

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2*

### **Letter(s) to the Lost from Tom Sheehan:**

Dear Big John and Little John and Billy and Hughie and Londo and Eddie Mac and Breda and Kujawski and the comrade I carried to his death whose name I never knew and all the others I pray for every night yet, the men of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment;

Every reading I've done for more than 55 years simply begins this way: John Maciag was all bone, knees, elbows and jaw, hated his rifle, proficient at killing, wanted home so badly it burned his soul. We leaned up that mountain near Yangu, frightened. War's hurricane tore our ranks, trees of us lifted by roots. I came running down three days later. Like cordwood the bodies were piled between two stakes, all Korean but that jaw of John Maciag I saw, a log of birch among the pine. The sergeant yelled to move on. I said no, maybe never. I am going to sit and think about John Maciag's forever, whose fuel he is, what the flames of him will light. Perhaps he will burn the glory of man or God.

When asked to read to celebrate my new book of memoirs, I wanted to let the audience enter the cubicle where the work came from. This is what I told them: I'll celebrate with you by telling you what I know. I'll tell you how it is with me. This is what I know. This is what I am and what has made me:

Just behind the retina and a small way back is a little room. It has a secret door and passageways and key words other than *Sesame*. If you're lucky enough to get inside that room, at the right time, there's ignition, there's light, there's a flare, now and then there is a pure incandescence like a white phosphorous shell at detonation. It's the core room of memories, the memory bank holding everything you've ever known, ever seen, ever felt, ever dislodged spurting with

Tom Sheehan

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energy. The casual, shadowy and intermittent presences you usually know are microscope-beset, become most immediate. For those glorious moments the splendid people rush back into your life carrying all their baggage, the *Silver Streak* unloaded, Boston's old South Station alive, bursting seams. At times I have been so lucky, brilliantly, white phosphorescently lucky; it's when I apprehend it all. I see the quadrangle of Camp Drake in Yokahama, Japan in February of 1951. I know the touch and temperature of the breeze on my cheek and the back of my neck; the angle of the sun on me and a host of my comrades, how it has climbed past a chimney of a long, long, gray barracks, and withers on a mountain peak of an unknown horizon flaring at darkness. I know the weight of a rifle on a web strap hanging on my shoulder, the awed knowledge of a ponderous steel helmet on my head, press of a tight lace on one boot, wrap of a leather watch band on one wrist.

I am lucky to know it all again. Pete Leone from McKees Rocks, PA is on my left. Pete Marglioti from McKees Port, PA is on my right. Pete and Re-Pete. Frank Mitman from Bethlehem is there, an arm's length off. Minutes ago, from a standing still position in all his gear, he did a full flip in the air and landed on his feet. John Salazer is behind me. John Maciag, Big John, is in front of me. Oh, how he appears again and again. Behind me, John Salazer is the comrade with two brothers not yet home from some place in World War II, who the captain calls one day and says, "You're going home tomorrow. Get off the hill before dark." "No, sir, I'll spend the last night with my buddies down in the listening post." After darkness settles a Chinese infiltrator hurls a grenade into their bunker. The count begins again, the eternal count, the odds maker at work, the clash of destinies. On the ship on the way home, on the troop train rushing across America, in all the rooms of sleep since then, there are spaces around me. Memory, at times fragile, becomes at times tenacious. It honors me as a voice, and it is my will to spread that tenacity.

I bring pieces of it with me today, pieces I have captured

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under white phosphorous as true as a rock in place. They come from the little room with the secret door just behind the retina, just inside a bit deeper.

Knock with me. I share "Milan Carl Liskart, the Coalman," with you, and my grandfather Johnny Igoe, the Yeats' reader, and a few other shining lights that, with tenacity, have found these pages of *A Collection of Friends*, dedicated *For those who have passed through Saugus* (and every town), those comrades who bravely walked away from home and fell elsewhere, and the frailest imaginable soldier of all, frightened and glassy-eyed and knowing he is hapless, one foot onto the soil at D-Day or a statistical sandy beach of the South Pacific and going down, but not to be forgotten, not here.

I had their attention. We shared. I said: The shells were cannonading when he died in my arms, blood setting the sun down. Night or darkness now and I cannot find his face again. It is lost, I search for it, stumble, and lose my way. October is rich again, exploding. Fifty-five Octobers have burst the air. I inhale it all anew, leaves bomb me, sap is still, muttering of the Earth is mute. I remember all the Octobers; one tears about me now, but his face is lost. How can I find his face again?

Men of this command would not speak the name of comrade knowing the fragmentation of loss as if bones could dwindle. I cannot speak of time coming, only of time past and the laughter/cries of young voices sounding vibrant horns. I hear only echoes from mountains of years in the quick tumbling. You must hear the same mountain, the uncluttered system of their thoughts, the brass and velvet of young men at thinking sometimes down precipices sharper than truth; they would have twinned this command, yielding neither dreams nor arms, ideas set as hard as Excalibur before Arthur. Now their softness mingles in mind's debris trying to say what they knew and took to grave. John never hurried anyplace but to die. He talked to the mountain and we are listening.

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This is what John listened to: The day had gone over hill, but that still, blue light remained, cut with a gray edge, catching corners rice paddies lean out of. In the serious blue brilliance of battle they'd become comrades becoming friends, just Walko and Williamson and Sheehan sitting in the night drinking beer cooled by Imjin River waters in '51 in Korea. Three men drably clad, but clad in the rags of war.

Stars hung pensive neon. Mountain-cool silences were being earned, hungers absolved, a ponderous god talked to. Above silences, the ponderous god's weighty as clouds, elusive as soot on wind, yields promises. They used church keys to tap cans, lapped up silence rich as missing salt, fused their backbones to good earth in a ritual old as labor itself, these men clad in the rags of war. Such a night gives itself away, tells tales, slays the rose in reeling carnage, murders sleep, sucks moisture out of Mother Earth, fires hardpan, sometimes does not die itself just before dawn, makes strangers in ones' selves, those who wear the rags of war.

They had been strangers beside each other, caught in the crush of tranced night and starred flanks, accidents of men drinking beer cooled in the bloody waters where brothers roam forever, warriors come to that place by fantastic voyages, carried by generations of the persecuted or the adventurous, carried in sperm body, dropped in the spawning, fruiting womb of America, and born to wear the rags of war.

Walko, reincarnate of the Central European, come of land lovers and those who scatter grain seed, bones like logs, wrists strong as axle trees, fair and blue-eyed, prankster, ventriloquist who talked off mountainside, rumormonger for fun, heart of the hunter, hide of the herd, apt killer, born to wear the rags of war. Williamson, faceless in the night, black set on black, only teeth like high piano keys, eyes that captured stars, fine nose got from Rome through rape or slave bed unknown generations back, was cornerback tough, graceful as ballet dancer (Walko's opposite), hands that

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touched his rifle the way a woman's touched, or a doll, or one's fitful child caught in fever clutch, came sperm-tossed across the cold Atlantic, some elder Virginia-bound bound in chains, the Congo Kid come home, the Congo Kid, alas, alas, born to wear the rags of war. Sheehan, reluctant at trigger-pull, dreamer, told deep lies with dramatic ease, entertainer who wore shining inward a sum of ghosts forever from the cairns had fled; heard myths and the promises in earth and words of songs he knew he never knew, carried scars vaguely known as his own, shared his self with saint and sinner, proved pregnable to body force, but born to wear the rags of war

I came home alone. And they are my brothers. Walko is my brother. Williamson is my brother. God is my brother. I am a brother to all who are dead; we all wear the rags of war.

I can take you back to all the hard places, to the adjectives and verb ends; to the quadrangle in Japan in 1951 and the cool wind coming through Camp Drake and the voice of death talking in it and calling Maciag's name (Body Hunger) and little Salazar (Arab Dagger) and Captain Kay (Memphis Peon) and Billy Pigg (Cowpoke) and Stoney Mason (Pennsy Slateman) and Anadazio (Bread You Can't Imagine) and Dan Bertelsen (AKA The Knife) and you listened and it didn't talk your name and you still felt sad and knew you were the only ear. In three weeks they were gone, all gone, and their voices went into ground, and all their words, and they built on the word rock and now they still dance sadly...such words that make you cry with music still in them, and they come long and slowly out of another time funnel, like Billy Pigg crying as he rolled over in your arms and Captain Kay saying, "I just want to go home for a little while and tell Merle and Andy I love them. Just for an hour or so."

And I can say to Hughie: You think I don't remember you. Your nose was red, ears outsized, you moved lanky in your lanky way, you had blue eyes, your cheeks red. In front of the State Theater on Saturday matinees you towered over us.

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But I do remember you, Hughie. I do! Your hair was tall in front, dark; your arms were long, your nose English like mine's Irish but mostly for word music. You wore dark blue denim dungarees; once a blue jacket with red sleeves. You didn't skate with us, but I remember your picking leaves, watching the sun fall all the way through the filaments. I saw you Saturdays, later on, watching us play football at the stadium. Then, how Time plays tricks on all of us, we were in Asia, carrying carbines in the Land of the Morning Calm. That far Asia's sun set down on you, Hughie, but I walked free of that hole. Each morning now, on my way to work, old shells echo, shy infiltrator eyes me, cursed land mine sits a maimed turtle in my path, dark clouds grow darker, dread rain becomes yellow madness, deep earth opens its welcome arms, and your name flies its black letters on a gray cast iron sign in East Saugus. Once, when I was late for work, snow on the hillside, flowers rimmed the pole. I keep wondering for you, Hughie, Who put the flowers out in January? Is there a friend with long memory? A girl who dreams? Did you visit?

Or send a letter to Londo 50 years later, after Korea, after finding each other:

There was a silence at midnight. Cold leaped in pieces like slate falling. Feathers coming loose. Burned bread tossed three days early is sought. Find the jam in cans. Look in the sump holes. Find the raspberry. The sour strawberry. Find jam and old bread harsh as leather. No milk here. No mother's milk. No sour cream on a bet. No cow's cud. No cow. Just cold. Cold smooth as slates. Cold gray as slate. Cold in thin sheaves, like knives in the wind, or emptiness or worn sleeves. Remember the rain we had. Just days earlier. How warm it was, cleansed us down to our toes, inside out, newness. Remember the rain. How warm it was. In puddles it shone your face. Showed you, me, in pieces. But warm. How warm it was. How mild. The grass in mountain grips shone. Now it flares cold with light.

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Draws attention to itself. Freezes. Tells us it freezes.  
Says don't hold on to us. The mountain talks back. If  
you listen, you hear me, it, us, and the cold. Tells us it  
also is cold. Leans inward. Wants the rain more than  
we do. And knows better, all its storms cashed in.

I think of you in Las Vegas now, the wind across a desert raw  
as lonely can be, both of us wondering where Jack Slack was  
hanging his hat all this time, finding him at last at Fort Bliss  
National Cemetery, Section PG, retired as M/Sgt. John. R.  
Slack, fifteen years hidden from our grasp.

Then, think with me in the first week of October, 2006, after  
my son was married, my wife and I spent a day and a half  
with Chuck Rumfola in Avon, NY, not having seen him since  
February of 1952. I said hello for all of you, to this other  
brother of ours, and he said it back to all of you not forgotten  
here, never forgotten.

- *Tom Sheehan's Epic Cures, (short stories), from Press 53 won a 2006  
IPPY Award from Independent Publishers. A Collection of Friends,  
(memoirs), 2004 from Pocol Press, was nominated for PEN America  
Albrend Memoir Award). His fourth poetry book, This Rare Earth &  
Other Flights, issued by Lit Pot Press, 2003. Print mysteries are  
Vigilantes East and Death for the Phantom Receiver. An Accountable  
Death is serialized on 3amMagazine.com. Six novels seek publication. His  
short story collection, Brief Cases, Short Spans, will be issued in 2008,  
and The Quickening Source has been completed, as has Silas Tully,  
Saugus Cop Now and Then. He has nominations for eight Pushcart  
Prizes and two Million Writers Awards, a Silver Rose Award from ART  
for short story excellence, and many Internet appearances. He can be  
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