New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: “Fort Mirror”

Getting posted to Fort Mirror was a death sentence. The most coveted of all postings, soldiers jockeyed for the honor, begged superiors to send them to the fort on patrols or did what they euphemistically called “drug deals” to get assigned to units deploying soon. You went there, you died. Or you didn’t. Some people got hurt. Many of the people who spent time at Fort Mirror came away unharmed. Others went mad.

Officers were the worst. Ambitious young men and women subjected themselves to demanding and physically exhausting trials, hazed themselves brutally just for a chance to deploy to Fort Mirror. Knowledge of which units were headed where was highly sought after. If based on rumor and forward planning at headquarters it looked like there was a 20% chance a particular unit was going to Fort Mirror, that was considered quite good, and the officers lined up to serve. Over time, officers became conniving, wheedling things, strong from their training, ruthless in their networking. Most of them (save for the luckiest who knew somehow they were going to Fort Mirror) lost themselves completely trying to get there.

But Fort Mirror was worth it. That’s what everyone said. People knew that at Fort Mirror whatever else happened, the enemy would attack in strength—they’d come in the night, from some direction nobody thought possible. Or they’d come during the day in overwhelming numbers, and it was all hands on deck, fighting from one side of the fort to the other with a box of hand grenades to share on those occasions the enemy attacked at the place defenses were strongest, and still got in,

punched their way through, although the base commander had anticipated that very move.

People went to Fort Mirror because catastrophic, once-in-a-decade attacks were bound to happen. Soldiers and officers went there in pairs, with their best friends, each knowing that the other would likely die, and it would be a formative tragedy. Each man secretly believed it would be the other who perished. Sometimes, a man went to Fort Mirror to die, and formed a friendship with a soldier or officer whom they believed would make it through, thereby keeping their memory strong. It actually played out that way a few times. A few times it played out the opposite, with the person who went there to die living, and the person who went there to live dying unexpectedly.

Those were the glory years for Fort Mirror. Rumors spread from the military to the writers obsessed with military affairs. Journalists began showing up to write stories and record television spots, to film for documentaries. This furthered the fort's fame, spreading its name far and wide among those paying attention. The more that soldiers and officers were recorded or written about at Fort Mirror, the greater the numbers of ambitious young soldiers and officers clamoring to join units going or staying there. To a certain type of man, this notoriety was reassuring, knowing not only that one would perform brave valorous feats, but that afterwards, there was a reliable chance that one might read an article about it in the newspaper, see themselves on television.

For the career minded, Fort Mirror became a rite of passage. Promotion was assured for those who could deploy there and turn it to their advantage. Many junior officers went on to distinguished careers after serving at Fort Mirror, likewise with the sergeants. Medals for bravery were handed out there like pieces of candy at Christmas. Every other year or so, a soldier or officer would earn the highest honor their country had to give.

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The military hierarchy hated Mirror. Its existence repudiated so much of what the war was said to be about in the generals' press releases. It was the grain of truth in the myth of the war, it was the persuasive argument justifying some new barbaric action. Academics wrestled with it as a problem, conceding that its being an outlier to their models spoke to some more essential lesson about conflict. Meanwhile outside of government and the military, few had heard of Fort Mirror—and that's because few had heard of the war, in spite of the journalists writing stories about it, in spite of the television spots and occasional documentaries. Even though there was no specific awareness of Fort Mirror, it's safe to say that without it, the war as a phenomenon would not have been possible.

Operations at Fort Mirror were sometimes mission driven, but they were never metrics-driven or data-driven. It had not been optimized for search results, there were no subheds partitioning it into sections or dragging readers' eyes from one section to the next. It had no keywords. Its reading level could not be assessed. It was not hyperlinked or back-linked to other pages. Its domain authority score could not be established.

In terms of its layout, Fort Mirror was not exceptional. It consisted of walls, and an entrance, and guard towers, and a dining facility; all the things you'd expect a fort to have. Still, because of the terrain on which it had been built, part of Fort Mirror extended onto a flat plateau—a brooding section that seemed to gaze out at the surrounding countryside like a man lost in thought. There was a second, lower section at the base of the plateau. A trail cut into the stone cliffside centuries before by some farsighted builder or military commander connected the two positions and had been expanded and fortified over the decades. In its whole, Mirror was remarkable, a shining, demented visionary, a Castle

Frankenstein or one of Frank Lloyd Wright's lesser-known experiments; a part of its surroundings, and also totally apart from them, impossibly alien.

When the military arrived they stationed artillery and mortars on the plateau, and had a place to land helicopters full of food, mail, and other sundries needed to keep a fort going. Around 300 soldiers lived at the fort at a time though occasionally the number would grow for bigger operations.

The terrain deserves more consideration. Because of its appearance in various print and broadcast media across various seasons, it's possible to get a sense of the place, but in *spite* of widespread coverage, descriptions of it conflict and can even at certain points as was the case in a feature in *The New York Times* and another in *Der Spiegel*, explicitly contradict each other. In some recollections the plateau on which the fort was founded grew out of a hill within a valley, ringed by foreboding mountains. In others, the plateau jutted out above a deep river that cuts through what appear to be plains, or emerged from buildings in a town or bazaar. It was compared favorably and unfavorably with a decayed New England industrial center, hollowed out by offshoring. Others saw in it the mountains and rivers of Central and Eastern Europe. One thing that everyone agreed on, in describing the milieu in which Mirror occurred, was that the weather in the place varied wildly, with sunny calm often replaced with no warning by torrential downpours. Fog, too, often obscured the fort, rendering it vulnerable to attack, but also difficult to detect.

There were several Observation Posts or "OPs" higher in the hills, manned by soldiers and local constables in groups of 8-12, total. The precise number of OPs varied between three and five, depending on the goals of the commanding officer. At first the OPs were named for cardinal directions, but over time, took on the names of soldiers who fell in fighting. One was even named for a heroic local constable who sacrificed

himself during a particularly desperate action, unexpectedly saving the lives of eight soldiers. This act of love was seen as something of an exception to an unspoken rule to acknowledge the local residents as little as possible; in general, places were named only for military soldiers or officers, or cultural signifiers or signposts from home. Locals had their own names for things. They even had their own name for the fort, though it was deployed as trivia and assigned no particular importance, save to the occasional soldier or officer who thought taking local matters seriously ameliorated their complicity in the war, or because it reminded them of a spouse or partner.

*

The oddest thing about Fort Mirror, and the thing that most people remarked on when they first arrived, was that every inch of the fort was covered in mirrors of the sort one might find on the local economy. The walls were covered with mirrors outside and inside. Instead of windows, there were mirrors, instead of paintings, mirrors, instead of doors, great opaque slabs of reinforced glass, in which one could see one's own reflection and that of one's surroundings. The outside of the fort was draped in mirrors which were affixed by metal wires or placed into stone or wooden fittings designed for the purpose. This was true of the lower and upper portions of the fort, with the exception that the mirrors hung in the lower part of Fort Mirror were in general larger and heavier than those above. Some suggested that this was owing to the difficulty of porting larger mirrors up the cliffside; prior to air travel there was no easy way to bring mirrors up from the surrounding valley to the plateau.

When mirrors were damaged by the fighting, as they often were, they were quickly replaced. Mirrors had been built into and onto the fort long ago—more credulous soldiers said that this was done by special operations during the initial phase of the war, but the special operators who had seized the fort from

enemy forces maintained that the mirrors had been there when they arrived. Earlier accounts from militaries of other, older armies, had also described the fort as having been draped in mirrors or “reflective glass,” and hypothesized that it had at one time been the residence of a great king or emperor.

One officer developed a friendship with a popular and well-educated interpreter, “Johnny,” who said that the fort was a place of great religious significance. According to him the fort was on very old ground, perhaps predating monotheism—perhaps, indeed, contributing to it in some obscure way. The local villages all regarded the fort with dread and superstition, and the fort and its occupants played significant roles in myths of the sort still regularly encountered in distant rural areas even in the 21st century. Furthermore, the fort factored into local religious stories, which attested to its durability, as myths of a certain power and endurance were always incorporated into orthodoxies rather than destroyed. Every time the enemy attacked, they would leave behind new mirrors to replace the ones they’d damaged. With time, it became a tradition among soldiers as well, with new units bringing new mirrors of all shapes and sizes, and purchasing quantities on the local economy at a significant mark-up.

In the arts, Fort Mirror inspired many essays and fictional stories focusing on its construction and layout, and the effect that living there produced on many soldiers and officers. Journalists helped lead the way by writing about it in public, and always seemed eager to consider its significance in terms of what to them was a unique experience. There was invariably a part in every article or video where the author or narrator would show how little most soldiers and officers cared about living among their own reflections, as well as how odd and disorienting it was to new arrivals. Many soldiers and officers took it upon themselves to understand the significance or consequences of living on Fort Mirror

through graphic novels, fiction, memoir, movies, video games, and art.

“I wake up in the morning blinded by the light of thousands of suns, trapped in a funhouse maze of my agonized and distorted, shattered body,” wrote one reporter, “while a sergeant walked by me in flip-flops to the showers, totally oblivious, as if this were the most normal thing in the world. A mortar boomed in the distance, and as I dropped to the ground, he reached the bathroom and opened the mirror, then disappeared nonchalantly inside as an explosion burst a few hundred meters to our south…”

It was a strange place. Legends grew up about and around it over the years within the military, though you truly had to have lived it to understand many of them. Some soldiers fell in love with local women, others, with each other; others still, with the idea of escaping Fort Mirror, which while one was posted there was almost impossible. Some went mad sitting in their barracks rooms, at night, flicking a small flashlight on and off, staring at themselves in the mirror-walls, wondering about what they might have done differently during the previous day’s patrol, or how they’d perform on the upcoming operation. It was said that one could see the past in the mirrors, dead soldiers from wars long past or from actions just months old. Perhaps those who died within Fort Mirror’s walls were doomed to walk within forever. A persistent but idiosyncratic story was that one could see the future in the mirrors, given credence by the many soldiers who experienced professional success in their subsequent civilian lives. Another story concerns a distinctively squat and strong-willed but disliked colonel, who disappeared from the fort, but who was subsequently reported roaming the mirrors of the fort too many times and by too many different sources for it to have been coincidence.

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One might think that there would be some taboo against breaking mirrors while posted to the fort. There is some truth to this, to deliberately destroy a mirror needed some justification. If, for example, one broke a mirror accidentally, firing at a perceived foe, this was permissible. To destroy a mirror in order to "liberate" the image within was also viewed as understandable, though officially it was frowned upon and never encouraged. Breaking mirrors out of an instinctual desire to wreck or destroy was also dissuaded even though soldiers and officers caught doing it were rarely punished. As with all things Mirror, justice bent toward mercy and understanding when it came to acts of violence.

Adjusting the mirrors – changing their orientation or marking them with paint or markers – was something that inspired instinctual revulsion by all, soldier and local alike. Soldiers caught changing the mirrors in any way would be transferred out from the unit after a quick investigation to determine the facts. Locals caught changing the mirrors in any way were never seen again.

Another notable characteristic of the fort was that having struggled so mightily to be posted there, as soon as a soldier or officer would leave, they'd be filled with a burning desire to see the place closed. They justified this desire by explaining that no more people should die or be injured in so pointless and strange a place. Meanwhile, the soldiers and officers who'd yet to deploy to Fort Mirror maintained that this was bitter jealousy, that Fort Mirror veterans wanted to hoard all the glory for themselves; that they only wanted to close the fort so that nobody else could get medals, so they'd be the only ones who were special.

Would the war ever end? Would the soldiers stop flowing into Fort Mirror, fighting desperate battles at night or in the day? Would the junior officers stop competing for posts there, stop gazing into Mirror's walls to regard their square-jawed future political campaigns? Would journalists stop writing

nuanced pieces balancing the reality of the war with the idealism of the energies that had brought the military to occupy the fort in the first place? Would the timeless myth, whispered among the oldest locals, ever come to pass: that someday a line of light would appear in the middle of the fort’s mirrors and all the mirrors of the world, accompanied by the thunder of countless horses hooves, before the people of the mirror world burst their magical reflective confines to enter our own world? And what would happen if they did?

New Fiction from Terry Sanville: “The Metallic Sound of Rain”

Just about every afternoon the wind came up suddenly, stirring the dust that blew through the screens of our company’s orderly room.

“Get moving, Gorski,” the First Sergeant commanded.

“Got it, Top.”

I jumped up from my desk and ran outside. Metal awnings protected each of the screened openings into our building from Vietnam’s roasting sun. Metal supports propped up each awning. I ran along the outside walls and knocked out the supports. One by one the awnings crashed down onto the sides of the building, sounding like metal dumpster lids being slammed shut. Similar sounds came from throughout the battalion as other company clerks did the same.

I barely made it back inside before the rain came. It thundered against the roof and protected window openings, insistent, wanting to get in, to invade our sticky-hot refuge.

Before I could close the front door, a jeep with two mud-spattered MPs and a third man pulled up. The MPs got out and hauled Private Kelly into the front of our office. He wore leg irons and handcuffs.

The First Sergeant came forward as the MPs unshackled their charge. One of them handed Top a sheaf of papers. “First Sergeant, we’re returning Private Kelly to your unit.”

“Why? I thought he’s supposed to stay in LBJ until the end of September?”

“They’ve had a bit of a problem at the jail,” the MP said and grinned. “The prisoners rioted and started beating up whites and torching the place.”

“I’m supposed to feel bad about that?” Top said, a scowl creasing his Black face.

“Well, First Sergeant, no disrespect but it seems like it was a race thing.”

“That’s not what I heard. So what has Private Kelly been doing for the past two months?”

The second MP grinned. “The guards said he’s been making concrete tire stops.”

“That explains his burnt skin. And they wonder why they riot.” Top scribbled his signature on the papers then turned to me.

“Put him back with Sergeant Johnson’s ship platoon.”

“You sure, Top? Remember what happened?”

“Just do it.”

“Got it, Top.”

I made a note on my desk pad to make the appropriate entry in the next day’s Morning Report, and set off with Kelly to hit supply then get him situated in his hooch.

Small with tight features, Kelly walked with a limp that I didn’t remember him having before he got thrown into Long Binh Jail, or “LBJ” as we called it.

“You okay, Kelly?” I asked.

“I’ve been better.” He fingered dark bruises that covered his sun-crisped forearms.

“You’ve gotta stop messing up, man. You’re racking up so much bad time in the stockade they may never let you leave Nam . . . or the Army.”

Kelly looked at me, a grin splitting his face below impish eyes. “Ah Gorski, you know me. What fun is it to color inside the lines?”

“It’s gotta be more fun than making concrete tire stops in the blistering sun.”

“You would think . . .”

I tried getting serious. “Now look, Sergeant Johnson is not gonna be pleased to see you back after you busted up Simmons.”

“That cracker had it comin’. Honestly, I didn’t know a bar stool could do so much damage. But he got an early out because of it, right?”

“Yeah, they sent him back to the world to piece his face back together.”

“There ya go . . . a happy ending.”

Yeah, a happy ending. I couldn't imagine Kelly having one. But then he always seemed to bounce back, find some new way to stick it to the Army, to rail against authority, our very own Cool Hand Luke. Kelly was an artist who could paint and draw just about anything. I still have a pencil drawing he did of me sitting at my desk pounding out Morning Reports.

One day our Commanding Officer had told him to paint a three-foot-tall color portrait of the cartoon Little Devil, our company's mascot, on the bulletin board outside the orderly room. Kelly did a beautiful job of capturing the character's mischievous nature, but with a couple added features: the devil's hand that grasped the pitchfork had its middle finger extended; and a huge boner stretched the little guy's shorts. The GIs loved it. The CO, a non-lifer Lieutenant from Boston, laughed when he saw it. Top was not amused.

From the supply hooch we retrieved Private Kelly's personal belongings that had been stored there during his latest incarceration. His hooch stood empty since Johnson's ship platoon was finishing up its 12-hour shift, unloading freighters at Newport on the Saigon River. I wasn't sure what was worse, unloading ships in the broiling sun or making concrete tire stops.

Kelly stretched out on his bunk and pulled his cap over his eyes.

"Now look," I said, "just lay off the booze and relax for a while. Johnson is gonna be really pissed. And Simmons' friends will want to beat the shit out of you."

"Don't worry, Gorski. I'll stay out of their way. I think I'm ready to go home, had enough of this place."

"Good, that's good."

We all had enough of that place.

For a while, Kelly seemed to toe the line, worked as a stevedore during the day and occupied a corner of the dayroom at night, sketching and painting from snapshots he took with his battered Polaroid camera.

“My Mama gave me this camera when I went away to art school,” he told me. “New York City felt like heaven to this country boy . . . the clubs, the chicks, and the music. One night I even caught Dylan in Greenwich Village singin’ *A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall*. I started drinkin’ heavy and poppin’ ludes. But it didn’t hurt my art and I seemed to fit in.”

“Yeah, well you definitely don’t fit in here,” I said. “There’s no room in Nam for real art.”

“You got that straight.”

Slashes of rain hit the dayroom’s metal siding, sounding like someone flinging handfuls of buckshot at us. I thought about Kelly’s first fuck-up with our company. He’d just arrived in-country and Top gave him the job of manning the arms room that held all of our Army-issued weapons and the officers’ personal ones. On a rainy afternoon, Kelly sipped booze from his pocket flask while messing around with the CO’s chrome-plated Thompson machinegun. He laid a finger on its trigger and promptly put a neat row of bullet holes through the armory’s roof. Top thought we were under attack. He would have beaten the crap out of Kelly if the CO hadn’t intervened.

But this time weeks passed without incident. Then Sgt. Johnson reported Kelly AWOL after he failed to return to duty from lunch.

“That mother fucker’s probably downtown Saigon, screwing his brains out and shootin’ up on Tudo Street.”

“Don’t think so,” I replied. “Kelly’s afraid of needles. But the screwing part I can believe. Typical messed-up Irish Catholic.”

“I don’t give a crap how messed-up he is. I want him out of my platoon.”

“You’ll have to talk with Top and the CO about that.”

Sgt. Johnson scowled and joined the rest of his crew outside the mailroom, lined up and waiting for Gibbons to open the window and start passing out letters and packages from back in the world.

Kelly returned after three days, his neck covered in hickeys, and made a beeline for the first aid station and a shot of penicillin. The CO gave him an Article 15, a minor form of court martial, for going AWOL. He docked Kelly’s pay for two months and extended his time in Vietnam by two weeks, that latter punishment being the worst.

But Kelly stayed in Johnson’s platoon, kept a low profile, and gradually became a short-timer like me.

“So, what are you gonna do when you go back to the world?” I asked Kelly about two weeks before his scheduled departure.

His eyes sort of glazed over and he shook his head. “Don’t know. I hate the way Nam has wore me down. New York seems like some faded dream, and Tennessee and the folks’ place might as well be on another planet.”

“You could go back to school on the GI Bill?”

“Can’t see myself sittin’ in a classroom, or even an artist’s studio.”

Kelly seemed to fold in on himself and I shut up, not wanting to worsen his downer. Most of the GIs, including myself, just focused on getting the hell out of Nam. But poor Kelly felt tortured thinking beyond that, with few answers in sight.

About a week before his scheduled freedom bird flight out, Kelly went AWOL, or missing in action, or something I didn’t

know how to code for the Morning Report. A monsoon had hit the company area and the rain sound on the orderly room's metal roof felt like living inside a snare drum. Outside, a deuce-and-a-half squished to a stop and Sgt. Johnson's platoon off-loaded.

Johnson entered the office, rainwater streaming off his poncho, and pushed through the half door in the front counter. "I need to see Top." His whole body trembled and his face had a grayish, almost ghostly tinge to it.

"He's in his office. Go on back."

After a minute, Top yelled, "Gorski, get in here, and bring a note pad."

When I entered the office, Johnson sat staring at the floor, a puddle forming at his feet.

"Sgt. Johnson, tell me what happened . . . and do it clearly 'cause Gorski's gonna write it down."

"Sure, Top. Well it was a couple of hours before end of shift and the crew was topside, takin' a smoke break. But Kelly wasn't with 'em."

"Had you seen him earlier?" Top asked.

"Yeah, right after lunch he was down in the hold with the rest of 'em, hookin' cables to cargo pallets."

"Did he normally go off by himself?"

"Yeah, sometimes. But he's so damn short that I didn't figure he'd go AWOL again."

"No, that doesn't make sense. So what happened next?"

"Well, I checked the hold where the crew was workin', figgerin' he might be in the shadows down there. But I couldn't spot him, so I started to move forward."

“And? Come on Johnson, spit it out.”

The sergeant shook himself and sucked in a deep breath. “Found Kelly sittin’ on the bow rail, just starin’ upriver. I yelled at him and he turned and grinned at me. That son of a bitch even waved.”

“Come on, Johnson. This is the last time. Get on with it.”

“Sorry, Top. I heard loud voices from where the crew was hanging out, like somebody arguing. I turned toward them, just for a moment, not even a moment. When I turned back, Kelly was gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“He wasn’t there, Top. Nobody was there.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran forward and looked over the rail. It must be forty or fifty feet to the water. Nothin’ . . . no ripples, no bubbles coming up. Ya know, the river is like coffee with cream; ya can’t see shit below the surface.”

“So what did you do?”

“I hollered at the crew and we hauled ass off the ship and down to the launch ramp. We yelled at a couple of Vietnamese boatmen paddlin’ their canoes, gave them a few piasters and commandeered their boats. Jenkins and I took off upriver and Corporal Lynch and Days headed downriver. We checked everything along the banks, both sides for hundreds of yards. Nothin’.

“When we got back I notified the Port Command and clued them in on what happened. They said Kelly was probably tangled up in crap on the river bottom and would never be found.”

“Is that it?”

“Yeah, Top. That’s it.”

The three of us sat there for a few minutes, not speaking. My mind drifted to images of that freighter and the mocha-brown Saigon River, its mud concealing the wreckage of conflict over the decades, and now maybe one Irish Catholic body. That night in the dayroom, the guys talked about Kelly, with many of them guessing that he got away and had a girlfriend or maybe even a wife and family in Saigon that would hide him from the MPs.

The next day I cleared out his wall and footlockers and stowed the personal belongings in the supply hooch. But I kept a half dozen of his paintings, rolled them up and shoved them into a cardboard tube I got from the mail clerk. They’re framed now and hang on the walls of my writing studio, my man-cave where not even my wife ventures. And every time I hear the loud bang of a dumpster cover, I think of the assault of rain on the roof, that metallic rattle that takes me back to Long Binh Army Base and the misfit artist who stayed behind.

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner: “Death Takes a Temporary Duty Assignment”

Death had narrowed his search of potential candidates down to two soldiers, both with high kill counts. Qualified applicants were always military men assigned to the line. Death had been a knight under Robert the Pious. His predecessor had been a Centurion under Augustus. Snipers, artillerymen, and pilots were ineligible, too much separation from the butchery. Intimacy and closeness were necessary for a harvester of souls.

Blackburn and Rojas. Each man had seen the whites of enemy eyes before pulling the trigger. Death had brushed shoulders with each of them, literally and figuratively.

Death sat beside his laptop computer, his bony finger pressing SEND on the last of his 555,000 emails: intercessions, near death experiences, and miracles forwarded to him by God. “Finally,” he said as he rose and grabbed his scythe, “I’m all caught up.”

Death had been granted a two-hour Temporary Duty Assignment to pick a successor. Having completed his thousand-year tour of duty, he had extended for three more years to clear up a client backlog. The twentieth century had been a busy time for the Grim Reaper, perhaps the busiest in history. With the invention of the cell phone and internet, the incumbent Death received a constant barrage of text messages and emails which—considering his birth 400 years before the printing press—he managed adroitly.

As a spirit operating outside the bounds of space and time, Death’s job granted him near omnipresence: only a fraction of a second later he was standing within a concertina-lined forward operated base in Northern Iraq. He checked his watch—1300 hours.

Invisible to the Living, Death strode through Task Force Warrior’s Tactical Operating Center, spotting Sergeant Major Muerte haranguing a long-haired private. “Sergeant Major,” he said to himself as he stepped into Muerte’s body, “I hope you don’t mind me possessing your soul for a tick.”

The private reeled as Muerte’s Aztec hue shifted to a bloodless pallor and his face, previously the picture of health, deflated. Staring through opaque eyes, Muerte—now Death— snapped his fingers, and his scythe instantly appeared

in his pale hand.

The private straightened up, eyes trained on the razor-sharp scythe. “No need for that,” he said, backing out of the TOC, “I’ll cut my hair, Sergeant Major.”

Scythe in hand, Death, now Muerte, walked around Warrior Base, finally locating Charlie Company’s first sergeant. He had little time to dawdle.

“I need to speak with Sergeants Blackburn and Rojas, First Sergeant.”

Staring at the large Scythe, the square-jawed first sergeant hesitated. “What about, Sergeant Major?”

“A promotion.”

“A promotion? To what?”

“The Angel of Death.”

“Oh…” he said, exhaling in relief. “I thought I was getting transferred.”

Located in a derelict guard house, Muerte’s office was the epitome of military austerity—desk, two chairs and a laptop computer, the antithesis of Death’s Victorian-era quarters. Muerte set his Scythe against a bullet-riddled wall and took a seat behind his computer. He logged onto his email and sighed at the 300,000 unread messages in his inbox. He downloaded Blackburn’s file.

Just as Muerte was about to call in his first candidate, the report of a mortar round rocked his office. With less than ninety minutes to conduct his interviews, he couldn’t afford any distractions. Within an instant he was outside Warrior Base’s perimeter standing beside a truck occupied by three insurgents and a mortar.

Upon seeing the now manifested scythe-wielding, eight-foot tall skeleton draped in a black robe, the insurgents' faces froze in silent screams. "Do you mind?" he said in perfect Arabic. "I'm conducting interviews."

"Malak al-Maut![1] Malak al-Maut!" yelled the driver as he stomped on the gas, covering Death's robe in a brume of powdered dust.

Transposing himself back into Muerte's body, he checked his watch. 77 minutes. Barely over an hour left to select a candidate for a thousand-year tenure of abject grief and hopelessness. He'd kill for more time.

Sergeant First Class Blackburn stood in his doorway as Muerte reviewed his file, "You asked for me, Sergeant Major?"

"Take a seat, Blackburn."

Standing a portly 5' 2", Blackburn's stature was exacerbated by his unusually long arms which necessitated his wearing gloves to protect his dragging knuckles. Blackburn took a seat across from Muerte and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest," said Muerte, "Can I bum a square off you?"

Blackburn offered Muerte a cigarette from his sausage-shaped fingers. Muerte took a deep drag, relishing the tobacco, tar, and carbon monoxide as it entered his lungs. Cigarettes and Death. Death and cigarettes—like ham and cheese to the Living.

Muerte gazed at his laptop. "It says here you killed 22 insurgents."

"23, Sergeant Major."

"No, Sergeant, 22. One was shot by friendly fire."

"Oh…"

Muerte leaned back in his seat and took a deep drag, sizing up Blackburn's homuncular appearance. "What does that mean to you, to kill 22 men?

"Are you with JAG?"

"No, I'm not with JAG."

Blackburn's eyes darted around the room. "I don't know if I should answer that."

"Anything you say here stays in this room."

Blackburn leaned across the desk. "I'm the Angel of Death," he whispered.

"Say again?"

"I'm the Angel of Death."

"*You're* the Angel of Death?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major."

Muerte was taken aback by Blackburn's hubris. Boasting was bad form even among the Living.

"That's awfully presumptuous, isn't it?"

"Presumptuous?"

"Can you answer two million emails in a single day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"Can you answer three million phone calls a day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"How about travel? Can you be in a million places at once?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

Muerte stood. “Thank you, Sergeant. I’ve heard enough.”

Blackburn offered a handshake, but Death politely refused. He hadn’t come to collect Blackburn, only to interview him.

Muerte returned to his chair and checked his in-box. 700,000 unread emails. Never a moment’s rest. Death gave the Rojas file a quick look. Just as he was about to call him in he heard a truck turn sharply into Warrior Base’s entrance. He rolled his eyes, “Here we go again.”

Materializing beside a pick-up packed with explosives, Death killed the engine. He had dominion over the Living *and* all forms of technological devices, including internal combustion engines. Few were aware of this.

The suicide bomber sat motionless in the driver’s seat, horrified by the cloaked figure towering over the hood of his truck. Death walked to the driver’s side and tapped his bony finger on the glass. The suicide bomber rolled down his window.

“Kinda busy right now,” Death said in Arabic. “You mind coming back later?”

The suicide bomber nodded and put the truck in reverse.

Death returned to Muerte’s body. 1,200,000 unread emails in his inbox. He’d give his soul for a personal assistant. He checked his watch—30 minutes. He was out of time.

“Next!”

Sergeant First Class Rojas entered Muerte’s office. Five-foot ten with a rail thin physique, Rojas looked like he’d be ground to powder by a sandstorm. His freckled face was capped by a thatch of red hair. Death smiled at his surname. *Rojas*.

“You summoned me, Sergeant Major?”

Muerte motioned for Rojas to take a seat. He stared at his laptop, then turned to Rojas. “25 insurgents. It says here you killed 25 insurgents.”

Rojas sat silently, running his hand over his ginger brush cut.

“How does that make you feel, to kill 25 men? “

“Are you with JAG?”

“I’m not with JAG,” Muerte said. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“It’s a loaded question. If I said I felt nothing I’d be a sociopath. If I said I enjoyed it, I’d be psychotic.”

Muerte chuckled. “You Living, always putting labels on your own agency.”

“Living?”

“I’m not here to diagnose you.”

“Honestly?” said Rojas as he straightened up. “Part of me felt good to kill those men.”

“Good?’

“Yes. They were trying to kill me, but I killed them first. I suppose it’s primal.”

Muerte leaned back in his seat, “Please elaborate.”

“It felt good, but I don’t get any joy out of taking another man’s life. I simply did what had to be done.”

“And that is?”

“Bring my men home. Those men I killed, they have families, but so do the soldiers in my platoon.”

“So, in a way,” Muerte said, closing his laptop, “you view death as simply a consequence of your chosen profession.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. And I take that profession very seriously.”

Muerte ruminated on his words, sizing up the freckly-faced, red haired non-commissioned officer. There was no doubt about it. He’d found his replacement.

“Congratulations,” Death said as he rose and offered a handshake. “You’ve got the job.”

Rojas stared at Muerte’s pale fingers. “Job?” Rojas asked as he rose and offered his hand in return.

“Yes, a job,” supplemented Muerte. “But I must warn you, the workload will kill you.”

[1] Angel of Death

New Poetry by Stephen Massimilla: “Wounded”

CAPILLARIES OF ROOTS / image by Amalie Flynn

WOUNDED

—to Laura

Bleating thing without wool
Thunder without sound
Ghost of wooded peaks, of constricted arterial waters

There is a dog inside the heart, voice bursting
Interminable silence, blown-open iris

Over organs buried deeper in the earth
where capillaries of roots still bleed orange dust

Leave me be, hot tongue of fireflies,
      cracked pharynx of ice

Do not ask me to slip
      down among green nerves of water-weed
             where the flesh of the sky
is unmoving and fruitless

The moon still hovers in its surgeon’s coat

But do not try to satisfy the dead
who hold on with claws like desperate fevers

Leave my sutured skull of empty ivory forever

But pity me; put an end to this much hurt

         I am love, I tell you
and all the quick wings accumulating

as restlessly as the breaths

       that were once inside

these wheel-crushed, wind-scattered leaves

New Poetry by Kevin Honold: “A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest”

RADIANT AS NOON / *image by Amalie Flynn*

A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest

Tell me again of that fabulous
kingdom where a single
ear of corn is more
than two strong young men can carry, where cotton
grows untended, in colors never dreamed of,
to be spun by gorgeous slaves
into garments that lie
cool as cornsilk against the skin and shine
radiant as noon.

*

How sordid and predictable history can be.
Within sight of the prize
but out of ammunition, they
lowered three men down the volcano’s throat
to fetch sulfur for gunpowder.
                        This
was the vision
prefigured in the prophet’s eye:
three men curled in a basket peering
back across the centuries,

their dewy starving faces so
desperate with hope
as they dissolve in a yellow mist,
felons set adrift.

*

North by west toward the cities of gold,
the soldiers in rags walked half-bent
with hunger and dysentery, nursing
grievous wounds sustained in hit-and-run attacks
by moss-troopers talking Choctaw.

Beside the mother of rivers, the horses sickened and died
but the soldiers, being less reasonable,
proved less destructible.
At disobedient towns they dragged out
chopping blocks to punish malefactors
and departed in a shower of ash, their legacy
a heap of severed hands slowly
clutching at flies.

*

But the much-sought golden cities sank below the horizon
like the tall ships of fable. For the Spaniards,
the age of miracles ended
somewhere in southwest Arkansas. The palaces of silver
turned Outlaw Liquor Barns, Triple-X Superstores,
the stuff of vision a mustard-colored mix

of smoke, dust, emissions
from riverside refineries and coal
plants along the Mississippi where squadrons
of John Deere combines like barn-size locusts
roll in drill order over the dry land,
half-effaced by squalls of chaff.

At night the fields burn.

Stray flames browse the blackened
shoulders of the interstate,
crop the stubble beneath the billboards.

*

In the state park south of Hot Springs
I fell asleep in a chair in the heat and woke
to a titmouse perched on the toe of my boot
with that peculiar weightlessness
shared by birds and planets

and I searched without hope for my place in the book.
Buzzards killed time there, their shadows
slipping across the iron ground
like fish in a shallow pool
while Time gaped
      at the spiders that battened
   on the flies that
swarmed the rotten
windfall apples.

*

Tenochtitlan.
At the imperial aviary, we found
a pair of every kind of bird in the world:
parrots and finches in profusion, brooding vultures,
egrets, ibis is sacramental scarlet.
Seahawks stooped and banked

through that hostile truce and we marveled
at God’s prodigality, His exuberant
inventiveness, then piled tinder
to burn the thing to the ground.
Flames sheeted over the soaring

lattice dome like the fleet
shadows of clouds. For a time,

the structure smoldered,
a hissing wickerwork steaming as it cooled.
Here and there, a bird crashed the skein of ash

like a rogue comet bursting
the flaming ramparts of the universe.
Charmed in place, we held our breath,
beside ourselves, like couriers
trapped in a snowglobe, blinded
                in a tempest of embers,
astonished at the work of these hands,
the everyday miracle of destruction.

New Poetry from Gail Nielsen: “Something Like Nightfall”

BLACK LACE TREES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

SOMETHING LIKE NIGHTFALL

something, like night falls
slow, as if
nothing in the world has ever moved
but distant hope descending, still ablaze
days soften to wonder

what else leaves
silhouettes these black lace trees
fades from me

it is you from my life
steadily, quietly
as celestial movement

New Nonfiction from Ulf Pike: “Tone Deaf”

With a slightly youthful blurring of reality, sandhill cranes resemble pterodactyls in flight. Each year when they return to the valleys and high plains of southern Montana, their warm bugles trill two miles in advance of their prehistoric forms, sounding the merciful turning of the season.

Fuzzy aspen catkins map sporadic, swirling gusts while the thawing ground gives underfoot. Surrounding peaks loosen their hold on treasuries of snow, reluctant at first and then with the ecstatic flourish of a gambler intent on losing it all—as one must be, in the end, to live free and die well.

Drainages thrum with frigid, crystal surges, pulling down silver snags and churning up boulders. A great tumbler, the mountain unlocks, releasing winter to the rivers and creeks in muddied volumes. Sagebrush slopes and grassy pastures blush green where fawns wobble on new legs after their mothers and drop like speckled stones at the faintest threat. Smoke rises in thin columns from slash piles and wafts throughout the valley, drawing on long memories of starry skies, the sharing of food and mingled voices around an evening fire. Days open and close in slow beauty along the arc of the sun, in the ungovernable balance of the planet, in the violent, wordless, infallible perfection of natural phenomena sustaining us.

Atmospheric pressures constrict into fists and then fall sharply. Cumulus clouds gather and darken into an anvil where the season’s first low peal of thunder is hammered out like a skeleton key to the warm womb of the universe.

In the beginning was the tone: that matter-manipulation wrought between the amplitude of some original cosmic drop. The vibratory paradox of which resonates in perpetuity, pleading with us like a mother to please, for heaven’s sake, turn off that noise and go outside. Deep down she feels an impossible urgency to protect her babies from her own need to protect them. She is plagued by her duty and meditates on one true miracle: In the beginning, she knows, either something came from nothing or everything is infinite. She peers into the pit of strip mine, down through geologic eras and finds herself traversing veins of minerals through time. She feels the sublime adrenaline of a shrew falling under the shadow of an archaeopteryx, everything vibrating at harmonic frequencies with the unequivocal imperative of that original-bird. Both lived in
vibrant, kinetic, absolute necessity. The shadow of death is what kept them both alive. That was the tone. For millions and millions of years. Anthropologists surmise that during an era in emergent hominoid history the tone forever changed when consciousness was identified.

What is perhaps most unique about being human, as far as we know, is that we know. We know we are here. There is a thing that it is like to be human and we know of this thing as an abstraction from our corporeal, moment-to-moment presence. And what purpose does this knowledge serve? To know we are here means we also know that at some point we will cease to be? This ancient epiphany was the foundation of the first timeline, the first mystery of existence.

Life was suddenly charged with new impulses for projections and provisions. Planning on death redefined human instinct to produce surplus, more resources than were required to satiate

immediate hunger. By fortune of birth or early migration, populations in resource-rich environments were able to procure exceptional stores of wealth allowing their numbers to grow exponentially. In their numbers was previously unknown strength. The protection of such wealth spawned the crude hierarchy of class and government, the legacy of organized warfare and systemic dependence under which our race of knowers still generally functions today. Though “functions” is a relative term. A heart, after all, can function just as flawlessly as a guillotine.

On the flip side of the surplus coin was the novelty of free-time, at least for those of some status. The cultivation of self-consciousness, almost by necessity, amplified the otherness of everything outside the experiencer’s internal landscape. Just as projections of an abstract physical future produced surplus and therefore power, so a burgeoning mind-world whispered of similar promise. That which was hunted and grown for food became the subject of worship. It became the life-giver, the savior. In the form of painted representation it became an idea which transcended the physical realm into the other place, the spirit-world, the invisible home of the soul into which death was the portal. Perhaps the sum of all human expression—technological, artistic, religious—can trace its origin to a single moment of clarity between near-human eyes staring into glassy water—the moment a mind cleaved itself from nature.

We’ve come a long way in a very short time. The standardly cited fulcrum is the Industrial
Revolution, a mere 250 years ago. The chart graphing human consumption, reproduction and toxic emissions from that point on looks like a cartoonishly steep tidal wave looming over all our tomorrows. Ever since, many constructively sane and criminally insane have been waving their hands, warning us that we’re taking a long walk off a short pier. They cry that we have gone deaf. That seems to be the tone these days.

Panic, desperation, delusion, denial. Through technological proliferation and our inextricable integration with it, our abstraction of death is now so thorough and complete that its sudden arrival falls over us like the shadow of some prehistoric terror. Our dependence on surplus and the powers that rule over it has been proven our greatest weakness. But for very few, we no longer are capable of providing for ourselves, for directly contributing to our own survival and the survival of those for whom we are responsible.

The system thrives on our unexamined dependence on it. The system, as it were, is the Shadow Mother and we the feeble children at her chaffed nipples, dimly aware of the in beauty we have forfeited for instead being coddled. This revelation is a profound, visceral injury to our pride, one from which the psyche staggers back and hides in the dark to protect itself from the compounding insult of closely assessing the trauma. Yet this is what must happen. The hard look in full sunlight at the wound. Tragically—perhaps catastrophically—this wound will fester in darkness while we fumble to put the fragments of our habituated, abstracted conceptions back together then sheepishly push them out into the light as decoys, only peeking out once in a while from hidden safety. We will not risk enough to be free.

A time traveler wandering deep into the misty mountains might find themselves greeted with outstretched hands holding a vessel of water which had been hummed and chanted over for days, purifying it for the intrepid visitor. Endlessly compelling is the geometric symmetry of fine sand formed on a screen when vibrated by harmonic frequencies and then is scattered and blurred by dissonant frequencies. More compelling still, is the same effect such frequencies have on the molecular structure of water. Which begs the question: Are we not mostly water ourselves? What is humming and chanting over us?

Spring is returning and with it the sound of sandhill cranes,

of rushing wind and water. Soon like a mother that low peal of thunder will vibrate through the atmosphere and lodge in our chests: *Go out there, child. It is dangerous. I love you, and you must*
go out there.

Interview with Tom Keating, Author of 'Yesterday's Soldier'

Andria Williams for The Wrath-Bearing Tree:

I was honored to read Tom Keating's memoir, 'Yesterday's Soldier,' an excellently written and sensitive account of his time as a non-combatant servicemember during the Vietnam War. Tom had been a noviciate in the Roman Catholic priesthood, but when the priests at his seminary deemed him a not-ideal candidate for that calling, he enlisted in the army, which caused him a massive change in his state of mind. His responses to some of my questions are below, and the link to the full interview is embedded. Please come watch – Tom is a great speaker, and his thoughts on how various cultures of religion and obedience play into military service are interesting.

Good news: Tom is now happily married and lives in Massachusetts.

*

WBT: Can you explain your path from seminary school into the

military?

Tom Keating: I am the first son of my family of Irish Roman Catholics. Back then, to be a priest was admirable. I attended an all boys' catholic high school taught by priests, the Congregation of Holy Cross. They were young priests, and they were great role models. The idea of being like them grew as I went through the four years. In my senior year, I sought their advice and declared my intention to be one of them. The next five and one half of my life I was one of them.

My admission of my CO struggle at Bridgewater State college during the class on educational philosophy. The assignment was, we all had to share a moment of radical action we performed. The class was full of veterans. It was tough to share my story with them. Their positive reaction to my story gave me the idea to write a book, but it took years to complete.

WBT: You mention that there were 27 novitiates in your first-year group, but only 5 remaining when you left. What do you think made them leave?

Tom Keating: I was a young seminarian full of the aggiornamento of the church, full of the idea to be Christ's apostle for the flock, so to speak. That flock included the young men who wanted to avoid the draft. I saw my role as ministering to them. Hell, I even co-signed a loan for my friend, a coed who needed money. Of course I had none myself. That action and my activities did in fact affect my future as a priest. The men who were in charge of the seminary were afraid of the liberal trend in the church that I embraced. I originally wrote in the EPILOGUE of the book "And Father's world? The world he lived in, one of order, Latin masses,

strict obedience to a hierarchy, Gregorian Chants, celibacy, black cassocks and clerical collars, a world he treasured and tried to protect? He was right to be afraid. That world had been turned into—dogshit." A reference to the dog poop on the previously spotless corridors of the seminary (Cat, my editor, thought I should change that, so I did make it milder.)

My Dad and I watched the demonstrations in Chicago during the convention. I was home then from the seminary. We shared our shock and disgust at the police in the riot. He was from the World War 2 generation, respect for authority, etc. It cemented our relationship.

There were violent incidents where I *didn't* have that aversion, mostly in-country. A monument to Army training/brainwashing. In the book, I described a vehicle accident that happened when I was on my way to the elephant factory. That violence was accepted by me and the jeep driver. The dead bodies on the wire after a sapper attack elicited no aversion, just acknowledgement of our firepower. I was bothered by that but could not show it.

Seminary life in 1963-64 was harsh. Monastic rule meant sparse meals, rule of silence except when in class, early morning prayers before breakfast, work on the property after class. No social life, parental visits once a month, poverty chastity and obedience. The social dynamic of 27 mostly teenage boys in that pressure cooker of conformity and strict rules was tough. The novitiate year, where we spent working and praying on a farm in Vermont was very strenuous. It was a pressure cooker, like military basic training, only it lasted one whole year. Our farm was located outside the town of Bennington VT, and we could hear the music playing on car radios that drove by. The world was driving by us, and we were anchored in a centuries-old system. Desertion from the novitiate was swift. We finished the year there with 10 newly sworn in religious.

War and peace today? Of course right now the Ukrainians are

being assaulted by Russia. Peace is harder to find. I don’t have any great thoughts on war and peace except to say countries are fighting for lithium and rare earths now, and resources like water and iron and salt and sugar. It is insane. I try to have peace around me, so I work with my church and the local veterans’ community to help them. I can’t do much for nations and their wars, but I can give peace to my friends and social circle.

*

Watch the full interview with Tom Keating here: