

Dedication

*George Winnie Jr. 1947-70, UC-San Diego*

by Benjamin Balthaser

1.

Dust glistens on newsclippings  
the plump librarian reads from.

A small, black haired woman  
opens her hands:

it's like Santiago,  
the way a man's skin

shivered from the singe  
of kerosene he poured

through his thick, black hair:

the military would not tell him  
what happened to his sons.

It's something we nod our heads to,  
the line of bare, brown hills,

the old Spanish fort under eucalyptus,  
images just on the horizon of sight.

It's 35 years after the fact.

And I didn't know an American  
kid did this. The same woman collects

for the banner and wreath, and  
the handpainted sign. My hands

feel empty. *It is something to make  
yourself a victim* the woman says.

Overhead, military jets darken,  
December wasps, the dangerous silk of smoke behind them.

2.

*In the Name of God, End this War.*  
Standard title capitalization. A comma

and line break. Present, active tense.  
Imperative. In class, I talk about choices

a writer makes to communicate, commas,  
line breaks, full sentences. Sentence

fragments are the favorites, for they force  
the reader to complete the thought.

35 years ago, Winnie Jr.  
put the poem on his body

and it blazed across Revelle Plaza for six  
minutes until a student

tackled the screaming wound with a blanket.  
*Gas burns very hot*, a student said to reporters

*I couldn't save him.* But not before  
separating two dependent clauses.

In the corner behind the library,  
the administration placed

a bronze plaque, a mile from Revelle.  
I walked by the plaque a dozen times

and not seen it. What it means to be moved  
from the broad light of Revelle to this place,

leafy and quiet on the margins, is hard  
other than to say - the smell of burning hair,

the pulsing cord of light, the sudden thunder  
of visibility and then silence - the little we communicate

is not up to us. Sage clutters and grows over.

3.

An observer said

it glittered like water.

The day was hot, late spring  
in the desert. "I thought

he wanted to cool himself  
off." And what he must have seen

was a look of relief, even  
pleasure, as the kerosene

splashed over Winnie's  
eyes and hands,

as if it were the clean sting  
of fresh water, or rain pearly with light.

And it looks like fire,  
the sharp braids of light

from the fountain now standing  
where Winnie dropped the match

and exploded into a human bomb.  
(Six minutes before the last flame

evaporated. There are no clocks  
that can record the slowness of that time.)

There is a warning not to touch  
or drink the water; there is the pungent

and acrid cement cracking in the sun;  
a plaque for university administrator

to whom it is dedicated. I'd like to say  
there is a trace of Winnie's face in the green  
gray water, even as the kerosene drenched his arms

and chest: the look of someone  
for whom the war is finally over.

Something maybe, not at all unlike  
what the unnamed observer said he saw,

something clean and fresh and cool:

water on your head on a hot day in the desert.

4.

The memorial is over.  
The five of us who show

have gone home.

I would like to say  
*silence descends over the garden*

but Winnie's face will not age.  
His full lips refuse a smile

in his high school photo. And  
the woman who said she knew him in college

will not speak for him, her skin dark,  
burnt by years in the sun.

There are only so many places to go for answers.  
The man who tried to save him

is full of regrets, *I prolonged*  
*his suffering*, and he would know

lingering with a stroke in a small  
college town up north.

*On Sunday, May 10, 1970*  
*George Winnie took his life*  
*to the end the war.*

*Today, May 12,*  
*The war continues.*

--cartoon, editorial page *Triton Times*, UCSD, 1970

Of course, it's one of those San Diego days,  
dry even sunlight, salt water and chaparral,

girls with a healthy, athletic stride,  
and when they walk, they walk as though

they push an invisible weight forward.

I try to imagine what it would be like  
to kill yourself on a day like this.

Palms and smog and soft places  
where a student lays her towel down on the grass.

A feeling of heaviness from walking too long in the sun.

*Gas burns very hot.*

Pleasure is easy here. There are girls  
pink with sun, professors wearing sandals and cellphones,

the woman on the grass of the Plaza,  
shade under Eucalyptus.

Everything else an afterthought.

Even the way grass stiffens  
after a body leaves it, like hair caught in fire.