

Emma Bean

War Touched Us Here

My eldest brother had just been deployed across the Pacific. I still vaguely recall his first letter home. *Our mission is never clear here*, he wrote, describing his new life in the army. *I was under the impression that we were expected to bring civilization, but I can't see that the way we live is any more civilized than the natives. We keep ourselves occupied, though.* I had imagined this as a more rustic camping trip that would be the continuance of Chet's high school years, roasting weenies and playing touch football. In reality, I think my brother spent his "at war" stoned, which was okay as long as you did what you were told (one of Chet's many talents) and didn't talk back.

My other brother was mostly interested in girls, and drugs too at that point, but instead of being at war he was at his drums, so I was left mainly to myself. Except when I was expected to work in my father's store, *the* store in our small town. I was the only son around, representing my brothers and all that, all the mothers of other boys in my class and my brothers' classes asking about Chet. Chet could have been fine or dead for all I knew, because we hardly ever got word from him, and leastwise, I wasn't trying to have any more contact with my classmates' mothers who would clutch their handbags in remorse and shake their heads, pretending to sympathize, really just afraid that their son would be next. An occasional mother would reach over and pet my arm, pretending to soothe me, but it was the reality of me, the live flesh and blood, that actually soothed them. I was a charm against those devils

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across the Pacific; my blood ran red, white and blue against that telegram, the harbinger of sorrow. I was beginning to prefer staying in the back storage rooms, pretending to stock useless bolts and screws. Near the end of the summer, I got my own job. It was outside of town, a game farm, working for the state. It didn't pay particularly well, but a guy I used to pal around with in school worked there too, so we'd spend the day shooting the shit and cleaning cages and laying seed and preparing for the oncoming winter. It was hard work, but it was outdoors, and no one interfered with us much.

Occasionally, after the day's work, we'd bring the tools back to the shed near the boss's one-story house, once gray, now stained darker gray and black by the unpredictable rain and lack of upkeep, contrasting the surrounding greens and yellows, a stubborn stone in a field meant for cultivation. He'd be out on the porch, even if the day wasn't warm, staring off, sometimes at the setting sun, sometimes in that general direction, but evidently at nothing in particular. We'd try and make as little noise as possible, not wanting to disturb what might have been tranquility, though his expression was never serene. I always avoided looking at him squarely in the face, and I especially avoided looking at him during those times on the porch when his hardened face was in a kind of neutral position, convoluted and revving, gathering potential energy, so that it was impossible to gauge just exactly which gear he was going to jump off into.

People say that times were different then. I suppose I ought to have an opinion, one way or the other. They might be right: if times were different, or if they weren't, if one war is better or worse than another, or if there is any one time that is remarkable in its capacity for confusion, and for pain. All I know is that I was young then, much younger, and my parents were much younger then, too. It was just after the sixties, so I recall them, my parents, as mostly a blur of cocktail attire, phone calls to the neighbors, the nightly news and an after-work martini. Everything is colored by a soft blue-gray haze, either from the fading of time or the cigarette that was permanently attached to my mother's hand. She was beautiful then, and the trail of smoke following her from room to room only added to my love of her, her mystery, whistling to the jazz she played softly on the record player.

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Nearing the end of summer and the end of the time I would be working at the farm, a boy and I were heading out to run the usual sleepy-eyed morning rounds when Mr. Hunter—*Hunt* as everyone called him—busted out of the garage in his old Ford truck that must have once been a fire-engine red, but now gave the impression of wilting roses. I don't think he could have worked on that truck much, because it did make a racket. The other boy's words were lost to me, and as *Hunt* pulled up to us, neither of us tried to carry on as we had before, worried that the man had finally lost it; a former service man, it was rumored that he had kept to himself ever since his return from Korea.

He pulled up a few yards away, too close for either of us to be comfortable, and neither of us would admit that he could make a grown man piss his pants, and we were completely afraid. We'd never chosen to be close to him, and when forced into contact, we'd make it as short as possible. But today, he looked us over, his eyes beadily bouncing back and forth between the two of us, and then he reached out a long finger. *Stuarts*, he barked, looking me in the eye for just half a second before jamming his thumb in a backwards motion behind him. *Hop in back. Need an extra hand today.*

I refused the nagging urge to meet the other boy's stare, followed orders, and hopped in the back of the old truck. As we lumbered off, me sitting on the wheel well, I felt a pair of eyes on my back, tugging at my sweatshirt, pulling me back to the small mound of earth where I had been firmly planted only seconds ago. Now we were headed out toward the outer edges of the acreage, out toward the forest and the river, past the cages and the open fields where the pheasants and other small wild-life scavenged for worms and food bits blown by the wind or carried on the backs of smaller critters.

By the time we reached the outer edge of the reserve, the sun had fully risen, as much as it would in the early fall days. It wouldn't get much higher than the jaunty angle in the eastern half of the light blue dome, keeping the plants and grass a type of golden that sticks in my memory, that I can only see in my mind's eye now, or when I look at the faded photographs of the album my mother pieced together from that time. The haze that separates the camera from its object, a dusting that illuminates the space, but also clouds the definition between the physical objects themselves, captured in the image. The longer I think of myself standing there, the sharper the golden light becomes, the lens rotating into focus, the peppered gray of *Hunt's* overgrown military cut, and the individual blades of field grass, varying in length, stirring with the faint drafts spiraling down from overhead, from the shifting of the

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skies and the early migratory paths.

It was on this outermost edge that Hunt had laid his traps. We had often wondered what the large iron clamps could have been for, jumbled in menacing piles behind the tool shed, half hidden by burlap in masses like the ugly excrement of ancient machinery, entrails, chains and sharp edges overlapping. Shifting a clump of dried grass to uncover one of the traps, I could only gasp in exclamation and ask, *but what are they for?* before I remembered that I ought to be too scared to question the old man. Hunt wasn't disturbed by the question, only growling low that they were for protection. *Without us these birds would be defenseless. Never know who might run out of food and take a fancy to a pheasant dinner.* I tried to wrap my head around this, trying to imagine just who exactly we were protecting the pheasants from, but we continued along, checking over each trap that Hunt had laid, uncovering it, seeing that all was in working order, and laying it in the grass again.

After the first ten minutes of the process, I began to loosen up and lose interest in the task, bored at the repetition, annoyed that I couldn't take a cigarette break and that the dried, tall grass was pricking my skin. But that was when we heard the whimpering, faint at first, as if having lost hope in the purpose of calling for help, but in such pain that—the animal, whatever it was—could not contain it. Hunt's eyes narrowed and he started in the direction of the noise. I have no recollection of striding over those few yards, but I must have done it just as Hunt did, one foot in front of the other, stepping left-right-left, toward the destination. I must have just followed.

There, peering around Hunt as I would have had to do, moving away from directly behind him, was a mass of fur, painted brown, at his feet. In all of two seconds it was clear: the paint was not paint, and the mass of fur was an animal. The color of the paste coating the animal was not just brown but a maroon, red, brown from the mixture of blood and dirt that must have been alternately seeping out and drying for the past few hours. Steeling myself to look closer, the animal began to take shape: a leg here, the tail there, the head tucked under another leg, but it was undeniably a dog, midsized, a pet, or more likely a farm dog that guarded one of the nearby farms. The trap had closed firmly on its leg, from what I could tell amidst the blood and grass, and my gut dropped. I couldn't figure why Hunt had laid these traps, and I couldn't figure what kind of pain this dog felt, but I felt this was wrong. These traps, they couldn't be safe. They couldn't be legal, judging by their size. The

animal barely hung on. It was hard to tell just how long it'd been out here, but it wasn't going to last much longer, and this dog did have an owner. I could see Hunt thinking, maybe with a similar train of thought, this animal's death, unlike the countless wilder animals that he must have caught, would not go unnoticed. I waited, wondering what his next possible step could be. He was careful with the next few words that came from his mouth. *Go. Get. My. Gun.*

I stuttered in disbelief, grasping to the naïve hope that there would be no more blood today, perhaps the gun was to call for help. Perhaps.

Seeing my inaction, Hunt strode back to the truck and lifted the gun from behind the seat. Small and narrow, the iron looked cool, and even from the few yards away that I stood, it gave me the idea of pre-meditation. Though I knew next to nothing of guns or armory, I could tell that this was not a farm gun. This was not a gun for hunting. It was a shotgun, a type of weapon that only people who like guns own.

Even though I had been watching his every move, every twitch of his muscle, the cock of the trigger made me flinch. The reality of the sound, while not unexpected, was definite, a promise, a death sentence. The last few minutes stretched as if hours had passed. This morning had been days ago. Hunt motioned for me to take the cool steel from his hands, *come on, boy, take it.* My only response was to stare at the gun, then at Hunt, then at the gun again, not blinking once. *Take it. Shoot the dumb dog.* My breath was shorter now, haggard and uneven. I couldn't even look at the dog again, though I felt it breathing sharply too. The only one who seemed to be able to remove himself from the inaction, a common rush of blood, a fiercely beating heart that linked us all, was Hunt.

No. I whispered softly at first. Then shaking my head back and forth, *no*, I said again, a little louder this time, the shaking of my head gathering resolve and I myself committed to the decision. I would not shoot this dog. Perhaps it would have been more humane to do so, but I would be no part of this. I would not shoot that gun. I would not cause the birds to flutter out of hiding. I would not have the razor-sharp silence following. I would not help Hunt lug the carcass to the back of the truck and then dump it in the river. But neither would I run away. I would not close my eyes as I rode in back with the mangled dog, as I watched Hunt struggle to lift the dog and heave him into the faster part of the river, watched him struggle on the dirt and roots and pebbles that lined the bank, watched him nearly lose his balance and did not make a single move to help.

When we got back to camp, I must have told the other boy. I must have tried to convey my disgust, the revulsion I felt as I watched a grown man struggle, my nausea at my own helplessness. I must have

returned home and lain on my bed, staring at the ceiling for hours until night fell, until I passed out, fully clothed. I must have continued at work as if nothing had happened, finishing that last week before school would start again, and I would turn out for football and make JV, and there would be one girl out of the many I coveted who would talk to me and let me hold her hand, maybe more, and I would go back to my father's store and talk to the mothers, and then in Spring my brother would return with scars, visible and not, and then the next year I would graduate high school and we would all grow up and marry and have children and our parents would die but our children would be growing and we would hope good things for them as parents do, and I would only pause very rarely to remember that time, how that last week I would have scrutinized Hunt each evening, as I was storing away the tools, but he stared off into the distance just the same as ever, just the same look as he might have ever had, gazing at the nothing just past the evergreens.