

Market Day¹

by Karly Randolph Pitman²

When I visit my parents in the Cleveland suburbs, my 81-year-old father and I go to the West Side Market. The market is a Cleveland landmark, and has served produce, meats, bakery items, and prepared foods in an old, beautiful brick building for over a hundred years.

My dad goes to the market every week to pick up his beef, a loaf of wheat bread, and a treat or two – shrimp dip, gyro sandwiches, or apple strudel. He wears his “Vietnam Vet” baseball hat and people come up to thank him for his service – a strong contrast to his experience coming home from the war in 1970.

I’d long wanted to honor my dad and his war experience by writing a poem about our market trips. Then a few years ago, I worked with a therapist who asked me a surprising question – “Did you know you carry your dad’s fear from the war in your nervous system?” That left me weeping in the truth of it, and in relief. And it left me wondering what I could do to help ease our pain.

My mom has long believed that one of the reasons why my dad survived the war was because he was twenty-five when he was drafted, not eighteen like so many other combat veterans. My own son is eighteen now, and his notice from the selective service arrived in the mail yesterday. He showed me the letter and joked about being sent off to war.

My son and his friends tease each other about getting drafted to fight in World War Three. While they’re lighthearted in their humor, I sense that it’s also how they cope with their fear.

I don’t know if my dad was afraid when he was drafted in 1969. But I do know that he was against the war. And yet because he was drafted,

he felt it was his duty to go.

As a child, your parents are your parents, not people; they only become real flesh and blood as you gain the wisdom of age and your own lived experience. I didn't think much about my father's experiences in the war when I was younger, although I heard and felt the whispers – and not so whispers – of its effects.

But as I got older, I began to wonder about how his war experiences had impacted him. A few years ago, I asked my dad how he survived the war, and he said, "I just buried it. It was the only way I knew how to cope." I nodded in sympathy, for I saw some of my own coping strategies in his answer.

What is buried in my father's body, in my father's heart, in my father's war? What is buried in my body, in my brother's body, in my family's body? What lives on in my dad's nervous system, and in mine? My dad and I both care for some vibrant strands of anxiety, and in this shared experience, I've learned compassion for the vulnerability of being human.

I try to imagine what it was like for my dad, a young man in a foreign country, fighting in a war he didn't believe in, trying to survive each day's combination of horror, camaraderie, and boredom. Sometimes I weep for him. Sometimes I weep for every soldier that has lived through war, *lacrimae rerum*.

My therapist suggested I do a water ritual to help move some of the anxiety out of my body, so one afternoon I walked to a pond by my house. This pond is well known to and loved by me, where I've walked my dogs nearly every day over the past twelve years. A blue heron nests in the trees at its shore, and children often come to play in the sand at the water's edge.

I've cried at the pond, leaking salty tears into her water. I've poured out rage and anger, fear and frustration. I've swum into her waters in ecstatic joy, playing fetch with my dogs. The pond doesn't hold any of it against me.

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That day, I found several small rocks by the shore and tossed them into the water, each rock a place of shame, regret, fear, sorrow, pain, or loss. One by one they washed into the murky sea. At the end of the ritual the blue heron took off from the reeds, flapping her wings as she arced towards the sky.

A few weeks later, my father's poem began to take shape, a gift I wanted to offer him for his birthday. After he read his poem, he gave me his blessing to publish it in the hope that it would help other veterans and their families.

Poet Andrea Gibson says that all good art comes from the dead, and I've wondered if this is true. Since writing my dad's poem, I've felt more connected to my ancestors. In particular, I've felt the presence of my dad's dad, my grandfather, who died of a heart attack in a perfect sandwich, two years after my dad returned home from Vietnam and two years before I was born.

Although I've never met my grandfather on this side of the veil, I began to sense his presence around me. I put a photo of him on my desk and often talk with him as I move through my days.

As he also wrestled with fear and anxiety, he's become a steady source of comfort on days when the anxiety was strong. *"I know you know what this feels like,"* I tell him. *"Please come and help me. Please hold me."*

One day, while running errands, I sensed his presence so strongly in my car that it was palpable, a warm liquid love that seeped into every part of me. I sat in my car and cried.

But perhaps the night I most sensed my grandfather's presence was Memorial Day, when my dad's poem was published in a poetry journal. As the news spread, friends and family shared their reactions to my poem and their own experiences with the Vietnam War.

I heard about my friend Tom, who flew helicopters for several years in Vietnam – how on earth did he survive? – and my friend Dennis,

who was just shy of the age of being drafted, but who was imprinted by that time nonetheless. But I also heard from those on the other side, from friends who'd protested the war and who carried shame about how their protests had hurt returning soldiers like my dad. *We didn't know*, they said. *We're so sorry*.

That was a tender day, and I'd already cried many tears. But they were mostly tears of gratitude, happiness that I was finally able to honor my father.

That night, as I chopped carrots and onions for dinner in my kitchen, I felt the presence of my grandparents, both long dead, with me. They were behind me, over my shoulder, and I felt them exhale, a feeling of pure, utter relief, as if something clicked into place, now complete.

Perhaps some kind of healing medicine had moved through the poem that also included them. Perhaps, as Andrea suggests, they were the inspiration behind it. Perhaps writing the poem blessed them as much as it blessed my father. Perhaps it also blessed me.

Perhaps sharing the truth blesses all of us.

Market Day

On market day my father unfolds himself
inside his plaid coat and black ball cap.
Vietnam Veteran, it spells across the brim,
dotted with buttons and army pins.

We walk the stalls. A fruit vendor offers
a slice of orange and I meet the baker of
my father's bread. We stand in line
at the deli, waiting for my father's
favorite sandwich. There we're interrupted

by a stranger's handshake: "Thank you
for your service." My father nods
and replies "thank you," twice.

Sometimes a man will bound up and grasp
his elbow, forearm to forearm. He smiles
wide and finds my father's eyes –
"Welcome home, brother!"

I was born after my father's war.
It wasn't his war, either. Was it anyone's?
And yet he went. He arrived in country
in December. When he returned home
the following year his mother's hair
had turned white.

On the flight home in his battle fatigues
the other passengers ask to be moved to
another part of the plane. Each trip
to the market he gets back on that plane.
Fifty-three years later, the passengers
have returned to their seats. They see
the uniform and see what he saw, now
buried deep.

Another piece of him returns.
His mother's hair turns grey,
then ash, then brown:
radiant, alive.

¹ The poem *Market Day* already appeared on the online magazine «One Art» on May 29, 2023. We publish this revised version of it with the Author's permission. The original version is accessible at <https://oneartpoetry.com/2023/05/29/market-day-by-karly-randolph-pitman/>.

² Karly Randolph Pitman is a writer, teacher, poet, presenter, and mental health facilitator who helps people nurture a more compassionate relationship with their struggles. She creates books, courses, presentations and trainings to bring insight to our human vulnerabilities, especially food suffering like overeating. In addition to

her healing work, Karly is a published poet, writes a reader supported poetry newsletter, *O Nobly Born*, offers writing and mindfulness workshops to nurture self-awareness and self-compassion, and works with teens as a teacher and tutor. She lives in Austin, Texas with her family where she takes her sweet dog on leisurely bike rides and creates as much as possible with her hands. In all she remains in awe of the human heart.