

New Nonfiction by M.C. Armstrong: "Murder Most Foul: The Role of Lyndon Johnson in the Murder of John F. Kennedy"



*What is the truth, and where did it go?
Ask Oswald and Ruby, they oughta know.*

*"Shut your mouth, " said the wise old owl.
Business is business, and it's a murder most foul.*

-Bob Dylan, Murder Most Foul



Doyle Whitehead flew Air Force One on November 22, 1963, the day JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas. Whitehead waited a long time before speaking up about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He enlisted in the Air Force after graduating from Oxford High School in 1954. In 1959, after one of Dwight Eisenhower's Air Force One stewards suffered a heart attack, Whitehead subbed in and became part of the executive detail. It was while serving on Air Force One that Whitehead came to know Kennedy. Caroline, JFK's daughter, called the steward "Whitey."

"Did you know I have a steward on my plane who went to Oxford?" Whitehead remembers the president teasing on occasion.

“People celebrated on the plane ride back to Washington,” Whitehead said in 2016. “They were laughing and talking about ‘what we gon do now.’ They were so loud we had to shut the door so Jackie wouldn’t hear them.”[\[i\]](#)

Only hours earlier, Johnson was being investigated for corruption by the Senate Rules Committee.[\[ii\]](#) As recently released evidence reveals, Kennedy was about to drop Johnson from the 1964 ticket.[\[iii\]](#) Thus, flying back to DC, drinking nearly a fifth of Cutty Sark whiskey on the way, LBJ had reason to celebrate. His job was secure. And as President of the United States, he now possessed control of the investigation into the murder of JFK.

The Radioactive Belief

In 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Nobel Prize-winning songwriter Bob Dylan released “Murder Most Foul,” a seventeen-minute ballad about the death of President Kennedy. Many writers reported on the song’s length and surprise surge to the top of the Billboard charts. But Richard Eskow wrote, “most commentators tiptoed around the true news value: a major cultural icon has boldly given voice to a widely held but professionally radioactive belief: that John F. Kennedy was killed, not by the lone nut, Lee Harvey Oswald, but as part of a plot that was tantamount to a coup d’etat.”[\[iv\]](#) Is America finally ready to have an adult conversation about this “radioactive belief”?

It is time to reclaim the narrative of the Kennedy assassination from the propaganda machine Lyndon Johnson catalyzed when he commissioned the Warren Report, the official government version of the JFK assassination. Johnson played a hand in the murder of President Kennedy and America needs to reckon with what this means for our democracy. To be sure, we must be careful when handling the reputation of a public figure, especially one like Johnson whose presidential achievements in civil rights tie his story to so many others.

But America is a deeply divided country whose democracy is in danger. The post-truth moment we find ourselves in will not go away by continuing to dance around the history of the coup in Dallas.

Dylan writes, in "Murder Most Foul," that "We'll mock you and shock you and put it in your face/We've already got someone here to take your place."[\[v\]](#) But who was the "we" and what was Johnson's role in the conspiracy? In November of 2022, longtime JFK assassination researcher Jefferson Morley asked on Twitter, "What's the evidence tying LBJ to the crime or to Oswald? I don't know of any."[\[vi\]](#) Morley is not alone in viewing the LBJ theory as a hidden history. But there is a mountain of evidence hiding in plain sight to indict Johnson and demonstrate that he was the mastermind of the coup.



Nobody but Johnson had the means, motive and opportunity to kill Kennedy, and those who knew LBJ left behind a trail of transactions, confessions, and forensic evidence. As members of Kennedy's Secret Service acknowledged after the murder, there were multiple conspiracies to kill JFK in the fall of 1963, such as one in Chicago just a month before Dallas.[\[vii\]](#) To pull off a coordinated attack against a formidable security apparatus required a command of the police on federal, state, and local levels. The fact that the successful plot finally played out in Johnson's home state of Texas is no coincidence.

We cannot comprehend Johnson's role in the plot without understanding the network of supporters he cultivated from his earliest years as a Congressman from Texas, among these being Herman Brown, Johnson's number one source of money. Johnson's "power base," in historian Robert Caro's words, "wasn't his congressional district, it was Herman Brown's bank account . . . His power was simply the power of money."[\[viii\]](#) To understand Johnson's part in the killing of Kennedy, we must map the finances and motives of the men who depended on

Johnson's access to Washington. Among these were three key figures: Herman Brown, the oilman D.H. Byrd and Ed Clark, Johnson's attorney and a former lawyer for Brown and Root. The story of the Kennedy assassination is the map of Texas power. The "we" Dylan describes in his song is the bipartisan war industry that depended on Johnson for their work, both at home and abroad.

Forensic Evidence & CIA Confessions

Dylan's "we" suggests that the Warren Commission's official story of a lone nut assassin was a myth and that there was a second shooter stationed atop a slope of grass in Dealey Plaza. The songwriter sings, "Put your head out the window, let the good times roll/There's a party going on behind the grassy knoll."[\[ix\]](#) Twenty-first century scholarship supports Dylan, revealing that the decisive headshot from frame 313 of the Zapruder film was, in fact, from an angle consistent with the location of the grassy knoll. In a 2001 issue of *Science and Justice*, a quarterly from Britain's Forensic Science Society, a government researcher named D.B. Thomas claimed that there was more than a ninety-six percent certainty that the infamous headshot came from the front right of JFK's limousine and, more specifically, from the grassy knoll, not the Texas School Book Depository.[\[x\]](#) Thomas' article, supported by Josiah Thompson's 2021 study, *Last Second in Dallas*, refutes the Warren Commission's 1964 "lone nut" theory and affirms the findings of the 1978 House Select Committee on Assassinations who argued the president's murder was most likely the "result of a conspiracy."[\[xi\]](#)

✖ The power of *Last Second in Dallas* is a function of Thompson's methodology "that ignores the sexy and elusive" question of "whodunnit?"[\[xii\]](#) Like the scholarship of D.B. Thomas, Thompson takes us back to the fundamental questions of forensic data such as "Were there multiple shooters?" and "Where did the shots come from?" By focusing rigorously on the

forensic analysis, Thompson creates a firm foundation for investigators to now concern themselves with the question of culpability. The answer, in line with the work of researchers like James W. Douglass, Gaeton Fonzi, Oliver Stone, and David Talbot is that the CIA, using Cuban and mafia assets, murdered JFK, with Allen Dulles playing a key hand.



But we must now go one step further and share the big open secret in Texas: Lyndon Johnson sat at the top of the plot's chain of command. Johnson, Kennedy's Vice-President, ordered the hit and, through his attorney, Ed Clark, played a decisive role in the orchestration of both the assassination and the cover-up.



To prove this point, we must step behind the curtain of attorney-client privilege. Barr McClellan, who was the father of Scott McClellan, the press secretary for George W. Bush, was employed by the Johnson administration (National Labor Relations Board and Federal Power Commission) and served as a Johnson attorney from 1966 through 1971, working under Ed Clark and Don Thomas at Clark, Thomas and Winters. For decades, McClellan maintained a silence consistent with the code of confidentiality that attends lawyer-client relations. However, like Whitehead, McClellan felt an obligation to tell the truth before it was too late. In 2003, forty years after the murder of the President, McClellan wrote *Blood, Money, & Power: How LBJ Killed JFK*. What McClellan's book reveals is a man who was an eyewitness to history and intimately understood why Johnson had Kennedy murdered: to end a government investigation into Johnson's corruption. In 1973, the same year LBJ died, Don Thomas confessed to McClellan the firm's role in the assassination and that Ed Clark was the figure who planned the hit. McClellan writes, "Edward A. Clark, attorney at law, Johnson's right-hand man and the only man he trusted,

was the key man in the scheme that culminated in Dallas on November 22, 1963.”[\[xiii\]](#) McClellan’s book investigates Johnson’s hand in the assassination, Johnson’s theft of the 1948 Senatorial race (Don Thomas stuffed the ballot box in Precinct 13), and also explores LBJ’s relationship with Malcolm “Mac” Wallace, whom McClellan claims was responsible, at Johnson’s behest, for the 1961 murder of government investigator Henry Marshall. McClellan writes that Johnson was a “psychopath” and capable of murder and that the Wallace case offers precedent for the murder of JFK.[\[xiv\]](#) Recent scholarship from Jeremy Kuzmarov supports the claim that Johnson had plotted other murders before Kennedy’s. McClellan, in his book and Kuzmarov in his article, “Was LBJ A Serial Killer Who Advanced His Career by Murdering 6 Other Men Who Stood in His Way?”, both reveal a nexus of Texas corruption (“Bubba justice”) that resonates with this student of the Iraq war under Bush and Cheney.[\[xv\]](#) But before the Kellogg, Brown, and Root that regulated the burn pits of the Global War on Terror, there was the Brown and Root that served Lyndon Johnson and his corporate partners in Vietnam.



McClellan points readers toward a “money trail” that shows contracts at risk before November 22, 1963, and contracts secured after the assassination. On January 17, 1963, John F. Kennedy proposed the repeal of the famous “oil depletion allowance,” a revision to the tax code that would have cost Texas oilmen up to \$300 million a year.[\[xvi\]](#) In addition to documenting these provocatively progressive policies from Kennedy, McClellan goes beyond circumstantial evidence and delivers forensic data that places the fingerprint of Wallace, Johnson’s henchman, on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository on the day of Kennedy’s murder. Furthermore, the Wallace print has now traveled through a blind submission peer-review process and has been confirmed by two independent researchers, including Interpol print examiners in Paris,

France. [\[xvii\]](#)

The Wallace print is significant and so is the precedent of the Marshall case. In 1961, Henry Marshall was himself investigating Johnson and another LBJ aide, Billy Sol Estes. Wallace, implicated in Marshall's murder, was spotted at the Texas School Depository on November 22, 1963, by a Chickasaw Indian named Loy Factor who claimed that he himself—Factor—was part of the kill team. Factor's statement and Wallace's fingerprint in "the sniper's nest," places Johnson's key fixer at the scene of the crime. But Whitehead and McClellan's disclosures, Factor's eyewitness account, and Wallace's fingerprint (available for viewing in the National Archive) do not close the case of the Kennedy assassination. No single data point does. As Jim Marrs, the author of *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, writes, "when it comes to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, don't trust any one source." [\[xviii\]](#) Let it be clear: McClellan is not the only witness indicting Johnson. So let the story now turn to corroboration from participants in the coup: E. Howard Hunt and David Morales.

Famous for his role in the Watergate break-in, Hunt was also a novelist and screenwriter, as well as a friend of former CIA Director, Allen Dulles. Hunt, who died on January 23, 2007, admitted to being a "benchwarmer" on the CIA team that murdered JFK. [\[xix\]](#) Hunt's testimony, published on the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Wired* in 2007, can also be located in his son Saint John's 2008 memoir, *Bond of Secrecy*. [\[xx\]](#) In the map of the hit that he provided to Saint John, Hunt places the name "LBJ" at the top of "the chain of command." Beneath LBJ is a CIA agent named "Cord Meyer," a man whose estranged wife, Mary, was a mistress of JFK and was herself murdered less than a year after the president. In addition to this "chain of command" map, Hunt provides a timeline for a plot that begins in 1962 and includes the names of CIA agents Marita Lorenz, David Atlee Phillips, and David Morales. Lorenz, Phillips, and

Morales, separately, claimed Kennedy's death was a CIA hit, but Morales went further, arguing, like Hunt, that Johnson approved the plot. [\[xxi\]](#)[\[xxii\]](#) Even more than this, "According to his lawyer, Robert Walton, Morales revealed that he [Morales] was involved in *both* Kennedy assassinations." [\[xxiii\]](#) Yes, Morales' and Hunt's story point straight at the man McClellan accused and the same man Whitehead heard laughing and celebrating on November 22, 1963: Lyndon Johnson.

"Business is business": The Money Trail

Clare Boothe Luce, former Congresswoman and the wife of Henry Luce, the media magnate who founded *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune* and countless other mainstream media publications, knew a thing or two about power and propaganda. On the way to JFK's inaugural ball in 1961, Luce asked the new Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson, if he minded being relegated to the number two spot. She asked Johnson to "come clean."

"Clare," Johnson replied, "I looked it up. One out of every four presidents has died in office. I'm a gamblin' man, darlin', and this is the only chance I've got." [\[xxiv\]](#)

If Johnson rolled the dice and was indeed the figure at the top of the chain of command for the assassination of JFK, why should we care, now that both men are dead? Sixty years later, what does this story tell us about contemporary America where this is still so much talk of coups, corruption, and treason? In order to comprehend government corruption we have to understand how corporate power captures government agencies and assets. We cannot fully fathom the means and motives of Johnson without understanding America's permanent war party, the ongoing bipartisan social network of politicians and their clients in the military-industrial community. In order to contextualize the killing of Kennedy, we have to study the city and state of "The Big Event," as the CIA called the assassination. [\[xxv\]](#) If Johnson ordered "The Big Event," and Clark and the CIA orchestrated the logistics and Brown was one

of Johnson's primary financial backers, who in Dallas facilitated the placement of Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas School Book Depository?

In 2021, the year after Dylan released "Murder Most Foul" and the same year Thompson published *Last Second in Dallas*, the historian H.P. Albarelli published a posthumous book called *Coup in Dallas*. Based on the 1963 datebook of CIA operative, Jean Pierre Lafitte, *Coup in Dallas* offers readers a primary document that maps the cast behind "The Big Event." On November 23, 1963, Lafitte writes, "Rene says, 'Coup de grace.'" [\[xxvi\]](#) "Rene" was the name of Lafitte's wife, the woman who gave Albarelli the datebook. Rene Lafitte once remarked, "Dallas, ah goodness, I'm not sure what to say . . . I wasn't there anywhere near as often as Pierre . . . not at all. But Pierre would say it was . . . Dallas was like the arms and legs of the American secret service, your CIA." [\[xxvii\]](#) Albarelli's book shines a light on the major players in the coup and pays particular close attention to Johnson's friend, D.H. Byrd.



Other than C.I.A allegations, eyewitness accounts, and the fingerprint of Mac Wallace, how else do we answer Jefferson Morley's question and connect Oswald to Johnson? The answer is David Harold "Dry Hole" Byrd, the military subcontractor, Texas oilman, and founder of the Civil Air Patrol, to which Oswald belonged as a teenager. Incidentally, Byrd also owned the building that contained the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald was employed on the day of the assassination. Byrd was a crony of Johnson and once said, "Sam Rayburn, Morrie Shepard, John Connally, and Lyndon Johnson on the national scene were to become men I could go to anytime that I wanted action, and so were a succession of Texas governors." [\[xxviii\]](#) Like Brown, Byrd knew Johnson personally, stood to profit greatly from a Johnson presidency, and,

likewise, stood to absorb substantial losses if the oil depletion allowance was allowed to expire or if Johnson went to prison. We may never know for sure whether Oswald was a whistleblower, CIA double-agent, or “patsy” (as he claimed on TV), but what is now irrefutable is the fact that there were multiple shooters and that on November 22, 1963, Oswald was working in the building Byrd had purchased just the year before and where a fingerprint of Johnson’s fixer, Mac Wallace, was discovered by police.[\[xxix\]](#)

McClellan, Byrd, Clark, Hunt, Factor, Wallace, and Morales all tie Johnson to Kennedy’s killing. McClellan claimed that Johnson’s attorney, Ed Clark, was horrified when Oswald wasn’t murdered after the assassination but was instead arrested and allowed to speak on TV and declare he—Oswald—was a “patsy.”[\[xxx\]](#) McClellan provided his colleague’s confession and Wallace’s fingerprint as evidence to connect Johnson to the crime of the century, but also insisted that researchers follow the money trail of Johnson’s social network in order to witness foreknowledge of the plot. Nowhere is the advance intelligence more apparent than in the pre-assassination stock trades of Byrd and his associate at Ling-TEMCO-Vought (LTV), James Ling, former employer of Mac Wallace. LTV, perhaps the inspiration for “Vought International” from the Dynamite Comic series, was one of the largest engineering and manufacturing conglomerates in the United States in 1963. Like with Brown and Root, the profits of Vought went through the roof in the years after JFK’s murder. Right before the assassination, Ling and Byrd, through an investment vehicle called the Alpha-Omega Corporation, “purchased 132,600 shares of LTV stocks for around \$2 million.”[\[xxxii\]](#) LTV was responsible for developing a number of planes and weapons that were used during the Vietnam War. According to Albarelli, the “\$2 million investment by Byrd/Ling was worth \$26 million by 1967.”[\[xxxiii\]](#) As Johnson reversed the Kennedy policy of withdrawal from Vietnam and the war progressed, LTV “would consistently be among the top-ten aerospace companies in dollar volume of prime

contracts.”[\[xxxiii\]](#) Which is to say, Byrd got rich off the coup in Dallas, and so did Clark and Brown of Brown and Root, later renamed KBR. Lyndon Johnson was the savior of the military-industrial complex. So much depended on that day in Dallas.

“Lyndon Johnson Did It”

Critics might reasonably ask, “Where are the stories of the marginalized?” in the history of the Kennedy assassination? How do we summon the voices of the millions dead in Vietnam? We can’t possibly tell the tales of all the people around the world who were impacted by Kennedy’s murder. But perhaps some small measure of justice can be achieved by listening to four American citizens whose stories have been muted by the media. So, let us turn here in the end to Abraham Bolden, Evelyn Lincoln, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Dorothy Kilgallen.

On April 26, 2022, President Biden pardoned Bolden, a man JFK called “the Jackie Robinson of the Secret Service,” which is to say the first Black Secret Service agent to serve on White House detail. Bolden was hired by Kennedy and then later challenged Johnson and the Warren Commission with Secret Service evidence of conspiracies to kill Kennedy prior to the release of the Warren Report.[\[xxxiv\]](#) Was Bolden rewarded for his bravery? No. Like so many who came after him, Bolden was attacked for telling the truth and on May 18, 1964, Bolden was thrown in prison for bribery, conspiracy, and obstruction of justice.



Bolden committed a narrative violation. Decades before Snowden, Assange, Hale and Manning, Bolden blew the whistle on the military-industrial complex. He told the truth. For sixty years, Bolden claimed he had been framed by the very government he took an oath to serve. He has stated to this writer and others that he heard Johnson threaten both Kennedy

brothers while serving in the White House.[\[xxxv\]](#) In the twenty-first century, Bolden has been forceful about his analysis of the killing: “[T]he assassination of the president went to the highest position of government,” he said in a 2018 interview. “There was a coup to take him [Kennedy] out of power.”[\[xxxvi\]](#) Like “many in the DFS” (Mexican CIA), Bolden’s investigation of the murder points to “the highest position in government.”[\[xxxvii\]](#) But for a long time, Bolden, author of *The Echo from Dealey Plaza*, has been ignored by America’s mainstream media. Fortunately, with the help of journalists, President Biden heard Bolden’s story before it was too late. In January of 2022, Mary Mitchell, writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, published an editorial in which she wrote, “While Bolden’s life story might seem like a conspiracy theory to some, Black Americans will identify with the brand of injustice that buries its victims under false accusations and legal documents.”[\[xxxviii\]](#) Mitchell’s voice, amplifying Bolden’s, was legitimated by Biden, the man who now keeps a bust of Robert F. Kennedy in the Oval Office and is currently being challenged by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. for the 2024 Democratic nomination.



Perhaps part of RFK Jr.’s challenge to Biden has something to do with Biden’s refusal to go all the way in the story of Kennedy’s uncle. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., whose career and campaign platform focuses on government corruption and agency capture, may be the only American capable of compelling Biden to open the assassination archives. Certainly, others are trying. In October of 2022, The Mary Ferrell Foundation sued the Biden administration for once again postponing the release of the JFK files.[\[xxxix\]](#) In December of 2022, the Biden administration ordered the release of more than 13,000 records, but caved to the CIA’s appeal to maintain the redaction of more than 4,000 others.[\[xl\]](#) Why does the censorship persist? Is this just institutional protection or

is something else at play? And beyond the redaction and withholding of documents, why does the American media refuse to listen to the people closest to this case? What did Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's secretary and a passenger in the motorcade, say at the time of the assassination and how did Jackie Kennedy, covered in the blood of her dead husband, view the crime she witnessed?

Lincoln, who was fifty-four on the day of the murder, visited JFK's grave every year on November 22nd. On the plane ride back from Dallas, the same flight where Whitehead overheard Johnson celebrating, Lincoln wrote down a list of suspects. At the top of her list was the same name at the top of Hunt's deathbed chain of command: "Lyndon." [\[xli\]](#) Was Lincoln the only one on Air Force One who felt she was travelling with the architect of a coup?

No.

Jackie Kennedy knew what many in DC knew about her husband's relationship with both LBJ and Allen Dulles. She knew that her husband loathed the Vice-President and that the ex-head of the CIA resented her husband after JFK fired Dulles subsequent to the disastrous failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Did Jackie see the pictures in the *Chicago Tribune* on August 15th, 1963, three months before her husband's murder, revealing Dulles meeting with LBJ at the Vice-President's ranch? Did she ever come to find out that Dulles, who kept a meticulous datebook, left that particular encounter with LBJ off the record? [\[xlii\]](#) We may never know the answer to these questions, but we do know that on November 22, 1963, Jackie Kennedy was an eyewitness to a crime that traumatized her, her family, her nation, and countless others beyond America's borders. We also know that Jackie, like her brother-in-law, Robert F. Kennedy, suspected a conspiracy from the very beginning.

RFK once famously said, "If the American people knew the truth about Dallas, there would be blood in the streets." [\[xliii\]](#)

Jackie Kennedy knew there was a conspiracy. She was caught in the crossfire. Hours after the assassination, while aboard Air Force One with Whitehead and Johnson, she considered her grisly appearance. "My whole face was splattered with blood and hair. I wiped it off with a Kleenex," she said. But then, "one second later I thought why did I wash the blood off? I should have left it there, let them see what they've done." [xliv] Jackie knew from the start that her husband's murder was the work of more than one lone communist nut bar. Her pronoun was "they."

But Jackie went further.

According to Whitehead, after the assassination Johnson and his cronies were laughing and celebrating within earshot of the widow and were so out of hand that Whitehead had to hide Jackie away. Perhaps keeping this woman in the dark seemed an act of mercy in the moment, a gesture of compassion on behalf of "Whitey." But the truth has a way of getting through those doors men close to protect women. No one was closer to the crime of the century than Jackie Kennedy. No one had a better seat for what Dylan called "the greatest magic trick ever under the sun." [xlv] In the singer Eddie Fisher's memoir, *Been There, Done That*, Fisher describes his relationship with Pamela Turnure, the press secretary for Jackie Kennedy at the time of the assassination. "On the flight back," Fisher writes, "Pam told me, Jackie told her, 'Lyndon Johnson did it.' Words I'll never forget." [xlvi] Those words, like Bolden's, Factor's, Hunt's, Lincoln's, McClellan's, Morales', Whitehead's and so many others, cannot stand alone. In this essay, however, they find accord. In closing, they stand here with the voices of Dorothy Kilgallen and Jack Ruby.

In "Murder Most Foul," Dylan sings, "What is the truth and where did it go? Ask Oswald and Ruby, they oughta know." [xlvii] Dorothy Kilgallen did ask Jack Ruby, the man who murdered Oswald on national television. Who was this fearless journalist who dared to question her government's official

narrative? According to Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Kilgallen was “the greatest female writer in the world.”[\[xlvi\]](#) Kilgallen, in the final years of her short life, worked as a crime reporter and was about to publish a book about the Kennedy killing. But Kilgallen died on November 8, 1965, just before she could deliver the pages of *Murder One* to her publisher at Random House, Bennet Cerf.[\[xlix\]](#) However, history has documented that Kilgallen’s quest for the truth was focused on Ruby. Kilgallen attended the Ruby trial and was the only journalist granted a private interview.



Dorothy Kilgallen, journalist

In February of 1964, Kilgallen wrote, “It appears Washington knows or suspects something about Lee Harvey Oswald that it does not want Dallas and the rest of the world to know or suspect.” Kilgallen told her closest friends that her Ruby disclosures would “blow the JFK case sky high.”[\[li\]](#) But then, at the age of fifty-two, Kilgallen died of an “accidental overdose” of alcohol and barbiturates. Was she murdered because she knew too much? We may never know. But what the historical record can provide, even though her book and notes have disappeared, is the voice of Jack Ruby, the key to the Kennedy assassination, according to Kilgallen.

In a letter he sent to a friend while in jail, Ruby wrote: “I am counting on you to save this country a lot of bloodshed. As soon as you get out you must read Texan looks at Lyndon (reference to a book called *A Texan Looks at Lyndon* by J. Everett Haley), and it may open your eyes to a lot of things. This man is a Nazi in the worst order.”[\[lii\]](#) Yes, Jack Ruby knew that Johnson was corrupt and part of the plot. Ruby shot Oswald to protect the cover story. Jack Ruby didn’t kill Lee Harvey Oswald out of love for JFK and he certainly didn’t do it out of love for the man he calls “a Nazi.” This pattern of focusing on LBJ can be further located in Ruby’s testimony to the Warren Commission and the videos of his brief exchanges

with reporters.

“I wish that our beloved President Lyndon Johnson would have delved deeper into the situation,” Ruby said to the Warren Commission, but the Commission never granted Ruby his request to leave Texas and travel to DC where he felt he could tell the truth.[\[lii\]](#) So Ruby continued to hammer on the president in later interviews.

“The people that have had so much to gain and had such an ulterior motive for putting me in the position I’m in will never let the true facts come above board to the world,”[\[liiii\]](#) Ruby said. When asked by a reporter to elaborate, Ruby who was himself about to die in 1967 (right after winning an appeal for a new trial), said, “I want to correct what I said before about the Vice-President.” He then continued. “When I mentioned about Adlai Stevenson, if he were Vice-President, there would have never been an assassination of our beloved President Kennedy.” The reporter asked Ruby to “explain again.”

“Well,” Ruby said. “The answer is the man in office right now.”[\[liv\]](#)

“[T]he man in office right now,” in 1965 when the interview with Jack Ruby took place, was Lyndon Johnson, the architect of the Vietnam War and the man Ruby characterized as a Nazi. Ruby’s response here gives the reader a sense of why Kilgallen was so excited about publishing her book, *Murder One*. Kilgallen’s voice, however, was never heard. Like Ruby and so many witnesses in this case, Kilgallen died a premature death. But here, alongside Jackie Kennedy and Evelyn Lincoln, we can see that the women closest to this case all came to the same conclusion. Cumulatively, as a people’s history, the story these women tell aligns with the arguments of JFK’s Secret Service, LBJ’s attorneys, and the CIA agents who were part of the hit team. Their voices, revealed as Bob Dylan’s chorus in this space, support contemporary peer-reviewed scholarship and

its thesis of conspiracy. John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, was murdered by his successor, Lyndon Johnson, in a coup d'etat, an act where the means and motive were one and the same: power.



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For More Information

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Patrick Bet-David, Interviewing David Bolden: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHEX8DZQ160>

Nigel Turner: "The Men Who Killed Kennedy" (originally aired on The History Channel): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSLWsoj0L4A>

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New Fiction from M.C. Armstrong: Excerpt from Novel 'American Delphi'

Note: M.C. Armstrong's new novel, 'American Delphi,' will be out October 15, 2022 from Milspeak Books. It has been hailed as "riveting, wise, and wonderful." Please feel free to [pre-order here](#), or purchase wherever books are sold.

—

From 'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong

"How do you tell the world that your brother is a psychopath?"

"You don't," my mom said. "Get away from the screen and journal about it."

She took this black and white notebook out of her grocery bag and handed it to me like it was supposed to be the answer to all of my problems. So here I sit, notebook and pen in hand,

being a good girl while Zach is standing in the kitchen literally jumping up and down about how the world is ending and how America has more cases of the virus than any other country on the planet and how he saw a video of somebody fall off a motor scooter in Indonesia and watched the guy's face go black before vomiting blood and dying right there by his scooter and you would think, by listening to my brother describe the story, that he was talking about a corgi or some Australian getting playfully punched by a kangaroo on YouTube. But this is somebody dying and for Zach it's like the best thing that's ever happened. It's like it's confirming all of his theories about apocalypse and totally justifying all of the whips, knives, guns, and fireworks he's been collecting in the closet of his crazy-ass bedroom upstairs.

"Buck says the virus is the medicine," Zach said, getting up in my face and breathing his hot breath all over me.

Buck London is Zach's special friend. Buck's an old man who just moved into Orchard Chase and smells like mothballs, and I can tell from Zach's smell that he's been spending way too much time with Buck.

"Get away from me," I said. "You're not practicing social distancing."

"We are the virus," Zach said.

"You are the virus," I said.

"Nobody is the virus," mom said, tossing a salad with a bunch of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and falafel (feel awful). Mom said we should use the plague as an excuse to go vegan, but there goes Zach behind her back, just standing, smiling at me as he's shoving disks of salami into his mouth. It's like he's proving this psychopathic suicidal point by eating meat while mom is making a salad, and I said: "NINA!" because I call Mom by her name when she won't listen. But by the time Nina turns around, Zach's pretending like he's tying

his shoe and I'm taking a picture of this journal just in case he kills someone someday.

*

Mom said her biggest fear is that I end up a "twentysomething grandma" like Tanya Purtlebaugh. Mom's entire life seems organized around making sure that I don't end up like Mrs. Purtlebaugh, but I said "seems" because Nicole, Tanya's daughter, did just have a baby at seventeen and Nicole's two years older than I am and her mother is exactly seventeen years older than Tanya which makes her mother thirty-four and that's only three years younger than Mom which, if you do the math (which I do), it's pretty clear: Tanya Purtlebaugh is not a "twentysomething grandma." In other words, Mom's entire mission in life right now (and she's succeeding) is keeping me from having sex so I don't basically have a ME which, if you think about it (and I do), is really sad and it makes sense why she lies and covers up by blaming it all on a "twentysomething grandma" who's not actually a twentysomething grandma.

Mom doesn't want me to see what she calls "the elephant in the room": Her biggest fear is actually another ME. I am the elephant. Mom is afraid she's like the virus and has passed on all her bad decision-making to me and when I told her, in the fall, that I didn't want to play tennis in the spring or take any "private lessons" with Pastor Gary, she flipped out because she basically wanted to ensure that I was constantly quarantined in clubs and sports and stupid boring activities where I was sweating and bickering with other girls instead of having "idle time" with boys, but look at everything now. What happened to the tennis team? Same thing that happened to track, soccer, drama, ballet, baseball, archery, karate, and everything else—canceled.

Everyone's in their room by themselves except Nicole with her screaming mixed-race baby, but guess who's used to being

alone? The elephant in the room, that's who.

*

"This is like a taste of being old," Mom said as we drove to the grocery store, Zach riding shotgun, me in the back.

"Nina," Zach said. "Please tell us exactly what you mean because I wasn't listening."

"Okay, Zachary," Mom said. "I mean this is what we've been looking forward to all day, isn't it? Our one chance to get out of the house, where nothing is happening, just so we can listen to some music in the car and see a few people at a store. Think about how many old people don't have soccer practice, piano, or archery."

I'll give Nina credit: she made me see things differently for a second. There was an old black woman covered in a clear plastic bag in the produce section picking through apples really slowly, and I felt bad because the one place where this old woman gets to go is now invaded with danger, and we are the danger, and I wonder how long until she gives up and has some granddaughter teach her over the phone how to have groceries delivered to her front door by a drone?

"Off your phone!" Mom said to Zach as we passed by the meat shelves which were picked totally clean of everything except the meatless meats. So much for America using this crisis to wean itself off fossil fuels and diseased beef.

"Look!" Zach said.

Passing by a little mirror near the cheap sunglasses, I saw my stupid, long witchy nose. I hate my nose.

"Look!" Zach said.

"Look at what?" I said.

I put my palm up to my nose as if to smash it back into my head. We wheeled past the glasses and down the coffee aisle so Mom could get her “medicine” when Zach showed me a picture from MIMI of the socially distanced sleep-slots for the homeless of Las Vegas, a parking lot that had basically been turned into a dystopian slumber party for all these Black Americans who live in this city with a hundred thousand empty hotel rooms. But because we are America, we force the poor people to sleep in a parking lot, and there was this woman in a white hijab or bonnet standing over the homeless like she was some kind of monitor to make sure the poor were keeping their distance. Or who knows? Maybe she was nice and asking them if they were okay, or if they wanted soup. What was not okay was the way psychopath Zach was grinning as he was thrusting the screen in my face.

“Why are you smiling?” I said.

“He’s smiling because he’s alive,” Mom said, sweeping three bags of Ethiopian coffee into our loaded cart, and Mom’s answer would have been totally perfect if it weren’t for one thing: IT’S HER ANSWER. NOT HIS! MY BROTHER IS SICK!!!

*

I have a wasp in my room because my window won’t seal. But a wasp is just a bee, so his brain is as big as a flea, which means he won’t fly through the crack, and there’s a yellow jacket on the other side of the window, and he’s just a bigger bee, so he’s dumb too. He doesn’t know he just has to fly in the little slit if he wants to see his friend or fly a little higher to show his friend where the opening is so he’ll stop going crazy and bouncing off the walls. Instead, the yellow jacket just hovers and buzzes while the wasp goes nuts and it’s actually kind of funny. I think the yellow jacket is pretty much watching TV, and the wasp is his show for the night, and I guess I am, too, and it’s like the birds have stopped quarreling and are now laughing like a sitcom

audience, like the birds know everything.

What do the trees know?



'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong, October 2022. Cover art by Halah Ziad. Milspeak Books.

There goes my brother running through the grass. Wonder where the psychopath is going with his big backpack. It's like a scene from a movie. The psychopath with his backpack loaded with knives and fireworks walking through this totally dystopian, suburban wasteland of saggy porches and American flags towards this half-moon that looks like a lemon wedge while Toast, the Kagels' new corgador, rams up against the invisible fence with his special red cowboy bandanna around his neck, and how can I tell my brother's a psychopath, you might ask? God. Just look at him baiting Toast by charging the invisible fence. You can totally tell Zach loves electrocuting Toast, and you know what they say about boys who are cruel to animals. Zach is totally toasting Toast so I open up my window and scream at him to stop and when I close it back up the wasp is gone.

Mom's right. This is what it must be like to get old. I have to take my sunset walk and "get my steps in." I walked by Aria's house and then the Kagels. I called Toast to the edge but I didn't taunt him like Zach. We just sort of looked at each other, mirroring one another. Toast blinked. I blinked. Toast tilted his head. I tilted my head. Toast looked right. I looked left. Then I noticed at my feet some magenta letters. Maybe they were mauve. I don't know. The words on the sidewalk were written in this pinkish chalk and it wasn't the first time I'd seen the graffiti. For the last two weeks the parents of all the little kids have been outside drawing pictures of daisies and birds and smiley sunshine faces with their kids, and Zach and I are too old for that, but some of the older

kids have been using the chalk to say other things or to mark their times on their bike races since they're being forced to exercise outside for the first time in their lives and they're actually having fun with it, but this graffiti wasn't like that.

This was different:

Go Vegan.

I walked a little farther and read in yellow:

Media Lies.

A little farther in blue:

Big Pharma Kills.

A little farther in red, white, and blue:

Government Lies.

And then in white:

Black Lives Matter.

And after that it was back to magenta:

The Truth is a Virus. The Truth Leaks. Spread Truth.

And I was like, okay. How do you do that?

How do you spread truth?

I kept walking. Now, in purple, but with the same handwriting, they said *We Need Change*. And I'm like, okay. Duh. But then, near the turnoff from Cedar to Byrd—right where you could see this big stack of logs against the side of Buck London's house—there was one more phrase before I turned around and it said: *American Delphi*.

I was pretty much across the street from Buck's, staring at

this dark green holly bush he has in front of his house and this stuffed armadillo everyone can see on the chipped paint planks of his porch, but because of the huge prickly holly bush, you can't really see anything else. I couldn't tell if he was sitting on his porch in his underwear smoking a cigar with a one-eyed cat in his lap, or if he was inside on his couch looking at naked pictures of girls. I have no idea why Zach spends so much time with Buck, and I have no idea what *American Delphi* means.

But I am going to find out.

New Nonfiction from M.C. Armstrong: "J.F.K. Revisited: Through the Looking-Glass"

I write this review of Oliver Stone's new film during the most bizarre month in America since the January of the Capitol riots and the de-platforming of Donald Trump, a president who promised to release the final government files on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This November, a subculture of Americans known as QAnon gathered in Dealey Plaza. During the same month that Khalil Islam and Muhammad A. Aziz were exonerated in the 1965 murder of Malcom X, QAnon held vigil in Dallas, Texas. The Q crowd sang Michael Jackson's "We Are the World" as they awaited the resurrection of President Kennedy's dead son, JFK Jr., at the site of his father's murder. I think it's fair to say that what the stories of Q and X tell us, at the very least, is this: America has a problem with truth-telling.

Enter Oliver Stone and *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*. I locate Stone's film squarely in the camp of the lawyers, experts, and citizen-journalists who worked tirelessly to absolve Muhammad and Islam. Stone's argument in this revelatory documentary, is that Lee Harvey Oswald may also be innocent. Aligning himself with the facts revealed by unredacted government documents from the 1990s, as well as the conclusions of the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations, Stone argues that President Kennedy was murdered by a CIA conspiracy. Whereas Trump and his supporters may have indeed *attempted* a coup d'état on January 6, 2021, Stone argues that the CIA performed a successful coup on November 22, 1963.

☒ Stone brings the receipts when it comes to proving what he calls the "conspiracy fact." *JFK Revisited* is structured around two parts. The first part, narrated by Whoopi Goldberg, offers a devastating and compelling forensic analysis of the murder. This segment alone is worth the price of admission. The second part, narrated by Donald Sutherland, invites viewers into the "why" of the murder and reveals, through the voice of Robert F. Kennedy's son, that on the day after the assassination in Dallas, the attorney general's first reaction was to call the CIA and ask if they had "conducted this horror." Of course, five years later, RFK himself would be gunned down in Los Angeles during his run for president.

The structure of the first part is chronological and goes something like this: Here is a vision of America in 1963 just before the assassination (we begin with President Kennedy's famous commencement address at American University, known to some as the "Peace Speech"). The summer is then followed by the fall and the first eyewitness accounts of the murder. Then comes the story of revision, the eyewitnesses to a shooter from the famous "grassy knoll" suppressed or ignored as Lyndon Johnson places Allen Dulles, former director of the CIA, in charge of the investigation into the murder of the man who

fired Dulles. After briefly recapitulating Dulles' findings as detailed in the Warren Commission and giving voice to the dissenting members of that body (like Senator Russell Long), Stone follows that dissent as it builds into the 1970s and culminates with the American public witnessing the murder for the first time on national television when Geraldo Rivera asks the African American comedian, Dick Gregory, to narrate the killing as documented by the home movie known as "the Zapruder film." Without citizen-journalists like Abraham Zapruder, it is quite possible that America, to this day, would still be under the spell of the Warren Commission.

Echoing the rhetorical power of Gregory and Rivera, Stone and Goldberg together tell the story of how Stone's own dramatization of the murder, the 1991 movie, *JFK*, catalyzed renewed public interest in the assassination. Just as Rivera's show helped create momentum for the work of the House Select Committee, so did Stone's Academy Award-winning movie inspire a fresh release of JFK files during the Clinton administration. It is through these unredacted primary documents and from the testimony of experts like Cyril Wecht, former president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, that Stone constructs the strongest part of his argument: the refutation of the "magic bullet theory." As part one concludes, Stone reveals that the chain-of-custody on the magic bullet was broken. He shows a future American president, Gerald Ford, altering evidence. He gives voice to three women witnesses from the Texas School Book Depository who were systematically suppressed from the public record. But perhaps, more important than anything, through this people's history of the Kennedy assassination, Stone demonstrates that there were, beyond a reasonable doubt, more than three shots fired that day in Dallas. And as members of the Warren Commission themselves knew, if there were more than three shots, then there was more than one gunman and, thus, a conspiracy.

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship from Josiah Thompson (*Last*

Second in Dallas, University of Kansas Press, 2021) supports Stone's forensic analysis. This achievement of taking the story of the Kennedy assassination from "conspiracy theory" to "conspiracy fact" cannot be understated and could not have happened without a people's movement, a subculture of JFK researchers dedicated to discovering the truth. Much like those committed to the exoneration of Muhammad and Islam, this community has worked tirelessly over the span of decades in the name of justice. *JFK Revisited* is a tremendous democratic accomplishment, especially considering the ongoing obstacles of state propaganda in collaboration with corporate media partners. What remains uncertain, however, and what constitutes the weaker part of Stone's film, is the "why" and the "who." I wouldn't blame viewers who walk away from the two-hour version of *JFK Revisited* still hungry for answers.

Stone claims Kennedy was killed because the thirty-fifth president wanted to end the Cold War and went behind the CIA's back to broker peace with Russia and Cuba, among others. Stone, a veteran of the Vietnam War, argues through a host of primary documents, that Kennedy wanted to end the war in Vietnam, not escalate it like his successor, Lyndon Johnson. However, if the second part of the film doesn't convince you that a war-crazed CIA was behind the conspiracy, perhaps Stone's soon-to-be-released four-hour version will more thoroughly address that question. Or perhaps the "why" and the "who" will continue to evade the American public until this country has a leader with courage. Donald Trump was not that president. He did not keep his campaign promise. He caved to CIA appeals and refused to release the final JFK files. Maybe Joe Biden, who often poses with a bust of RFK in the Oval Office, will be that man. Early in his career, Biden often talked about the legacy of the Kennedy brothers and the tragic consequences that followed out of their murders. As late as 2019, Biden went on the record to talk about the way the assassinations of "the late 70s" still haunted the political landscape. Journalists had to correct Biden and remind him

that these murders took place in the 1960s. But Biden, at the very least, seems to know that President John F. Kennedy, like his son, is dead. *JFK Revisited* will not be able to convince QAnon supporters that Kennedy and his son are never coming back. But for that small silenced minority of Americans who still read and don't think of truth as some kind of joke worthy of air-quotes, Stone's documentary just might do that thing that our post-truth culture seems algorithmically designed to prevent: It might just change your mind.

New Review from M.C. Armstrong: Diane Lefer's 'Out of Place'

I can't stop thinking about Dawit Tesfaye, an FBI agent in Diane Lefer's excellent new novel, *Out of Place*. Shortly after 9/11 and the launch of the Global War on Terror, Tesfaye, along with his partner, Daniel Chen, are sent by the Bureau to investigate a laboratory in the Mojave called the Desert Haven Institute. Like many of the scientists he interviews at DHI, Tesfaye does not quite fit into the simple monolithic identity categories that suddenly demarcate the cultural landscape of what many now have taken to calling The Forever War. Like Dr. Emine Albaz, a Turkish Jew who "abused her security clearance regarding US nuclear technology" and just happened to be married to a "jihadi captured on the Afghan-Pakistan border," Tesfaye challenges the reader to care about someone who is not white or a young adult. More than this, and unlike Albaz, Tesfaye is not a suspect in the War on Terror but is instead part of a new movement within the national security state that simultaneously employs diversity while deploying these diverse

forces all over the planet to snuff out a predominantly non-white bogeyman. *Out of Place* may well be the most profound fictional meditation I've encountered on the emerging phenomenon some call "intersectional imperialism."



One of the great pleasures in *Out of Place* is traveling all over the world with Lefer's characters and savoring granular renderings of Iran, India, Mexico, and that cosmopolitan state where so many countries converge: California. *Out of Place*, far from a narrow treatise on race and terror, is also a thoughtful story about science and cosmopolitanism and people like Albaz who actually think about concepts like cosmopolitanism: "Careful now," the scientist says to herself. "[S]he was not a rootless cosmopolitan—that old slur against Jews. She was a cosmopolitan who loved her roots." Lefer, reminiscent of authors like Don DeLillo and Michel Houellebecq, affords her characters a fully imagined adult life, replete with interests in science, politics, music, philosophy and sex. One is tempted to describe *Out of Place* as a novel of ideas.

And perhaps it is, but that descriptor, like "cosmopolitan," often comes with a burden, the suggestion that in novels of ideas character does not count and place is a chore. Although Lefer's cast is large and her concern with caste sometimes trumps her fidelity to scene, I was moved by her empathy and dazzled by her ability to web together so many languages and voices, including those of scientists, musicians, programmers, and Zoroastrians. *Out of Place* is a novel that aims for both the heart and mind and I admire that ambition. But, to mix metaphors, it is walking in the shoes of Tesfaye, just after the attacks of 9/11, where I most powerfully feel the arrow of Lefer's compass.

Tesfaye is mixed. "He'd been born, he'd believed for years in what was now Eritrea, but it hadn't been a country then, and

later he learned he'd been born in a refugee camp and there were so many stories, so many lies, he wasn't sure over which border, if any, or where." When I was traveling through Iraq as a journalist in 2008, I remember encountering a noteworthy number of Eritrean guards posted at the dangerous outskirts of "coalition" bases. Was this a coincidence, all of these black bodies guarding these predominantly white compounds? This is intersectional imperialism, the weaponization of identity politics by the foreign policy establishment, a term first defined by Alex Rubinstein. Connected to "seculo feminism," "rainbow capitalism," "woke imperialism" and the Intelligence Community's recent "digital facelift," intersectional imperialism is a term that is increasingly used in new media environments to caustically describe the contemporary Democratic Party and its strategic use of figures like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Pete Buttigieg to maintain an imperialist status quo. But as Lefer's return to the attacks of 9/11 reminds readers, this all began a long time ago. It was Cheney and Bush that sent Colin Powell to the United Nations to argue for the invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, as America's dominant political parties evolved their cynical use of diversity to combat the crisis of democracy, working-class immigrants like Tesfaye were forced, every day, to choose a line of work in an increasingly globalized national economy. So how does the reader feel when Tesfaye does the bidding of a police organization whose home office still bears the name of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who sent the hit down on civil rights leaders like Fred Hampton?

Perhaps more than a bit torn.

Perhaps, like all of us, Tesfaye is not simply one thing. Lefer constantly challenges the reader's readiness to impose monoliths, binaries, and judgments. Maria del Rosario Saavaedra Castillo, one of the DHI scientists, in a conversation with a cartel boss named "El Chato" (who seems interested in repurposing Maria's research on parasites),

describes how snakes can sometimes serve as a “paratenic host. Paratenic means being the intermediary in the life-cycle.” Not only did I feel my vocabulary expand as I made my way through Lefer’s book, but I also experienced a growing sense of awe at the symbolic unity she had achieved through all of these characters and the eleven government “files” she uses to structure her story. In many ways, Castillo, Chen, Albaz, Tesfaye, and all of the other figures who orbit around DHI are paratenic, particularly when it comes to the ways in which they are used by their host institutions and the people all around them.

In light of America’s recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and the conversations about LGBTQ+ rights that emerged during the exodus, Lefer’s novel seems timely. This is a book about the people who do not fit into the dominant narrative of The Forever War. A striking number of Lefer’s characters are single or alienated from their spouses. The DHI, with its intersection of science and desert, seems to attract this lonely and roaming profile, the descendant spirit of nomads, bedouins, and pioneers. But Tesfaye is a noteworthy exception. His story is bound not just to the FBI, with its secure funding (in contrast to DHI), but also to a fellow Eritrean refugee named Gladys. “Glad,” Tesfaye’s wife, as her name suggests, is grateful to be in America, away from the country that was not exactly a country, the place where, as a child she had received a clitorrectomy from a number of men who used “a broken bottle” for the task. Her husband “couldn’t bring himself to enter her where she was scarred. They held each other at night. He caressed her with hands and lips and tongue, seeking anywhere on her body where she might feel pleasure.” Even here, in the American home, far from the maps and territories of war, Lefer’s character struggle, mindful, like their author, that the body is a country of its own.

Out of Place will be published September 13th, 2021 and is

available [here](#) or wherever books are sold.

Dissent in Iraq

By M.C. Armstrong and Noor Ghazi



Demonstrators, the Iraqi October Revolution (1 November 2019, 09:10:15)

Protestors in Iraq have a great deal in common with the new wave of protestors in the United States. David McAtee, the owner of a barbecue restaurant and an unarmed demonstrator in Louisville, Kentucky, was shot dead by police shortly after midnight on May 31st while marching in response to American police brutality. Safaa Al-Saray, an Iraqi blogger, was also unarmed when police struck him in the head with a tear gas canister in October of 2019. Al-Saray died from his injury, and this is tragic, to be sure. But why should Americans care about Al-Saray? Why should they embrace a protest movement thousands of miles away from US borders?

Many Americans would like to forget about Iraq, but, unfortunately Iraq does not have the luxury to have amnesia. Whereas America has not been occupied by a foreign nation since the War of 1812, Iraq, in spite of having nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11, remains under American supervision, and Iraq is now, once again, on the verge of chaos, which certainly raises questions about the quality of this supervision. One of the richest countries in the world in terms of cultural heritage and natural resources, Iraq is suffering today from a dangerously high rate of unemployment,

a lack of quality education, and a dearth of public services such as electricity and clean water. But there is hope. On October 19, 2019, just before the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, a powerful wave of protests disrupted Baghdad and the target of this "October Revolution" was the corrupt political system that emerged from the ashes of the 2003 US invasion.

The first round of revolt spread quickly across the country after originating in Al Tahreer Square. The marchers launched a peaceful crusade of free speech in the streets of Basra, Karbala, Maysan, and Babylon, the multi-generational gatherings chanting for change in a government many now believe to be controlled by the mullahs in Iran. Just as the Americans had Iraqis locked in their grip during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the power dynamic has now shifted to Iraq's neighbor to the East. In both cases, the influence became unwelcome and has, once again, created the potential for civil war. The Iraqi government faced her peaceful protesters with live ammunition and tear gas. The government ignored multiple international calls, warnings and condemnations. Just as McAtee was not the only American casualty of police brutality, Al-Saray was not the only casualty in Iraq. More than 500 martyrs were shot down in the streets. Just as African-Americans wonder where the forces of freedom have gone when their young people are murdered or choked to death on the streets of the United States, Iraqis also wonder what it will take to activate the forces of freedom.

According to the Independent High Commission for Human Rights of Iraq, nearly 15,000 Iraqis have been injured since October of 2019 when the Iraqi government took desperate measures to regain control of Al Tahreer Square, ground zero for demonstrations. Like in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011, these despotic attempts at suppression included police brutality, curfews and internet blackouts to limit communication between protestors. Such media suppression enabled the government

cover-up of violent criminal actions and left millions of Iraqis isolated from the rest of the world.

As the pandemic wakes up so many across the planet to the realization that "we're all connected," the situation on the ground in Iraq reveals the other side of that platitude and that very real connection. Yes, a virus in China quickly becomes America's worst nightmare in this globalized world where the line between tourism and terrorism grows blurrier every year. And yes, it is wonderful to witness international cooperation on the effort to pioneer a vaccine for Covid-19. But before public health became America's favorite media frame in 2020, its predecessor was war and terror. Most Iraqis have no interest in a third decade of the Global War on Terror, but whether its occupiers like it or not, Iraq does have an interest in freedom and democracy, and if Iraq's people can win a democratic future, the public health consequences will almost certainly be positive. After years of bombing, burn pits, police brutality, and depleted uranium one has to wonder: could the public health of Iraq possibly get worse?

Under occupation, the answer is yes, but that is precisely the point. The occupation must end. Just before Covid-19 leveled Western economies and turned so many countries inward, young people in Iraq were marching like their Egyptian friends of 2011 and like so many Americans in the 1960s and again right now. Thousands of demonstrators started requesting United Nations intervention to stop the atrocities against peaceful civilians who were simply asking for human rights and a better life. Iraqis frequently raised the UN flag in Al Tahreer Square to grab the world's attention and make the message clear: If the UN wished for peace, democracy, and freedom in the Iraq of 2003, where there was no war, why did they send war and then, two decades later ignore the homegrown calls for peace? When will the basic dignity and humanity of the Iraqi people trump America's hunger for one more fix for its fossil fuel economy?

In November of 2019, as the October Revolution was reaching its climax, *The New York Times* and *The Intercept* shared 700 pages of leaked documents about how Iran and America have used Iraq as a battlefield for a proxy war ever since the American invasion of 2003. Far from his 2016 campaign promises, Donald Trump has maintained the policy positions of George W. Bush and Barack Obama and the mullahs have responded in kind. *The Intercept* documents revealed conversations from the Iranian embassy in which Iranian officials decried the free-thinking of Haider al-Abadi, an Iraqi candidate for prime minister whom Iran viewed as insufficiently servile to their interests. These leaked files “show how Iran, at nearly every turn, has outmaneuvered the United States” and its formidable network of intelligence agencies. But what is urgent to state before the eyes of the world is this: There are human costs for the ways in which “Iran and the United States have used Iraq as a staging area for their spy games.” The occupation must end.

These human costs can be heard in the voices of the protestors and seen in the pattern of mass arrests among activists. Intimidation, torture, and in many cases, assassination, has been the tactic at “play.” Take the story of the activists, Hussein Adel al-Madani and his wife Sara Talib. Al-Madani and Talib were some of the first Iraqis to march against Iranian influence and government corruption. Talib, in particular, was one of the first women bold enough to take to the streets of Basra.

“But they had to stop,” claimed a friend named Abbas. “Gunmen raided their home late in 2018 and asked them to write down the names of other protesters.” Talib and al-Madani, like so many Iraqis before them, fled their country. They traveled to Turkey. But also like so many before them, Talib and al-Madani returned to Iraq. Just before the launch of the “October Revolution,” they came home to Basra. Then, on October 2nd, assassins entered their home and shot Al-Madani three times. They killed Talib with a single shot to her head. And what was

their crime? Why were the protesters sentenced to death? Was it free speech? Idealism? Talib provided medical aid to her own people while her husband helped with organization. They spoke openly, opposing the influence of Iran-backed militias on Iraq.

The occupation must end.

Many other activists were kidnapped by the armed militias such as Ali Jasib, a human rights attorney who helped with the release of many arrested activists. Ali was kidnapped in Maysan province. But as the chaos in America and the Covid-19 pandemic steal the headlines, the international community seems to be forgetting about Iraq and protestors like Ali Jasib.

The Iraqi protests began with simple demands. The Iraqi people want quality education, decent employment, and public services. However, as so often happens, these demands were quickly revised when the first protestor fell dead. The Iraqi people called for the ouster of the government and an end to corruption. They asked for new electoral laws that would protect the country from regime change wars. The persistence of the protestors did force prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, to submit his resignation in November of 2019, but a demonstrator from Al Tahreer Square exclaimed, "Adil Abdul-Mahdi's resignation will not make the required change. We want a new government that can respect our demands and needs. We want a home."

The occupation must end.

Just as so many Americans tire of the regime change wars they were forced to pay for under Bush, Obama, and Trump, Iraqis, too, have grown tired of the wars. But Trump continues to ratchet up the tension between Washington and Tehran. First, he withdrew from the United States' nuclear treaty with Iran, which was a small albeit imperfect first step toward peace in

the region. Then, in a provocative move, Trump assassinated Iran's top security and intelligence commander, Qasim Soleimani, on Iraqi soil. While Trump's supporters chant about "blood and soil" in America and America expands its Global War on Terror to now include its own homegrown protesters like Antifa, the American president continues the Global War on Terror's policy of pell-mell assassinations overseas, broadly, and in Iraqi territory, specifically. Like Obama's drone assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki and his fifteen-year old son in Yemen back in 2011, Trump's killing of Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport in January of 2020, raises serious questions about international law, human rights, and the rationale for America's continued presence in the Middle East. The attack, far from being framed as a defense of Iraqi civil liberties, was described, instead, as a response to the death of an American contractor on December 27, 2019 at the hands of an Iranian-backed militia. Most Americans, one suspects, do not even know that contractors, intelligence operatives, and special forces are still occupying Iraq. But the occupation continues and the occupation must end.

"General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region," the Pentagon said in a statement. "General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more."

Although the Pentagon report may well be accurate, the larger and more uncomfortable geopolitical truth is that Soleimani and his Quds Force never would have had a chance to kill so many Americans if America had not invaded the wrong country after 9/11.

In any event, after the American drone killed Soleimani, Iraqi politicians, religious leaders, and conservative protestors chanted for the immediate withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, which inspired fear among the more liberal protestors

that such an evacuation would only allow for the expansion of Iran inside Iraq. This is the chaos of occupation. The occupation must end.

When Iran announced its retaliation on the US by targeting airbases housing US forces on Iraq's land, the demonstrators rejected this violence, too. Iraq does not want foreign drone attacks and Iraq does not want foreign missile strikes. Like the US and Iran, what the vast majority of Iraq wants is peace, freedom, and respect for its sovereignty.

In the wake of this most recent chapter in The Global War on Terror, mayhem ensued and the streets were again filled with protest and revolt. The government scrambled to establish order. Iraq chose Muhammed Tawfeeq Alawi to be its next prime minister, but Alawi was rejected and so was his successor, Adnan Al Zurfi due to disputes over ministerial portfolios and budgets. Also, they were utterly rejected by protestors since they didn't meet the basic demands. Like so many failed states around the world, the United States included, Iraq is waking up just as the independent media, international travel, and respect for civil liberties is beginning a potentially indefinite pandemic hibernation. Covid-19 has not been a friend of free speech. Iraqi protests could not be crushed by drone attacks, missiles, torture, or government-imposed internet blackouts. But a public health crisis is a different story.

"The pandemic has adversely impacted the situation on the ground," says an Iraqi protestor who has asked to remain anonymous. "Protestors demands haven't been answered."

Although many protestors initially resisted the demands of the World Health Organization and stayed in their tents in Al-Tahreer Square, others went home. They retreated into social media where they witnessed, among other things, shared grievances from their fellow American protestors, but also a surge in honor killings and domestic violence in Iraq, a

country more terrified of doctors laying hands on their wives and daughters than on corrupt leaders usurping their civil rights.[\[1\]](#) Meanwhile, the Iraqi government used this international public health crisis as an opportunity to consolidate the old order's power by appointing Mustafa Alkhadimi, the former head of Iraqi Intelligence, as the new prime minister. As protestors overwhelmingly reject Alkhadimi on social media, one wonders at this point if such rejections do little more than provide valuable intel to this spy who now runs Iraq.

Did America's Global War on Terror successfully deliver democracy to the Middle East? Just as Tahrir Square passed in Egypt, some suspect the October Revolution in Iraq will also pass away. But what those with roots in Baghdad know is that a critical mass is gathering, both in Iraq and abroad. The Iraqi people recognize that the October demonstrations were different and far more powerful than any other in the past. The Iraqi people are getting a taste of freedom. The hunger for freedom and change is going viral just as an actual virus spreads around the world, and although Covid-19 is frightening, it is nothing compared to the horrors of war the Iraqis have witnessed for nearly four decades. This new generation of Iraqis, like other brave young people around the world, is speaking up against corruption and they are not afraid. Like Hussein Adel al-Madani and Sara Talib, they came out in October seeking a better life for the next generation. They want to be left alone by Iran and they want the US to lift its knee from the neck of their country. As one father in Al Tahreer Square said, "I am here today because I am looking for a better future for my daughter. I don't want her to live through this poverty and broken system as I did." It has been almost nine months since the start of the October Revolution and as the demonstrators continually repeat: "We will not return home until our demands are met." The occupation must end.

M.C. Armstrong embedded with JSOF in Al Anbar Province and reported extensively on the Iraq War through *The Winchester Star*. He is the winner of a Pushcart Prize. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Esquire*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, *The Mantle*, *Epiphany*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Mayday*, *YES! Weekly*, *The Literary Review*, and other journals and anthologies. His memoir, *The Mysteries of Haditha*, will be published by Potomac Books in 2020. He lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.



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[1] From Human Rights Watch:
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/iraq-urgent-need-domestic-violence-law#>

New Poetry from Matt

Armstrong: "Covid Night"



SUSPENDED PETALS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Paris sirens

Pewter sky

The white lace

Of a dogwood bough

At midnight

Reach up

Clutch and huff

Hungry before bed

For the sweetness

Of a rose

But a dogwood

Is a dogwood

And there's no escaping

The sentence

For the world:

The old blacks

And the new poor

Must die

From the bugs

At the grocery store

Drones police the distance

Between

New Yorkers

Robots shout from spring sky:

Stay away

While sanctions

Strangle Caracas children

Bleed Persian women

And a million singers scream

To the people of the screen

A poet in Madrid
Sits under house arrest
Another in Algiers
Might as well
Be in Madrid

And what do I mean by
Paris sirens
Beyond the sad
Pin pon wail
That cries arretez

I mean a rhythmic wigwag
Just a bit more rounded
Now our own martial horn
But Greensboro, Nazareth,
Athens, Melbourne

It's all the same sentence tonight:

No more fingertip touches
From the beached weaver
No more whispered breath
From the one making masks
For the world

Just this:

The unyielding petals
Of a midnight limb
As the strange siren hunts
For those with a touch
Of needing too much

The Spotlight Trial

"Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

-The Gospel of John

One day you're a teenage girl in the arms of Fidel Castro and you're carrying the Christ child of the Christless revolution and you're thinking this man needs a filling between his front teeth and then he will be perfect. The next you're a lonely New Yorker taking a long walk just so you can sleep. It's getting late. You clutch the American's letter in your hand and stall by the summer stoop under the lightning on a night warm and wet like a mouth, the flashes revealing skyscraper spires and a proud trumpeting pig in the passing racks of silver nimbus. Most people don't have enough imagination for reality. They find their only paints in the office and the TV and the two or three streets of their Saturday nights. You are not one of these people, though tonight you wish you were.



Photo:

Handout.

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4777676/jfk-files-confirm-elaborate-cia-plots-to-kill-fidel-castro-included-exploding-sea-shell-and-contaminated-diving-suit/>

The American lawyer wants you to tell your story. You hear thunder like the echo of a shot. You hear a click. You look over your shoulder at the door to your Queens apartment but it is only the old Italian with the brittle papery hands and the tomato garden where he seems to spend every hour of his summers.

You wave. You walk inside to a warm laundry smell that reminds you of candy, black and white subway tiles checkered beneath your feet except that one bare spot beneath the chandelier. This missing tile—this is you.

And the American wants to return you to your place.

Dallas.

Dallas. Dallas. Dallas. You imagine old American Indian women saying it around a fire while poking a pale doll with a needle. Dallas. Dallas. Dallas.

The American has organized his entire life around this one city and this one day and this one man named Eduardo and the American sees you as his key, his missing piece. He seems like some kind of lonely figure obsessed with a jigsaw puzzle: the body of John F. Kennedy. Who is the one woman who can fill in the holes? How many others are there like the American, lost men in small rooms staring into holes, waiting for the black jewel of your tale.

You stand against the window holding the American's letter between your thumb and your forefinger, hoping for another flash of lightning. The top of the Empire State building needles into the sky as if in bequest of the same strike, the start of the storm. You could turn on the TV, what you sometimes call "the boob tube," but you don't care about the Olympics or the talk shows or the news. Instead you stand for a moment waiting for the rain, trying to make out the words of your Soviet neighbor next door with his grouchy wife and sick daughter. You listen to the Russian, the music of the dying revolution, the squabbling over the heat and the TV. You read the letter out loud:

"There will be no telephone service in the room," the American says.

You almost trust his assurance. You have always been a fool for a strong voice, all these men like Eduardo and Fidel who want to protect you and feel they know the story of the future.

A small woman with chestnut hair and a turtle brooch sits silent in the corner, prepared to record your story. This is the best most women can hope for: a place in the room. Like the blacks who mop the floors and the Mexicans who clean the sheets, most women in America move silently around the white men with the booming voices. Silence is survival. You know this. To come from Germany is to know a story that dwarves the evil of all others, but it is also to know that you do not tell that tale while the beast is still alive if you wish to survive.

“Come to Miami,” the American says.

“You are lucky to have me here,” you say.

You are lucky to be alive. You have been on the edge of death your entire life. Your mother was born in America. Like you, she fell in love with a foreigner and tried to help the laborers in Bremen escape the wrath of the Fuhrer and this is how a child ends up in the camp at Bergen-Belsen. This—this American blood—is how you end up daring enough—foolish enough—to fall in love with Fidel and because of your ties of love to this one man you now have ties to the men who hate him and so here you are in this beige room across the street from Madison Square Garden with the American. You are the daughter of a German sailor and an American actress and now here you are standing in a black dress in a hotel next to the biggest stage in New York City with one more chance to sing your song.

The American keeps pressing you about coming to Miami for the trial. He wears the black Buddy Holly glasses you used to see everywhere in New York. Like you, he is not as young as he once was. You dye your hair. He does not. He takes off his glasses for a moment and taps the temples against his forehead. This is the man Lee Harvey Oswald’s mother chose to represent her son. But the Warren Commission refused to accept

him as the assassin's advocate. Dick Gregory, the famous black comedian, made this white man his vice-presidential candidate in 1968 for the Freedom and Peace Party, but now this American, like you, is largely forgotten. You are his last chance at a second act. And perhaps he is yours.

"If you don't come to Miami, I'm going to have to hire an actress to read your testimony in court," he says.

"How perfect," you say.

"Could be," he says. "But it might also ring hollow and contrived. People want the real thing."

"There you are wrong," you say. "People want the performance, not the facts. Look at the president. Why am I telling you this? You know this."

"I know a courtroom," he says.

"You don't know these people," you say. "They have killed and would not hesitate to kill again."

You know these people. FBI. CIA. Army Intelligence. Whenever they get caught they change names like the corporations. The American returns his glasses to his face. He stares at you, as if seeing you for the first time—as if still trying to grasp the strangeness of your life, the incredible fact of your survival. Who else can build the bridge from Hitler to Havana to Dallas? Can the American see what Fidel saw—the ghostly glint of the eighteen-year old girl you once were? If beauty blinds men and ruins revolutions, you also know that it opens their eyes and fuels their fires and prepares them to die for an ideal rather than merely survive in the name of retiring to some small white home on a golf course in Florida. You were once the one who lit the fire. You were the one with the entire world wrapped around her finger. You were the one the young *lider* wanted and the one the old white men needed to kill him when he grew too big. But somehow, you and Fidel are

still alive, and so is your son, Andre, who has has your eyes and your mouth and Fidel's nose, and maybe you are here because you want to give him a better world and maybe you are here because some part of you will always be faithful to Fidel.

"Let's talk about Eduardo," the American says.

The American looks you in the eye and asks you about your present employment, but you just smile. You cannot tell him the truth. The closest you can come is telling him that you cannot tell him the truth. That is the truth. You refuse to give your home address. But when he finally asks if you have been employed by the Central Intelligence Agency, you answer, "Yes," and even the stenographer with the turtle brooch looks up, and outside a car honks its horn twice like they do every day in New York, but the sound makes you sick today because you know their ears are everywhere.

The American continues to question. You cannot believe Eduardo is foolish enough to bring this lawsuit against this tiny magazine—*The Spotlight*. It is like there is some sick part of him that wants to give the left exactly what they want. Like he, too, wants to tell the truth before he dies. Or maybe Eduardo has become just another tired throwaway governed by the terrible truth at the black scoured bottom of America: money.

"During and prior to November 1963, did you live in Miami, Florida?" the American asks.

"Yes," you say. "I did."

"During and before November of 1963, did you work on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Miami area?"

"Yes."

“Did you work with a man named Frank Sturgis, while you were working for the CIA?”

The American removes his glasses and skims the temples against his forehead. The motto of the CIA is from the Bible: “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” If by free they mean dead, sure. Fine. You imagine the actress who will perform your lines in Miami with her chest thrust out and her lipstick bright red and her eyes dark and defiant like you when you were young and the world seemed a tree full of ripe low-hanging fruit. And you were not the only one who was once young. You know the American lawyer thought he could do what will never be done. You know he thinks CIA stands for “Capitalism’s Invisible Army.” You know he thinks you have served the devil and that the devil can be killed, somehow separated from God.

The American still believes. And maybe you do, too. It feels good not to lie for once. You admit to knowing and working with “Frank Sturgis.” You go further and tell the American that you knew him as “Fiorini” and “Hamilton” and when the American asks you if you ever witnessed anyone give money to Fiorini for the work both of you were doing on behalf of the CIA, you say:

“Yes.”

And with this one word you know you have just shot a hole into Eduardo’s story. Fiorini is the bridge. Eduardo claims *The Spotlight* ruined his life and convinced his children that he is Kennedy’s killer. He testified in the first trial that Fiorini–Frank Sturgis–never worked for the CIA and Eduardo won, but the magazine has appealed with the American as their new attorney and the only way now that they can strip Eduardo of his precious money is if they catch him in a fiction.

You imagine Eduardo played by Paul Newman but you know Paul Newman would never play a man everyone knows to be a murderer,

a thief, and a swinger, so you imagine Gene Hackman instead. The Lex Luthor villain character from the Superman movie. You see Sally Field as the actress who plays the actress who plays you. You see Eduardo's shiny bald head and those predatory eagle eyes and that Florida tan and that thin glint of a smile that was so cool and calm in November of 1963 before Capitalism's Invisible Army killed their president, killed his killer, and then threw Eduardo into prison for the Watergate burglary like a common criminal. Today is not the first time that Eduardo's last name—Hunt—has struck you as the perfect description for the life he has chosen.

"Who," the American asks, "did you witness make payments to Mr. Sturgis?"

You see Sally Field bite her lip the way she does when she's nervous. You see Anjelica Huston and Sonia Braga. You see Hackman smile next to a greasy lawyer played by the nephew of a director who is funded by the mob, the famous smile a wink to that one viewer who waits around in the theater after everyone else has left to study the maps of lies and compromise and money anyone can read in the credits, all those fake names and those lawyers and editors who make sure nobody says anything too dangerous.

You bite your lip. You glance at the stenographer whom you imagine as Sissy Spacek. When the American asks you the name of the one with the money, you say:

"A man by the name of Eduardo."

For the first time the American smiles. And his grin is not so different from all the others. Fidel, Kennedy, Hunt—they were all hungry young men on a mission and you were always running their errands, wearing the costumes, the shawls and sunglasses. You see those days in Miami like a black and white movie in your mind: strangers passing through a square, a man looking like a banker, a woman like a

housewife on her way to pick up the laundry. Eduardo was the moneymen and Francisco handled the guns and contacts. A live drop meant Eduardo put the cash in your hand like a husband giving his wife a bit of spending money before a business trip. A dead drop meant a briefcase or a brown bag left at a bench or an envelope stuffed in a mailbox marked with chalk or soap.

“Did you go on a trip with Mr. Sturgis from Miami during November of 1963?” the American asks.



You remember it like it was yesterday. You remember the wind from the open window as you drove north, the laughter of the men at the gas station with the old bald tires sitting flaccid in the weeds. There were seven of you before you arrived in Dallas. You see the sky over the gas station again: the grasping racks of clouds over the barren land, the brown mangy hound tied by a chain to a phone booth, the way it rose up on its hind legs to try to capture a fly in its mouth. Eduardo had not yet joined the party. He was on his way from DC.

“Was there one or more cars?” the American asks.

“There was a follow-up car,” you say.

“Does that mean two cars?”

“Backup,” you say. “Yes.”

“What was in the follow-up car, if you know?”

“Weapons.”

This was what the men liked to talk about more than anything: their weapons. The new guns and the new bullets. The scopes and the range. The angles and the number of shots it would take and you kept asking yourself, “What am I doing?” as you passed normal Americans driving south with men looking at maps

and children looking out the windows and billboards for Coca-Cola with women in bikinis smiling to a single hand coming out of nowhere with a Coke and the single word, "Yes," on the sign, but you were thinking, "No."

"Did Mr. Sturgis tell you where you would be going from Miami, Florida, during November of 1963, prior to the time that you traveled with him in the car?"

"Dallas, Texas," you say.

There's that name again. The needle in the neck of the pale doll.

"He told you that?" the American says.

"Yes."

"Did he tell you the purpose of the trip to Dallas, Texas?"

"No," you say. "He said it was confidential."

You almost betray more, but you have been trained well. There is a fine line between the obedient housewife and the intelligent operative. You take orders and you get taken care of. You speak when spoken to. Fidel was the same way with you. Most men are. They don't really want to know what a woman thinks or remembers, but you remember everything and anyone with half a brain remembers what everyone was talking about in Miami in 1963: Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy. They called him a pantywaist and a nigger-lover. They called him a communist and the anti-christ and a sonofabitch and they called him a traitor for letting all of those men die on the beach—the *bahia de cochinos*—and they—Francisco and Eduardo—they were always talking about "the fall" and "the beach," and you were no idiot. You knew exactly what the talk was all about. What you weren't exactly sure of was why Eduardo wanted you involved, but the more cigarettes you smoked on the road to Dallas the more you believed Eduardo knew that you still loved

Fidel because you did and if Eduardo knew what was in your heart—and Eduardo knew everything—he would use you like he did everyone else and would throw you away to get exactly what he wanted and you knew exactly what Eduardo wanted. Eduardo wanted Fidel dead. He wanted World War III. Eduardo wanted to return to the beach.

You want to know what the actress will look like. Sally Field is too fragile, not enough bite. You imagine some stock raven-haired refugee the American finds in a Miami theater troupe for a couple bucks, a little thing sticking out her chest as she places her right hand on the Bible and raises her left like a robot. You can hear her heaving her whispers at the obese jury. You see the scattered silhouetted heads of showgoers watching you scowl at Gene Hackman as you tell your story in a movie you know the Americans will never have the balls to make.

The American flips the page of his legal pad. For a moment, you remember that there are two Americas, two hundred and fifty million Americas, and this one has risked his life for the truth. You see him played by Gregory Peck. Atticus Finch suddenly in color, his hair going salt and pepper as he tells the obese amnesiacs in the jury the story they don't want to hear.

"After you arrived in Dallas," the American asks, "did you stay at any accommodations there?"

"Motel," you say.

This one word tells the tale. Motel. Not a hotel where families laugh and husbands toast wives in a bright-lit lobby. No. You stayed at a motel, a small anonymous roadside hive of strangers plotting sex and death.

"While you were at that motel, did you meet anyone other than

those who were in the party traveling with you from Miami to Dallas?"

"Yes."

"Who did you meet?"

"E. Howard Hunt."

You cough a laugh as you imagine Gene Hackman wincing and Eduardo wincing at the fact of Hackman wincing on screen. You see yourself walking into your apartment tonight as the actual Hunt, clad in a black turtleneck, waits for you behind your door and whispers "bitch" into your ear as he crushes your hyoid bone with his black gloved hands before tossing you down to the street where the lazy police and the lazy reporters from the tabloids will, of course, call your death a suicide.

"Did you see Mr. Hunt actually deliver money to anyone in the motel room which you were present in?"

"Yes," you say.

"To whom did you see him deliver the money?"

"He gave an envelope of cash to Frank Fiorini."

"Did anyone else enter the room other than you, Mr. Fiorini, Mr. Hunt, and others who may have been there before Mr. Hunt arrived?"

"No."

"Where did you see the person you identified as Jack Ruby?"

This will be the moment the camera pans back to the obese amnesiacs in the American jury. Here will be the moment where the movie's musical montage breaks and silence plays its seven-second role in the American mind. See the septuagenarian schoolteacher with the nervous snuffle and the octagonal glasses and the varicose veins. See the pale carbuncled

walrus-faced machinist as the name "Jack Ruby" dawns in his pouchy eyes, the black and white television memories of his youth struggling to latch onto the colored drama of hazy middle age, the tragedy that so badly wants to remain a comedy.

If one day an actress will perform the actress who performed you, who will perform the killer who killed the killer to hide the identities of the true killers? You will never forget Jack Ruby. There he was: the mob guy who asked, "What's the goddamn broad doing here?" Fiorini told him to be quiet, that you were part of the team, but Ruby said, "I don't do business with broads," and you couldn't stand his macho bullshit. You stared at this squat, egg-shaped man with his stubby fingers and sebaceous skin and his adenoidal voice and his sick furtive smile, this man who would later bark Ozzie's name before killing him on national television. There you were, the only "broad" in that smoky little motel room. You tell the American that Ruby arrived forty-five minutes to an hour after Eduardo left.

"When you say Eduardo, who are you referring to?"

"E. Howard Hunt," you say.

You repeat the name with mock irritation. You know it is important that the American and his actress repeat the name E. Howard Hunt, like a chorus, as many times as possible. Hunt. Hunt. Hunt. America's amnesia is fueled by names like Eduardo, Francisco, and Marita. Names like pills. White pills they remember. Dark pills they forget. The "E" stands for Everette. Everette Howard Hunt, unlike most of his countrymen, could speak both Spanish and English. If you were a member of Operation 40, as you were, you spoke at least two tongues and had at least two names. You were all actors playing parts your entire lives. That was the great thrill of the CIA. It was all a performance. The name for the Dallas movie was *The Big Event*. Everyone in America, it turns out, bought a ticket to

the show. Except you and the American and all the others who are now dead.

“Screw this mission,” you told the team that night.

You left that Dallas motel room the day before they murdered Kennedy in the streets and you returned to Miami where you saw it all on TV. Eduardo never imagined a Russian immigrant with a handheld camera could ruin his plan. The man with the home movie of the killing was named Abraham. Abraham Zapruder. He was a dress-maker and he captured the president’s head exploding and he captured the president’s wife in her pink dress and her pink hat crawling all over the brain-spattered back of the black convertible as it drove through Dallas. This is the movie that shows the shots. This is the movie that changed America forever.

On a cold February night, your handler calls you to tell you that Leslie Armstrong, the foreperson of the Miami jury, has spoken to the local cameras, claiming that the evidence in the trial clearly revealed that President Kennedy had been murdered by his own government with the assistance of the plaintiff, E. Howard Hunt. Armstrong asked for the government to take responsibility and bring the killers to justice.

“This is not going to end well,” your handler says.

You say nothing.

“If this goes national, you’re in big trouble,” you are told.
“Big big trouble.”

You smile and hang up. You pour yourself a glass of wine and wait for the nightly news, a break from the daily numbing charade of Reagan and the Russians. But Tom Brokaw, Walter Cronkite’s dashing but slightly effeminate young successor, doesn’t mention the trial. He doesn’t say a word about Miami

or Eduardo. Sometimes NBC needs to wait for the CIA to know what they can say. So, with the rest of America, you wait. You turn up the heat. You mute the game show, but keep the picture on the screen in case the news breaks through.

You listen to the Russians through the walls, the horns of the cabs. You rifle through your bills. You throw away a summons for jury duty. You take off your shoes and sip on your Cabernet with your feet up on the couch and you now turn on the sound and watch the new show about the black family in Brooklyn with the doctor-father played by the famous comedian, Bill Cosby.

“Heathcliff Huxtable!” says the doctor’s wife in a mock-scolding tone.

They call the black doctor Heathcliff on the show, like the orange cartoon cat. Doctor Heathcliff Huxtable. The alliterative name, coupled with Huxtable’s nostalgia for jazz and his sweaters that seem both a tribute and an insult to Jackson Pollock—they all combine to suggest—no—you don’t want to say it. You are glad the blacks have their show. After what happened to King and the Kennedys the least they can do is give them this show with a good father.

You wait for the urgent horns, the symphonic interruption, the return of Tom Brokaw. As you finish your glass of wine and the laugh track triggers a smile at a line you don’t even hear, you wonder how the American pulled it off. You see Gregory Peck thundering and this woman named Armstrong actually listening to the argument and you see Gene Hackman wincing and you wonder: Did Eduardo get too cocky? Did he explode in front of the obese amnesiacs and shake them out of their trance with his entitled anger? Who was this Leslie Armstrong who dared to dress down the American government on camera? Years later at a party, just after Eduardo dies, you will talk with an Israeli who was also sworn to secrecy for her entire life, and the two of you, the German and the Jew, will laugh about Fidel and

Eduardo and their appetites and how America has no stomach for the truth.

“The truth in America,” the woman will say, “is like constipation. You know the business has to come out. You know you will die if it does not. But it surprises you how long a body can last.”

But that is the future. For now, before the constipation and the inflammations and Hollywood coming to you for the rights to your life, you drink your Cabernet and laugh along with America at the black family in Brooklyn. The show is so good there is a small part of you that prays that the news break will wait until *Cheers*, the show about the bar in Boston tended by the retired baseball player with the saddest name in the world: Sam (M)alone. You are like this Sam Alone. And you have a little crush on Ted Danson, the actor who plays Sam. You wish him well. You don't want Sam to end up with Diane. You want him to wait, because admit it: if he does not the show will end, and when it finally does begin and the fat jolly Norm sits down with the erudite mustachioed postal worker named Cliff and the two men begin to drink away their day, you pour another glass of wine and you join them. You fall asleep years before the news finally breaks.

New Essay: Axe by M.C. Armstrong

I met a woman on my way to Iraq. Just before I stepped onto the midnight plane to Baghdad, she asked me what should have been a simple question:

“Who do you work for?”

Her name was Moni Basu. She was a journalist. She had thick dark hair, an intense demeanor, and she wore a helmet that said "Evil Media Chick." We were drinking coffee at a picnic table behind a beverage kiosk at the back of Ali Al Salem base in Kuwait. Her traveling companion, a photographer named Curtis Compton, had caught shrapnel from an IED during a previous embed. A moment before, Moni had given me, a rookie journalist, an important Arabic term: *mutar saif*. It meant lies, bullshit, summer rain, a thing that just didn't happen in the desert.

I told her I worked for a magazine called "CQ."

"GQ?"

"No. CQ."

"You write for Congressional Quarterly?"

The questions never stopped with Moni. She could smell the bullshit.

"Convergence Quarterly," I said. "It's a new magazine. This will be our first issue. We're sponsored by North Carolina A&T."

"You work at North Carolina A&T?"

I nodded nervously. I'm white. A&T is a historically black college in Greensboro, North Carolina. Many people argue that the student protest movement of the 60s began at A&T when four courageous young men conducted a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter on February 1st, 1960. This was the part of our history that we advertised to the world.

"Do you know who graduated from there?" Moni asked.

"Uh, Jesse Jackson?"

"Khalid Sheikh Mohammed?"

She said it like that, like a question, like she couldn't believe that I was here with her and didn't know this crucial fact. It was early March, 2008, the fifth anniversary of the Iraq invasion. I'd been working at A&T as a lecturer in interdisciplinary writing for the past three years, but didn't know a thing about Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

"This is the guy who masterminded the attacks on 9/11," Moni said. "You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

Moni glanced at Curtis who was applying a cloth to a lens with calm circular strokes. It was just beginning to dawn on me that I might be in way over my head, like maybe I was the man my father was afraid I was, a rube destined to die a ridiculous death in the coming days, my charred body hung from a bridge in some war-torn hamlet, men in loose-fitting garments cheering as my ashy corpse twisted in the wind. Or they'd put me in one of those orange jumpsuits and cut off my head, whoever "they" were.

I took a long sip of my coffee. Surely, whatever crush I had on Moni would not be reciprocated given my astounding ignorance about the war on terror. There I was, about to embed with Navy SEALs in Haditha, one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq, and I had no idea about the man who had started the very war I was trying to cover for a magazine that hadn't even released its first issue. Yes, I was the guy who had traveled seven thousand miles to learn that the mastermind of 9/11 had been educated in my own backyard.

"Excuse me," I said.

Rather than behave like a good journalist and question Moni relentlessly about KSM, I retreated to the bathroom to attend to suddenly struggling bowels. I stared at the graffiti from the troops:

Chuck Norris doesn't consider it sex unless the woman dies.

Chuck Norris's tears cure cancer. Too bad he never cries.

Here I sit, cheeks a'flexin, ready to unleash another Texan.

Here I sit, upon the crapper, ready to produce another rapper.

Can't wait to go home.

Have a nice war.

They called my bus. I put on my army surplus helmet and bulletproof vest, jotted down a few notes about the jokes in the toilet. I sat close to Moni as the bus filled up. I didn't want to lose her. I felt like I needed her, and I wasn't used to that feeling, that fear. Basically, I didn't want to be left alone in Iraq. On the drive to the plane, I made small talk about the record-breaking drought back home.

"It's so bad in Atlanta," she said, "that I keep a bucket in my shower just so I can save enough water for my garden."

We walked across the tarmac and up the ramp into the loud bloated hull of a C-130 Hercules. It was me, Moni, Curtis, four soldiers, and two contractors. The C-130 is an exposed experience, a cabin stripped of padding and panel, the seats nothing more than net and pole, the lights a dim red, white, and blue, the floor studded with traction pads. After the plane took off, Moni fell asleep and so did one of the soldiers. Another sat with his headphones blasting so loud it sounded like spit was coming out of his ears. I smelled grape Kool-Aid powder. I looked around at the seemingly calm faces occasionally jostled by the turbulence. There was no turning back. For the past six months, I'd been obsessed with seeing the war for myself and escaping the media-saturated mindfuck of left versus right, peace versus war, WMDS, beheadings and 9/11 conspiracy theories. I wanted to see the thing for myself and now that I was here I couldn't stop thinking about how blind I'd been to the very place I was escaping: America: my own backyard.

Other than KSM, what else had I missed? Was I about to get kidnapped and beheaded, my father dropping to his knees in our front yard with photographers clipping pictures all around him, just like the dad of Nick Berg, the famous decapitated contractor? And were contractors—these men snoozing all around me—were they the bad guys like everybody said? Was America evil? And why were our troops so infatuated with Chuck Norris?

All the lights went out in the Hercules, the cabin a dark tunnel of jiggling multi-national bodies as this massive airship began its spiral descent to Baghdad, the famous lights-out, corkscrew roller-coaster free-fall approach the military's way of evading RPGs and demonstrating to rookie journalists just how simultaneously colossal and agile America can be if she truly wants to keep herself a secret.

Baghdad seemed calm before dawn, more a dense constellation of sapphire lights than a bombed out wasteland. I pressed my cheek against the glass of the Blackhawk. Here was one of the oldest cities in the world, Babylon herself on a Sunday morning. As a thirteen-year old boy I'd seen SCUDS and Patriot missiles doing their duty on the news, my country at war for the first time in this city down below, but Iraq meant nothing to me back then. In high school, I owned a bong named the Enola Gay. History was just a game, a trivial pursuit, a place to get names for marijuana paraphernalia. Now I was here, in the center of the mediated world, seated next to Moni and Curtis and two soldiers manning swiveling guns as we strafed over the dark crawl of the Tigris River.

We touched down on a slab of cement behind a barricaded building known as LZ (Landing Zone) Washington. Apparently

most of the soldiers at this chopper terminal for Green Zone activity were employees of a contractor firm known as Triple Canopy Security Solutions. Moni, Curtis, and I walked into the office with two soldiers who were in town for a court-martial.

The first thing I noticed inside LZ Washington was a photo on the wall, an autographed black and white shot of Chuck Norris next to the sign-in desk.

“What is the deal with all the Chuck Norris worship?” I asked Moni.



Chuck Norris doesn't read, he stares at the words until they change into the meaning he believes they should communicate. If he blinks the whole process starts over again.

She shook her head and smiled, like I was paying attention to the wrong things. As we waited for our ride to CPIC, the Combined Press Information Center, I stepped closer to the Norris board, the little flapping scraps of pink and green post-its framing the autographed photo, the post-its scrawled with doggerel travelers had dedicated to this classic example of the Whitmanian American, that man who contains multitudes. Norris' life was actually quite remarkable, I realized at that moment. Not only was he an actor, but he was also a former contractor, a highly decorated martial artist who formed an entire school of Karate, and, on top of it all, he was a devout Christian political wonk who'd recently taken over William F. Buckley's conservative column in hundreds of newspapers, railing against premarital sex, gay marriage, and other such signs of the apocalypse. The picture of Norris I saw posted in LZ Washington had him seated atop a motorcycle

that might as well have been a white horse. Beneath were bits of wit like:

Chuck Norris doesn't read. He stares at the book until it gives him information.

Chuck Norris wears cowboy boots. They're made of real cowboys.

Chuck Norris doesn't mow his grass. He dares it to grow.

I wrote down as many of these jokes as I could, determined to keep alive the lighter side of Iraq, but as we drove through the sunrise streets of Baghdad, I couldn't stop thinking about what Moni had told me just before we'd gotten on the C-130.

"You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

How bad is America's amnesia, its will to blindness? And to what extent is that blindness connected to our sense of humor, our addiction to nervous, absurdist jokes? Was I the only one who didn't know the names of our enemies? How little did we know about "them"? From the back of a Humvee, I looked for faces. We passed by monolithic cement barricades, flashes of street vendors with exhausted leers pushing bales of blankets, a statue for the soldiers who'd fought against Iran in the grisly chemical weapons fueled war of the 1980s. God, how did I not know that the man who started this whole "war on terror" was a graduate of the school where I taught? Was the gap a function of too many rips off the Enola Gay as a teenager? Was I the only American who was this clueless about the Global War on Terror? Sometimes I felt extremely uncomfortable about just how much I had in common with the fool we'd elected President: George W. Bush.

My father gave me some advice before I left for Iraq. He said that Operation Iraqi Freedom was just as much our civil war as it was theirs. He said all anybody talked about in the press was whether we were the good guys or the bad guys.

“But what about them?” he said. “Who’s their good guy? Who’s their George Washington? That’s the story you want to find. Talk to *them*.”

That was my goal. I knew I had bigger fish to fry than the graffiti dedicated to Chuck Norris, but talking to actual Iraqis without intrusive oversight was easier said than done. After being in Iraq for more than a week, I still hadn’t met a single Iraqi. On the eighth day of my tour, along with my military escort, a large mustachioed Mormon named Reynolds, I landed at Al Asad, a sprawling base that reminded me of summer camp, soldiers jogging and playing volleyball, fobbits zooming around in golf carts, a commissary store loaded with candy and chewing tobacco and cellophane wrapped soft core magazines displaying pin-up girls. Around three o’clock in the afternoon, under a shelter at the back of the base, as I was paging through a men’s magazine, I heard a familiar voice.

“Eat Boy!”

I looked up from my picnic table and ran down to the barricaded cul-de-sac where my SEAL platoon had parked their humvees. I hugged my old friend, now the Lieutenant for this platoon that was actually a Joint Special Operations Force (mostly SEALs mixed with contractors, CIA, and Rangers). Diet was a man I’d known since I was five years old. He looked different, his thick bristly mustache designed to create an air of gravity and power—what the Iraqis called *wasta*—but to me, it was pure comedy, a nod to the porn stars of the seventies or perhaps the viceroys of nineteenth century colonial England, Panama Jack.

“Nice stache,” I said.

Diet commented on the disproportion between the hair on my face and the hair on my head. Whereas he was growing a mustache, I was growing a beard, having learned from him that while mustaches suggest power to Iraqis, the beard suggests holy man.

“You’re in the back,” Diet said, as we stepped towards a humvee with the name “Leonidas” spray-painted on the back. Leonidas was an ancient Spartan king, and also a fictional character from a recent movie, “The 300,” which followed one Spartan unit’s heroic exploits during the battle of Thermopylae. According to historical legend and the movie, the Spartans died valiantly fighting against King Xeres and his Persian horde, the Spartan story told only because Leonidas was wise enough to send a man named Dilios away from the platoon on the night before the decisive battle so he—Dilios—might tell the story of the soldiers’ bravery to the masses.

“We’re driving?” I said.

Diet nodded and smiled. I was surprised and pleased, and scared shitless. I’d enjoyed the aerial views of Iraq, the absence of Iraqis, but was growing a bit suspicious of the embedding strategy, the careful hopscotch from base to base, the way we avoided all the spaces between, the people.

“You scared?” Diet said.

“Should I be?” I said.

“No,” he said. “That’s part of the story here.”

I put on my helmet and ceramic plated vest. *Complacency Kills*, said a spray-painted sign on the edge of Al Asad. A soldier named B. Dubbs was driving as we passed beyond the wire, the concertina and the cement barriers. Diet passed back a tin of Copenhagen. I threw in a pinch, feeling like high school, about to go rallying through the woods on a winter day, except

we weren't entering a state forest or the rutted lanes of an apple orchard. This was a war zone.



The Haditha burn pit. Part of the desert scenery.

Diet had described Haditha to me as the West Virginia of Iraq, a triad of tribal villages a hundred and fifty miles northwest of Baghdad. Unemployment was seventy percent. There was desert everywhere, many of the people making a living the way they had for thousands of years: fishing and farming, ghostly figures shepherding goats on the smoke-plumed horizon. There were men in robes selling what looked like lemonade from cheap collapsible roadside tables.

"That's gas," Diet said.

I nodded my head. Children ran along the shoulder with their hands outstretched. We threw them candy, jolly ranchers. I felt good. I loved the way the desert sky was skinning my eyes, the taste of my fresh chaw and its fiberglass shards tearing through my gums, the feeling of sharing a buzz with Diet in this surreal landscape that seemed to go back and forth between war-torn and exotic, novel and vivid on the one hand, tragic and impoverished on the other. I listened to the gobble of radio communications, smelled the sweat of the men, saw fruit stands pass by along the road, date palms and eucalyptus, a graveyard of jets, a black burned out hulk of a sedan on the shoulder a reminder that I was not in the Disney version of Iraq anymore and that, at any moment, one of these swaddled and stoic-faced roadside strangers might decide to press a button on a cell-phone he'd converted into a remote control and thereby remind me that not everybody shared the enthusiasm of the children for the foreigners with their tanks and their sunglasses and their gargantuan guns and their swollen lower lips.

I tried to keep my head in the moment as we approached Haditha, my vision of the world at that moment an opaque dust-smear profile of Diet riding shotgun, his face a single sunglass eye and the edge of that thick mustache, a wire coming out of his ear, his lips mutely mouthing orders into a mic as we passed through a gate, and then we could suddenly see a lake to our left and the Euphrates valley to our right down below, this ancient river of grade school lore now a roaring spout from the cement jaws of a massive dam, the slabby Soviet architecture and the sulfurous smell of the Haditha Dam not enough to mute the feeling of ancient resonance, the awe of seeing distant cities of mud huts clustered behind palms on the east and west banks, a vast desert stretching out forever on the southern horizon, no billboards anywhere.

“Can we go for a swim?” I asked.

“You do not want to swim in there,” Diet said.

I wondered what that meant. Was the river polluted or was he wisely discouraging the appearance of recreation, a spring break scene of buddies privileged white men splashing around in sacred waters while dark people downstream were cutting each other's heads off? I've always been a sucker for symbolic baths, half-hearted ablutions. When I see a new body of water, I want to swim. I kept telling myself to shut the fuck up, to remember the wisdom of Mark Twain: “It is better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

We parked the humvees and stepped out, were greeted by a pack of sand-colored mongrel dogs that threaded their way through our dispersing ranks. I gave one a tentative pat, stretched my legs and spit out my dip, then looked around the base at black missile-shaped tubes of inflatable boats leaned up against the cement barriers that fortified the borders, red and green storage containers forming a wall against the

southern end of the camp, an empty plywood watchtower like the first leg of a Trojan horse.

“Who’s on the other side?” I asked Diet, as we stood on the bank of the river looking across at the camp on the eastern shore. He told me that was where the contractors slept. Sure enough, I saw the letters “KBR” sprayed in red on a cement wall, a few extremely thick men milling around. Kellogg Brown Root was a subsidiary of Dick Cheney’s old company, Halliburton.

“What do they do?” I asked.

“They more or less take care of the trash,” Diet said.

The great secret of my time in Iraq, I thought for awhile, was that trash, the burn pits KBR ran and the rash of scary symptoms discovered in soldiers and in Iraqis, or maybe, I came to think, it was a chemical weapons discovery at the Haditha Dam, a story one of those KBR contractors told me in a tent one night back in Kuwait. According to him, we never told the media about these “WMDs” because the serial numbers indicated American origins. This was a big story, I thought, as big as they come, but after I put it out in *The Mantle* the very week C.J. Chivers of *The New York Times* released a similar story about such weapons being discovered all over Iraq, I realized people didn’t care, that our complicity in Iraq’s development of the very WMDs we’d used to justify the war meant nothing to most Americans.[\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) No, I now believe that the big secret of Iraq is still that thing my father told me to explore: the people.

Diet showed me the trailer where I could take a shower, then ushered me into a maze of corrugated storage containers. I followed him across a wooden plank past a dark empty plywood room. Behind this was another row of these metal containers, the “ConEx” boxes that served as the sleeping quarters for his men, each door sprayed with their nicknames, monikers like

“Lurch” and “Tree.” Diet’s door was marked by two big black letters: “LT.”

“Damn. Not bad,” I said, as I walked inside and beheld strands of Christmas lights forming vines above a red bed and a wall decorated with an ornate tribal tapestry, the pattern a pointillist spread of teal and brown leaves. I saw trunks of care package goodies everywhere, a Macbook on a desk under a reading lamp. Behind Diet’s computer sat a black and white photo of his father from his time in the Marines during Vietnam. Above the photo were Diet’s books, including a tattered copy of William Faulkner’s *Flags in the Dust*.

As Diet took off his gear, I sat down in his black swivel desk chair and read through his Faulkner. I came across a line on a page that had been dog-eared, a passage I wrote down for some reason: “When a feller has to start killin’ folks, he most always has to keep killin’ em. And when he does, he’s already dead hisself.”

“You hungry?” Diet asked.

“What do you think?” I said.

“I know. Stupid question.”

He laughed. Eat Boy’s always hungry. Diet offered me one of his care-package nutrition bars, something with flax and honey and other progressive ingredients. It felt good to eat, to take off my shoes, to savor for a second the sense—the illusion—of finally having arrived.

“Fucking Eat Boy,” he said.

“Bet you never thought this was going to happen,” I said.

“No,” he said. “To be honest. I didn’t.”

I looked at the cutouts of women from *Maxim* magazine he’d taped to the walls. He had a white dry board on the back of

his door.

“Let’s come up with a list of five stories,” he said.

I didn’t like the sound of that. I told Diet I could find my stories on my own. Diet, for good reason, looked at me skeptically, or perhaps paternally is the better word, or maybe it was close to the same look Moni gave me when I asked about Chuck Norris and told her I’d never heard of KSM. All three of them—Diet, my dad, and Moni—knew I knew nothing, and thought this was to my detriment, but sometimes I wondered if there wasn’t a certain advantage to my naïvite.

“Just out of curiosity,” I said. “Why does there have to be five?”

“It’s a good number, Eat Boy. One story a day for a full work-week.”

Three months earlier, after our local newspaper had backed out on sponsoring me because my father had threatened their editor (his patient) with a lawsuit if anything happened to me while I was in Iraq, Diet had called from me Haditha and challenged me to “be a man,” to make the trip happen in spite of my father’s resistance. So, like my president, I faked my way into Iraq, came up with a magazine of my own. I was proud of this, my American ingenuity, but as Diet stood there telling me what stories to write, I felt like he was meddling.

“I wanna meet some Iraqis,” I said.

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

“You wanna meet Captain Allah?”

“Yes, I wanna meet Allah.”

That’s how the name first sounded to me—Captain Allah—Captain

God. Like, sure, let's go straight to the top. I had no idea who he was, but he sounded important and he definitely sounded Iraqi. Diet and I walked back through the maze of trailers that finally spilled out into the open air of the Iraqi night, some of the brightest stars I'd ever seen, the lighting of the base kept deliberately low, the vast miles of desert all around us offering no diffusing glow to the constellations, Orion stippled with a dress of chain mail armor, stars below his belt I'd never seen before. I spun around in the cool night air like I was stoned, saw a tall black SEAL walk out of the shower hut with a towel around his neck, saw the mongrel dogs play-fighting down at the southern end of the base by the red punching bag hanging beneath the watchtower.

We walked into the room of one of the platoon's translators, a thick-bearded Jordanian named Rami who had a large American flag posted over his bed in the same fashion that Diet had a tribal tapestry tacked over his. Cutout pictures of women in skin-tight apparel modeling machine guns dotted Rami's walls.

Diet was briefing Rami on what was about to happen and I was admiring a photo of a blonde woman in a black dress wielding a black rifle when a tall man with a feathered mullet and a gold tie walked through the door, his entrance worthy of a sitcom scene. I half expected a studio audience to explode into a roar of applause. He was gangly, a silver pen clipped to his left breast pocket, his white dress shirt and olive suit freshly ironed, his eyes moving left to right in a furtive display of awareness and anxiety that evoked Kramer's character from *Seinfeld*. But this was unhinged, unrehearsed. Here was a man like me, who did not know his role, and no feature of his appearance suggested this more than the feathered mullet.

"Matt, this is Captain Al'A Khalaf Hrat. He's the leader of the thirty man Iraqi Swat Team we've been training over the past few months."

“Assalamu Alaikum,” I said, rather proud of myself for remembering this rote greeting.

I shook the man’s hand, felt a strong calloused grip. He responded with a deep voice and an abridgement of the conventional crib sheet Arabic greeting:

“Salaam.”

He took off his jacket, revealing a shoulder holster, two pistols tucked beneath his arms. He took that off as well, spoke at length, looking back and forth between Diet and me, never once looking at Rami, which I thought was “interesting,” as they say.

“He wants to know where you’re from,” Rami said.

Either Arabic is the most inefficient language in the world or Captain Al’A wanted to know more than just where I was from. Rami wore a tan jumpsuit with an American flag above his left breast. I was anxious, aware that a lot was going to be lost in translation. I had my journal in my hands with all of the questions I wanted to ask, but felt tempted, as I almost always do, to improvise, to throw my notes aside, and go with the feeling of the moment.

For the first time in my life I was not only in Iraq, but I was finally sitting with an Iraqi, the leader of a SEAL trained SWAT team, perhaps the Iraqi equivalent of Vic Mackey, Michael Chikliss’s character from my favorite cop show, *The Shield*. Was it possible that Captain Al’A’s mullet meant to Iraqis what Mackey’s shaved head meant to Americans? Was I dealing with the alpha dog, the badass, a rogue cop, the sort of man who made his own rules? I kept getting this comic vibe from Captain Al’A, the ghost of the American mullet and its connotations of “I don’t give a fuck, throw me another beer” mentality.

After telling Al’A that I was from a town close to Washington,

D.C. I decided to forget my questions about statistics and George W. Bush and the fifth anniversary of the invasion and “the Al Anbar Awakening,” and I elected, instead, to ask him about his hair. I told him I liked his mullet. I told him that I understood that different hairstyles meant different things to different people, that the mustache was supposed to mean power and the beard holiness, “but what does the mullet mean?”

I exchanged a quick look with Diet who shook his head in crestfallen disbelief. Captain Al’A crinkled his eyes and also looked toward his boss, perhaps not expecting the interrogation with the American journalist to broach such serious subjects as the symbolic significance of a mullet. I felt like such an amateur. I wondered what Moni would do. Over a hundred thousand Iraqis had already been killed in the war and I was asking questions about hair care. I looked down at Al’A’s feet, determined to get serious with the next question, scolding myself for my improvisational approach, my belief in naïvete perhaps nothing more than the sophist’s justification for laziness, a tragicomic foreshadowing of the America to come. In the seconds between my question and Al’A’s answer, I noticed the Captain wore ankle length socks. There were subtle pin stripes in his pants, a sharp pleated crease. He removed a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and offered me one.

I took it. We both lit up. And then he began to talk, his deep voice drawn into higher registers by the frenzy of his thoughts, glottals and hisses clashing, Rami listening from his desk, the Captain seated on the translator’s bed, Diet standing over us. When Al’A finished speaking, he took a deep inhalation and blew a clean two-pronged stream of smoke out of his considerable nostrils, his face—his wide eyes and large nose a bit reminiscent of the Muppet character, Gonzo.

“He says that his men are not afraid of death,” Rami said. “He says that in some cities his haircut is not allowed, that

it means a man is gay, and if you are gay you can get killed. But he is not gay. He just does what he wants. He is not afraid of death. He has lost eight family members, three brothers kidnapped and killed. His uncle, who was the police chief—he and his three children were murdered. It has been a terrible time for Hadithans. Hundreds of people leaving the city for Syria and elsewhere. Refugees. There was a man, an insurgent, who spoke to an American in public so everyone could see. Fifteen minutes this man and the American talk so everyone can see. Then the insurgent goes and kills an old innocent man, a barber. What do you think people thought? Do you understand the game they play? You cannot be afraid of death.”

Lately, I've given a lot of thought to this moment, the story that emerged out of that question about hair. Many of the men we armed in Al Anbar, men like Al'A, joined up with the Islamic State. Many of those who did not continued to flood Syria, contributing to the destabilization of that country and its civil war that goes on to this day. So I've thought about Al'A's words a lot, his story, the flood of death in his family. I've thought about these words specifically: “You cannot be afraid of death.” This value, what some used to call bravery, has not aged well in the twenty-first century, or at least the American version. Sometimes we now call people who embrace death “cowards.” The absence of fear in the face of death runs totally counter to the American way of life and the way it's so structured around careerism and self-interest, retirement and insurance and health care, keeping people alive into their nineties, banking their bodies in the faceless retirement communities we find near our beaches and deserts, Florida and Arizona.

That night I looked into the spaniel calm of the Captain's eyes as another divided slide of smoke issued from his nose. A million thoughts were rushing through my head. I thought of Native Americans, the ones who got the haircuts and joined us,

the ones who didn't, the Shawnee who occasionally came to dance at my elementary school when I was a child. Was I engaged in a timeless rite in that moment, sharing tobacco with a Brave? How ironic was it that the white man, or at least the white man's corporation, was now the one to provide the tobacco? And who, truly, was the savage in this "game" of drones and beheadings, snipers, IEDs and WMDs? What would you think if you were in the Captain's shoes, an Iraqi man working with Americans in the heart of a war that might well be illegal and might possibly (and simultaneously) produce positive unintended consequences, your every move fraught with the implications of poverty versus complicity? A simple conversation could cost you your life.

I felt a tremendous surge of affection and pity for Captain Al'A. We continued the interview. I learned that he belonged to the tribe known as the Jughayfi. He was born the son of a worker at a local oil refinery. He witnessed the Iran-Iraq war and thereafter the first war with America. For a long time, like most Iraqis, his hatreds were pure, thoroughly controlled by an oppressive regime and its lockstep media, a government that kept tight control over the textbooks in the schools.

"You were not allowed to think," Al'A told me. "Everything was military."

God, I wanted to drink a beer with this guy and tell him about what it had been like the last five years in America, generals galore on TV, generals on the radio, CIA on NBC, assassins on Fox, anchorwomen cheerleading the war, military budgets exploding, everybody in the country shaving their head like yours truly, everybody with their support our troops bumper stickers and tree ribbons, every chicken hawk politician suddenly with polished flag pins posted on their lapels, country musicians turned to jingoistic sycophants for the war machine, everybody every day constantly reminded by the streaming ticker on the TV that we were living in code orange

and it was all the fault of people like Captain Al'A.

"How have things changed?" I asked him.

"Come downtown with me," he said. "Come see the souk. It used to be so small you could fit it into the back of a truck. Now it's like, it's like—it's like Europe. It's like Paris."

Rami laughed, said to me, "Matt, it's not that nice. Definitely not Paris."

"You should come to the market," Al'A said.

I looked to Diet like a teenage son begging permission from his father to go to a party with the older guys, that archetypal convertible revving in the driveway. Diet looked back at me like I wasn't quite ready to take that ride, a long pointed blink.

"Don't worry, Eat Boy," he said. "We're going downtown tomorrow."

I was terrified—thrilled, intoxicated by war, confident in the seal of my spectatorial membrane, my security detail. I'd never been "downtown" in a place where barbers were murdered in the streets, a city where there were "attacks" every day. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I was finally getting around to my father's advice. I was talking to an Iraqi. But there was still a veil over the scene, a translator and a lieutenant, cement barriers everywhere outside. To go "downtown"—that might actually qualify as reality, an authentic "beyond the wire" glimpse of Iraq. Hot dog! Come on, Daddy-o! Can't I see beyond the walls?

Diet told me to wrap it up. I suggested a photograph with the Captain before calling it a night. Then, in a moment I'll never forget, Captain Al'A stood up and brandished a small bottle of "Axe" cologne. This baffled me. We'd been sitting

incredibly close the whole evening and not once had he broken out the cologne. Smell, of course, is not conveyed in a photograph, so why the hell would a man spray himself with cologne prior to a photo? To comb one's mullet or tighten one's tie—this I understood. But as I flew back to America, I couldn't stop thinking about this final gesture. Why had this man with a mullet sprayed himself down so profusely with cologne before locking arms with me? Was this a custom my crib sheets had neglected to apprise me of? And why, of all colognes, was he wearing Axe? And why do I focus on trivial things like haircuts and colognes when there are body counts and ideologies and elections and secret prisons everywhere?

Perhaps the answer is simple. I don't know. I'm a coward. I'm an American idiot. But maybe that's too easy, modesty to the point of dishonesty and disavowal. So let me try to step it back. Most Americans know Axe as the Walmart of colognes. Axe is the most aggressively advertised cologne slash body spray on the marketplace, a cheap and strong smell for young men looking to score. Axe is what we advertise to the young after advertising Viagra and Cialis to the old and Coke to all. As I sought Iraq, perhaps Iraq sought me as well, reaching out with the one smell that could not possibly be misinterpreted. Maybe Iraq, too, was befuddled by the multitudes Chuck Norris contained, the strange mixed messages of our muse and our media.

Ultimately, whether Iraq and Captain Al'A were as confused about us as we were about ourselves, I think it's safe to say that I'll never forget either. Captain Al'A, the way his mullet brushed my bare scalp as we wrapped arms for the photo, his locks dusting me with a musk laced with body odor and American tobacco, his ribs for a moment in contact with mine, their texture uncovered by his absent holster, the awareness of those bones sharpened by that most pungent of musks; begging for my approval, hungry for my adoring stare.

[\[1\]](#)

<http://www.mantlethought.org/world-literature/spring-break-iraq>

[\[2\]](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/14/world/middleeast/us-casualties-of-iraq-chemical-weapons.html>

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