

Poetry Review: Aaron Graham's BLOOD STRIPES



1.

I'm reading Aaron Graham's war poetry. And I think *violence is a volcano*.

How pressure builds. Between layers of rock. Trapped in a chamber. Or when magma pushes. Fissures like rivers. Up through the upper mantle. Finding surface. How it erupts. Spews hot lava and ash. How bodies can blow. Apart and across a desert named Fallujah. Hurtling and pyroclastic. Or the aftermath.

Graham's poems remind me.

How war is.

2.

This is Graham's Iraq.

Come see the valley –

the death-cradle of civilization

(Boots On The Ground)

Iraq is where war is. Where Graham was. Deployed as a Marine. It is where I find him now. A soldier narrator. On the pages of [*Blood Stripes*](#), his debut poetry collection. It is where his poems take me. To Iraq where. Violence erupts and

shells of men are spit out

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Skies are shrapnel

whose maw expands in the air

teeth like flame plumes

scorching gouts

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Soldiers learn

fresh-burnt flesh

smells like roast beef

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. There are

limbless boys

*whose beautiful bodies
collided on football fields
in Iowa not six months before*

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Where
*infantrymen are now the law
and the law is a pack of white dogs
hunting high-value targets
covering bearded brown faces
with black bags*

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. Children die and
*There are bullets in young Sunni boys
mothers must take to a morgue*

(Conjunctivitis)

Where the question. This question
did I bury a Sunni girl no larger than my arm?

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Dares to exist. This is Graham's Iraq. Where bullets pierce organs and

When a tracer round

becomes a collapsed lung

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How

breath

becomes a sparrow flapping

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham's poetry makes me think of J.G. Ballard. How he [said](#) *our civilization is like the crust of lava spewed from a volcano. It looks solid, but if you set foot on it, you feel the fire.* Graham's poems are full of fiery war. The violence of its eruptions. Graham's words forcing themselves up the throat of a volcano. Exploding like lava onto a page.

3.

Graham writes violence as a woman. How even before. War or enlistment. There is a craving

Until bent and jointed,

I hung

Between your breasts

(Midnight Runner)

Or how at war. Violence becomes anatomical. Between fingers.
Coating tongue and gums. How

with each trigger pull

until death is a second skin to me,

is the film I rub

between my index and forefinger –

a charnel film I grind against

the backs of my front teeth with a raw

and bleeding tongue

(The Situation on the Ground)

And how after war. How it never goes away. Graham writes

I wear my violent acts

like a hand knit cap – reserved like a fossil fuel

a blubber slice

(Repatriation)

Graham writes of the aftermath. How after the eruption. Lava
will flow. How even after. War can push into a house. Seep
into a marriage. How

I tell her there are things you know only

after you've seen combat, there exists depths,

intimacies, I cannot will into existence

even when in her arms

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

Magma cools and hardens. Forms new igneous rock and PTSD. How
Your curse is the hammer about to drop –
hyper-vigilance. Doors you always lock
when you're on the wrong side

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

For Graham PTSD becomes its own violence. One that violates
but also beckons. Graham writes

I give thanks to the dead

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

And. How it is

Because so many of the dead

they're always here

at the table

I've set,

like a mother's breast

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham's poems tell a truth about war. Its intimacy. How

*there's nothing as intimate as bleeding
with those men in the desert. A devotion
you'll never share with a lover, child, or spouse*

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

War is not just what happens on the battlefield. War is what happens after. What keeps happening. To the soldiers who fight it. The civilians who survive it. After deployment is done. Armored trucks move out. Or a soldier goes home. Graham's poems offer us the aftershocks of what explodes. And the truth. The truth that. For those it touches. War does not end.

4.

In Graham's poems, the landscape haunts. Graham writes

I know my way around velvet

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How the air in Iraq is alive and cellular.

Electrons sway like the boiled wool

hides – hanging in Yezidi doorways

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Landscape is a language. The shape of it shapes meaning. On the pages of *Blood Stripes*. The desert stretches. Almost endlessly. Across Graham's poems. Across a war. Across all wars. Years that span a history that can feel ancient. Endless like a horizon line or how

Still the magnitude hits.

A thousand years stretch

down this street

(Mythos (Deployment))

But Graham's landscape is not endless. This is a landscape marked by war.

The golden sands

that appear

a cold dark green

an eternal crystalline lawn

surveyed by rifle scopes

(Funeral Pyre)

Here is the desert. Where war and dunes heave. Like dying lungs.

This is Graham's Iraq. How it seems endless. And how. It is also a place of endings. A landscape cropped by the circumference of a rifle scope. Cropped by what happens when. Bullets tear through a chest wall. And hit heart.

This is the striking duality of Graham's landscape. Because

the cost of invasion is

how something beyond

fathom is lost

or, rather –

comes to end

(Sandscape: Mojave Viper)

This is where. The desert nurtures.

Iraq sand holds your face –

like friends and family used to

(Repatriation)

And this is where war also takes and takes. Until everything
is gone or dead. How

in deep deserts

there is only

the abrupt – blast –

cracked windshields

and punctured MRAP

husks. Their rhinoceros bodies –

(Footfalls)

This is where soldiers patrol streets alive. But almost dead.

We trod the pavement on dead

patrol. Deep desert has no edge.

Our third day over the line

outside the wire
horizons merge, a cusp
of bright sky bleeds into earth
where being and not
being
touch impossibly

(Footfalls)

Graham's poems offer us the duplicity of war. It is the craving and the curse. The eternal and the instantaneous. The invigorating and the deadly. And when soldiers are lucky to live through it. War is a landscape they leave behind. Before realizing they took it home with them.

5.

There is a tension. In Graham's poems.

Of whether to tell his story of war. Or not to.

I pulled back from the vastness
where nothing needs
– and does not need –
to be written

(Sandscape: Dunes Overlooking Balboa Naval Hospital)

There is the question of how to write war. Because

Violence has a language all its own

(The Language of Violence)

There is a feeling. How war is

Just us bleeding in the desert

(Ode to a Wishing Well)

And that no one. No one else will understand.

Because. Americans do not know war. How they

probably learned

the words that describe

what happens to Marines

in the desert by watching

Anderson Cooper's lips –

round words

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

War for civilians is somewhere else. A running body of chyron.

About a third of the way into *Blood Stripes*. On page 32. A poem entirely in Arabic. I make a list of who I know who speaks Arabic or how. I decide not to. Decide not to try to find out what it says. What the words mean. Because the poem speaks to me in Arabic. How I can read it in Arabic. Even though. Or because I do not know. What it says.

This is a truth of war. It belongs to those who fight it. The land it is fought on. The civilians who endure its wrath. How there are parts of it. Parts of war. That are hard to translate.

Still Graham does it. In poem after poem. He writes war. He writes war in its own language. Where

a statement is a scar

(The Language of Violence)

Where

The voice of the wound

has a flickering tongue

its syllables escape

with fine bits of lung –

falling wet, into sand

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

And where. A Syrian amputee standing on a road speaks. Speaking in scars

the sacred scars,

which are a language

I can read to you at night

(The Language of Violence)

When Graham writes

how to sing bombs out of the air?

How deep to listen?

(Repatriation)

This is the task. The poetic task Graham takes on. Arming himself with words and war memories.

The result is *Blood Stripes*. And war. Written into being in Graham's poems.

Vivid and startling and forceful.

6.

I wake up thinking about Baudrillard.

And how [*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.*](#)

It happened obviously. But it was something else. Something other than what we thought it was. Different from what we were told.

For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was a series of atrocities. Not a war. The Gulf War was a performance of war. Not a war. The Gulf War was a media narrative constructed. Not a war. Where even the word fighting defied its own definition. As Iraqis got bombed by Americans flying in a technological sky. For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was hyperreal. A simulacrum. It was a not-war war.

And yes Iraq.

How the Iraq War was like this too.

A war. Where American soldiers went. Because of *weapons of mass destruction*. To look for *weapons of mass destruction*.

That did not exist. How the war they thought they were fighting. Was a war that did not happen.

And yet. Graham.

He writes

dry bodies

bloating and broiling

fattening in the desert

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How he writes

the purple lips of a wound

(Speaking Arabic With A Redneck Accent)

And I think to myself *there. There it is.*

Because war is not what our country tells us it is. War is what happens. To the soldiers who fight it. To the civilians. To the men and women and children and land it surrounds and engulfs and assaults. To the ripped bodies and roads. Roads of sun and bones it leaves behind. To everyone who carries it after. To everyone who carries war for days and weeks and months and years after. Long after we say *it is done.*

The Iraq War happened.

I know it did.

And not because my country told me it did.

But because it is there. Because I felt it. In the viscerally

powerful poems of Graham's *Blood Stripes*.

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Blood Stripes is available for [purchase](#) at your local independent bookstore or wherever books are sold.