

RUSSELL SCOTT VALENTINO

EDITOR'S NOTE

When the family of Vietnam War veteran and antiwar writer and activist Jeff Sharlet approached us about establishing a writing contest for veterans in his memory, we thought about the central importance of the return of U.S. veterans in the country's social and cultural life—after World War II, with the massive increase of college students through the GI Bill, the paperback revolution in publishing (whose story is recounted by Jason Epstein in *Book Business*), and the dramatic expansion of the middle class; after the Vietnam War, with America's questioning of its place in the world and the spectacular changes in behavior, values, rights, and tastes that followed. It occurred to us that with war a recurring figure in the history of the United States, and with our nation having been at war continuously for the past eleven years (much of that time with two wars running concurrently), there are veterans from previous and current wars who have returned and are still returning every day, attempting to reintegrate themselves into the lives they interrupted, start anew, and sometimes share their experiences.

We know return is one of the most powerful themes in all storytelling, that the memory of what is still or perhaps no longer there intensifies when one is here, and the projected possibilities of what was there then make what is here now radiant, or excruciating, or both. We know how the distances, imagined or real, physical or temporal, both separate and unite in such stories, and how our sense of what we can or should do now or tomorrow turns out so clearly contingent on who we find ourselves with, where, when, and, then again, sometimes on none of that, and nearly on nothing at all—a glitch, a harsh word, a miscue, a silly thought, the whims of the gods. We know such stories have been with us for a very long time, and that they show us how little our choices can mean in some circumstances, and how much they can mean in others.

And so the idea of a contest for veterans who are also writers, or rather writers who are also veterans—we are a literary magazine after all, so the distinction needs to be articulated—found a place amid the existing contests that *The Iowa Review* runs each year, in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. The Jeff Sharlet family provided the seed money for three years' worth of prizes. All U.S. military veterans and active duty personnel would be eligible to enter.

The genre and subject matter would be open. We decided to read the entries in summer, when we had a little more time, sending the finalists on to our judge, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler. We wondered whether we would receive any entries, or more than a handful. We were prepared for neither the number nor the high quality of the work we received and soon found our reduced summer staff completely taken over by the 268 entries in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and the many inquiries that came with them. It was hard to choose the best.

So hard in fact that we decided, for the current issue, to showcase not only the winning entry—poems by Hugh Martin—but also the work of ten other finalists. (All are listed on page vi.) Our cover and artwork insert feature the creations of the Combat Paper Project, an initiative in which veterans turn their uniforms into paper and then use the paper to create art.

As usual in our pages, subtle connections abound among the various works published here, half of which, it should be noted, did not come from our veterans' contest. These are the sorts of connections that become apparent when you're not quite looking, when, by virtue of one thing being placed next to another, being experienced alongside another, you're made aware of what you might not have paid attention to otherwise, the details that make all the difference, and that help you make sense of and appreciate more fully all the rest. But we cannot help but be struck—when we do begin to look in earnest—by the intensity of many of the other connections, their lack of subtlety. With veterans and non-veterans writing in such overlapping ways—about home, technology, power, peace and violence, intimacy and estrangement—we realize how much war and the legacy of war shape us all.