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Once settled into retirement, we need to find ways to spend the time on hand, preferably without it costing extra money yet still requiring something of a commitment. In this spirit I joined the judging team for a publication whose brainchild, a lawyer in Texas, had made *Ageless Authors* his retirement project. Larry Upshaw set up competitions for prizes and publication through which he collected the poems, fictional stories, and personal essays of authors 65 years and up. Each submission was rated by three readers like me through a detailed rating and evaluation scale. Submissions that made the cut were published in annual anthologies that, besides prize-winning narratives, included three or more "Honorable Mentions" and three or more "Recognizeds."

I signed up for "Nonfiction" and Upshaw sent me 20 submissions to read and rate, along with a copy of his first anthology, published in 2017, dedicated "To all those late bloomers who had other things to do when they were young but are now reaching their creative heights." Eventually he published *Dang! I Wish I hadn't Done That*, which was compiled from 2018 competition results and came out in 2019. In due time I received a copy thereof.

The book is divided into sections of "Military Memories" and "Parents, for Better or Worse," plus "Regrets: I Wish I hadn't Done That." It further contains "Special Poetry Prizes" and "Ageless Authors Bonus Selections." While all sections include some extraordinary efforts, one of the "Military Memories" caught my eye and heart. Scooter Smith, its writer, recalls an unsettling conversation with his Black "roomie" in one of the squadron's cubicles. "Because of Vietnam," the roommate tells Smith, "America is training thousands of black men in all aspects of war. We are learning to speak the white devil's language of violence." He also says, "Black America has finally realized that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Smith decides not to argue but hear him out.

Smith, a new recruit, adheres to the peace movement and has read the recently-assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr. From his one year of college, and as an avid reader, he is familiar with other Black writers also and mentions the "Ballots or Bullets essay by the X guy"—meaning Malcolm X—to his roommate. The roomie, Petty Officer Ray Hill, adheres to Black Panther tenets and is in the midst of reading Robert Williams's *Negros with Guns*. Hill leaves the book for Smith to peruse as he steps aboard a plane that's to take him, together with a group of coevals, to a base in the Philippines. When the flight goes down in the South China Sea leaving no survivors, Smith begins to read Hill's book. What he learns leaves the young Texan dumbstruck about the hardships of Black Americans, "the soul-crushing degradation that was part and parcel of black life in America." It dawns on him, "asking people who are systematically abused by the commercial and legal establishment to please be patient" only perpetuates the system.

So taken was I with the writer's courage, I made his story the center of a proposal to Wyoming Writers for a workshop on "Risky Writing" for its June 2020 conference. The proposal was accepted and, with Covid raging, the conference evolved on Zoom. Through Upshaw I had contacted Scooter Smith, the writer. Would he talk about writing an essay so many years after the fact? Smith gladly assented; he event mounted the narrative on PowerPoint slides for our audience to read. Larry Upshaw, too, joined us virtually. During the discussion it transpired that the fateful plane crash was not due to enemy fire, as readers might assume from the narrative, but was caused by a flaw in the design of the airplane. The defect caused two more deadly crashes while a fourth plane, badly crippled, was brought in by the co-pilot whose arm was sheared off in the explosion that killed the captain. Only through examining the damaged plane was the problem pinpointed.

Upshaw was ecstatic with the results of the workshop. "You and I should get together and develop an online course for older writers and post it on the Ageless Authors website," he said. "I've heard a number of our authors say they want to improve their writing."

"I'm game," I said. Indeed, I had composed a few blogs for his website, offering tips to get started and to keep going. A webinar seemed the logical next step.

Sadly, three weeks later an email arrived from Larry's wife Janiece, who identifies as "Dr. Janice Upshaw." She explained her husband had suffered a stroke. "He was lucky an ambulance got him to the hospital in time," she wrote but warned it would take months for Larry to recuperate.

In the spring of 2020 Upshaw had put out a call for submission on the theme of crisis for the next anthology and forwarded twenty-two essays for me to read and rate. In hopes of garnering submissions on Covid, he had lowered the age requirement to fifty.

One of the essays I marked "publishable" was "A Family Holiday"—a bland title if ever there was one, considering the trauma the vacationers experienced. A family from Wales, England, had signed up for a vacation on the French seashore in a family-size tent cabin. During their second night in the tent, the writer woke to the shrieks of his wife and found himself engulfed by smoke and fire. He rushed into the children's compartment, where he stumbled over the dead body of their three-year-old girl. He grabbed their ten-year old son, who was on fire, and managed to drag him outside, but both the father (who wrote the story) and the child suffered such severe burns, they were in treatment for years. I imagine the fire, unprovoked by the family, also gave rise to a law suit that kept the family in France. They never returned to their home in Wales, states the writer, even though the tragedy happened two decades earlier. I had the sense that much of the family's anguish remained undisclosed.

"I look forward to working with this writer," I had emailed Upshaw. "The story needs a bit of editing, and the title fails to prepare readers for the trauma about to be disclosed. I'd like to suggest a more relevant title." The family had vacationed on France's *Côte sauvage*—"The Savage (or "wild") Coast"—a name that could be part of the title to hint at the darkness to come. I added that I was astonished at the many submissions that dealt with a crisis or trauma thirty or

forty years into the past. Upshaw had sought narratives about Covid hardships, but evidently these were too raw yet for sufferers to write about.

By summer I had read and rated all the submissions assigned me. While I thought every narrative ought to be commended—many disclosed a hardship or trauma suffered by a family or an individual—some deserved further acknowledgement, I thought, even in the two instances where fellow readers had rated them down.

Silence issued from the Upshaw office. Eventually his wife emailed, saying Larry suffered from aphasia—an inability, caused by brain damage, to understand and express speech. I emailed back that I'd heard of survivors recovering from aphasia and hoped that Larry would, too.

That was eighteen months ago, and not a word has reached me (and presumably my fellow raters elsewhere) regarding Larry's fate. I've emailed repeatedly but have gotten no answers. The website of agelessauthors.com still exists, and Upshaw still shows up there smiling at some administrators, but the site is stuck in mid-2019. I am saddened for Larry, but I'm regretful as well for the 182 authors who poured their hearts into telling their adversities only to be left in limbo—they may never know that a small army of readers studied their submissions with care. "I'd be glad to contact our submitters," I emailed Janiece but have had no response.

The discovery that lingers is that many of us suffer hardships we never disclose—or if we do, it's not until well after we have absolved career- and family obligations, as Scooter Smith did. Perhaps, while caught up in the busyness of life, we cannot afford to call up a trauma and reflect on it, which necessitates a certain reliving of the experience. It takes a good deal of energy, plus a willingness to work through the awfulness of it, which perhaps comes only with the passage of time. Or else our disclosures slip out if and when we feel the urgency to explain something about ourselves to next of kin, friends, or readers.

I remain humbly grateful to the submitters whose personal stories came to me albeit by chance; they are indelibly etched in my heart. I keep wishing I could say so to the writers who sent them.