

New Nonfiction from Kiley Bense: Tell Me About My Boy

Here's an empty grave, where a body that had been a boy became bones beneath a wooden cross. They buried him with one set of dog tags hanging against his bloodied chest.

He bled in a field hospital bed not far from here, shrapnel buried in his skin. Is that what killed him—hot metal melting flesh, an unseen severing? Or was his body tossed limply from a jeep seat as it crossed the desert, the crush of cargo snapping ribs, a crackle of tinder at dusk? “Morale is very high,” the morning reports said, on the day the boy disappeared into the horizon. The next day he'd be dreaming under several feet of sand. They couldn't have known. They couldn't have. They couldn't.

When he died, the boy was twenty-three and dark-haired, all shoulder and grin: my grandmother's little brother. It's one thing to consider his photograph on a mantelpiece, a charming kid wearing a tilted cap; another to imagine him becoming broken, hollows purpling beneath his eyes and a bloody bandage wrapped around one thumb where a cactus thorn was entombed in the soft pad of his finger. One thing to read “artillery fire” on a typewritten government medical form (death requires paperwork); another to watch a German gun spitting shells, coughing up sounds that rattle across time and sky. How fragile is a human body in the path of such certainty.

Here is that body: one-hundred-sixty-two-pounds, down from one-hundred-and-seventy since he'd filled out his draft card in an office in Philadelphia one year before. Seventy-five inches tall. Gray-blue eyes, like his father's. Freckles across the top of his nose blotted out by five months of sunburn and grime. One thumb now scarred. One uniform crusted with sweat, salt, blood and smoke, one rosary and an American

flag stuffed in the pockets. Feet stiff, callused and blistered. Lean jaw and face, angles cut sharper by sleeplessness and fear. Shrapnel lacerations unfurled like tattered red-black lace over his left arm and chest. This is the body they buried in Tebessa with a gunshot salute and a chaplain's murmured blessing.

Bury him at Gettysburg, his father said, when the government wanted to know where to leave his son's bones for good. There's no room in Gettysburg, came the reply, that meadow's already crammed with dead American boys. Choose another tomb.



Here is a letter about nothing: "Dear Sir," it begins. "Will you kindly change my address on your records? My son, Private Richard H. Halvey, 331356641, Headquarters Co. 18th Infantry, 1st Division, was killed in action in North Africa, March 21st, 1943, and I am anxious to have your records correct so that I may receive future correspondence regarding the

returning of his body. Thanking you for your attention, I am, Very truly yours." Signed, Brendan H. Halvey, my great-grandfather. Here is pain, laid out on one creased sheet of paper.

He bled for us. But he will not rise. Here in Algeria the air is still, the night is silent. There is no weeping. The only cross at his grave was the slatted thing they stuck in the dirt above his head, one set of dog tags looped around its arms. He hated those dog tags. The cord bit at his neck, a reminder that the Army was trying, every day, to convert him from a person into a number. It took all of one day for him to die. Then he was inked into a serial code in some forgotten notebook. 331356641. 331356641. 331356641. Repeated till it stays.

Across the ocean from the skeleton his son had become, his father wondered where to bury what was left. Here is what the government said: We can't tell you much about your boy, other than that he isn't coming back. They took his blood and his body, and all that's left is bone.

Maybe Brendan asked for Gettysburg because the government was bold enough to parrot Lincoln in the pamphlet it mailed to stricken fathers. "Tell Me About My Boy," the pamphlet was titled, though really it told nothing. The dead were valiant and heroic, said the pamphlet, they "gave the last full measure of devotion." There was no mention of Lincoln's next line: "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

Arlington, Brendan decided, finally, in 1947. So they shipped Dick Halvey's body (which was jumbled bones and dog tags) to Virginia, where the Army shrouded him in stripes and etched a cross on marble above his name. Not blood-soaked Gettysburg but Arlington, everything green and white except the roses laid on headstones. Here, across the river from the capital, we buried our boys in neat rows. "Our boys," they said back

then, pleading with o-m mouths at news reels for a glimmer of truth. Our boys aren't coming back the same.

Note: Tebessa, Algeria was the site of a temporary American cemetery during World War II. Starting in 1947, soldiers' remains were moved from Tebessa either to the American cemetery in [Tunisia](#) or brought back to the United States, according to the family's wishes.