

## CHILD OF AGENT ORANGE

world. He was in no hurry while virtually everyone around him skittered in high gear. Fighting through his depression would not involve rehabilitation but rebellion. Eden was desolate; Godzilla ruled. He shrank from the future as his culture raced past like a rabbit. Rather than dragged toward the future he felt pushed into it by the past.

*But what was he afraid of?* The uselessness of life would be worth dread; yet it presumed a forlorn desire for celestial recognition and purpose. Existentialism appealed while simultaneously opened a hole in both types of spirit. Everything was obviously as immaterial as it was material.

He answered the shrink that he was afraid of everything and had always been. It was the root of his courage, which generally arose to save him from danger. The essential answer was not that he was afraid of death but to die.

He was eager for breath and moment, accompanied with regret that each shortened his presence in the cosmos.

He was sharply aware he had lived longer than the time left. He lived his best years half-heartedly, uncertainly and afraid. He shuffled rather than sprinted, reluctant to surrender the past, wishing he could bore into it like a worm into a womb. (He would not die back there; he could continually burrow into the past as it moved irresistibly ahead, abstract like a good clock — but the clock runs out of time as it ticks it off; the past perhaps bends upon itself and he would eventually bump into its beginning.)

Preserving and prolonging life is instinctual, even if it seemed ironic to cling to a half-lived life rather than die and make room for a new life that might make a better case of it. He was not in enough despair to fling himself off a bridge or shoot off the top of his head. He preferred a slower suicide; erosion of spirit and purpose.

The shrink said he attempted too hard to intellectualize his emotions, that he abstracted pain and anxiety. Yet such abstraction helped him spread out his personal problems and alleviate morbid self-pity to a awareness that millions of others undergo similar problems.

The shrink thought the war was behind his psychic pain. Of course it was. "If you don't come back from a war crazy, you're really crazy," he said. Vietnam was for him, in the words of Elizabeth 1, his *Annus Horribilis*.

During the long war years after his return from Vietnam — the name for a bitter lost war, not a nearly obliterated ancient civilization — he narrowly skirted mental breakdown because he knew that every day the war continued Americans and Vietnamese were dying; and each day he and others urgently spent attempting to stop it they were rebuffed by a stonewall of disapproval and malignant patriotism. Patience was the shibboleth of both those for and against the war whose concerns were more about the outcome than the costs. More than once he wished to quit and disappear but he knew the alternative was eventual suicide — and he didn't want to go there, too many of his friends who had fought so desperately to live through the war surrendered to suicide once back home, which he refused to do. So he wearily and angrily and always impatiently persisted. He watched the antiwar movement disintegrate although the war continued. Eventually most Americans were pulled out and sent home; the draft ended, which cut off the supply of fresh dead Americans but just as well ended the active involvement for peace by young males no longer concerned about their personal safety. But the Vietnamese continued to kill each other, and when the war finally ended it was virtually anticlimactic in the USA: a made-for-TV drama of defeat and abandonment.

His fierce opposition to the war was partly justification for quitting it when he had the chance instead of extending for a second tour. He had used up his luck. He was certain a second tour would be fatal. He had given the war and the USMC ample opportunity to kill or cripple him. He might feel what later would be called survivor guilt, a feeling of deserting friends who would remain in Vietnam — proof of his not doing enough was his survival; but he was not a fool, nor were most of his friends who rudely congratulated him for his good luck of survival with fervent expressed hopes of reaching their own deliverance dates.

Yet he had been sickened at what he had helped bring upon Vietnamese and the cynical cruelty that impelled it. It did not take much persuasion for him to become an antiwar activist and he believed he would have been even if the Vietnam Veterans Against the War had not existed.

He felt a deep responsibility for his involvement in the war despite the urging of friends to put it aside and "move on" with his life. He had participated in something he regarded as dreadfully wrong and wished to make amends in some manner; it seemed to be up to those like him to attempt undoing what they had done even if they had had no choice — because he knew he had a choice, even if refusing had meant disgrace or death. There it was! You ride history or it rides you.

He turned irrevocably against the Vietnam War. But even his stance for peace was grim and warlike, and his experience against the war was for the most part violent although he was generally on the receiving end of the violence perpetrated by police and National Guard units. He got beat up by cops, maced, teargassed and arrested all around the country organizing veterans and participating in antiwar demonstrations.

He fought the 'Battle of Michigan Avenue' against Chicago cops and Illinois National Guardsmen during the 1968 National Democratic Convention, nearly skewered on a guardsman's unsheathed bayonet. He threw war medals at Congress with a thousand other Vietnam vets and 100 pounds of farm fresh chickenshit at the front of the Pentagon with other vets, calling themselves 'The Chickenshit 20' in the patois of the era, and in retrospect figured it to be the last major assault on the Pentagon until 9/11.

At first he had believed that at bottom people would ultimately listen to the soldiers who fought the war rather than the incessant propaganda by war hawks who never left home. He was wrong, at least initially; he and other combatants who publicly turned against the war were denounced as "traitors", even as "cowards." More sympathetic persons said to him, "You can't stop war!" — He replied, "It stops with me. A majority starts with one."

Very little fazed him no matter how much he was scorned or injured because nothing was as bad as the war and because he was doing the good work he should have done all along. He sought redemption by police clubs, by arrest and the malicious scorn of so-called "patriots." He understood the hatred resulting from fear that impelled Americans to punish the Vietnamese in retaliation — it was the usual day-to-day racism of humiliation and superiority Americans displayed toward all Vietnamese that incited his first doubts and second thoughts about the war he considered in retrospect the most absurd war in the country's history.

He thought he had always been lucky without the good sense to have made better use of it. He had escaped with little sweat and less pain while others expended much sweat and suffered grotesque pain. He was alive from situations and experiences others died doing, and not a few afterward died from injuries or suicided because of a combination of mental and

My name is Anna Myers and I'm an Agent Orange baby. For the past 19 years I have been faced with many challenges due to my father's exposure to Agent Orange and other chemicals during the Vietnam War. That is how I acquired my disabilities and I have a wide range of them. These include Cerebral Palsy, pilipsy, learning disorders, and last but not least, an odd skin condition that has baffled many doctors.

When mom and dad found out she was pregnant it was a difficult decision for them to make to terminate the pregnancy or carry to full term because they watched their friends who had been in Vietnam and who had children with disabilities struggle with everyday life. On August 11, 1984 I was born. My mom tells me that dad said I was the best present he ever got. I was 4 months old when he became terminally ill. Thirteen months later he held me for last time — days before he passed away.

After that mom and I carried on with life the best we could. My Grandpa Liebig, though a 1000 miles away, helped bridge the gap. Grandma and Grandpa Sheets, who are family friends, were a huge help with my daily care. Mom went to college to become a teacher so she would be home with me in the afternoon and during the summers and we simply took life day to day.

By far the biggest challenge has been my epilepsy. I have had *petite mal* seizures since birth and the *grand mal* seizures started when I was 13. In the tenth grade a local doctor took my mom aside and told her the most humane thing she could do was to put me in an institution, but mom refused. I also have partial complex seizures that look like temper tantrums. This same doctor told my mom I was emotionally and behaviorally disturbed when in fact my new doctor explained that those temper tantrums were part of my seizure disorder. Again, it was the support of other people that helped. My mom's best friend at work and my step dad directed us to a new doctor.

My other large challenge is my dyslexia. I struggle to read and write which is a huge challenge. The computer helps help me to write and books on tape help to get the information I need. I am looking at purchasing software to help with my writing.

In the past 3 years I have over come many struggles. In 12th grade I saw the new doctor who changed the dosage of my medication and my seizures are under much better control.

moral breakdown that afflicted most who survived the Vietnam War (*every war!*) to various degrees.

He knew his luck would soon run out and be paid back. He felt his survival of the war only set him up for a large cosmic joke — but perhaps his survival was the joke.

He thought more often lately of family and friends who had evaporated back into the dusty cosmos — and he felt that he resisted bonding with very many people because his closest friends were dead and he had the same reluctance to buddy up that virtually all combat men felt in the war — yet they bonded nevertheless, tighter and more necessarily than with any others except lovers, who do not usually share daily death and horror, and often in certain enduring respects deeper than with lovers.

There were times when he saw everyone as dead; he tried to talk to friends about it which usually left them unsettled and desiring to change the subject, in particular those whose lives had seldom been at risk.

He had not made much of himself by American standards, but he hadn't intended to. He did not wish to be prosperous when most of the world was poor and hungry. Vietnam affected him that way. He saw people there who seemed to have nothing much to live for yet fought desperately and sacrificed heavily to maintain their way of life, and though it might have seemed self-defeating and even pathetic, he was deeply impressed. He seldom missed a meal and generally had enough to pay his rent and drink occasional glasses of red wine, but he purposely kept himself below the cultural poverty line which still made him richer than royalty compared to the Vietnamese he admired.

He wished to keep his life simple and uncomplicated amidst hyperactive USA. He did not preach or practice any religion but appreciated the Buddhist lack of attachment, even to life, to which he was very attached, especially after surviving his own holocaust of war. He felt removed: "You're not of this world," a woman said, perplexed he seemed oblivious to everything that concerned most people.

He envied Vietnamese their essential closeness to raw life; they were peasants and yet among the most literate people in the world. Most had very little but that seemed to be their treasure and their pride. He was split between a dichotomy of American values — wealth or poverty. He was independently poor, frugal enough (without television, telephone or car) to live on very little made at odd low wage jobs, which was how he wished to live. Though he knew it was impossible as an American to live comparable to a Vietnamese peasant, he wished little more.

He might go back to Vietnam or to Cambodia — to help alleviate the continuing horror of landmines that clogged the paddies and jungles from the wars in both countries, but not until after his mother died. He owed her that, and much more for all the worry he had caused her. After his father's death he made a promise to never frighten his mother again. A friend had postponed joining the Peace Corps until both his parents were dead and he saw the compassion and wisdom in his friend's decision. "A person is only grown up after both parents are dead," the friend said when his own parents died.

His mother had told him before he left for Vietnam the only crime that would cause her to disavow him as her son would be using his position as an armed soldier to rape a woman or girl, a threat she had never made before. He followed her admonition; and afterward claimed he had not adhered to the military code of conduct, various Geneva accords, the mandates of Nuremberg or any of the other warfare doctrines. He obeyed his mother's rules of war.

His dream was to go back eventually, to see in peace before he died the incredible beauty of Vietnam that was never entirely spoiled by the war, and which illuminated his spirit despite his numbed terror every moment of the year he was in country.

He knew he would never feel whole until he returned to Vietnam. He wanted to rediscover his metamorphosis from war, which was simply a matter of shattering fantasies and illusory intimations of immortality which warfare accomplished irreversibly. Constant fear alters one's sense of position in the cosmos.

He was 'Asiatic'. He had found the sense of his inner self while making war upon his teachers. He got besotted with Asia, which he only knew surfacely and doubted he would penetrate

I graduated with my class this past year and I even got to swim at the district swim meet my senior year and both the Seaside and Astoria teams cheered me on. I've had an article and poems published in the *North Coast Times Eagle* and I'm now looking at publishing elsewhere. My IQ has jumped by 30 points and I no longer require speech therapy. I'm working on a book recording the stories of Vietnam vets, and mom and I are talking about co-authoring a book about my life so far. I'm saving up for a lap-top so I can go on to college and take writing courses, and I want to publish my book so I can be on the Oprah show before she retires!

We are looking at buying a house and I want to help with that. I need a shower I can get in and out of and I've outgrown my room! Besides, my dog needs a fenced back yard. Having Cerebral Palsy and walking a big dog is a real challenge. Now that mom can work full time this just might happen in the next year or two.

What has made the difference in my life? Doctors who listen to me and a non-stop determination to make it! I have puzzled my teachers by the will I have to keep on going. My mom, my step dad Gordon, Grandpa Tony, Grandma Jo, Grandma Anne and my teachers and friends at the high school make a difference, too. They stand beside me and cheer me on and, Grandma Anne in particular always knows I can do it — no matter what it is.

War affects everyone no matter who you are or who you have lost. War is painful to the ones who fight and the ones they leave behind, but the greatest honor survivors can give those who fought is to keep going on with their lives. I write in memory and honor of my father and I've learned a great deal about him and other vets. I have a real respect for those who fight, those who die and those who are left behind because of war. I will go on to other subjects in my writing but I will always remember and honor my dad.

*Anna Myers made these remarks at the Peace, War & Its Aftermath conference held November 8 and 9 in Astoria. It was sponsored by the Clatsop Community College Arts & Ideas, North Coast Physicians for Social Responsibility and the North Coast Peace Coalition. The Thuja String Quartet conducted a peace concert each night of the conference.*

much deeper despite his efforts to assimilate Asia as if through osmosis.

He almost laughingly felt that perhaps the only place in the world he might feel safe was Vietnam. He once half-jokingly tried to talk a friend, also a Vietnam veteran, to go back and both of them be reenactors, paid like mercenaries to portray imperialist Ugly Americans shot and killed every day in mock battles by heroic NLF or NVA soldiers (better yet, by women Viet Cong), and after showtime sit in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) or Da Nang or Nha Trang bars and drink 33 beer (Bon Me Bon) with their "killers".

He wondered if anyone would actually form groups of reenactors for Vietnam as they had for the American Revolution, Civil War and World War 2. How would they try to restage the abrupt and usually brief firefights? And what would it be like for him to reenact his own virtually anonymously unknown part in the war?

After 9/11 he was criticized for not showing sufficient sympathy for the victims of 9/11. On the contrary, he was appalled — but not surprised. He could imagine the hideousness of 'Ground Zero', paradoxically from his own experience of seeing dead Vietnamese in villages that had been bombed or shelled by artillery or offshore naval ships. And he long expected as a result of experiencing Vietnam that someday somebody would pay America back — if not precisely for Vietnam, for the other places in the world America intimidates with its military supremacy for its own malevolent policies.

"I saw hundreds of dead people killed by bombs and shells," he will say to anyone in counterpoint. "Old men, women, children. They had no more to do with the war than the people in the World Trade Center — yet because they were Vietnamese we considered them all guilty; and that's the way the rest of the world thinks about us. We're Americans and we're responsible for everything done in our name because our biggest brag is that we the people are the government — so we're all targets of whoever is pissed off about whatever we're doing to them."

Everybody was in this all together now. That gave him a sense of grim satisfaction rather than camaraderie. He felt no closer to anyone, just a feeling that most were becoming aware of what he had known all along. He felt he was no longer a pariah. Friends didn't suggest he forget about Vietnam as they used to. Now they coyly asked him what real war really was like, especially younger people who were anxious they might be called into service.

Now a new war, fabricated with as much dishonesty, treachery, pompous folly and willful hubris as Vietnam. He wished he could stop it, stop the young ones who might have had a whole new century to explore but would instead die or else be ruined before they even got started into it. He and other old vets obsessed with their past wars should take the place of the young women and men and finally die in the combat they had initially survived but which had deadened them — Why not save the young and finally do something long postponed? He knew that was unreal, that he would never go to war again (unless it came to him, which was unlikely), only grieve for those who would. He would see some come back, haunted as he had been. Nothing he could tell them now — nothing he would have to tell them later.

*Nearly every day, whenever he walked downtown or back, he stopped at a thin glade of trees along the Columbia River and stood on a grassy riverbank built up from rocks once used as ballast in old sailing ships and discarded overboard once in the river to load cargo in Astoria or the inland cities. He paid homage to a forest of splintered gray log pilings that once held up a part of old Astoria. They clustered against the shore, erect as a rollcall formation of soldiers, battered and hoary from a century of wind and water, preserved by historical neglect. He thought of them as ghosts of his dead Vietnam buddies the insignificant year he was in the war with them, skeletal ranks of long dead Marines who were denied the opportunity for senility.*

*On the night of September 11 he walked to the spindly stalks and talked to them as if they really were his dead wartime buddies. "We've got another war," he said bitterly, and congratulated them for being dead rather than brokenhearted by this new assault by humanity upon humanity. At least you don't have to die again, he said.*