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NAMes

They called him *Sukie*,
the black soldiers did.
Hey, Sukie!
Sukie, bro, how's it swinging?
Sukie, my man!
they said.
The black soldiers
with their magic walk
and sweet voices.

But Uncle Billy's last name was Soquili.
That means "horse" in our language.
In Cherokee.

Sukie, that is complicated
in their language,
in the language of black Americans.
Sukie – it was a woman's name. Often
it was a slave woman's name.
But you called a woman that when she
was showing off, looking her best.
Perhaps when she was acting above
her station, thinking she
was special working in the master's house.
Or perhaps when she was being brave,
not acting like a slave.
But the black men called each other
this, too. They said it when someone
did something funny or impressive.
They knew my uncle's name was Soquili,
but that was unfamiliar to them,
so they called him something they knew
to make him one of them.
My uncle did not mind.
They said it with love.

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A white soldier once called him
Squeelie.
Like a pig. Get it? SQUEEE –
Uncle Billy surprised that soldier
and himself
by punching him in the mouth
before the squeal was done,
while that soldier's lips were pulled back
in an ugly grin
making that noise.
One of the front teeth came out
of that soldier's mouth,
and a lot of blood came out too
from his busted lips.
Looks like you should call me The Dentist,
my uncle said
like it was nothing,
like that soldier and what he said
was nothing.
My uncle just walked away.

The black soldiers laughed.
They laughed real loud.
Sukie, you all right!
they shouted.
With love for my uncle
they laughed.

—Scott Andrews

NAMes II

*Most love affairs start with a kiss,
but ours started with a punch in the mouth*
is how Uncle Billy starts the story
of how he and Tommie became buddies in Vietnam.
A punch in the mouth,
a laugh that ended with blood
and others laughing.
*Tommie made fun of my name
one too many times, Uncle Billy said.*

Soquili.

That was the name stitched on my uncle's uniform,
but Tommie said it like he was calling pigs,

Squeelie!

But it was Soquili.
That means "horse" in Cherokee.

He was just like that government agent back in Georgia, Uncle Billy said.

When our family was removed
from their home in the mountains,
we had no last name,
not like white people did.

So the government agent who made this theft legal gave us a name, "One Horse."
The agent wrote down everything we owned that we were leaving behind –
house, barn, tools, crops. He paid the family for it and recorded that. The
theft was legal that way. He called us "One Horse" because that is all my ances-
tors were taking with them.

We were removed for our own good, the government said, to protect us from
the white people who wanted our land and the gold in the mountains. This
kindness drove us from our homes, from the bones of a thousand grand-
mothers and grandfathers.

The soldiers loved us with guns and boot soles.

The agent loved us with a cruel quill pen, loved us into poverty.

He tried to love us into extinction.

Our world was translated
from one of honor and family
to a new one of laws and power,
from the real world to a paper one,
to a world where what was legal
was more important than what was right.

It was a world we were not meant to survive.

So we translated our new name back. We turned “One Horse” into “Soquili.” The name always reminds us of how our family’s history was altered, how we got from the mountains of Georgia to the hills of Oklahoma, but it does not let that government agent own us.

You see, Tommie’s language had come to him too freely, Uncle Billy said. He thought he owned everything, thought he could rename what he wanted without being responsible. He needed to be reminded of the price of words. So I conducted a little transaction. I was always good at negotiating.

—Scott Andrews

Water Spider's Gift

Uncle Billy hovered
at the end of the slender rope
over our heads
— me and the little cousins —
and then let go, flying
with a laugh and a whoop
and a big splash in the creek
behind grandmother's house.
We all had our shirts off for swimming
and as he angled toward the water
we could see on his back
the star-burst scar
he brought back from Vietnam.

Down at that creek on those summer days,
he used his scar to keep the little cousins in line.
They begged and pleaded to touch it.
But only if they took turns on the rope
and only if there was no fighting,
no one crying and running back to grandma.
They promised and watched
that scar with hungry reverence.
They knew of its history,
and imagined what they didn't know.

I was just out of high school
and too cool to beg for such favors.
But I watched Uncle Billy and the scar
in the hot air above the cool creek.
I was learning the terrain of sex
and imagining what I didn't know.
His wife must touch it when they made love,
her hands on his back.
I wondered what she thought
when her fingers traced its edges.
Did she feel his pain from the day he was shot?
Was it stored in that scar like electricity
that shocked others?
Or now healed, was it a source of healing?
And how did he feel when others touched it?
Did he give to others through it?
Did they take from him?

An array of welts,
it looked like the burst
of a bottle rocket
on the Fourth of July.
Or like a spider,
spreading wide.

Yeah, a spider, he said one day. A spider. That fits.

He did not feel the bullet when it hit him. He thought someone had pushed him from behind when the firefight started, perhaps some soldier diving for cover behind the large, twisted roots of the trees along the jungle path.

I felt no pain at first. I just lay down. Like a big hand pushed me into the earth. I just lay there, wondering what had happened.

He heard men yelling for action, calling out enemy positions. Some voices called for help. He wondered if his voice was one of those.

I was on the front row at the movies. None of this was happening to me, but to those other people, up there on the screen.

He saw his buddy Tommie across the path. *You okay, Billy? You hit bad? You okay, Bill?*

My uncle did not answer. *You don't talk back to the movie. You just watch it and wonder what will happen next.*

What happened next was I got a part in the film. Suddenly the pain came and all the action around me went from being far away to right up close.

The pain he felt most was the heat from the angry bullet. It burned inside him like a live coal. He tried hard to not be one of those men calling out, cursing, crying. He shut his eyes.

That is when I thought of Water Spider.

Long ago, Water Spider crossed the water to an island where the first fire was burning inside a tree. She got a coal from that fire and it put in a basket on her back. She brought the fire back across the water to the animals and the people, so they could use it. She walked across the surface of the water, the way she can still do today, on her long, careful legs, so light and tender they don't break the surface.

I imagined her taking that fire out of my back and placing it in her basket and carrying it away from me. And then I imagined her carrying me back home.

A spider. That seems right.