Vietnam Comes Home

By Paulina Borsook

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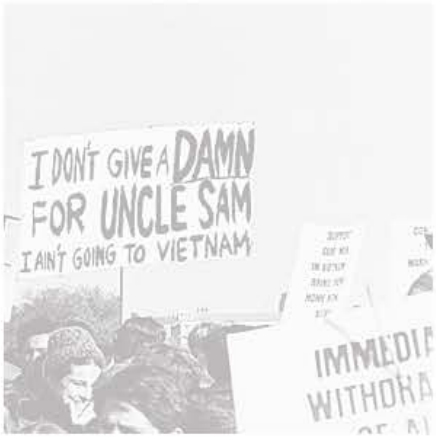

PASADENA — 1960s

It would seem to make no sense to talk in direct terms about my Vietnam War. I was never in-country, I didn't lose a loved one there, I was too young and the wrong gender to have been affected directly. But I was in Vietnam, in the ways of the war at home.

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The Vietnam War, The

magazine of self-immolating Buddhist monks and Americans in uniform headed off to Vietnam during the Kennedy administration, the first *personal* signal about the war in Vietnam came at the end of sixth grade in 1964 when the scientist father of one of my friends refused to work for any company that had war contracts. I didn't understand what that meant exactly but I did recognize principled opposition when I saw it.

There might have been something epigenetic going on: my father's father, long dead before I was born, had been a deserter from the Czar's unjust army. My brother's bar mitzvah speech centered on the Civil Rights workers then so recently murdered in Mississippi.

All I can reconstruct is that by age 13, at the beginning of the 1967 high school year, I had become radicalized — as it was called then, although that term means something very different now. I read the *L.A Free Press* and the *Berkeley Barb* and *Ramparts* and so many texts that bore the title "Why are we in Vietnam?" — a subversion of the title of LBJ's self-justifying Johns Hopkins speech of 1965. Asking a potential boyfriend what he felt about the war in Vietnam was just what one did. That bumper sticker summed it up: how many Vietnamese fought in our civil war? Tiger teams. Napalm. Dow Chemical.

I was still mostly a boy-crazy teenager who loved rock and roll. But, the war, the war, the war. It was the beginning of: "Which side are you on?" It was already at the point of asking any guy you met who was beyond high school, "What's your draft status?"

Then I got shot in the head, in quite literal terms, by a friend. We had gone to her house for lunch in between finals at the end of 10th grade. In that way we always had, what played out was our dynamic of her being id and my being super-ego. She pulled the gun out of the drawer to tease; we had been playfully bickering about politics and boys and she had been getting irked the way puppies do when they get bitten on the ear one too many times. That is, if those puppies had been coydogs and were reenacting Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*.

She pivoted, pointed the gun at my head; I told her to put it away and walked out of the kitchen. I turned back to see what she was doing and *bam*, the bullet went straight through my right cheek, jaw, and skull (what is now known as a through-and-through), pierced a wall, and found its final resting place in a brick fireplace. A .45 is as big as your thumb and I had been shot at a distance of six feet; by rights, it should have blown my head apart, turning it into an exploded watermelon. Gabby Giffords is my spirit animal.

I put my feelings about this into an art project called *My Life as a Ghost*, which was fundamentally about the mind-body problem and the existence of the soul. But there was a strong political aspect to this. She and her family were what we then called Birchers and maybe what we would now call members of Trump's base. It made sense to them to have a loaded and cocked Colt .45 in their kitchen drawer in case of civil unrest; that is, if there had been a race riot.

So when that accidentally-on-purpose moment happened, one of the drivers

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was ideological. I was absolutely against the war. She, one of my closest friends, was an avowed anticommunist. And maybe I deserved to die for my beliefs.

In the summer of 1969 I fell madly in love with the glossiest of my Caltech pals, one whom I had met under the most magical of circumstances — slinking around the basements of Caltech after midnight, I heard the sounds of drums, rock music not something I at all associated with Caltech. I walked toward that sound and there was this vision of radiant longhaired young male beauty: he looked up and said, "Who are you?" and I replied, "I am looking for an omen." He was brilliant and beautiful and introduced me to elements of the counterculture such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, global conspiracy suiting the temper of the times.

He headed off to do what would turn out to be *Science* magazine-worthy research on the dance-language of bees in the Oregon desert, very near where the scary Malheur Wildlife Refuge occupiers would wreak their malicious mischief 50 years later.

We talked and talked and wrote tons and tons of letters — and when he came back to town he set about having me meet with one of those flashy Westside liberal lawyers that the '60s was kicking up: the lawyer drove a Porsche and talked about his castration complex (Freud hadn't yet been dethroned). Idea here was could I legally be emancipated from my infanticidal parents, these tyrants of the Establishment that all my friends and beaux feared, loathed, and pitied me for? The answer was of course not. I was too young. One was being subjected yet again to the capricious powers of the state.

But my beautiful avenging archangel was having his own problems with the state: about to graduate, he was going to be called up. I recall sitting with him in his little Pasadena bungalow when we discussed how he had 10 days to get his weight down to 110 pounds (he was 6'1") in the hopes of flunking the draft physical at the induction center in Oakland. He was already in touch with some of his Berkeley friends about going underground or escaping to Canada. There were so many draft-resistance organizations around then, helping guys avoid going in and helping active-duty guys get out. I remember him drinking lots and lots of instant coffee.

Years later we reconnected (no, not on Facebook) and we had long email exchanges about our time together and what 1967–'73 had been like for us, both separately and together. We agreed we had never really gotten over those years.

Another of my close Caltech friends, the fellow we all considered the wisest among us (I have been told he was maybe the one in his generation at Caltech who really would have made a difference: he was pursuing interdisciplinary work as was not common then and he was killed in an automobile accident in 1973 — but that's another story) organized the 15th-of-the-month moratoriums at Caltech. For years afterward, I kept the blue cotton workshirt onto which had been stenciled the red 15 in the shape of a stop sign which was the logo for the moratoriums.

A high school friend was already off to Berkeley in 1969: she told me about the teargassing and, of course, People's Park. The effects of the war and our government turned against us were visible everywhere, and up close and personal. It wasn't just a television war; it was a war that we were immersed in, wherever we lived and whatever we were doing.

An even older friend from high school had gone off to college even earlier and had become even more radicalized. A member of SDS, involved with student protests at Harvard, she had been in Paris on the barricades in 1968. I visited her when she was spending a summer at the San Francisco Institute of Art, and the dog in her communal household was named Tatlin. She explained that the Pathet Lao were the most right-on of the Asian communist liberation groups. I recall her proclaiming that when the revolution came, all travel would be nationalized and free. Why that, I wondered? Why not telecommunications? Did this mean we would all be able to hop on a free flight to Aruba?

This is not to say my friends were bad influences, a concept I have always found ridiculous. It's to say my friends were experiencing my being-in-the-world and letting me know.

TORONTO — 1969

Most of us don't make grand gestures or attempt big things for just one reason. What drags us down and what lifts us up can be hard to explain to anyone outside ourselves — or even to ourselves. What proffers hope, meaning, escape, health, spiritual development, we can intuit, even if to others our motivations seem at best opaque and at worst nonsensical.

By the autumn of 1969, so many centrifugal forces were acting on my life, spinning me out. Or maybe they were centripetal forces, boring in. For me it kicked up my very considered decision to run away from home to Toronto.

While I didn't understand all that had gone awry, my headshot-enabled traumatic brain injury (TBI) was making it impossible to continue as the high-performance Marine-World-of-the-Pacific-leaping dolphin I had always been trained to be. My ability to focus was gone and my grades were plummeting and Radcliffe (as it was known then) was clearly no longer in my future. I didn't know why I couldn't pay attention to what I was supposed to be paying attention to. I was more inclined to attribute this blanking-out to horror at the world around me and the horror at home, an inner self of insurrection and self-salvation.

The externalized horror was surely part of what was going on, but brain injury was also having its way with me.

So I thought and thought about everything; I couldn't stand to be in this country anymore and the achiever-rabbit path I had been on all my life was

clearly falling away, in part for reasons in my conscious control and in part for reasons beyond it. And, I had no safe home base. My deranged dad would later say he would rather have me declared insane and placed in a mental hospital than let me chose my own destiny.

So I fled. Farewell to all that, goodbye to the life I had led and all I had known and loved, goodbye goodbye goodbye. Observing the troops in uniform at San Francisco International Airport confirmed the rightness of my decision. When had we become a military dictatorship? This war had not been declared by Congress; surely this was unconstitutional. The soldiers sickened and scared me — not for themselves, but for what they had become tools of. I was determined to make my own path, find my own life, live in a place neither terrifying nor toxic.

And I found it, living with the kindliest Americans in flight from the United States of the 1960s and the sweetest of Canadians.

Everyone was so gentle and easy; I felt at home with other humans as I never had before and, I might argue, I have never felt again. They liked the way I thought, but to them I also wasn't Clever Hans.

When my parents caught up with me, as one could have predicted they would, I was told that if I went back home willingly, no official action would be taken by Canadian authorities, the RCMP among them, and the people I was living with would be left alone. If I resisted, I would face legal deportation and they would be as well — in addition to being charged with statutory rape.

How could I send these good souls back to the place from whence they had fled? And for some of them, they would be thrown into the Terrible Awful No-Good War Machine.

I had no choice. The powers of the state were larger than I was.

It's usually so deeply buried I prefer to never think about it, but this: the tall lanky draft dodger looking at me and saying, "I want to sleep with you and be with you and watch your mind grow so shut up and go to sleep." It remains one of the most profound moments of my life.

He used to talk about the then-hippy haven of Coconut Grove, as celebrated by John Sebastian. He knew it as it was then, not the South Florida analogue to Newport Beach it is now. Originally from rural Pennsylvania, he was an early instantiation of a male archetype present since preschool: on the tawny-haired spectrum, gentle, sensitive, warm, boyish, neither jockish nor macho nor wimpy, no bluster or bullshit. The comfort of someone who gets you and caters to your best self, comfort and joy and truth.

The way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. His love of Ray Bradbury. The way he looked in his jeans, wearing deck shoes with no socks: not a preppy affectation but the style choice of those who had lived in the South or spent time sailing. It's the music of Fred Neil, not least of which

is because of the mention of Coconut Grove in one of his lyrics.

Would you like to know a secret
Just between you and me
I don't know where I'm going next
I don't know who I'm going to be
But that's the other side of this life
I've been leading
That's the other side of this life.

Well My whole world's in an uproar
My whole world's upside down
I don't know where I'm going next
But I'm always bumming around

And followed on a few weeks later by the look of horror, fear, empathy, and helplessness on his face when I was being dragged away. He certainly knew what the country we had left behind was like and he had some sense of how I had fled what I had fled for damned good reasons. And of course, we didn't want to be parted.

This old world may never change
The way it's been
And all the ways of war
Can't change it back again

I've been searching
For the dolphins in the sea
And sometimes I wonder if you ever think of me

I'm not the one to tell this world
How to get along
I only know peace will come
When all hate is gone

Writing about the draft dodgers to Canada has long remained on my list of projects never brought to fruition. I have a feeling that several books have been written by now about them and that these books have largely been ignored.

And if you look back
Try to forget all the bad times
Lonely blue and sad times
And just a little bit of rain
And just a little bit of rain

And if I look back
I'll remember all the good times
Warm days filled with sunshine
And just a little bit of rain

PASADENA — 1970

There was the invasion of Cambodia under the euphemism of "incursion," just like the rest of the disinformation/deformation of language we had been hearing for years. We even heard rumors of the intent to use nuclear bombs (gotta love that Kissinger). There were the bombings on the Plain of Jars.

When four students were killed at Kent State, I can't say I predicted it (because I hadn't) but it fit with my worldview. We as a country were destroying ourselves: fratricidal, internecine, a civil war, the powers of the state turned against each other. Adults killing their young. And having been shot strengthened my visceral empathy toward the Kent Staters. All experience everywhere was about what the war had set loose.

MADISON — early 1970s

Somehow I ended up entangled with a Vietnam vet. There were a lot of those poor lost souls around then. You know, the guy with the fatigue jacket, the long hair held back with a headband, sweet, damaged, and fumbling in his attempts to explain the shooting war he had endured and how now it was incumbent on him to try to work with others to save the world. We were each other's plushy bears, tender with each other and shivering together, a warm place in a very hostile world, not love but the camaraderie of the trenches.

I am ashamed to admit it, but a few years later in the early 1970s there would be other liaisons with other guys also ruined by the war. These were not important relationships, were hardly the only relationships I engaged in, and were mostly about need on both sides. One was a West Point dropout and one was a former Marine who had suffered a head injury. I am not proud of these dependencies, but all I can say is that broken people seek each other out and that by my mid-20s I had unconsciously fixed myself sufficiently that these desperate leanings-on no longer happened. I may have remained miserable and depressed and love-starved — but I would not, could not, do that any more. The broken-by-the-war guys disappeared from my life. Maybe they too by then had either healed or destroyed themselves or that particular flavor of broken alienation no longer resonated.

Then I got pregnant. Because I was *too young*, the laws of the state had prohibited me from getting prescription contraception. In fact, it had been technically illegal then for me to buy condoms. I ended up in New York, where abortion had just become legal, as it was not in Wisconsin (recall this is before *Roe v. Wade*). It was a second-trimester abortion using a now-obsolete modality: with a large needle, sterile saline was injected into the uterus through the

abdomen, an oxytocin drip was hooked up and a miscarriage induced, no painkillers provided. At least it was safe and legal and in a hospital setting.

This only signifies because once again, hegemonic powers had been enacted upon me. Wrong age, no freedom of choice, the repressive force of the state particularly as applied to women (for men, it had been the draft). However absurd it sounds now, it felt like the same unjust systems of laws that had gotten us into Vietnam and destroyed civil liberties and my country and my classic female trouble — all of it had not entailed the consent of the governed. I grew a year older and the laws had changed, so I was able to get contraception, becoming an autonomous female human being in charge of her destiny. Self-determination, as was the language of the time. Up from patriarchy and all that.

A good friend of my dead brother's, who after college graduation had had the bad luck to end up with too low a draft number, joined the Coast Guard and went AWOL to see me in Madison. I was glad to see him but the courage (desperation?) he had shown in seeking me out as a romantic refuge — I just couldn't reward in the way he wanted. Even with the idea floating around of "girls say yes to boys who say no," I just couldn't do it. I believe to this day it was less romantic intention and more reaching out for a hometown emotional life-preserver that led him to such a dashing and foolish action.

When he came back from his tour of duty a few years later, he was utterly changed; his impish side gone, he had clearly become tied up in knots I never saw get unsnarled. Of course it's hard to know how much you can predict about how people will turn out based on who they were when they were young — but the playfulness was forever gone, something fearful and constrained and self-limiting, with traces of impotent rage, was there forever after. And we never discussed his foolish faux-romantic gesture.

After that — and I really can't say how it happened except that in a liberal college town like Madison and during the Vietnam War era — people just talked and started conversations wherever they were: at the airport, on State Street, on the plaza of the student union building. So somehow I ended up becoming friendly with some of the most hardcore political kids in town. They called themselves WERM (Wild-Eyed Radical Movement) and the place they lived, WERM house.

There was that dinner (brown rice included) where Jerry Rubin (a Movement heavy, as such folks were called, although he was more of the prankster/street-theater provocateur than Days of Rage soldier) was on the phone to someone in North Vietnam. How that call was achieved with a hostile state with primitive telecommunications in the time before global roaming plans, I don't know. But heavy, man.

I quickly realized radical politics was just high school writ large; the alpha males sat around and did the important fun work of strategizing and the women and the beta males did the scut work. No thanks; I was out of there and was further reinforced in my lifelong suspicion of totalizers.

Within a few years several of these guys would be sent to jail for threatening to blow something up. I believe fuel oil and fertilizer had been found in their personal effects (this was the Midwest, where such products are easily available). While I tend to not believe in lefty conspiracy theories of miscarriages of justice everywhere, I never trusted these verdicts. Had these guys gotten framed? Had their defense been so shoddy? Somehow they had all seemed more like what the Communist Workers Party termed "student adventurers" and a lot less like what are now called domestic terrorists. I remember the photographs of them in the Madison newspapers, clearly having been knocked around in custody. But I had lost touch with them before all this went down.

I was leaving that time in my life behind; unresolved, papered-over, and onto the next round of interactions, people to know, things to be involved with, new griefs, new sociopolitical worries, new areas of commonality.

Most people I have become acquainted with since then know nothing about the centrality of all this to my psyche. They wouldn't even suspect it.

SANTA BARBARA — early 1970s

In Santa Barbara, the burned-out Bank of America building, symbol of the war economy, remained closed. And once again, I ended up hanging around with those who had been politically active against the war. They had witnessed law-enforcement violence (one student killed), members of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Special Forces unit pouring out of dump trucks in full battle regalia, beating up protestors. So much harkens back to 1968 (when I was shot) and 1969 (when I ran away). A friend had helped shut down the Santa Barbara airport so that then-governor Ronald Reagan, who had campaigned on cracking down on student protests and gutting the University of California, couldn't land.

One of the precipitating factors in one of the biggest and worst clashes between the powers-that-be and my Santa Barbara cohort was the appearance of William Kunstler, the civil liberties lawyer defending the Chicago Seven, the name given to the defendants in the notorious federal trial of those involved in countercultural protests during the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention. Jerry Rubin was one of those Chicago Seven (originally Chicago Eight) defendants.

"Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago!"

"The whole world is watching!"

My Santa Barbara boyfriend, this one a navy brat and a son of a retired captain (Caltech dropout, then a UC Santa Barbara BA in East Asian History), told me that the real reason we had been in Vietnam was because of offshore tungsten deposits. I only list a bit of his background because it should have made him

the most credible of sources: familiarity with the military, fine analytic intelligence, subject-matter and geographic-area expertise. Maybe there was some truth to strategic tungsten being key to it all, but I have never heard this explanation anywhere else before or after. As callow as I was, it just didn't seem right that the cause of this terrible geopolitical misadventure could have been that simple. He had flunked the draft physical because of punctured ear drums.

BERKELEY — 1973 to 1983

Next up in Berkeley was Tu Do restaurant near Telegraph, the name of which I had been told had something to do with something right-on in North Vietnam, maybe Hanoi. There were certainly NLF posters all over the place; it felt daring to eat there because Vietnam was so off limits and, who aside from veterans actually knew anyone or really, anything Vietnamese? I slotted Tu Do in the same category as Berkeley's Starry Plough (the IRA pub) and La Peña (the Cuban/Latin American liberation movements cafe). It turns out Tu Do means "freedom" and was later the name of a boat built to help escaping South Vietnamese, but that couldn't have been the reason for the restaurant's name then, not with the vivid Viet Cong propaganda posters all over its walls.

And there was Cordon Bleu, another mysterious Vietnamese restaurant, this one in San Francisco where one could get (for the first time ever) five-spice grilled chicken. Who were these people and how did they get here? Given the time period (early 1970s), I knew these progenitor Vietnamese-restaurant owners must have had very charged backstories, either CIA or Comintern or blessed with the gift of prophecy (get out of your country *now*). As far as I knew then, there *was* then no other evidence of Vietnamese in California — just as in the early 1970s the two Cambodian restaurants (one in Berkeley, one in San Francisco) were the first local evidence of the war and genocide in Cambodia. How had they survived? Gotten out? One didn't inquire.

But Berkeley itself was in shell shock after the 1960s: the SLA, Synanon, the Zebra killer, Jonestown, the Moscone/Milk assassinations — people had other things on their minds than Vietnam. Stagflation. CETA. The national media nicknamed Governor Jerry Brown "Governor Moonbeam" because he cared about sustainability and advocated for solar energy.

We had all met Vietnam vets, those of the thousand-mile stares, the chips on their shoulders, their desperate sincere need to never be silenced again. By then it was said that half of the male homeless population were Vietnam-era vets.

NEW YORK — 1980s

Jerry Rubin was now promoting the official business of networking. That is, he was promulgating the idea that people would pay money to attend events where people would hustle each other for useful connections. Little did I know

that this was just the beginning of the trend of commodifying and monetizing all human connection. That which had previously had arisen through people you met or worked with should be obviously evolve into an overtly profitable enterprise. For Jerry Rubin, the 1960s anti-war tumult and grief had ineluctably led to this.

A vice president at an advertising agency, a Manhattan Mr. Perfect who had had nothing to do with the war, remarked that my language was filled with the lexicon of destruction, catastrophe, and war.

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA — 1990s onward

When the first dotcom businesses in San Francisco were coming into existence, the language of revolution and freedom-fighting had become part of the business self-justification. True, some people involved were defenders of free speech in cyberspace. But mostly the rhetoric of another time was being borrowed in the name of multinational capitalism; no one's body was on the line and it was mostly about making the world safe for venture capital. These were hardly the kinds of goals that ripped the United States apart and caused examination of conscience. There was lots of knee-jerk (and in many cases appropriate) suspicions about the government — but that's about as far as it went. Vietnam was mostly a cheap place to manufacture goods and maybe visit on an exotic surf safari.

Instinctively concerned about the new and growing problem of how to protect civil liberties in cyberspace, I fell into that small circle of people then in the Bay Area who were concerned too. We knew what was happening with computers and communications was important, complex, and troubling — and was potentially heading up as another major showdown between the powers that be and individual liberty, the force of law, and the meaning of the US Constitution.

One of the people I ran into from that small, self-selected, loose affinity group gave off a strong political-countercultural vibe such as I hadn't run into in decades. Couldn't explain it, another of those nonverbal pattern-recognition situations. You know it when you see it.

He and I finally became romantically involved around 9/11, and one night when we were lying around his house he grabbed a mosquito out of the air, the way a cat pounces on a hummingbird or a frog slurps up a no-see-um. I gawped: "How did you do that?" I had known bits of his professional history but little about his past. And then it came out.

He had dropped out of college in the mid 1960s and ended up in a radical anti-war commune. His great hand-eye coordination had been made use of when he went to firing ranges to practice being a sniper for the revolution; it was almost inconceivable in this most gentle giant of men. He was associated with the Weathermen and became part of the draft underground — neither a

conscientious objector nor an immigrant to Canada, he was one step ahead of the FBI for years, living under a pseudonym and operating in the underground economy. I don't think he went back to using his real name until sometime in the 1970s when he felt it was safe to do so. And he forever kept that alternative identity at hand in case he needed it.

The potential bad actions of the government and the paranoia it engenders, what the Vietnam War era had taught us, never leaves you.

He had a great deal of shame of what he did in those years, about why he hadn't spent them learning something (that is, continuing his college education, never mind how well read he actually was) or doing something productive. But we all did what we felt we needed to do. And it could be argued that he had been living his truth, as perhaps those who stayed in college did not.

Finding this out, I felt "that explains it." That is, why we seemed to share a particular worldview, one of those psychological terra incognita you can feel but can't put into words, inchoate yet palpable. It's something about attempting to heal the world and a commitment to the right use of power and about a kind of '60s-era damage we each as individuals carried forward ever since. We never had to argue about politics or even much discuss it — because we knew we both shared the same attitude toward what the United States and the rest of the world ought to be doing but so often wasn't. It's a worldview both countercultural and skeptical, about the necessity of giving back and an acknowledgment of our lost years of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

We had both been marked and scored by that war; neither of us had Vietnam War–era narratives that we much wanted to talk about, had ever much talked to anyone about. But in some respects the war made us who we were. We shared an abashed self-interrogation: who could we have each been without the war? Never mind how each of us had reconstructed acceptable selves after 1975.

Yet I would argue this having been marked by the war was not necessarily a function of age.

My ex-husband, also born in New York City in 1949, wasn't marked in the same way. He *did* graduate from college and with the luck he manifested throughout his life, his draft number turned out to be extraordinarily high. Yes, he had what used to be called "credentials for the revolution." When he came out to Berkeley for his MBA, he wrote his thesis on Wobblies in the Labor Movement. And before he went to law school, he among other things worked as a cameraman for an early political video collective, filming the arrival at Camp Pendleton of South Vietnamese refugees. And of course he had the same lefty politics as everyone else did in Berkeley in the 1970s. But the war hadn't really changed him.

I have gotten others whiffs of that markedness from time to time. There was a therapist who clearly had been active in the anti-war movement in Boston in

the 1960s; his frames of reference told me so. The Agent Orange veteran husband (now dead 10 years) of a friend, with whom I struck up the most unlikely of friendships, also comes to mind. He annoyed the hell out of me the first time I met him and for years afterward. So I think it was a surprise to us both when we became good buddies in the last few years of his life — and no, we never talked about the war. But I have wondered since, if part of why we became such terrific correspondents toward the end of his life, and maybe part of why he dropped by to see me as part of his last-hurrah cross-country motorcycle trip — the one in which he had the morphine pump implanted in his arm and had lost so much weight that he looked like a heroin-chic male model — was because of mark we both carried.

Among the extraordinary artifacts Oakland Museum curators had assembled for their exhibition on California in the 1960s were parts of a fuselage of an airplane used for troop transport to Vietnam, the rows of seats still in place. There was a prow of one of the troop ships, cut away so you could still see on the interior walls where the young men being sent overseas had inscribed their names, the dates they were aboard, and their hometowns. The friend I was walking the exhibition with caught up to me and said: "Nothing has ever seemed as real since." I understood. It was the war.

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