

GREGORY L. ABBOTT



THE HOLLOW MAN

BY MICHAEL NORMAN

I am going to level with you: I hate the war. I have hated the war since the day I walked off the battlefield. I hate it now even as it works its way up my throat and slips across my tongue — to you. I hate the war so much I can no longer think of it in any terms other than personal. I no longer give a damn about its political legacy, about its cultural vicissitudes, its historical aftershocks, its literary revisionism, its misapplied lessons, its frauds and fakes and Johnny-come-latelies. My hate, my unbridled passion, sweeps all that away. For me Vietnam now is the first person singular.

I am, I always will be what I was — a boy pulled from his time, a man who left something essential behind him. You ask, where am I now? I answer, still in the killing zone.

I am fire and I am smoke. I am a dark red spot on a dusty road. I am corpses stacked like cordwood on the fender of a tank. I am a little girl crying before my burning house.

Most of all, I am afraid. I am crouched atop this ridge at the head of a column and something is moving in front of me — there, across the divide. A tree is moving, tuming now half tree and half man, a tree-man holding a rifle, a rifle pointed at me. I am pulling back the slide to put a round in the chamber. I must kill this man before he kills me. I must take his life away from him. My hand shakes. I will ask God to steady my hand. I will ask God to help me kill this man killing me.

And now I am rifling his body, picking in his pockets, pulling his wallet from his pants. Here is Dong. And here is Dong's wife. And here is Dong's child. Mine was the bullet that left them alone.

I, too, of course, am dead. The bullet that killed Dong killed me. One shot, two souls. I now am a hollow man, empty and alone. My psyche has a cicatrix.

I am at home now, sitting in church. The bishop is in fine voice this Christmas eve, telling the congregation that God is on our side, that the war is just, the enemy evil. I am getting up now, in full view of all these people and my parents, getting right up without so much as an excuse me and walking out into the cold air and swearing never to go back, never again. I hope Dong can see all this. *Semper Fidelis*, Dong.

I am chasing a career, sitting at the rewrite desk of my newspaper, and a colleague is complaining about all these mewling, crying, Vietnam veterans demanding everyone's attention, these scruffy men marching in the street. And I say, tell me, my friend, what bad battles left you so bitter? And he says, actually, you see, actually he did not wear a uniform. He could have served, you see, but he didn't really believe in the war, you see, and damn if he was going to be cannon fodder for someone else's cause. And I say, yes, I see. I really do see.

And now I have written a book about the war, a five-years-in-the-making book, a book meant to exorcise all the ghosts, exorcise me, the ghost I've become. I am sitting in a San Francisco radio station and the host of the program is saying to me, Mike, may I call you Mike? Yes? Good, Mike, I bet this book was great therapy, wasn't it. Don't you feel, well, healed? And I am stumped, right there in front of hundreds of thousands of listeners. I want to say, Well, Mr. Host, I am healed. As a matter of fact we're all healed, every man jack one of us,

even my friend Squeaky who lost an eye, and my friend Belknap who had his hip and hand blown off, and my friend Charles who has a metal plate in his skull. We're all feeling a whole lot better. Healed? You want me healed? Should I invoke Eliot? *Time is no healer because the patient is no longer here.*

The truth is I'm not really playing it straight with you here. I gave Dong a name he didn't have and put him in a place where he wasn't. I found the body and saw the pictures and that was truth enough for me. As for the rest most of it happened, not exactly as I have delivered it here, but then when it comes to the war, I don't know anymore where my memory ends and where my dreams take over. With the war there is no telling what is true. The truth always turns on the meaning of life and I have been talking about death.

So I have no truth. My grandfather was gassed in the trenches of the Argonne, my father narrowly escaped the beaches of Normandy. War makes men like me, hollow men, men weighed down by memory, out of time and out of place, men who spend their lives trying to recover what has been lost, men haunted by the awful mystery that spared them, that left them alone, walking in the empty spaces.

Michael Norman is an associate professor of journalism at New York University. He served in Vietnam in the USMC and is the author of *These Good Men: Friendships Forged From War*. This article is adapted from a speech he gave at the Bemis Free Lectures series in Lincoln, Mass.

PERSIAN GULF ILLNESS: A BETRAYAL CONFIRMED

Six years after the ending of the 'perfect' war, soldiers who served are still learning the extent of their betrayal. There are 78,000 Gulf War veterans who suffer from undiagnosed illnesses. Over the last several years, Gulf War Veterans groups and other supporting parties have gathered information from individuals and from Freedom of Information Act requests sufficient to motivate the U.S. Congress to investigate the illnesses, and sufficient to pressure the Department of Defense into reviewing its documents for evidence of possible chemical exposure.

In February, 1997, Pentagon officials made public previously classified documents which showed that, contrary to the years of Pentagon denials of chemical exposures in the Gulf, the U.S. Army had been warned in 1991 by UN investigators of the presence of Iraqi chemical weapons among armaments destroyed at Kamisiyah, the site of a captured Iraqi military complex. The weapons bunkers were destroyed by U.S. troops in March, 1991.

The newly unclassified documents show that in November, 1991, the CIA contacted the U.S. Army Central Command (ARCENT) intelligence section, and told them of the presence of chemical weapons at the Kamisiyah site. "We are sending this information to you in order to take appropriate action as you see fit as the risk of chemical contamination by the 24th Infantry Division personnel is a possibility. According to CIA documents, the information was relayed in a phone call from the CIA to an intelligence captain with 24th Mechanized. The captain "has no specific recollection of the phone call," nor does his supervisor recall being told of it. The names of these individuals have not been released.

(The CIA has acknowledged withholding information about chemicals at the Kamisiyah site from the units responsible for clearing it, claiming data foul-ups.)

~NORTHWEST VETERANS FOR PEACE

Northwest Veterans for Peace was formed in Portland during the Persian Gulf War and is made up of veterans of that war, Vietnam, Korea and World War II. NWVP believes that young people are not receiving a balanced perspective on war in today's society. "We believe a youth well educated in the reality of war can only benefit society. If the true consequences of war are not shared person to person, it is more likely to be accepted as an alternative to settling international differences." This article and the NWVP position paper on Bosnia are reprinted from the group's newsletter, *Collateral Damage*.



HOPE L. HARRIS

LICENSED
MASSAGE
THERAPIST

503/325-2523



A REAL PEACE IN BOSNIA

It is difficult for individuals to accurately assess the goals of a government in taking a particular action. If the goal of our deployment to Bosnia is in fact to create a livable peace, there are several issues that need to be addressed. The logic of preventing violence by violent means is highly questionable and needs to be examined. Introducing our soldiers with instructions to fight back if anyone breaks the peace, while perhaps sufficient to limit the level of armed conflict, invites us to be merely another player in this self-perpetuating drama of abuses and revenge. Any benefit resulting from our presence will vanish with the withdrawal of our troops because our presence fails to alter the fundamental relationship of the warring parties. It may be possible to impose order, but it is not possible to impose peace.

Northwest Veterans for Peace is largely composed of combat veterans and people who are close to them. We know that the wounds inflicted on the souls of people involved in traumatic events — the fear, the rage, the despair — don't vanish with the occurrence of peace. Bosnia doesn't even in fact have peace, it has only the cessation of war. A year of imposed order is not sufficient to heal these wounds. If we are serious about furthering peace in Bosnia we must take concrete action to heal these traumatized people and alter the relationship between the warring parties. There are many people trained to help both the victims of violence and the perpetrators to recover — mental health professionals, rape counselors, veterans' counselors and others. There are survivors of the Holocaust who have spent a lifetime dealing with the aftermath of genocide and learning to transcend it. We have people whose lifework is helping groups embroiled in hatred learn to coexist. If we can afford to gather and transport thousands of soldiers and an untold amount of armaments to Bosnia, we can afford to gather and transport people with the skills to begin the healing of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We can send people to work village by village, encouraging among the parties agreements that will increase the security of all people in that village. We can send healers to help them, individual by individual.

If we send troops but fail to take concrete actions to alter the Bosnia that exists today, we will be wasting American lives without even the hope of a better tomorrow to justify it, and squandering any hope of peace this action claims to bring.

~NORTHWEST VETERANS FOR PEACE