Japanese call survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki *hibakusha*. They are, literally, "explosion-affected people", different from the rest of us, living in another category of existence. Rod, too, lived in another category, another realm of fate, a land alien to the rest of us. His trauma was so severe, so beyond the range of anything ordinarily experienced, that it was impossible for him to return to daily life or feel normal. He had been sent into the DMZ to be a Manchu and die. Now, living, he was a Manchu forever.

I, on the other hand, was uneasy with this special category, this isolated class in which vets lived. Could we make room in our swift, stressful, workaday worlds for people who had been through such horrors? Could we provide them with support, validation, purpose? Could we offer them, rather than a disabled identity or some impossible version of their old selves, a new identity that included and transcended their war experiences? Could we give them a role, a class that would include their war experiences while encouraging them to feel honorable, empowered and enabled rather than disabled? There had to be some category other than PTSD that could carry the hearts and minds of such as these.

I called Rod to say this to him and to thank him for what he had taught me.

His flat voice perked with rare energy. "Yeah?" he said, "Maybe there's hope for some of us. Maybe somebody someday will listen."

"I hope so", I said. "I hope people will listen. I want all of America to listen and learn."

"It's a nice dream", Rod said, "but I don't expect much from this country anymore. I'm a poor boy. The Vietnam War was a poor boy's war. Poor boys did the fighting and poor boys died. It's always been that way. Nobody cares about the poor boys."

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of parts of the first two sections of this article appeared in my first book on working with veterans, *Sacred Mountain*.

<sup>2</sup> This was the number at the time I treated Rod soon after the war ended. To date more than 120,000 Americans veterans of the Vietnam War have committed suicide, more than twice the number killed in action. In all modern American wars the numbers of suicides during and after the conflict vastly outnumber the numbers killed in action, making death by suicide a far greater threat than death in combat. For fuller reports on veteran suicide see Coleman (*Flashback*); and Tick (*Warrior's Return*: 39-41).

<sup>3</sup> Nightmares are a pervasive and disturbing symptom of war trauma and too often therapists do not know how to work with them. The result is that countless veterans are heavily medicated to squash the symptom – without relief or therapeutic benefit. It is incumbent upon veteran and trauma therapists to welcome the dreams as what I call "psychic shrapnel." They are important messages from the inner word coming to the surface and therapists must work with them therapeutically.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete comparative list of combat and suicide casualties in American wars from World War I to the present, see Tick (*Wild Beasts and Wandering Souls*: 6).

## Appendix

### Selected poetry and prose

By Edward Tick

#### MMK3025

At Chuong Ek, the Killing Fields of Cambodia

Dear unknown friend,  
I met you at the tall stupa –  
red cone roof climbing toward your burning sky.  
First a woman, toothless, barely as tall  
as my chest, offered me one choice –  
incense or lotus flower.  
I refused neither prayer nor payment.  
She nodded but did not smile.  
She looked old but here we cannot tell.  
Could she have been your mother, aunt or wife?

I climbed the stupa's concrete steps  
slowly, sadly, frightened.  
I saw you in the crowd as in an airport,  
blending into all the other faces,  
not noticing me. I did not charge  
through the gathering to grip you in my arms.  
I did not want to hurry our meeting.

I tried to meet your friends and neighbors first.  
There were many. Some grinned at me  
with teeth showing, jaws hanging open.  
Others were clenched and solemn.  
The entire group stared as if at once  
looking through me and not seeing me.

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You had so many neighbors  
I feared I would never find you.  
I shuddered before their stares  
that rooted my feet to the concrete portico.

Bird song and wafting incense broke me free.  
I moved on to the second crowd  
and the third. They were younger –  
children, teens, boys and girls, showing me  
how fertile your land and people are.  
Many wore piercings, but not the kind  
teens wear at home. I could not see  
their pins or rings. I could not see them play.

The thick crowd continued to stare.  
No one said hello or asked my name.  
I knew I was in a foreign land  
different from any I had ever visited  
but the only place where I could find you.  
I kept searching the faces, the stares,  
the grins and piercings for one face,  
just one I could name.

I finally found you. You were gazing sideways,  
staring at the back of the head before you.  
You did not turn to look at me  
or greet or welcome me. You did not call my name.  
But of all this massive crowd,  
of all these empty eyes and stretched grins,  
of all these piercing holes and crooked teeth,  
of all these broken noses and offset jaws,  
in all this multitude of strangers  
you were the only one I could name.  
There, inked across your left temple –  
“MMK 3025.”  
That is all that is left of you  
so that must be your name.  
You are not my father, brother, uncle or cousin  
but I have found you and call you friend

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for on this field in this kingdom of skulls  
you are the only one I can name.

### **Noah and the pandemic: a survivor's transformation**

A cataclysm that destroys all life on earth and cleanses the planet for a new cycle of rebirth – whether by flood, fire or ice, this motif of world destruction is nearly universal in world spiritual and mythological literature. It occurs in ancient Greek, Native American, Sumerian, Hindu and other traditions. It is one “symptom” of Apocalypse that, numerous traditions tell, has revisited humanity regularly throughout the ages and is not an accident of nature. Rather, it is profoundly connected to how we humans behave toward our planet and each other.

The Flood, of course, is an early event in the Judeo-Christian sacred history of the world. In *Genesis*, long before Abraham perceived the One, lived Noah, who was “righteous” and “blameless” and “walked with God.” But even in that early time the people had forgotten the Creation and its care. “All flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth” and “the earth is filled with violence.” The Divine determined that all living things would be blotted out – except Noah. Because he was righteous, he and his family would be saved along with pairs of animals to repopulate the planet after its devastation. Noah the Good, saved from the horrors that devastate the rest of humanity. The story traditionally gives us hope and faith that if we are good we might be spared “all the ills that flesh is heir too,” that goodness may serve as a protection against harm and evil. This belief is part of the innocence we carry in the face of a universe that can seem random and cruel.

The theme of divine or natural retribution in response to human wrongdoing is at the core of the universal message sent by Apocalypse. When “the earth is filled with violence” – human beings against each other, against the poor and weak, against nature itself – then Nature or the Divine pushes back in ways we experience as catastrophic. We have rendered the cosmos out of balance. While nature itself can be violent towards its creatures, the floods, fires and other environmental disasters we experience globally today are largely inevitable results of the imbalances we human beings have caused. The Divine has been seen in nature throughout time. The natural order is an expression of the Divine. When nature strikes, though modern scientific thought teaches us that it is inanimate and neutral, we experience nature's manifestations as an expression of the Divine and our relationship to the cosmos.

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The Flood in Noah's time was God using Nature to strike back at the human violence that had upset the order and harmed the balance and harmony of life. Noah, the only righteous man, was chosen to survive the pandemic in order to repopulate the planet supposedly emptied of human violence.

Imagine the mass destruction caused by the flood. Every human and animal being drowned. Cities underwater. All flora under water. The entire earth covered. No refuge in sight for days and weeks. No knowledge of an end to the calamity. And then the olive branch, the waters receding, the rainbow of hope and promise.

Hearing this story, we concentrate on the message of hope. Life is restored. We are Noah's distant inheritors. We are great grandchildren of the righteous. We have the earth and its bounty for our home. The rainbow promised "Never again."

But we must pause to ask, what happened to Noah and his family? Was he so good? Did he remain so? Did he restart humanity based in righteousness? What was the impact of being saved while watching the entire planet and all its creatures destroyed? The Bible gives us that aftermath as well.

As is common with ancient tales, we are not told Noah's emotions but only his actions. His actions following the flood are recognizable symptoms of what today we label as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

We are told that when the waters receded Noah planted the first vineyard, made the first wine, got drunk, passed out, and cursed the son who found and helped him for looking on his shame and nudity. Noah declared this son, Ham, would be a slave to his brothers for all time., thus providing the Biblical rationale for practicing millennia of brutal slavery. Noah became alcoholic and acted out blindly and aggressively against loved ones – a familiar traumatic response.

We are further told that after the flood the Divine gave Noah and humanity permission to eat flesh for the first time. Supposedly humanity was vegetarian, did not take animal life, until the Divine became convinced that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from the time of his youth." Only if we tend toward evil are we given the right to take other life to support our own. Tending toward violence, taking life, losing compassion – familiar traumatic responses.

We are told that Noah sacrificed live animals to the Divine for his salvation. What should we think of Noah killing a few of the few remaining creatures, believing that more bloodletting, more death, would please the Creator and that

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it was okay to kill rather than preserve those few remaining animals. Again – the tendency toward more violence – a familiar traumatic response.

Since Noah was righteous and singled out for survival and restoration of the species, we may wonder why he was not, like Abraham, the friend of God and father of his people? Rabbinical scholars have observed that though righteous, Noah seemed only concerned about himself and lacked compassion for suffering humanity. Biblical text commonly does not tell the emotions of its figures and we project our interpretations on them. But if Noah indeed lacked feeling for all those lost in the flood, we may be viewing Noah's inability to feel except for oneself and one's survival. This is known as psychic numbness - another symptom of PTSD.

Noah after the Flood – the righteous man saved to repopulate the earth had become alcoholic, abusive, violent, acting out, angry, numb in his feelings for others. distorted in his thinking by the massive destruction and death he witnessed and survived. No one comes out of such horrors unchanged, unscathed, still innocent and gentle. Would Noah be diagnosed with PTSD today?

And the rainbow promise? We suffer rising seas, melting glaciers, cities, islands, countries going underwater, people migrating in terror, natural habitat being destroyed. The Divine "Never Again" meant that humanity had to learn from the Flood, changes its ways, stop perpetrating violence and abusing the Creation. Never Again does not mean that the Divine or Nature will not be skewed by our actions and strike back against us. It means that unless we align ourselves with the balance, it will.

So, what did Noah learn? What does humanity learn from this early apocalyptic ordeal and the one we suffer today? Can global trauma be a balancing and teaching force that brings us and nature back into a oneness that sustains life instead of the abuse that causes the imbalance and destroys? We too are left, as we creep out of our private arks back into public spaces, with Noah's challenge.

### Noah<sup>1</sup>

"I will never again curse the  
ground because of man, for the  
imagination of man's heart is  
evil from his youth; neither will

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I ever again destroy every  
living thing as I have done."

*Genesis 8:21*

What did he learn then,  
Floating on that silent expanse  
While the bloated bellies of neighbors  
Bumped his hull and drifted away?  
What did he sense  
Astride a tone of manure  
That rose faster than he could shovel?  
What did he feel,  
This caretaker of all remaining life,  
As the last fawns and kids  
Bleated helplessly from drowning rocks?

And what finally left him  
When the deluge withdrew  
And land that could still sprout olive branches  
Revealed its litter of white and staring eye sockets?

He knew his duty:  
We must thank the great One.  
His first act:  
To roast a large bit  
Of the little remaining clean flesh –  
Sweet sacrifice for being saved.  
His second act –  
To banish one son of three  
For looking on his nudity.  
After the flood Eden was not even memory.

O Universe, you have been skewed  
By the powers of our hands.  
And we who taste your rain  
And tornado, your typhoon and blizzard,  
We who sweep the refuse of seed  
After the cleansing wind has passed  
We who float

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Give you our own flesh  
In apology and retribution.

### **Potatoes**

After a story reported during the trial of Klaus Barbie for crimes against  
humanity, August, 1987

1.

She wore her long auburn hair  
rolled in a bun and pinned in the back  
like the other women of her time.  
But at night, for me,  
her slender fingers pulled long pins  
one by one, until her hair  
tumbled over her shoulders  
onto my chest in the moonlight  
a meadow of ripening wheat.

2.

I survived by lapping water like a dog  
and remembering the tingle of her hair  
on my rancid chest. At the end,  
with Russian cannons exploding in our ears,  
they ordered us – walking piles of bone,  
worm-eaten stomachs, eyes like dice –  
to march or die. Soot coated my shoulders

and stuffed my nostrils as I forced my limbs  
through ripening, crater-torn fields.  
Just then a heavy frau, gray hair  
rolled in a bun and pinned in the back  
placed a bucket of boiled potatoes  
beside our long line of bones.

3.

I emerged a skeleton  
and went in search of her.  
I found

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the only part left –  
a pillow  
stuffed with her hair  
for the S.S. officer's head.

4.  
I never use a pillow  
but in winter always eat  
boiled potatoes.

### **Praying**

Never in my life did I pray so hard  
as that day, at the smoking bottom of this mountain,  
among giant boulders and fallen trees,  
when the enemy overran our wire  
and sprouted like berserk rice stalks  
no farther away than the length of my rifle  
and our muzzle holes became God's wrathful eyes;

Never in my life did I pray so hard  
until today, on the cloud-crowned top of this mountain,  
among smiling statues and wafting incense  
when their children took my hands and called me Uncle  
and monks bowed to me as if I were a saint  
and I embraced their dead as my true brothers  
and God's loving eyes gazed through my torn and mending heart.

### **To friends at war**

For United Ministry Team Chaplain Chris and Sgt. Tony  
In Afghanistan, 2012

I sit on this eastern shore.  
The wind whipping my bare legs  
is warm and soothing and does not rend.  
The waves rolling in from the gray horizon  
sing in incessant monotony.  
The lone gull shrieking by my side

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may be begging, crying, laughing.  
If I knew his language I would send it you.

You are deep in distant sands.  
The wind that lashes your faces and hands  
is filled with fragments of shrapnel  
that tear both flesh and soul.  
You have neither rolling waves nor ready water  
and the shrieks arising from your torn earth  
are the begging and lamenting  
of the hungry, the angry, the wounded and the dead.

Thinking of you I have no rest or sleep  
but even my weariness in love for you  
is as a gnat before a dragon.  
You are in a world that denies all succor.

I rise, walk to the line of wet sand  
where sea and shore caress and devour.  
I collect shells – long, smooth and black  
or white and fissured like turtle claws  
or cracked and half-eaten by gulls, tides or time.  
I gather gull feathers wet and straight from foam  
and sticks polished smooth by the great sea carpenter.  
As I hug this wild armful against my chest  
I think of how your rucksacks bite into your shoulders.

In that strange pause between sea and shore,  
wind and tide, sand and sky,  
in that terrible place in which we all must stand  
between chance and fate, the divine and damned,  
I lay down my load. As my bundle hits the sand  
I beg that in this moment you too can drop your burdens.

I fall to my knees. I fall on my hands.  
I grasp each fragment of shell, stone, stick and feather  
one by one. I lay each next to another  
and place and place until these elements of ocean  
strongly, simply, clearly spell your names.

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Above them with black shells I shape a chalice.  
In its bowl white shells leap as eternal flame.  
Around this ideogram made of nature's detritus  
I inscribe a giant heart. Beneath it  
I write the words that wind and tide will steal –  
"To Friends at War."

I sit back. A dog walks through unheeding.  
Two children stop and stoop and ask  
then drag their parents who stand and read  
then offer a prayer for you whom they do not know.  
I sit and sit and guard your altar  
until the green-gray tide washes in,  
washes over, and sucks your names,  
your totems, and all our prayers  
back into its one great womb.

If tides have any mercy,  
if the shafts of light cracking these gray clouds  
like albumen leaking through egg shells  
have any meaning beyond what we can see,  
if there is a throbbing heart in the core of this immensity,  
then the wind will etch these shells and prayers  
into the bloodied sands beneath your boots  
and you will hear the gull cries I send to you.

### **Welcome to the Apocalypse**

Pandemics. Droughts. Fires. Locusts. Floods. Tornados. Tidal Waves. Hurricanes. Volcanos. Species extinction. Cities submerging. Cancers. Terrorism. Endless wars. Mass migrations. Mass shootings. We are indeed in a time of environmental and systemic collapse. It has been variously known as The Great Flood, The Ten Plagues, World Wars, karmic retribution, divine punishment, dying worlds in Hindu, Greek and Native American cosmological cycles. We can understand it through environmental, scientific, historical, moral, spiritual, transgenerational, karmic, religious and other lenses. Each offers a pinhole image of the complete portrait of our current moment. One lens, revelatory yet neglected, is the archetypal.

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Archetypes are enduring images, symbols, stories and patterns that recur throughout human existence and experience. They are universal. Every age and culture gives their particular embodiments to these universals.

What does this have to do with our collective moment? The terrible truth is that this is archetypal. It has happened before; it seems to be a recurring theme and event in human and natural history and cosmology; it is forewarned and foretold in our major religions and mythologies as well as by science. We are in the archetype of the apocalypse.

Apocalypse is associated with St. John's Book of Revelations. He envisioned the Four Horsemen – pestilence, war, famine, death – galloping down upon humanity. We meet them today in the guise of Covid19, eternal warfare, climate crises. They destroy the old order with much suffering in their wake. Old ways must die and their toxic underpinnings revealed. Chaos ensues and ultimately a new order seeded. We may or may not like the new order. It may or may not be matched to our desires or efforts. We may or may not survive the recreation. We cannot subvert or avoid this process. We are in it. Its possible consequences – death or rebirth.

The word Apocalypse comes from the ancient Greek. *Apokalypsis* literally means to take the covering away, to reveal what has been hidden. During Apocalypse hidden and denied forces of global proportion surface to possess and direct humanity. These forces are karmic; they are the powers and traits that possess and control us, yet we remain unaware of them. Depth psychology calls what is revealed the Shadow – our lusts, greed, selfishness, disregard, all that we are and do not wish to admit to ourselves. Apocalypse releases the long-denied human shadow. Its symptoms are what we have wrought.

We may not see the great darkness, known as Satan in the Biblical tradition, the Dark Lord or Force in *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*. But we feel it pulling its shadow over us like a shroud upon the living. Apocalypse is not a great and horrible being outside of us. It lives through the countless small egos it possesses. It shatters the world as it has been and destroys the old order. It demands that we become conscious. It projects us into the liminal and onto the threshold of the new. There we are responsible for what happens next and either repeat, transform or are obliterated.

To live in apocalyptic times means that we must see – not only the floods and wars but the universals behind them. George Orwell who tried to warn us said, "It takes constant struggle to see what is right in front of your eyes." See that we are in End Times. See that the old order no longer serves and will not return.

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See that we are all endangered, wounded, being transformed, from frogs to humans, insects to elephants. See that a great darkness is rolling over us, many will not survive, and we cannot be the same. And see that we are all in this together.

It means that we must transform. Our old ways of being and doing, measuring and acquiring, defining, behaving, competing and keeping apart, working for ourselves, believing ourselves better or more secure or more protected or wealthier or safer are no longer true. We are all in Poe's citadel and the Red Death can touch any one of us anywhere. We cannot survive by behaving in the old ways – from washing hands and kissing to social gatherings and sports. We must find and create new ways for billions of people and untold species to live together – or not. We cannot know in advance what these new ways will look like. We must be together in a collective limbo and create a collective trust and purpose.

Every one of us becomes highly responsible for the tiny bit of the universal web we each inhabit. It matters whether I sneeze near you, whether we hug when we meet, whether we each get sunlight and fresh air and space. And it matters that we are all safe in the exchange.

The majority of us do not live most of our lives fiercely awake and responsible. But Apocalypse demands it. World wars, continental plagues and famines, decades-long droughts and fires – we cannot avoid Apocalypse. We must see it. We must embrace it. We must each do our small parts to protect the whole and transform together. Here we are. Welcome to the Apocalypse.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Tick. *Noah*. «Carousel Quarterly of Poetry», 4, 2 (1979): 16.

Selected poetry and prose by Sandy Scull and Brent MacKinnon from the volume *Agent Orange Roundup. Living with a Foot in Two Worlds* (Bookstand Publishing, 2020)

By Sandy Scull and Brent MacKinnon

**Skewed**

When I returned from war, mother threw me a party  
on the brick terrace ringed by roses and pansies.  
From a balcony I looked down on the guests.  
Mother wore a mini skirt, my ex-tennis partner,

a beard and pony tail. My brother brought  
one of my old dates. I gripped a gin and tonic,  
grateful for ice to freeze frame something familiar.  
In my absence, everything had skewed.

A friend suggested I take his date home,  
his apology for not writing me.  
A WW2 vet presented me a dorky statue  
inscribed with, "Our Hero."

Then, something from Vietnam intruded.  
At first I thought it was the off idea  
of an award for war. Or the sound of the word  
"hero" that I coupled with dead.

No, it was a smell. In my brain, nod no  
pungent orange napalm devoured  
jungle green. Father had sprayed gasoline  
between the red bricks to kill the grass.  
His war with what grew w-i-l-d

*(Sandy Scull)*

**In the wake**

*Nantucket Island, 1970*

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I trod the same cobblestones as George Pollard,  
whaling captain turned night watchman, 140 years before.  
Followed his route past the Whaling Museum,  
where on rainy days as boy of nine, I read the log  
of the Essex, slowly turning its jaundiced pages.  
Pollard's ink. All was not well when his ship  
was sunk by an enraged sperm whale.

Near the log, the jawbone of a large whale stood vertical.  
I would cringe through like some *Jonah boy* looking up  
at the teeth as if to redeem the horror of the slaughter.  
A three-thousand-mile drift in an open boat.  
Lots drawn – the custom of the sea. Shooting and eating  
Owen, Pollard's young cousin entrusted to him.  
The mother who never forgave. In the Great Fire of 1846,  
through a window, Pollard saw her hair and gown ablaze  
and was burned trying to save her.

After the war I drifted back to Nantucket.  
Stood on the same wharf where the town  
had silently met Pollard's return.  
When I came home from war,  
my mother said to my father in a hushed tone:  
*His eyes are popping out of his head.*

I worked for the newspaper that first reported  
the whale's attack on Pollard's ship,  
which inspired *Moby Dick*.. My night-watch patrols  
ended at the lighthouse on Brant Point.  
A beacon: Warning. Guiding.  
I wondered if Pollard had stood  
on those same rocks to view  
ships entering safe harbor,  
A comfort to me that Melville wrote:  
*Pollard had found a way to live on.*  
And when Emerson spoke at the Athenaeum,  
Pollard realized the sage of Concord knew nothing  
about darkness in the heart of Islanders.

I slept on the beach below my great-aunt's shack,

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listening to waves massage that sand.  
When he couldn't sleep, I imagined Pollard climbing  
the ladder to his widow's walk and looking  
to the stars for a new way to navigate.

(Sandy Scull)

### **Mars return**

At a reunion dinner for my class of Marine Lieutenants  
a toast turned toward the platitude side of sacrifice  
and commitment, and I found myself thinking about  
the 17 suicides a day among veterans.  
Taps blew for our long list of classmates  
who didn't make it back. A choir sang.  
I was moved.

To the young returnees from our current war,  
I want to say: Your mission is to relax  
and learn to love the ordinary.  
Observe how trees grow towards the light,  
how the ocean is buoyant and animals forgive.  
I want to say, take off your armor  
and run naked in the rain. Breathe in  
how nature turns death into life.  
And how roots reach into a web  
to support what grows above.

War's appetite is so voracious,  
you can't join and not eat, or be eaten.  
Thou shalt... replacing thou shalt not.  
That God role so overloads,  
the home front spreads flat

When drowning with the weight  
of what's left in your pack,  
blood may be thicker than water,  
but who cares? Semper Fi to what?  
Make your allegiance to something larger.  
Home should not be where you hang yourself.

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(Sandy Scull)

### Sea salt

After the Viet Nam War, I withdrew to the island  
of my youth: Nantucket: "far-away isle."  
Hoping to glimpse the boy before soul fled the body.  
Thirty-three miles of ocean exiling me  
from a homeland offering little embrace.

Me and my dog Christopher. Christ-love  
disguised as loyal canine. We roamed beaches.  
Working for the island newspaper  
connected me to people and place.  
Tides soothed with ebb and flow.  
A rhythm I could trust. Even eat by.  
I fished the last three hours of the east tide.  
Buried my toes in the sand, searching  
for the texture of little-neck clam.

When water was warm, I sailed out solo.  
Stripped then slid into the sound.  
Looked up toward the surface light.  
Christopher's gaze wavering,  
wind and water between us.  
Breath bubbles rose, bursting under his nose.

My body now embraced,  
a ritual purification in salt.  
Dismembered dreams floated closer.  
Something dissolved in a solution  
that held me. Breathing easier,  
I could imagine again.

(Sandy Scull)

### Viet Cong girl

The barrel, the boom. the bullet  
Speeds to greet and extinguish

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Encounters in War" (2020)

The Other

Our mirror image  
In this only moment  
Of intimacy with  
Each other

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

**Horsemen of the orange Apocalypse**

*Sunday School, 1958*

*Revelation 6:1-8*

For it is written and sealed  
By God's right hand

Wherein we, the Lambs of God  
Shall not take away the sin  
Of our foreign brethren

But shall be sacrificed  
Not once  
But twice

For we opened the first seal  
Heard the notice and thunder  
And there went forth upon  
A White Beast conquering  
And to be conquered

And when we had opened the second seal  
We heard the second Beast say,  
"Come and see."  
And thus went out upon him  
He who was blood Red

And power was given to us who sat thereon  
To take peace from the Earth  
That we should slay one another

*Close Encounters in War Journal, 3: "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as Aftermath of Close Encounters in War" (2020)*

For there was given unto us  
From above a great Orange sword  
Sheathed within the land  
And within us  
And now the Fifth Horseman  
Sharpens our Orange halo  
Not once but twice  
With his scythe  
  
Bringing Hell to all Horsemen  
And to take from us our sins  
At last

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

### **Monsoon**

Nong Son Village, Vietnam

«Can you hear me, Mac? Nod your head. Good.»

The sound of rain. A waterfall slid off the roof of my hut and poured down over cobblestones running to the Thu Bon River raging below. My fever burned hot and the medic from Echo Company shook his head, his distant voice fighting with the sound of the storm outside. «Mac, I can't get the temperature down. Only thing for that in my kit here is aspirin or morphine. You gotta drink as much water as you can.»

I said nothing. I couldn't.

«We need medivac but a no-fly order is in effect until this storm lets up. I gotta get back up the hill before dark or they might shoot me comin' in. Hate to leave you here alone.»

Behind him, four or five of my students stood against a wall.

The security team leader stuck his helmet through the broken window. «Gotta go, Doc. Captain says now.»

«See you tomorrow Mac.» I felt someone pat my shoulder.

Motion. Whispers. Silence.

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Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son.

«We help you, Tai.» An elder pulled off my T-shirt and fatigue pants. Naked, dizzy, near delirium, I could only lay exhausted, unable even to wonder if my shorts were clean.

Over the river, thunder boomed. Two of the younger men stood me up. «We help, Tai.»

I leaned on them as they pulled and hugged me through the front doorway and into the monsoon. And there we stood, under a torrent of water, two five-foot human crutches supporting a six-foot white ghost.

In just a few minutes, my temperature began to drop. A fuzzy clarity returned and in a flash of lightening, I saw the smiling faces of my two saviors staring up at me. After fifteen minutes of Vietnamese hydrotherapy, we returned to my room and old Quang dried me off before the three of them laid me back down. He covered me with a dry sheet, tucked me in, and gently wiped my face.

He smiled. “Drink chai. Good.” Hot tea stank of rotten roots and dark earth. He folded his arms across his chest and stood like a midget gunnery sergeant in pajamas.

Quang turned down the lamp, gathered spectators, and left the room. Yet I felt the presence of another, softer energy somewhere nearby. Gradually the ceiling stopped crawling and I began to dream....

...An elderly woman with white hair sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed. In front of her, a charcoal brazier supported and heated a pot of tea. The dancing red glow of coals cast her shadow on the wall as she chanted and rubbed a string of wooden beads back and forth between wrinkled and ancient hands. I slept the Sleep of the Dead.

A streak of sunlight splashed across the ceiling. Our monsoon had gone as quickly as it came and taken my fever with it. I felt renewed, born again, lighter in body and spirit. The after-taste of terrible tea from the night before filled my mouth, accompanied by a raging hunger.

Quang leaned against a post in the open doorway, smiling. He nodded in the direction of the far corner and I twisted around to look. The old woman from my dream smiled back as she sliced vegetables, making Pho soup.

Something strange and wonderful was happening to me. The tough combat vet, now a helpless patient ten thousand miles from home, won over by the hearts and minds of peasants in a remote Vietnamese village.

As a Marine, I was no good after that. The thought of shooting someone, anyone, belonged to a Self who no longer existed. I had been recruited and initiated into the human race. I now knew the real mission: To do as much good for the village in what time I may have left.

Something had transformed me and charged with purpose and meaning, I was full of energy. My days became alive and my body vibrated with urgency and mission. I didn't want to go to sleep at night. I knew this new life, this new feeling could end at any moment. I didn't want to miss anything.

The war around us intensified so I ate and slept in students' homes as they rotated me around like a circuit-riding preacher. Returning to my own room in the mornings, footprints left evidence of midnight visitors. We never spoke of the danger and in the Vietnamese way, only a gentle squeeze of my hand while inviting me to dinner, sent the darker message that guerillas might visit that same night.

And so began the love affair of my life. Whatever intelligence, creativity, and strength I was born with was called forth, valued, and embraced by those around me. Giving and receiving became one. My naïve suburban soul recognized something very precious and fragile filled every moment. It couldn't last.....

The war continued and after three months I became a casualty, not of violence but of hospitality. Each day, students manipulated and competed to bring me home for a meal. While flattered, I knew that my performance as the new oddity in town was much in demand.

My repertoire of excruciating tonal accents, a few card tricks, songs, and amusing cultural body language, entertained and distracted families. After many meals of mystery cuisine, I began to lose weight, energy, and the ability to concentrate. River fever ended my stay and Doc of Echo Company called in a medivac.

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

### **Vietnam hangover**

I got the news today.  
My V.A. claim denied.

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Fuck you  
I don't want money. Just say you did It  
Say you killed me with Agent Orange  
Say you did It.

The rumor's true: We *are* time bombs.  
Cancer, hiding 50 years,  
Laying in ambush  
Blew up in my body,  
Just as Peace of Mind  
called a cease fire

And as my grand children  
Stared from the end of the hospital bed,  
I almost...  
Disappeared  
Just say you did It

This shared legacy,  
the Gooks and us-  
Stillbirth and deformity  
Amputation and agony.

Here in our communal family plot,  
Buried in a mass grave,  
Yellow ghosts smile across the years  
Tombstones by Monsanto

Charlie was in the bush  
Eating fish heads and rice  
Seasoned with Agent Orange  
His skull still grins  
While our heart clock  
Ticks this time bomb  
Buried deep in DNA.  
Just say you did It.

We still live, yet  
We died in Vietnam  
Marching across that moon scape:

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Your black and grey, lifeless DMZ.  
Aliens in camo space suits breathing in that  
Bardo Plain of demons and phantoms...  
We were to become.

My soul dreams of WWI  
Shell blasted waste lands.  
Gentlemen poets in a muddy inferno  
Whispering of an endless cemetery,  
Trenches for graves,  
Bones coated with mustard gas.

And in this time, future ghosts  
Marching in black and grey  
Tailored body bags,  
Embark for the East  
From West Point.  
Eager sacrifices  
Lining up,  
Already  
Death

*(Brent MacKinnon)*



## From a U.S. Marine to His Vietnamese Counterparts, with an Introduction by Edward Tick

By Pat Guariglia

### **Letter of reconciliation after war: an introduction**

War deconstructs our world, causing not just the individual but everything human to be rendered “disordered.” We must make extreme efforts, step out of our comfortable boxes of diagnoses and prescribed treatments, even out of the safety of the therapy room, to bring genuine healing to those suffering the traumas of war and violence. Healing must include significant efforts to rebuild our world and reconstitute broken relationships. This is atonement – bringing back into oneness what war and violence have sundered.

In my long service to our warriors and survivors, I have sought the most comprehensive healing strategies to achieve atonement and reconciliation for all touched by war. In this effort, since 2000 I have led annual healing and reconciliation journeys for American veterans of the Vietnam-American War as well as family members and peace activists. We travel all over Viet Nam, visit former bases and battlefields, immerse in Vietnamese culture, and meet with Vietnamese veterans and survivors of all factions. We sit in respectful circles and share the stories that prove to be universal and bond us, as Viet Cong veteran Tam Tien said to my visiting group, “as brothers and sisters who survived the same hell.”

Pat Guariglia was a Marine sergeant in heavy fighting in Viet Nam. He returned psychologically and spiritually wounded by the war and has courageously engaged in many healing efforts. Though he has not returned to Viet Nam, he has assisted me in philanthropic activities in that country and the US, helping any survivors of that conflict. In our reconciliation efforts, Pat wrote the following letter to his counterparts among Vietnamese veterans – the North Vietnamese Army Regulars and Viet Cong against whom he fought.

We translated his letter and read it aloud in both English and Vietnamese at veteran gatherings in several regions of Viet Nam. In every instance the veterans of both countries and all factions recognized these as the words of a brother in arms who has traveled the long distance from hatred and fear to honor and respect, and from an identity as an antagonist to the shared identity of “brothers and sisters who survived

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the same hell." Pat learned that truth. He now teaches and preaches it as he continues to guide younger veterans on their long healing paths home.

*Edward Tick*

### **From a U.S. Marine to his Vietnamese counterparts**

To all at this veterans gathering,. I am sorry I cannot be there personally with you in Viet Nam.

I want to say first that I recognize that all of us that took part in the Vietnam-American War were, for the most part, there because we thought we were serving a cause greater than ourselves. We were willing, if need be, to sacrifice ourselves for that cause. It has been a long time coming for me to make that realization about us all, but I recognize it for what it is – the truth.

During my service in the war, I did not want to see that truth for I was blinded to it by hatred. I was only thinking about me and my sacrifices. After all I traveled 13,000 miles or 20,000 km to Viet Nam to a people and place I did not know because I wanted to help the Vietnamese people. I wanted to help them fight the aggression of the north, to stop communism, and to help the ordinary Vietnamese person to achieve freedom. To be free. To protect them from harm, from evil. I knew what I was doing was noble, so I came and fought you, my enemy, with all I had in me, believing in my ideals. Then you killed my brother, my blood brother, my closest friend, a person I loved. I fought harder after that, wanting to revenge his death and even the score. I saw my enemies only as evil. You killed a good man I loved. So I was going to hunt you down and make you pay. Eventually I realized that you can never get even. Revenge does not and cannot achieve anything worthwhile; it only spreads more harm.

After a while I went back home, back to the States, back to New York. The war and its brutality had changed me forever. But I decided to put the war behind me, start a family and carry on. I still couldn't, wouldn't, think of my enemies as people; you were the VC , the NVA , Charlie, or Gooks, people to hate. I kept these feelings hidden for a long time, then through a series of fortunate events, I received psychological help. With this help my hatred eased and gradually faded away. It was replaced with me trying to understand what had happened all those years ago.

To do that I tried to put myself in your position. Suppose I had been born in Viet Nam. Suppose I had seen what the French did in Viet Nam Suppose I had seen the corruption of the central government in Saigon. I might have looked at the US presence in my county not as beneficial but as perhaps a bad thing, another invader. Suppose I

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Pat Guariglia

*From a U.S. Marine*

had a loved one killed by bombing or I heard of a young family killed, even accidentally, by US troops or even US supported troops, what would I have done? So now I know.

I would have wanted to free my country from those evil people that would bomb and kill an innocent family. If I was in the North I would have joined the NVA. If I was in the South I would have joined the Viet Cong. I would HAVE to join. Because that was the noble thing to do, even if it meant sacrificing myself.

Upon realizing this, I came unexpectedly to a place of peace. My hatred totally evaporated. Now I realized that we were all, on both sides, trying to do the right thing. So now what? For me it means seeing you and your side as not very different from me. Both of us tried to do the right thing. In that spirit I see you as fellow warriors, brothers of a kind, even if we were on opposite sides, in that spirit I ask you to forgive me in your heart as I forgive you in mine.

It is time that we as brothers in arms try to love rather than hate each other. It is time...

Respectfully,

Sgt. Pat Guariglia

United States Marine Corps

## Wave<sup>1</sup>

By Kate Dahlstedt

My father was a regular G.I. He and his fellow troops issued supplies to the European front and followed behind combat troops, always trailing through the destruction after the battle, but never being aimed at, never firing back. Finally, Europe was liberated. Japan was the next front. My father, like so many others, was ordered to invade that beautiful land. He was sent there as a combatant. He was sent there to kill and perhaps be killed. After a few months in the Philippines he was on shipboard with the other soldiers, crowded and lonely for home.

They were all terrified of what waited ahead, invading enemy territory, a Pacific island they had never seen before. Europe had been vaguely familiar, reminiscent of home. But, Japan was another world, and the Japanese soldier a foreboding and unknown entity. My father, like many of his counterparts, kept his deepest fears inside. If he had dared let himself fully feel his own terror, he would have been lost to himself, given over to that other sphere where nothing makes sense anymore. The die had been cast. He was on his way. He was in the hands of fate now. All he could do was hold fast to hope.

One day flowed into the next. Playing cards, smoking cigarettes, talking about girlfriends waiting back home and the job or house they'd have someday; anything to keep from feeling where they were going, what they were doing, what lay ahead. And truly they did not know what lay ahead. How could anyone? Beyond imagining. Beyond all human comprehension.

And then the news... A radio dispatch... A bomb, the biggest, was breaking down the enemy. There was cheering and laughter and hope that the end was near, that their dreams of home would really come true. They could pick up where they had left off, and life, their lives, would go on as planned. Now they glued themselves to the radio listening for updates, making bets, making promises to God. Finally, it came, three days later, another bomb, another city, Japan had surrendered. Relief raced through every muscle. My father breathed his deepest breath. The war was over. He had been spared.

The ship came alive. Music could be heard in the mess hall. Nervous laughter was everywhere. My father wrote letters home, one to his mother with facts and

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<sup>1</sup> Wave appeared in Kate's new book, *Lessons From The Garden. Selected Poems and Essays*. Sacramento, CA: Mandorla Books, 2020. The editors of the CEIWJ are thankful for permission to reprint.

reassurance, one to his sweetheart with love and dreams. He imagined a few more months of that drab green and army rations, then the boat ride home. A few more months of jeeps and guns and he'd put it all behind him. He still didn't know what none of them knew, the price they had paid. With the end in sight anything seemed bearable. Anything *seemed* bearable.

He didn't feel the shock waves then. They were imperceptible, distorted, clouded by the unreality of victory. And when he saw, his mouth agape, the ravaged earth, the rubbled city, the people gone for miles around, he still didn't know that he was changed forever. There was no going home again, home to innocence or home to glory. No one will ever be home that way again.

My father didn't talk much about those times, and most people who knew him never knew his story. He wept when he told me of those days, not only for what he saw, but for what cannot be seen. His life was spared, and thousands more, but he was never sure it was an even trade.

He didn't know me then, riding through those leveled streets, silently taking in the smoke and stench that filled the air. He had not even dreamed me as he watched the children shuffling through the wreckage for something familiar to hang on to. He couldn't imagine then that what he saw was only the beginning of a wave so great that I would feel it too someday, that all of us would feel it deep in our marrow forever.

My father went on to have a good life. He was a gentle man who always felt blessed. He died recently in a memory care facility. Surprisingly, in his final days, although he no longer remembered my mother, he began telling anyone who would listen that he had been in Hiroshima after the bomb dropped. That event became the central focus of his identity when most of who he was otherwise had left him, and as he faced his own death.

My father was very happy having a family, grandchildren and great grandchildren. But he never lost sight of the wave, the human evil that always lurked. And in his quiet moments when he looked out over the ocean he felt sad and shameful and angry about the human capacity for such savagery. And I believe he knew, though he never said it out loud, that since that time we have all been existentially searching, like children through the wreckage, for something safe to hang on to.

## **The Desert within<sup>1</sup>**

By Gianluca Cinelli

As he got off the bus, Jackson sniffed the scorching air of July saturated with the smell of withered earth and dried hay. He knew he was alone again. He had reached Albuquerque on a Greyhound and had afterwards headed west beyond Gallup, until the last local bus had dropped him in the middle of nowhere on a crossroad. No one could track him down now.

He looked around like a castaway on a desert island. It would not be easy, but he kept repeating the words which Karen, the elderly neighbour of his parents', had told him before he left from home: «There's no good in crawling back. Ahead must you go.» And so he meant to, although he had no idea of where to start from.

He looked at the setting sun and began to walk westward. The land was dry and rocky, low hills wrinkled the horizon like waves, and the vultures flew high in the pale-blue sky. Had it not been for the scent of hay, that empty sky could have been just the same as in Afghanistan. The same hostility and strangeness lurked in its unfathomable depths. And yet, this was supposed to be home, his own country, and people, for whom he had sacrificed his youth. But Jackson did no longer know where home was. His entire life seemed severed in two halves. One part lay far behind like a dead thing, while the other one lay ahead as dark and formless as the desert's night.

He walked on in the peaceful desolation of the land, interspersed with low bushes and lonely trees. The heat made him dizzy, but as the evening was coming down, he knew that some fresh breeze would blow after dark. After a few miles, the land changed abruptly. All vegetation grew thinner until it disappeared completely, leaving only a barren desert of reddish and sharp rocks. No sooner had the sun disappeared, than he heard the distant roar of an engine and turned around with a start.

An old orange van was crawling up to him through the desert, and its glimmering lights looked almost unreal in the violet twilight. The van slowed down and eventually stopped a few yards away. The driver wore a hat and looked rather massive, but his face was invisible inside the dark cockpit. Jackson reached the van and looked inside from the open window.

«Hi, wouldn't you give me a lift?»

«Sure. Where are you bound to?»

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Jackson could not answer, for he did not know. All he managed to conjure was a vague jest of his hand.

«Jump in», the man said. As the driver offered him a cigarette, the little flame revealed that the man was an Indian.

«How far can you drive me?», he asked, looking out at the desert that was getting dark.

«I'll stop in Naschitti.»

Jackson had never heard of such a place before, but it did not really matter.

The driver was silent and breathed heavily. The van was old and dusty, it smelled of oil and tobacco. Jackson closed his eyes and let his mind wander off. The monotonous roar of the old engine, the bumps along the road, and the dry scent of the cooling desert brought him back overseas, where his youth lay slumbering forever. It had taken some time before the Army found out what he had done, but now they were at his heels. The desert, though, would protect him this time, for things can hide and live in the desert.

He woke up and saw the stars glittering in the clear sky. The van was crossing the night as if flying over an abyss. Jackson reached over to his hip, checking that his weapon was there, for the province of Herat was insidious after dusk. However, he could not find it and startled.

«How long have we been patrolling?», he asked in a perplexed tone. He could not believe he had fallen asleep during a patrol.

The driver looked at him twice before he replied: «This is no patrol, buddy. We're in New Mexico. You slept. And talked, too.»

Jackson came back to reality at once and knew he was not on his Hummer. The man sitting next to him was not Franklin, who was dead. Jackson knew that it was his fault, for he had seen the kid kneel and aim his RPG towards their vehicle. It could see him right now with his very waking eyes, and his mouth dried once again. God only knows why he had said nothing. Franklin got killed in the blast.

«Listen, man», the driver said quietly. «There are no hotels in the place we're going to. I would keep you at my place for tonight, but my ma wouldn't allow you in. I will drop you at the gas station. You can stay for the night in the rear, in my office. You'll find something to eat and drink on the shelves.»

«I'm much obliged», Jackson replied, feeling uncomfortable. He was now a vagabond and needed others' help for everything. Him!, who had never asked for anything, he who had always watched over the sleep of others. How funny it was now to be sitting

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at the bottom, eyeing that strange rope, hanging from above. He was uncertain whether he should hang himself with that, or grasp it and wait for being rescued from the pit he had fallen into.

Jackson and his rescuer reached the village quite late.

«Get in now», the man told Jackson, as they stepped out from the van before the gas station. «Close the door behind you when you leave. North from here, you'll meet the road to the west. God bless you.»

They parted without saying anything more and the night swallowed up the Indian.

\* \* \*

During the night, Jackson woke up in fear once again, for he dreamt about being aboard his Hummer with Franklin. As usual, the kid appeared and fired his rocket-launcher. However, the dream unfolded in an unprecedented way, and Jackson slipped into another dream. The desert turned green and grey and was eventually replaced by a forest under a stormy sky. The firs swayed in the fierce wind and Jackson was standing alone before a barn. A small man, no bigger than a fat child, danced in rags before him and waved his hands madly, in a somewhat mocking way. A huge black dog was chained to a pole and howled wildly. Jackson looked upon the scene in horror. Then Franklin appeared behind the wild man and began to beat him senseless or maybe dead. A tornado eventually appeared in the sky, and the rain started to stream down onto earth like a waterfall, wiping away the house, the corpse, and the dog with its pole.

When he opened his eyes, the eastern sky was growing rosy. Jackson left the village unseen and headed north until he met the old Indian route, the same that the Blue Jackets once rode to reach the farthest outposts in Alamo and Fort Defiance, on the border. Long before, he thought, foreigners from the East had come here with their guns to impose their laws and ways with violence. His black skin was the other face of the same story. His forefathers were herded on the wild coast of Africa and shipped off to the west in chains, to feed the men who ventured in this desert chasing the red people. Was any justice and meaning to be found in all that? As he walked on, Jackson felt as though he was streaming back through time, and what he saw was a long chain of wars and bloodsheds. He did not want to be part of that history anymore. This was a place where ghosts still lingered on, protected by the desert, and he felt finally at home. He walked on and on in the sunlight that grew fiercer by the minute. He saw life fight back among the rocks to survive, no matter how hard or pointless it might be. He felt

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like he was turning into a black rock among those red rocks that fiercely stood there, where the red warriors had fallen under the sabres and bullets of the conquerors.

The blaze of the sun became unbearable, Jackson had to stop before collapsing. He came across a dirty bar by the road and got in despite his pockets not jingling as he sounded them. Nonetheless, he slipped inside and paced straight for a table in the farthest corner of the room. The air was stuffy and warm, and a sour-sweet smell of decaying food floated around, making him feel somewhat nauseous. He sat and saw a handful of customers sitting in a row at the bar, leaning forward and heavily sunken in their thoughts. Nobody spoke. It seemed that some sort of spell kept those people stunned. Some kind of pain forced those men to perch on their stools and bend over.

No one really seemed to acknowledge Jackson, until the Indian bartender left his spot and came forth.

«What will I bring you?», he asked after peering at Jackson.

«I'd just like to stay here for a while, please», he answered in a humble tone.

«Wandering alone in the desert in July is dangerous.»

Jackson looked up at the man and smiled faintly.

«Ten to one, you're in the Army», the barman said.

«How so?»

«I see many like you. They come from the north, mostly from Colorado Springs. They pop by and move off southbound.»

«And what does make you think I'm one of those?»

«The look on your face. See those wrecks there?», he pointed to the men at the bar and sat down next to Jackson. «Nobody ever stops here but folk of their like. They're not really alive, nor are they dead yet. Do not think bad of me, but I've grown quite good at understanding at first glance what sort of people walk across my door. This bar is a strange place, where old broken things come to be mended or to waste away once and for all.»

«You've much to say, I reckon. But I'm not sure I feel like listening much longer.»

«Yeah, whatever. Can I offer you a coffee? It's on the house.»

«That's kind of you, man.»

«No problem. I'll get back in a minute.»

Jackson sat back and closed his weary eyes and started brooding over broken things. The penetrating smell of rotting food disgusted him. He had to find out how to mend his own cracks. The barman came back with the coffee, but he did not pour it, nor did Jackson drink any. The man sat down again by him and put his elbows on the table.

«I'm here to get cured», Jackson said suddenly.

«You are what?»

«You said that broken things come here looking for mending.»

«I did, yes. But I don't have the cure myself. I'm no voodoo-medicine man.»

«Is this what you say to those who come here?»

«They don't usually ask. You're the first one, and that's why I wish to help you. There's a place in the Reserve. A wise woman lives there. She's ancient and knows the mysteries of earth and sky. She's been living in the desert since ever. She can speak with the dead.»

«Are you kidding?»

«You asked, man. I'm only telling you what I have heard of.»

«And where would this woman be?»

«Beyond the lakes, right north from here, where our people once dwelled. She will help you. I'll show you the map.»

The man disappeared into a backdoor and reappeared a few seconds later holding a yellowish parchment that looked as old as the desert itself. As he laid the thing on the table, Jackson realized it was a worn-out piece of leather with a map drawn upon. He could see the roads, the hills, and a green patch scattered with blue stains, just like an oasis. One red line showed the way into the heart of the green area.

«Just follow the map, and you won't fail. But be ready, for she'll ask for something back.»

«Do you know that woman? Personally, I mean.»

«Of course not» the man hastened to reply. «You'll need your strengths for the journey. You can stay here for tonight, then you'll leave before dawn. You see? You now know what you came here for.»

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And morning came, finding Jackson lying on a bench in an empty room apparently used as a storage cabinet. The house was quiet, and Jackson woke up surprisingly fresh. For the first night, he had had no nightmares whatsoever. The first thought that darted through his mind was the map, which was nowhere to be found, though. He looked around baffled, for the place looked shabby and derelict. Two piles of cardboard boxes stood in one corner, under a thick layer of the same dust covering the floor, where his boots had left footsteps. The air was stuffy, and the shutter of the only small window was broken. A calendar of 2008 hung from the wall, discoloured and soiled.

Then, a sudden rustle followed by a stomp startled him. Perhaps the barman was back. He waited, but nothing happened. No one opened the door and came in, however, he sensed that the mysterious visitor was lingering outside just beyond the door. Jackson shivered and held his breath. He could imagine the man standing outside, with one ear pressed against the door to catch the least sound from within. That must be Franklin, for sure. He had caught up with him at last.

Jackson could not tell how long he remained still, listening. Eventually, a blade of reddish sunlight appeared on the wall opposite the window, and he knew that the day was young and he had to leave. The ghost was gone, and he cautiously opened the backdoor. There was nothing out there, except for the almost inaudible rustle of the cool, nightly breeze rushing away. Distant red rocks glowed in the sunlight. Jackson ventured around the house that now looked very old. The shutters were closed, the paint was peeled and scraped, and a thick layer of sand covered the porch, where he could clearly see the marks of military boots. So it was true! Franklin was here. Although he thought that the men he had seen in the bar the day before should have left their footprints behind too, none were visible. He could only see the traces of desert-boots, which were not unlike his own after all.

Jackson headed northeast leaving the barn behind. There was no track to follow but the tiny red line he had seen on the map. He just began to wonder who had ever drawn it, for he had asked nothing about it. It might be a hoax, and he had not even worried about it. What if the man had just made of him the greatest fool, sending him to get lost in the desert?

On he went, and the sun rose higher and higher over the desert, blazing and scorching the already excruciated rocky bulges. After hours of rambling, Jackson finally reached a valley like an oasis. Here the barren desert turned into an Eden where little trees grew on the side of the hills, around a quiet, shiny speck of blue water. The man sped up through the bush pacing straight to the lake.

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The trees offered some shelter from the violent touch of the sun, but he was sweating and swaying. As he reached the shore, he did not even stop and walked straightaway into the cool water with his clothes still on. The touch of the water was icy and gave him cramps in the stomach. He headed back to the beach and crawled under a shadowy bush, where he got off his clothes and lied down naked, letting the breeze caress his body. He felt dizzy and lightheaded. The trees and the bush began to sway, and the light white clouds floating above him in the sky seemed to whirl as if caught in some unnatural storm. The sun had maddened him and now chained his naked body to the ground, forcing his soul neither to sleep nor to stay awake. Jackson's wearied mind just wandered astray.

He heard steps coming near. Jackson rolled his eyes to look at the stranger, fearing that the phantom had caught up with him once again, but it was not Franklin who was approaching. It was a woman who stopped and startled as she saw the naked body lying. She thought him dead, but Jackson moved his arm feebly and opened his eyes. He knew he had found her, for he had reached the place where she lived forever, apart from human eyes.

«Are you hurt?», he heard her ask. It was a low, ancient voice. The face that leaned on him was old and wrinkled, tanned and ugly, her eyes were as blue as the sky, and silvery, long hair came streaming down her shoulders like a frozen waterfall. He could feel the touch of her bony hands on his chest and neck, on his hot forehead, and around his pulsing wrists.

«You'll be fine», she said. «You're lucky that I found you.»

Her words eased Jackson's weary mind, and he suddenly felt better, as though life was streaming backwards through his veins. He turned his head and winked to peer at her. Although naked, he felt no shame, for she was no mere woman and had no appetite for his body. She was a witch if not a goddess, and what she craved for was his soul. He struggled to talk, but his mouth was dry and his throat sore:

«I was looking for you», he said faintly. «The map took me here.»

She looked at him and smiled, then touched his forehead gently.

«You must have been walking for hours, young man. The desert is dangerous, at this time of the year.»

«You saved my life», Jackson said eyeing a circle of vultures high above the lake.

«I'm glad I found you. You gave me a startle, for you did look dead already.»

«I cannot die, as long as I remain in the desert.»

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She smiled again as he went on:

«My friend keeps living in the desert too.»

«Your friend? You're not alone?»

«I am. He just keeps following me, he's got the grudge.»

«Is your friend anywhere around?», she asked in alarm.

«You could talk to him and tell him to leave me alone. I didn't mean to hurt him, I really didn't.»

The woman looked around, pondering what to do. She thought that something had been going on around there, for the man was far sicker than sunstroke could have caused him to be. What if he recovered his strength? He could not be older than twenty-five and was strong and healthy, despite his being rather thin and unclean, just like a tramp.

«I was told you can heal me», he said faintly.

«Who told you that?»

«Someone I met on the road. He showed me the map to you. He said I'm a broken thing and I need mending.»

«Did he say that?»

«He did, and I found you.»

«Was your friend who told you that?»

«He was no friend, no. I had never seen him before, he was an Indian.»

«So, he was not the one you... killed.»

Jackson chuckled: «That was Franklin, he drove the Hummer. He's no Indian. He's a very good buddy.»

The woman was now utterly puzzled.

«Does anyone know that you are here?»

«No one knows», he said stirring. «No one must know.»

«Ok, now calm down. It's all right. You're doing great.»

The picture was slowly getting clear. The man had killed some friend of his called Franklin, and he was now on the run. He was also shocked and confused, and he believed that his friend was still lurking out there as a ghost, looking for revenge. She

thought the police must be looking for him, but her phone was dead and her car was at least two miles away, over the hills. She shivered and thought that the best thing was keeping the man quiet.

«Your man was right, you know», she said reassuringly. «I can heal you.»

Jackson looked at her with gratefulness, while she poured water from her canteen into his dry mouth and over his naked chest and head.

«I can't do much here, though. I'll go get my jeep and come back to pick you up.»

«You've got a jeep?», he said surprised. «Don't you live in the desert?»

«It does not matter, does it?», she said, but Jackson was getting nervous.

«You're not the holy woman I was looking for», he protested trying to get up.

«Calm down, I said I can help you and I will, but I need to take you away from here.»

«No! You're a fraud! You're a spy! You were tracking me down, to get them on my trail.»

As Jackson struggled to get on his feet again, the woman panicked and fled, followed by the desperate curses of the man, who felt too dizzy and stunned to run after her. He strived to put his clothes on and he cried out his desperation. Then, a man in a desert-suit came out of the bush. Jackson saw him and drew himself up half-frozen in astonishment and fear. Franklin was standing there before his very waking eyes, pale and stiff.

«Franklin?», Jackson muttered.

«Yes, Jackie, it's me. I've been looking for you all over the place. It's beautiful here, ain't it?»

«It's wondrous. Was it you this morning, tapping at my door?»

«What do you think?»

«I think it was you, buddy. How did you find me?»

«You never let me go.»

«Yeah, I didn't, could I?»

«Will we sit down? There, by the lake.»

The two friends went to sit where Jackson saw the water gently caress the land. He wiped his tears and sighed deeply. He was glad that Franklin had found him.

«Are you still mad at me?», he asked shyly.

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«I never was, Jackie.»

«Really? Despite it all?»

«Despite it all.»

«I thought you got the grudge. I am so ashamed of myself», Jackson said crying. «I didn't mean to let you down, buddy. I wish I had died in your place.»

«I know. It was not your fault. Now it's time to stop running away, don't you think?»

«But they're hunting me down like a beast.»

«I know that too.»

«How can I prove that I am innocent?»

«Innocent?»

«You just said so, but how will I tell them?»

«I didn't say that, Jackie.»

Jackson stared at the ghost in bewilderment.

«I said that what happened in Afghanistan was not your fault. But then?», the ghost said.

Jackson was puzzled, he went back to the days he had spent with his parents, the gloomy days in which solitude was like the lid of a grave over his head. His recollections were now so blurred as though he was trying to recall someone else's life. He could see the big house upon the hill, the garden, and those appalling mists exhaling from the forest. He could now see the house of their neighbours, the face of Karen and her beautiful daughter Cynthia, with her long dragonfly-like limbs and big eyes. Were they real?

Then his memories grew darker. He could now see the steep slope downhill with a white track leading to the shabby shack of that ugly, wicked man, who lived alone with his horrible black dog. He shivered, as the curses of the midget, who was calling him names, still resounded in his ears. There were darkness and rage then. He could now see him lying down with clots of brain coming out of his cracked skull to form an ugly pond of dark blood. Then the rain started pouring down, washing the horror away. A fierce wind ripped the shack into the air, and the howling dog and the corpse of the murdered man flew swirling up in the sky.

Jackson put his hand to his eyes and said:

«I dreamt of that man the other day. You were in my dream too, rescuing me. You killed him.»

«Jackie, my friend, it's time to face the truth.»

«What truth?»

«Karen told you, he was a wicked man. He beat up his wife and let his dog rip cats to pieces just for fun. He was a horrible man, but it was not up to you to bring justice upon him.»

«I didn't kill the man. You did it!»

«I'm just a ghost, I exist only in your mind. I can kill if you do. I can go if you let me. I'm nothing but a hollow.»

Jackson grew dumb. He thought he saw himself in another life, as somebody else. He knew he was both the man, and he was Franklin and the Indian bartender too. All these people existed inside his mind and he could no longer tell the dream from reality.

«Should I stop running?», he asked.

«It's up to you.»

«They'll punish me for what I've done.»

«You can start again. You just need to believe that you can.»

«I wish I could.»

«Stop looking backwards. You got to get outta here, buddy. Stop running and leave the desert behind.»

«I'm afraid, Franklin.»

«We all are, buddy. Look at me. Am I not afraid of leaving all this behind? But I'm here only because of you. Let me go, I beg you.»

Jackson turned to stare at the lake, so placidly flat and blue as though it had swallowed the sky. He finally felt ready to face his fate, whatever it was. He had killed the man upon the hill, he didn't know why, for he could not remember. His rage had had the upper hand upon him, and it could happen again. He needed to be healed.

«I don't want to live on like a dead among the living», Jackson said. «I want to be born again, and I'm ready to go through it.»

«I'm proud of you Jackie. Be ready though, for each birth claims a death.»

Franklin grew paler and paler as if he was to fade.



«I'll miss you, Franklin. I love you.»

«I love you, Jackie.»

\* \* \*

The woman came back with two cops. The sun blazed, the air had become hot. She had not said much to the cops, she did not mean to get the poor man into more troubles than he already was in. She had just said that he was in dire need, and she expected to find him where she had left him naked. They found the body lying with the face into the sand. He had tried to put his clothes on, but he must have collapsed before he could finish. She pronounced him dead without even taking his pulse.

«I'm sorry ma'm», one of the cops said. «I'm afraid we'll need to rob you of a little more time for a statement. Sorry about your spoiled holiday, by the way.»

The desert was silent under the slow, circular flight of vultures.

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<sup>1</sup> This short story appeared in Italian language in the magazine «Fermenti», 250 (special collectible issue) (2020): 289-298.

## Authors' biographies

**Stefano Bellin** has recently completed his PhD in Comparative Literature at University College London (UCL). He is currently a stipendiary lecturer in Ancient Philosophy at King's College London and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) at UCL. Stefano studied Philosophy (BA, MA) at the University of Padua and at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. After working at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (MACBA), he completed a second MA – in Contemporary Art Theory – at Goldsmiths University. He has published articles on several subjects, including Primo Levi, Kafka, Deleuze, Human-Animal Studies, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Shame of Being Human: A Philosophical Reading of Primo Levi*.

**Andrea Roxana Bellot** is a post-doctoral researcher at Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain. Her main research interests focus on the cultural and literary representation of war, with a particular emphasis on the Malvinas/Falklands War. Her main publications include: *The Faces of the Enemy: The Representation of the 'Other' in the Media Discourse of the Falklands War Anniversary* (2018) and *The Malvinas/Falklands War* (2013).

**Gianluca Cinelli** is a scholar in Italian Studies and Comparative Literature. His research interests include war witness-narratives, history and ethics, and the connection between violence, trauma, and literary creativity. He has published the monographs *La questione del male in Storia della colonna infame di Alessandro Manzoni* (2015), *"Viandante giungessi a Sparta..."* (2016), and *Il paese dimenticato* (2020). Author of the novels *Fantasma in Val d'Orcia* (2012) and *Il segreto della città di K.* (2019) he has published short stories and has founded the literary blog *Discorsiva Mente* ([www.discorsivamente.wordpress.com](http://www.discorsivamente.wordpress.com)).

**Kate Dahlstedt** is a psychotherapist, mentor, writer, trainer, and the co-founder of Soldier's Heart, a veterans' healing initiative. She has worked with veterans and their families for over 27 years. Her work has taken her to the rice paddies of Vietnam with U.S. veterans as well to the townships of South Africa working with AIDS victims. Some of her writing has been translated into Greek and Vietnamese and read at national

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and international events. She has also written several professional book chapters and journal articles and recently released her new book, *Lessons From The Garden: Selected Poems and Essays*. The daughter of a WW2 veteran, Kate spent many hours as a child talking with her father about his army experiences. She is grateful that even though war broke his heart it did not break his spirit.

At 95 years old, **Thayer Greene**, Ph.D., continues serving as a senior Jungian analyst. During World War 2, he served in the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division and took part in the battle of Cologne in March of 1945. In April, his unit was involved in the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Dora-Mittelbau. That experience shaped his life toward doing good and practicing healing and reconciliation in every role. In his career of almost seven decades, Thayer has served as a college chaplain supporting German-American reconciliation after the war, a Congregationalist minister, and for the last half century an analyst. He is the author of *Modern Man in Search of Manhood* (1967) and is a distinguished Jungian lecturer, mentor and teacher (<https://www.gazettenet.com/Memorial-Day-profile-by-Nick-Grabbe-25548483>).

Originally from New York City, **Pat Guariglia** was a Marine sergeant in fierce combat during the Vietnam War. He fought with both American and South Korean (ROK) forces. After the war he moved to the mountains of upstate New York to find peace and healing and raise a family. He made a career there as an antique dealer. Pat has contributed much to reconciliation with Viet Nam and in recent years has served as mentor and homecoming guide to young combat Marines from the “sandbox wars”.

**Brent “Mac” MacKinnon**, M.A., began his teaching career while with the Marine Corps infantry when assigned to live alone in the village of Nong Son. A few years later he served two tours with the Peace Corps. Graduate school placed him in the Linguistics Department with a license to wander and he continued for decades. Unable to participate in his own culture, his path was to include a Navajo school, SEAsian resettlement, Latino immigrant programs and CAP poverty projects. After years of working abroad he returned to facilitate recovery sessions with incarcerated veterans and group retreats of combat vets. Currently Mac coordinates a poetry group for younger men. He has published six books, two on related subjects; *Winning the War Within* (2010) and *PTSD and Expressive Writing* (2012).

**Patrizia Piredda** is a scholar in literature and philosophy. She has published on ethics and literature, metaphor, and utopia, and she has focused on such authors as Pirandello, Primo Levi, Thomas More, Wittgenstein, Aristotle, and Nietzsche. Among her publications: *“L’etico non si può insegnare”* (2014); *La letteratura e il male* (2015); *La maschera del dandy* (2017), and *La riflessione etica nel teatro italiano contemporaneo* (2018).

**Charles “Sandy” Scull** holds a PhD in Transpersonal Psychology. In 1967-68, he served as a Lieutenant in the Marines in Vietnam, leading convoys in the Northern I Corps. After the Tet Offensive he joined a mobile counter-attack task force. Returning home, he worked with three Madison Avenue advertising agencies before relocating to San Francisco. Oprah Winfrey featured Sandy as a guest on her TV show based on his anthology, *Fathers, Sons & Daughters* (1992). He interned at the Men’s Trauma Recovery Program with the V.A. in Menlo Park, CA. For twenty years, Sandy volunteered with the Living Dying Project offering spiritual accompaniment for the dying. In 1988, he and his co-author Brent MacKinnon traveled to Russia and Kazakhstan to offer counsel to their veterans of the war they lost in Afghanistan. His poems have been featured on *Bill Moyer’s Journal*, *Shambhala Sun* and various poetry journals. *Reaching Across* was published in 2007 and contains 125 poems written between 1995 and 2007.

**Edward Tick**, Ph.D., has been a holistic psychotherapist for more than 40 years. He is co-founder and director emeritus of Soldier’s Heart, Inc. ([www.edwardtick.com](http://www.edwardtick.com)). Ed has been working to heal the invisible wounds of war and violent trauma in our veterans, families, society and world for over forty years. He is the author of four nonfiction books including the ground-breaking *War and the Soul* (2005), and two books of poetry. He has served as subject matter expert on healing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury for the U.S. military. He has been leading annual healing journeys to Viet Nam and Greece since 1995. He is a specialist in archetypal psychotherapy and the use of the humanities, literature and ancient practices for modern healing. All his work is devoted to restoring soul and spirit to our modern world.