

New Poetry by Aaron Wallace



Blackhawk

Truck 2 is hit,
and they're calling
for the medic,
and I'm out of my truck
kneeling next to the driver –
I could hold his organs in my hands.

At the top of Stanley Road

Tim the Chip Man sings
steak and kidney pie,
steak and kidney pie, oh my my,
I love steak and kidney pie
to the deep fat fryer.

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as the rifles tap-tap-tap
like the pen in my hand signing the mortgage
to the only home I've ever had
and Cole is tap-tap-tapping a magazine
against his helmet to knock the sand out
before he reloads.

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as my wife
breaks the crest of the dunes
backlit by a burning ball of hydrogen on her way
to our altar on the beach,
while the driver bleeds in waves.

The lieutenant is mouthing words over
the radio while the VA doctor explains
that the war will kill us now
or some other time so I stick the driver
with too much morphine.

I walk with my wife and son
in Central Park. Trees are chirping—
the bird is on the way, the bird is on the way.

War Porn

After mission he sits covered
in sand, sweat, blood, then boots
up his laptop – listens to the whir of the hard
drive as he goes through folders and picks
his favorite girl, blonde with globular breasts
and gapped teeth, who bounces

her ass on the floor and looks up at him, her hands braced against him while she moans

“Do it Daddy, give it to me, I need it.”

He turns away, uninterested, and thinks instead about the woman from the village, her supple voice babbling and crying while he kicks over pots and furniture—she eventually falls—reaching for anything, everything, to throw at him, cursing him, his family, his country, and he hears Bucky outside urging him to do it, *just fucking do her* – so he reaches down, undoes his fly, spits on his hand, thinking how lucky am I?

Photo Credit: Basetrack 18

New Fiction: “Plink, Rack” by Steven Kiernan



The
re are many moving parts in a gun. There's the trigger, which most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They're the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you. Sometimes not.

Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn't hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands. Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack. Plink, rack.* Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen comrades. For a few days after the bricks were laid, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring

the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack.* He swiveled towards the other soldier. *Plink, rack.*

"Doing alright up there, Hal?" J asked from the driver's seat.

"Just great," Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I fucking hate pulling security for 1st platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound," J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

"Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer."

"I got ya, bro," Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG

on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn't yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

"This is just getting ridiculous." J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

"You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted." J said.

"No shit?"

"Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I wanted to be." He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. "Then I got this great fucking idea, *I'll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film,*" he said in a nasally voice. "Even told my recruiter about it."

"I bet he fucking loved that," Hal said. "Why didn't you go combat camera? He get you with the old 'Infantry is the only slot open right now' line?"

"Guilty as charged."

"So, how's your 'epic war film' working out? I bet it'll be realistic as fuck."

"Don't you worry, I got it all planned out. It's gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic."

"Yeah. But those ten minutes though..."

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

"My grandfather fought in World War II," J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. "Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn't until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what's it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

A man kicked his brother down the street.

A policeman shows up and says, "Hey, why are you doing that? You can't do that."

The man turns and says, "It's alright, he's dead anyway."

"I didn't get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it's pretty fucking funny."

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side

of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see him."

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, shit. He's got an RPG!"

"What?!" J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. "Shoot him, man. Shoot him!"

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

“Shoot him!”

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn't really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn't breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He

exhaled. *Plink, rack.* There was a knock on his door. “Hey, Hal, ya in there?” Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack.* “What are you doing, man?” *Plink, rack.* It’s alright, Hal thought. It’s alright.

Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps

Not For Sale: Private Farmland in Post-Soviet Ukraine

For those Americans who think about Ukraine at all, it is no secret that the country has faced two wars since 2014. The first, most conspicuous war, exists in Ukraine’s South and East, against Russia. The second, much less visible but far more important, exists throughout every city and village in Ukraine. This is the war to reform Ukraine’s government and society.

Many of the reforms one hears discussed as priority items for Ukraine are useful, necessary preconditions to making it more European (which is to say, a better country). Judicial reforms to clean federal and oblast courts of corrupt, compromised judges is obviously a good idea. Transparency mechanisms that require journalists, non-profit workers and politicians to declare all income and assets is also good, and unquestionably useful in an aspiring western-style democracy.

One proposed change to Ukraine’s legal or social system that gets an extraordinary deal of attention (as these things go) is reforms to permit the sale of agricultural farmland. Take [this piece](#) published by the World Bank, by the country

director for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. It begins: “Land reform—lifting the moratorium on agriculture land sales—is the most powerful measure the government can take to boost economic growth and job creation, particularly in rural areas.” Pieces in the [Atlantic Council](#) and other western publications make similar claims.

But what is Ukraine’s law about land ownership? Where does it come from, and why does it exist? What are its goals? More importantly, what about land ownership in Ukraine needs reforming—why are the IMF, EU and World Bank so fixated on this specific issue?

The History of Land Ownership in Ukraine

To understand the law as it exists now, one must first understand the history that led into it. To do so, one could go back to the fall of the USSR and the distribution of collective, state-owned land to newly-enfranchised Ukrainian citizens. Or one could go back further, to the policies of collectivization that required citizens to live on land that they themselves did not own.

To really get a feeling for what land ownership means to Ukrainians, though, it’s important to consider the traumatic rending that took place when they were forcibly separated from their land in the first place. This process occurred primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating with the events around what Ukraine calls the Holodomor—an engineered famine in which millions perished. Holodomor, much like the Holocaust, is perceived as a special type of outrage perpetrated specifically against the Ukrainian people. It was very much rooted in the land, and many Ukrainian people’s connection to the land, and the consequence of it was that afterwards, almost no Ukrainian owned his or her own farm. This event, or series of events, has been baked deep into the collective psyche of Ukrainians.



Ukrainians have specific and intensely negative memories of the last time individual farmers lost their land in the name of collective livelihood and national prosperity

Many Russians counter that the famine was accidental and that the millions who died in Ukraine and across the USSR did so as the result of well-intentioned tragedy.

In order to assuage that historical trauma, one of the first actions taken by Ukraine's second President, Leonid Kuchma was to privatize agricultural land held by the state. The way he did this was riddled with imperfection and the potential for corruption, but he made good on his promise to give the land back to the people. Any Ukrainian citizen could lay claim to parcels of agricultural land sufficient for their subsistence, and many did so (some others gamed the system and were able to seize or acquire good agricultural land far less expensively than would otherwise have been possible).

The extent to which Kuchma is remembered positively in Ukraine

is due in large part to these reforms (overall, his legacy is very mixed owing to charges of murder and corruption). Only Ukrainian citizens can own agricultural land, and it cannot be sold to corporations, or foreigners.

Whether one believes the Russian account of the 1930s or the account of Ukrainians, the fact remains that the famines of the 20th century and the connected process of collectivization (which involved forcibly parting people from their land) left a major, lasting impact on them. Any discussion of land ownership is guaranteed to bring up old and bad memories.

The Case for Land Sale

There are three primary reasons that one could support opening the sale of agricultural land to non-Ukrainians. First, it doesn't make economic sense to close markets off to foreign investment. Conservative estimates suggest that Ukraine could increase its GDP substantially ([from 5-10%](#)) simply by allowing foreigners and corporations to buy and sell these tens of millions of hectares.

Also, it's important to acknowledge that limiting the agricultural land market doesn't actually prevent foreign companies from using the land—it just means they have to “rent” it from villagers. The price for renting the land is not advantageous to the villagers—it can be less than \$80 per year. In other words, the land laws as they exist have led to a busy, unregulated black market on what amounts to land sale. This serves to enrich some individuals or areas, but it does nothing for the government of Ukraine.

Third, land sale to foreigners would be a good move from a security standpoint, in the sense that encouraging foreign investment—specifically, *European* investment from places like the US, Britain, Poland and Germany—will go great lengths toward tying foreign interests to Ukraine. These countries will have a stake in Ukraine's survival, because they'll have “skin in the game” beyond an ethical desire to see weak protected against strong (or strong-er).

To summarize: the case for agricultural land sale is that Ukraine will get richer and less corrupt, and foreign companies will care more about the country and thus be further incentivized to care about its protection.

The Case Against Land Sale

There are logical and illogical reasons to view farmland reforms with skepticism. The logical reasons first: as things

currently stand, people are merely being exploited for their land. They still *have* land, which is better than not having it, because things can be grown on land and worst case scenario it is possible to feed a family with 2 hectares of good, fertile earth. A small family, yes, and not well-fed (but sufficiently well-fed), but human history is proof that people have been able to scrape by with less than one might think. So long as one has land, life is possible. Once it goes away—once the land has been sold—there is no going back to freedom.

Furthermore, the very things that are bad about a bunch of people owning two-to-four-hectare plots of farmland—inefficiency, less money—also make Ukrainian society more resilient than most of its western, European neighbors. It's difficult to imagine what would happen to the USA if it were to go two weeks without food being delivered to supermarkets. In Ukraine, people know—they'd just call up their friends and families who live on farms, or buy food from local markets. There is a thriving "cottage industry" of individual and collective, non-corporate farmers who would keep people fed.



For some, farmland is more than just a business—it's a way of living that goes back generations.

The Ukrainian agricultural holdings have a stake in this, too—the domestic corporations that struck the original rental agreements do not have the means to compete with foreign agricultural corporations. As things exist now they have good agreements with local villagers—and are uninterested in negotiating at terms that are disadvantageous to them.

Illogical reasons to oppose land sale both relate to history. One is the immediate history of Ukraine—the famines and/or Holodomor—which saw private land stripped from individuals wholesale, and created a large well of bitterness toward the idea of any large organization (cooperative, Kyiv, Moscow) having direct and absolute say over land use.

Another is the broader history in Ukraine of foreign exploitation, which feels worse than domestic exploitation.

Selling agricultural land to foreigners, for better or for worse, sends a very strong and negative message to Ukrainians. Populists and domestic agricultural concerns have done a great deal to stoke fears over Chinese or Russian corporations buying up Ukrainian land and then oppressing Ukrainian villagers and destabilizing its economy and security—fears that have some basis in reality, in both cases (China is still ostensibly communist, and Russia occupies large swaths of Ukrainian territory).

Who Stands to Lose What

Investors stand to lose access to markets. The nation of Ukraine stands to lose—hypothetically—increased profits generated from a more efficient agricultural sector and a less corrupt land black market. Ukraine also stands to lose the interest of European countries.

The people who have land in Ukraine stand to lose their livelihoods and freedom, irrevocably. Ukrainian society stands to lose basic food security.

In Conclusion

It's difficult to say which idea is better. Pros and cons exist on both sides. There are good reasons to privatize the land, which would help Ukraine. There are also reasons to keep the land as it is—private, privately held. Ultimately, it comes down to whether one believes that a country is best served by collectivizing its interests and selling them to corporations for the biggest profit, or whether it's best served by a poor but enfranchised citizenry, which tends to be exploited by domestic (rather than foreign) agribusinesses.

New Poetry: "Layla's first buck" by Denise Jarrott



her father said it was his favorite thing about her, that she was a hunter, like he is.

she holds its head up for the picture. she wears an orange

hat. now the deer
unfolds from itself like the fortune telling paper folded and
labeled with
possible outcomes. the deer's eyes dark and its body flat. I
was not so calm

at death as she. she is twelve now. I remember when I was
twelve, when I began
to take notice of men, thought if I was pure enough they could
never
touch me, that I'd float away on quiet feet if they got too
close. I'd just go upward,
and utterly silent. some animals piss on themselves to deter

predators, I didn't brush my hair, I wore ugly underwear my
mother purchased
for me in plastic bulk, I focused my gaze upward with my heart
hot in my throat.

Layla, it is around this time you discover the existence of
horrible people,
men with gray lips with spit foaming at the edge of their
mouths,

the looks on the faces of girls you know that will feel like
acid, their laughter
will eat at you the same way acid does and they are casual
with it. You will begin to recognize the wedge-faced boys with
big teeth and a sour smell, like sweat and milk,
you will learn that everything you do feeds their hunger.

I wonder if you will want to be far away, just somewhere else
on the other side of the world, or perhaps in a forest where
you
wake in a tent or in a shelter of branches. I wonder if you
will

want to be in a city, in an all-white apartment of your own,
those

apartments that I know don't exist that look like the netsuke
one sees
now and again in museums, those little curls of bone. I wonder
if you will
want to wake in your blue bedroom with a glass of water next
to you, full of still

bubbles where the air got in. Layla, I will not tell you to
freeze yourself as you are, to preserve time for anyone to
spoon out your youth into a jar and graze against time with
your feet. You will grow, you will come to know your own
capabilities as some people come to know the positions of
stars, or how to speak another language.

It is not for me to whisper to you across this divide.

Photo Credit: Smithsonian Society