WHEN SONG BIRDS FALL SILENTLY: WAR, NATURE, AND THE TOADS ALONG THE WAY

a review by Annalise Quesnelle

Stan Lake. *A Toad in a Glass Jar*. Dead Reckoning Collective, 2025.

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STAN LAKE is an author, veteran, photographer, and filmmaker, living in Bethania, NC. His poetry has been published in venues such as *The Havok Journal*, *Backcountry Journal*, and *Dirtbag Magazine*. He is also the author of three children's books and a Christian devotional book.

The North Carolina child who would become a punk frontman, author, Iraq veteran, and amateur naturalist, Stan Lake, may have encountered a toad with a sense of innocent awe and curiosity; however, his debut poetry collection, *A Toad in a Glass Jar*, begins with the unsettling dissonance of inhabiting the toad's perspective, moving from the wonder of observation to the vulnerability of becoming the observed, as he writes in the title poem, what it means to be "An oddity collected / But quickly neglected." Of the collection's 150 poems, *A Toad in a Glass Jar* is organized into four acts that follow the life cycle of a toad. As a poetic memoir tracing the shifting thresholds of Lake's life, the collection reflects his conviction that veterans need an outlet, a space where they can articulate their trauma openly and vulnerably. In the documentary *Hammer Down* (2016), which Lake co-directed with fellow "battle buddy" Daniel Charles, the former Army National Guard soldier explains that his work is grounded in "the importance of veterans telling our stories."* *A Toad in a Glass Jar* realizes this ethos through its remarkable attentiveness to the natural world. Frogs, cicadas, Iraqi bats, and camel spiders become recurring companions in Lake's struggle to find his way back to himself.

In the first act, "Beginnings," readers are invited into the fragile yet formative moments from which Lake's values and worldview emerge. In "Mawmaw's Garden," Lake reflects on the location where he developed his lifelong fascination with catching toads as a place where children ran barefoot, even through the snow, and "where love grew." The garden is a testament to the enduring influence of his grandmother, whose presence continues to animate his life: "A memory forever, / I hope she knows. / Her impact, her value, / As my smile grows." Lake repeatedly turns to the natural world as a way of understanding human experience. In "I Dreamed I Saw a Turtle," a turtle stranded upon a sidewalk, far from the safety of its habitat, becomes an image of endurance. Faced with the danger of crossing open pavement in search of food, the turtle presses on because "the turtle learned long ago that scars heal, / and moving forward is the only way to his next meal." Here, Lake suggests that survival often requires accepting the possibility of harm and continuing despite it. The remainder of the section broadens this portrait of the influences that have shaped him, and the section closes with "Old Sages," a tribute to the writers who helped shape Lake's imagination. Reading the poem, one might imagine a rather improbable literary family reunion: Robert Frost, George Orwell, and Rachel Carson gathered around the table, realizing their strange poetic offspring had become a toad-catching punk frontman with a notebook full of environmental wonder.

In the second act, "Larval Phase," Lake enters the developmental stage suggested by the section's title: a period of irreversible transformation. Yet these poems do not present

* Stan Lake and Daniel Charles, *Hammer Down* (HammerdownFilm.com, 2019) YouTube.

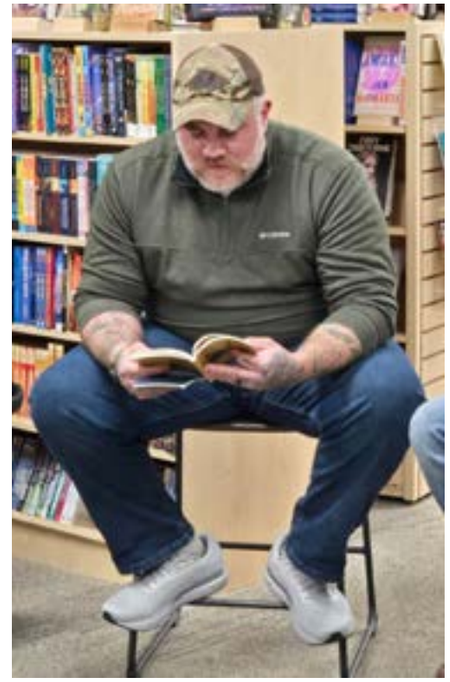
lection similarly create moments of belonging, reflecting the intentionality Lake brings to organizing and making sense of his many fraught worlds. In "War Dreams," readers witness Lake begging for rest as he trauma as the erasure of the vulnerably reflective and attentive Stan Lake introduced in "Beginnings," but as a force that inscribes itself across various facets of the self. This transformation leaves behind an ongoing insecurity, as he asks in "Saves the Day," "How much more / Will I change?" In "Scania Toads," after completing a convoy, Lake recalls that "Spring in Iraq made me forget convoy attacks, / With yellow flowers in roadside cracks." Hearing a familiar noise brings him back to the "ancient Mesopotamian marshlands," where, to his surprise, he discovers that they have "produced a green toad in my hands." He writes, "the deployment and exhaustion melted away. / In this moment, I was me again, in every way." Within the memoryscapes of war, even his own body seems to recognize what it means to feel at home while positioned within an imminent world of danger. The gentle end-rhymes that recur throughout the collection similarly create moments of belonging, reflecting the intentionality Lake brings to organizing and making sense of his many fraught worlds. In "War Dreams," readers witness Lake begging for rest as he wrestles with the paradoxes between honor and remorse, reflecting on "a war I never cared about. / A cause I didn't buy into." This admission reveals his struggle to reconcile his experiences of war within a clear ideological framework, confronting the deeper, messier reality of being embroiled in a conflict one does not believe in while still carrying the responsibility of healing from it.

"Homesick Dreams," the final poem in "Larval Phase," ends with Lake's return from war and the confession that "I've been homeless since I left you," an almost love-stricken, nostalgic declaration that foreshadows the concerns of the collection's third act, "Metamorphosis." Twenty-three-year-old Lake, now home from the sobering realities of war, navigates the turmoil of integrating back into civilian life. The poems trace his battle with alcoholism through moments of painful and deeply affecting vulnerability, inviting readers beyond familiar narratives of military heroism to encounter the more difficult aftermath of survival. Here, Lake confronts government paranoia and skepticism, a pervasive sense of apathy, and the enduring burden of outliving those who did not return or could not go on. In "Reflected Ghosts," he wrestles with the uncanny experience of recognizing his fallen friend in the faces of his friend's children: "Why did you leave them both behind? / You may be dead but you live in both of their eyes, / Like reflected ghosts." The metaphor of ghosts comes to haunt the section, giving form to the intangible griefs that accompany a veteran home from war and continue to shape everyday life long after the conflict has ended. Notably absent from this shortest section of the collection, however, are the poems that foreground Lake's naturalist eye. Instead, his attentiveness turns inward, examining the psychological and emotional aftermath of violence.

In the final act, "Adult Phase," Lake turns to what the title suggests: his present-day life. What is immediately striking is how many of the themes established in "Larval Phase" continue to persist. Rather than affirming the linear life cycle implied by the collection's organization, these poems suggest that healing from trauma is recursive, with old wounds continually resurfacing in new forms. This pattern is made explicit in "The Cycle Repeats," where Lake continues to write of the "nocturnal demons of wide-eyed stimuli" that sustain his "vigilant awareness of my finite existence." Yet, like the turtle introduced in the collection's opening act, Lake gradually develops the resilience to confront what has pursued him throughout the collection. In "Monster," Lake writes:

> You have the power
> To conquer
> Any monster.
> Even the ones
> You make up.

This hard-won resilience is accompanied by a recognition that he had lost sight of the things that once sustained him, particularly the creatures and landscapes that shaped his formative years. By "Gnats on the Wind," however, the collection returns to the early images of wildlife that had gradually fallen away over the course of the collection. Sitting upon a dilapidated dock, Lake becomes absorbed by the movement of "tiny pests dancing on the wind, as if they knew me." The natural world, once the backdrop of his childhood curiosity, becomes the site through which he rediscovers a sense of belonging. As Lake writes in his book's epilogue, "The poems in this collection made me evaluate what it means to be at home, both physically in a place and metaphorically as a concept." *A Toad in a Glass Jar* ultimately suggests that coming home for a veteran is a gradual return to the practices of attention that make healing possible. Lake's poems demonstrate how a sustained and courageous commitment to tenderness and observation offers a way of moving forward without denying the persistence of the past. ■



ABOVE **Stan Lake (who earned the moniker critter getter from his unit) outside of Abu Ghraib prison, circa late 2005 or early 2006**

ABOVE **Stan Lake filming an episode of *Catching Creation* at Stone Mountain (view on YouTube)**

ABOVE **Stan Lake at at Bookmarks in Winston-Salem, NC, Aug. 2026**

ABOVE **Lake at his Veteran's Day book launch at Book Ferret in Winston-Salem, NC, 11 Nov. 2025**