

# From Where I Sit: Disconnected Memories and Thoughts From Beneath the 58,000

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I pull open the glass doors of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum and walk inside. The heat on my back fades away as the cool air conditioning presses in on me. With each step, the brightness of the sun is slowly replaced by fluorescent lights. As I walk across the lobby towards the entrance, I pass a small café and a welcome desk on my left. The museum's eight-foot-high, barred gate moans as I push it open.



For a moment, the onslaught of sculptures, paintings, and photographs is overwhelming. All around me, items cry out for my attention. A sculpture directly in front of me captures my gaze. From a distance, it looks like a miniature of Michelangelo's *Pietà* – the famous marble sculpture of the Virgin Mary cradling the lifeless body of her son moments after he was taken down from the cross. But as I get closer, the sculpture reveals itself to be of a young marine and small child. The marine looks up at the sky, his arms clutching the child's limp body, his eyes seemingly searching for some answer, some reason. The sculpture seems to contain the short intake of breath before his inhuman wail of anguish explodes through the air.

I've seen the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on two separate occasions, but I've never felt like this before. I feel like something has knocked the wind out of me and detached me from reality. This young boy in front of me looks to be about my age. He could be my best friend, my brother, or even a younger version of my father. For all that I know, this same scene is happening right now somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan. And that scream ripping through the air halfway around the world is the same one reverberating throughout my body. I don't want to keep staring at the statue, but I cannot look away. I take a step back, trying to ground myself in reality, wanting to feel something besides the pain emanating off the sculpture.

Standing in front of the statue, I can see my reflection on the steel entrance to the elevator behind it. The black skirt and high-heeled wedges I had carefully picked out to wear seem

foreign amid the images of warfare, camouflage, and men. I ask myself, how did I end up here, interning at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum? I don't even like war. In fact, I would describe myself as strictly the nonviolent type. Well, except for the occasional spider that unluckily finds its way into my bedroom. Yet, here I am, at a museum dedicated to veterans, a place that by definition implies the presence of war and violence.

My reasons on paper for this internship seem solid, or at least they did before I entered the building. I'm an undergraduate psychology major interested in post-traumatic stress disorder and art therapy. Yet no article about the theory behind trauma or any accompanying photograph in a textbook has ever made me feel like I do now, staring at that statue. I'm so used to speaking about emotion in the callous words of psychology, so used to memorizing terms and theories and regurgitating them into thick test booklets. Now, all that knowledge, all those long classifications and terms seem euphemistic, the jargon stripping the humanity from the human experience, detaching the emotion and casting it aside.

The other reason I use to justify my internship, that I am the daughter of a veteran, looks better on paper than it does in reality. My father may be a Vietnam veteran, but I have never understood what that meant. He never discussed his time in the Navy, and the only things I know about it are what I have pieced together from various items scattered throughout our home: a blue woolen Navy jacket aging in the spare-bedroom closet and a small wooden box locked in a child-proof drawer containing some medals and a few photographs. These items

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always seem so distant, so far removed from the man that I know, like things bought at a garage sale, someone else's history, someone else's life.

The only time this hidden past emerged was on a family trip to Washington, D.C. We were standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial Wall and I watched a few feet away, as my father traced a finger over the name of a stranger, tears rolling down his face.

To me, the moment was unfathomable. This was my father, my superman. The person who gave me piggy-back rides in the den, coached my baseball teams, and filled the hours of long car rides with math games. I have kept this memory of him distant from the others. I never knew how to integrate it and so it remained separate, tucked away.

Standing in front of that statue, I feel like an outsider, like I am behind enemy lines. I may be the daughter of a veteran, I may live in the same country and speak the same language as the veterans who work alongside me, and I may know the history of the Vietnam War, but the atmosphere inside the museum is worlds apart from the one I have lived in for so long.

While I am not the most outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq, I am coming from a liberal, East Coast university known for student activism, and in some ways I feel like a representative of that culture. The very same culture that forty years earlier gave birth to the antiwar movement, pitted the world of academia against the world of the military, and vilified returning soldiers as baby killers.

It's been a few decades since the war in Vietnam ended, but the divisions it created within American society still stand today. Some of those barriers are self-made, others imposed, yet either way, they have created separate realities contradictory to each other. As I stand inside the museum, in front of that statue, I feel like the product of those two legacies. I wonder how to tear down the wall that has so long divided civilians and soldiers. I wonder if it is possible to tear down the smaller one that separates a father and a daughter. I turn away from the statue and head upstairs.

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From my seat at the information desk, I watch people pass by on the street. I can see a woman pushing a stroller, a couple on a bicycle built for two, and a young girl rollerblading. As they pass by, they seem so full of life. The sun beats down upon their skin, reflecting off their sunglasses, and the cool breeze ruffles their hair.

Inside the museum, I feel like I'm watching these strangers on television going about their everyday errands. Most don't even look up or break stride as they pass the faded purple banners with the museum's logo printed on them. Of those that do momentarily pause and peer into the windows, the majority step back as if something inside warns them to stay away. Not even the presence of the small café draws them in. As if the plain brick building and sound of coffee grinding are only an outward façade of normality, the stranger offering candy to lure little children into his car.

Most tourists do not know the museum exists. A few of the Chicago maps I have seen haven't even highlighted its location; 1801 South Indiana remains dark, while the beacons of other museums, parks, and monuments burn brightly. It's there, but only if you know to look for it. Even the museum's location isolates it. A half hour's walk south of downtown is too far for the time-strapped tourist and too short a distance to pay for public transportation.

Only a fraction of the people that walk through the glass doors are here to see the museum; the majority turn into the restaurant. Yet the museum's visitors are easily identifiable. It's something about the way they walk; there is purpose in their step. Nothing distracts them from their mission, not even the beauty of the courtyard next door or the cool breeze wafting in from the coast of Lake Michigan. Those few visitors that do come here make the journey for a reason.

**I wonder how to  
tear down the wall  
that has so long  
divided civilians  
and soldiers.**

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A pilgrimage made not because they want to, but because they need to: to remember a friend, honor a parent, or acknowledge their own past.

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*“Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity.”*

During the half second it takes me to breathe, I prepare my answer. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any brochures at the moment. *But*, I can give you a print-out that tells the history of the museum and how it was founded.” I reach across the counter and pick up the topmost sheet. I feel slightly embarrassed. The corners of the thin, white computer paper are bent and the ink is faded almost to the point of illegibility. I examine the man’s face, desperately hoping the solution will appease him. But something about the man tells me he is the worst kind of visitor, the one ready to explode at the drop of a pin.

He is wearing a blue Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. A large camera hangs around his neck, leaving the area red and puffy. His wife stands a few feet away, crossing her arms and tapping a foot anxiously. She alternates impatient glances between her watch and her two small children dashing across the floor playing a game of tag. The dark circles under both their eyes imply an early morning flight, most likely on a delayed plane with a screaming child. And the veins protruding from their temples indicate they are about one more shrill, prepubescent shriek away from canceling Christmas this year.

Trying to avert the pending eruption of anger, I offer an explanation in my most soothing voice, normally reserved for talking to small children or fluffy animals. “The museum is undergoing a name change from the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum to the Veterans Art Museum. Although the museum was originally founded by Vietnam veterans and the majority of the collection focuses on their work, we want to expand the mission to be more inclusive of all veterans, regardless of nationality or the war they fought in. Until the change is made, we are hesitant to order more brochures with our old name and logo.” I hold my breath and wonder if he would even hear my explanation above the loud screech of his children and hope that the bit about inclusion tugs on his heartstrings enough to avoid an outburst.

As he opens his mouth, I flinch, expecting the worst. Instead, in a calm and even voice, he says, “That’s really something. It’s like I always say, we veterans need to stick together. Never again will one generation of veterans turn its back on the next.” He smiles to himself and lets out a short laugh.

I am stunned by his reaction. How could this simple mention of older veterans embracing the next generation be able to instantly quell his flame of anger? Never in my entire experience of working in customer service have I seen someone pacified with a single phrase. Even after he and his family have walked out the door, I half expect that he will run back to the desk, his eyes bulging in anger, and demand to speak with the manager.

When I first walked through the museum, I was stunned by the full spectrum of emotions presented in the art. I guess I had half expected the majority of pieces to be about emotional turmoil or isolated suffering. And while the museum has its share of this kind, alongside them are those that depict unity and brotherhood. Until this moment, I have never been able to reconcile the differences.

I smile to myself and look up at the dog tags blowing gently in the wind. Each of the more than 58,000 represents a soldier killed during the Vietnam War. As I watch them move together in unison, I think back to a sentence that I had previously not understood. It is from a collection of stories, told by a doctor who worked in an Army hospital during the Vietnam War. Each story is more devastating than the last and at times I found myself not wanting to hear anymore. Yet, now, amid all the pain, I can see the hope.

“As for me, my wish is not that I had never been in the Army, but that this book could never have been written.”<sup>2</sup>”

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“Are you a veteran?”

I look up. The speaker is an elderly man hobbling out of the museum towards the desk. He is leaning on a cane and wearing a black baseball cap with “WWII Veteran” embroidered in gold. Beneath his thick glasses, his eyes are moist.

“Are you a veteran?” he repeats.

“No,” I reply.

“Well, you must be an artist then, right?”

“No, but my father is a Vietnam veteran.” For some reason, I find myself desperately wanting to justify my presence to this complete stranger.

“Interesting,” he says. “When did he serve?”

I furrow my brow and look off to the right. Why do I not know this answer? It’s such a simple question. I frantically search the recesses of my mind, hoping an answer will miraculously appear. A few seconds pass. The man’s gaze does not waver. “I actually don’t know,” I say. “He never really talked about it.”

As the man walks out the door, a thought fills my mind. My father may never have spoken about his time in Vietnam, but that doesn’t explain why I had never asked.

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I admit that I have never been able to walk through the museum in its entirety. Unlike other museums with walls covered with tranquil images of landscapes and haughty-looking aristocrats, each item here tells a story and reveals something personal about the artist. I will not allow myself to just walk by any piece; I feel as if these artists deserve at least a moment of my time. After all, when they were my age they were halfway around the world fighting for their lives, and I’m spending the summer inside an air-conditioned building catering to tourists.

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The collection is a wound that refuses to heal; its containment inside the unbecoming brick building is the bandage that keeps it out of view from the general public.

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*“If you hold a real weapon in your hand, you will feel its character strongly. It begs to be used. It is fearsome. Its only purpose is death, and its power is not just in the material from which it was made, but also from the intention of its makers.”*

*It is regrettable that sometimes weapons must be used, but occasionally, survival demands it. The wise go forth with weapons only as a last resort. They never rejoice in the skill of weapons, nor do they glorify war.*

*When death, pain, and destruction are visited upon what you hold to be the most sacred, the spiritual price is devastating. What hurts more than one’s own suffering is bearing witness to the suffering of others. The regret of seeing human beings at their worst and the sheer pain of not being able to help the victims can never be redeemed.*

*If you go personally to war, you cross the line yourself. You sacrifice ideals for survival and fury of killing. That alters you forever. That is why no one rushes to be a soldier. Think before you want to change so unalterably. The stakes are not merely one’s life but one’s very humanity.”*

—“Thoughts on War” quoted from Den Ming-Dao, a Taoist monk, several hundred years before Christ

Inscribed on the wall of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum

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I reach my hand up in front of my face and rotate the one-inch, square slide before my eyes, trying to make out the image despite the lack of light. Although out of focus, I can see the form of a small jet taking off the deck of a large ship. My eyes water from the strain of squinting; I can feel the distant rumblings of an oncoming headache.

**My father may never have spoken about his time in Vietnam, but that doesn’t explain why I had never asked.**

I put the slide back into the dusty container and pull out the next one. Like many of the other slides in the box, the one I hold now is damaged. Rusty dots and mildew freckle the surface, a reminder that forty years have passed since these snapshots were taken. I try to gently brush off the blemish with the corner of a tissue, but the damage is permanent. I raise the slide above my head and squint my eyes, hoping that the residue will resolve away.

A whisper from across the desk interrupts my concentration, “Tell me, is it a dangling or pregnant chad?” I laugh as the famous photograph from the 2000 presidential election pops into my mind: a balding man, eyes magnified through his glasses and eyebrow raised, stares intently at a ballot raised above his head.

Standing in front of me is a young woman in her late twenties. Dark curly hair much like my own is pushed back from her face by a pair of large aviator sunglasses. Despite her smile, her eyes look sad, as if her joke was a last and futile attempt to cling to something positive. I welcome her to the museum and begin to give a brief summary of the collection’s history. She cuts me off. “No need for explanation. I make the trip here every year. My father was a Vietnam vet and died from complications of post-traumatic stress disorder.” Her smile falters and her voice cracks as she finishes her statement. Without waiting for a response, she walks into the museum.

I let out a long sigh and sink even further into my chair. The silence of the lobby is broken only by the soft jingling sound of the dog tags hanging twenty feet above my head. Although

I cannot see it, I imagine the ringing is emanating from the solitary black one hanging slightly removed from the rest. The one that stands for those never found or who died after the war from the emotional or physical injuries they obtained from their service.

Although I will myself not to, my mind wanders to my own father. Throughout the years, our relationship hasn't always been the best. I remember a time when I refused to speak to him for months on end. We were moving again and I was angry about leaving my friends behind. It seems silly now, especially in comparison. I know that girl would give anything to have one more conversation with her father.

I pick up the next slide and hold it up to the light. I groan. Another photograph of an airplane. What is it with this guy and airplanes? Out of the hundreds of slides I have already looked at, the majority have been devoid of people. Instead, the slides capture the infinite number of angles and variations of lighting that can be used to highlight the mechanical features of planes. My mind wanders to a memory of going to an air show with my father and older brother. Both of them stood transfixed, rattling off names of jets and gasping at their prowess. Meanwhile, I huddled on the ground covering my ears and drew stick figures in the dirt with my toe. I never quite understood or shared the fascination my father had with airplanes.

I pull out the next slide and a well of excitement erupts inside of me. The slide is populated not by inanimate objects, but people. I chuckle as the image reveals itself to me in the waning light. It shows a young man holding up an open issue of *Playboy*. His shoulders are slightly hunched and he has a guilty look on his face, as if expecting that the door behind him would open and display the angry face of his apron-clad mother. The look on the young man's face is so familiar. My own mother has a talent for walking in on the five-second period of nudity or the singular slew of obscene remarks in a movie. I know that the young man in the slide is now my father's age. He's probably a business man, married, has a few kids, lives in Ohio. But I imagine that every now and then that same guilty smile still graces his face.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what my own father would have been like at my age. Yet my memory of him perpetually wearing a business suit and continually worrying about what could go wrong won't allow me. Sure, I've heard stories about his youth, but they always seemed censored or edited. He lived the American dream as the son of a truck driver who became a successful engineer. His goal in life was to have two children that would grow up to be doctors, lawyers, or scientists. He would aspire to live in a suburban home with a white picket fence and a free-spirited,

Frisbee-retrieving dog. A propagator of 1950s American values, chasing after the dream of *Leave it to Beaver* or *I Love Lucy*. The infallible imagery, too benign to be believable.

As I continue to imagine my father in my mind, I realize that the image I have conjured up is exaggerated. The holes in my memory have been filled not with facts but stereotypes. I have relied on images of others to give me answers to the most personal of questions, "How has the war affected him?"

I finish sorting through the rest of the slides and begin to pack up my stuff. When I pass through the glass doors of the museum, the irony does not escape me that I now know more about a stranger's experience of war than my own father's.

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Except for the group of hungry patrons congregated in the restaurant, the museum is devoid of people. Only five visitors today, all of them veterans. I spin around in my chair at the welcome desk and look up. Fifty-eight-thousand dog tags stare back, winking in the light.

No matter how many times I look up, I am always stunned by the amount of space they cover. Each tag is only an inch apart, yet in total they take up the entire ceiling of the lobby. Alone they do not have a voice, but together their faint song fills the silence.

I marvel at the number. Fifty-eight-thousand, almost double the size of the town I grew up in.

As I focus on them, I find myself searching for one in particular, the one that belongs to a stranger. It carries a name known only to my father. Hidden amid tens of thousands of others, I know I will never be able to locate it. But I do know that it is there, always in the background.

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### 309.81 DSM-IV Criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

A. The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following have been present:

(1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.

(2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

B. The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:

(1) recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions.

- (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
- (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur upon awakening or when intoxicated).
- (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
- (5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.

C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

- (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
- (7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:

- (1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
- (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
- (3) difficulty concentrating
- (4) hypervigilance
- (5) exaggerated startle response<sup>3</sup>

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The sound of her black pumps on the tile floor echoes throughout the lobby. One manicured hand clutches a magenta purse while the other holds a white iPhone to her ear. She is wearing a miniskirt and a pink T-shirt with “Blondes Have More Fun” written in rhinestones. Without giving it a second thought, I sigh and look away. She’s not here for the museum.

Yet, instead of turning into the restaurant, she remains inside the lobby talking on her cell phone. Periodically, I look up and watch as she drifts about the lobby, traversing it like an elaborate pre-choreographed dance. As the volume of her voice increases, she moves faster, stopping only when she is listening.

After she hangs up the phone, she seemingly takes in her surroundings for the first time. She is standing in front of one of the museum’s pieces. It is a large mirror with an

oath written on top that soldiers are required to take before entering the military. For a moment, she just stares at it, her eyes focused narrowly on it. She furrows her brow and walks closer. I creep forward in my chair to get a better view. I have never seen someone so enthralled by this piece; most simply walk by it.

She places her hands on her hips and lets out a long sigh. For a brief second, I think she might actually start crying. I hold my breath. What if this moment is the one that changes this girl’s life forever?

Then, she reaches into her purse, pulls out some mascara and begins to fix her makeup. No, she is not here for the museum.

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An elderly woman approaches the desk. She walks toward me with purpose, throwing each step down forcefully. I look up and welcome her to the museum. She returns the smile and says rather matter-of-factly, “I’m here to see a painting. The one by Cleveland Wright.” She waits calmly as I frantically search my mind. Nothing, not even a blurry image appears. I honestly have no idea who Cleveland Wright is.

For what seems like the thousandth time, I feel inadequate and out of place. Is my presence here even meaningful? I can’t even answer questions more complicated than “Where is the bathroom?” or “What time is it?”

Focusing my attention back on the woman in front of me, I meekly ask for her patience as I find the location. It’s times like these that I wish the museum were run by museum professionals and not artists. I take for granted having a database of the collection at the Museum of Fine Arts. All it takes is a simple search and I can pinpoint the location of any piece inside the museum within a few feet. As I head towards the intercom, I try one more time to place the name Cleveland Wright somewhere in the museum, but I am no more successful than before. I switch the dial to the third floor and call upon the closest thing the museum has to a database: Jerry, the general manager. After a short exchange, he says he’ll be right down.

While I’m waiting for Jerry to come to my rescue, I pull out the only thing I can think of, a publication of the museum’s original collection. Although it’s out of date and won’t help me find the location of the painting in the museum, I figure it’s worth a shot. I search through the index looking for the artist. Bingo. I flip to the page and turn the book towards the woman. She lets out a small squeal. “That’s it! That’s my brother’s painting.” She closes her eyes and runs her fingers

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across the page. The tenderness of her gentle caress makes me imagine she is touching a real person and not merely a painting of one. I hear footsteps behind me and look up. Jerry has arrived. After brief introductions, I explain the problem.

Jerry takes a quick look at the book and frowns. “That painting is actually out on loan right now. It is part of a traveling exhibition.” He looks at the calendar behind the desk, thinking for a moment. “But it is still in Chicago at the DuSable Museum.” Noticing the look of sadness on the woman’s face, he continues, “It’s about a half hour trip from here. I can drive you there if you would like.”

As Jerry and the woman leave, I turn the book towards myself. On the page is a painting of a seated woman. One hand clutches a red handkerchief over her face, the other lies limply in her lap on top of a letter. The title, *We Regret to Inform You*, seems to encapsulate it all. A lightbulb above the woman’s head illuminates this private scene, and her pain seems to pass through the paint into my own body. I read the short paragraph next to it and discover the artist died sixteen years ago. He made this painting as homage to a friend who died the day before leaving Vietnam.

Unlike my other encounters with art inside the museum, my feelings of sadness are fleeting. For the first time, I understand that while there is no shortage of pain inside the museum, there is also a strong sense of hope. I can hear it in the voice of the man with the Hawaiian shirt, I can see it in the compassion Jerry showed to a complete stranger, and I can feel it within my own desire to forge a connection with the artwork.

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*“Recently, journalists and film makers, generals, diplomats and politicians have decided to tell Americans how and why that boy died. Much of their tale has concentrated on the silences of the closed casket. As the story unfolds, it either ignores the humanity and individuality of the boy inside the box, relegating him to the cold storage of statistics, history and politics, or it capitalizes on the mystery of the coffin’s contents, elevating the blood and the bones to a mythic realm of heroism or evil or rock ‘n’ roll madness.”<sup>4</sup>*

Before I came to the museum, the majority of the images of veterans I had seen portrayed on film had depicted them as infallible heroes or damaged souls. Those veterans from wars that we had won, WWII, were always categorized as the former and those from wars that we had lost, Vietnam, were always categorized in the latter.

Until I arrived at the museum, I thought nothing of this dichotomy. In fact, I even applauded those descriptions of veterans as somehow damaged. I had believed it raised awareness about the psychological damages war can inflict. Yet now, after having spent a summer listening to veterans tell their own stories, those black-and-white characterizations seem to lack truth. Those depictions take the story away from those who lived it and instead force it into neat boxes of either patriotism or antiwar sentiment. The replication of these themes reinforces in the public mind that veterans are either one or the other. Without ever asking, we assume we know.

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Maybe the reasons I thought I was spending my summer surrounded by veterans aren’t the real reasons why I’m here. Maybe I’m here because the few memories that I have of my father in which his image as infallible figurehead have been shattered are the moments I have felt the closest to him.

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Before I met Joe, I knew his birth date, where he was born, and that he was a prominent Chicago artist known for his wildlife illustrations. I also knew he was a Vietnam veteran, the years and location of his service in the army, and I knew that he had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I learned all of this from his biography located inside the museum’s main catalogue. In some ways, I felt like I had read his diary and then attempted to befriend him without ever letting it slip that I knew his secrets.

Akin to the other dozens of times I have spoken with Joe, I find myself unconsciously searching for some indication, some sign, some outward scar or mark that reveals his past. But I find nothing. He reminds me of my father. They both have a quiet, warm presence about them. They never dominate the room, but you’re always drawn to them. Maybe that’s why I like Joe so much, why I look forward to Thursdays. Those conversations I have with him are the conversations I wish I would have with my own father. And maybe I hope that each exchanged word will give me insight into my father’s experience in Vietnam.

Today, Joe and I talk about the book he is reading. It’s the personal account of a frontiersman who was integral in the expansion of American settlements. It’s his fourth time reading through the book and his eyes light up as he speaks about it. We continue talking for the better part of an hour. Our conversation, mostly guided by him, covers a brief biography of his life. He tells me about his love of museums and how as a child he would sneak into drawing classes at the Art Institute and sketch the nude models. We talk about his love of nature and he tells me that he once lived in the

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woods. He tells me about his career and how he once created a large diagram of Lake Michigan from the Paleolithic era, and that he learned leather working from an old, crotchety European man who refused to answer questions. Yet nowhere in the conversation do we ever speak about his experience in Vietnam. We talk as though the area of his life that connects most strongly to the museum does not exist.

I've seen his artwork. In fact, his pieces are some of my favorite in the museum. One in particular comes to mind whenever I think about Joe. It's a lithograph entitled *Going Home Early*. The brown, earthy tone and gradual layering of color give the piece a calming feeling. Three faceless men, their backs hunched, trudging through thick, knee-high grass barely stand out. Two of the men carry a man on a stretcher, his arms hanging limply over the edges. Unlike the three men, the body looks flat, devoid, missing something, like an imitation of its former self. The tranquility of the scene almost fools you enough to believe this is just another nature scene, that there is hope for the man and that he is just sleeping. But death, the hidden fifth character in the image, trudges silently along, whether it is admitted or not.

It's like that part of Joe that created the artwork about Vietnam has been relegated inside the museum, placed inside frames and on top of pedestals. He once told me that he doesn't think about the museum when he isn't there. The only reason he still volunteers to help restore damaged and deteriorating pieces of art is because he wants to help out, wants to make sure the museum will continue to exist. Its very existence proves that veterans are not alone and that the truth has not been stripped entirely from public memory.

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Across the counter from me is a man I have known my whole life. We have the same blue eyes, the same long, rectangular face, and the same large nose. There is a desk separating us, yet for a brief second it feels like there is nothing else in the world but him and me. The man across from me is my father.

I watch as his eyes look up to the dog tags hanging above. His smile falters, and is slowly replaced by a look of hesitation. He seems to be saying, "What have I gotten myself into?"

This summer was supposed to be about career development, about increasing my knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder and art therapy. Instead it became about my father. It became about the relationship I have with him, about the things we say and the things left unspoken. It became about my trying to reconcile the two opposing images I have of him: the tall proud man who taught me to play baseball in our front yard and the hunched man with a tear-stained

face touching a name on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. It became about trying to fill in the gaps with pieces I found at the museum. I wasn't looking for my father, but I saw him everywhere.

As my father walks inside the museum with my mom, I remain where I am. Although I don't completely understand why, I know that I cannot go inside with him. In much the same way I finally realize that no matter how many war movies I watch, how many memoirs I read, or how hard I try, I will never completely understand what it means to be a veteran. Instead I wait where I am, at the welcome desk.

**I wasn't looking  
for my father,  
but I saw him  
everywhere.**

From where I sit, I'm not entirely inside the museum, but neither am I entirely outside. I occupy that space in between, a place where those from the military and those from the civilian population cross. If enough people can walk through those doors, stand beneath the sea of dog tags, and connect with something inside, I believe the separation between the world of civilians and the world of soldiers can fade.

I look over my shoulder as my father comes out of the museum. He is speaking with the general manager. I watch from a distance as my father turns towards him and shakes his hand. His eyes are moist and his voice breaks as he says, "Thank you for what you do. This place means so much to us." For a fleeting moment, before he blinks away the tears from his eyes, I see that same man from the wall.

Watching my father inside the museum, I realize that the most important thing I could give the veteran community is my willingness to listen and share my experience. I realize that the greatest gift I could give my father is a phone call made simply because I wanted to hear his voice.

A few minutes later, we walk out together. Like everyone else that comes to the museum, we walk out differently than we entered. We walk out carrying a piece of the museum with us.

#### Endnotes

1. Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books. pg 214
2. Glasser, Ronald J. 1980. *365 Days*. New York: George Braziller. pg. xii
3. <http://www.mental-health-today.com/ptsd/dsm.htm> Mental Health Today Website
4. Baker, Mark. 1981. *Nam*. New York: William Morrow and Company. pg xi-xii