New Poetry from Yuan Changming

[anagrammed variations of the american dream]

A ram cairned me
In a crammed era [where]
Cameramen raid

A dire cameraman [or]
Arid cameramen
[Becoming]

A creamed airman [or]
A carmine dream
A minced ram ear

[a] maniac rearmed
As freedom turns into a dorm fee
Democracy to a car comedy, and
Human rights to harming huts

D.H. Friston, Scene from The Happy Land (The Illustrated London News, March 22, 1873)

[we have no more statesmen]

They have now become speech actors, working with
Eight classes of words and
Seven syntactic elements
Changing singulars to plurals
Passive into active, or otherwise

A whole set of rules

All as conventional

As idioms per se

Adding some new vocab every year

Their job is to make new sentences

Based on the same old grammar

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.

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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 a 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.

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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-smeared 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 are 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

M. C. Armstrong embedded with JSOF in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. He published 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 Missouri Review, The Gettysburg Review, Mayday, Monkeybicycle, Epiphany, The Literary Review, and other journals and anthologies. He is the lead singer and rhythm guitarist for Viva la Muerte and lives in Greensboro, North Carolina with Yorick, his corgi, whose interruptions to his writing are frequent but welcome.

Interview With Will Mackin, Author of Bring Out the Dog

Guest Interviewer Peter Molin of *Time Now* interviews U.S. Navy veteran Will Mackin. Mackin's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times Magazine.* His story "*Kattekoppen*" was selected by Jennifer Egan for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2014,* and his essay about being an extra on Breaking Bad, published in *GQ*, was nominated for an American Society of Magazine Editors "Ellie" award. Mackin's debut collection of short stories, *Bring Out the Dog*, is on sale now.

Describe the path that led to you joining Naval Special Warfare? What were your thoughts and impressions of the SEALs when you first joined them? At what point did you feel you truly belonged?

MACKIN: I volunteered, interviewed, screened, then went through direct support selection, which is nowhere near as grueling as what the operators/SEALs go through. Most SEALs were personable one-on-one, but I found them to be very insular as a group. I never felt like I truly belonged.

From "Kattekoppen": "The variety of ideas among soldiers developed into a variety of ideas among units, which necessitated an operational priority scheme. As SEAL Team Six, we were at the top of that scheme. Our ideas about the

war were the war." How are SEALs different from soldiers in line-units? What motivates them and what's important to them? What were you surprised to learn about the SEALs, as individuals and as a collective fighting force?

MACKIN: The main thing that differentiated our unit from "straightleg" units was our budget. We had a lot of money to throw around. There was also a genuine desire on the part of the operators to fight, kill, and vanquish, and absolutely zero tolerance for administrative bullshit. This would sometimes bite us in the ass because no one ever wanted to plan. What we lost in lack of planning, however, was often made up for in execution. As individuals I was surprised to find those who I wouldn't have expected to be SEALs. In other words, guys who didn't fit the mold of the tattooed, bearded, Harley-riding Alpha male. They were just normal dudes with this ridiculous and well-disguised drive.

In the Acknowledgements to Bring Out the Dog you write, "To rejects of all shapes and sizes," but also "And last but not least, a sacred debt to the men and women of Naval Special Warfare Development Group." What lies behind those two sentiments, which seem to express contrasts. What specifically do you owe DEVGRU?

MACKIN: I was assigned to Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU, from 2006-2011. Our mission was to research and develop tactics, techniques, and procedures for operators in the field. I'd deploy with those operators to test whatever gadgetry or tactics we'd come up with. Meanwhile I'd fill in on some operational requirement, like forward air control. I've always felt an affinity with the fuckups and rejects who populate the entire spectrum of military activity. Some just hide it better than others.

What are your thoughts about movies such as American Sniper, Lone Survivor, and 0-Dark-Thirty? How did you try to differentiate your take on the SEALs from other works that

celebrate or castigate them, or treat them as heroes, barbarians, or traumatized victims?

MACKIN: I purposefully didn't watch any of those movies, nor read any of the books, because I didn't want to think my way around them. Character-wise, I tried to stick with the guys who surprised me by being SEALS, those who were able to sidestep the everyday macho nonsense without losing an ounce of respect.

Who and what were you reading before you joined the military? Were you writing? Did you publish or attempt to publish anything? Were you reading and writing while in the military?

MACKIN: The first book I loved was "The Outsiders" by SE Hinton, which I read in the sixth grade. As part of our lesson my English teacher brought in a boom box and had us listen to The Who's "Baba O'Riley" start to finish. She then related that song to the plight of the Greasers. I've been hooked on reading and writing ever since.

While in Navy I read mostly nonfiction and I wrote in my journal. I published columns for McSweeney's Internet Tendency and The Believer ("Dispatches from Iraq" and "Nutrition is a Force Multiplier", respectively) under the pseudonym Roland Thompson.

When, where, and why did you begin working on the stories in Bring Out the Dog? As you began to write, what attracted you to fiction, rather than memoir? Who or what helped most to develop you as a writer and reach your full potential? When did you realize the stories were getting good?

MACKIN: I started writing the book in 2011 after I transferred from DEVGRU to the Navy ROTC unit at the University of New Mexico. I gravitated toward fiction because it allowed me to better explore the anxiety that I'd felt during certain real-life situations. Those who really helped me were George Saunders, my friend and mentor since we met at a writing

retreat in 1998; my editor Andy Ward, who gave me enough rope to hang myself; and Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at the New Yorker, who never failed to set the bar really high. I knew when a story was getting good when I'd derive energy from it and not the other way around.

What was the kernel of the first story that made it into the final selection, both in terms of its relation to things that happened in real life and when you began to write about it? Which story in Bring Out the Dog was hardest to write and why?

MACKIN: We lost a dog on the first night of my second deployment to Afghanistan. The circumstances behind that loss and its fallout informed *Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night*. The cat-head shaped licorice and the seven-foot tall Dutchman, both featured in *Kattekoppen*, were real. I wrote *The Lost Troop* over a long weekend in April of 2017. Otherwise every story took forever to finish, with lots of iterations and getting stuck. The hardest story to write didn't make it into the book.

One of the recurring characters in your story is Hal, the SEAL team chief who expresses very strong ideas about tactical competence, unit discipline, and team-culture fit. What is complicated about Hal, what is simple, what is ambiguous, and what is problematic?

MACKIN: Hal is a combo of five or six real guys, named after the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. What makes him complicated/ambiguous is his love for his men versus his love of the war. What makes him problematic is his ego. The only simple thing about Hal is his mullet.

Many Bring Out the Dog stories describe a new team member or potential new member striving for membership and acceptance. What attracts you to this type of story?

MACKIN: It wasn't so much an attraction as a default. Aside

from providing built-in conflict, that striver was me.

From "Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night":

"The stars were so bright we could have gone unaided. Still, night vision afforded certain advantages. I saw ice crystals trailing off the drone's wingtips, meteor shower in the ionosphere, plasma connecting unnamed constellations. Down in the valley I observed wind, not just playing on the corn, but the actual movement of air in evergreen loops. The sky was jade, the faraway mountains aluminum, the river like something you'd discover out the window of a time machine."

What is the story of writing this paragraph (which I chose almost at random)? What's the real-life origin? What's the literary genesis?

MACKIN: The real-life origin was me stopping to look through my goggles while on patrol. The literary genesis, I'd say, occurred in the space between my eye and the night vision screen, or reality and its projected image, how those things were different but also the same.

What feedback about Bring Out the Doghave you received from members of the SEAL community? Are you worried that it might not be well received?

MACKIN: Most guys say they like it, but I think they're lying. I had to stop worrying about it or I would've gone insane.

Check out an excerpt from Mackin's Bring Out the Dog Here and Buy it Here

New Fiction: The Lost Troop by Will Mackin

We had a dry spell in Logar. It was December and the weather was dog shit, so a degree of slowness was expected. But this went beyond slowness. It was like peace had broken out and nobody'd told us. Nights we'd meet in the ops hut for the mission brief. We'd tune the flat screens to the drones—over Ghazni, Orgun, and Khost—only to find all three orbiting within the same cloud. We'd listen to static on the UHF. We'd stare at phones that never rang. We could have left it all behind, walked off the outpost into the desert, never to be seen again. We could have created the Legend of the Lost Troop. Instead, we chose some place where we imagined the enemy might be hiding—a compound on the banks of the Helmand River, a brake shop in downtown Marjah, a cave high in the Hindu Kush mountains—and we ventured out there, hoping for a fight.

I thought of the Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, who, when their island fell to the Americans, didn't know that it had fallen. Who, not long after, didn't hear that A-bombs had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that their emperor had admitted defeat. Those soldiers hid in tunnels, on Iwo, for weeks after the war was over. For months, even. For them, the fight continued in those dark and narrow spaces, until they ran out of food. Until they drank the last of their water. Until, absent the means and/or the will to take their own lives, they climbed out of ratholes into the sun, to wander warm fields of lava rock in surrender.

I wondered if, one night, we'd drop out of the starry sky in our blacked-out helicopters and land near a walled compound in the desert. We'd run toward that compound with the rotor wash at our backs, through the dust cloud that had been kicked up by our arrival and out the other side. Through a crooked

archway in the compound's outer wall, we'd enter the courtyard. And there, among the fig trees and goats, we'd find an American tourist with a camera slung around his neck. Having served his time in Afghanistan, our fellow American had gone home, fallen in love, got married, and had the two bow-haired daughters now hiding behind his legs. Maybe he'd wanted his girls to see how brightly the stars shone in the desert. Maybe he'd wanted to share with them all the strange places the Army had sent him, way back when. I imagined that he'd look over at us and then say, with understanding and remorse, "Dudes, war's over."

But, as far as we knew, it wasn't. Therefore, we met in the ops hut every night at eight. In the absence of new intelligence, we'd review old intelligence. We'd double-check dead ends and reexamine cold cases. Finding nothing mission-worthy, Hal, our troop chief, would open the floor to suggestions. It'd be quiet for a while, as everyone thought.

"Come on," Hal would say.

He'd be standing in the middle of the room. We'd be sitting on plywood tables, balancing on busted swivel chairs, leaning against the thin walls. The drones, orbiting inside moonlit cumulonimbi, would beam their emerald visions back to us. Lightning would strike twenty miles away and the UHF would crackle. I, for one, didn't have any good ideas to offer.

One night, Digger spoke up: "Who remembers that graveyard decorated like a used-car lot, out in Khost?"

I raised my hand, along with a few others.

"I think we might need to go back there," Digger said.

The graveyard in question was on the northern rim of a dusty crater. We'd patrolled just to the south of it, a few weeks prior, on an easterly course. The "used-car lot" decorations were plastic strands of multicolored pennants. One end of each

strand was tied high in an ash tree that stood at the center of the graveyard. The other ends were staked into the hard ground outside the circle of graves. The graves themselves were piles of stone, shaped like overturned rowboats. I couldn't recall the name of our mission that night, its task and purpose, its outcome. But that graveyard stuck with me. I remembered the pennants snapping in the wind, dust parting around the graves like a current.

Digger, who'd been closer to the graveyard than I was, thought that the graves had looked suspicious. He thought they resembled old cellar doors—the type, I imagined, you'd find outside a farmhouse in Nebraska and run to from darkened fields as a tornado was bearing down. Digger postulated that at least one of those graves was made of fake stones.

"Styrofoam balls," he suggested to us in the ops hut, "painted to look like stones, then glued to a plywood sheet." Digger though that, if we sneaked into that graveyard and pulled open that hypothetical door, we might discover a Taliban nerve center, a bomb factory, or an armory. Digger had no idea what could be down there, but he'd got a weird feeling walking past that graveyard that night.

"Good enough for me," Hal said. "Let's make it happen."

We rode our helicopters—two dual-rotor, minigun-equipped MH-47s—northeast from Logar. We sat in mesh jump seats, across from one another, roughly ten per side. The MH-47, at altitude, stabilized like a swaying hammock. Lube, dripping from the crankcase, smelled like bong water. Beyond the open ramp at the back end of the tubular cargo bay, we watched the night pass by like the scenery in an old movie.

The 47s dropped us off in a dry riverbed, three miles east of the graveyard. We patrolled westward under heavy clouds. The clouds carried a powerful static charge, while the earth remained neutral. Sparkling dust hovered, and through night

vision I saw my brothers, walking with me, as concentrations of this dust. All I heard, as we walked, was my own breathing.

We connected with the crater's easternmost point, then walked in a counterclockwise direction along its rim until we reached the graveyard. We found the pennants torn and tattered, the ash tree diseased, the graves crooked. None of the stones were made of Styrofoam. Not one of the graves was an elaborately disguised entrance to a nefarious subterranean lair. Though, upon closer inspection, I noticed that the dust that I'd remembered parting around the graves, like a current, actually funnelled into the spaces between the stones. In fact, it seemed to be getting sucked into those spaces, as though there were some sort of void below the graves, which lent a measure of credence to Digger's theory.

From the top of one grave, I selected a smooth, round stone, about the size of a shot-put ball, and I heaved it into the crater.

Joe, our interpreter, was right there to scold me. "I would expect such disrespectful behavior from the Taliban," he said, "but not from you."

Joe was Afghani. His real name was Jamaluddein. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1980, he'd escaped to the U.K. with his parents; he was twelve years old at the time. Now, as a middle-aged man, he'd returned to help save his country from ruin. He wore armor on missions, but he carried no weapons. His interpretations of our enemy's muttered words were always clear and precise. He had a bad habit of walking two steps behind me on patrol and closing that distance whenever we made contact with the enemy. Thus, I'd seen conflagrations reflected in the smudged lenses of Joe's glasses. I'd heard him whisper prayers between sporadic detonations. His voice, with its derived British accent and perpetual tone of disappointment, exactly matched that of my beleaguered conscience.

So I jumped into the crater after the stone. I found it at the end of a long, concave groove in the dust. Turning toward the crater's rim, I saw my boot prints in the dust, descending the slope, each as perfect as Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. On my way back up to the graveyard, I was careful not to disturb those tracks, or the flawless groove that had been carved by the stone. I wanted these things to remain, I suppose, in the event that an asteroid should slam into the planet, sloughing away the atmosphere, boiling the seas, and instantly ending life on earth. Our troop—asphyxiated, desiccated, frozen—would lie scattered about the graveyard, preserved in the seamless void of space forever, or at least until other intelligent beings came along and discovered us. Perhaps because those beings existed as thin bars of blue light, incapable of offensive or defensive action, they'd puzzle over our armor, our rifles, our grenades. They'd wonder, especially, why we'd worn such things to a graveyard. There would be no mystery, however, regarding the boot prints in the crater, since they'd know, from the boots still on my feet, that I was the one who'd left them. Furthermore, they'd deduce, from the groove, that I'd descended into the crater after a stone. Only one particular stone could've cut that groove. And they might find it, among a thousand others, right where I'd returned it, atop the grave, just moments before the asteroid struck the earth. But none of that would explain why the stone had been in the crater in the first place. "Did one of them throw it?" the curious bars of blue light might ask themselves.

New Poetry by Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

she be like, damn

she be all tired.
she be like a flattened house shoe
she be full of compunction
she be remembering what was said.
she be told what she deserves.
she be believing everybody.
she be weepin’ in the bathtub
she be like her momma,
she be lying.
she be saying it’s the arthritis
she be talking like it ain’t her head
she be actin’ like hurt don’t bother her.
she be actin’ like she foolin’ somebody.
she be foolin’ no damn body.
she be scattered.
she be slidin’ across marbles.
she be grabbin’ onto nothin
she be almost breakin’ her wrists.
she be lying on the floor
she be holdin’ her stomach
she be trying not to vomit soggy cake
she be wishin’ she ate almonds instead.
she be losin’.
she be wantin’ rest.
she be told she ain’t gettin’ shit she want
and she be still wantin’ shit.

Annibale Caracci, circa 1580s.

juanita

juanita put on her tap shoes and danced in her kitchen,
in her living room, she composed. and into her gilded bathroom mirror, she gave monologues before powering on
her home recorder that, in those days, weighed a sailor’s duffel bag.
debuted films at thanksgiving, after feeding a houseful. she, in a
form-fitting black dress made of sturdy garbage bags.

“i am more than wife, mother of ten, church organist.”

then, she started with captain and tennille, followed by neil diamond.
nieces, nephews elated. her children feigned embarrassment,
but devotees, nonetheless.

a woman from disbanded and reshuffled peoples. owned by a
garden variety, bearing traces of many countries,
the dominant, the birthplace of black magic.
what might have been if they hadn't
made us afraid of our gods? she could have
been another brooklyn starlet, sing stormy
weather like lena horne in the movies. what *if* we harnessed
the power of our goddesses?

you favor her. nearsighted. prone to excessive
pounds in mid-life, obsessed with communing
with the dead. her grandfather, angel, the cuban cigar maker,
joined in the chorus of *guantanamera*, and when she strummed
like memphis minnie, nada, rocked back and forth

the way grandmothers do when they are stirred.
all principle and heart—that one. sung *time
in a bottle* with sam, her second husband.
sam on guitar, juanita at piano. time was
a real question for those graying lovers.
never enough time for a woman
whose first husband tried to reduce her
like soup stock. being mad took more time
than she could give. so she produced.

wrote about an urgency for peace,
though we were not the ones who begged for war
but in 1984 she scribbled in "jesse." argued
about the virtues of speaking one's mind
to punks who called it a wasted vote.

you hold onto the ways that you might be like
juanita, though you know you are dot's child.

in a family large enough populate three small towns. you
were never one to be known in these townships. not like aunty,
who mailed everyone copies of her latest records,
performed at all family gatherings, taught whosoever will how to play.

when there are so many, there are so many to lose.
juanita weeped the longest over all bodies—ah, yes,
another way you are like her. your spirit, too, is made
of blown glass. at the last burial before her own,
she warned those within the sound of her voice that she was tired.
you were young but old enough to know the weight of words.

juanita is a starlet. it is time for another moment under glaring lights.
it is quiet on the set, a recreation of 1943. she is small-wasted again,
and in high heels. she looks directly into the camera, then up,
when studio rain hits her face.

hot tea

precious one, emancipate your feet. stretch
your soles from here to far from here,
across acres of african moons.
young dignitary, miles of highway
know the impression of your shoe
by heart. it is tender at your core.
the injured hum their names in
your ear like seraphim. faces soaked
up by the cortex for sight cannot
be unseen like the ground where
they last stood cannot not absorb

a life poured out. this agony, you
haul with all subtle movements
and speak at movements of
national proportions. in squares,
your voice expands beyond
itself and crescendos into a whispers.
hot chamomile with lemon and honey
will help. i have prepared this for you.
sit as we remember our future. rest
until you are well again. and you
will be well again to move us further.

tony

this father’s son is loved not only by this father
but by the holy angels too, and by a few demons
who step to him on the street to give him what-up
jabs on the shoulder. i do not mean to compare
this father’s son to the son of the father, but that is
what this father’s son had been to sisters.

one came to him at night spooked by utterances
in her own head. one saved for him her best jokes.
another came when broken by a boy. the last placed her
report cards on the table just before he sat down to eat.
all waited for his perfect response, better than imagined.

to sisters, this father’s son was close to the son of the father
when this father/a daddy departed. not to be with the father,
but to be with a woman he met in night school.

to sisters, the one who gabs with the unseen, the formerly broken,
now zealot, the first to die, a comedian and especially, the last,
the critic of religious patriarchy, who loved showing off

her report card, this father’s son, a shepherd. for that moment
in time, sisters, not yet knowing what else they could be, were lamb.

inflammation

1.
something almost remembered
then, pushed away for a later date
only to finds its way into the body, dawdle there
and hope to be recognized, assessed, sifted through
for what good it carries, then separated from its waste.

if left alone for too long it splinters
into the convolution gray matter
latching onto cells weakening them

sometimes it arrives as a simple question
while listening to gossip radio, while not
wanting to be bothered by anything too
onerous like separating sewage from my
cells while driving home from a hard-day’s work

the words link together and i remove them
like a chain from the bottom of my belly,
straight out of my mouth—

“what do i do with the men?”

2.

i know what the question means.
you get rid of them. i said “rid” motherfucker, rid of you.
 praise be to—
well, not all of them, of course.
i love daddy. he was forty when I was born.
when i turned forty i was the adult daughter.

tenacious. never falling apart for too long, anyway
since enacting my three day rule
three days to be dumbfounded, three
days to panic, three days to flounder
full recovery occurs on the fourth day.
too goddamn much to do to flounder four whole days.

so by the fourth day I am fortified,
and so daddy shares with
one part regret, one part pride
in his accomplishments of bedding women
sometimes a handful in one weekend. some
served with him on neighborhood watch. most
were the mothers of the pta, he was president, and
a poor man with classical tones resounding from his
long,¸ thick cords; like blues from a cello
and, women moved to the sound of him.
bed became a verb that broke my mother.
but she’s dead now, so what does it matter. daddy’s nearly ninety.
growing older provides perspective. distance
dilutes notions about what to do with the men.

3.

the question is absurd.

4.

there were four of us girls. i was the baby.
the others had me my by eight, ten, and eleven
years so i benefitted from my sisters’ skill in hair braiding and designing clothes. my favorite was the red jumpsuit with shoulder ruffles. i looked like a five year old disco queen the day i wore it for my birthday. one sister picked my hair out.

i do not blame any of them for their lack of warning

about life in a girl's body; the ownership some feel they have.
to take without permission. they never spoke of rape by the neighbor or by nana's boyfriend. "it's just the way it was," one sister
told me. "it was our job to be okay."

I do not want to answer. I'm done being a traitor
It is difficult to defend this place where I enter the story.
I am middle aged, not a helpless girl.

real women grow up and care for the most devastated among us
and I already decided a long time ago that I would be the giver
not the taker of care. not the interminably wounded
and, I love a woman so what does any of this matter to an old dyke like me?
feminine discomfort is an act of treason.

5.

I know the forces against my man-child—

6.

the one long gone was the easiest of all.
a stack of papers, a hearing or two, the crack of a gavel
and it was done. i did not wish a brother dead.
and every day, i am reminded, i forgive him and
every day i am reminded, i am the one who is sorry.

7.

i have chosen the path of the giver.

Shh…i will only say this once. do not repeat this to anyone.
the leading cause of death for
young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner
violence. *Four times greater for black than it is for white.*

The consequences for
perpetrators of intimate violence is less when the victim is black than when she is white.
shh… i will only say this twice. the leading cause of death for young black women between
the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner violence. one last time, i will say, the
leading cause of death for young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is
intimate—

Brie Golec trans woman of color stabbed by her father,
Yazmin Vash Payne trans woman of color stabbed by her boyfriend,
Ty Underwood trans woman of color shot by her boyfriend
within days of each other—
debbie and i once made soup out of dirt and rain.
as teens, she had ramell. i had an on again,
off again, thing with jesus. between debbie and ramell,
were ramell's hands that behaved any which way they pleased
especially when clenched into spherical solids.
my hands secured notes in white envelopes.
"god loves you," my hands told the pen to tell the paper
to tell debbie. no wonder debbie cut her eyes at me
whispered loud enough for me to hear her talk about my
whack old lady clothes to the other girls. ramell and i both lost
the battle against our powerless hands. i was outcasted.
ramell and debbie made a baby.
when debbie's little brother became a teen his hand held heavy
steel to the face of his pretty boo across the street. when the steel
exploded with one motion of a rogue finger little brother's hand
brought the steel to his own face. however, that time the rogue finger
refused. it triggered the same dumb ass question.

long before any documents were filed, i recognized
the man i married had hands like ramell,

but the righteous knows what’s up.
race matters. gender belongs to somebody else.
i know men who want to reclaim their innocence.
deemed guilty without due process. I will speak their cause,
but speaking mine would perhaps pose a conflict of interest as
the earth collapses between us.

8.

the body becomes inflamed in the protection
of itself swelling occurs while the question is held in the nerves.
i sit on the floor of my bedroom and in four square breathing
i release the question back out into the air to revisit at a later date
man-child barely knocks. i struggle to my feet. open the door.
taller than me, he lowers his head to my shoulder. “goodnight mom,”
he says. n four counts, i release the question and hold him.
i hold him as the question finds its way back into my body.

demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be—shhh…. do not repeat this to anyone.