

New Movie Review: In “The Interpreters,” Home Is No Place At All



“The Interpreters,” a new documentary film by directors Sofian Khan and Andres Caballero, is a raw, emotionally vigorous, and, only too often, devastating look into the lives of Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and their efforts to flee home for the United States.

When it comes to narratives of the Forever Wars, interpreters consistently rate as some of the most important people working on the ground, frequently appearing in the novels and nonfiction works coming out of these conflicts, darting the intricately woven fabric of U.S.-focused narratives as charismatic, generous, and occasionally suspect men of two worlds. Very rarely, if ever, do they get to speak for themselves. This film gives them that opportunity.

“The American forces...call us interpreters, not translators,” a resonant voice narrates over opening frames of desert sand, Americans on patrol, soldiers and villagers deep in conversation. “The translator, he will just translate the word, exactly. We are *interpreters*. We interpret what they say to our soldiers, and what the soldiers say to our people.”

According to the documentary, over 50,000 local nationals have served with U.S. military and coalition forces since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But these so-called invaluable assets have found themselves flung forcibly from one fire into another, having been labeled traitors by their home countries for aiding outside forces, only to find themselves unable to acquire the necessary visa to enter and resettle in the United States.

Khan and Caballero make three such men the narrative focus of "The Interpreters," which debuted at Telluride Mountainfilm Festival during Memorial Day weekend, 2018. "Philip Morris," a quick-witted chain-smoker from Iraq; "Mujtaba," a protective and desperate father of three from Afghanistan; and "Malik," an Afghan interpreter still serving with the U.S. Air Force, whose striking features are half-concealed by a keffiyeh throughout the film. They are men who, were it not for the efforts of the filmmakers who sought them out, would otherwise be names on bureaucratic paper, anonymous victims of the machinations of the U.S. government.

Phillip Morris, Mujtaba, and Malik are three representatives of a significantly larger whole, men who were promised Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) by the U.S. government in exchange for their work as interpreters. They did this work at risk to their lives and the lives of their families. "When I started working with the U.S. Army, I was trying to help them to help us," says Phillip Morris. "We spent our lives suffering because of Saddam's regime." With the outside support and aid of his best friend, Minnesota National Guard veteran Lt. Paul Braun, Morris's SIV application moves through the doldrums of Washington bureaucracy and—after some tense back-and-forth traveling between the U.S. and Iraq—eventually sees Morris and his family safely relocated to Minnesota. According to the documentary, by law, the application and approval process should take no more than nine months. Morris's takes four years.

Were it in Hollywood's Midas hands, "The Interpreters" would be made as a kind of filmic victory lap with Morris as the only subject, a golden testimonial to the U.S. military's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and the generosity extended to interpreters by our government. Of the three subjects in the film, Phillip Morris is the resounding success story, and certainly carries the bulk of the narrative. But what Khan and Caballero have done—smartly, and well—is avoid the gilded trap

almost entirely. They choose not to rest on the laurels of Phillip Morris's story alone, and instead show a range of experiences that are far more indicative of what it means to be an interpreter marked for death while waiting, interminably, for a promise made by a foreign government to be upheld.

In Mujtaba's case, the waiting becomes impossible, and he flees the country with his wife and children. After arriving in Turkey, Mujtaba seeks out a smuggler who can take him and his family to Greece. In their desperate attempt to cross the Aegean Sea, the small smugglers' boat capsizes, and Mujtaba's wife and two of their three young children drown.

✘ Following their rescue at sea, Mujtaba and his son are returned to Turkey. Now refugees, they are forced to try and negotiate the SIV application process while simultaneously avoiding deportation. Mujtaba is adamant in his belief that his wife and two children are still alive, and enlists the help of a volunteer from a refugee organization to look for them. It's a painful thing to watch, knowing what Mujtaba is risking by living in denial and extending his time in Turkey because of it. The longer he stays behind to look for his family, the less tenable his refugee status becomes, and if his SIV is not approved, Mujtaba and his young son will be forced to return to Afghanistan.


It is a life lived between impossible choices, every one of which is likely to end in some degree of tragedy. Mujtaba eventually receives approval from the State Department to continue with the SIV application process. The approval, unfortunately, comes two months after his wife and two children drowned in the Aegean. He continues to refuse to go anywhere without them.

Throughout the film, American voices—both military and civilian—maintain what is (or should be) abundantly clear to anyone watching the film: Iraqi and Afghan interpreters are

service members of U.S. and coalition forces, and they are being abandoned. It is an ongoing injustice, an ugly stain not only on the U.S. military, but the government that sent those Americans into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

Journalist George Packer, who appears in the film, authored one of the most significant contributions to the conversation surrounding interpreters, SIVs, and America's responsibility toward the people it enlisted to help fight its endless wars in 2007. Packer's *New Yorker* piece, *Betrayed*, drew back the curtain on what was already a messy issue at the time. Reading it eleven years later, one can easily imagine seeing Malik, Mujtaba, and Phillip Morris's names in place of those like Othman, Laith, and Ali, given how similar their stories are, the events and struggles of earlier years repeating themselves *ad infinitum* with each generation of interpreters looking for a way out. It could just as easily be Malik on camera in Afghanistan telling us what Laith told Packer in Iraq so many years ago: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."[\[1\]](#)

In the film, Packer—who reinforces the importance of interpreters in these ongoing conflicts—attempts to draw a line between past and present by referencing the unofficial evacuations from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War and the interpreters being left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan today: "For some Americans, their finest hour in Vietnam was at the very end, and I wondered if something like that was happening in Iraq—were people organizing some kind of exodus for their Iraqi contacts? It wasn't as clear-cut a situation. But if you're an Iraqi who's gotten a death threat, it doesn't matter."

When the Americans began their own gradual exodus in 2011, Morris knew he faced an uncertain future. "I told [Lt. Paul] Braun, I told him, 'When you leave, what's going to happen to me?'"

In the case of Malik, another Afghan interpreter and the third subject of the film, that abandonment is a very real life-or-death issue. A marked man (his sixteen-year-old brother was beaten for information regarding Malik's whereabouts), Malik is forced to move his family from house to house and never shows his face out of doors. The film follows him as he continues to serve as an interpreter while he waits on a response to his SIV application.

Malik holds to his belief in America's mission in Afghanistan despite knowing that he cannot stay to help rebuild his country when and if we leave. He works diligently under the pall that is the outstanding threat on his life: "As I go to my work location," he says, "I won't take the same taxi, the same bus, and I won't take the same gate every day. Daesh, Talibs, Al Qaeda...if they find out that I'm still presently working with the U.S. Air Force in Kabul, they may get me, and they'll kill me."

The SIV program for Iraqi interpreters was enacted in 2008, but stopped accepting new applications in September 2014, leaving tens of thousands of people—interpreters and their families—in the lurch and forcing them to go through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for resettlement, to little to no success.[\[2\]](#) The same SIV program was extended to Afghan interpreters in 2009 (the Afghan Allies Protection Act) and is still active, but the number of applicants accepted dwindles with every passing year. According to Human Rights First: "As of July 2017, over 11,000 Afghan principal applicants and 13,000 of their family members are still waiting at some point in the application phase."[\[3\]](#)

In the end, too many people are being forced to fight over too few visas—for those principle applicants and their families, for example, a grand total of 3,500 SIVs have been allocated for fiscal year 2018.

"The Interpreters" is a visually striking and narratively

incisive investigation into a human rights issue that is as long and convoluted as the Global War on Terror itself. Interspersed with cell phone camera footage throughout, it is very much a documentary of the moment, immediate and jarring, and the stakes are all too real. Any faults are few and far between, a roughness in the editing that does little to take away from the effectiveness of the whole.

In a film full of emotionally resonant scenes, the one that arguably strikes the strongest chord is also the most subdued, the most well-earned: late in the film, having just watched Phillip Morris reunite with his family only to hear Trump extoll the virtues of the Muslim Ban seconds later, one feels braced for the worst. It's impossible to forget, after all, that while throngs of protesters outside John F. Kennedy Airport chant "No hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here," that Mujtaba's wife and children remain lost to the sea.

But then we see Malik, in 2017. A long white line at the bottom of the screen illustrates the amount of time it took the U.S. government to grant him his SIV. It is a freedom moment, a cause for joy, as much as it is a long pause that carries the weight of six long years of mortal uncertainty. We see Malik, and his quiet reveal reminds those of us on the outside looking in that a face is just a face, except when it is a target.

Malik and his family arrive in America in early 2017, just under the wire of Trump's initial ban. His success is nothing short of a statistical miracle: between January and April 2018, only thirty-six Iraqi interpreters and their families were admitted into the United States.[\[4\]](#)

Khan and Caballero have made a landmark documentary, a film that is by turns devastating, uplifting, enraging, and only too timely: as of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States has voted to uphold Trump's Muslim ban, sparking renewed outrage among American citizens and recalling the most

inhumane of Supreme Court decisions past. Having watched “The Interpreters,” I can only wonder what thoughts are on Phillip Morris’s mind. Is Malik at risk of being deported? How is Mujtaba—still a refugee in Turkey at risk of being deported back to Afghanistan—contending with this latest in a long series of setbacks?

Because of the Supreme Court’s decision, it stands to reason that by this time next year, thirty-six Special Immigrant Visas will seem like a lofty goal.

Early in the film, Malik says, “I hope that they won’t forget what I do for them.” Facing away from the camera, he looks out across the American base in Kabul, his body silhouetted between an aircraft hangar and a broad swath of dusty blue sky, tracking a single C-130 as it flies up and over the sun-bleached mountains in the distance. In that moment, Malik could be any one of the thousands of interpreters left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan—men still biding their borrowed time behind threadbare keffiyehs in the hot sun, waiting for a piece of paper to decide their fate.

[1] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/26/betrayed-2>

[2] <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194>

[3] <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/afghan-special-immigrant-visa-program>

[4] <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194>

New Memoir: Call Me American by Abdi Nor Iftin



CALL ME AMERICAN / Abdi Nor Iftin

Excerpted from Chapter Five: Arabic to English

By December of 1992, the world could no longer sit back and watch the starvation in Somalia. Humanitarian aid had been coming in for months but the warlords grabbed all the food and medicine for themselves and gave none to the people. The situation got worse until finally the United Nations decided to take action. Led by the U.S., twenty-eight countries organized a military task force called Operation Restore Hope. The goal was to supervise the distribution of food and supplies.

In Somalia we call Americans *Mareekan*. When I heard these *Mareekan* were coming to Mogadishu, I asked my mom who they were. I didn't know the people in the action movies were *Mareekan*. "They are huge, strong, white people," she said. "They eat pork, drink wine, and have dogs in their houses."

This sounded like the people I had seen in the movies. Whoever they were, the militias looked worried about their arrival. Many rebels started burying their guns; some fled Mogadishu. There was confusion and tension everywhere. I couldn't wait to see *Mareekans* land in Mogadishu! Hopefully they would look like actors in the movies and would spray bullets all over the militias.

And so at midnight on December 9, the thunderous roar of Cobra helicopters and AC-130 gunships filled the air. From the ocean came the buzz of hovercrafts, unloading tanks and Marines onto

the beach. Our house was close to the airport and the sea, so all these sounds woke me up right away. Through the bullet holes in our roof I could see the gleaming lights of the planes, accompanied by the roar of tanks along the roads. My mother, Hassan and Khadija were all up, even Nima.

I was eager to see the troops and the helicopters in the morning. At dawn Hassan and I, holding hands, walked down to the airport past streets that used to have sniper nests. There were lots of Somalis in the street, all of them headed the same way, towards the airport. As we got closer, the sounds of the Cobra attack helicopters became deafening. We joined a group of other excited Somalis, some standing on the walls, others on top of roofs, watching as big Chinook heavy-lift copters took off and landed. We could see warships in the distance on the blue ocean; everywhere around the airport, Marines in camouflage were taking positions and setting up gun posts.

Someone said the *Mareekans* had rounded up the rebels who were controlling the airport and seaport. The crowd got bigger and bigger, we shouted, laughed and cheered in excitement. Security perimeters had already set up, blocking entrances to the airport. The *Mareekan* flag was waving, stars and stripes. That's when it hit me: *I had seen that flag in movies!* These *Mareekans* were the movie people, and this was a real movie happening in front of us!

Commando must be here, I thought. This is it. This is the moment I had been waiting for, to meet Commando and watch him blow away all the militias! Helicopters dropped a shower of leaflets with photos and information about the troops. I picked up several of them. "United Nations forces are here to assist in the international relief effort for the Somali people," it said in Somali. "We are prepared to use force to protect the relief operation and our soldiers. We will not allow interference with food distribution or with our activities. We are here to help you." Because not so many

Somalis could read, the leaflets also showed an illustration like a comic book of a U.S. soldier shaking hands with a Somali man under a palm tree, as a helicopter flew past. I couldn't wait to shake hands with Commando.

Everything was moving so quickly—the tanks, the soldiers, the planes. We jostled for positions to watch the movie that was happening in front of us. Except there was no gunfire. I kept waiting for the battle to start, I wanted the Chinooks and Cobras to blast away at the rebels. But everything was peaceful. Then I remembered it's always like this in the movies. First you see all the heavy machines and helicopters gearing up for action, then the battle comes later. I wanted to see the militias face these troops, but the rebels I had known since we returned to Mogadishu were now walking around unarmed, acting like regular people. They didn't dare to face Commando.

I watched all day as the Marines took positions, more and more of them coming. Two men in uniform waved to let us cross the airport runway up to the sand dunes, so we could watch as the hovercrafts brought more and more Marines from the sea. Humvees and tanks roamed noisily but never fired a shot. I was getting impatient for the battle to start. We watched as the troops pulled out their stuck Humvees from the sand dunes. Hassan and I grew bolder and edged close to the troops. I stood there with my mouth open, watching them drink from a water bottle and smile at us. I made a sign asking for water, and the white guy in uniform went into the Humvee and handed me a plastic bottle. Then we made eating signs with our hands to our mouths, and they handed us tasty marmalade, bread and butter. The Commando lookalikes even spoke to us in Somali, but all they could say was "*Somali Siko!*" Somali move back!

One of the Marines threw a chocolate candy to me. I grabbed it and swallowed the whole thing. When I got home and told Mom, she gave me a hard slap.

“You must not eat pork!” she said.

I told her I didn’t think it was pork, it was sweet, but she didn’t believe me. How would she know what pork tastes like?

Night came again, and Mogadishu was noisier than I had ever heard it. But for the first time in two years, there was no sound of explosions and gunfire. We were surprised how the Marines lit up the airport. Lights came from everywhere, helicopters, tents, cars. It looked like daytime in the middle of the night. We were not allowed to get too close to the airport at night—“*Somali Siko!*” the Marines yelled over and over. But for the first time my friends, my brother and I could go out on the dusty streets after dark and play games, laugh and talk. We counted the helicopters as they flew over, and the big gunships that circled over the city. Falis’s movie theater could now stay open at night, but we did not go. For the first time in years, outside was even more exciting than the movies.

The year had changed to 1993, my ninth year of life. The U.S. troops and the star-spangled banner were now accompanied by blue UN helmets and flags of countries from all over Asia, Africa and Europe. Many non-military people also came to the city to help. We would see them jogging, and swimming in the green waters off the beach. One woman, some kind of aid worker, jogged every morning near our house. She was white, had long hair, and she smiled and remembered my name. I made sure to get up every morning and say hi to her when she passed. I watched her listening to music on her headphones and stretching. Sometimes she would sit and play games with me, my brother and Nima. She always brought us snacks like peanuts, candies and cookies, and she also brought painkillers, antibiotics and other medicine. We had never seen pills, so she explained what they were for, and how to take them. I think I fell in love with this woman; it wasn’t romantic but I

just wanted to stay close to her. If I knew her name today, maybe I could find her in America, but I only called her what we called all non-Muslims, *gaalo* or infidel. One day she came to the *madrassa*, just to visit and say hi. Macalin Basbaas refused to shake her hand. Then one day we stopped seeing her. Soon we realized no one was jogging anymore.

The warlords were getting restless, they wanted the city back. Aidid had a radio station and was telling Somalis on the air that they should fight the "occupation" of Mogadishu. On June 5, UN forces went to the radio station to seize weapons. Aidid thought they were trying to shut down the broadcasts and he ambushed the troops, killing twenty-four Pakistani soldiers. That's when things got bad. On July 12 the Americans sent Cobras over a house in Mogadishu where they thought Aidid was hiding and blasted it into rubble. He wasn't there, but dozens of other people were killed. Aidid claimed the Americans had killed women and children, and he started to whip up Somalis against the infidel "invaders." The Americans said only Aidid's soldiers had been in the house, but the seed of resentment against the foreigners had been planted. Aidid wasted no time, planting roadside bombs in August that killed four American soldiers and wounded seven others. The Battle of Mogadishu had begun.

I had been waiting so long for this moment! I wanted to see the American troops in action and how they fight. Hassan and I were so excited for war, we ran toward whatever corner of the city we heard explosions or gunshots. Soon Cobras and Black Hawks were swooping down everywhere, hovering over buildings where militias were hiding. I looked up and cheered whenever the helicopters shot at a building, to me it seemed like the greatest movie. I stood on the streets and watched militias yell at each other, jumping from house to house and hiding in narrow alleys. We watched them take positions as helicopters hovered over them.

I thought the airplanes and helicopters would scare the

militias away, but instead the huge, strong American men of the movies were being chased by Somali rebels on the streets. It was not what I expected. Soon everything had changed. We were no longer welcome near the Marines, there were no more candies or cookies. For the first time the Marines were aiming their guns at Somalis and pushing them around, even us kids. They looked nervous.

It is hard to explain why so many Mogadishans turned against the Marines and cheered the militias. The rebels had been killing us for four years, stealing our food and shitting in our houses. The Americans had been so kind. For sure it was partly the U.S. attack on the house that killed so many civilians. And at this point we were so familiar with death and destruction that this new battle seemed like a basketball game or a soccer match, it wasn't even real life. People filled the streets, rooting for their home team. I too fell in with the crowd. I yelled out to the militias to let them know which side the helicopter was coming from. I threw rocks at helicopters. I ran with the crowd, repeating their cheers: "Up with Aidid! Down with America!"

The battle continued for weeks. The foreign troops slowly withdrew to the airport. Militias loyal to Aidid ruled the ground, but the foreign troops ruled the skies with their helicopters. At night it was hard for the Somali militias to see, but the helicopters with their infrared lasers were able to fire at their targets. Every night from our house I watched militias changing positions, shooting at helicopters. For a few minutes it would be dead quiet, then the helicopter would swoop down again and fire back. I believed my mother's prayers saved us from the helicopter cannons but now I think it was the pilots' precision.

On Sunday October 3, Aidid's forces shot down two Black Hawk helicopters with Russian RPG bazookas. I heard the booming explosions and columns of smoke rising about a mile from our house. Naturally, I ran as fast as I could to watch this new

action unfold. Everything was so dusty I could not see much or get very close. A crowd was dragging the bodies of dead Americans, and people said others were still alive, trapped. The rescue operation lasted until the next day. Sixteen Americans died and more than three hundred Somalis. A few days later I was playing hide and seek in the remains of one of the Black Hawks.

Five months later the Americans left Mogadishu. It was March 1994, my tenth year. The skinny rebels with their ugly brown teeth had beaten back the movie-star Marines. The Americans and the UN troops left so fast they didn't even take their stuff. They left behind malfunctioning helicopters and vehicles, boots and uniforms. I joined a crowd that went to the same spot where the *Mareekans* had first invited us to watch them land on the beach in hovercrafts. This time we were looting the stuff they left behind, even the boxes of medicines, tablets, discarded syringes. We stuck the syringes into our hands for fun. We ate the tablets. Was it looting if they just left it?

The same militias whom we had cheered against the foreigners would soon turn on us again—stealing our food and shooting at us for sport. I felt shame that I had cheered against the Americans, the people who came to help us from the country of my dreams. But I now realize that I was lost—a nine-year-old boy caught between the teachings of Macalin Basbaas, my mother and her view on infidels, the American troops and their kindness and food, my love for my brave father and the glorious Somali basketball team, and the American movies I loved.

I stood on the beach, picking through the discarded camouflage uniforms with the American names sewn above the pockets. I held them up, hoping one would fit my skinny little body. My friends Mohammed, Bashi and Bocow laughed. I looked at them and scowled.

“I’m not Somali,” I said. “I am *Mareekan*. I was left behind by the Marines. And they will come for me soon.”

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Interview with Matt Young, Author of *Eat the Apple*



Matt Young is a writer, teacher, and veteran. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Miami University and is the recipient of fellowships from Words After War and The Carey Institute for Global Good. You can find his work in *Catapult*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. He teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Centralia College and lives in Olympia, Washington. His first book, a memoir titled *Eat the Apple*, is out now from Bloomsbury Publishing.

WBT: In Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist and World War Two veteran, discusses how he “gradually became aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.” Calvino then relates the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Perseus, Calvino argues, not only kills Medusa with his shield’s reflection,

but must also carry the burden of his experiences—and Medusa's head—with him indirectly; otherwise, he will, well, turn to stone. Perseus's strength, Calvino claims, "lies in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden."

I have found this a useful metaphor for the problem of relating war experience. Too literal, you kill the experience. Too abstract, you don't say anything at all. It is also the first thing I thought of when I encountered Eat the Apple's humor, diagrams, cartoons, and pronouns ("you" and "we" and "Recruit" and "Young," instead of "I"). Can you talk to us about how and why you decided to recount your military experiences indirectly?

YOUNG: The change in POV started off as art imitating life. In Marine boot camp you're required to refer to yourself as "Recruit So-and-so" and it felt unnatural to write a story about boot camp using "I" so I let the third person do work there.

I struggled with the fact that most war memoirs I'd read had some kind of extreme circumstance at their center—that kind of Special Forces narrative that inundates the media these days. My experiences by comparison seemed tame and silly. But I thought about all the grunts I'd served with who'd had similar experiences over the four years we were together and I thought about all the battalions that had replaced us in country full of similar guys who'd also had similar experiences. Those two thoughts gave rise to that communal first person plural voice—I realized it was best to lean into that idea of not having a unique experience, painted myself as no different than any other.

Lots of early pieces I wrote were 'How to' stories. Some of those made their way into the final draft, but many more changed focus later on. That highly imperative second person,

felt like it confronted both military and civilian complicity in Iraq. But ultimately, the second-person perspective loses its power quickly because it often forces the audience to acknowledge they're reading a story in ways other perspectives don't so I tried to keep it to a minimum and fit it with form to make it feel more natural.

I also found that those other perspectives helped me confront my past actions in a less direct manner and helped me be more honest about who I'd been and what I'd done. They made me feel less alone, took me off the page and put me next to the reader and let me show them something I couldn't have with just "I". There's something about the removal of the "I" that let me cut a little deeper.

WBT: The essays in Eat the Apple are relatively short and incredibly poignant. I experienced each and every one like a punch to the gut. Did this economy come into your writing naturally? Or did you have to refine longer essays into the powerful vignettes they became?

YOUNG: When I started writing I set off to write flash. I wanted the essays to mimic memory, and flash felt like a natural fit. It's often how I remember moments—a smell or image or sound recalls a tiny thing and sends it zipping through my brain for a microsecond and then it's gone, but I'm left thinking about it and reflecting on it sometimes for days.

I didn't write or journal during my time in the Marines so I had to do a lot of memory recall exercises, late-night texting of former platoon mates, and research online to find incident reports. That process itself felt fractured, which also seemed to fit what I was trying to do—piecing together four years of experience and emotion to make a narrative.

I love the lyricism that generally comes with flash essays—it felt like a fantastic way to spice up the sometimes complete

banality of war. In the beauty of those lyrical descriptions the horror of what I'm writing about maybe becomes a bit easier to stomach for a reader as well—that's the hope anyway.

WBT: In a Time Magazine essay, you write the following: "I tried to fictionalize what I'd done because I wasn't quite ready to acknowledge that I never fulfilled that manly heroic expectation people have of military service." As someone who writes fiction, I found this unsettling (in a good way). Could you expand on what you meant here and maybe tell us a little about what you consider the relationship between fiction and nonfiction?

YOUNG: It happened on two levels for me. My senior Marines had fought in Fallujah. I saw them as the peak of manhood, real heroes. They'd been in firefights, cleared houses, killed people. I wanted to have done those things then. I'd been told those men were the pinnacle of maleness and I was so uncomfortable in my skin and lacked so much confidence as a young man that I was an easy sell and bought in fully. Then, when I got home after my first deployment I didn't feel like I'd measured up to them and when I went to tell my family and friends about what war was like, I felt like I didn't measure up to their expectations, either. So I made up stories to tell them, made my experience more like my seniors'. I lied. And I kept lying for years because it made me feel good and it kept me from having to reflect about what I'd done and what had happened.

Then, by the time I got to undergrad at Oregon State and started writing I had those lies mixed up with my truth. When I tried to write stories about my experience I saw myself in the characters I created and immediately began to defend them, to make their experience mean something. I wanted them to be heroes, and so they turned into caricatures. They spent their time in my stories explaining "the real world" to civilians unironically. There was no truth in those stories, because I couldn't be truthful with myself.

It's a bit odd, maybe. You usually hear from writers that fiction is a more direct vehicle for the truth. But for me it wasn't writing fiction that got me there. It was using fiction writing techniques. Lines between fiction and nonfiction are super blurry a lot of the time. The moment an event happens and someone documents it, it's filtered through an individual's lens—that person's contextual place in the world. Are the things I recount and the stories I tell considered fact? Probably not, by most standards. Are they truth? 100%.

WBT: Toxic masculinity is a topic much in the news recently. For good reason. We spend a lot of time of WBT debating and thinking about violence and its effect on communities. But sometimes we can forget how cultures of violence eat away at men too, at how this toxicity is a two-way street. Eat the Apple bravely confronts this exact issue. For example:

"You've chosen the United States Marine Corps infantry based on one thing: You got drunk last night and crashed your car into a fire hydrant in the early morning and think—because your idea of masculinity is severely twisted and damaged by the male figures in your life and the media you surround yourself—that the only way to change is the self-flagellation achieved by signing up for war."

I feel Eat the Apple responds to this "idea of masculinity," and I encourage readers interested in this subject to buy and read the whole collection through (a couple times). Did you set out to write on this idea of what it means to be a man in the U.S. today or is this simply a byproduct of describing your particular experiences in the Marines?

YOUNG:

Short answer? No.

Longer answer? I set out to write my experience as an infantry Marine and it was impossible to write that experience without writing about the antiquated ideals of masculinity and anti-

feminism, which construct the ethos of both the Marine Corps and especially Marine grunts. It was delivered via Drill Instructors, School of Infantry Instructors, senior Marines, and higher-ups—a kind of disdain for everything feminine. Drop back on a hike? You're a bitch or a pussy. Have a girlfriend back home? She's fucking some other guy behind your back because you can't trust Susie Rottencrotch. Women Marines—WMs—are dehumanized; called Wookies (which I never got) or walking mattresses. Those are the more overt portions of toxic masculinity I, and most, experience.

Then it hits you from civilians, too. Again with their expectations—what a soldier is supposed to be, what they're supposed to have experienced and done, and how they're supposed to react to that experience. Usually civilians expect you to have killed someone, to be damaged irreparably by post-traumatic stress, to be that strong silent type, to be a hero.

But calling someone a hero negates their experience or their feelings about that experience. It tells them their individual feelings are wrong and replaces them with a narrative people are more comfortable with. Hero worship is part of toxic masculine culture and it's an act of silencing. It says, Shut up about your experience, smile when I thank you for your service so I can feel better about myself, and take the beer I just bought you. It perpetuates the tough guy military narrative—a thing I'd bought into so much I lied about my true experiences to family and friends when I returned home. I really couldn't write about anything in my life right now without confronting masculinity in our culture.

WBT: Hard question time. That quote above. Isn't this exactly what happened? Didn't the experiences recounted in this book change you in ways that you both wanted and did not want? It's okay if you just say, "read the last chapters of Eat the Apple." Readers should.

YOUNG: Unsatisfying answer time: For sure. Doesn't every

experience do that? Before that quote I speculate as to what might happen if I don't join. Do I think now that becoming a Midwest caricature was the only other outcome? No. I could've joined the Peace Corps, or sucked it up and enrolled in community college, or reconciled with my parents, or hit the lottery. There are infinite futures I could've had that could've changed me and affected me in infinite ways, but at that time I thought I was a bad man on a road to even more badness. I thought the Marine Corps would give me direction and purpose. I thought it would make me a man. I'm impulsive by nature, so I went with it.

I spend most of the rest of the book examining how misinformed I was and how directionless I became. This is really the problem I had with writing fiction about my experience when I got out. I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to know the world and myself better and more fully afterward—or wanted to pretend my military service had enlightened me to those things—but everything became more convoluted. It took being out and going to college and gaining education and language that I could use to articulate my experience to help me understand my experience and myself more fully.

WBT: I teach Slaughterhouse-Five to students every year. Every year they get upset by the descriptions of masturbation, pornography, and the picture of Montana Wildhack's breasts. I ask them why they get upset by the masturbation and not all the massacres of human beings. Eat the Apple does not pull any punches when it comes to the sexual life of Marines. Can you tell us about Eat the Apple's reception? Have you had any pushback?

For the most part people have appreciated the honesty. I write a lot about masturbation in the book for a couple reasons—one because I (and most of us) did it a lot. It really is a way to stay awake on post or pass the time or make you feel like you're still somewhat human, so it becomes part of the fabric of Marine grunt experience. But also, it's super intimate—in

some respect more so than sex. You're at your most vulnerable when masturbating. All your shortcomings, your kinks, your dumb facial expressions, whatever. You don't have to hide any of those things when you're jerking off by yourself. I wanted people to see that part of myself. It helped me let down that masculine guard that's always up in military memoirs. Everyone masturbates. It's a great way to build empathy.

Some people see it as crass and childish or disgusting, which says more about them as readers and people unwilling to engage with difficult topics. Most of the pushback comes from older men who don't like me scuffing up the spit polished Marine Corps veneer. They're a dying breed I think—those men and the stories they love so much. People want more. If the festering gash that is civilian/military divide is ever going to heal it's going to take acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of service experience out there.

That people clutch their pearls at sex and not violence is an issue of our puritanical and patriarchal roots. Sex is bad because it empowers women. Violence is good because it establishes dominance and power—regressive masculine traits.

WBT: A fellow WBT editor and I have an absolutely unscientific generalization about war literature. There has not been, we contend, a war book published in the last fifty years that has not mentioned dogs, dead or otherwise. We have many theories as to why, none of them particularly insightful. Your work spends a lot of time talking about dogs too. Why do Americans write so many war books about dogs?

YOUNG: Man's best friend, maybe? Relatability to the audience? Shock value? Killing a dog probably has some kind of purpose in the moment—to get them to stop eating corpses, or to get them to shut up, or out of boredom. In terms of literary merit, the killing of a dog is maybe more powerful than the killing of a human. We're so desensitized to human death. The killing of an animal, especially a dog, is much more

rhetorically pathetic.

*Tobias Wolff has maybe the best line ever about U.S. war writing in *In Pharaoh's Army*: "And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart?" Of course, Wolff—being the brilliant writer he is—does not actually admire his sorrow, but interrogates it through the essay form itself—opens up the tensions implicit in recounting morally repugnant wartime experiences. I believe *Eat the Apple* to be one of the few memoirs since Wolff's that accomplishes something similar. I also believe there is little "sorrow" in *Eat the Apple* and even less patience with those who might admire it. Did you consciously reflect on the privilege of reflection when writing these essays? How did you avoid falling into the trap Wolff describes?*

YOUNG: I love *In Pharaoh's Army*. One of my undergrad professors, Keith Scribner, recommended it to me when I was trying to figure out how to write about the Marines. Now that you mention that, maybe he saw me admiring my own sorrow in my fiction? Damn. My mind is kind of blown right now.

Anyway, after trying to fictionalize my experience I became very aware of the benefits and detriments of reflection. Honesty and humor kept me out of the trap. Those POV switches and different forms and styles were all working towards honesty and let me pull out the magnifying glass and pinpoint a sunspot to scorch the living hell out of my past self. Most of the humor in the book is self-deprecating—lacerating I suppose. I wanted the audience laugh at me. The humor at my own expense is naked honesty; the audience is laughing because of how horrible I am, which maybe makes me feel a bit of shame because of the rhetoric surrounding the military ("Support Our Troops!"). It creates a balance with those poignant moments and keeps me from verging into woe-is-me-I-signed-up-for-the-Marines-and-they-made-me-go-to-war-isn't-that-sad? territory.

WBT: You teach writing. What do you tell your students on the first day of class?

YOUNG: Anyone who gives you a prescriptive fix for your writing, and means it, is a cop.

WBT: What do you tell your students on the last day of class?

YOUNG: Go make art and be good.

Purchase *Eat the Apple* [here](#).

New Fiction: Excerpt from Hilary Plum's Strawberry Fields

An excerpt from the novel [Strawberry Fields](#). Alice, a reporter, and the detective Modigliani are both working on the case of five murdered veterans of the Iraq War (including Kareem, named below). The investigation has extended in many directions, including toward the private military contractor Xenith, with whom the victims were involved.



Alice

Modigliani came over, a bottle brown-bagged in his hand. I'd hoped for wine but it was gin. He poured for us both and produced a jar of olives from his jacket, with his fingers

dropped three into each glass. Thank you, I'm sure, I said, eyeing the greasy floating pimentos. Your table sucks, he said, rocking it back and forth with his hand.

The death of Farzad Ahmad Muhammad, I said.

OK, Modigliani said.

You remember it, I insisted. He was murdered in US custody. A British journalist got interested, and so there was an actual military follow-up. A few guys were held responsible, or kind of—I pushed photos toward him, tapped each face in turn—this one spent two months in jail, this one was demoted, this one not even discharged. These photos, I added, were Kareem's. He was working on some kind of amateur investigation.

OK, Modigliani said.

Modigliani bent down and slid the lid of the olive jar under the short leg of the table. Now we have to finish these, he said. How did he die?

I said: He was hanging from the ceiling by his hands, which is common practice, but he was left there for days, and they beat his legs to interrogate him, the backs of his knees. *Pulpified*, is how the autopsy describes his legs—if he hadn't died, they'd have had to amputate. They said the beatings were normal, but none of them realized how many teams were going at him, how many altogether, and blood pooled around the injuries until his heart stopped, with him just hanging there. They found him on the morning of the fifth day.

Modigliani nodded. And where does Kareem come in?

He knew one of the guys who was later held responsible, the guy who went to jail. They were based out of the same compound for a while, they met socially, if that's the right word. I'm trying to see if maybe Kareem is the one who tipped off the journalist in the first place. Like, he gathered this evidence

to give it to her.

And this works out to a motive for killing Kareem, what, seven or eight years later?

Fuck, I said, fuck.

Modigliani stacked the photos and pushed them back toward me, maneuvering around drinks and olives. He said: If the guy who killed the prisoner was Kareem's friend, Kareem could have been looking to get him off, not get him punished. But you know that. Not to mention, he added, that we have four other victims.

I know, I said. The photo on top was of the bruised legs, and I covered it with both hands.

Alice-Modigliani said, looking in the direction of the air conditioner-your thinking is the opposite of conspiratorial. It's the web without the spider.

He said: I think I've always liked that about you.

Later I understood this was the one thing he ever said that I truly believed.

If I were a conspiracy theorist, he went on, I'd think you were trying to distract this investigation from its real target.

Bill LeRoy, I said obediently, Xenith.

Right now he's angling to replace the military in Afghanistan, Modigliani said. All private contractors, private air force. British East India Company model.

I said: At the same time he's selling his forces to countries hoping to keep migrants in or migrants out. Or rather, Muslims out. Turn back the boats at gunpoint.

Modigliani shifted and I thought he was going to lay his hands

over the photo, over my own.

What happens, I wondered, when a spider mistakes itself for a fly?

Modigliani finished his drink and rose. The table rocked again.

Have you ever noticed, he said, how rarely I ask a question?

After Modigliani left I went on: I'd called the guy who'd served time, the guy Kareem knew. He was punished most severely because he'd visited the prisoner the most and was supposed to be the one signing off, keeping track of the others.

I was only halfway through Kareem's name when the woman who had answered the phone interrupted: He doesn't know anything. Don't call here again. She was gone and with her the background sound of a child's off-key singing. I called again. I thought of going out there, to the Midwestern farmland where they lived, not far from where I used to visit a long-dead uncle of my mother's. Amish in buggies or on bicycles on the road's shoulder, cornfields, trampolines in yards that back then I'd coveted. He was a farm boy, this man, and at first I thought this should damn him. Shouldn't a boy like that have known, have understood the body and what it won't endure? Only once did they unhook Muhammad from the ceiling and by then he could no longer bend his knees. But tonight, the refrigerator assuming the role of crickets, the floor athrum with someone's bass, I understood why this made no difference.

Strawberry Fields was published in April, 2018 and is available from [Fence Books](#) or your local bookseller.