Prompt for Veterans’ Group Meeting, 1/26/13

Keeping a Dream Journal

Author James Johnson, who will be coming to give a reading at S.U. on February 20, begins his book, *Combat Trauma*, with a powerful scene in which he is standing on the deck of an armored troop carrier (a 60-ft. boat) in the Mekong Delta, when he is hit by enemy fire. As he recalls the details of being shot in the chest and trying to catch the attention of his fellow infantrymen below deck amidst an explosion of gunfire, the narrative begins to rupture. Johnson writes, “My mind is on overload. I am sweating profusely. My legs are moving but I am not going anywhere. I am hollering for help. I am trying to crawl to safety but I get tangled up in the blanket. For God’s sake, where did that blanket and sheet come from?” (3). At this point, Johnson’s sense of reality is completely unmoored. Is he falling unconscious from his wounds and dreaming of home, or is he having another nightmare about Vietnam? Finally, he comes to full consciousness: “I step into the bathroom,” he writes, “The bubbling sound of my pee hitting the water serves as a wake-up call. By the time I have emptied my bladder, I know it was another of those horrible nightmares. I am relieved, yet angry that now, four decades later, I am still in Vietnam, and I realize I will never be totally out of combat” (4). This dream sequence, told in elaborate detail, opens the door for Johnson to begin his inquiry into the phenomenon of combat trauma. He writes that “Hundreds of thousands of combat veterans have nightmares and suffer numerous other debilitating symptoms of combat trauma” (5).

This is an open writing prompt that I would encourage you to take up as a side project in addition to your other writing. The project is to keep a dream journal, and record any dreams that you regard as post-combat—or just important—dreams, including recurring dreams and nightmares. Try keeping a notebook near your bed. It’s best to write down the dream in its entirety as soon as you’re able. If you wake up in the middle of the night and can’t or don’t want to write down the whole dream at that time, jot down a few key words on the pad. This is usually enough to trigger your memory of the full dream the next day. When writing your dreams, don’t think too much about how to say what you experienced. Use the language that is most immediate to you, even if it doesn’t entirely make sense. Doing so will allow you to capture some of the oddness of the dreamspace, and you can always go back later and add in clarifying phrases.

Keeping a dream notebook has the potential to reveal previously unknown aspects of your own mind to you over time, as well as generate strange and innovative moments in language. But beyond that, dream narratives can be introduced into a memoir or other book of creative nonfiction (as in Johnson’s book) to demonstrate the inner-workings of one’s psyche—the fears, resentments, and desires that haunt the unconscious mind and perhaps play a role in motivating the character that is you.