

# New Poetry from Randy Brown

## victory conditions

My father taught me  
to say *I love you*  
every time  
you stood in the door

left for school  
went to work  
flew off to war

it became a habit  
a good one  
like checking the tires  
or clicking your seat belt

but now  
every conversation feels  
like a movement to contact

we took the same vows  
we swore the same oaths  
we wore the same uniform  
we see the same news

I raise my kids  
like he did his  
and have the same hopes for them

How is it that we now live  
in two countries?

## three more tanka from Des Moines, Iowa

1.

The leafblower drone  
buzzes into consciousness—  
fast cicada hum.  
I wave to the new police,  
before I close the window.

2.

Yellow Little Bird  
hovers near high-voltage lines  
conducting repairs  
outside my bedroom window,  
but I am miles away.

3.

Thunder and popcorn;  
a remembered joke about  
the “sound of freedom.”  
In rain, I stand listening  
as rifles prepare for war.

### **a future space force marine writes haiku**

1.

This drop won't kill you—  
terminal velocity  
varies by planet.

2.

We spiral dirt-ward,  
samaras in early fall,  
sowing destruction.

3.

Reconnaissance drones

orbit our squad's position:  
Expanding beachhead.

4.

"Almost" only counts  
in horseshoes and hand grenades.  
Go toss them a nuke.

5.

If war is still hell,  
at least my bounding mech suit  
is air-conditioned.



"An American pineapple, of the kind the Axis finds hard to digest, is ready to leave the hand of an infantryman in training at Fort Belvoir, Va, 1944. American soldiers make

good grenade throwers.”

### **This is just to Say All Again After ...**

*after William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say”*

I have expended  
the “pineapples”  
that were in  
the ammo box

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for final protective fires

Forgive me  
they were explosive  
so frag  
and so bold

### **Most Likely / Most Dangerous Enemy Courses of Action**

what most  
threatens my children

social media /  
unending war

the rat race /  
the daily grind

half-baked policies /  
global warming

a lack of hope /  
a lack of justice

my constant distraction /  
my constant distraction

### **the stand**

if you can't stand injustice  
take a knee

if you pray for others  
take a knee

if you believe in freedom, not fabric  
let others see

you practice  
what you preach

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## **New Poetry by Randy Brown**



PHOTO:  
Marie-Lan  
Nguyen. Bust  
of Homer

# Toward an understanding of war and poetry, told (mostly) in aphorisms

Poetry is the long war of narrative.

Poetry, like history, is subjective.

If journalism is the first draft of history, poetry is the last scrap.

Poets set the stage of victory. Just ask Homer: Who won the ball game?

Do not make fun of war poets. A war poet will cut you.

War is hell. Poetry is easier to read. But each takes time.

Any war poem is a final message home.

Poetry can survive fragmentation. Irradiation. Ignorance.

Poetry can cheat death. Poetry has all the time in the world. Poetry will outlast us all.

Poetry is a cockroach.

"History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme."—Mark Twain

"Twain didn't actually say that."—John Robert Colombo

John Robert Colombo is a poet.

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*Notes: While John Robert Colombo incorporated the popular "history rhymes" quotation—which he then attributed to Mark Twain—into his 1970 work, "A Said Poem," he later privately*

*reported he was uncertain of its origins. And, despite the poetic construction here, Colombo himself never said, "Twain didn't actually say that."*

*In an 1874 introduction to "The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day," co-written with Charles Dudley Warner, Twain apparently did say, "History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends."*

*History prefers Colombo's version. So do I.*

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PHOTO: Spc. Leslie Goble, U.S. Army. A soldier peeks out of the "Death Star." The outpost overlooks Combat Outpost Najil and is manned by soldiers 24 hours a day.

## **the bottlefall at COP Najil**

in summer sun, a plastic waterfall cascades,

the emptied residue of our Afghan brothers

encamped along the ridge just across from the fortress

we call the Death Star.

above and below, a Scout Weapons Team buzzes up  
and down the valley, TIE fighters searching for a truck  
full of fertilizer, a bomb waiting for us  
to happen.

we have taught the Afghans well: That water  
comes only in bottles. That cowboys don't  
care for the desert. That our brand of war  
is sustainable.

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*Notes: The acronym "COP," pronounced "kahp," stands for "Combat Outpost." A "TIE fighter" is a fictional spacecraft—one that is powered by "Twin Ion Engines"—that first appeared in the 1977 movie "Star Wars."*

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## **the homecoming game, a war sonnet**





PHOTO: Jessica Blanton. Navy Petty Officer Jeff Howard surprises his mother and grandmother at a Falcons Preseason Game at the Georgia Dome. Petty Officer Howard's mother, Tina, thought he was still in Afghanistan. DVIDS worked with the Falcons to coordinate the emotional homecoming.

Friends and countrymen, lend us your eyes

—the half-time tribute our G.I.s deserve!

For patriots' love, a gladiatorial surprise:

one family's tears on your behalf observe!

Our man behind curtains will soon appear

to his kids and young hot wife transported

from Afghanistan to home so dear,

their kiss upon a Jumbotron distorted!

Then, attend these soapful sponsored messages:

Your focus on this spectacle so pure

will wash your laundries and your sins in stages  
gentle, scent-free, and all-temperature!

For we, about to cry, salute our troops—  
their sacrifice played in commercial loops.

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# three tanka from Des Moines, Iowa

## Spring 2016

1.



PHOTO: Spc. Emily Walter, U.S. Army. Cadets file into a Chinook helicopter to begin the Ranger Challenge, Nov. 3 at Camp Dodge, Iowa. The challenge consists of several tactical training events that test the soldiers' physical and mental capabilities.

A flock of Black Hawks  
thudding through our barren trees  
announces March drill.  
In springtime, comes the fighting,  
but we wait for the Chinook.

2.  
With ceremony,  
Old Man assembles his troops.  
It is Mother's Day;  
sons and daughters are leaving  
in order to sustain war.

3.  
Conex boxes stacked  
in the Starbucks parking lot  
bring back memories  
of making war and coffee.  
I miss the old neighborhood.

**Randy "Sherpa" Brown** embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. He authored the poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire* (Middle West Press,

2015). His work has appeared widely in literary print and on-line publications. As “Charlie Sherpa,” he blogs about military culture at: [www.redbullrising.com](http://www.redbullrising.com).

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## Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: The Great Contemporary War-Writing Quiz

30 questions; let’s see who knows their stuff. Answers below.

27-30 Correct: Expert

23-26: Sharpshooter

19-22: Marksman

Less than 19: Bolo

Ready, go!

1. “The war tried to kill us in the spring.” This is the opening line to what 2012 novel by an Army veteran about two buddies deployed to Iraq?

2. “We shot dogs.” This is the opening line to what 2014 short-story by a former Marine?

3. The author of the 2011 short-story collection *You Know When the Men Are Gone* is \_\_\_\_\_.

4. In 2012, this novel about an Army Iraq veterans attending a Dallas Cowboys football game was a finalist for the National

Book Award.

5. Match the author with the title of his or her story in the 2013 short-story anthology *Fire and Forget*:

Jacob Siegal

"The Train

Brian Van Reet

"Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek"

Mariette Kalinowski

"Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere"

6. What are the names of the Iraq Army veteran and Afghanistan Navy veteran who started the NYC non-profit war-writing organization Words After War?

7. This 2012 novel set in Afghanistan drew inspiration from the Greek classic "Antigone."

8. Match the title and author name of these GWOT war novels written by civilian women:

Roxana Robinson

*We All Come Home*

Helen Benedict

*Carthage*

Joyce Carol Oates

*Sand Queen*

Katey Schultz

*Be Safe I Love You*

Cara Hoffman

*Sparta*

9. Name the titles of the two graphic novels written by Maximillian Uriarte, one set in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

10. This novel by Marine veteran Elliot Ackerman takes its title from a phrase used to describe American casualties suffered at the hand of their Afghanistan allied partners.

11. Match the author and title of these novels written in the early years of the GWOT veteran-writing boom:

Benjamin Buchholz                      *The Sandbox*

David Zimmerman                      *Last One In*

Nicholas Kulish                      *One Hundred and One Nights*

12. Match the names and titles of these novels and short-story collections written by male civilian authors:

Luke Mogelson                      *A Big Enough Lie*

Eric Bennett                      *These Heroic, Happy Dead*

Jonathan Chopra                      *The Good Lieutenant*

Aaron Gwyn                      *Veteran Crisis Hotline*

Whitney Terrell                      *Wynne's War*

13. The name of Marine veteran Atticus Lish's novel about a former Marine adrift in New York City is \_\_\_\_.

14. Match the names of the Iraqi authors with their works:

Sinan Antoon                      *The Corpse Exhibition*

Hassan Blasim                      *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Ahmed Saadawi                      *The Corpse Washer*

15. Match the name of the war-writing collective/seminar/journal and its founder:

The Wrath-Bearing Tree                      Lovella Calica

Veterans Writing Project                      Adrian Bonenberger

Voices from War                      Travis Martin

Military Experience and the Arts                      Kara Krauze

Warrior Writers                      Ron Capps

16. Which military academy sponsored the War, Literature, and the Arts conferences in 2011 and 2018?

17. In what branch did vet-writers Brian Castner, Jesse Goolsby, Eric Chandler, and J.A. Moad serve?

18. In what year did Phil Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* win the National Book Award?

19. This Navy veteran's short story "Kattekoppen" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2013 and then in the author's short-story collection *Bring Out the Dog* in 2018.

20. The proprietors of MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, respectively.

21. The title of this poem by Brian Turner was later used as the title for an Academy Award-winning movie. What is the title?

22. What are the names of the memoirs written by the following veterans:

Brian Turner \_\_\_\_\_

Benjamin Busch \_\_\_\_\_

Ron Capps \_\_\_\_\_

Kayla Williams \_\_\_\_\_

23. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Colin Halloran                      *Sand Opera*

Hugh Martin                      *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*

Kevin Powers                      *The Stick Soldiers*

Phillip Metres                      *Shortly Thereafter*

24. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Lisa Stice *The Iraqi Nights*

Jehanne Dubrow *Clamor*

Elyse Fenton. *Stateside*

Dunya Mikhail *Forces*

25. The Army veteran author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds* is \_\_\_\_\_.

26. The two novels set in Afghanistan written by Pakistani-British author Nadeem Aslam are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

27. “The Trauma Hero” is a concept associated with which Army veteran writer? \_\_\_\_\_

28. What are the names of the war-writers portrayed in this photo accompanying a 2014 *Vanity Fair* article titled “The Words of War”?



(*Vanity Fair* photograph by Jonas Karlsson)

29. What are the names of the authors featured in this 2015 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) panel?





30. What are the names of these war-writing luminaries, taken at a reading at The Strand Bookstore in NYC in 2014?:



BONUS (2 points): Benjamin Busch wrote the introductions to one of the following anthologies and Ron Capps wrote the other. Match the author with the anthology:

*Retire the Colors*

*Incoming*

Answers:

1: Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds*

2: Phil Klay, "Redeployment"

3: Siobhan Fallon

4: Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*

5: Jacob Siegal: "Smile, IEDs Are Everywhere." Brian Van Reet: "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek." Mariette Kalinowski: "The Train"

6: Matt Gallagher and Brandon Willetts, respectively

7: Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch*

8: Roxana Robinson: *Sparta*. Helen Benedict: *Sand Queen*. Joyce Carol Oates: *Carthage*. Katey Schultz: *We All Come Home*. Cara Hoffman: *Be Safe I Love You*

9: *The White Donkey* (Iraq), *Battle Born: Lapis Lazuli* (Afghanistan)

10: *Green on Blue*

11: Benjamin Buchholz, *One Hundred and One Nights*; David Zimmerman, *The Sandbox*; Nicholas Kulish, *One Hundred and One Nights*

12: Luke Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*; Eric Bennett, *A Big Enough Lie*. Jonathan Chopra, *Veteran Crisis Hotline*; Aaron Gwyn, *Wynne's War*; Whitney Terrell, *The Good Lieutenant*

13: *Preparation for the Next Life*

14: Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*; Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*; Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

15: The Wrath-Bearing Tree: Adrian Bonenberger; Veterans Writing Project: Ron Capps; Voices from War: Kara Krauze; Military Experience and the Arts; Travis Martin; Warrior Writers: Lovella Calica

16: The United States Air Force Academy

17: United States Air Force

18: 2014

19: Will Mackin

20: Tracy Crow and Randy Brown (Charlie Sherpa)

21: Brian Turner's *The Hurt Locker*

22: Brian Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country*; Benjamin Busch, *Dust to Dust*; Ron Capps, *Seriously Not All Right*; Kayla Williams, *Loved My Weapon More Than You* (or, *Plenty of Time When We Get Home*)

23: Colin Halloran, *Shortly Thereafter*; Hugh Martin, *The Stick Soldiers*; Kevin Powers, *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*; Philip Metres, *Sand Opera*

24: Lisa Stice, *Forces*; Jehanne Dubrow, *Stateside*; Elyse Fenton, *Clamor*; Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

25: David Abrams

26: *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*

27: Roy Scranton

28: Left to right: Maurice Decaul, Phil Klay, Elliot Ackerman, Kevin Powers, Brandon Willetts, Matt Gallagher

29: Left to right: Brian Turner, Katey Shultz, Siobhan Fallon, Benjamin Busch, Phil Klay

30: Left to right: Adrian Bonenberger, Roxana Robinson, David Abrams, Matt Gallagher

BONUS: *Retire the Colors*: Ron Capps; *Standing Down*: Benjamin Busch

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# Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of

talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka “Charlie Sherpa,” is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories*. Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:



## **Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation**

*When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?*

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund

others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

*What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?*

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

*What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?*

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by

Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between*, has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses*, of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront*, lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment*.

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi*, by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope...compelling...An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen



readers.”

And of course we’ve published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson’s memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones’s short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson’s debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon’s collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI*.

***What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?***

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel resources allow, but we’ve also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can’t say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they’re profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I’ve been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict

resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

*What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?*

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence*, a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing*, by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.



### **Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:**

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand “how-to” newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn’t public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers’ off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn’t know what to tell him.

There weren’t any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym “Charlie Sherpa.” The exercise was equal parts “learn by doing” and “ask forgiveness, not permission.” People still call me “Sherpa,” particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It

also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a “micro-press”—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between “military” and “midwest”? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are “heroes.” Neither are all veterans “broken.” Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the

work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I’ve often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it “lessons-learned integration.” In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*.

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we’ve serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting “21st century war poetry.” Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we’re not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between “military” and “civilian” audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-

experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about \$12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even, and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War

Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You Were*—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle ([www.aimingcircle.com](http://www.aimingcircle.com)), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way,

build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

*Wash, rinse, repeat.*

Middle West Press: <http://www.middlewestpress.com/>

MilSpeak Foundation: <https://milspeakfoundation.org/>

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.

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## **Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'**

*Still Come Home*, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that



“insists on the wrongness of her life.” Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya’s sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can’t get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who was forced to flee three years before. She doesn’t know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become “quietly minted Taliban headquarters”—getting his instructions for the day’s distasteful work. (“Afghans have been fighting for all of time,” he reasons. “Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.”) His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz (“the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose”), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—“dancing boy”—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that “his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used.”



Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply

knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

\*

Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming ("it could be now. Or now. Or now"). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word "impossible": "Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible." When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. "It feels so good," he thinks, "to do something right." By "right," he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have

done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

\*

Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

“‘When was this cup  
That shows the world's reality  
Handed to you?’”

\*

*An excerpt of Still Come Home appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it [here](#) and purchase the book [here](#) or [here](#). Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a [recent review](#) of Still Come Home—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.*

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**New      Fiction      from      Mike**

# Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

## The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton seceded further from the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of

September 2014. As

Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend schedule to pencil in sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid eyes on breached the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish, sun-cooked man appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out in every direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-the-rack, navy double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral at a regatta that Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams. It was the sort of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families would ever breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a comic eagle nose that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him up in return, Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the window, Wharton twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the downtown skyline was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that he had been tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around in his chair to regain the initiative. "Who—"

"You're the man to beat?" A smile the size of the intruder's face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of

swollen red gums  
congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth,  
which, if not  
fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining  
of the other  
teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man's  
mouth. A muddy five  
o'clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon  
closer inspection  
of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not  
shaving than some  
celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton's  
office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his  
desk toward  
Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the  
mask of imperturbability  
he wished to project, "Who are you and what is the nature of  
your business in  
my office?"

"I'm Mike Fink," the man said in a mysterious  
dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could  
only place as from  
the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by  
Fink. His flagrant  
confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew  
the name, if not  
the reputation. "I'm here for the leadership position."

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see  
to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no  
analysis. Wharton  
pulled his hand from Fink's clasp and came around from his  
desk. "Be that as it  
may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this  
misunderstanding



in no time if you would please . . .” But Wharton trailed off, watching in horror as Fink plopped down unmasked in the chair across from Wharton’s desk and wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This creature’s cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself slightly behind Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview. Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to

the savage's tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine's Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

"Oh, Brock, I'm so sorry. I guess you hadn't been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn't able to make it for the morning block of interviews." She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. "Here's a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are."

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial

silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, "He's a Green Beret."



"I don't care if he's the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview," Wharton said truthfully, for despite his conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane rah-rah yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace

between the jingoes,  
Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good  
about their  
participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink  
character was granted a  
CCG interview.

"Well," Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on  
Carissa, "it appears I am to interview you. I'm going to take  
a minute to scan  
through your résumé."

"Take your time," the applicant advised the  
interviewer. "There's a lot there."

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot  
there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience  
(unless  
ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor  
of arts in  
English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane  
University (a  
bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review  
applications from)  
the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink's résumé  
was actually a  
mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact  
opposite looked  
back at you.

"An English literature major?" Wharton murmured,  
bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

"With a minor in theater. I read  
somewhere that English majors make the best consultants.  
Stands to reason."

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces  
bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview?

Special Forces

could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to apprehend that he did

not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper squandering his time, was

offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life cultivating a résumé.

Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched CCG; how had he

passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it to be the most

heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the oversized font or

alignment from section to section was consistent in what amounted to only a

stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high school senior

class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see him fondling his

Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder

on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the ball upside down on

its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted

in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the

triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last” to describe the

still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn’t forgotten was the

chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and boosters who had once

ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him

the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. "Were you drafted as well after graduating college?"

"Drafted by our country," Fink said, startling Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high suicide rates.

"Thank you for your service. Now why don't you walk

me through your academic accomplishments?" Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. "I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane."

"Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you're really telling a tale, you could round that to a three point zero."

"CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?"

"The Special Forces Qualification Course."

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. "I don't think I follow," Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton's plan of wrestling back control of the interview. "Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?"

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning

for a small part in a play?

*"De Oppresso Liber,"* Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton's appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he knew full well what was expected of him in life's starring role. Finally, Wharton asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting,



it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that—"

*"Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement... A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent and promise."*

*— Kirkus, Starred Review*

"I didn't ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree."

"I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up," Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

"Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do

that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces

Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record

of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the

senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of

a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—"

"Influence," Wharton repeated. "You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?" Here was a hick who

could not influence the next banjo number at a  
hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because  
they're all  
related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought  
himself up to  
CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military  
applicants not being  
that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how  
everyone else was  
afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office  
and shooting up  
the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military  
candidates, but  
rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct  
them to their  
intellectual rung below dietitians. He did not doubt that they  
probably thought  
his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as  
such was part of  
the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In  
Wharton's CCG class,  
there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had  
lasted a year out  
of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his  
pervasive logical  
staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around.  
He'd even had a  
gut.

"May I please just be allowed an opportunity—" But a  
knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him  
off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties  
with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network  
around town at  
all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday

school, stepped  
inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He  
apologized to  
Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a  
real pressure  
cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink  
said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew  
backbone into an  
erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to  
Wharton. "Yet." Their  
hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in  
the kind of  
kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace  
coup plots. They  
smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he  
were a naked man  
changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great,  
Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name,  
paraded as it was by  
Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the  
noxious fumes that  
he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn  
light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's  
bird-of-prey  
profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of  
the hawk-nosed  
dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high  
on hash and his  
mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on  
the balls of his  
feet. "Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were  
sparring about the

value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought”—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—“regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part.”

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall

you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

*“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American exuberance.”*

*—Ha Jin, National Book Award winning author of Waiting and The Banished Immortal*

“I like to win . . . in . . . life.”

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. “How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?”

“Forty thousand.”

“Come again?”

“Forty thousand.”

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand after factoring in the four thousand meals for the international flights.

Wharton attempted to salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate that had always stumped even the smartest business school students by an incorrect margin of at least ten thousand. "Would you care to illustrate how you arrived at that number?"

"For the reason that around forty thousand is the right answer," Fink charitably clarified.

"I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten minutes and watched two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to calculate how many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three runways total and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five passengers. Which you multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from midnight to four in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And that, of those domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a meal service."

"Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I had one shot, one kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don't mean at an investment banking desk job playing with myself and numbers."

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit

across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink's wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton's mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter's rights to Wharton's office? After Fink's barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity. "You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad minute of firing. "Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible

for fifteen percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours, enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five percent per meal. The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen million dollars over five years.” Fink’s pen lay untouched atop the paper.

“What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a minute to structure your—”

“I’d pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client’s only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You’ve got to roll the dice to make money.”



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

“Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment.”

Fink held up his index finger to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index finger reappeared two more times separated by three-minute intervals between



flashes. It took  
all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its  
third appearance and  
break it.

"What do your numbers say?"

Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute  
silence of his life.

"Profits of almost six million  
dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan.  
That's before I  
shave their fixed costs to trim them down."

"I think you mean variable  
costs," Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such  
amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top  
piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the  
illegible writing,

indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

"God only knows

where, but I'm afraid you have an extra zero or two in there  
somewhere. I don't

know where to begin helping you because I can't make out a  
single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this  
as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation;  
that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your  
calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate  
of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a  
year over the next

five years, and that it would take almost six years just to

break even after  
the investment if they could withstand the initial losses.”

“I was shooting for long term,  
the big picture.”

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated this  
rationalization before he fired. “If you were thinking ‘long  
term’ and the ‘big  
picture,’ you would have noted they needed to increase their  
market share by  
marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would  
last longer and  
save the airlines money compared to the other products being  
offered by  
competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs.  
And that’s only  
after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would  
have recommended  
that they diversify with other products or at least expand  
their current market  
into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement  
centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And  
that is exactly  
what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though  
the real company  
was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took  
you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to  
distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where’s your  
outline or structured  
strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom,

the outline. "There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use," he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper:  $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$ , and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

" 'Always look at the revenue.' I don't even know what this means," Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to his desk. "This is your foundation?"

"Winning," Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. "Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wilddcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—"

"I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting," Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink's clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton's hometown.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. "I've got nothing for you."

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

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