

RECONSIDERATIONS: “Brave Words”: Rehabilitating the Veteran-Writer

Liam Corley

From September 2008 to July 2009, I traded academic robes for the Army Combat Uniform issued to US Navy personnel deploying to Afghanistan. Along with using the ceramic and Kevlar body armor I learned to don at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I metaphorically defended myself from the disruption to my personal and professional life that would result from this mobilization by calling it a fully funded overseas federal fellowship. “War as sabbatical” became a way of making my departure from a tenure-track job as an English professor seem less unusual, less concerning to senior faculty, and, ultimately, less perilous, especially for me and my family. Optimistic even up to my last trip to the state university where I taught American literature, I grabbed a number of unread scholarly books from my office shelves, intending to shoehorn them into one of my overfull seabags.

Although I thought of myself as the man inside the uniform, photographs posted on my deployment blog gave the lie to the sabbatical charade. Who can see a professor behind ballistic eyewear, seventy pounds of armor, and an M16 swinging on a three-point sling? There’s no insignia for PhD, no patch that portrays a pen rampant over a field of swords. What I had negotiated and what my university had given was a stop on my tenure clock, a lacuna in the vitae that would document my campaign for tenure, a silent fit of laughter that any of this could ever occur. My last month of interactions with university colleagues, administrators, and staff oscillated between professional nullity and personal concern: tender eyes and words even as minds accepted that I was hurtling away on a trajectory that might have no returning.¹

And so for 293 days I carried a gun instead of a textbook, a journal article, or a pile of ungraded essays. I jockeyed four computers instead of one; knowledge passed up instead of down. I slept alone, ate curry prepared by Indian contractors, and made

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new friends. The one academic piece of writing I completed while deployed was turned down by three publications.² One kindly editor suggested I would be better able to convey my experiences after I gained some distance from them. Seeing now how the opposite is true, I marvel at her tact. The essay I wrote on the way to war was infected by denial, the tyro prophet's willful avoidance of the fact that he lives in a city slated for destruction. I strained to put this interlude of violence into a civilized context, a literary heritage, a moralizing space. I made an aesthetic of war, and the effect was a lie, another step farther off the path toward tenure, security, and normalcy. Like many veterans, I decided, at least provisionally, that silence would be better than mouthing conventional lies about an experience I could not articulate. Academic books stayed on the shelf. When I packed my belongings into a Gorilla box for the long-awaited shipment home, I noted the outline left by three volumes of history and criticism, furred with the ash and dust of an Afghan summer, fall, winter, and spring. Alone among my possessions, the pages of these books were clean.

In the first few months after I returned from Afghanistan, I was plagued during my walk from the faculty parking lot past the library and up to my office with fits of muscle memory. My right hand slapped the thigh where it used to reassure itself with the grip of an M9 pistol. My gait remained awkward from the phantom weight of a drop holster and magazines, despite having left them in Kuwait at a "Warrior Transition Course." Sitting in my quiet office, surrounded by old, familiar books, I compulsively searched the Web for news articles about my last duty station, reading between the lines for a glimpse of what was really going on in Kabul, Herat, and Farah. Mentally, I was struggling to detoxify from switching between four computer systems, each with a separate email account, unique capabilities, and classification level. More than anything else, I had to relearn how to concentrate without the adrenaline rush of hourly deadlines, abrasive colonels, and the acid anxiety of overlooking the one deadly needle in a relentlessly replenished haystack of daily communications and intelligence reports.

I was more blunt than usual in conversations with colleagues and students, accustomed as I was to pounding urgent points home to hardheaded army leaders befuddled by lack of sleep, past experience, and professional prejudice against "the Navy." Terse and ironic, I left first-years reeling. I held no hands, changed no grades, and always said I was adjusting fine. In 1946, W. H. Auden wrote, "Professors back from secret missions / Resume their proper eruditions, / Though some regret it" ("Under Which Lyre" 333–34). I marveled at his concise expression of the emotional withdrawals I felt now that I was cut off from the daily morphine drip of significance conveyed by relentless deadlines and the endlessly reinforced message that *lives depended on the accuracy and clarity of my work*. I struggled with self-loathing as I engaged in academic tasks less evidently meaningful.

Although my teaching soon regained equilibrium, writing—the facet of my scholarly life that I had always found most satisfying, most challenging, and most intimate—remained stunted, maimed, at sea. While deployed, I wrote more rapidly and clearly than ever before, but only on topics of the moment—threat evaluations; regional stability assessments; predictive analyses of political, military, and criminal activities. Scholarship—writing for the ages—stopped me cold. Anxieties that had plagued me as a beginning writer resurfaced—do I have the endurance to complete a longer project? Can I concentrate long enough to develop an academic thought worth chronicling? Has everyone else said all that needs to be said about the topics and characters I’m drawn to? Are my textual observations and historical/cultural/theoretical connections enlightening and reliable enough to merit the authority of publication? After years of swimming in the ocean of academic writing, I had been tossed back on a rocky shore, shrinking again from the chill of water and fearing afresh the violence of the surf.

The normal tricks of the trade were some help. I read current scholarship in my field, developed proposals for academic conferences, and relied on the deadline of an audience of my peers to force me to produce six or seven hard-fought pages of text. Confidence in my ability to conceptualize larger questions of significance in the field returned, but a fund of ideas only heightened my sense of inadequacy to do the careful and painstaking work of academic argumentation. The disparity between my intellectual ambition and the daily struggle to write academic prose began to fuel a sense of despair and isolation: I felt connected to issues of vibrant intellectual concern, but I doubted my ability to write in a way that would capture the attention and respect of my peers. Something was keeping me from sustained academic argumentation—defining terms, marshalling evidence, navigating competing views, establishing my own perspective, and drawing conclusions with broad significance. Identifying the origin of my blockage was a source of unease. Was it impatience? Incapacity? A loss of identity? I began to wonder whether war had disabled me as a scholar.

Like many veterans, I strenuously avoided considering the possibility that I had sustained invisible wounds during my “sabbatical.” I was quietly proud of my service and resisted labeling any of its effects as disabling. In time, my resistance to exploring the effects of my deployment became in itself the disability I feared. I could no longer write as I once had and so began to discount the value of academic writing altogether, fortifying my writing psyche within a foxhole of inexplicability. Then one liquid spring day of the sort I had fantasized about during the dust storms of Kabul, an insight both shameful and freeing burst into consciousness: *who I had become was not the problem; how I was coping with it was*. To overcome my internal barriers to sustained academic writing, I needed a tactic other than frontal assault. I needed to reconnoiter and regroup.

Thus it was with some relief that I turned to poetry to break the writing logjam. Almost immediately, I felt that I had found a means to explore my murky depths. Poetry's compact form and evident claims to significance satisfied both my hunger for meaning and my impatience with triviality. After several months of writing and dozens of poems, I unearthed one of the significant barriers I face as a veteran-writer. Like any beginning writer, I have been struggling to achieve a voice that does justice to my thoughts, is true to the various worlds I inhabit, and still conforms to academic expectations. When I abandoned academic writing mid-tour because I preferred silence to deception, a weight settled on my throat, compressing the larynx, stifling speech. On a subconscious level, I knew I was juggling incompatible demands on the diction I had previously adopted as a writer. My writing style, so well adapted to scholarly work, seemed inadequate for a new world of military experience. The ensuing silence did not indicate a lack of thought or analytical insight; its source lay deep in my writing psyche, quietly swelling a rising pool of conflicted linguistic codes, drowning out speech with the suffocating immediacy of immersive experience.

I turned to verse, then, as a breathing apparatus, clenching poems in my teeth as tools enabling me to dive beneath the surface of language to the element of voice that had undergone such a wrenching transformation during my deployment. Poetry focused my ear on the struggle to combine the unpretentious and direct speech of a veteran with the academic modes of expression in which much of my philosophy and analytical approach were embedded. The challenge of reconciling these voices, so starkly visible in the oscillation between narration and assessment within a poem, surfaced for me a fundamental blockage I faced in my long-deferred return to scholarly writing: *if I knew how to speak, I'd know what to say*. For a poet, style and substance, expression and content, differ no more than syllable from sound. *How to speak* and *what to say*: safety catch and firing pin.

While in Afghanistan, I lived and wrote with a world-weariness that clipped my expression and boiled all argument into a simple formula, BLUF: Bottom Line Up Front. This no-nonsense approach to communication embodies in rhetorical form the impatience with ornament and etiquette typical of military members. Its characteristic terseness is linguistic evidence of experiential knowledge, a mode of expression captured in another (symptomatically) acronymic compression, BTDT: Been There, Done That. Taken together, BLUF and BTDT comprise touchstones that many veterans use to recognize truth, and they are the means of expression we tend to adopt when conveying our own beliefs and experiences. Such nakedly empirical and declarative truth claims clash with a host of assumptions governing academic speech, not the least of which is the belief that the essay form is inherently elliptical, meditative, and provisional. As a soldier and a professor, I found myself caught between two worlds of expression, two poses of authority, two systems of

stylistic allegiance. Epistemological adherence to one system disabled my ability to speak in the other, and as in many systemic conflicts where combatants speak other languages, the differences seemed irreconcilable.

However, once I had articulated this conflict between military and academic modes of expression and argumentation, I realized that the differences were not so stark as my subconscious mind had precipitously concluded. For example, judiciously playing the BTDT card as a teacher has helped move forward literary discussions of violence, cultural differences, and sacrifice. Poets also unabashedly claim to speak from such hierophantic knowledge: “About suffering, they were never wrong, the old masters”—BTDT. And who has not in our utilitarian times extolled the outcomes of a class at its very beginning? BLUF. Poets, too, delight in BLUF’s abrupt upsetting of inference, preferring to slap readers with unwelcome truths rather than sugarcoat them. “Success is counted sweetest by those who ne’er succeed,” or “Tell all the truth but tell it slant”—BLUF.³ Yet academic writers often shrink from relying on evidence that inheres principally in personal experience and from starting conversations with a right hook. I believe one reason for this is a reticence surrounding our ethos as academics, a self-consciousness regarding the fact that our ivory tower, while the site of much valuable and intensive inquiry, is not the only avenue toward truth. Particularly in the humanities, the testimony of nonspecialists (a self-identification, disingenuous or not, made by a great many authors and artists) is taken as seriously in the public sphere as that of the equally creative and experienced scholars who dedicate their lives to interpreting them. When Sigmund Freud made his famous disclaimer about cigars, did he speak as a psychoanalyst or as a smoking man?⁴ Perhaps the power of his quip comes from the merger of these two authorities.

Ralph Waldo Emerson expounds this point in a passage from “The American Scholar” I have long loved:

If it were only for a vocabulary the scholar would be covetous of action. Years are well spent in country labors; in town—in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the end of mastering in all their facts a language, by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and copstones for the masonry of to-day. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made. (1144)

Although Emerson is principally referencing the wealth of analogies that can be derived from an active life, “how much” a scholar “has already lived” forms an essential element of his or her ethos. Indeed, Emerson frequently posits a reciprocal connection between experience and thought in which “vocabulary” serves as the linguistic evidence of active thought and thoughtful action. Writing poetry gave me permission to explore and catalog a new world of veteran analogies and authority

that, once openly acknowledged, could also be used to refine academic thoughts. Further, I began to perceive the BLUF and BTDT elements of academic essays I had previously admired for *clarity of speech*, *strength of conviction*, and *sense of high purpose*. Thus, instead of viewing my internal clash of dictions as being disabling, I began to see them as sparring partners, each relentlessly seeking weaknesses in the other, each committed to larger principles of truth, clarity, and integrity. On this proving ground, internal dissonance could become a regimen, a dialectic means of reconciling worlds.

For a time, this version of a path toward authorial wholeness satisfied me. The competing demands of audience and integrity could be managed in the redoubt of creative language, and scholarly speech could be held to the same standard. Yet my academic tongue was not loosed when I identified how and to whom I would now speak. Instead, rubbing the grime from the rhetorical turret window gave only a clearer view of other Afghan scenes that made me know things I couldn't say.

To be sure, I did a lot of writing while deployed, important writing that went up and down the chain of command, sometimes affecting individuals and other times entire provinces. Working seven days a week, fourteen hours per day, for months on end put me in a mental and emotional state that “exhausted” and “stressed” do little to convey. In the midst of this frenzy of high-stakes work, there were times when I was wrong—analytically, morally, and yes, even existentially. I would write up an assessment and argue with the Australian lieutenant colonel (I was in a joint command) who was trying to make it right. I can no longer remember what he was doing to correct those failures of mine. Maybe he was cutting a sentence, changing a nuance, nudging the subtle prescription of the piece toward a more military and less political solution. I do remember the coldness inside, the coarse grip of words I'd heft to avoid the point he was making. I'd push back once, twice, and then it was all, “Yes, sir. No, sir. Tell me what you want it to say, and I'll write it, sir.” I disassociated.⁵ The writing was no longer mine. The thinking in the writing was no longer mine. The landscape in the village and the governor of the province were no longer mine. They belonged to the colonel. The words belonged to the military. The assessment belonged to the war. That 95 percent of the words on the page had come pulsing from a heart and mind totally committed to excellence and victory meant nothing. I surrendered my soul into the offending 5 percent. Sometimes I'd even remove my personal information from the product's contact line, leaving only my department's functional name. This anonymity was as much pouting as the uniform would allow.

Despite these occasional stylistic, analytical, and methodological failures, I got a big medal at the end of my tour. In army-speak, I had been an O-3 performing at the O-5 level, so I “qualified” for a big one. As I was detaching from my command,

the Australian lieutenant colonel took me aside to thank me for my work and give me some constructive feedback about my ten months with him: "You're one of the best analysts I've had, but you take things too personally. You're arrogant. When I give feedback, your eyes say, 'You're wrong.' When I disagree, you become hard to work with. You should hide that better if you want to succeed in the military. Me, I don't take it wrong. But generals will."⁶ Of course, I thanked him for his candor. One thing I've learned as a professor is that people don't give hard feedback to difficult people at farewell moments just to make a point. He did it as a mark of professional honor, maybe even respect. On days when I tell someone the truth—on a draft, in my office, or after class—I may even call it love.

Failure in writing and in life can seem like a good reason to quit trying, to go on auto, to stop caring: "It isn't mine. Just tell me what you want." These are the thoughts of a frustrated student for whom the mind of the teacher is a mystery. Yet military culture, especially in times of stress and crisis, encourages disassociation even apart from failure. Though there is always a place for healthy dissent, subordinates get only two push-backs before bars, oak leaves, or stars get slammed on the table and rank gets the final say. For a writer, this disassociation contributes to the impersonal style fostered by military writing guides, which itself is a subset of larger patterns of group identification and depersonalization that structure many facets of military life.⁷ If I didn't sleep during all of my six hours off-shift, if I didn't work out, if I didn't eat right, if I didn't stop a hangnail from getting infected, if I didn't get all my shots from the doc, if I didn't do something that would keep me functional and mostly sane, I would not be taking proper care of government property and I would be guilty of malingering, a chargeable offense under the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice). In a combat zone, nothing a soldier has is really his—not his body, not his time, not his armor, sometimes not even his life, and certainly, never his work. We're constantly turning over—end of watch, end of tour. The military way of work and the military way of writing acknowledge we don't own what we do, the words belong to someone else, and much of the time we don't even get to see the end of a process we've begun.

Failures and disassociation were thus contributing factors in my silent homecoming. On one level, I struggled with the moral shrapnel all soldiers carry home from a combat zone. Countless narratives and poems by soldiers testify to the fact that it is impossible to be involved in war without its overwhelming inhumanity, evil, and senselessness leaving a mark on one's soul. As with Marlow in the Congo, it's only a matter of time before the hand of darkness touches our heart, leaving a part of it seared and unresponsive, sometimes for a season, sometimes forever.⁸ When people ask me what I did in Afghanistan, I don't think at first of deeds described in the citation for my end-of-tour award. Instead, I think of things I'd rather hide: the time I lost my temper, the time I missed a clue, the time paranoia made me unreasonable, the

time prejudice made me slander an unlikeable but innocent person, the hours I spent stewing over lost words, lost battles, lost pride. These were banal failures and could have happened anywhere. That is the way of things in war: there may be greater consequences for failures in a combat zone, but the roots of our failings are common to all. Although such self-knowledge can lead to humility, shame is not, at least at first, a good foundation for critical scholarly work because it shatters confidence and elicits silence. One reason I found poetry so beneficial was that it allowed me to express my culpability without, by virtue of its license, defining me by it. As art, my poems also gesture toward reparation, an imperative our actions may never be fully capable of achieving. Yet art, too, has limitations. “What beautiful work / Will redeem the heartbeats of a living creature / And what use to confess deeds that last forever?” asks the speaker of Czeslaw Milosz’s haunting poem “The Master,” before he concludes, “What comes from my evil—that only is true” (114).

The corrosive effects of disassociation and shame over my failures were part of the waters that discouraged me from exploring directly the challenges and changes my writing voice had undergone while deployed. As personally invested as I was in my military writing, the self was often beaten out of it before it made its way to wide release. Now that I was back in my university office, no Australian lieutenant colonel lurked at my shoulder to tell me when I was wrong. Like many scholars working on a campus without colleagues in the same subfield, I’m sometimes the only bludgeon my academic writing encounters before it takes the big chance with an editor and two outside reviewers. And I care about being right. Seeing that I had been willing to fight for the 5 percent I had wrong because I liked a turn of phrase, a nonessential point, or a personal tic, made me doubt my ability to revise my own prose. And though I often taught the importance of revision from the perspective of a disassociated self that identifies with a chosen audience and not the author’s peccadilloes, I felt desperately that willed self-alienation could not be allowed to displace entirely the caring soul who puts up with academic conventions because some things are worth writing for. So long as these dynamics were submerged in darkness, below the surface of language and consciousness, I was rooted in place, fighting an audience I should more justly have embraced.

Beyond its particular origins in times of failure, a capacity for disassociation can have a positive role to play in academic writing, despite its sapping of creativity and initiative. Consider how academic publishing works: we put only the accepted articles on our curriculum vita. No one knows how many failures prop up each accomplishment. When the thin envelope comes back from the journal, or the bland email from the editor-in-chief with anonymous reader reports declaring that our essay, while promising, is not publishable as is, is deficient in some element of evidence, argument, or insight, we can go numb in the privacy of our own thoughts and office. No one stands over us with a marked-up draft saying, “I want this line

gone. Here is where you talk about how the drone fucked up.” We have time to let the natural elasticity of our guts pull our insides back together. We need face no one immediately, not an editor, not a reviewer, not a department chair or a spouse. When we choose to learn from our mistakes, we can do so in our own way and on a schedule that makes believable the little lies we tell to keep the knowledge of first failure from stinging deeply into a psyche we need strong so as to be able to send the work out again. From this, I learn to admire the moral strength of students who, after receiving our feedback, retreat to their dorms and apartments swearing never to return to class again. And yet they do.

Trauma survivors often attempt to foreclose the reintegration process by precipitately declaring, “Mission accomplished!” after a small success in self-understanding or social interactions. The reasons for this are complex: exhaustion plays a role, and so does inexperience. Moreover, many a long march has its sun-dappled moments, as necessary as water in a desert. Even so, the drive to reassert normalcy and control can lead to denial, a blithe journeying forward along a road still mined, conversations that explode in silence or in rage. Writers are apt to make such discoveries. Amputees commonly report pain from an absent, phantom limb. I, who sustained no physical loss in war, can write only of a phantom self. In “Transformations,” one of the few essays to speak knowledgeably about veterans and composition, Galen Leonhardy acknowledges in a typically understated manner the pitfalls of contemporary rhetoric’s dependence on the personal essay:

Many non-veterans have a deep curiosity about the war in Iraq, as well as about war in general. I consider it my duty to be honest and to support such investigations; however, asking a person if he or she has killed another person *does seem* to push the limits of propriety, *something that teachers might want to get across* to students in a way that does not stifle curiosity. (346; emphasis added)

The composition classroom is not, of course, the only place where otherwise forbidden questions are given license. As a veteran-scholar, I have followed words beyond the written page and outside of the classroom, as we all do, to those places of university service and life where curiosity, both warm and voyeuristic, has pressed me to probe further for a meaning to my time abroad.

In the year before my deployment, I volunteered to serve on a subcommittee of the Academic Senate’s Enrollment Management Advisory Committee. Our charge was humble enough—veterans’ outreach—but the ambition of our members to revamp entirely how the university dealt with veterans from admissions to graduation had the full support of the university’s president, and our small group laid out a campaign plan for reform that would have filled the agendas of most committees for a decade. As the only non-ex officio full-time faculty member on the commit-

tee, I was given the responsibility to chair the group. I soon discovered that little “chair-leading” was required, given the nature of the university staff who had also volunteered to serve on the committee. Nearly every one of them was either a veteran or closely related to one. They were scattered about the university in key positions—the head of health services, an admissions administrator, an affirmative action officer. After a year of hard work and some wide-ranging recommendations, the subcommittee was reconstituted into a campus-wide veterans’ services initiative with a membership directly appointed by the university president. Around the same time, I was notified by my US Navy Reserve command that I would be mobilized and deployed to Afghanistan. After working for a year to improve the environment for veterans on my campus, I learned that I was to become one. Some of the most heartfelt farewells I received when news of my deployment spread came from this small group, and I suspect that backdoor maneuvering by some of them helped smooth my way through the more onerous administrative challenges I had to navigate in negotiating my military leave without pay.

I fully expected to rejoin this group when I returned to campus a year later. I did not. At first, I said no to all university service, with the full support of my dean and department chair, who knew I needed time to focus on teaching and restarting my research projects. In pockets of time between classes, I found a service role for my dispassionate deployment writing style as my department prepared for an external review that required extensive self-studies, complete with statistical analysis and detached assessment. I also found myself with several one-time service opportunities that would keep my tenure application strong while scratching my itch to make my campus a better place. I spoke to a political science club about “The Context of the American War in Afghanistan,” and to a community group about “The Ends of the American War in Afghanistan.” One colleague in agronomy invited me to address a group of National Guard members preparing to deploy to Afghanistan as agricultural consultants. Two events, however, summed up my changing relationship to veterans’ issues on campus, and both came at the invitation of the veterans’ services initiative I was no longer a part of.

In November 2009, a scant four months after I returned from Afghanistan, I gave the keynote address at the campus’s revived Veterans Day commemoration. I was still punch-drunk from various cultural clashes involved in reentering civilian life and gave the address in my service dress blues, the first time I had worn a military uniform on campus while the university was in session. In the days before the commemoration, I heard rumors of conflicts between the still-forming student veteran organization and the event organizers, which led to an informal boycott by some students who felt overlooked in the planning process. I was friendly, vague, and noncommittal on all sides, unable to discern whether the situation was one that created a conflict of loyalties for me or not. My speech, as evidenced by the following excerpt, was

unabashedly idealistic, moving from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and the military oath of office to the Preamble of the Constitution and the post-9/11 GI Bill:

My oath to support the Constitution—that document which defines our (lower-case) constitution, this social and political organism called the United States of America—leads me to be involved in my local community, to donate to charities and disaster relief, to serve in my local church, to pay taxes ungrudgingly, to vote, and to help my neighbors when their kids or their food pantry are in need. Indeed, when the pleasures of my job as a professor slacken—as they do on some days in California—I encourage myself by remembering how what I do as a teacher prepares others to lead productive and responsible lives as citizens. Actions like these help to bind us together, make us strong, and foster the health—the constitution—of our society [. . .] It’s a small step, but a positive one, to realize that we need more veterans in college so that we can increase the pool of influential people who see their personal welfare as inextricably tied to the health and welfare of our community. Veterans are by no means uniform or alone in a predisposition to use their education to benefit our country more broadly, and as I look around I know that many of you are equally committed to supporting our constitution as a nation. On this Veterans Day, I salute you for pursuing higher education, for supporting veterans, and for keeping faith with those to your right and your left. I wish you all the greatest success.

The speech was followed by a series of awkward congratulations as colleagues, administrators, and current and former students who had been drawn to the crowd and amplification on the quad absorbed the sight of someone they’d known as no more than a tweedy professor with unusually short hair now attired in the almost-foreign habit of a military dress uniform. Equally foreign on this commuter campus thirty miles from my home were my wife and three children, dressed in formal attire to support me on a day where heart, work, and life experiences were swirling together in a disorienting mix of worlds, words, and expectations. My desire to use the combined influence of my veteran and professorial status for good purposes ebbed rapidly away as the ceremony concluded, and my feet worked in consort with my smile to move me quickly back to the privacy and anonymity I suddenly craved.

The following year I wore only a tie, no uniform, to sanctify the day. I gave a shorter address, more in line with remarks made by other veterans on the stage. In this speech, my academic persona was firmly in the driver’s seat as I discussed how veterans brought important gifts to the classroom because of their prior experiences with leadership, teamwork, other cultures, and personal discipline. More specific to my discipline of literature, I recalled a student I had taught six years before, a marine who had been a part of the battle for Fallujah:

Though not all veterans are combat veterans, many these days are, and I’ve found that they have particular gifts to bring into the literature classroom. Literature, like most academic disciplines, demands to be measured against the realities of life. Many literary works are as self-consciously descriptive and formative of real-world dynam-

ics as any history or physics textbooks are. And war between nations or people is a perennial topic. I've seen veterans approach such readings as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the famous Hindu meditation on dharma that is set on the eve of a major battle and addressed by a divine charioteer to the general of the army, with a sensitivity and insight unavailable to students for whom the *Gita's* engagement with death and duty seems remote. Many veterans are able to test literature's claims of special insight into the nature of duty, loss, war, violence, virtue and sacrifice with a measuring stick formed out of their excruciating life experiences. For the literature professor, such students are more than students—they are partners in the common task of finding meaning in a world of suffering and delight.

My reminiscences merged with fantasy as I created a fictitious veteran student I'd seen only in snatches and hints and in my own longings and thoughts. Indeed, the veteran-students I've spent the most time with since my return are ones from other disciplines who sought me out for help with various administrative challenges unrelated to the classroom, or for support in community service initiatives that were born out of their experiences with nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast to the conventional idealism of my talk a year before, I concluded my speech by reading Stephen Crane's bitter poem of grief, "War Is Kind." In successive stanzas addressed to a lover, child, and mother bereaved by the death in battle of husband, father, and son, Crane flatly commands, "Do not weep [. . .] for war is kind."

Crane's poem is difficult to understand. Initially, most readers view his repeated injunction that "war is kind" as sarcasm, false comfort meant to torture survivors with absurdly nationalist lies. Read thus, the poem serves as a satire of public rituals (such as Veterans Day) intended to assuage mourners. In my reading of the poem, I see a deeper compassion throbbing beneath the poem's forbidding surface, a pained insight into the long days and years of grief belonging to a "Mother whose heart hung humble as a button / On the bright splendid shroud of [her] son." Compared to the desiccated future existence of mourners, "war is kind." I had taught Crane's poem in several classes even before I was implicated as one of its traumatized survivors, but unfolding it before a group of veterans and those gathered to honor them, I felt I had come to the end of my unsought sabbatical in war:

For we who have been left behind by those who died in war, who have grieved and given our best to honor their memory, the reversals of this poem are familiar. Indeed, death in war is kind in comparison to the costs borne by those left behind or those maimed and broken survivors whose damaged limbs or souls calls out the sympathy of all who see them. On this day of commemoration, let us recall the words of President Abraham Lincoln and commit ourselves "To *care* for him who shall have borne the battle and for his *widow* and his *orphan*." And may the Almighty grant us all peace.

War's long shadow—the aftermath of its traumas, evil, insights, and losses—can, at times, become the wound that leads to wisdom in a life composed, limned by chosen words and thoughtful deeds. When personal writing rises to the bar of contempla-

tion, it can, in Emerson’s words, “[detach] itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind. Instantly, it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption” (1143). Writing poetry hastened my journey to that moment when experience ripened into thought, dark and forbidding as those thoughts have sometimes been. How could they be otherwise in a world where greed, pride, and hate fester into war, where books of nature and human art are laid aside in order to preserve for a few the peace and security that are the birthright of all?

The first book I read upon returning home from Afghanistan was Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, newly translated by Robert Fagles. Truly a character worthy of contemplation by an American veteran, pious Aeneas embodies the nobility and brutality that became Rome. Virgil’s mournful epic of empire depicts Aeneas as a man whose gods were not worthy of him.⁹ Reading the poem slaked my thirst for understanding the changes inside me, inarticulate as those understandings were at the time. For a season, the tragedy of Aeneas was a compass to the changes in my heart, and Virgil’s art sustained hope that what was transpiring inside could one day be expressed. Aeneas’s speech to his men after surviving the epic’s opening storm, delivered once they have all collapsed into grief and trembling weakness, struck me as a particularly cogent expression of the disjunction between “[b]rave words” that must be said and an unappeasable sorrow concealed beneath a cheerful pose:

The commander’s words relieve their stricken hearts:
 “My comrades, hardly strangers to pain before now,
 we all have weathered worse. Some god will grant us
 an end to this as well [. . .]
 Call up your courage again. Dismiss your grief and fear.
 A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember even this. [. . .]”
Brave words.

Sick with mounting cares he assumes a look of hope
 and keeps his anguish buried in his heart.

(1:232–46)

For pious Aeneas, the endless conflict of life is not merely external. In Virgil’s crafted lines, Aeneas displays an interior struggle that bursts occasionally into eloquence or grief. In this address, Aeneas says the opposite of what he feels; he acts a role that makes, through force of speech and character, impossible futures possible. By composing himself before his comrades, Aeneas portrays the power of words to make us more than what we are, a gift that may console us—in part—for what we have become.

NOTES

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1. Dean Barbara Way, Dr. Liliane Fucaloro, Dr. Don Kraemer, and many others in the dean's office and English and foreign languages department rose to the unusual challenge of my deployment with great goodwill and generosity.

2. I've conflated three editors into one in this passage, including Dr. John Schilb of *College English*, to whom I am very grateful for the careful reading he gave my work. Jean Tamarin, senior editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, also deserves particular mention for her fund of useful, affirming, and honest advice. Ms. Tamarin's efforts allowed me to publish an exploratory column in the *Chronicle* ("An Academic in Afghanistan: Code Name Cassandra," June 29, 2009) that was a significant step in my journey toward discovering a post-deployment voice.

3. Auden again, this time from "Musée des Beaux Arts." The Dickinson poems in this paragraph are already identified by title. See also "The Brain Is Wider than the Sky" for an earlier allusion.

4. As is appropriate for an illustration demonstrating how professional and popular authority bleed into each other, there is no evidence that Freud ever said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

5. My reasons for choosing the less common *disassociation* over the more clinical *dissociation* are twofold. First, I confess that I like to see "ass" in the middle of a word that describes how I was then acting. Further, this variant of the term emphasizes the voluntary aspects of affiliation—one chooses to associate or not. Second, I wish to avoid a narrowly clinical use of the term because many readers will recognize it as one of the key symptoms used in diagnosing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Though the dynamics I describe may fall on a spectrum related to PTSD, I don't want through this essay to empower readers to diagnose their students with a clinical disorder. PTSD remains a stigma most veterans fear immensely, especially those who aspire to working lives that depend on their minds more than their brawn.

6. In Tim O'Brien fashion ("How to Tell a True War Story"), I've taken liberties here; as Aeschylus is reputed to have said, "In war, truth is the first casualty." I worked with more than one Australian lieutenant colonel, and the composite figure discussed here includes a few American senior officers as well. However, I owe the greatest debt to Lt. Col. "C . . .," Australian Army, for hardheaded, insightful, and fair critique.

7. Kelly Singleton Dalton provides a useful framework for further research in these areas in her recent MA thesis, "From Combat to Composition: Meeting the Needs of Military Veterans through Postsecondary Writing Pedagogy." See particularly chapter 1, "Military Culture and Language."

8. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not overtly about war, despite its adaptation into the iconic Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now*. Although most analyses of the novella focus on the darkness in Kurtz, I reference here the impact on Marlow of his time in the Congo, particularly the incidents where his curiosity, ambition, and (in his interaction with Kurtz's Intended) compassion result in a twisted complicity with the rapacious and genocidal venture that is at the heart of the darkness in the book.

9. The source of this mot has eluded me, so I attribute it here to Arthur Quinn, late professor of rhetoric at the University of California–Berkeley, with gratitude for the introduction to both Virgil and Milosz.

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