

## ***Night Journey 57: A Knight of Resignation among the Lotus Eaters***

When I think of war, I think of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The two together form the profile of the unchanging face of eternal human warfare and a soldier's protracted psychological return home from war. I see in *The Odyssey* a metaphor: a soldier, similar to a Veteran with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, is no longer in physical conflict; instead, he is in psychological conflict, and is unable to find his way back home to his individuality, his humanity, and a meaningful life.

All nations prey upon their citizen's deontological nature to dutifully serve national interest, which is often nothing more than rationalized acts of violence in defense of an abstract ideal. The term Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), a military strategy, is a fitting description for all wars. MAD, in summary, states that the cost of destroying is to be destroyed. Historically, militaristic societies have been destroying themselves for centuries, and the United States, with its continual involvement in conflicts, is no exception.

When one enters military service, the process of de-humanization begins immediately to remove what Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* describes as "our most important, most treasured possession, our individuality." Dehumanized individuals become instinctual and non-thinking because it is easier to kill what one doesn't know and when one's heart becomes indifferent to another's life.

Survival on the battlefield depends upon diminished humanity, but war is brief, and at some point the soldier must make the journey back to his individuality and humanity. To fully return home, the newly formed individual must be able to reconcile and take responsibility for his actions in war. This is often complicated by a seemingly indifferent society into which the former soldier attempts to reintegrate. What the society of a warring nation fails to recognize is that no one is innocent of causing death and destruction. We all directly or indirectly cause death by our actions or inactions and cannot diminish our collective guilt by assigning it only to our soldiers. As a collective in a nation at war, we all have indiscriminately killed non-combatants, women, and children for the purpose of a military victory in defense of an ideal or an imaginary enemy. Since society perceives itself as being uninvolved and therefore indifferent to those who physically experience the war, the process of returning from war rests solely on each individual soldier.

The focus of *Night Journey 57* is the Veteran that has not found his way home from war and is therefore homeless. Homelessness can be either a physical place or a metaphorical or psychological state of mind. According to a 2012 article in the Huffington Post by Harry Bradford, there were more than one million veterans at risk of becoming homeless, while the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty indicates that in 2014 there were 1,750,000 homeless people in the U.S., of which 40% were Veterans.

In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses eats the lotus plant, inducing an amnesia that relieves the memory of war and suspends the arduous journey home. Similarly, many Veterans resort to substance

abuse to achieve the same repression in the face of what they may perceive to be an indifferent world where there is no justification for any productive interaction with society.

In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses returned home disguised as a homeless beggar to be invisible to those who knew him. In my painting, I choose a surrealist depiction of a Veteran's invisibility to a pacified, pre-reflective, society captivated and imprisoned by its own contemporary, addictive form of lotus eating.

The point of this depiction is that deontology is a one-way street. The nation and society expect its citizens to dutifully serve while neglecting its own duty and responsibility to those whose individuality it has stolen and forgotten. The Veteran lives homeless in a society that doesn't accept responsibility for the complicity of its own inaction that consigned the Veteran's life to the one he must now serve.

To construct the painting I drew parallels relative to Homer's *Odyssey*, but that foundation was untenable because Ulysses was always a part of a power structure that never lost individual identity and was able to re-establish his life within his accustomed social order. I merely stole Homeric metaphors to create visual symbols to construct my social-surrealist, narrative painting. My symbolic character fails to make the transformation from a cog in a war machine to a vital individual and active participant in a reflective society. My symbolic Veteran is transformed into the Kierkegaard personage of a "Knight of Resignation for whom the world's privations empty life of all hope, joy and meaning."