Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival, has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in the Sand* "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* blogpost titled "Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?" I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie's resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn't state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments” is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between “Biodegradables” and “Seven.” In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn’t) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments,” Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida’s thinking and writing:

The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just this week I read an article about the danger of “micro-plastic” particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. His fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the

“shelf-live” of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives, which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida’s musing might be, the larger context of “Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments” is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida’s inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany’s attitude and actions to oppress Europe’s Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which de Man’s journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida implies, is an abrogation of a “natural” process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That’s a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as “cultural biodegradability” that structures the dissolution of a publication’s ideas and import into culture over time. He

asks, “Can one transpose onto ‘culture’ the vocabulary of ‘natural waste treatment’—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the ‘environment’ in our societies?” In Derrida’s formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls “the great organic body of culture.”

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases, fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida’s) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuring decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but many knew of it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm, Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific “paradigm” in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the “male gaze” in a 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books,

movies, and art about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis' article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the "good man with a gun" sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether "biodegradability" or "cultural biodegradability" best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I'm describing, I'm not sure, but I don't know what the better words are. Derrida doesn't clearly explain whether an important work (a "classic") resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I

like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there's also plenty of evidence that a book's reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida's formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today's cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man's expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can't have one without the other. As Derrida writes, "the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but 'the Deconstruction' of 1989."

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research

and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn't jibe with the values held by the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

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New Poetry by Jim Kraus: “Amphibious”

ABOUT TO DISAPPEAR / *photo by Amalie Flynn*

AMPHIBIOUS

In Hokusai’s “Kanagawa Wave,” the boatmen
look like a school of masquerading fish
about to disappear into the vast trough between waves,
the scene a masque for the knowing seascape.

Underwater, Ahab,
pinned to the great white
creature, like a wave that has
disappeared into silence.

In memory’s slow dancing,
flesh now dissolved,
seafloor muck covers bones
and shark-tooth nodules.

Out of the bubbling methane,
Ahab is reborn with tripod limbs
and tiny feet, the wooden leg
now a trail of seafloor slime,
amphibious.

New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: Jaroslav Hasek’s

“The Man Without a Transit Pass and Other Tales”

There are few things I like better than sitting down with a copy of classic Central or Eastern European literature from the 19th century onwards, especially its short fiction. The best authors from this area all have this in common with Stephen King: the longer works can be powerful, but there is something particularly pointed about their short work. Constrain them to a few thousand words and one is rewarded with beautiful, absurd, and entertaining stories suitable for any setting: morning or evening, summer or winter.

I read Jaroslav Hasek’s *The Man Without a Transit Pass and Other Tales*, published by Paradise Edition and translated into English by Dustin Stalnaker (@Jaro_Hasek on Twitter) over the course of two days. Consisting of 15 short stories of between a thousand and several thousand words, no single story is so sophisticated or overwhelming that it will require a PhD to read; furthermore, those references in the story that do benefit from context to which your average English speaking 21st century reader does not have access are suitably footnoted.

The stories are filled with a wry and subversive humor characteristic of those places touched by the Austro-Hungarian empire – the absurdity of a space defined by hidebound bureaucracy and hereditary aristocracy, combined with the knowledge that its many flaws notwithstanding, at least the system was to a certain extent a known entity. Like the works of Babel or Kafka, one has the impression of looking into a world that could not exist after the Holocaust; the little indignities and tragedies of life not quite yet condmned to

the absolute horror of totalitarianism.

Hasek's Czech, Hungarian, and Galician regions bustle with charming frauds, shameless charlatans, fools, and ne'er do wells trying to hustle their way through life one scam at a time; these are its heroes. Aligned against them are those government functionaries, holy men, and police (always the police) who are embodying or upholding a fundamentally hypocritical and iniquitous system that is dedicated to oppressing its citizenry. In "The Footrace" a con man seeking a bed and a meal accidentally swindles his way into a betrothal with a young woman while pretending to be a British (or American) millionaire; this is similar to what happens in "The Beckov Monastery" where a con man lies about his purpose to monks and enjoys their repast on the backs of local farmers, and also "A Legitimate Business" and "A Guest in the House is a God in the House." "The Reform Efforts of Baron Kleinhampl" follows an imbecile who inherits a manor and sets about bedeviling its residents with harebrained improvements.

My favorite story – a difficult feat in a book filled with delights – was "A Legitimate Business," the heart of which is a familiar concept to fans of Seinfeld. A group of hucksters used to showing people things like flea circuses, while hunting for a new trick, come upon a novel idea – a show about nothing.

"Hang on a minute with the 'show them something,' I interrupted, drawing with my walking stick in the sand. "Why this 'something'? Let's go one step further. Do you get me? Show the audience *nothing*!"

The show consists of a person entering a dark room where they're promptly seized and thrown out of the room into daylight; it proves a hit with locals who want to see others subjected to the "fun," and ends (as do many stories in the collection) with police breaking things up.

Perhaps this story resonates in part because so many of today's controversies feel so odd or irrelevant. A professional American football team, The Washington Commanders, were briefly known as The Washington Football Team (and before that, a name that was too rude to write here). A dislikable and argumentative short man, Ben Shapiro, reviewed a movie by way of a video titled "Ben Shapiro Destroys Barbie for 43 Minutes." Meanwhile, a war rages in Ukraine – part of which, Galicia, appears in Hasek's stories. It's been a while since so much of so little consequence has occupied our attention – or so little of things of great consequence have not.

The society and time related by Hasek is filled with lighthearted and for the most part seemingly inconsequential mix-ups, which means people can feel comfortable taking pleasure in the follies that unfold over the pages. I encourage anyone who enjoys this sort of literature (as I do) to pick up a copy and read it. And thanks to Matthew Spencer (@unpaginated on Twitter) of Paradise Edition for putting this into print – you can acquire your own copy here.

New Nonfiction from Andrew Davis: Korta Za: Go Home

Andrew Elliot Davis was born July 1, 1990 in Worcester, MA; his family moved to Milford, NH, where he graduated high school in 2008. Although Andrew had a lot of different interests as a young man, his dream was to be in the military, and he joined the Marines right out of high school—not knowing exactly what to expect but willing to take on whatever his country needed from him. Andrew faithfully served in the

Marines as a Sergeant in the Infantry through three tours overseas, including a tour in Afghanistan. That is where he got his idea to write Korta Za.

After he was honorably discharged from the Marines, he went on to get his bachelor's degree in environmental economics from the University of New Hampshire. While attending UNH, he became an avid fan of their college football program, where Andrew was a season ticket holder. He would later donate a New Hampshire state flag that he had taken on his tours overseas to the UNH football program, and they still bring it out at every game to this day.

Like many other military members, Andrew had a hard time in life after his service, and throughout his successes he also suffered from PTSD. Unfortunately, Andrew passed away before he could publish his story. His family is very proud to share this story with others and our hope is that he would be proud as well. Andrew is buried at the Boscawen Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen, NH and is finally at peace, at last.

Korta Za: Go Home

When you experience something so life-changing, it is sometimes with you everywhere you go. Such is the case of my experience. When I turn away, I see it; when I go to bed, I feel it. When I close my eyes, it haunts me like a horrible movie on rerun over and over in my head. I will drift to sleep in order to get some liberation, but the dreams always turn into nightmares. It's like a rat caught in a maze with no sensible exit in sight—just a loop of walls and empty corridors. This is my experience that changed me from who I once was to the man I am today. Whether I like to admit it or not, it affected me with such magnitude that I cannot possibly ever hope to comprehend it. The only thing I know for sure is the change will forever be with me.

This is about my time in Afghanistan, when 45 men from Third Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 2ndMarines left the United States for seven months. We were going to a place we had never been but had read, talked, and heard so much about. For many of us, this was the first time out of the country, or even away from home for that matter. There is nothing in this world that could have totally prepared us for what we would go through in the next seven months. Not all the training, not all the class time, not a thing could. We left as boys. For those of us who did return, we were men, but not ordinary men. We were tired, broken, and defeated. This is my story.

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The hum of the rotors pierced my ears like the sound of a million wasps swarming around my head. The heat of the helicopter engulfed me as I struggled to breathe through the exhaust filling my lungs. This was a United States Marine Corps CH-53 helicopter, and it was my golden chariot to battle. Inside it were twenty tightly packed Marines, not knowing what awaited us. I sat with my heart pounding out of my chest, clutching my rifle for dear life as we were tossed and turned in our seats. Outside, I could hear the gunfire from below and I could feel the pilot swerving to avoid it. *So, this is **it**,* I thought to myself. *This is what I have been waiting for my entire life*. Ever since I watched the World Trade Center Towers collapse on the screen over and over, I knew what I was destined for. Here I was, sitting in a metal coffin headed to the middle of nowhere in a country that might as well have been Mars.

We were given the signal for five minutes out and in one fluid motion I placed my rifle into condition one. This meant that I now had a bullet in the chamber and my rifle was ready to fire. We hit the ground, hard, and the ramp immediately dropped. Half dazed, we all threw ourselves up and ran out the back as we had practiced hundreds of times in the States. I

struggled to see as the brown-out conditions of the sand overtook my eyes and throat. Still, I knew what I had to do and followed the outline of the Marine in front of me. Almost on cue, I threw myself to the ground in a defensive posture. I heard the helicopter take off behind me and then there was nothing but silence as I heard her rotors slowly fade into blackness. I pulled the butt of my rifle hard into my shoulder and immediately started scanning my surroundings, looking thoroughly for any possible sign of a threat. In the distance I could hear the sounds of war, but of them I could see nothing. The scene before me was like something out of a movie about other planets. All around me, we were surrounded by large mountains that would have looked more appropriate on Mars. They were nothing but rocks and dry dirt, not a tree on them. The ground itself was made up of hard-packed dusty sand that got into my eyes and throat with every breath. The sun beat down so hard it was like walking into an oven, the wind like holding a hairdryer on high to my face. We lay like this for what felt like an eternity, until the order came from around the group. *Pickup and move!* With my heart nearly pounding out of my chest and my body numb from adrenaline, I slowly rose to my feet and proceeded to fall into place with my comrades.

We set up our forward operating base in an abandoned police compound on the outskirts of a town called Dehana. This area had many strategic advantages. It sat right on the Dehana Pass, which was situated between two mountains. It was a central chokepoint for any movement coming through the area, and it gave us enough high ground from which to keep observation posts on the valley below. This pass was famous for Alexander the Great’s army moving through it during his invasion of Afghanistan. We felt as if we were following in his footsteps. At one time the town might have been flourishing, but all that I could see of it now were bullet-ridden walls and shops in appalling states. War had torn this town apart and its inhabitants were equally tattered. Our base

consisted of one central building that had at one point held the town's police force, and then before us was owned by a drug lord. Now it was to be our home for seven months. There was no running water and the only electricity we had was from two generators we set up ourselves. The generators were used specifically for charging radios and running vital equipment. We slept on any ground that lay within the walls of the compound, but mostly sticking to our squads of thirteen Marines.

We took no time at all militarizing our new home. We placed barbed wire on entry and exit points and set up trip flares all throughout the perimeter. If anyone came near us in the night, they would be surprised with a large flash of light. We built posts and filled the sandbags. To us, we were just doing what we knew how to do, what we had always been trained for. To the people of the village. we were invaders from a far off land. Whatever we were, one thing was for certain: The Marines of third platoon had moved in, and we were here to stay.

On our forward operating base (F.O.B), life to us was good. We had bottles of water plentifully, and we ate prepackaged food called MRE's. But best of all, we had walls. Walls made out of mud so thick that the danger of what was right outside them seemed so far away. That for a moment we could feel safe was all we needed sometimes. Knowing that just right outside our gates was an entire town that wanted us dead would become disconcerting, on occasion. If I said life on the F.O.B was amazing, I would be lying. But if I said I couldn't have asked for better, I would be telling the truth. We had water, food, and walls. I couldn't have imagined it could get any better. I was nineteen years old and there wasn't a telephone, toilet, or running water for that matter, in sight. We went to the bathroom in a bag and then burned it in a hole we dug out of the ground with our shovels. We would eat two meals a day consisting of food all out of a package, some twenty years old or more—but it was food. We would sleep maybe once every

forty-eight hours or so—but it was sleep. I would huddle close to my brothers when the nights got freezing cold, and collapse into the shade of a wall when the temperature outside rose to 130 degrees during the day. On post, I would laugh with the children and throw them packages of freeze-dried muffins and anything else they would beg me for. This was my daily life within the base. Eat, stand post, eat again, laugh with friends, clean my gear, clean my rifle, and reload ammo. It was a good life, and it was a welcome opportunity from what lay just but a few hundred meters away.

Of all the men I was with, my best friend was Jake Fanno. He was from Oregon and had grown up similarly to me. He was in my squad, and we had gotten along from the beginning. We would always hang out and make jokes to each other to pass the time, and I always knew I could count on him for anything. I had no problem trusting him with my life. Of my best memories, I can recall this particular time when we found a bag of taco meat and then searched everywhere for packaged tortillas. Everything we found happened to be rotten and about thirty years old. We were so excited by the time we finally found tortillas that we forgot we had no way to cook the meat. So we just opened the bag and ate it cold. We were so happy we had found something good to eat that neither of us wanted to admit how horrible it really was.

“This is so good,” Jake said.

“The best,” I replied, “you could never get anything like this at home…”

“Dude, this is horrible.”

We both laughed hysterically for about ten minutes and finally gave up on the entire situation. This was what made us happy—finding food that was thirty years old and pretending like it was edible. Just because of the idea that it might make us think of home. We could never get past how fake the

food was, or how sick we always got from it.

When it was our squad's turn for patrol we would suit up and head out. Patrols were always conducted on foot and were the most dangerous parts of our days. We would wear our helmets, bullet proof flak vests, boots, camouflage utility uniforms, and of course our rifles, ammo, and whatever grenades or rockets we could carry. It was particularly dangerous because this was when we were most likely to be attacked. The enemy would watch and wait for us to get away from our base to open fire. Every step could have been our last. A favorite tactic of the enemy was to plant bombs in the ground, called IED's, that could blow up right under any of us if we didn't find them in time.

Walking through the village was always the most stressful time for me. The people did not like us at all and made us very aware of it. As we walked by them, they would clamp their mouths shut and berate us with their eyes. Any sign of weakness and they would be quick to take advantage. We were outnumbered by them, so it was important to always be on watch and not allow for any mistakes on our part. Whenever I was dealing with the villagers, I always had both hands on my rifle and kept such an aggressive posture that no one would dare to attempt to get the better of me. No matter what it took, I was coming home alive. I would let nothing get in my way.

IED's were always my biggest fear while on patrol. Of all the times I was shot at it was easy to take cover and shoot back. IED's were another thing. While patrolling, my heart would fall into my stomach with every step. My mind was always so convinced that this would be my last step on earth. I had seen it happen to so many friends, to so many villagers that I was convinced that I was next. One second, everyone would be walking around like everything was fine. The next second, the ground was opening up, and hell for a split moment was swallowing the world as I watched my friends launched into the

air with agony and horror in my heart. This was the fate that scared me the most. I was a grown man, and I went through horrible things on a daily basis. But of everything that happened to me this was the fate that was always so continuous in my mind.

One day while I was eating lunch, it began to thunder. I found this odd because never in all my time being in Afghanistan had I seen it rain. That was when I heard the familiar snap of rounds overhead. I instantly sprang to my feet and threw on my gear as fast as I could. My adrenaline was pumping so hard that I couldn't even remember placing a magazine of bullets into my rifle and making it condition one. It was just all a fluid motion, as if my rifle was an extension of my body. I flew to the gate where everyone was already waiting anxiously. They had never dared to attack us in our own backyard, and we were all nervous of what we would find right outside the door. Without hesitation I opened it and led the way out. They had come looking for a fight from us and they were going to get one. Had my body been listening to my mind before I opened the door and went outside, then maybe I would have acted more slowly or rationally. My mentality of "act immediately without hesitation" is exactly what had kept me alive up till that moment, but I feared this mentality would now get me killed. Instantly, upon stepping out of the gate I heard and felt the symphony of death play its encore all around me. The dust at my feet and the air around my body was being sprayed with what felt and sounded like millions of little firecrackers. I pushed on and flung myself behind a grave and began to return fire. Rockets exploded right in front of me, but my body was so full of adrenaline that I ignored them. As my mind screamed for it all to stop, as my gut gave out, as I instantly wanted to vomit, my legs carried me, and my hands reacted. It was as if I was acting on autopilot and was up above watching the entire situation. When I made my way up to the wall, I knew that my fire team was behind me. I knew that if I pushed on, they would be there. They always were. I had two choices, go

left or go right. If I chose right and everyone followed me, we could all be killed. If I chose left and everyone followed me, we could also be killed. It was the most important decision of my life, and I knew exactly what to do. I followed wherever my legs would take me. These are the moments that defined my time there, the times that I can gaze back on and know that I am lucky to be alive.

So many years later I can look back on my experience and I can talk about it. There are many things I did not mention in this story. Some things are so horrible that they need never to be talked about to a single soul, things that nobody could possibly comprehend. Those horrible things were part of my everyday experience. But it has shaped who I am today. Not a day or a minute goes by that I do not think of these things. That how at nineteen years old I was a grown man, knowing that each day, each moment, each step could have been my last. I have many friends that do not have the opportunities that I have today: to go to school, to enjoy a football game, to kiss a girl. They are no longer here, and they are some of the best men I have ever had the honor of knowing.

In Pashto “Korta Za” is a phrase that means “*go home*”. The locals would always tell us that, meaning that this was their home and we needed to leave. To me, it always had more meaning. To me, it meant that we would be going home. But not going home as who we once were; we would be going home as shells of those young men. Forever changed by our experiences, our innocence forever left on a mountain top in the Dehana Pass of Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

New Fiction by Pavle Radonic: Murder, War and the Dead

An old unsolved murder mystery in a foreign sea-port. Ship Captain the victim, done nobody any harm. Who killed Captain S. Palori and why?

Why was Palori's mission kept quiet from the populace of the island country that received his cargo three full years? This was the further and larger question, one ultimately of State and international relations.

Poor, unfortunate Palori. Second-Mate Rashid was still grieving the man more than thirty years later, in the midst of his own recent misfortune.

Palori's misery might have been over instantly with a single bullet, no lingering or hardship. Rashid's lot on the other hand would be hardship and trouble all the remaining days of his life.

The tale of Palori's end and Rashid's own present difficulty were bound up together. You could not have the one without the other.

Usually Rashid kept a fine and sunny disposition. Even eighteen months after his accident he had learned not to complain and irk listeners with his troubles. People could not listen more than a little to tales of woe. That kind of thing could not be endured more than once in a while. Little wonder Rashid adopted that uncomplaining manner.

It's OK. A nuisance, but you know. Not so bad.

In the first place, Rashid would do himself no good at all moaning and groaning.

How does a man turning sixty cope living suddenly with one half-leg and a half-foot? Eighteen months after his accident Rashid had time to consider and rake over the past. There had been the lying prone in a hospital bed a good time too. Out on the water seamen were tutored in reflection by waves and far-fetched skies. Rashid showed all the signs.

One thing Rashid had surmised was that amputees had a shortened life span. The problem was something to do with the circulation, the truncation bottling up the blood somehow. In his remaining limbs Rashid could feel the change, even in the unaffected arms. The former strength in Rashid's hands had been lost, his secure, tight clasp never returning. A simple double-knot was beyond Rashid now.

*

Just as Palori and the ship's story came in segments, the matter of Rashid's condition and his particular circumstances followed the same pattern. The wheelchair was one thing, presenting the general case plainly enough for anyone to see. Enquiring after details and examining more closely needed a number of meetings.

Vietnam came up somehow without warning. Being a younger man still short of sixty, Rashid seemed an unlikely source for anything touching the war in Vietnam. Developing the account of sailing days, the usual roll-call of countries and ports was tallied. All the old sailors brought out the extensive experience. There were something like two hundred countries visited during Rashid's career on the water, numerous ports among them. Mombasa, Panama, Texas… Ho Chi Minh was finally included in the list of impressive, out of the way points on the compass.

Following which full circle, Rashid's last, fateful trip to Vietnam, where he had gone to investigate a business opportunity. First Palori's fateful trip to Vietnam; followed thirty years later by Captain-in-his-own-right by then, Rashid the Malay.

*

Palori never made it out of Vietnam; Rashid had gotten more than three quarters of the way home. On the Peninsular highway in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, riding his big *Kawasaki 900* through the monsoonal downpour, the rear tray of a Double B it may have been suddenly swinging across in front of Rashid and pulling him under its wheels.

Through the early telling, before we had arrived at Palori, it had been assumed the shoe on the end of Rashid's good leg enclosed an intact foot. Not the case; therapeutic item.

On the fourth or fifth meeting, Rashid waved a hand at the shoe with its adhesive straps rather than laces, only then observed for the first time.

Though wasted, both arms and hands were whole and undamaged; ribs and shoulders well-healed.

Divorced. An eighty-nine year old Ceylonese mother, who spoke a language unknown to her children, living alone out in Bedok South. Estranged sibling relationships made things harder again.

The former sailor's grass-widow encountered her first husband across at Geylang Serai Market recently for the first time in twenty years. A small island like Singapore, yet even so the former wife had heard nothing of Rashid's accident of more than a year and half ago. Their two daughters the same no

doubt, ignorant of what had become of their father.

The former wife had asked after Rashid's new wife and was surprised, shocked indeed, to learn there was none.

(Had Rashid rehearsed what he would tell his wife when they finally, inevitably met? It was impossible to tell and difficult to ask)

I have only one wife. Never another, Rashid told the woman who had divorced him twenty years before.

Pointing at his heart when he delivered the encounter at the *Labu Labi* table.

It made the former wife cry. Seeing him suddenly in a wheelchair; then comprehending the solitariness on top.

*

Almost certainly, one assumed, Rashid had led the wayward sailor's life away from home. Rashid himself had been the victim of a port shooting, at a table outside a bar in the Philippines. Jealous husband or boy-friend involved, Rashid had surmised.

In fact, on the contrary, Rashid maintained, the usual seaman's dissolution did not apply in his case.

A handsome man still, Rashid held to the position. There had been no whore-houses, no girls in any ports, no girlfriends of any intimate kind. An irony for such a Sea-salt to lose the loved one blameless like that.

Rashid's good leg carried the marks of his earlier lucky escape in the Philippines: one wound from the bullet that went in above the knee and the other grazing the thigh. That

incident too had required a period of hospital recuperation. Put in the shade now by subsequent events.

*

Palori had collected his bullet in the head. Early nightfall, Ho Chi Minh City.

Dusk was a strange time in Ho Chi Minh even five years after the war. It was as if the smoke of bombs and chemicals still rose up from the fields despite the intervening years, bringing a premature close of day. Some of it was the peasants burning off, though this was different to what Rashid was accustomed to in Singapore from the Sumatran and Malaysian burn-offs.

Shrouding dusk that rose from the ground in the port of Ho Chi Minh and drew unexpected nightfall in strange, unfamiliar hues.

Even when not on his watch, Captain Palori came up to the bridge, ordered coffee and handed round cigarettes. Palori often sang tunes like the troubadour Malays.

Palori had taken his cigarette over to the port-side window. There beside the bearing compass, at the open window, the Captain blew toward the cranes loading the *Seasweep's* cargo. Marines below working in the compound, trolleys rolling over the jetty back and forth.

Second-Mate Rashid was down in the Mess Hall taking an early supper when the shots rang out. After the heat of late afternoon, all the port holes were still wide open.

*

Rashid was scheduled to attend regular medical check-ups for his wounds at two different hospitals. Transport was a problem. One morning Rashid waited from eight until well after noon for the friend who had agreed to drive him. A lift for the appointment would have been a great help. Rashid did not ask that anyone wait for him to finish with the doctors, just drop him.

Without money for cab fare, a few weeks previously Rashid had wheeled himself back from *Tan Tock Seng* out in Balestier Road. Cars honking behind. Rashid had kept to the kerb and pushed on. Luckily some Bangla boy helped him over the Kallang Bridge. The soon-to-turn sixty former bike enthusiast enjoyed the rush going down on the other side.

Sore shoulders and fingers afterward, thumb and forefinger especially. Three hours in all. Twice now Rashid had returned from the hospital under his own steam.

As Rashid's story emerged the news-reports of the death of the famous old Viet general Nguyen Vo Giap, reminded of the figures. Two and one half million Vietnamese casualties during the course of the war; 58,000 Americans on their side, Rashid was told after some double–checking.

No surprise this for former Captain Rashid. The population of Singapore three decades ago dying in a long, protracted war against the French and then the Americans.

Fifty-eight thousand Americans tallied roughly for Rashid too. A short while Rashid had revolved the latter figure, calculating quietly for himself over some minutes.

*

Second-Mate Rashid signed on from the beginning with Captain S. Palori, in 1979. Full three year term on the *Seasweep*. After Palori was killed a Filipino Captain was brought in to take command.

The job could not wait; as soon as the *Seasweep* was loaded, anchors away. Some kind of investigation dragged on for a while behind them at the dock. It was a hopeless, futile endeavour. Palori's killer would never be found. Five years after the war, not only Ho Chi Minh, but the whole region was awash with guns of all kinds and no end of marksmen.

All the ports were dangerous, Ho Chi Minh particularly. The *World Vision International* Chief and the Shipping Agent had warned the men never to stray from the compound on the dock. It was highly dangerous. No-one had anticipated the deck or the bridge could prove equally so.

*

Rashid gave the well-known report of the returning sensation of the missing limb. Chuckles at it as if at the captivating play of a favourite child. Funny that.

One evening raking over the details, recapitulating key points, a small, precocious boy happened by and stopped directly before Rashid in his chair. Clearly the pair was known to each other from the footpath outside the *kopi* shop.

The boy had not forgotten Rashid. Not forgotten and perhaps dubious and unsatisfied at the man's by-play.

Hey Mister. Where's your leg?

Again Rashid repeated the tale of his fishing accident that he had told the boy previously.

Hanging over a line, no bite. Waiting. Waiting.

The boy was looking into Rashid’s chair harder than he was listening.

Like a rifle barrel suddenly raised, the stump twitching up from Rashid’s shorts and surprising more than just the boy.

TWANG!

Oh Gee! Fishy got dinner now. The *Burger King* one. The other leg was too spicy for Mr. Fish’s taste. Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

After the theatrics the child was peering closely again. That was what it looked like, alright. But really?

The Grandpa behind the young lad had showed chattering jaws for apology.

You know how it is.

Which was unnecessary for Rashid. No harm done; the boy was understandably curious.

*

It had been assumed Rashid had a flat of his own, rented if nothing else. More than thirty years a seaman; sixteen as Master.

The chaps around Geylang Serai still honoured the former Captain. Local businessmen establishing new ventures picked Rashid’s brain for various particulars.

How had the Captain let all that money slip through his fingers, never thinking of rainy days ahead?

By the mid-‘90s the shipping game had changed, barter trade becoming the norm, which priced Singaporean Masters out of the business. Far cheaper Indonesian and Chinese officers had been readily available. For a number of years Rashid led the local protests for native Masters on Singaporean ships.

In his chair Rashid slept nights there by *Labu Labi*. When the place closed for the day the old Sea-salt pulled up one of the red plastic chairs for his leg. An improvised sailor’s bunk.

When some money came his way Rashid took a hotel room, washing his clothes and using the aircon for drying. Being always so clean and presentable, one assumed other arrangements.

Luckily for Rashid, there would be money coming from insurance and also CPF, once the paperwork and procedures were complete.

*

A few years on there would come a whiff of the con man about Rashid. After four or five months of regular nightly sits at the *kopi* shops, Rashid disappeared for a stretch and on return said little about his absence. A hot scheme was afoot, a project that promised rich returns. Only a few thousand was needed, $4-5K for a nice windfall. Timber or sand it might have been, bundled with the usual oil. One of the Javanese Sultans was on board. If you or any of your Australian friends were interested.

A rift with Bee Choo preceded another absence. Surprisingly, Bee, who always pleaded straightened circumstances, had advanced the Captain a thousand or more dollars. A short-term return had been promised; the time blew out and Bee became

importunate. Rashid fully intended to repay; Bee would be duly recompensed. But she could not get about making false accusations; Rashid would answer the police, or any other authority. The money had sunk in some kind of hole and Rashid was in no position to produce a sum like that at the drop of a hat.

Another disappearance saw a turnaround—here was the Captain flashing a wallet thickly stacked with fifties, easily over a grand. There was more in hand too. Had you eaten? Could the Captain buy you a meal or drink? Rashid's numbers had come up on the *4D* or *Toto*.

Rashid's innocence in the rupture with the wife rang somewhat suspiciously too. Remaining faithful and supportive himself, there had been no reason; the woman had simply abandoned her husband. It was rare in that conservative Muslim milieu. The two daughters "followed" the mother; they had become estranged. One would have liked to have heard the other side.

*

Eight or nine day round trip, depending on the weather. Two voyages a month over three years. Palori was killed around the half-way mark of the cartage.

How many body bags had the *Seasweep* carried? On one particular trip there had been almost fifty in the hold, Captain Rashid reported over the richly sweetened *kopi* that he favoured.

Rashid was in a position to know the numbers. Second-Mate's duty had included going down into the hold with the Marines to verify figures. Numbers correlated with names showing in the clear plastic pockets of the bags, where any personal effects were also placed.

Second-Mate counted off carefully for each delivery, presenting the documents to Captain Palori, and then the relieving Captains after him.

All present and accounted for, Captain.

The ship could not leave port without the clearance.

Verifications could be difficult for the Second-Mate when there was some kind of inconsistency, larger batches usually throwing up problem on top of problem.

So many *Browns* on numerous occasions, seven or eight not unknown on a large, single loading.

Browns in opaque bags of that colour, zippered tight and tagged.

After the exhumation of corpses that had been in the ground ten years many of them, there should not have been such stench rising from the hold and penetrating the entire ship.

Down in the hold masks were useless and the odour saturated clothing and hair. Some of the sailors took their meals on deck rather than the Mess Hall.

Some of the sailors surmised the chemicals the Americans had dropped infected their dead and possibly posed a threat to themselves now in turn. What might be in store as a result of their work on the Cross and Bones *Seasweep*?

It was the Devil’s own wages. Long-termers on the job were given cholera shots every three months; special pills were available to help the men cope, one morning and one night. Second-Mate didn’t like the whooziness and only took a single pill at most.

The bags were supposed to be air-tight.

Forklifts pulled pallets from the rear of delivery trucks.

Sometimes the ship waited two or three days for a single truck to arrive, the officers on the Bridge watching the marines lounge, play cards and smoke below.

On the dock they carted ten at a time, slowly and carefully on trolleys pulled by motorized carts. Ten was the maximum on the trolley.

From the jetty alongside, the pallets were craned aboard directly into the hold and sorted into racks.

Second-Mate Rashid had needed to stand on his toes to get the particulars of the topmost bags. Occasionally watched by high-ranking American officers, once even a general of some kind, who climbed down into the hold to inspect.

Second-Mate was specifically charged with ensuring each tier was double bound and securely tied against the typhoons and other weathers.

Out on one side of the port the jungle came down almost to the water, tall trees in the midst that became the centre of suspicion after Palori's killing. Captain Palori's was not the neat, piercing wound from close range. A sniper awaiting his chance in amongst the lush greenery could have bided his time until Palori presented a clear target.

120-30 metres. Single bullet only ever found, though some of the men reported a hail of fire.

Another body-bag was added for Palori.

*

An easy, mostly uneventful passage down through the Gulf of Thailand, past some of the resort islands. Along the East

coast of Malaysia and around into Sembawang.

Same route taken by land-lubing Captain Rashid on the *Kawasaki* more than thirty years later, not far inland from the coast.

Through the war there was good business from the Americans come down on R&R into the naval base at Sembawang. Like many other ports of the region, Singapore had prospered with the American presence. The soldiers on a break from the jungle were ready to spend up big. The prostitution industry in South-East Asia essentially derived from the Americans in Vietnam.

The trade in living flesh was an open secret in Singapore, well-known even to schoolchildren. That of the repatriation of foreign war dead much more closely guarded.

The matter was so sensitive that there was not a whisper of any kind. No one had heard of the arrangement in Singapore. Three years' transport to-and-fro.

From Sembawang the bodies were trucked to Changi, where U.S. aircraft took the cargo the last leg home. Local carpenters were engaged for the pine caskets that would present the remains to kin in the States. Military bands, draped flags and saluting guards of honour.

*

Nothing surprising about the secrecy for the City-State. Nothing shameful about repatriating war dead. On the contrary, it was an honourable, compassionate service performed for an important ally.

A certain prudence was all. The Malaya Emergency was some years before. Soeharto in command in Indonesia. The Near and

Far East continued at the time very much full-blush Red.

No need provide information unnecessarily to the public. Why would one do that? No harm occasioned.

The Red Alert at embarkation at Ho Chi Minh ran counter to the usual story of the ready Vietnamese forgiveness and charity toward the former foe. Every war left grizzly, hard-arse tough guys up in the hills or jungles, continuing their private struggle. How could one blame renegade Vietnamese units?

Poor Palori, *ni kriv, ni duzan;* neither guilty, nor indebted, as the Montenegrins, well-versed in warfare, concluded for such personal tragedies.

For a while there Rashid had been selling the dried and seasoned packets of cuttlefish and cigarette lighters from one of the *Labu Labi* front pavement tables, earning a few dollars while awaiting his compensation. Smiles and good cheer maintained.

Memorable scenes of the Captain lighting up one of his *Gudang Garams* beside his eighty-nine year old mother, with her own expertly rolled tabacci.

*

In the first months listening to Rashid’s unfolding of the Seasweep you could not help wondering. A three year operation of that scale, without a whisper. Asking around, combing the newspapers of the period, the parliamentary record—nothing. Men from the marine sector, the army and police quizzed; politically engaged, educated citizens.

Eventually, five or six years after Rashid left the scene for good, it seemed—he had mentioned a plan to retire in

Indonesia—an independent source emerged. Mohammed Noor from Joo Chiat Complex had worked a couple of decades at the Seletar airport, where he sometimes liaised with the port at Sembawang. No word in his time of the transport. But in his retirement, at the Haig *kopi* shops Modh frequented most days, a pal, chap called Man—Osman—an Indian, told of his sewing at Sembawang. It might have been others filling the bags; Man was tasked with the stitching of the fabric, working with industrial machines. Bodies of a single limb, or trunk only; ambiguous bodily segments bundled. Two left arms; a pair of heads. Man saw them go into the bags. They might have been sorted better on the other side. Telling what he had heard from Man at the Haig, Mr Modh swivelled in his chair with a chuckle and grin.

New Fiction from Andrew Snover: Dana and the Pretzelman

The Pretzelman died yesterday. He was shot on his corner half a block from his home, and if he has family they'll pile stuffed animals, and one of his boys will spray-paint *RIP,* and someone will take his corner. Old ladies will sometimes mention him, but that will die out as well, and the neighborhood's memory of him will fade like the colors of the teddy bears' fur and the sharpness of the letters RIP and the print of the newspaper clipping in its vinyl sleeve stapled to the telephone pole.

Dana knew the Pretzelman. She was a fifteen-year-old girl from

up the block. She knew of the Pretzelman before he had the corner, because her eldest brother had fucked the Pretzelman's cousin for a few months, but the two of them never met until the Pretzelman took the corner and began to make himself known.

He stayed on the corner all day, unlike the men who owned neighboring blocks and took breaks on the hot days to drive around in their cars with their music and air-conditioning blasting, just to make themselves seen. He just walked down in the mornings and stayed there all day, every day. He and his boys would talk to each other, and stare down cars whose drivers they didn't recognize, and sell to those who bought.

Dana first met him one morning when her grandmother sent her out for a forty of Olde English. It was a hot Sunday, and her grandmother's favorite treatment for the brutal heat of their home was to drink something cold. The house smelled of death from the time that a great-aunt had declined and passed in the living room. Because the family had no money to keep her in a hospital, and because her bed couldn't fit up the stairs, for six months she had been in the center of all activity in the house. The stench of her sheets and her disease had slowly permeated everything, and then she had died. Dana liked being sent to the store for forties and half gallons of milk and packs of Newport 100s because it got her out of the smell.

She walked down the street, looking out for any of her friends who might be awake and out on their stoops. She didn't see anyone as she walked the block, so she crossed diagonally through the Pretzelman's intersection toward the store that stood on the corner where he usually stood with his friends. The small white awning read, "Complete Grocery and Deli," and there was a sign that said, "Hoagies Snacks Cigarettes We Appreciate Your Business."

Dana knew enough to know what groups of boys said to girls walking alone, and she knew that her age was no longer a

protection now that her body had changed. That day there were three others besides the Pretzelman. As she walked up to them, and they looked at her flip-flops and her shorts and her beater and her purple bra underneath, she prepared herself to deliver an insulting reply to their comments, but no one said anything. The Pretzelman smiled at her, and she passed through them into the store.

She walked up to the glass, spoke loudly, “Olde E,” to the distorted image of the lady on the other side, passed through the slot the five-dollar bill her grandmother had given her, waited for her change and the brown bag to spin on the carousel to her side, and left. As she passed back through the group, the Pretzelman said, “Have a good day now,” and she didn’t say anything.

That day the heat endured, so Dana was sent back to the store two more times on the same errand, and by the last trip, she had smiled at the Pretzelman. He told her to have a good night.

The Pretzelman lived in an abandoned house around the corner that he and his boys had fixed up a little bit. He said hello to the old ladies. He threw his trash in the can, at least when he was on his corner. Dana wasn’t sure if he made his boys do the same, but there wasn’t much trash on his corner compared with the other three of that intersection, so she thought that he did.

He got a puppy from a man he knew who bred pits. It was a brown-and-white dog with a light nose and light eyes. He walked it on a leash down to his corner in the mornings, and then he tied it to the stop sign, and it stayed with him and his boys. They fed it chips and water ice and other things that they bought from the store. The old ladies sometimes would stop and pet it.

Dana loved dogs, and she asked the Pretzelman one day if she could pet it, and he said, “Of course,” so she petted it and talked to it. After that, on trips for Newports and chips and hug juices, she would always kneel down quickly and whisper in the dog’s ear, “Good pup,” or “I love you.” The Pretzelman would smile down at her, and she would tug on the dog’s ear and then run in and finish her errand. One day as she knelt down to pet it, she looked over at a parked car and she saw a pistol sitting on top of the rear passenger side tire.

She got more comfortable around the Pretzelman through her relationship with the puppy. She asked him one day if she could see his gun. He chuckled and he said, “That stuff isn’t for girls like you,” but when she asked again a few weeks later, he reached into the wheel well and picked it up. He did something to it that make it rasp and click, then handed it to her. The weight of it frightened her, and she stared at it in her hand, thinking in a haze that it must weigh more than the puppy. She put her finger to the trigger, and the gun was so big that only the tip of her finger could reach around. She stood up and pointed the gun at the Pretzelman, and she heard her own voice say, “What now,” and she saw the Pretzelman’s face drain.

Her hand shook and her knees shook, and the Pretzelman took one step forward and snatched the gun from her hand and slapped her in the face. She didn’t cry out, but she shuddered and cried a few tears and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t like that.” She had scared herself as much as she scared him, and the Pretzelman saw this, and he said, “This ain’t no joke. Why you think I said guns aren’t for girls like you.”

She talked to him a lot about guns after that. They sat on the stoop of the house next to the store, and he told her that most boys held their left arm over their face while they shot with their right because they didn’t want to see what the bullets did. He said that only the crazy ones or the liars said they didn’t cover their face. She asked him if he covered

his face, and he didn’t answer for a minute. Then he said, “Not the first time.”

He took her behind his house to shoot the gun, because she asked him if she could try it. They walked through the high nettles and the broken glass and the needles, and he said, “Watch out for dog shit.” He made her stop and then walked ten feet and set a bottle on the back of a chair and came back and handed her the gun and said, “Here.” She pointed the gun at the bottle, and her body jerked, and her ears rang, and the smell made her eyes burn. She looked at him after the first shot, and he said, “Try again, but hurry up ’cause they’ll call the cops.”

She shot six more times and hit the bottle with one of the shots, but she couldn’t tell which one because the cracks and the flashes didn’t match up. The wall behind the bottle was soft quarried stone with lots of mica, and the divots and craters where her bullets hit were a fresher shade of gray than the rest, and they sparkled in the light. She thought through the roaring in her ears that if someone were to shoot the whole house, it would look newer than it did.

She told people about the Pretzelman because she was proud to know him. She told her friends about him and introduced a few of them to him. One Saturday night she had her friend Kiana sleep over, and they whispered about boys until late. “He don’t say anything ignorant to you, and he’s even nice to the old ladies,” Dana said. Kiana rolled her eyes.

“You know he’s too old for you. You wouldn’t even know what to do when he started to try out that nasty shit.”

Dana shrieked and rolled over onto her belly. Then she said, “I would too know what to do. I would too.”

That night after the girls had fallen asleep, they were awoken by a string of gunshots and then tires squealing. When it ended they ran to the windows and looked up and down the

block, but they didn’t see anyone. Kiana fell back asleep soon after, and Dana lay there for a long time listening to her steady breathing, thinking about situations that could be, and in them what she would do.

On her way to the bus the next morning at seven, Dana walked past the poppy store and saw the Pretzelman in his normal spot. He nodded to her, and she ducked her head. She felt a quickness in her chest and heard a buzzing in her ears. When she got on the bus, she tried to close her eyes and take a nap like she usually did on the way to school, but she couldn’t find a comfortable position in her seat.

In English class that day, Dana’s teacher talked about how the best characters always seem very real, yet a little too large for life. Dana raised her hand and said, “I know someone like that. He’s got the corner on my block, and he has this nice dog. They call him the Pretzelman because his skin color is like the pretzel part, and that stuff he sell is white like the salt.”

“He sounds like an interesting character,” said the teacher. “I would enjoy reading a story about the Pretzelman.”

After that Dana couldn’t help but think of the Pretzelman as a character. Everything he did was covered with a thin gauze of fantasy. One of the boys on the block wanted to work for him, but they already had a lookout and the boy was too young for any of the other jobs, so they sent him on little errands. One of these errands was to take the bus to Target and buy sheets, because the Pretzelman was tired of sleeping on a bare mattress. Or at least tired of hearing his girls complain about it. The boy took the hundred dollars he was given and rode the bus for thirty-five minutes and went into Target and bought the sheets. The Pretzelman had said to him, “I don’t need no change, understand?” The boy knew that the change was

to be his payment for the errand, but in order to avoid looking like he was trying to profit too much, he bought the most expensive set he could find. He brought back a set of king-size sheets and proudly presented them to the Pretzelman, but they didn't fit the twin-size mattress. According to Dana, the Pretzelman didn't make the boy go back to Target and exchange them because the mistake had been his to not give the boy more specific orders. They made fun of the boy and called him King Size, and the Pretzelman slept on a twin-size mattress with sheets for a king. Dana looked at sheets the next time she was in Target, and she saw that the most expensive sheets sold there had a thread count of six hundred and cost $89.99, plus tax.

Another time Dana walked down to the poppy store and came upon the peak of an argument between the Pretzelman and one of his girls. She was standing in the street screaming at him and making motions with her arms like she was throwing something at him. The motion was like a Frisbee, and the girl did it over and over again with each hand, and sometimes with both. But the Pretzelman, like a character in a different movie, was just standing against the wall of the store. He wasn't looking at the girl, and he wasn't looking away from her, and it looked to Dana like he hadn't noticed that there was anyone else there at all.

There was a certain face that the Pretzelman used when he was out on the corner, but this one was different. His normal stern-faced grill would crack sometimes. The corners of his eyes would crinkle up if he caught her spitting or stopping to adjust her belt or her shorts. His eyes would crinkle, and she would know he had watched her the whole time.

This face wasn't crinkling at all, no matter what the girl screamed about his shithole house and his dirty, grubbing life. Suddenly Dana saw him in the same pose, leaning with his shoulders against the wall and his feet planted, but the vista had changed. The tan car in front of him and the picket fence

across the street with its peeling paint were gone, and instead he was at the edge of an enormous, planted field, looking out at the work he had done and the work yet to do. Or he was at the top of a rocky hill, and he was looking down at the river below, at the cattle or the buffalo. Or he was on the balcony of a high-rise, looking past the skyscrapers toward the lower buildings, the row homes, and the narrow streets that he owned. Or he was in the tunnel at an arena, waiting to be introduced over the loudspeakers. Waiting for the roar of the crowd. The girl in the street was still yelling, her hair and her cheeks shaking with rage. He could have been made of stone.

Dana tried to talk to the Pretzelman about how she saw him, what she thought about him. Every time she tried it, her words ran into the obstacle of his eyes on her, the smile starting to play in the corner of his mouth. One time she made it as far as telling him, “You know, you’re nice. Really nice.” She wanted to continue, but she could tell he was making fun of her when he replied, “Well, some people think so. I’m glad you think so.”

In English class her teacher made the class do a writing exercise called “What everyone knows vs. What I know.” Dana continued the first sentence. “What everyone knows about the Pretzelman is his puppy, and his nickname.” She quickly wrote a full page in her looping script, smiling as she pictured his eyes, his hands.

She was still going when the teacher said it was time to begin the second part. She wrote, “But what only I know is that he…”

She stopped writing then, and thought about what would happen if she wrote what she knew—really knew—about the Pretzelman. Or if she told it to him out loud. How would his eyes look if she wrote it—all of it—and then handed this letter to him,

rather than turning it in to the teacher? When the class ended, her ellipsis was still open, waiting to be filled with what she knew.

Before long the Pretzelman died, and here's how it happened. He woke up on his mattress on the floor between the sheets he got by sending his boy on the bus to Target. He grabbed his gun from the floor next to his bed. He put the leash on the dog, and he hollered to the others to get up. He let himself out the back, which is what they always did so that the front could stay boarded up and keep its abandoned look. He walked around to the front of the house. He didn't carry the dog over the broken glass, as he had done when it was a smaller puppy. He might have waved hello to an old lady. He might have stopped to wait while the dog took a shit.

As he walked down the street, he heard the engine of the car roaring, and he looked up to see why someone was going that fast. He saw clearly the face behind the wheel, and then the tires screeched, and he saw clearly the other face in the back seat, before the bright flashes. He went for his gun, but the bullets spun him around and knocked him onto his belly, and his arm and the gun got pinned under his body. The dog ran off. The Pretzelman bled out onto the sidewalk while one of the old ladies called 911, and his boys came out and saw what had happened and they ran off. Dana left her house to catch the bus and saw the cops taping off an area around a body that was covered with a heavy sheet too small for the whole creeping stain. She didn't know it was the Pretzelman until she came home that afternoon and her friends told her.

As she lay in bed that night, she thought about the dark red color and feared that she might never be able to think about anything else. She searched her feelings, wondering distantly if she was going to cry. She fell asleep thinking, but she slept well. It rained that night and the whole day after, so

the stain was gone. The Pretzelman’s mother placed the news clipping of his shooting inside a plastic sleeve and stapled it on the telephone pole, with a note about a reward for evidence leading to the killers. Before long the corner belonged to someone else, and there was a colorful cairn of stuffed animals piled against the fence where he’d lain, and one of the walls nearby read *RIP*. Dana noticed these things when she walked out to the store or the bus stop, and she passed them again whenever she walked back home.