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Winesburg, Indiana: The Historian

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Winesburg, Indiana: The Historian

Abstract
So then I was downtown, right? Trying to remember the street they renamed in honor of that kid from Winesburg who was killed in Iraq, when I found myself in front of this granite pillar rising from a pedestal, a tidy pyramid of bowling balls at each corner, a huge stone Eagle at the top, even a poem.

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So then I was downtown, right? Trying to remember the street they renamed in honor of that kid from Winesburg who was killed in Iraq, when I found myself in front of this granite pillar rising from a pedestal, a tidy pyramid of bowling balls at each corner, a huge stone Eagle at the top, even a poem:

Till the Years of Earth are Over
And the Skies Gathered like a Scroll

(or some such)

... 

We Remember The Union Army
Erected, Chamber of Commerce, 1939.

Words cast in bronze (now green). And I’m thinking, that that’s like 1939 minus 1862 = 72, 71 years after the Civil War. So what did they know about it? Them and their bowling balls. Or maybe they were supposed to be cannonballs. Did any of them, the Winesburg artist, Winesburg poet, or Winesburg businessmen who made the memorial, fight in the Civil War? Was anyone from the Civil War even alive in 1939? A matter of
representation. Or knew the difference between a bowling ball and a cannon ball? It’s not impossible. Some squirt, a Winesburg drummer boy say, 15, 16, mans-up in 1869 just as the war ends, and so survives to make memories another day. That means he’d be like 94 in 1939, which is possible. But then you gotta wonder, how much did this squirt see? How sharp’s this geezer’s recall? Not that some of the kids in Winesburg aren’t wide-eyed, not that some of our geezers aren’t sharp as tacks at 94, or even 100. Even good bowlers. But still, you see the point. This granite memorial isn’t at all like those memorials to victims of highway crashes, or drive-by or schoolyard shootings where the photos, flowers, and teddy bears pile up before the bodies are cold. The wounds still fresh. Too fresh. An outrush of emotion. Too much to bear. Can’t have that. Can you imagine? A forty-foot granite teddy bear in our town square? No, better to wait. 7,000 corpses scattered across the fields of Pennsylvania, blackening in the summer heat. Better granite bowling balls. That’s what makes history history. And not journalism, or memoir. The forgetting. The not being there.

Dear Diary,
I’ll get back to you….
May 18, 2012

Winesburg, Indiana: The Historian

72 years later. That’s like farther from the Civil War than we are from WWII. Dear Diary, (Voila! Instant history)—Are there eagles in Pennsylvania? I remember it as pretty flat, flat as Indiana, flat enough for fields and armies, anyway: 3,000 swollen horses and mules mixed in with those 7,000 soldiers. Six million pounds of rotting flesh if my math is right. Quite a stench. Vultures, more likely. Maybe that’s what that drummer boy saw. Doesn’t take long. Vultures, lots of them. And mistook them for eagles. Doesn’t last long. That’s why you got to write it down. Even then, people forget. Or get confused. I mean, maybe the squirt saw vultures and the geezer remembered eagles. It happens. Or maybe he saw it wrong and remembered it right. Just as common. Or saw it wrong and remembered it wrong or saw it right and remembered it right to the artist of the memorial who heard it wrong. Haven’t you ever played Winesburg telephones? How many historians does it take to screw in a light bulb? Shed a little light. Illuminate a subject so everyone can see. ‘One’—me—at least that’s what they seem to think when every historian before them (obviously) got it wrong. I mean, history is a special kind of memory, right? What I leave out is as important as what I put in, Hemingway—who was actually born in Winesburg—wrote about his war. Still, makes you wonder why historians have such faith in things written down: birth certificates, letters, memoirs, laws, deeds, treaties, documents, agreements, vows—Till Death do us part—histories (obviously) all flawed (obviously), speeches, memorials, all given meaning by the absences. The silence. The way sound without silence is just noise. Or print without gaps is just solid black—not the marbled page, not letters of the alphabet, which are important to poems, memoirs, histories, novels about wars, etc. Hemingway left Winesburg to join the Great War. The War to End All War as they called it before Wars to End All War had sequels—37 million killed —and
needed numbers to tell them apart. Like Superbowls. 60 million in WWII. You can look it up in the Winesburg library: 263 tons of ammunition fired by U.S. soldiers each day. 42,500 aircraft destroyed; 5,151 warships sunk by U-Boats alone; 767 U-Boats alone (crew of 54 each) sunk in reply; 603,400 civilian deaths from air raids; 12,000 heavy bombers destroyed, but not before they dropped 3.4 million tons of bombs, obliterating 197 towns, too many pounds of rotting—or evaporated—flesh to even guesstimate—and that’s just some numbers from our side, the victors, the good guys whose records were written in places like Winesburg instead of places like Dresden or Hiroshima, the Great Cornucopia of America replacing all of those lost ships and planes, uniforms, helmets, shoes, canteens, playing cards, bullets—also chandeliers, chess sets, kitchen tables, board games, wallets, dog tags, filing cabinets, radios, cigarettes, boots, shaving kits, pots and pans and pens, libraries, churches, railroads, beer steins, schools, desks, dolls, bugles, clip boards, grenades, pogo sticks, pencils, typewriters, erasers…. Bowling balls too, no doubt. But not people. Not even family photos. In 1954 there were still six soldiers from the Civil War still alive, the last of them dying in 1956. On his 100th birthday they gave him a tee-shirt: I Survived the Civil War. The photo of him in that shirt in his obituary is what set off the war over who should have gotten the tee-shirt, a Confederate soldier claiming in 1957 that he was the last civil warrior standing, until he died in 1958, whereupon a Union soldier piped up from the Winesburg nursing home to claim the shirt. Then he died. And a different Confederate soldier hit the Raise-Head button on his hospital bed—*The South Shall Rise Again!*—to claim the title. A pride thing, etc. And so it went, Union, Confederate, Union, one old geezer after another claiming he was the last. The winner. None able to prove it. There not being any written records. No one ever wrote it down. Or they lived but their records didn’t. Sherman’s March to the Sea. Who can say? Maybe some of these geezers were just confused. Brain fade. Memory as roadkill along the march of time. Thought they were at Bull Run when they’d really been at Iwo Jima. And that’s not counting those who were there but didn’t want to talk about it.
Winesburg, Indiana: The Historian

Didn’t want the tee-shirt. Remembered vultures not eagles. Like my uncle. 77 Years—as far from the Civil War as we are from The War to End All War II—got a Silver Star, my uncle did. In Okinawa. Or maybe it was Normandy. Hard to say since he never wanted to talk about it: how his entire unit was being mowed down by machinegun fire. Uncle Cab rushed right at the pillbox with a flame thrower strapped to his back, a weapon sort of like the bowling balls full of napalm that his son dropped on Vietnam (if you want a more recent reference), with dozens of Germans or Japanese shooting at him the whole time as he dodged and danced his way to the pillbox, just like in movies, and sprayed in his liquid fire—What I put in is as important as what I leave out—burnt alive a bunch of guys. Saved a bunch of guys. Depending on your point of view. Stench of burning hair and flesh. Not what they show us in the movies. At least according to my other uncle, Cab’s brother, who loved to tell the story. Of course I was only a squirt then. And he was pretty old—a geezer actually. Who liked to embellish things, gild his words, leave out details, too, or arrange facts to make a better story. Not so unlike historians, though sometimes he’d confuse things with movies he’d seen.

When the sublime celestial bugler
Rings our heroes’ reveille….

Too bad no one was there to take a photo. Like the photo of those guys raising a flag on Okinawa. Or those Civil War photos that Mathew Brady—who was also from Winesburg—took of corpse-strewn battlefields. Not that words can’t be memorials.
Remember the Winesburg!
Never Again!
Till the Skies Unroll like Scrolls,

etched (by businessmen) in bronze (now green) to last forever. Like the plaque erected just south of here, on the south branch of the Fork River where troops, fresh from their victory in the Civil War, were sent to join the war to end all wars with the Indians who used to live around here. You didn’t think they named the place Indiana for nothing, do you? The Battle for Fork River, the plaque reads. The Troops sent to the river being hardened military men. Maybe even the same guys immortalized in bronze poems back east. Used to the stench of burnt bacon. Strategists. Savvy enough to wait until winter, when most of the Indian warriors would be away hunting. And the snow so deep that army horses could charge but the women and children camping at the Fork River wouldn’t be able to run away. When they attacked at dawn. I wonder…. Why don’t holocausts have numbers? Wouldn’t that make them easier to remember? Like Superbowls? It’s complicated, of course, one man’s genocide being another man’s Battle for Fork River. Like when my uncle asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I told him I wanted to be a vet, meaning I wanted to take care of sick animals, and he thought I meant a ‘vet’ the way everyone who’d been in The War to End All War II meant a ‘vet,’ and he just misted up, shook his head and walked away. What I leave out….
Lots of rapes at Fork River, some say. Not the Indians, of course. Nor photos, like Mathew Brady took, and the camera doesn’t lie, as people say. Of course, the people who say that obviously never took a picture of someone trying to kick them. Have you ever noticed how enormous the foot in one of those photos looks? Still, people say things like that. Meaning, the person had to be there for you to take a picture of them, the way a vase of flowers had to be there for you to take a picture of it, or a teddy bear, your uncle, or the Winesburg’s Civil War memorial had to be there for you to take a picture of it. Of course that isn’t strictly true either, or mean that just because you were there someone would take your picture, but whatever. The point being, 9 times out of 10 the thing that a picture was of had been in the world at a particular place (in front of the camera), at a particular time (shutter snap), and that’s what’s so mesmerizing: proof of existence. That’s what makes a picture a memorial. Even if it’s a memorial of a memorial. It’s the reason old photos of the dead have such power over us. Sepia-toned stares. Or those washed-out colors in photos from the 50’s, when everyone in Winesburg was digging bomb shelters and Kodak was king—4th of July!— but the kings of photo-as-memento-mori are daguerreotypes like those carried by Civil War soldiers of their wives, sweethearts, mothers. Or those daguerreotypes soldiers left behind of themselves in uniform. Poignant. The way they had to sit still as a corpse (instead of waving flags—4th of July!— or having a squirt-gun fight in a backyard pool). Because of the long exposures. Open, dead-eyed stares at the camera. Couldn’t duck-and-cover like we used to at Earl Butz Primary School, or even smile, or blink because a blink would blur the picture, not at all like that famous photo of Winesburg soldiers raising a flag at Iwo Jima, a victory, an instant memorial to the taking of the island, though afterwards the story gets a little fuzzy, with some soldiers who were there
saying that the shot was faked, if by fake you mean staged the way some people say Mathew Brady faked his shots: put one dead soldier’s hand on his heart, or slump two together as though they passed away in their sleep, rearranging them into more moving postures. Makes a better story that way, though the Iwo Jima photographer—another famous Winesburg native—denied doing any such thing. Said it was spontaneous—the photo, not the flag raising which everyone knew was staged by a general—until a second, different, negative was discovered (the camera doesn’t lie) at which point he remembered that he’d shot a spontaneous one, then asked them to raise it again so he could have a do over, but couldn’t remember which was which. Whatever. Anyway, our Representative sponsored a bill in Congress to make a statue of the photo, and came up with a really great line that he used in his speech at the unveiling—“Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it”—which even made it into the movie that Hollywood made about the statue of the staged or rehearsed or spontaneous photo of the raising of the flag, and seems to be even more true today, given all the talk about “The death of photography,” photographers laying teddy bears and wreaths on what the creators of those Civil War daguerreotypes meant by “a picture” when their subjects couldn’t even blink, let alone run around with squirt guns or raise flags. And photographers couldn’t change the hairstyle of their subjects, or airbrush out their acne, or Photoshop my wife’s Ex out of their wedding photo in which she looked so hot, and her parents were still healthy (the last picture of them that way), and it was really a simple thing to erase Asshole (bad memories) and add in her old college Roommate (good times) who couldn’t make the party. That day. My wife has a photographic memory, everyone says. Anyway, the movie was very popular in Winesburg. When it came out, our son’s history teacher took him to see it, along with the rest of his class—including the kid they renamed that street after, come to think of it—‘lest they forget. He even wrote a paper about it. The movie still plays down at the Winesburg Biograph, I think, on a loop.

Steve Tomasula is author of the novels VAS: An Opera in Flatland (University of Chicago Press); The Book of Portraiture (University of Alabama Press/FC2); IN & OZ; and TOC: A New-Media Novel (University of Alabama Press/FC2). His short fiction has appeared widely in magazines like Bomb, McSweeney’s, The Iowa Review, Denver Quarterly, and The Western Humanities Review. He lives in Chicago and can be found at www.stevetomasula.com.