Richard Currey *In Their Own Country transcript*

Richard Currey: 1 At night in the war, I listened to monkeys in the jungle all around me. Low murmur of voices, the clucks and warbles and sighs of monkeys at peace with starlight, and I could rest with their voices, knowing that as long as I could hear them, I was safe in a ring of darkness, lying there thinking, When this is all over, and I am out and gone, everybody will want to hear the story.

And the story begins like this: There was a boy standing in the middle of America. He was standing in a winter garden with his toy gun strapped on slightly askew, an easy smile, blond hair cut close to the pale skull, rolled-up cuffs on his jeans. The stretch of distance behind him was indistinct, unreal, as if field and horizon had raced on ahead as he stood to turn and look back.

He was a boy who rode his bicycle on early summer mornings, past the elementary school named for Mark Twain and the junior high school named for General Patton, out into the wide boulevard with Ormin's Market at the corner and Henry Ormin sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store window filled with mops and stacks of fruit crates and racks of dusty hats and gardening gloves.

Kate Long: That's the voice of Richard Currey. The jungle was in Vietnam, and the boy standing in the middle of America grew up in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Welcome to In Their Own Country, another hour-long visit with another nationally-published and praised West Virginia writer. This week it's Richard Currey. I'm Kate Long.

Parkersburg native Richard Currey has lived in many places, but when he writes, he always comes home to West Virginia. As he says, "to my mythic ground." This visit with him will be filled with stories about Vietnam, the mine wars, musicians and murders.

His main characters are almost all ordinary people who have to face something very difficult. He's interested in how they deal with it.

2 KL: You write about ordinary people, and you give them a lot of dignity.

RC: Well, those are the heroes in stories and in life. Everybody struggles to live their life. They try to put the pieces together, to make it work. And I think that, in ordinariness is often seated a great deal of dignity.

I think people face what happens to them. This is a key tenet that drives my storytelling. And it's in what happens in your life that you discover dignity. Or you discover grace. You discover direction. You learn your largest lessons. Or you don't.

His characters do face some rough situations. Due to the subject matter, there'll be some violence and a little cussing, so parents be advised. Otherwise, pull up a chair and listen.

3 KL: As the Los Angeles Times said, Currey writes "stark, locomotive-driven prose... that would set to thumping the heart of any lover of the English language." And as the Dallas Morning News said, "Having entered a world created by Richard Curry, you will not forget it quickly."

Now here IS Richard Currey, reading "Tyler's Ballad," from his short story collection, The Wars of Heaven. In this story, Edward Tyler meets life head-on.

4 RC: Edward Tyler drove the night train north from Charleston and back again, had done so since 1931, after the Depression killed the family farm and forced him into another line of work. He started as a brakeman, then fireman, made his way to engineer, loving the seasons of the night, the smell of coal smoke laced with winter and the air-through-teeth hiss of steam's release when he vented the boiler at the stations along the way. He leaned at the cab's open hatch and watched the transfer of mail and merchandise halfway down the train - silhouettes and unreadable voices - until it was quiet and the platform was empty and the brakeman's signal light sliced an arc into the darkness. Tyler pulled the throttle slowly and the engine jerked forward against the weight of the train, a muscle unfolding in a blind man's arm.

Riding through the hills and watching the rails' blue shine in starlight he would sing to himself, and his voice merged with the moan of the engine until the music was something that happened in his lingering imagination, like memory or the remnants of dream. The locomotive's headlamp wobbled a line of light in front of the cars of chickens and cabbages, refrigerator vans, flatbeds and tankers and gondolas and the endless barges of coal.

His schedule laid over in a depot town called Carneyville. Tyler and his crew crowded into the stationmaster's office, stripping their work gloves, laughing, smelling of kerosene and black coffee. Tyler sat on the leather divan talking about the prices of corn and soybeans and beef, about FDR and the New Deal. He listened to jokes about the pope and colored people and the local whores, and jokes about old men like himself who were married to beautiful young women.

music

Edward Tyler and Elizabeth Roman were married in a mountain church. White clapboard, one room at the end of a packed-earth lane, random tombstones climbing the hill like teeth in an old man's mouth. Not many were in attendance. A few friends, Tyler's aging mother sitting in the front pew with wildflowers on her lap. Elizabeth's father. The minister's wife playing "Amazing Grace" on a pump organ. A mongrel dog slept in the aisle.

Elizabeth seemed unbelievable to Tyler, a fragile beauty, ethereal eyes invested with a kind of elementary clarity he had never seen before. She stood so gently beside him in front of the altar, and as the preacher read from his litanies Tyler looked at Elizabeth. They had met at a

Christmas dance, introduced by Elizabeth's father, a friend of Tyler's, and Tyler danced with her most of the night and took her home in the crisp mountain air, and they were married six months later. He was forty. She was twenty-two.

He rented a house outside of Charleston, the last of a farm cut down to two acres and a barn, garden plot, woodshed and root cellar. He bought a milking cow and a radio and watched Elizabeth move through the house, watched her as she slept, brought her clothes and perfume from Pittsburgh, and was gone every other week of the month driving up the green map of West Virginia.

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The night of Edward Tyler's forty-first birthday, it rained: he remembered it well. It was the night his brother found Elizabeth in the woodshed, where she had ended her life with a deer rifle, sitting on a box of pine chips with her eyes open, looking exhausted and melancholy, the back of her skull open and wet on the dark wood. The gun had slipped from her grip and leaned barrelup between her legs. Her hands lay empty to either side, palms gently opened as if they might speak.

For most of three weeks, Tyler sat in a single chair under a single lamp, not eating, only a distant awareness of the run of sympathetic visitors, his body fighting his mind's insistence on complete despair. He had seen no signs of trouble. Elizabeth was often silent, at times unable to sleep and drifting through the long hallways at night, but Tyler took it for diffidence and intensity - aspects of her beauty - and stared from his mourning chair cursing his ignorance and willingness to imagine an identity for a woman he did not know. He wanted to have a place for what his life had become but found none, and felt like an empty shape filling with apparitions and the soft drum of autumn rain. He would pass off to sleep sitting in the chair and start awake in the midst of nightmare, Elizabeth's corpse speaking to him from her death seat in the woodshed, her disembodied voice an emanation. Tyler gripped the chair's arms and rediscovered his face, aligned in a rigid mask of anguish and disbelief before he called himself back into being, trying to find a breath of air in the darkened room.

He wanted simply to understand, and saw that he could not, and would never.

In time he was back at work, back on his route. He moved out of the farmhouse and into a condemned caboose on a siding in the switching yards and though he had never been religious, he prayed. Jesus, he whispered, protect me from my innocence. Love me in my weakness.

His train was a friend, unwinding its way out of rain-misted hills. Through long stretches through the central part of the state he rode alone at the cab's window, knowing if he reached out to touch the rhododendron and chokecherry that crowded the roadbed splits, his hand would be pulled into a rapture of night, as sweet as blood. The train would break from undergrowth and forest, and meadows would stretch away filled with moonlight and ground mist. Tyler searched for a direction he could depend on, and thought of Elizabeth. On one late winter night, as his train rounded the long bend beyond the Afton station, he found himself in tears and saying aloud, "I didn't know you, girl, I didn't even know you," his voice lost in diesel roar.

5 KL: People hear an intense story like that, and they automatically think, "This must be something that happened to you."

RC: Well, it didn't happen to me. It didn't happen to any member of the family. Folks think, well, your grandfather, your uncle, some family myth, some legend. No. No, none of those kind of things. Most of the writing in my life is a process of evolution. It can spring from seeing a man, In this case, an engineer, just standing at the open window of the locomotive passing by. And beginning, for very mysterious reasons, I think, to imagine an entire life for this person. Out of that - out of that single image - came this character of Tyler and the situation that he faced.

KL: When you write it, do you sit and make lists of what might happen to your character? Do you sit and just visualize your character? How do you do this?

RC: I'm very musical. I improvise. I sit and write the way a pianist composing might sit at the keyboard. I start with the very kind of central image that I just told you about and I go with it. And, you know, sometimes it doesn't work. But generally, I'm looking for that point where the character will speak to me. And then I'm not exactly in control of it any more.

You'll hear this, I think, from many writers, that mystical or quasi-mystical sense that some other kind of energy speaks through you. But I think that's common in any kind of creative art form. It certainly would be true if I were composing music.

I listen for the sound of it. I listen for the chords. I listen for the way the themes move. And when it's affecting me powerfully, and I'm finding that the rhythm is right, the downbeat is correct, the emotional movement is moving for me, then I'm hopeful that that will be true for other people.

6 KL: Richard says he writes some stories carefully, with many drafts, and others just stream out on the page like jazz. Here's one of those pieces that just streamed out onto the page: "The Wars of Heaven," from his short story collection by the same title. The main character killed a man and he's running from the law on foot in the snow, holed up in a little church, thinking how he got to that point.

RC: That's how I came to be in on the robbery of Strother's Store, over in the mining camp. The other boys wanted to do it, claimed old Strother kept a mint under the floor behind the cash box, and I said, "Well, OK." When we got over there, I felt no fear. I still cannot explain how I walked right up on the porch and butted my rifle right through the plate glass and opened the door and walked inside like it was my store and not his. But let me tell you, it inspired a measure of confidence in those boys who went in behind me, yes indeed. And you know the strange thing is, I walked into that store holding my rifle up like I was looking to shoot something. Walked in and straight back past them tables all laid with canned goods and linens and bottled water. Right

back to the rear wall where Strother had all his bridles and reins hung up. And I turned around to face front, leaned against the wall and just stood there. I didn't want a goddamn thing. I didn't care about money or the things worth stealing in that store. I felt then as I did ever since. I felt mad with temper and like I could just keep it under my skin if nobody pushed at me. And so damned afraid. Afraid of what, I've never been truly sure. But I know that if the sheriff walked into the middle of that robbery or any other one and shot us all down, I wouldn't have much cared. That's the kind of feeling I'm speaking of. And I felt that way until the day I hit Judson Church and looked back on what had gone before and knew I had to wait in that little house of the Lord, wait there for my redemption in whatever form it was coming. And at least I was in a sanctified place.

7 KL: Richard Currey was born in Parkersburg and raised there till his schoolteacher dad took his family to Maryland during the school year because West Virginia's teaching salaries were so low back then. They came back to live in Parkersburg in the summers.

RC: My mother is from Ritchie County. She grew up on an isolated hilltop on a subsistence farm. She was an orphan. Her father, as she says, "run off." Her mother was killed in a house fire when she was a baby. She was raised by her two aunts and her grandparents. She has the most marvelous, idyllic memories of that hilltop. These were people who raised what they ate.

They lived on top of a hill that was almost impassable. When she was a young girl, you walked, you were in a buckboard. So my mother grew up in true rural West Virginia.

KL: What about your dad's family in Harrison County?

RC: Four brothers arriving on a patch of ground, was what that amounted to. They came from Ireland. I think that it's completely reasonable to assume that they came for the reasons that everybody left from Ireland, poverty and famine.

I always imagine these four guys who basically lived next door to each other. I can imagine them in their seventies, looking out at a whole community, all of which they spawned literally, this community of uncles and cousins and children and great-grandchildren and all of them working the fields around them.

My grandfather, who was born in 1890 and - he told me himself - was never much interested in the farming life (laughs) came to Parkersburg, became a businessman.

8 KL: You were born in WV, and you've lived here and you've lived elsewhere. A lot of your stories are set here. You've very connected to this place.

RC: Absolutely. The stories are deeply rooted in WV. Fatal Light begins and ends in the state. The stories in The Wars of Heaven all are set in the state or depart from the state. Lost Highway is about a musician who lives in WV. His whole life is set in a West Virginia small town.

9 KL: After Richard saw the movie, Matewan, he did a lot of research into the mine wars in the early part of the 20th century. And he began to imagine a coal miner named Raymond Dance. Raymond Dance joined the union as soon as the union organizer arrived. And here is Raymond Dance, speaking through Richard Currey.

RC: The mine wars were like nothing we had ever seen. God-awful, bloody, terrifying to the bone. Red Jacket Coal and Coke showed their colors and just like we expected hired in hoods and killers. Baldwin-Felts detectives for the most part. We all went at each other, baseball bats and rocks and knives and finally guns. I lost teeth and busted my nose and my wife Alice was calling me off the whole affair. She reminded me there were miners who were not union. They kept clear of trouble and hoped they'd be alive and still have a job when the smoke cleared, and she was telling me to take their example, stay home, wait. But I had too much of a taste for it, I was too sure it was the right thing to do and that I couldn't live with myself if I wasn't out there in the fray, going to meetings, saying my share. I've never felt different, and I've never had a regret.

There was the night me and Wilbur Landown took on three Baldwins out in the Williamson field, the two of us standing vigil on picket, thinking we had a quiet shift, an easy time of it, middle of the night sometime in June 1920. The scabs were inside working the mine at about a third of what a real force of men could do, but nobody had come up to the line on foot and we knew we had trouble when those three yokels sauntered out of the dark, big hats and looking like brothers on the lam from daylight.

There was no conversation, no negotiating with these boys, they sauntered a while but as they came in close they started to run at us. Two of them were over me like a blanket drawn across my head, flailing, pounding my chest with so much force you'd think I was carrying a Congo gorilla on my back. I heard Wilbur screaming, and I heard the soft grunt of fists coming into flesh, and I was rolling around taking a bruising but the Baldwins were in too close for real damage, more like wild boys in a schoolyard.

I pulled loose and scrabbled backward in the dirt, one old boy was standing over me and in the downswing with a club the size of a bull's hind leg. I got to my knees and coupled my fists and brought my arms right up into the bastard's crotch: that stick still hit me broadside across the shoulders but there wasn't much punch left in the blow, and my man fell down on his butt with his hat across his eyes. I stood up and took a sucker punch to the upper lip that knocked me straight flat. For a minute, I didn't know a thing. I came to in a haze with Wilbur pulling me upright. Wilbur looked in at me and his face was the grandest goddamn mess you've ever seen: teeth gone in front, most bent sideways, cheeks and hair smeared with dirty blood. He looked at me and his eyes were bright and full of food times and he was grinning as if he'd heard the best joke of his life. Come on, he said, let's send these fellas down the chute.

My mind wasn't any too clear and Wilbur held me up by a shoulder saying, "You don't look too good, know that?" I told him he was handsome as ever and got to my feet. One of the Baldwin

men was gone, run off; the other two were on the ground and for all I knew were dead. Wilbur was already dragging one toward the mine gate, motioning me to do the same with the other. I got my man at the ankles and pulled him along; he started groaning and his eyes fluttered. Wilbur pressed the elevator call switch and I heard the old metal cage clanking up the shaft. My man said something blurred by a mouthful of swollen tongue, tried to lift his head to no avail.

I got worried the elevator might come up filled with Baldwins and we'd be dead for sure, but the cage scraped into moonlight empty. Wilbur opened the gate, dragged in his man. I did the same, closed the gate, and we sent them both back down.

When I got home, I told Alice we'd run into a little trouble at the picket line. She dabbed my wounds and frowned, didn't ask for details.

10 Next morning I had Alice and the two babies with me at the train station. Alice was grim, thin-lipped, the new sky overhead was wild as fire and water, and in the time we stood on the platform we didn't speak. All I wanted was to board a train with all of us in one piece.

The northbound came in and took us out and we were a good seven miles from town when Alice said we shouldn't come back. Not for a long while, she said.

I looked out the window with my older daughter on my knee. "Well," I said. "I'll have to come back."

Alice stared at me with a look that held every insult I could hear. After a moment she told me I was like all the rest, just a damned fool.

I was scared and empty-handed and wanting nothing more than to agree, to stay on with her family near Welton, help around her father's farm. Let it all blow over.

She asked me exactly what had happened, and I told her.

She took off her hat and pushed at her chestnut hair. "They'll be waiting for you," she said.

I told her I was sure they would be.

The whistle blew as the train slammed through a water crossing. "I'll stay a spell with you at your folks' place," I said. "And then I'll come back. I can't just disappear."

Alice looked at our daughters, each in turn. The baby in Alice's lap began to cry and I remember to this day the sound of that cry and the shape in Alice's eyes, washed-away, proud and cold as ice. "My God," she whispered.

11 I came back into Red Jacket at dusk three days later, thinking our house would be gone, burned out or vandalized. It was our own home, land that had been in my mother's family, outside town limits and it was there, still standing pretty as you please, that old coat of ivory paint peeling black under years of coal soot. They had been there, somebody had: the front door stood open. It had rained in; dead leaves blew straight into the parlor. I went through every room, every closet, cupboard, shelf. I looked under beds and up the chimney until I was satisfied nobody was waiting for me. By then it was dark, and I turned on all the lights downstairs, drew the curtains to give the place a warm and homey look from the road. I locked the front and back doors and all the windows and took the shotgun from the hall closet corner. Upstairs I pulled off my boots and socks, loaded the gun with two shells full of number six buckshot and sat in my bedroom in the dark, shotgun in my lap, terrified of every little sound I heard. I had the time, sitting there, to think about my situation, to consider the plight of a man who dispatches his family to innocent country and sits afraid for his own life in his own home simply because he wants to trade his labor for a decent wage, and the Baldwin men stepped up on the front porch. Knocked politely at the front door. I kept my seat.

I heard them speak to each other, quietly. Then one said my name, calling me Mister, still polite as Sunday morning. He tried the front door, rattled it gently against the latch, then walked sideways along the porch, a heavy pair of boots under the room I was sitting in. After more than a minute of silence, I heard the back door window shatter. A moment later the door squeaked open and the boots were inside my house.

That was the meaning of forever, listening to those boots from room to room, slow as honey on a cold morning. Closet doors opened and closed. He went into the kitchen, seemed to stay there a full minute or two. When he crossed into the front hallway I got to my feet and came to the side of the bedroom door. He started up the stairwell, and I was useless for any purpose but holding my breath and staring into that patch of invisible future that stands directly in front of a man's eyes. It was peculiar now to recollect that in a moment of such overriding danger a man's imagination might rise like water to fill that place and show him a field of snow he last saw in his childhood. In such a moment you might think nothing would move in a man except the trace of his fear, the taste of his own salt burning his tongue and the corners of his eyes, and to this day I remember the brief light of that winter memory, traveling to see my grandparents in a sleigh, horses steaming and trees in silver freeze. The road was disappeared, rivers snowed under and forests lost in the white. I could hear my visitor breathing as he reached the top step.

The smell of slept-in clothes and poor man's tobacco was strong on the landing. He stepped into the doorway and stopped.

He was not a large man and looked as if he might be quick as he waited for his eyes to come around to the darkness in the bedroom. I pushed my shotgun's muzzle up against his neck.

He let out a small cry and stifled it. For a moment he didn't move, then he made to turn suddenly. I shifted the muzzle to just behind his head and let go one barrel into the empty hallway, and my visitor fell flat.

The echo boomed around the house and I heard plaster and woodwork splinter and fall. My friend on the floor quivered, face down. I smelled him as he soiled himself. He had been armed with a big Colt .44. The pistol was out in the middle of the bedroom floor. I straddled his body and lay the two barrels in at the base of his skull and I swear I have no idea what I said to him. In the years since, I've imagined every manner of remark, but the truth may be that I said nothing at all. I let him stand up - he thought he was mortally wounded - and walked him back downstairs with the shotgun steadied between his shoulder blades. I directed him out the back door and onto the porch and his man was standing there, and I know I told them both to start running. The partner was gone like a rabbit. I shoved my visitor with the shotgun and he fell off the porch into the mud and got up and ran like a cow into the field, grunting, slipping and whimpering. I lifted that old twelve-gauge and fired the second barrel into the stars.

12 RC: I did a reading at West Virginia Wesleyan. And a woman was at the reading, easily a hundred years old - she turned out to be 98, she told me - who had grown up in the town of Red Jacket, West Virginia. Loved the story. And said, you know, my father was really a lot like Raymond Dance. It was one of the most touching things that anybody's ever said to me. A very powerful moment to have made something up, basically out of whole cloth - it's to some degree informed by historical reading - and have this marvelous woman nearly a century old approach me after the reading and say, "You've got it. You've nailed it. This was what it was like."

13 KL: Most people who can tell stories heard stories when they were a kid. Who told stories in your life?

RC: Everybody told stories. Everybody. Everybody at the table. Everybody at the Sunday dinners. Everybody at the Easter picnics. My grandparents would tell the stories of their days growing up, which went back to the turn of the century. My parents would argue over the various fates and destinies of cousins and nephews and wayward uncles and the like. The stories were everywhere. It was an environment. It was like being in a kind of water. I swam in it.

KL: Richard, when you were a kid, did you think that you could or would be a writer?

RC: Uh, oh yeah. Absolutely. About the age of 12, I decided that that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a writer. My grandfather, God bless him, I think he recognized that I had talent, even then. He would have me - at the end of a summer day - come down and bore the rest of my family, reading little stories or poems I'd written. He was obviously very proud of these things.

But yeah, I wanted to be a writer. I just liked to do it (laughs). It was really that simple. I liked to do it.

KL: Your grandfather was one of your first and best audiences, wasn't he?

RC: Absolutely correct. Who knows whether this man had any actual sense that his grandson was literally going to become a writer? But he valued that. That's all. He valued it.

KL: His grandfather encouraged him when he was writing songs and was in a teenage band too.

RC: There was a point when I was 16, 17, 18, when I really thought that I wasn't going to be a writer. I was going to be a musician, a composer. The war interrupted all that, but I have felt very strongly that this arises out of the same creative place in me and that I use all the same tools for composing a paragraph, a story, a book, as I would composing a piece of music.

14 KL: At the beginning of the show, Richard Currey said that ordinary people are the heroes in life, as they face what life brings them and learn from it. Raymond Dance in the mine wars. Edward Tyler facing his wife's suicide. Currey himself is no different. In the late 1960s, he went to Vietnam as a navy medic. His two books about the Vietnam War - *Fatal Light* and *Crossing Over* - are his most autobiographical writing.

In both books, a young guy living an ordinary life in West Virginia gets drafted and is sent to Vietnam as a medic. In the face of daily horror, he scrambles to keep his spirit intact and to be kind.

Of *Fatal Light*, an National Public Radio reviewer said, "Currey makes you feel you are hearing more of the truth than a thousand pages of official history."

Many of the combat chapters are short, intense glimpses through the young medic's eyes, like this one:

15 RC: Maldonado in the ditch bottom whispering in Spanish, his blood mixing with the rain, his hands fluting the air like he's reaching for something flying that evades him. His leg gone at the thigh. I use his belt to tie off the stump. The firefight pocks and talks above us. Maldonado looks at me, actually smiling, and says, "Guess I stepped in some shit, right?"

KL: He deals with situations like this on an almost daily basis.

16 RC: On a combat operation with a Marine Corps unit, my platoon comes under fire. I use a US government-issue, non-retractable ballpoint pen to open an airway for a Marine shot in the face and unable to breathe in anything approaching a normal manner. This procedure is done by placing the pen a few centimeters below the cartilege in the lower neck and shoving it directly into the trachea.

Having done this and established, at least temporarily, a patent airway, I removed the pen and wipe it on my trouser leg and return it to my pocket, in the event it should be necessary for any similar situation in the future. Later that day, I use the same pen for a short report and later that night, to complete the Graves Registration for two Marines who died of their wounds in triage.

17 KL: Richard, how, how did you write things like this? How do you remember? How could you stand to remember?

RC: It took a while to "stand to remember." You know, I wrote nothing about my military experiences, nothing about that period of time until the late 1970s. In fact, I remember being in Morgantown, being a student at West Virginia University, and at the time thinking, "I'll never speak or write about any of this, ever." And I didn't. There were years of writing, learning how to write, writing poetry, publishing, never touched on these issues, never went close to them. Then, I would say, about 1978, is when it just began to pour forth.

KL: Was there a point where you just decided, OK, now I'm going to write about the war?

RC: No, no there wasn't. There were times when I'd write pieces that were about the war, then I didn't for some time. Then I would come back to it. And it gained a kind of life of its own. And I had grown enough, enough time had passed, enough years had gone by that I was able to return to the material. I was able to remember it. I was able to sit with it and not have it be either overwhelming to work with or - in some way, for me - an obscenity, something that I, that I felt for a long time that I shouldn't speak of.

18 KL: How autographical is your writing about the war?

RC: On an emotional, spiritual, and moral level, I would say completely autobiographical. I mean, I use various techniques. I compress characters. Two or three people become one character. Episodes that happened a month apart happened in the same day. Just techniques of fiction. But the essence of these pieces, yeah, they - where they occupy an emotional register - that's strikingly autobiographical.

KL: Did you have to go out on helicopters into firefights to pick people up?

RC: That's one of the key things that medics do in combat situations, is man those helicopters. And, you know, I get off the helicopter and go pick the people up, if they can't get to you, which is often the case.

RC: Helicopter approaching ground under fire. The earth seeming to flatten and recede, pulling back into its own daylight that we can see but not penetrate. Everything in miniature, shadowed and working. Trees sway under the machine wind, distance leaving the groundfire hollow and artificial. Random pops, stutters. Men run about, helmetless, gesturing and falling, comic if we did not know the situation, if we did not know what they were running from. The unit we are coming for has been caught in the open, retreating across a sunny flat toward a dike, taking casualties as we watch. There is a lurch in the air we pass and the earth roars suddenly toward

us. Trees and ground and running men, surging into the vertical, gunfire slamming around our head. smashing down from the placid sky. We take on men. I am on the ground, loading, pushing, shoving, shouting. The other corpsmen start the fluids. Bag breathe the near-dead, position men on stretchers and line them on the deck. No more than 20 feet away, a marine is on the ground, writhing, calling out. I motion the crew chief to help me. I am at the man's feet. We lift. My grip slips on his ankles. I catch at bootlaces and feel the pant legs sag, as if they are two bags filled with mud. And it is everything I can do to keep a finger grip on his laces and run forward. The chopper powers up, and we are on board, lifting away. It is the sky again, the hovering, silver border of the universe. And my hands are shaking with their own memory of lifting those legs that were not legs, that had become something other than legs, that were glutinous mire, that were ooze. We are in the sky, traveling the expanse of its silence, the open road of its vacant glory.

KL: All that hell on the ground and then suddenly that beautiful sky.

RC: The juxtaposition of the beautiful and the horrible. The sublime and the obscene. You know, wars are fought in beautiful places. Extraordinarily difficult things happen, and at the same moment, you can look up and see the sky, a tree line, something that echoes with beauty. And certainly, in *Crossing Over* and *Fatal Light*, I sought to bring those two things together as a constant reminder of that stark and starling combination of experience that is right there, it's together, it's all the time. It's not ever one thing or the other.

19 *RC*: "*Take it easy*," *I said.*

"I'm dead, and I know it. Only a matter of time." Linderman's chest was a matted heap of bloody meat, shotgun blast. Close quarters outside a little buffalo ville, a standoff. Linderman killed the man who shot him.

"Very weird," Linderman said. He was breathless, as if he'd run a long distance.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Well, you know. Sitting here, talking like this, waiting to die."

"You just might make it through this, you know."

Linderman grinned. "Liar," he said. I tried to grin back. "This sucker's starting to hurt," Linderman said. "That's strange. It's just starting to hurt."

"Take it easy," I said.

"You hit anywhere?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so," I said. "Don't worry about it. Linderman grimaced, grabbed at my shirt, opened his mouth wide, blood smeared on his teeth. He choked, gagged. I pushed his head to the side as he vomited blood. He tried to speak, and when he did, a whisper. "God, don't let me go." I cradled his head. "It's strange," he said. "I'm young."

"Yeah," I said. "We all are."

"I just wish I was gone, that I didn't have to think about it." I reached behind him, lifting his body off the ground, embracing him. He looked at me, his eyes clear and troubled, and he said, "Now I'm going to cry."

"Go ahead," I said. "I've got you. I'm with you."

There was a call for help from a few yards away, a call for water. "Hey," Linderman said, "See what you can do over there. Get that man some water."

"Howard can get him," I said.

Linderman said, "No, it's OK. I'll be all right."

"OK, I'll be right back," I said. And I lowered him to the ground. He groaned as I pulled my arms free. The man who wanted water had been hit in the legs, fragmentation spray, Howard working on him when I got there. I let the wounded man sip from my canteen. When I tried to pull away, he pushed forward, so I left the canteen with him and moved back to Linderman. And Linderman was dead.

KL: My God, Richard, was that, is that a true story?

RC: Uh, yeah, Yes, it is. It combines episodes and, you know... But yeah.

20 RC: Actually, I think many, many people want to know if writing is cathartic. Or if one writes in search of catharsis. I know people certainly do. I'm sure they do. I hope it's successful. I don't. You know, I've never had that desire to relieve myself of any particular burden. And in fact nothing I have written has in fact relieved me of any burdens. Um, you know, I think that what happens in one's life is exactly that. I think what we are humanly responsible for, we're responsible for. You carry those things with you forever. You can't make up for anything exactly. You might come to terms with it. You might understand it better. You might make your peace with it. Or not, as the case might be.

For me, writing is not a - it's not therapy. It's not a psychological exercise. It's a creative art form. It drives out of a different place.

21 RC: One afternoon in the hospital, we heard an announcement. Bob Hope was touring in country, entertaining the troops. The announcement came just after a general stopped in to award a silver star. I was asked to sit at the soldier's bedside in a wheelchair, an audience, the witness. The soldier's head was a white swath stained yellow and green at the temples, eyes staring flat as stones from the windows in the tapes. I had overheard one of the surgeons on rounds looking down at the bandages. "Brain's gone," he said. "All we can do is wait him out."

The general's aide read the citation about meritorious action in the face of a hostile enemy. Citations always told the story in 100 words or less, small translations of how lives ended on bleached afternoons along river banks or inside the night's suffocating rain. The solider in the head bandage had escaped a mortared bunker, but returned to reclaim a burning corporal. Killing four or five enemy with knife and sidearm on the way back in. He sustained his wounds on the crawlout, taking shrapnel in the head and shoulders, but moving on with the burning man on his back.

The man he rescued, I was told by those who were there, was dead by the time he regained cover. They were both in flames.

... The medal, in a case lined with scarlet velvet, was opened in front of the soldier's eye window. And he stared through the box lid, into the bed across the aisle, into the next world. I wheeled slowly back to my cot. As the entourage moved out, the general's aide stepped to one side of the doorway and announced that Bob Hope and company would be at the hospital in the coming week. "Mr. Hope is coming to cheer us up," he said. The aide read prepared copy, typed on an index card. We would all be expected to attend the performance. He read on about classic humor, beautiful girls, and a special musical guest. All of us, all of us who could, watched the doorway in lengthening silence. All of us, bandaged, minus limbs, minus eyes, in traction, in body casts, in wheelchairs, on crutches, we watched that vacant doorway. The solider with the silver star continued to stare into the same square of empty space. His medal glinted in its case, with a copy of the citation on the bedside table.

I heaved up to my cot and lay down and looked at the water-stained ceiling, listening to helicopters coming and going, smelling the mud and sweat. My mind seemed useless to me, an old engine riding into a backwash, lost in the world I had called home.

I sat on the side of the bed to reach for some old C-ration chocolate I had saved. And I was unable to cry or speak or move.

music

22 RC: I dream about two Vietnamese monks. It is a desert, and one of them is lame, the other blind. They live together and take care of one another's needs. When I encounter them, I am in uniform, in jungle utilities. They take me in, feed me, but neither speaks. As time passes in their hovel, I want to speak of something that troubles me. I hold their silence until the desire to speak burns in me, and I yell, my voice startling the dream, "Would you kill another being for food?"

Immediately but slowly and smoothly, they become trees, the shapes of their bodies, the shapes of trees, their feet taking root, their arms and heads branching and leafing and flowering endlessly.

23 KL: At the end of *Fatal Light*, Richard sends his main character home to West Virginia, to his grandfather's house.

RC: I sat in the fold of some final and complete desperation, thinking I could never explain what had happened or where I had gone or what had changed me. I was not sure that I knew or wanted to know. "It just seems nothing I can say..." I said, and faltered. "It's like wanting everything to disappear."

"Nothing's going to disappear," my grandfather said. "Except maybe you."

I looked at him.

"If you're not careful," he said.

KL: Richard Currey got wounded in battle, was sent back after he healed, and was eventually stationed elsewhere. He got out of the Navy in 1972.

RC: I traveled somewhat aimlessly around the country on my \$900 severance from the military. And in December of 1972, I arrived in Morgantown on the bus. And I remember vividly walking up High Street. And it was snowing. I remember how beautiful a violin was in a store that sold musical instruments. I don't even know if it's still there. It must have been midnight. Snow was flying through the empty streets. And I walked on up to the Mountainlair. I went in and spent the night on a sofa. And when the morning arrived, I walked about a block away from the Mountainlair, saw a sign in a window that said Room to Rent. And I rented it and stayed on.

24 KL: Richard Currey's 1997 novel, *Lost Highway*, is based on the life of a traveling West Virginia musician - a musician who played that raw, lonesome, early kind of country music.

RC: *Lost Highway* was originally a short story that was going to be in *The Wars of Heaven*. And, uh, the story got longer and longer (laughs). It just overflowed its banks.

I grew up in and around country music. I listened to it originally on an Edison Victrola that my grandfather had. These were recordings that were done in the twenties, very, very early versions, very raw, primal country music. Two guys, a guitar and a harmonica, and the most high, wide, and lonesome voices you can imagine.

The original story, though, was about a man who was going to collect his son's body. His son had been killed in Vietnam, and this man happened to be a vintage banjo player. In the original drafts of the story, as he drove - he was driving from WV to Pittsburgh to pick up the casket. And he was reflecting on his own life as a musician. And it grew, his character grew for me, I continued to allow it to develop and move. And soon it was not twenty pages, it was fifty, then it was sixty. And I realized that he wasn't at all going to pick up his son's body, that his son had survived, that his son was coming back. And that that was a key piece of the story I wanted to tell.

KL: And here is that character, Sapper Reeves, as a boy.

25 *RC*: A night I remember in the deep August of 1940, air heavy with the promise of rain, I carried my banjo and an oil lantern and went to meet the cow in her slow return to the barn. I put her in the stall and dropped the bar lock. The bats squeaked and warbled in the hayloft, flapping out through the hay window for the night's forage. I took my banjo to the barn door, sat on a bale in the opening. From my seat, I watched the kitchen window where my mother had hung a spray of wildflowers to dry, the upside-down bouquet tilting on the breeze.

Sundown birds roared in the tree line, and I began to play, improvising, feeling a growth of natural strength over the strings, knowing that, as my fingers moved, the notes would be there, waiting, ready for me, my right thumbnail finding its place as my left hand fretted down to find an opening directly into the body of the music.

I closed my eyes, hands siting their own country on the banjo's face, a sense of place and the coming knowledge that music is travel, borders in, rivers out. I played a measured step on that passage, and the trees blew and whispered, notes walking one behind the other, a half-tone drop and suddenly an octave above. And I sat on the bale in the open barn door, lacing the banjo's life, chanting with it, a wild, rolling tangle. Eyes open again, I looked toward the valley sky beyond the house, and the music billowed under my hand as lightning flickered to the east, and the wind died, and the first drops of rain rattled in the trees.

The hundreds of birds went suddenly silent. And the only sound still in the night was the sound of the banjo and my humming chant. And the rain came then, riveting the tin roof of the house's sagging porch and forcing me from the bale. I stood inside the barn, inside the doorway and just out of the rain, lit the one oil lamp behind me, the roar of downpour all around as I stood and watched the water fall and played the banjo.

KL: You know, it's interesting. We know at the end of the book here, this fellow becomes world famous. And a lot of times, when somebody like that bursts on the scene, people think they're an overnight sensation, and they say, "Where'd they come from? They haven't paid any dues."

RC: But of course, they have paid dues. Lost Highway is a book about dues. It's really about any artist's life. I think of it as a wide metaphor for a life devoted to any creative art form.

26 KL: Sapper and his buddies play in bars and carnivals, bowling alleys, wherever they can get a gig. And it takes its toll on his family life. Here, Sapper talks with his wife, Riva, from the road.

RC: I could not recall Riva's laugh, could not center my memory on the heat in her voice when she was smiling. I hung up the phone in forgotten corridors, motel rooms, roadside rest stops. I said goodbye, and Riva sometimes said goodbye and sometimes did not, the phone line going empty and blowing across the predator miles.

27 KL: At the end of the book, Sapper still lives in Maxwell. Journalists and young musicians come there to find him.

RC: The last few pages of *Lost Highway* are, to my mind, the operative metaphor of the writing life, as well as, I think, in many ways, the musical life. And that is, that we don't know where the stories come from. We don't know where they rise from. And then they're there. They've beautiful, they're nuanced, they're shapely. And yet they don't seem to be about anything that we specifically knew or were experiencing at the time that we wrote them.

Here's Sapper Reeves.

28 And when the journalists ask where my songs come from, I tell them about the summer I was 18 years old, standing under a willow tree beside Red Row Creek on Water Hill Ridge, looking up into the tree's long, tendril leaves. The wind moved slightly in the bows, and the sky above the tree was cloudless, a blue of such intensity and depth, it was nearly irridescent. Standing there, looking up, I began to sing to myself, wordlessly, an arrangement of notes, the beginning of a melody. After dinner, I took my banjo outside, sat on the edge of the porch and began to play. The melody I carried through that day became the song, "Miranda," although I had never met a woman named Miranda. Nor is there any mention in the song of a willow tree or a visionary sky

or a narrow creek on the side of a lost mountain. But those are the roots of a song I have played all my life, thousands of times, in hundreds of places.

Most of my songs originated in the same random and inexplicable way. I carried them all out on the road with the band, writing more as we traveled, fragments and edges of words or music or both. Small legends of the miles.

I watched the land bend and rise and fall, the big, empty days filled with mountains and clouds and the cold, black shine of the sculpted nights, as we drove on to another town and another show, dead leaves slicing and whirling to paste flat against the Chrysler's misted windows.

One night we passed a farm boy in bib overalls, sitting astride a milk cow and waiting to cross the 2-lane. He watched us come and go, and I saw myself in that boy, no different from the boy I once was, waiting and looking into the unknown future, as if it might reveal its design out of the shapeless dreams of the earth.

29 KL: One final story from Richard Currey, about his grandfather's house.

RC: The first story that I ever published, in a school literary magazine in junior high, was about that house. And in that story, I had envisioned returning to the house years later and traveling through it in much this same way, with the people gone.

KL: So. A few years ago, on impulse, he drove to that house. Hadn't been there in years. It was empty. Nobody lives there. He went in, found himself in that living room he knew so well. Dusty, still, like a time warp. He saw something on the mantle.

RC: I saw an envelope. And I went over to find out what it was. And I was stunned. It was a padded envelope that my father had sent his father in 1959. It's empty. I don't know what was in it. A piece of the past that was just sitting there, undisturbed, waiting for me.

I began to move through the house. Many parts of it are in ruins now, ceilings are collapsing. But I found things. I found a copy of Jules Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. I had it at my bedside when I was ten years old. It was still on an end table.

KL: I picture the air even kind of looking different.

RC: Inside the house? Yeah. It was amber, amber and soft. And it was a falling kind of air. So the first story that I ever saw in any printed form, twenty-five years later, I lived that same story!

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