

New Poem by Eric Chandler: “The Path Through Security”

my family lived there before it was Maine
before this was a even a country

they still live there so we visit
we fly in and out of the Jetport

we place our shoes in a tray
empty our pockets on the way home out west

the guy asked which one of us was Grace
I pointed to the infant perched on my arm

she was selected for
enhanced security screening



it's possible that happened in the same tunnel of air
the hijackers passed through

the imaginary tube
the human-shaped ribbon through time

the permanent trace of their movement through space
I could see it all at once

we have repeatedly walked in
the steps of those men

the hotel manager where they stayed
had a nervous breakdown

I flew over the Pentagon and Manhattan
one year afterward

other deployments far away
that all blend together

we drove by that hotel again
as we left Maine this summer

we take off our shoes
in a new part of the terminal

and our departure gate is always next
to the old closed security line

little kids run around under a big toy airplane
that hangs over that spot now

a child-sized control tower and terminal building
instead of x-ray machines

we wait to go home
and I always look over

at the playground
in the path of destruction

New Fiction from Patrick Mondaca: “The Ministry of Information”

Too often your mind wanders back to those places where God has turned his face away. For example: the prison your platoon guarded in Baghdad in the early months of the war. Displaced Iraqi families were making new homes under the comforting shadows of your machine guns and you kicked soccer balls around the dusty yard with delighted Arab children like you would have had they been your own nieces and nephews.



But they were not your nieces and nephews, and at the end of the day they would sleep in jail cells stained and streaked with the blood of their countrymen, tortured and executed by now-deposed Saddam Hussein and his two crazy sons. When you walk down the narrow hallways, peering through iron cages, you

marvel at the claw marks in the walls, made by human claws, and at the shoestrings and bootlaces and belts, broken and frayed, tied to the window grates where the doomed had tried to hang themselves, where desperate people would now be grateful for the shelter.

As you lounge on the roof of the prison, baking within the overwatch position on the roof—which is just a makeshift tent rigged from ponchos encased in sandbags with cheap folding camping chairs you’ve purchased at the PX back in Kuwait—smoking shisha from a hookah in the heat of the afternoon sun, you begin to better understand why you are there.

Marwan, the Iraqi kid from across the way who’s been acting as an unofficial translator, tells you more of what you’ve heard on CNN and Fox News and read in the New York Times and Stars and Stripes. The torture and the death. The rape and pillaging. The opulent wealth and endless greed.

One late afternoon, after you’ve been in place for a few days and the locals start wandering over to barter, or look on curiously, a couple of girls come to visit. They look to be in their late teens and they don’t have their heads covered. They come asking for cigarettes, or Pepsi, or something of which you wouldn’t have thought that’s the thing they’d be looking for after having been invaded just a few weeks earlier, but they do and they stick around to chat in their limited English. One is blonde, probably dyed, and they are unafraid to talk to American soldiers, they ignore your weapons and body armor, and they ask things that every girl would ask a soldier, about your wife or girlfriend and if you have children, that kind of thing.

Marwan has seen this before. Maybe with the Marines in the weeks prior. “Turkish,” he says, and makes a face. “Prostitutes, I think.” They invite you for tea in their apartment, on the tenth floor across from the prison. That’s

high up. You have an image of yourself spiraling face first to meet your death from blunt cardiac trauma while Turkish whores rifle through your wallet, your squad leader gingerly rolling over your smashed head with a gloved hand and wondering where your BDU pants are. What his after-action report would sound like. You think that this is not a good idea.

"Come on, man," says the PFC most enamored with the girls. "We'll go and come back before anyone knows." The girls follow the debate with hopeful expressions. For tea, they insist. Yeah, right.

You do think about it. The logistics of it. One up, one down. Cover me while I cover you, that kind of thing. What the hell, right? You could all be dead by morning. You don't even know what you're doing here besides babysitting an empty prison rapidly filling up with displaced Iraqis.

But the Turkish girls go home, much to the disappointment of the PFC.

The shift is over, but because there is nothing else to do but sleep, this is where you stay. The next team takes up positions in another spot, eating the good parts of their MREs and tossing the remainder to the kids below. You smoke hookah until the sun goes down, Marwan heads back to his apartment, and eventually you drift in and out of a fitful sleep on a poncho liner underneath the stars for a couple hours before waking up to drink water and rinse the dust off your face and out of your mouth and eyes again. Some of the guys are sleeping in the trucks still, but you and your team will sleep on the roof because it's both easier and minimally more comfortable, at least at night when it's about thirty degrees cooler.

This is a strange place for a prison, you decide: behind a government complex and smack in the middle of a residential

street. You suppose Saddam Hussein had them everywhere, so probably people just forgot they were there. Until the invasion when he gave the order to empty the prisons and release all the prisoners, and the inevitable chaos that followed such a directive when criminals, psychopaths, dissidents, and whoever else were now back out in the street. You wonder what condition these prisoners were in. Did they just stagger out, the ones that could, blink into the sunlight and fall back down onto their knees into the sand in despair? Did they dash from their cells and out the prison gate into the apartment complexes and beg passersby for a bite to eat, some money for a taxi, or a cellphone to call their loved ones? Did they just run outside and murder the cellmate they hated, or track down the guy sleeping with their wife and kill him amidst the chaos of the American invasion or join in on the citywide looting sprees with their countrymen? You wonder these things for a while, smoking cigarettes on occasion to pass the time.

You stare at the now vacant Ministry of Information building, hulking, towering above the prison yard. What kind of government information ministry has an onsite prison? You think it would be like if the Voice of America office in Washington D.C. had its own prison behind it for anyone accused of crimes against it. Voice of America dissenters all locked up and forced to listen to Armed Forces Radio deejays and shitty Brittany Spears pop music on a loop twenty-four hours a day. The horrors, you think. What if, though? What a weird fucking place, you answer your own question. That's the only answer.

You think about "Baghdad Bob," Saddam Hussein's comically misinformed Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, who spent the last days of the war broadcasting that the American infidels were committing suicide outside the city gates while American tanks rolled down Baghdad's streets. What'd Bob do in

his off time? Stroll casually through the backyard prison kicking at the cell doors of prisoners and late-for-work newscasters, calling them imperialist dogs and commies and stopping occasionally to administer the usual electric shock or to rip off a fingernail or two? Where's old Bob now? Where is that crazy fucker?

What's Baghdad Bob going to do with himself now that there's no war to rattle on about? You picture him hosting Iraqi Jeopardy in his retirement, some sultry Iraqi swimsuit model flipping clues on the game board. "Weapons of Mass Destruction for \$200," he announces to the audience, his signature black beret still plastered to his head.

You wonder if Baghdad Bob had a fancy office, all gold and gaudy and plastic-treed, with ornate massive chairs like at Uday's palace where the platoon first was camped out. You think maybe you'd like to go look for that office, kick your boots up on his desk, take a picture with his favorite beret on or something. Maybe tomorrow.

"Where you wanna go?" asked your buddy Jay from home, another sergeant who's come up the ranks just a couple years before you.

"I'm just going to go to see what kind of cool shit's left behind that the Marines didn't get," you tell him. "You know, like flags and uniforms and bayonets and shit. Stuff to send home."

"Yeah, let's do it then."

And so the two of you go in the morning. You stack your rifles in the overwatch lean-to—bringing pistols only; you want to be light and unencumbered—and tell the specialist on watch you'll be back in a bit.

This is how soldiers die, you decide. Boredom, the age-old killer. Boredom and curiosity and kleptomania combined. You're still going to go in, though.

When you step inside the exterior door to what must have been the basement loading dock, all you first see is what looks to be an abandoned storage room, desks and furniture tipped over, papers scattered everywhere, nothing too exciting. Because it is dark and there are few windows on this floor, the two of you alternate using your high-powered Surefire flashlights as you sweep the corners of the room, peering into the shadows, stepping gingerly over spilled boxes of binders, files, gas masks, breathing canisters for gasmasks, and piles of other stuff you can't quite make out.

"This is pretty fucking stupid, man," you whisper to Jay who grins and whispers back, "So, fucking go back out, then," nodding in the direction you just came. But you don't. And you know neither of you will. The two of you are going to the top of this thing, and you both know it, stupid or not. And so, you sweep left to right, right to left, Surefire flashlights in your left hands and Beretta 9mm pistols in your right, wrists and backs of your hands together in the traditional police "ice pick" grip, and the two of you move slowly shoulder to shoulder, back to back, toe to heel, trying not to make a sound.

There are definitely people still in there, though. Or close by. You can hear other voices somewhere else around the building, muffled, but human nonetheless. Considering the population of displaced persons now living in the prison cells next store, you wonder if there are displaced persons doing the same thing you are, looking for cool shit to steal, or maybe food.

Yeah, you think if they're displaced persons, then they're

probably looking for things they can live off of, food and water, things to sell maybe.

Unless they're Fedayeen hiding out still, or wounded Ba'ath Party Ministry officials biding their time, waiting for the right moment to escape. You feel the hair tingle on the back of your neck and the muscles in your forearms tighten and the flexor tendon connecting that muscle to your trigger finger twitch. If someone comes around that corner screaming "Allāhu akbar!" you'll be prepared to double-tap that motherfucker and hope for the best. You flick the safety off the Beretta and look at that little reassuring orange dot that says it's ready to do its job, and you hope that this is one of the days when it doesn't jam.

Jay does the same and you say "Shhh..." with your pistol barrel to your lips instead of an index finger, but it comes out as more of a nervous "Shhh..." giggle and he suppresses his own nervous laugh.

"We're fucking assholes," you say under your breath.

"Yeah we are," he smirks.

It occurs to you briefly that any one of the boxes or drawers or corrugated metal filing cabinets that you've just kicked open might have exploded in your faces, and you might be nothing more than a pink mist clinging to the thick morning air right now if you kicked the wrong box, and then you see it and any thoughts of tactical awareness evaporate the second you glimpse that red, white, green, and black fabric wedged between the box of photographs and flipped over desks.

You will have no thought whatsoever that those photos of men women and children are most likely of prisoners who have been tortured or killed while you're hurriedly pushing aside the only evidence of their existence with the hopes that you will get your greedy little dirty mitts on the discarded colors that represent their homeland.

But you don't give a shit about that. You want your souvenir. You kick that box of Iraqi humanity right the fuck out of your way, and you pull that Iraq flag out from under all that shit and hold it up. "Jackpot. Look at this thing," you say and it's intact other than the line of successive holes singed around the edges where it appears that a Marine or some other fucker went full auto with a small caliber rifle.

"Damn, son," Jay shakes his head, "Fucking jackpot."

"Don't worry, man," you say, "We'll get another one." And so, the two of you clear all twelve floors left to right, right to left, ceiling to floor, floor to ceiling—looking not for enemy fighters, or hidden caches of weapons and evidence of the Saddam Hussein's regime of tyranny, but because you are looking for garbage quality mementos like flags and unit insignia and bayonets that the Republican Guard has discarded to send home to your colleagues in suburban Connecticut.

When you get to the top, the sun is blinding, the blue skies are clear, there are only a few burning buildings in the distance, and the effect is surreal. You have a butt pack full of Iraqi flags, Republican guard insignia, and other Iraq military paraphernalia in your U.S. Navy-issued Kevlar vest under your Connecticut National Guard-issued flack vest and you're not dead.

It's a beautiful day in Baghdad, you think. "Good morning Baghdad!" you scream into the wind doing your best Robin Williams in Vietnam impression. Jay laughs and points to an abandoned anti-aircraft gun emplacement at one of the corners of the rooftop, and the two of you gleefully climb into the gunners' seats completely forgetting to check the thing for booby traps. You get up to set the timer on the camera that you brought with you and the two of you take celebratory photos sitting in Baghdad Bob's anti-aircraft gun on the top of his wrecked and looted and bombed-out office building. Just a couple of buck sergeants hanging out on the roof like

fucking tourists.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here, man,” Jay says, and so the two of you descend the twelve stories in a much less guarded fashion than you climbed it.

Years later when you are home again and you have dragged that same Iraqi military shit around since that day in the Ministry of Information building well over a decade ago, you will wonder why you still have it. Why you still schlep it from place to place, apartment to apartment, state to state, and country to country so many years later. You will want to know what it means, what value it has, this box of war tokens still smelling of smoke and dust and fear and stupidity a decade and a half later.

But you won’t know why you hold onto it, of all things. The footlocker that holds those things that you took so long ago is the only thing that you would never part with of all your earthly possessions. You think that these are the things that should be buried with you when you finally go. That this should be the rule: whatever remains of any war ought to be buried with whoever has been a part of it. That maybe this is your final penance, to be buried with your stolen Iraq War paraphernalia. Your dinars and your insignia and your bayonets and your flags. Bury it with you, and you with it; and bury the war, and forget you and it and your part in stealing it. Forget your part in a dirty war.

New Poetry from Frank Blake



Poet Frank Blake during his Army service.

We came home

And had nothing to do and nowhere to go and too much freedom
and money and space and women and cars and booze.

No more mission

Like a marathon runner collapsed at the end of a race and
across the finish line and not really sure how to stop running
or what to do next.



We missed each other

These other humans didn't get it and had never been in that place where it was not fun but we had fun anyway because we had the love of combat brothers

We were bored

Because no matter what, nothing we would do in a week back home was even close to being the team with unlimited government funding using state of the art weapon technology

And none of us yearn for combat

But we do wish we could go back to a time where our actions mattered and our friends were nearby and we all had a great goddamn adventure ahead of us.

And now we know

That "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire" and that everything that comes next will probably suck in comparison

because life needs us to be paying cable bills and walking dogs

And it's hard

To find meaning in things of little consequence when we learned so early on that the world is big and scary and violent and can be filled with acts of valor and sacrifice and hate and love.

So our only option

Is to live such a great and full life of found meaning in meaningless tasks as to make the sacrifices of those who didn't come home and don't get to walk the dog all worth it.

So we try

To draw as much life out of life and to execute a new mission of a great and purposeful existence

Because not all of us can

Because some didn't make it back.

Tracer

There is one round among many
Painted with that iridescent color of night time illumination
Designed to mark the path
Of bullets flight in jet black fear fueled midnight battles

Zips towards the enemy
A laser of lead and anger

Ricochet path betrayed by a bright glow

The rule is

That for every one you see

There are many more you don't

Just like the veterans suffering back home years later
We can see one every so often
Glowing in pain

Tracing the path of alcohol fueled rage and family splits and
no jobs and hard times fitting in

But we all know
For the one we see
There are lots more



Descent

On the escalator at the airport

I saw a young man headed down as I was moving up

He wore that same familiar ripstop nylon rucksack that I knew
all too well

It had patches from his units and friends and adventures

It had the same contents as mine

He carried in it lots of sadness for the friends he had lost

And guilt that he had made it back

And fear for what to do next

And memories of things he should not have done

And dreams of little girls dying

And lessons about leadership

And instincts to make his bed

And tears from current day family strife

And resumes to find new jobs

And drinks for when times get hard

And pills from the doctors

But it wasn't his rucksack that made me know he was a combat
veteran

It was the knowing dead look in his eyes that gazed right past
me and through me at the same time in that one brief moment
where our missions intersected.

The Iliad: A Poem of Force and Pity



Every fall I read the first stanza of the *Iliad* out loud to my students: “Sing, Goddess, the Anger of Peleus’ son Achilles / and its devastation...” (*Iliad* I:1-2)[\[1\]](#). I ask them what the poem is about and eventually someone states the obvious: Achilles’ anger. Then I ask how the poem ends. Someone says with a horse. He’s wrong. In fact, most the memorable cultural highlights from the Trojan war—the abduction of Helen, the Trojan Horse, the Death of Achilles—never show up in the *Iliad*. Even more discouraging, no glorious gains. King Arthur gets Camelot, Beowulf saves Heorot hall, Aeneas gets Rome. What does Achilles get? He gets angry, mourns his dead friend,

and then brutally kills a lot of Trojans. As far as a war story goes, the *Iliad* is a killjoy.

What makes the *Iliad* a great war epic then? Why is it folklore that Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military conquerors of the Western world, slept with the *Iliad* (in scroll form, mind you) under his pillow so that he might fight as the reincarnation of Achilles? Why is Achilles remembered as the great warrior who won glory at Troy? To me, the gainless brutality and relentless sorrow written about in the *Iliad* doesn't reaffirm the glory gained in war but squashes it. And this is, as far as I can tell, what we get from the first great war epic: the demystification of the glories of war and the tragic delusion of Force.

In her famous essay The *Iliad*, or, The Poem of Force, Simone Weil says the true hero of the *Iliad* is Force. By Force she means, "It is the x that turns anybody who is subject to it, into a thing...Somebody was here, now nobody is here at all." The Force on display in the *Iliad* is not the mechanized and industrialized warfare we know. Instead, it is spears and swords ripping and puncturing flesh, vividly. Here is an example:

"Hippolochos sprang away, but Agamemnon killed him dismounted, cutting away his arms with a sword-stroke, free of the shoulder, and sent him spinning, like a log, down the battle." (*Iliad* XI: 145-147)

The *Iliad* is chalk full of gruesome descriptions of bronze cutting limbs and shattering bone. This stuff may just be an example of something like a Tarantino e.g., *Kill Bill* or *Django* fascination with graphic human carnage. Or a Mel Gibson war movie interested in giving the most brutal war examples on record. Gahw! Look at all that blood! In some ways, I think Homer is interested in the gruesome spectacle of Bronze Age combat. But, unlike Tarantino and Gibson, Homeric death scenes

are especially visceral for the audience because the warrior getting gutted is a man with a name, a lineage, and a history. He's not just an anonymous human body—or whole group of bodies—exhibited to bleed and die. There are no anonymous deaths in the *Iliad*. Every death is particular. Although the individual warriors may reduce each other to objects, Homer refuses. Here he tells of a pair of brothers, one of whom will shortly die:

“There was a man of the Trojans, Dares, blameless and bountiful,
a priest consecrated to Hephaistos, and he had two sons,
Phegus and Idaios, well skilled both in fighting.
These two breaking from the ranks of the others charged
against Diomedes”

(*Iliad* V: 9-12)

These young men enter under the contract of Force, and Phegus dies in the dust only a few lines after we learn who he is. Someone has become nothing. Although the Force of combat destroys young men, Homer resists the Force by reminding us of a man's identity before he is slain. Still, Force in war takes individuals and turns them into dust. There is only death, and this is most clearly seen in the waring rage of Achilles, the incarnation of war.

Achilles is the ultimate weapon. As one of my students said, he is like a nuclear weapon released on the Trojans. He kills without pity or discrimination. Here is Homer's description:

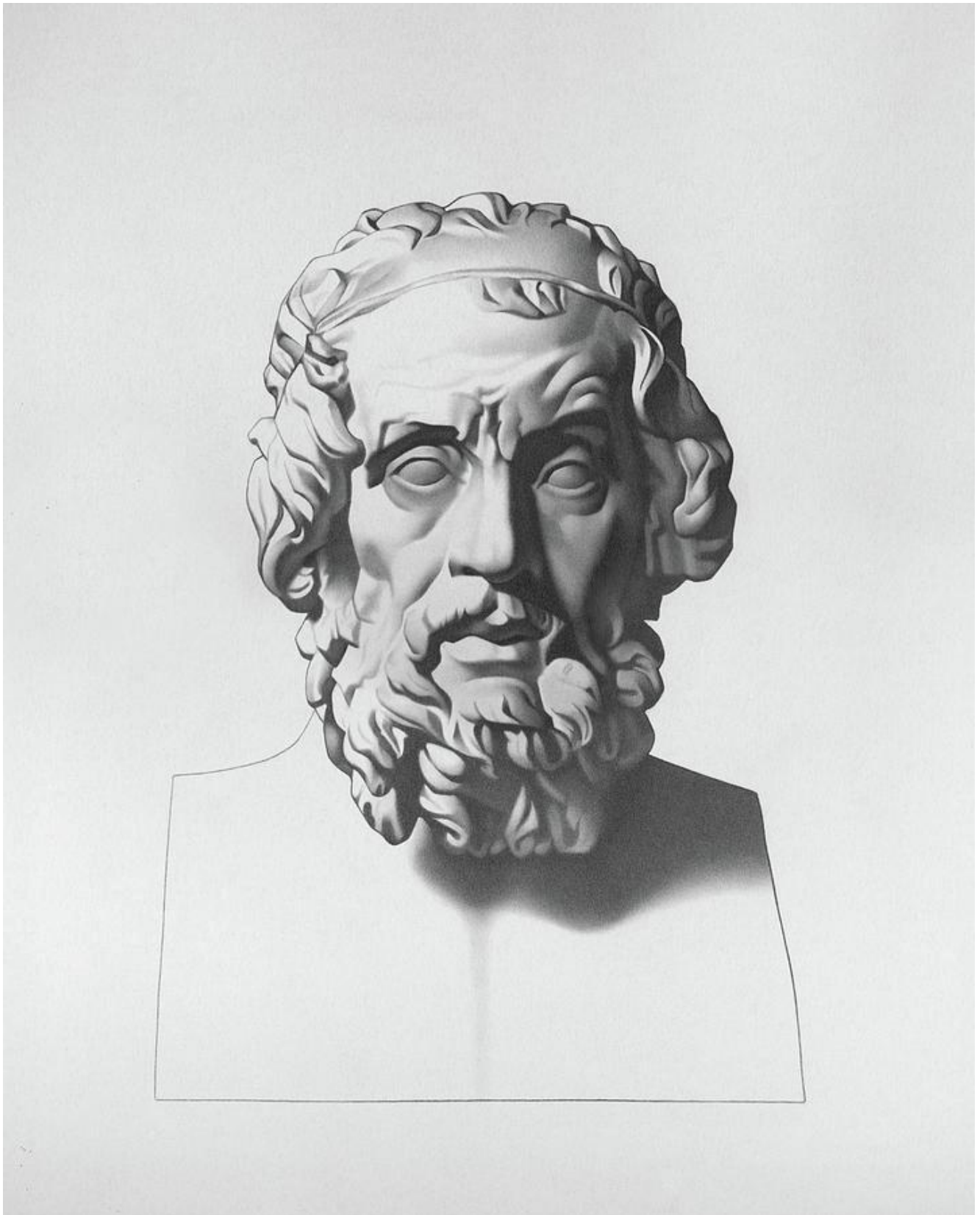
“As inhuman fire sweeps on in fury through the deep angles
of a drywood mountain and sets ablaze the depth of the timber
and the blustering wind lashes the flame along, so Achilles
swept everywhere with his spear like something more than a
mortal

harrying them as they died, and the black earth ran blood.”
(XX: 490-494)

As you read about Achilles' exploits, you can hear Oppenheimer saying, "I am become death, destroyer of worlds." As an incarnation of war, Achilles demands ultimate, sweeping annihilation. Three chapters of killing culminate in the death of Hector, the prince and protector of Troy. Achilles attaches Hector's limp body to the back of his chariot and drags the body around the walls of Troy for his family to witness.

"A cloud of dust rose where Hektor was dragged, his dark hair was falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled in the dust; since by this time Zeus had given him over to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers. So all his head was dragged in the dust; and now his mother tore out her hair...and his father beloved groaned pitifully." (XXII 401-407)

This iconic disgracing of Hektor's body intentionally furthers the sorrow of Hector's surviving family members. It does little for Achilles. After all the Force Achilles brings against the Trojans, he is still angry. This destruction has brought him no respite, and he cannot fill the void in his heart that was caused by the death of his friend, Patroklos. As Weil writes: "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims: the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates." Achilles subjugates a slew of Trojans to the equation of Force, and in doing so he loses all sense of pity for other human beings. Ironically, pity turns out to be the one thing Homer thinks can lessen a small portion of Achilles' suffering.



This is the truth that Achilles swallows at the end of the poem. Force only brings more sorrow, and this does nothing to quell his own sorrow. Force exacerbates sorrow and can never end it. The *Iliad* is not an anti-war story as we might conceive it with a clear moral lesson about the sorrows of war. I don't think Homer thought he could end war, just like

he couldn't stop floods or forest fires. But, by putting violence and sorrow on display in the way Homer does, he saps war of its glorious claim and forces the reader of the poem to witness a mother and father in despair.

Life in war is suffering, Achilles tells Priam at the end of the poem. Weil, in a terrible historical predicament herself (born Jewish and living in Nazi occupied France) also echoes Achilles' sad realization. "Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men's eyes. The strong are never absolutely strong and the weak are never absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this. They have in common a refusal to believe that they belong to the same species." Perhaps humans can't end violence, but they can transcend the dictates of Force and be godlike in lessening this sorrow. This is the change Achilles bears witness to at the end of the poem. When Priam enters Achilles' tent to ask for Hector's body back, Priam grabs Achilles' knees and begins his plea:

"'Achilles like the gods, remember your father, one who is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age...' (XXIV: 486-7)

Confronted by Priam, Achilles then sees his own lonely father in Priam's face, and returns the body of Hector to the Trojans. Achilles forgives his enemy and discovers pity.

The more I read the *Iliad*, the more I am convinced that the poem does not glorify war in any meaningful way. Instead, the poem exposes us to gratuitous pain, destruction, and suffering. The poem is not epically cool; it is epically sad. In this, the *Iliad* sets a precedent by telling a war story with all the gore but no glory. It points out the sadness and vanity of the endeavor. This precedent of overwhelming sadness continues in many of the other great war novels of Western literature. Books like *Red Badge of Courage*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Things They Carried* are common in our

high schools and challenge the idea of glory in war. Glory and military virtue are not the main subject of many of the war novels we, as a culture (or at least high school teachers), consider great. Is a great war novel primarily an anti-war book then? Not necessarily. For me, what makes the *Iliad* a war-epic is that it can help us rediscover, or even reimagine, a part of our humanity. This is what we see in Achilles at the end of the poem.

Achilles learns through his own sadness how to become a human that extends pity even to his enemy. In doing so, he rejects his god-given power that subjugates those weaker than him to Force. I see this as heroic. Achilles shows moral imagination by going beyond the glory of his warrior culture, relieving the sorrows of war, rather than exacerbating them. By the end, Achilles understands the limits of Force and moves beyond those limits by practicing an empathetic kindness toward his enemy, Priam. Achilles only understands the limits and delusions of Force by living them out. Perhaps only a powerful man like Achilles can show us this because he has the full control of Force at his fingertips. In the end, Homer has Achilles use his power to heal a wound he created, and in doing so, he shows us what is meaningful about being part of the human species.

[\[1\]](#) All quotes are from Lattimore's translation of The Iliad