NIGHT OF THE SAME DAY

by

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(Under the Direction of Leanne Howe)

ABSTRACT

This is a long, fragmented poem which builds from archival research to respond to the life and influence of the author's great uncle, Dr. Thomas A. Dooley III (1927-1961), a wealthy Irish-American medical doctor who became briefly famous in the middle of the 20th century for writing about his role in the movement of Vietnamese refugees as a Navy doctor and, later, about the work of his organization MEDICO, which provided medical aid to Southeast Asia, particularly Laos. In addition to considering the strategic Cold War role of MEDICO and of Dooley's propagandist writings in justifying the Vietnam wars, this poem considers the roles that Catholicism, homosexuality, and illness played in his life and legacy, as well as the implications of his sentimental idealism and humor regarding popular American feelings toward foreign aid and "protective" militarism.

INDEX WORDS: Creative Writing, Hybrid literature, Poetry, Postcolonial Literature, Tropical Medicine, Disability Studies, Global Health, Laos, Southeast Asia, Queer Studies, Queer time, American History

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INTRODUCTION

1. Ok, Boomer, Bor Pen Nyang

This is a book about my great uncle, Dr. Tom Dooley, who died in 1962, the day after his 34th birthday. I am telling his story now because it is on the precipice of being lost, and because it is reflective, in its ways, of my own time. On October 29th of this year, 2019, Taylor Lorenz declared that the popular comment-section quip "Ok Boomer,"—which millennials and Gen Z use online to respond to the outdated ideas of our elders (whether they be literal elders or elders in their obsolescent thinking)—"Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations." Lorenz is right that this age and its attendant issues (with financial inequality and climate change impeding youthful hopefulness for a future) has opened a chasm between American generations, arguably the largest generational tension between American notions of what is possible since the 1960s. Lorenz rightfully places the power of the phrase "OK Boomer" in its flippancy, its humor. We have been scoffed at all our lives and told, in our requests for equity, non-violence, and environmental responsibility, that things "just don't work that way." Now, with "Ok Boomer" we are scoffing back, but louder. Who is this joker, telling me how the world works? Who are you to deny me, a being born summoning knowledge from their fingertips, that better wages, better climate policies, better health systems, are all impossible? We are old enough to dismiss the cynical "wisdom" of systemic stuckedness. "Ok Boomer" is funny because it takes the same tone with which starry-eyed, too-green children are dismissed as without practical knowledge and flips it onto the nay-saying "adults." What Lorenz does not consider is whether we young people are actually speaking this way to the boomers in our own lives, in our own families or

workplaces. There is a willingness to fight a general entity (the boomers!) without engaging with the individual (my mom!) by instead just agreeing to disagree, and I am guilty of it too.

In this project I have this conversation, but with an absent party, not exactly a Boomer, but my Great Uncle, who died long before I was born, but was always present at the margins of my life. Briefly famous in the United States, particularly among Catholic school kids, Dr. Tom Dooley was a gay St. Louis socialite from an Irish Catholic family with a dwindling steel train foundry fortune. He enlisted, Randy Shilts has argued, out of guilt, but in the Navy medical corps. He ended up a celebrity, and was started down the road of sainthood after he died, but never arrived there. He was a vanguard for the American wars in Vietnam and Laos, despite having been the spokesperson for the region (particularly for Laos) in American media.

By engaging with the life of my great uncle Tom in these poems—where I speak at his ghost and he talks back to me in fragments—I have sought a kind of scapegoat for my concerns with my militarized, homophobic, neoliberal family and the militarized, homophobic neoliberal nation to which they (and, once, I) have pledged allegiance, a scapegoat who allows me to exorcise my moral objections to foreign policy without engaging face-on with my family (who are maybe even less interested in that exchange than I am). I have also, paradoxically, found in Tom the opposite of a scapegoat, a conduit who makes me empathetic to a past more complex than popular memory gives it credit for being. In his best moments, he aimed to usher in a generational shift toward more positive, responsible American aid policies abroad, yet he was strategically and intimately taken advantage of by domestic small-mindedness at home. Tom does not seem, especially in relation to the other servicemen in my family, like much of a soldier. He was more of an artist, a poet like me. He had enlisted in the Navy as a doctor, a position where a peaceful man could ostensibly do no harm and probably never fight, although

"Corpsman" could be armed and often were. Randy Schilts argues that Tom's enlisting was a response to his gay, Catholic guilt, a means of making his family and nation proud without exactly being a soldier like his brothers. Still, through the vehicle of sexual shame the Navy made him into a weapon of public opinion, blackmailing him into a public life for which he had not exactly asked. He still took to the attention. He had after all been a chorus boy for "The incomparable" Hildegaarde.

Jasbir Puar's point that gay racists have always benefited from their inclusion in the nation-building project of racism is well taken here, and I do not dispute the clear truth that Dr. Tom Dooley benefited from his whiteness and wealthiness, or that privileges manifest in ultimately violent ways. But in the Dr. Tom Dooley who allied closely with women from different backgrounds, like the medical doctor Estelle Hughes, (whose son Everard told me she adored Tom), Dr. Dooley had, on more than one occasion, developed close working relationships with women whose careers he helped to advance, at a time when working womanhood was even more difficult than it is today. There was also his friendship with South Vietnamese humanitarian socialite Madame Ngai of the famous An Lac orphanage, the same orphanage from which Betty Tisdale, inspired by Dooley, would take 219 children as part of Operation Babylift. Although there is plenty of question as to whether that operation was in those babies' best interests, especially considering that some were not orphans and some died in a crashed plane. And of course there was Teresa (Tess) Gallagher, Tom's loyal friend and secretary, the only friend who was there when he died, placing the roses of St. Theresa in his hands. St. Theresa, the doctor of the church who died young of tuberculosis, there for Dr. Dooley, who died young of skin cancer.

In those relationships I see a potential model for a kind of queer and diverse global network which deploys political influence and wealth for global good, along a network of

diplomatic, international friendships between health workers, toward an ideal of health surveillance and cooperation rather than one of military surveillance or domination. I recognize that Tom's network of humanitarianism was held up by and strategically useful to the American empire. But while the long term harm of Dooley's work is, as Diana Shaw points out, nothing less than the American Wars in Vietnam and Laos, it is also a legacy of global health: Tess Gallagher, fed up with poor organization and irresponsible spending at what remained of MEDICO after Tom's death, started the Dr. Tom Dooley Foundation. In 2014, a graduate of a Dooley foundation affiliate in Cameroon was one of the "Ebola Fighters" honored as Time Magazine's "Person of the Year," for their cooperation in containing the virus. Nancy Gibbs writes that "Ebola is a war, and a warning. The global health system is nowhere close to strong enough to keep us safe from infectious disease, and 'us' means everyone, not just those in faraway places where this is one threat among many that claim lives every day." Part of the problem with Dr. Tom's celebrity was that it insisted on his individual power and ability. But, while he was an inspiring speaker and a natural star, he was only one doctor, and not an especially skilled one. More importantly he was an ambassador, a publicist for the cause, a networker. The story of Ebola has shown us that a network of both resources and individuals is required to combat contemporary disease, and that we should approach it with the zeal and strategy of war. War and illness work together against humanity: 2019's ebola outbreak in the DRC has only been as bad as it is because of conflict in the region. Now, in this moment of generational conflict, maybe even the precipice of national economic re-configuring, this moment of "OK Boomer," I want to ask: what if it were possible to replace our offensive, imperialistic military with health networks? What if we had the "gallantry and gullibility" to ask that sort of question of our own governments? "It's impossible," you say? Ok, Boomer.

None of this is to say that Tom was a model of perfect Global Health praxis: looking at the MEDICO organization now it's clear how much of the work was being done, thanklessly, by women, like Teresa Gallagher and Dr. Estelle Hughes. It's commendable that Tom often focused on women's and maternal health, but he was a male figurehead for a female workforce, and he got the credit, a persistent problem in Global Health, where women make up a vast majority of the workforce (not to mention the majority of volunteers) yet are put in astoundingly few leadership roles (WHO). Dr. Dooley knew this was a problem, even if he didn't understand it to be a gendered one: in response to that 1959 Gallup poll, which ranked him among the world's most admired men, he said "This staggers me, and frightens me. When will people begin to think of MEDICO, and not of Tom Dooley" (Fisher 241)? But how many would have thought of MEDICO at all if it weren't for his celebrity, his humorous person-to-person appeal, his charming, supposed openness?

Tom wrote, in his journal, of a link between vulnerability and heroism. It's not just selfies that my friends share but spreadsheets of our employer's salaries. We are open with each other about what we pay in rent, and live with roommates, sharing collectively when we can. I was taught by my biological elders not to discuss money, but have seen, like all Americans if we are looking, what a refusal to question wealth has done to our country. I have been taught by my chosen family that openness in all things, resources and money included, helps people survive. Over-sharing, in things and in stories, is a political tactic, and a discouraged one for a reason. As ostensibly "free" as American Information is, state facts exist on a lag, and that lag is consciously timed so that by the time we know about events, they are old news. In the time between when the U.S. "Secret War" in Laos occurred and when American citizens were told about it, how many thousands were maimed or killed by unexploded American bombs? There are information gaps

here—we have yet to see a comprehensive study on how many disability adjusted life years have been lost to unexploded American bombs in Southeast Asia. This, for someone of my generation, who grew up with an instantaneous cycle of event and reporting around the world, seems absurd, equally as absurd as the fact that it took until 2009 for the Hmong who fought for the CIA to be honored as veterans. People my age expect the truth to appear instantaneously, but what is happening now that will be revealed, in the future? How many of these current 2019 coups are CIA backed, like the one in Laos was? When and how can we ensure these truth lags end? In this project I want to flout—in aesthetics and in content alike— these truth lags by playing with polite notions of what is and is not history, of where "The Figure" ends and "The Person" begins, of what is and is not revealed and how. I want to tell my own truths without any lag, naval-gazey and narcissistic as it might seem. I want to ask what happens if I put myself, not just a woman but a young woman, alongside historical, egotistic young men.

While his wealthy politeness and his anticommunism might have made him dismiss some of my more "millennial" ideals, Tom's sentimentality (which, by the irony and cynicism of post-60's culture, is easily dismissed as schmaltzy and "trembling") and his insistence on descriptions of the bodily (with their attendant paternal insistence on health care for those who "ain't got it so good") foreshadow the ideals of openness and collective care that define my own generation, ideals that had been largely dormant in the zeitgeist. Moreover, the humor he used to sell those ideals, and to subtly undercut the traditionally isolationist American aid policy they challenged, foreshadows our flippant "Ok Boomer". Still, more than half the time I look at Tom wanting to dismiss him with an "Ok, boomer," of my own.

In any case he has been largely forgotten. While there are still, strangely, hold-out fans from his heyday reviewing his books favorably on Good Reads, they are not being reprinted in

new editions, and Dr. Tom has all but completely fallen out of American public consciousness. His namelessness now is the punchline to a joke; The set-up was the insistence, on his death, of his legacy's lasting import. Russell Working, in a blog post, sums it up nicely. Working finds a copy of James Monahan's biography of Tom's last months alive, Before I Sleep:The Last Days of Dr. Tom Dooley, used as a set piece in an IKEA model bedroom and subsequently uses it as a prop in a picture of his "sleeping" son:

> It was stuck in a stack of books supporting the base of an IKEA lamp, because it's cool and stylish and Nordic to place lamps, salt shakers, TVs, gerbil cages, diaper pails, and so forth on books. […]Tom Dooley. Physician working among Vietnamese and Laotian [sic] refugees in the 1950s. Humanitarian. Saint? Spook? Or not? Lord knows. Not the same guy who was supposed to hang down his head and die, but dying young, anyway. He succumbed to cancer in 1961 at 34 years old.
>
> I can feel guilty about anything, so I chose to feel guilty for joining Crümbleables of Stockholm in disrespecting both books and a great humanitarian with my photo-mockery. Tom Dooley would have absolved me, though. I was sure of it. Had a sense of humor.

Film collects traces of what documents flatten, and in footage of Tom I can see this humor, which was the only vehicle by which his ambivalence was expressed publicly, and even then, only subtly. In the footage of his appearance on the CBS game show What's My Line, he wore saintliness like drag. With wit. It was as if everyone was always asking him, "why do you, you handsome and wealthy white American Doctor with everything you, want to spend your time in some smelly old place like THAT," and his response was to don a martyr's costume and

getting on his martyr's soapbox and play this character of "Saint Giving it All Up For The Wretched Sins of Humanity." It's a character I imagine he developed as a Catholic school kid. There's just something funny about the way he put his fingers in his mouth, the way he turns his head and blinks, the sibilant way he says "perhaps." He was making fun of himself a little, which is what made the sentimentalism he shilled possible to take, and even popular. Yet he also believed it whole heartedly. It was irreverent and deeply felt, at once. It had, we might say, "Ok Boomer" energy.

On the show, the beautiful blindfolded contestant who will soon win by guessing Tom's identity asks him if he works with a "not for profit organization." He says yes. Then she asks him this: "The nonprofit organization however has nothing to do with the defense or the armed services?" The camera lingers on her, a moment, in her pearl-lined sleeping mask, then back to the host, Mr. Daly, and Tom, who is wagging his finger back and forth, trying to determine how to answer her seemingly straight forward question. Tom looks his big, lash-lined eyes at Mr. Daly another long moment then draws a line in the air with his finger and determinedly says "no," which Mr. Daly rephrases, in mock clarity, as "Yes it has not no, yes." Here is is the central question: whether Tom's role was militaristic. Tom himself is uncertain. Is he trying to convince himself with the long deep "no" on which he finally lands? Or is it like in an improv class scene, where he must stay true to his false character, even if that means he must slow down the action for a moment to determine what that character would do?

I've convinced myself that in the pieces Tom never published—the letters, and the journal of fragments from which my project takes its name—is the person who played that character Moment to talk about the intertextuality of your project?. Not necessarily the "real" Tom, but another one, maybe a deeper one. The same person unsure of how to answer that

military question, a lonely, uncertain, and somewhat unstable young person with responsibility he doesn't seem to have wanted or really understood. He was, after all, of little actual significant power outside of his own organization.

As James Fisher points out, young Tom was theatrically, hedonistically lazy, always skipping class and blowing his family money, of which there was plenty, on the "hoodlums" he hung out with (31). As an adult, his rebellions weren't quite as loud. Tom never once questioned the American military in the press, but his faith in U.S. policy was tested when he saw patients sick with symptoms of atomic flu, ostensibly from the fallout of American weapons (Fisher 154). Dooley's transition from proud, naive American to skeptical, disappointed American was in fact, arguably, the very occasion of his death. The fact is that Dooley, who had lived with advanced, metastasized melanoma for more than a year, died less than a month after New Years Eve, 1960, which was when he learned of the battle of Vientiane, where rightist, Western-Bloc backed forces broke Laos' tenuous peace with military action. He was reportedly devastated, and made it only one day after his 34th birthday, just old enough to have outrun and thereby dispelled the thirty-three year old Jesus allusions made in fan mail and by the likes of Father Boucher, who gave Tom his last Christmas communion, reported that Tom said "If this is the way God wants it to be […] this is the way I want it, too." And Boucher, like so many admiring children in their fan letters that sit still in St. Louis, made the obvious allusion to this dying thirty-three year old: "Here was a young man in the prime of life, at the peak of his career, saying a thing like that. A couple of thousand years ago a Man of the same age spoke almost the same words in the Garden of Gethsemani: 'Father, if it be Thy Will let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless not my will but Thine be done'" (Fisher 275). On one hand I like to read holy portents into these coincides of letters and numbers, like Tom did with his initials (Temporary Active Duty—which he took as a

sign to go East to Vietnam), and like Father Boucher did, with this dying thirty-three year old. But I also read this particular timing of Tom's death as more than coincidence. His death isn't a mere metaphor for a break between the idealist promise of American aid's pre-war soft-power and its wartime American militarism. He was a young man who literally gave up on fighting his terminal illness because he was heartbroken.

Tom is archaic now in his anticommunism and his Vatican I Catholicism, but in his own time he was a fresh voice arguing for a new perspective on the United States' relationship to other nations. He represented a potential shift between an old militaristic America and a new, globally helpful one. But that optimism was squashed in the war that it made possible (the first American war lost, after all), and that neutrality was squashed in the polarizing culture wars that accompanied it.

James Fisher writes longingly about the "hope to discover the 'historical' Tom Dooley." Fisher attributes the impossibility of finding this historical Tom Dooley to the limitations of the available source texts:

> "But the precelebrity, presainthood version is only faintly accessible to us, due in part to the influence Dooley's public image inevitably exerted on the memory of his friends and acquaintances. In light of Tom Dooley's adult reputation as a manic extrovert, even the surviving artifacts of his childhood feature a rather impersonal tone, as though he had already learned to present versions of himself to others (and even to his scrapbooks) while deferring the emergence of a 'stable' identity. (322)

By suggesting that Dooley presented himself as complex and fractured, rather than considering that he might have just been complex and fractured, Fisher fails to see that the actual Tom is the

fractured ambivalent one, his allegiances split between spirituality and aesthetics, obligations and desires.

Fisher concludes that:

> In the absence of the core personality that custom demands we first locate in a subject's childhood, the Dooley legend spawned dark rumors about a 'missing diary' that could provide insights unobtainable through traditional methods of invasion. As there is no such diary and the belief in its existence only enriches the quality of his elusive genius, we are left in an encounter with this uniquely vulnerable individual who so often resembled a lost boy.(322)

I do see in Dr. Tom this lost, childlike soul that Dr. Fisher sees, but the insistence on assigning him some "core" or "stable" personality is at the root of what I have called, to myself, the "Dr. Tom Problem." This book is about recognizing that there is no core, that they were all him. As a relative of his I have of course looked for my own reflection in his face, but there are only a few ways that I see myself there. Perhaps something about the ends of our noses, and certainly something in our voices, but, mostly, in his uncertainties. It has been asked why I use the various names for him so interchangeably. What difference is there between Dr. Dooley, Tom, Dr. Tom, Tom Dooley, Than Mo America? But I'm a poet more than anything, and a poet can acknowledge the porousness of these named borders better than most are allowed to, certainly better than the documents can. I can imagine the soft moment of a lover calling him, playfully, Dr. Dooley, just as I can imagine him asking a patient to call him Tom, or insisting a "coolie" call him Doctor.

The most useful Lao phrase I learned in my four months in Vientiane was “baw pen nyang,” which was explained to me as a panacea of a phrase, like “hakuna matata,” meaning, variably, “whatever,” “it’s okay,” “don’t worry about it,” or “sorry,” among other things. It wasn’t until a few months in that I put together what the phrase literally means: it translates, loosely, to “There is no what.” What is Dr. Tom Dooley’s “core” self? There is no what. That’s asking the wrong question. As in Anne Carson’s *NOX*, where the image of an estranged, deceased brother becomes not clearer but cloudier as the text continues, the deeper the inquiry into individual Tom goes, the further away the possibility of his “essence” recedes. But as his essence recedes, it is replaced with specificity, and in that specificity, reflection. There I consider the issues of my own time, and how his specific failures might inform them.

2. American Automobiles and Shifting Baselines

This is a text as much about cars, and airplanes, and motorcycles as it is about vaccines, and military service, and gender. Patriotism, in my divorced metro-Detroit households, was more directly linked to the American automobile industry and musical tradition than to politics or the military. I was taught this by two men, neither of whom saw action: my father, who worked for Ford after enlisting late in the war as an army engineer, and my stepfather, older than my biological dad, who worked for Chrysler after protesting the war and being drafted. My dad had not left training by the time combat stopped in 1975, and my stepdad had gotten out of his draft-lottery obligation (itself a coincidence of numbers—determined by birthday) from a bad knee, although his own brother chose to enlist, flying with the Marine Corps over Southeast Asia. While my father seemed proud of the military and his associations to it, it was always understood that the soldiers were the gallant ones, and the highest up (the "big" officers and politicians) deserved skepticism.

It is not only my families' militarisms to which I am an ambivalent, but also to my relationship to their other livelihoods, which have been in transit. American militarism and American movement are inexplicable, and both have driven (pun intended) the spread of not just American products and American soldiers but American youth culture, American cool. Here again, a paradox of oppression and liberation: access to transit empowers women, and access to transit makes empires. Access to transit makes healthcare possible, and drives global warming, a health problem of its own. It's the impetus of wealth, and the loss of it: I graduated high school in 2009, coming of age as the American automative reign crumbled. As a result, I am one of many white Americans who are probably in the first generation of their families to not be

comfortably wealthy. I'm not complaining (although there is much to be said about the role of academic fees in millennial financial precariousness). Rather I have sometimes hoped to see this realization of white Americans my age, the realization of our infallibility and of the difficulty of escaping debt cycles, as potentially connective. Perhaps this novelty, of widespread young white American brokeness is a blessing, because it could be the key to creating solidarity with those groups who have been, in America and globally, not just broke but poor? Dr. Dooley wrote that he hoped his nieces and nephews—my father and aunts and uncles—would go to big state schools rather than fancy private schools, so that they could better understand fellow Americans. I ended up at a big state school because of its affordability, yet still took out tens of thousands of dollars in loans for just my undergraduate degree. What Tom hoped would be his family's self-humbling was instead a humbling by national circumstance, but the benefit was not lost: in my more public education I did develop relationships to communities I would have been alienated from if I had lived as Tom had, isolated in wealth and whiteness. Relationships he had to build by consciously, performatively "stooping" were easier for me than for Tom, more natural, both from my comparatively working-class upbringing and by my place as a woman. Probably the hope that white brokeness is unifying is naive: millennials aren't any less racist than our parents (sources)

Baseline shift theory describes how we become so used to our current contexts that we have trouble comparing them to their origins. For instance it might not alarm you that you hear no birds when you awake in the morning, but if you could compare that directly to the mornings of your childhood—if you could go to sleep in a birded world and awaken in this birdless one—you would panic, aware suddenly of what has been gradually lost. Tom is my baseline, my birded world. By putting us side to side I am struck by the stark changes in our times—the smallness of

the world through technology (I can speak to friends in Laos whenever I'd like!), the advances in treating that cancer which killed him, the progress of LBGTQ+ communities. What alarms me isn't the loss of our family's money, but the loss of his optimistic, hopeful tone, his earnest instances that the barriers to joint health and peace are less than our similarities.

3. Gallant Gullibility

Michael Vatikiotis introduces Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia by "contrasting themes of gallantry and gullibility," (11) a phrase he borrows from that "paragon of foreign devils and barefoot reporters" (11) the Australian journalist Richard Hughes. My inquiry, too, is gallant and gullible. Before I endeavored to research my own family, I wrote poems about sickness and stories about space. While my work as a writer up until that point may have been brave in its intimacy, it never hazarded to speak on issues as messy as Southeast Asian history or weighty as American imperialism. Several times in my research for this project my mind has been changed about things I once "knew" as fact. This book is built on reversals, threads woven back and forth under and above other strands. It is a long process of correcting myself, and of being corrected. There are moments of gullible "I should"s followed, swiftly, by "No, I shouldn't"s. There are explanations of what I understood followed by the realization I was wrong. Sometimes those realizations of wrongness are immediate. Other times, they take decades. Southeast Asian history does not conform to what we, in America, once considered the strict standards of fact, and neither does the life of Dr. Dooley. These issues of truth are ambivalent, and so too is the "Ok, boomer" issue of direct opposition against (and even dialogue with) the cynical people close to us who dismiss our "unrealistic" optimism.

It is not so simple as being gallant enough to argue. Willful opposition has dire consequences beyond just "arguing at the dinner table." This is especially true in military families. We imagine military wives, in the culture, as loyal, window-waiting, patriotic, proud. Because the United States fights wars abroad and not on home soil, we have this gendered image of distant spousal support. But wars are already being fought in U.S. military households:

Domestic abuse and intimate partner violence rates are higher among American military households than in the general American population (SOURCES). Military partners (who we can no longer think of only as wives, as we might mistakenly have done in Tom's time) ostensibly have the most to lose from American wars, since their loved ones are at risk of coming under fire, while most American homes, and citizens, aren't really. I do believe the spouses (and children) of enlisted service people have the greatest potential to interfere with, perhaps even stop, the processes of war. But should the burden of opposition really be on those who are dependent on American war for livelihood, especially when they are likely fighting on their own domestic fronts? My project both empathizes with and questions these masks of stoic, uncritical support thrust onto military family members. I had not expected, going in, for this paradox to be such an inter-cultural connection, but have since learned how high domestic violence rates are in Laos, a place with a culture of saving face which is romanticized as having peaceful public life. The dangers of unmasking, in both places, are not metaphorical and are difficult to overstate.

Just as secret American CIA wars require painful, after-the-fact revelations if their wounds are ever to be addressed, so too do the secret, gendered wars in our own families, churches, and schools. Neither case, of stoically accepting wars or stoically bearing abuse, is as hopeless as I might be making it sound. I have seen, in my own grandmother, that the women who enact silent politeness and publicly support their military families can be the same women who ultimately risk their reputations in the service of painfully revealing family history: without the signature from my grandmother, Diana Shaw could never have accessed the necessary documents to write her *LA Times* article which definitively outed Tom and definitively asserted that the Navy had taken advantage of him. When my uncle voiced how he never again wanted to hear "any of that gay shit" about his own heroic uncle Tom, I doubt he knew it was effectively

his own mother who had been the one to reveal said “shit.” Sometimes, maybe, we can unmask the truth for the sake of future generations, but leave it safely on at home. I want to be gallant enough to reveal my own truths, even if it is gullible to think I can do so without familial repercussions.

4. Not ONLY "Like That"

In the 2016 Saturday Night Live parody commercial "Wells for Boys"— co-written by queer millennial genius and self proclaimed "Atheist space prince" Julio Torres— a small sensitive kid is given a toy well to sit by, wondering. Most toys, the commercial tells us, are not for him, but this one is. The point is not exactly the boy's sexuality (though he displays what bad psychiatry might call homosexual tendencies, ignoring his father and favoring his protective mother). The point is his sensitivity. The best line of the sketch is its last, where the Fisher-Price voiceover implores us, "don't just get him a Barbie. Yes it's 'like that,' but it's not ONLY like that." I was that kind of little kid—the too sensitive, well-sitting kind—and so, I've gathered, was my great uncle Tom. Randy Shilts writes that shortly before he died Tom told his friend and pilot Ted Werner he was worried that, if people knew about his sexuality, "All they'll remember is that I was queer" (752). This book is a way to say, to Tom, yes, I see that it's like that, and that's ok, but it's not ONLY like that. I, at least, will remember you for more, even if some of that "more"—mistakes and lies and ego—are not the ways you'd want to be remembered. Dang Thuy Tram, the North Vietnamese Doctor who died at 27, wrote in her diary that there is red and black in all of us, good and evil, doctor and soldier. It's like that, but it's not only like that.

This isn't to say that this project does everything. It isn't a history of Laos or of the United States. If you're looking for a historical, exhaustive book on the specifics of Tom Dooley's life, read James Fisher's *Dr. America*. Yen Le Espiritu's *Body Counts* is a better critical examination of how American aid was militarized in these American wars, and Viet Than Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* a better reckoning with how these wars fractured the individual and spiritual identities of those who fought them. Mai Der Vang's *Afterland* speaks to the repercussions of American exploitation of the Hmong in ways that I could never. Likewise there

is no poetic image I can offer you that will approach the evocative, horrifying drawings done of American bombings in Laos by those who survived them, collected in *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War.*

But in the spaces where my project takes place—gay bars and grottos, music scenes and *baci* ceremonies— I find rituals as sacred from the inside as they are absurd from the outside, and I find there kernels of earnest, hopeful, connective American humor, an unpretentious optimism toward honesty and healing, a promise of equity which should not be disavowed just because it was once taken advantage of to justify harm. I have found a shared lineage between "Ok, Boomer," and Tom's sibilant "Perhaps," which fuses hope and flippant dismissal. I have found a requiem for that tone, and a celebration of its resurrection. My project takes its power from a willingness to reinfect the flatness of history with humor and bodily fluid, with self-made spiritual portents and with simple materiality, like the universalism of felt experiences of night and day, whether in snow or rain, both somatic. This project rejects the claim that these histories are too complicated, too stuck, to reach toward with our own flawed and feeling hands. It also rejects the cynical and easy claim that we cannot make things better going forward.

NIGHT OF THE SAME DAY

When I was a kid, my dad had this medal in his living room,

one of a few decorations.

Just this medal, a statue of liberty poster, some small framed

painted masks he'd bought from a Detroit charity raising funds.

I thought it was a coin and could be spent.

As an adult I read Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer* where she writes that, for the Hmong,as yet-unborn babies live in the skies, watching their ancestors as they wait to be called down

to earth. I dream between time. I dream horribly of being the sky who bears

fire.

Clouds have waves which crash also, although to a different, slower time than sea. How their tips curl too.

How waves roll in even as the tide recedes.

He's the first song I learn on guitar

On the little half-size that's still, by then, at 7 or 8, too big for me

Dun dun dun dun (wait) dun dun

Dun dun dun dun dun dun dun (wait) dun

Slow plucked and still imprecise (I never do

In the span of this story get much good at guitar)

Hang down your head Tom (wait) Dooley

Hang down your head and (wait) cry

I don't explain the coincidence to my teenaged-boy music teacher

That I am a Dooley too, that I have an uncle

Tom Dooley who himself had an uncle Tom Dooley, a famous doctor,

And presumably, an endless stream of Tom Dooley's that way

All the way down

To some source

Uncle.

I don't explain the coincidence or (wait) understand it

Hang down your head Tom (wait) Dooley

Poor boy you're bound to (wait) die.

As a kid I'm told about Please and Thank You

two monkeys

my dad and his siblings got

growing up in Detroit.

I interrupt to ask where

did they, the monkeys, come from,

and cue dad's chorus of somethings

something about boats something

about his own father

his own father's brother's time in Asia,

and then--and here his story picks up speed away

from my question--that the monkeys, swinging and shitting as they were

were donated eventually

to the Detroit zoo where they live forever on

enshrined by the Please and Thank You Memorial Bathrooms

of which I have not, since, been able to find proof

on account of how maybe they never existed. You

tell me.

(Now my question is of course who thought it was

a good idea to add monkeys

to a family

with so many children)

Any excuse

lake water, air pressure,

and my ear drums swell

to bursting.

I spend an inordinate amount of time in ear nose throat

offices.

I could draw you a eustachian tube

from memory.

Or recite for you the call and response poem

Airplane / Airplane

Hotdog / Hotdog

Sailboat / Sailboat

which the person in the headphones and small glass room

used

to gauge me.

I liked the testpart with words better

than the testpart with beeps, beeps

which came as if from he bottom an ever elongating

well.

it is a persistent feeling in my life: disclarity

of a beep's origin,

head or otherwise.

And still, each night, I turn my headphones up loud enough there seems to be no head

between them.

my dad tells a story about his uncle:

he'd put a piano in a truck bed

and been driven down those divided St. Louis

boulevards

playing.

What a thing to aspire to,

such extravagant street song

(and this was before that Vanessa Carlton video).

What a pure image of ingenuity, of genetic tendency, to poison

a little girl's notion of possible.

my dad tells another story about his uncle:

he'd put a horse on an elevator

at the hospital.

so every hospital elevatorsI rode

from then on contained

the possibility of a horse.

I did not even ask

if this was the same uncle as the one I understood

to be a saint.

Of course, it was.

I did not, exactly, read the copy we had of his “Three Great Books”

(the first about his time with the Vietnamese, on badly ventilated

boats, a great deal of time spent on describing efforts to increase

air flow

the other two about his time in Laos, in

“jungle hospitals,” patients

wounded with backwardness by which he meant

with communism)

but I brought the copy we had up to my childhood room from the basement, kept it

amulet-close and flipped through it often looking

especially for all the children, their faces open, laughing, or open, taking his medicine.

and looking for all the requests to kids like me, to American kids, to help in our ways in money

and prayer.

I could not sleep, then, because of all

my praying.

So much to live up to, such

responsibility to the world in this man

looking out over my bloodline at me

saying this is yours to fix, little girl, literally saying

that.

Up to you, American, to serve these “wretched.”

Up to you, defeating evil.

I didn’t know then that the map

in the beginning of the book, the map of where Dooley
suggested we aim that help, had been littered with
our bombs. I didn't know about the secret war or that
it was no longer secret.

I did not understand the function of prayer except
that by forgetting someone I would damn them.

So I laid in bed, burdened
naming whoever I could think to spare
god bless garbage men
god bless coney island ladies
and *Maury* ladies
and cranberry farmers in their bog boots
on tv commercials for Ocean Spray
god bless anyone I could think of including
the kids in Laos, including the open faces
of child patients.

A definitive influence in my life: the toilet-side stack of *Reader's Digests* in my father's house from which

I memorized jokes.

I did not consider the brand loyalty, did not know that they owned the rights to to my family member, his likeness and our name.

My grandmother's name is Gay.

so I grew up first understanding Gay to mean

the strength of grace and then to mean something which was funny

for a secret reason

(imprinted feeling of

not getting

the joke)

Then I came to understanding

the secret but that too ended up

meaning grace again, eventually.

She had rules, Grandma Gay, for the way a house was run.

No labels on the table.

(This is what politeness is: miraculous arrival at a moment

in time without the ugly specifics

of transport.

I have hated the burden of blankness but also loved how it looks, the visual calm of a table

unmarred by slogan, by nutritional information.

Call and response of my slammed door

and dad's "It's a car, not a tank"
Something I believed to be a common expression until,
older, my militarized language is pointed out to me by a
friend. Then I understood it as the material of a man who had felt
the heft of an armored door as opposed to this,
a sedan one.

There had been some disclarity around his military service.

Mostly I knew that when he returned to his storage unit
after the training camp in California
all of his records had been stolen.
The psychedelic ones, single pressings.
    This in my dad's telling was the tragedy
of his service although the long hours of history channel
suggested otherwise.

The way he would open a joke with a long "ohhh" that announced
the arrival of a humorous observation and the way he cut off any remotely
uncouth question with a short "no" and turn of head.

My father, his soldier's tidiness

and few, repeated health tips:

Yogurt on antibiotics,

Gum on airplanes.

I regret, sometimes, looking into it.

But.

"This is not history. That would be presumptive.

This is not philosophy. That would be egoism."

Call it an epitaph for my unmarred table.

Plinthless statue I'd built of him, overturned

at my first adolescent half-curious googling.

Split prismatic,

infinite, irreconcilable Toms.

Selfless Toms

dressing wounds and sailor Toms boarding boats,

god bless them, and shadow Toms informing the CIA on the

movements of their patients and frothing Toms convincing the

Hmong to take up fruitless arms and propoganist Toms pulling out

American heart strings, weaving

Vietnam wars.

Of course I go out seeking to absolve him.

To Missouri, to the archive
stacks, which Tess Gallagher (Tom's best secretary and best
friend) and Earl Rhine (one of the men who, young idealist
worked with him at Medico) and my own grandma Gay gave.

I go alone by plane then later with help, by car.

The staff notice, of course, the repetition of name
when I sign in. Dooley for the Dooley papers. Several times
he is referred to, wrongly, as my grandfather though what
difference does it make to me, having met
neither.
One archivist pulls out her favorite picture of him
(like I'd come looking for proof
of
beauty.)

There is evidence there, for other Toms.
The one who wasn't a good doctor.
Who treated his mother as an assistant.
The one who wanted only to deliver wealthy, happy babies.

The personal enemy of mine, who cracked one

about a waitress menstruating, another about pinching pretty

blondes.

The one who wanted only to be near home, away from mud and revolutions, where he might have a life of picking out rings and playing a piano that did not require

shimming with wittled blocks under its pedals.

But in that archive: I meet, also,

Tom. Inverse of microfiche,

white ink on black paper.

Oracle of fragments, talking always

back to me. Simply,

about sun.

He was writing it as he was dying, but it never saw press.

A turning over, not an end.

I start to trace the line of Toms,

the Tom Dynasty.

Tom Dooley, first of his kind, success of steel society, of rigid business and careful speech up to whom the next Tom, blessed in inheritance, never measured and when

a third Tom came he wrote the hagiographies of himself and passed his name along a crooked line, through his brother's wife, Gay,

to my own uncle Tom (who I always thought of as local Kroger famous, smiling baldly out of metro Detroit shopping carts to sell houses) and eventually the name spread to his son, Tommy, kindest of all my cousins, who I know mostly as liking dog

videos and being nice enough

to talk to.

Dooley broke, millenially, Americanly worthless, meaning worth less than my debts,

which are extravagant,

broke, millenially, Americanly broke, meaning rich in things and low in accounts,

meaning service industry professional and professional student of writing and

of scenes,

giving a reading to strangers in Los Angeles with a black skirt belted on my head

like

a habit.

I pass out scantrons to the audience and tell them they are taking a standardized

test

of faith and make them eat frosting so I can ask them about this sin

of how sugar stings thick in their throats.

The farther I try to get

from the story of my family the nearer I keep

approaching it, side-long.

If this family is shaped like the arch of Tom's city, with his father's train money up

and my dad's Ford Motor Co. down

does this make Tom the peak

does this make me the ground?

In the archive I use my phone to make videos of the films which can't otherwise be digitized

so that when I watch back on them later

I'm the inverted one, my reflection in screen glare.

shadow of present on past.

(this time let's go backward and I'll play the ghost)

In the basement archive, in the tape of *Biography of. A Cancer,* for CBS,

I watch

his hand flop slack with anesthesia and

his chest bloom a bouquet of hemostats.

It's the first time, I've been told, that "cancer" was said

on televesion

but it seems I'm the first

to see it lately.

Who wants to watch this when they know the outcome: Dooley here insisting he won't let the whole thing get

maudlin that he's got really great chances that all he wants is to show other patients

the benefits of optimism.

About a year before he died.

A selection of the parts of the story which people were probably wrong about:

that he was a saint

that he slept with Rock Hudson

that he knew what he was doing.

A selection of the parts of the story which people were definitely wrong about:

that he was a priest

that he slept with Marilyn Monroe

that it was communists who killed him

Instead of using the insurance money to make a dent in my student loans I buy two plane
tickets for California and
in the San Francisco Public Library's archive find
fact made of my family's euphemisms. By a man who called Tom his spouse.
A man appropriately, nautically named. Cliff Anchor.
Cliff at birth, then changed to Michael,
and Cliff again before the end (again as ever this turning
back). The same man I'd seen in that photograph, white mustached in uniform, kissing this other white mustached serviceman (Technical Sergeant Leonard P. Matlovich, Purple Heart), and on his shirt:

They gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.

In the archive, in San Francisco,
Cliff has put this Kodak print
of the outside of the New York hotel
where it had (poor boy)
happened to Tom. Countless uniformed
windows flags protruding
in threes.
The hotel where they (wait)
blackmailed him.

Navy investigators.

A planted man, a hotel.

A wire.

They liked to make a show of

it, of discharging a man for

being, as I hear Tom called himself

in the blackmail tape

a flower.

A reverse awards ceremony.

As I understand it

He was given a choice.

Dishonorable discharge or

Southeast Asia. They needed men who could speaks French because that's who'd last colonized it.

But more than that if they were going to

beat the communists they needed men who could

just speak.

And he had that.

not a wall, but a bulkhead

not a queer, but a flower

It's another secret I arrive at so late it's already only fact.

Diana Shaw printed all this in the LA times just a year after my birth and still it took me until 27 to find.

She'd written it with my

grandmother's permission, and titled it for scandal. "The Temptation of Tom Dooley"

Continually I enter this Benny Hill

hallway just after the truth has left it.

"Customarily," Shaw writes "the Navy casts off homosexuals in a deliberately demeaning manner--stripping them of their bars in front of an assembly of officers and enlisted men.

I learn he'd barely graduated. That maybe he'd joined the Navy because tropical medicine was the only kind they'd let him practice. Or maybe because his brother had died in the war after writing home so

rousingly.

I learn he'd named his horse for the errant, fabled stowaway. Jim Hawkins.

Horse on an Elevator:

Prince Tom of the pink hunting jacket,

Country club scion of a new Irish kingdom.

Prince Tom high astride Jim Hawkins,

A sailor hero for a horse.

You colt of St. Louis.

You bottom of the class barely-doctor,

clowning fly in the medical school ointment.

Call the elevator!

Rouse the patient!

Trade absurdity for pain and bring the kid thy mustang!

Let him put his huffing face in that pulled and braided mane

Let levity assuage.

Pray your white-coat prayer and when

Charm's irrefutable clout is questioned

("You'll never practice medicine

Here")

Well

Do like Jim Hawkins and hear the telltales:

Speak at the navy 'till job a rolls in.

Every ship needs a doctor and every Prince

Needs a sea something

Lifting

Like a steed.

I recognize the horse's name.

We had loved, in my father's house, *Muppet Treasure Island*

One song in particular.

About sailing for adventure on the big, blue, wet thing.

In another physical joke where the laugh is at the expense of my late

entrance,

Cliff Anchor is of course already gone by the time I learn

he'd existed.

But at least there's a picture of him, and his husband, and their kids,

on the beach. By the sea, squinting.

The parabola of sun-and-not on the flight tracker screen.

That shot, in the cancer documentary,

of his open, ringless perioperative hand

washed up on a surgical sheet's bank.

That Bright Eyes song: "And I came upon a doctor

Who appeared in quite poor health

I said there's nothing that I can do for you you can't do for yourself

He said oh yes you can, just hold my hand, I think that that would help"

Instead of making a dent in my student loans, I use the last of it toward
a ticket to Laos, where I get a teaching job.

(These are obligations I make for myself; this thief I keep inviting over.)

(If I had not told anyone of this story in the first place they would not have suggested
I pursue it it and I would still be writing easier stories about
space)

The cheaper the ticket, the longer it takes.

The things which made me cry in transit:

The man unloading cargo from under the plane, wearing jelly sandals with his uniformed flight suit. Beautiful as I remember them looking on myself as a little girl and with that authoritative romper I was
in love.

The middle aged white lady who wouldn't stop complaining, in English, as they diverted our flight for turbulence we could all feel
and how she tried to make eye contact with me as if I would agree with her

and the long nailed, lovely young man in front of me who sang quietly as the turbulence came for our collective stomach.

The bulkhead of many interlocking flat metal compartments, visually
indistinct yet each full of some different inflight amenity built to interlock for storage efficiency —headphones, beverage accessories — which the China Airlines stewardesses opened and closed deftly, smoothly, one after the other, like it was an instrument, like it was a system of switchboards.

The bag of de la rosa marzipans, packed for me by my friend in LA in a, which I ate gratefully in the long quarantine in Vietnam.

The first “sabaidee,” from a flight attendant.

The fact that when, finally, I got onto last plane to Laos my cream green t shirt just happened to be the same color
As the pleather seats.

I am, upon arrival, an idiot, a child. At the taxi counter the men cluck their tongue at the unsorted mass of bills in my hand. The first kip I've held. Map, map, map, one clucks at me, in perfect English, when I hand him my phone.

What is it with us Falang and maps?

(I'm not sure but they're right.

How I depend on maps, the simplicity

of their lines the certainty

of their order.)

A week there and I'm barely any better: I accidentally give a tuk-tuk driver a tenth of what I owe him for the long ride to my school in his technicolor carriage. So hard to tell the 1,000s from the 10,000s.

When I get to that school and I'm asked by my boss "Why Laos" I will
launch into too long a story about a great uncle
and some medical clinics.

That should be a book, he tells me, like there aren't already several.

My student gives me three bags, from her mother

full of small yellow curls like if my own hair

Was made into many mementos mori

I have to ask her what it is

For eating with sticky rice

She explains with that pinching gesture

as if

That weren't how everything's eaten

here.

Pig pubes we call them

Says another teacher

You could eat it, but I wouldn't.

I make a big act of appreciation for the student -- on top of everything there is this comradery I

feel with the women,

How they never give their candy to the men.

But always have some for me.

I decide to give some to the cat in the courtyard

Who had screamed at me for days with her belly baby-wide

When I asked my neighbor where the kittens were, where had she hidden them,

In heaven I'll bet

She laughed.

Does the fact we share the joke make it

Hurt less.

I see a puppet show put on by a Lao-French woman

And learn about the first battle between war and sky

How it was a clever toad and the gift of rice

Who brought them back together.

I go to the Catholic church, closed the entirety of the time between Dr. Tom's time and mine.

Instead of prayer books there are poorly hung computer

Monitors on the white columns displaying prayers.

It's the first time I see the rush to Mary after communion

The first time I'm reminded a woman can be prayed to.

I imagine great gulfs.

I buy a baci blessing on the street.

String dragged down the river of my wrist.

Bad out, good in.

A summer earlier I'd stood on a porch

overlooking an Oconee river creek

and bartending someone's wedding

while the police dregged the river for a body.

Someone went in for a dog and someone went in

for their friend who went in

for the dog.

When the no body turned up and the emergency workers left watchers arrived instead, rotating shifts in foldable chairs by the bank.

The idea was that if the watcher saw the body they could call the authorities

before

In Vientiane, a student shows me a viral picture of a man stretched

vertical over the brown slanted border

of the Mekong's bank.

He's flying, he tells me, beaming.

It takes a second student's explaining for me to understand the word he means

is hanging. He's

hanging.

My mother doesn't tell me until I'm 28:

that when she met my dad in that Detroit bar he was not just an ex-soldier who worked with her
brother as a carpenter making wood models for auto companies but that she had already
recognized his name from reading
his uncle's books when she was younger.
that the last name, Dooley, and what it meant
probably had something to do with her
taking it in marriage for a while.

she was studying to be a Med Tech. She taught me later
about the grace of urine crystals and the jokes
people tell in hospital cafeterias when they
spend their workdays with dying babies.

An incomplete lists of saints I know but Tom

never did:

saint of carefully overdrafted banking account

saint of selling the bonds

saint payment plan

saint of a medical receptionist who explains winkinglingy that the sign insisting upfront payment

is fallible

saint of administrative assistant who un-holds my student account for a few days so I can borrow

library books

It started as a joke with myself: I said I wanted

to be strong enough that when I did

not enlist it would be because

of choice instead of inability.

I wanted, and here only half-jokingly a body that was strong enough that when I did not enlist

I could feel I was withholding

something.

The boxers teach me to count.

The boxers, when I eat raw beef and drink Lao Di with them in the morning after one fights, call me Baby Lao

a step up from what I had been:

Strong Falang.

I do not expect the broad white florescence of all indoor spaces, do not expect
small tunnels to live along the walls
housing electricity, when it is home.
I do not expect the ubiquity
of tile or the propensity to party
from morning.

I do not expect to be invited to the Fourth of July at The Residence
of The American Ambassador, do not expect to go from working catering
to eating from a bowl of pasta salad labelled with an official, American seal, hating myself,
dipping my feet in the American ambassador's beautiful pool,
hating myself.

Here, by no virtue of anything except an ability to make friends
and by coincidence of American birthplace, I start to feel
like someone cosplaying a young diplomat in embassyland,
this weird Pangea of a small capital, condensed world-in-world.
You start to go toward the top, and the mountain gets smaller.

I do not expect to get so used to eating that way, to being

rich.

I do not expect to come home and be startled to see how the landscapes

I had always known had been, always, so engineered.

I had made, in my own mind, a big deal of having ever protested, of a riot poleyn
in my back on the Chicago sidewalk, of standing at the school of the America's small fenced
protest pen
and watching (just watching) clergy step calm across the law-border to be
arrested which was done like rhythm each year,
ho, heave.

And here a woman, my age, eyes
censored with that eternal black bar, wearing stripes,
the background a wash of concrete wall. Haven't got a clue, do I, C.D. Wright says.

The post is a warning, virality of internet at the service of its siren-spread: it is illegal
to criticize the government on social media.

The night the power went out (normally) and we learned it was from someone young climbing to his death.

And me, father dead and mother far

As I can keep her only obligation I feel

To friends and siblings and animals,

In this land

Of family.

(I still spoke,

Twice weekly,

To my stepfather in his old

Folks home and he still told great

Stories [a drunk tank cell

In Japan a bum knee

That got him undrafted, thank

God and the missions his brother

Flew over Vietnam, how they would

Sneak out over the border]

but by now he can't

Remember if they're fact or just films

He'd seen.

I’m maybe 9, and they cut off my “suspicious” moles.

To keep me safe for later,

The one on the side of my face, my mother had called my beauty mark. Safer, then, not to be too beautiful.

Tom was vain and so am I. Mostly this means we are both

disappointed

by the usual imperfection of our faces.

Vanity another series of impossible faiths.

In Laos I was wrinkling, hanging with weight loss, bruising from boxing, infected
falang tattoo expanding on my ankle, which is to say infected motorcycle exhaust burn
swelling with abscess.
My friends from embassies and agencies brought me essential oils, bandaids, concern.
One small student, the kind of child
who must always have looked
at least 40
pointed to it knowingly, made the motion
of throttle in his hands, said gravely how
he had been warned of this.

I was finally convinced to get seen for the infection
when I was in Michigan for my brother's wedding. In the pictures
you can see the bandage.
I'd been scared to have it drained in Laos, but wish in retrospect
I hadn't been. In Vientiane it would not have cost me 400 dollars
or an hour and a half of driving.

But at least for the first time in memory it was summer

and I was not sunburnt at the top of my back, my shoulders not prickling

with blister because I was covering myself from day, like Lao women do.

Then indoors, my over-shirt off, women kept grabbing my hand, or forearm,

looking up close at my skin, these few inches of me,

to inform me I was beautiful

at that scale.

I cannot help myself.

I put Tom's face through the app to age him.

To see who he might have been if he'd made it

all this way, to me.

"Meanwhile, I had to have the plane overhauled and, just in case he insisted upon making the flight to Muong Sing and Ban Houei Sai, I had the extra seats removed and an air mattress installed."

-Ted Werner, the pilot, on Tom's last flights, December, 1960

Every death is ruled by air: it goes, all follows.
you insisted on flying so near your exit you tried
to make angels of the stewardesses you'd always so liked
tried to relish that take-off flip of soul above stomach tried
to pretend the flip hadn't become always in the pressurized
cabin of your cancer but it was planes that kept my grandparents
from being there at your funeral a Mexican airliner downed by snow right
out their hotel window I know four people died in that plane but can tell
you nothing
of their breath.

Entombed Ordnance

Time transmutes air war into earth war.

The planes come and people climb digging

Into new tunnels. Monks take to trees.

Then it’s today and not bamboo but a hard small nut

of bomb a child exhumes

Turns in her hands and

Is so scattered.

On the first anniversary of my father's death

My relatives all text me pictures of water, sky beyond mountains.

"There he is."

The last thing he said to me: “don’t be a stranger”

Oh, patron saint

of unfollowable

orders.

It confuses people, sometimes, In Vientiane, that I have tattoos but

long hair. Am I a Tom, or aren't I?

As a kid I was a Tomboy. It was given to me like a name:

before I could understand it.

Big jeans, a series of hats which I would wear to smelling

for months at a time.

Was I a Tom, or wasn't I?

I liked it there, that middle place,

Tom-or-not.

If this is a story about the wayward princes of crumbling kingdoms then why couldn't I,

American girl with a dog at her right hand and an IUD inside, why couldn't I also

count myself among the princes wearying

of responsibility, uncertain

of their own reign's right.

New Years eve, 1960 and the slow news makes it, weeks late, to Tom's hospital bed.

The Battle of Vientiane.

Royalists and secret CIA Americans and guerilla Hmong, breaking

neutrality.

The armies chose to shoot up. To kill civilians

instead of each other.

(When buffalo fight, it's still ants who suffer.)

Tom of the little flowers, already unctioned,

disintegrating in a city hospital.

Every organ cancerous.

Oh left hook of the lord.

What am I looking for?

I like my reflection best at her weakest.

Night windows. Water skins.

What a thrill, in the pictures of himself that he hated.

Essential by being indirect.

The day David Berman dies

I go to the COPE center in Vientiane.

Karen and I see the planters made from American bombs

the belt buckles made from American bombs the cooking instruments

and the hanging mobile made from American bombs.

I write I'm sorry in the guestbook, sign it Dooley.

Oh useless saint of small admission.

Have you ever seen it, the tridentine mass

two men together, a back and forth,

one priest bowing, another standing,

both of them facing that same sunlight of alter,

the other one collapsing in response to the first's standing.

mass of whispers and of small hands.

telling the host its holy like

only he can know.

voice, voice, hand, hands on the alter, lips on the alter,

the bowing and the color the color

and the kneel

the particular rhythm of movement the particular

expectation of downcast eyes.

oh kneeling one lift that stander's god-skirt, better whisper

small rustle of robes small ringing of bell

small priest hands raised thumb to pointer as to pluck.

careful tearing of bread careful covering of cup .

In Vientiane, in 2019, my first outing past the city center is to walk down past the market with its walls made from corrugated steel marked USAID, ChinaAid, and past the walled French embassy with its gate slotted for gunfire like arrowslits to the old white church which had sat empty for our between time. and I sat in the back for the first mass I'd seen since my father's funeral (where my sister had read rousingly (FIND THE PASSAGE) about heaven breaking)

I sat in the back not knowing that when we gave each other peace it would be by nopping not knowing

that my hideout in the back left pew would be the front seat for the line of faithful who would pray to her, to Mary in the back, near the names of the Vietnamese martyrs, near the barred-up open windows which look out, obscurely, at the grotto.

As a kid there were two churches

To which our father took us the big one

With the stone and window light and

“Saint Speedy’s” where, oh saint of faith’s loopholes,

We could leave quickly after communion

For the diner.

When overcome by complexity

it helps to return to counting. Something to hold onto

to free the limbs.

There are two photos I put up in my Vientiane studio apartment

the first, torn from Dr. Fisher's book was Tom turned away

at an audience of kids their faces

bored adorably

at the accordion hanging from his neck

at his slanting, open, clapping form

which I'll admit to finding

adorable also.

those polka dots, turning out at his folds.

the rare masklessness of his back.

a performer always/still someone more themself

onstage.

Everyone gets younger in death: at the funeral of my father

Images of him appear earlier

Than I'd ever seen him.

It is easy to get caught up with the numbers: Malcolm Senior dies at 46, 12 years older than his brother Tom died

In 1975, 12 years after his brother Tom

died.

angel paradiddle, angle mittwork

all percussion inborn.

I write it on a piece of paper, I put it on my mirror.

You are not really fighting until you don't turn away

from getting hit.

Diana Shaw wrote that Dr. Tom's own dad wanted him to be a prizefighter.

I didn't realize it until after I'd started boxing.

Meaning just a word for repetition.

These atavisms count up crooked, like a

loop pedal pressed at the wrong time and

overlapping rightly.

It's too easy to get too caught up in the numbers of it

for instance: 61.

1961 the year Dr. Tom died,

my father gone at 61.

Or: January 2nd

My father dead on my stepfather's birthday.

Not a metaphor.

Or: January 1st

New year's Eve 2017, ankle rolled by the night before, hungover,

And I finally get a hold of Dr.h's son (stupidly iadk him about the

Construction

What he remembers, of course is the water

In Thailand

How Tom taught him to swim.

A year later, New Years, and I am still in bed sleeping off

the molly when I miss the 27 calls saying

come home.

Or: 27

how old I am when I lose my father how old Tom is

when he first leaves for Asia.

It seems always to be the same day, or the day after.

Malcolm Jr. trained as a sapper

an engineer of mines and

lining buildings with plastique

Thuy Thram said she felt, in war,

as if under stagelights.

That was the sappers.

I wonder often what he would think of this, my world.

At my other job where I bartend weddings and try to pay my credit card bills and school fees I meet a best friend, working to pay for her cancer. We are about the same age. 26. 27. When my father dies she cleans the house while I am gone she fills it with

white wedding

flowers.

in the other picture, which I bring to Vientiane and sit above

my light switch in its 3 thousand kip plastic sleeve from walkman village

is the one I took from the manila folder

from my grandfather

when he served in Korea.

after my dad dies I get a package of photos in the mail in Georgia

which my dad had not wanted and so left them with my mom after their

divorce and she did not open them some twenty years.

mostly the photos were men uniform, smiling in front of a backdrop of endless

a-line tents,

all posed.

this was the only picture in the folder with a woman. her face

turned away

from a soldier's outstretched arm.

this is why I bring the photo. for her turning.

a bravery in how she hides her face.

When a pain bit Malcolm Sr. in the side he went next door
To see his friend, a doctor, but the Tiger's game
was on and Malcolm Sr. he knew it was a kidney
stone. So the doctor fed Malcolm Sr. some whiskey
To postpone the hospital, to catch all the innings
so Malcolm Sr. passed the whiskey and the whiskey
just passed it on its own.
I knew this story already in 2012, when walking
home, black pain opened in me and I stopped
at my friend's on that street who was home
playing Xbox like I knew he would be
because I knew already it was a kidney
stone and that it would pass because I had
passed one before but in a hospital with more
expensive drugs than the smoke down
this friend gave me and this is one of the
only things I understand Malcolm Sr. and I share:
that a game like baseball like
Marvel vs Capcom is the right
accompaniment for passage.
Sport grunts of pain and reaction slowed

in the syrup-plowing of altered sense.

There was always something uncertain about my grandfather's death. Something about stairs
about Arlington Virgania. But the death certificate just says
cirrhotic liver.

My father, standing in a pool in the white Georgia light of his last visit out to see me,
scar of removed mole like a ash cross in the center of his forehead
if an ash cross was made by a priest rocking his thumb nail
against the forehead, indenting:

my father says, for the first and only time, "my dad
died from trying too much to be like
his brother. Tom."

A list of things I know about my grandfather:

that his children had to run the flag up the household pole each morning.

that he had a game where they lined up against the wall so he could throw things at them.

that he ran for office.

that “he died from trying to be too much

like his brother”

that in the pictures where Kennedy gives the medal

to my family

his hand is on my dad’s shoulder and my dad

does not look glad for it.

In *King of the Hill*—the only American television show I've ever seen which features a Lao-American family—it is easier to simplify the violence so we don't see ourselves. The plight of Laos is simplified as the result of a dictatorship. Not an American war.

People, particularly men, like to hear me tell the shortest version I can muster , at that moment, of this story, and then interrupt to tell me how it should be a movie. I should make a movie about this uncle, they say, then move on,

They don't leave me time to explain the several times it nearly was a movie, the rights bought, Kirk Douglas cast, the family called into a hotel room where my dad and aunt and her then-husband were asked to look over the script. The point of that story, on my dad's telling, was always how smart my uncle Tasty, his sister's then-husband and, was, how capable he was of seeing inconsistency in the script.

Someone made a play, too, promotions for which featured
A beautiful shirtless man
Kneeling in stage light.

The reviews I read said it was too abstract, too flamboyant,
but I'm empathetic to the desire to try to tell it
        with dance
to the impulse that intractable mystery be dealt with by the body.
I don't know why the film never got made
   (ask Oliver Stone)
But I imagine there were too many
loose ends.

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