

New Fiction from Lisa Erin Sanchez: “Signatures of Ghosts”

He had one scar when I met him, a single blow to the back of his neck in the soft fleshy space between head gear and body armor. He liked to say, I’ll tell you this for free. I’d move in close and listen. His voice was a lyric tenor. A murmur, a whisper, sometimes a songbird’s call. In the medic’s kit were the trappings of his profession: butterfly clamps, a triangular scalpel, and three items for clearing a blocked airway. He packed these into a metal case the night before he left.

Another case was filled with antibiotics, antifungals, and the antimalarial drug Mefloquine, which caused one soldier to have a psychotic break and go on a rampage in Qandahar. In the third and final case, he kept morphine, oxy, and a handful of drugs whose names I can’t recall.

That whole case was reserved for pain. He was constantly having to refill it.

The medic had a silver star, a purple heart, and an enormous pair of jump wings. On his neck, he had one scar. I wasn’t his wife or life partner. I was just his girlfriend but I loved him. For six blissful months I loved him. In the Carolina woods, on the Roanoke dunes, under moonlight and firelight, in oceans and cars. We had our own special places, our own secret codes. We had summer and sand, and autumn and wind. We had indigo and sepia, and waves and retreats.

By Thanksgiving I learned to play first-person shooter games. *Left 4 Dead*—his favorite.

I’d get shot or lose a limb. He’d pick it up and replace it.

After that, he packed his metal cases. The first month of his tour passed quickly. He called to say his team had arrived safely somewhere between Kabul and Khost, but soon they'd have to move. South, I figured, then we lost contact.

I spent the next few months feverishly knitting. I didn't know how to knit, but I couldn't think or stop thinking, so I taught myself to knit and I made three sweaters. By the time he called, I had started an afghan blanket. It was the color of a storm cloud, between black and white.

Mela? he said.

He drew out the vowels in his sing-song voice. He knew not to say Philomela. My parents had been cruel to name me after the bird-princess who lost her voice, and let's face it, I was no princess. Still, I felt some affinity with the bird-like qualities of the fallen Athenian. I admired her metamorphosis and had chosen for myself a perfect match: an airborne army medic who could heal people and fly.

I could hear the medic breathing and pressed my ear to the phone.

Mela, he said. Can you please pick me up?

I drove to airborne headquarters, parked my car, and ran to him. We crashed into each other like dive-bombing birds tangled in flight. He cut his lip on my kiss; I tasted his avian blood.

Yes, I did pick him up, but we didn't quite make it home. We stopped at a co-op for migratory creatures where we loved for hours on end. He brushed a lock of hair from my eye. It caught on an eyelash, which was thick with mascara and fairy dust and moonbeams and tears. I mirrored his motion, sweeping his brow. That's when I noticed a fresh scar. I ran my finger along the jagged edge. It fell from his face but I caught it. I was cradling his wound in the palm of my hand. I wanted to mend

his cut, put everything back in order, but I couldn't.



Leda and the swan, from ruins at Argos.

For the next six months, we tried to remember. We took long walks in the steel blue fog of the Great Smoky Mountains, but only the ravens and the falling leaves spoke. We drove to Roanoke Island and waded in the sea foam, but the cold bit our toes and a massive cloud formed, dumping hard wet rain atop our two heads.

By spring, the medic started train-up. All the things a smoker loathed: running, climbing, jumping out of planes. Schlepping

his shit through the Carolina swamplands. For weeks, he was a tortured, exhausted, sweaty mess.

Then came the desk sergeant with the paperwork.

Death preparations, the army called it. Where was his property? Who was his beneficiary? Who was his next of kin?

The closer it got to go date, the more detailed the process became. What type of casket would he like? What song should be played at his funeral?

He came home furious that day. He'd picked a tune by Alice in Chains, it was my favorite, too, but the admin didn't know it, so he told her to play Bad Romance. Lady Gaga, he'd said. Play fucking Gaga.

Nowhere on the forms was a place for my name. I wasn't his wife or the mother of his child. I was just his girlfriend and that's the way the army liked it. Stateside commanders had learned a thing or two since smiling housewives were used to sell war bonds and make hungry young men think they wanted to fight. Girlfriends, they reasoned privately in their secret quarters, were cheap. Why buy the bird when you can rent the feathers?

I didn't care about any forms. I held my lover's wound in the palm of my hand.

When it was time for the medic to redeploy, I drove him to post, went home, and picked up my afghan. The thing was ten feet long by then, witness to my waiting.

I thought about giving it to a family member or friend, but what would they do with a woolen blanket? I considered this for several minutes before deciding I would send it to no one. The blanket was a harbinger, more salient for the absence it signified than the object it had become. Each stitch echoed the promise of return, and even though the medic had left

voluntarily, I felt like he'd been taken.

Halfway through his second deployment, the afghan had grown another ten feet. Why hadn't he emailed or called? Was he sick? Was he hurt? Had he lost his men or his mind? I scoured the internet for information. If you can estimate a soldier's whereabouts within a fifty-mile radius, you might get some information. You might find a newswire about a firefight or an ambush. A special missions team can usually survive those. What you don't want to find is an accident like a Humvee over a cliff or any kind of explosion. What you don't want to find is a roadside bomb planted by a starving Afghan who's been paid ten times as much to blow up your boyfriend as the Afghan National Army can pay him to guard bases.

I sat at the computer with coffee and cigarettes, digging for an Associated Press report or two sentences from a military embed. All I could find were things like, *Predator drone kills twenty civilians in South Waziristan*. Or, *Suicide bomb kills eight U.S. soldiers in Khost*, followed by, *A spokesman says the attack was waged in retaliation for the death of twenty civilians killed in South Waziristan*.

With no further contact from the medic, I decided to take action. I purchased the sequel to *Left 4 Dead*, threw myself into the zombie apocalypse. When I could fight no more, I went back to my knitting: knit two, yarn over, slip slip knit, knit three. I had altered the pattern midstream and now half of the blanket had the tightly-woven look of knit stockings and the other half was an intricate lace with empty spaces forming the shape of inverted wings. The transformation had come about quite by accident. I had slipped a stitch and decided to work in the mistake. It was pleasing to see the little holes, I wanted it to be more transparent. This is what I was thinking as I held the afghan to the light, and when I did, I realized I could see my way through, and I felt a charge in my body, a quiet yearning followed by something more vexing. The sensation was overwhelming. It had a distinctive taste and

smell, a clean, utilitarian scent with an aura of hand wringing and finality, of having been useful to the entire enterprise.

The medic would understand this, I thought. For, he had been utilized too. Except, I never told him anything. When finally he called, I had traveled very far and had reached the state of Catatonia, overcome body and soul by a force with the strength of an entire army.

Still I picked him up. This time we didn't go to any hotel, co-op, or Outer Banks beach. The medic was exhausted so we went straight home. He stumbled through the door and fell on the bed, a heap of defeated manhood, nothing but feathers and bones. I took off his Danner desert combat boots and his jacket. He was still wearing his bird tags: name, social security number, blood type, religion. All the important stuff.

I removed the tags and set them on the nightstand. I'm not going to tell you his name but I'll tell you this for free: somewhere downrange, his wings had been soldered to his armor and he'd converted from Catholic to Holy Order of the Jedi Knights. Said so, right there on his tags.

I removed the rest of his clothing—his army gray t-shirt and ACU combat pants with the pixilated universal camouflage pattern, a mix of desert sand, urban gray, and foliage green, which made him invisible in any battlefield, all contingencies covered.

His feathers came off last. That's when I saw the scars. Every inch of him was marked, and there was a deep black gouge beneath the skin, on his soft, fleshy heart, which was barely beating.

I reached for a salve and rubbed it over his body, counting the scars, dividing wounds over time. There were exactly three thousand scars, a thousand a year for his travels, each one

concerning a distinct war story. How could his commander have missed these? I decided I was the only one who could see them or the only one who cared.

Another season changed and it started again. Fourth deployment for him, third for me. The medic dragged himself to train-up, this time coughing and hacking, sweating alcohol from his pores.

Did I forget to mention his drinking?

He came back nine months later. Families were gathered in the parking lot of the great airborne fortress, waiting for their beloved songbirds. Some came home walking, some were sitting in wheelchairs, others were missing entirely.

I stood beside my car as the medic ambled toward me. A line of cars extended behind me, each one with a lone woman sitting in the driver's seat. The line wrapped all the way around the garrison and out the gate to Bragg Boulevard, a yellow ribbon of girlfriends all the way to the

Atlantic Ocean, not one of them crying because, let's face it, who would hear?

The medic got in the car.

Paddy's? I asked.

He nodded. I drove.

We walked inside and sat at the bar. He motioned the barkeep and then he looked at me and then I looked at him.

How was your tour?

Not good.

I missed you.

Me too.

I sent you an email.

The internet was down.

Where were you?

Can't say.

Did you receive fire?

We had an accident. And the team hit a roadside bomb.

The bartender stood before us, arching his brow.

Straight up, the medic said, and knocked twice on the bar.

The man poured two glasses of whiskey and the medic downed them both. You should find someone else, he said. He had nothing left to give.

I cleared my throat but I couldn't speak. *He* had nothing to give?

He put his hand over mine. He was staring into an empty glass like he wanted to dive in.

What'll you have, he asked.

He drank another shot before I could say beer then knocked once more on the bar.

My eyes traveled the room. Photos of fallen team guys lined the walls, their names carved for posterity like signatures of ghosts in the great mahogany countertop.

The bartender poured another whiskey and the medic turned to me. Light or dark, he asked.

I knew which one I wanted but my vocal cords were frozen, and as I watched him swallow, I thought about flying away.

Your beer, he said. Light or dark?

New Fiction from Brian Van Reet: “Lazarus”

We were the HMDs: the human mine detectors. In a sense the job was easy, but impossible to do well. There was no good method, for example, by which to differentiate animal carcasses packed with high explosives from those concealing only bloat and maggots. If roadkill was sighted, rather than stop to investigate, one of us gunners would shine a spotlight to indicate the location of the foul thing that might kill us as we drove past, taking the widest possible berth, clinching, waiting. If nothing exploded, we had not found an IED.

That was the job, repeated most every night, with every fresh patch of asphalt, each curb that looked like it might've been sledgehammered and pieced back together, every mound of garbage dumped on the roadside, each stray, suspicious length of wire. We didn't have the time or resources to search it all properly. We spotted the vast majority of devices when they were triggered, not before. It didn't take much more than a few catastrophes like that for us to reach the conclusion: the army must not mind us finding them that way. Why else would they keep sending us out there, if not for a deep appreciation of our talents as HMDs?

It was on one of these IED sweeps, not long after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, that I was standing in the gunner's hatch of our truck and someone first tried to kill me—I mean, deliberately tried to do it. I was fortunate enough as a cocky young volunteer soldier to sort of want that to happen, but wasn't awake enough to realize it had. I had nodded off on my feet, my IED-finding spotlight wedged between the roof of our truck and the gun mount, so it appeared I was doing my job,

scanning the pavement and rubble for the fourth consecutive overnight hour, when in fact my head was drooping, bobbing, snapping up every so often with that sudden falling feeling you get when you drift off someplace you hadn't meant to.

We were on the return leg of the sweep, nearing Checkpoint Delta, a traffic circle, when the first RPG woke me, the rocket engine hissing and shrieking as it flew like a high-powered Roman candle, missing the truck ahead of ours and striking an adobe shanty just off the road where it exploded in a flash of orange and dust. Half a dozen heartbeats and another rocket, this one missing our truck, brought me fully awake and cemented the idea. They were trying to kill me. Who, I didn't know. Someone I couldn't see and had never met hated me or the thought of me enough to want to end my life right there in an instant on that lonely stretch of road, like something out of loneliest New Mexico, if you must place yourself somewhere more possible than Iraq.

Below me in the truck our lieutenant was hollering, "Turn that shit off, man—turn it off!" and when he grabbed my leg, I saw he meant me, my spotlight. Not so effective at locating hidden bombs, it was far more useful to the enemy as a million-candle-power bull's-eye.

I switched off the light and set it on the roof of the truck, taking the gun off safe and fumbling with the tension knob on the gun mount for a few seconds until it came loose. I swung the mount toward the east, the direction I thought the rockets had come from. I couldn't see much past the starlit road. Beyond it was a farmer's field growing some kind of summer crop—muskmelons, I think it was—and on the far side of that, an irrigation canal I'd noticed in the day but couldn't pick out now. A cluster of electric lights on the horizon marked a squatter village we called Squaretown for no other reason than its geography.

One of the other gunners started shooting into the field, and

even though I couldn't see anything out there, I followed his lead and opened fire, letting off a wild burst from my machinegun, I don't mean an M-16 but a truck-mounted machinegun that could send bullets the size of fingers through engine blocks and concrete walls. Every fifth round was a tracer and there were several burning in the air at any given time, the smell of hot brass and powder, shell casings streaming out of the ejection port; somehow, one of them was ejected in such a way as to kick back and lodge under the collar of my Kevlar vest.

I had no idea what had happened. I yelled, my neck suddenly on fire; I ducked through the hatch into the truck's cab with the rest of the crew. In the front, Yarrow was passing the lieutenant a hand mic, while in the rear, Lorcin was discharging his M-16 rapidly on single shot out the passenger's side window. Martinez sat opposite him with his rifle between his legs and his hands placed calmly over his ears to muffle the noise. Ducking and stooped on my knees in the center of the truck, roughly at the midpoint between all of them, I spun toward Martinez.

"I think I'm hit! Can you see it, can you see it?"

The immediate burning sensation had subsided some, but it still hurt, and I was freaked, frantically lifting my chin to expose my neck to the medic, who always rode in our truck. That wasn't by accident. The lieutenant, top man in the platoon, also always rode in our truck. The lieutenant was slick like that: keep your friends close, your first aid closer.

Martinez leaned toward me and swept his hands over my neck and shoulders, feeling for blood and in the process discovering the hot shell casing, which had migrated off my skin and down between my uniform and vest.

"You're not shot, bro! It's just some brass!" Martinez shouted

over the deafening report of the rifle firing inside the truck. Lorcín had dropped a mag, reloaded, and resumed shooting. He was nineteen, a typical age for a private, but unlike any other I had met, he was technically still a French citizen, working on his U.S. citizenship (a fact he had been able to keep hidden from most of the platoon, not having a discernible accent, and which he had sworn me to secrecy about after confessing it one night on guard duty). The kid, Lorcín, had spent most of his life in Vegas where his dad worked as a chef. He was a good soldier. Martínez was, too. He actually was from some lonely place in New Mexico; I forget the name of the town but remember him turning twenty-two later that summer, making him about my same age. To my knowledge, it was the first time any of us had been shot at.

"Brass, what?" the lieutenant roared indignantly, turning his attention from the radios to the commotion over me in the turret. The LT was a big man who had played some college ball and was very physically brave. I'm not suggesting, with the thing about Martínez always riding in our truck, that the lieutenant was a coward, only that he was not above taking advantage. He distrusted the competence of others, is one way to put it.

"Goddamnit!" the LT yelled. "Get your happy ass back up there!" He slapped me on the helmet to hearten me. I got to my feet in the hatch, and he went back to making his radio report about the shit we were in, carrying on three simultaneous conversations: two by radio, with the platoon and higher headquarters, and also one with us, in person, in the truck.

No more rockets had been launched after the initial volley, but that didn't stop us from shooting up the landscape a while. I don't trust my memories of time in those situations, but it couldn't have lasted much more than thirty seconds after the point I'd mistakenly thought I'd been shot, burned by my own brass. You could try consulting an official report to get the army's stats on the engagement, rounds expended, an

exact timeline, but that information, even if it weren't classified, would be no more reliable on the whole than what I have put down here. What happened at Checkpoint Delta was altogether unusual but ordinary in at least one respect. The official version was riddled with omissions, errors, and lies.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" the lieutenant ordered. "Punch it around these fools! No, that way!"

Our driver, Specialist Yarrow, sped past the other trucks, leading them to the checkpoint, out of the kill zone, the roar of gunfire petering away to ringing ears and scattered pops. A short time later we pulled into the traffic circle, one truck stopping off at each of the four cardinal directions. To the west lay our camp; to the south, Baghdad proper; to the east, Squaretown; and if you took the northern spur, after passing through a number of other hardscrabble villages, you'd eventually reach desert as open and empty as the surface of Mars.

Some of us dismounted at the checkpoint to assess the damage, of which there was none. Not a single man or truck had been hit. No one had seen who had shot at us; many guys had seen the rockets, but our descriptions of their points of origin were in disagreement, and none of us had seen "an actual fucking bad guy firing an RPG," as the lieutenant eventually put it, ending that line of speculation. Battalion ordered us to hold the checkpoint and wait there for the quick reaction force to arrive from camp. Only the throbbing red mark on my neck and our warm gunmetal yet proved the firefight was something other than a collective hallucination.

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Our reinforcements were late. According to the latest from battalion, the QRF was "spinning up," whatever that meant. The transmission on their status was a bad turn and it came through on the radio not long before a pair of headlights

appeared on the road leading to the traffic circle from Squaretown. The eastern road. We had been fired on from the east. There was a sundown to sunup curfew in place, and no civilians were supposed to be on that road at that hour. Even without the preceding ambush, the sight of headlights approaching would have been alarming.

We prepared to face round two alone. On the lieutenant's orders, Yarrow moved our truck to the eastern spur, supporting Sergeant [Redacted]'s position there. [Note: The occasion for this account is truth-telling and the airing of long withheld grievances. With that being the case, I do not take the decision to redact lightly. But I've recently learned from a trusted source that this former sergeant is, for whatever reason, struggling with severe addiction. I make it a point to say Sgt. R. is addicted *for whatever reason* because, by his own admission before going to war, he was a drinker. The lingering effects of combat could not have helped his disease, which was nevertheless preexisting: who knows why he originally took to drowning his sorrows? I don't feel sorry for him, either; that's not why I've redacted his name. I've got enough on my conscience as it is, and the small portion of the truth that I'm blotting out is not worth being questioned someday by another ghost. His, waiting in the wings, whispering to me that I got it all wrong. What would be the point in opening myself up to that? There are untold thousands like the old sergeant, wandering free in the United States of Amnesia, and I have no evidence compelling enough for any prosecutor to pursue charges against him for something that happened fifteen years ago in a foreign country. If my source is correct about the state of his health, the judicial system might be the slower route to justice, anyway, depending on how you define it. Either way, I can't stand the thought of becoming entangled with his fate any more than I already am.]

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said, never taking his eyes off the approaching headlights. "Throw a couple flares out. Far as

you can.”

R. opened the hatch of his truck and found a stash of road flares in an oily canvas bag he kept there. He struck a flare to get it going and lobbed it end over end, burning bright red into the spur ahead of us. He did another, and another, a line of flares intended to signal to the approaching driver that the traffic circle was off-limits: turn back immediately.



The driver did not turn back. He did slow down, then stopped, then lurched forward again but slower than before, and continued to vary his slow speed erratically after the appearance of the flares, as if he had obviously seen them and our position, yet still insisted on approaching, albeit indecisively.

“Hold fire! Fire on *my* order!” the lieutenant yelled up and down the line. “Don’t come any closer, you dumb son of a

bitch," he said to himself. Only those of us near him—meaning Yarrow, Lorcin, Martinez and me—heard him say that last part.

The driver stopped again at about a hundred meters. Redacted had gone out ahead of our trucks to toss the flares, which were at fifty meters. In their backlight I could make out the shape of the car, which looked like an old Volkswagen sedan. Those were everywhere in Baghdad. We were thinking it might be nothing, but who knew. Worst case, the car was rigged to blow, the driver getting cold feet, or maybe stalling purposefully, and the second wave of the ambush would hit us at any second, a mistimed Trojan-horse-style scenario.

The driver rolled down his window and stuck out an arm, waving in apparent distress. None of us budged. He took his foot off the brake and idled forward.

"The fuck's he doing?" Yarrow said.

"Could be wounded," the lieutenant said. "Could be one of the guys who shot at us."

"Or some random drunk asshole."

"Flash your brights at him."

It was at that point—the lieutenant telling Yarrow to flash his headlights—that I remembered my own spotlight. We carried no brighter light than the one I had with me up in the hatch, and I flicked it on and shined it at the Volkswagen. The car dipped to a stop. Another gunner turned on his light. Our crossed beams penetrated the windshield to meet on the driver, no longer a dark silhouette but a young Arab man squinting and turning his head. The hand that had been held out of the window was now raised to his face, shielding his eyes. He appeared to be alone, upset, confused or traumatized or drunk or all of the above, dazzled by the spotlight's glare. Nothing changed from one moment to the next. Then, Sergeant R. opened fire.

Only a handful of people have ever read the official report on the incident. This exclusivity should not be attributed to its juiciness, more the opposite. It's hard to overstate how successfully the army reduces even spectacular violence to a series of boilerplate phrases that signify little about the reality of war other than its essential bureaucracy. Like all such reports, if this one still exists, access is restricted. It's not in the trove of documents famously leaked in 2010, not even tracked there as a serious incident in the master list, as no U.S. personnel were wounded. I haven't seen the report since 2004, when the lieutenant asked me to proofread it before he submitted it to our company commander in the form of a sworn statement, but I remember it, and other similar reports, well enough to recreate the crux with some accuracy.

The local national driving the vehicle approached a U.S. position after an RPG ambush on Route Predators near Checkpoint Delta. The vehicle failed to stop after being warned repeatedly to do so with flares and lights. Deadly force was subsequently used by soldiers of 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st of the 15th Cavalry, who reasonably believed they were at risk of death or imminent great bodily harm.

Once R. started shooting, two other men in the platoon did as well, and between them they discharged a dozen or more rounds before the lieutenant could scream "Cease fire!" loud enough to stop them. Our rules of engagement stated that a vehicle or person could be declared hostile simply by the act of one of us shooting at him/her/it. So, when R. opened fire, those other two soldiers followed their training and his lead. The sergeant might've seen something they had missed: a detonator in the man's raised hand, wires running into the car's trunk, a group of insurgents creeping toward us in the dark muskmelon field.

I had seen nothing like that and was not one who fired at the car. I might've done it—probably would've, by twitchy nervous

reflex—if my finger had been resting on the trigger when I'd heard the shots, instead of being curled around the handle of my spotlight. Unintentionally, it had served to pinpoint the target, increasing the accuracy of R. and the others, their gun smoke wisping and curling in the unsteady beam that magnified the trembling of my hands into the world.

The Volkswagen's windshield, now frosted with bullet holes, obscured the man inside, slumped over the steering wheel. The car's horn bleated pathetically and continuously under his weight.

"What happened?" the lieutenant asked, his voice missing its usual bravado. "What the hell'd you see?"

"He wouldn't stop, sir." R. said it with such perfect conviction that—though I'd just seen the car was stopped, had been completely stopped and the man had had his hand up, shielding his eyes—I wondered if I had missed something crucial.

"He was stopped," Martinez said.

"Bullshit," Redacted said. "He did for a second before he floored it."

"Yeah, *after* you started shooting."

"Bullshit."

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said sternly, "You and Yarrow go clear that vehicle."

R. gave the lieutenant a questioning look that turned sour as the lieutenant made no move to reconsider his order. Typically, a squad leader like R. would not have been given such an immediately dangerous job as clearing a possible suicide car bomb. The lieutenant was breaking protocol and assigning this duty to him as a kind of rebuke, I thought. The implications of that were disturbing, but at the time no one

said anything more about the circumstances of the shooting. We were not out of the woods, providing over-watch as R. and Yarrow hunch-walked down the spur toward the Volkswagen, which had come to rest with one of its tires wedged against the curb.

"There's someone in the backseat!" Yarrow said. "Some dude hiding in the backseat!"

"Get out, now! Ishta!"

"I think he's dead, man. Fuck. I don't know."

"Open that door. I'll fan out and cover you."

"*You* open the motherfucking door, brah. You're the one shot these motherfuckers."

R. outranked Yarrow but put up no more argument. He crept against the car and popped the rear door latch. Nothing happened. He nodded at Yarrow, who took up a good angle. He flung the car door open. Still, no movement, and Yarrow repeated his opinion: the man in back looked dead.

Hearing that, R. glanced in the car, stood to his full height, and poked around in the backseat with the muzzle of his rifle. I was a ways off and didn't see it clearly, but heard Yarrow tell it back at camp. R. poked one of the dead guy's eyeballs with the muzzle of his rifle. Not hard enough to pop it out of his skull, but hard enough. I was told it's what hunters do with large animals they've shot, to make sure they're truly dead before letting their guard down. Now satisfied the man in back was not merely unconscious or faking, R. went to the driver's side door, opened it, and pushed the other dead man off the steering wheel to stop the horn sounding. The noise had been uncanny, the steady accusation of a machine.

"Ain't shit in the trunk but trash and shit," Yarrow said. "It's clear, LT."

The lieutenant and the rest of our crew moved closer. The inside of the car stunk of burnt cloth and blood. The man in the driver's seat who'd been shot was in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore a wedding ring. His eyes were half-lidded, and the expression on his face made it look like he'd died in agony. It was the first time in my life I'd ever seen anything like that, and it shook me up, but not how you might expect. The lows came later. In the moment, the feeling was nearly the opposite. I felt so high I was almost sick, not from disgust, but the nauseating thrilling impossibility of being alive while this other human being was suddenly not.

"Gimme a hand here," Martinez said. He was attempting to drag the other dead man from the backseat. That guy was older than the driver, not quite elderly but almost. Though the two were separated by decades, some of their features bore a close resemblance, too much for a coincidence, I thought. They were probably a father and his son.

We dragged the old man out of the car, onto the road. He looked beyond saving, his skin the color of a pale blueberry, but Martinez went through his checks, patting him down systematically, searching for blood by touch. He turned his head and held it over the man's pale blue lips, feeling for a wisp of breath, using two fingers to check for a pulse on the carotid. Nothing.

"He ain't shot," Martinez said. "I think he had a heart attack or something."

"Because of the firefight?"

"I doubt it. Probably just bad luck."

To me, however, it remains an open question, one of many from that night. Did we (and the militiamen who'd ambushed us) literally scare that old man to death as he slept in his bed and we sent rounds downrange in the vicinity of his home in Squaretown? Was the driver of the car really his son? Had he

brought his dying father to us at the checkpoint in the hope we could save him? Iraqis sometimes did ascribe miraculous technological powers to U.S. foot soldiers, including when it came to medicine—or was it just the driver's terrible fate to have taken a route to the nearest hospital that happened to cross our path? Was it a series of unfortunate coincidences, or a tight chain of cause-and-effect? In the end, no one could say. They couldn't tell their story.

Martinez unzipped his aid bag. He removed a ventilator mask for CPR and three clear packing tubes that held epinephrine autoinjectors for the couple guys in the company who suffered from dangerous allergies. He cracked each tube and shot the injectors into the old man's thigh. Then he straddled him and with the heels of his palms started chest compressions, counting them out. Something like a tree branch snapped in the dead man's chest. Yarrow gagged. He was holding the mask over the man's nose and mouth, pumping the ventilator ball to breathe for him when Martinez said to.

They went through one cycle of compressions and ventilations, then another.

"He's gone, Martinez," the lieutenant said respectfully.

The medic acknowledged that likelihood but kept working. We were still waiting for the QRF to arrive and there was nothing better to do, so the lieutenant let him work. Someone actually said it was good training, like it was good the guy had croaked so that Martinez could practice his CPR on real flesh. Some of the men stood watch, facing out on the perimeter; others followed the lieutenant's lead, drifting away from the Volkswagen and its gruesome scene to attend to their trucks; and still other soldiers lingered or moved closer to the bodies, beginning to get comfortable in the presence of death. Sergeant Redacted went back to his truck and found a digital camera he'd bought in Kuwait. The lieutenant stopped him on his way back to the Volkswagen.

"What're you doing with that, Sergeant?"

"We should get a few pics of their faces," R. said. "We might have to ID these guys. They could be important."

"Put that shit away," the lieutenant said.

"Sir?"

"I said stow it. Now."

R. pocketed the slim silver camera. He elaborated no more on his intentions but it seemed unlikely he had meant we might have to identify the dead men to their next of kin. Either he was lying about his reasons for wanting a photo or he genuinely believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that he had just shot two insurgents who were big-time enough to be known by face to military intelligence.

I have an opinion on why the camera came out, but it's only that. By way of factual background, I can say R. was a self-described good old boy from Tennessee who liked to hunt and fish and whose dream, after serving out his twenty years, was to open a bar with a veteran's small business loan and his pension. He hated politicians and especially liberals. Along with his outdoor hobbies he liked all things Star Trek, pulp sci-fi, tabletop wargames, and was, surprisingly, a gourmand: sort of a dorky redneck, you might say, if forced to sum up a personality in a few broad strokes.

Once, in the lead-up to our deployment, I'd heard the sergeant say he wanted to "stack a few bodies over there" as revenge for 9-11. As far as he was concerned, that was why we were in Iraq, and he was fine with it. There'd been a lot of that kind of talk going around, and it was hard to know who to take seriously. It seemed incredible to think his vicious streak ran strong and dumb enough for him to murder a man in cold blood in front of fifteen witnesses before attempting to photograph the evidence with his own camera. Then again, a

state of war does afford the psychopath much leeway.

A few days later, I brought up my concerns with the lieutenant in the privacy of his room when I returned the incident report with typos and awkward phrases marked in red.

"You don't think he did it on purpose," I said, somewhat between a statement and a question.

"Of course he did it on purpose," the LT said.

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant."

"Oh."

"Listen. I've talked to Sergeant R., okay? I talked to him for a very long time. I have no doubt he was in fear for his life when he made that decision."

"He didn't seem that afraid to me," I said, skirting the edge of insubordination.

"You're forgetting that two other soldiers fired as well."

"Only because he did."

"You weren't afraid at all then, Corporal? Can you honestly say that?"

I shrugged, not knowing how to answer that question without sounding snippy or absurd. I was afraid every single time we went outside the wire. You learned to deal with it. Fear didn't give us a license to kill.

"Well I was," the LT continued. "And you know what? If I, as a reasonable person, believe R. might've been right—not that he was, but *might've been*? Well, you better believe I'm not gonna accuse him, or any of you guys, of a thing like that. We need men like Redacted. I can't have you all hesitating in a

decisive moment.”

“Sir. The car was stopped.”

“Briefly. You saw the guy; he was driving all fucking...herky jerky and weird.”

“You said to fire on your order, sir.”

“Do you know something I don’t, Corporal?” he said, a tired-sounding challenge.

“No. I saw what you saw.”

“Exactly. So we’re done here. Go tell the guys we’ve gotta go out tonight at zero three hundred. Another IED sweep.”

“Roger, sir.”

“Hey. Wait. I know this isn’t easy, okay? It’s a terrible thing, but we have to put it behind us. We don’t have a choice. How do you think Sergeant R. feels about it?”

I said I didn’t know, while secretly doubting the LT’s considerations were all so selfless as he made out. We were at the very beginning of our tour, with forty-some-odd weeks left to suffer the war and each other. Any serious accusation or investigation would’ve torn the platoon apart, guaranteeing discord, scandal and ruining the lieutenant’s command reputation, no matter what, if any, justice was ever done. Given the circumstances of the shooting and our rules of engagement, the scales were tipped toward R.; without a confession, there was no hard evidence he had acted with malice. The sergeant wasn’t exactly popular among us, but there were those in the platoon who would’ve had his back with testimonies of the shooting to counter any accusing witnesses, which, though some of us talked privately about our misgivings, never emerged publicly to point a finger. Even those men who had misgivings and didn’t care for the sergeant on a personal level were reluctant to inform on a fellow

volunteer-prisoner, both for the sake of upholding the inmate's code—you don't rat, no matter what—and for fear of violating it and incurring reprisals.

There were none for the shooting. Nothing formal, at least. The killing near Checkpoint Delta went unpunished and was only avenged in a proximate and random way by the IEDs that picked us off by ones and twos every few months for the rest of the year. R. was never so much as wounded on that or any of his deployments. We are not friends, but I can see his profile pic on Facebook. It's him looking sharp in his dress blues; the photo might have been taken at his retirement ceremony, two years ago. He made it to the finish line and got his pension, but from what I've heard, he blows it every month on bar tabs, and not at his own watering hole, which he's never gotten around to opening. I think his drinking picked up so dramatically after he left the service, not because he was so torn up about what had happened overseas, but because he thrived on that sort of thing, missed the thrill, the absolute sense of purpose, and felt bored and aimless without it. He is doing now what he did back then, times he was bored and free to drink, only, there are many more free nights now, post-retirement, for him to burn out his liver with Old Crow and hillbilly heroin, neither of which should be mistaken for karma.

The only other time I heard the sergeant talk about the shooting was the day after. He was eating chow with a few of the other squad leaders from our company. One of them asked him about it, and after a little prodding, he told them the story. The way he told it made no mention of the car being stopped. Instead, he focused on its erratic approach, how close it had gotten.

"You know the deadly radius for exposed personnel in a car bomb blast? By the book it's like three hundred meters. Dumbass hajji—how was I supposed to know?"

His story had changed in a day's time. Whether or not the car was stopped had been the sticking point in the immediate aftermath. Now, that point had been dropped entirely, in favor of the maximum effective range of car bombs and the situational difficulty in determining whether a stranger's baffling actions indicated hostility or foolishness.

If the Volkswagen really had been loaded with explosives, it might have killed some of us, it's true. The sergeant's new explanation for why he'd fired was stronger and more valid than his original one, but mostly it struck me as a red flag, upon hearing it in the chow hall, precisely because the explanation had changed. To my mind, this shifting logic suggested R. had been lying from the beginning. He had refined his initial story into one more plausible with the benefit of another day to think it through.

In that case, he is guilty of a war crime: shooting a civilian, knowing the man was probably not hostile, exploiting the uncertainty of that night's events to get what he had wanted all along. Here was his chance to stack some bodies. The facts do fit that scenario, but I must admit they also fit one in which the sergeant acted honestly (and stupidly). It could be the lieutenant was right and R. truly had believed we were in imminent danger when he pulled the trigger. If so, the conversation I'd overheard in the chow hall was not evidence of premeditation; rather, a state of denial, which had lifted enough, in a day, for the sergeant at least to acknowledge he'd not killed an insurgent, while at the same time continuing to blame the dead man for what had happened.

Enough conjecture. It can be tediously endless and abstract. I was an eyewitness and should lay my cards on the table. In my opinion, the man is a murderer, though I don't believe he's ever thought of himself as one. To this day, I imagine he remains the beleaguered hero of his own story, or the victim, or something like both, simultaneously. Anything but the villain. Few of us can stomach being that.

*

"I've got a pulse!" Martinez said. I had moved off from the Volkswagen to monitor the radios, listening for any word on our reinforcements, but now I rushed back to see for myself. The old man remained unconscious and laid out in the road but his skin had lightened up, no longer so blue, and his chest was rising and falling rapidly.

"Holy shit. You brought him back."

"What were those shots you gave him?"

"Epi-pens. Basically, pure adrenaline."

"Good work, Martinez. Yarrow. Goddamn outstanding work, you two."

"He's not out of the woods yet, sir. He needs evac'd. Like, now."

"The QRF are two mikes out. Soon as they get here, we'll take him to the CASH."

And so we did. And I cannot tell what happened to the old man after that. He was alive and unconscious when we left him at the combat support hospital. For all I know, his heart might've stopped again, shortly thereafter, or he might've wound up living for years but as a vegetable. I suppose he could have recovered from the episode only to have suffered another, more horrible death in wartime Baghdad, anytime from 2004 to this writing. Statistically, it's unlikely, but he may still be alive. He would be a very old man for Iraq in 2019.

His revival was one of the more incredible things we were involved in during our deployment. Throughout the rest of the year, the story came up often. Hard and cynical as some of us were, I think we liked to fall back on telling it to feel better about ourselves, if you can believe a person might be comforted by the events I've just conveyed. Like any story,

how it's received depends on how it's delivered, the focus of it, and where the listener is, the context. We were all eye-deep in the shit and generally proud of Martinez for what he'd done, one of the few acts of redemption we accomplished in a year of waste and toil, or so we thought. With more distance, it's easy to realize the old man might've rather stayed dead of a heart attack than come back to life to learn of his son, killed while delivering him to an unlikely salvation.

We left a dead son and, in the best case, his father to live another twenty years with a cruel debt he couldn't repay. From where I stand now, our one act of grace, that resurrection, seems closer to a tragic curse. I can't remember anyone insisting on that obvious point, back then. Nuanced consequence was lost on most of us. We were in our teens and early twenties, even our leader the lieutenant, and the stakes were too high and stark to accommodate the over-contemplation of grey-shaded outcomes. I imagine we all would've preferred to be revived if it came to it, and so naturally, whatever we thought and said privately about the shooting itself, when we recalled the story as a group or to outsiders, we focused on conjuring the thing we most wanted from its elements that were actually true.

That was life. Survival. Fortunate, unexpected, persistent life, snatched from the jaws of death by a feat of willpower and know-how. A charm against death was what we all wanted, and we told our buddies in other platoons about Martinez and the old man, the incredible thing we'd seen with our own eyes, while minimizing the tragedy of the dead son and R.'s role in making it a tragedy in the first place. Instead of the one time over there when we might have saved a life without taking more.

"You hear what happened the other night?".... "Naw, he wasn't the one shot. Heart attack or some shit.".... "It was crazy. Freakish, really. Dude was fucking blue, right, like his ticker *had been* stopped, and this sumbitch right here, *this*

motherfucker, he brings him back from the dead, man.” “Best medic I ever saw.” “For real. Dude’s a miracle worker.”

“I don’t do miracles,” Martinez said once, fed up enough to overcome his usual reticence. “I did what I could, and it worked. He wasn’t meant to die. That’s all it is.”

As word got around, someone started calling Martinez, Lazarus. The nickname stuck and was perpetuated within the platoon by a certain dominant clique that referred to him that way almost exclusively for the remainder of the tour, even though Martinez hated the name, and even though, according to the Bible, Lazarus was the man Jesus raised from the dead, not the one doing the raising. For the allusion to make sense, we should have called the old man Lazarus. More than once, I said as much to the guys, but nobody who had gone over to using Lazarus, primarily, ever changed his behavior and went back to “Martinez” as a result of me pointing out the inherent error.

“Come on, Professor,” they said, using their nickname for me that I hated. “We’re not calling him Jesus. That’s just dumb. He’s Lazarus, brah. Seriously. Don’t overthink this shit.”

Novel Excerpt: Elliot Ackerman’s ‘Red Dress in Black and White’

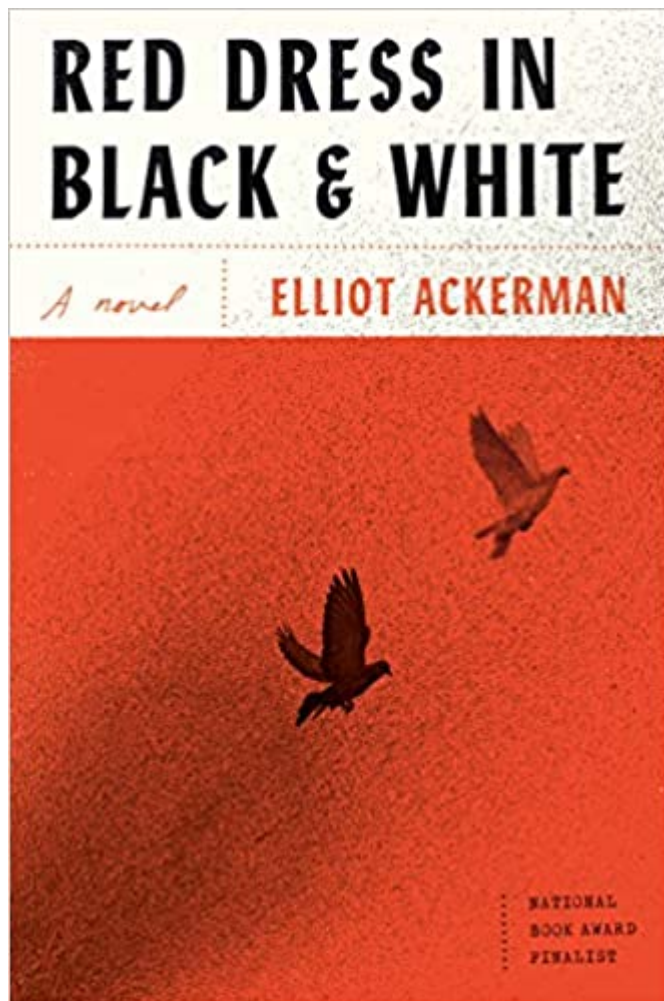
That evening, at half past nine

To William, the question of his mother is clear. The question of his father is more complicated, because there is Peter.

The night that they meet, William is about seven years old and

his mother has brought him to one of Peter's exhibits. She hasn't said much to her son, just that she has an American friend, that he takes pictures and that the two of them are going to see that friend's art, which is very special. That's what she always calls it, *his art*.

His mother doesn't drive, at least not in this city, and in the taxi on the way there she keeps looking at her wristwatch. It isn't that they are late, but that she's anxious to arrive at the right time, which is not to say right on time. The apartment she's trying to find is off İstiklal Caddesi, which is a sort of Ottoman Grand Rue running through the heart of Istanbul, the place of William's birth but a home-in-exile to his mother, who, like her friend Peter, is American. As their cab crawls along Cevdet Paşa Caddesi, the seaside road which handrails the Bosphorus Strait, she stares out the window, her eyes brushed with a bluish cosmetic, blinking slowly, while she absently answers the boy's questions about where they are going and whom they'll meet there. William holds a game called Simon on his lap. It is a palm-size disk divided into four colored panels—blue, red, green, yellow—that flashes increasingly complicated patterns, which reflect off the cab's night-darkened windows. The aim is to repeat those patterns. It was a gift from his father and his father has the high score, which he has instructed William to try to beat.



An allée of birch canopies their route and they skirt the high limestone walls of Dolmabahçe Palace. Their cab jostles in and out of first gear in the suffocating traffic until they break from the seaside road and switchback into altitudes of linden-, oak- and elm-forested hills. When the sun dips behind the hills, the lights come on in the city. Below them the waters of the Bosphorus, cold and pulling, turn from green-blue to just black. The boat lights, the bridge lights, the black-white contrast of the skyline reflecting off the water would come to remind the boy of Peter and, as his mother termed it, his art.

After paying the fare, his mother takes him by the hand, dragging him along as they shoulder through the evening foot traffic trying to find their way. Despite the darkness eternal day lingers along the İstiklal, flightless pigeons hobble along the neon-lit boulevard, chestnuts smolder from the red-

painted pushcarts on the street corners, the doughy smell of baked açma and simit hangs in the air. The İstiklal is cobblestone, she has worn heels for the occasion, and when she catches one in the grouting and stumbles into the crowd, she knocks a shopping bag out of another woman's hand. Standing from her knees, William's mother repeatedly apologizes and a few men reach under her arms to help her up, but her son quickly waves them away and helps his mother up himself. After that the two of them walk more slowly and she still holds his arm, but now she isn't dragging her son, and when the boy feels her lose balance once more, he grabs her tightly at the elbow and with the help of his steady grip she manages to keep on her feet.

They turn down a quiet side street, which aside from a few shuttered kiosks has little to recommend it. The apartment building they come to isn't much wider than its door. After they press the buzzer, a window opens several floors above. A man ducks his head into the bracing night and calls down to them in a high-pitched yet forceful voice, like air through a steel pinhole. He then blows them an invisible kiss, launching it off an open palm. William's mother raises her face to that kiss and then blows one back. The street smells bitterly of scents the boy doesn't yet recognize and it is filled with the halos of fluorescent lamps and suspect patches of wetness on the curbs and even the cinder-block walls. The buzzer goes off and William's mother shoulders open the door. Inside someone has hammered a plank across the elevator entry. It has been there long enough for the nail heads to rust. They climb up several floors where the brown paint scales from the brick. The empty apartment building meets them with an uproar of scattering rats and the stairwell smells as bitter as the street.

A shuttle of unclasping locks receives his mother's knock at the apartment door and then the same man who had appeared in the window presses his face to the jamb. His gaze is level

with the fastened chain and his eyes are pretty and spacious, as if hidden, well-apportioned rooms existed within them. The honey-colored light from inside the apartment shines on his skin. His eyebrows are like two black smudges. William notices the plucked bridge between them, and also his rectangular smile with its brilliantly white teeth. The man is uncommonly handsome, and William feels drawn to him, as if he can't quite resolve himself to look away.

The chain unlatches and then half a dozen or so men and broad-shouldered women spill across the apartment's threshold, pressing against William's mother, kissing her on the cheek, welcoming her. When they kiss William on the cheek, the harsh, glancing trace of the men's stubble scrapes against his fresh skin. The women begin a refrain of *Wonderful to see you, Cat*, and while they escort her inside they keep saying *wonderful* over and over in their guttural voices as if that superlative is the last word of a spell that will transform them into the people they wish to be.

A blue haze of cigarette smoke hugs the ceiling. Tacked to the sitting room wall, next to a white hard hat displayed like a trophy, is a poster advertising this exhibit. It is a portrait Peter shot of one of the women. She was photographed shirtless from the shoulders up, her mascara runs down her cheeks, her lip is split, a small gash zigzags across her forehead, and her wig—a tight bob symmetrical as a rocketeer's helmet—is missing a few tufts of hair. That summer, protests had shaken the city, shutting it down for weeks. Hundreds of thousands had squared off with the authorities. William's dominant memories of those events aren't the television images of riot police clubbing the environmental activists who opposed a new shopping mall at Taksim Square's Gezi Park—seventy-four acres of neglected lawns with a crosshatch of dusty concrete walkways shaded by dying trees—or even the way so many everyday people surprised themselves by joining the protesters' ranks, but instead William remembers his father

pacing their apartment on his cellphone, unable to drive into the office because of the many blocked streets as he negotiated a construction deal on a different shopping mall across town.

By the time the protests had finished, the city's long-persecuted queer community had assumed its vanguard. This caused one columnist, a friend of Peter's, to observe, "Among those who struggled for their rights at the police barricades at Gezi Park, the toughest 'men' were the transgender women." And so, Peter had a name for his exhibit. In the poster, battered though she is, his subject's eyes hold a certain, scalding defiance, as if she can read the words beneath her: *The Men of Gezi, An Exhibit*. As William's mother wanders into the apartment she becomes indistinguishable from the others, blending perfectly into this crowd.

. . .

Catherine and William have arrived at Peter's exhibit right on time, which is to say that they have arrived early. The apartment belongs to Deniz, the one who had appeared in the window to let them in. His date, who takes their coats, is a university-age girl with a pageboy haircut. She is as beautiful as Deniz is handsome. Her mouth is lipsticked savagely, and with it she offers Catherine and William a thin smile before retreating to the sofa, where she stares absorbedly into her phone. Soon others arrive and Deniz comes and goes from a small galley kitchen off the sitting room, where his guests pick at the food he's elegantly laid out on the thinnest of budgets. Not much wine, but carefully selected bottles from his favorite bodegas, a few plates of fresh sliced vegetables on ice bought end-of-day for a bargain at last Sunday's market, small boxes of expensive chocolates to ornament each table. William can't keep track of who is who, as there are several Hayals, as well as many Öyküs and Nurs. Their self-assigned names affirm their identity, but in this political climate also serve the double purpose of noms de

guerre. Who knows if one Öykü was born an Arslan and one Hayal was born an Egemen. Why so many of them had chosen the same names, he couldn't say. What seemed most important was that they had chosen.

His mother makes him a small plate and sits him in a chair by the window. While William picks at his dinner, the scented and beautiful crowd swarms around her, saying *Cat that* and *Cat this*. To take her son here, without his father's permission, so that she can be called Cat instead of Catherine, which is what everyone else calls her, endears her to the Men of Gezi. She has made a choice, just as they have. Having lost sight of his mother, William removes the game Simon from his pocket. He sits by the window and he plays.

Soon everyone has arrived and the apartment becomes too warm. Deniz walks to where William sits and heaves open the window. William glances up from his game. His eyes are drawn to Deniz's muscled arms, his rounded shoulders, how strong he is. A hint of breeze passes through. Deniz cracks a door catty-corner to the window and whispers inside, "Our guests are here." Nobody replies and he says it again. Then a man's voice answers, "Yeah, okay," and Deniz shuts the door and returns to mingle in the crowd, where William has lost his mother.

Whatever this night is about exists just beyond that door, so William stands from his chair by the window. Carefully, he turns the knob. The hinges open smoothly, without a trace of noise. Inside there is light: white walls, white floor and ceiling. The room is transformed into a gleaming cube. The scent of fresh paint hangs heavily around Peter, who stands in the room's center, his back to the door, surrounded by his portraits. William steps behind him and watches.

Peter has almost hung the exhibit. A pair of photos lean one against each of his legs. They are printed in the same dimensions as the other portraits, twelve by eighteen, and the finishes are a monochromatic black-and-white matte. In front

of him a single empty nail protrudes from the wall. He combs his fingers through his longish brown curls, which he often teases into a globe of frizz while concentrating. He cranes his neck forward, as if trying to stoop to a normal person's height, which bends him into the shape of a question mark. He has pulled his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and his alternating gaze dips into their lenses and then shifts above them. None of this seems to help Peter resolve the decision with which he's wrestling. William watches him for a while, until Peter feels the boy's eyes on his back despite the many sets of photographed eyes that encircle him.

Peter turns around. His scrutiny is slow and accurate. "Who are you?" he asks. As an afterthought, he adds, "And shut the door."

William does as requested but remains silent.

"Wait, are you Cat's boy?" Peter combs his fingers back through his hair and he puckers his nose toward his eyes as if the remark had left a spoiled, indigestible taste on his lips. "She brought you," he says, like an accusation, or statement, or even a compliment. William can't figure out which, so, finally, he says, "Yes."

"Come here," says Peter. "I need your help with something." He has transformed the cramped bedroom into a pristine gallery, and William steps carefully through the space Peter has created. "I can't decide on the last photo." Then Peter crouches and tilts out the two frames balanced against his legs. William crouches alongside him. One of the two photographs is similar to all of the others: a man with long, stringy hair wearing makeup looks back, a bruise darkens his cheek, a cut dimples his chin, he wears a hard hat like the one hanging on the other room's wall by the poster. Though he stares directly at the camera, his eyes are not set on parallel axes—one wanders menacingly out of the frame.

The subject of the other photograph is beautiful.

Peter has shot this young woman in the same dimensions and lighting as the rest of his portraits. A sheet of dark hair falls straight to her shoulders. There is a bruise around her eye. Up from her chin and along her jaw she also has a cut. She wears a bright dress, whose shade in black and white is exactly the same shade as the cut. A tote bag hangs from her shoulder. Her eyes fix on William clearly, in a way that feels familiar to him, the reflection in her pupil serving as a kind of a mirror.

"This one's a bit different," Peter says. "She was born a woman."

Being a boy, William doesn't understand the exhibit, the nature of Peter's subjects or why he would mix in a single photograph of this one particular woman. But William knows the effect the second photograph has on him. He tells Peter that he likes it best. "You sure?" asks Peter.

He says that he is.

Peter hoists the last photograph onto the wall. As he takes a step back, he crosses his arms and examines it a final time. Then he crouches next to William. Peter has pushed his glasses all the way up his nose and his hands are planted firmly on his knees. "We'd better go find your mother," he says.

. . .

Twenty photographs hang inside of the gallery. About the same number of people mingle in the kitchen and sitting room. William recognizes many of the faces he has seen in the portraits. Peter's eyes shift among them, as if counting the tops of their heads. When it appears that he has found all of the portrait's subjects, he takes off his glasses and tucks them into the breast pocket of his corduroy sports coat.

A knife clinks against a wineglass. The noise comes from a woman who stands alone in a corner of the apartment. The party faces her. Around her neck on a lanyard dangles a blue badge with an embossed seal—a bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch between two furious talons. This places her in the U.S. diplomatic corps. In her photo on the badge she wears the same navy blue suit jacket with a boxy cut and powder blue shirt as on this night, giving the impression that she has only the one outfit, or maybe multiple sets of the same outfit. Her face is lean. Like that of Deniz's date, her black hair is cut into an easy-to-maintain, yet severe, pageboy. Her complexion is such that she could readily be mistaken for a native of this city. A slim and no-nonsense digital triathlete's watch cuffs her wrist. The crowd turns its attention to her. She glances down at her chest, as if she can feel the many sets of eyes settling on her badge.

Awkwardly, she lifts the badge from around her neck, having forgotten to remove it when she left her desk at the consulate. She then raises her glass. "Thank you all for being here," she says. Her eyes land with sincerity on Deniz, who's telling his date to put away her phone. When he looks up he seems startled, as if confused at receiving thanks for being present in his own home. "And thank you to my old friend Deniz, for lending us his apartment. He was one of the first people I met when I came here nine years ago—"

"The first and last reception you ever threw at the Çırağan Palace," interrupts Deniz with a good-natured smile.

Kristin gives him a look and he shrugs, settling back into his seat. Her gaze then turns to Peter and she speaks to him directly. "I want to congratulate you on this remarkable exhibit and say how proud the Cultural Affairs Section is to have helped, in our small way, to host tonight's event."

Everyone toasts.

"That's very kind of you, Kristin," says Peter, but his words stall in the forest of raised glasses, and before he can say anything more, Kristin continues her remarks, speaking over him, saying that she hopes Peter's photos will bring awareness not only to the events in Gezi Park but also to "this community's long struggle for equal rights and dignity." The room listens, politely, but by the time she finishes most of the crowd, including William and his mother, has migrated into the gallery.

Each person falls silent as they find their image on the blistering white walls. On one side are the portraits of the battered "men" of Gezi and on the other side are the women with their meticulously layered makeup and hair arranged as best as they can manage or covered with a wig for an evening out. Viewed from the doorway, a duplicate of Peter's exhibit begins to form among the guests. Then the finished product appears: a set piece, the exhibit itself as subject, portraits in and out of the frame. William can't put words to it, but he feels the effect Peter has created.

"What did you help him with?" his mother asks.

Of the twenty portraits, the only one that nobody stands in front of is the girl in the dress chosen by William. He points toward it and his mother says nothing but leaves him and wanders to its spot on the wall. Now every portrait is mirrored by its subject, or, in the case of his mother, a nearly identical subject. William turns back toward the door, where Peter leans with his camera hung around his neck. He snatches it up and takes a picture of his exhibit. Then he departs into the sitting room.

Deniz and his guests circulate among the portraits, theorizing about themselves in Peter's work, honing in on different details within the photos. William can hear them teasing one another, saying that they look like hell, or some variation on the same. The quiet that had descended so quickly lifts. The

party that began in the sitting room and kitchen now resumes in the gallery. William's mother has drifted away from the photograph of the girl in the dress, even avoiding it, instead finding protection with Deniz and the others, who keep her at the center of their conversation with their *Cat that* and *Cat this*. William has no one to stand beside, so he follows Peter.

Kristin has forgone the gallery and stands by the window. With her thumbs she punches out a text message. Peter sidles over to her and she glances up from her phone. "I have to go," she says.

"You liked the exhibit that much?" Peter says self-deprecatingly. "What's the matter? Problem at home?"

"No, nothing like that. I've got to get back to work." "It's almost midnight."

"Not in Washington it isn't, but the exhibit's beautiful. Congratulations." Kristin tucks her phone back into her overstuffed handbag, from which she removes a small bottle of Purell. She squeezes a dab into her palms, which she vigorously kneads together. Heading to the door, she nearly bumps into William, who is slowly angling across the room toward Peter. "It's almost midnight," Kristin says to the boy in a tender almost motherly tone, as if the fact that he is up at this hour is more remarkable than the fact that he is at Deniz's apartment in the first place.

"That's Catherine's boy," says Peter.

Kristin glances behind her, offering Peter a slight rebuke. Of course she knows that this is Catherine's boy. "Don't let your mother stay out too late," she says to him, then touches his cheek.

"He won't," says Peter, answering before William can. Kristin leaves and Peter and William install themselves at the window, staring toward the streetlamps with their halos.

"Take a look here," says Peter, lifting the camera from his chest. William tentatively leans closer.

"The portrait you picked was perfect." Peter guides the boy next to him by the shoulder. With his head angled toward Peter's chest, William stares into the viewfinder. The picture Peter took inside of the gallery is a symmetrical panorama, five portraits hung on each of four separate walls, with every person a reflection of their own battered image.

"Your mom filled the last spot."

William vacantly nods.

"One of the first rules of being a photographer," says Peter, "is that you have to take hundreds of bad photos to get a single good one." He points back into the viewfinder. "This is the one shot that I wanted, understand?" He is inviting William to be in on something with him, even though William doesn't completely understand what it is.

The boy offers a timid smile.

"Photography is about contrasts, black and white, light and dark, different colors. For instance, if you put blue next to black, the blue looks darker. If you put that same blue next to white, it looks lighter." Peter flips through a few more images on the viewfinder, pointing out pictures that demonstrate this effect. Each time that William nods, it seems to please Peter, so William continues to nod. "But the blue never makes the white look lighter and it never makes the black look darker. Certain absolutes exist. They can't be altered."

Catherine wanders over. She takes Peter's hand in hers, quickly laces together their fingers, and then lets go. "The exhibit is fantastic," she says.

William reaches for his mother's hand and grips it tightly.

Peter shrugs.

"You don't think so?" she asks.

He dips his gaze into the viewfinder, scrolling back through the images.

"I'm sorry more people didn't show up," she continues. "I'd hoped a couple of critics might come to write reviews. I know Kristin tried to get the word out through the consulate, but you know most of the papers are afraid to print anything on this subject."

"Meaning photography?" says Peter.

"Meaning them. Don't be cute."

He tilts the viewfinder toward Catherine. She tugs the camera closer so that its strap cinches against his neck as she takes a deeper look. On reflex, her two fingers come to her mouth. "This whole thing was a setup for that photo?"

He takes his camera back and nods.

She glances into the exhibit, to where Deniz's guests revel at being the center of attention, for once. "Don't show them," she says.

"Catherine, I need to talk to you about something." Peter rests a hand on William's shoulder. "Give us a minute, buddy."

Catherine and Peter cross the room. They speak quietly by the front door while the party continues in the gallery. William reaches into his pocket and removes the Simon game. He plays for a few minutes, trying to match the elaborate patterns set before him, but he comes nowhere close to his father's high score. While he presses at the flashing panels, he begins to think about what Peter had told him, about contrast, about how one color might change another. He glances up from his game. As he watches Peter standing next to his mother, the two of

them speaking close together, she is like the blue. William can see the effect Peter has on her. While Peter looks the same, unchanged by her, like the black or the white.

*

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An Interview with Elliot Ackerman

Elliot Ackerman is the author of four novels—most recently Red Dress in Black and White, set in Istanbul primarily during the 2013 Gezi Park protests—and a memoir.

Here's a synopsis of [Red Dress](#):

“Catherine has been married for many years to Murat, an influential Turkish real estate developer, and they have a young son together, William. But when she decides to leave her marriage and return home to the United States with William and her photographer lover, Murat determines to take a stand. He enlists the help of an American diplomat to prevent his wife and child from leaving the country—but, by inviting this scrutiny into their private lives, Murat becomes only further enmeshed in a web of deception and corruption. As the hidden architecture of these relationships is gradually exposed, we learn the true nature of a cast of struggling artists, wealthy

businessmen, expats, spies, a child pulled in different directions by his parents, and, ultimately, a society in crisis. Riveting and unforgettably perceptive, *Red Dress in Black and White* is a novel of personal and political intrigue that casts light into the shadowy corners of a nation on the brink.”

Wrath-Bearing Tree is featuring an excerpt from *Red Dress* this month, and were glad that Ackerman agreed to drop in for a chat to accompany it. Here, he talks with WBT co-editor Andria Williams.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Hi, Elliot. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I just finished *Red Dress in Black and White*, which the *Seattle Times* called “cunning, atmospheric” and “splendidly gnarly” (!).

I’d love to hear about the writing process for the novel. I think I remember reading that you spent several years on this book. What gave you the idea for a love story set in Istanbul?



Elliot Ackerman, author of
*‘Red Dress in Black and
White* (Knopf, May 2020).

ELLIOT ACKERMAN: I lived in Istanbul for about three years, arriving shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests that are

mentioned in the novel and staying until 2016. Throughout my time in Istanbul, I could see how those protests—a political event—echoed in the personal lives of so many of my Turkish friends. I've always been interested in the fault line between the political and the personal, so it felt very natural to tell a love story not only set in Istanbul but also set within a society in crisis, which Turkey very much was during the years that I lived there.

AW: *One of the other Wrath-Bearing Tree editors, Michael Carson, and I both noticed some similarities – in tone, in the characters, in the use of a young boy as onlooker – to Graham Greene's The End of the Affair (but without the fatal dose of Catholicism!).*

Is Greene an influence, or are these similarities coincidental? Who are your biggest literary influences?

EA: I've always admired Greene's work and I think he and I are interested in many of the same themes, namely the intersection of the personal and the political. *The End of the Affair* is a great book but didn't directly influence the writing of this book, though I certainly see what you and Michael are talking about. William, the boy you mentioned in my novel, does serve as a more passive onlooker. The sections that are told from his point of view are important because they give us a glimpse of the principle characters from outside the many other biased perspectives that occupy the novel.

As for other literary influences, it's tough to say because they're constantly evolving. There are, of course, those classic writers who you encounter when you're younger and constantly return to (Greene, Hemingway, Malraux, Didion, Balzac, etc.) but I'm always reading and being influenced by what I read, so of course that filters into my work. Recently, I've greatly enjoyed books by Renata Adler (*Speedboat*), Richard Yates (*Young Hearts Crying*), Catherine Lacey (*Pew*), Richard Stern (*Other Men's Daughters*) and Shelby Foote (*Love*

In A Dry Season).

AW: You write quite frequently from what could be considered an “othered” position: with close third-person perspective on characters who are Afghan, in *Green on Blue*; women, such as Mary in *Waiting for Eden* and Catherine in *Red Dress in Black and White*; as a Turkish businessman in *Red Dress*, and as a dozen or more other people across your work who aren’t like yourself.

As a fiction writer myself, I’m interested in this part of the craft, and am wondering if you could speak a little about it. Some writers of fiction stick close to their own time frame, social milieu, and so forth, and that can work very well. But I think there’s a certain bravery and liveliness to writing from a variety of perspectives.

Did this sort of wide-ranging style come naturally to you, or did you have to train yourself? What about the adjacent humor of being frequently referred to as a “journalist” when you so often write from completely different points of view than your own?

Who is to say that I [even] am writing about the “other”? In *Green on Blue*, I wrote about a young man fighting in an Afghan militia; I spent three years embedded and fighting in the very militias I wrote about. Mary is a woman, sure, but she is a military spouse; if you know anything about my life, it will probably come as no surprise to you to learn that military spouses who’ve lost loved ones certainly don’t feel like the “other” to me, and in the case of Catherine nor does a woman living in the expatriate scene in Istanbul. Also, if you believe, as I do, that every person contains within them the “feminine” and the “masculine” it is no problem for a man to write from the female perspective or for a woman to write from the male one. As for Murat, he is Turkish, but he is also a businessman who struggles to balance his personal life with his professional life; and, well, let’s just say I have plenty

of loved ones who have faced similar struggles.

I only bring up these examples because the current fashion in so much of literature—and, sadly, in art—is to force writers into a cul-de-sac of their own experiences as defined by those who probably don't know them and are assuming the parameters of the artist's experience based on some superficial identity-based epistemology. That type of censoriousness makes for bad art and, in my view, bad culture.

AW: *Thanks for those thoughts!*

Much of 'Red Dress' is set around a dramatic protest which took place in Gezi Park, when citizens rallied against the government's urban development plan. Can you talk about these protests? Were you present for any of them?

EA: These protests—which occurred principally in May and June of 2013—began as a demonstration against the proposed development of Gezi Park—a greenspace in central Istanbul—into a shopping mall. The government reacted brutally to handful of activists and then the protests spread, becoming the greatest political upheaval in Turkish society in a generation.

I wasn't present for the initial set of protests but was present for the subsequent protests in the fall and into the following year. There are scenes in the novel that describe the protests and I recreated those based on conversations I'd had with friends who participated, as well as the work I did as a journalist covering subsequent protests in the same parts of the city.

AW: *Do you see reverberations of the Gezi Park protests in the current and enduring protests that have surged in the United States this summer?*

EA: The way the protests have captivated the public consciousness is certainly similar, but American society isn't Turkish society. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests led

to the re-writing of the Turkish constitution, a failed military coup, the creation of an executive presidency as opposed to a parliamentary one where Erdoğan can stay in power indefinitely, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of anti-Erdoğan intellectuals and the state takeover of the majority of media outlets. We're far from there, and I think it's important not to engage in hyperbole, as if the situation in the U.S. (troubling as it may be) is analogous to Turkey.

AW: In an interview with The Rumpus, you speak very eloquently about your time in the Marine Corps, and how much of it is essentially about "building love" for fellow Marines, but then being willing to tear this down – that the mission supersedes even such a strong love.

I see elements of this thinking in both Waiting for Eden and Red Dress. Can you speak more about this idea, in military service, life, and art?

EA: Art is the act of emotional transference. How often have you gone to a museum and been overwhelmed by a work of art? Or seen a film and cried? When I am writing—if it's going well—I am feeling something as I put the words on the page, and if you read that story and feel some fraction of what I was feeling then I have transferred my emotions to you. That we both feel something when we engage with the subject matter is an assertion of our shared humanity and that is an inherently optimistic act.

To create this type of art—in stories—you have to learn to love your characters. In the military—to serve, to sacrifice—you have to learn to love the people you are alongside. My time in the Marines taught me how to love people across our many seemingly profound but ultimately superficial divides. That impulse has ultimately found its way into my writing. My hope is that it finds its way to my readers in the stories I tell.

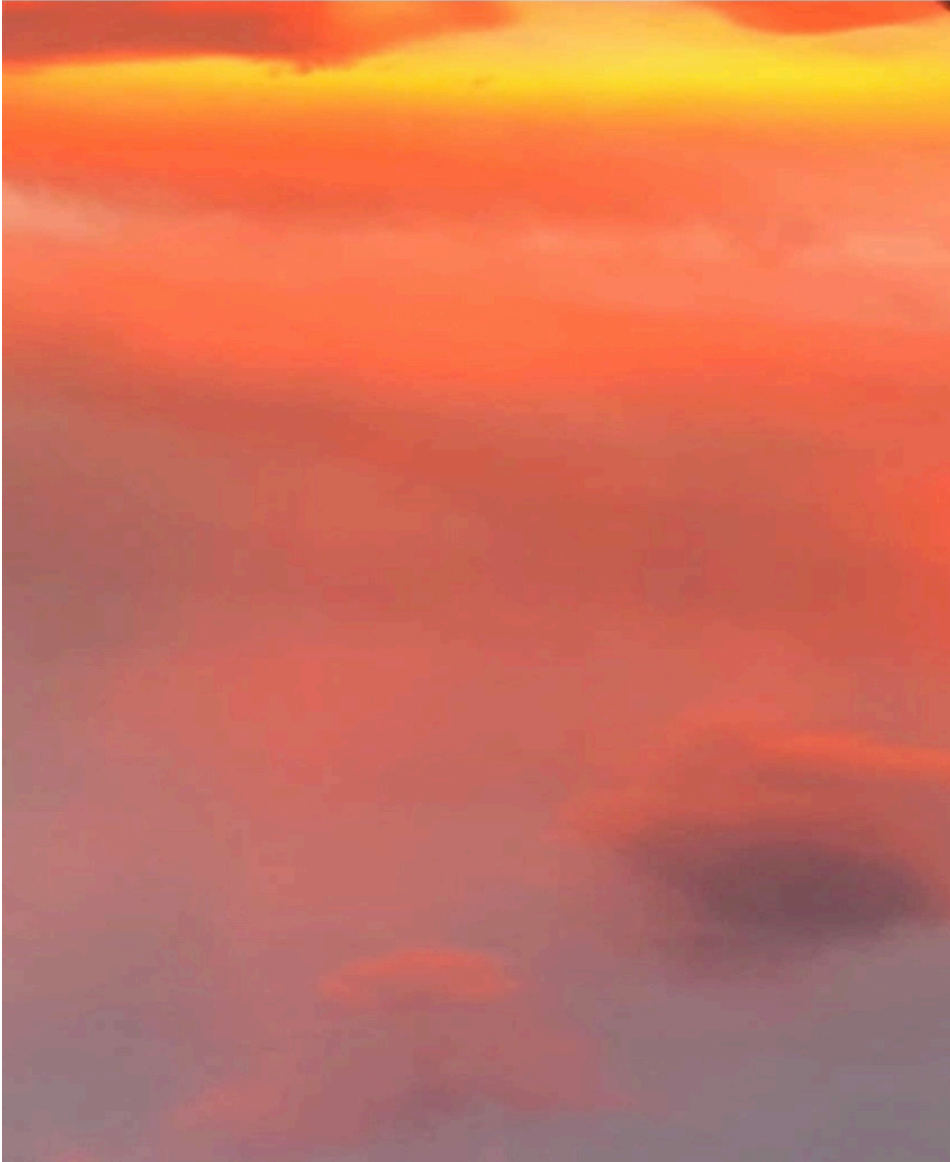
AW: What are you working on next?

EA: I've co-authored a novel with my friend Admiral James Stavridis, whose last position was as Supreme Allied Commander Europe; it is a work of speculative fiction (so a bit of a departure for me) which imagines what would happen if the U.S. and China went to war, primarily at sea. It is a story told on a broad canvas with a large cast of characters. It's been a lot of fun to write and will come out in March 2021, with Penguin Press. These calamitous events take place in the year 2034, from which the novel takes its title: *2034*.

AW: That sounds like lots of fun. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Elliot.

[Red Dress in Black and White](#) *is now available wherever books are sold.*

**New Poetry from Mbizo
Chirasha: "Casava Republics,"
"Sad Revolutionary
Lullabies," "Rhetorics"**



SUNSETS OF POLITICAL MASTURBATION / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**CASAVA
REPUBLICS**

Juba

Child of lost sperm in sunsets of
political masturbation

Wagadugu

Deadline of our
revolutions

Darfur

Constipated stomach ,disease ravaged,

bloodless dozing monk.

Nairobi

Culture lost in the dust of Saxon lexicon
and gutter slang

Soweto

Xenophobia
Drunk and Afro-phobia sloshed.

Marikana

Cervical blister of the unfinished
revolution fungi.

Harare

Corruption polonium deforming elders into
political hoodlums

Congo

Lodge of secessionists and human
guillotines

SAD REVOLUTIONARY LULLABIES

.....Sing songs of afghan circumcised,

Damascus masturbating bullets

Sing *Belafonte* Sing!

Of
revolutions that never crawled, sing!

Lumumba, see whiz kids castrating
political gods

Nkurumah, see them mutilating
revolutionary goddesses

Sing *Kunta*, Sing *Kinte*

I am tired of revolutions importing
colonial mood,

Propaganda decayed pimps frying anthems
like *frikadels*

Tired savages roasting constitutions in
corruption oil pans

Sing songs of freedoms that never walked,
Sing!

RHETORICS

Mandela, the summer sun that rose through
rubbles of our winter

Gadafi and Sadamu making *shadufs* and
pyramids

..... . another spring

Obama and Osama pulling rich political
carrot in *Segorong*

Robin Island slept golden nightmares and
charcoal dreams,

Soweto virgins cracking their under feet
in the long walk to freedom

Faces carrying the burden of freedom and
anthems.

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Mosul Reflections,” “St. Martin in the City,” “The Rearview Has Two Faces”



STOMACH OF A COUNTRY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Mosul Reflections

Ten years and the place is not the same.
Memory of green hills in a dry land,
cratered by what fell from the sky.
I don't know whether to trust the image
on the screen or the one in my mind.

One I only knew as Sayyd gave well water,
sweet tea and mince meat on laffa.
We were tired from the spring rains,
three days in the stomach of the country,
we sank into the hard wooden benches
and we ate.

I thought of Jonah, not wanting
to travel here, and when he did, enraged
at an apocalypse that never came –
how he rested under a bush then watched
it die.

The father of the family smiled
as I ate – both of us, with time, smiling.

Dost thou well to be angry?

His child in the corner never took her
eyes off me. Her mother would glance
over, expressionless, as if waiting
for something that never happened.

Rain fell like mortars, knocking the edges
from the dirt roads, craters in the middle.
In a few minutes it would take us with it,
descending. We'd see the fragments,
some carved reliefs; we'd wondered
what we'd destroyed, what we'd left
the world – an image of broken rock
in need of a makeshift savior.

St. Martin in the City

Hunger sometimes reaches up
grabs your cloak while you're riding.
You can't shield your eyes,
or go into hiding.

Every treasure you've carried home,
is never enough.
A beggar beside the road, lifts his head;
loose skin and sullen,
he shivers and so do you.

* * *

The day before we shipped
I was walking with Preacher
into the Walgreens for cold
medicine and we saw a man
asking for change. 'Pity it
couldn't be him,' Preacher said,
not waiting while I fished for coins.

Since returning the eyes
of every refugee leap
out of every face.

* * *

The stuff of nightmares.

Suffering
you thought you knew.

Sometimes it happens, a hand
reaches out and causes
you to draw back – until
you see your fear in their eyes

both surprised how easily
the veil between you parts.

The Rearview Has Two Faces

Your memory has two faces. The thought occurs
as you adjust your mirror in the chapel parking lot.

The eulogy's done its job, a few tears from even
the most stoic, stone-faced ground pounders,
the cracks in the First Sergeant's voice as he belts
'Smithson,' once, twice and again – as he waits
for a response that never comes.

If you believe
the words-

he defended the abstraction of freedom with every fiber,
never showed late, said his prayers, and flossed.
You remember an emails he sent. 'When I get back,
there's a lineman job in Oklahoma. And the houses
are cheap.' Days before he did it.

You remember
the night
on your property, shooting empties off fence posts.
'I'm not going back,' he said. And you knew he would.
Frustrating as hell but reliable. And you'd rather
have sincere doubt than cocksure and careless.

The sun from the East burns the side of your face
through the driver's side window. In the rearview
you can see your left side turning red.

Yeah.

The night he told you, you didn't sleep, agonized over
what to do about what he hadn't done yet.
And when he showed that morning, early,
two full duffel bags and a goofy grin, you chided
yourself for doubting.

You look one more time.

Sometimes he's there sitting in the back seat,
an afterimage lingering after the flash has burned,
you still trying to regain your vision.

An Interview with Filmmaker Jordan Martinez

First Sergeant Russell Tuason faces a dilemma: does he deploy once again to Iraq to lead the troops he has been training, or does he take a meritorious retirement from the Army and begin a family with his wife Krissy?

His best friend, Sgt. Emmanuel Sanchez (Ramon Rodriguez), tells him that he has already proven himself and has no need to return to battle, that he can “ride off into the sunset.” However, In Jordan Martinez’s 2019 film *The Gatekeeper*, Tuason feels that if he retires he will be abandoning his duty and his men, sacrificing his honor, but if he deploys he will be jeopardizing the hopes and dreams of his wife Krissy (Jennifer Marshall), and the promises he made to her. In an argument with his wife, he says, “If I don’t finish what I’ve started, then what kind of leader does that make me?,” a conflict that is at least as old *The Odyssey*. Tuason is torn between what he “wants to do” and what he “should do,” between family and duty. He chooses duty.

The Gatekeeper, Jordan Martinez’s first short film, begins with this conflict. Martinez explains that he “wanted to convey that going back is a choice. Russell doesn’t have to go, but he feels his sense of purpose or duty is to ensure the safety of his men.” Later on, we discover that Russell’s sense of duty isn’t the only thing compelling him. “Perhaps in his mind he believes he is choosing duty for the right reasons. Or is he lying to himself?”



The character of Tuason is portrayed by Christopher Loverro, an Army veteran of a 2005 deployment to Iraq, former SWAT Team member, and founder of Warriors for Peace Theatre. He remarks that he “struggled with suicide when I returned from Iraq, so much of what the character was going through were things I could relate to in my personal life. Everything my character in the film experienced were things that I could relate to or experienced personally or someone I served with experienced. I pulled from my own personal military bio or used soldiers and leaders I served with to pull from.”



The action shifts to Iraq, circa 2004, with Tuason's company in a firefight with insurgents (shot at Blue Cloud Movie Ranch in one day of production). As Tuason enters a courtyard scanning for the enemy, camera work and special effects lead to a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, creating disorientation and uncertainty. He hears the faint cries of a woman and enters a door which leads into a church. In a flash forward, he sees a flag-draped coffin (his?) and a woman, who in a later scene is shown to be his grieving widow.

Martinez, born in 1990, served for 10 years in the Army, which he joined at 17, training as a paratrooper and eventually becoming a Civil Affairs Specialist, with a deployment to Afghanistan. He says, "I was attracted to the military as a child. My sister was in the military at the time and I wanted nothing more than to go on an adventure and see the world. When I was about sixteen years old I knew my goal would be to

join after high school and I wasn't afraid of going overseas even though the wars were going full speed."

After he left the service, Martinez had some jobs in various film productions. He learned about the graduate program in Cinematic Arts at USC and "made the second best decision of his life" to apply. He was accepted, and thus Martinez fulfilled a life-long dream to make movies, which began when he was eight years old growing up in Southern California. Brian DePalma's *Scarface* (1983) made a significant impact, as did *What Dreams May Come* (1998), starring Robin Williams. The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) were influential, he says, for their conceptual frameworks. While at USC, Martinez studied with such top industry professionals as Robert Nederhorst, Visual Effects Supervisor on *John Wick 3*, Academy Award Winner Michael Fink, and John Brennan, Virtual Production Lead on *The Lion King* (2019). *The Gatekeeper* is ground-breaking in utilizing on such a small project "motion-capture previsualization," a type of digital storyboarding which allows complex scenes to be created before shooting, thus saving time on the set. All told, the film came to fruition over a year and a half, from the script to post-production to screenings at film festivals. *The Gatekeeper* is Martinez' final project for his Master of Fine Arts in Cinematic Arts from USC. He graduated in December, 2019.

As the firefight continues the company is pinned down, and Tuason, now in command, faces another choice: return to the base or maintain its position and take the fight to the enemy. He decides that they will "stand our ground," a fatal mistake that leads to the deaths of everyone in the company except Tuason. When he returns stateside he suffers from intense survivor's guilt and believes that he "should have died there with them . . . They all died because of me." At his best friend's, Sanchez's, funeral, shot at the Los Angeles National Cemetery, he hopes to obtain absolution from Sanchez's widow,

but she tells him that her husband is dead “all because you wanted to be a hero,” and referring to their daughter: “and now she has to grow up without hers.” This sends Tuason further into depression.

As he contemplates suicide, he is visited by Sanchez’ ghost. Sanchez is an emissary, but from where? Heaven? Hell? Is he the gatekeeper? As Tuason makes a final pact with Sanchez, he has visions of his childhood, his men, his wife and their newborn daughter being given up for adoption. The final shot of the film is a close up of Tuason’s face, eyes questioning, searching. Martinez provides no answers, preferring ambiguity and individual interpretations.



The film has been called a “military thriller” and a “psychological thriller,” but Martinez says “it could be a military thriller, a psychological thriller, a supernatural

thriller, a drama, a war film, and in all honesty it can be all of these. It just depends on your perspective. This was my initial goal in making the film because no one wants to be told what to believe. I really wanted it to start a conversation, perhaps even pose the question, 'What did I just see?'"



Martinez, left, during his Army service.

Martinez wanted the film to be accurate in military aspects. Even though he was in the service for 10 years, he relied on Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Stroud to insure authenticity.

In a twist, Stroud was Loverro's First Sergeant in Iraq in 2005 and Martinez's Command Sergeant Major in Afghanistan in 2012. The casting of veterans in major roles and the use of veterans behind the camera was crucial to him, not only for realism but also to allow vets to tell their stories in the non-stereotypical ways he sees in many big-budget films. "Veterans were in front of and behind the camera," he

explains. "Veterans are the first to destroy a film for its lack of authenticity since they are trained to find flaws. Therefore, they are the hardest to please. I wanted to ensure I had extra attention to detail to make sure they were immersed in the experience since bringing them back to those memories of service was extremely important to me." He notes that he's received many emotional responses from military wives and veterans. He adds, "it's an honor to be able to connect with those closest to the material." His sentiment is shared by the film's co-star, [Jennifer Marshall](#), a Navy veteran from Denver, CO, who notes that she has occupied many roles related to the military: she has served, she has been a wife at home while her husband deployed, and she has lost friends both while serving and then to PTSD after coming home.

"I was honored to play the role and bring my real-life experiences to making her a real person." Marshall adds, "It's essential that veterans in Hollywood work with other veterans and bring our stories to the forefront. The alternative is Hollywood telling our stories for us . . . often times riddled with errors and half-truths."

Loverro says, "War veterans offer an understanding and breadth of knowledge that give them an advantage a civilian actor or director might not have. That's not to say civilians can't make great films about war, obviously many have. However, during the making of the film we felt what we were telling 'our' story and that process in and of itself was cathartic."

Beyond authenticity, Martinez's overarching reason for making the film was to address PTSD and the human toll as a result of war, and by extension other types of trauma. Having lost friends to suicide, he wanted to show that an extreme decision has ramifications beyond the individual. He points out that civilian rates of suicide are also high and that many of those who have committed suicide had experienced trauma. "I think this film can touch on trauma of all types and that those experiences can negatively influence our judgment, leading us

into a treacherous depression or a dangerous thought process.”



He hopes the film can start an honest conversation about what the military does to people, and that the purpose of the military can be both fighting wars and also healing those who fight in wars, and better preparing them for how war changes them as well as helping veterans readjust to civilian society. Aspects of the military mentality can take a toll not only on vets but also family members and he believes that more discussion in the country as a whole could help prevent veteran suicide.

Martinez's long-term plan is to obtain funding to make a full-length feature of *The Gatekeeper* and receive theatrical distribution. He has a treatment for the entire film that he is ready to pitch to major studios. His goal is that the film will bring this conversation to national and international audiences.

The following is an interview between professor Larry Abbott and filmmaker, Jordan Martinez.

LARRY ABBOTT: Can we start with a bit about your background and how you came to be a filmmaker?

JORDAN MARTINEZ: I was born in 1990. I'm from Southern California. I grew up all around the area when I was a kid. My mom was a single mom. She moved around, county to county pretty much. I enlisted in the Army in 2008. Once I joined, I became a paratrooper, joined Civil Affairs, and eventually became a Civil Affairs Sergeant. I was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 to 2013, in Kandahar Province.

After that, I was still in the Reserves, all the way up until last year. The last couple years, I started working in Japan for USFJ. I officially got out last year, a total of 11 years, most of it Reserves.

I started getting into film in 2013, when I got back from Afghanistan. I met a couple veterans who brought me to some organizations in Hollywood, got me some jobs here and there, and I started doing a lot of background production assistant work.

I realized that that was not the path toward becoming a director, which is what I always wanted to be from childhood. It's a very difficult journey to become a director. There was a lot of opposition, but if I wanted to have a chance, I needed to get educated. I had my Bachelor's Degree in Communications & Film, but I didn't feel like it was really a substantial degree. I didn't feel like it really taught me the technical skills I needed to work in an evolving film industry.

I entered the film program at USC and I've been there for the last four years. I learned a lot about the technical side, and I met a lot of great people, and got more experience. That's exactly what I wanted, to have more stuff on my reel, build my

network, learn more about the technical skills that are involved in filmmaking.

I had the opportunity to be mentored by an Academy Award winner, one of the visual effects supervisors for *John Wick: Chapter 3*. He was a great mentor of mine and still is. He helped me out with making *The Gatekeeper*, as far as telling me where I was going wrong, what I was doing right. *The Gatekeeper* was definitely the pinnacle of my work at USC.

ABBOTT: Why did you decide on a military theme?

MARTINEZ: I realized early on that military films are not really being told. It's funny, because I didn't really think, when I started in the film industry, that I was going to be a director of military-related films. I didn't think that was my path. I didn't think much about that genre-wise.

When I started going to USC I really started to think: Okay, I need to double-down on this because there's no one else doing the job. There are no movies, in my opinion, that are really, at the moment, doing a lot of justice to the experiences of serving in post-9/11 wars. I started getting my feet wet with that.

2016 was very divisive. I really feel like it was similar to—maybe not quite the same, because I wasn't born in that era—but similar division-wise to the Vietnam era. You had a lot of protests. You had people who just didn't like the military. It's unfortunate, but you get a lot of this in strongholds like Los Angeles and New York.

Regardless of all that, I made military-related films when there were people who didn't really like the underlying messages, who thought they were controversial. But I told them that they were accurate and often based on actual events that happened to people.

I work very hard to get my films as authentic as possible

because I know, as a veteran, how much we are willing to totally tear apart a movie. We look at something like *American Sniper* or all these high-budget movies and we say, "Hey, you had \$100 million. Why couldn't you get this shit right? Why couldn't you hire someone, a veteran, to help you out or even tell the story?"

I think that's part of the disconnect that I hope we'll see change. We already are seeing "veteran" being its own diversity category. We're not really being represented in the film industry at all. If you look at the demographics, veterans are the least represented in the film industry.

I think that this is changing, and I've already seen the beginnings of it. I hope it continues to change because veterans want to be able to tell their own stories. They want to be able to enjoy films that are accurate and that honor the sacrifice that veterans have made in service to this country to further the ideals of freedom and democracy that have really been under attack for quite some time.

I'm not political in any way. I'm very independent-minded, but I do believe in America. I do believe that the sacrifices of our veterans are being misunderstood and not really being taken in total account.

We look at Veterans Affairs, we see tons of suicides. For me, I've known people who have either attempted or actually committed suicide in the military. It totally turns the world upside down for everyone around them. Friends and family are destroyed. I think, for far too long, it's been brushed under the rug.

The idea of *The Gatekeeper* began in 2015, believe it or not. It was my first film at USC. The original idea started when I saw *What Dreams May Come*, which is a Robin Williams film. It's something that many of us think about in the military. It's a military ideology: Valhalla, Warrior Heaven, and all that.

In the film Robin Williams' character goes into hell to save his wife. I felt this was a keen idea of film in general, an interesting concept, and I combined that with the ideals of the military and the genre of the military itself. I think it is its own genre at this point. My film is not really a thriller. It's not really military. It's not really a drama. It's all of those combined.

When I made the short film, sort of a prequel, I didn't have enough money. Back in 2015, I didn't have the assets. I did it for my first project at USC. It's a very, very restrictive time constraint. You have five minutes! But it was really well-liked. A lot of people liked the concept, but it just wasn't a big enough production. It didn't have enough screen time. It didn't have all those things that are necessary for a film.

USC is a very, I would say, liberal-minded campus, nothing wrong with that, but they are not into seeing the military in a positive light. I'm not making the military positive or negative. I'm making it authentic.

That's something that I think is not being recognized in Hollywood. The military is either portrayed as super evil or super good. That's just not what it is at all. It's not super good. It's not super bad. It's just an ideology that people fall into who are supposed to support the Constitution and the country of the United States.

That's the perspective that I didn't see represented, so I decided to keep making films that show what it's like being overseas as a soldier. I made a second film about Afghanistan. It was about a child suicide bomber. It got a lot of heat. A lot of people didn't like the fact that I was getting into controversial things about the war.

I said, "Okay, cool. I'm hitting a button here. I'm hitting something. I'm getting a reaction out of people, which is, for

better or worse, good." As long as it comes from truth, I think that that's a good place. Eventually, through my time at USC, I learned more and more, and I became known as "the military director."

ABBOTT: How important is authenticity?

MARTINEZ: Eventually, I was getting close to the end of my time at USC. I was there for four years, from 2016 until December of 2019. The process for making a thesis film is really about three semesters, a little over a year, and the script for the thesis film was really pretty much the same thing as my original short, which was essentially the same concept as *The Gatekeeper*. I have the same main actor, who's a good friend of mine, Chris Loverro. He himself is a war veteran. He's an amazing patriot, amazing veteran, amazing theatrical actor. My relationship with Chris is so strong I knew that I was going to be able to pull this film off with him.

For *The Gatekeeper*, he was instrumental with helping me build the firing range shown in the film, with helping me get right certain things that a high-ranking soldier would do. Even though I was in the military for ten years, I couldn't know everything. I think that's where Hollywood gets it wrong. They have directors who have spent zero time in the military, and then they don't even listen to the military advisor that the studio has provided for them.

I really tried to make the film as authentic as possible, as military people will totally rip apart any little thing that's incorrect in a movie. It's like, hey, if I'm going to be known as a military director, I better make sure I have this complete on lock the weapons, the uniforms, the jargon, the tactics, everything single thing has to be completely on point.

ABBOTT: How did the actual shoot progress?

MARTINEZ: We filmed *The Gatekeeper* in six and a half days. That was all we could afford within our budget. I was lucky enough to be able to get some financial help. I did spend a lot of my own money to get the project going, which I saved during my time in service, and then also I got scholarships and grants. I was very fortunate to get help from the Robert Rodriguez Scholarship, as well as a few other people that were kind enough to donate as well.

I built a lot of connections within my time at USC as well, so the weapons and the locations and everything like that, a lot of it I got for free or next to nothing, which was a huge help in being able to pull this thing off.

I had great help from people who chipped in their time, chipped in their energy, a lot of veterans that I knew within Hollywood that I had built a relationship with who knew me came out of the woodwork to make this film come alive. Jennifer Marshall, she's probably the most well-known actress in the film. She's been in *Stranger Things*. She's been in *Hawaii Five-0*. She has her own television show on CW called *Mysteries Decoded*.

It was a long and grueling process, but also a great process to collaborate with cast members who are veterans. I wanted to make this movie after I learned that a friend of mind had committed suicide around May 2018. I found out that he had hanged himself. It finally struck me that veteran suicide is a big problem. Essentially, I wanted to be able to convey to veterans, in their own language, how suicide is not the answer, no matter how depressed one is. Anybody can be susceptible to suicide.

ABBOTT: How does this concern come out in the film?

MARTINEZ: The lead character, Tuason, is the highest-ranking member in the platoon, the first sergeant. Even he can be susceptible to depression. That's what I wanted to show.

You're not weak for showing guilt.

A lot of this movie has to do with my own experiences. Some of the characters reflect my own perception about how the military really functions. Too many times we hear things that are not helpful to soldiers. I think there can be some change within the military to help people.

In my opinion, it's definitely against human nature to kill one another and see one another killed, and it can cause quite a lot of damage psychologically and spiritually to people.

That's the thing a lot of people don't see, too, especially from the outside, is that the experience is not all sobs and horrors. It's also very exhilarating and addicting. I virtually don't know any veteran who wouldn't go back overseas. I honestly don't think I know one. Every veteran I talk to, if you asked them today, "If you could put your gear on and you could go back to a war zone, would you do it?" I would guarantee you 75%, if not more, would say that they want to.

Once that feeling is in your blood, once that level of excitement is in your blood, it's impossible to top. Risky behavior, driving a fast car—that's why you see a lot of veterans on motorcycles, because that's the closest they can get to the type of thrill that makes them feel alive.

There's absolutely a psychological effect that combat has on people. Whether it's addicting or thrill-seeking, or whether it's a combination cocktail of all of those things, there is that element that you see in *The Gatekeeper*.

For me, I think there are a lot of similarities in the cultures of religious ideology and military ideology. There's loyalty. There's the idea of seeing each other in the afterlife. There's the idea of a higher purpose, of renouncing the individual self for the group.

That's what I wanted to show in *The Gatekeeper* as well. The whole scene, to Tuason, is about him believing that he's going to see his friend in the afterlife. This is something that is absolutely real in the military.

LA: Sanchez, Tuason's best friend, does appear as a ghost. What exactly does the title refer to?

JM: The title refers to multiple things, but the main thing is the gate between heaven and hell. That's what Sanchez' character in the afterlife is supposed to portray. It also has a dual meaning because the main character is somebody that essentially keeps the enemy at the gates as well. That's the big question: Who is really the gatekeeper? It is Tuason or is it Sanchez?

I also wanted to make this film connecting to people that believed in theism or people that were non-theist. That was very important to me. I wanted it to be connected on both sides. There's a huge religious element to the film, even in the beginning, when he says, "You're gonna send these guys to the afterlife." It's very strong in the narrative.

What I wanted to convey with this is that Tuason's belief system is, in my opinion, religious. The United States is still a Christian religious country.

LA: What were you after at the end of the film?

JM: At the very end, did he go to hell, or was it a hell he felt psychologically? You can perceive it in both ways. We all share this one thing that's on our minds more than others: the thought of death and the thought of going back into the earth, if there is life after death, and all of these other types of constructs. The life-after-death construct is definitely heavy—and has always been heavy—within the warrior mentality, because there's just so much of it within that culture.

I definitely had a very deep philosophical angle that I wanted to show. The main thing is that a lot of veterans are suffering and they are not only feeling guilt, but there is also the ideology of honor that is in the military ideology.

I think honor's great. It's great that people have the Medal of Honor. And the ideas and concepts of honor are good in a lot of ways. But I also think, in other ways, when we start to really look at it, it can have negative effects. How do you define honor? Can honor be fully achieved? What is the effect of lost honor?

I don't think people in the very strongholds of Hollywood care, to be honest with you. I don't think they really care about the veterans' suffering. I think they believe that the wars are evil. I think that this is a huge, how do I say, misfortune. It's a huge misfortune for all of us, because we're not getting movies like *The Gatekeeper* that can ask more questions. I want the audience to ask questions. I don't want to tell you what exactly it means. I want you to find a deeper meaning to it.

For me, my deeper meaning is: When we tell somebody they need to aspire to a sense of honor, and then you take it all away from them overnight, all these ideas of being a soldier, with the Tuason character, he didn't feel like he had achieved that honor, and that's where the guilt comes in, where he felt like he wanted to go back to combat, because he wanted more of this experience. This can absolutely crush and destroy people.

LA: The ending of the film is ambiguous. Tuason goes to the hospital and talks to Sanchez. You use some special visual effects.

JM: Not to give away any of this, but what I was trying to say with that—the veins, the choking—is it really does feel like we cannot communicate with the rest of the world. The pain he was feeling throughout the film suffocated him. That is much

more common and much more real: the war within the self.

Tuason joins the firefight to save his troops, which is definitely an honorable thing to do, but he makes the decision to not retreat and essentially go for revenge, for the satisfaction of killing the enemy and completing the mission. It doesn't work out. More of his men are lost because of his decision. He loses everything, including his own mental health.

You can't talk to the military about PTSD or you will be yanked from your command. All sort of repercussions would happen if you had any psychological disruption, especially during that period in Iraq of the '03-'05 era.

The military has definitely gotten better at this, but Tuason felt that he couldn't to talk to anyone within the military or within his family. He's being psychologically choked. He can't breathe at that moment because he's being pulled back into hell as well. So, there's a supernatural element combined with the element of his being suffocated, in so much pain, with this depression, this guilt, not being able to connect with anyone. It's a dual feeling that I was portraying there.

And then, with him at the very end, I wanted to add some suspense if he was going to kill himself or not. I wanted people to see what it is like to be in that suicidal state so they don't get to that state. I want veterans to feel what it would actually be like to be in that state—you're probably not immediately going to die in any certain circumstance. I don't care if you jump off a roof. You're probably still going to be conscious for some period of time, according to scientific data.

Even if you shoot yourself in the head, you're probably going to feel that pain of not being able to go back, the real regret. Who knows what goes on at that point? We don't know what kind of ideas and dreams you have before you leave this

world. I wanted to show that Tuason felt the pain, he saw the pain, of leaving his wife and have her shatter to pieces. She'll never be the same person again after her husband's death.

LA: When she's in the hospital bed, giving birth to the child she always wanted, the image of her is in black and white and her face is distorted.

JM: She's distorted. That's what the underlying message is that she's a shell of what she could've been and he gets to see the baby girl. He gets to feel the real pain of his ultimate decision, which is irreversible, of killing himself. That's what I want veterans to see.

And not just veterans. I wanted to connect with everyone. Even though this film is centered toward the veteran, I think a lot of people can understand the suicidal impulse. It doesn't matter if you were a first sergeant in the Army. That doesn't matter. What matters is that we all feel trauma. We all feel pain. We all sometimes feel like quitting, especially right now, with this coronavirus situation. There's a lot of depression, I'm sure, going on. The real tragedy is to give up and to give in. Taking your life is something that will affect all of those people around you in many different dimensions.

I wanted to be able to send that message to the big screen, because we're just seeing too much of this happening in our society. It's really an epidemic, maybe a pandemic, but there are is a shocking number of veterans who are committing suicide. I've seen it happen too many times. We've see the data.

LA: What were your influences growing up, filmmakers or otherwise?

JM: I'm a huge fan of *Scarface*. When I was eight years old, in 1998, I saw *Scarface* for the first time, and that's when I knew I wanted to become a filmmaker. There was something about

that film that made so much sense to me. It was just such a beautifully directed film.

Obviously, it was a little beyond my time. I was very young and the movie was probably ten years old at that point, or whatever, at least. But I just connected with it in such a way, and I kept watching it and watching it and watching it. It's a three-hour movie. I just fell in love with the artistic side of that film.

The Matrix was also a favorite film of mine from my era. There's a sleekness to *The Matrix* that I tried to emulate—being in another world, different dimensions. That's kind of what you see in *The Gatekeeper*. I tried to combine that sleek and slickness as much as I could.

LA: *The Gatekeeper's* structure is certainly non-linear.

JM: Exactly. The whole movie is really jumping between timelines. That's something I picked up from *Inception*. It's not my favorite movie by any means, but I do appreciate the non-linear "what's real, what's not real" element. I liked the concepts it was trying to master, and I borrowed a lot of those things, as much as I could, to put into *The Gatekeeper*.

Every film borrows ideas from others. We all know this. It's just what happens. There's a lot I borrowed from *What Dreams May Come*. You could arguably say *The Gatekeeper* is *What Dreams May Come* meets *American Sniper*. That's really what it is.

There's this whole ideal in the military "sweat more, bleed less." But death can come to anyone in the military. Under bad leadership, everyone can be vulnerable to death.

But you are also vulnerable under good leadership. It could be an unfortunate event. It's really your perspective. Death is random. It's the luck of the draw. It doesn't matter sometimes how skilled you are. It can matter, but it's multitudes of things. We all like to think—and we are all trained in the

military to believe—that it's not luck, that it's really how well-trained you are.

I think we have to talk about these tough things in order to really bring change. We can't have them taboo forever. We've been so under the spell of "Oh, yeah, you can never talk about politics. You can never talk about religion. You can never talk about veteran experience, because they're all sacred."

I don't buy into that. I think when we don't talk about those issues, it leads to this toxic cocktail of isolation. Veterans in the Vietnam War and the current wars, too, have been forced to kill children. We see a little bit of this in *American Sniper*. People are using children as soldiers, and that really can screw up the psyche of a soldier, being forced, essentially, to kill children. That's just one example—women, children, innocents.

So, if we don't talk about it, if we're barred from talking about it and we're being forced to live within this illusion, that has repercussions and can damage veterans.

LA: Have you shown the film to other veterans? Any feedback from them?

JM: I have. I did a screening, an educational screening, in downtown Los Angeles, where USC is. I showed it to a bunch of veterans. We had a huge amount of people come. It was the first actual screening of the film. I had people cry. I had a woman whose husband was a Vietnam veteran, and she said there was so much of that film that she, as a wife, could connect to. So, that was really powerful for me to see her so emotional from this film.

I've shown it to other veterans as well. They have been very emotional after seeing the film, knowing that I tried to show the truth in the way that veterans think, and that veterans within our communities are essentially silent when they kill themselves.

Honestly, I don't think I've had a veteran who hasn't understood the film at some level. Combat veterans love the film. They totally get it—Army, Marine Corps. It doesn't matter what era, because the movie is showing what the ideals of military service are.

But the film is not just for vets. I wanted to be able to connect with civilians. I think they are emotional through it, in a sense, and they can see how war can have negative impacts overall on people's mental health. Suicide is not just a veterans' issue.

I would love to be able to get this in front of people in Washington. I've been working toward that as well. But if I can get tapped in to Washington, I think there could be some great ideas in being able to work together and promote content that is more accurate to mental health issues.

LA: You've said, "I want to make a difference and start a conversation. I think *The Gatekeeper* can save veteran and civilian lives."

JM: That's the overall goal of the film. You could call it a deterrent. Sure. But we use deterrents in society all the time. We have police deterrents. You can't go to the beach right now in LA. You get a \$100 ticket.

So, deterrents aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be used for good, especially when society needs to be pushed back in the right direction.

You take somebody who's had an enormous amount of power, enormous amount of respect and responsibility, and then they get out of that world. Maybe they hated aspects of it and maybe they loved aspects of it, but now there's nothing. We couldn't really get into it within the film. There just wasn't enough time. But that element of nihilism, that's what I firmly believe is the number one killer. I think what a lot of veterans go through is a sense of needing direction and

purpose.

I want to stop them from killing themselves and make other narratives that are better. It's a huge thing for me to be able to hire veterans. I hire a lot of veterans with my own money. I don't live in a mansion over here in LA. I live in a very small apartment. But I paid a lot of veterans to be able to come out, help me out, and make a film that, overall, is essentially a deterrent—specifically for veterans, but it could also be for everyone in these dark times.

LA: You see that theme of the difficulty of returning to the civilian world in a lot of the films and the novels and the stories. In *War*, Sebastian Junger mentions Brendan O'Byrne, who comes back to society and nothing is life and death anymore, whereas, in war, an untied bootlace could mean your death. You come back to the civilian world and nothing has that import anymore.

Tim O'Brien writes about a buddy of his, Bowker, who comes back from Vietnam but can't fit in anywhere. He drives around and around in circles all day, before finally killing himself.

You see this in Hemingway's story "Soldiers Home." Krebs comes back and he can't fit into the family anymore. He can't fit into society. Religion fails him. At the end of the story, he just leaves; he can't bear being back home again.

Anyway, your film is notable for using 3D motion capture and digital storyboarding. How important was that to you?

JM: I'll put it this way: there were not enough hours in the day to finish the film without that previsualization, because it's so important from a production angle.

It is a storyboard on steroids. Using that technology would've probably cost me \$30,000 in Hollywood, at least. But, because I used USC's technology and the information that I learned from being a student there, I was able to plan every single

shot of my movie. We shot all the Iraq war scenes in one day. That was an incredible amount of footage to be able to capture in one day. Everything was planned because I had that previsualization.

A lot of the process of movie-making—even George Lucas talks about it—is to keep it in the parameters that you have, the resources, the time, the ability. I was able to mobilize all the various components—and you know what the beauty of it is?

My experience in the military is all about planning. It's all about preparation and then execution.

So, because of my background, I was able to have that discipline and plan the film out as much as I possible could. I think *The Gatekeeper* looks a lot closer to a Hollywood film than a lot of student projects because of that reason, because of my background. My military training helped out a lot.

LA: You have multiple settings. There is a cemetery, the interiors, a hospital, battle scenes, a rifle range.

JM: The VA actually allowed me to film at the West LA National Cemetery. I filmed the range out in the middle of the desert. I actually built that range with my bare hands and help from my command sergeant major and a couple other Marines.

The film was impossible to do without the veteran community. When we all come together, when we all have a common goal, and when we all know that this problem is eating away at our society, we can accomplish great things. That's what I want to do.

LA: You co-wrote the movie. Could you talk a little bit about your co-writer?

JM: Connie Siu was the co-writer. I wanted to have a civilian help me make it more understandable, and she was great in helping out with the female character. In the early stages of the scriptwriting process, there wasn't enough substance for

the Krissy character. I wanted to have a strong woman, because you need a strong woman for a strong man like Russell.

I didn't want to screw that up, because women, especially in the military films, are not really represented that well. I didn't want to be branded that way. But, at the same time, women are not in the infantry, so you've got to have a realistic story. I just had to toe a line in being able to convey that wives have a huge role to play, during and after deployment. After he's done with the military, he's got to have, hopefully, a family to develop and look forward to. The same could hold true for a woman in the military with a civilian husband.

I wanted to have a woman on the team in the writing stage that could really help out with not only me asking her, "Does this make sense to you as a civilian?" so I don't go too far into the military jargon. She also helped with getting things done as well as a producer.

LA: How much did you create or work on the musical score?

JM: I wish you could see it in theaters because that's really where you can hear the score to its fullest. It kills me to have to show it to people online, but you've gotta do what you've gotta do. The score was a huge part. I was very connected to the score. I probably had about five sessions with the composer, and those sessions probably lasted about three to four hours, on average.

It was a live score. We recorded it live with many musicians and opera singers. It was an amazing experience. It was probably one of the greatest experiences I've ever had to have an actual score on the film.

Mateus de Castro Machado Freire graduated from USC last year. I knew of his work. His music is like—you listen to it and you automatically think of Steven Spielberg's films.

I reached out to him. He's from Brazil and was living there at the time. After he saw the rough cut of the film, he said he would fly up to California and make the score, and that's exactly what he did. He flew from Brazil, came to California, and just slaved away at the score. You've got to understand that there are a lot of deadlines. There are a lot of time constraints. I loved what he did. We worked very hard on the score. I will probably work with him in the future for the right project.

I think my favorite part of the score is the war scene. That's the longest song. It's about four or five minutes long. He's just a master at transitioning the tone of a film. That's really important. It switches tone from thriller to war to almost like horror in one moment. He did a spectacular job. He was a composer in Brazil before he went to USC. He was a violinist for many years. He's just a true artist, a great friend.

LA: To wrap up, the film touches on many issues, such as the returning veteran and the transition to civilian life, the military mindset, the aftereffects of war. What are your concerns beyond the film?

JM: I think many returning vets feel a loss of purpose. I think art can restore purpose. Chris Loverro, who plays the main character, Tuason, is a huge advocate for acting as a therapeutic method for veterans. If he can get veterans into showing their emotions again, I think it is freakin' phenomenal. For so many years, you're being told no emotions, kill without emotion, operate like a machine, be a machine, lean like a Marine machine—all of this propaganda that you are just a cog in a machine.

That works well for the military environment, but when you get out, your emotions being gone can lead to extreme mental damage. When you're fearful of using your emotions, never use them, and to be like a savage—which is kind of the culture of

the military, I would say—I think there should not be a ceremony but maybe an exit—maybe more focus on that, focus on, “Hey, these things that we taught you in the military may not help you in the civilian world.”

We can't talk about women in society in the same way that you do in the military. The military is a fraternity. You can't treat people in civilian society the way you do in the military. It just doesn't work. You would be chained up. You can't treat other people like machines. That's what you did as a sergeant in the Army or Marine Corps. You're copying like Mr. Smith in *The Matrix*. You're making more mini-clones of yourself.

That mentality is hard to come out of when you've been so impressionable to it. I joined when I was 17 years old. I was a paratrooper by my 19th birthday. What I'm saying is that it can help you in many ways and it can really damage you in a lot of ways. It's taken a while in order to overcome the negative things that I learned within the military.

I didn't really have a father. I grew up pretty much with a very distant father, you could say. The military was more of an impressionable father figure than my own father. The things that they taught me were not good in a lot of ways. They were good for being in the military, but they weren't good for being a civilian in other ways.

Leadership? Yeah, okay, that's good. So, anyway, what my point is at the end of this is that maybe the military can adjust. Maybe they can—whether it's at the exit of your time in service or maybe they just adjust the culture, just in general, to be in a way that is less—I guess you could say trusted, especially to the youth, the people that are the youngest.

If you're an officer and you join the military, you're probably 22 or 23, because you have to go to college first.

So, in that time, you're able to develop your own philosophy. You're able to have more life experiences. And you may not be totally susceptible to an onslaught of demeaning, horrible treatment and ideology, because you're a lieutenant. You're kind of above all of that.

I'm a big supporter of the military, but I also believe in change. I think that there's change that has come, and I think there could be more change that will be able to come.

Military rape is a huge problem—huge, a huge. How are you going to be comfortable sending your daughter into the military when you hear that rape is so prevalent, especially in certain branches? We've got to change the military culture.

That's a whole other conversation, but the actress, Jennifer, is very open about being raped in the military. That's horrible. People shouldn't have to go through that. How can you be raped by another Marine, soldier, sailor?

You can't do the things that you did in the service that were celebrated. Society, especially in liberal society, will make you a total outsider, a total outcast, and you'll suffer.

With that, the wars have drawn down. We're not getting a huge influx all at once of people that have just come straight out of the battlefield. I think if we improve these things we can have less suicide. We can have a better military force. We're always going to need a military force. There's no way around that.

The other ideology of the liberal doctrine, in my philosophy, thinks that we don't need a military. The military is belittled and people think that vets are a bunch of wackos and killers. That's not the way to think about that, either.

Hopefully there can be a middle ground, a neutral position, that can understand that we need the military but at the same time see veterans in a more positive, welcoming light.

**New Review: BRAVO! Ben
Fountain Scores a Touchdown
on Reality**



'A fierce, exhilarating novel' GUARDIAN

BILLY
LYNN'S
LONG
HALFTIME
WALK

'A hero for our times' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

BEN FOUNTAIN

Americans do not genuinely support the troops. This is the impression Ben Fountain's 2012 war novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* left me with. Though American society supports their military in theory, they don't care beyond their own comfort zones. And by comfort zones I mean luxurious "La-Z-Boy's" close to the remote for changing the channel as soon as it gets uncomfortable. I am aware that this is a broad and exaggerated statement to make, but Fountain's novel made me question America's supposedly infinite support for its veterans and challenged my assumptions about American patriotism.

When the novel opens, it is Thanksgiving Day at Dallas Cowboy Stadium. The 19-year old Billy Lynn and his fellow Bravo squad members have just finished two weeks of special leave from Iraq for an act of heroism caught on film by a FOX News camera crew. They have been paraded throughout the country to reinforce America's faith in the war, and they will now spend their final day, and the entire novel, at a uniquely American holiday celebrating a uniquely American sport. When the day is over, the eight "Bravo Squad" Soldiers will return to Iraq. Unless—again in uniquely American fashion—they can land a movie deal first. Right away, Fountain's plot reveals how, for America's entertainment elite, the true battle has nothing to do with Iraq. FOX News producers, Cowboy Stadium CEOs, and Hollywood directors do not really want to celebrate these soldiers for who they are or what they did. They would rather celebrate capitalism by fighting each other over who can make most money off these soldiers' traumatic experiences.

Through a close third-person narrative, Fountain gives unfiltered access to an impressive amount of tangled emotions and interactions happening over the course of one single day. Streams of consciousness collide with word-clouds emphasizing words in uncommon ways (e.g., "nina leven", "currj," and "terrRist"). This creates confusion and distracts from things happening outside of Billy's head, but, at the same time,

Billy's intimate and honest inner monologues tied me to the novel. It felt voyeuristic, allowing insight into thoughts far from my reality. Imagining the "overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampoline right down the middle of his hangover," I got the feeling I knew his moods and opinions better than the overcaffeinated "grateful" citizens. Yes, I even almost felt his headache worsen as the manager kept forgetting to get a real twenty-first century "hero"—Advil.

Fountain's decision to name the squad "Bravo" points to the endless thanks given to veterans, handed out as effortlessly as clapping your hands and yelling "Bravo" at overworked stage stars. Like actors, these soldiers wear costumes to fit expectations and re-appear for encores despite being tired after the big show. This thread of superficial gratitude stretches throughout the entire novel, pointing out not only the civilian crowd's thirst for sensation but also their longing for justification. "It was worth it?" they ask Billy. "Don't you think? We had to do it, don't you think?" Billy, having seen the reality, wishes that "just once somebody would call him baby-killer." While doubting the legitimacy of his duties to patrol, shoot and kill, he experiences how society glorifies a soldiers' violent agency. Being celebrated for "the worst day of his life," Billy questions whether the U.S. Army's actions abroad are fully understood and if his fellow citizens even desire to do so. This impression gets reaffirmed when the squad is expected to march onstage unprepared during the Halftime Show. "The explosions start," Billy says, "and they all flinch, boom boom boom, lum rounds are shooting off from somewhere backstage, smokers that explode with the arid crackle of cluster bombs scattering over a wheat field." These cheering fans fail to notice that fireworks might not be as entertaining to veterans as they are to civilians. Nobody bothers to wake Bravo Squad up from this PTSD nightmare.

In addition to the stream of consciousness and word clouds, Fountain provides flashbacks to round out Billy's character.

We find out that Billy might not have even joined the military voluntarily. The reader re-experiences his many moral challenges and choices, and Fountain manages to convey the unfamiliar situation of a teenager who survived frontline battles while still being unsure if he had adequate alternatives besides enlisting. Furthermore, Fountain digs up emotions merely hidden underneath layers of stereotypical masculinity. Lacking role models in his father and community, Billy looks up to his fallen supervisor, the NCO "Shroom," who shared not only advice, but also his final moments with Billy.

Fountain satirizes themes of masculinity and femininity in other moments too. He provocatively reduces manhood to muscles and materialism while minimizing womanhood to sexual temptations. Billy and the other soldiers objectify every female in the novel, infusing the war-hero-trope with the thirsty testosterone of a sexually deprived teenager. Additionally, Fountain critiques America's second biggest source of pride (next to its military): football. When Billy sees the football players' excessive protective equipment, he reasons: "They are among the best-cared for creatures in the history of the planet." So why not "send them just as they are at this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat?" "Send the entire NFL!" he shouts—"Mere bombs and bullets bounce off their bones of steel. Submit, lest our awesome NFL show you straight to the flaming gates of hell." Obviously, Billy, a soldier who has fought for life and death rather than for a championship, does not want autographs.

The author creates a tornado of national pride, suppressed emotions, consumerism, and trauma, and leaves the reader both speechless and yet also asking, "how should we treat veterans?" This, in addition to the jumps from reality to flashback and Billy's constant hangover, makes *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* a stressful read. Fountain provides long build-ups to multiple dramatic turning points, including the movie deal, the return to war, the need for intimacy and the

official "Halftime Show" climax. As a reader, I constantly hoped for success while suspecting failure. Eventually, I began to question society as a whole. I asked myself, if this is true, if society does use solidarity to hide self-absorption, what's the point of this book? Why put ourselves through this? But Ben Fountain assists the reader at the right moment. He leads us through Billy's twisted experiences, making sure we stay with the novel, understand its message, and take heart from the experience. Toward the end, Fountain has Billy observe that "his reality is their reality's bitch." Those words kicked in like the Advil Billy never got. They made me rethink the fake, oversaturated, and questionable life America and maybe even I call reality, what Fountain describes in another work as the "Fantasy Industrial Complex."

This book is a stressful one. But this is exactly what makes Billy Lynn a page turner. We bond with Billy faster. His thoughts and feelings stick with us after turning the last page. A worthwhile read, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* changes our perspective of the world, which is what, in my opinion, a war novel should do.