



Not Far From Here

Poems & Flash Fiction
by **John T. Hitchner**
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The following poems and flash fiction were previously published in the journals listed here. The other works appear for the first time.

Blind Man's Rainbow: "After Prayer"

Chantarelle's Notebook: "Approach"

Children, Churches, & Daddies: "Across the Back," "Sunday Rituals" "What About Tomorrow?"

Clark Street Review: "Before," "After," "In the Marathon," "People in the Café, Guys on the Ground," "Waiting for Work"

The Diner (an affiliate of *Clark Street Review*): "On Being Told, 'Your poem does not engage the reader.'"

Down in the Dirt: "Days Ago, Tomorrow," "Not Far From Here"

Hidden Oak: "Only Ordinary Children"

Homestead Review: "Hard Love"

Marquis Cafeteria Round Table: "Almost," "Killing the Silence," "Me, Elvis, Scotty, Fats, and the Rest of the World," "I Don't Live Here," "Only Hope," "Too Late," "Trapped,"

The Stray Branch: "Burren Stone," "What Flesh"

To my son, John R. Hitchner

What Flesh?

What character, this inner landscape?
No sacristy in form,
no altar in soul.
Does it kneel,
take bread,
touch wine to its lips?
Or, like some rough smiling beast,
does it turn and laugh upon nails, bones,
and skulls in its wake?
What flesh?

What skin this paper, these coins?
To burn oil, light lamps,
Or to whet hands
that anoint brows with blood,
pierce bodies with bayonets?

What destiny, this wind,
this fire, this earth?
What flesh?

Only Ordinary Children

We were children at play,
more than ordinary,
school books tucked under our arms
like chores to be done later,
perhaps even forgotten.

We listened to songs,
swayed to melodies,
and sang lyrics over and over.
That's how it is for us, we said,
and vowed that's how it would always be.

What is it about clocks and time
that makes you look beyond the person across the table
and see only yourself?
Where were you?
Where was I?

What stills conversation
more than one day and night,
more than numbers on the clock.
What makes cold silence ordinary as closing a book?
Perhaps we hear too many songs.
Perhaps we hear none at all.

Separated

The boy swing-clings to rope-vines,
calls like Tarzan over toys and stones,
scuffs dirt, stops.
Hanging still, a loose-shirted sinew,
he mumbles words his toys know,
as Dad's tires crunch pebbles.

The girl imagines a lover's arms,
but Dad's shoulder's soft,
his arms enough dream now.
He kids new braces,
she dips a silver smile
knowing he'd say that.
Finger-twirling hair,
she is twelve, fifteen, twenty—
so many ages for so little time.

Dad scouts windows.
"Mom's inside," his daughter tells.
Her shoulders shiver questions.
Silent, he remembers telling her stories.
He has none now.

"You gonna stay?" the boy asks.
"Not today," his dad says.

Time twists endings.

Hard Love

Where are words of natural affection?
In tremble of windows?
In tumble of flesh and bone
across wood and stone?
Where?
On paper
words appear thin as smoke,
lost as a lover's hand drawn away:
cold comfort.
The heart demands comfort hard,
truth hard as fist upon face,
as bruise upon heart.
The heart demands
your palms will open to hold my face,
your hand will no longer bruise my heart,
and your heart will never break mine, again.
These are my words.
Are they enough?

Not Far From Here

She stood in a pub doorway in a city 5000 miles from my home, her skin the shade of light coffee, black hair in ringlets, brown leather mini skirt, pearl-buttoned scoop-neck white blouse, the tops of her breasts like smooth crescents.

“Come on in, enjoy the music,” she greeted me.

I thought, *Why not.*

Over watered down wine and beer, we swapped life stories: I a travel writer between marriages, a stranger in this city of cathedrals and colleges. She a full-time single mother, part-time waitress, part-time singer.

“Will you write about me someday?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“Stay?” she said, her hand covering mine. “I’m on again at eleven. Afterward, we can walk.”

She closed her eyes and sang of empty rooms and half-open windows and half-open doors, bass, sax, and piano behind her. Her voice and hands let lyrics drift toward unanswered questions and dead ends. When she closed with “Heart Like a Wheel,” I wanted to lie down beside her.

“Let’s go,” she said when she came back to the table.

“Where?” I said.

“Where you’re staying.”

In bed she asked questions with her body, but the answers I gave her were the laments and dead ends she had sung about.

When she got up to leave I said, “Stay.”

“I have to go. You’re all strangers,” she replied.

“I’ll walk you home,” I said.

“Never mind. I’m not far from here.”

Killing the Silence

She wore broad pastels
to hide her weight—
breasts soft as pillows,
hips wide as doors.
“Piano legs,” her brothers derided.
She tried to hide it all
with dresss and smiles
that never covered enough
what everybody saw.

At home,
she scanned wedding pictures
where she stood near ushers
who danced their obligatory dance
with her.
In front of the mirror
she turned this way and that way;
she saw what she saw:
not a sweet, “big-boned woman,”
but ‘the fat lady’
who yacked on the phone
to her sisters, never her brothers,
just to talk, just to kill time,
kill the silence.

“Go on a cruise, honey,
you’ll meet some nice people there,”
her mother encouraged her.
“Yeh, you should do that,”
her sisters said.

No. Too many fake smiles,
too many “Nice to’ve met you’s”
too many times.

“I’ll be OK,” she said to herself,
her apartment’s taunting silence
loud as the dark after she turned out the lights.

The Passing

A path beckons.
A cabin stands shuttered, blind;
its steps sand-scabbed,
its door wood pocked skin.
No.

And the path leads through rising fog
into an evergreen grove,
where branches hang like hairy black bones,
and the moon pales a blurred crescent.
No.

And the path winds to a road—
an empty companion;
a slow snake that drinks the dark.

I follow, thirsty stickman hearing no music,
writing no songs,
tracking down prayerless distance.

Across the Back

My father cried out in his sleep.
His explanation: “Bad dreams.”
Young, I accepted that reason,
and pedaled to the playground,
shot hoops,
and wondered about tomorrow’s games.

Older, over a beer one night,
I asked my father the truth.
“Your grandfather’s razor strop,” he said.
“If I didn’t do my chores,
or said something out of line,
he let me have it across the back—
my hands, my legs.
Not just once, not just twice.

“I got out when it was time.
Enlisted, went to Korea.
I tried to put a machined-gun face
back together.
Forgotten war, hell...
Damn near froze to death.
I could take shit then,
took it for a long time.
That’s why I came down on you
all those times.”

“A long time ago,” I said.

“Too close,” he said,
and rubbed the backs of his hands,
the sound like nails drawn across stones.

Trapped

How to get into their heads?
Where to begin?

How Leatherman returned from Iraq
and now lives in a tent in the woods?
Bring him a bottle of JD
and he'll open up about life in the 'sand box'.

How Motorcycle Man lives in a trailer
after two tours in Afghanistan,
a .38 caliber Colt within reach 24/7.
He knows it's exactly four steps
from sofa to front door
just in case...just in case.

These guys matter.
So does Larry the cross-dresser.
So does Hamburger Man,
who invokes some unseen presence in the sky
as he walks the streets.

How to get into their heads?
What do I do?

I stare at empty notebook paper.
I stare at a blank screen.
Nothing happens, nothing comes,
nothing of real importance.
Trivia provides security:
keys arranged, loose change counted;
bills opened, checks written.
Things easy to control.

I think about Lenny and George,
Nick and Marjorie, Rabbit and Janice.
I know what I want to do,
what I want to say,
but when it comes out it's all bananas,
and I've been there before.

I get out of my chair.
I think about Ernest on that warm July morning,
about the Old Man against his enemy.
I return to the empty page.
I have to.
I begin again.
There is nothing else.

On Being Told, “Your poem does not engage the reader.”

To the editor:
You want formula?
I've got formula:
A four-car chase,
a three-car pile-up.
A severed arm and leg,
a knife in the back.
If you need one,
I could write a hospital soap opera
or a teacher's fling with a student.
Or—and this would *really* capture network honchos—
a story about a counter-terrorist
who can't explain everything now,
but he will later. Trust him.
If none of these *engage* you,
I'll resurrect the malicious doll and evil puppet.
The puppeteer's the new boss,
same as the old boss.
But you've seen that before,
haven't you.
Have a nice day!

Only Hope

Sometimes things break,
fall apart.
Sometimes another war
but not enough remembrance.
Dishes and furniture and lives thrown away.
What's left?
Dreams of kisses and touches,
nightmares of search-and-destroy missions
where your buddies stepped on IED's.
After you come home...
too many voices in the house,
too many questions at the clinic.
Even silence in the bedroom...

Hope? Maybe.
Maybe hope comes
in memory of a single voice,
or the sight of a familiar car,
or a face very much like someone
you once kissed.
It is hope;
nothing tangible,
no one you can hold,
no one you can ask to stay the night.
Only hope.

Between Times

They meet in front of coffee shops or convenience stores. They stand beside their baby carriages and push them back and forth, back and forth, and talk about who's still together, who's split; who got in trouble with the cops, who's getting out next week, and, "When's she due?"

I recognize some of them. I remember their names, even their final grades in my classes the years they dropped out.

Bonnie dropped out the week before Thanksgiving her junior year. The day before Christmas vacation began, she brought her baby to class. The boys slumped in their seats and watched; the girls gathered around Bonnie and her baby. "She's so *cu-u-ute*," they smiled. Bonnie glowed in their attention.

"Wanna hold her?" she asked me. "Her name's Holly. I wanted to name her something to do with Christmas. She's the best present I ever got."

I held Bonnie's baby, soft and light as blankets in my arms, and I wondered about the future of this young mother and her child. I had no answers.

One morning last spring I saw Bonnie again. She sat smoking a cigarette and talking with a friend on the brick wall in front of Mac's Gas Mart. The friend pushed a baby carriage back and forth, back and forth. The infant sucked a pacifier.

"This's Taryn," Bonnie said to me, nodding toward her friend.

I said hello to Taryn and then asked Bonnie, "How's Holly?"

"She's somethin' else. You oughta see her, she's growin' like a weed. My boyfriend's watchin' her right now. It's her nap time."

"How are things with you?" I asked her.

Taryn nodded to me and asked, "J'you know she's gonna have another kid?"

Later, I wondered if Bonnie had seen surprise and sadness in my eyes and heart as I said, “Well congratulations!”

But now her eyes shifted from customers at Mac’s front door. She turned back to me. “Yeah, my boyfriend and I, we weren’t planning on it, but that’s the way it goes. Anyway,” she shrugged, “I’m gonna try an’ start night school if he can work first shift. If he can’t, guess I’ll have to wait. You know how it is.”

I did know. I had seen other Bonnies and Taryns bring their infant sons and daughters to school, to bask in attention and affections and then say goodbye and leave for the street and for homes, where maybe another mother and maybe another father waited for them. They wanted to be good mothers, these Bonnies and Taryns, but I wondered if their eyes and faces would soon show fatigue and lines and answers to problems they did not want to admit to themselves; the same fatigue and lines and answers they had seen in their own mothers and fathers.

When I came out of Mac’s Gas Mart that spring day, I saw Bonnie and Taryn walk toward the street. Taryn pushed the baby carriage. Bonnie walked beside her, her hand a protective guide on the carriage.

In an Airport Waiting Room

I stand at a window
and watch planes arrive and depart,
fuselages sleek,
dark windows blind to earth and sky.

That 747 lifting off now—
Its wings bank, test resistance,
cut through current
hawks and eagles glide within.
A higher altitude gained by us.
Another machined wind beaten down upon them.

What do we seek
above canyons and mountains,
rivers and oceans?
A space closer to God?
Someplace other than home?
No promise fulfilled
except to arrive somewhere as soon as possible,
or possess more of what controls us,
or compare numbers on spreadsheets.
One could do more than be
a passenger on a plane.

In the Marathon

Low gray dawn edges sky.
Outriders check watches,
cell-phone another appointment,
swing onto the 7:38
and text one more message
as they ride in on antennae airwaves.

In the apartment
the baby's fingers fidget,
peel a scab;
blood, like her cries, coagulates.
In another room
the lover finds solace in the warm sheath of his love,
and wonders if five loaves and seven fishes
fed five thousand;
if one rifle or five were fired that November day.
He counts freckles on his lover's shoulder.
Rising away, he tamps down his hair
with the heel of his hand.
Tomorrow the answers.
Tomorrow.

In the bagel shop,
customers turn pages,
read of offerings made, promises broken.
The same door opens to the same store,
where the same counter serves the same top 40 fast relief
with or without chips.
Outriders instant message "Sell, sell!"
Buyers charge the gates,
show teeth, flash money.
The takers take.
The lover waits.
The baby waits.
The gates close.

Me, Elvis, Scotty, Fats, and the Rest of the World

A warm Saturday night,
August, 1956:
Downstairs, my parents and their friends
snap down cards, push pennies, nickels, and dimes
across a Michigan Rummy board.
Upstairs, room dark, radio alive
with “Mystery Train,” Elvis’s cry
and Scotty Moore’s licks
tease nerves never touched in me before.
Will Elvis sing it on Ed Sullivan next month?
I burn to move in my life
like Elvis and Scotty do.
They break boundaries
and laugh along the way:
Come on! We’ll figure things out somehow.

I think of my girlfriend,
her just-right body against mine
with my arms around her.
I know about boundaries—
We haven’t talked about them.
It’s unspoken where I can put my hands
when we kiss in the balcony
or beneath the trees in her yard.
When we pull apart
it’s like going into separate rooms
with doors locked behind us.

Now, downstairs,
card table legs snap into place,
friends call “Thanks! Goodnight!”
Walls, chairs, and tables
will gather my parents’ voices.
Now on radio
Fats Domino wails a thrill
on Blueberry Hill,
a love never to be.

Life: Loss and restrictions.
You find your way in and out of tunnels.
The Mystery Train’s a long black train,
Scotty’s licks temporary as a 45 RPM.
You never really fall asleep
without drifting toward the next tunnel.

What About Tomorrow?

The snap of clock hands,
the rip of envelopes,
the mounds of trash:
heaps of obsolete appliances,
severed limbs and branches,
plastic bags stuffed with God knows what
await crushers, splitters, and haulers.
So much of our lives disposed—
furniture and food, children and cars:
a boy an ash tray for his new daddy's cigarettes,
a girl a plaything for her new "uncle"
while Mommy negotiates dollars on the street.
So much to lose in so little time.

Too Late

Friday night: 10:07.

Wyles poured himself rye and ginger over ice, clicked on the ancient stereo console turntable, and walked to his apartment front window. The wet street below hissed with traffic just the way Wyles liked to hear it, and Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" crooned with piano, horns, and brushes on snare drum just the way he liked to hear it.

He sipped the rye and ginger, watched, and listened.

No, you didn't need a singer when you had piano, horns, and brushes on skin, Wyles thought. There was nothing like the soft call and plea of trombone and sax. The world of heart and want and need was there in those voices.

No, people don't listen—*really listen*—to music anymore. They only react to it. They plug in ear pieces, tune out the noise of the world (Can't really blame them for that...) and pummel their ear drums with metal and rap and all the rest of what the lowest common denominator will bear. No wonder most people under thirty have never heard of Sarah Vaughn. No wonder they can't make change without using a calculator. No wonder it's getting late.

On the street below, traffic smeared puddles, and people ducked into a restaurant. Couples read menus and leaned forward to talk to each other.

Wyles sipped his drink. He savored the bourbon, soda, and ice.

Listen: listen to that, he said to no one but himself. "Mood Indigo." The soul of all that's missing in us today is right there in those first seven notes. Ella and Sarah sang it but Duke felt it first. Duke knew the feeling of wanting to lie down and spend the night with someone. He knew how it was to watch window lights go out. He knew it felt to have the night pass too slow, or to know that morning might never come at all. You don't need a singer to tell you that.

Wyles switched off the turntable and gently placed the arm in its cradle. At the window he finished his drink. Traffic and time passed in wheels and footsteps and in the faces of people in the restaurant window and in window lights that came on and went out in buildings across the street.

"It's too late," he said to himself and no one else.

Waiting for Work

Mornings it's cigarettes, coffee, and want-ads.
Throat burns like messages for payments overdue.
Hands steady, though,
as when he held snap lines and levelers.
“Good job,” the boss had said. “See you tomorrow.”
Things balanced then.
The center held.

Afternoons it's cigarettes and beer,
waiting for calls back,
waiting for the unemployment check.
No direct deposit.
He likes to hold the check,
touch the paper's surface and colors.
The amount? Never enough.
No balance there.

Evening—beer, cigarettes, games at the club.
Hands steady enough for eight-ball
and maybe a few riffs, if the guys let him sit in.
Onstage, he closes his eyes.
Fingers play his soul,
but the band is too much percussion,
too much like the boss's “I have to let you go. Sorry.”
“Sorry,” he tells the band. “Gotta go.”

Home:
Messages? None.
History Channel? Stonehenge:
monoliths like faceless gods above land,
lintels raised, set in place,
circle and center, sun and moon aligned.
His hands flex.
Fingers imagine surfaces of greatness and time.
All in balance.

Before

Look at us:
Mothers and fathers,
sisters and brothers,
cousins of all ages
on Nana and Granddad's front steps.
Before the Fourth of July parade
we faced Uncle Steve's lens,
squinted and smiled
a minute's moment
tucked away until a funeral.

Aunt Ginny:
So the story goes,
in satin she greeted the mailman,
accepted bills
and blushed him on his way.

There's Uncle Phil,
before he went to pieces
and scuffed state hospital halls.

Here, my cousins:
Jean and Joan dressed me
for living room vaudeville.
Bobby fooled me with rum
instead of root beer,
and Joey wrote letters from Nam
before he tripped a wire.

And Dad, before he lost my name,
and Mom, who found it for him.

The dead and living voices
who still laugh,
still whisper and wail
like nails that will not, do not,
surrender.

Sunday Rituals

My father inspects me like an interrogator.
“Stand up straight,” he says.
“You have to look nice for church.”
I stiffen,
dare not slouch.
He tugs the shoulders
and yanks the hem of my gabardine suit jacket.
“Pull your pants higher. Let the creases be sharp.”
I smell his Old Spice after-shave.
I see his black whisker specks,
his cautious eyebrows.
“There,” he says and appraises me:
“I guess you look all right.
“Behave yourself in church.”

In church
I sit beside my mother.
We watch my father march with the choir,
his hymnal held like an offering.
His throat tightens,
strains for high notes of God’s glory.
During prayers
I bow my head,
touch the sharp creases of my pants.
No blood shed.
My mother hands me an open prayer book.
I read silently,
letters and words odd pieces of a puzzle
I’ve solved every Sunday:
If you say the right words,
you will be good, and God will be happy with you.

What would happen if I tore the pages from the book,
scattered them like so many coins?
Would anyone pick them up, count them,
put them back together?

Stained glass saints and martyrs stare above my head.
What would happen
if I shattered their faces with stones,
shards of eyes and mouths scattered within and without?

Can God see me?
Can He read my mind?
Would He cast me out,
or tell me to sit up straight and behave myself?

The minister makes the sign of the Cross above us:
“May the blessing of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
“be amongst you and remain with you, always.”

My mother folds her hands.
My father cradles his hymnal.
My hands skim the creases of my pants,
like fingers testing blades of knives.

After

What does she have now?
What remains?
Family pictures:
her wedding—
two families stiff in smiles,
her father a hand and heart away from her mother.
The mountain cabin—
the unmade bed for love
morning, afternoon, evening,
sheets and pillows valleys and mountains,
rain like a waterfall off the roof.
The beach last summer—
the kids building castles and moats.
What protects them now?
The ring on the third finger of her left hand?
Not the letter of notification,
not his medals and coins,
watch and ring.
Not his folded shirts and sweaters,
not his uniform.
They are things,
arms and legs without flesh.
Who, what can she hold now?
Not the letter,
not the uniform,
not the flag.
Only the ring on the third finger of her left hand.
A circle: the beginning of life,
the end of life.
But not the end of love.

People in the Café, Guys on the Ground

And the people in the café,
sipped wine,
stabbed hors d'oeuvres,
talked of marriage and separation,
and soon walked away
to meet friends at another café,

while the guys on the ground
smoked cigarettes,
read mail from home,
cleaned their weapons,
and saw black smoke like a curse
in the sky,

while people at home
clicked on the tube
to find out who was still lost,
who was still dancing;
who was desperate,
and who was in the zone,

while a guy on the ground
lit a cigarette for his buddy,
and another read mail to his friend,
and another wrote a letter home
to his friend's family.

And people in the café
put aside newspapers,
sipped wine,
and stabbed hors d'oeuvres.

“I don’t live here.”

Words come,
but not the right words;
not ones that match images
behind his eyes.

He is 78.
He asks his wife, “Is Oswald dead?”
Before sleep, he tells her “Goodnight, Gigi,”
Gigi his pet poodle dead two years.

He remembers his mother’s first name
his high school football jersey number,
but not his current address
or town he lives in.

He does not read a newspaper.
He holds it, blinks at print and pictures,
and turns pages in the rhythm
of his breathing.
When he signs his name,
he writes the letters
like a child learning cursive.

One day letters don’t come.
One day names don’t come.
One night he runs away.
Police bring him home.
“I don’t live here,” he tells them.

His final home a 'care facility,'
where nurses raise their voices to him,
where attendants button his shirts for him,
and where his wife brings him canvas loafers,
eats lunch with him,
and slices his meat loaf.

Before she leaves,
he holds her and sobs, "I don't live here."

She does not say goodbye anymore.
She has already said it
more times than she can remember.

After Prayer

In winter
the steeple raises a white sword to heaven.
Stained glass arcs freeze forgiving hands.
Huddled masses quicken pale-breath prayers
before bending home.

A bell tolls,
and sunset strikes the steeple sword,
shrouds the black bell in molten gold,
pierces blessed robes and hands,

while, in presence of unseen enemies,
the villager prepares his table,
bows his head,
prays forgiveness of lessons learned,
trespasses kept,
and waits his daily bread.

Almost

The dance pavilion a steam bath
like all Saturday nights that summer.
Ray and I were sure,
sure as hell this time,
we could get two girls to drive home:
“Definitely tonight!”
Maybe stop for pizza and beer
(if we didn’t get carded),
maybe park above the lake,
play it cool,
no rush,
see what happens.
Why not?

So we joined the other stags
and watched the unattached girls fast-dance,
blouses sweat-splotched, arms outstretched,
pumping air like crazy to “Willie and the Hand Jive,”
legs jack-knifed the way Keith Richards riffs today.
A couple girls slow-danced with us,
danced almost every slow dance with us,
these girls very nice,
very nice indeed,
real close on “The Great Pretender” and “Don’t.”
Even on the last dance—
“I Only Have Eyes for You”—
I mean, it was *so* close.
We were *almost* there.

After the lights came up,
Ray and I walked these very nice girls outside,
and just before Ray said, “Can we drive you home?”
one of them says, “My dad’s picking us up.
See you next week, maybe.”
“Yeah, thanks,” the other one says,
like they had it rehearsed,
almost like we did.
Almost.

Approach

Evening falls upon the city
with rush of rain and umbrellas,
busses and taxis filled, taken.
A wanderer seeks shelter
down a subway kiosk.
He follows angles and stairs,
searches pockets for correct change,
and finding not enough,
seeks fortune
with words spoken before,
hands offered before.
Nothing given, nothing taken,
except eyes that slide away
toward tokened metal mouths,
entrances and exits.
He stands between,
and hears down a concrete tunnel
a train approach,
its voice like shattered glass,
familiar...final.

Within the Lines

Hands folded at her chin,
she contemplates her still life:
What colors to mix?
What brushes to stroke?
What lines to make?
Her canvas a vase of spring flowers
on a remembered table.
“How nice...Lovely,” visitors say.
“Thank you,” she replies,
and watches them congregate,
lounge coffee and soda.
Rain curtains a nearby window.
She traces droplets
down the glass,
down into memory
of bedrooms and classrooms,
years of staying within the lines.
No. There is not enough time today
to make another stroke there,
to add more color here.
Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps.

Pownell's News Agency, 1951

Jockey lean,
infielder quick,
my father pushes through swinging doors,
paces to newspapers stacked like guards
in Pownell's back corner.
Under globe lights
he scans *The Evening Bulletin*,
then tucks Cold War news and local sports
under his arm.

I watch him from the front seat
of our '48 Chevrolet.
I am ten,

not old enough for magazines
high school boys gawk at;
not old enough to bum cigarettes
from counterman Pete Pownell;
but old enough to know
the hometown boy killed in Korea last week,
old enough to know
my mother, father, and I will attend
his funeral tomorrow.

At the roasted peanuts warmer
my father jaws Bud Gessner
("Guessin' Gessner" to my baseball buddies and me),
probably about umping bases
at next week's games.
He cuffs Chick Dudley's right arm,
knocks the air between them with his fist
as he talks with Harry,
probably about the soldier's funeral.
Chick nods,
squeezes the cigarette between his lips.

A hometown guy, my father.
Everybody knows him.
Everybody likes him:
ex three-sport high school athlete,
shipyard riveter after Pearl Harbor,
now farm machine part clerk.
He clears a four-figure sum every two weeks,
enough for house rent, food, insurance.
Little left over.

I rubble the Chevy's glove compartment,
unfold a map of our home state,
tap our hometown—
a black dot southeast of Philadelphia,
city of the "Fightin' Phils"
and "High Flying Eagles."
I daydream smacking home runs
and snagging touchdown passes.

Wide smile rare as a fifty in his wallet,
my father pays Pete Pownell
for news, sports,
aromas of cigarettes, peanuts, and goodwill.

Home, my mother serves
chipped beef and gravy—
"s o s" Dad calls it.
No talk of sports,
no Sinatra on the radio;
only news of young soldiers
led by an old general not yet faded away.

I ask, "Can we go out for ice cream?"
"Not till next week," my father says,
without looking up from his plate.

Days Ago, Tomorrow

On a jungle hot day, Private 1st Class Thomas Harbison reconned with his platoon in a jungle like all the other wet and green and bug-infested, gook-infested jungles in a country he didn't know existed until his American history teacher had pointed to it on a map. Private Harbison understood today's mission: search and destroy a hamlet of enemy sympathizers. He knew that orange and black flames would roil from the hamlet's huts and smear the sky just like the fire from another village they had wiped out last week. He had watched pieces of enemy soldiers' flesh spurt from the impact of bullets from his and the platoon's M-16's. He knew these things.

But on this day, Private Harbison wondered about the fate of his beloved New York Yankees. Maybe a pennant? Maybe World Series champs? He thought, too, of his Holly, his fiancé, and remembered the last time he had caressed her and saw the smile beyond her closed eyes when he drowned in her.

Behind him now his buddy Stoney said, "Them gooks gotta be—"

Stoney's voice was crushed in an explosive vice that ascended from the ground and descended from the trees. Chunks of Stoney flared up and out and over and into vines and trees and helmets and into Private Harbison's face.

*

An ocean and three thousand miles away, Private Harbison's father awoke, the bed sheets twisted and damp over his chest.

"What is it, dear?" his wife asked.

"Can't sleep. I keep thinking of Tommy."

"So do I," she said.

*

Days later the Harbisons received a call from a military hospital in Tokyo. An official voice identified himself and then explained to Charles Harbison his son's mission and the results of the enemy's explosive devices. "Your son received shrapnel wounds in both legs, but he is not critical, sir. He's out of danger."

"Will he be able to walk?"

"Yes, he will, sir. He should be up on his feet in no time."

"When can we talk to him?"

"As early as tomorrow, sir. He's resting now."

"Thank you."

Charles Harbison turned to his wife. "Tommy's all right," he said.

"Now we know why, don't we...But when will it be over?" she asked.

"When he comes home. When we see him walk through the door."

"I'm never going to let him go back," she said.

Burren Stone

Upon the old land
at the edge of the sea,
high tide washes over stones,
withdraws,
then washes over them again:
faces with mouths ragged,
eyes empty casks,
hands of hunters and kings
who struck fires,
built towers and tombs
in fear of enemies and gods,
and kept watch over the sea—
the eternal sea in its eternal mission
of ebb and flow, wash and cleanse,
upon the stones,
the still and eternal stones.

About the Author

John T. Hitchner was born and raised in New Jersey and is a graduate of Glassboro State College (now Rowan University) and Dartmouth College. He has also studied at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom and the New York State Summer Writers Conference at Skidmore College. His poetry and fiction have appeared in many journals. He is married and lives in Keene, New Hampshire where he teaches Coming of Age in War and Peace and Creative Writing.

Not Far From Here

John T. Hitchner

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