

Selected poetry and prose by Sandy Scull and Brent MacKinnon from the volume *Agent Orange Roundup. Living with a Foot in Two Worlds* (Bookstand Publishing, 2020)

By Sandy Scull and Brent MacKinnon

### **Skewed**

When I returned from war, mother threw me a party  
on the brick terrace ringed by roses and pansies.  
From a balcony I looked down on the guests.  
Mother wore a mini skirt, my ex-tennis partner,

a beard and pony tail. My brother brought  
one of my old dates. I gripped a gin and tonic,  
grateful for ice to freeze frame something familiar.  
In my absence, everything had skewed.

A friend suggested I take his date home,  
his apology for not writing me.  
A WW2 vet presented me a dorky statue  
inscribed with, "Our Hero."

Then, something from Vietnam intruded.  
At first I thought it was the off idea  
of an award for war. Or the sound of the word  
"hero" that I coupled with dead.

No, it was a smell. In my brain, nod no  
pungent orange napalm devoured  
jungle green. Father had sprayed gasoline  
between the red bricks to kill the grass.  
His war with what grew w-i-l-d

*(Sandy Scull)*

### **In the wake**

*Nantucket Island, 1970*

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I trod the same cobblestones as George Pollard,  
whaling captain turned night watchman, 140 years before.  
Followed his route past the Whaling Museum,  
where on rainy days as boy of nine, I read the log  
of the Essex, slowly turning its jaundiced pages.  
Pollard's ink. All was not well when his ship  
was sunk by an enraged sperm whale.

Near the log, the jawbone of a large whale stood vertical.  
I would cringe through like some *Jonah boy* looking up  
at the teeth as if to redeem the horror of the slaughter.  
A three-thousand-mile drift in an open boat.  
Lots drawn – the custom of the sea. Shooting and eating  
Owen, Pollard's young cousin entrusted to him.  
The mother who never forgave. In the Great Fire of 1846,  
through a window, Pollard saw her hair and gown ablaze  
and was burned trying to save her.

After the war I drifted back to Nantucket.  
Stood on the same wharf where the town  
had silently met Pollard's return.  
When I came home from war,  
my mother said to my father in a hushed tone:  
*His eyes are popping out of his head.*

I worked for the newspaper that first reported  
the whale's attack on Pollard's ship,  
which inspired *Moby Dick*.. My night-watch patrols  
ended at the lighthouse on Brant Point.  
A beacon: Warning. Guiding.  
I wondered if Pollard had stood  
on those same rocks to view  
ships entering safe harbor,  
A comfort to me that Melville wrote:  
*Pollard had found a way to live on.*  
And when Emerson spoke at the Athenaeum,  
Pollard realized the sage of Concord knew nothing  
about darkness in the heart of Islanders.

I slept on the beach below my great-aunt's shack,

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listening to waves massage that sand.  
 When he couldn't sleep, I imagined Pollard climbing  
 the ladder to his widow's walk and looking  
 to the stars for a new way to navigate.

*(Sandy Scull)*

### **Mars return**

At a reunion dinner for my class of Marine Lieutenants  
 a toast turned toward the platitude side of sacrifice  
 and commitment, and I found myself thinking about  
 the 17 suicides a day among veterans.  
 Taps blew for our long list of classmates  
 who didn't make it back. A choir sang.  
 I was moved.

To the young returnees from our current war,  
 I want to say: Your mission is to relax  
 and learn to love the ordinary.  
 Observe how trees grow towards the light,  
 how the ocean is buoyant and animals forgive.  
 I want to say, take off your armor  
 and run naked in the rain. Breathe in  
 how nature turns death into life.  
 And how roots reach into a web  
 to support what grows above.

War's appetite is so voracious,  
 you can't join and not eat, or be eaten.  
 Thou shalt....replacing thou shalt not.  
 That God role so overloads,  
 the home front spreads flat

When drowning with the weight  
 of what's left in your pack,  
 blood may be thicker than water,  
 but who cares? Semper Fi to what?  
 Make your allegiance to something larger.  
 Home should not be where you hang yourself.

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*(Sandy Scull)*

### **Sea salt**

After the Viet Nam War, I withdrew to the island  
of my youth: Nantucket: "far-away isle."  
Hoping to glimpse the boy before soul fled the body.  
Thirty-three miles of ocean exiling me  
from a homeland offering little embrace.

Me and my dog Christopher. Christ-love  
disguised as loyal canine. We roamed beaches.  
Working for the island newspaper  
connected me to people and place.  
Tides soothed with ebb and flow.  
A rhythm I could trust. Even eat by.  
I fished the last three hours of the east tide.  
Buried my toes in the sand, searching  
for the texture of little-neck clam.

When water was warm, I sailed out solo.  
Stripped then slid into the sound.  
Looked up toward the surface light.  
Christopher's gaze wavering,  
wind and water between us.  
Breath bubbles rose, bursting under his nose.

My body now embraced,  
a ritual purification in salt.  
Dismembered dreams floated closer.  
Something dissolved in a solution  
that held me. Breathing easier,  
I could imagine again.

*(Sandy Scull)*

### **Viet Cong girl**

The barrel, the boom. the bullet  
Speeds to greet and extinguish

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The Other

Our mirror image  
In this only moment  
Of intimacy with  
Each other

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

**Horsemen of the orange Apocalypse**

*Sunday School, 1958*

*Revelation 6:1-8*

For it is written and sealed  
By God's right hand

Wherein we, the Lambs of God  
Shall not take away the sin  
Of our foreign brethren

But shall be sacrificed  
Not once  
But twice

For we opened the first seal  
Heard the notice and thunder  
And there went forth upon  
A White Beast conquering  
And to be conquered

And when we had opened the second seal  
We heard the second Beast say,  
"Come and see."  
And thus went out upon him  
He who was blood Red

And power was given to us who sat thereon  
To take peace from the Earth  
That we should slay one another

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For there was given unto us

From above a great Orange sword  
Sheathed within the land  
And within us  
And now the Fifth Horseman  
Sharpens our Orange halo  
Not once but twice  
With his scythe

Bringing Hell to all Horsemen  
And to take from us our sins  
At last

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

### **Monsoon**

Nong Son Village, Vietnam

«Can you hear me, Mac? Nod your head. Good.»

The sound of rain. A waterfall slid off the roof of my hut and poured down over cobblestones running to the Thu Bon River raging below. My fever burned hot and the medic from Echo Company shook his head, his distant voice fighting with the sound of the storm outside. «Mac, I can't get the temperature down. Only thing for that in my kit here is aspirin or morphine. You gotta drink as much water as you can.»

I said nothing. I couldn't.

«We need medivac but a no-fly order is in effect until this storm lets up. I gotta get back up the hill before dark or they might shoot me comin' in. Hate to leave you here alone.»

Behind him, four or five of my students stood against a wall.

The security team leader stuck his helmet through the broken window. «Gotta go, Doc. Captain says now.»

«See you tomorrow Mac.» I felt someone pat my shoulder.

Motion. Whispers. Silence.

Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son.

«We help you, Tai.» An elder pulled off my T-shirt and fatigue pants. Naked, dizzy, near delirium, I could only lay exhausted, unable even to wonder if my shorts were clean.

Over the river, thunder boomed. Two of the younger men stood me up. «We help, Tai.»

I leaned on them as they pulled and hugged me through the front doorway and into the monsoon. And there we stood, under a torrent of water, two five-foot human crutches supporting a six-foot white ghost.

In just a few minutes, my temperature began to drop. A fuzzy clarity returned and in a flash of lightening, I saw the smiling faces of my two saviors staring up at me. After fifteen minutes of Vietnamese hydrotherapy, we returned to my room and old Quang dried me off before the three of them laid me back down. He covered me with a dry sheet, tucked me in, and gently wiped my face.

He smiled. “Drink chai. Good.” Hot tea stank of rotten roots and dark earth. He folded his arms across his chest and stood like a midget gunnery sergeant in pajamas.

Quang turned down the lamp, gathered spectators, and left the room. Yet I felt the presence of another, softer energy somewhere nearby. Gradually the ceiling stopped crawling and I began to dream....

...An elderly woman with white hair sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed. In front of her, a charcoal brazier supported and heated a pot of tea. The dancing red glow of coals cast her shadow on the wall as she chanted and rubbed a string of wooden beads back and forth between wrinkled and ancient hands. I slept the Sleep of the Dead.

A streak of sunlight splashed across the ceiling. Our monsoon had gone as quickly as it came and taken my fever with it. I felt renewed, born again, lighter in body and spirit. The after-taste of terrible tea from the night before filled my mouth, accompanied by a raging hunger.

Quang leaned against a post in the open doorway, smiling. He nodded in the direction of the far corner and I twisted around to look. The old woman from my dream smiled back as she sliced vegetables, making Pho soup.

Something strange and wonderful was happening to me. The tough combat vet, now a helpless patient ten thousand miles from home, won over by the hearts and minds of peasants in a remote Vietnamese village.

As a Marine, I was no good after that. The thought of shooting someone, anyone, belonged to a Self who no longer existed. I had been recruited and initiated into the human race. I now knew the real mission: To do as much good for the village in what time I may have left.

Something had transformed me and charged with purpose and meaning, I was full of energy. My days became alive and my body vibrated with urgency and mission. I didn't want to go to sleep at night. I knew this new life, this new feeling could end at any moment. I didn't want to miss anything.

The war around us intensified so I ate and slept in students' homes as they rotated me around like a circuit-riding preacher. Returning to my own room in the mornings, footprints left evidence of midnight visitors. We never spoke of the danger and in the Vietnamese way, only a gentle squeeze of my hand while inviting me to dinner, sent the darker message that guerillas might visit that same night.

And so began the love affair of my life. Whatever intelligence, creativity, and strength I was born with was called forth, valued, and embraced by those around me. Giving and receiving became one. My naïve suburban soul recognized something very precious and fragile filled every moment. It couldn't last.....

The war continued and after three months I became a casualty, not of violence but of hospitality. Each day, students manipulated and competed to bring me home for a meal. While flattered, I knew that my performance as the new oddity in town was much in demand.

My repertoire of excruciating tonal accents, a few card tricks, songs, and amusing cultural body language, entertained and distracted families. After many meals of mystery cuisine, I began to lose weight, energy, and the ability to concentrate. River fever ended my stay and Doc of Echo Company called in a medivac.

*(Brent MacKinnon)*

### **Vietnam hangover**

I got the news today.  
My V.A. claim denied.

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Fuck you  
I don't want money. Just say you did It  
Say you killed me with Agent Orange  
Say you did It.

The rumor's true: We *are* time bombs.  
Cancer, hiding 50 years,  
Laying in ambush  
Blew up in my body,  
Just as Peace of Mind  
called a cease fire

And as my grand children  
Stared from the end of the hospital bed,  
I almost...  
Disappeared  
Just say you did It

This shared legacy,  
the Gooks and us-  
Stillbirth and deformity  
Amputation and agony.

Here in our communal family plot,  
Buried in a mass grave,  
Yellow ghosts smile across the years  
Tombstones by Monsanto

Charlie was in the bush  
Eating fish heads and rice  
Seasoned with Agent Orange  
His skull still grins  
While our heart clock  
Ticks this time bomb  
Buried deep in DNA.  
Just say you did It.

We still live, yet  
We died in Vietnam  
Marching across that moon scape:

Your black and grey, lifeless DMZ.  
Aliens in camo space suits breathing in that  
Bardo Plain of demons and phantoms...  
We were to become.

My soul dreams of WWI  
Shell blasted waste lands.  
Gentlemen poets in a muddy inferno  
Whispering of an endless cemetery,  
Trenches for graves,  
Bones coated with mustard gas.

And in this time, future ghosts  
Marching in black and grey  
Tailored body bags,  
Embark for the East  
From West Point.  
Eager sacrifices  
Lining up,  
Already  
Death

*(Brent MacKinnon)*