Peter Molin’s Strike Through the Mask!—Elliot Ackerman’s “The Fifth Act: America’s End in Afghanistan” and Jamil Jan Kochai’s “Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories”

Afghan resettlement camp, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, October 2021

It’s a commonplace that America largely ignored the long war in Afghanistan while it was being fought. Now, after a brief flurry of heightened interest in the 2021 evacuation of Afghan allies from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, Afghanistan has again receded from national interest. But another truism has held that a proper accounting of America’s post-9/11 wars, either in fiction or non-fiction, couldn’t usefully happen until the wars concluded. “Tell me

how this ends," is a quote ascribed to General David Petraeus in regard to Iraq. The imperative now is timely in regard to Afghanistan.

And so, the first drafts of history, in the form of online articles and podcasts by veterans who fought in Afghanistan and in particular those who were involved in the HKIA evacuation, have begun to appear. In summer 2022 came former-Marine Elliot Ackerman's *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan*, among the first of book-length appraisals.

Ackerman has always been quick into print. His previous books—some fiction, some non-fiction—have appeared with yearly regularity and have consistently zeroed in on hot-button issues: refugees, disabled vets, Syria, China, and now the Afghanistan end-game. More a novelist, essayist, and memoirist than a scholar, historian, or journalist, Ackerman's primary subjects in *The Fifth Act* are his own life and thoughts, which he portrays in vignettes heavily reliant on narrative and physical description, which he then connects to large-scale events in which he played parts. Though *The Fifth Act* is not a work of focused, deep analysis, Ackerman definitely has ideas born from his experience fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more recently, circulation at high-levels among military and national powerbrokers. Judging from *The Fifth Act*, Ackerman has an eye-opening number of well-placed contacts in the nation's military and security apparatus, as well as in government. An invitation to lunch with Afghanistan's ambassador to America in the summer of 2021 is described; so too is an invitation to speak privately with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Similarly, many of the officers with whom Ackerman formerly served with in the Marines and as a CIA paramilitary officer are still in service, and a surprising number were stationed in Kabul in 2021 and involved in the evacuation effort.

These connections come into play in one of *The Fifth Act's* two main narrative thrusts: description of the part that Ackerman

played, from afar in Italy, and operating mainly via text messages, helping busloads of Afghans evacuate in 2021. Ackerman at the time was on vacation in Italy with his wife and kids, and vignettes of tourist-life are interspersed with recaps of text exchanges with his network of fellow veterans in Kabul and around the world fighting to evacuate Afghan allies. These scenes, to my mind, are vivid and dramatic. Even more compelling are passages depicting scenes of combat in Afghanistan leading small American advisor teams and Afghan militias in battle. Ackerman has seen an extensive amount of combat, and a previous book, *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning* (2019), recounts actions in Fallujah that led to him being awarded a Silver Star. The Afghan accounts in *The Fifth Act*, however, are far from triumphant. Instead, they are haunted by Ackerman's sense that he has failed in certain respects and disappointed people who were counting on him. Two long passages describe combat missions recovering bodies of American fighting men; another describes a wrenching conversation with a mentor whom he must tell that he is leaving a CIA career in which he was being groomed for success. The connection between the two narrative arcs, mostly juxtaposed, but sometimes asserted explicitly, is clear: Failure experienced on the personal level in Afghanistan reflects the American failure at large, with both arcs culminating in the ad hoc evacuation effort in 2021. Underlying Ackerman and his network's desperate desire to rescue endangered Afghans is the battlefield ethos of "leaving no man behind."

Speaking personally, and also on behalf of at least some veterans, these passages resonated strongly. My own tour in Afghanistan was marked by events remembered remorsefully, even painfully, and my own efforts to help Afghans evacuate in August 2021 (and since) were all-consuming, though without the successes Ackerman and his network achieve. (Earlier I have helped three of my interpreters emigrate to America, and remain in periodic contact with two of them, who are doing

well. I am also still trying to assist allies still in Afghanistan who are stuck in the infernal Special Immigrant Visa purgatory.) GWOT memoirs by officers are fewer than those by enlisted soldiers, and the enlisted memoirs tend to portray officers harshly—incompetent and self-serving, often out-of-touch and even delusional, not to be trusted. Be that as it may, *The Fifth Act* excels at tracing the deep tugs of responsibility and duty that motivated at least some officers to do their best in tough circumstances. Responsibility and duty are embedded in military codes-of-honor, but *The Fifth Act* documents how they are experienced personally as desire to please, desire to not disappoint, desire to measure up, and desire to form allegiances with fellow officers of perceived merit. Early on, Ackerman describes how Marine officers are judged as either "a piece of shit or a good dude." Something of the same emphasis on personal reputation and honor animates Army officer social dynamics, and I'm sure the other services as well.

Intermixed with the passages about evacuation efforts and combat missions in *The Fifth Act* are ruminations on the collapse of Afghanistan in the wake of the American withdrawal and Taliban takeover. Some of Ackerman's ideas are widely shared, but given interesting new formulations. The tendency of Americans to fight a twenty-year war "one year at a time" is brought home to Ackerman by his observation that buildings on American bases were built out of plywood rather than concrete. Afghan military ineptitude is touched on, but the real issue, he asserts, was the doomed structuring of Afghan forces that had ethnic minorities fighting outside of their regional homelands. To send, say, Uzbeks, to fight in Pashtun regions such as Paktika and Kandahar de facto deprived the Afghan National Army of local legitimacy and cultural competence. Glossed over are American military tactics and operations, either those that didn't work or which might have worked, to include consideration of indiscriminate night raids to kill or capture high-value targets that many critics

suggest destroyed Afghan trust and confidence in the American war effort.

Instead, Ackerman holds Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden accountable on-high for decisions that led to military and government failure in Afghanistan. According to Ackerman, Obama's declaration that his 2009 surge would be short-lived was an open invitation to the Taliban to wait out the influx of forces. He judges President Trump's Doha Accords a craven notice to the Taliban that the country would soon be theirs, while messaging the Ashraf Ghani government that they were effectively out of the picture. Regarding Biden, Ackerman maintains that the final collapse that led to the impromptu evacuation was an extreme failure of leadership. He asks why, given the US military presence in so many countries around the world, it was so impossible to conceive of leaving a force of some (unspecified) size and capability in Afghanistan to protect American interests and facilitate working relationships. Finally, Ackerman suggests that the American public's failure to care much at all about anything in Afghanistan represents an egregious manifestation of a civil-military divide that left many military members and veterans (such as Marine lieutenant colonel Stuart Schiller, Jr. and former airman Ashli Babbitt) seething with resentment and contempt.

In a review of *The Fifth Act* by Laurel Miller published in *Foreign Affairs*, the author, an Obama-era diplomat who served in Afghanistan and Pakistan, refutes Ackerman's big-picture analysis while expressing scant regard for the human narratives that constitute most of Ackerman's story. Miller accuses Ackerman of basing his claims on opinion rather than scholarly analysis of facts and events : "When the book comments on policy and politics, it offers no basis for its reasoning besides Ackerman's personal experience." This is a reasonable charge, I guess, given the highly-literate *Foreign Affairs* readership. I don't think Ackerman would disagree and

general readers might not expect otherwise. But Miller makes a further claim that bears heavily on what will follow in this review. That *The Fifth Act* is so "me-centric" is actually congruent with the biggest problem with the American war effort in Miller's diagnosis: from beginning-to-end it paid short-shrift to the cultural and structural aspects that defined the Afghanistan operating environment while remaining fixated on American goals, policies, and actions, as well as the personal experiences and opinions of participants. "Looking at the conduct of the war through a narrow aperture," Miller writes, [Ackerman] focuses, as Washington did, largely on U.S. forces and U.S. policy; the politics, motivations, and experiences of Afghans are pushed offstage." Books such as *The Fifth Act* illustrate, then, how Americans measured the war primarily in relation to American perspectives, while marginalizing Afghan (and Pakistani) actors.

Bad reviews suck, and valorizing the experience and opinions of like-minded individuals over those of racially different "others" and structural aspects can be a problem. In regard to Afghanistan, this line of critique also appears in a *Los Angeles Review of Books* review of Afghan-American author Jamil Jan Kochai's 2022 collection of short-stories titled "War Is a Structure: On Jamil Jan Kochai's "*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*." Author Najwa Mayer praises Kochai's stories about Afghans both in America and in Afghanistan for "[i]ndicting a transnational structure of war that conscripts everyone" as opposed to war literature that "glosses over the geopolitical structures that produce unequal suffering." Continuing, Mayer writes, "War's structure includes its diffuse militarisms, profit economies, reforged borders, and cultural marketplaces, as well as its displacements and wounds, which leave indelible marks and absences long after the bombs have dropped." Ultimately, Mayer praises the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* for finding fresh literary-thematic means of not "narrating the harsh trials of war and displacement through the interior life of a character." So,

according to Mayer, down with stories that emphasize the "interior life of a character" and up with literary portraits of the "transnational structure of war." That sounds dry, but literary efforts to alter the template of things-that-happened-to-me-and-what-I-thought-about-them are welcome. Mayer's review elsewhere highlights how Kochai's stories are imaginatively and poignantly crafted, a sentiment I share.

But Mayer's review really begins to crackle when she turns her attention to Ackerman's own review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* published in the *New York Times*. Ackerman is not totally critical, but over-all the review is luke-warm. Ackerman is not especially impressed by Kochai's literary verve and innovation, and outright rankles at Kochai's failure to get military details right. Most of all, he is irritated by what he perceives as Kochai's portraits of white American soldiers as evil and Kochai's overall "fixation on whiteness." Ackerman writes, "When Kochai wants to signal characters are generically bad, he describes them as white; all the characters from the U.S. military — a remarkably diverse institution in reality — are described as 'a small clan of white boys.'" In response, Mayer states, "Yet, very few white characters appear in the collection; indeed, a narrative decentering of whiteness in a collection about the US empire's racialized wars is, perhaps, the point. Kochai does, of course, intimate the well-documented history of white supremacy that is foundational to the enterprise of US imperialism– a history never lost on the colonized themselves."

Mayer's concern expressed here is measured compared to numerous other denunciations of Ackerman (and the *New York Times*) following publication of his review. Played out in Tweets and blog posts, one of the charges was that in a short review Ackerman focused obsessively on trivial aspects of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*—getting military detail right—at the expense of more considered evaluation of its virtues. The

larger charge was that the review was racist and so per force was the *New York Times* for commissioning a former Marine officer and CIA operative to write a review of a book that illustrated the ravages of war on Afghans in their home country and displaced throughout the world. Ackerman's review is curious in respects (*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* has otherwise been universally acclaimed), but Ackerman upon reading the social media firestorm that followed his review must have been thinking about his own endeavors on behalf of Afghanistan. To have lived and fought side-by-side for some 500 days-and-nights with Afghans and to have successfully engineered the evacuation of hundreds of endangered Afghans, to say of nothing of having written a novel—*Green on Blue* (2015)—that is focalized through the eyes of a Pashtun, only to be reductively categorized as a member of a "small clan of white boys" by Kochai and "a former Marine and CIA officer" by Kochai's supporters must have grated. The closing words of *The Fifth Act* quote a video-message from an Afghan who with his family squeaked through the HKIA gates and is now on to a new life:

For such a help, for such a mercy, for such a service, I have no idea how to thank. But I'm thankful of everyone, of every single person of US America, because we never dreamed of such a thing. Their love. Their mercy. Thank you. Thank you for everything.

Jamil Jan Kochai's family emigrated to America from Afghanistan in the early 1980s; they might have had similar high hopes and equally copious amounts of gratitude. The stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, heavily autobiographical (though enlivened with flights of magical-realism fantasy), trace the subsequent decades of transiency, menial jobs and poverty, sickness and injury, constant cultural clash (both within the family and up-against the larger strictures of American life), and ultimate disillusionment and remorse bordering on regret that the

family had attempted such an audacious transplantation. Roughly half the stories are set in contemporary Afghanistan as characters travel back to their home province of Logar or the capital of Kabul. War has ruined the lives of the Afghan characters in the novel, and to the Afghan-American characters it's a matter of chagrin that it is the Americans, not the Taliban, who are responsible for blowing apart Afghanistan culture and society and making so many people miserable. And yet, as fractured as modern Afghanistan is portrayed in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, the Afghan-American characters, given a choice, commit to life, on whatever terms, in contemporary Afghanistan as preferable to continued second-class citizenship and cultural alienation in America.

All in all, a grim vision, but making the tension and anxiety compelling as stories are the characters that (perhaps) most resemble Kochai himself—immigrant sons imbued with American habits and attitudes who carry the weight of their family and cultural expectations. These characters for the most part come to detest how thoroughly Westernized they have become, though they also struggle with their parents' old-fashioned ways and outlooks. It is these characters' often sulky and sometimes irreverent voices that spice up the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*. To my ears, they are in the great tradition of young male adult American fictional characters—think Huck Finn, think Holden Caulfield—struggling with the circumstances of their lives and who wield scorn as a weapon to protect the shreds of their idealism while desperately searching for place and purpose in adult life. The opening paragraph of the first story, "Playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*" illustrates:

First, you have to gather the cash to preorder the game at the local GameStop where your cousin works, and even through he hooks it up with the employee discount, the game is still a bit out of your price range because you've been using your Taco Bell paychecks to help your pops, who's been out of work

since you were ten and who makes you feel unbearably guilty about spending money on useless hobbies while kids in Kabul are destroying their bodies to build compounds for white businessmen and warlords—but, shit, it's Kojima, it's Metal Gear, so, after scrimping and saving (like literal dimes you're picking up off the street), you've got the cash, which you give to your cousin, who purchases the game on your behalf, and then, on the day it's released, you just have to find a way to get to the store.

That's a bravura opening, to be sure, inflected throughout with vivid detail and signifying resonances. Not to make too much of it, but the wildly undisciplined melange of sentiments expressed by the young male narrator also resembles that of disgruntled Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans flailing against the limits of their own lives, as expressed in many GWOT stories and memoirs.

It's doubtful anyone will be inviting Jamil Jan Kochai and Elliot Ackerman to the same dinner party anytime soon, nor ask them to share a conference stage. The war-of-words surrounding their recent works reveals that the civil-military divide still gapes, and efforts to speak across it can easily exacerbate mistrust and miscommunication. However, it's not impossible to like both authors' books. Readers interested in Afghanistan-American relations and the Afghan diaspora in particular can read them in tandem for insight into how the population flows linking the two countries are often experienced individually as confusing and disappointing.

Former site of the Joint Mguire-Dix-Lakehust Afghan Resettlement Camp after its dismantling. July 2022

Elliot Ackerman, *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan*. Penguin, 2022.

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Elliot Ackerman, *NYTimes* review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*:

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/books/the-haunting-of-hajji-hotak-jamil-jan-kochai.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytbooks

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Najwa Mayer, *LARB* review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*:

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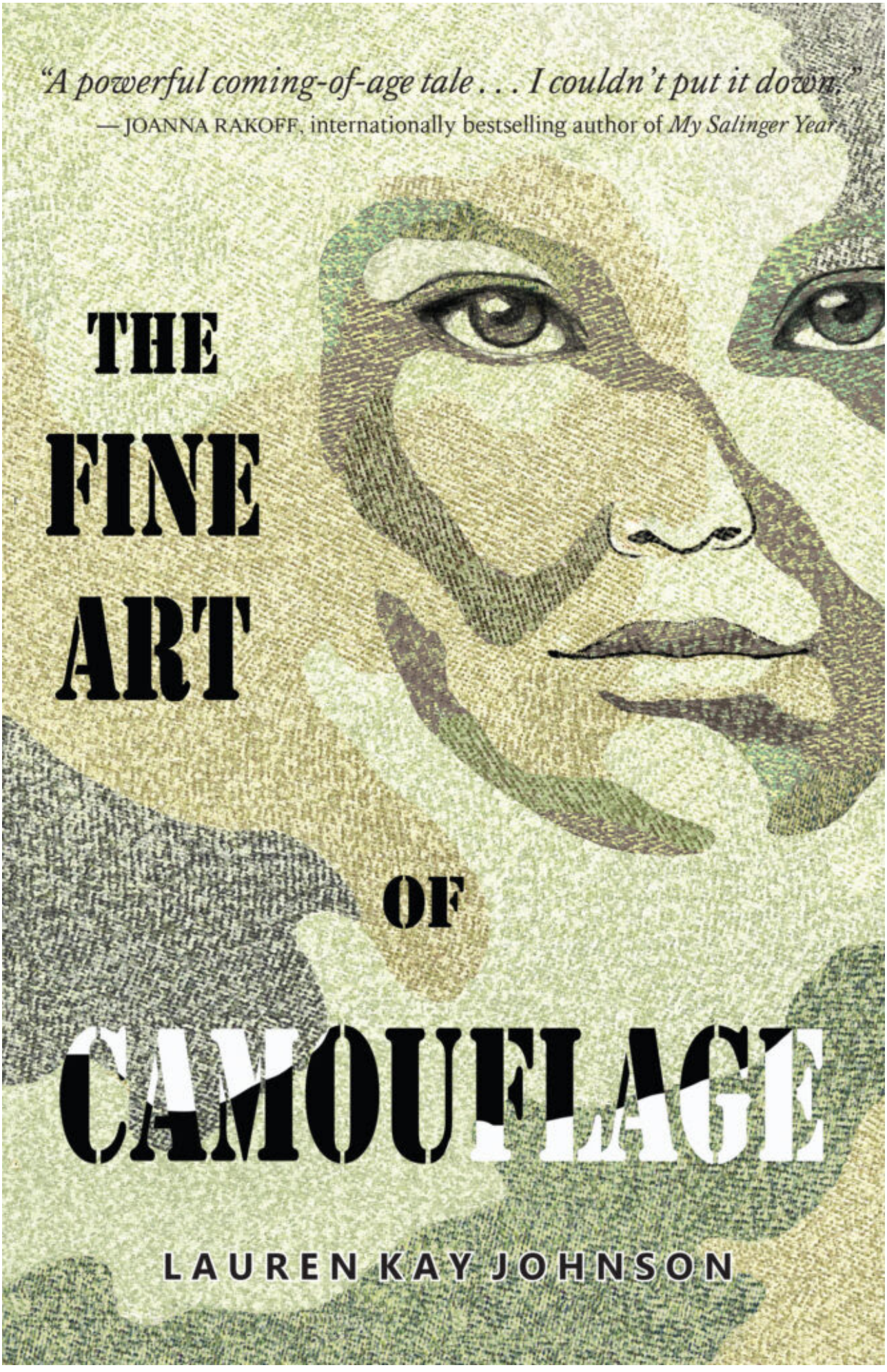
New Nonfiction from Lauren Kay Johnson: “Inheritance of War” an Excerpt from The Fine Art of Camouflage


"A powerful coming-of-age tale . . . I couldn't put it down."
— JOANNA RAKOFF, internationally bestselling author of My Salinger Year
THE
FINE
ART
OF
CAMOUFLAGE
LAUREN KAY JOHNSON

I swore I would never become a soldier like my mother.

She called it a blip, a few months out of an otherwise enjoyable career with the Army. No one saw the blip coming. Both of my grandfathers served in the military, but their wars stayed cold. My mom's reserve unit, Seattle's Fiftieth General Hospital, with 750 personnel, was too big, too expensive deploy, the very reason she'd chosen the unit. Aft er three years as an active-duty Army nurse, she wanted to start a family. The Fiftieth promised stability; for them to deploy, it would take World War III.

On Thanksgiving weekend of 1990, my mom got a phone call. She had been receiving practice calls ever since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, drills to make sure the phone tree was accurate, to keep everyone prepared. This time, the call wasn't a drill. The unit was put on alert for deployment orders. My sister, brother, and I were asleep, so we didn't see the white-faced shock when Mom answered the phone. We didn't watch her crumple into Dad's arms when she told him or see the shock mirrored in his own face as questions of her safety, the family's well-being, single parenthood flooded his mind.

Mom and her hospital unit wouldn't receive orders right away. They would spend Thanksgiving with their families, worrying and hoping—hoping World War III would dissipate with the holiday weekend; hoping their orders would leave them as local backfill for active-duty soldiers who deployed or send them to Germany, the unit's assigned overseas operating location based on the Cold War model; hoping their orders would be short.

None of these hopes materialized. Mom's orders were for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for an undetermined length of up to two years.

I hardly recall the Army's presence in our family before Desert Storm. The Army slipped in and out one weekend a month and two weeks a year when Mom put on green clothes and went "camping." Sometimes we ate hotdogs and pretended to camp too. With that Thanksgiving phone call, though, the Army consumed us. I had just turned seven, my sister, Shavonne, was eight, and my brother, Matt, barely two. Suddenly, we were no longer a regular young family. Mom had always been the center mass around which we all orbited, and now our gravity fi eld had shift ed. In preparation for the deployment, she took frequent trips to the local Army base, sometimes for days at a time. Big green Army bags piled up in the living room where we used to build puzzles and pillow forts. Instead of driving to school with Mom, Shavonne and I went to daycare with Matt early in the morning when Dad left for work. Neighbors stopped by our house to drop off funny-tasting casseroles. They said nice things like, "We're praying for you," and "Let us know if you need anything." I just needed my mom. I was restless in school and gymnastics practice, anxious to get home and hug Mom and hold onto her forever.

Before she left for Saudi Arabia, I told my mom I hated the Army. "Oh sweetie," she said, "I know it feels like the Army is being mean, but it's the Army's job to go help people. A bad man invaded another country, and we need to go help the people there and get him out." With that, she redirected my hatred to Saddam Hussein. The Army wasn't taking Mom away; a bad man was making her leave. Shavonne and I even learned a song about that man and how much we all hated him. We sang the song over and over, and Mom laughed the hardest:

Joy to the world, Saddam is dead!

We barbequed his head!

Don't worry 'bout the body

We flushed it down the potty,

And round and round it goes . . .

I don’t remember this, but my parents tell me that before she deployed, I asked Mom if she could die. I imagine myself climbing into her lap. In my mind she’s wearing the soft blue bathrobe she had when I was growing up. I’m clutching it, nuzzling into her brown permed curls. Mom wraps her fuzzy blue arms around me, and I can feel her heartbeat, strong and serious. She gazes out through her thick-framed glasses, her eyes light like mine above the long, sharp nose and freckles inherited by Shavonne. Mom purses her lips. She’s thinking about my question, about my life—all our lives—without her. She’s thinking about the briefings the hospital unit received, the expectations of chemical weapons and massive casualties, the potential for an attack on Israel and an ensuing holy war of nuclear proportions. She’s thinking this might be a suicide mission. Mom pulls me closer and strokes the top of my head, trying to memorize the feel of me. She’s weighing her need to protect her child with a desire for honesty.

She answered my question: “I’m going to do the best I can to come back to you as soon as I can.”

“Don’t tell her that!” my dad said. “Tell her no!” But my mom couldn’t lie.

Just before she left, Mom wove Shavonne’s and my hair into double French braids, like she did when we had soccer or T-ball games, the only thing that would keep my thin hair and Shavonne’s unruly curls in place under helmets and through trips up and down the fi eld. These braids were special, though. They held the memory of Mom’s touch: her gentle fingers brushing across my scalp, the nail of her little finger drawing a part down each side, her soft breath on the back of my neck. I wanted to keep the braids forever. I

promised Mom I would. It would be our connection while she was gone, and every time I looked in the mirror I would think of her.

Mom deployed right after Christmas. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, and the occasion carried extra weight in 1990 because we had Mom with us. The Christmas morning snowfall seemed magical to us kids but made a treacherous drive for our relatives, who commuted several hours for everyone to be together. I don't know if our house has ever been so full; it's funny how war brings people together. We had an epic snowball fight with my cousins, opened presents, ate roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy, and took pictures around the Christmas tree, just like every year.

A few days later, we watched Mom board an Army transport bus. She waved to us through a grimy window until her pale face was lost to camouflage and dust and distance. On the bus she was surrounded by other moms and dads, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and a single twenty-something medic. The medic had no family to wave to through the grimy window, but he saw us: a man with red-rimmed eyes standing next to two girls with double French braids. Both girls clung to the man and cried. In the man's arms was a small boy. The young soldier couldn't hear it, but the boy repeated, "Where's Mommy going?" over and over, long after the bus rolled out of sight.

"Looking at your family when we left was my war moment," the medic later told my mom. "Seeing how heartbroken they were."

My memories of Mom's deployment blur into a fuzzy background, punctuated by snapshot images of clarity. I remember cheese quesadillas, "cheese pies" I called them, cooked in the microwave. A neighborhood mom who watched us aft er school served them to us while we waited at her house for Dad to pick

us up. One day while there, I got the stomach flu. The neighbor tucked me into a nest of blankets on the couch with Gatorade and a bucket, but I kept getting up. I walked to the hallway and threw up. I threw up in the living room. I kept walking, looking for my mom.

As the days passed, oil slickened my hair and my precious braids started to unwind. I remember an angry fit of protest, and an ultimate compromise. Every few days the gracious neighbor cleaned and re-braided my hair. It looked exactly the same. But it wasn't.

I cried every night in bed aft er Mom's tape-recorded voice finished reading a bedtime story. I saw the school counselor for a few weeks. I don't recall her name or what she looked like or even what we talked about, but I remember staring out her window at the snow-crusted ground. My classmates were at recess, throwing snowballs, having fun. For the first time I did not feel normal.

We were the only local kids who had a parent deployed. Neighbors took turns babysitting and delivering meals. A yellow ribbon hugged the big maple tree in front of our elementary school. When she returned, my mom would cut the ribbon off to a whooping chorus of cheers from our classmates. But while she was gone it hung there, through rain and wind and snow. I saw the ribbon every day, and I hated it.

We lived for weekly calls from Mom, letters, occasional pictures, anything to let us know she was safe. Each trip to the mailbox was its own tiny Christmas, marked by expectation and, too often, when no letters came, disappointment. At one point, Mom sent Shavonne and me matching T-shirts with pictures of camels wearing combat boots and gas masks. I still have that shirt, a child's size small, buried in the back of a drawer. Dad pointed out Saudi Arabia on our office globe. Mom was there, inside the little star that represented the capital of Riyadh. It didn't look very far away.

We watched news reports every evening on TV. Headlines that spring covered topics that interest me now as an adult: an escalation of violence in Sudan following the imposition of nationwide Islamic law, an historic meeting between Nelson Mandela and Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Haiti's appointment of its first elected president, the controversy over Dr. Jack Kevorkian's assisted suicides, the Exxon Valdez oil spill. In 1991, I could focus only on the war. My world expanded exponentially when Mom deployed; I wasn't yet ready to stretch beyond the Middle East. Besides, the Middle East was everywhere, dominating TV, radio, and newspaper reports. In a letter home Mom noted that we were probably getting more news of the war than she was; TV was censored in Saudi Arabia, and she didn't have free time to watch anyway.

In the States, we witnessed a new era in broadcasting, the first time war received real-time coverage from reporters on the ground. They showed awesome footage of planes taking off from aircraft carriers and terrifying shots of exploding missiles. All around were people in camouflage, but not the green and black my mom wore on Reserve duty. These uniforms were brown like dirt. There was a lot of dirt on the news when they talked about the war. I thought it must be hard for Mom to stay clean. I had never watched the news before. Sitting on the couch, my legs curled beneath me, I got my first exposure to the industry of which one day I would be a part. As a public affairs officer I would be there, against the dusty brown backdrop of war, ushering reporters, directing camera angles, providing talking points to the people in camouflage, filtering conflict for the families back home.

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm represented a new era in warfare too. Mom was part of the largest reserve component ever activated in support of an armed conflict, and the first involuntary call requiring reservists to report to active duty since the dissolution of the draft. In total, the government activated more than 227,000 reservists. The Army

provided the bulk of personnel, nearly 140,000, with around fourteen percent in medical specialties like Mom's hospital unit. Mom was also part of the largest contingent of U.S. military women ever to deploy. By war's end, 40,000 women had served overseas, almost as many as had been on active duty during the height of America's last large-scale conflict, the Vietnam War. Desert Storm saw two American women held as Prisoners of War, and thirteen killed in action.

Sometimes on the news they talked about people dying. At recess one day I was by myself, as I often was during that time, wandering along the edge of the concrete basketball court, when my class bully sauntered up to me. "Hey, I heard about a lady that got killed in the war," he chided, "Do you think it was your mom?"

I hadn't heard about the lady. Had she been on the news the night before? No one had called to tell us something bad had happened. Wouldn't they call? But what if they had called; what if Dad answered and didn't want to tell us before school? What if they knocked on our door but no one was home? Maybe the bully had seen a news report that I'd missed? The thought of never seeing my mom again overwhelmed me, and I sat down on the concrete and cried for a long time.

While Mom was gone, we made up games to make time and distance not seem so massive, to trick ourselves into feeling like we might have some sort of control. For "When will Mom come home?" the whole family—my dad, sister, brother, grandparents, and I—scribbled our return date guesses across the calendar. My sister's prediction, March 12, 1991, was the earliest, three and a half months aft er Mom's departure. The rest of us hoped but doubted she was close.

As March arrived, we only got a couple days' notice that

Shavonne’s guess was exactly right. As suddenly as war had swooped into our lives, it ended. We let ourselves be consumed by frenzied preparations for Mom’s homecoming, spending hours tracing letters and gluing glitter onto bright sheets of poster board. There were trips to Party City to buy trunk-loads of yellow ribbons and American flags. We must have alerted the relatives the elementary school, my Girl Scout troop, the whole neighborhood, and Mom’s college roommate, because hordes of them showed up at McChord Air Force Base outside Seattle on the morning of March 12.

Together we stood behind a chain link fence, a crowd of hundreds, watching the empty runway. Shavonne and I held signs and chattered with our classmates. Matt, too young to understand where Mommy had been or why, just knew that this was the day she was coming home. He coiled his tiny hands around the fence and rocked back and forth, back and forth, eyes glued to the tarmac. His expectant little face, framed by a puff y black and red jacket, became a popular clip on local news segments.

I don’t know how long we waited before we heard the drone of an approaching aircraft . The crowd hushed. We twisted our heads frantically and shielded our eyes from the sun. A dark speck emerged on the horizon, and we erupted into a cacophony of cheers. The dark speck got bigger and turned into a place that drift ed slowly across the landscape. As it inched closer, the crowd grew wild. We screamed and shook the fence. My dad scooped up my brother. Someone, a grandparent maybe, grabbed my hand. Reporters yelled into their microphones. We were supposed to stay behind the fence, but when the plane landed and the first camouflaged figure emerged, we stampeded the runway. All I could see was legs: jeans and khakis and sweats, then a trickle of camouflage moving upstream, and then a pair of legs that stopped and dropped a bag and bent and hugged and cried, and then I was in her arms and nuzzling my face into her hair and the world was whole again.

For a while after her deployment, I screamed every time Mom put on her uniform. Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there.

We were extra thankful on Thanksgiving when the phone didn't ring. We got teary-eyed whenever Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." came on the radio, an anthem for Mom's unit. For years, our schools asked Mom to give Veterans' Day speeches, and Shavonne and I modeled Saudi Arabian clothes she'd brought back as souvenirs: black draping capes and veils that covered everything except a square around our eyes, similar to the burqas I'd see eighteen years later in Afghanistan. I loved being a part of Mom's experience, if only from under the veil. I liked to twirl and see the fabric billow around me. Mostly I liked watching my mom.

She talked about how difficult life was for women in Saudi Arabia. "They have to cover all their skin, even when it's really hot outside," she said. "If they don't, the police can arrest them! And they aren't allowed to drive!" Even as an American, Mom said, she couldn't go certain places because she was a woman. She told our classmates about the armed guards on the hospital buses and around the compound to help keep the doctors and nurses safe. Mom shared that she was afraid at first to take care of Iraqi prisoners, but she learned that they only fought because their families were threatened by Saddam Hussein. I thought how brave she was and how lucky I was to have a mom who was more than just a mom, but also a soldier, a healer, and a hero who helped save people from that mean man. After Mom finished speaking everyone clapped for her, and I beamed under my veil.

I didn’t know how painful those events were for my mom. I didn’t realize she struggled diving back into her roles as wife and mother and everything else we heaped on her. She didn’t discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn’t know she carried trauma with her every day, even aft er she returned home. I didn’t understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough.


Hom

New Poem by Sandra Newton: “Naught”

PIROUETTE OF WORDS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

NAUGHT

There is naught to be done for it:
We are over
As the ocean is over its attraction
And is now crawling
Back from the shore,
Having fucked it thoroughly.

We are done
Like steak on a grill,
Sizzling and aromatic,
Waiting to be devoured.

We are finished
As a wood floor sanded to undeniable
Smoothness and shine,
A surface of beauty concealing
The pitted underbelly of it all.

Or like promising to explain to others
What happened to us.
Over, done, finished,
Is all we need to say
Or want

While the gifted interpreter
Turns a pirouette of words
And keeps you safe
With her basket of naughts.

New Nonfiction from Joan Stack Kovach: “What He Wore”

He was always a very sharp dresser. Firstborn child, he toddled around in a merino wool coat from Lord&Taylor and a short pants suit from B Altman that would be handed down to his younger brothers. At seventeen he looked “collegiate” in madras plaid shorts and a pastel button-down shirt. He hated to be called “preppy”, but he was. Handsome and preppy.

Years later, after the war, when he worked his way into an office in a high rise down in Boston’s Post Office Square he wore gorgeous suits he’d purchased at a men’s store called

Zara.

But for two years of the time between the madras shorts and Zara suits, he wore jungle camouflage, just like all the other draftees. And when he finally flew back home, exactly 365 days from when he'd landed in Vietnam, he wore the requisite Dress Greens with combat patch and overseas bars on his right sleeve.

He asked that no one meet him at Oakland Air Force base when he landed, didn't want to be seen in uniform. He stashed the gabardine greens and the cotton camouflage in the attic, gave his little brothers his medals to play with, and created a new narrative, one in which the combat never happened. He didn't speak of what he endured on the commercial flight cross country either.

Back in the states he tried hard to resume a life in civilian clothes. He married, started a family, bought a boat. On weekends in his khaki shorts, polo shirts with embroidered alligators on the chest, and topsiders, he was surrounded by those who dressed the same and colluded in his denial. It wasn't hard. Most of America had little to say about Vietnam beyond the horrors of Kent State, and then the tragic beauty of the memorial in DC. When he applied for jobs, there were no Veteran boxes to check, or if there were, nobody smart would check them.

During the week he sat at a desk wearing button-down shirts and Brooks Brothers suits, until he discovered even better suits at Zaras. There he chose ties that were silk and dreamy, even his socks soft and stylish, and Italian wingtip shoes. He bought his underwear, boxer shorts, for full price at Mr. Sid's, the men's store in Newton Centre.

It was thirty years in these lovely suits before the force he'd used to push it all away gave out, before memories from the days of jungle fatigues blindsided him, kept him awake,

immobile, defeated. It's always hard to know for sure what is really the precipitant for a powerful change. For him was it his sons becoming the age he was when the draft found him? Or the TV flooded with news of a new war, young kids like he was, but in desert not jungle cammo? Maybe simply the loss of the intense and rigid structure of his job that had held him together. But once he left that job, moved abroad for a family adventure overseas, an elective plan to live differently for a while,there were no more desks in a high rise piled high with work to do, no more suits, no more daily conversations with engaging colleagues, or pressing deadlines. But there was plenty of late night TV coverage of men at war. Is that what made his wall crumble?

When he finally went for help at the Vet Center, he dressed down in khakis and loafers, a sweater, and a windbreaker for his intake appointment. Bearded men in bandana headbands, fellow Vets ahead of him on their journeys, sat in the waiting room. They wore jeans and work boots. Tattoos peeked out from their open leather jackets, flannel shirts.

"I'm not like them," he said when he got back home. "They're alcoholics or recovered druggies. They're on maybe their third wives. They smoke like chimneys. They seem like good guys, but I can't relate to them. I'm just not one of them."

"Welcome soldier. You know, you're one of us, bro," they repeated, patiently, gently when he joined them in the group. "It's okay. We get you. You're one of us."

He kept showing up to the appointments. He swallowed the meds. There was a six-week rehabilitation program at White River Junction; another two weeks up at North Hampton. Then weekends. A weekend on grief. Another on guilt. He met one guy who wore tassel loafers and worked on Cape Cod in real estate. "Mark seems more like me," he said, but Mark didn't stay with the program.

He brought out those Zara suits for family events, celebrations, or funerals where he had to show up. He looked dreadfully handsome in them, handsome, calm and in control. Being in a crowd demanded a new kind of courage, especially that one crowded wedding reception in that arts gallery with the low ceilings and unmarked exits. "I can't stay" he said, quietly. It was impossible to hang out in a building with no clear way out. It was too much like a clusterfuck, an ambush ready to happen. He waited two hours in the safety of the parking lot until the rest of his family was ready to go. That's the kind of guy he was.

He wasn't working in a high rise anymore, so he worked in the driveway. In work boots, flannel shirts and jeans, he scraped and painted the shutters for the house. On Thursdays he showed up at those group meetings in his boots and jeans, sat and shared thoughts, feelings even with the tattooed men in leather jackets.

On one of those Thursdays in May, a man dressed up in aviator sunglasses and a flight suit landed on an aircraft carrier for a nationally televised press conference. Surrounded by Secret Service, he stood before a banner that said "Mission Accomplished." As if some sanitary business deal was completed. As if a photo shoot reinforcing a stylized image of warfare would tie things up neatly. In fact most of the casualties in Iraq came after that speech by a president who, though dressed for the part, had never flown a combat mission.

The President and most of the country were oblivious to the tattooed men in flannel shirts, men with Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars sitting in a circle at the Vet Center that day. They sat and talked about what they'd experienced, maybe wondered what it all had accomplished beyond their disabilities.

Twenty years on, more Veterans, those lucky enough to survive, will follow these men, sit in a circle, maybe wonder the same.

This next crew, men and women, might wear tee shirts and desert camo, sweatpants and flip flops, as they talk about what most of us in our busy lives and busy attire don’t know, about what really happens in war.

New Fiction from Michael Loyd Gray: “The Song Remains the Same”

Dalton bought a used F150 in Kalamazoo with oil rig money and drove north to a trailer he owned south of Mancelona. It squatted on ten acres that were his along a creek. It was way out in the boonies, very secluded at the end of a long and winding lane behind a tree line. He let two chucklehead brothers, Dace and Lee Morton, live there. They had been a couple years behind him in high school.

The Morton boys sold weed, but Dalton didn’t give a shit. That was their gig and not his. Live and let live. He was just the landlord. They were good about keeping the place up and if they got caught, it had nothing to do with him. He would just

point out that he arranged the rental by phone and took his payments by wire down in Florida.

He hadn’t been there in three years. That was back in 75, just after Saigon fell. Some days, Vietnam seemed like a long time ago. Some days, it didn’t. And some days, but not so many anymore, it seemed like yesterday.

Dalton flashed his headlights on and off a few times. It wasn’t some pre-arranged signal, which the two chuckleheads would have forgotten by now, but he knew not to just barrel up the lane and startle them. He figured they kept a few weapons, and they weren’t the brightest bulbs around. And they were perpetually medicated. Drugs and guns – what could possibly go wrong?

He gave them some time to get sorted and then he eased slowly up the lane, flashing his headlights again for good measure. No cop would come up like that. He knew that and knew they would, too.

Dalton pulled on up to the trailer and got out and stood next to the truck for a moment, to let them get a good look. A flashlight beam from one of those big camping lights got switched on him. It lingered on his eyes. He put a hand over them after a few seconds.

“Okay, dickheads—knock off the fucking searchlight shit.”

“Jesus – that you, Dalton?”

“No – it’s fucking Yosemite Sam.”

“Yeah, that’s Dalton,” a second voice said.

There were two young, pretty girls inside with Dace and Lee.

Both blonds. No surprise there. Barely over eighteen, by the look of them. No surprise there either. They were stoned to the gills. Again – no surprise. Weed dealers always had a pretty girl or two hanging on, mooching weed and speed in exchange for sex. Not quite customers and not quite girlfriends. A sort of entourage born of necessity and practicality.

The trailer reeked of weed, but it was otherwise clean, orderly. An empty pizza carton was on the coffee table. He wondered who delivered this far out. A bong was propped against a sofa. He had been right that the Morton boys would keep the place together. Dace switched the stereo back on. Dalton recognized Zeppelin right off, but it was an older album – Houses of the Holy.

Dalton signaled for Dace to cut the volume some, so he could be heard, and he dialed it back to background music.

“How are you, Dalton? Long time no see.”

Dalton nodded.

“That album is, like, five years old,” he said.

“We’re just getting around to it,” Lee said.

The blonds had glassy stares.

Dalton nodded again. Dace passed a joint and Dalton took a hit but declined the second time around. He didn’t mind cutting the edge from the long drive, but he wasn’t interested in getting baked until he had a good lay of the land.

“Lee,” Dace said, “why don’t you fetch old Dalton here a cold brewski.”

Lee smirked and went to the kitchen.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Dalton said.

“Long trip?” Dace smiled.

Dalton leaned back and sighed. Lee came around the corner and handed him a cold Pabst. Dalton took a healthy swig.

“The train up from Florida,” he said and took another swig. “Then the drive from Kalamazoo. Yeah, it’s been a long, strange trip.”

He wondered if they got The Grateful Dead reference.

“New truck?” Lee said.

“A new old one,” Dalton said. “Just bought it in Kalamazoo.”

“Staying long?” Lee said.

“Forever and a year.”

He drained the rest of the beer and Lee got him another.

“You worked up a thirst,” Lee said.

One of the blonds abruptly said, “Can we turn the music up?”

Dace patted her thigh.

“Hold on, baby. We’re having a little talk here with our old pal Dalton.”

“Who’s Dalton?” she said. Dace fired up another joint and handed it to her. The two blonds passed the joint back and forth and giggled.

“I need a place to crash tonight,” Dalton said.

“Well, *your* casa is *your* casa,” Lee said, sniggering.

Dalton didn’t like the sound of Lee’s voice. Never had. The boy had always struck him as barely north of retard.

“You come at the right time,” Dace said, a quick frown aimed

at Lee.

“Why’s that?”

Dalton leaned forward.

“We’re going on a road trip tomorrow.” Dace grinned. “The four of us.”

“Is his name Dalton?” one of the blonds said. To Dalton, they really did seem interchangeable.

“Where to?” Dalton said.

“Chicago.”

“How long?”

“Four, maybe five days.”

“Pizza at Giordano’s,” Lee said. “Wrigley Field and all that shit. We get to sing Take Me Out to the Ballgame.”

Dalton and Dace rolled their eyes. Dalton knew Lee was an idiot. So did Dace. Still just a happy-go-lucky high school kid, really. But he would probably not grow up beyond assistant weed dealer. And he would probably turn up dead in a ditch someday. Dace was the brains of the outfit, but that wasn’t saying much.

“Taking the train down to Chi-Town,” Dace said. “Like real tourists.”

“So, a pleasure trip,” Dalton said.

“Some business, too. There’s a vehicle to drive back.”

“Of course.” Dalton figured Chicago was their source of supply. It made him think of Seymour, of Vietnam, but he managed to shake the images away. “How much product you got on hand now?”

Dalton was mostly just making small talk, but he was curious, too. It *was* his trailer.

“Just what we need for recreation,” Dace said matter-of-factly. “We never keep any amount here.”

He had a smug look. Dalton figured that was to let him know he knew his business.

“Smart.” Dalton sipped his beer. “You never know who might pull up the lane.”

“*You* did,” Dace said, grinning.

“Sorry to bust in on you unannounced.”

“Don’t say bust, man,” Lee said, attempting the joke.

Dace glanced at Lee.

“Lee, why don’t you take the ladies outside for a little snipe hunt, so me and Dalton can talk.”

Lee nodded and took them out. They held hands and stumbled, nearly falling to the floor.

“What’s a snipe?” one of the blonds said.

“Bye, Dalton,” the other blond said, waving.

After they were gone, Dace said, “She’ll keep you company, if you like.”

Dalton grinned but shook his head.

“That’s mighty generous of you, Dace. But maybe another time. I’m wrecked from the road.”

“Anything we ought to know?”

“Like what?”

Dace leaned forward.

“Like, why you ain’t on an oil rig in the Gulf, making good bread.”

“I made enough for a while. Three years of it.”

“How much is enough?”

“My needs are simple. And now I have cheap wheels. You ever even seen an oil rig, Dace?”

“Can’t say I have.” He expertly rolled another joint. “But I have bought a few oil filters in my time. Other than Chicago, I ain’t never been farther than Detroit.”

“You ain’t missed much,” Dalton said. He decided he could partake after all. Dace handed it to him and he fired it up. He wasn’t going anywhere. No plans to operate heavy machinery, including his brain. His only tangible plan was to stay off that asshole Seymour’s radar. He didn’t know if that was possible. But it was a theory that needed to be tested. The future—whatever was in it – was limited by Seymour’s radar screen.

After the joint, Dace turned up the music just enough to be heard clearly. Zeppelin was playing “The Song Remains the Same.” Dalton nodded and kept time and thought, yeah, that’s life. It tends to usually stay the same. You had to break out to have a chance at all. Breaking out meant finding a door. If there was one. Life was often just four walls and no door.

“You’re not here for just a joint,” Dace said. “Not after three years.”

Dalton thought a moment, which wasn’t easy because it was primo weed and it cooked inside him pretty well. He could see himself just turn up the knob and groove to Zeppelin rocking the trailer on its foundation.

“I might want to build a little something out here, by the creek,” he said after a long pause. “A cabin, maybe. But livable.”

“You got enough for all that?”

Dalton mulled how much he’d made on oil rigs. And then there was the money from Seymour. The payoff for keeping quiet about something they’d done in Nam involving drugs, which made Dalton indebted to Seymour. Accomplice was a better way to put it, but he was too tired now for that shit.

“Yeah, I reckon I can swing it.”

Dace nodded but looked slightly skeptical.

“How do you figure to make a living? No oil rigs around here.”

Dalton shrugged.

“I could sell a few acres, if I need to. One step at a time.”

“And you don’t need dope dealers as neighbors.”

“It ain’t that.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, Dace, I’m sure. And I’d do you a deal, for taking care of the trailer.”

Dace thought in terms of deals, related best to deals.

“What kind of deal?”

Dalton went to the kitchen and got a beer to buy time, to make sure he knew what he was doing. He brought Dace one, too.

“To getting evicted,” Dace said, holding up his PBR.

“I’d give you the trailer,” Dalton said abruptly.

“Say again?”

“Just haul her to a new location out in the boonies somewhere. You could be back in business in under twenty-four hours.”

“For real?”

“Sure. We can put a hitch on my truck to do it.”

Dace eased back in his chair and mulled it. He smiled.

“Mighty white of you, Dalton.”

“Well, shit, I’m feeling especially white, I reckon.”

“When do we do it?”

“Not for a while,” Dalton said. “No hurry.”

“Winter’s coming, Dalton. Comes early here in case you forgot that down in sunny Florida.”

Dalton nodded.

“Maybe I break ground first, before a freeze. Get a foundation down for spring.”

“Cool.” Dace passed the joint to him. “So, what’s Florida really like?”

“Hot.”

Dace nodded and waited to hear more, but Dalton just passed the joint back and leaned back into the sofa, glancing at the ceiling a moment, exhaling smoke.

“Sometimes,” Dace said, “me and Lee think about shifting business down to Florida.”

Dalton raised his head and smirked.

“That would be like opening a McDonald’s on a whole block of

McDonald’s, my friend.”

Dace nodded and looked disappointed.

“It was just a thought.”

“Uh-huh.” Dalton knew Dace lacked enough drive to make such a move. And Lee had no drive at all. They would live and die as the weed kings of Antrim County. And probably in a low, short trajectory.

“But, man – thanks on the trailer.” Dace sipped his beer and then offered a hand. They shook vigorously. “You always done right by us, man. I appreciate it.”

“Esta bien,” Dalton said, not immediately aware it came out Spanish. “No sweat, Dace.”

“You speak much Mexican?” Dace said.

“Spanish, Dace.”

“Pardon my French.”

“Yeah, I know a little. From the rigs.”

Lee and the blonds came back in, and it took a minute for the blonds to get situated on a sofa and fire up a joint. Dalton partook in that one, too. He figured he was now sort of on vacation. Or something close to it. A lull of some kind. A lull away from that fuck Seymour. Calm before the Seymour storm? He couldn’t discount that. But it was okay to get good and baked and let Zeppelin drill a hole in his head.

“Lee said you got a Purple Heart in Vietnam,” one of the blonds abruptly said to Dalton.

“Did he?”

“That’s what the man said.”

“Must be true, then.” Dalton put his hand over his heart. “But it doesn’t feel purple.”

“Did it hurt?” she said.

Dalton looked at Dace and rolled his eyes. Dace chuckled.

“Naw,” Dalton said. He didn’t think a serious war story was the way to go with the blond. It would just be more than she could relate to. But he rolled up his sleeve anyway and showed her the long scar. He didn’t know why.

“Just a bee sting, really,” he said.

She ran her finger along the scar.

“A bullet did that?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re not sure?”

She was baked even worse than he was.

“Yeah, I’m sure. A bullet. Bob the bee bullet.”

“That’s gnarly,” the other blond said. Dalton hadn’t heard anyone use that word since he rolled through California on the way back from Nam. He’d spent an interesting week in Frisco with some hippies in Haight-Ashbury. He learned right off that the locals hated the name Frisco. Only outsiders used it. Travel was always an education. Florida was where he learned too much about that bastard Seymour.

The other blond leaned closer for a look at the scar.

“Lee says you got a Bronze Star, too.”

“Lee’s quite the encyclopedia,” Dalton said.

“What’s a Bronze Star?” the blond said.

“A medal, for being brave,” Lee said.

“Were you brave?” she said, grinning. She touched his elbow lightly.

“Not at all,” Dalton said. “It’s just bullshit.”

“If it’s bullshit, why’d you get one?”

“They pass them out like candy.”

“But you must have done *something*,” she said.

Dalton sipped his beer and studied her face a moment. The lighting was dim, just a soft -bulb lamp in a corner and the lights from the stereo, and he couldn’t quite make out her features.

“I guarded the rubbers,” Dalton said.

Dace and Lee laughed. The two blonds looked confused.

“Rubbers?” one of them said. “Somebody had to guard rubbers?”

“Yeah—we had a whole warehouse of them.”

“Bullshit,” one of the blonds said.

“No, it wasn’t. Couldn’t just let the enemy get them, right?”

“And who again was the enemy?” one of the blonds said.

Dalton realized it no longer mattered which one it was. Keeping track was irrelevant. And history? Fuck history. Americans didn’t know history.

“The VC,” Dalton said soberly. “Victor Charles – the Vietcong.”

“That sounds nasty,” a blond said.

“Didn’t they have their own rubbers?” another blond said.

Dalton and Dace laughed loudly. Lee brought beers from the kitchen.

“What’d I miss?” Lee said.

“Alice wanted to know why the VC didn’t have rubbers,” Dace said.

Dalton looked at the two blonds and wondered which one was Alice. He ought to have paid attention at that point but said to himself, fuck it. We are now all baked in an oven and turning brown. Go ahead and spread cinnamon on us.

A blond squeezed Dalton’s knee and he figured it must be Alice. Or one of the other blonds. He nearly laughed at loud at the notion of a room full of stoned blonds.

“Primo weed,” he said to Dace, who nodded confidently.

“I really want to know why there were so many rubbers,” Alice said. “Is that all you guys did over there?”

Dalton chuckled and then got a few, fleeting images from Vietnam, and it all kind of swept over him suddenly and he shivered.

“We put them over the barrels of rifles,” Dalton said calmly, after a pause. The images had slipped away. He had a swig of beer.

“That’s what you called your cocks – rifles?” Alice chuckled. “You guys always think with your dicks.”

“Wow!” Lee said, shaking his head.

“We put them over the rifles to keep water out, to keep them dry,” Dalton said quietly, seriously.

“You mean real guns?” Alice said.

“Yeah.” Dalton finished his beer. “As real as it gets.”

Silence set in among them for a minute, just Zeppelin low in the background. The album had been started over and Dalton again heard “The Song Remains the Same.” There was a lesson in that if he could think well enough to say it. He stood, a little rubbery in the legs.

“I could use a blanket or two, and a pillow,” he said.

“Lee, get the man some blankets and a pillow,” Dace said quietly. Lee came back from the bedroom with them, and Dalton slipped the blankets under an arm and clutched the pillow. He turned toward the door.

“We got a spare room, Dalton,” Dace said. “It’s your trailer, man.”

Dalton glanced back.

“I want to sleep outside. By the creek.”

“Your call,” Dace said.

“What if it rains?” Lee said and Dalton thought of many nights it rained in Vietnam.

“I want to hear the water rush by,” he said. “And see the moon.”

“Okay, man,” Dace said. “Your wish is our command. Lee, help him with that door.”

Dalton stepped out and walked toward the creek. Crickets performed an amazing symphony, and he was so baked he felt he could reach up and touch the moon.

He dumped his bedding under a tree hanging over the water and he propped himself against a boulder and listened to the riffles in the creek. It was a lovely sound that seemed as strong and loud as Niagara Falls.

“Good damn weed,” he told the creek. “You should try some.”

In a few minutes, Alice showed up and handed him a beer. He figured he had room for one more beer. Just one. She didn't say anything. She played with a curl of hair next to her ear and grinned, looking down at him for a few seconds, and then she sat beside him.

"So," she said, drawing the word out like it was taffy," are you all fucked up from that shitty war."

She was direct. Dalton liked direct.

"Are you asking if I'm crazy?"

"Well, not *insane,*" she said. "I didn't mean *that*."

"Good to know."

"There's all sorts of fucked up," she said.

"True enough. Are you asking if I'm a violent asshole –shit like that?"

"Well, are you?"

"Make love, not war," he said, chuckling.

"That's just a saying."

He held a hand up, making the peace sign right in front of her face.

"Peace, love, dope," Dalton said.

"You're avoiding the subject."

Dalton drew his knees up under his chin and listened to the water.

"No, I'm not crazy. Or violent. The first couple years back in the world, I had trouble sleeping but that worked itself out."

"Nightmares?" she said.

“A few. But they finally went away. Just up and went.”

“Why?”

He shrugged.

“One day I just reminded myself they couldn’t send me back to Nam. That door was closed. Locked. Game over. Things perked up some after that.”

“What did you see?” she said.

“In Nam?”

“No, in your nightmares. What were they like?”

Dalton tried to remember one of them clearly, which was hard at first because it had been a while. Only hazy fragments came to him. Jagged pieces of the puzzle.

“I really can’t remember much now. Maybe that’s for the best.”

“But surely you remember something?” she said.

He sighed and looked up at the moon for a moment. It looked the same as in Vietnam. The moon was the moon was the moon.

“I remember little things.”

“Like what?” she said.

“Smells.”

“Just smells?”

“And the fucking heat.”

“Good,” she said. “This is progress. What else?”

“And how birds stopped talking to each other when someone was coming, and the jungle would go as quiet as a graveyard.”

“Good,” she said. “We’re rolling now. What else?”

“I remember the fucking drippy humidity. It was like a steam bath.”

“Like down in Florida?”

“Yeah, but nobody was shooting at me in Florida. And we had AC.”

“And now you’re home, safe and sound.”

“That’s the rumor.”

They watched the water, moonlight kissing the surface, and for a long time, neither of them spoke. The weed and alcohol and fatigue from the road now weighed him down and he felt himself slipping away. A benign darkness descending. He wanted to talk more with Alice. Lovely Alice. But she was now just a dark face in the moonlight as his eyes fluttered. The booze and primo weed did their anesthetic duty and tugged at him, pulling him deeper, and then he smirked before he sank for a while into the peaceful abyss.

Dalton was reasonably sure he wouldn’t dream about Vietnam.

New Fiction from Lucas Randolph: “Boys Play Dress Up”

When visiting

a friend's grandpa, the Boy learned that the grandpa liked watching football games on the weekends instead of the black and white western movies. His favorite football team was the Kansas City Chiefs. Their team colors were—red, white, and yellow. Some of the fans had feathers on their head and they chanted and made a chopping motion with one of their hands when the game started. Sometimes a man who was dressed up in a pretend costume would beat on a giant drum. The grandpa said it was tradition and traditions were good. The Boy asked the friends grandpa if he ever watched western movies, but he said those were all fake and weren't worth the copper they were printed on. That's why he liked watching football. Real men. Real blood. Real consequences.

None of that fake cowboy horseshit.

Sometimes, though, if it was late at night, the friend's grandpa said he liked to watch military documentaries, but only if everyone was already asleep. The Boy didn't ask why. The grandpa had an American flag that hung from the front porch of his house—red, white, and blue. The Boy's own grandpa didn't have one. Neither did the Boy's father.

Were you in the War too?

No, my parents wanted me to go to college. The same college my daddy went too. In fact, we even played ball for the same team. That's my old jersey there.

The friend's grandpa pointed to the wall. Two framed black and white photos with wooden frames that bent and curved all fancy like hung next to each other. The Boy knew one photo was older because it had a football team where they all had leather helmets on, and the image was faded. There was also a framed football jersey on the wall with the same last name that his friend had with stitched together letters on the back of it. The team colors were—green, gold, and black.

I almost volunteered for the military. I wanted too—hell, they almost got me in the draft! Maybe I wish they would have. Just wasn't in the playbook, I guess. Your grandfather was in the service? World War II?

Yes sir. Well—no, he fought in Korea. My dad too. Air force. He didn't fight in any War, though.

That's okay son, you should be damn proud. We all have our role to play. That's what my old man used to say.

I'm going to join too—when I'm old enough, anyway.

The grandpa smiled and put a hand on the Boy's shoulder.

That's a good boy.

The grandpa reached over and grabbed an old football that sat

on a wooden mantle with some sports memorabilia underneath the old photos and the jersey. He held it in front of the Boy's face close enough for him to smell the aged pigskin leather, letting his eyes wander over the scars from the field of battle. When the Boy's hands moved to touch the football, the grandpa reached back in an old-school football pose like the quarterback does and threw the ball across the room to his grandson who caught it above his head with both hands.

Nice one! Just like your old man!

He lost

his favorite coffee mug. The Old Man poured dark roast into a short glass mason jar mixing it with the golden liquid already left waiting at the bottom. It wasn't meant for hot liquids and the Old Man reached for a red trimmed potholder with a green and yellow wildflower pattern to hold it with. He sat down into his favorite corduroy rocking chair, one hand against his lower back for support. He smiled with the jar between his legs letting the glass cool, the steam from the roasted beans rising to his nose. Smells of earth and sweet honey warmed the room. The sting of diesel was nearly absent.

Please, just one-story Grandpa. I promise I won't ask for more. Please—

Well shit, you're old enough by now. I promised your dad I wouldn't, but hell in my day you could drive a tractor at ten, and you're nearly that. It can be our little secret. What do you want to know?

About the War, about—Korea. Like, what kind of gun did you use?

A few, but mostly the ole Browning M1919. I bet you don't even

know what that is, do you?

The Boy shook his head no.

It’s a light machine gun. L.M.G. It took two of us to shoot and two more to carry everything. It was a real son-of-a-bitch to get around.

Did you have to shoot it a lot?

I never shot it once, to tell you the truth, not at anyone anyway. See, I just fed the ammo to keep it firing. Do you know what that means, to feed the ammo?

The Old Man didn’t wait for the Boy to answer.

I was what they called an assistant gunner. Corporal did all of the shooting and stuff for us. He liked that kind of thing.

The Old Man grabbed the hot mason jar from between his legs and took a long drag of his coffee. The rounded glass edge burned against the crease of his lips, but he drank it anyway. He remembered the Corporal well. They grew matching mustaches; they all did. The lieutenant dubbed them his “Mustache Maniacs,” which later got shortened to just “M&M’s.” It was a real hoot with the men. The Old Man shaved it shortly before returning home. He felt stupid with it by himself. It didn’t feel right without Corporal Lopez and the rest. He wouldn’t tell that story today, though.

They didn’t deserve it, the people. Not too different from us you know—some of the best God-damned people I’ve ever met, actually. They fought side by side with us. Those Koreans, real God-damn patriots. We suffered together; I remember how hungry they were. How hungry we were—and cold, for shit’s sake was it cold. Colder than a well digger’s ass, if you ask me. You have to understand, it’s a different kind of cold they have there in Korea. It’s all any of us thought about most of the time. We weren’t ready for any of it. It was a terrible

War.

Why were you fighting then Grandpa? If they weren't bad?

It wasn't them we were fighting; it was those god-damned Reds! You see, retreat was never part of the plan, hell, War was never part of the plan—we just killed that other bastard five years earlier! You have to imagine, when they first came over them mountain tops, millions of 'em, I swear to God, the God-damned ground disappeared. I don't know if they shot back, or hell, if they even had guns. Corporal [redacted] just kept firing. There was so much smoke you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. I loaded until my hands charred like wood. We could hear them breathing they was so close. A wave of glowing lead to the left. A wave of glowing lead to the right.

The Old Man's arms followed waves of bullets from one side of his body to the other in a repeating pattern. The aged wood from underneath his corduroy rocking chair snapped with the weight of his story. Liquid from the mason jar in one of his hands splashed over the rim.

The Boy breathed hard, too afraid to look away.

We screamed for the runners to bring more ammo; I don't remember when they stopped coming. The Reds didn't. They never stopped. When they were right God-damned on top of us, Corporal [redacted] handed me his pistol, a Colt 1911. Just a small little thing. He picked up that son-of-a-bitch Browning with his bare hands and we fired until we both had nothing left. And then, we ran. We all ran. Everyone did. And we kept running. When the order finally came to stand fast; we already made it to the God-damned ocean.

The Old Man drank from his mason jar again, the amber glow of liquid not able to hide behind his lost porcelain coffee mug. He nearly spit it out when he started laughing from somewhere deep down in his belly. He had to use his free hand to cover the top of the jar to keep the liquid from spilling

everywhere.

You know, when we finally did stop, there were these two supply crates, just sitting there waiting for us. One had ammo, one had food. We hadn't had a single round of ammunition to fire in over a week and no one had eaten in at least double that amount of time, probably longer. But wouldn't you God-damn believe it, I was the only shit-stick dumb enough to go for the ammo first. I was more scared of those god-damned Reds than I was of starving to death. Go for the ammo first, that's what Corporal ████ would have done, so that's what I did. He always knew what to do.

Invitation to a Gunfighter, staring Yul Brynner and George Segal, played at a low volume in the background on a black and white television screen. The film ends after the hero takes a shotgun blast to the chest and one bullet through the stomach. The hero manages to jump from his horse in a dramatic roll before single-handedly disarming the bad guys in one swift motion. An entire town watches from the side. The hero then spends the next two minutes and thirty-four seconds forcing the bad guys to apologize in front of all the town's folk for their crimes against their own neighbors. Eventually, the hero succumbs to the injuries and the people carry him away on their shoulders. The Old Man and the Boy sat in silence until the credits finished and the screen turned to black.

The Boy wasn't sure what was meant to be funny about the ending to his grandpa's story. He waited for the rest of the story to finish, but it never came.

The Sheriff

first met the Boy when he was still just a boy. The Sheriff took the Old Man away but said he could come back home once he

was feeling better. The Old Man said it was the bitch’s fault. The Sheriff also gave the Boy a pack of Colorado Rocky baseball trading cards and a golden sheriff’s sticker that he could put on the outside of his shirt. The Boy wore it to school the next Monday and everybody wanted to know where he got it from but he told them it was a secret.