

New Nonfiction from Brooke King: “Ghosts” and “The Only Stars I’ve Seen”

Ghosts

The young Iraqi girl stared back at me, her face covered over in black; only her eyes shown out from under the cloth. For years the girl I saw in the marketplace haunted me. I used to wonder what she saw. We were almost the same height, and though I had armor and a weapon, she stood there across the street from me staring at me as though she couldn't decide if I was a friend she'd once known long ago when she was child. We did not speak to one another, but I often wondered what I would have said to her, what she would have said to me. She stood beside her mother, who was waiting for water and aid from one of the soldiers who was handing out supplies from an LMTV truck bed. The girl's hands were clasped onto one another, her gaze direct. Her abaya and hijab covered her figure and her hair, only leaving the eyes for me to see. They were restraints from her religion, but they did not seem to bother her. She had lived that way as long as she could remember. She watched her mother carry out the same routine in the morning before she ever left the house: this is how you wrap the hijab around the head to cover the hair, she would say, pin it here underneath the throat and wrap the rest up and over the head. As a girl, she practiced it every day. Now a young adult, the girl had a hijab that was perfect, wrapped tightly and neatly around her head, the black shielding her from me. Her eyes peered at mine, locked in an understanding that this was her home, her street, the marketplace where her father sold spices, and though I was only there to make sure she received water and medical aid, I felt as though I were an intruder. I smiled at her, and it was then that she looked at my rifle. Two days from now the marketplace will be a pile of

trash, rubble, and bodies. She will be dead. Her mother will cry out for her, not knowing in the chaos where she is, and the next time I look at her in the eyes, there will be no life in them. But I did not know that now. Right now, she stared back at me, as if to acknowledge that we were both trapped, that at some point one or both of us will die, and that for a short while we must continue living, if only to come to the understanding that the world consists of people waiting to die.



The Only Stars I've Seen

The Paladin tanks of First Cavalry, Eight-Second Field Artillery, had been firing shell rounds for an hour, creating a low-lying fog around the base from the barrel smoke of their guns. Their constant firing echoed like thunder and the flash bangs from their turret barrels reflected off the smoke like lightning. The war-generated storm that had engulfed our base

reflecting the mirage of a foreign battleground from history's past. Atop the back wall of our base, our brigade colors flew true in the slight wind that had picked up. It had made the battle sounds of firing guns less persistent, as the artillery unit battled not only the wind but the incoming barrage of mortar rounds that were starting to land inside our concrete barrier-lined base.

It had been a few months since my near-death experience with the mortar round, but I still couldn't sleep; the residual pain in my healing shin and the noise outside kept me awake. I'd climbed to the top of my tin-roofed hooch, and as darkness fell I sat there thinking about what every soldier far from any familiarity would think about—home. I thought back to Kyle and the last night I spent in his pickup, his hand trying to find a space on my leg—how he finally settled on my knee, firmly holding it with his sweaty palm. I remembered wishing that he had found a place for his hand closer than my knee. I thought back about what I could've said in the silence of that cab or what I could've done, but I knew only a good fuck and an "I love you" would have made him wait for me. I looked out beyond the concrete walls lined with razor-edged concertina wire and realized how stupid I'd been to leave home and come to this hellhole. All I wanted now was Kyle's loaded "I love you's" and the warmth of his suggestive hand on my knee.

The outgoing fire had ceased. The smoke from the barrels was too thick, making vision nearly impossible. From my perch, sitting in the rusted lawn chair I had acquired earlier from the smart-mouthed medic who lived behind me, I watched as the smoke slowly rose into the air. I'd been trying to fall asleep when the outgoing fire started, but I now found myself looking up at the night sky, waiting for the out-going guns to start up again. It was the only sound of war I looked forward to.

Whenever the cannon cockers of Eighty-Second Field Artillery began outgoing fire, it was tradition for Tina and me to watch the outgoing shells. The artillery unit had missions only when

the sky was completely clear. Normally it was covered with smog, sandstorms, or clouds. Tina and I missed the clear skies of our homes in California—dark nights full of twinkling stars and crisp, cool night air that could suck the breath out of you if you didn't wear enough layers. Of course it was dangerous to be outside because of the return fire, but we braved it. It was the closest we could get to seeing the night sky, a taste of home. I had gotten the bright idea one night to sit on top of the roof of our hooch while incoming mortar rounds were whistling into the perimeter of the base, but it only took one time for Tina and me to be sent scrambling from incoming mortar fire for her to say that she was never going up there again. But those nights were few in number. Most times I sat for hours by myself on the roof looking up at the stars. When Tina joined me, I'd sit down on the stoop with her, swapping funny stories or talking about our families, and sometimes we just sat without saying anything, just looking up at the clear night sky, listening to the incoming and outgoing fire.

Tonight Tina had been called into company headquarters for the first shift of radio duty, and so I was left alone to watch the night sky by myself. The military field chair I had acquired from outside of First Sergeant Hawk's hooch stood beside me empty, as I sat in the white plastic chair I stole from a Charlie Company medic for mouthing off to me in the showers the night before. The smoke was beginning to lift, but I guess not fast enough for the Eight-Second's gun bunnies because they began to shoot flares up into the night sky, staining it with red streaks of bright light. The flares' light gave away my position, and Sergeant Lippert, who happened to be passing by, looked up and found me sitting on the roof.

"King," he shouted up, "just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The sound of his hard voice shouting up to me made me jump.

Soldiers were not allowed on their roofs because of safety issues, something Tina and I ignored at least once a week. We had managed thus far not to get caught.

"Hey," I said, clearing my throat, trying to come up with a bullshit explanation that he knew was going to be a lie. "I just wanted to get a look at the action that's going on by the back gate."

He glared at me in disbelief. Normally soldiers didn't intentionally put themselves in harm's way, but that didn't matter much to me anymore. He kept staring up at me. I knew he was contemplating whether or not my excuse for being on the roof warranted his attention. A couple of seconds had gone by before he looked like he'd come to the conclusion that I was up to no good.

He yelled at me and pointed to the ground, "Get the fuck down from there. It's one in the morning. You don't need to see anything but the back of your eyelids."

I leaned forward in my seat and peered down at him. "Not to be a smart-ass or anything," I said, as I gestured down at him, "but you're not exactly slamming back zzz either."

I was still sitting in my seat atop the roof when Sergeant Lippert stomped closer, with a heaviness to his stride like he was putting out a fire with each step. He didn't look pissed off, but his stiff and quick gait suggested he was none too thrilled at my remark. In a few seconds he was next to my front door and I was stuck on the roof, cornered. For a couple of seconds he disappeared and then reappeared again.

"Hey, King, how the hell did you get up there?"

I leaned out of my chair, cringing as if he was already within arm's length of me with his hand stretched out trying to snatch me up. "You're not going to kick my ass or anything, are you?"

"No, now tell me how you got up there or I am going to kick your ass."

For a split second I contemplated whether or not he was bluffing about kicking my ass, but looking down ten feet at him next to my front door, I realized that either way I was fucked. I sighed and said, "All you do is scale the side of the concrete bunker by sticking your feet in the metal rings on the sides. Then when you're on top of the bunker, swing a leg up onto the roof."

He started up, his combat boots slipping on the bunker wall. "It's easy, once you get the hang of it," I said, as I watched him struggle up the side. He looked like a dog trying to scale a chain-link fence to get to a cat. It took him three tries before he finally got to the bunker roof, and next thing I knew he was sitting next to me in First Sergeant Hawk's chair.

"This chair looks familiar."

"Really?" I said, looking away from Sergeant Lippert, who was inspecting the chair. "It's Specialist Kennedy's."

Trying to shift Sergeant Lippert's attention from the familiarity of the first sergeant's lounge chair, I quickly changed the subject.

"So," I said with a nonchalant smile, "what brings you up here?"

"I wanted to see if your bullshit excuse about being able to see the action was true. But from what I can see, you have a pretty good view of the back gate."

"Yeah, well," I paused. "That bit about the artillery wasn't exactly true."

We both looked at the back wall; the gun bunnies had reloaded the guns and were getting into position inside the turret. The fog from the guns had started to lift and the night sky was

visible again—the stars breaking through the haze in patches.

“I thought so,” Sergeant Lippert said, as he shifted his weight in the chair to look at me. “So what the fuck are you really doing up here?”

“Don’t laugh, okay?”

Private, tell me what the fuck’s going on or I’m going drag you down from here,” he said, pointing to the ground, “and smoke the shit out of you.”

“Okay, okay.” I took a deep breath. I knew he wasn’t going to believe me, but telling him the truth was better than doing pushups until I couldn’t feel my arms. “Specialist Kennedy and I come up here when the artillery is going off because it’s the only time you can see the stars at night.” I pointed up to the sky. “That’s what we do up here.”

As I spoke, he looked up, then back at me, and then back at the sky as if to study if I was fucking with him or not. For a minute I watched him, his head tilted back, quietly looking up.

“You know,” he said, his voice dropping a little, “if you sit on the deck of my parents’ house back in Austin, Texas, you can see a whole sea of stars. So many stars, you can’t even begin to count them.” He leaned back in the chair, arching his neck so he could get a better view. “I used to love sitting out there on summer nights with my kids. I used to point out the constellations. The kids would point at other stars, trying to make them into different things.” He was smiling with his hands on his chest. “Jeanie, my youngest one, she loves horses. She’d swear up and down that Orion’s Belt was really a horse.” He laughed and glanced at me. “You couldn’t tell her anything,” he said, shaking his head, “stubborn, just like you.”

I looked over at him. He didn’t say anything for a minute but

sat there quietly squinting up. I could tell he was thinking about the same thing Tina and I thought about when we came up on the roof to look at the stars—home. Though he was probably thinking about more memories of his wife and kids, I was thinking about my dad and where he lived now in Colorado. He always used to tell me about this lake, Turquoise Lake, where he would go camp out underneath the big Colorado sky. I wanted to be there now.

I turned and looked back up at the sky and said, “You know what’s great about the stars?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going tell me,” he said, as a smirk cracked across his face.

“Constellations never move, only the earth does, so no matter where you are in the world, your loved ones are staring at the same sky as you are right now. It’s like looking up at a little piece of home.”

For a while, Sergeant Lippert sat there staring up at the sky. Then he looked at me and nodded before he got up from the rickety chair and started scaling back down to the ground. “You okay?” I asked, as I watched him move down the side of the bunker and then disappear out of sight.

Below me, the gravel shifted and rustled. I stuck my head out over the edge of the roof to make sure he’d made it down all right. After a moment he reappeared below, brushing off some dirt from his ACU top. He shouted up to me, “King, don’t fucking stay up there all night, you hear me?”

I smirked. “You got it, Sarge.”

I watched him walk down the aisle of hooches. He’d just disappeared around the last hooch on the corner when I heard Tina call to me. I chuckled at Tina’s skinny, gangly legs striding out of sync as she walked toward our hooch, flinging gravel behind her.

I called her name as she got closer to the door. She looked up. I smiled.

"No way in hell."

"C'mon, I got you a chair."

Slinging her M16 over her shoulder and scaling up the side of the bunker, she shouted, "We better not get in trouble for this!" I decided not to tell her about Sergeant Lippert or the fact that I had thrown her under the bus a little bit. As she made her way onto the roof of the bunker and then onto the roof of our hooch, I said, "You'll be fine."

"Where'd the chairs come from?"

Smiling coyly at her, I said, "You really want to know?"

With one eyebrow raised, Tina said, "Ah, something tells me no. I heard over the radio that the outgoing fire is going to start any minute now."

"Did you happen to grab any munchies?"

She plopped down in First Sergeant Hawk's chair, set her m16 next to her, opened both cargo pockets of her ACU pants, and pulled out two bags of Hot Cheetos. She handed me one of the bags.

"Thanks, battle."

"Anytime," Tina said, smiling.

Opening our bags of Cheetos, we leaned back in our chairs. We peered up at the clear night sky as we waited for the outgoing fire to start up again, both content to sit and gaze at the stars all night. Again my mind wandered home. I missed the routine sounds of familiarity, the slamming of the front door, Grandpa yelling, "Don't slam the door!" The low chuckle Nana used to make every time I purposely slammed it so I could hear

Grandpa holler at me from wherever he was in the house. I missed Dad's loud music, the crackled sound of the stereo blaring Grateful Dead that echoed in the driveway like an amphitheater. I missed how Dad burst in the door every night, yelling with a crescendo in his greeting, "Hello!" I thought about the last time I'd called home just to hear their voices. I'd only gotten the answering machine, the sound of Nana's voice, "Hello, you've reached the Kings. We're not home right now, but if you leave a name, number, and a brief message, we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you and have a beautiful day."

I closed my eyes, trying to see the faces I knew so well. But the memory was blurred. I clenched my teeth in anger. I needed home right now.

"Do you think it's too late to call the West Coast?"

Underneath her patrol cap, Tina was trying to figure out the time difference as though it were a calculus equation. Using a Cheeto and an invisible chalkboard, Tina leaned out of her chair, counting the hours with her Cheeto, trying to deduce the correct answer. Nodding her head in agreement at her calculations, she turned in her chair and said, "I think it's only five in the afternoon in California."

I lifted up my ACU sleeve and looked at my watch. It was one in the morning. Nana was always my first choice. Counting nine hours back from my time, I realized that it was only four in the afternoon California time.

"Tina, you suck at counting."

"What?" she said, raising one hand in the air, a Cheeto caught in between her index finger and thumb.

"It's four in the afternoon, not five."

Throwing me a cocky look, Tina's green eyes stared at me,

daring me to challenge her again. "No, Brooke, it's five."

"No, it's not," I said, shaking my head. "You count back nine hours from our time. It's one in the morning here, which means it's four in the afternoon in Cali."

With a furrowed brow, Tina threw a Cheeto at me. "Whatever."

It bounced off my forearm and onto the tin roof. "Waster," I said, leaning over and tossing it into my mouth.

I decided to give a phone call a shot, hoping to reach Nana. It was Thursday, which meant that she'd be home from her stint at Saint Therese's, where she sat in the chapel every Thursday for an hour to pray. As I pulled out my phone—a red Motorola Razor, the only perk of being stationed so close to the Green Zone in Baghdad—I contemplated what to tell Nana. I couldn't tell her that I was having a hard time being in Iraq and that I was seeing way more combat than I anticipated. You just didn't say those things to Nana. She was a gentle and sensitive Old Italian grandma who got what she called "worrying stomachaches." Ever since she'd had her bleeding ulcer two years back, I had tried not to worry her about my army stuff. She was having a hard enough time with the fact that I'd been deployed.

I dialed my home phone number, hoping that Nana would pick up. I let it ring twice but then closed the top of the cell phone and hung up. It felt wrong to call home, but I needed to hear her voice. Her gentle but frail voice always reassured me that everything, no matter how bad, was going to be okay. I opened the phone back up and dialed again. I sat waiting, looking up at the stars, thinking of my bedroom back home. For my seventh birthday I had begged my dad to buy me a packet of plastic stars that I could stick on my ceiling. Grandpa had said no, but Dad ignored him and bought them anyway. The night of my birthday my dad woke me up at midnight to give me my gift: the ceiling above my head covered with stars and even a glow-in-

the-dark full moon. He had snuck up to my room and put them up while I was sleeping. Of course Grandpa was mad, but by the time I was in high school I had bought enough stars to cover the whole ceiling, so I had the constellations inside my bedroom. I looked up at the night sky and thought of my room with all the twinkling stars plastered to my blue ceiling as I sat there waiting for someone to pick up the phone at home, but it rang four times before going straight to the answering machine. Nana's voice—a resonating crackled sound that echoed through the receiver I held to my ear. Tears welled in the corner of my eyes. From the other end I listened to the background noise of the greeting—the living room TV turned on, the sound of someone shuffling past in the kitchen, the distant sound of Molly, my Alaskan malamute, barking at the back door. As the greeting came to an end, Nana's voice grew louder as she said to have a beautiful day. The usual cadence of silence passed before I was prompted by the answering machine beep to leave my message. In a shaky crackled voice I said, "Hi, Nana. I couldn't sleep and just wanted to hear the sound of a familiar voice. I guess you're still at the church, probably praying for me not to die here. I guess I'll call tomorrow or something. I, ah . . ." I tried to rush the rest of my message before I totally lost it. "I miss you and love you. Talk to you later, bye."



I slapped the phone shut and shoved it back into my pocket. I was a total wreck. I threw my hands over my face and bent forward, resting my head on my knees.

Looking up from her bag of chips, Tina asked, "You okay?" I turned my head toward Tina, wiped my tears onto my uniform, and said, "Ah, no. I think I successfully just left the worst message a granddaughter, who is at war, could've left on the family answering machine."

Leaned back in the chair with her legs crossed, Tina canted her head toward me, raised her eyebrows, and nodded her head in agreement as she said, "Yeah, that was pretty bad."

Chuckling, I wiped snot from the back of my hand onto my black pt shorts and said, "Oh gee, thanks, Tina."

"Eat a Cheeto." Tina handed me the one in her hand. "It'll make you feel better."

Shoving the Cheeto into my mouth, I let the hot flavor of the chip dissolve in my mouth, hoping that it would take away the longing for home that I felt, but it wasn't making my homesickness go away fast enough. I started shoving them in one after another until my mouth felt like I had just shoved ten habaneros inside of it, but I still didn't feel any better. I didn't feel anything but the need for the normality of home.

"Ease up on the Cheetos, Brooke." Tina put a hand on my arm, preventing me from putting another Cheeto in my mouth. "You're throwing those things back like some anorexic chick who hasn't eaten in days."

"Fuck you," I said, spattering half-chewed debris from my full mouth.

Tina just shook her head at me, eased her hand off my arm, pulled another chip from her bag, turned to me, raised one of her Cheetos in the air, and said, "To home."

I leaned over out of my chair, put my arm on her shoulder, raised a Cheeto, and with my mouth still stuffed full, I echoed her toast, "To home."

A loud booming sound rippled through the air like a shock wave. The outgoing fire had begun again, but it didn't bother me. I was thinking of my bedroom, of home.

"Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen" have been excerpted from [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#) by Brooke King ([Potomac Books](#) 2019).