Endless swearing, a hoarse, braying wind of words, a weary, scornful, bemused reply to a war, swearing at those who were there and those who were not, at the army and the enemy, at death and life: everything blasted, withered, and coated by the tongue of injury. The question behind each insult and mockery being: What in the vast scheme of motley doings conspired to put me here? How did speeches spoken by gasbags of every stripe over decades come to endanger my modest network of blood? And if I wanted to be here, in my arrogance, manhood, confusion, enthusiasm, stupidity, patriotism, I must swear all the more. Who could have known?

Out, dunghill!

Swearing about food, rain, heat, women, officers, and, most of all, each other, each of us in the same unpredictable predicament. Swears coupled with other swears, vicious adjectives meeting nasty nouns: motherfucking shithead, goddamn asshole. Semi-swears, the ritual male abusing of male anatomy: you worthless little prick, the voice measured—a judgment—or light-hearted, oh, by the way. Long strings of swears blurring into one run-on, guttural frenzy. Or
sometimes a simple “look, bitch,” which starts a few shoves, shoulder pushes, and glares, the saying that you are a woman—a low blow. Swears for what seems like no reason, your voice mysteriously alive, proclaiming you are here in this faraway hell where, even on a good, un-murderous day, you are pissed. A reason can be found, if you want to go looking, but a lot of grim bile is in us already. Though not always bilious, everyone was once an infant gurgling, burping, unaffected by the droppings of time, though I think of guys like Briggs or Stone, who probably by the age of two were waiting to get bigger so they could get to Vietnam and start shooting people. Someone kicked them down the stairs early, the war on the home front. Or without the proclamation of reason or motive, like the tattoos: born to be bad, born to lose, born a conniving, chip-on-the-shoulder bastard.

Bastardy base? Base?

Briggs bought it, to use the lexicon you adopt when you see much random death. There wasn’t a lot of him left either. He was what they call “remains.” That doesn’t matter, does it? Whether there’s 98 percent of you intact or 32 percent. No open casket for him, if you like an open casket, and a lot of people do, death looking sort of rosy and peaceful, a time-out after the end of time. It’s hard to make up for the missing 68 percent, though you never want to underestimate modern technology.

I remember a lot of deaths, some miscellaneous, some not. Some I heard about second- and third- and fourth-hand as facts became legends but they still got inside me.

Did you hear? Dost thou know me?

I was raised not to swear. It wasn’t so much a sin because no one in my house cared about sin, we being take-it-easy-on-the-brimstone Protestants, social Christians who wake up on Christmas morning, remember Jesus, and then go back to sleep. It was because it was distasteful and bad manners. I agree with that. Swearing makes for a rotten take on life—ferocious, low-down, quick to find fault, the sum of your precious days little more than exasperation.
It worked, though, for the misery we were enduring. I bet even those serious, sweet-faced guys you see in Matthew Brady’s photographs swore their churchgoing heads off. There should be a column of swears in the history books beside this or that war. Probably even Achilles and Hector bad-mouthed the other guys. Or maybe they were polite. Maybe they were real heroes and respected the men they were killing. I doubt it but maybe. Didn’t Achilles drag Hector’s body around at the back of a chariot? *Atrocity*—way more than a word—like what got done to some of our guys: mutilated real bad, their dicks cut off and stuffed in their mouths, and like we did to some of their guys. Anger that went past anger, way past.

See thyself, devil.

At first, before I went over there, when I was in basic and it was fuck-this and fuck-that, the swearing startled me. Do we have to curse everything? Must words be bullets? And even when I was there, I remember I told Stone one day when we were sitting around doing nothing that it was gratuitous. I talked like that—two years and two months of college, full of the mild eloquence of an English major’s education. But what vocabulary was right? There was none, probably never has been, the government’s language worse than swearing. Vietnamization—there’s a word for you. There’s a word to die for.

When I said that to Stone about “gratuitous” he looked at me like I just dropped a turd in his soup. Look, you educated faggot bitch, he said. He paused to smirk then laid what he considered wisdom on me: well, Tom boy, we’ll see if your smart ass stays alive. Guys with too many words in their heads come out on the short side here.

How comes that?

You had that staying-alive thought in the back of your head and the front, too. You tried to push it away but it never left. I wondered sometimes if there were people who expected me to die, who were thinking, “Tom, he won’t come back.” You know, people in my
hometown, going about their business, taking out a can of creamed corn from a grocery sack or closing the garage door and thinking, “Poor Tom.” Or “Better him than me”—the perennial boundary of empathy. Or thinking nothing at all: “Tom, he gone.”

I should have gotten the shivers from Stone because he was laying a curse on me but I was shivering all the time anyway. Standing upright and shivering, lying down and shivering, leaning over my food and shivering.

How dost, my boy? Art cold?

Bad night on the heath, Lear. Incoming torment.

When we were doing nothing and going nowhere, the guys would ask me, “Hey, College, tell us a story.” I told them about Lear. How would you like it if you had two daughters who take what you give them—a lot of land and a big house—and then they treat you like squat? How would you like that? Once or twice, I extended the situation as in you could have nation problems. You’re a big nation who goes to help some little nation that’s getting pushed around but maybe it’s not as simple as “getting pushed around.” There’s a civil war. There’s a small mountain of barbed history. There’s some thoughts called “ideology.”


He let his daughters fuck with him? Dude deserved it. Man’s gotta be a man.

Thy element’s below. Where is this daughter?

Like in a play, we talked back. No script beyond what we were making up but we talked back. It meant we were still alive. The storm hadn’t come for us yet. We had no shelter, no hovel, but the storm that waited for each of us hadn’t come yet.

It’s the body that the swearing targets. Hard to be in a body, most of the time it works okay but it’s permeable, easily invaded by foreign objects, fragmentary devices. And it’s sad how the mind is always ridiculing the body, how its sexual organs are a source of contempt, and how The Act is always seen as obscene. Obscene? The dream of it was the oxygen we breathed.
Let copulation thrive. Let soldiers forget.
Let day relieve night.
I should ask the lieutenant. What happened?
I already told you back then.
No, I would say. You have to tell me again.

Soldier. (He would call me soldier. No matter how much time went by, he would call me soldier, like a couple of decades after Agincourt or Gettysburg or the Somme, and we meet in some bar and we’re still soldiers.) Soldier, we engaged the enemy. As you know, we took some casualties. According to our body count (he would pause there because he liked to savor any official type language) we killed seven of them. Some VC, some sympathizers.

“CC” we called the lieutenant, the Corpse Counter. Did they do that when Napoleon fought battles? Walk around afterward and count the dead? The VC took their dead with them anyway. The people who got killed weren’t enemy. They were people who were trying to stay alive. They were people living in their godforsaken village that was a happy village once upon a time with children running around barefoot and pigs rooting and old ladies gossiping and everyone praying to whatever gods floated their boat.

Don’t bring God into it, soldier.

Things with the lieutenant would go downhill from there. If I’ve gotten into the house in a suburb somewhere in Texas, and if the little lady is home, she’ll ask me if I want an iced tea and I’ll say Yes, ma’am. The lieutenant will make a strained face like he’s got to make a bowel movement and ask how it’s going, despite his knowing how it’s going, and not just for me. Every day one of us makes it onto the front page: shoots himself, shoots his old lady, shoots some buddy of his, gets shot by some buddy of his. Some of us haven’t adapted well. Hard to get rid of the reek of war inside of us.

Who gives anything to poor Tom?

I’ll tell him I’ve been reading King Lear again, that actually I never stop reading it; that it’s like a bible to me.