

Ghosts in Earthly Colors

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Love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source. It dies of blindness and errors and betrayals. It dies of illness and wounds; it dies of weariness, of witherings, of tarnishings. - Anais Nin

The Guide to Defending Yourself Against Indigenous Non-Living has a single entry on romantic love between a member of the living-class and one among the dead. It is exactly two sentences long, and it reads as follows: It is a situation that should be avoided at all costs. Both parties will feel overwhelmed by the need to exist in the same state – be that life or death – and, because it is impossible for the dead to return to life, there is only one available option.

On James's third day at the hospital in Saigon, every canvas chair in his ward is found stacked into a single, tall ziggurat. The nurses circle around it, running their index fingers down the moist fabric, droning softly amongst themselves before separating to scold the patients, followed by a whorled cloud of Maybelline face powder and insect repellent. On the fifth day, the televisions in the game room turn on spontaneously and broadcast Vietnamese funeral bells over a static screen for twenty minutes. Nothing surprises him anymore. The thing has been following him since Echo Company hiked up the Mekong River, disrupting their radio signals, their compasses, and the heart monitors at the medical tent, brittle fingers that wrap around his wrist, and demand look at me, look at me.

The most terrible thing about the hospital is the boredom, the whiteness, the cyclic schedule of stethoscopes and morphine drips. To amuse himself, he imagines the appraisals of the doctors to be enemy chatter, the tap of the nurse's white heels are intermittent bursts of gunfire, and the heart rate

monitors beeping without cease, a countdown to an appointment made against his will. He lies awake, listening to the death march of his heart, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. The nosebleeds are regular now and the night nurse waits with a handful of tissues. She holds it to his face, blood splatters across the front of her dress like a buckshot wound, the look of disgust on her mouth at odds with the gentleness of her hands on his scalp.

Her lips are moist against his ear, the words sloppy, murmured, English, a nursery rhyme, ashes, ashes, we all fall down, while he stares at the overhead lamps, lights of such clarity and precision that his eyes ache and his heart swells.

He knows he is going to die.

He knows the spirit watched the bullet rip through his solar plexus, and held him together with her cold hands, and silently promised him a death more beautiful than this. And now, she follows any nurse that shows even the most cursory interest in him, gripping her nightgown, skin shorn thin over her knuckles, screaming vulgarities in a language he does not understand.

It's no jungle-thing, not the humanoids with perpetually dilated eyes that had crouched in the canopies along the riverside, or the folk ghosts in the wells and temples of the villages. This thing is quiet and hungry and childish, and it kicks the metal frames of the hospital beds and steals the sheets and swaps the pills in the bottles of the medicine cabinet. Sometimes, he sees it crouched at the edge of his bed in the night, a wicked too-sweet smile, fingers folded into an empty pillowcase, black dog, black owl, black-haired Vietnamese girl with electrocuted eyes and blood pooling in her mouth, her nails peeled back, her hair in clumps like barrettes next to her temples.

She has a flat chest and narrow hips that bulge like twin bird skulls, and her eyes are both blank and exacting, raptorial, and she has an irritating habit of telling the truth, immediately and completely. The first time she had spoken to him was to say, "I like you," which was the thing he least wanted to hear. He had responded, "Go away," staring at the shoulder exposed by her lopsided nightgown, not sure if he meant it, because the current players had grown stale and uninspiring, and her stance was hunched but assertive. "Go away. We have ways of dealing with things like you."

She had only smiled, the smallpox scars on her cheeks deepening like dimples.

She has scratched six marks into the wooden nightstand next to him, and waits until he is watching to drag a bisecting line through the first. A crude X. The gesture's meaning is clear and absolute.

Five more days.

He is going to die and he doesn't know what he despises more: the things that could have been, the possibilities, or the fact that his life will be taken away before they have a chance to be realized. Soldiers are liars, but the truth is a cancer; the truth is the red Vietnamese earth; the truth is a gun leveled at the back of his head. His stomach hurts, it really hurts, but he doesn't want to die. When the ghost loses some of her shyness and threads her fingers

between his toes, he feels his knees lock. He ignores the haunted speculation, the strangely lacking feeling of her knuckles against the calluses on his feet. “What do you want?” he says, and his voice no longer sounds like his own, edged by panic. She bends down and kisses his shin, her hair catching in his toenails, and no, he thinks, no no no no no, but also please yes.

It must have been before the bullet pushed through him in Nghia Lo; nighttime and Echo Company gripping each other’s shoulders in the out-of-the-atmosphere blackness, not speaking, the weight of suppressed fear and sexuality upon them. They were repeatedly awoken by periods of enemy fire. The collective sleep deprivation was doing strange things to all of them. They saw things that were not there or were, and found themselves unable to decide which was more unsettling: autonomous lanterns moving across the distant rice paddies or snakes with red, jeweled eyes. Vietnam had everything it took to grow ghosts and gods — time and blood. Vietnam had everything it took to make them think stupid things about brotherhood and destiny, and if one of them died, they all died. And Vietnam had what it took to make that seem a little romantic, a little okay. The American media called the conflict a labyrinth, a maze, the most complex game of chess ever played — massive pieces moving across a board, both queens gone, and the pawns tumbling with no strategist to guide them, East versus West, and both versus the world, and in the end, maybe everyone was on the side of the apocalypse — but really, it was so simple. Simple and beautiful like dying.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

The girl was in the river.

This in itself was not particularly worth noticing. There were always girls in rivers, cows with their throats slit on the roadside, snipers in the hills, landmines, statues of the War Buddha with deep cracks in his ribcage, hyper-intelligent spiders with eight calculating eyes, water that tasted like piss and piss that looked like blood, and Elks sucking on barbiturates as if they were breath mints and tallying, “I got nine of them in Than Uyen. That’s another thirty points, brother.”

“Points. Stop talking about your fucking points. This isn’t a fucking game,” James said, but inside he was slightly delirious, because though Elks was only saying this to compensate for the inexpressible, he was unaware that he had accidentally stumbled upon the truth.

“What are you talking about, man? Of course it is. You have to play it better than Charlie does.”

The girl was in the river, wearing a white nightgown that was billowing and bubbling around her. She may have been bleeding, but all the rivers in this province resembled pink floral teas, the dilute red dust of agricultural land. It should have crossed his mind that ghosts did strange things in water, or at least they did according to his *Guide to Defending Yourself Against Indigenous Non-Living*, a handbook for avoiding, identifying, or manipulating (officially, negotiating) any species a foot soldier was likely to come across in

the line of duty. This field looked as though it had not been fully realized, a carbon sketch, an under-painting, exactly the sort of place the handbook claimed ghosts were especially prevalent. He should have recognized it in the same way he knew how to recognize hostile civilians — but the rains were collecting the ashes from a burning village twenty kilometers away and depositing them on his shoulders, particles of home and dog and human, and he was feeling that peculiar sympathy for the enemy that seemed to free him from responsibility. The earring shone subtly in the girl's ear.

"Don't do it, brother," Elks said from behind him. Always brother this, brother that, like he was a goddamned monk or Negro or something. "I don't like the looks of this place. Get all your points taken away, and then the game's over."

Maybe he did it just to spite Elks. Maybe it was because her spirit already had its little fingers around his ankle, and he just didn't know it yet. He bent down and unclasped it from her earlobe, disappointed by the inane moment that followed. "Souvenir," he explained, and tucked the gold hoop into his pocket.

He wrote about it later, in a letter to his mother. He wrote about how much he hated the war, how much he dreaded going home, and how hard he had to try to keep from nuzzling adoringly against the butt of his rifle because it was the only thing keeping him from death, or — if he did not leave Vietnam in a box — the lifetime of irritated boredom that would surely follow. Sometimes he wrote about a mid-sized mid-Western city, and his dumb wife, and his kids who would grow up to be fat and alcoholic and freckled, and he fucking hated freckles. He wrote that he didn't know which was worse. He would get a job in an office building. His wife would be an East Coast prep-school dropout who spent two years in San Francisco learning how to play the acoustic guitar, and she would write country songs that were not particularly good, and they would have one child and then another, and they would forget all the private jokes they once shared, and she would learn to drink, really drink, and her thighs would get cellulite, and she would eat toast in their bed and get crumbs in the sheets, and they would fight over the crumbs, and after a while, he would know nothing about her, except that he hated her every time he woke with pockmarks on his arm from where stale crust had been digging into him in the night. He wrote that he did not want to leave the jungle. He understood how this country made ghosts inevitable, and that they were watching him right now, but it was all right; they couldn't read this because they didn't speak English, just some crazy shit that wasn't Vietnamese, wasn't even human.

He didn't send these letters. He sent the ones where he asked about the new Rolling Stones record, and if his sister was doing all right in high school, and if they could mail him a picture of his girlfriend.

War was more embarrassing than anything else, he thought. It was like everyone got to see the faces you only made in private; the sadness, the anger, the frustration that arrived with every speck of the knowable because there was boundless unknowable behind it. War was shitty and terrifying and a

hell of a lot better than anything he'd ever done back home, better than sex and beer and pot and a brand new baseball wrapped in the palm of his right hand. So this place might have been getting to him a little, but he didn't want to go home. Richie from Louisiana went a little nuts and mowed down a family near the Mu Gia pass and he was sentenced to supermarkets, girls in canvass sneakers, lecture halls, and a tremulous zeitgeist of hallucinogens, transcendental meditation, Charles Manson, Sadie Glutz, beautiful and bald with halogen-lamp eyes, sexy Sadie, what have you done?

In America, the ghosts were docile and compliant. Just last year, they found a whole colony of men with buffalo heads living in an open plain and built a strip mall over them without incident, except the rare occurrence of chanting over the intercom and the occasional overpowering smell of animal feces. America was just too new. In England, they had an agency, complete with receptionists and bureaucrats, to deal with the sorting of souls; unfortunately, the system had proved to be as efficient as any government project, and the number of reported hauntings had actually increased. This was due, for the most part, to a nonsensical filing system and the seemingly preternatural ability of paperwork to get misplaced.

His captain described the Vietnamese spirits as no-good-sons-of-bitches, and each private was issued a handbook -- a list of rules, like do not touch objects with a suspicious aura, do not stare into a black lake after dark -- but direct contact with them was rare, and besides, they had Special Ops guys for dealing with any hoodoo Charlie decided to throw at them. James was only barely accustomed to seeing a family sitting cross-legged on their lawns with a picnic of fish and sweet cakes while their bodies lay inside, picked apart by a fragmentation grenade and full of shrapnel.

"This country," Elks said, crushing a codeine tablet between his molars, "Let me tell you."

On second thought, maybe he shouldn't have touched the earring.

The nurse puts a hand on his shoulder and her mouth moves in a way that he supposed makes words. "Bullet to the stomach, snipers," he explains, though that may not be the question she asked. She nods in sympathy and changes the bag on his morphine drip. He feels as though his eyes are made of cotton. Pushing his head into the pillow, he doesn't watch when she cleans out his bedpan. He turns to the spirit, who is sitting on the windowsill with her knees drawn up to her chest as she draws ugly geometric patterns in the dust with her index finger. She was displeased when the nurses took down her tower of chairs and has taken to flinging them violently across the ward. Yesterday, they moved them all to another floor and one of those suited Special Ops guys had shown up, scanned the room from top to bottom with a portable Infrared bulb and declared, "Poltergeist. I'll have a monk come by tomorrow and perform an exorcism."

All the while his ghost, his ghost, did some stupid gingerly dance around him and laughed and laughed, her wet hair floating behind her like the

ribbons cheerleaders wore back home.

“I don’t remember anything before the chopper picked me up,” he says when the nurse doesn’t respond. The ghost watches him and he can feel her falling in love, a terrible feeling that pours forth from the useless, one-dimensional non-organs inside of her, and his mind says no no no no, but also yes, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. “You can go now,” he tells the nurse, but she is no longer standing there. His ghost appears satisfied with this, her eyes tremulous with greed. She hooks her index finger into the earring then tugs, distending the earlobe too much to be natural. She crawls into the hospital bed and moves delicately over the wires and the IV tubes.

The manual says: if you find yourself being personally haunted or experiencing black-outs indicative of possession, tell your superior immediately, and he will contact Special Operations personnel. The manual had been thrown together hastily after an entire platoon was lost to ritual suicide, following possession by a legion of dead Vietnamese soldiers, and because of this it is full of misspellings and typographical errors such as: the first step in a successful exorcism lies in uncovering at least one of two things — one, the spirit’s true name, or two, its reasons for not passing on. The most commonly encountered explanations for this include: avenging their death or the deaths of their loved ones, protection of a person or place, or out of bitterness and the desire to torment the loving. It was supposed to be living, and the new edition had corrected the mistake, but he feels the original was perhaps more accurate.

To torment the loving.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

She gives a tuneless hum and reaches for his hand beneath the bed sheets, a reassuring squeeze that crushes his fingers together. He is going to die, and he knows it. “My English is getting better,” she says, a stream of water escaping her mouth, the sheets growing suddenly cold around his arm. She nibbles at his wrist bone, and he cannot forget for a moment that she is here to kill him.

To torment the loving.

“Then tell me, now that you can, why are you here?” he whispers, although it hardly matters, since the hospital ward is full of men weeping, sobbing for their mothers, begging for morphine, laughing, cursing, shitting themselves — being overheard talking to oneself hardly seems consequential.

She releases his hand and unfolds to full height, her feet shoulder width apart on the mattress. When she hooks her fingers over the rim of the florescent lamp above him, he is sure she is going to take off and swing like a howler monkey, a burning canopy, the smell of napalm. She pushes it, so that it rocks on the metal links attaching it to the ceiling, and he sees the light sweeping over his eyelids. “You stole my earring,” she explains, her head tilting to the left.

“I gave it back.”

War is nothing if not life, not crime, not death, taken to dramatic ex-

tremes. War is like paranoid schizophrenia with an outside feed. Of course, stealing an earring from a dead body is punishable by execution. From beneath her, he can see up her nightgown, smooth girl thighs and hipbones like skulls. She tugs at the hem of her dress and crouches again, a faint ochre flush on her face.

“You stole it. Just giving it back doesn’t absolve anything.”

Absolution, absolution, what a strange word to bring up in this context. He drops his cigarette into the cup of used mouthwash on his nightstand. Such a wonderful word, full of sadness and incidental poetry. He feels his heart contract and he wants her to say it again. The boy in the bed next to him used to build forts from his cigarette cartons, cheap red boxes, and he never smoked a single one. He either died or went home, and now they are James’s cigarettes, and he hopes to God the kid went home, because a pack of Marlboros in Vietnam are definitely worth haunting over. She sends down a cruel smile that James feels in his stomach, his lungs, his balls.

She continues, “Death is black and boring. And it’s hungry. I am hungry all the time. My stomach begs and begs, but my mouth is the size of a pinhead.”

He wonders if it’s still so bad if it comes from the hands of something that loves you. He closes his eyes and doesn’t remember sleeping, but when he wakes later, lonely, aching for her, she is dancing through the trays brought out to serve their evening meal. He had been dreaming of his girlfriend back home, who is pretty and dumb and blonde and studies the Romantics at a university in Massachusetts, and who wears pastel sweaters and white linen sneakers and the skin of her bottom lip is always too pink from smoking her cigarettes all the way down to the tip. Sometimes, he would cling to her in the backseat of her sedan and press his ear to the itchy fabric of her shirt, ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum, and wish and wish for it to stop, because he is selfish, so selfish, and he doesn’t want anyone to ever love her but him, and it would take nothing, just a twist and snap, that’s it, birth and death, easy as anything, but forgive us the breadth of a lifespan between. He rarely stops to wonder how much of his wit and instinct is tempered by this insanity.

“You’re awake again,” the ghost states, pirouetting on the ball of her left foot. “I wanted to ask you something else.”

“What is it?”

“As a matter of curiosity, were you a brave soldier?”

“That question is irrelevant.”

“Oh,” she says. She has a white towel in her hand and it floats horizontally as she spins. While he slept, she scratched another line from the nightstand. Only three left, now.

“I got up every morning,” he says to the silence.

Funny, the times he remembers best are not the moments when he saw action, but the lulls. The days of marching single file, knee-deep in collected rainwater, cow shit, rice paddies, with Elks behind him, bisecting a pain

pill in one hand with the thumbnail of the other, and Dan in front of him, who was from up North and didn't do much but complain about the heat and swat at mosquitoes. He had a talent for this, and his uniform was always freckled with dots of blood, since he caught them in the act nine times out of ten. They had been together long enough to memorize the freckles on the back of each other's necks, their speech patterns, the nonsensical themes of their conversations. He remembers the rain starting and stopping. The shooting starting and stopping. Everything existing in cycles.

All that matters in life happens in the moments of absence.

James had come from Massachusetts and spent his life sneaking away from burgundy brownstones, stepping over stray fan blades and trash can lids and the remains of ceramic pots, and avoiding his secondary school teachers, and faking sick, and huddling over radios with men in white sleeveless tops, and baseball, baseball, baseball, the sacred red soil of the field, and the scent of leather gloves, and the smooth white plates, and walking through the playing field at night was the same feeling as being born, again and again. He was never any good, not like his best friend who just knew where the ball was, knew with some preternatural sense they were too young to name. Still, it was all James had thought about, ever, in his earliest memories, baseball, never good enough to be a pro, but talented at hopping the fence with Thomas in old Keds sneakers, and a ball they'd stolen from the drug store on Tenth Avenue, which had been lost, found, stolen, fought over, won, and now permanently affixed in his field of vision. The bats were James's father's, who had died of cancer. His mother cleaned hotel rooms in Boston proper, and slept deeply through the night, and would never notice the crack of an opening window or the chime of glass Coke bottles being heisted from the refrigerator.

To say he hadn't wanted to go to war was a lie. A baseball game, an international conflict, an outcome dependent on delicate fractions of time, on the changing nature of the players, what was the difference? Americans played to win, always.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

Vietnam was too humid, and the night that Elks got shot in the head was unearthly in its darkness. There was only the sound of gunshots, illusory speed trails following bullets, and James, with his hands over his helmet, falling to his knees. His captain screaming to get down, get down, get down, and stupid thoughts going through James's head, I already am.

If anything, he wanted it to be quick and soon and painless before he was forced to go home. Maybe he was already dead, and his heart was still marching on, double time, waiting for her to dig her little hand into his chest and squeeze. He had already seen her twice since that day on the river, shy, tiptoeing behind the company, peeking out from behind trees, huts, and rocks. Men were shouting around him, and for the first time since the baseball fields of his youth, he felt something other than inanity and boredom. He shoved his hand into the pocket of his army-issued jacket and wrapped the earring around his fingers and waited for the shooting to stop. He'd never felt strongly about

anything except for baseball, and this – this fear, paranoia, and blindness had gone to his head. He felt drunk, and wonderful, and terrified. Three days later, after his fifth sighting of the ghost, he threw it into a field of horsetail grass and screamed, “Fine, take it back,” and she would, but it wouldn’t mean anything.

The shooting stopped. The shouting stopped. Elks was dead, but other than that, everything went back to normal. Or, at least, as normal as it got it Vietnam. They marched and fought and shot and cowered like whipped dogs and prayed and prayed and prayed, even though he’d always claimed to be an atheist (a real God would take care of all these translucent souls floating around, bumping into things, brushing shoulders with the living, lacking all purpose). More than once, he dreamt of catching his ghost by the throat, and snapping, “What are you, really?” but he was afraid of the answer that might follow. Ghosts were terrifying in their sincerity.

Elks didn’t stick around to haunt him, and so James stole what was left of his pain pills before the helicopter lifted Elks and all his possessions into the sky, and he swallowed two of them with water, and that’s probably why he felt so slow and heavy when the shooting started up again, and then he was cursing himself, he had fucked himself over, drugged himself for the one time he felt, above all, hopelessly and ruthlessly alive. But maybe that was all for the best in the moment the bullet entered him, burrowing through his torso, bright and blinding, and painful. Then he was bleeding away, bleeding into the cool Vietnamese soil, the world backwashed in red, his ghost materializing over him, a look of mock concern that — under other circumstances — he would recognize as a concealed threat, no one gets to kill you but me. He reached for her neck and was rewarded by a sensation of sub-cold that entered between his ribs, and then everything inside was locked in place. His lungs wouldn’t move or his voice box.

He thought, don’t touch me, but he also thought, please save me, and by the time he closed his eyes on the battlefield, he still had no idea which was happening.

“If we had met when you were alive, would this have been different?” James asks.

It’s such a stupid, childish question, but he has to know, because in the night he wakes between each heartbeat afraid that the next one won’t come, reaching for her, terrified of her, and of her not being there. She is sitting cross-legged between his thighs, dripping water unto his sheets, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes in a gesture that is surprisingly canine. The earring falls against her neck. “If we had met when we had been alive, I think you would have tried to kill me.”

“Probably not, unless you did something stupid,” he says.

She considers this. “I was doing stupid things all the time. I drowned.”

“Drowned,” he says. It seems too simple, too mundane. “Like Ophelia.”

She tries to pronounce the English name, but gives up on the second try, and he decides maybe he shouldn't tell her that story because he can't picture her singing and distributing flowers to soldiers on this battlefield of national defeat: there's a rue for you, and there's some for me. She courts him and he entertains her suit. She is beautiful because she is a child, and will be a child always, and if children are allowed to live for too long, they are murdered by adults, a slow death by poison, and that will never happen to her. The nurse brings him bland food on a tray, along with a handful of violently purple grapes, and the ghost presses them to her mouth before dropping them into his lap, and they will taste like death, but the indirect kiss will be sweeter than the lipstick-bitter mouths of any of the girls back home.

Grapes, he thinks, remembering Catholic School, are associated with blood. The blood in his heart, making its last few marches through his body, lost, near the point of panic, moving through the jungle in child-like sorrow, past the beetles, and orange snakes, and parrots, and temples carved into the sides of a monumental cliffs. Surrounded. Last inning. All players on the field. All things fragmented, so that even the most mundane forms appear as symbols.

All games, like baseball plays, like wars, like people, must have an ending.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

"Besides," he says, but he doesn't know what thought he is continuing, "I don't know anything about you."

She shrugs, spitting the single grape she had kept into her palm with a look of disgust. It is whole, wet, and unchewed. "It doesn't really matter. Being dead outweighs all of my other qualities by far," she says and refuses to elaborate. Her sigh is directed at the uneaten fruit.

"I don't even know your name," he says. James hopes she does not notice the nervous energy in his voice.

She wags a finger at him, letting the grape fall carelessly from her hand. Even the most awkward and clumsy of her movements take on a numinous quality, Eastern spirits and their multiple aspects: maternal and homicidal, erotic and demonic. She is both reality and a subversion of reality. "You know I won't fall for that one."

He wants to know what the hell the nurses did with his handbook.

He wants to know why the monk the Special Ops guy promised never fucking showed up.

The ghost picks another grape from the plate and closes her hand around it. When she loosens her grip, the grape is gone, replaced by a baseball which she bounces twice in her palm before aiming it at James. A lazy, curved toss that he should catch easily, even with the wires and tubes attached to his arms. He holds out a hand, but hears the ball hit the metal bedframe and drop unceremoniously to the floor.

"You're out," she says, gleeful.

"I'm supposed to get two more tries."

“Since when have we been playing fair?”

There are two marks left on the nightstand. James wonders how many men are killed by ghosts, out here, and how many Washington admits are killed by ghosts. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing you haven’t tried to stop me from doing.”

Elks was the sort of person with Theories. He was also, without doubt or comparison, the single most perverted man that James had ever met; which meant something, seeing as he had gone from the hormone-fueled world of team-sports to the hormone-fueled world of warfare, boy’s games, both of them. Because of this, Elks spent the majority of their evening ritual of digging foxholes engaged in a one-sided monologue in which he alternately philosophized and asked James questions about his girlfriend back home.

“Love at first sight? Soulmates? All that shit?”

James dug his heel into the ground, and did not mention that women had never made him feel much of anything, that nothing had ever made him feel much of anything unless there was a chance that he could lose and lose hard, and that maybe Vietnam was the best thing that ever happened to him and he never wanted to go home. He shrugged. “Guess so, yeah.”

Elks stopped digging. It irritated James. Every night, their foxholes got deeper as Charlie got bolder and Charlie got smarter, but sometimes – in the night – the war was very far away, and he forgot its texture and scent. “You know what I think, brother? They make two copies of you, in case one gets fucked up or fucks up, one or the other. Even if you never get to meet, it’s okay, because they’re still out there, doing the same job as you are.”

James thought of the girl in Massachusetts. Her name was Shannon, maybe. He sat in front of her at a movie theater. She had her feet up on the back of his chair, and there was a globule of petrified gum on her left shoe. Later that night, she’d called him ugly because he was, with a baseball cap to hide his thin hair and an inert, expressionless face. She’d kissed him with tongue, and he liked fighting with her better than he liked fucking her, but at least his uncle had stopped accusing him of being a fag. “That makes no fucking sense at all, Elks.”

Elks took his helmet off, and beneath it he was wearing a checkered headscarf. It was a bad habit, and when Elks took a bullet to the head, several days later, the irony would not be lost on James. It was one of the few times Elks was actually wearing the damned thing. “Yeah, brother” he said, shaking his head. “You’re right. It’s probably one of those things, like, thinking about it too hard will reveal some god-awful secret about the universe, and then you go crazy.”

Twenty years ago, scientists figured out how to split the atom in two. Less than ten years ago, Kennedy put a man on the moon. “There are no more secrets about the universe, Elks.”

“Ha. Wouldn’t that be the worst one of all?” Elks lit a cigarette, cupping it in his hand so that the ember could not be seen from a distance. “Fuck

it, brother. When I get home, I'm going to learn German and read Kant. What about you?"

James shrugged. He had already made the decision not to go back to school. He did not miss his family, except in some vague obligatory way, and it was more nostalgia than genuine longing, and he couldn't remember the names of any of his friends, and sometimes he dreamt of a baseball pitch after the rain, but this game was so much better, even with Elks on his team.

God, he loved this country.

"I'm going to get a degree in business," he said, and pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. He only ate the bread and dessert cans of his C-rations. They felt soft.

Maybe Elks was on to something, he thinks now, tracing the ghost's carvings in the nightstand with his index finger. Maybe, in this world, there are only two of them, gaining in scale and ferocity, player against player, straining towards one another, but she's cheating and he is disheartened, disinterested, and this could have been the best game of all, and she could have been his favorite playmate, and all his miasmic longings are suicidal, at best. There's nothing like this in the handbook, nothing at all, nothing that tells you how to cope with a dead girl's wet hair, clinging to your face like seaweed when she folds her body over to kiss the corner of your mouth. She tastes like algae and stomach acid and her skin feels amphibious, and somewhere his future-never-to-be-wife is singing about murder and whiskey and he doesn't care, he can't think except for stop no please. The ghost's fingers are curled around his pubic hair, tugging softly like she's not sure what to do, she's just as scared as he is and when she straightens, he coughs up the river water that has transferred from her mouth to his and shoves her off. There is a freshwater mussel clinging to the sleeve of his hospital gown. "That's disgusting," he says.

"What you do is disgusting."

He doesn't want to argue, does not want to admit guilt or cowardice or defend the necessity or hidden morality of war, because he doesn't really believe any of those things anyway. He does not say how the war arrived in his life as a means of salvation; he'd spent nine months living in a dormitory, filled with such restlessness that he ate all of his meals standing, pacing each time he put down his fork, and how the manila folder that arrived with his name on it was all that could calm the staccato sensation in his chest. He could not debate or defend Communism or Capitalism if his life depended on it, and it has, and look where that's got him. "I did my job. Anyway, fuck you and your little countdown, just kill me already."

He got a letter this morning, saying he is discharged and being sent home. He does not know if she is aware of this.

"That's nobody's job. You think my death was justified because of where I lived on earth."

If time has not stalled, then it is lazy. The air, too viscous. The nurse materializes to change his IV, and then dematerializes. They no longer change his sheets or wash his hair, and he misses the sensation of the warm sponge

against his forehead, the linen-smell of powdered soap. But his ghost throws a tantrum when they touch him, and tips the bedpan over, or drops jumping spiders down their dresses, or rips through the screens and lets the mosquitoes in, and they mutter, “That poltergeist again.” But they all know by now, that it’s him. He is marked, cursed, and they must sense his despair, and reverence, and shame, despite the letter on his nightstand that says he is going home. They’ve all seen it happen and sigh, a heavenly maternal sound, and while they can’t understand the endless green wall of jungle, and the missions, and the pursuit of an unseen enemy, and how it all coalesces, personified into one great Buddha-figure of War with a capital W, at least when they misunderstand — they do so with the upmost tenderness.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

“I’m going to do it, because you are far too perfect to ever leave,” she says, without being prompted, and he makes every attempt to suppress the swell of pride the words begin in him.

One notch left.

“Have you spent one moment of your life thinking about other people?”

“This has nothing to do with revenge.”

“You’re right,” she says, “It doesn’t.”

The one nurse who is not afraid of him wipes his eyes and talks to him about God, and asks why he’s crying, and he can’t stand to hear it, because the only God he wants to know are the old spirits of the jungle encroaching on the mortal world.

“Are you doing this to save me?”

“That’s even stupider than your first assumption.”

For some reason, she made him think of his father, his poor father, who smoked too many cigarettes and died, but did not leave any kind of hole or emptiness behind; pinched out of existence, along with his memories, and his aftershave, and his collection of signed baseball cards like they hadn’t been there all along. What was the difference? Why did some people disappear and some remained tethered to the earth, bobbing above the ground like helium balloons?

She had been following him for a full week. “Whatever,” he told her, even though she had hardly spoken yet, and Elks was watching him over his shoulder, you okay, brother?, this place isn’t getting to you, is it?, and James shrugged and ignored the little ghost inside of himself that desperately wanted to rise to the bait, tucked neatly beneath his stomach.

Later that day, they had done a sweep of a village in the delta, and

shot two goats just for the hell of it, and he felt the world dismantling into its simplest, geometric forms – the strike of a gunshot, the yelp of an animal. James was not a conversationalist, his arguments were clumsy, and he failed so many classes in high school that they only let him graduate out of misplaced sympathy, but this, he could understand.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

When it happens, it is simple – just like everything else. He registers the commotion around him, but his attention is held by the great War Buddha, golden and speechless, and his disciple of a girl, all white gown and black eyes and mad heart. He can feel her shoulders heaving with laughter as she kisses him, and the water fills his mouth and his lungs and his limbs and he drowns in a hospital bed, but the sound of the blood sloughing inside of him is louder than it has been in all his life.

In 1975, the United States Army distributed the final and most thorough edition of the Guide to Defending Yourself Against Indigenous Non-Living. It circulated for exactly four months before the war ended, and the soldiers returned to America, where ghosts did nothing but moan in empty Victorian-style houses and, on occasion, get tangled in electrical boxes.

The most notable revision was the addition of a new chapter on the ghosts of American soldiers who had died on Vietnamese soil. It was the longest chapter by far, as these particular spirits had caused more disruption to both sides than any other species; however, it was mostly composed of psychological hyperbole, and no soldier in possession of the manual truly took its advice into consideration. The stories circulating between companies were far more informative and terrifying, since no one could imagine who would want to stay here, here, of all places, forever and ever, only the real crazy ones, who felt as if some invisible force had drawn them, and who were excited by the way Charlie endlessly eluded them because it meant they got to keep playing, it meant the game went on and on. In the worst stories, the dead American soldiers were teamed up with dead Vietnamese villagers with bundles beneath their arms and hand grenades hidden in their hats, covered in mud and blood and cow shit, because those are the ones for whom the war had nothing to do with Capitalism and Communism, East and West, with Right and Wrong, those who were the ones who loved the war for the war's own sake, a lonely and powerful devotedness. Those were the scariest ones of all, slumping across the lines of charred earth, through the radiant spin of insects, emitting a low sound like flutes and cymbals, marching forever.

Ghosts were men who became the reflection on the barrel of their pistols, on the damp jungle floor.

They printed no new editions of the handbook because the war ended. The soldiers went home and spent their money on shoes and houses and cars, or lost themselves to the untranslatable pain of having no home, and for those that remained, Vietnam was yellow and green like land in its becoming.