

A BROTHERHOOD OF BIRDS

for Tim Hermsen

We were young, younger than the calendar suggested, growing up in the '50s and early '60s, that schizoid time after our nation's "good war," where we learned to duck-and-cover when we weren't running after ice cream trucks, hands filled with new coins, state fairs featuring the miracle of microwave cooking next to displays of backyard do-it-yourself bomb shelters, the sky above us filled with jets and rockets and Sputniks, our young president determined to fly even higher.

Nineteen sixty-seven: senior year in high school, history class debate on the war in Vietnam, "for" or "against" mostly immaterial, the war itself no more real than *Gunsmoke* or those giant radioactive ants crawling across our movie screens.

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We were the sons of John Wayne and Elmer Fudd, the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, that hapless fool endlessly blowing himself up or falling from massive buttes in pursuit of a delusional dream, but always returning for more. It wasn't that the bird was so smart, just that the coyote was so dumb, so in love with technology.

Then 1969: swept to the rice paddies of South Vietnam from the small-town streets of Ohio, caught in that whirlwind fear of falling dominos, an abrupt dislocation of body and spirit—and playing war was no longer play.

And while it's politicians who start wars, it's children who fight them. Knowing we weren't alone helped. Knowing we were all just as scared as the guy behind us, but knowing, too, that there *was* a guy behind us.

Some things you never forget: headless torso in the mud, like some bad pen-and-ink drawing, proportions all wrong; flat whop of helicopter blades slicing the air above us, both odd and comforting; odor of burning shit; sound of incoming bullets shredding the air, too fast for the eyes but not the ears, quickly learning to distinguish incoming from outgoing rounds.

We all bear scars. And in the end, we're all crazy, each in our own special way; it's just more obvious with some than others.

It's weird the things you remember: small black bird with blue wings and belly, common dollarbird (*Eurystomus orientalis*) sitting on a branch, dark

eyes bright with curiosity, like a child, head turning left and right until a mortar round took the tree away—branch, leaf, bird, everything—leaving behind smoke and dust, a shallow crater to mark the spot, those bright eyes. Fucking bird.