

New Nonfiction by Adrian Bonenberger: “An Alternate View of Moral Injury”



An Alternate View of Moral Injury

Introductory note: I originally composed this essay between 2022-23. I've gone back and forth about publishing it; it's true, I stand by everything I've written, but I'm certain that many people won't like reading it. It is certain to damage or even destroy my reputation in certain circles. Let it be so. When I saw Donald Trump's remarks on the utility of subjecting Liz Cheney to combat on October 31st, 2024, I realized that the misperception that an individual's experience of combat was absolute or had some absolute value needed to be checked. Here is the essay as I wrote it originally.

For some years now, I've wrestled with an uncomfortable truth. It occurred to me for the first time in Ukraine, in 2016, where I encountered it confronting my experiences at war in Afghanistan in conversation with veterans of Ukraine's war of self-defense against Russia. At first, the truth shocked me. Later, my recollection of the revelation nagged at me while I read certain articles or watched televised or cinematic depictions of war that emphasized its various negative consequences.

A [War on the Rocks](#) essay brought the matter home and inspired me to write this piece, which I hope will illuminate the issue for the public. The WoTR essay is titled “Moral Injury, Afghanistan, and the Path Toward Recovery.” It claims that most or maybe all the veterans of the US war in Afghanistan suffer from moral injury.

In the standard definition of moral injury, a person's morality (and therefore their self) becomes injured by doing or seeing things that conflict with their idea of right and wrong. Distinct from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), moral injury affects *or should* affect everyone good who participated in the evil of war. If you are an essentially good person, then doing things in war that would be bad or wrong outside war ought to fill you with revulsion, and damage you.

Grim consequences lay in store for veterans who avoid therapy or treatment for this condition; harder to employ, more susceptible to radicalization and extremism (political, ideological, religious, whatever), divorce at higher rates, more likely to traumatize their children with uncontrolled outbursts, suicide at dramatically higher rates.

It's undeniable that some epidemic afflicts veterans of war – not only in Afghanistan, but all wars. The stakes are high. This affliction corresponds with violence of all stripes. It's important to confront and accept difficult truths, both for individuals, and as a civilization. And the veterans affected by it, whatever "it" is, have for the most part endured in silence.

And where you have victims, there must be aggressors, criminals. "The American government and the Department of Defense should be more candid in acknowledging the failure of America's war in Afghanistan" says the WOTR essay, channeling anger about what the United States was doing in Afghanistan and why.

As someone who has written often and [critically](#) about the outcome of the war in Afghanistan, one might think I'd be enthusiastic about DoD or the Biden Administration issuing some formal apology. That's not how I see it; in fact, the USA could have done little differently in Afghanistan save to get out earlier and in a more organized way. The evacuation of

Afghanistan was an unparalleled calamity; rather than hand wringing over words, I'd prefer to see the current administration do more to help Afghan allies who languish in terrible conditions. Besides, the decision to leave was itself a kind of implicit endorsement of the idea that the time had come for Afghanistan to stand on its own. I supported that idea at the time. Should the US apologize for ending its occupation of Afghanistan? I don't think so.

By far the most interesting discussion – one that I've been having with friends and combat veterans since the thought occurred to me in 2016 – is what to do about PTSD versus moral injury versus whatever we call a soldier who doesn't experience either. The casual conversations I've heard about people who suffer psychological or "moral" wounds in war conflate different forms of injury. Sometimes I think that enthusiastic and well-meaning crusaders mistake both injuries' origin and location.

A brief caveat before continuing, here: this essay discusses the experience of troops in war. While it could be expanded to include non-combat veterans, or civilians indirectly exposed to war, this would risk widening the scope of the essay to the whole of human experience, a theme so broad that only the wisest and most ambitious thinker would dare consider it. I am not such a thinker, nor is this already (with apologies, dear reader) sprawling essay even a hundredth of what would be necessary to explore PTSD and moral injury outside the relatively narrow scope of war.

The world of so-called moral injury consists of PTSD as extreme response to some form or forms of trauma, and the aforementioned "moral injury" (feelings of grief, trauma, or betrayal connected to service). The soldier so injured has been compelled by circumstance or authority to do something in war that violates their code of ethics, from an order that leads to a friend being hurt or killed, to a badly planned or executed operation in which the wrong people (usually

civilians, often children) are hurt or killed, and everything in between. War is filled with such hazards; they are nearly impossible to avoid. When a soldier or officer falls afoul of one of these calamitous moments through their actions or decisions, the harm they see or do causes them (and those around them) distress, and the memory of the act also causes distress.

Some cannot escape the memory. It could be observing a crime, such as rape or torture, or it could be shooting or stabbing an enemy soldier. It could be watching helplessly as a line of refugees is expelled from their homes. It could be exile; unwilling to potentially expose oneself to moral hazard, the soldier is sent far from their unit to a larger base, away from danger, and in so doing abandon their comrades to that risk instead. One can easily imagine this type of thing, and the nightmares it would cause over a lifetime to a decent person. Doubly so during a war of conquest, an unjust war. Surely, as I write, some Russian soldiers are in the process of being "morally injured" by their horrible and evil government and also by their own complicity in the crime of attacking a peaceful country that offered their own nation no threat or insult.

What is the distinction between PTSD and moral injury? PTSD is a diagnosable and physiologically distinct injury. [According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 7% of veterans](#) develop PTSD, mostly in war. Physiologically and psychologically, the experience of war is so damaging to them, they can no longer function correctly within society without some form of treatment. Authority figures fill them with an instinctual fear and disgust. Bureaucratic incompetence, which many people take in stride as part of the cost of doing business in a civilized world, becomes to a combat veteran suffering from PTSD an active threat to be avoided at all costs. People suffering from PTSD know what happens when you give folks great power then bury their accountability for that power

behind walls of hierarchy: nothing. Maybe the platoon leader will get thrown under the bus for ordering you to shoot at a motorcycle, maybe you'll get demoted. Maybe he'll get pardoned by the President. It's all the same shit; shit that the person suffering from PTSD has to relive through nightmares and debilitating, unjustified feelings of fear, horror, and shame.

These are casualties of war. There are ways to treat PTSD that help with its symptoms, but it is not currently within medicine's power to cure it. Some cases resolve on their own over time, such that victims can live whole and healthy lives. Others linger. In a few cases, usually when addiction disorders are involved, and along with the PTSD going untreated, war comes to define a life's course, often tragically.

Because of its physical characteristics – [medical imaging](#) detects differences between groups of people who have PTSD and healthy controls– PTSD occupies one sphere, the objectively verifiable.

Moral injury occupies another, more subjective sphere. People who suffer from moral injury feel troubled by what happened to them, or by what they did, but there is no sign of trauma that a doctor can identify. Their diagnosis lies in the realm of philosophy and perhaps religion.

What is the number of people who see themselves as affected by this subjective diagnosis we call moral injury? It's difficult to say; solid numbers are hard to come by. Anecdotally I'd say the number of people who are troubled by their experience of war (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Vietnam, or WWII) *because it made them feel complicit in something awful* is somewhere between 20-30%. My source for this is innumerable conversations with veterans from different services and countries in a variety of contexts. Many (what does that *mean*? Seven or eight in ten, the remainder left over from those identifying as harmed?) will say that while war was difficult,

they are at present largely untroubled by what they did.

A quick caveat here: because this is anecdotal, when I say 20-30% are or were troubled by their experiences in war, I've necessarily wrapped that 7% who have PTSD in with those who have moral injury. Not everyone who has moral injury has PTSD, but everyone with PTSD has been morally injured. Therefore the total number of people who find the experience of war so damaging and troubling that it defines their experience is (as far as I can tell) somewhere around 20-30%. I'm eager to see the results of [VA studies hoping to better understand the prevalence of moral injury](#), as well as how they define it, and suspect that the number will be higher for some wars, and lower for others.

Maybe – best guess – somewhere between a quarter and a third of all veterans feel overall that war was a bad experience for them, either because it physically injured their brains, or they felt and feel awful about what they did or saw during war.

This leaves two thirds to three quarters of combat veterans. People who don't feel betrayed by their country (perhaps, in some extraordinary cases, such as the Wehrmacht in WWII, which was adjacent to unthinkable horrors and directly complicit in some of them, one might find lower numbers – even then, perhaps not, just take a look at veterans of the South's Confederate Army), or that they did anything wrong in war. Have they been morally injured? You can tell them they were, and while they may nod and smile if you are an authority figure or friend or family, in the company of other combat veterans, they will tell the truth – not only were they untroubled by the experience, but they were *proud* of it.

Here is the plain truth: many combat veterans derive some pleasure or satisfaction from doing things in war that are considered bad or wrong outside of it (killing, hurting other people, destroying buildings with fire or those weapons that

produce fire). Killing the enemy fills most soldiers with a savage glee in the moment. It may trouble the conscience afterward, particularly once the soldier has returned to civilization. These troubling thoughts are the product of healthy and uninjured moral instinct, but it doesn't trouble the soul. On a biological level, for most veterans of combat, *there is nothing wrong with killing enemy soldiers or destroying their positions or equipment or even the people who are nearby during war.*

Let's sit with that for a moment. I want people to consider it on its terms. The claim is not "you have justified a thing after you did it because it was a bad thing to do, and you felt bad, but life must go on." No, the claim is "it felt good and just to kill the enemy, and I was only troubled in any way upon considering what the reactions of others might be first that I did the killing, and second, that I enjoyed it," plus perhaps "those civilians who were hurt or killed as a result of combat – that was someone else's fault, not my own."

The most popular version of war is one told by a traumatized combat veteran – typically a relative or friend – that goes something like "I got lucky and killed the enemy before he killed me, but maybe he was the lucky one because I have to live with the guilt." In this version of war, everyone feels guilty about what they had to do in war save perhaps for the psychopaths, or the wretches who were unhinged by the experience.

This version of war is echoed in mainstream movies, prestige television dramas, and even video games. Its claim – that the majority of US soldiers are suffering from moral injury, betrayed by a country that sent them to a foolish war in Iraq or kept them in a pointless occupation of Afghanistan – is the one with which most people are familiar. But it cannot be true; either the war was bad and people are outraged about it

(in which case, they aren't morally injured; rather, they feel a justifiable sense of outrage, their morality is behaving correctly) or the war was bad but was not perceived by soldiers as such at the moment – only when they arrived home and were essentially told that they ought to feel bad about it, by friends, by literature, and by cinema – in which case, the moral injury does not exist within the veteran but is a kind of mutable social construct that comes into being or vanishes depending on the veteran's surroundings.

On Killing, by Dave Grossman, is the most significant and popular book to forward the claim that the default setting for most people is against killing. According to Grossman, people must be trained to overcome an innate resistance to killing for any reason. Something like “thou shalt not kill” but as a concept hardwired into humans, which must be overcome. The book bases its arguments on a dubious WWII-era study (sadly, irreproducible) that concluded that only 15-20% of soldiers fired at humans in combat during WWII. In any particular engagement, 80-85% of the soldiers were shooting at nothing, or not shooting at all. Somewhat famously, swapping out human-shaped targets for bullseye targets and training them to fire at those human silhouette targets popping up at different distances is said to have increased soldiers' rate of engagement in Vietnam to nearly 90%.

The study raises many questions, such as: how reluctant were soldiers to fight Germans or Italians versus Japanese; how did soldiers feel about *killing* rather than shooting; and, most importantly, if there was a deep and essential aversion to killing in humans, how was 2 ½ months of training including a week of shooting at human-shaped pop-up targets at a range able to bring the number of effective soldiers from 15% to 90%?

An uncomfortable answer is that Grossman's book on the subject of killing and the study on which it was based both miss something fundamental: that the majority of soldiers have no

problem killing an enemy who is trying to kill them or the context in which surviving that occurs (a context that sometimes includes damaging or destroying civilian property and life). Indeed, the majority feel pleased with themselves at the time, and mostly afterwards as well. Killing isn't a problem in war (in fact, it's an advantage), but the existence of that truth does become a problem when those combat veterans return to civilization. *This return* creates a new kind of moral injury – to civilization, to morality, by the combat veterans who carry knowledge or self-awareness like an infection or an unspoken accusation.

This social component of moral injury is reflected by literature and movies about Vietnam and WWI, and tells a very specific type of story about war, authored by people with refined sensibilities who did not enjoy war for an audience with refined sensibilities. Veteran-writers (and artists, and filmmakers) are more likely to be a part of this 20-30% of people who suffer from PTSD or moral injury. Certainly in my experience, this is the case. And they (we) have struggled to explain what was distinct about Iraq and Afghanistan from Vietnam. This was not the case when it came to finding a distinction between Vietnam and Korea, or Korea and WWII, or WWII and WWI; on the contrary, those distinctions were straightforward for all involved (some had been involved in at least two of those wars), and for the most part came down to technological advances.

One constant of war is that there are soldiers who are troubled by what they do and see or injured as a result of enemy action (shelling, bombing). And the soldiers who are troubled by these things are greatly troubled; it's not something they could easily accept or stand. Consider: Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller (both of whom were injured, morally, by their wartime service) each wrote extraordinary novels that are routinely referred to as among the best

literary works of the 20th century. And *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five* are about how useless and absurd their experiences were... in World War II, fighting the Nazis. Only a fool or a Nazi would argue that fighting the Nazis was a mistake, that fighting against the Nazis was a just and justifiable activity might as well be a Voight-Kampff test for political sanity. If one does not understand the necessity of stopping Nazi Germany, one is not sane in an important sense, or one does not understand the Nazi project sufficiently well to see why doing so was necessary.

It is just as easy to imagine Vonnegut and Heller in Vietnam, a very different war, and a war that history has proven to have been a massive folly and waste in every sense (many knew this at the time, too). The details would have been different in their books, but the themes would have been the same: corruption, an out-of-control military industrial complex, the futility and tragedy of sending children to die. They could have written these books about Iraq and Afghanistan, too, or any of the smaller (though no less consequential to the civilians who experienced them) brushfires in the Global War on Terror.

Slaughterhouse Five and *Catch-22* aren't the only great books about war. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an incredible portrait of war. *The Battle of Malden*, too, is a story – in poem form – about a battle (at Malden) that draws very different conclusions about what goes into a war (fear, obligation), and what comes out from it (honor, fame).

And another story about war – *The Iliad* – has more to it than Ajax's madness, or the wrath of Achilles. There's Diomedes, who becomes so inflamed by combat that after wounding Aeneas, he wounds *Aphrodite*, and attacks Apollo when that god descends to rebuke him. Later, Diomedes wounds Ares. To the Greeks, Diomedes was as important as Achilles – but his berserker rage and the cultural context in which it exists is basically

incomprehensible to the modern reader, and as a character he's largely forgotten, overshadowed. Modern audiences prefer Hektor seeing his son recoil from his frightening helmet, and they prefer Achilles exacting revenge on Hektor for killing Patroclus, and reveling in that vengeance (as the reader or listener revels with him).

Western civilization has come to see war as an evil, and true wars of necessity have become increasingly rare (at least, until recently). As a result we've lost touch with one of the most obvious and fundamental elements of war as it is experienced by soldiers. Our literature and art of war have been the literature and art of a minority of war's participants.

One reason for this is that it is more important to storytellers to explain that war hurt them than it is for those who had a "good" experience of war to explain that to anyone. This is analogous to the phenomenon in which there are more negative reviews online than there are positive reviews; one is likelier to act out of a sense of injustice or rage than contentment or happiness.

Another reason is that war is universally awful and evil from the perspective of civilians. As fewer and fewer people serve, fewer and fewer civilians are veterans, and fewer of those non-veteran civilians have any basis for understanding war as it occurs to the people fighting in it. They are therefore most likely to enjoy stories that are sensible to them from the perspective of a victim, or someone who has been injured or exploited. There is little market for Diomedes' tale – some hundreds of thousands or millions of people across the world.

As war and the experience of war ebbs from social consciousness, its opposite, peace, flows. I believe that this is one of the sources of moral injury and explains why and how it is becoming more widespread in the military and among veterans. People today go to war expecting the rules of peace

to apply and are surprised and outraged to learn that they do not.

Here it is important to note that war is evil – occasionally necessary (such as Ukraine’s noble and vital defense of its borders against an invading Russia, or the Allies’ war against Nazi Germany) but always and unquestionably evil. *Whether a person’s experience of it is pleasant or unpleasant is irrelevant to that fact.*

In civilization, the good feelings that one enjoyed while fighting during war get offloaded to spaces that feel comfortable to an audience that would be unreceptive to a more honest but otherwise troubling account. Frameworks are created to hold such conversations; myths constructed, and built, passively but energetically. The conventional explanation for why people emerge from war with positive associations becomes either that in war people get a sense of purpose that they lack elsewhere (the reason for the war), or that (per Sebastian Junger’s [Tribe](#)) even in the absence of a unifying purpose behind a particular war, there is a strong sense of meaning inherent to living inside a small group of peers. This sense of meaning and purpose can easily be found in a military unit.

There is something to this. Nearly everyone agrees that a “good” in war is the sense of camaraderie one builds under extreme adversity; doubly so when part of a good unit filled with good people (and a majority of people are decent or from a moral perspective overall “good,” otherwise civilization would not be possible). Having been in a “company of heroes,” one finds oneself seeking to recreate those conditions, either as a leader or as a subordinate – the memory of that moment stays with you always and is real; it is as true an experience as a person is apt to encounter in the world, the template for all the great myths and legends. [King Arthur](#) and his knights

of the round table, Homer's [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#), the [Epic of Gilgamesh](#), the [Romance of the Three Kingdoms](#).

While we extract good to redeem the unmitigated disaster that is war – the almost unimaginable scope of destruction and evil war entails – there is a taboo that resists most efforts to overcome it. This taboo is one of society's most powerful, a basic precondition for civilization: the taboo against murder. No culture views this act as tolerable; it is incompatible with modern civilization, and people who murder face stiff penalties and social opprobrium. For premeditated murder, planning to kill another person “in cold blood,” the legal system reserves its harshest punishments. It has been this way for millennia; we can tell that this is the case from the remnants of ancient legal codes such as that of Hammurabi. The sixth commandment retrieved by Moses from God instructs in the original Hebrew that “you shall not murder” (not “you shall not kill”).

But in war all you do is meditate about ways to kill your enemy; you dedicate most of your time and attention to figuring out ways to do that, while they're doing the same to you.

War is bad, killing is bad, but killing in war is necessary – moreover, as many combat veterans will tell you, killing or wounding one's enemies in war feels good. Killing and wounding civilians and destroying their possessions – collateral damage – isn't good, but, for most people, is understandable, tolerable. The combat veterans who are fine with killing or hurting their enemies do not experience moral injury in war, or injury at all; for them, the experience is good or at least just. But these combat veterans do experience moral injury in another space: returning home, where they are encouraged to view themselves as wicked or flawed by civilizations in which killing and wounding people is a major (and useful) taboo.

Killing enemy soldiers in war is experienced as a good by the

individual (at least, most of them), but those same individuals understand, regardless of their background, that such an act is, strictly speaking, bad or evil – and that they must be bad or evil for having experienced pleasure from the act. The way combat veterans deal with this is to talk with each other.

If in conversation a combat veteran explains that they did not take pleasure in killing the enemy, one no longer brings up the subject with them; these make up the relatively small group or subset of combat veterans who suffer from the experience, and combat veterans are not interested in perpetuating their anguish. The matter is let to drop.

The rest of the veterans talk and reassure each other both that (1) they are not crazy, and (2) they are not evil; they are decent people. Killing in war, after all, is ok, regardless of whether one derived pleasure from the act or not; it is killing in civilization, in peace that is forbidden. Moreover, usually the reason one kills in war is to prevent killing in one's own civilization; certainly, that is why Ukrainians are carrying arms against the Russians invading and occupying their land.

Here, I believe, is the crux of the problem with how moral injury is understood or discussed. The vast majority of the writing and thinking public whose views they reflect, assume a priori that killing likely fills a person with horror and anger; that murder is in addition to being a civilizational taboo, a *human* taboo. It is not!

I don't think civilization depends on those things both being true; it's certainly the case that if murder was permissible, that civilization as we know it would not be possible. In rural Afghanistan, for example, where certain types of killing are permitted (*badal*, or revenge, permits killing in response to a person or tribe's honor being imputed, for example, but also offers compensation as a suitable replacement for blood),

a town looks like a medieval fortification in part because one must constantly worry about 6-10 men from some other tribe attacking you over a disagreement – something trivial and recent, or maybe something older, something from a century ago or more. The amount of energy and anxiety that goes into this rather than any other productive activity including sleep is a brake against progress. And even they have formal social constraints on murder.

Precisely because killing one's enemies *feels* like a good and satisfying way to adjudicate disputes, civilization needs to take it in hand; every society, no matter how small or undeveloped, does so. It is the first thing a society must do to secure its existence: resolving disagreements through peaceable and satisfying mechanisms (such as, in rural Afghanistan, the practice of resolving *badal* through monetary compensation).

There is a tension here. Every civilization is made up of a majority of people who would prefer not to make war, who in war develop PTSD or become outraged at their nation for putting them in a position where they have to violate their ethical code, and a minority of people who are fine with combat. If it were any other way, logically, countries would spend more time waging wars against each other. In the past, when civilization was less influential than it is now, this was the case; war was far more common, and the minority of people who enjoyed it wielded more power. But the costs and stakes for modern war are so high that few are willing to bear it save in truly extraordinary circumstances. In a just country people are willing to bear that cost if they must in a necessary war of self-defense, or against a truly wicked and chaotic enemy, such as Nazi Germany or Putin's Russia. They serve in a military during times of great peril, and do so understanding that it is preferable that they bear the cost of service (intuiting from their reading, studies, and stories from relatives who served that the cost will be great).

Meanwhile, the minority of people in civilization who enjoy war or are ok with it (who are the majority of people in the military) join or stay because they for their part intuit that it could or would be a good thing to do; they've read or heard stories from combat veterans about the thrill of conquering one's hated enemies, and seek out combat. Without their numbers or excitement at the prospect of war, it's difficult to imagine any military attracting the numbers or energy needed to win. Whereas in civilization, a majority of people are formally and firmly opposed to war, in a professional all-volunteer military, the majority of people are trained and encouraged to be in favor of it.

This explains the prevalence of stories about and around moral injury from WWI and Vietnam, and their relative absence from WWII. As discussed earlier, Vonnegut, a prolific author, happened to be caught in one of the few unequivocally immoral acts of the second World War on the Allied side – the British firebombing of Dresden. On the other hand, Heller happened to be one of the people doing that type of bombing.

Is the current recruiting crisis facing the U.S. military tied to perceptions of moral injury and PTSD and the futility of serving honorably? Absent a clear and true understanding of what service means, what happens in the military – what happens in battle – it is impossible to say for certain, one way or another. The widespread expectation that a person will inevitably be morally injured or develop PTSD can't *help*. Not everyone who serves is dealt moral wounds. I think the majority of people who serve grow from the experience.

Both because it does not occur to the type of person who thrives without the instinct for blood, and because civilization has robust traditions and laws in place to discourage fighting and killing, it becomes difficult or even impossible to face this truth that war exposes, which is that decent, law-abiding, and mentally well-adjusted citizens could accept or even enjoy killing other humans under the right

circumstances. *This* is the true threat to civilization, *this* is the rich soil in which political or religious radicalization thrives. And this is why combat veterans are so prone to those specific forms of radicalization. Not viewing things dispassionately and on their own terms, civilization creates a moral hierarchy, in which the combat veteran who feels little or (if they're being honest with themselves) no shame for their behavior in war is at the bottom, and the wounded or traumatized or betrayed veteran is near or at the top, along with the good civilians whose hands are clean from blood.

This truth, exposed by war, comes into conflict with one a lie that is essential to civilization: that war is not pleasurable to anyone, and makes everyone crazy. The majority of soldiers who have killed an enemy fighter or destroyed an enemy position or fortification with artillery fire or bombs know the truth (that savage destruction is pleasurable) like they know a spoon is a spoon, it is as obvious as the cloudless midday sky is blue – and radical political groups use that truth like a crowbar, to pry otherwise stable and useful combat veterans away from their societies. The fascists and Nazis infamously had the most success with this tactic, deliberately targeting the many combat veterans of WWI to form political organizations dedicated to the idea that *war* was the highest truth. They took it a step further – in fact, this is one of the reasons the Nazis needed to be opposed so violently and at all costs – their project was to invert the moral order that exists in civilization where murder and fighting are at the bottom and peace on the top. Nazi Germany aimed to elevate killing to the highest form of good, in order to usher in a brave new future. Repudiating their vision of things paradoxically required the most bravery and death in war that the world had ever seen. It ended with the United States dropping two atomic bombs on Japan.

Those atomic bombs are important, and not enough gets said

about them. The second bomb – why even mention the first, when you can look at the *second* – was dropped on Nagasaki. The city, an important center for the production of ships and naval armaments, was not even the day's primary target. That was a city called Kokura. Obscured by clouds and smoke from fires that resulted from the firebombing of a *third* city, Kokura was spared when the bombers couldn't drop their payload on target. They flew on to Nagasaki (incidentally, then the most Christian city in Japan, owing to its having been provisionally open to sixteenth century Dutch and Portuguese traders and the missionaries who accompanied them). There, the US bombers dropped an atomic bomb that killed between 60-80k people. WWII ended (depending on who you talk to, and what sources you read, partially or entirely as the result of that second atomic bomb) hours later.

Most people I know (and everyone from my grandparents' generation who lived through those times– even the socialist-leaning people, such as my father's father and his wife) believed or at least acted as though they believed that the US was basically justified in ending WWII the way it did. What of those 60-80k who died, or the 150k in Hiroshima before? These were overwhelmingly civilians. Dozens or hundreds of *soldiers* were killed in Nagasaki; thousands in Hiroshima. Everyone else was relatively speaking a noncombatant, whether they were at home preparing a meal, or – a distinction that was important four years into a war that had dragged on for various participants in some form since 1937, though we do not observe it now – in a munitions factory pouring gunpowder into tank or aircraft bullets.

So, when we talk about “collateral damage,” and the psychic damage it entails, we have to take into account the bombing of cities we did during World War II, and especially those bombed almost as an afterthought with atomic weapons. Collateral damage, like moral injury, is and should be a great concern to any civilized person, in or outside war, but we must account

for the fact that the US erased hundreds of thousands of Japanese people, and, more relevantly to the essay, most people are essentially fine with that. People may rue it in the abstract, or when they think in concrete terms about the death of, say, a Japanese child – that the US dropped these atomic bombs – but there isn't enough energy behind the few who deeply care about such matters to even force the US to formally *apologize* for dropping the bombs. Why should it? Most people –Japanese and American – understand that the single greatest incident of collateral damage in military history, the dropping of the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, was at worst understandable, and at best necessary (I'd draw the line at "good" and hope others would, too).

Don't take my word for this. None other than Paul Fussell, author of *The Great War and Modern Memory* (among others) and renowned for his criticism of war and warmaking, wrote upon consideration of the event's anniversary: "[Thank God for The Atomic Bomb.](#)" Whether you agree with Fussell or not – hardly a warmonger, again, and likely among that 20-30% who'd describe themselves as morally injured if writing today – it's at least worth considering that the closer one gets to the possibility of dying in Japan, the happier one is that the war was concluded before you got there.

If dropping atomic bombs on Japan to force its surrender is something most people at the time believed was necessary, and almost nobody today gives much thought to it, it shouldn't be hard to understand why most or at least many soldiers are, while troubled by the collateral damage they see or cause in war, able to go on with their lives after. When it occurs in a war that a soldier sees as unjust or unnecessary, the troubling but comprehensible ability to rationalize away "collateral damage" diminishes in proportion to the injustice and wickedness of the war and the deeds the soldier does while in service. Instead, the soldier is wracked with feelings of guilt, impotence, rage, and betrayal – moral injury.

When peaceful nations and civilizations cannot admit the truth of war, the truth about *themselves*, for the majority of war's direct and indirect participants – that the killing there felt fine, and also that there's nothing wrong with killing feeling or being fine in a *necessary* war – they create a terrible hazard for their country and culture. In seeking to preserve a pristine account of human morality within civilization (murder or deliberate and unsanctioned killing is bad), they help lay the groundwork for unscrupulous agents of chaos to seize upon combat veterans, and set them against what becomes to them a hypocritical and even evil system – a system capable of waging war and countenancing killing, but not capable of seeing it clearly.

The “betrayal,” then, is not the United States government or Department of Defense refusing to take responsibility for the failure in Afghanistan. While it may be true that such a project would be useful for some soldiers – maybe it would help treat PTSD and moral injury, maybe it wouldn't (anything that undermines an individual's sense of agency over their life is psychologically harmful, it's difficult to see how in the United States specifically, and its modern day all-volunteer military, such a remark would truly help the individual) – what the majority of combat veterans and citizens would really like to hear from their country is that *what we did in Afghanistan was fine*.

Underlining instead that the war in Afghanistan was a failure in order to help salve the outraged or disappointed few, one inevitably imposes moral injury on those people who did not experience much or any to begin with, or who have processed it and moved forward with their lives – a majority of combat veterans. For my part, while it's clear that the occupation of Afghanistan was carried out largely under false pretenses – [I blame the generals and to a certain extent the battalion commanders](#) – I'm not sure who would or should own that series of bad or lazy decisions. The presidents who permitted it to

continue (Bush, Obama, Trump)? Their top generals? The evacuation of Afghanistan was botched by the State Department. Would that apology be The Secretary of State at the time – Blinken?

To the critic who might say that such an apology or explanation might be owed Afghans, I would say that this too is a dangerous self-deception. Those people who wanted victory the most in Afghanistan, the Taliban, achieved it, and the Taliban don't need America's apology, they earned their victory honestly, they won, the victor has truth in their hand. For the Afghans who are upset that their country fell, rather than looking to America for an apology (with the possible exception of Afghan soldiers who have been given no path to safety once their government fell), they should look instead to those brave countrymen of theirs who lie in the ground, now – and to those leaders of theirs at the time who failed to organize an effective defense, or empower the non-state volunteer organizations that are critical to helping prosecute a successful war of defense when the state itself is weak (as was certainly the case in Afghanistan).

Back to the problem of moral injury, which is really a problem of how to bring combat veterans back into society after war. To recap, there are (1) veterans suffering from diagnosable PTSD, which can be treated (7%); (2) veterans suffering from a sense of outrage or betrayal toward their country for putting them in a position to do things they hated or which caused avoidable harm to innocents (13-23%); (3) veterans who for the most part enjoyed their time in the military, feel good about having dispatched vile and wicked enemies or directly and actively participated in dispatching them – a difficult and praiseworthy thing! – and only wish that they could share this without feeling like outcasts (70-79%) and (4) psychopaths who enjoy killing (less than 1%, though overrepresented in combat arms for understandable reasons). These last two groups (3, 4)

views collateral damage as just that – damage that was outside what was intended, and therefore, beneath consideration for them, personally.

We know how to treat PTSD effectively. Efforts are afoot to discover ways of treating the moral injury felt by certain veterans (usually and most understandably veterans of combat) which, assuming the treatment won't then leave the remainder of soldiers radicalized, is good and useful. How, then, to help the majority of veterans, who know a terrible truth that has been obscured from people living in peace and civilization – that killing can be a joyful act, that leaves one with a lifelong sense of confidence and pride or at least is basically untroubling? How further to do this in a way that does not undermine or damage the peaceful people on whose behalf these combat veterans did their killing? Answering these questions will help guide more of the correct people into the military and keep out people who probably ought not to serve (those who are physiologically predisposed to PTSD, for example, as well as psychopaths whose affinity for murder will lead them to kill when killing is unnecessary) and whose writing and movies end up presenting a flawed and incomplete portrait of war. It ought also to help solve the military's recruiting woes, reducing *uncertainty* around how a person's service will be seen and experienced. Wondering if you could pull the trigger and kill someone who is an enemy of your civilization? Worried a commander might send you to kill the wrong person, accidentally? You are probably better served applying to college or graduate school than joining the infantry.

There is an excellent blog post about this phenomenon that a friend suggested to me, written by Bret Devereaux, PhD, the author of ACOUP. I recommend that one [read the post in full](#). In it, Devereaux, one of my favorite historians, examines what he describes as the curious phenomenon of pro-war medieval poetry through the lens of an 11th-12th century Occidental

poet and nobleman. The poet-knight enjoys war unreservedly; Devereaux says this could be partly because war, for the armored poet in question, is objectively safer than for most of the other people taking part in it at that time (the unarmored and poorly equipped peasant conscripts). Perhaps this was the case for American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, with their advanced body armor and night vision; their jets, helicopters, and artillery? In any event, Devereaux concedes at the end of his post that the poet is sincere in his attitudes toward war, and that it likely reflected a widespread cultural sentiment active at the time, rather than the idiosyncrasies of a deranged individual.

Unlike fascists or aristocratic warrior-poets, I don't think the answer is to create a code in which killing is elevated to a good in our civilization. To begin with, this would do great harm. It is, moreover, unnecessary – the majority of combat veterans, as I mentioned earlier, already *know* what they did was good, this does not require endorsement from a culture or government – neither apology nor applause is needed. This is a characteristic of truth, all who see it know it for what it is (whether they like or hate that truth is another matter).

What is the solution? A well-funded and capably staffed Veterans Affairs is a good start. For PTSD: continue exploring treatment and therapy. For moral injury: gauge the true extent of the problem across wars (I suspect that unjust wars such as Vietnam or fruitless wars such as WWI will have a higher amount of moral injury than those that are seen as just or necessary, such as WWII). For the rest of the soldiers who fought in wars and don't see much or anything wrong with what they did: local spaces for community are still the best answer. American Legion and VFW are and should be good places for soldiers to meet and talk free from the judgment or guilt that can be levied by those who never served or fought against those who did. It seemed for a couple decades while GWOT was in full swing that there was an essay a week or so about how

returning veterans didn't like being asked whether they'd killed anyone, so it's fair to assume that's still not a great conversation-starter. But for curious civilians who want to go the extra mile anyway, find a way to create space for honest conversations with friends and relatives. Few combat veterans have ever been given permission by anyone besides each other to have those discussions.

Also, stop with the fiction that an individual's experience of war – positive or negative – should determine one's own attitude toward it. War is always evil, though sometimes necessary. Regardless of how one came out the other side.

Finally, simply admit that every war is not horrible for everyone. If one believes, as I do, that truth is the basis for human progress, an acknowledgement of fact – rather than a rhetorically hollow and ultimately meaningless grand gesture of the sort that gets most countries into war in the first place – is the real hope for healing a kind of injustice that exists for most combat veterans. “Tell me about the war” free from implicit judgement has the advantage, too, of being something anyone can ask, whether of a friend, acquaintance, or relative. Try; it might just work.

New Poetry by Douglas G. Campbell: “The President’s New Children’s Crusade”

New Poetry by Douglas Campbell: “The President’s New Children’s Crusade”

New Poetry by Sylvia Baedorf Kassis: "Detritus"

New Poetry by Sylvia Baedorf Kassis: "Detritus"

New Fiction by Jake Bienvenue: Chasing Colonel Sandro



Illustration by [Aspen Kelly](#)

Dr. Maldonado fiddled with the picture of his hot wife and blonde sons, making sure I noticed. Hot professors are rare at Christian universities. They're mostly Anglican, for some reason. Such a character. I was happy for him.

"I'm thinking about grad school," I said, taking a seat and crossing one leg over the other. "I suspect this could be my calling."

Christians take this idea very seriously. Dr. Maldonado raised his eyebrow and rotated his coffee mug on his desk. It had a picture of his wife on it also. Her hair was done up in little ringlets. She looked like she had good theology, good ovaries. "Your calling," he reflected. "Well, Lauren, your work thus far has been... general, I'd say. So I'd be inclined to ask what specifically you'd want to study."

Ouch. I thought for a moment. "I don't know."

"Well, do you have a topic for your paper? Grad apps would be due in, what, a year? This would be a good opportunity to get some research together."

"Dr. Maldonado," I said, touched. "Thank you."

A few minutes later he said he had to get ready for class. "Perfect timing," I told him. "My grandpa's funeral is about to start."

He looked at me funny, then decided I was joking. "See you in class, Lauren," he said. From his breast pocket he pulled out a small cloth and began polishing his lenses. His face was round and pale without glasses. He looked as blind as a mole. The spell was broken.

I walked across campus to my dorm. Around me the elect 2,000 bumbled along. Most of them were homeschool kids, weirdos. Unfortunate I would end up at this backwards school, but my grandparents were paying for college. Or I guess just my grandma.

Alone, I sat on my bed and FaceTimed into my grandpa's funeral, which was down in California. I guess not a funeral, per se. He'd been a marine, so some soldiers would shoot their guns in his honor. My dad answered my FaceTime and directed the camera toward the proceedings. I was in Gram's backyard. Two men in blue uniforms and crisp white hats appeared. My family stood off to the side. The marines folded the flag into a triangle with precise, robotic motions. My grandma accepted the flag with a bow, ran her hands along the fabric, then, with gravitas, held it out in offering. For a moment I thought it was coming to me, but then I remembered I was only a phone. My brother reached into the frame and accepted the Old Glory. He hugged my grandma and saluted the marines. He was in uniform also. A few hours later he'd be back in Texas, where he was stationed.

Afterward, my dad's face appeared. "We were bummed you couldn't be here, sweetie," he said. "Mom and I are going to stay with Grandma through the weekend if you want to come down. She'd love that."

"No thanks," I said. Not a chance. It would be nice to see my dad, but not worth it, even with how boring my weekends had been. At Calvin the only thing to look forward to was the biscuits and gravy they served for the Sabbath. Everyone just hunkered down and tried not to masturbate until then. Luckily there was the prayer chapel when one inevitably failed. Nothing makes you want to jack off like a Christian university, I swear. Except your childhood home.

"Are you sure?" he said. "There's a greyhound coming down tomorrow morning. Grandma said she would pay for it."

"That's very kind of her," I said.

Shortly after we hung up, I heard the fateful footfalls. Two sets. One heavy, one light. So it was both. Brooke and I had dormed together just over a month; it was the end of September. Brooke was one of the few people I liked at Calvin. The problem was that she came with Wes, who sucked. Brooke opened the door and peeked her head in. "Oh, Lauren. I thought you were out."

Before I could respond, Wes shoved his ogreish frame into the room. "Hmm," he said, squinting at me. He had a round and pale chin, and wore a hat with an assault rifle on the front that said "OreGUNian." I don't know what he thought I was impeding. At best they would've made out. Brooke is super Christian.

"My grandpa just died," I said flatly. Not technically true, but I was losing control.

"Oh!" Brooke said. "I'm so sorry! We can go somewhere else."

Wes blew air from his nose and dropped himself on Brooke's

bed, his camo pants monstrous on the pink duvet. "We can't go to my room," he said. "Mike's in there with the chick from Dead Sea Scrolls." Brooke winced. "He said they're going to be in there all weekend, so."

"Okay," I said. "Yeah, you guys can be in here, sure. I'm actually going home this weekend. I meant to ask, Brooke, could you take me to the greyhound station tomorrow morning?"

"Killer," Wes said. "Yeah, she can take you. Mike is gonna be stoked." He rolled his eyes lustily around the room. I had a vision of him urinating in my pop-up hamper. "That your brother?" he asked, settling on a framed picture on my desk.

The picture in question showed me hugging my brother on an airstrip at dawn—him in the marine getup, me in a hoodie. "Why," I said.

"When you see him, thank him for his service," he said bravely. "My uncle is in the army."

The idea that there was some similarity between Wes's convictions and what my brother was fighting for—which I understood to be nothing—made me want to puke.

"Aw," Brooke said. "You're so sweet." She nuzzled beside him on the futon. He grunted and lay back like a fat lion. They lay side-by-side, shoulders touching like cloud-watchers in a field—so chaste it was dirty.

~

Brooke took me to the bus stop the next morning. "I think Wes might be a fascist," I told her.

She turned the heater up all the way. "I'm not a political person," she said.

I looked out the window. "Well," I said, "thanks for dropping me off."

I sat on a gum-crusted bench. The Chehalem Mountains sloped behind me, and in front the road ran out where the valley opens to the sky, which was thin blue at the top but yellow over the hills. Somewhere, my grandpa was looking down at me and this wide cold country, thinking about immigration and Reaganomics and law and order. Not heaven, but somewhere.

It was late evening when the bus reached the city. My dad's hatchback was in the parking lot. He was a shortish man with fair hair that gleamed in the streetlight—a black sheep among the Italian eyebrows and thick black hair of the de Lucas, my mom's side. He was a middle school teacher. I'd always had a soft spot for him, but over the years that softness had morphed into a kind of pity. He couldn't pay for college, which seemed to diminish him. Still, I was glad he'd been the one to come.

"Welcome back, Lo," he said, and hugged me and took my bag.

"Who's at Grandma's?" I asked as we pulled onto the freeway, heading into the suburbs.

"Just me and Mom. And Grandma."

"How's she doing?"

He gave me a blank, knowing face. This sort of frustration had been our secret language among the de Lucas—the solidarity of outsiders. "She's Grandma," he said. "How are you handling things?"

"Fine," I said. "Grandpa was a tough guy, so."

He shrugged.

The lawns were trim; the lanes were lined with poplars. Mansions of orange glass stared down from the hills. The gate swung open, and we drove to the top of the hill. We parked in the driveway of my grandma's formidable house and walked up to the huge double doors, which were made of smooth red wood and

latticed with glass like chapel windows.

My grandma threw open the front door. She seemed taller, thinner. She palmed the air for my cheeks. I let her grab my face. The smell of instant coffee, perfume, and wine washed over me with kisses. "It's so good to see you, baby," she said, then grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen table. She pushed me into a chair and, seeing my parents shuffle in behind us, asked them to get me something to eat, I must be starving. I felt the empty rooms and hallways. My grandma sat with her back to a pair of tall windows. I ate microwaved chicken parmesan and said yes to the Chianti she offered.

"How have you been, Grandma?" I asked once I'd settled in.

"Carrying on," she said. "It does get lonely. Though I'm on Facebook now," she said, then laughed like it was the craziest thing in the world. "So, it's been nice to connect with old friends. But how are you? How's school?" I told her it was going fine. "Sociology, huh?" she asked. "Like your father? I just hope I'm not paying for you to make lattes once you graduate," she said, then laughed.

My dad laughed softly. What infuriated me was the sense that my father's deference was a tithe, his laughter a thing owed in lieu of money he, we, would never make. Because I am not my brother, I decided not to pay. "What's your degree in?"

"Lauren!"

My grandma's face went smooth. "It wasn't an option for me," she said coldly. "The only reason you're able to go is because Grandpa spent his life 30 feet up a powerline. Public service. It's the schools now, they don't teach you kids that," she said. "Though your brother seemed to pick it up somewhere."

I looked at my dad. I waited for him to say something in my defense, but he stared into his wine glass, impotent. We shrunk back into a soured small talk. After a few minutes I

said, "I think I'm gonna go to bed. Long drive."

"Oh, but we forgot to toast!" my grandma said. She raised her glass. The three of us followed without enthusiasm. "To Grandpa," she said to my mom and dad. "And to your brother," she said to me.

My grandma, generous in victory, offered me any bed in the house. I chose the couch. Everything else felt dirty. I laid in musty quilts and cried. Then I got angry, and passed the time simulating arguments in which I smoothly dismantled my grandma in various political debates. But I would've been up at that all night. So I went to the kitchen for some water. I halted before the entryway. Someone was around the corner, breathing. I peeked around the wall. My grandma sat alone at the kitchen table, scrolling her iPad. Beside her was a cup of wine, filled to its brim, black in the darkness. She raised the cup to her lips. Her face seemed doubly wrinkled in the iPad's soft blue light. I could see the tiny muscles of her face twitch to what she was reading: an elongation of lips, a flare of eyes, a crease along forehead, a plunge of brow—these gestures flashed across her face, signs meant for no one, formed in darkness. Like a malfunctioning robot. On her face was a secret despair at a country which had left her behind, and out of that, tiny celebrations of meaningless victories. Her breath was raspy like a snore. I crept backward with averted eyes, to hide the shame.

~

My dad dropped me at the greyhound stop early Sunday morning. The idea had been brewing all weekend. Gam was the symbol of a collapsing generation, a perfect case study of the mentally vulnerable, and the ideal intersection of my personal and sociological interest. I was eager to get on the road. As we drove, the sun rose over the long, grassy plains of Northern California, and I texted Brooke: "Can you pick me up at the bus stop tonight?"

"I don't think so, I'm gonna be at Wes's tonight. We're watching *Prince of Egypt*."

"I'm sorry I called Wes a fascist."

She took a while to reply. "It's okay. I get what you mean." I wasn't sure what she meant, but it sounded hopeful. I told her I'd buy her a coffee if she would pick me up. She said okay. With that taken care of, I set to work. The first thing would be to create a fake person with whom I could interact with my grandma. Who would she respond to? Not me, certainly. Someone like my brother. So I googled "American soldier" and scrolled through my options. I settled on a picture of a man wearing Oakley sunglasses. He stood in what looked to be a hot, dry place, surrounded by dusty green tents. He wore camouflage. Gam would love him. I used an old email address to make a Facebook profile. What should I name him? Colonel something. Colonel Sand— Colonel Sandro, I typed. I birthed him in 1964, and made him from Oklahoma, a respectable state. Then I plugged in the picture of American Soldier. I paused and admired my work. There he was, a *tabula rasa*, waiting for his breath of life. Colonel Sandro. At ease, soldier.

I set to it, giving him all sorts of strange biographical information. The Colonel, since his honorable discharge after two tours as an Army Ranger in Kuwait, had found work as an underwater electrician. He was a very serious snowmobiler, and in fact even built his own snowmobiles—sometimes underwater. I gave Colonel Sandro all the nuances of a flesh-and-blood human being, which, for the conservative patriot I was making him to be, could be fabricated in less than half an hour. Once the Colonel was online, I reposted a bunch of conservative content on my—our?—page. Little sticky traps for my grandma. Then I searched Elena de Luca, and there she was: her profile picture was of her and my brother, hugging tenderly the moment she handed him my grandpa's flag. And there, in the background, was me: the phone in my father's hand, a dark lens. I hit "Add Friend" then slept until Oregon.

~

The following afternoon my grandma became my friend. I messaged her. "Hi Elena," I typed, voicing each word as a man's in my head. "I'm sorry to hear about Bob. He was the best of us." I grimaced and hit send. A few minutes later, the ellipses popped onto the screen.

"Hello," she wrote. "Thank you for the condolences. How did you know Bob?"

"From work," I said. "We met at an electrician's conference in Tucson. He took me under his wing at a time when I didn't know why I was doing it anymore. Bob was a great man."

"I don't remember him going to a conference," she responded. "But there was a lot I did not know about him."

Alone in my room I felt insane. I read her message over-and-over. "The men of this country bear such a terrible burden," I wrote, my hands flying on the keys. "Especially of his generation. Feels like there's not a single man like Bob these days." I bit my nails and clicked send.

"I know," she said. "My grandson gives me hope. He remembers the things this country was founded on. He is in the army too." This was accompanied by an emoji of a terrifying grin.

"Well God bless," I said. "Maybe I know him. I was in Kuwait just a couple weeks ago." That felt stupid immediately. Kuwait? Sure, I'm there all the time.

"Probably not," she responded. "He's stationed in Texas. Lance Corporal Jimmy de Luca, 187th Infantry. Is there a name and rank I could pass along to him? I'm sure he would love to talk with someone who knew Bob. The passing has been hard on him."

I panicked. "Colonel James Sandro," I wrote, "Army Ranger in the 101st Airborne." I hit send and began another message: "Bob

did not seem like a man who kept secrets, but if he did, I'm sure he had his reasons."

The ellipses were up for a long time. "Bob was a great husband," was all she said.

~

I waited two days; I didn't want to seem too eager. In the meantime, I drafted more focused lines of inquiry regarding Operation Catfish My Grandma. I decided to relocate my dear grandmother from the relatively banal Facebook into more extreme right-wing internet spheres, and basically just see what happens. Was I hoping to turn her blue? Of course not. People over 40 don't change their minds. But neither did I want to mindlessly enact a political conflict for its mere drama. Instead, I would study it. Scholarship legitimized the whole endeavor.

On the morning of the day I was to message my grandma, just after my first class, I walked into my room and discovered Wes and Brooke sitting in silence on the futon, not touching. Brooke's eyes were red.

"You're still up for coffee, right Brooke?" I asked, as if we had plans.

Brooke looked up and nodded, smiling sadly. Wes stood and pulled his shirt down over his gut—the libertarian snake uncoiling—and walked out, giving her a look. The door shut. We released our breath simultaneously.

"What was that?" I asked.

"He's not a bad guy," she said. "I know you think that, but he's not. He's complicated."

She looked so innocent. I empathized with her—both at the mercy of Republicans.

"Do you want to see something?" I asked. I sat down at my desk and opened Facebook. Brooke pulled her chair up behind me. "Hello, Elena," I typed, thinking in the man-voice, then hit send and pulled up the Colonel's profile.

"This is for my sociology class," I told Brooke, scrolling up and down. "I made a fake person to talk to my grandma about her beliefs."

"That seems—weird."

"I'm gonna tell her, of course. Once I have the data."

"Data on what?" she asked, but I just shrugged.

It took my grandma less than ten minutes to respond. "Hello, James," she said. "I worried I'd never hear from you again. How have you been?"

"Check it out," I told Brooke, then typed, "Oh, just fine, Elena, just fine. And yourself?"

When I was writing like that, I had a vision: the Colonel beside a grill, hairy toes tan in my flops, smell of charcoal and cut grass, a brew in my left hand, silver tongs in my right. *Just fine.*

"I've been mostly alright. A little lonely." Then in a separate message she said, "It's been very nice to find some old friends, but they don't fill the house, you know."

"This is kind of sad," Brooke said.

I squinted. "Once, for Christmas, my grandma gave my brother \$100, and me \$50."

Brooke raised her eyebrow. "You're doing this for sociology?"

"I'm doing this for a lot of reasons." I cracked my fingers then typed, "Nothing'll replace Bob, but I know some folks he would've loved to meet. Folks who aren't on Facebook." To

Brooke I said, "I'm trying to see how she'd react to a site like Reddit."

"Wes is on Reddit every day," she said. She looked at the screen with more interest.

"Yes, I've liked some of them!" my grandma replied. "You know, I thought it would be harder to find level-headed people on Facebook. California is so Democrat I forget we are actually the majority."

I took a screenshot and scribbled some notes. "I'm trying to see how people like her, and Wes kinda, end up as they do. Or how they get worse."

"You mean conservatives?"

"No no," I lied. "It's both sides." Then I turned back to the screen.

"Hell, don't I know it," I typed, feeling saucy. "And Facebook is just the tip of the iceberg. We're everywhere. Can I show you a place that's even better?"

"Will you be there?" my grandma responded. This time the emoji winked.

~

That's how I got my grandma on Reddit. Making a col.sandro12 profile was no problem, and then there she was: ElenadeLuca1945. I spent some time beforehand mapping the conservative Reddit sphere. The best place to start was r/CollegeRepublicans. Most redditors there espoused old-school right-wing politics, deregulation and stuff. I explained the site to my grandma beforehand—how you went to a r/ page, how you posted comments, how the voting system worked. She picked it up in no time.

"It just blesses my heart to see the youth like this," she

wrote me following an exchange on how political correctness is modern Nazism. "On the news it seems like all kids care about are vaping, video games, and transgenderism."

Gam was ready for the deep dive.

But I was wrong. When we moved on to the more intense r/Anglosphere, she was appalled. "This is awful, Jim," she told me. "I don't even know what 'cuck' means. My husband would flop in his grave if he knew I was on here."

I panicked. "You can't think of it like that," I said, channeling the Colonel's militancy. "No offense, Elena, but you come from a time when politics were civilized and rational. You've got to have grit! Just think what's at stake."

Grudgingly at first, then curiously, then zealously, she grew a pair of big Reddit nuts. I took meticulous notes. Over time we fell into a schedule: every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon we met on Facebook, moved to r/Anglosphere to bolster our traditional values, then made our way to r/politics to hash it out with the snowflakes. After six weeks I had compiled extensive field observations on the capabilities of my grandma to not only adopt the idiosyncrasies of incel speech, but even to generate and spread neologisms. Her language became violent as well. "If they don't wanna work, shoot 'em," she wrote in one post. I encouraged this. It estranged her into the thing I hated. It felt like I was in the vanguard of sociological research. My grandma was my prodigy, and as time went on, when I pictured the Colonel by his grill, I imagined my grandma there as well: her toes brushing the surface of the swimming pool, looking up at me expectantly, waiting for the tri-tip. We'd never been closer.

But my research was constantly interrupted by Wes and Brooke. They fought so much they were comfortable fighting while I was in the room. I was spending so much time in Wes's world, I

felt like I understood him, too. As the weeks went by, more-and-more I heard Brooke crying in the dark, after Wes had gone.

I finished my paper just before Thanksgiving. At the time, I felt I'd conclusively demonstrated that the root of conservative thought was a sort of vestigial sociopathy left over from the toddlerhood worship of the father, and that only the senile, repressed, rich, or stupid—or some combination of the four—were susceptible to this kind of politics, but also that the senile, repressed, rich, and stupid constituted an alarming portion of the population, indeed even sometimes a political majority. I wanted to slap Dr. Maldonado on his juicy Anglican ass. I was an academic. I turned the paper in with a wink and a flourish. Perfect timing: back to my grandma's for Thanksgiving.

The night I was to head back to Sacramento—Wednesday—I walked into my room after class to pack my things. Brooke was lying face-down on her futon, sobbing into the duvet. I set my backpack down and dropped to a knee beside her. “What did he do,” I said.

Brooke rolled onto her side to face me. Her mouth was all quivery. Spit webbed between her lips. “Are we even friends?” she moaned.

I leaned my head against her shoulder. “Of course,” I said. And I was happy.

After a few stabilizing bouts of tears, Brooke stood and wiped her eyes. “He's such an asshole!” she said, pacing the room. “And don't say *anything*.”

I put my hands up, hopeful at her use of the word *asshole*. “I would never,” I said. “What happened?”

Brooke sat down on my bed. She wiped her eyes with both hands outward toward her ears. “I broke up with him.” I waited. “And

he said 'no.'”

“No?”

“No. And said if I forced his hand, he would tell our bible study we had sex.”

I understood why that was a big deal, but it was still somewhat difficult to empathize.

“Jesus,” I breathed. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re gonna talk after I drop you off at the greyhound station.”

We didn’t say anything on the ride over. When I got out of the car, I told her that yeah, it would be tough if she lost her friends, but that I’d be there etc., etc. She just nodded. Then I left.

The bus rolled through the countryside. I couldn’t sleep. It was only after we rolled into the city, after I got into my dad’s car, that I finally slept, and hard.

I woke on my grandma’s couch in the late afternoon. The autumn sun was warm on my face. The voices of the de Lucas sounded from the kitchen, along with the smells of Thanksgiving. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. When I opened them, my grandma was standing in the hallway. “Hey, baby,” she said, then hugged me warmly. “So good to see you. Come say hi to everyone.” My mom and dad bustled around in the kitchen. The air was thick with the smell of food. With a wink my dad poured me a glass of wine, something bold and Californian, and because I hadn’t eaten, my cheeks flushed and my blood warmed. Conversation came easy across the generations. My grandma was glowing, happier than I’d ever seen her. And it was not so much a revelation I had, more like a voice I heard—my own—that asked what the fuck am I doing catfishing my grandma? In my head I executed Colonel Sandro by firing squad and felt much better.

I swilled wine and schmoozed.

The doorbell rang just before dinner. My brother stood in the doorway. He was in fatigues, a bag slung over his shoulder. "Hello?" he called. The four of us swarmed him, my mom kissing his cheeks, my dad pulling him into a bear hug, and my grandma, tears in her eyes, resting her head on his chest, saying, "I missed you."

"Hey, little sister," he said, grinning, after they had cleared.

"Hey," I said. "I didn't know you were coming."

He held me at arm's length and looked up and down my face. "So you've got a nose ring now," he teased. "It looks awful."

"Haha!" I said, because it was stupid, because it was him. Disarmed without meaning to be, I wrapped him in a big hug. There was a sort of comfort, I realized, in the acceptance of differences—a playfulness on both sides I'd ignored. No matter what, I was one of them. I looked over and saw my dad smiling at us. I smiled back, home at last.

Before dinner we placed our phones in a wicker basket under the windowsill. De Luca tradition. As we took our seats, the basket filled with iPhones and Androids and Grandma's tablet. Then we ate and had a good time.

"So, I've got some news," Grandma said afterward. Her voice was high and thin from the wine. "I've met someone," she said.

My blood went cold. I studiously rearranged green beans on my plate.

"Mom!" said my mother. "It's only been a couple months."

She waved away the criticism. "It's not serious," she said. "We're just messaging online. And I've been so lonely. And Tommy," she said. "He was in the Army, too!"

After a second, my dad said, "Good for you, Elena," and my mom reluctantly echoed, "I'm sure Bob would understand." But that was all. Conversation awkwardly resumed. I was quiet.

My dad filled the sink with soap and water for dishes. "Will you dry for me, Lo?" he

asked.

"Sure," I said, and got up and grabbed a towel.

"I can help too," Tommy said, but my grandma grabbed his arm.

"Hold on, Tommy, I want to show you something. Go fetch me my iPad, will you?" she said, putting on her reading glasses. "I want to show you a picture of Jim."

I watched as Tommy took the iPad from the basket and brought it to the table. Grandma used her index finger to open Facebook. Her eyebrows popped over the top of her reading glasses, as though this were a thing which required great concentration. Finally, she managed to pull up the Colonel's profile. Tommy squinted at it. "Well," she said. "Do you recognize him?"

He laughed. "No, I don't," he said. "He probably served before me. What division?"

She swelled with pride. "Army Rangers," she said. "101st Airborne."

He laughed, again at her ignorance. "I doubt it," he said. "That's not a special forces unit."

Grandma frowned. "Well that's what Jim told me. Here," she said, scrolling up through our messages. "Look, Jim said 'Army Ranger in the 101st Airborne.'" Her voice was stubborn, assured. Out of touch. Like any grandma. I was drying off a saucepan and listening, blurry with anxiety.

"Let me see," he said, taking the iPad. He went to the Colonel's profile. "Grandma," he said severely. "How long have you been talking to this person."

"Oh, I don't know, a couple months?"

"This profile was made a couple months ago," he said grimly. "There's only one picture. Have you given out any information to this person? Credit cards or anything?"

"Goodness no," she said, shocked. "Why would Jim ask me for that?"

"This is a fake account," Tommy said.

"What do you mean, fake? A person can't be fake. Give me that," she said, taking back the tablet. "I'll message him right now."

I dropped the pan and cut toward the basket. Too late: my phone buzzed, impossibly loud, rattling against three other phones. Tommy looked at the basket, then at me. His mouth fell open at the panic on my face. Grandma was still focused on Facebook. I snatched my phone out of the basket just as she sent a second message; it buzzed audibly in my hand. Then she looked at me, her eyes narrowed. She sent another message, then another. Dumbly I gripped my buzzing phone.

"Lauren?" she asked.

The confusion in her voice broke my heart. There was no explaining. I slipped my phone into my back pocket and looked at my socks on the tile.

"Is this you?"

The question contained a number of dimensions, not a single one of which I was prepared to answer. "I..."

"Excuse me," she said. She stood, an old woman, and pushed in

her chair. She went upstairs.

"What did you do?" Tommy said.

I looked around. My mom and dad were watching me also. "I've been messaging her," I said. "For a school project."

My mom followed upstairs without a word. I stood in the same place, not sure where to go, what to do. I turned to my dad, but he just shook his head and gravely said, "Lo..." Tommy got up and followed my mom. I sat on the couch, looking dumbly again at my feet. My dad finished the dishes in silence.

Finally, my mom came back downstairs. I anticipated anger, but she took one look at me and broke down crying. "What?" I begged, but she walked right past, into the kitchen where she began to speak to my dad in a low voice.

I walked upstairs. The bedroom door was open. My grandma sat in the easy chair, my brother at her side, silent. She stared at me. I stared back. An odd look of triumph was on her face.

"I'm sorry," I said. What else was there to say?

Her voice was measured. "If you're so intent on being this, this *outcast*, then you can do it without my help."

What did that mean? I looked at my brother, but his face was a mask. I left.

Downstairs, at the kitchen table, I sat across from my parents. My mom wiped the tears under her eyes. "So," she said weakly. "Grandma's not going to pay for college anymore."

I felt weightless. "What?"

"What did you do, Lo?" my dad asked. His voice was so... tired.

"Nothing," I said. "I just... it was a school thing. For a paper. She's really doing this?"

My mom nodded, very slowly.

"I'm not moving home," I said. "Dad, please."

"Please what," my dad said. He grabbed my mom's hands, then lay his head across her knuckles.

~

My brother took me to the greyhound station early the following morning. "Are you alright, Lo?" he asked in the parking lot.

I wanted his anger, not his concern. "I'm fine," I said. "Thanks for the ride."

I boarded the bus and curled up in the back. The bus took off into the plains. Up ahead Mt. Shasta rose against the ice blue horizon, into which the sun had not yet risen. I wished it wouldn't. A few rows ahead, a little boy peeked around his seat. He stared at me with black eyes. For a long time I stared back, us two alone awake in the lawless dawn.

By the time we rolled into the Willamette Valley, I felt strange: hollow but intensely perceptive, my mind quick and sharp. I did not want to leave, I realized. Brooke picked me up. I asked if she wanted to get a drink, and was surprised when she said yes. It seemed we both were reluctant to share how the weekend had gone. We drove to Lumpy's on the edge of town. She asked me what she should get. I said I'd handle it, and came back with an armful of dollar gel-o shots. We took a booth and used hairpins to scoop out the muck. At first Brooke puckered at the taste, but after three or four, she put them back easily. I waited until I felt the alcohol, then asked her what happened with Wes.

"If I tell you, can we still be friends?" she asked.

The word *friend* almost brought me to tears. "Yes."

"We're back together."

"Fuck, why?"

"It's just easier," she said. "You don't have friends like ours. They're not very... nice."

I put my head in my hands. "Fuck, fuck," I said, then groaned.

"What? What is it?"

"My grandma found out about the Colonel. She said she's not paying for school anymore. I might have to move back home."

"How did we both—? How come neither of us could—?" She looked away, embarrassed.

The bar became rowdy around us. A fly landed in one of the cups and rubbed his little hands on a nuclear green bit of gel-o.

"Do you want to play ping-pong?" I asked.

The liquor hit while we played. "You're good," I told Brooke, wobbling.

"Church camp champ," she said, then pounded a topspin off my side. It bounced into a nearby pitcher of light beer. "I'm sorry!" she said to a couple of old drunks, then caught the ball back and served it past me again.

After a couple of games, neither of us could drive. We sat in the dirt at the edge of a vineyard. The wind rustled the vines in the light of a full November moon. I was happy.

"How are we getting home," I asked lazily.

"I can text Wes," she said. The thought made her giggle.

"Yeah, yeah. Do it. That would be fun. He doesn't drink, does he?"

Brooke recoiled and shook her head dramatically. "No way," she said. "What's he gonna do, break up with me?" She pulled out her phone and texted him.

"I have a plan to stay here," I told her. "I want to stay. With you. Not like, I don't know, but I want to stay." I felt myself blushing.

Maybe I loved her. Maybe I did. But that is beyond the scope of this paper.

She just laughed. "I want you to stay, too."

We were quiet for a while. We watched the valley. The moon was so bright we could see the hills rear up against the night, their slopes covered with vines and thatches of fir. Moonlit clouds rose up flat in the darkness behind them. It was not too cold. A pair of headlights flashed into our faces. We shielded our eyes. A car door opened. It was Wes.

"You guys smell," he said.

"Shut up," Brooke told him.

~

"Do you remember a few days ago," I told Brooke at breakfast the next day, "about that Navy veteran in Portland? Who shot and killed that protester?"

"Wes was talking about that," she said warily. "Why?"

"He's facing 25 to life," I explained. "Conservatives are riled up about it."

"So?"

"So my grandma's been watching that," I said. She waited for me to explain. "You're a computer science major, so you know how to set up websites and stuff?"

“Why?”

I told her my idea.

She frowned. “No way,” she said. “That’s fraud.”

“It is,” I said, “but all you have to do is show me how to do it.”

“Won’t they know it was me who helped you?”

“Who’s *they*, Brooke? Come on. I need you. Don’t you want me to stay? My life is *fucked* if I have to leave. I’ll end up living in some crackhead apartments. I’ll become a prostitute. Please!”

So Brooke taught me how to build a website. Basically, the idea was to create a fake fundraising webpage for the Navy veteran’s legal team. www.right2selfdefense.law. I did some research and filled the site with a lineup of conservative legal experts, then surrounded them with American flags and right-wing adages. The donation fund linked to a stealth PayPal account that Brooke helped me set up, which I could route to my own account. Then I posted the website link on 4chan at the local library under a card I faked using a school ID I took from the lost and found. It was a professional quality job. I posted the link on all the old Reddit threads. After the post was up, I changed Colonel Sandro’s name and profile picture so I could repost it on Facebook where my grandma would see it. Then we were live.

We made two grand in the first week. When I opened PayPal and saw the number, I ran across campus to our dorm. Brooke started shaking when she saw it. That night we went to Lumpy’s and bought the whole bar a round of Rainiers. By three weeks we had \$11,000. A popular far-right blog had kicked it to their social media. But I had no way of knowing if I’d bagged the trophy buck. Had my grandma even seen it? I called my mom. “Can you ask Grandma something for me?” I told her my

question.

“What is this about, Lauren?” she asked skeptically.

“Please, Mom. You know how difficult this time has been for me.”

“No. Are you moving back home after this semester? We cleared your brother’s room.”

“I told you, I’m staying here.”

Then it all fell apart. A few days later, the Navy vet hung himself in jail. The tithes stopped coming in. Desperate, I started a fundraiser for the funeral expenses, but it didn’t get the same kind of attention. We’d already made over \$17,000 dollars. Although this felt like a great sum, it wasn’t even enough to pay for one semester. My days in God’s kingdom were numbered.

“Brooke,” I said, “How committed are you to your education?”

“What?” She looked up from her phone. “I don’t know, very?”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get an apartment in the city. Let’s be cocktail waitresses at some fancy restaurant.” Brooke gave me this heartbroken look. She sat beside me on my bed and squeezed one of my hands. “What?” I said. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Stop,” I said. “You sound like my brother.”

“What do you mean?”

I couldn’t explain it, so I told her I was gonna go talk to financial aid. Instead I went to Dr. Maldonado’s office.

“Are you looking for your sociology paper?” said the old humanities secretary when I came in. She eyed me warily. “It should be in your mailbox.”

I shoved into the mail room. A white-haired prof was waiting for the coffee maker to finish. After one look at my face, he left. A thin sheaf of paper rested in my cubby. I pulled it out. There was a big red D on the top. Underneath it said, "Unfocused, unorganized, unethical, un-Christlike." I wanted to scream. I held it up with two hands and bit the corner as hard as I could. I cast it, mutilated, into the recycle bin, then stormed up the stairway to Dr. Maldonado's office.

"Oh," he said when he saw me in the doorway. A student was in a chair across from him. The twerp swiveled around, startled.

"Please give us the room," I growled.

"Lauren, you can't—"

"It's fine," said the boy, clearly shaken. I moved to let him pass, but stayed on my feet.

"That was very inappropriate," said Dr. Maldonado.

"Are you happy with your wife?" I said.

"Lauren!" he said. "I'm going to politely ask that you—"

"I'm going to have to drop out," I rushed. "My family won't pay anymore. And what is *that* going to do to my *calling*?" The levee broke; tears spilled down my face.

He sighed. "Sit down," he said. I did. I tried to stifle the sobs, but that just made them sound broken and gross. Dr. Maldonado handed me a box of tissues, shut the door, then sat and waited for me to compose myself. I arrived at a breathy calm. "What's going on," he said.

"I'm fine," I said, wiping my eyes. "I'm not one of those girls who cries in their professor's office. I'm sure you have *other* things to worry about," I said, nodding toward the picture of his family.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." He angled the pictured frame away from me. "But I do have an obligation, financially and biblically, to be here. So. What is it?"

"My life is ruined, that's all. I'm dropping out. I'm not gonna get a degree. My family wants nothing to do with me. I only have one friend. And I guess I'm no good at sociology, even."

"Your paper did show promise at times. Certainly it was inventive. Perhaps I graded you to the standard of graduate school," he said gently. "Regarding the other stuff, I'm sure a campus therapist would be happy to meet with you during your remaining couple weeks."

"You mean the faith healers?" I sat back and crossed my arms. "I'm good."

He sighed. "If your dream is really in higher education, then you'll figure out how to make it happen. There's community college, scholarships, plenty of resources. If you feel you've actually been called, then the matter is settled: nothing can rescind it. Do you believe that?"

That was the last time I saw Dr. Maldonado. I did leave his office feeling a little better, but it faded the moment I saw Wes and Brooke in the room, the same as ever. Nothing changes. I stopped going to class. As winter break approached, I kept feeling like the FBI was gonna bust down my door and throw me in lady prison. But no one ever came. Nervously I began to transfer some of the money from PayPal into my bank account. \$17,000—I could live for a year on that. I took a room at the Rivercrest Apartments, a shitty complex across the highway. Brooke helped me move. Sometimes she comes over and we eat Chinese food. I didn't go home for Christmas. My mom and dad called that morning, but it was awkward. It snowed that day—rare for Oregon. Of course nothing stuck. That evening I sat outside my door, on a plastic chair provided by the

apartments. Me and all the other old smokers, lined up outside like gargoyles.

Me, I just sat there and thought about what Dr. Maldonado said before I left. About how you can't be uncalled. I know what that means. It means some people are never called at all.

~

New Nonfiction by Kyle Abbott Smith: The Superman Fight



Fights within the infantry were common enough that their variations came to be source material for a dark form of in-unit comedy. So it was with one of my tussles in the Pendleton dirt.

My platoon, nearing a four-day weekend of liberty, hurled headlong into its assignments like men frenzied by a demon possession. Our leaders enthralled our thinking minds with the simple incantation of the word "leisure" alone. Noncoms whipped themselves into a lather, finding a way to use the carrot of a long weekend as a psychological stick. Every whiff of insubordination, every instance of languor was shouted-out as sufficient cause for losing precious hours of rest.

Leadership had planned this so-called Final Exercise prior to our release. It was as a field maneuvers demonstration—a check mark within the long list of requirements needed to attain the status of combat readiness, elevating us from a training atmosphere to a higher, deployable strata.

We hustled overladen vehicles hungrily about a portion of the base restricted from live fire. So deprived of ordnance within our training exercises, we found ourselves reduced to infantile instances of make-believe that rapidly bled-out the platoon's energy. The brass fed us unsatisfying reasons for our empty magazines and absent ammo boxes related to fire safety and protected wildlife species, all of which we decoded as thin cover for their avoidance of the paperwork and bureaucratic effort involved in drawing ammo and identifying a suitable training theater.

Jokesters in the platoon gifted us with over-blown sound effects to mock the silliness of the exercise, improvising the blast sounds of an 81 mm mortar system before gamefully cycling through childlike takes on the percussive noises of our small arms weapons. Daunted more by boredom than combat, they struggled mightily against the dullness by inventing a soundboard of fictional laser guns to mine for any scarce laughs. Gruff Marines felt uncomfortable as such horsing around left a residue of foolishness, implying the unwelcome notion that we were unserious men at play. Soured by the exercise, the warrior class of our platoon retreated into stoic silences and meditative tobacco dipping, abruptly disinterested in bird-dogging us onward.

We were ordered, uncharacteristically, to establish a static firing position for all eight of our mortar squads without the usual fuckery of being shifted about the terrain like a knight giving chase across a chess board. We set aiming stakes, assembled the M252 81 mm mortar systems, practiced site-to-site procedures to ensure we were firing as a unit, and spent the ensuing hours digging ever deeper mortar pits, filling sandbags, and rotating out to periphery watch positions, vigilant for an imagined enemy within the borders of Camp Pendleton and, unthinkably, within the United States.

Idle hands.

We settled in for the night with ample time to find cause for complaint, for our muscles to tense from disuse, and to turn on each other.

Morning came sleepily with its characteristic valley cold. Light fog lazed about the hills until chased away by an ambitious California sun. We burrowed into our three-layer sleeping bag systems and bulked-up on layers of Polypro undergarments which we shed through the slow progression of the day and its rising heat. Relative to other large-scale exercises, we were skating along Easy Street which we managed to spoil with the tone of our own malaise.

There were no hypothetical fire missions, no ammo dunnage to be cleaned, and our weapons would be free of carbon upon our return to the armory. There was only the occasional squawk of the radio and light whispers between the radio watch. The officers and Staff NCOs hovered around some kind of illicit field coffee maker that could have easily set the dry grasslands afire.

We reconciled ourselves to eating MREs the likes of beef stew or teriyaki chicken for breakfast, tending to their careful heating and preparations like entranced Zen masters engaged in sacred ritual. Some Marines tugged dog-eared novels from overstuffed cargo pockets and sought their escape through the mind. Others napped within their flak jackets and deuce gear, ready to move at a moment's notice should such orders ring-out like spontaneous gunfire.

I was sent on an early perimeter watch rotation having been spared from a night shift through a miraculous cosmic dice roll. The lax discipline that was everywhere on display had seeped into my bones, and I sauntered to a watch position on an elevated ridge cocooned in my green poncho liner which I had tucked into the neckline of my flak jacket, flagrantly assuming too much comfort to be an effective guard. I chose a prone position, laying on my stomach, occasionally scanning

the hillsides for movement. Intermittently, a few CAAT platoon Humvees could be seen, sight-lined along various hillside approaches.

“Contact right!” I called out, generally unclear if CAAT was considered our ally or our enemy in this particular portion of the pretend field exercise, as much to feign attentiveness than out of any real desire to invest effort into the day’s training. Our platoon leadership generally held back the underlying intent of any given exercise as a means of bottling information to feed their own self-importance and maintain an artificially created advantage they lorded over us. The only information that filtered through the sieve of ranks was when to break down, where to go, and when to dig-in. All else was “need to know” and it had been made abundantly clear that I didn’t ever need to know.

Having established a veneer of alertness by communicating a few vehicle approaches, I allowed the cool of the morning fog to lull my body into a relaxed state and slow my breathing as I pretended to look out beyond the sights of my weapon. Sleep quickly overtook me, drawing me down into a place of deep and inner calm like a rounded stone welcomed gradually to its new resting place at the bottom of a quiet pond.

“Wake the fuck up, Smith!” a voice screamed into my ear. His volume was deafening and was easily loud enough to carry throughout the valley. I had been caught. Panic and adrenaline began coursing through me. I had never fallen asleep on watch before; this was something I prided myself on, though many Marines struggled with the discipline of it throughout their enlistment. Yet, here I was, undeniably in the wrong and spotlighted before the Staff NCOs and the officer. I scrambled to my feet and sought out the snitch.

Alanzo.

Chunky. Worthless. He stood leering over me, a light duty

commando who was able to slip through the cracks of the Marine Corps by embracing an encyclopedic documentation of his various and vague ailments that precluded him from ever engaging in any serious training. It confounded me as to why he had chosen to be in the infantry when he so clearly did not belong even, apparently, by his own assessments. I could understand not being talented; I could not abide the way he gamed the system to drift by. If you don't want to be here, my thought was, then be bold and shoot yourself in the foot or take a few sips of weed like some many others did and move on. Don't waste everybody's time pretending you're a part of the unit instead of a platoon bottom-feeder in search of an easy way out instead of working your way up.

He represented all that was wrong with the Corps. He regularly cheated on his Physical Fitness Test, finding sympathetic or similarly chubby Marines who would lie about the number of sit-ups he could perform in the span of 2 minutes to goose his score by about 50 points. There was no cheating on pull-ups or run-times, which were too public, but it was obvious he did not meet the weight requirement standards, nor could he complete a unit run without falling back, wheezing and making over-exaggerated facial contortions intended to convey the depth of his unbearable pain to justify his inability to run further. Through his sick hall manipulations, he managed to alter his status to non-deployable before our pump to Iraq. Though his pretense had sickened me, I was glad he hadn't participated in the invasion. I had no desire for someone of his questionable worth to supposedly watch my back. Perhaps more true, I felt his inclusion in the Corps cheapened what it meant for me to be a Marine, robbing my chosen struggle of its intended meaning. That he represented what it was to be a Marine dimmed the light of our collective reputation.

His presence compounded my embarrassment and fear at having been caught shirking my duties. I felt dirtied by his involvement. Those emotions immediately evolved to rage at the

sight of this shit-bag Marine gloating at having the upper hand over someone (anyone!) to divert the negative attention away from himself and garner a sliver of praise, if only for a fleeting moment. I reacted in the only way that made sense in an infantry platoon. I balled my fist and let fly a wild haymaker at the general direction of his stupid face.

My punch smashed into the side of his Kevlar helmet, dampening its intended effect but delivering enough power to knock him to the ground. After he fell, I immediately scrambled atop his chest to pin him to the ground with my body weight and began raining blows towards his mouth. My strikes were largely ineffective given he wore armor and used his flailing hands to shield the exposed portion of his mouth and nose and eyes. In the heat of the grapple, he managed to shoot his fingers up and into my mouth, thrusting his fingers into my throat. I let loose a bizarre animal growl, frustrated, and swatted his hand aside before resuming my ineffectual attack on his face. My anger was only ramping up, with years of smoldering disdain for this near worthless Marine stoked to blast furnace rage by his momentary air of superiority over me.

We had the platoon's full attention. There wasn't much going on that morning, so it was a welcome entertainment. Even so, it could only be allowed to go on so long.

"Smith, get your fucking ass over!" called Corporal Wes. My anger waned, undermined by the uncertainty of just how bad the disciplinary action to come would be. "Now!" I didn't have much time to think it over. I released Alanzo, shoving myself to a standing position by pushing down on him to add a parting gesture of disrespect. I ripped the poncho liner out of my flak jacket, realizing how undisciplined I looked, collected my light machine gun, and trotted back to my squad's mortar pit.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

“Punching that piece of shit in the face, like he deserves.”

“You were sleeping on watch, weren’t you?”

“I was,” I admitted, clenching my jaw, forever proud.

“I sent him over there. I knew you were sleeping, idiot.” I didn’t respond, waiting. “Why do you think he was wearing armor? I told him to put on his Kevlar before messing with you. Fuck! It’s like I’m a puppet master pulling all the right strings! I knew you’d take a swing! I willed it into being!” he said, smiling around an oversized dip of Copenhagen snuff. I couldn’t tell if he was proud of himself for busting me asleep on watch, for manufacturing conditions that led to Alanzo getting punched, or for having an excuse to screw with me for the remainder of the field exercise. Probably all three. Corporal Wes—master drama tactician. I appreciated the subtle genius of it. In addition to the obvious amusement, I had also served as an example to the remainder of the platoon to tighten up. There was always a sacrificial lamb, and I had become the fool unknowingly marked for slaughter. Worse still, a fool unredeemed by innocence.

“What are we going to do with you?” he asked, rhetorically. I knew enough not to offer-up any solutions. Best to shut your face and work through whatever came. I deserved it, which made it easier to swallow. “To start, lock your body at Present Arms. Now hold out your SAW straight-out at arm’s length. Keep your arm perpendicular to the deck.” I followed his order. I was well versed in this game from boot camp. He observed me as the strain grew in my muscles, then he glanced at the Staff NCOs and the Platoon Commander who were watching from a distance. Unsatisfied with the visual tableau he’d created, he unclipped the Kevlar that hung from my deuce gear and placed it atop the flash suppressor on the barrel of my machine gun. He forced me to heft an extra five pounds or so, cantilevered at the distance of my extended, skinny arms. The weight immediately created fire in my delts and shoulder muscles.

"You better keep it the fuck up, Smith."

"Aye, Corporal." The worst part was not knowing how long it would last and was worsened by knowing that it was a biological fact that I would ultimately fail. I threw myself into the hazing, concentrating my entire being into denying the existence of my bodily pain and to hold my weapon and Kevlar at a perfect arm's length. My friends walked by, some laughing and shaking their heads, others making weird faces at me to disrupt my military bearing and get me in further trouble for their entertainment. I don't know how much time passed. Not much. It could have easily been three minutes as thirty. Pain stabbed at my muscles with increasing fervor until Corporal Wes next came by to venture an appraising look.

"Put your Kevlar on and lower your weapon," he said. "You're going to be an Ammo Man for the remainder of the day," he said, demoting me from my usual position of Gunner. "But while we're waiting for our next fire mission, I want you to low crawl out to both aiming stakes and adjust them."

"Aye, Corporal."

"That's not all. Put a dip of Copenhagen in, before you go." He handed me his can of snuff and watched as I pinched a healthy portion between my lip and gum-line. "That's right."

I stepped away, clipped my chin strap into place, then began low-crawling toward the first aiming stake fifty meters away, careful to drag my Kevlar's edge in the dirt as I had done in Basic Training to simulate avoiding direct fire and, more importantly, to help convey the sense that I was being adequately punished. I used my sling to drag my light machine gun along with me, careful not to flag any one behind me, but occasionally (unavoidably) flagging myself, inadvertently breaking the weapons safety rules. By the time I reached my objective, the nicotine ambushed my body, vulnerable in its chemical unfamiliarity, leaving my head plundered and

spinning. The day was by then hot. The heat coupled to the unfamiliar tobacco had my stomach turning somersaults. Once there, I made minute adjustments to the cant of the stake based on hand signals from my mortar squad. I crawled to the most distant stake a full hundred meters out from our position. Occasionally, I took a scenic route to circumnavigate clumps of cacti and brambles with thorny seeds.

“Hurry the fuck up, Smith!” Corporal Wes yelled. I marginally increased my speed immediately after he ordered such things, but quickly returned to my previous rate which is the only acceptable way to say “Fuck You” to a ranking Marine while in duty without actually mouthing the words aloud.

Once returned to the mortar pit, Corporal Wes smiled broadly. “Come on, Smith! Lighten-up! You know I had to do something, or Gunny and the Lieutenant would have come over, and it would have been worse. They probably would have fucked with all of us, and that’s when the whole damn platoon turns against you.” I nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. I was sullen, but more so at myself for having fallen asleep than at having been called-out on it.

Stan Walton, a Lance Corporal like myself at the time, rejoiced in the retelling of my fight. Before enlisting, Walton had routinely played in a Death Metal Band while studying blues guitar at the University of Memphis. He had sleeves on his forearms—tattoos that covered all available skin with endearing messages such as “Dying” scrawled laterally down his forearms, with flaming skulls embellishing the periphery of each word.

“You looked like a retarded Superman!” he teased, smiling ear to ear. “We saw everything. When you went back to wind up for a punch, the poncho liner you had tucked into your flak jacket whirled out like a goddamn cape! Ha-ha! Then you gave this ridiculous over-punch that made you look like something out of a DC comic or like some fool trying a drunk version of a

Street Fighter super move!" Everyone in the squad laughed until they couldn't breathe. He began re-enacting the scene, miming it over and over, wildly exaggerating my every move. I couldn't help but smile and laugh along with them at my idiocy.

"I just can't believe you sent over fuckin' Alanzo!" I kept saying. Obsessing over his involvement. Amazed by it.

"He's worthless. He deserved to be hit in the face." This was the general consensus of the squad and, most likely, that of the platoon. It was probably the driving reason Gunny and the Platoon Commander had decided not to get involved, tacitly approving of the desire to police our own. Letting us men work it out like men are supposed to do.

That I had been the bully in this remembrance gnawed at me, undermining my ability to think of myself as a good guy. I had beat on a weaker Marine to cover my shame. I regret. I have so many regrets.