Wild Delights: Patrick Hicks Interviews Brian Turner

Patrick Hicks: Brian Turner earned an MFA from the University of Oregon and taught English in South Korea for a year before he joined the United States Army. He served in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the 10th Mountain Division and, when he was deployed to Iraq, he became an infantry team leader with the 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. His first collection of poetry, *Here, Bullet*, won the Beatrice Hawley Award, the Pen Center USA "Best in the West Award", and it was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice Selection. His second collection, *Phantom Noise*, received equally strong attention and it was shortlisted for the coveted T.S. Eliot Prize in England. His memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country*, has been praised for both its clear-eyed perception of what it means to go to war, as well as it's narrative structure, which is fragmented vignettes that examine the many wars that America has been involved in. Turner nudges us to think about the long after-burn of war and how one generation influences the next.

His work has been published in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic, Poetry Daily*, *The Georgia Review, Virginia Quarterly Review* and many others. He received an NEA Literature Fellowship, the Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship, a US-Japan Friendship Commission Fellowship, the Poets' Prize, and a Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation. Turner gives readings all over the world and he has made appearances on NPR, the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, PBS, and RTÉ in Ireland. When not writing or touring, he is a faculty member in the MFA Program at the University of Nevada Reno at Lake Tahoe. Although soft spoken and humble, his readings at book festivals and universities are deeply

thoughtful and moving explorations about literature, global politics, and our responsibilities to each other.

Turner has three new collections coming out with Alice James Books, and we sat down to talk about the first in the series: *The Wild Delight of Wild Things.*

Patrick Hicks: Let's start with the title, which comes from a line of poetry that your wife, Ilyse Kusnetz, wrote. In fact, the very first poem in The Wild Delight of Wild Things isn't your work, it's hers. It's as if we have to read through her work in order to get at your own. And perhaps not surprisingly, she infuses the entire collection. She passed away of cancer in 2016 and, as I read this new collection, it felt like a restoring of her presence or an act of determined memory to be in conversation with her. Could you talk about Ilyse's place in this collection and how she continues to influence you?

Brian Turner: Our home in Orlando, Florida, has a small entryway that leads to the living room. I've never told anyone this, but whenever I'm about to leave the house and whenever I return home, there's a very brief ritual I do that reminds me of Ilyse. It's one of the many ways I try to be alive with her in my life. To be present. To be in the presence of. To be in conversation with. And I think this practice mirrors, in some ways, the construction of this book—as her voice both begins and ends the meditation.

It's also a chance for me to share her voice with others, which is a way of saying it's a chance for more people to fall in love with her. And on that note—I dare anyone to read that first poem of hers and not fall at least a little bit in love with her.

PH: One of the first poems in *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* is "The Immortals." It's about jellyfish that seem to resurrect themselves from the dead and become young again.

It’s a denial of death, and it’s rooted in nature. You write, “They have learned to reinvent themselves in defiance/ of the body’s undoing. They rise from their own deaths./ They rise from the bottom of the sea.” For a poet who has been lauded, rightfully so, for your work about the Iraq War, there are many references about nature woven throughout Wild Delight. Was it liberating to focus on things other than the Iraq War? In many ways, this collection feels like it comes from Brian, and not from Sergeant Turner.

BT: You know, this is something I’ve thought about quite a bit—not only for myself, but it’s a dynamic that I recognize in many writers and artists. When I lead writing workshops for veterans, for example, I often mention that my intention isn’t to simply give them writing tools and meditative approaches that might help them to explore and navigate their experiences while in uniform. I tell them that my larger hope is to offer tools that might help them to write their way into the rest of their lives.

And here I am, doing that very thing. You know? Becoming Brian, more and more with each passing day.

PH: “The Salton Sea” starts off with a rumination of the crew of Enola Gay practicing bombing runs as they drop huge barrels of concrete onto a target that would eventually become Hiroshima. And then the poem switches to the Cold War. You mention how twenty-four million gallons of jet fuel spilled “into the water that Albuquerque rests on.” Ilyse grew up in Albuquerque and died of cancer. It’s entirely possible, as you write, that she is “one of many unrecorded deaths on the home front.” In the poem, you talk about a reluctance for some people to think that she could have been a victim of the Cold War. Could you talk about what prompted this poem?

BT: This poem is watermarked with so many conversations Ilyse and I had after her diagnosis. And the anger welling up near the end—that’s her anger, blended with my own. There’s

research involved in this poem, too, sure, but the basic argument and the emotional structure of the poem were drafted by her one conversation at a time with me as its first audience.

If we take a bird's-eye-view of this… I've long been fascinated by the boundaries drawn between what some call the home-front and what we might think of as a conflict zone. There's a kind of psychic disconnect there, I think. While it's a very practical and seemingly logical thing to associate conflict zones with places where pain and trauma and death and violence occur, it does a disservice to the complexity of experience when we untether the home-front from the battlefield.

It's similar to the experience of looking at an oak tree—how easy it is sometimes to forget that the root structure below can grow as much as three times larger than the canopy above.

PH: Maybe we could stay on this line of thinking for a moment. In the poem immediately following "The Salton Sea" you write about Cuvier's Beaked Whales beaching themselves—and dying—due to the "acoustic blasts of active sonar" in submarines. Just as the military inadvertently poisoned the water of Albuquerque, the Navy is doing collateral damage to whales. In both poems, you question the long-term hidden effects of war. Do you notice such things, perhaps, due to your experiences as a soldier? You have spoken at book festivals about the grave and lasting harm that has been caused to children caught in war.

BT: It's impossible for me to know whether I might have written this poem if I'd never worn the uniform. But I'm moved and troubled by these losses when I hear of them. Collateral damage. I recently visited the battlefield in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and walked some of the Union lines. As I considered the landscape, I searched for stands of red cedar and live oaks. I was looking for survivors—for ancient trees

with stories to tell. Eastern red cedar, for example, can live up to 900 years. And I wondered if some still held minie balls or grapeshot within them, or if trees sometimes weep bullets the way the human body can sometimes weep shards of glass or metal fragments long after an initial injury.

PH: In “The Jurassic Coast” you have a lengthy stanza that lists off the animals that will likely go extinct before the century is out. I have to admit, I hadn’t heard of many of them, which is precisely the point I think you’re trying to make. What are we inadvertently killing? Why don’t we care? You end the poem with a powerful stanza about the last passenger pigeon, named Martha, who died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. Just as you celebrate the wild delight of wild things in this collection, there is also an undercurrent of lament and despair.

BT: I wonder sometimes if the vast scale of it all is simply too overwhelming for the mind to grasp. I know that’s true for me. While this book holds an intimate conversation with Ilyse at its center, that conversation is mirrored, in some ways, with a meditation on climate change and what it means to live in the Anthropocene. Elegy is at the heart of this, I’m sure. A way of praising and lamenting and grieving and offering comfort all at once. My hope is that it’s clear-eyed in its compassion.

PH: Very much so. And even though I just mentioned an undercurrent of despair running through this collection a few seconds ago, it is equally true there is profound awe and fascination for the world around you. Some of these poems span lengths of geological time that our minds simply cannot fathom. It’s clear that a great deal of research went into these poems. Can you talk about your research process and how you threaded that information into these poems?

BT: Long before this book truly discovered its form, I began an earlier version as a kind of challenge: I would write 100

brief lyric essays on nature, and in each piece, I would learn something about the world and I'd also in some way be in conversation with Ilyse and our relationship. It didn't work as a book, though—and that was a hard thing to accept at first. I had to sit with that fact for some time before rolling up my sleeves and weighing what was necessary and what had not earned its place on the page.

One of the beautiful things I learned in this entire process is that scientists and researchers are incredibly kind and helpful and clear and generous. Only once or twice did I not receive a response to a query. The opposite was true of the vast majority of folks I reached out to for their expertise. I have a standing invitation now, for example, to visit cave sites in India and to see first-hand the cupules I've written about in "The Auditorium Cave." And I can't wait to go!

PH: One of the most powerful poems in this collection is "Ashes, Ashes." You start by saying "California is on fire" and then mention how trees and plants have been turned into particulate that rides the air as ash. You also bring our attention to the longest burning fire anywhere on Earth—an underground coal seam in Australia that has been raging for some 6,000 years. The third part of this poem focuses on your father's body being broken down by the intense flames of a crematoria oven, and you write about it in great detail. Lastly, there is the haunting image of you cradling Ilyse's ashes the night you brought her urn home. Could you talk about the writing process for this poem? How long did it take to write "Ashes, Ashes"? It's one of your longest poems in the collection, and I sense that it took a while to piece together.

BT: "Ashes, Ashes" took several years to write, though the bulk of the writing was done in three phases. The first half of the poem was written after my father's death, in 2015, and Ilyse was still alive. We didn't talk about Marshall's death. It was something I pushed down inside of myself emotionally.

And yet, I wrote this meditation during the autumn after his death. Ilyse read everything I wrote and this meditation was no exception—as she was its first editor. And so, in a sense, we talked about this grief through the page as she suggested edits and choices in language, but the conversation stayed there and I didn't talk about his loss outside of that.

What I couldn't see then—or had blocked from my own imagination—was that this meditation would later include the second half that you mention. A version was published in *The Georgia Review* (Fall 2017), and that was later scaled down into the much more streamlined version that's here in the book.

I'm continually reminded that there are things I want to write, and there are things I need to write. It's a rare thing for a poem to contain both of these things at once.

PH: A difficult question, and I want to ask it delicately. In "The End of the World" you write, "I wanted the ruin. I'd be lying if I said otherwise./ I wanted the hurricane to destroy what was left of my life./ […] if that hurricane simply crushed me to death/ and then splintered the home around me into an unspeakable/ puzzle of what was once our favorite place on Earth—so be it." Ilyse passed way in 2016 and you have also lost your best friend, Brian Voight, as well as your step-father, Marshall. Grief has been your companion for a long time now. How have music and words sustained you?

BT: Now that some time has passed—it's been almost seven years—I can see a bit more clearly. I can see that writing helped me to find my way forward. I had a lot of anger for quite some time, and it's been difficult for the body to metabolize that and then slough it away. Part of what helped was the research I did into the natural world. In some ways that attention to the details of this amazing planet helped me to fall in love with it once more. And yes, I had fallen out of love with it. When I realized that art offered some ways

back into memory, and into conversations with the dead I love—that began a series of creative meditations both on the page and with sound that have sustained me to this day. Ilyse and Brian both died far too young. Both were artists that had so much to give to this world, to all of us. Part of my work now, as an artist, and as a human being, is to find ways to collaborate with them so that others might have a chance to meet those I love.

I've found that the sorrow that lives within the body remains, at least for now, with a kind of ebb and flow to it. It's something I'm learning to live with. We each grieve in our own way, and the signature of love and loss is unique to the heart that carries it.

A friend in Colorado has shared with me some of the trees up in the mountains that are a part of his life. Lightning trees, as he calls them. You can trace the smooth skin of the trunk where lighting has discharged through the tree with such intensity that the bark has been blown off. They are mapped with scars from the ground to the sky. They are survivors. They radiate a quiet wisdom. And I can't explain what it is or how it happens, but when I place my palms on the trunks of those trees, a sense of calm washes through me, something timeless and transcendent, and I open my eyes, and I breathe, and then I walk back into the days of my life.

PH: There is a definite, and yet subtle, soundscape to this collection. Waves appear in many of the poems. So do birds, clouds, fire, and the fall of rain. You've done something unique for this collection because you have literally created a soundscape that can be accessed by a QR code. Once a reader finishes *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* you invite them to listen to a thirty-minute song called "Clouds," which in many ways is an auditory meditation on the entire collection as a whole. I can hear the sounds that hold these poems together and there is also film of clouds taken at 30,000 feet. I'm not aware of seeing—or hearing—anything quite like this before.

Could you talk about how the idea, and the song, came together?

BT: I didn't realize I was creating this when I began it. In Chennai, I sat under a sacred tree and recorded the birds above. I then had the honor of speaking with over 100 students of traditional dance and song in a nearby classroom—and so I asked if they might follow my lead and sing a wave-like meditative pattern with me, which I recorded on a hand-held recorder that I often carry with me. Likewise, while living in Ireland as the inaugural John Montague International Poetry Fellow for the city of Cork, in 2018, I was lucky enough to have a full choir bussed in from an outlying town to record in a gorgeous chapel. The waves themselves were recorded late one night on Anna Marie Island as Ilyse and I sat on the beach to watch the Perseids rain down.

And so, this meditation in sound arose organically as I began to learn how to live in the word after. Now that it's done, I hope that "Clouds" might help the reader to process their own thoughts and feelings and experiences once they're finished with the book. But in a larger sense, I hope this meditation stands on its own—and that it might prove meaningful and helpful for others in ways that I can only imagine.

*

The Wild Delight of Wild Things will be published by Alice James Books in August 2023. To hear a sample from "Clouds," click here.

Peter Molin's Strike "Through the Mask!": Three Vignettes

Memoirs written by soldiers and Marines who fought in the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq and the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan portray many events that caused their authors anguish. Below I describe three particularly wrenching episodes. More than narratives of harrowing combat action, they illustrate the emotional strife wrought by war.

The first two episodes are from Ray McPadden's memoir *We March at Midnight*. McPadden served as a US Army platoon leader in 1-32 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, on a 15-month deployment to the Korengal and then on a subsequent redeployment there with the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

The third episode is from Alexander Saxby's *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt's Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. Saxby, a rifleman in 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, recounts his participation in the house-by-house fighting in Fallujah in November 2004.

As you read my summaries of the events, consider what would you have done if you were in the authors' boots and how would you feel about the events now.

The Powerless Lieutenant

Late in McPadden's first tour in the Korengal, he and his platoon are visited by their battalion commander (a lieutenant colonel) and command sergeant major (the senior enlisted soldier in the battalion). McPadden and his men have been in the field throughout their deployment, seeing much fighting and also engaging extensively with local nationals on more

peaceable terms. They have endured a long, cold winter without many amenities, and as McPadden puts it, “climbed every mountain in Kunar twice.” McPadden and his men clean-up as best they can for the visit, for they sense it is as much an inspection as a friendly chance to thank the platoon for a long, hard job well-done. Throughout *We March at Midnight*, McPadden recounts a love/hate relationship with his chain-of-command. On one hand, he idealizes his company commander and battalion commander as soldier-warriors he hopes to impress. However, he also often finds them out-of-touch with the actual circumstances he and his men face and prone to issuing orders that are impossible to fulfill.

The visit begins well, but then goes horribly wrong. A soldier in McPadden’s platoon attempts a funny retort to a question from the sergeant major and the sergeant major, a by-the-book stickler for order-and-discipline, is not amused. He rips the soldier a new one, and then orders the soldier to pack his bags; the soldier is unceremoniously being removed from the platoon. By the sergeant major’s book, an insubordinate wise-ass given to pop-off answers has no place in the unit, no matter how good a fighter he has been or how entrenched he is in the platoon family. The platoon, already short-handed as a result of combat death and injury, must now endure the last few weeks of deployment without one of their beloved members and a trusted fighter.

The soldier is crushed, and McPadden stands there dumbfounded. He appeals to the battalion commander, but the colonel is anything but sympathetic. “It’s decided,” he retorts, “Trust me, we are doing you a favor,” as if he too believed the soldier was a cancer that needed excising for the good health of the platoon. McPadden, suddenly aware how powerless he is and how capricious is his chain-of-command, stands paralyzed as the soldier packs his gear and stows it in one of the colonel’s trucks. McPadden writes:

Minutes later the colonel’s convoy departs with [the soldier]

crying in the back seat of the second Humvee. I cannot stop thinking about this little warrior, crying at being removed from his platoon and squad, destroyed at being forced off the battlefield.

Former Friend, Now a Foe

Toward the end of his tour in the Korengal with 1-32 Infantry, McPadden befriends a local policeman named Abdul, who then becomes McPadden's partner in several military, infrastructure, and governance projects. McPadden and his men are invited into Abdul's home for meetings and meals, where they meet his family and are always extended hospitality. All good, but two years later McPadden returns to the Korengal as part of a Ranger strike-force charged with killing-or-capturing Taliban leaders. As one mission unfolds, McPadden finds himself and his Rangers lined up outside Abdul's residence. An Afghan male emerges from the compound and is shot dead by the Rangers. McPadden makes a funny quip about the man's death rattle, but upon inspecting the body recognizes the man as Abdul's father. The Rangers then raid the residence and McPadden follows his men inside. There, he sees Abdul lined up against the wall with the other detainees. McPadden writes:

His aquiline nose I will never forget. If this were a movie, at this point, we would lock eye and one of would say something with tremendous gravity. In reality I freeze, then spin away and duck out of the house, fearing Abdul has seen my face. I do not know what he would say to me, whether he'd insist this is a mistake and plea for release or maybe admit to being bad. Perhaps he will blame me for everything that afflicts his homeland: poverty, lack of social mobility, decades of civil war, scarce natural resources, corruption, economic instability, and religious fanaticism. I don't really know. I do know that when we shot Abdul's dad, I mimicked his

death sound perhaps to convince myself that I didn't care about these people. In any case, I decide the worst thing would be Abdul failing to remember me at all.

Death in a Minaret

A week into the Second Battle of Fallujah, on Alexander Saxby's birthday, a good friend of Saxby's is killed. Saxby's unit fights on, and later they assault a mosque from which they are taking fire. They return fire and then enter the mosque and climb to the top of the minaret. At the top, they discover the now-dead bodies of two insurgents who are obviously not Iraqi nationals. Confirming the presence of foreign fighters is a high priority information request from Saxby's higher headquarters and also of interest to two *New York Times* journalists embedded with Saxby's platoon.

A few hours later, Saxby describes to the two journalists the foreign fighters lying dead in the minaret. The journalists want to see the bodies for themselves, and the fighting calm for the moment, they convince Saxby's platoon leader to assign a squad to escort them back to the mosque for photographic documentation. Saxby doesn't go, but another of his good friends, Bill Miller, is part of the journalists' escort. Unbeknownst to the patrol, the mosque has now been reoccupied by insurgent fighters. As Miller leads the journalists to the top of the minaret, he is shot and killed.

That evening, Saxby and one of the journalists are on the roof of a house the Americans have occupied. Saxby writes:

The New York Times reporter was sitting near us, trying to get a signal to send out his stories. He looked at me and asked what I had gotten for my birthday. I didn't even look at him when I said, "Two dead friends." I knew it would be many years before I celebrated my birthday again, assuming I made it past

the next few weeks.

I have described the scenarios starkly and solely from the point-of-view of the authors. McPadden's colonel and sergeant major may have seen more troubling signs than McPadden realized. Abdul, as McPadden notes, may have been a Taliban or Taliban sympathizer all along. The two journalists in Saxby's account actually do have their say in later pieces (links below).

That's all fair, and the confluence of perspectives have potential to change the thrust of the stories I have described. But that's not work I will do here, and would probably be of little use to McPadden and Saxby. In the moment, and for years after, events occur on the battlefield that forever impress themselves on the participants without easy or satisfactory resolution. The average ordinary circumstances of deployment and combat are challenging enough, but sometimes an extra-added quirk or fillip of circumstance elevates the average and ordinary into the overwhelming and unfair. Soldiers rely on training, their mission orders, their instincts, and their sense of what their rank-and-duty role entails to see them through, but nothing prepares McPadden and Saxby for the events described above. Power, or powerlessness, is at the heart of the issue in each vignette, but not simply in the form of being subject to the cruelty of rank. The vignettes speak to the powerlessness of soldiers in the face of circumstances they couldn't have seen coming and whose unintended consequences place undue demands on their ability to make sense of them.

****

The *New York Times* reporter in Saxby's vignette is Dexter Filkins, the author *The Forever Wars*, an excellent journalistic account of the Global War on Terror campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. With Filkins is photographer Ashley Gilbertson. They offer their version of Bill Miller's death in

a recent PBS Frontline interview titled “Once Upon a Time in Fallujah”:

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/once-upon-a-time-in-iraq-fallujah/transcript/

In 2008, Filkins wrote at length about the event in a *New York Times* article titled “My Long War.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/magazine/24filkins-t.html

Ray McPadden, *We March at Midnight*. Blackstone, 2021.

Alexander Saxby, *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt’s Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. 2021.

For all Strike Through the Mask! columns and especially this one, thanks to Wrath-Bearing Tree editor Michael Carson for suggestions and inspiration.

New Fiction by Tim Lynch: “The Skipper”

It was a typical Thursday night at the Taj Tiki Bar, tucked away off the Jalalabad – Kabul road in the hamlet of Bagrami just outside of the Jbad city limits. The Tiki Bar at the Taj had been established by a UN road building crew from Australia in 2003 and was the only bar in Eastern Afghanistan. The Taj itself was a three building world-class guesthouse that also featured a custom swimming pool that the Aussies built that we

filled with sand filtered, freezing cold well water. This being Afghanistan, Afghans were not allowed in the Tiki bar and because the pool was frequented by western NGO women it was surrounded by a 40 foot bamboo screen. Bikini wearing women cavorting in a pool with men is haram in Afghanistan and best kept out of public view.

During the summer of 2008 the Tiki Bar had never been busier during weekly Thursday night happy hour. The UN had pulled out the year before, so the Taj was now home to the Synergy Strike Force, an MIT FabLab, and the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club. My USAID funded Community Development Program (CDP) was also based there. Jalalabad and San Diego are sister cities which was why the Rotarians were actively funding projects to refurbish schools, build dormitories at Nangarhar University and purchase modern equipment for the Nangarhar University Teaching Hospital.

The Synergy Strike Force (SSF) was a San Diego based collection of high-end tech gurus who were there to “save the willing” by accessing unlimited funding from DARPA to fine tune their crowd sourcing software. To get the internet out to the people the founder of the Synergy Strike Force, a dual MD/PhD named Bob, conned the National Science Foundation into funding the deployment of an MIT Fabrication Laboratory to the Taj Guesthouse that came with two Grad students to set it up.

The Tiki Bar had become so busy that I brought my son Patrick, who had just graduated from High School, over to run the bar allowing me to focus on supply. Buying beer was no problem but getting it past the National Directorate of Security (NDS) checkpoint in the Kabul Gorge could be a real problem. I had already lost 2 sets of body armor and 5 bottles of booze to them, but they headed home early every Thursday clearing the run back from Camp Warehouse long before the sun set.

There was a giant clay fireplace across from the bar for cold weather operations and the patio area between the main house,

bar, and pool deck was filled with the usual suspects. NGO workers from the American aid giants DAI and Chemonics, two women from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale, the attaché from the Pakistan consulate who had the hots for one of the German ladies, four agriculture specialists from the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the ever lovely and vivacious Ms. Mimi from Agence Française de Développement. Mimi had a male colleague who insisted on wearing a speedo bathing suit in the pool area, but we let it slide because Mimi was a most attractive and agreeable guest who often stayed the night and spent Friday's pool side.

A Blackwater crew from the Border Police training academy were there as usual as was the brigade Human Terrain Team from FOB Fenty. There were two Air Force officers from the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team (technically in a UA status). One of them, an intelligence officer, was dating my Aussie running mate Rory which was a lot of risk for marginal gain in my opinion, but I'm a retired Marine Corps grunt on the other side of 50 so I might have been jealous, I was never sure.

The SSF crew were spending their last night in country before heading back to the USA for the annual Burning Man festival and they were in rare form, as were the Rotarians from the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club who were reinforced by some Rotarians from Perth Australia because it turns out Perth too is a sister city of San Diego and Jalalabad. The Twins were the MIT grad students sent to start up the FabLab. They were from The Center for Bits and Atoms and were both TS (SCI) cleared engineers. They were from New Jersey, both had long jet black hair, both smiled so much it made me uncomfortable; one was Chinese American the other Indian American. They were seated at the bar with The Skipper – an EOD trainer who remained outside the wire living with his Afghan trainees in a compound near the Jalalabad Teaching Hospital. The Skipper was my nickname for a retired navy Senior Chief EOD specialist who looked just like Alan Hale from the 1960's era TV Show

Gilligan's Island. He had laid out a bunch of triggering switches he had collected from disabled IED's and was taking notes as the Twins examined each with magnifying glasses. The Twins had the uncanny ability to recognize countries of origin and fabrication anomalies in the circuit work.

The Twins were trouble from the start because they proved themselves to be indispensable. We expected computer geeks from MIT, not engineers who could fix or build anything without apparent effort. They rebuilt the Tiki Bar because they found the original construction faulty, they built shelving from wood scrapes that were so impressive they looked like museum pieces. They got bored one day and started working on the War Pig, our up armored Toyota Hi Lux, fabricating a turbo charger and, with the help of our house manager Mehrab and a local diesel mechanic, super charged the engine and lifted the suspension 3 inches so the new tires they "found" would fit the truck. Once done they surmised the War Pig it would run hot and fast on the hairpin turns which were a feature of the Kabul – Jalalabad highway and they frequently jetted out of the front gate to drive like maniacs on the mountain roads when unsupervised.

The Skipper was a regular at the Tiki Bar Happy Hour every Thursday evening where he drank exactly two beers regardless of how long he stayed. The Skipper was superstitious, he insisted on driving himself, like I did, but he was the slowest, most cautious driver I ever saw in Afghanistan. He also never missed church on Sundays. After getting his engineering reports sorted he told the Twins he'd be heading into Khogyani district in the morning to blow some dud ordnance at the Border Police Training Academy. Friday being a weekend day in Islamic lands it should be quiet enough for them to tag along.

I agreed to join them to provide an extra hand if things went pear shaped so as dawn broke across the Nangarhar Valley on a scorching hot Friday I was poking along in The Skippers

armored SUV with the twins. I was wearing body armor, with my 1911 pistol mounted in a chest holster, and I had my Bushmaster flame stick with its 10.5 inch barrel and Noveske vortex pig snout flash suppressor. We had discovered regular bird cage flash suppressors kicked too much gas and noise back into a vehicle if you were firing while mounted but the pig snout kicked it all out the end of the barrel which resulted in a little additional muzzle flip but no gas blowing back in your eyes.

The Twins carried Glock 19's with two extra mags in kydex holsters and they both sported WWII era M3 .45 caliber Grease Guns. There were hundreds of old M3 submachineguns and 1911 pistols floating around Afghanistan at the beginning of the War, and we had obtained more than our fair share somehow. The M3 was the only weapon that could be fired out of the muzzle port in the windshield of the War Pig. The poorly designed add-on armor from South Africa featured a V shaped windshield with a firing port on the passenger's side. But the angle of the bullet proof windscreen was so steep the only weapon we could fire out of it was an M3 subgun held upside down with the bottom of the magazine facing the roof. But the Twins liked them because it was easy to modulate the trigger and control them when firing on full auto.

We were poking along the hardball road leading into the foothills near Tora Bora when The Skipper stopped dead in his tracks. His Afghan EOD team driving behind him must have anticipated this because they stopped on a dime too. "You smell that" he asked as he opened his door letting in an overpowering smell of cut hay and shredded leaves. His Afghans were out of their truck looking up and down the road, The Skipper looked over at me and said "IED". That perked the Twins up as the Skipper explained we should be seeing a carpet of leaves covering the road ahead.

The road doglegged to the right crossing a large culvert that channeled a fair-sized stream under the asphalt paved road.

The road was covered in a several inch carpet of leaves but there was no blast signature I could detect. We got out of the trucks and started looking around, trying to figure out what had happened when a patrol from the Afghan National Army (ANA) pulled up with a bunch of villagers in the back of their pickups. The villagers told us there is a bomb in the culvert we're standing on. The Afghan team leader asks what had just blown up and an elder pointed downstream and said, 'the man who put the bomb in the culvert."

The Skipper got one those fisheye mirrors used for vehicle searches out of the back of his truck along with a powerful surefire flashlight and gave them to his EOD techs. One of the EOD techs laid on his belly and held the mirror in front of the drainage pipe while one of the other EOD men shined the flashlight into the culvert pipe. They spot the IED immediately – The Skipper and the Twins look and see it too; a pressure cooker on vehicle jack stand jammed up against the top of the culvert pipe with a blasting cap inserted into a hole in the lid and wire running out of the drainage pipe heading downstream.

The Skipper called back to FOB Fenty at the Jalalabad airfield to tell the brigade what he found, and they instructed us to stay on scene and wait for the route clearance package to lead the EOD team out of Fenty to recover the IED. The Skipper acknowledged them but we both knew waiting for the army was a non-starter. They would take at least 8 hours to roll out of the gate and another two to get to us; there was no way the ANA would keep a road closed that long. He looked at the Twins and said, "let's blow this bitch up". They broke into radiant smiles and immediately started organizing a work area in rear area of the truck.

The Skipper got four bricks of C4 out and gave them to the Twins who taped them tightly together while he unspooled some det cord. The Twins then wrapped the bricks tightly with the det cord and handed them to the Afghan EOD techs. They along

with the ANA troops glued the charge to a piece of cardboard and then tape the cardboard to a five-gallon water jug they had some local kids take down the creek and top off.

The Twins conned The Skipper into giving up his blasting caps so they could prime the charge, the Afghan EOD men attached about 10 feet of shock tube to the charge and using 550 cord lowered the water jug over the mouth of the culvert. A few of the ANA troops and some local teenagers had stopped up the downstream end of the pipe that was now filling with water. The other ANA troops were with the EOD techs in the stream bed making a big show of lining up the shot correctly. Once the shot was perfectly lined up, they threw a yellow smoke grenade into the pipe and scrambled up the stream bank.

When the smoke was flowing out of the pipe the senior Afghan EOD tech looked at the Skipper who nodded his head while putting on set of high-end hearing protectors. The Twins and I had foam ear plugs which we fished out of our pockets before sitting on folding beach chairs the Skipper carries around for just such an occasion. With the smoke billowing out, the techs and ANA soldiers yelled ‘fire in the hole’ three times (in English) and the senior EOD man shot the charge.

The C4 went off with a giant WHOOMP; it’s a slow burning explosive so it doesn’t evaporate the water, it pushes it down the pipe at around 26,000 feet per second, the kinetic energy takes out the IED and the water renders the explosive components safe. A giant gush of yellow tinted water erupted out of the downstream end of the culvert pipe arcing over the creek bed for about 100 feet before slamming into the trees like a wave. The water then exploded up into the sky, slowly dissipating in a rainbow of colors that hung suspended in the air for a good 45 seconds.

There were dozens of local people from the near-by villages and the stalled traffic watching us and they erupted in cheering and laughing and shouting. Their kids were dancing

around in excitement laughing and clapping; local men came up to take pictures with the ANA troops and the EOD team. The Skipper looked over with a big wide smile and said to me “can you believe we get paid to do this shit”? I could not, nor could the Twins who were self-funded volunteers and not making a dime during their time in the Stan but still happy to be here with us.

The Skipper lost his dream gig in 2011 when the position was eliminated, and he moved onto the big box FOB on Bagram. His company felt it was no longer safe for him to free range outside the wire and they were probably right. Somebody up in Nuristan had taken a shot at the Skipper that missed due to a low order detonation from incompetent poor waterproofing so despite his willingness to stay it was time for him to go. For the three years he roamed around N2KL (Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman provinces) ‘removing the boom’ from local towns and villages while making one hell of an impression on the Afghans. They loved him and he, in return, poised for hundreds of pictures, while patiently fielding complaints about ISAF, the Afghan government and various American administrations from local elders. The Skipper had balls the size of grapefruit and he never hesitated to go into Indian Country with just his Afghan EOD crew when called.

The Skipper, like every heavily armed humanitarian I knew, made it home safe and sound after staying in Afghanistan (on FOB’s) until 2015. His never talked about his free-range past because none of the people he worked with believed his stories. That was a common among us outside the wire contractors in Afghanistan. There were only a few of us who invested the time it took to learn the language and put their skin in the game. Those that did, like the Skipper, were rewarded with a veil of protection by the local people. That may have been a minor accomplishment in the big scheme of things, but it was a worthy one that came with no small amount of pride. We were able to go places and do things that would

have gotten us killed ten times over had we still been in uniform. And that little bit of special pride is borne in silence by us these days because nobody believes that we lived outside the wire with the Afghans, for years and enjoyed every minute of it.

New Fiction by Todd Easton Mills: “When Beauty is Convulsive”

From his notebook, illustrated with a picture of a four-eyed flower:

We live in a bungalow in Pasadena, California, where my father is a professor of physics at Cal Tech, and my mother is a plein air watercolorist. My mother taught me how to read, and at the age of seven, I was assigned two books per week or eight per month. Later the number went up. You may have already guessed I was homeschooled and that was the case. It was a utopian life, unmarred by peer pressure and the stresses of competitive education. I am now twenty-nine years old and understand the world of “common consent.” Except I can’t take it anymore.

***

It was Tuesday afternoon and Bartholomew was tutoring English to a ninth grader from San Marino High School. His parents,

Anthony and Barbara, quietly slipped out the kitchen door so as not to disturb the lesson. They had been walking for several blocks around the leafy neighborhood.

“He needs a degree,” Barbara announced.

“We’ve talked about this before,” said Anthony. “College isn’t for everyone. Barth is what they call a creative.”

“Who says that?”

“It’s a designation.”

“Whose?”

Anthony laughed. “Never mind.”

“He needs a good job—a career,” she said. “We thought he would find his own way. Fat chance.”

“I thought you were being serious.”

“I am.”

“He likes living with us,” said Anthony. “He doesn’t see a logical reason to leave home.”

“Then it’s time for him to move out,” she said.

“He’s broke.”

“Give him his college fund.”

“And push him out to sea,” said Anthony.

“If you’re going to the Athenaeum for lunch, I thought I would join you.”

“I’m having lunch with the department head.”

“Oh, well then—” she said.

“Don’t look so glum.”

***

It was the beginning of April and unseasonably hot. They walked around Lacy Park and down Orlando, past the big houses that Anthony referred to as palaces. Barbara was the first to notice a broken sprinkler flooding the lawn of a Spanish revival. Ducks from Huntington Gardens had discovered it.

“We’re in a drought,” she said. “I’ll go up.”

She rang the doorbell—and rang it again. A big dog started barking, and Barbara told the dog to shut up. This made the dog snarl and scratch at the door demonically.

“Shut up,” yelled Anthony from the driveway.

“Shut the fuck up,” chimed Barbara.

They were cutting across the lawn when another sprinkler went off, and they had to run through the duck pond to get away.

***

At lunch at Cal Tech’s Athenaeum, they discussed the pros and cons of giving Bartholomew his college fund, which had grown substantially.

“You’re right. Barth needs a job where he can meet new people,” said Anthony.

“Like single women,” said Barbara.

“What do you think he would do with two hundred fifty thousand dollars?” wondered Anthony.

***

Bartholomew didn’t have a driver’s license, but he didn’t mind walking to Barnes & Noble three miles away. When he arrived at the store, his shirt was sticking to his back under his corduroy sport coat. The store manager gave him an application

and directed him to a table at the bookstore café.

“Let’s see. Bartholomew? Like the apostle?” asked the manager.

“That’s right,” said Barth.

“What’s your experience working in retail?”

“None in retail,” he said. “I’ve been tutoring for the last several years.”

“I see. How many hours a week?”

“Two.”

“I see,” said the manager evenly. “Are you living at home?”

“Yes.”

“And no college?”

“No college but I am quite well read.”

“Everybody who works here reads. We like to hire people who are bibliophiles. Do you know the word?”

Bartholomew nodded. “I’m a bibliolater.”

“That’s a word I don’t know,” said the manager.

“I have an extravagant interest in books.”

“I like how you say that, Bartholomew. Can you estimate how many books you’ve read?”

“Over four thousand. My parents kept a log.”

“Excellent. May I ask how—”

“Five books a week—twenty a month.”

The manager returned to Barth’s application. “That’s the advantage of a homeschool education, I guess. We have an

opening in customer service. This package has all the information—the benefits and raises. We pay eighteen-seventy-nine an hour to start. You don't need to wear a sport coat to work. Some people wear T-shirts, but we prefer a shirt with a collar. Can you start tomorrow?"

"I'd like that very much."

***

It had been three days, and he still hadn't run into the manager. Instinctively he knew what to do. There were books in carts to put away, books on the floor, books and magazines on tables in the store café. The scene was similar to the disarray at the public library. He arranged errant books alphabetically and put the magazines back on the rack after reverse rolling them to make them lie flat. At the end of the day, a young woman named Nadja introduced herself to him.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"A customer?" Barth ventured.

"I'm Nadja, your boss. I'm taking over Carmen's job."

"Nice to meet you, Nadja," Barth said.

She appeared to be his age and had a nice figure—although it was hard to tell under her wrinkled khaki jumpsuit.

"I like how you're organizing the fiction section," she said.

"It was a big mess. What happened to Carmen?" he asked.

"Carmen quit." She stood up on her toes to stretch her calf muscles. "He quit the day he hired you. He said he can't stand customers who never buy anything."

"You mean the homeless?" Barth said.

"Oh, they have homes," she said oddly. She looked at him

suspiciously. “Carmen thought you were homeless.”

“I was hot from walking.”

“I do like your corduroy coat. Why don’t you wear it for work?”

***

They were in the children’s section on the second floor. Nadja took a seat in a tiny chair at the table. There were several books out, including one turned over with a broken spine. She picked it up like it was a bird and bent it backward to restore its shape. “Nothing can be done for it,” she said.

Barth was surprised at how different she looked. Her blond hair was clean, brushed, and tied back in a ponytail. She wore slacks with a gray blouse studded with military buttons. She wanted to know about the books he had read.

He said: “Well, just about everything we have in fiction.”

“How about non?”

Bartholomew was too tall for the table and his legs were cramping. He tried to keep them down, which made one of them vibrate. At the bookstore café he had noticed a lot of people with the condition—usually vibrating one leg at a time. It was something to look into.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He blushed.

“We have something in common,” she said.

“Were you homeschooled?” he asked.

“I never went to school. I had a studio teacher. Actually he was my dialogue coach. I played an English boy, and it got harder for me to do as I grew up.”

“You never went to school?”

“Not a single day. I played against type. Do you know what that means?”

“Reversed?”

“Yes, reversed,” she laughed. “My coach wanted me to try different dialects. It confused me. Sometimes I was a posh boy and sometimes sort of cockney. I wasn’t a good actress. ‘Hello, chappy.’ See, I can’t do it anymore.”

“Hello, chappy,” repeated Barth.

He noticed how she had outlined her left eye with makeup but not her right. “Did you have friends your own age?”

“Adults mainly.”

“I had neighborhood friends,” he said. “They’re not the same as school friends.”

She was paged: “They need me at the register.”

***

He had been thinking about Nadja all week. He loved watching her go up and down on the escalator in the pink pastel sweater she now wore every day. He thought of her as a pink cloud that floated up—diagonally. A routine had developed between them. She would surprise him when he was replenishing the stacks. When he was engrossed she would whisper something in his ear. Once she asked: “Does it frighten you to go upside down?”

He thought he understood the question. He identified it as a reference to St. Bartholomew, his namesake, the patron saint of plasterers and bookbinders. For his zealotry the saint was flayed and crucified upside down. Bartholomew had always been frightened by the story. One day Nadja said: “Has your heart ever been higher than your head?”

***

In May Bartholomew saw Nadja standing in front of Tiffany & Co. on Colorado Boulevard. She looked hypnotized by the window display and didn't seem to recognize him at first.

"I'm shopping for a birthstone ring," she said in a voice that sounded distant.

"Let me guess—" said Bartholomew.

A pretty little girl in a sundress ran up to Nadja. She asked her something Barth couldn't hear. "Yes, puppet, the diamonds are real, but the emeralds are made of celery," she said.

The little girl laughed and ran away.

"I know your birthstone," said Barth. "You're moonstone!"

"Bingo!" said Nadja.

"Let's grab a drink at the 35er. We can walk there!"

At the bar the bartender seemed to know her. Bartholomew ordered a Bloody Mary, and Nadja asked for change for the jukebox. She dropped quarters into the slot without pausing to read the selections. After a minute "I Am, I Said" by Neil Diamond came on. The next song was called "The Dolphin on Wheels." She tapped her foot against the barstool but was a beat off. A man approached them at the bar and asked her if she was working. She smiled at him and said: "Is that you, Charlie Chaplin?"

***

Nadja's apartment was in a condo converted to an extended stay suite. It was a furnished one-bedroom unit with a gas fireplace and refrigerator with bottles of Perrier and Laughing Cow cheese. The light was low and Bartholomew sat across from her in a red leather chair. He liked that she had

colored her hair black, and it was cut short with bangs.

“Did you just move in?” he asked, looking around.

“Not just.”

“Where are your books?”

“At the store. Oh, you mean…” She laughed.

Nadja sat with her hands folded in her lap. He sat with his knees touching hers, and they shared a long moment when neither had anything to say. Barth didn’t mind, he didn’t need to talk. She was such a strange bird—the bird is the word—and she made him feel easy because she was like him. Of course she wasn’t just one person. That was obvious. Why was she wearing her watch with the face turned backward on her wrist? As he considered this, the name of the book he had been trying to remember came to him. It was a book by André Breton, the charismatic leader of the early surrealist movement in Paris. Barth read it when he was thirteen and had not thought about it since. The book was called Nadja!

Nadja laughed. “I forgot you were coming over.”

“Did I come on the wrong night?”

“I was playing no-argument solitaire,” she said.

“How do you play that?”

“No kings or jacks.”

“How about jokers?”

“They’re anarchists, you know.”

Bartholomew laughed.

“We haven’t seen each other for a long time.”

“Not since you quit at work,” he said.

“How long ago was that?”

“Two weeks.”

Nadja removed the back cushions from the sofa and threw them over the side. “Take off your sandals. I want to see your feet. Oh, too wide.” She laughed.

As she leaned over he could see the teardrop shape of her breast. He remembered more details of the story. Nadja had been the lover of Max Ernst, who said she was the only natural surrealist in Paris. Bartholomew kissed her and felt an electric disturbance that ran through his body and coiled around his tongue. He remembered this feeling from a dream, and it was accompanied by paralysis, where he found himself hanging upside down with blood rushing to his head and arrows in his chest. It was at this moment that he moved up the plain of her long legs to where they forked and revealed a small yellow bird’s nest.

He started gently and she cried: “Oh Charlie, oh Charlie.” This was her reanimated meme, and it made him angry and so he teased her slowly, exploring with his tongue, until the dam swelled, trembled, and broke—and then he pulled her up by the waist, and they climaxed together in beauty and convulsive beauty like wild horses.

Afterward Nadja drove him home in her car. There was condensation on the windshield, and Nadja turned it into a blank slate and started to write a message with her finger. She licked it and said: “They say you aren’t supposed to lick your finger. It makes the writing smear.”

The word she wrote was HELLO. It ran and only HELL was left.

Bartholomew felt his heart beating too fast.

“What is it, dear friend?” she asked.

“I know how this story ends,” he said solemnly.

“How does it end, André?”

***

Anthony and Barbara were playing Word Exchange on the dining room table. “Barth has a new girlfriend,” said Barbara.

“He told me about her,” said Anthony.

“I’m not sure she’s right for him.”

“Who is?” asked Anthony.

“Nadja was his manager and then something happened.”

“He told me.”

“Did he show you the book?” asked Barbara.

Anthony nodded: “He believes he knew her in a previous life.”

Barbara fell deep in thought—her breathing changed and she started to sob. “We both thought it was the way to go. He’s not normal, is he?”

“Unfortunately, he’s not,” said Anthony.

“What happened?”

“It’s just the way he came, Barbara.”

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn:

“Strip”

New Poem by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

New Poetry by Damian White: “Alabaster Clouds”

New Poetry by Damian White: “Alabaster Clouds”

New Review from Larry Abbott: “Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons” and “Midnight Cargo”

Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons. Poems by Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis. Trumansburg, NY: Out of Step Press, 2021.

Midnight Cargo: Stories and Poems. Kevin Basl. Trumansburg, NY: Illuminated Press, 2023.

Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons is a chapbook of 11 poems, a collaboration between Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis, who seek to answer the question “why did you join the military?” Although the question pertains to them and to their unique individual circumstances, the question also has a broader resonance.

Basl, from rural Western Pennsylvania, joined the Army in 2003, first went to Iraq as a mobile radar operator in 2005, and then was stop-lossed, returning in 2007. Lewis is from upstate New York. He joined the Army at 18 and deployed on an MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) Artillery crew to Iraq in 2003, just in time for the invasion.

"Corn" and "Coal" represent not only the specifics of family background but also the regions that the poets hail from. "Yellow Ribbons," of course, is the near ubiquitous symbol of freedom during the Iran hostage crisis and continuing to the first Gulf War

In the introduction, they try to, if not fully answer the question of "why" a young person joins the military, at least present the conditions that lead to enlistment. They take a different approach, "an oblique perspective," to the "why": "More often overlooked are the cultural and economic conditions that push kids toward military service, an experience that will fundamentally change them, sometimes in tragic ways." The genesis of the book was a workshop that involved discussions with veterans from rural areas, and although the poems are written for vets they make aspects of the military experience accessible to the civilian.

The poems alternate between Basl and Lewis (except for two consecutive by Basl) and often complement each other. The poems, part reminiscence and part search for understanding about the past, use finely-tuned details to show the impact of that past on the present.

"Rust Belt Fed" by Lewis makes the connection between the socioeconomics of a hardscrabble region which "seems to grow only feed corn and soldiers" with military recruiting; ironically, the ground *is* fertile for the production of generations of soldiers. Recruiters in essence prey upon the vulnerable youth of the area who are precluded from exploring more expansive options:

The combine strips the corn from the fields,

the recruiter’s van strips the youth

from our schools, churches

Like metal scrappers pulling wires and pipes

from a foreclosed home

The image suggests that the recruiting process has virtually a criminal motive, with the only purpose being to “feed” the war machine with “kids with computer skills . . . /To be made into precise cyber warriors” and “Athletic kids dense enough to be/turned into blunt weapons, ...”

Basl’s poem “Mouth of the Abyss” echoes some of the imagery of “Rust Belt Fed.” The poem begins with the destruction of a farm, “clawed away for stripping,” by “Whitener Brothers Coal Incorporated.” A way of life is expendable; nature and the human residents are beholden to the forces of despoilation. Coal mining destroys a way of life in the same way the recruitment process destroys the young. The mining strips the land; the military strips the young.

The speaker, a seven-year old boy, is able to watch the mining “canyon” expand, and one day goes to the “mouth of the abyss” with his father, who warns him of the potentially-fatal dangers of the crater. As the poem ends the boy wonders if it is possible “to witness man’s work/and live to talk about it.” The same could be said of war.

Lewis’s “First Ambush Mission” and Basl’s “Resume Builder” both connect a youthful event to later Army experiences. In the former, Lewis recalls the “Ragweed insurgencies, nightly raccoon attrition” that plagued his parents’ corn field. He and his twin brother decide to lie in wait through the night with their shotguns:

Pulling triggers interested me more than pulling weeds

Out back in a kid-built shack called “The Fort”

Twin brother and I on an ambush mission

Raccoons standing in for guerillas

After their unsuccessful foray—one shot at “Something moving in the shadows”— they return from the fort in the morning and unload their shells on the kitchen table. As the poem ends there is a correlation between the events of the night and his military future:

My wet sneakers squeaking on linoleum—

Had my ears not been ringing

I would have heard

Desert Army Boots crunching gravel

It is as if his soldiering was preordained; he was one of the young men “stripped” from home by the “metal scrappers.”

The idea of a preordained military future is echoed in Basl’s ironically-titled “Resume Builder.” In this poem the speaker recalls Mr. Floyd, a somewhat notable member of the community (“Lifetime member of the Hallton Rod and Gun Club./Two-time winner of the American Legion turkey raffle”) and a long-time high school gym teacher. He has little tolerance for students with “zero athletic aspirations” and despises “Phish-phans, Juggalos, skaters, and scummies.” The ending of the poem reveals Floyd’s recognition that the military may be the only option for those with a foreclosed future:

Counselor of numbskulls when he tells them

    there may be a place for you yet

    faraway at basic training

Bastard prophet, when you realize, damn, how he nailed that

last one.

Although Floyd, whose own life is mundane, is an object of ridicule to the students, he is also that “bastard prophet” who knows that his students’ lives will basically go in one direction.

Overall, the 11 poems in the book show a side of the military that is far from the heroic ideal. The authors note that the “book’s cover was handmade from pulped U.S. military uniforms” (with the cover image by Christopher Wolf of a tank plowing through a cornfield), showing that as swords can be made into plowshares uniforms can be made into art.

Each author’s post-military life has shown that commitment to the arts. Basl holds a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from Temple University. He has worked with Warrior Writers and Frontline Arts to conduct art workshops and is an accomplished paper-maker and musician. He was featured in Talia Lugacy’s 2021 film *This Is Not a War Story*. He has written numerous essays and articles about various aspects of the veteran experience. Lewis, Like Basl, has conducted writing and papermaking workshops for veterans since 2009. His artwork has been shown in many galleries across the country, including the Brooklyn Museum. He appeared in the film *The Green Zone* (2010) and *This Is Not a War Story*. He is one of the founders of Out of Step Press. The name of the press is an ironic twist on the precision of military marching along with a connotation of non-conformity

Midnight Cargo is a collection of three stories and eighteen poems, many of which derive from specific events during Basl’s deployment. Although trained to be a radar operator (14J) Basl was re-classed, at various times, as a cavalry scout, security escort driver, laborer guard, and, less excitingly, deliverer of trash to a burn pit. The book’s title references another one of his jobs in Iraq, that of the nighttime loading of the remains of deceased service members onto C-130 cargo

planes. The poem “Sacrifice” is most closely aligned with the meaning of the book’s title. He describes the loading of “those long metal boxes” for the final journey home. However, the loading and imminent departure is unsettling, as the reality of death breaks through the impersonality of the task. The plane itself is like a coffin, “exhibiting the skeletal hull/wires and nets/vining the walls –”; it is “an inglorious vessel,” lacking the solemnity that the occasion requires,

set to carry home

the cold weight

of a friend’s absence

the cold weight

of a mother’s depression

housed in a coffin

wrapped in a flag.

The loading of the bodies occurs at night, which reflects the secretive nature of the event, as if there can be no acknowledgement of death.

The first poem in the book, “The Red Keffiyeh,” and the following story, “Occupations,” pivot on the object and symbol of the keffiyeh. In the poem, the keffiyeh was a gift from a boy in Iraq whom the speaker became close to, and which now represents the memories of his tour, especially his interactions with Iraqi civilian workers at Camp Anaconda. The keffiyeh “now lives in an unfinished hardwood case,” unopened for years “till last night.” As he tries on the scarf he notices that the “checkered fabric had frayed,” analogous to the fraying of his memories of Iraq. There is a sense of loss and regret in the poem’s final lines:

[I] gazed in the mirror at my weary face

and, still gazing, went on to consider sadly

its beauty and how old the boy would now be . . .

“Occupations,” which can be seen as a companion work to the poem, details the narrator’s interactions with Iraqi laborers employed for “hootch fortification.” The story is told in third-person, but focuses on a Sergeant Adams, who develops a relationship with a boy, the teen-age Gabir, whose brother and father were laborers. As section 2 of the story opens, Adams asks Gabir to buy him a keffiyeh for his wife’s birthday. His wife is a musician and he feels that she could wear the keffiyeh while she played cello and sang: “The perfect gift. Their marriage might survive this deployment after all.” He gives Gabir money for the purchase. Gabir agrees, but in the ensuing days is elusive about the scarf, and one day Gabir and his family fail to appear at the camp. Two weeks later, though, a new laborer shows up at the camp and gives Adams the keffiyeh. Adams attempts to get information on Gabir and his family from some Iraqi workers but they are reticent to offer any specifics, only saying that the family “went north.” He gives the men a message of thanks to Gabir, but the men are noncommittal. As the story ends Adams, still deployed, receives a photo of his wife wearing the scarf. However, after he returns home, he “never saw her wear it—on stage or anywhere.” And a year later, after they divorce, “he found the keffiyeh buried in a box of clothes and jewelry she returned to him.”

Both the poem and the story are linked through the kaffiyeh; the story also illustrates that what is meaningful to one person is simply a disposable object to someone else.

Two poems that use the cleave structure are “Art Therapy” and “The Agency’s Mark.” The lines can be read down the left column, the right column, or across, giving a sense of three poems. The juxtapositions are similar to stream of consciousness, with new meanings revealed depending on how the

lines are combined by the reader. “Art Therapy” was inspired by George Bush’s *Portraits of Courage* paintings, and a note explains the Right to Heal Initiative that the poem also references. The left column alludes to Bush’s paintings, while the right column begins:

Cops march into position

protestors in pepper spray goggles

unfurling a hand-painted banner

We Demand the Right to Heal!

Similarly, “The Agency’s Mark” interweaves two parallel experiences. The left-hand column limns a painting by Haeq Fasan entitled *Horse Dance*, while the right-hand column critiques the CIA’s secret funding of art that would “counter the Soviet’s promotion/of ‘socialist realism’—” by providing money and venues for art that would reflect American values. In a note to the poem Basl cites an article from *Newsweek* in 2017: “The CIA weaponized art as a form of ‘benevolent propaganda,’ intending to show the world that capitalism, not communism, produced better—and more—work.”

Another poem with an interesting structure is “God Mode.” The lines are relatively short, separated by backslashes and white space, giving a sense of a computer or machine spitting out phrases. There is also the suggestion of an omniscient, impersonal armed drone operator watching his dehumanized potential victims on a screen: “your body of pixels/ is the target of my wrath/ your heat/is a death signature/ your name/ is irrelevant/ . . . ” War becomes a computer game, albeit with human lives at stake.

Where “God Mode” shows the impersonal aspect of war conducted from a cubicle, “Rules of Engagement” focuses more on the individual in a situation where violence saturates one’s daily existence; the potential, and almost need, for violent

readiness is everywhere. The phrase "'Deadly force authorized,'" visible in every camp, becomes part of "your foretold madness. . . . Your rifle will become a phantom limb." The poem ends, though, with a question apparently addressing his fellow soldiers, positing that the individual has lost agency and any sense of choice:

You ought to question, hero, before the rounds go flying

Whose hand really does the authorizing?

The ramifications of this "foretold madness" takes a chilling turn in the poem "Terror," which describes the psychic dislocation engendered by "Deadly force authorized." The terror becomes what is internalized *from* this environment:

Someone you think you know

Free falls through darkness . . .

In the greasy smoke

a mirror to greet him

fractured

opaque

two eyes not his own:

the violence he has sown

now feeds on his days.

The story "The Bugler" has echoes of the black humor and absurdism of, among others, Joseph Heller, Tim O'Brien, and David Abrams. The story concerns Specialist Jenkins who, although unable to play the bugle, is called upon to be the bugler to play "Taps" at a funeral ceremony for a World War II veteran. Jenkins is issued "a special bugle . . . 'It has a little speaker inside' . . . You push a button and "Taps"

plays.’” Much of the story then concerns the bumbling attempts at a rehearsal for the ceremony. On the day of the funeral the preacher gives the standard encomiums about the deceased, the 21-gun salute was “coordinated and crisp.” After the volley Jenkins takes center stage, raises the bugle to his lips, presses the button, and a “tinny, nasally . . . lifeless” “Taps” issues forth. He is “embarrassed for the family . . . sad and embarrassed for himself.” The widow, however, to Jenkins’ chagrin, praises his playing. As the story ends, Dave, a Vietnam vet, apparently an acquaintance of the deceased, asks to see the bugle. He removes the speaker and plays a few notes. He hands the instrument back to Jenkins and urges him to play. Surprisingly, after a feeble attempt, Jenkins does blow a “satisfying” note. As the story ends, Dave calls an elderly couple (who had a wreath with a yellow ribbon attached) over “to come see what the noise was about, to come learn the truth for themselves.”

What is the “truth” to be learned? Is it that the ceremony was part sham? Is it that belief, expressed by the preacher and the yellow ribbon, is hollow? Or that belief is more important than truth? There is a note of irresolution about what constitutes the “truth.”

The work in *Midnight Cargo* was inspired by a range of subjects, from the writer’s memories, experiences and observations of war broadly defined and his time in Iraq, to his return to the States and feelings of discord, to post-war endeavors like making paper from cut up uniforms, to cultural events, like the 2023 Rose Procession in Chicago. Overall, through this prismatic lens, Basl emerges, as he writes in the poem “Presence,” as “the person who is here now.”

For further background:

Outofsteppress.com

Kevinbasl.com