

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Tom Sheehan

Beau Geste Murtaugh, Veteran of Wars

"HERE I AM," says his imperative argument in an undertone, "eighty-seven frigging years old, my knees gone to hell and back, my gut talking about all the beer I've sailed my life across, barrels of it talking to me all at once, and this little kid out in front of my house crying his head off. This little kid, this little shaver, one of the ones we did our thing for, our future."

Beau Geste Murtaugh realizes he's swinging these days through a vortex of thoughts and memories. It takes a toll, he knows. But he's been here before; the past never letting go, the future waiting its turn.

He limps to the top of the porch steps, the worst of his bad knees pumping with an underling pain, a behind-the-scenes kind of pain promising more, promising depth of character, becoming the real thing. Though he's known real pain on long nights, he forgets to measure it again, how much it cuts its way in. "What's the use?" he says. "Might as well get a Band-Aid or an APC pill."

The dark brows, knitted in one solid line, are not quite comedic; the depths of his eyes, declaring otherwise, preclude that translation. One cheek is splotched rough as a bad peach. He knows he should breathe heavily, but pretends otherwise. A blue denim shirt remains buttoned at the collar. The sleeves exhibit pressed creases.

"How come you're crying this morning, Pippin?" Beau Geste says. He loves this kid, a youngster without any reservations, as honest as any eight-year older can be. The boy looks up at him with wide eyes, the sun leaping miniature chromium spears off tears and tear streaks. From the first there've been no barriers at all with the tow head, not a one, a healthy smiler from day-one, a waver. "This is a kid who has intestinal fortitude," Beau Geste reminds himself, "and he's crying." Beau Geste hates tears. From day one he has hated tears and what they wrought, the posture they leave a weeper in. Suddenly, at some calcified point within, where bone and philosophy match wits and endurance, he is being melted by the youngster. Kids are the true owners of magic.

"Mr. Beau Geste," Pippin says, eyes soupy in their residue, "daddy says I shouldn't talk to you 'cause you fought too many places in your life. You were in too many fights or battles. He thinks you carry a knife in a secret place or a small gun, but my grandfather's just like that, kind of secret-like all the time. And he has a gun up in the garage rafters, too. I saw it one day when he was hiding it."

Beau Geste measures the boy's clothes. They sit neat and clean even though worn. Hair above his ears is trim, military trim, half moons neat as pencil lines. His face is clean. He imagines his mother's kitchen and nods appreciation at the gleam of pots and pans, cutlery, table tops. "This is a promised one," the old battler says under his breath, and smiles at the boy as he had smiled at the first encounter months earlier. The lineage of the youngster, coming down from his grandfather, is obvious; patrician, nobler than thou, comes a welcome thought to Beau Geste .

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In short order the boy tells him they are trying to steal the house right out from underneath his grandfather and nobody wants to do anything about it.

"Who's they? Beau Geste says." His hand tousles Pippin's hair. It is a light touch Beau Geste has employed before, a mere caress. Pippin's neck curves slightly in comfort, in acceptance.

"The crooks at the town hall." He gestures with one flattened hand. "And all their pals." He gestures with the second hand. Redness leaps across Pippin's face, anger letting loose. "And dad says he can't do much about it. If the town wants somebody's land, all they gotta do is take it. That's what they say, what he says. And he shrugs his shoulders all the time. Some days I think my mom wants to kick him, him thinking there's no way to help Grandpa, that he can't do nothing." His small hands knot into small fists, and Beau Geste sees the promise. The boy slumps on the stairs, as if he has emptied his lungs.

Beau Geste sits on his top step, the tow head on the bottom step, looking up at him, the most basic honesty in Pippin's face he could ever see; it shines.

"Tell me about it, Pippin, what you know."

"You have funny scars on your chin and your neck. Grandpa told me you could wear them for medals, but nobody else says a word about them. Where'd they come from? I bet Grandpa has his own someplace, but I never saw them."

The boy appears in deep thought, and adds: "My dad knows some money guy is behind it all. Thinks he's someone at the bank, gonna do what nobody thinks he's gonna do. Dad says it'll be legal robbery. That's what he says, a legal robbery. Later they'll do something else with grandpa's land. Mom wants to kick him whenever he says he can't do nothing about it."

The martial music comes out of no place special in his past, but from somewhere back there. Beau Geste hears it. Angers wells up for another turn at control.

"From the mouths of babes," Beau Geste says to himself, just as an ambulance roars down the street past them. In the contrast of youngster and ambulance, he's caught between the old and the new, in a kind of no-man's land. Instant knowledge says he has been here before, recently quite often. Memory, as he allows it, swallows him in one sudden gulp, the trail opening, bringing him along. He remembers the obituaries in the paper only this morning, a clear dozen of the announcements having an Old Glory imprint attached as a memorial marker. The numbers of WW II vets are drawing down toward nothing, some statisticians saying a thousand a day are dying, at the speed of light until darkness comes across the land. He is aggrieved, yet tempered by a soul in distress; caught again in that no-man's land.

Oh, God, this kicks the crap out of me, starts the fire!

Bingo!

Beau Geste Murtaugh is unretired. Just like that!

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Bingo!

Back in action!

Damn, he can feel it breaking loose! Adrenalin at a runaway, at a rout and him at the threshold, at the lead once again! He is hearing Boots and Saddles from the edge of a battle long gone to imagination. Oh, the music of it is so alive his soul feels the freedom, the challenge, the leaning on a brother of the warring arts, at an instant every ligament of his soul stringed and played, the fine tune calling on his reserve. For all his fears, for all the silent ministrations, for all the memories, he is home again. He almost sings. Glory! Glory! Glory! The hell with the doubts! Reach for the yesteryear. Grab a slice back from wherever it's gone and fire it up today!

He drops one of his crutches on the porch floor. Though it is accidental, it gives out a BANG! The sound is gunshot loud, and he can see behind his eyes, better than he can hear, Emilia getting out of her chair in the living room, rounder, stouter, at this end of her age more woman than she has ever been.

"Don't worry none, hon," he says, his voice masking the act, for the knee tells him it is ever at revenge. "It's okay, hon. Just dropped one of these damned oak rods. Scared the hell out of me too. 'Magine that! 'Magine that! It ain't never as bad as what it seems, I swear!" He relaxes into the comfort of a feigned vernacular, thinking it will carry itself off. Always has with Emilia, he is convinced, though he believes back in the living room she is nodding and smiling in silent reply.

His mind staggers for justice, and images kick in as his many military posts and stations around the world leap for phantasmal grip. Floating between the then and now, the sudden movie flows for him as he goes elsewhere; pieces of gray barracks edged with twilight, a small city of canvas gone sepia-like in a spread of Philippine moonlight, ten thousand friendly faces at parade rest, fields of shouldered rifles in the Pusan Perimeter looking like his own Rumney Marsh full of cat-o-nine tails. Horace Termellin, he determines, has been waiting for this moment to come back. Down his frame old soldier Beau Geste shivers as the long-forgotten face resumes its place in the ranks; the name Horace Termellin resurfaces from the outer darkness, as an act of bravery and faith comes alive for a new appearance. For a split second, and for the first time in years, the name and its face exist together as an entity, they live; the chopped ear lobe from a sniper's residue, the anvil chin and eyebrows thick as brushes obviously from birth, one eye tortured and worn like an old mine shaft, the perennial half smile of the usual malcontent unconsciously graced with courage. The visceral artist leaves a moment's painting for this exhibit.

If it were not for the child in front of him, Beau Geste knows he would shut his eyes and go somewhere with that apparition, an old battlefield hero and card-playing comrade suddenly together again at the edge of a newly-captured Pacific tarmac, if only for mere seconds that new visit. A tingle and a slight resonance echo inside him in illustrative and flashing recall, sending timeless but faint messages long withered on the vine. No longer does he know Horace Termellin's voice; it is gone into the absolute void. The face follows, lost again. Time, relentless, presses down in a new hold.

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Beau Geste realizes he does get controlled, influenced.

In his mind he holds mild and minor perversions; Old General Mac was right: Old soldiers never die ... they just go on to the next war coming out of the politicians' tunnel, savored, wrapped up for them, for him and his brothers: pawns of the warring world and its overlords of commerce. We are nothing but hired hands, so we lean inward, on the one true brotherhood, on the guy on our left flank, or scouting out in front, or closing off the trail behind us, those who share the outback of life with us.

Beau Geste Murtaugh, living in the small Cape cottage his lone son had left him in his will after the wreckage of his midnight train ride on a Colorado mountain, knows he has taken time to know his neighbors. Some of them proving slightly uppity and that counts enough for him and eventual schism. But this kid who comes past his door each morning, waves, says hello, is innocence itself. He can't buck that. Nobody bucks innocence, a tow head, a smile to beat all smiles.

Today is different, and the angle of the sun makes a difference, a cool spot surfacing under cover, his mind light with partial concentrations. He is not called Beau Geste as a growth nickname. One lieutenant said it much simpler: "He gets more done in 20 seconds than a dealer does with his own deck of cards."

Mount a charge. Make a difference. Spell something out so that another old soldier gets a late and good deal. It's owed to him. He assesses his own position, being more an oddity than notorious, a mere gunslinger of sorts reduced to the inert, an old veteran too tired in his years to swing arms again. So he would make noise; he'd make detonation, he'd draw attention. In essence, he would become notoriously noisy, therefore recognizable. In town he knows there once was a lot of him, like-tired, worn-out old veterans who had been there and done it: that was his great claim; he had been there and done it. So had they. That he should be able to do it again found acclaim deep down inside the tired frame. He had lots of those friends, the scarred and the beaten in a sense. Yet most of them he hoped could still kick the can, make their unified voices heard or blow out the deaf eardrums.

He'd go see to them at the VFW and the Legion, any place they gathered in a grasp at memory, at unity. He'd let it all go. Boots and Saddles! Hot damn, he could hear it, how it ran up his backside without failure. He'd be stentorian, the man in the toga, the new Roman in the hall. In charge again!

On Monday morning he appears at the Town Hall, asking for a meeting with the Town Manager. Three minutes into Beau Geste's pitch, the Town Manager says, "You haven't got as much chance as a prayer in hell of killing this project. It's a real pet of mine, if you know what I mean." His dark eyes grow darker in punctuation.

Beau Geste says he doesn't know what the manager means by a pet project, and adds, "But I got a pretty damn good idea. It appears to me to be a bit of thievery down the road."

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"Get the hell out of my office!" demands the manager and calls his secretary in. "Call the police and if this guy isn't out of here in two minutes, throw him out."

Beau Geste says, "I'll be back. I'll be back, and that's a promise."

The manager, built like an old Reo truck, sidles up close to Beau Geste out of earshot of his secretary, and scowls, "You old farts think we owe you everything. But you don't stand a chance of killing this project. I've worked too damn long on it and the old buck down there is going to do okay on the exchange, but he can't hold me up on it. Nor can you. It's as good as done, believe me, old timer."

On his bad knees, Beau Geste about-faces, campaign maneuvers already fermenting.

The next day, and for days after, Beau Geste goes to the VFW, the American Legion, the DAV post, the Senior Center, the high rise home-stead for the elderly. "They think we're next to dead, that we don't count any more, over the frigging hill, all us old farts who been there and did it." He goes to a host of condominium meetings. "You got a chance to do something here." He drops in at social clubs and fraternal organizations, asking to say a few words. "Think about it this way... if it was your place for fifty years." Some places he goes lavender and then purple, laying out all the straight lace he knows, and some he reaches for. "You know it's robbery and someone who will remain nameless will also gain by this measure. It's not a secret any more."

By the dozens he amasses listeners. He can see it in their eyes. He rants and raves and winds up the old vets for one last charge. They shake lethargy and pain and immobility to varied degrees. The word spreads in the thin ranks. On the appointed Monday evening they convene in front of the town hall, mass themselves, crutched, caned, culled in walkers and wheel chairs. They invade the town meeting as lost Company C might have moved, or the Last Brigade.

Perhaps it is the one final battle they can muster for. Their children and their grandchildren and friends have come, the raw recruits at the pale. A commingling of ages and temperaments takes place, of dispositions and true leanings. The session itself, in the old Town Hall, stands in small honor to the influx of the wounded, the maimed, the heroes of a time long past, nearly forgotten. Yet to most of the town meeting mere hours ago they are all but completely forgotten; and a magnet of tolerance draws them to their feet. A respectful silence descends. The name of each decrepit veteran is embossed at the War Memorial in front of the high school, and now their faces are shown.

Something is out of whack, it seems, out of step. An imbalance imperils the evening politic. The town manager, training his eyes on Beau Geste, leaps from his seat, says Beau Geste and his comrades have no place at the session. "This is an elective body. This body represents you. They call the shots for you."

Beau Geste disagrees. "We are the electing body. This, from way back, is our show." From the ranks a sudden underground movement rustles into place, a slow swelling, a restless music of feet and unclasped hands,

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heads tossing and craning for support, eyes looking and seeking light, heightened blood coming into the flow, and then it breaks loose and pandemonium at last flies in the face of the gathering. The old guys are at it again. They cheer. They yell. They wave their hands over their heads. They sit, suddenly at attention in the ranks.

Then they watch. They wait. They nod.

The vote is swung, the land and the house of Pippin's grandfather are saved for the moment.

"We will come again," Beau Geste says, "if we need to. Next year or the year after." Even as he talks he sees Old Glory imprinted on the many obituaries coming up in the local paper. It will escalate, he knows. Some of these faces he will never see again. Horace Termellin comes in sight once more, out past the crowd in a steamy background, the palm trees just as quickly fading. Then he goes away forever.

Beau Geste takes Pippin by the hand, walks off a ways from the crowd, and says, "It will be up to you, Pippin. Don't ever let go. Remember this fight."

The small hand in Beau Geste Murtaugh's hand makes a fist.

It is a hard fist.