Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I’m not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples’ books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn’t have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts…. Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis….

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here, Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018

Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018

Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014

Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)

Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014

Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark, NJ, 2014

Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016

John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018

Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019

Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021

Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020

Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy's War, Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.

Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.

Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.

New Poetry by D.R. James: "Surreal Expulsion"

New poem by DR James: Surreal Expulsion

New Poetry by Pawel Grajnert: “Michigan”

New poem by Pawel Grajnert: Michigan

New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: “An Arrangement”

Houston Skyline from Midtown

I escaped to America after my fiancé, Farhid, died. He was an officer in the Afghan National Army in Bagarm when he was killed by a roadside bomb. His friend Abdul called and told me the news. He and Farhid had attended school together and had joined the army at the same time. Abdul used to visit us, but I hadn’t seen him in years. When I got off the phone, I felt like still air on a clear day. Nothing stirred. No sound and no one around me. An emptiness engulfed me that was not altogether unpleasant. I was adrift but not grieving. I had never wanted to marry him; it was my father’s wish that I do so. Farhid was my cousin.

His father, my Uncle Gülay, was my father’s brother. Gülay died in a car accident before I was born, and my father took Farhid and his mother into our family. I saw Farhid as an older brother—someone I played hide and seek with as a child—and not as a husband, but my father said he wanted to

have grandchildren, especially a grandson. He also thought our marriage would honor Gülay, and he made it clear I didn't have a choice. I don't like Farhid, I told my father, not in that way. Oh, you are a big shame, he scolded me. I didn't ask for your opinion. I decide. I ran to my room. My mother followed and sat beside me as I wept into my pillow. Your father has decided as my father decided for me when I was your age, she said. It will be fine. Your family wouldn't make a bad decision. Farhid is a good boy. Open your heart and you will see him as your father sees him and learn to love him.

After Farhid died, I mourned the boy I knew but not the man I hadn't wanted for a husband. I remembered when he stood with me on the second floor of our home in Jalalabad when the Taliban left Afghanistan after the Americans invaded. We watched them drive away, their faces grim, angry. After that, my father allowed me to leave the house without a burqa. Farhid and I would walk to the downtown bazaar, and he'd hold my left hand as he guided us through the crowds. He liked to make puppets, and some mornings I'd wake up and find him crouched at the foot of my bed with socks on his hands imitating sheep and goats. Get up, baaa! Get up, Samira, baaa, he'd say and I'd duck under the sheets giggling as he pinched my toes. These memories made me sad. Farhid—my cousin, my brother—was gone, but I felt a certain lightness too because now I'd never have to marry him. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and saw hill-shaped shadows rise out of the dark and spread across the ceiling and loom over me and I knew it was the spirit of Uncle Gülay, enraged that Farhid's death had denied him the honor of our marriage.

My father hung a photograph of Farhid in his army uniform in the entrance of our house. I hadn't seen this picture before. He looked older than I remembered. He had a sharp chin, a firm mouth, and a stern look that gave the impression of someone gazing into their future. He wasn't the boy with the puppets. Perhaps I could have loved him, I thought, and for the first

time I felt despair but it was a distant kind of grief toward someone I had never really known.

After his funeral, my life resumed as if he had never died. I woke up early and attended classes at Jalalabad State University from seven to one. After school, I took a computer course and studied English so that one day I could get a good job with a Western NGO. One of my favorite memories: accessing the internet for the first time and establishing a Yahoo email account.

Those leisurely days didn't last. Eight weeks after Farhid's funeral, I began receiving death threats from Taliban supporters. Some of them sent text messages: *We know your fiancé fought against the army of Allah*. *He is dead and you'll be next*. Some mornings, my father would find notes tacked to our front door: *Whore*! *You have betrayed Islam by becoming engaged to an infidel*. *We will eliminate you and all infidels who betray Allah*. Whoever wrote these notes, I believe, set off bombs near our house, too many to count, and sticky bombs on cars belonging to our neighbors. It became normal to hear an explosion and the panicked screams that followed. I became afraid to leave the house and stopped attending school.

My father was a physician. One day he went out with the Afghan National Army to treat sick soldiers when a bomb exploded and shrapnel tore into his left arm and both legs. A neighbor heard the news but didn't want to alarm my family. He asked for some clothes to take to the hospital treating my father. Why do you need his clothes? my mother asked; but instead of answering her, he rushed off without explanation. Then my cousin Reshaf called from Kabul and asked my mother about the bombing. He had read about it on the internet. It killed ten government soldiers, he said. My mother tried to reach my father but he didn't answer his phone. Finally, someone from the hospital called and said he had been injured. We rushed to the hospital and wandered halls where injured soldiers lay on

gurneys and stared at us with dazed, hollow eyes. My father lay in a bed in a small room with peeling green paint that overlooked a courtyard. Families sat under trees. Roaming dogs snapped at men who chased them away. A white sheet covered my father up to his chin. His blood-stained legs were raised in slings, and his injured arm was wrapped in gauze soaked by iodine. Dozens of cuts ruined his face. He tried to speak but his voice caught in his throat and I looked away as tears rolled down his face.

He recovered but he couldn't walk without help and often used a wheelchair. Nerve damage in his left hand prevented him from using medical instruments. He spent his days in his small clinic sitting at his desk and offering advice to colleagues. He watched them work, and when he grew bored he scrolled through his computer until he grew tired and rested his chin on his chest and slept.

The threats against my life continued. That summer my father began making inquiries, and through a friend in the Ministry of Interior he secured a visa for me to emigrate to the United States that was given to families who had either fought or worked with Western forces. Her husband was an Afghan soldier, my father told his friend. She can't stay here. That night while I was in my room preparing to go to bed he called for me. I followed his voice out to our garden where he stood in the light of a full moon. Cats yowled and the distant barking of dogs rose above the noise of car horns and of voices in the shopping centers of Shar-e-Naw. My parents' bedroom window opened onto the garden and I could hear my mother crying. Without looking at me, my father said I'd fly to the United States in the morning. Arrangements had been made through an NGO to take me to Houston, Texas, where an American aid organization would help me. You will leave us to start a new life, inshallah, my father said.

I ran from the garden to my mother's room but she had shut the door and wouldn't let me in. There is nothing I can do for

you, she called out to me. I slid to the floor and wept. In my bed that night, I wondered where Texas was in the United States. I thought of Farhid and the resolute look on his face in the photograph above our front door. I decided to have that same kind of determination, and I embraced his image, ignored my fear, and withheld my tears until something inside me retreated to a far corner.

My father and mother took me to Kabul International Airport. I held my mother for a long time, our wet faces touching. A plane carried me to Qatar and then to Washington, D.C. That evening, I flew to El Paso and stayed in a tent in a U.S. Army camp near Fort Bliss. I couldn't count the number of tents and the number of people filling them. Like a gathering of nomads stretching without end across a white desert. The suffocating summer heat, I thought, was worse than Jalalabad. Sand and dust swirled endlessly. There wasn't a single second I didn't hear babies crying, heavy trucks driving past, and announcements over loudspeakers. One morning a soldier took me to a room in a square, concrete building where a man sat alone at a table. He said he was from the Department of Homeland Security. He asked me about Farhid. I told him how we used to play as children. I know nothing about his life as a soldier, I said. But he was your fiancé, the man insisted. My father arranged our marriage, I explained. He asked about my parents and if they had ever traveled outside of Afghanistan. No, I told him, they hadn't. He thanked me and the soldier returned me to my tent.

I lost my appetite and would sit on the floor of my tent and spend hours rocking back and forth as I had as a child when I was scared. A nurse told me I suffered from panic attacks, and she gave me medication that put me to sleep. I had dreams of bomb blasts. In one dream, I told my father, Let's go away from here. You're in America, he said, don't worry. Another time, I dreamed my father was in great pain. When I called them, my mother said, Your father's legs were hurting him.

That’s why you had the dream.

Two months later I flew to Houston, where I was met by a man named Yasin from the Texas Institute for Refugee Services. Welcome to Houston, he said, and then he led me out of the airport and into a parking lot. The hot, humid air wrapped around me so tightly that my arms felt stuck to my body. My clothes clung to me like wet paper.

Yasin told me he was my caseworker. What is that? I asked. It means you are my responsibility, he said. He had dark hair and brown eyes and he wore a white shirt with a thin tie and a gray suit. He said he was from the Afghan city of Herat and had worked for an American NGO until he came under threat from the Taliban. He got a U.S. visa like mine and had flown to Houston three years ago. I told him about Farhid. I’m sorry for you, he said. When I think of Afghanistan and everyone I left behind, I shake with fear. His sad look touched me.

He led me to his car, a hybrid, he told me proudly. Turning a knob, he switched on the air conditioning and a chill ran through me as the cold air struck my sweat-dampened clothes. He gave me a bottle of water and told me I could remove my hijab; in America, he explained, women don’t have to cover their heads. I told him I felt more comfortable keeping it on. I wore your shoes once, as the Americans like to say, he said, but don’t be scared. After a while the U.S. won’t feel so strange and you will take off your hijab. He smiled and showed all of his teeth.

We drove to a Social Security office where I signed up for refugee benefits and Medicaid. He said these programs would provide a little bit of money to pay for housing, food, and health care. He took me to a small apartment in a five-story building owned by the institute. A swing hung motionless in an empty playground and large black birds hopped on the ground, and the noise they made flapping their heavy wings reminded me of Jalalabad merchants when they snapped carpets in the air to

shake off dust. We took an elevator to a second-floor apartment. It had a sofa and a table with two chairs. A small bed with sheets and a blanket took up most of the bedroom. Blue towels hung from a rack in the bathroom. This will be your new home, Yasin said. I looked out the living room window and saw nothing but the doors of apartments across the way. Through my kitchen window I noticed people sitting on steps leading to the floors above me. Shadows converged over them and I became depressed, and I thought of Farhid's spirit rising toward paradise—a dark journey toward light—and I decided this was my dark journey and eventually, inshallah, I'd find light and happiness in this my new home.

In the following days, Yasin took me to a job preparation class. The instructor was impressed I knew so much English and I explained I had studied it in Jalalabad. That is a good start, but you don't know everything, he said. He told me that when I met someone, I should shake their hand and look them in their eyes and say, How do you do? Nice to meet you. I told him in Afghanistan this wouldn't be possible; a woman would never shake a man's hand or look at them unless they were their husband or family. You aren't in Afghanistan, he reminded me. After class, Yasin would always walk ahead of me and when we came to a door he would stop and open it for me. I told him he didn't have to do this, but he insisted. He was very kind. Slow, slowly, in the evenings in my apartment, I began to think that I might like America. I thought I could love Yasin.

After four weeks, Yasin told me he could no longer see me. Catholic Charities worked with refugees for only one month. He was very matter-of-fact. He told me to stop at a flower shop near his office. It was owned by a friend of his, Shivay. He had spoken to him and Shivay had agreed to hire me. You are fully oriented to the city, he told me, and now you will have a job. You're set. Go and live your life. He smiled his toothy grin and stuck out his hand to shake mine. I don't understand,

I said. What don’t you understand? he asked. That stillness I felt when Abdul called me about Farhid returned, but this time it was Yasin’s absence I began to feel and I didn’t want him to go. He looked at me without understanding. I resisted the tears I felt brimming in my eyes and took his hand. Thank you, I said, looking at him. It was nice to meet you.

The next morning, I met Shivay. He told me he was born in Houston but his parents are Afghan. They came to the United States after the Russian invasion. I tried to speak to him in Dari as I sometimes had with Yasin, but he shook his head. My parents always spoke English around me, he said. They wanted me to be an American. That is what you should want to be too, Samira. He provided me with a table and a calculator to ring up sales. I inhaled the fragrance of red roses that filled buckets on the shelves by the door as I waited for customers, prompting memories of my childhood in Jalalabad. In those days, Farhid and I helped vendors put roses in pails of water outside their stalls on narrow streets hazy with dust. Orange trees bloomed in the summer and after the fruit had set, Farhid climbed them and dropped oranges down to me. The Kabul River passed behind the bazaar and we dangled our bare feet in its clear water. The frigid winter weather made us shake with cold and we stayed inside under blankets, eager for the comforts of spring. The sun blistered the sky in summer making the days impossibly hot, but no matter the heat we’d be back in the bazaars helping the vendors with their roses, deep red and cool in their buckets.

The flower shop took up a corner lot in a quiet neighborhood near a park where people gathered in the afternoon. I’d see men walk up to women and hug them and after a brief conversation they’d walk away. In Afghanistan, a woman would never hug a man outside of her family. Who were these men, I asked myself? The women wore slim dresses that revealed too much of their bodies, and I wondered how they felt, almost naked in public pressing their bodies against a man, some of

whom didn’t wear shirts, and I saw the men’s bare chests and my heart beat fast and I blushed when I caught Shivay watching me. He laughed. Here, there are many men and women who aren’t Muslim, he said. In America, it isn’t shameful to look.

One morning Shivay surprised me with a cup of green tea. My parents always drink green tea, he said. They say it’s an Afghan custom. Is it? I told him it was and from then on he made green tea for me every morning.

At midday, Shivay would buy us lunch and after work he’d walk me to the nearby bus stop, and he’d wait with me until the bus arrived. I told him he didn’t have to do this but he insisted. You are a pretty girl and shouldn’t go out alone at night. When the bus arrived, I’d get on and watch him walk away. I felt warm all over. I thought I could love this man.

Two months later, however, Shivay told me he no longer needed me. He had hired me as a favor to Yasin, he said. That night when he walked me to the bus, he suggested I apply at a nearby Wal-Mart. He promised to give me a good recommendation and then he handed me a half empty box of green tea. I don’t drink it, he said.

Wal-Mart didn’t have any job openings. I applied at other stores, but no one called me. I called Yasin. He said he’d try to help me, but I was no longer his client. I stayed in my apartment and when I grew bored I drew henna tattoos on my hands and feet, and at night I took the pills that helped me sleep. Then one afternoon, my father called. He said Farhid’s friend Abdul had received a U.S. visa and would be arriving in Houston soon. He has visited your mother and me many times since Farhid died so that we’d know he honors Farhid’s memory, my father told me. He is a nice boy. I have spoken to his family, and we are in agreement that he’d make a good husband for you in Texas.

I didn’t know what to say. After a moment, I hurried outside

and took the elevator down to the playground and sat in a swing, gripping my phone in my left hand, and rocked back and forth, thrusting my legs out to gain momentum and stared at the sky through the spare trees. Motionless clouds blocked the sun. Lean shadows cut across the sidewalk. I rose higher and higher, lulled by the rhythmic creaking of the swing. Hello, Samira, are you there? I heard my father shout. No other sound but his voice disturbed the resigned stillness until I was ready to emerge from its quiet consolation. I ceased pumping my legs, let my toes drag against the ground. I slowed to a stop. Yes, Father, I'm here, I said into my phone. I asked him to text me a photograph of Abdul. Seconds later, a young man with a smooth face stared out at me from my phone. He had a distant, moody look that conveyed a seriousness of purpose, of someone who believed he was performing his duty. As would I. Over time, I was sure I could love this man.

New Fiction by Jesse Rowell: "Second Skin"

Opuntia sp. (prickly pear cactus) (Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas)

Alpert Nelsen had lost a toe. He just didn't know it yet. Not a big toe. One of the smaller ones. It got infected when he kicked a roll of fencing after his cameraman deleted the interview footage.

"Can't you disinfect it?" he asked his doctor, a bearded and bespectacled man working out of a family clinic in the Bronx. "You know. Cut it off. Clean it off. Then reattach it?"

His doctor looked at him for a beat. “Sepsis,” he said flatly. “Tell me, Mr. Nelsen, how did you injure your toe?” He wiped Alpert’s arm with an alcohol swab, pinched the skin, and plunged a syringe needle into his muscle for tetanus.

He winced at the sting. As the doctor covered the spot with a bandage, Alpert told him about the desert along the northern Texas border and his interviews with the sheriff. Spools of wire sat scattered across the cracked earth, random and misplaced like aeration plugs on a drought-stricken lawn. Glug glug, the sheriff had joked as he watered a long line of planter boxes under the eaves of the waystation, the sharp tips of yucca leaves spearing the soft bodies of jade. Empty water bottles blew across the road into a ditch, a reservoir of plastic.

“So, you’re telling me you kicked a roll of fencing on the Texas border?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah.”

“You will need to be more careful next time.”

“Yeah, but what about one of those fancy new prosthetics? You know, put that in place of my toe.”

“No,” the doctor said. “If your foot was missing, sure. Or your hand. Or a limb. You could opt for a nerve-spliced prosthetic with synthetic skin, indistinguishable from the real thing. But a missing toe? No, that is just something you will have to get used to.”

“Huh.”

“Not to worry, though. You will get used to it. A slight limp for a few months, regain your balance, and then you’ll be right as rain.”

“Might as well chop off my entire foot. Better to have a prosthetic.”

“Might have to do that if you don’t get started on antibiotics right away. And we need to schedule intake at our sister clinic to have that toe removed,” he said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert’s face, he assured him, “It’s a simple procedure, really. They’ll numb the area, no pain, and then snip it off at the joint. You won’t feel a thing. You cannot leave that toe unattended, Mr. Nelsen.”

Mr. Nelsen attended to his apartment instead, limping as he looked for an old Two-Way camera. A Two-Way won’t have a crisis of conscience, he thought as he picked through oil-stained boxes at his workstation. A Two-Way won’t look away. The automated flying recorder would feed his servers footage that he edited into digestible narratives for his followers to share and patronize. Still, his subscriber count had begun to dip.

People quit on him. His cameraman. His girlfriend. Sinkholes appeared in his life without warning, leaving him to scramble around the openings and shovel dirt to bring the ground back to level. Oriana Knowles had left him to help refugees fleeing Texas after other countries airlifted their citizens to safety, or so she had claimed. He remembered her face, a tear-streaked mask of resentment framed by hair the color of sunlight, a Renaissance painting if there ever was one. He held the Two-Way to a pendant light and fiddled with its gyroscope.

A battery pack fell out, tumbled against the workstation, and landed on his bad toe. He shrieked in pain and clutched his foot. Goddamn me, he admonished himself. I shouldn’t have started thinking about her. But he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Her absence. It wasn’t fair that Oriana had cared more about others, cared more about some strangers in some far-off land that could have been ignored just by going about their lives. Eating penne alla vodka at Guiseppe’s. Strolling through Central Park. Gelatos under the Statue of Liberty. He missed those quiet moments when a pocket of time opened up

just for them.

His toe throbbed on the flight back to the Texas border and hurt even more as he baked under the New Mexico sun. The sovereign territory of Texas disappeared over the horizon, flat and dry. Dead earth not worth fighting for. They thought they were free, but the collapse had brought cartels into their cities, and detention camps spread throughout the Texas deserts like cacti bloom after rain.

A man with a cowboy hat, the sheriff, walked toward the waystation, heat mirages and dust distorting him in the distance. The man showed no urgency to join him under the shade, taking his time to adjust his boots or shift something he carried. As he got closer, Alpert recognized the object as a plastic jug, like the water jugs on pallets inside the entrance. Water. He swallowed and felt thirst scrape at his throat. He had forgotten how quickly dehydration came here in the desert, even when standing in the shade.

He eyed the jugs on the pallets. Some were half-empty, bubbles resting in the water, but each had an individual and somewhat peculiar stamp. A blue trident, its lateral prongs curving comically off to the side, or a cartoon devil, its horns making the same exaggerated curve, or an abstract bird with curved wings. He bent down and rubbed his thumb over one of the trident stamps. The ink didn’t smudge as the water jostled inside.

“Traffickers stamp them,” the sheriff said, coming up behind him. “Their way of identifying their stash. I find them and confiscate them.” He placed the jug he had been carrying next to the others.

“Can I have some?” Alpert asked hopefully.

The sheriff nodded. “Knock yourself out.”

Alpert fumbled with the cap on a trident jug and drank, drops

splattering against his collared shirt. The water calmed his thirst, for a moment, but he knew it wouldn’t be enough to last for long. He handed the empty jug back to the sheriff.

The sheriff watched him with detached interest. His eyes hid behind wrap-around sunglasses, skin peeling at the edges of his sunburned nose and cheeks, ears pushed down under the brim of his white cowboy hat. The faded insignia of border security rested above the hatband. It showed an old map of the southern states before Texas had seceded, blobs of territory shifting throughout history.

Texas independence, if it could be called that, had come through the judiciary a decade ago, granted by the Chief Justice himself in a 5-to-4 ruling. Texas’s right-wing militias took over most of the territory in the years that followed, like warlords from some distant land, and interstate commerce collapsed. New maps of America showed a cavernous hole where Texas had once proudly stood, cordoned off by fencing and surveillance, an emptiness that felt like a phantom limb.

“What happened to your cameraman?” the sheriff asked.

“Fired him.” They both knew he hadn’t fired his cameraman, Pierre Teeter from Nova Scotia. Pierre had stormed off in a huff after the sheriff had mocked him for the umpteenth time, testing his discomfort. Having a good cameraman was preferable to self-shooting. More accurate reaction shots, whereas the Two-Way pivoted in the air between sounds. “We’ll use my floater to finish our interview and get aerial shots. That work for you?”

“Knock yourself out.”

Alpert considered the sheriff’s repeated phrase of self-harm as he set the camera aloft and decided it was easier to believe that he hadn’t meant it as an expression of violence. Either way, it would be captured on his remote servers to be

edited, memed, and shared. A self-described independent journalist, he had attracted a fanbase of anti-refugees after multiple interviews with Texas militia leaders, but really they were just ranchers armed with weapons of war. Most had knocked themselves out with assassinations on rival militias and mass shootings, creating the recent influx of Texas refugees seeking asylum.

After confirming his profile in the viewfinder, Alpert adopted the practiced pose of pensive curiosity as he squinted at the camera. “Sheriff Ward Baptiste is a humble man decorated for years of service protecting our southern border. We are here today to learn about the technology deployed at his border station, an unassuming rambler hidden somewhere secret, a location that even I cannot disclose.”

The sheriff chuckled. “Sure, Alpert. Very secret, very hidden. Illegal aliens are scooped up by our surveillance-detention system and brought back to Texas Detention Centers, or TDCs. Simple as that. We keep it clean-clean as a jellybean. On this side of the border, at least. Can’t speak for the other side.”

Finally, Alpert exclaimed, some good soundbites. Ward Baptiste, sheriff Glug Glug himself, must have been practicing. Absent were his previous one-word answers tinged with distrust. Perhaps he watched some of my other interviews, he thought. “Tell me about the illegal aliens. Who are they, and why do they come here?”

“Well,” the sheriff drawled, seeming to stare off into the distance behind his impenetrable sunglasses.

Alpert feared he had returned to his adversarial persona, like the whiplash of interviewing a politician who delights in switching between faux compliments and verbal abuse. Alpert tightened his jaw as he prepared to prompt him again.

“Well.” Ward pointed toward a distant object in the desert that wavered behind a heat mirage. “Why don’t you ask one

yourself?”

It looked like nothing, and it looked like it could be anything. A specter among the many wavering things sitting at the edge of the horizon. Alpert glanced at the footage captured on the Two-Way on his phone, but he couldn’t determine its location near the border station as the camera circled overhead. He pulled at his collar to get air moving over the sweat on his chest, this unexpected and unseen thing ratcheting up his frustration.

“How can you tell?”

“Been around the desert long enough to know when something is out of place. It’s a second skin. Same reflection every day. Any change out there is a mole or a freckle that needs to be looked at. C’mon, boyo, let’s start walking.”

Looking back at the utility vehicle sitting in the shade of the waystation, Alpert hobbled after Ward. Sun blasted him from above as he came out from under the eaves.

“Can’t we take the four-wheeler out there? Looks like a long walk.”

“Naa, I could use your help destroying supply caches. Easier to find them on foot.”

Alpert felt like Ward was torturing him on purpose as he took his time around the rolls of fencing, looking back at Alpert to make sure he was keeping up. The sheriff exercised excruciating exactness overturning rocks and opening bluffs woven out of dried mud and sticks. He unwrapped food hidden in underground stashes, scattered it across the earth, and told Alpert how coyotes and red-tailed hawks gnawed at it and shat it out. “The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain,” he quoted and laughed. Upon finding a cache of energy bars in yellow packaging, he unwrapped one and dropped the wrapper. Alpert watched it flutter away like a butterfly in the wind.

“See that shape drawn on the ground over there?” Ward smacked his lips as he talked, his tongue navigating nougat. “Go brush off the dirt and rocks and lift up the panel. Water’s hidden underneath.”

Alpert stared at the ground for evidence of a shape. He looked back at the sheriff’s inscrutable face under the shadow of his cowboy hat. He felt frustration rising again with the heat, sweat dripping down his chest. His inflamed toe pulsed with pain. A mingling of misery that made him impatient and made him long to be back in his climate-controlled apartment. He squatted down, tilted his head, and looked for the thing, anything, hoping to see it from a different angle. No shape appeared.

“What are you seeing?” He shook his head in defeat.

“Right there in front of you. El Cartel del Mar. They mark their stashes with a trident. You gotta look for the curve in the dirt they make with pebbles and rocks. Ya see it now?”

Alpert saw it, finally, couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it to begin with. Like learning to see an optical illusion, the shape was obvious to him now. Looking around the ground, he saw other distinctive curvatures marking hidden stashes. “There are so many of them,” he said in astonishment. He shook his head. Not having Pierre here to capture footage of the markings on the ground, a graveyard of contraband, lessened the impact. The Two-Way hovered lazily nearby, focusing only on him and the sheriff as they spoke.

“Wait.” Alpert knitted his brow above his practiced pensive look. “I can’t believe that the cartels are helping Texas refugees, I mean, illegal aliens. What do the cartels get out of hiding food and water near the border?”

Ward looked at him for a beat, which made him feel like he was back in the doctor’s office asking stupid questions about reattaching toes and prosthetics. No, these are all perfectly

reasonable questions, he thought, but conceded that he should have considered his doctor’s advice before rushing back to the border, his toe pulsing with unbearable heat.

“Money,” Ward said flatly. “Moving commodities is a lucrative business, whether it be drugs or aliens.”

The panel pulled up like the top of a trapdoor spider’s hidey-hole, and Alpert lifted out a water jug, thankful no spiders jumped out with it. Only a quarter of water sloshed at the jug’s base. He drank greedily at the spout, water running down his neck and chest. Water. Sweet, delicious water in the heat, even if it left a plastic aftertaste. He placed the empty jug back in the hole and hobbled after the dirt clouds stirred up by the sheriff’s boots.

They walked toward the object that had piqued the sheriff’s interest, still about a hundred yards out or more. Alpert couldn’t determine distances here. In a baseball stadium, sure, he could say they were as close as the 15th row to the pitcher’s mound. Goddamn me, he thought, to be at a Yankees game right about now would be fucking fantastic. He imagined resting his aching foot on the cup holder mounted to the front row seats. The quiet before the crack of the bat against the ball, the roar of the crowd as the ball sailed into the stands. The hitter lazily rounding the bases toward home, crossing himself and gesturing to the sky, sanctified. Oriana sitting beside him, a bright smile every time he turned to tell her he was the luckiest man alive and kiss her soft cheek. Laughter as her hair, hair the color of sunlight, blew across his face, the sweet smells of her shampoo and perfume.

But she had to go all social justice on me. Better to just accept the new reality, or what had she called it? The Balkanization of America. The mirror had been shattered, our national identity strewn across the southern states like broken glass where we couldn’t recognize each other as Americans anymore, even as former US citizens begged for

reunification. The Supreme Court had killed that hope, she had complained bitterly. Precedent, originalism, and the constitution be damned, amorphous terms that had never protected civil rights.

Alpert pushed her out of his mind and focused on the thing ahead. He hadn't noticed that Ward had been talking the entire time about immigration policy and Texas bounty hunters assigned to detention centers. "They nab the aliens before they get close to our borders," he said. "Collect their reward from a TDC, and we clean up the rest."

No matter, he thought, the heat making him listless. The Two-Way would have recorded anything important he had missed, and he could edit out any of the parts that didn't appeal to his fans. The sins of journalistic malpractice—omission, hyperbole, and outrage—didn't apply to the profession of professional vlogger. Only establishing a narrative that helped his patrons feel better about their own lives. They would certainly feel happy about not having to walk through this godforsaken desert, he thought.

The heat rose off the ground and enveloped him like a blanket. He felt thirst clawing at his throat. He scanned the ground and located the faint outline of a symbol marking a stash. El Cartel del Mar. How good of them to hide life-saving supplies here in the desert, but no, wait. They're the bad guys. They're the invaders who traffic humans and guns and drugs. But how very good of them, how very nice of them to leave me water. His mind reeled as he reached for the trapdoor.

Ward pulled him back, a firm hand on his shoulder. "No, boyo, not that one. Don't touch that." He studied the ground and pointed toward another trident symbol about a stone's throw away. "I'll unearth some water there. You stay put."

Alpert limped toward the thing instead, a second skin the sheriff had called it, or a boll weevil, or… he couldn't

remember through the pain of his toe. The Two-Way spun off from filming him as it picked up muffled moans coming from the thing, close enough now that he could see it was a human, or a human-shaped thing, trapped inside a net. The net scrunched closer and closer the more it struggled, mesh pressed against the skin. Bending down, he saw that it was a woman, and he recoiled from the smell of urine.

“Hey there, dearie.” Ward joined Alpert to stand over the cocooned body. “You look a little parched. Glug glug.” A crystalline column of water poured out of the jug, beads of water splintering against her body. “Strands keep them alive for a few hours under the sun, needles injecting saline and a mild sedative. Makes it painful on the hands where all the nerve endings are, but they can’t feel it on the rest of their body, for the most part. By the time I get to them, the saline has run dry. They need a splash before heatstroke sets in.”

Alpert looked for a drone or a machine crawling along the ground that could have deployed the net. “How does the surveillance-detention system work? I don’t see where the net came from.”

The sheriff nodded as he deactivated the net with a key fob. “You’re not supposed to see where it came from. This isn’t some penal colony where you get to see all the secrets behind our technology.” The net slackened and flopped open on the ground. The woman rolled off and tried lifting herself on her hands and knees before collapsing. Her chest heaved as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

The net looked like a spider web. Its silk lines rustled in the wind, breathing in and out. It glittered with beads of water. He watched, mesmerized, and by looking at the net instead of the woman, he didn’t have to acknowledge her existence.

He began to run his hand over the edge of the net before

jerking back and cursing. The pressure-sensitive surface jumped up to grab at his hand like some living thing, and it stung like nettles, that ugly plant growing between sidewalk cracks in the Bronx, and god help those who happened to brush a bare calf or ankle against one. Spines barbed to the skin, uneven patches of inflammation, and scratching at the invisible thing ended with no relief.

“Discourages second attempts, doesn’t it,” Ward said as he grinned in satisfaction. “No repeat offenders. Once they’ve gotten tangled up in our nets, big fish, little fish, never coming back.”

“Goddamn me,” he spat at Ward. “That hurt. How is this contraption considered okay, you know, with human rights? It seems unnecessarily cruel.” He stopped, realizing he would lose more of his fans and most of his patrons mentioning human rights. I’ll have to edit this out, he thought, but his frustration rose like nettle rash.

“Illegal aliens don’t get human rights,” the sheriff said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert’s face, he assured him, “It’s simple, really. Title 8 and the sovereign territory of Texas authorizes the capture, detainment, and transfer of aliens as soon as they step on American soil.”

Alpert looked at her, finally. Hair the color of sunlight. She didn’t look like an alien. She looked like she belonged in America. Oriana had referred to refugees as future Americans just to tease him. Maybe she had been right.

“Look here.” Ward pointed at the woman’s blistered neck. “That’s a cartel stamp. She’s been trafficked. And look here.” He wrenched the woman’s wrist around to show Alpert her forearm, ignoring her yelp of pain. “That’s a detention center tattoo. That symbol means that she was detained for the murder of an unborn baby, and she has since been sterilized. She’s the property of Texas.”

The woman looked up at them, blue eyes darting between their faces. Her chapped lips sputtered, white spittle crusted on the corners, but no words came out. A Renaissance painting that reminded him of Oriana. The day she had left him came flooding back, a gut punch as he remembered her face. Disappointment. She had cried that day, tears running down her soft cheeks that he had tried to wipe away, but she had swatted at his hand and insisted that he didn't understand the damage Texas had inflicted on America, the inhumanity of a theocratic wasteland that imprisoned and killed women.

The woman on the ground uttered a word, her first, and Alpert squatted down to hear her, pain shooting up his leg from his toe.

"Water."

Alpert saw the outline of dried tears over the dirt on her face. He was a fool to not have admitted it earlier. Her absence hurt. He wanted her back. He wanted her safe from wherever she had disappeared to inside Texas, wipe away all those tears, and tell her she was right.

"Ya want water?" Ward asked the woman. "Ha! How does the old saying go? 'You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her drink,' or something like that."

What happened next felt like a memory, like he was watching it happen without control over his body and its actions. The sheriff fell backward, his hat flying off into the wind. The net leapt up to meet him, grab him, and crumple him into a ball. He tried stretching out toward Alpert and yelled invective until the net cinched over his mouth, the sound of sunglasses crunching against his face. He looked like a burrito baking in the sun.

"It's okay." Alpert turned to offer the woman his hand. "I'm going to help you."

She swatted at his hand and scooted back in a panic as the Two-Way pivoted behind him.

“Oh, that? Don’t be scared, that’s just my camera. I’m a journalist. I’m filming a story about the Texas border. Really, you can trust me. I’m going to help you.” It felt good to repeat the words, like the act of saying them out loud absolved his actions. He hadn’t been able to wipe away her tears, but he would wipe away the guilt of letting her disappear.

She looked at him suspiciously before pointing. “Water. I need water.” Her finger pointed at a symbol marked on the ground.

The trident, El Cartel del Mar. He felt sandpaper in his throat as he tried to swallow. Yes, water. How very good of them. How very nice of them.

He limped toward the symbol. “Don’t you worry,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m going to help you.” He brushed off the trident and opened the ground. A net exploded out of the hole like a trapdoor spider capturing its prey. The pain was instantaneous as the net’s needles sank into his skin. He struggled to escape, but the net tightened around his body, hugging him like a second skin.

The woman stood over Alpert and watched. She made no effort to free him. After he stopped moving, she found the sheriff’s plastic jug and drank deeply of what remained. Her neck muscles worked as she dipped her head back, hair moving across her shoulders. She dropped the empty jug between Alpert and the sheriff, and started walking toward the waystation. Toward America. The Two-Way sparkled in the sun above them for a moment until it spun off to record the sound of wind scraping across the border.

New Nonfiction by Larry Abbott: The Photographic Self-Portraits of Ron Whitehead

There Is No Such Thing as an Unwounded Soldier

Ron Whitehead works in a variety of photographic series: *Eye of the Storm* are impressionistic visions of war to give a more dynamic view of combat than a strictly documentary approach. One work shows a flaming parachutist plunging toward the ground; another shows a jet fighter in a lightning storm; a third shows a helicopter and tank silhouetted by flames; *Looking Back* focuses on the impact of the past on the present, specifically the transition from his military experience to civilian life; *My Lighthouse* was inspired by a song by the Rend Collective and expresses his commitment to the Christian faith and how his commitment can calm the inner storm and offer a sense of healing; *Art of Healing* expresses the ways that art can be instrumental in the post-war healing process but also that this process is tentative; the images in *Fight for It* reference the brutal nature of war; *American Dream* is ironic in that the photographs show more a problematic re-adjustment rather than a return to a perfect life.

Although his oeuvre encompasses a variety of imagery, including some where the camera itself is the subject, Whitehead's reflexive self-portraits are the predominant images in his work over his career, not in an egocentric way but as an artistic mediation of how he negotiates the past and the present. The photographs suggest that, post-war,

Whitehead is “in pieces,” no longer a unified whole, but also that he is searching for ways to re-establish an integrated self. The self-portraits negotiate the space between the past of war and the present of job, home, family, community, and the larger society. His work objectifies the inner conflicts between “the face of war” and “the face of after-war.” The photographs express T.S. Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative (1921), in that they represent Whitehead’s emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The self-portraits appear in many forms, some literal, some abstract, some surrealistic, some humorous, but each expresses the effect of his return to post-war life and provides the viewer with an insight into these perceptions. He occasionally blends text to complement the image. In her discussion of the ways that the arts, particularly poetry, tell us about war, Janis Stout (2005) writes that “literature and other cultural products offer an indispensable means of gaining impressions of war . . . not only are such cultural products ends in themselves, they are also means to the end of gaining insight into how the war was experienced and perceived by specific human beings” (2005). Whitehead’s self-portraits reveal how *his* war, and *his* return, were experienced.

One of the themes that emerges from the self-portraits is that of the split self. There is a schism between the self that went to war, the pre-war self, and the sense of self after war. Whitehead began exploring this theme photographing a colleague, Harry Quiroga. In “Still Serving” (2013), an early work from the *Art of Healing* series, Whitehead’s photograph of Quiroga’s face is split (the same image appears in “Love a Veteran,” which includes a quote from Welby O’Brien: “It takes an exceptional person to love a warrior/especially a warrior whose war will never cease”). In the photograph Quiroga, dressed in a business suit and tie, stares into the camera. One side of his face is “normal,” representing the apparent seamless transition back into the world of work and formality. The other side of his face

retains the camouflage paint from the war, suggesting that even back in "the world" the soldier retains the indelible "paint" of war. In another iteration of this image (2013) the photograph is "torn" down the center, with the "now" side in color and the "war" side in black and white. The idea of the split self appears in a number of other works. "Smoke and Mirrors" (2014) takes another angle on the split self. Whitehead's face is in profile, enveloped by wisps of smoke. Superimposed on the profile is an image of his smiling younger self in his Army uniform. The past is never far from the present. In a 2018 work from *My Lighthouse* Whitehead is centered in the frame. On the right-hand side a lighthouse beam brightens half of his face. On the left, his face is darkened by the smoke of battle in the desert. The photograph highlights the stress of living in two antithetical worlds. In "Two Face" (2013) there are mirror images of Whitehead's face looking at the viewer. Half of the face on the right is "normal," while the other half is in camouflage. The face on the left is again split, with the right side of *that* face in camouflage; Whitehead adds a twist with his "normal" face in profile on the left side. "Two Sides" (2017) extends the theme of the split self. In the photograph there are two identical and connected faces in partial profile looking in opposite directions. Razor ribbon coils around the faces. The expression of duality emerges with some variation in such works from the *Looking Back* series as "Mask," "Mask 2," "Façade," and "Façade Mask" (each 2018). In these Whitehead places a mask of his face on or near his "real" face. In "Façade 2" Whitehead is in black and white, while the mask he is putting on and the hand holding it is in color. In "Façade Mask" Whitehead is looking at the camera while, ambiguously, pulling a mask over his face or, perhaps, removing it. Is he removing his "face to the world" to reveal his authentic self? Or is he in the process of pulling down the mask to hide that self? Superimposed on the image is a scene from Desert Storm with burning oil fields. Likewise, in "Mask," oil fields burn in the background while he holds a mask in

front of him. Each of these “Mask” portraits speaks to the tension between the memories of the war which affect the present and the need to forget the war and reintegrate into society. As the text in “Remembering” (2014) states: “Remembering Is Easy. It’s Forgetting That’s Hard.”

Other portraits are more abstract but still reveal the psychic dislocation he felt after his discharge and return to the States. “Looking Back 2” (2017) borders on the surrealistic. In this work Whitehead creates a distressing and baffling effect by using horizontal strips to break the image of his face into incongruous components. Each “strip” is a different part of his face that do not align connoting, again, a sense of psychic disharmony. The same effect is seen in “Parts” (2017). In this work the strips, smaller but more numerous, re-arrange his face. “Torn” (2018) is a variation on the use of the strips. In this work Whitehead’s face, in black and white, is facing the viewer, superimposed over a desert scene. However, a strip is “torn” across his eyes, revealing eyes, in color, staring at the viewer. This creates a contrast not only in the blend of black and white and color, but also an opposition between past and present. “Ripped” (2018) also uses this motif. There is a close-up of Whitehead’s face in grainy black and white. A strip is torn off to reveal his eyes, in a horizontal panel, in color. This smaller panel is superimposed on the desert scene of burning oil wells. He is looking out from the war, and that only the war provides any color. (In “Rear View” [2015] the point of view is from a driver looking out of the car’s windshield. The road ahead and the surroundings are in black and white; in the rear-view mirror is a group of Whitehead’s fellow soldiers, in color). “Bullets” (2017) is another variation on the use of the strips. In this case the strips are bullets, and his facial features are on the shell casings. “Broken 1,” “Broken 2,” and “Explode” (each 2018) use the same image

of his face. In “1,” part of his face is shattered, looking like exploding shards of glass. In “2,” the image of the exploding face is superimposed over a tank. In “Explode” the impact of the war is more explicit. Whitehead’s face is on the right side of the frame; the exploding shards are smaller, and as the image gives a sense of movement from right to left the shards blend with the smoke and flames of burning oil wells.

RW 1

“Picking Up the Pieces” (and the related numbers “2” and “3,” each 2018) are similar to the portraits using the strips. In each of these Whitehead’s face becomes a jigsaw puzzle with pieces detached from his face, making his appearance enigmatic and fragmentary. In the first work part of Whitehead’s face in black and white is dimly seen behind other parts that are in color. Two jigsaw pieces of his eyes, in color, are where his eyes should be. But are they to be placed into the puzzle of the face, to make the face whole? In “2” Whitehead, holding a hand in front of his face, stares at the viewer through eyes that are jigsaw pieces. There are empty spaces in parts of face where the pieces are missing, revealing blue sky and clouds in the background (“Hands 6” [2018] is a variation on the motif). “3” references the war more directly. Whitehead stares at the camera and reaches toward the viewer with a jigsaw piece, on which are an eye and a scene of battle. Other pieces have desert scenes, with a burning desert in the background. By handing the puzzle piece to the viewer Whitehead may be trying to bring the war out of his consciousness and share his experience. “3” is an attempt to put all the pieces of his life back together and to represent in these photographs Lois Lowry’s words that are embedded in another photograph, “Sacrifice” (2014): “The

worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It's the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared." Art is a way of sharing painful memories, a cathartic process. By offering the viewer the puzzle piece Whitehead shares his memories.

RW 2

"Just Another Day" (2018), from *American Dream*, is a portrait that reveals by what is *not* shown. There is a figure in a medium shot, dressed in a suit and tie, representing the "uniform" of the civilian world of work. However, in place of the head is a white cloud (perhaps smoke from a battle). The headless figure "wears" a tanker's camouflage helmet on which is perched dark goggles, symbolizing the military world. The title suggests both the repetition of the civilian world of the "daily grind" and also that the memories of war uneasily co-exist with the civilian world. The absence of the face, replaced by the smoke, suggests that these two disparate worlds somehow neutralize one's identity. Whitehead was an infantryman in the 1st Armored Division and became a Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) driver in Desert Storm, and a particular vehicle, nicknamed "Terminator," is pictured in some photographs, like "Driver's Eye" and "Globe 2" (both 2018).

RW 4

There is a humorous undertone in some photographs with Whitehead in the pose of Clark Kent ready to take off his civilian clothes to reveal his real identity. In "Still Serving Office" (2018) Whitehead is dressed in suit and tie

(with tie “blowing in the wind”), with a city scene of office buildings in the background; opening his suit jacket reveals an image of his smiling teenage self in his army uniform. *SM_BDU* (2018) uses the same image of Whitehead in suit and tie, but the background is a lightning-flecked American flag. He opens his suit jacket to show his army uniform. Whitehead is conveying the idea that the formal dress is a type of camouflage; underneath the suit and tie, hidden from the view of the civilian world, is the most meaningful self. On a more serious note, Whitehead in suit and tie also appears in one of the works in *My Lighthouse*. An image of a lighthouse is revealed on his chest when he opens his jacket. Whitehead is superimposed on a battle scene with a map of Kuwait. The lighthouse represents the delicate balance of hope and stability while the war still rages in his mind.

RW 5

Eyes and hands are an important part of Whitehead’s self-portraits. In a number of photographs eyes and hands are disembodied, existing on their own. In “Hands” and “Hands 4” (both 2018) two hands with open palms are centered in the frame. The skin and lines on the hands have been replaced by images of Whitehead’s fellow soldiers from Desert Storm. Behind the hands is the familiar desert scene with smoke and flames from the burning oil wells. Similarly, in “Hands 2” (2018) his hands are crossed, and on the palms is an image of a tank in battle; the background is a desert scene resembling a maelstrom or a tornado. The memories of the war are literally imprinted on the soldier’s body. The flesh, the “reality” of the hands, is erased; the memories and perceptions take over. In “Hourglass” (2018) two hands hold an hourglass. The sand in the top bulb creates an image of a tank in a burning desert. The sand passes through the neck

into the lower bulb; in this bulb an image of Whitehead's face is gradually formed by the sand. The war "sand" creates Whitehead; the two bulbs are symmetrical, each connected to the other. The war is being poured into Whitehead. In "Contain" (2018) Whitehead grips a glass globe in his two hands. (On his left wrist he wears a bracelet he made from his Combat Infantryman's Badge). Inside the globe is desert scene of war. The photograph suggests that Whitehead is attempting to "contain" or control the forces of war in which he participated. "Hand in Mirror" and "Mirror" (both 2015) are similar. In the former, Whitehead stands at a bathroom mirror and extends his hand toward it. However, his image is not reflected; the image in the mirror is a scene of war, and part of his hand seems to disappear into the mirror image, again suggesting that memories and perceptions of one's war experiences are inescapable, and that there is a desire to reach back into that experience. In the latter, he stands at the same mirror. This time, the reflected image *is* Whitehead . . . as a teenager dressed in fatigues, seeking perhaps an impossible connection between past and present. Whitehead follows this search for connection in two untitled 2022 works. In one, he stands in front of a brick wall with an image of a war scene, as if on the other side of the wall. He is reaching through the wall toward the scene. Utilizing a similar image (without the wall), a crucifix is suspended over the war scene. He is reaching toward the cross. Taken together, the two photographs reveal the tension between the desire to reconnect to the war experience and the desire for peace which the cross evokes. Can the two desires portrayed in the images co-exist?

RW 6

The eye as a subject in itself becomes an important part of

the self-portrait, as the eye both looks out while at the same time takes in. Like a photograph, the eye records, and this visual document can be permanent. "Paper Eye" (2018) shows a scene of a desert aflame with burning oil wells. A strip torn from the image reveals an eye staring back at the viewer. "Eye" (2018) shows an extreme close up of an eye. Superimposed on the pupil is a tank, and smoke and flames blow through the sclera. In "Looking Back Flame Eye" (2017) the pupil emits a large flame. Within the flame is a disabled tank. A similar image is in "Looking Back Flames" (2018). In this work the pupil is engulfed in flames while an invasion map of Kuwait emerges from the flames. In "Pop Out" (2018) there is a close-up of an eye in profile superimposed on a burning desert. The eye explodes outward in fragment that resembles a map of Iraq. Imprinted on this fragment is an image of the teenage Whitehead in his Army uniform. "Eye Lens" (n.d.) is a variation. Again, there is a close-up of an eye with a scene of a burning desert. But in a twist, the pupil is a camera lens, suggesting that the images of war become permanent photographs in the mind. "Broke" (2018) shows a close-up of a pupil shattered like glass; inside the pupil is a tank. Surrounding the broken pupil is a length of barbed wire. In "Camera" (2018) there is a close-up of a Canon Eos. In the camera's lens there is a human eye with images of captured enemy soldiers. The scene of death is so powerful that even the camera lens explodes, sending pieces of glass toward the viewer. The uneasy relationship between war and post-war lives emerges in a work in the *My Lighthouse* series. On the right side of the frame a cross is superimposed on a close-up of an eyeball; on the left is a lighthouse casting a beam of light on the eye. The lighthouse rises from a war scene in the desert.

It might be unusual to consider a skull as a form of self-portrait but this image appears occasionally in Whitehead's work. "Skull" (2017) is one of his more disturbing, yet more powerful, self-portraits. Whitehead is in medium shot framed against the background of burning oil wells. However, most of his face is a skull with a vacant eye socket and clenched teeth; superimposed over his neck and part of the face is an American flag. There is an uneasy relationship between life and death. For the combat soldier the line between life and death, living flesh and the fleshless skull, shifts by the minute, by the second, by feet and inches. The skull also figures in three untitled works from 2023. Two of the photographs use similar imagery. Whitehead, in jeans and t-shirt and carrying a backpack, is on a highway, moving toward a skull in the distance, set in a desert of smoke and flames. Is this a rendezvous with death even after thirty years? In another untitled photograph a skull is in profile with its top and lower jaw missing. A burning desert is superimposed. The empty skull holds a dozen small paintbrushes. Whitehead suggests that death and war could be transformed by, and into, art.

RW 8

Some recent untitled work takes a different approach to the self-portrait. Three photographs from 2021 show him facing the camera or in profile, and what looks to be a primal scream emanates from him. The smoke and flames of a burning desert are superimposed around his face. In two photographs Whitehead seems to be on fire. In another close-up the screaming face, with a reddish tinge, is speckled with black flecks, giving the appearance of ashes. In another work he stands in the desert like a colossus. In one work from 2022 Whitehead looks up at a sky of smoke and flame; in two others

his body is partly composed of Polaroid One Step 60-second snapshots, creating an ambiguity of who is the "real" figure and who is a disembodied group of snapshots (another photograph shows the camera printing a photograph of his younger self in the Army). In a more surrealistic work his head is tilted forward over a desert scene. His face is not flesh but comprised of the browns and greens of camouflage, which drips into a sinkhole in the sand. It is as if Whitehead's identity is melting into the sand.

RW 9

A 2021 untitled photograph shows Whitehead, with a philosophical, thoughtful expression, against a backdrop of a Desert Storm scene. The text embedded on the left side of the frame reads, as if Whitehead is pondering the message, "You Live Life Looking Forward/You Understand Life Looking Backward." This phrase reflects one of the major concerns of Whitehead's work. The bulk of his photographs explore the interaction of past and present, and seek, through the artistic image, an understanding of the past, especially war, and its continuing impact on his life today. It is an on-going search for unity and coherence. His art is a type of bulwark against chaos, and attempts to recapture memories and make sense of the past as it impacts the present, and to commemorate that past, although painful in certain aspects, to make permanent the evanescent, and to reconcile opposites in that search for unity.

Ron Whitehead joined the Army right out of high school, serving for four years as an infantryman. He was initially stationed at Fort Polk in Louisiana and then to Bamberg, Germany. He deployed to Iraq in 1990 and fought in Desert Storm with the 1st Armored Division. After discharge he joined

the Maryland National Guard and entered Messiah College in Pennsylvania. He has an undergraduate degree in Art Education and a Master's degree in Instructional Technology from Western Connecticut State University. He has been teaching high school art in Ossining, New York, for almost thirty years. He continues to work with veterans whenever he can. One of his passionate endeavors is to bring students to the VA hospital in New Haven, CT. The students listen to the stories of vets and turn those stories into art as a way to honor the veteran.

A selection of Whitehead's work can be viewed here: https://sites.google.com/view/ron-whiteheads-portfolio/home

Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood*,1921. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. https://www.academia.edu/796652/Hamlet_and_his_problems, p. 4

Stout, Janis. *Coming Out of War*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005, p. xiv.