

**Rick Campbell**

**Balm**

I would make you a promise  
that the world will turn  
toward good, but you're no fool  
to the way worlds turn, and you  
know my powers and promises  
often fall short.

There's a small grove of wax myrtle  
and cedar. Its shade is honey  
when the sun is high and hot.  
Bees gather there to rest.  
If you burn, I'll try to soothe you  
with aloe and oils. I will bring you  
grapes, peaches and teacakes.  
What's this all about, you ask.  
I don't know. I don't know.

**On Dying too Soon After Finally Finding Love**

for James Wright

When does too soon become long enough?  
When your love lights the trees of your East River park,  
shouldn't you get another lifetime more?  
Certainly, we might wonder, "how much love  
is a lot more love than not much love at all?"  
That's not a rhetorical question.  
It's cold this morning. As I walk the dog,  
my fingers feel brittle. The trash truck beeps  
two shell roads over. As he squats, I watch  
a white squirrel chase a gray from pine  
to pine. The gray scrambles up the trunk  
then reverses, like a runner in the open field,  
or a soldier dodging enemy fire, and leaps  
across to the tree he just left. The white  
remains still, content, I guess, to claim  
his tree. About love. About age.  
About death. What do squirrels know?

Rick Campbell

### **Love Is Not a Victory March**

It's come to this. Freezing  
night. A quarter moon in the sky,  
one star, bright as a spaceship  
hovering in the south, somewhere  
over the water. It was too cold to sing.  
We walked, particulates — dust, pollen —  
floated in my headlamp's bright beam.  
Florescent bugs glowed like jewels in the grass.

Love, how far away it is: a village  
at the edge of a lake, satellite image,  
dark and round with what could be trees  
ringing the shore from heart  
to heart as the crow flies. Who  
can fly with crows, love?

**Poem for John Prine**

I don't think I ever prayed  
without being forced to. Ten  
Hail Marys, three Our Fathers,

an Act of Contrition. I confessed  
some made up sins, embellished  
my venial faults to seem

a worthy sinner. Then I quit.  
God wasn't doing me any favors.  
South Florida was so far from the Celestial

Palace that even my sad mother  
couldn't hear the angels sing. The God  
who made me, floated above smoke

stacks, his fingers stained with soot.  
But today, sun rising over the Gulf,  
Dear Lord

Rick Campbell

## **The Old Places**

for Philip Levine

Here, in the modern invention  
of South Florida, I am trying  
to remember a place that never was.  
The ever and never changing malls,  
gated communities with names  
that conjure the idyllic out of palmetto  
and scrub. I point to a road heading  
west to more real estate and say  
that's mine. I flagged its only curve  
and measured half-mile sections  
to the horizon. On the rich  
island's forbidden green  
streets I take two quiet steps  
on paver blocks I laid and tamped  
with my German foreman and redneck crew.  
All over this county there's roads I drove  
trucks down, condo stairs I carried sofas  
and washing machines up. Out  
on Haverhill when it was the western edge  
of all that had been bought and sold, I  
pounded on an ex-girlfriend's door  
at 3 a.m. and then slept off a mushroom  
trip in the back seat of her unlocked  
VW. I used to call the Singer Island  
shoreline, where every high tide  
washed away the evidence  
that I was ever here, home.

## On Not Going to Vietnam

*Two young men are crawling in a ditch that runs along the dirt road in a campground, but now they are quite still. It's a shallow ditch, lit, barely, by moonlight. It's wet from the night dew. One young man holds a package of bacon, the other a half gallon of milk. They are wearing dark clothes and are hard to see in the dim light.*

*They are staring at a skunk a few feet away in the same ditch, and the skunk isn't moving either. In the dark only the skunk's eyes and the white of its body are visible. The young men in the ditch can smell both the potential of the skunk and its everyday skunkness; it smells tangy, but also warm and fresh, like mulch, like wet grass. In fact, the young men in the ditch smell a lot like the skunk — wet grass and sweat and everything is comingled in a less than glorious frozen moment in the natural world. Both parties are rigid, eyeing each other. The night is almost silent. There is a distant slap of the lake's small waves on the shore. Frogs, too far away to sound like every night frogs, croak. Farther away, fainter still, the low rumble of occasional tires rolls in from Route 6. The young men hear each mosquito, each gnat buzzing around their heads. The skunk hears all of this and more.*

*The young men are breathing with the little gasps and explosions of people trying to be quiet. The skunk is nervous too and hisses a little like a cat cornered, but breathes slowly, more rhythmically than the young men.*

*Nearby grass rustles, a mouse or small snake makes its exit. Everything crystallizes here like an unclicked photograph — a little moonlight, a few stars in the cloudy sky, two young men on their wet bellies, a thoughtful skunk.*

*Finally, the skunk turns away, climbs out of the ditch and finds its own campsite to forage. The young men begin to breathe and then to crawl. A few seconds later they rise and run with their spoils.*

It's the summer of 1971 and cow corn is green in the fields, taller than I am. I'm living in a cabin, actually more a shack, an amalgamation of structures joined into one small dwelling, near the shores of Lake Pymatuning in Northwestern Pennsylvania. I don't really know it, but I'm waiting for my lottery number to come up.

The shack is just west of Linesville, Pennsylvania, a little farm town that became a working class resort when someone flooded the Pymatuning Reservoir over farms and roads within a couple of miles of town. The town's most famous and lucrative attraction is the

Spillway where ducks walk on the backs of thirty-pound carp as both scramble for day-old bread that people throw to them. It's a town that benefits as much from the dollars of campers and fishermen, as the corn and cows, silos and barns that populate the countryside.

The lake is muddy green, cold as it laps against the bleached white driftwood that rings its shoreline. During the day I walk to the state park on the lakeshore where the free showers offer not only a chance to get clean, but also something to do. Entertainment is hard to come by here. The roads are tar-covered and heat shimmers off them as I walk; sometimes my sneakers squish and leave imprints in the bubbles.

I've been hungry a lot of this summer — out of money in early July and living mostly on rice and food that my father left on his earlier summer visits. I've made a few acquaintances in my two months here. I am the long-haired curiosity and some of the town boys stop at my camp to drink beer, or to just be in a place where there are no parents, no adults. I play whiffleball with one of them. If I strike him out, he has to bring me food the next time he comes around. He always bites on the big sweeping curve, flails at the knuckle ball or misses the diving fork ball. He looks bad. About once a week I get some eggs or bread that he swipes from his mother's pantry. It doesn't take much to get by.

Sometimes my friend from down near Pittsburgh joins me. He's younger than I am and not worried about the draft. I don't think I'm worried about it either, but I don't often tell myself the whole truth. We are only a little bit hungry, and we like the adventure of seeing where and when our next food will come from. We haven't had to beg yet and, until it happened, catching us by surprise, we'd never stolen any food either.

I have a girlfriend, of sorts, who lives down the road. She's a townie stuck on a street of working class summer cabins and trailers. Her mother hates me (of course) and forbids her to see me, so we sneak around a lot. One day I met her in town at the high school gym where she was working for the summer. A bunch of guys were playing basketball and the coach baited Ray, his best player, into playing me one on one — a battle with the long-haired stranger. We had a good game, matched each other shot for shot, drive for drive, and Ray won by one basket. It couldn't have gone better; I tried as hard as I could to win, but luckily or because Ray was really better, I lost. I won a measure of respect from him. When he walked off all he said was good game. But that, as players know, means a lot in these circumstances.

Hippies, which I looked like, but really wasn't, were not well accepted in the Pymatuning region, or anywhere else in the rural heartland. A common habit for the local boys was to cruise the picnic grounds and look for camper girls, the daughters of vacationers up

from McKeesport, Ambridge, or some other milltown. There were no shopping center parking lots to cruise, no malls to hang out in. The local route began at the Linesville Dairy Queen, shot straight out the road to the campground and sometimes, if kids were adventurous, cut west to Route 6 and circled back to the Dairy Queen. I'm not sure that the cruising locals (nor I) ever connected Route 6 (The Grand Army of the Republic Highway) to the far flung places it went; maybe we knew about Cleveland, but that it would have taken us across the Continental Divide, through the high desert of Nevada, and dumped us off in Long Beach was beyond our ken.

If there were no camper girls hanging around for the boys to leer at, and usually there were none, because this was a little fishing campground in Northern Pennsylvania, not the Jersey shore, the boys would look for other entertainment — either racing, or, after we arrived, hassling hippies. Usually nothing more drastic happened than someone shouting *get a haircut, faggot; get a job, or you a man or a woman?* But sometimes things escalated. Once, as I was sitting on my rock in front of bathroom at the end of the road, two guys I'd never seen before began to give me a hard time, trying to pick a fight. When I didn't bite, one pulled a choker chain out of his pocket and said that since I looked like a dog maybe he should put a collar on me. Just when things were going to get serious, Ray drove by and said, "let him go, he's ok," and the others left. Respect.

2.

I was there among the red barns and white houses where Mennonite farms melded easily into the secular world. My reasons, though unclear to me, were common to many young men my age in 1971: a desire to be somewhere other than home and the faint notion that the war and its draft were issues that I could not ignore no matter how oblivious I was to the news and events of the time. I didn't think of the draft as a central part of my reality. Though a few kids I knew had enlisted to avoid being drafted into the Army, none of my friends had been drafted yet. But to be unconcerned is not to be unconscious. I was acting on some mixture of fear and revulsion, some undeclared sense that everything I hated might come to claim me and maybe claim my life too. Probably my ignoring the war was an act of denial. Though I had talked about hating the war with my "peers," I assume that I might have gone if my number was called. I was young, naive, and easily pushed around; to do what was expect-



ed was the easiest road to travel. I don't think I had the guts to travel the road of overt resistance.

I had no thoughts, no plan, no strongly held beliefs. All I can be sure that I wanted was to avoid people like my father, like most of the fathers I knew. That alone should have made me a draft evader if I had had the courage to do something that difficult. I never seriously considered that I would be sent to Vietnam. I never thought I could die, in Vietnam or anywhere else. Yet somewhere inside, the situation must have been real to me. I was living a few miles from the Canadian border, and I was waiting for the lottery.

My circumstances were meager, but so were my experiences and my expectations. August was coming. I would turn 19 with no job; I was on a summer break from junior college, but I didn't like college. It had no purpose. There was nothing I wanted to be, only things I didn't want to do and people I didn't want to be like. It's true that I still had a student deferment, but that was some sort of some abstract thing. I had a draft card, but I don't think I had a deferment card. Maybe there was no such thing as a deferment card. What did I know? I cared so little about so much that I didn't care about my deferment either. Things happened and seeing what would happen next was enough. This slack version of *carpe diem* was pretty sustaining then.

Maybe that's why we were crawling through the ditch. It wasn't really hunger that sent us into the campground that night, just a sense of curiosity stretched too thin. A couple of the town boys were out to see us, and they'd had a few beers. My friend and I didn't want to eat as much as we wanted to talk about food, about the food we hadn't eaten for days and weren't likely to see unless we went home to our parents' refrigerators. We fantasized about cookies and cakes, about sausage and spaghetti. I went on too long about bacon, my favorite food. Soon we'd driven ourselves into a frenzy of sweet or savory desire, and someone suggested going into the campground and raiding the campers' coolers.

Just before we began our sortie, the townies chickened out and left. Scotty and I went through with it because there seemed no good reason not to. I got my bacon. I don't remember what else we liberated. We ate everything. Then we started to feel guilty because we knew that campers, people more or less like us, were not the proper targets for our raids.

3.

The morning that the draft numbers came out, August 6th, I walked down the tar road through the late morning's rising heat to Linesville to find a newspaper, and in Isalys at the end of the long formica counter in a pile left from breakfast was my number — 358. 358. Suddenly I believed in the war. I believed in not going and felt the lucky rush of having been missed by a speeding car after you step off the curb without looking. In a moment fueled by three simple numbers, I was suddenly aware of what the war meant to me: I wouldn't get drafted unless we were fighting on Mars. I bought a celebratory ice cream cone and walked across the street to browse the windows of Morrison's Surplus. Even in this moment of joy, or at least relief, Linesville offered little else in the way of celebration.

I'm not into numerology, not then, not now, but  $3+5+8 = 16$ , and August 16<sup>th</sup> is my birthday. There are good numbers and bad. If you play APPA baseball, where your fortune is decided by rolling dice, the best numbers — 11, 22, 33, 44, 55 and 66 — bring homeruns and extra base hits. 3 is auspicious and maybe even Holy. 5's pretty good. 7 and 11 are lucky in craps. Willie Stargell wore number 6, Clemente, 21; Mazerowski wore number 9. But in the draft lottery did any of this matter? Probably not, and if it did I certainly don't know why. But, a lucky number came up for me and I've no reason to discount anything that might have caused it.

I spent a few more uneventful weeks there in the shack by the lake, and during those weeks I realized a few things about my life. I discovered that Ray and a lot of the town and farm boys didn't get number 358. Many of them, too many for sheer chance it seems, had numbers below 100. I also learned that since I was 358, I didn't know what to do next. I grew tired of the cabin and had to go somewhere else.

4.

Ray might be dead now; I don't know. I think he drew number two. He probably wasn't thinking about going to Canada or becoming a CO; he probably didn't want to go to war, but he probably thought there was nothing he could do about it. Most of us really have little control over our lives, and working class kids have less control than those with better lives and better connections. I doubt that anyone ever told him that you don't have to go get killed; you don't have to walk out in front of a

truck. As I grew more knowledgeable and distrustful of our government's ways, I came to suspect that the lottery was rigged so that poor boys not in the habit of making critical decisions were the ones who got the low numbers. As Steve Earle sang, "they draft white trash first round here anyway." Did the lottery have a list of birth dates cross referenced with stats on income, education, geography, so that low numbers came up in Linesville, PA, the Dakotas, West Texas, most of the Deep South? In 1971, I knew only two draft-age black men; I'm sure that my geography of who gets drafted would have been changed by race, but race was not yet a factor in my thoughts on Vietnam or my life at large.

For sure, lots of kids were getting drafted and getting killed. In 1972, the good chance of getting killed numbers were 1-125. A boy born on December 4, 1952 would have been number 1. January 25<sup>th</sup> was number 2. December 15<sup>th</sup> — number 3. Those two-digit tickets-to-a-body-bag numbers had to be someone's; but I did not have to worry about it. As a wise song says, "*It's not hard to get along with somebody else's troubles.*"

Being 358 meant that I didn't have to go back to the junior college classes I'd been taking. I was bored. I didn't know why I was taking them, so I let the fall term begin before I headed back to Florida. Being 358 meant that the vague plans I'd been considering of running off to Canada, or just drifting anonymously across the country, weren't necessary anymore. I'd have to actually think about what I wanted to do. I wandered home after Labor Day.

By the time I grew conscious of the war it was obvious that it was a bloody, dangerous, stupid mess. I might have been ignorant about why we were fighting and apathetic about opposing the war, but I was not about to enlist. For me to have gone to Vietnam, via enlistment or the draft, would have been an act of monumental emotional confusion. Maybe I wasn't the most informed guy around, but *you don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows, do you?* After Kent State even I was aware of the opposition to the war. Even I knew that kids had died for no good reason and that they were still dying. I could have gone to war and joined the troops doing pot, acid and heroin; I could have fragged arrogant officers, could have mutinied and said I wasn't going to fight, could have gotten caught in a civil war between black troops and white racists. Yes, there was a world of opportunities that I missed. But as I've said, I didn't know enough then. So, I just didn't go; I had no concrete,

articulated reason for *not going*. There are degrees of not going. To be a CO and not go, to be an anti-war activist and not go, to be a draft evader and not go, these were noble stands. The more selfish position was to believe that someone had to fight the Commies, but not me. The most common position held by my generation was probably to hang on to your college deferment, do some good dope and hope to get laid. But even that kind of *not going* was better than going.

Bill Clinton didn't go either, and he and I weren't alone in missing the war. Very few American men, less than 10% of those eligible to serve, went to Vietnam. Most Americans simply didn't go and didn't become COs, antiwar activists or draft evaders. Most didn't do much of anything except stay in college or get lucky. I won the lottery.

Even though I did not go to Vietnam (and in 1971, walking through Linesville, PA, I might have been very much out of touch with the political reality and threats of the day) I later found that I had friends whose lives were damaged or terminated by Vietnam. My neighbor Larry was a few years older than I when he was shot by his own men on Christmas Eve walking perimeter guard duty. I'm not sure when I came to know this, but I did find Larry's name on the Vietnam Memorial many years after 1971. At the Memorial, as I rubbed his name, I was sure that try as he might, he couldn't quietly walk guard duty. Larry was clumsy. He was a fat kid who dropped at least sixty pounds so that the Army would take him and then served less than 50 days in Nam before he was shot. His Service Record says he died from a "Misadventure." It's sickening to think of those words and what they mean in this circumstance, but I have often been sickened by the evasive, whitewashed language like "friendly fire" that the military regularly uses to describe the tragedies of war.

Tommy, a good friend, the best baseball player I knew, was also a few years older than I; he enlisted in the Navy so that he would not get drafted. He came home with bad hearing, a penchant for weed, and a lethargic, broken spirit that kept him either in his parent's house or holed up in his apartment. I only saw him twice after Nam. Another guy, I met him much later, in the late 70s, joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War when he was in Nam and then accidentally had his face plastered on the cover of Life Magazine. He came home a bit crazy, but not as fucked up as many others. My neighbor of the last twenty years served on a river patrol boat like the one in *Apocalypse Now*, and for much

of his early years back in county he was pretty crazy too. We all have war stories. Not going did not necessarily insulate one from the fallout of the Vietnam War, but it's pretty safe to say that for all but the most gung-ho, not going was certainly better than going.

5.

There are many conspiracy theorists who claim that the lottery was rigged. Maybe losing any game of chance that is likely to result in getting you killed is enough to get people thinking the game's rigged against them. Remember Tessie's cries in Jackson's short story "The Lottery." But there were some weird circumstances that caused a lot of doubts about the lottery's fairness. It was supposed to work like this: a birthday lot was drawn, say August 16th; then a draft number was assigned to it. In the lottery held on December 1, 1969, dates were written on slips of paper and placed in blue plastic capsules; then the capsules were drawn from a large glass container. Congressman Alexander Pirnie of New York drew the first capsule, September 14, and this date was assigned the number one. Then youth delegates who had been chosen from places all over the country were given the dubious honor of drawing the remaining capsules; each date drawn was given the next number in line. Think again of "The Lottery" when the administrators of the town's lottery made sure that all of the children had stones to throw at the sacrificial victim. Having kids draw numbers was morally suspect, but the story gets worse. It was later discovered that the date capsules were kept in shoeboxes; each month had its own box, and then the capsules were dumped into the glass container in chronological order. October, November, and December were dropped in last. The capsules were not mixed very well so those capsules remained near the top and too many dates, to be statistically fair, from the last months of the year were drawn first and given low numbers. The random draft wasn't really random, but this mistake was more a product of inept and sloppy thought than cheating or targeting any certain groups of young men. However, everything matters when we are gambling with lives.

I can't get over the idea that the Nixon administration thought it was a good idea to have young people participate in the lottery by drawing the lots. Nixon, as did many others in America, knew that the young targets of the draft distrusted the process. He cooked up this scheme to use even younger kids to

draw the lots hoping that it would “answer questions and dispel illusions about the conscription process which are now held by many of our younger citizens.” This scam, The Youth Advisory Committee Program, was meant to create the illusion that America’s youth supported the government’s war policy. Through these no doubt hand-picked “good” kids, Nixon hoped to create “a channel for communication and for influence” and “provide a way in which young people can help to shape government policies in which they have a very special stake.” This was clearly another joker the Nixon administration’s pack of cards.

After Rep. Pirnie drew number one, young Paul Murray, of Rhode Island, drew lot number two. These kids, who were chosen or volunteered to be on the Youth Council, were either Angels of Death or Angels of Mercy, depending on the numbers they drew. Did they understand this as they came to D.C. and then walked up to the glass jug to draw a capsule? Their participation even further complicates the metaphysics of why some men got low numbers and went to Nam and some got high numbers and were spared. Here are the permutations of why Tommy gets a low number:

Chance

God’s will

Deceit and corruption

Karma

If chance governed the lottery, as the Selective Service and government wanted us to believe, then it did not matter who drew the lots. If it was God’s will, then if there was a God, it probably didn’t matter who drew the lot for whom, and there was probably nothing anyone could have done to change the outcome of the drawing. If the lottery was rigged, then again it didn’t matter who drew the lot because winners and losers had already been chosen according to factors of privilege, power, politics, and social control. But if Karma also factored into this equation, good old American Karma without the additional complication of reincarnation, just the idea that we get what we deserve, then what one got, in the way of a low or high numbered lot, might have been affected by who drew the lot. If “bad Karma” low numbers came about because of the previous negative Karmic actions of the young man who got the low number, then in our limited understanding, it would seem that this young man got what he deserved. But what if the Youth Advisor kid had the bad karma?

What if he (or she) wasn't as pure as Nixon wished? Could this youth pass bad Karma on to the young man being drafted who had to live (or die) with the terrible lot he was assigned?

What strikes me as most resonant about the Youth Advisors drawing lots for others is how it implicates them in the fates of those about to be selected or set free. They become saviors or executioners. They're made to function like those Just Say No kids of the Reagan 80s snitching on their weed smoking parents. Humans have a long tradition on turning on each other for many reasons: McCarthy and his suspected commies. Judas and Jesus. Snitches and scapegoats.

In the 1971 draft, my draft, a lot more thought and care went into making the process more statistically random, but when the capsules were placed in drums and rotated, much like Lotto and Powerball drawings on TV today, one of the drums broke and rotated for half of the time it was supposed to spin around. Sloppy, but no one claims this sloppiness resulted in an unfair draft. In the 71 draft, July 9<sup>th</sup> was number one, but since the war was winding down, not as many young men were sent to Vietnam in 1972. Whatever glitches and problems there were in the 1971 lottery, they did not affect as many lives as in the years before. In 1972, only 49,514 boys were inducted, as compared to 382,000 in 1966.

6.

As I wrote the first drafts of this essay I was a lot older than the 18 year old kid in the ditch. I was living in the country, listening to the rain, to woodpeckers, the deep rushing beat of cardinals at the bird feeders and the more distant sounds of the neighbors' peacocks, chickens, cows and a solitary and seemingly sad mule. Looking back at the kid crawling through the ditch, though I didn't really hurt anyone by stealing that food, I've always been a little ashamed of the deed. It's not that I believe theft is always wrong; sometimes, under certain conditions, it can be quite necessary. But I don't believe in stealing bacon from a camper's cooler. I imagine a family getting up in the morning, opening their cooler, having maybe dreamed of bacon and eggs, but their bacon is gone. They are shocked, can't believe it. Maybe the old man accuses his wife of forgetting it. I did not mean to cause that conflict, to throw a wrench in otherwise decent family outing. I wasn't really that hungry.



Coda

In a sort of seven-degrees-of-separation event, I met a writer at a conference and over beers we were talking about our lives. He taught in northwest PA, not far from Linesville. I told him about my going to Linesville often years ago, about this essay, and about the encounter with Ray. Then I sent him what I thought was a finished draft of this essay. It turned out that his wife went to high school in Linesville, and when she read the essay she figured out that Ray was probably the Ray she knew. Her Ray was alive and well and still living in the Linesville area.

As a writer, I was a bit disturbed by this turn of events. I was happy that my Ray (and hers) was alive, but what about the facts, the truth, in this essay? I began asking my friend questions, and he would run them by his wife and if she needed help answering them she would ask her sisters.

Did Ray play basketball? *Yes. He was his team's star.*  
Was he sort of short for a basketball player? *Yes.*  
Did Ray look Hispanic? *Yes, but he was Filipino.*

Ok, I thought. The bigger question — now that Ray appears to be alive and back in the world:

Did he go to Vietnam? *No.*

No? Now I'm wondering where I got this story about Ray? Did I make it up? Did we ever talk about Vietnam and draft numbers? I don't know for sure anymore. I do believe that a nonfiction essay ought to be as true as the author can write it. Memory is suspect, yes, and all things can't be researched and proven. But I don't like the feeling that I've made up such an important situation about Ray. I am certain that I played a game of basketball in the Linesville gym that summer, and the same guy I played drove by and told the choker chain guys that I was "ok."

I need to know what Ray's lottery number was. I was pretty specific about that important claim; maybe I weaseled when I wrote "I think Ray *told* me he was number two." Now, when so much of what I wrote and thought was accurate has been thrown to the winds of doubt, I'm forced to consider this. I don't remember any conversation with Ray. Even during the game I doubt that we said more than an occasional "nice shot." We



only “knew” each other for maybe thirty minutes — a game to 21. After the game we did not suddenly become good buddies who were going to chew the fat about our chances of going to Nam. That sounds crazy now. I’m sure I went back to where my “girlfriend” sat during the game and soon we left the gym. I’m pretty sure about this too: the game probably took place in the weeks before the lottery was held. When we played, there were probably no numbers but the score for us to be concerned with. *Probably* is a convenient word to a memoir writer. Now I ask if I found out what Ray’s draft number was, how and when did it happen?

After the August morning when I found out my number, I hung around Linesville for a couple, maybe three more weeks. I saw my girlfriend a lot; we said tearful goodbyes I suppose, and I must have promised to come back sometime. I’m sure that I would have told her of my lucky draft number. Maybe she told me that Ray was not so lucky. Maybe. Maybe I did speak to Ray again after the lottery. Maybe.

I asked my friend to help me get in touch with Ray and so I have his address. If I can find out when his birthday is, I can look up his draft number. I don’t think he will remember me, or the game we played. I don’t suppose he’s ever thought of me again, and I figure he will be surprised (and I hope not angered) that I took his life and used it in this essay without knowing all, or many, facts about him. If I do get in touch with him, if we do talk somehow, I don’t know if I will record what I find out. Maybe this is the end. If there’s a second Coda, then it’s not. But really, how important is it that Ray did not go to Vietnam even if I thought he did? Lots of young boys went. What if he did not have a low number? Lots of young boys did. This essay is about me — me and the lottery and the Vietnam War. It’s about my not going to Vietnam, about my being spared having to suffer through the worst historical event that happened to people, men and women, boys and girls, of my generation. I believed what I wrote here, years ago, to be true, and if I had not met a poet in a St. Augustine bar, I would still think that I had written a true account of what I thought happened to me — and to Ray. So I’m thinking that maybe Ray’s number, his going or not going to Vietnam, doesn’t really matter in this essay. His not going to Nam matters a great deal to him; it might be the major reason he’s still alive, so I’m happy that I had that part of the story wrong. I’m not even sure how much my life matters to this essay. What if the essay, the important part, is more about Vietnam and what it

meant to America, to people like me, and what if the value, the measure of this essay is more how well written it is (if it is) and how well I've used these words to string together sentences to make some beauty, maybe some truth? If that's the measure of this essay, of any essay, then how much does it matter if what I've written is true?

Answer: it matters to me. It matters a lot. I believe in the Covenant — not the one between God and his Chosen People (not Americans) but between the nonfiction writer and the audience. I want to tell the truth as well as I can and create beauty too. I want to. I do. It's absolutely true that I stole that bacon and stared at that skunk. Honest. Believe me.

### Coda II

Ray never answered my letter. What now?