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Ferocious Alphabets: Michael Herr's *Dispatches*

"Whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil."
—Nietzsche

§ *Dispatches*: the most curious of love letters... but also, an elegiac state-of-the-union meditation on violence and language in the high noon of an imperial quagmire. Hence the willingness to be painfully self-revelatory. Hence the anger at the betrayal, among other things, of a common language. *Dispatches* sees the violence of language, the violence of the letter, the letter that kills, the language that effaces, euphemizes, vaporizes...

§ *Dispatches*: sendings off, communications, executions—all of these connotations share a common denominator: death. For to send away (exile, reject, conscript), to write an official state report, can involve a form of death as sure as execution, if not as obvious.

§ The violence of the letter that legitimizes killing to the extent that death becomes a rhetorical figure, doomed to stand in for a reality it cannot signify. *Dispatches* autopsies the effects of killing, pinpoints causes, but it also reports on the language that kills. The letter as violent, the letter that wars against violence... in a culture of death, the letter takes on a deathly urgency, a deathly aura...

§ But the letter also takes on an urgency charged with the pure vitality of life, never more alive than in its last flare-up of incandescent beauty and terror...

§ Vietnam as a swarm of texts; texts thick as flies. Letters, reports, statements, newspaper articles, write-ups, announcements, cover-ups, communiqués, investigations, circulars, memos, maps,

mimeographs, photographs, photocopies, poems, duplicates, facsimiles, tallies, stories, songs: all *dispatches* of one kind or another. All letters. Recall "Bartleby": "Dead letters. Does it not sound like dead men?"

§ How can letters be violent? When they kill, lead men to their deaths, then euphemize those deaths—is that not proof of their violence? (As if proof would be sufficient). The violence of the letter, yes, but also its ferocity, "ferocious alphabets": language as the site of violence, war—and its resistance. Scarlet letters redux...

§ "Nothing so horrible ever happened upcountry that it was beyond language fix and press relations, a squeeze fit into the computers would make the heaviest numbers jump up and dance. You'd either meet an optimism no violence could unconvince or a cynicism that would eat itself empty every day and then turn, hungry and malignant, on whatever it could for a bite, friendly or hostile, it didn't matter. Those men called dead Vietnamese 'believers,' a lost American platoon was 'a black eye,' they talked as if killing a man was nothing more than depriving him of his vigor" (42).

§ Lying always runs the risk that the liar will come to believe his lie. When that happens, the liar loses the world, and cannot distinguish himself from an angel or a devil. This fatal wishful thinking is what befell the military brass in Vietnam—and in part, America itself: "A twenty-four-year old Special Forces captain was telling me about it: I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?" (172). The need for America to always be good is deeply rooted in Americans (since the Puritans, we have been a uniquely "good" people; necessarily good because we were a *chosen* people); hence the seductions, and perils, of lying to ourselves as a nation...

§ If Sir Walter Scott's romantic fiction led to the Civil War, as some have claimed, then movies, especially Westerns and war flicks, can be said to have led to the Vietnamese war. "I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. They were insane, but the war hadn't done that to them. Most combat troops stopped thinking of the war as an adventure after the first few firefights, but there were always the ones who couldn't let that go, these few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras. A lot of correspondents weren't much better. We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. The first few times that I had got fired at or saw combat deaths, nothing had really happened, all the responses got locked in my head. It was the same familiar violence only moved over to another medium: some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end so they could get up again and walk it off. But that was some scene (you found out), there was no cutting it.

A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all, and even after you knew better you couldn't avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies, just like *The Quiet American* or *Catch-22* [...]" (209-210). America's fate: to be powerful—and trapped in the funhouse of its own mythologies...

§ In Herr's book, Vietnam is both a text and a not-text. Yet the text *wills* the not-text into being, gives violent birth to a new Vietnam, one that heartlessly replaces the old.

§ *Maps, mapping, ground*: The coordinates of a reality that is never *there*. Wasn't that the problem "with" Vietnam? That our representation of it never corresponded with the reality? That America tried to create a Vietnam suasive to its own desires—one that Vietnam rejected, ultimately *expelled*? Vietnam during the "Vietnamese" war: a bastard simulacrum, orphaned in history's vast orphanage... "You'd stand nailed there in your tracks, sometimes, no bearings and none in sight, thinking, *Where the fuck am I*, fallen into some unnatural East/West interface, a California corridor cut and bought and burned deep into Asia, and once we'd done it, we couldn't remember what for. It was axiomatic that it was about ideological space, we were there to bring them the choice, bringing it to them like Sherman bringing the Jubilee through Georgia, clean through it, wall to wall with pacified indigenous and scorched earth" (43).

§ What do maps map if not the ground? Are they even real? "That map was a marvel, especially since it wasn't real anymore[...] The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west, past Laos and Cambodia sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old, I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map." (3). Can it be that they map out nothing more than the kingdom of our desires, our wish to make the world transparent, knowable, known? The wish to remake the strangeness of the world in our own image is manifest in what they leave out. They purge reality of difference. The *absence* of reality is what makes maps the same everywhere. At the same time, the thin blue lines follow the trace of wishes we hardly know how to speak of. This is what makes them *marvelous*...

§ Hence the nostalgia evoked by old maps: it is the nostalgia for an older set of desires, desires that have become quaint with age, sepia-toned, brittle, distant from contemporary maps which purport to replicate the real, inscribing it within a labyrinth of lines. Renaissance maps illustrated monsters rearing up out of ocean

foam at the edge of the world; from the beginning, the connection between maps and the monstrous was made manifest. Today's maps do not show monsters; they are monstrous.

§ The history of maps is a history of desire.

§ All maps lay a veil over the countries they depict.

§ Maps: war by other means.

§ The American presence in Vietnam: *groundless*. Hence the mania for maps.

§ The destruction of the Ho Bo Woods and many other jungles in Vietnam: the revenge of the West upon the East for presuming to be *different*.

§ In the American, Puritan-derived consciousness, the jungle is affiliated with the wilderness, an ungodly, heathenish unmapped territory associated with the dark places of the mind. Mary Rowlandson: "I went along that day mourning and lamenting, leaving farther my own country, and traveling into a vast and howling wilderness, and I understood something of Lot's wife's temptation, when she looked back." In eradicating the jungle, the attempt was to eradicate fear, the unknown, fear of the unknown, indeed the unconsciousness itself. *If only Vietnam could be mapped, seen, made visible, made an object of complete surveillance, then the war could be won.*

§ Dominion—the American obsession. Is there a greater one? "Once it was all locked in place, Khe San became like the planted jar in Wallace Stevens' poem. It took dominion everywhere" (107). The jar defines the wilderness as wilderness; in its very arbitrariness, it creates a centered, geographical space—it takes dominion everywhere just as Khe San, the doomed American outpost in Vietnam "took dominion everywhere." Or sought to. Herr's quotation of Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar" subtly touches

upon the long history of conquest in the New World which worked by a process of redefinition of geographical space—the creation of new centers in the "wilderness"—with renamings of that space, just as Vietnam was renamed. The jar is other: "It did not give of bird or bush." Yet Stevens' poem gestures also to an ineluctable lesson of Vietnam (this is its genius; it can do this): however powerful any redefinition of geographical space, that new map, that redefinition, is also a fiction, a representation. And the siege at Khe San testifies to the perils of confusing representations with reality: that dominion—established by a jar or a base—can be redefined; it is not an integral part of nature. And when the military decided that Khe San, the western anchor of the war, wasn't that at all, and abandoned it, the fiction of dominion departed too, and the jungle returned. The wily minimalism of Stevens' tart anecdote suggests both the power and fragility of dominion (just as the jar too is a metaphor for poetry and a cautionary tale on its aspirations to dominion, its power and fragility...)

§ The origin of the Vietnam war is itself a palimpsest in which layer upon layer of writing, of history, goes at least as far back as the domestication of the New World. Vietnam: not an aberration in American history, but a pure product of it: "You couldn't find two people who agreed about when it began, how could you say when it began going off? Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw back as far as War II and the Japanese occupation, you were practically a historical visionary. 'Realists' said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flack insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn't really war. Anyway, you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (49).

§ Does all mythology emerge out of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of that which is different, empty, silent? Mythology, especially national mythology, works to eradicate difference, to transform that which is strange into that which is familiar: “the devil that you know...” In the New World, the besetting sin has always been the intolerance of difference: Eden could not be edenic precisely because it had been cast into the role of being Eden.

§ Marx’s dictum: “History repeats itself the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” The tragic farce of American history is our amnesia, we repeat ourselves, our history, again and again, as if for the first time, with all the license of an innocent first embarking upon the world. Absolute innocence requires, too, an absolute form of amnesia, and amnesia is the price we pay for our innocence (and “innocence” is the price we pay for our amnesia).

§ Herr reminds us of the violence of the Vietnam War, but also the extreme righteousness with which it was prosecuted; the infallibility of the cause. In the righteousness of the violence that marked that war (and the denials and self-defensive justifications of it) we can see an affiliation between Vietnam and the eradication of indigenous peoples from the New World; both undertakings were underwritten by a belief in Manifest Destiny, which is itself but a new name for the righteousness the Puritans possessed, fortified as they were by the belief that they were fulfilling God’s mission to create a New Jerusalem in the wilderness, to wrest a “shining city on the hill” out of the devil’s territories. Violence on behalf of the sacred... and the sacred become violent. Which is not far off from the sacralization of violence.

§ The fate of irony in war: “‘Come on,’ the captain said, ‘we’ll take you to play Cowboys and Indians.’ We walked out from Song Be in a long line, maybe a hundred men; rifles, heavy automatics, mortars, portable one-shot rocket launchers, radios, medics; breaking into some kind of sweep formation, five files with small teams of specialists in each file. A gunship flew close hover-cover until we came to some low hills, then two more

ships came along and peppered the hills until we’d passed safely through them. It was a beautiful operation. We played all morning until somebody on the point got something—a ‘scout,’ they thought, and then they didn’t know. They couldn’t even tell for sure whether he was from a friendly tribe or no, no markings on his arrows because his quiver was empty, like his pockets and his hands” (61) This finely-honed irony strikes out at the self-conscious/unself-conscious figuring of the Vietnam War as a re-enactment of How the West Was Won. There is a wink-and-a-nod to the ironies of restaging of the most famous (“colorful,” “dramatic”) chapter of American history—on Asian soil—but the significance of repeating genocide, or attempting to do so, circa the US in the 1960s, drops away, overtaken by the sheer excitement of war play. One play begets another: the extension of the Cowboy and Indian metaphor is allowed the full play of *its* grotesque implications in order to indicate the degree to which it has colonized our assumptions. Reality as theater, as an essentially histrionic process: the Vietnam War is made to become a re-enactment of the Cowboys and Indians myth. A diorama of history which has escaped the diorama. Here the Vietnamese man is forced into a Manichean allegory whereby he occupies the role of the (Indian) aggressor. Herr’s language dramatizes the power of metaphor to metamorphose the actual (the Vietnamese man) into the allegorical (the Indian). More terrifying than the possibility that this man was an innocent is the realization that in this peculiar restaging of American myth, all that remains of him are metaphorical scraps.

§ To ironize catastrophe approaches futility; to not ironize it is to acquiesce in it. Irony... the necessary *first* gesture....

§ Conrad: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking of it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow

down before, and offer a sacrifice to... ” Herr has even fewer illusions: the idea, for him, is ruinous, not redemptive. In the context of conquest, irony can no longer afford the luxury of outright self-contradiction...

§ *No empire thinks of itself as an empire; it is always something else, something benign, ultimately, an expression of love.* Nietzsche: “One has watched life badly if one has not also seen the hand that considerately—kills.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*).

§ *Dispatches:* A lover’s discourse, full of ambivalence toward his beloved...

§ The tragic achievement of a frontier nation is that it must continually invent new frontiers. Woe betide that which inhabits the space of the new frontier...

§ Vietnam: both not-home and not-foreign, a fast-forwarded, on-speed, colonial hybrid that never took hold. What could be more unsettling than something half a world away being half-familiar—and wholly strange?

§ In Vietnam, the American obsession with mobility—mobility as the guarantor of individual freedom, mobility as self-expression, mobility as self-improvement—was rehearsed with a vengeance within the theater of war. Far from being a means of progress, it hastened a slow, inexorable process of disintegration. “Best way’s to keep moving,” one of them told us. “Just keep moving, stay in motion, you know what I’m saying?”

We knew. He was a moving-target-survivor-subscriber, a true child of the war, because except for rare times when you were pinned or stranded the system was geared to keep you mobile, if that was what you thought you wanted. As a technique for staying alive it seemed to make as much sense as anything, given naturally that you were there to begin with and wanted to see it close; it started out sound and straight but it formed a cone as it progressed, because the more you moved the more you saw, the

more you saw the more besides death and mutilation you risked, and the more you risked of that, the more you would have to let go of one day as a “survivor.” Some of us moved around the war like crazy people until we couldn’t see which way the run was taking us anymore, only the war all over its surface with occasional, unexpected penetration. (8) Mobility as death, or worse than death: the “moving-target-survivor-subscriber” risks psychosis. In Herr’s Vietnam, there are no survivors. Atomized warfare, atomized bodies, atomized minds: “the system was geared to keep you mobile, if that was what you thought you wanted.” Here rationality—or belief in rationality—leads to the breakdown of the man-machine at its most vulnerable. Vietnam as America’s future...

§ Vietnam: mobility as catastrophe, the end of freedom, the death of freedom, the quintessence of unfreedom: the unbearable lightness of being...

§ Vietnam: the ruin of system; or, system’s ruin revealed.

§ If we had let Vietnam signify itself, name itself, choose its own identity, there would have been no Vietnamese War (in Vietnam: “the American War”). The semantic fracturing of North and South Vietnam made war inevitable, and it maintained its necessity...

§ Vietnam: the culmination of the American pursuit to perfect the seamless integration of the man-in-the-machine, the man-as-machine. Fordism brought to new heights: the old illusion, the technological holy grail: the eradication of the human. (This is the fantasy of much of post-Vietnam science fiction Hollywood, which thrives on post-apocalyptic scenarios). Vietnam: our first science-fiction war, our first truly spectacular war, the first war to become a widely seen, on-the-spot, televised spectacle. But Vietnam also dramatized the age-old Puritan refusal to see the dystopia borne out of the dreamt-of utopia. But also the terrifying/exhilarating pleasure/pain seduction of dystopia. Was it really about winning or losing? When did it become something other

than a conventional war? About pushing the technological envelope, *seeing what happens?* What could be *gotten away* with? “In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I’d flown in began to draw together until they formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind, it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right-hand, left-hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot-steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder” (9). War as narcotic, a death-giving, death-defying unscrambling, reprogramming *pleasure machine*.

§ “‘Quaking and Shakin’,” they called it, great balls of fire, Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body, get as close to it as you can without being in it yet or of it, guess who’s flying around about an inch above your head? Pucker and submit, it’s the ground. Under Fire would take you out of your head and your body too, the space you’d seen a second ago between subject and object wasn’t there anymore, it banged shut in a fast wash of adrenaline. Amazing, unbelievable, guys who’d played a lot of hard sports said that they’d never felt anything like it, the sudden drop and rocket rush of the hit, the reserves of adrenaline you could make available to yourself, pumping it up and putting it out until you were lost floating in it, not afraid, almost open to clear orgasmic death-by-drowning in it, actually relaxed. Unless of course you’d shit your pants or were screaming or praying or giving anything at all to the hundred-channel panic that blew word salad all around you and sometimes clean through you. Maybe you couldn’t love the war and hate it inside the same instant, but sometimes those feelings alternated so rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until you were literally High On War, like it said on all the helmet covers. Coming off a jag like that could really make a mess out of you” (63). War as orgasm: never more alive than at the brink of death or dismemberment. No subject, no object—only is-ness—a perverse,

amped mimicry of the tranquillity of the Buddhist monks who gave themselves up to flames, their serenity a testament to a subjectless, objectless world, the violence of the flames a protest against human violence, a protest against the demonic pleasures of war...

§ Their *pain* a testament against the demonic pleasures of war...

§ War: the triumph of being—and its undoing.

§ War: the undoing of being—and its reincarnation, one way or another.

§ *Maps, mapping, ground:* —“There was a famous story, some reporters asked a door gunner, ‘How can you shoot women and children?’ and he’d answered, ‘It’s easy, you just don’t lead ‘em so much.’ Well, they said you needed a sense of humor, there you go, even the VC had one. Once after an ambush that killed lots of Americans, they covered the field with copies of a photograph that showed one more dead American, with the punch line mimeographed on the back, ‘Your X-rays have just come back from the lab and we think we know what the problem is.’” (35). Among other things, this “bad joke” is a black parody on the American reliance upon technology, upon its presumptive power to resolve all difficulties, cure all ills. The parody’s twisted—but brutally effective—message is that this technology, and the presumption of God-like omniscience and righteousness that goes along with those who wield it, is deadly, creates death, produces dead bodies. The VC text is x-raying the American body politic, ruthlessly revealing the bad politics “behind” its techno-fantasies, its technology-driven will-to-power...

§ The proof of the body as body and not simply machine is not the dead body, but the presence of death, the dead. “Men on the crews would say that once you’d carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you. Like all combat people they were incredibly superstitious and invariably self-dramatic, but it

was (I knew) unbearably true that close exposure to the dead sensitized you to the force of their presence and made for long reverberations: long” (9). The dead as *presence*. Their presence, their palpable presence, haunts the text of *Dispatches*, haunts all its texts, all its intertexts, calling into question the forced, victory-is-at-hand rhetoric until the irony it evoked became palpable, embarrassing, intolerable. Vietnam has always been a country that has revered the dead; in *Dispatches*, it is a ghostly country in every sense of the word (also America’s ghost). It can be said, however, that those ghosts brought the war to an end...

§ Only the dead offer stories without rhetoric: “After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories, you’d hear them out of a remote but accessible space where there were no ideas, no emotions, no facts, no proper language, only clean information. However many times it happened, whether I’d known them or not, no matter what I’d felt about them, or the way they died, their story was always there and it was always the same: it went, ‘Put yourself in my place’” (31). America needs these rhetoric-less stories, even if they must take on the dress of rhetoric in the retelling. The irony is that it has to kill—or allow its soldiers to die—to receive them. Truth at the price of death of its young, the ultimate cannibalization, worse than any Greek myth of sacrifice.

§ “... the voice loud and small at the same time, insistent, calling ‘Who? Who? Who’s in the next room?’” (33)

§ *And to whom will the stories be told? And what will they matter?*

§ *And what would happen to a nation unable to be an audience for its own life-and-death stories?*

§ Herr does not present himself as an author as such: the Romantic “genius” who demands recognition for the unique, rare, one-of-a-kind text that he summoned into being; rather,

Dispatches returns us to an earlier model of narration, not the novelist exactly (though the narrative is in part novelized), but the storyteller who draws on, and frames, a community’s hoard of stories. He writes as the transcriber/interpreter of the stories which the living and the dead speak. There is no need to invent the story; the stories he conveys are already fantastic, grotesque, unbelievably believable precisely because they are obviously part of a national tradition which is, and has been, committed to doing the fantastic, the impossible—even when those acts require a blood sacrifice. *Dispatches* speaks of national nightmare by retelling the stories of those who made it happen. It is not his story alone; it is our story, a monstrous text, collectively authored.

§ All the same, *Dispatches* is a unique, one-of-a-kind, rare book, one that only a genius could have written.

§ “Once we fanned over a little ville that had just been airstruck and the words of a song by Wingy Manone that I’d heard when I was a few years old snapped into my head, ‘Stop the War, these Cats is Killing Themselves.’ Then we dropped, hovered, settled down into purple lz smoke, dozens of children broke from their hooches to run in toward the focus of our landing, the pilot laughing and saying, ‘Vietnam, man. Bomb ’em and feed ’em, bomb ’em and feed ’em’” (10).

§ *Dispatches* is suspicious of the written word, suspicious of the ways in which writing becomes an instrument of power, suspicious of the ways in which power contaminates and corrupts texts from the inside out by marshaling them on behalf of unworthy ends; yet, *Dispatches* is a text that honors the spoken word above the written word. The spoken word is invested with spontaneity, candor, unguarded soulfulness—in short Truth. This helps to explain why *Dispatches* constantly cleaves to spoken language, why it constantly quotes the colloquial, often crude language of the soldiers, their one-liner, cynical, in-the-know asides, their numbed revelations, their hyped-up conversations, their desperate

monologues, also why it constantly quotes rock n' roll lyrics, which are seen as another variety of spoken language. *There* the book says is truth, as opposed to the lies and distortions of written language (official reports, articles, etc). *Dispatches* constantly struggles to metamorphose itself into spoken language in order to distance itself from the degraded language of power. Only by approximating spoken language, only by distancing itself from the counterfeit currency of written discourse, can it hope to authenticate the *truths that are spoken in it*.

§ Vietnam as a rewrite of *The Tempest*, in which Prospero struggles with Caliban, but Caliban, this time, triumphs: "The ground was always in play, always being swept. Under the ground was his, above it was ours. We had the air, we could get up in it but not disappear in *to* it, we could run but we couldn't hide, and he could do each so well that sometimes he was doing them both at once, while our finder just went limp. All the same, one place or another it was always going on, rock around the clock, we had the days and he had the nights. You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional, that early death, blindness, loss of legs, arms or balls, major and lasting disfigurement—the whole rotten deal—could come in on the freakyfluky as easily as the so-called expected ways, you heard so many of these stories it was a wonder anyone was left to die in firefights and mortar rocket attacks" (14). But in Shakespeare's play, Prospero finally abjures his "art":

But this rough magic
I here abjure; and when I have required
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than ever did plummet sound
I'll drown my book. (V,i)

The US left Vietnam, vanquished, but it never abjured its own "rough magic," its own power over the earth. We have yet to

drown our book... like some demented Prospero, who, rather than relinquishing his unearthly power in order to rejoin the brotherhood of men, we prefer to cling to it—even at the cost of isolation. *The Tempest* recognizes that the power which Prospero wielded—the power to remake the earth, the past, the present—is tainted by tyranny and that, therefore, it has to be relinquished before its potential for destruction overtakes its potential for rectification, such as it is. The limitations of power, and its inherent corruptibility, remain letters in the untranslated book of Vietnam...

§ Is it a cliché to say that war breeds a pornography of spectatorship as well as a pornography of bodies? That it invites spectators to gaze upon the spectacle of dead bodies conjoined by an extremity of force? Bodies undone by an extremity of force? What is present in pornography is the physical force (e.g. the illusion of pleasure) that brings bodies together, contorts them into positions of pleasure or pain or both; what is absent (or present as a *trace*) are the social forces—in the case of visual pornography, capitalism; in the case of the Vietnamese War, anti-Communism, anti-nationalism, neo-colonialism—that have generated the *scene* of pornography—its stage, its actors, its characteristic offering to the audience of the performance as a spectacle to relish or to be repelled by. "Even when the picture was sharp and cleanly defined, something wasn't clear at all, something repressed that monitored the images and withheld their essential information. It may have legitimized my fascination, letting me look for as long as I wanted; I didn't have a language for it then but I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world. I could have looked until my lamps went out and I still wouldn't have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of a body, or the poses and positions that always happened (one day I'd hear it called "response-to-impact"), bodies wrenched too fast and violently into unbelievable contortion. Or the total impersonality of group death, making them lie anywhere and any way it left them, hanging over barbed wire or thrown promiscuously on

top of other dead, or up into the trees like terminal acrobats, *Look what I can do*" (19).

§ In war, there are no clichés. Yet every war is a cliché.

§ "Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the serious but crude belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored in your eyes. Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are" (20). Looking as a mode of seeing, seeing as a mode of recognizing, recognition as a mode of horror for "you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did." Against the horror of war, *Dispatches* asserts a poetics of relationship, a radical ethics, in which the subject/object world fades out like a scene in an old black and white film, like an old, used-up myth. A radical vision of love. To use another metaphor: subject/object duality is seen as a veil which causes us to misinterpret experience: seeing is not some detached activity that some mobile autonomous observer brings to something separate and fixed, something seen which is then left behind. Seeing itself is an act of responsibility inasmuch as that which is observed touches the observer; the observer takes in what is seen, *makes* it, and makes it a part of himself. He can no more leave it behind than he can leave behind his leg; it has become him. In seeing, you become responsible for what's seen because you use it for your own ends, and in using it, you owe it a part of your being. Nothing therefore is separate. The Vietnamese war: the vengeance of the "autonomous" ego upon a world it does recognize as a world of its own, as itself, the world it made...

§ Silence: the weight of history.

§ Silence: the emptiness of history.

§ Silence: the writing of history.

§ Blanchot: "—It is as though it were said that for him death would occur in life. Let us leave to silence this sentence, which only means, perhaps, silence." (*Writing of the Disaster*, 138)

§ *Dispatches* surges forward on a current of amped-up language, a war-fevered language on overdrive, language possessed by a sense of its own power—and powerlessness—but it also pays tribute to the *power* of silence.

§ What is this power? The power to embarrass, the power to communicate *something* of the uncommunicatable, the power to respect that which cannot be signified by refusing to diminish it in words *that will not hold up*. Silence as the final guarantor of integrity, an essential gesture in acknowledging the force of power...

§ For all of *Dispatches*' stylistic brio, its linguistic virtuosity exists only as a stage for another kind of action. The text's performance climaxes on silence. *Dispatches* aspires to a state of pure silence.

§ *Silence: the only way of honoring the dead*. Also, the impossibility of honoring the dead in this way.

§ Apropos of silence, shame. Herr speaks of "American shame." For him, the most shameful people in the war were the war bureaucrats, much more shameful than the soldiers who actually did the killing: "It seemed the least of the war's contradictions that to lose your worst sense of American shame you had to leave the Dial Soapers in Saigon and a hundred headquarters who spoke goodworks and killed nobody themselves, and go out to the grungy men in the jungle who talked bloody murder and killed

people all the time" (42). Herr speaks of "losing your worst sense of American shame"; losing it entirely is not possible. It becomes something ineluctable, a part of one's identity, a "secret sharer." What is shame? It is the intense recognition of failure or wrongdoing which brings about a gnawing sense of isolation from others, or a fear of isolation from the embrace of the community. Shame is not an inert burden, but a corrosive, destructive, internal one; one that transfigures. Hence its sheer productive power: in dividing an individual or a nation from its cherished self-image, it requires the construction of painful new recognitions, chastened new identities—or else a tremendous expenditure of psychic energy as the individual or nation vainly tries to insulate itself from the monstrous truth about itself... the burden of maintaining an untrue identity, of constantly fighting a rearguard action against the *truth that shame speaks* requires the deliberate, ongoing, never-ending fictionalization of an identity, an act which, by necessity, can never be entirely successful. In a nation, the same thing, except that in the context of modern war, there arises the necessity of an entire class of "public relations" officers—Dial Soapers—who have the job of strangling shame in its crib. A war fought without shame will be unspeakably brutal and brutalizing because those who perform shameful acts will feel the need to punish those who "caused" them to deal with the psychic burden of shame. A shameful nation will perpetrate more and more terrible acts of aggression in order to prove to itself that it is not shameful, that it is not burdened by stigma, by an indefensible immorality. A shameful nation will always see itself as essentially *virtuous*, indeed as exceptionally virtuous...

§ *Maps, mapping, ground*: "In Saigon, it never mattered what they told you, even less when they actually seemed to believe it. Maps, charts, figures, projections, fly fantasies, names of places, of operations, commanders, of weapons; memories, guesses, second guesses, experiences (new, old, real, imagined, stolen); histories, attitudes—you could let it go, let it all go. If you wanted some war news in Saigon you had to hear it in stories brought from the field by friends, see it in the lost watchful eyes of the

Saigonese, or do it like Trashman, reading the cracks in the sidewalks" (42–43). Tainted by wish-fulfillment fantasies, all these maps show are the feverish/sober, half-mad dreams of another century's would-be *conquistadores*. This much is evident. What is less so is that the ground itself is not self-evident, there: it too requires reading, interpretation. We have to become more like the Trashman, attentive to the cracks, and fissures of the ground, attentive to its shifts in meaning, its subtle semantic and political shadings, its unexpected widenings, its gaps, its sudden, swift, unexpected extensions. Is violence not rooted in the obstinate, perverse demand that the ground not move, that it correspond to our first or most cherished understanding of it, that it not change under our feet? Is violence not an expression of the doomed attempt to force the world to conform to an alien or antiquated arrangement? Are not maps representations of our desire to fix the ground, to arrest its flux, to give it a permanence that is always necessarily fictitious?

§ Wanton violence in war is always rooted in immaturity or insanity—or both. "There was such a dense concentration of American energy there, American and essentially adolescent, if that energy could have been channeled into anything more than noise, waste and pain, it would have lighted up Indochina for a thousand years" (44). Perhaps it is the adolescent's capacity not merely for violence, but for insanity, that makes him the most desirable of warriors.

§ "‘Nobody dies,’ as someone said in another war movie" (46). This is the fantasy that the U.S. has sought to sell its people while mobilizing for war, especially in the Twentieth Century. The transparency of the lie poses no threat to its efficacy, for it provides the necessary fig leaf for the repression of the truth. And if death arrives, it must arrive in the guise of nobility or heroism—idealizations that transfigure it, that deny it its sting, until it is no longer loss, but some recovered wholeness that reminds us of a virtue that has all but passed from this world. The fantasy of the Vietnamese War, as purveyed by the military, was of a casualty-

light war, a fiction finally ruptured by a reality which refused to conform to the script. Ever since, the fantasy has become more, not less imperative; the lesson of Vietnam is not that people die in war, but that we cannot allow them to die in war; which is another way of saying that death cannot be seen. Death in war has passed from being an inevitability, a bloody emblem of the sacrifice made on behalf of some larger cause—indeed, proof of the value of that cause—to being top-secret, inadmissible, taboo.

§ And if nobody dies, we can never learn the value of a life, of life, of living—a curse that no civilization worth the name can bear for long.

§ If death is stricken from the record of war, every war hereafter will have to be a comedy.

§ Vietnam: bad theater as only America can do. Every war hereafter will need to be tightly scripted, entertaining, good theater. And here there is progress...

§ Is all language a prayer? Can things ever be signified by words? If language is a prayer, our words beseech one another, longing for a comprehension just out of reach. And yet mysteriously, sometimes, it happens: a connection is made. “After enough time passed and memory receded and settled, the name itself became a prayer, coded like all prayers to go past the extremes of petition and gratitude: Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia” (56). In this sense, *Dispatches* is also a prayer, a prayer for language to be adequate to the world, and to the meanings available in it, however desolate. Like a lover, the author addresses the world with an urgency borne out of the fierce need to make it feel what he has felt, to know what he knows, however imperfectly, however fleetingly...

§ “The Soldier’s Prayer came in two versions: Standard, printed on a plastic-coated card by the Defense Department, and

Standard Revised, impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language, into chaos, screams, begging, promises, threats, sobs, repetitions of holy names until their throats were cracked and dry, until some men had bitten through their collar points and rifle straps and even their dog-tag chains” (58).

§ In war, all sound tends toward the inarticulate, towards silence. They are sovereign. It is precisely this sovereignty that *Dispatches* acknowledges, pays obeisance to—and disrupts. Language as regicide...

§ Yet it does so by telling a story, by writing about the stories heard, by reflecting upon what it means to signify the world in and through them. “Everywhere you went people said, ‘Well I hope you get a story,’ and everywhere you went you did” (29). Everything is a story, everything has a story—which is why for Herr the official dispatches about the war cannot be the Story, why there are only *stories* (Nietzsche: “there is only perspective seeing”) which can begin to do justice to the heterogeneity of experience. While the US Americanized Vietnam (less than many would have liked, but still), Vietnam Vietnamized American culture (less than many would have liked, but still), not least in the extent to which it assisted in the death of the Story, the realization that the one true, factual incontestable truth-version of things is a fiction. The death of the Story, Authority, Truth has been demonized in the postwar era as leading to fragmentation, relativism, immorality, chaos—“the center cannot hold”—but the Vietnam War stands as a monument to the dangers of the center—as well as the dangers of the center holding for too long. The question is not whether “the center” holds or not—but what kind of center is holding.

§ Or better yet: let us abolish the center and the presumptions of centrality. Let us concede to the inevitability of naming. But let us not idolize any single act of naming: let us, like Blake’s innocent, write upon the water (only then is innocence possible). Let be be finale of seem.

§ “TIME IS ON MY SIDE, already written there across the first helmet I wore there. And underneath it, in smaller lettering that read more like a whispered prayer than an assertion, *No Lie, GI*” (21).

§ The effort of *Dispatches* is to let stories, fiction, do the work that the Truth cannot. As if...

§ Only in fiction is there truth. But it has to be *imagined*—and reimaged...

§ Knowledge always exacts a price. What can you know—and at what cost? What happens to the self in war, or, in *warlike* circumstances? *Dispatches* circles back on these questions time and again, the novel/memoir itself is organized formally around this circling, not a linear narrative with a triumphant ending, conclusive and final, but a shape of circling, of returning again and again to questions, rather than to an ultimate ground. In war, the question becomes especially urgent, precisely because the knowledge—knowledge of oneself and the world one is making—is acquired at such a price. “Overload was such a real danger, not as obvious as shrapnel or blunt like a 2,000 foot drop, maybe it couldn’t kill you or smash you, but it could bend your aerial for you and land you on your hip. Levels of information were levels of dread, once it’s out it won’t go back in, you can’t just blink it away or run the film backward out of consciousness. How many of those levels did you really want to hump yourself through, which plateau would you reach before you shorted out and started sending the messages back unopened” (65). Worse than death is the death-in-life that these “levels of information,” “levels of dread” created: hollow men; men hollowed out by violence, by seeing too much violence, by the knowledge of one’s responsibility *for* it simply by being a witness *to* it. Ultimately, narratives, stories, created this violence of undoing—and the Faustian knowledge that flows from it.

§ Only other—new—narratives can remake that legacy, prevent another bad repetition of history, a fateful return to the old failures.

This is the buried hope of *Dispatches*. It is, too, the buried imperative in Walter Benjamin’s catastrophic vision of history—which is at the same time a vision of redemption struggling to come into being: “A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History”).

§ Horkheimer and Adorno: “Progress is leaving itself behind.”

§ To rename oneself, to acquire a new identity, or to hold onto an older, imperiled one: this is the function of the writing on the body in war that Herr records: “On their helmets and flak jackets, they’d written the names of old operations, of girlfriends, their war names (FAR FROM FEARLESS, MICKEY’S MONKEY, AVENGER V, SHORT TIME SAFETY MOE), their fantasies (BORN TO LOSE, BORN TO RAISE HELL, BORN TO KILL, BORN TO DIE), their ongoing information (HELL SUCKS, TIME IS ON MY SIDE, JUST YOU AND ME GOD—RIGHT?) (74). This writing signifies the experiential uncertainty of war; it advertises a fear of war, nowhere more obviously than in the slogans with the most bravado. Writing here exists as a response to the blood-and-guts, life-and-death threat of war—this as opposed to the bland, white-washed, denatured writing of the military bureaucrats. The grunt’s scrawled writing attempts to give voice to the inarticulation of pain, the silence of fear, the fear of losing one’s identity; in short, this writing aspires

to give the voicelessness of those fighting the war a voice; by contrast, the white papers of the bureaucrats would abolish it...

§ “And the grunts themselves knew: the madness, the bitterness, the horror, the doom of it. They were hip to it, and more: they savored it. It was no more insane than most of what was going down, and often enough, it had its refracted logic. ‘Eat the apple, fuck the Corps,’ they’d say, and write it on their helmets and flak jackets for their officers to see. (One kid had it tattooed on his shoulder.) And sometimes they’d look at you and laugh silently and long, the laugh on them and on you for being with them when you didn’t have to be. And what could be funnier, really, given all that an eighteen-year-old boy could learn in a month of patrolling the Z? It was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing. They even wrote a song, a letter to the mother of a dead Marine, that went something like, ‘Tough shit, tough shit, your kid got greased, but what the fuck, he was just a grunt...’ They got savaged a lot and softened a lot, their secret brutalized them and darkened them and very often it made them beautiful. It took no age, seasoning or education to make them know exactly where true violence resided” (103). Like Tiresias, D.H. Lawrence: “But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted” (*Studies in Classic American Literature*).

§ Yet the writing on the helmets and the flak jacket—like the mirthless laughter and the brutally ironic song—is not an expression of stoicism. It is an expression of protest, brutally put to protest the systematic brutalization inflicted by war—and by the military which wages it. Writing then as protest, as an assertion of individuality—as well as the loss of it. However formulaic it may be, each grunt’s graffiti aspire to the condition of writing in its fullest extension, each grunt to the condition of writer. Writing to crystallize a mode of being... but also, it is an objection to the function their being is made to serve within the machinery of the

military: this writing exceeds the system of military discipline, defies it, symbolically rejects it; but the military allows it as a necessary psychological safety valve. No accident that the graffiti are emblazoned across the head and the heart, the traditional sites for thinking and feeling, as if the sheer physical proximity of signs to organs demonstrates that these slogans are the most intimate expression of their being (the tattoo is merely the most radical expression of this logic). But also, the writing upon the body expresses not so much a talismanic belief in the power of writing to ward off death (although there might be traces of this wish there too), but, in siting the writing over the most vulnerable organs of the body, the brain and the heart, the grunt fatalistically acknowledges his own vulnerability to death, and preemptively curses the military for rendering him vulnerable to it, to dying, to physical agony, as well as to mental agony, whether as victim—or killer.

§ The essential American soul may be hard, isolate, and a killer—but, unexpectedly, it is also the soul of a dissident, who indicts killing—even as it becomes addicted to it. The American soul is neither one nor the other entirely, but torn, fatally divided by conflicting imperatives (idealism vs. duty), as well as by conflicting physical needs (safety vs. the thrill of adventure). Only this split, this self-division, this deep-seated ambivalence, can make sense of the geography of American history, in which there are vast, desert-like stretches of ruin, which give way, unexpectedly, to oases of splendor, shimmering like mirages on the edge of the horizon...

§ The other way to put it: The American soul is Lawrentian through and through...

§ Death as spectacle: one face of it is the face it assumes in the form of a spectacle, in which its sublime beauty momentarily outdistances its threat (or is it beautiful because of its threat)? Herr writes of war as not only catastrophe and terror, but as an expression of beauty. The aesthetics of war, the aesthetics of death—this is the siren song of a civilization in which beauty is

an émigré, and the price of admission is death, or the risk of it: “I remembered the way a Phantom pilot had talked about how beautiful the surface-to-air missiles looked as they drifted up toward his plane to kill him, and remembered myself how lovely .50-caliber tracers could be, coming at you as you flew at night in a helicopter, how slow and graceful, arching up easily, a dream, so remote from anything that could harm you. It could make you feel a total serenity, an elevation that put you above death, but that never lasted very long. One hit anywhere in the chopper would bring you back, bitten lips and white knuckles and all, and then you knew where you were. It was different with the incoming at Khe Sahn. You didn’t get to watch the shells very often. You knew if you heard one, the first one, that you were safe, or at least saved. If you were still standing up and looking after that, you deserved anything that happened to you” (132). Since Columbus, in the New World, beauty has been inflected by, and infected by, danger: explorers, apprehending the natural sublimity of the landscape, always understood that they were making themselves vulnerable to death. American beauty: beauty conjoined with a death-defying heroism/folly. In the New World, “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical, /Within whose burning bosom we devise/Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly” (Stevens).

§ In this sense, *Dispatches* is a beautiful book... furious at the senselessness of the carnage, but finding in it too a terrible beauty, a distinctly American beauty...

“For What Its Worth:”

There’s something happening here,

What it ain’t exactly clear.

There’s a man with a gun over there,

Telling me I got to beware.

I think it’s time we stopped, children,

What’s that sound?

Everybody look what’s goin down... (138)

§ The beauty of war: “At night you could lie out on some sandbags and watch the C-47’s mounted with Vulcans doing their

work. The C-47 was a standard prop floater, but many of them carried a .20 and .762—mm guns on their doors, Mike-Mikes that could fire out 300 rounds per second, Gattling style, ‘a round in every square inch of a football field in less than a minute,’ as the handouts said. They used to call it Puff the Magic Dragon, but the Marines knew better: they named it Spooky. Every fifth round fired was a tracer, and when Spooky was working, everything stopped while the solid stream of violent red poured down out of the black sky. If you watched from a great distance, the stream would seem to dry up between bursts, vanishing slowly from air to ground like a comet tail, the sound of the guns disappearing too, a few seconds later. If you watched at close range, you couldn’t believe that anyone could have the courage to deal with that, night after night, week after week, and you cultivated a respect for the Viet Cong and NVA who had crouched under it every night now for months. It was awesome, worse than anything the Lord had ever put down upon Egypt, and at night, you’d hear the Marines talking, watching it, yelling, ‘Get Some!’ until they grew quiet and someone would say, Spooky understands. The nights were very beautiful. Night was when you really had the least to fear and feared the most. You could go through some very bad numbers at night” (133). War as spectacle, technological marvel, and death mask: beauty-as-death, death-as-beauty, apotheosis and nadir, civilization’s dead-end, all at once. Reading this, it is difficult not to think of Benjamin’s warning against the seductions of fascism: “Marinetti says in his manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war: ‘For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war anti-aesthetic... Accordingly, we state: ...War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning

villages, and many others...’ This formulation has the virtue of clarity... The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society... Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of ‘human material,’ the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into human trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities.... This is evidently the consummation of ‘*l’art pour l’art*.’ Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own self-destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”

§ America: the land of the future, the land of the futurists...

§ *Dispatches* desires to speak for those who about to die, those who are so close to death that they are almost ghosts, specters in the making. It feels a burden of responsibility to them, to their experience, to the thin red line that they walk, even as they perform atrocities, unspeakable acts, as well as heroic ones on behalf of morally bankrupt principles. (The ungovernable eccentricity of love). Herr sees war as a system that brutalizes and corrupts, and not merely its victims, but its perpetrators. This brutalization, this coarsening, renders them the living dead: *Dispatches* longs to give voice to the pain of this self-alienation, this self-destruction, this spectrality; it offers America the uncomfortable position of being responsible for the devastation Herr witnesses. We become, that is, voyeurs of the maniacally-inventive, technologically-driven forms of destruction unleashed in Vietnam. In positioning us as voyeurs, *Dispatches* suggests the *pornography* of the war (its violation and abject meaninglessness): “There were choices everywhere, but they were never choices you could hope to make. There was even some small chance for personal style in your recognition of the one thing you feared

more than any other. You could die in a sudden bloodburning crunch as your chopper hit the ground like dead weight, you could fly apart so that your pieces would never be gathered, you could take one neat round in the lung and go out hearing only the bubble of the last few breaths, you could die in the last stage of malaria with that faint tapping in your ears and that could happen to you after months of firefights and rockets and machine guns. Enough, too many, were saved for that and you always hoped that no irony would attend your passing. You could end in a pit somewhere with a spike through you, everything stopped forever except for the one or two motions, purely involuntary, as though you could kick it all away and come back. You could fall down dead so that the medics would have to spend half an hour for the hole that killed you, getting more and more spooked as the search went on. You could be shot, mined, grenaded, rocketed, mortared, blown up and away so that your leavings had to be dropped into a sagging poncho and carried to Graves Registration, that’s all she wrote. It was almost marvelous” (134).

§ Responsible, too, to the idea of justice, which is nothing more than a ghost, a haunting, which reminds the community of what it is *not*. To make that which is ghostly, a haunting: this is the desire of writing...

§ Race (and racism) a related spectre which haunts Herr’s text, Vietnam, American history, invisible but palpable, everywhere—settling and unsettling everything...

§ Wandering and home: the fate and desire of ghosts: the fate of ghosts is to wander, but to search for home; the same true of writing...

§ Souvenirs: fragments from the past, reminders of who we are, where we’ve come from. Moreover, souvenirs are fragments symbolic of the past (they can only be *symbols* of the past, never the past itself). War souvenirs, no less, are tokens of identity,

reminders of the refashioning of the self that has taken place in and through violence. Like writing, they are commemorative, markers of the development of the self in time; but they are also tokens of the violence of war (the *boundarylessness* of it). As trophies of victory, they testify to a rebirth through violence. Signs of what their violence has done, war souvenirs are also the soldiers' signs of what has been undone: their former selves, their old world. Perhaps this is why they become fetishized objects: having lost their old selves, their old world, they need to remind themselves of their new selves, their new world—something being better than nothing. That so many of these tokens display graphic forms of separation (cutting, severing, dismembering) suggests the unmaking of the world that their violence has brought about. War souvenirs: autobiographies of lost souls: “[A] Marine came up to Lengle and me and asked if we’d like to take a look at some pictures he’d taken... There were hundreds of these albums in Vietnam, thousands, and they all seemed to contain the same pictures: the obligatory Zippo-lighter shot (‘All right, let’s burn these hootches and move out’); the severed head shot, the head often resting on the chest of the dead man or being held up by a smiling Marine, or a lot of heads, arranged in a row, with a burning cigarette in each of the mouths, the eyes open (‘Like they’re looking at you man, it’s scary’); the VC suspect being dragged over the dust by a half-track or being hung by his heels in some jungle clearing; the very young dead with AK-47s in their hands (‘How old would you say that kid was?’ the grunts would ask. ‘Twelve, thirteen? You just can’t tell with gooks’); a picture of a Marine holding an ear or maybe two ears or, as in the case of a guy I knew near Pleiku, a whole necklace made of ears, ‘love beads’ as its owner called them... ” (198-99).

§ Gooks: inhumans, language ghosts. Reincarnation through renaming: a “gook” is infinitely more easy to kill than a flesh-and-blood human being whose face mirrors your own. Language as a means of war: a word that licenses violence. (Kurtz: “Exterminate all the brutes!”). And a balm to the conscience. A ghostly etymology of “gooks”: said to be a racial epithet applied

to Haitians by American troops stationed there between 1915 and 1934 as part of a military occupation to prevent uprisings. A “gook” literally signifies “a foreigner.” So the term has a history of being used by Americans in foreign places, where *they* are the foreigners, to naturalize the American presence and de-legitimize the presence of the natives: “gooks” transforms them into something illegitimate, something “foreign,” undesirable, if not unacceptable. Ghosts in their own land. With an Alice-in-Wonderland power, it transforms occupier into native, and native into foreigner. (In the word “gooks” is inscribed the colonial mentality, indeed the colonial history of the US in the Twentieth Century). Racially inflected, it is a term of great plasticity; like a virus, it can lie dormant for decades and then suddenly spring into life with renewed vigor as it draws life from a new host population. Dormant now (a ghost), it awaits its next incarnation...

§ Vietnam: America’s ghost; America: Vietnam’s ghost. Each haunting the other, making of the other a powerful, spectral no-man’s land of memory and hurt, memory’s badlands that know no border with the here-and-now...

§ (Other ghosts: I too am wandering through Herr’s text, returning to its no-man’s-land again and again, willing it into being, never wanting it to go away, but doomed to grow thinner, more spectral, one day to pass away, like all the others... I am thinking now—and have been all the while—of my cousin, A.M., who, like many others, died in Vietnam, looking for an identity, and finding it too, as his last poignant letters home—his carefully-composed, handwritten letters—show. Did he know they were dead letters? He must have. Ghost letters, which these letters, these black marks on a white page cannot begin to do justice to...)

NOTE

All references are to Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.