Our Personal Community by Curtis J. Graham

It was in the news. On a bright summer day in Helmand Province, Lance Corporal Wickie did his duty and killed an insurgent. A suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into the berm of Outpost Shir Ghazay. Wickie returned fire, then applied a tourniquet to someone's wounded leg. He earned a Combat Action Ribbon, a Commendation Medal, and a Valor Device. He was promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant, and he reenlisted.

Before we deployed, Wickie told me he was getting out as soon as possible, that his contract couldn't expire fast enough. He would eat the apple, and fuck the Corps.

I first met Wickie at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was a Private First Class with a single chevron on my shoulder. I had orders to report to an office inside a warehouse, and the Corporals told Wickie to show me around. Wickie was small, with a round head and big brown eyes, like someone's kid brother. He brought me to a wall locker covered in dents and bootprints. He opened the door and pulled out a plastic cowboy hat. "Check out this bad boy," he said. He dusted it off affectionately and rapped it with his knuckles. "OSHA approved."

Outside, Wickie led me to the far corner of the lot, where rusty forklifts were parked in a row. He began to tell me about his dad. "Yeah, he was Secret Service for a while, before he got contracted for Blackwater. You know, spec ops. Assassin shit." He pulled out a camouflage wallet and opened it with a rip. He handed me a black business card with a

longhorn skull in the center. It said, *Robert P. Wickie, Blackwater Operative*, with a phone and fax number.

“There’s no address,” I said. “And why is there a fax number?” The card felt like printer paper.

“Obviously, ain’t no address,” he said, and took the card from me. He stuffed it into his wallet. “Works where he wants, when he wants, my old man.”

“How much does he make, doing that?” I said.

He took a while to answer, like he was making something up. Then he told me twenty thousand a week. “Bull crap,” I said.

Wickie sucked his finger and felt the wind. The sun was setting. “’Bout that time,” he said. We walked to the formation for dismissal, and Wickie realized he’d left his blouse out back. He was wearing a green t-shirt with a toothpaste stain shaped like a lollipop. The Corporals made him stand in his own formation for a while, facing a brick wall.

I’d been in Afghanistan three months, on an outpost called Shukvani. The base was situated in a depression surrounded by hilltops. The day Wickie arrived, he threw rocks at the windshield of the forklift I was driving and shattered it in three places. The Sergeant Major sent him away, to Outpost Shir Ghazay.

In the early months, I photographed things. I had a mattress in a metal bunk frame, a luxury, and I took a picture of it. The previous occupants had left us a mini fridge, a black loveseat filled with knife punctures, and a small TV. I took a picture of the sun setting behind an abutment, helicopters landing at night. A frozen steak grilling on wire mesh over burnt wood scraps. I uploaded the images to my Facebook

profile.

One night, a short burst of gunfire woke me up. The noise echoed around the base, then stopped. Everything was quiet. I climbed out of bed and pulled on my flak jacket and helmet. The radio crackled with chatter. “Everyone to the berm, now,” said the voice of the Sergeant Major.

Outside, dust blew in the breeze. The ground was pale blue with moonlight. We sprinted across the packed gravel of the helicopter pads. I imagined I might shoot and kill someone tonight, then I stopped imagining. I racked my bolt while I ran, chambering a round. I reached the berm and lay against the baked earth. I caught my breath. Nearby, I heard a radio. Someone spoke.

They told us that a small convoy operated by the Afghan National Army, our allies, had parked just outside the base. They were on their way to another part of the desert and needed to pass through. They had no radios, so they fired their AK-47s into the air to get our attention. We were not in danger.

I walked alone across the crushed stone, back to the tent. I lay awake on my mattress, and felt nauseated from unspent adrenaline. I listened to mice as they ran around the tent, invisible, chewing holes in things and attacking one another over food scraps. Their tiny screams. I awoke when the sun shone through a rip in the canvas by my eye. The next day, I went to the computer tent and logged into Facebook. I checked my album titled *Afghan 2013* for likes. People had commented on my pictures of our small television, the mattress, the single steak. Someone wrote, “Wow, really roughing it over there.” I deleted each of the pictures, then the album entirely.

A month passed before the big explosion happened. It felt nearby and sudden. It was like a punch of breeze, a gentle concussion. Across the desert, at this moment, Wickie was

becoming a hero.

When the deployment came to an end, we kicked the sand from our boots and flew home in cargo planes. They searched every other bag for rocks and vials of moon dust. “Leave the country how you found it,” they told us.

Back at Camp Lejeune, I found Wickie sitting in a pickup truck outside the warehouse. He’d used his deployment cash to buy a black Chevy with four rear tires. We got talking about Shir Ghazay. “No one believes me, man.” He reached up and slammed the truck door.

I’d read the official report on the Division website, and I’d heard from others who were there. Private Cody talked about how Wickie just shucked a bunch of rounds from his magazine so that later, it would look like he’d returned fire. Rucker said he saw Wickie crouching beneath a truck, covering his ears during the firefight. Wickie stood in front of me and twisted his toe in the dirt. He told me that, last week, he’d been eating a sandwich at Chick-Fil-A when someone dropped a tray of dishes. He ducked beneath the table and barricaded himself with chairs. People laughed at him, he said.

I’d been out of the Marines for six months. I grew my hair long and wore flannel shirts. I was in college studying literature, and I’d recently signed up for a course in war poetry. On my way to classes, I walked past the campus veteran’s lounge. It was an oversized closet with a computer desk and a silver mini-fridge with Capri Suns for the veterans to drink. The students inside laughed often. I never went inside. I didn’t feel like one of them. Most of them wore combat boots with blue jeans, t-shirts from the infantry units they’d been in. Their hoodies were smattered with graphics of skulls smoking cigarettes. Aces of spades, fanged dogs. They

probably had good stories, and I couldn’t think of any of my own.

In the poetry classroom, students took turns reading stanzas from Brian Turner’s “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center.” The poem was about a veteran walking through aisles and seeing weaponry in household items. The students sat in a circle, reading aloud. They were careful to pause when appropriate, to read with continuity from one line to the next. In the poem, a box tips over, and nails trickle out like shell casings from a machine gun. Paint spills and expands like a puddle of blood.

A student with a combover read a stanza about dead soldiers lying on the conveyor belt at the cash register. I listened to the description of the body. A year ago, I had been standing in a medical tent watching an Afghan civilian dying. He had fainted from blood loss. He was naked, with a catheter inserted. His toes were all crossed over themselves, and he had gashes that peeled and showed the muscle beneath. I watched the Navy Corpsmen bustle around, wearing tied-on paper scrubs over their cammies. At the far end of the tent, a little girl lay on a plywood table. She would soon have her legs removed. She would live. On the wall were x-rays of her femurs and pelvis. I saw the faint gray silhouette of her flesh on the outside, cracked white bone on the inside. She had stepped on a doormat bomb the day before. The man in the bed would die after amputation. The next day, I would drive a forklift and carry a cardboard box containing his legs, and those of the little girl, to the pit where they would be burned. I’d drop them off, and I’d smell them burning as I drove away.

In the poem, none of the shoppers see what the narrator sees. I set my photocopied page on the table because my hand was shaking. I looked around the room and was conscious of my heart beating in my ears. The students kept reading and reading. I grabbed my bag and left the classroom before it was my turn.

I walked down the hallway, touching the wall at intervals. It was cool beneath my fingertips. Billboard flyers fluttered as I walked past them, promoting frisbee tournaments and drag concerts. In the bathroom, I dry heaved. I flushed the toilet with my foot and waited in the hallway for the hour to end.

My next class was American Education. I arrived early. There were two veterans in this class, and they always came in together. The guy was bald and in his late thirties. He wore cargo pants and brown shoes. The girl wore a pink sweater that looked like shag. They didn't fit in with anyone but each other. They seemed to like it that way.

Today, we were giving presentations about our Personal Community. The guy went first, and he talked about the Army. He had a deep, loud voice. He shook a little, being at the front of the classroom. He spoke in short bursts, like a Sergeant addressing a group of young soldiers. He had to project confidence, because of his rank. He clicked through a slideshow of himself in various states of undress, posing with weaponry outside plywood buildings. The class clapped for him when he finished talking about the camaraderie he knew in Iraq.

The class was mostly queer and transgender students studying music education. The next person to speak was Skye with the green and black hair, the pierced lower lip. She spoke about her friend who leapt to his death from a parking garage. Another friend had opened the passenger door of Skye's car and rolled onto the freeway while she was driving. The people who understand Skye's post-traumatic stress, she said, are her Personal Community. Someone turned on the lights, and the classroom erupted with applause.

I stood next. I kept mine generic—my family, my friends. There was no camouflage in my slideshow pictures. I clicked through the photos as I talked. A camping trip. My uncle's '78 Nova. I imagined it wouldn't take much to make them think I was

someone, a person of valor. I'd just have to show the right pictures, ones with sand and smoke in them. I could tell them the story of how Wickie became a hero. I could talk about the sound and the blood, and the way it felt afterwards. I could be anybody. I could be Wickie. It wouldn't have mattered what I told them, really. They would still applaud for me. They might even call me a hero.

I walked down the hall after class and passed the lounge. Someone had just told a joke, and there was an explosion of laughter. I thought about leaning in and knocking on the door. I thought about stepping over the threshold, pulling up a chair. Maybe they'd tell the joke again. Maybe I could hear it, too.

New Movie Review: In "The Interpreters," Home Is No Place At All

"The Interpreters," a new documentary film by directors Sofian Khan and Andres Caballero, is a raw, emotionally vigorous, and, only too often, devastating look into the lives of Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and their efforts to flee home for the United States.

When it comes to narratives of the Forever Wars, interpreters consistently rate as some of the most important people working on the ground, frequently appearing in the novels and nonfiction works coming out of these conflicts, darting the intricately woven fabric of U.S.-focused narratives as

charismatic, generous, and occasionally suspect men of two worlds. Very rarely, if ever, do they get to speak for themselves. This film gives them that opportunity.

“The American forces…call us interpreters, not translators,” a resonant voice narrates over opening frames of desert sand, Americans on patrol, soldiers and villagers deep in conversation. “The translator, he will just translate the word, exactly. We are *interpreters*. We interpret what they say to our soldiers, and what the soldiers say to our people.”

According to the documentary, over 50,000 local nationals have served with U.S. military and coalition forces since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But these so-called invaluable assets have found themselves flung forcibly from one fire into another, having been labeled traitors by their home countries for aiding outside forces, only to find themselves unable to acquire the necessary visa to enter and resettle in the United States.

Khan and Caballero make three such men the narrative focus of “The Interpreters,” which debuted at Telluride Mountainfilm Festival during Memorial Day weekend, 2018. “Philip Morris,” a quick-witted chain-smoker from Iraq; “Mujtaba,” a protective and desperate father of three from Afghanistan; and “Malik,” an Afghan interpreter still serving with the U.S. Air Force, whose striking features are half-concealed by a keffiyeh throughout the film. They are men who, were it not for the efforts of the filmmakers who sought them out, would otherwise be names on bureaucratic paper, anonymous victims of the machinations of the U.S. government.

Phillip Morris, Mujtaba, and Malik are three representatives of a significantly larger whole, men who were promised Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) by the U.S. government in exchange for their work as interpreters. They did this work at risk to their lives and the lives of their families. “When I started working with the U.S. Army, I was trying to help them to help

us," says Phillip Morris. "We spent our lives suffering because of Saddam's regime." With the outside support and aid of his best friend, Minnesota National Guard veteran Lt. Paul Braun, Morris's SIV application moves through the doldrums of Washington bureaucracy and—after some tense back-and-forth traveling between the U.S. and Iraq—eventually sees Morris and his family safely relocated to Minnesota. According to the documentary, by law, the application and approval process should take no more than nine months. Morris's takes four years.

Were it in Hollywood's Midas hands, "The Interpreters" would be made as a kind of filmic victory lap with Morris as the only subject, a golden testimonial to the U.S. military's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and the generosity extended to interpreters by our government. Of the three subjects in the film, Phillip Morris is the resounding success story, and certainly carries the bulk of the narrative. But what Khan and Caballero have done—smartly, and well—is avoid the gilded trap almost entirely. They choose not to rest on the laurels of Phillip Morris's story alone, and instead show a range of experiences that are far more indicative of what it means to be an interpreter marked for death while waiting, interminably, for a promise made by a foreign government to be upheld.

In Mujtaba's case, the waiting becomes impossible, and he flees the country with his wife and children. After arriving in Turkey, Mujtaba seeks out a smuggler who can take him and his family to Greece. In their desperate attempt to cross the Aegean Sea, the small smugglers' boat capsizes, and Mujtaba's wife and two of their three young children drown.

Following their rescue at sea, Mujtaba and his son are returned to Turkey. Now refugees, they are forced to try and negotiate the SIV application process while simultaneously avoiding deportation. Mujtaba is adamant in his belief that

his wife and two children are still alive, and enlists the help of a volunteer from a refugee organization to look for them. It's a painful thing to watch, knowing what Mujtaba is risking by living in denial and extending his time in Turkey because of it. The longer he stays behind to look for his family, the less tenable his refugee status becomes, and if his SIV is not approved, Mujtaba and his young son will be forced to return to Afghanistan.

It is a life lived between impossible choices, every one of which is likely to end in some degree of tragedy. Mujtaba eventually receives approval from the State Department to continue with the SIV application process. The approval, unfortunately, comes two months after his wife and two children drowned in the Aegean. He continues to refuse to go anywhere without them.

Throughout the film, American voices—both military and civilian—maintain what is (or should be) abundantly clear to anyone watching the film: Iraqi and Afghan interpreters are service members of U.S. and coalition forces, and they are being abandoned. It is an ongoing injustice, an ugly stain not only on the U.S. military, but the government that sent those Americans into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

Journalist George Packer, who appears in the film, authored one of the most significant contributions to the conversation surrounding interpreters, SIVs, and America's responsibility toward the people it enlisted to help fight its endless wars in 2007. Packer's *New Yorker* piece, *Betrayed*, drew back the curtain on what was already a messy issue at the time. Reading it eleven years later, one can easily imagine seeing Malik, Mujtaba, and Phillip Morris's names in place of those like Othman, Laith, and Ali, given how similar their stories are, the events and struggles of earlier years repeating themselves *ad infinitum* with each generation of interpreters looking for a way out. It could just as easily be Malik on camera in Afghanistan telling us what Laith told Packer in Iraq so many

years ago: “Sometimes, I feel like we’re standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die.”[1]

In the film, Packer—who reinforces the importance of interpreters in these ongoing conflicts—attempts to draw a line between past and present by referencing the unofficial evacuations from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War and the interpreters being left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan today: “For some Americans, their finest hour in Vietnam was at the very end, and I wondered if something like that was happening in Iraq—were people organizing some kind of exodus for their Iraqi contacts? It wasn’t as clear-cut a situation. But if you’re an Iraqi who’s gotten a death threat, it doesn’t matter.”

When the Americans began their own gradual exodus in 2011, Morris knew he faced an uncertain future. “I told [Lt. Paul] Braun, I told him, ‘When you leave, what’s going to happen to me?’”

In the case of Malik, another Afghan interpreter and the third subject of the film, that abandonment is a very real life-or-death issue. A marked man (his sixteen-year-old brother was beaten for information regarding Malik’s whereabouts), Malik is forced to move his family from house to house and never shows his face out of doors. The film follows him as he continues to serve as an interpreter while he waits on a response to his SIV application.

Malik holds to his belief in America’s mission in Afghanistan despite knowing that he cannot stay to help rebuild his country when and if we leave. He works diligently under the pall that is the outstanding threat on his life: “As I go to my work location,” he says, “I won’t take the same taxi, the same bus, and I won’t take the same gate every day. Daesh, Talibs, Al Qaeda…if they find out that I’m still presently working with the U.S. Air Force in Kabul, they may get me, and they’ll kill me.”

The SIV program for Iraqi interpreters was enacted in 2008, but stopped accepting new applications in September 2014, leaving tens of thousands of people—interpreters and their families—in the lurch and forcing them to go through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for resettlement, to little to no success.[2] The same SIV program was extended to Afghan interpreters in 2009 (the Afghan Allies Protection Act) and is still active, but the number of applicants accepted dwindles with every passing year. According to Human Rights First: "As of July 2017, over 11,000 Afghan principal applicants and 13,000 of their family members are still waiting at some point in the application phase."[3]

In the end, too many people are being forced to fight over too few visas—for those principle applicants and their families, for example, a grand total of 3,500 SIVs have been allocated for fiscal year 2018.

"The Interpreters" is a visually striking and narratively incisive investigation into a human rights issue that is as long and convoluted as the Global War on Terror itself. Interspersed with cell phone camera footage throughout, it is very much a documentary of the moment, immediate and jarring, and the stakes are all too real. Any faults are few and far between, a roughness in the editing that does little to take away from the effectiveness of the whole.

In a film full of emotionally resonant scenes, the one that arguably strikes the strongest chord is also the most subdued, the most well-earned: late in the film, having just watched Phillip Morris reunite with his family only to hear Trump extoll the virtues of the Muslim Ban seconds later, one feels braced for the worst. It's impossible to forget, after all, that while throngs of protesters outside John F. Kennedy Airport chant "No hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here," that Mujtaba's wife and children remain lost to the sea.

But then we see Malik, in 2017. A long white line at the

bottom of the screen illustrates the amount of time it took the U.S. government to grant him his SIV. It is a freedom moment, a cause for joy, as much as it is a long pause that carries the weight of six long years of mortal uncertainty. We see Malik, and his quiet reveal reminds those of us on the outside looking in that a face is just a face, except when it is a target.

Malik and his family arrive in America in early 2017, just under the wire of Trump's initial ban. His success is nothing short of a statistical miracle: between January and April 2018, only thirty-six Iraqi interpreters and their families were admitted into the United States.[4]

Khan and Caballero have made a landmark documentary, a film that is by turns devastating, uplifting, enraging, and only too timely: as of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States has voted to uphold Trump's Muslim ban, sparking renewed outrage among American citizens and recalling the most inhumane of Supreme Court decisions past. Having watched "The Interpreters," I can only wonder what thoughts are on Phillip Morris's mind. Is Malik at risk of being deported? How is Mujtaba—still a refugee in Turkey at risk of being deported back to Afghanistan—contending with this latest in a long series of setbacks?

Because of the Supreme Court's decision, it stands to reason that by this time next year, thirty-six Special Immigrant Visas will seem like a lofty goal.

Early in the film, Malik says, "I hope that they won't forget what I do for them." Facing away from the camera, he looks out across the American base in Kabul, his body silhouetted between an aircraft hangar and a broad swath of dusty blue sky, tracking a single C-130 as it flies up and over the sun-bleached mountains in the distance. In that moment, Malik could be any one of the thousands of interpreters left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan—men still biding their borrowed time

behind threadbare keffiyehs in the hot sun, waiting for a piece of paper to decide their fate.

[1] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/26/betrayed-2

[2] https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194

[3] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/afghan-special-immigrant-visa-program

[4] https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194

New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You've been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,
chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over
like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams
smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.
The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond
the reach of ready palms.
A single leaf rests
on your cheek.
Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week
after our mailman’s son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie’s haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,

rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,
thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.
The lone sibling
stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother
lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith’s armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle
the graceful hum of atonement.

William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children
replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.

Interview With Will Mackin, Author of Bring Out the Dog

Guest Interviewer Peter Molin of *Time Now* interviews U.S. Navy veteran Will Mackin. Mackin’s work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times Magazine.* His

story "*Kattekoppen*" was selected by Jennifer Egan for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2014,* and his essay about being an extra on Breaking Bad, published in *GQ*, was nominated for an American Society of Magazine Editors "Ellie" award. Mackin's debut collection of short stories, *Bring Out the Dog*, is on sale now.

Describe the path that led to you joining Naval Special Warfare? What were your thoughts and impressions of the SEALs when you first joined them? At what point did you feel you truly belonged?

MACKIN: I volunteered, interviewed, screened, then went through direct support selection, which is nowhere near as grueling as what the operators/SEALs go through. Most SEALs were personable one-on-one, but I found them to be very insular as a group. I never felt like I truly belonged.

From "Kattekoppen": "The variety of ideas among soldiers developed into a variety of ideas among units, which necessitated an operational priority scheme. As SEAL Team Six, we were at the top of that scheme. Our ideas about the war were the war." How are SEALs different from soldiers in line-units? What motivates them and what's important to them? What were you surprised to learn about the SEALs, as individuals and as a collective fighting force?

MACKIN: The main thing that differentiated our unit from "straightleg" units was our budget. We had a lot of money to throw around. There was also a genuine desire on the part of the operators to fight, kill, and vanquish, and absolutely zero tolerance for administrative bullshit. This would sometimes bite us in the ass because no one ever wanted to plan. What we lost in lack of planning, however, was often made up for in execution. As individuals I was surprised to find those who I wouldn't have expected to be SEALs. In other words, guys who didn't fit the mold of the tattooed, bearded, Harley-riding Alpha male. They were just normal dudes with

this ridiculous and well-disguised drive.

In the Acknowledgements to Bring Out the Dog you write, "To rejects of all shapes and sizes," but also "And last but not least, a sacred debt to the men and women of Naval Special Warfare Development Group." What lies behind those two sentiments, which seem to express contrasts. What specifically do you owe DEVGRU?

MACKIN: I was assigned to Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU, from 2006-2011. Our mission was to research and develop tactics, techniques, and procedures for operators in the field. I'd deploy with those operators to test whatever gadgetry or tactics we'd come up with. Meanwhile I'd fill in on some operational requirement, like forward air control. I've always felt an affinity with the fuckups and rejects who populate the entire spectrum of military activity. Some just hide it better than others.

What are your thoughts about movies such as American Sniper, Lone Survivor, and 0-Dark-Thirty? How did you try to differentiate your take on the SEALs from other works that celebrate or castigate them, or treat them as heroes, barbarians, or traumatized victims?

MACKIN: I purposefully didn't watch any of those movies, nor read any of the books, because I didn't want to think my way around them. Character-wise, I tried to stick with the guys who surprised me by being SEALS, those who were able to sidestep the everyday macho nonsense without losing an ounce of respect.

Who and what were you reading before you joined the military? Were you writing? Did you publish or attempt to publish anything? Were you reading and writing while in the military?

MACKIN: The first book I loved was "The Outsiders" by SE Hinton, which I read in the sixth grade. As part of our lesson my English teacher brought in a boom box and had us listen to

The Who's "Baba O'Riley" start to finish. She then related that song to the plight of the Greasers. I've been hooked on reading and writing ever since.

While in Navy I read mostly nonfiction and I wrote in my journal. I published columns for McSweeney's Internet Tendency and The Believer ("Dispatches from Iraq" and "Nutrition is a Force Multiplier", respectively) under the pseudonym Roland Thompson.

When, where, and why did you begin working on the stories in Bring Out the Dog? As you began to write, what attracted you to fiction, rather than memoir? Who or what helped most to develop you as a writer and reach your full potential? When did you realize the stories were getting good?

MACKIN: I started writing the book in 2011 after I transferred from DEVGRU to the Navy ROTC unit at the University of New Mexico. I gravitated toward fiction because it allowed me to better explore the anxiety that I'd felt during certain real-life situations. Those who really helped me were George Saunders, my friend and mentor since we met at a writing retreat in 1998; my editor Andy Ward, who gave me enough rope to hang myself; and Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at the New Yorker, who never failed to set the bar really high. I knew when a story was getting good when I'd derive energy from it and not the other way around.

What was the kernel of the first story that made it into the final selection, both in terms of its relation to things that happened in real life and when you began to write about it? Which story in Bring Out the Dog was hardest to write and why?

MACKIN: We lost a dog on the first night of my second deployment to Afghanistan. The circumstances behind that loss and its fallout informed *Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night*. The cat-head shaped licorice and the seven-

foot tall Dutchman, both featured in *Kattekoppen*, were real. I wrote *The Lost Troop* over a long weekend in April of 2017. Otherwise every story took forever to finish, with lots of iterations and getting stuck. The hardest story to write didn't make it into the book.

One of the recurring characters in your story is Hal, the SEAL team chief who expresses very strong ideas about tactical competence, unit discipline, and team-culture fit. What is complicated about Hal, what is simple, what is ambiguous, and what is problematic?

MACKIN: Hal is a combo of five or six real guys, named after the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. What makes him complicated/ambiguous is his love for his men versus his love of the war. What makes him problematic is his ego. The only simple thing about Hal is his mullet.

Many Bring Out the Dog stories describe a new team member or potential new member striving for membership and acceptance. What attracts you to this type of story?

MACKIN: It wasn't so much an attraction as a default. Aside from providing built-in conflict, that striver was me.

From "Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night":

"The stars were so bright we could have gone unaided. Still, night vision afforded certain advantages. I saw ice crystals trailing off the drone's wingtips, meteor shower in the ionosphere, plasma connecting unnamed constellations. Down in the valley I observed wind, not just playing on the corn, but the actual movement of air in evergreen loops. The sky was jade, the faraway mountains aluminum, the river like something you'd discover out the window of a time machine."

What is the story of writing this paragraph (which I chose almost at random)? What's the real-life origin? What's the

literary genesis?

MACKIN: The real-life origin was me stopping to look through my goggles while on patrol. The literary genesis, I'd say, occurred in the space between my eye and the night vision screen, or reality and its projected image, how those things were different but also the same.

What feedback about Bring Out the Doghave you received from members of the SEAL community? Are you worried that it might not be well received?

MACKIN: Most guys say they like it, but I think they're lying. I had to stop worrying about it or I would've gone insane.

Check out an excerpt from Mackin's Bring Out the Dog Here and Buy it Here

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New Fiction: The Lost Troop by Will Mackin

We had a dry spell in Logar. It was December and the weather was dog shit, so a degree of slowness was expected. But this went beyond slowness. It was like peace had broken out and nobody'd told us. Nights we'd meet in the ops hut for the mission brief. We'd tune the flat screens to the drones—over Ghazni, Orgun, and Khost—only to find all three orbiting within the same cloud. We'd listen to static on the UHF. We'd stare at phones that never rang. We could have left it all behind, walked off the outpost into the desert, never to be seen again. We could have created the Legend of the Lost Troop. Instead, we chose some place where we imagined the enemy might be hiding—a compound on the banks of the Helmand

River, a brake shop in downtown Marjah, a cave high in the Hindu Kush mountains—and we ventured out there, hoping for a fight.

I thought of the Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, who, when their island fell to the Americans, didn't know that it had fallen. Who, not long after, didn't hear that A-bombs had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that their emperor had admitted defeat. Those soldiers hid in tunnels, on Iwo, for weeks after the war was over. For months, even. For them, the fight continued in those dark and narrow spaces, until they ran out of food. Until they drank the last of their water. Until, absent the means and/or the will to take their own lives, they climbed out of ratholes into the sun, to wander warm fields of lava rock in surrender.

I wondered if, one night, we'd drop out of the starry sky in our blacked-out helicopters and land near a walled compound in the desert. We'd run toward that compound with the rotor wash at our backs, through the dust cloud that had been kicked up by our arrival and out the other side. Through a crooked archway in the compound's outer wall, we'd enter the courtyard. And there, among the fig trees and goats, we'd find an American tourist with a camera slung around his neck. Having served his time in Afghanistan, our fellow American had gone home, fallen in love, got married, and had the two bow-haired daughters now hiding behind his legs. Maybe he'd wanted his girls to see how brightly the stars shone in the desert. Maybe he'd wanted to share with them all the strange places the Army had sent him, way back when. I imagined that he'd look over at us and then say, with understanding and remorse, "Dudes, war's over."

But, as far as we knew, it wasn't. Therefore, we met in the ops hut every night at eight. In the absence of new intelligence, we'd review old intelligence. We'd double-check dead ends and reexamine cold cases. Finding nothing mission-worthy, Hal, our troop chief, would open the floor to

suggestions. It'd be quiet for a while, as everyone thought.

"Come on," Hal would say.

He'd be standing in the middle of the room. We'd be sitting on plywood tables, balancing on busted swivel chairs, leaning against the thin walls. The drones, orbiting inside moonlit cumulonimbi, would beam their emerald visions back to us. Lightning would strike twenty miles away and the UHF would crackle. I, for one, didn't have any good ideas to offer.

One night, Digger spoke up: "Who remembers that graveyard decorated like a used-car lot, out in Khost?"

I raised my hand, along with a few others.

"I think we might need to go back there," Digger said.

The graveyard in question was on the northern rim of a dusty crater. We'd patrolled just to the south of it, a few weeks prior, on an easterly course. The "used-car lot" decorations were plastic strands of multicolored pennants. One end of each strand was tied high in an ash tree that stood at the center of the graveyard. The other ends were staked into the hard ground outside the circle of graves. The graves themselves were piles of stone, shaped like overturned rowboats. I couldn't recall the name of our mission that night, its task and purpose, its outcome. But that graveyard stuck with me. I remembered the pennants snapping in the wind, dust parting around the graves like a current.

Digger, who'd been closer to the graveyard than I was, thought that the graves had looked suspicious. He thought they resembled old cellar doors—the type, I imagined, you'd find outside a farmhouse in Nebraska and run to from darkened fields as a tornado was bearing down. Digger postulated that at least one of those graves was made of fake stones.

"Styrofoam balls," he suggested to us in the ops hut, "painted

to look like stones, then glued to a plywood sheet." Digger though that, if we sneaked into that graveyard and pulled open that hypothetical door, we might discover a Taliban nerve center, a bomb factory, or an armory. Digger had no idea what could be down there, but he'd got a weird feeling walking past that graveyard that night.

"Good enough for me," Hal said. "Let's make it happen."

We rode our helicopters—two dual-rotor, minigun-equipped MH-47s—northeast from Logar. We sat in mesh jump seats, across from one another, roughly ten per side. The MH-47, at altitude, stabilized like a swaying hammock. Lube, dripping from the crankcase, smelled like bong water. Beyond the open ramp at the back end of the tubular cargo bay, we watched the night pass by like the scenery in an old movie.

The 47s dropped us off in a dry riverbed, three miles east of the graveyard. We patrolled westward under heavy clouds. The clouds carried a powerful static charge, while the earth remained neutral. Sparkling dust hovered, and through night vision I saw my brothers, walking with me, as concentrations of this dust. All I heard, as we walked, was my own breathing.

We connected with the crater's easternmost point, then walked in a counterclockwise direction along its rim until we reached the graveyard. We found the pennants torn and tattered, the ash tree diseased, the graves crooked. None of the stones were made of Styrofoam. Not one of the graves was an elaborately disguised entrance to a nefarious subterranean lair. Though, upon closer inspection, I noticed that the dust that I'd remembered parting around the graves, like a current, actually funnelled into the spaces between the stones. In fact, it seemed to be getting sucked into those spaces, as though there were some sort of void below the graves, which lent a measure of credence to Digger's theory.

From the top of one grave, I selected a smooth, round stone,

about the size of a shot-put ball, and I heaved it into the crater.

Joe, our interpreter, was right there to scold me. “I would expect such disrespectful behavior from the Taliban,” he said, “but not from you.”

Joe was Afghani. His real name was Jamaluddein. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1980, he’d escaped to the U.K. with his parents; he was twelve years old at the time. Now, as a middle-aged man, he’d returned to help save his country from ruin. He wore armor on missions, but he carried no weapons. His interpretations of our enemy’s muttered words were always clear and precise. He had a bad habit of walking two steps behind me on patrol and closing that distance whenever we made contact with the enemy. Thus, I’d seen conflagrations reflected in the smudged lenses of Joe’s glasses. I’d heard him whisper prayers between sporadic detonations. His voice, with its derived British accent and perpetual tone of disappointment, exactly matched that of my beleaguered conscience.

So I jumped into the crater after the stone. I found it at the end of a long, concave groove in the dust. Turning toward the crater’s rim, I saw my boot prints in the dust, descending the slope, each as perfect as Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon. On my way back up to the graveyard, I was careful not to disturb those tracks, or the flawless groove that had been carved by the stone. I wanted these things to remain, I suppose, in the event that an asteroid should slam into the planet, sloughing away the atmosphere, boiling the seas, and instantly ending life on earth. Our troop—asphyxiated, desiccated, frozen—would lie scattered about the graveyard, preserved in the seamless void of space forever, or at least until other intelligent beings came along and discovered us. Perhaps because those beings existed as thin bars of blue light, incapable of offensive or defensive action, they’d puzzle over our armor, our rifles, our grenades. They’d

wonder, especially, why we'd worn such things to a graveyard. There would be no mystery, however, regarding the boot prints in the crater, since they'd know, from the boots still on my feet, that I was the one who'd left them. Furthermore, they'd deduce, from the groove, that I'd descended into the crater after a stone. Only one particular stone could've cut that groove. And they might find it, among a thousand others, right where I'd returned it, atop the grave, just moments before the asteroid struck the earth. But none of that would explain why the stone had been in the crater in the first place. "Did one of them throw it?" the curious bars of blue light might ask themselves.

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Interview with Jay Baron Nicorvo

Jay Baron Nicorvo's novel, The Standard Grand (St. Martin's Press), was picked for IndieBound's Indie Next List, *Library Journal*'s Spring 2017 Debut Novels Great First Acts, and named "New and Noteworthy" by *Poets & Writers*. He's published a poetry collection, *Deadbeat* (Four Way), and his nonfiction can be found in *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Believer*. You can find out more about Jay at www.nicorvo.net.

Interviewer:

We must first start with the sentences.

Some samples from your opening (check out more here):

"Specialist Smith gunned the gas and popped the clutch in the early Ozark morning. Her Dodge yelped, slid to one side in the blue dark, then shot fishtailing forward. The rear tires burned a loud ten meters of smoking, skunky rubber out front of the stucco ranch house on Tidal Road."

"She sped out of the hotdamn Ozarks through the Mark Twain National Forest. She threw her ringing phone—Travy—out the window and into the parched summer. It smithereened in the rearview. She used her teeth to pull off her wedding band and engagement ring. Spat them into her hand and shoved them into the trash-crammed ashtray, mall-bought diamond solitaire be damned."

T. Geronimo Johnson, author of *Hold It Till It Hurts* and *Welcome to Braggsville*, once argued that writers should consider the paragraph a sentence rather than limit themselves to movement between two individual periods (my rough—very rough—paraphrase). Your novel sparks from the first clause to the last, and each paragraph feels carefully crafted, as if itself a sentence. Can you give us some perspective on your syntactical choices?

Nicorvo:

Thanks, and I couldn't agree more with you and Mr. Johnson. I've got zero patience for shoddy craftsmanship. The neat masonry of reading in English, left to right, row after row, is a bit like brickwork. And writing is little more than masonry. Stacking, unstacking, restacking. If the basic building block is the word, than the syllable – where we're able to isolate the music, the meter, of each word – is my

mortar. Sounds of words reverberating off one another, that holds my sentences together. The syntactical choices I make are often musical. If a word doesn't sound right, even if it has the right meaning, it's got to go.

And it sounds fussy, but I'm not satisfied with the perfectly uniform bricks you get at the big box stores. I like a flaw. Give me those old terracotta bricks cut by hand, no two alike. They've got a warmth, a life, a history and a heft you can feel in the hand. Sure, they're more brittle and difficult to work with – they smithereen – but that's part of the satisfaction. Each sentence, like each brick, should be radiant, alive, tell a story and have its own weight. No two alike. And so, too, each paragraph. That's how you get – ultimately and after interminable years – to the place where you've built, brick by brick, not just a whole novel but a whole world. But that thing I said earlier? That writing is little more than masonry? That's some bullshit right there.

Interviewer:

Your novel is one of the first to directly connect the experience of two American wars—Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq—both through the lens of establishment outsiders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Not coincidentally, anxiety runs through each page and each word, and the reader is often rewarded with poignant paragraphs like the following:

"She loved being on the road, when the road wasn't going to explode beneath her. She gave it more gas. Milt leaned back as the van accelerated—slowly, surely—and reached the speed limit, 55. There she coasted. She was driving like an old lady. What's state motto was Live Free or Die? Freedom was like war that way: if it didn't make you nervous, you weren't truly engaged in it. Driving, she felt anxious, she felt

alive.”

What drew you to this subject and these points of view?

Nicorvo:

Well, I suppose I’m an outsider and I consider myself anti-establishment. I’m a civilian who wrote a war novel – though it’s really a post-war novel – so my perspective has to be farther from the frontline. This has its drawbacks. Harder for my point of view to have the immediacy – never mind the moral authority – of Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*, or Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood*. These are breathtaking novels by novelists who’ve had fingers on combat-weight triggers, and their stories are close-quarters. But every position has its disadvantages. The trick is to be aware of them, and then use that difference to possible advantage.

As an outsider, maybe I’m more inclined toward the long view, from the homeland, but also historically. I can’t help but see the invasion of Iraq – Afghanistan is different – through the warped lens of Vietnam, but through, too, as many other conflicts as I’m able. Civilians should feel obliged to read more about war, and some of them to try to write war. The author of the *Iliad* was a blind man. *The Red Badge of Courage* was written by a reporter. *A Farewell to Arms* is the work of an ambulance driver. *Tree of Smoke* was conceived by a hippy burnout. *The Sympathizer* came from an academic.

The late Tom Hayden is a bit of an easy target, a peacenik Freedom Rider and the second of Jane Fonda’s three husbands, but there’s a quote of his I think about a lot: “If you conduct a war, you shouldn’t be in charge of narrating it.” I take this to mean that those who conduct our wars should be doing the narrating, but not *all* of the narrating, and I don’t believe anyone should be in charge of who gets to tell a story. We’ve got no shortage of soldier writers. Oddly enough,

though, they're mostly dudes in my demographic: white working-class. I say oddly. One of the most beautiful things about the American military is how the institution takes in all kinds – though it likes the poor kind best – and puts them on firm but equal footing. I can't think of a more meritocratic American institution – for men, at least, though the women are securing their rightful place – and in my mind that makes it ideally American (even if the real America is about how best to subtly tip the scales in your favor).

So I'm an outsider in some ways, not in others. I'm right up there on the emotional frontlines, for one. I was diagnosed with PTSD about a month before my agent sold the damn novel. I like to joke that novel writing – and trying to publish a novel – caused my traumatic stress. But the hard truth is that I've suffered from anxiety overload (as you so perfectly put it) all throughout my adulthood, induced by my childhood sexual abuse, something I kept largely secret for 35 years. Phil Klay's got a killer essay, "After War, a Failure of the Imagination," that closes the gap between traumas. A funny thing about trauma – haha. The experience of it is absolutely singular. No two alike. You can never know my trauma. But the after-the-fact symptoms of trauma are all shared. That tourniquet chest. Those quick sipping breaths. The feeling like you've been here before and will, for fucking ever, be here again. Our emotional fallout is communal. You can't know my trauma, but you can share my anxiety, because anxiety is contagious. Once I can overcome my anxiety – which is not the same as having no anxiety – then I can tell you the story of my trauma. In my experience, that's one of the hardest things a person can learn to do, never mind do well.

Interviewer:

Irish novelist John Banville once said, "the world is not real

for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language." D.H. Lawrence famously wrote at length about the dramatic divide between the didactic and art. Yet, with a novel like yours, I feel "reality" and "language," are not necessarily mutually exclusive (or the former the product of the latter exclusively). Further, you have written powerful non-fiction about the United States Code of Military Justice, Bowe Bergdhal, Trump, and the history of democracy. Particular political wrongs and historical injustices seem to motivate your writing. What, then, are your thoughts on the relationship between politics and art?

Nicorvo:

I don't really recognize those dichotomies: reality, language; art, politics. In my fiction, I'm trying to make a recognizable reality using language. I'm doing the opposite in my nonfiction: trying to make reality recognizable using language. I'm not someone who believes all art is political, all politics is artistry. Music can be apolitical, I think. But writing, as an art form, has to be political. There's no way around it; it's guilt by association. They both traffic in the same medium: words. Novels and laws require nouns and verbs. The US Constitution isn't a piano concerto or saxophone solo.

Maybe because I grew up poor – sometimes on welfare, sometimes off – I've long thought the system was rigged. But one thing I learned pretty early was that command of language is a way to overcome some of the trappings of that system. Because our language shapes our reality. This, in part, determines the resistance to political correctness. When people try to shape our language, it quickly comes to feel like mind control. It's authoritarian. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" required for immersion into a good story might more accurately be classified as a willing surrender to authority.

Reading is submission to mind control. And some people can't take it. The reader gives up his inner self for a time – in what should be understood, in this egocentric age, as nothing short of heroism. When you read, you allow the writer, in this case me, to take up residence in your head. While you read this, your thoughts don't exist apart from mine, as I've here expressed them. This is, in part, what gives the word of God, as captured in the Bible, its control. Most of us have only a tentative grasp on the extent of this power – here's where politics comes in – but all of us feel its sway.

In my writing, what I'm aiming to do is to honor the trust you've given me – the leap of faith you're willing to take – by choosing to read what I've written. The way I best know how to hold up my end of this bargain is by making the effort to write about our most difficult issues – the wrongs and injustices – in a way that doesn't try to put them in a good light or a bad light but in a true light. If I do, you can tell, because the light hums.

Interviewer:

A lengthy author's note in the back of *The Standard Grand* lists a wide variety of source material. Your epigraph includes a quote from a Josh Ritter, a contemporary country singer. You have told me that particular television shows like *Rectify* inspired moments in *The Standard Grand*. Not all artists are comfortable acknowledging the collaborative nature of an artistic project. Some would resist lumping different mediums together into fiction. Obviously, you have no anxiety of influence. How did you come to this expansive (and refreshing!) view of the art of the novel?

Nicorvo:

Failure. I’m a firm believer in failure. And debt. One of the dumbest things F. Scott Fitzgerald ever wrote, in *The Last Tycoon*, was that “there are no second acts in American lives.” That reflects the backwards thinking of someone born into excessive privilege, where there’s no where to go but down. Look no further than the White House. America, where our pariahs become president. I’ve found that there’s nothing more expansive than failure if, ultimately, it’s overcome. And a debt repaid offers significant gratification. But if you succumb to your failings, if you’re overwhelmed by your debts, well, there’s nothing more isolating and suffocating. An awful feeling, getting choked out by the world. Failure imparts humility. Hopefully, it’s balanced out by a dram or two of success now and then. Otherwise, you’re reduced to sniveling, that or the tortured thinking of the conspiracy theorist or the lone gunman. If you’re lucky and stubborn enough to meet some eventual success after multiple failures – *The Standard Grand*, my first published novel, is the fourth one I’ve finished – I think you’re instilled with an increased capacity for gratitude. Because I have a great deal of influence anxiety – maybe more than my fair share – but it’s overshadowed by my gratitude. We vastly overestimate our independence. Especially in this country. And among writers, it’s no big secret that we take a great deal, knowingly and unknowingly, from everyone and everything around us, in order to finish what me make. I wanted to go on record acknowledging that I am not owed. I owe.

New Poetry by J. Scott Price

Captain Who?

That gut-black October night, a security patrol set out:

a platoon of Afghans

and two of us. They,

cloaked in toughness; we,

in mountains of gear, humped

an unseen base plate of irony

that chuckled, unheard.

Since the first tribes found common ground

with naming a common foe

and Allies first align side-by-side,

the dog sniff test begins– the unuttered,

unmetered tango that discretely discerns

the order on the Totem of Men.

Let's see what they can do, the closemouthed metronome

for the mission first cadence thrummed on the drums-of-tough.

Respect doled only

to those standing

when the pounding is complete.

Our security objective below, the key terrain far too far above,

we must sweep the elevated ridgeline for threats.

Afghan comrades lead us up

and up

and up

that mountain until we

could take no more. Wheezing

far from the top, we stop, defeated,

conceding victory in this unavowed war.

They smirked in the dark, unseen. We, it seemed,

were merely piles of panted breath,

exhaling vanquished pride.

At this critical point of concession, something suspicious up ahead in the dark.

Few mutual words to discern the threat, only frantic mimicry

of Charades-Gone-Bad to help:

but we all agree,

my NODs are needed now.

Leaning forward to green-light detect, I find no threat. But

with strained abdominals abused

and glutes pulling up the rear too loose

we are all ambushed by the unexpected—

a jarring, yet-almost-polite, puny

poof.

Not a valley rumbling show of force that loosens all inside

but a dry, mundane-almost-nothingness

that takes the Afghans by surprise.

The Lion of Ghazni

they dubbed one of my friends

in awe of his courage and his heart,

and I secured my place on their Totem

as the anointed

Captain Fart.

B Hut

“Brand Vision: Making the best air conditioner in the world.

Brand Mission: Making life better.”

Chigo Air Conditioning Co., LTD

Chigo heats, Chigo cools

with labored breath that soothes

ambient air despite never taming

the beastly space inside the plywood shell

where 12 guys retreat from the daily 15 hour duties

that composes their yearlong song with

just one more mundane or horrifying measure.

There are melodies of boredom and harmonies of fear

and it serenades to unrestful-sleep the

12 guys crammed into their plywood shell,

smaller than a suburbanite’s play room.

There’s plenty of opportunity to partake

in olfactory unease, and plenty of opportunity

to never really be at ease.

Stacked high and hard against the walls, poncho liner
privacy offers only illusions of solitude
and enough space to retreat into that illusion
just to be somewhere else during sleep.

Steadfast Chigo, their toolbox-sized comrade
high on the wall remains unnoticed
unless deemed malingering.
Chigo will usually be abandoned ,
unthought-of when the song is done.

But one fated Chigo has a terminal task to perform,
never envisioned during engineering,
nor tested during production, for
aimed with a rock and Allah’s will,
released with a wind up clock,
a discarded Soviet rocket rains
through plywood
and Chigo braces, unmoved
to shear off a detonator

that would have ended the song

in cacophony instead of a story that begins,

“You ain’t gonna believe this shit…”

New Poetry: “What Great Grief Has Made the Civilian Mute” by Jennifer Murphy

To watch soldiers load into planes on television
To ignore veterans who manage to make it home

To cry out when an airman murders four of your friends
To never question the valiance of combatants

To have visions of your father stabbing you to death
To lose your sight in vodka and cigarettes

To flee the western night for that big bright eastern city
To discover there is no such thing as relief in escape

To forget the names of the slain from your hazy youth
To remember in excruciating detail the site of their wounds

To learn there is nothing you can do to raise the dead
To spend your life writing the killed into existence

To read the greatest fear for men is being embarrassed
To understand that for women it’s being murdered

To be the only female in the room of camouflaged men
To befriend the lonely fighter in the city of civilians

To love a Marine who became a decorated firefighter
To lose him in the North Tower that blue September

To watch soldiers load into planes on television
To embrace veterans who manage to make it home

for Deborah, Amy, Melissa, and Heather Anderson
and Captain Patrick "Paddy" Brown

Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Maj. Adam Weece, 3rd CR PAO, 1st Cav. Div.

New Fiction: "Old Wounds" by Therese Cox

The YouTube walkthroughs have names, like action movies or episodes of a serial TV show. *Judgment Day. Suffer With Me. Fallen Angel. Old Wounds*. If you were playing, you'd fire up your console, scroll through the list, pick your game, and go. But Tracey Knox doesn't play. She's only here to watch. One quick click and SchoolofHardKnox is leading the way through the war.

She's watched them all, headphones on, grinding through anti-tank fire, lobbing grenades at ditches, clamoring for weapons, hoping there'd be one, just one, with a voice-over and a *howzit goin'*. How else is she going to hear Geoff's voice?

Flat Michigan vowels with those U.P. dips and stalls: a sound she doesn't get a lot of in New York. She's spent hours patrolling these deserts. It's only grown worse since she lost her job at the architecture firm. There's nowhere she has to be at 9 a.m. No project manager to look over her shoulder. No more designing cat fences for rich ladies in Connecticut. She is thirty-nine and can do as she likes.

There are thousands of views. Who was Geoff making these walkthroughs for? He didn't do voice-overs, didn't narrate, never popped up mid-scene in a Fugazi t-shirt, flashing his tats, to explain strategy. Each episode is like a movie he lived once and forgot about, one long jittery dream that Trace lives over and over.

"Old Wounds." She likes the sound of that one. He dies too soon in it but it's badass and medieval to gallop on horseback, brandishing a sword pried from a skeleton's ribcage. She clicks on the name and lets it roll.

*

It's Friday night at the Hampton Inn in DC. Tracey Knox is incumbent on a queen-sized bed, surrounded by plugs and remote controls. A screen flickers from her lap, lighting her face in flashes. Her eyes glazed, ears snug under industrial-sized headphones. She's been dressed in the same clothes for a week straight—baggy cammie trousers bought discount from the Gap, $4.98, an end-of-summer deal, and a faded Jackass t-shirt. She's skinnier than usual. All week it's been nothing but sunflower seeds and Arizona iced tea, but then, the anniversary usually has that effect. At the moment she's knee-deep in a YouTube k-hole and doesn't care who knows it. Each fresh burst of gunfire grinds her guts with a bad longing. It calls back the barrage of explosions drifting down the hall from under Geoff's bedroom door. The on-screen desert had been Geoff's playground. Virtual Sergeant Foley, a stand-in for Dad.

Tracey’s best girlfriend, Constance Lawson, is knocked up and across the room, embedded in a nest of Hampton Inn pillows. They’ve decided to do a girls’ weekend in DC. Just the two of them, like the old days, one last hurrah before Constance, now Connie, becomes an FTM, or full-time mommy.

Connie had planned everything. Two queen beds and an all-you-can-eat menu of reality TV shows and room service mocktails. Right now Connie’s reading to Tracey from an upbeat email. Connie’s writing a book about her experience of IVF, half memoir and half how-to. The future for mommy lit is apparently bright. She’s landed a slick agent on the basis of a sample paragraph and outline and is already in negotiations for a book deal for her WIP.

“What’s a W-I-P?” Tracey asks, slipping off one headphone.

“Work in Progress,” says Connie, who’s superstitious about names for unborn projects.

Tracey, for her part, has no reason to fire up her email on a weekend. She recoils at the memory of the last exchange before HR sent her the marching papers, a “reply all” that should very definitely not have been a “reply all.” Tracey nods, says it sounds promising. She switches to half-listen mode and goes back to the screen.

On her laptop, a menu of a dozen other options pop up, all listed under her brother’s screen name. She’s stopped talking to people online after a Skype with their LA office went balls-up and cost Tracey her job. She’s been living off her severance package above a tire shop in Greenpoint, buoyed by the salary of her Dutch bicycle-parts designing husband, Niels. Her job search is equal parts day-drinking, flirting with bartenders, and experimenting with the font size on her CV. If there’s a café with free wi-fi, she’s freeloaded. Whenever either of her parents, divorced of course, gets her on the phone, Tracey says the same thing: she is pursuing

other options.

“Do you think I should come up with a new name for TBD?” Connie asks.

“To be determined?”

“No, no, Trace, T-B-D. The Baby Dance. It’s what the *What to Expect When You’re Expecting to Be Expecting* book calls *sex*.”

“Why don’t you just call it *sex*?”

“Because,” Connie says, “That’s so louche.”

Connie reclines in yoga pants and places her hand on her swollen belly. She balances the phone on top and shows Tracey a new app, plugging in a set of hot pink earbuds. The app’s main feature is the frantic liquid throb of a fetal heartbeat so Connie can eavesdrop on her unborn infant. The baby, in all its amniotic fury, pounding away. It is just a cluster of nerve endings and cells and life pushing blood through its fetal chambers, *but listen to it go.* The heartbeat hypnotizes her with its systole and diastole, evidence of its miraculous, furious progress. Connie is transfixed in the dull spell, fingers slack on the edges of her iPhone, earbuds shoved in, the better to hear the back and forth of the protean sludge. Tracey tries to ignore it but Connie insists. Through the wire comes a birdlike thrum, frantic and pulsing, the life that is both part of her yet apart from her—primordial—she is life-giving—this baby-to-be, sloshing over and over just for her, the sound (she makes Tracey listen. *Listen, Trace!*) going *mama mama mama* oh god.

“But Tracey, don’t you think about it sometimes?”

Sure, Tracey thinks about it sometimes. The possibility of new life. The thing her friends are all doing, the thing she knows Niels wants. It’d be a beautiful baby: half-Dutch, half-red-blooded-American. Niels would have the kid on training wheels

in no time. She could forget about the architecture. Embrace the FTM. Make their offspring her avatar.

But Tracey Knox pursues none of those things. She unhooks herself from Connie's app and slinks back to pole position, head hunched, knees curled, itching to get back to her trance. She's not even playing the game, a level way worse, just watching virtual violence, eyes glued to the stuttering screen, explosions collapsing around her in bursts of orange and red, choppers snip-snip-snipping the sky above.

Outside the hotel room, DC lurks. Connie had come to grad school here. Tracey, dragging an art history degree behind her, had followed her out and spent a year mopping gallery floors, playing the mistress to a fastidious art buyer who lived in Dupont Circle. DC never spoke to Tracey in quite the same way it did for Connie. When Connie had first suggested it, that if they came to DC, Tracey could visit *the grave*, Tracey blanked.

"The grave," Tracey said, nodding. "Right."

As she fires up the next episode, she thinks maybe she'll look Danny up again after she gets back from DC, hit him up for a couple of cold ones and ask him more questions about what else he knows about Geoff. Now that she knows the story, or enough of the story. Maybe it's that she knows too much?

Blood and Gore Intense Violence Strong Language Suggestive Themes Mature 17+ Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Let's roll—

She adjusts the headphones so they're snug and then *wham!* she's back at the helm of the war machine, flexing assault muscles and tactical ops, leaping out of choppers as shrapnel rains from tall sheared-off buildings. Jump cuts, jittery exterior shots, implausible musculature and digitized MRAPs. Quick flash of landscape porn, desert mountains and desolate

horizons, fade in then fade out, the Ken Burns effect plus amphetamines, amplified and sped up and pumped out, life through the barrel of an assault rifle. She hijacks a chopper and mainlines that view from above—*I don't see, I fly*—then *whoosh*, she's back at ground level, hand to hand combat, slow sexy focus on metal and skin and tattoo and blood. She swims and she flies with her entourage, industrial war machine overhead in twenty parts glittering. Down below in the rubble it's all dirt and desert and fumes, the phosphorescence of foreign war, choppers rising up in clusters and scattering.

She's shooting lasers from what looks like a souped-up staple gun, exuding godlike luster in a landscape of smoke and red sand. She's busting into hideouts and blowing up bodies, dodging the splurge of vermilion enemy blood, no time even to blow on the smoking gun. Here she is no one, she is cranked up to full speed and smoothed down to her essentials—blood and muscle and armor—kicking down doors, spitting steel. She has no womb, no wounds. Tracey Knox is a killing machine, trained to close and destroy, breach and clear, dismantling all the architecture, trafficking in the invincible.

*

When Geoff Knox came back from his first deployment in Afghanistan, he was full of stories. They weren't usually what you would think of as war stories but more about things going wrong—stupid stuff, just everyday things: bad latrines and gravity-fed showers and pranks with packages. Over time the Afghan villagers had picked up certain American phrases. Sex was "up-and-down." Bombs were "bang-bang." The one word pretty much all of them knew was "killed."

One day, Geoff said, there'd been a bomb in a neighboring village. The usual shit—IED—and their interpreter—their "terp," Geoff called him—was off meeting with some village elders. So there's Geoff, asking around, trying to get a tally of the civilian dead. There was this one kid, maybe eleven or

twelve, name of Omar, who spoke some English and was trying to translate. And the kid had told Geoff, “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.”

Geoff scratched his head. “Two killed, not dead? The hell does that mean?”

Omar kept saying it. “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.” It took Geoff some time to realize that by “killed, not dead,” Omar was trying to say “hurt.” The kid didn’t know the word for “hurt.”

There’s a lesson in that now, Tracey thinks. Every wound, especially in the war, *killed* you. It’s just that some wounds left you dead, and others left you alive.

I have two siblings, Tracey Knox says. She’ll say it to this day, will say it to the end, whenever anyone asks. *I have two siblings, a sister and a brother*. One older sister: killed, not dead. One younger brother: killed, dead.

Tracey lost her brother, and her brother was in the war. At thirty-nine years old it was her saddest story. Some days it was her only story. Maybe she should just fix people in the eye and say, *My brother died in the war*. Or: *My brother was killed*? She’s always hated the passive voice, hated the linguistic gymnastics she had to do around the topic of her brother, who was dead, and it had nothing to do with just causes. He didn’t die in the war, he died during the war. And that’s as close as Tracey will ever get to telling Connie the truth.

*

After 9/11, Geoff Knox marched up to Lake Superior State University to the fold-out desk. The Army recruiter had been a bemused bruiser who, learning he had an eager fourteen-year-old kid on his hands, didn’t change much about his pitch. Geoff didn’t tell the recruiter about his big sister Tracey,

who was living in New York when it happened. The desk was busy that September.

The Soho firm had been Tracey's first job after architecture school. She'd landed a position with an architecture firm in the city and had been downtown when the planes struck the towers. She got to the eighth-floor window just in time to see the fireball roar through the second tower. Through glass she watched the haggard red stripes of flame rip the steel beams and the confetti of paper and debris that had fluttered out of the twin towers from gaping black maws. She called home, unable to get through till almost midnight, called that night and every night after to talk to their mom and Geoff, trying to describe the scene. What does she remember? The smoke, mostly. There was the smoke, first the black plumes and then the blanket of white ash and then the nauseating waves of air for days after, the rank stink of rent steel and rotting flesh.

As for New York? Vigilance—that was the word on the street. That was the order. Be vigilant. But what did it mean to be vigilant? *Semper Vigilans.* You'd better know, because you were supposed to be it at all times. If you see something, say something. The city's nervous system ran on a code. Orange alert. Red alert. Tracey played into the system like the compliant citizen she was trained to be, reduced to stimulus/response. Tracey tried with the subway but she couldn't be underground. She started taking buses. Goddamn buses. They were inefficient and made her late. But she had to see the world through windows, had to be near the yellow tape so she could press it at the first sign of mayhem and get the fuck out.

The American flag hung in every window. Stars and stripes stabbed into every lapel. Passing strangers on street corners, or sharing an stuffy elevator ride, Tracey looked into their eyes and asked them with her eyes, *If I look at you, if I show you my humanity right now, can I stop you from blowing*

yourself up? Or: *If this top floor gets blown to kingdom come, will you hold hands with me?* She looked down at a stranger's hand and pictured its entangled with her own. She pictured their two hands, severed, fingers entwined, lying on a pile of smoking wreckage. She saw the first responders finding their mutilated remains, heard the heavy goods vehicle carting off the load to Fresh Kills, all in the time it took an elevator to climb four floors and the stranger to scratch his nose.

There'd been the thing with the shoe bombs and the nitroglycerin. There'd been the anthrax letters. Investigating, Tracey learned the word *cutaneous*. Cutaneous, subcutaneous, airborne: it could get you any of those ways. Weeks of tension and indigestion. Ash and aftermath. Couldn't look at headlines. While Tracey Knox was commuting to work in Soho and coming home to hide in her Tribeca basement bunker, workers ten blocks south were down there shoveling through the rubble. Firemen, policemen, EMTs, contractors and volunteers, picking through smoking wreckage. Deadly particles seeping into skin, latching onto lungs. Outside the Century 21, finding actual human remains. But then somehow, over time, the terror here was wrapped up, boxed, and shunted back to its place over there. Till Ground Zero became just another construction site. Till the whole thing just deteriorated into a cycle of hearsay and fear—whispers and rumors—a ticker tape terror feeding the twenty-four-hour newsroom beast. Till the rumor of war had hardened into the certainty of war. A war that, fifteen years on, would know no end.

There's a longer history than the story she tells herself. But she still thinks back to that blue-sky morning. The day when, fresh out of Harvard, from the eighth floor of the architectural firm, she watched the towers burn.

Maybe Tracey feels at fault for the stories she has told. But the truth is, it didn't matter at all what she had or hadn't said all those years ago. All he had to be was an American citizen, clap eyes on those collapsing towers, and his mind

would be made up. He would want to do something for his country. For his sister. For all the usual words. Freedom. Terror. These are laden words. Tracey doesn't get them, didn't then and doesn't now. She understands form and function, angles and AutoCAD, blueprints and markups. Geoff hadn't seen the things she saw. He lived in a different aftermath. For a while, he put off enlisting. There was that degree he'd decided he wanted after all. He was so close to not being a part of it. That scholarship, Tracey thought, had saved him. But through four years of university, through a trail of tailgates and chemistry lectures and test prep on Red Bull and Adderall, he never forgot the towers. After all, Geoff Knox went off to war.

*

The third tour was to be the last. It is three years since Tracey stood in that moon-drenched kitchen and heard the story of Geoff's death, and she can't shake that phone call. Elyssa—it's always Elyssa who's the first to know everything—calls to tell her sister the news.

So it's happened at last. Their brother has died in Afghanistan. The first thing Tracey thinks when she get the news is that it's not Geoff who's died. She doesn't think of her brother dying in Afghanistan. She can't. She thinks of her brother, alive, in Michigan. She thinks of him back from basic training, planting green plastic army men on the Christmas tree for hide-and-seek the way they used to do as kids. The sniper was always the hardest to find, laying low in the bristles and garland, aiming his plastic gun at this ornament or that: the macaroni candy cane, the cradle in the manger. Or she thinks of her brother with skinned knees and gap teeth, climbing the crabapple tree in their old backyard. Or maybe she's remembering how he was the last time she saw him, at home on the couch at Thanksgiving, lean and muscled and laconic, eyes glazed after his second tour, dream-weaving his way through Call of Duty while she was trying to talk to him,

you know, actually *talk* to him about his deployment. But she's hard-wired against accepting such bullshit, that her brother would actually go to Afghanistan and get himself killed, of all things.

All evidence to the contrary—in four days she'll be carrying that urn—and she refuses to believe Geoff's mortal. Won't buy that it's her little brother who died in the war. She's going to watch him get hitched to some cute, fake-tanned Michigan chick and raise a crop of cornfed kids. He'll settle down in some government job, spend his weekends with his buddies at the Joe watching the Red Wings lose, eat red meat and wipe his ass with *Foreign Affairs*. Such news—her brother dying in Afghanistan—doesn't register. And as Elyssa keeps talking, the details really don't line up. In this story, there are no notifying officers, no Army chaplain. There are ER doctors and paramedics. She distinctly hears the word *Detroit.*

And so when it turns out that her brother dies but it's not in Afghanistan, that Geoff never went back on that last tour like he said he was going to, when it turns out her brother dies less than a mile down the road from DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital, that he's died all right, but it's in a squat with festering walls and peeling linoleum floors, when it happens that Geoff's been kicked out of the Army and OD'ed on oxycodone, Tracey tries to to piece together the unbelievable story she's hearing with the scenario she didn't even know to imagine. And none of it makes sense.

Tracey books the flights from JFK to Toronto, Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie, pronto. She pays way too much for the tickets but what is she going to do, it's her brother's funeral. She flies back to Sault Ste. Marie with Niels, who is Dutch and has never been to an American funeral before.

One day after the phone call, just before she flies home for the funeral, Tracey meets up with Danny, Geoff's war buddy, and gets a debriefing in a Queens sports bar en route to the

airport. Tracey rings Danny on their way to JFK because he's local and he'd once given her his number and said, *If you ever need anything, give me a ring*. The place reeks of Windex and buffalo wings. Tracey and Niels sit next to Danny at the sticky bar under flickering screens. They bear hug and order a round.

"You didn't know about Geoff's TBI?"

Danny blinks at Tracey, then at Niels, dipping a wing in sauce and gnawing chicken from the bone. Know about it? Tracey doesn't even know what the letters mean. Danny has to spell it out for her. Traumatic Brain Injury.

"Is that like PTSD?" she asks, timid. It's hard to make herself heard over the din of the bar and the Eagles-Patriots game.

Danny talks, gesturing to his temple with the chicken bone. "After the blast. He was bleeding from the ears, man. It scrambled his brains. He was all messed up. They had to send him off to the unit."

Tracey doesn't get it. Danny washes down the gnawed meat with a Rolling Rock and tells all. Things that didn't make sense before start to make sense. Geoff's fuzzy details about the last deployment. Her letter, stamped *Return to Sender*. And the discharge, unearned in Danny's humble opinion, of Other Than Honorable. Tracey feels her face flush. She hasn't touched her Jack and Coke. Danny, wide eyed, looks from Tracey to Niels, Niels back to Tracey.

"You don't know he spent that time on a wounded warrior unit?"

"Geoff's Humvee *got hit with an IED* and he didn't tell you?"

Well, and what if he didn't? That was always Geoff's way. If he was sick, he wouldn't admit it. Wanted to take care of himself, always did, didn't cry even when he was six and

Tracey, who'd more or less brought him up, went off to college. And here's the big sister, not one but two higher degrees. Graduates from Michigan with honors, goes off to Harvard and can't tell when her own brother is lying about his last deployment. But why would Geoff do that that to her, to all of them? Who had he been trying to save?

Trace feels sick so they leave the bar early. They hail a cab on the parkway to take them to the airport. Niels loads her luggage in the trunk. Tracey's eyes are hot with rage. The driver rollercoasters them to the terminal, and all Tracey can think about is their mom. Geoff's not going to have the military burial, that's one thing. Their mom had been hysterical about him going off to war in the first place, said she had a premonition. Now the premonition's come true, so good luck with that anxiety disorder. At JFK Tracey pushes her purse down the conveyer belt, is patted down by TSA, goes with Niels to the gate. There's that sense of being cheated. There's that Other Than Honorable. The discharge hung Geoff out to dry, now it's going to leave their mom without any benefits. Mom's on disability, their stepdad's a barely functioning alcoholic, and their dad, their real dad, oblivious in Grand Rapids with his new wife, will be no help at all. Remember when their mom was a successful marine biologist? Remember when Geoff was still alive? Tracey does. That life. What is it now but history?

At the gate, Tracey goes online to find out what's she's missing. She learns a lot of really awful vocabulary in the process, like the word *repatriate*, but she does gain some intel. It turns out when you take the whole foreign war component out of it the whole thing can be over and done in a lot faster than you imagine. The body didn't die in Afghanistan, so it doesn't have to be repatriated, it doesn't have to be flown into Dover on a military plane. A quick trip in a fast ambulance to the ER of DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital doesn't cost as much, and it's much quicker. You can

place a notice in the paper days later of the general death and keep details quiet. All you have to say is “in a private ceremony” and everyone has to respect that. They won’t ask, you don’t tell. Except when it’s your best friend involved, and you happen to lob her a fib. Then it gets complicated.

He wished to be cremated, so they honored his wishes.

She’d been distraught at the sight of the urn. Who wouldn’t be? She’d always imagined it as an elegant container, a silver goblet with a name engraved, displayed on a mantelpiece. This, though, was decidedly not that. This had been an industrial plastic tub stamped on one side *Detroit Crematorium* in an inelegant sans serif. The plastic lid screwed on and off. It looked like it held weed killer.

There’d been debate after the ceremony about what to do with the ashes. This was the Knoxes. Of course there was debate. The whole thing was ghoulish, Geoff’s body stashed into a Ziploc in the *Detroit Crematorium* tub, but Tracey had wanted to give him the honors he deserved. And so the day before she’d flown back to New York, Tracey had unscrewed the lid and made off with a scoop of her brother’s ashes. Is this the story she is supposed to be telling Connie over room service mocktails?

Because there’s the story Tracey told Constance, the story she’d told all her friends. The one about the military burial, about Geoff dying in the goddamn war. And here is Tracey Knox, anniversary number three, stationed for two days in hallowed DC. From the Hampton Inn, Tracey Google Maps the directions: 2.3 miles from that cemetery. That great green ground of tended graves. She ought to do something. She ought to lay it to rest.

*

It’s bone-chill weather, mid-November. Week before Thanksgiving. Tracey is stalking the grounds near Washington

Mall alone. She gets to thinking about monuments. You can't avoid it. Here, Lincoln parked in an armchair on that grand staircase. There, that obscene obelisk, rising up out of the ground like Mother Earth with a concrete hard-on. Tracey takes it in, drinking coffee from a to-go cup, her hands in mittens. A couple of people with clipboards and smiles, college kids, come at Tracey on the curvilinear walkway wrapped in bright red smocks that say *Save the Children*. Tracey dodges them, staring at her feet as she hurries past. Does she have a few minutes today for saving children? It would seem not. She cannot save children. She couldn't even take care of her little brother, the one child that had ever been entrusted to her. She let him go into that war. Is the people in the red smocks' plan to not let the children go fight wars in foreign countries? Because maybe she'd have a few minutes for that.

Tracey pitches her coffee in the trash and keeps walking, hands in her pockets. There's the packet of ash in her right pocket. She feels its uneven lumps through her mittens. She thinks maybe she'll find another Knox, a namesake, and scatter the dust there. But so far, no Knoxes, and the mission's making her sweat.

Tracey dreams, as she walks, about designing a monument for Geoff. Or no, monument isn't the right word. A memorial. She thinks back to her architecture school days and calls up a quote from Lewis Mumford. "The more shaky the institution, the more solid the monument." So, a memorial then. She can imagine it. There's a field lit in a haze. Lemon-colored light. Reeds and grass and stems. There's a crop of pink and red poppies, swaying and bending. She'd call it "The Poppy Field." It would be a vast stretch of land designed so you could walk through it. No sign would tell you not to touch the flowers or not to step certain places. You could press the velvet-soft petals of the poppies to your cheek. Or you could stand in the middle of the field and let the wind blow through your hair. You could breathe in the scent of earth, of sweet prairie grass and

Queen Anne’s lace. There would be no bodies buried underground. There would be no bodies at all, no ash, and no plaque to tell you what to think about. No why, no when, no who.

What can she say about the evenly spaced rows, the dignified engravings, the markers of moral purpose and patriotism? She can only wonder: Where is my brother? Where was I for him? She is insurgent milling through the manicured lawns. As she walks, she thinks about the memorial she wants to design, the one with the poppy field, and thinks it shouldn’t be called “The Poppy Field.” It should be called “Old Wounds.”

Tracey hadn’t meant to tell Constance, those years ago, an untrue story about her brother’s death. It had started as a story Tracey was telling to herself, a story she could use to comfort herself with, a story that he had died for a just cause. She wasn’t thinking when she typed it into a screen and hit send, and then the whole story had gotten out of hand. Tracey doesn’t know how to say it. That she never flew to DC for the funeral. That there had been no honors, no gun salute. That they’d scattered most of her brother’s ashes in Chippewa County into the St. Marys River between Michigan and Canada. All Tracey knows is, she didn’t tell the real story right away, and at some point—who knows when?—it had become too late. Connie, who has planned the whole weekend, has carved out a grave-shaped space into Sunday, assuming Tracey will want to use the time to visit her brother’s grave in Arlington National Cemetery. And who is Tracey to say that Geoff is not buried there?

That morning, Connie had asked if Tracey wanted company when she went to visit “the grave.” Now, coming back into the hotel room, cheeks flushed from the cold, it’s all Tracey can do is turn to her best friend and say, “Geoff’s not here, Connie.” It’s her attempt to come clean, and Connie misses it entirely. She thinks Tracey is being figurative, that it’s something spiritual. So close to telling the truth, Tracey lets the

confession drop. She hangs her coat from the plywood hanger where it swings, the packet of ash still sitting in her right coat pocket.

That night, Tracey crawls into the hard bed and snaps on the bedside light. She takes it out of its drawer, the little green Gideon's Bible. But all she's thinking about as she rifles through the tissue-thin pages is Geoff's copy of *The Art of War* and how she'd claimed it as her own. Geoff's secondhand paperback copy, underlined and dog-eared, is the closest she's come to his idea of a theology. The book's not with her. She hears Connie's breathing deepen. Tracey puts down Gideon and opens her laptop. She opens a browser tab and searches Geoff's username until she finds what she's looking for. No graphics, no explosions, just a careful set of instructions. She reads through the list for "Suffer with Me."

Throw a knife at the guard at the post.

Spam the FIRE button when Woods climbs to the first guard post.

Survive enemy RPG blast which causes collateral damage (to buildings).

Her tasks, here, are clear. Destroy enemy chopper with mortar round. Destroy tank with anti-tank mine. Her eye scrolls down to the last lines.

Kill 8 enemies in the clinic.

Collect all Intel.

Do not die.

From *The Art of War* to Call of Duty, military theory boiled down to one order: Do not die.

And if you do?

Tracey dips her head, plugs in the headphones, goes back down into the Black Ops forest.

*

“All Hunter victors, this is Sergeant Foley. Prepare to engage. We’re taking sniper fire from multiple directions.”

“Prepare to engage, we’re going in! Spin it up!”

The screen is flecked with blurs and drops of crimson. It’s an ambush. She moves forward but with difficulty. The explosions now have ceased to be controlled, now she surges forward with a deep nausea through the exploding mortar and shrapnel. Tracey hears the breath of the soldier come in hard, heavy bursts, so intense she can’t tell if it’s the soldier breathing or if it’s her. A message flashes on the screen: “You are Hurt. Get to cover.” The hands in front of her, her hands, Geoff’s hands, stay set on the gun as they stumble deliriously through the wreckage.

They are under sniper fire. She sees clothes and rags draped on a clothes line, a banner on which something is written in Arabic. Her head jars with every lurch. It feels like she is under fire from the very infrastructure. Her hands don’t leave the rifle. She falls into an alley between a chain-link fence and a corrugated steel shed. The sky is a smudge of smoke and rifle fire, the tracers of bullets garlanding the background. It feels like being drunk, stumbling to find a doorway she cannot find. Gunfire goes off but it’s a muted spray. She can hear Sergeant Foley screaming directions through a walkie-talkie but she can’t move her mouth to answer. Breathe. Breathe. The message flashes again, small, insistent: “You are Hurt. Get to cover.” Geoff does not get to cover. Tracey is spinning with him, stumbling each inch forward. She cannot rescue him, cannot get him to cover. The screen is streaked with fog, her eyes stung with shattered glass, drops of crimson, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—

“Trace.”

Tracers, rocket launchers. Connie is saying her name. How long has she been saying it? How long has Tracey been holed up in this hotel room in DC with her pregnant friend? There is nowhere to go. Her neck is clammy with sweat, her heartbeat going like mad, its pulse wild and lone and unmeasured. The screen is flashing but the sound no longer fills her ears. A desert stretches up to her feet, all the way up to the dull upholstery of the olive-colored couch, the beige wallpaper, the styrofoam coffee cups. Her hands, shaking. It would be so easy to snap the laptop shut, but she can’t bring her hands to do it. She’s still waiting for orders.

Photo Credit: the yes man

New Poetry by J.J. Starr

Concerning whether or not I am a horse

I strap torso & press arms

to diaphragm with breath

deep the distressed
voice of mistress
mumbles wishes
amid plum trees
& white headlight
bum-rushes the alleyway—

Am I a horse

kicking at its leathers?
How many full rides & how should I count?

Thought made in moonlight appearing
cogent, succinct behind glass
what makes a full ride?

Pulling hard & pulling harder, making iron
break soil, dancing in dirt, hooves
wet, mane draping the strength of a neck—

Am I

if no bit made better a turning
head? No harm but tightened
hips? & if my breast hardened by use?
My rump sheened in sunlight

Am I a horse?

Many hands have made my length
& I've never been bought.

Many hands have made
my length. Many hands.

God Between Us & All Harm

Lighted hallway, delighted guest,
the television the
lens of it, lends itself to you.
Trump again, brackish, weighted

eyes dilated, throat-moaning

“The beauty of me is that I’m very rich.”

Beleaguered, who can even remember a face
these days? My grandfather used to say things
like you can drown in a teacup of water
if you fall right. He was gladly on his way out.

Sometimes I see his point:

LSU live tiger-mascot dies of cancer at age eleven
his empty cage strewn with flowers, paper cards
a student says, “”nobody else had a live tiger.”

company shares tumble by 8%
top of the news feed
taking so much light
I’ve forgotten there’s war in Ukraine •

Afghanistan • Iraq • Nigeria • Cameroon • Niger •
Chad • Syria • Turkey • Somalia • Kenya • Ethiopia •
Libya • Yemen • Saudi Arabia • Egypt • India • Iran •
Myanmar • Thailand • Israel • Palestine • Philippines •
Colombia • Armenia • Azerbaijan • China • Bangladesh •
DRC • Algeria • Tunisia • Burundi • Russia • Mali •
Angola • Peru • Lebanon • Mozambique •

where &

& where else?

L asks what I think of the song

Listening with ears pricked upon
to Young Thug’s Wyclef Jean

I cannot be sure where I meet it

when he says let me put it
& I think of course not—but then
fingering the hem of my skirt

do I reject his desire to squirt
his cum on my face slick as a ghost
because I'm honestly or dishonestly

deposed? I want my skin touched—
perhaps it's how he asks,
telling me to deny my desire to bask

In the wet filth & become
part perversion myself. Because it was me
that morning who told

my beloved to do it & yes, I did want
kneeling deep in the tub looking up
all my skin like a socket, drooling mouth

blossomed, filled like a pocket.
L said to me, You don't think
about the implication, the intention.

I said, I don't think
of the gesture as blind contravention
or anything more than body & mess

upon mess in the deluge of sex. I confessed
I want to be seen as a canvass.
She said, I don't want to be mean,

with the swat of her hand, but
he's no Jackson Pollack.

Photo Credit: Cesar Ojeda

New Poetry by Randy Brown

PHOTO: Marie-Lan Nguyen. Bust of Homer

Toward an understanding of war and poetry, told (mostly) in aphorisms

Poetry is the long war of narrative.

Poetry, like history, is subjective.

If journalism is the first draft of history, poetry is the last scrap.

Poets set the stage of victory. Just ask Homer: Who won the ball game?

Do not make fun of war poets. A war poet will cut you.

War is hell. Poetry is easier to read. But each takes time.

Any war poem is a final message home.

Poetry can survive fragmentation. Irradiation. Ignorance.

Poetry can cheat death. Poetry has all the time in the world.

Poetry will outlast us all.

Poetry is a cockroach.

“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”—Mark Twain

“Twain didn’t actually say that.”—John Robert Colombo

John Robert Colombo is a poet.

Notes: While John Robert Colombo incorporated the popular “history rhymes” quotation—which he then attributed to Mark Twain— into his 1970 work, “A Said Poem,” he later privately reported he was uncertain of its origins. And, despite the poetic construction here, Colombo himself never said, “Twain didn’t actually say that.”

In an 1874 introduction to “The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day,” co-written with Charles Dudley Warner, Twain apparently did say, “History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends.”

History prefers Colombo’s version. So do I.

PHOTO: Spc. Leslie Goble, U.S. Army. A soldier peeks out of the “Death Star.” The outpost overlooks Combat Outpost Najil and is manned by soldiers 24 hours a day.

the bottlefall at COP Najil

in summer sun, a plastic waterfall cascades,

the emptied residue of our Afghan brothers

encamped along the ridge just across from the fortress

we call the Death Star.

above and below, a Scout Weapons Team buzzes up

and down the valley, TIE fighters searching for a truck

full of fertilizer, a bomb waiting for us

to happen.

we have taught the Afghans well: That water

comes only in bottles. That cowboys don’t

care for the desert. That our brand of war

is sustainable.

Notes: The acronym “COP,” pronounced “kahp,” stands for “Combat Outpost.” A “TIE fighter” is a fictional spacecraft—one that is powered by “Twin Ion Engines”—that first appeared in the 1977 movie “Star Wars.”

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the homecoming game, a war sonnet

PHOTO: Jessica Blanton. Navy Petty Officer Jeff Howard surprises his mother and grandmother at a Falcons Preseason Game at the Georgia Dome. Petty Officer Howard's mother, Tina, thought he was still in Afghanistan. DVIDS worked with the Falcons to coordinate the emotional homecoming.

Friends and countrymen, lend us your eyes

—the half-time tribute our G.I.s deserve!

For patriots' love, a gladiatorial surprise:

one family's tears on your behalf observe!

Our man behind curtains will soon appear

to his kids and young hot wife transported

from Afghanistan to home so dear,

their kiss upon a Jumbotron distorted!

Then, attend these soapful sponsored messages:

Your focus on this spectacle so pure

will wash your laundries and your sins in stages

gentle, scent-free, and all-temperature!

For we, about to cry, salute our troops—

their sacrifice played in commercial loops.

---

three tanka from Des Moines, Iowa

Spring 2016

1.

PHOTO: Spc. Emily Walter, U.S. Army. Cadets file into a Chinook helicopter to begin the Ranger Challenge, Nov. 3 at Camp Dodge, Iowa. The challenge consists of several tactical training events that test the soldiers' physical and mental capabilities.

A flock of Black Hawks

thudding through our barren trees

announces March drill.

In springtime, comes the fighting,

but we wait for the Chinook.

2.

With ceremony,

Old Man assembles his troops.

It is Mother’s Day;

sons and daughters are leaving

in order to sustain war.

3.

Conex boxes stacked

in the Starbucks parking lot

bring back memories

of making war and coffee.

I miss the old neighborhood.

Randy “Sherpa” Brown embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. He authored the poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire* (Middle West Press, 2015). His work has appeared widely in literary print and on-line publications. As “Charlie Sherpa,” he blogs about military culture at: www.redbullrising.com.

Sebastian Junger with WBT's Drew Pham on "Tribe"

How can a society so disconnected from its wars welcome back its fighting women and men? What do we lose when we privilege individuality over collectivity? WBT Writer Drew Pham joined in a panel discussion with Sebastian Junger on his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, alongside Columbia University Professors Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Peter Coleman. Venera Kusari of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Program at Columbia moderated.

Watch the recorded discussion below:

Sebastian Junger is the New York Times Bestselling author of *The Perfect Storm*, *Fire*, *A Death in Belmont*, *War* and *Tribe*. As an award-winning journalist, a contributing editor to Vanity Fair and a special correspondent at ABC News, he has covered major international news stories around the world, and has received both a National Magazine Award and a Peabody Award. Junger is also a documentary filmmaker whose debut film *Restrepo*, a feature-length documentary (co-directed with Tim Hetherington), was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.

Dr. Peter T. Coleman specializes in the field of conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Dr. Coleman holds a Ph.D. in Social-Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, where he today serves as Professor of Psychology and Education. He directs the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, and is the Executive Director of the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity at the Earth Institute.

Dr. Beth Fisher-Yoshida is a faculty member and the academic director of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution program,

Director of the Youth, Peace and Security program and Co-Executive Director of AC4, all at Columbia University. Dr. Fisher-Yoshida teaches classes in conflict resolution and related fields and conducts participatory action research, and research in the areas of conflict and conflict resolution with a focus on intercultural communication, transformative learning and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). She i received her Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California.

The Long March Ahead: A Veteran's Place in Resistance

The day after the election felt all too familiar. It felt like 9/11. Then, as now, that day only promised a long road ahead. The years that followed, I dreaded a war I felt duty bound to fight. I was only twelve on 9/11, but I came from a family a Vietnamese refugees, for whom war and resistance is as much a part of the fabric of our lives as family reunions and weddings. We have always fought for whichever country we called home, Vietnam under the French, both the communist north and American-backed south, and now the United States. My brother and I both fought in Afghanistan, and my family shed no tears when we deployed because for us it was inevitable—we fight.

Before all of that, on 9/11, amidst the anguish and strife, I somehow had the presence of mind to think:

Welcome to the rest of the world, America.

I thought the same thing the day Trump claimed victory. Yugoslavia came to mind that morning. My friend Sara, a

Croatian-American writer, likened a Trump presidency to the election of Slobodan Milošević. The hate-speech and ultra-nationalism of the Trump Campaign were the same starting points for ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Yugoslav wars. To many, Yugoslavia was once a paragon of multi-culturalism, but we witnessed a model society descend into conflict distinguished by crimes against humanity. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Peter Maas writes that before the Bosnian War started, Yugoslavs thought the brazen inhumanity that occurred would be impossible. They satirized and lampooned the idea of a civil war on national TV. All it took were a few—a small, cursed, hateful few—to throw a once great nation into turmoil.

My wife and I spent the whole day texting, asking, *what are we going to do?* She told me that she wasn't going to be one of those Jews that waited in Berlin until the day they put her onto a train; she wasn't going to just wait and see. Some part of me wondered if we were being irrational, these epigenetic memories of pogroms and falling napalm—surely these nightmares would never come to fruition? We have middle class jobs, a rent-stabilized apartment, we vote in local elections—surely it would never come to violence? I asked myself if everything I worked towards—my art, my family, my dreams—would be cut short by another conflict. The soldier in me yearned for the comfort my M4 carbine gave me in Afghanistan, but I didn't fight for an America ruled by the rifle rather than the ballot.

I was told by white men in my life to be patient, wait for the smoke to clear because it cannot be as bad as everyone thinks. One man told me that the campaign's bigotry might subside, that it was only a tactic to get into power. He said that the adult thing to do now was to build bridges, as if my anger at the election's result was childish—now wasn't the time to take up arms. I remember thinking that no one would come for him for being the wrong skin color, for saying the wrong thing.

I knew then that resistance was my only option. I struggled

with that decision. I wondered if I was just contributing to a deeper division in a country that seemed split nearly straight down the middle. Right wrong or indifferent, we elected Trump president—by action or inaction, we are all responsible. Yet it can't be just about healing, because the people that brought Trump to power seem to have little interest in bridging the divide given the uptick in hate-speech.

My wife and I took to the streets Wednesday, the ninth of November alongside thousands. We flooded Union Square. A city in despair called out, voices echoing through glass and concrete canyons. Those voices became one. Though we disrupted the organized chaos of Manhattan rush hour, bystanders cheered us from their city buses, honked their horns in solidarity, even joined us. Rain fell, but we were warm. When the night was over, I felt purged of despair. I am wary of emotionally cathartic experiences, because poverty, illness, and war have taught me that catharsis can be a cheap illusion, but I thought I felt something genuine.

That Saturday, I marched again. There were thousands more demonstrators on Fifth Avenue, where veterans had paraded with their flags and patriotic banners just the day before. There was something subdued about the demonstration, contained—police barriers formed a fence between us and pedestrians shopping at upscale retailers or couples leaving from brunch. The mass of protestors stretched for dozens of city blocks—it was hard to see where the huddled bodies began and ended, but there were times when the slogans and chanting stopped, falling into a cowed silence. It had only been a few days, and I worried that the collective passion that compelled us to gather had somehow subsided.

The closer we came to Trump's tower, the closer the police hemmed us in. A block away, the demonstrators were penned in on all sides by barricades. I speculated on how many of the men and women the NYPD would be called on to enforce the systemic cleansing of the country proposed by Trump and his

cohort. How many would relish it? Would I count them among the enemy soon?

It's just a job, most of the officers said when I asked them why they joined the force.

The black officers laughed when we started chanting, *Fuck Giuliani*.

I told one sergeant from the Seven-Seven out of Prospect Heights that I was sorry they had to spend their Saturday out here.

"At least it gets us out of Brooklyn," he said.

When we reached the police blockade below that glaring, obsidian edifice, Trump supporters—young men in their twenties perhaps—heckled the crowd. These men—or boys—were not the white working-class poor, those rust-belt disenfranchised that the new media looked to scapegoat after the election. They were patricians, dressed in expensive oxford shirts and high-end outdoor jackets. I can't remember what they said; I just remember their smug self-assuredness. While the others around me tried to ignore them, I yelled back. I wore a hat that read *Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran*, with a Combat Action Badge embroidered at the center.

"Motherfucker," I said, "why don't you go down to the recruiting station and put your money where your mouth is."

While his friends backed down, one of them leaned over the barricade and shouted louder. I didn't hear what he said over the sound of my own voice responding in kind. As we marched past I slung insult after insult until they were out of sight. I used my status as a veteran to humiliate him, and some part of me is ashamed, because I forgot that I didn't just fight for my idea of what America should be, but his as well.

By that point, my friends were tired and hungry. Everyone's

enthusiasm had dissipated. As we wriggled out of the pen, street vendors hawked cheap light-up toys out of granny carts and high-school kids took selfies, while an activist festooned with leftist pins and patches performed for a news anchor on the other side of the corral.

Free of the crowd, I watched the spectacle from the perspective of the cameras and passers-by. I remembered that they protested in Yugoslavia too, but tens of thousands had to die before Milošević was brought to justice. Almost everyone hoped for a peaceful resolution—everyone but the ultranationalists who laid their genocidal plans. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maas captured the laments of Bosnians caught unprepared for the violence that would beset them for nearly three years. As I watched the crowd disperse, I wondered if I too would be caught underprepared—outgunned, outmanned, starving. I wondered how many of these women and men around me would be willing to take up arms. Perhaps my greatest asset as a veteran was my capacity for violence, my ability to fight and kill, but the idea dismayed me.

When my train crossed the Manhattan Bridge, my wife texted me.

Traffic is totally fucked on bway/ in the 20s

Good job

Social media, the news, my friends—they all noticed the stand against hate. The whole country watched—continues to watch those that struggle for equality. I understood then that as a veteran, I am not an asset because of my capacity for destruction. We veterans seeking to fulfill our country's promise of liberty and justice for all are assets because of our capacity to organize. Going forward, we must exercise and teach our acumen for strategic decision-making, our ability to marshal resources, our ability to lead. If America is to resist the threat of mass deportation, hate crimes, and free-speech suppression, it will need its veterans.

Perhaps the day will come when we must defend our communities against violence, but violence is a tool of last resort. We would do well to remember that organizations like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement were populated and led by veterans who sought to build community, contrary to the popular narrative that they were terror organizations. Veterans are already standing up to Trump's vision for America. Organizations like Common Defense are speaking out against misogyny and homophobia, and Veterans for Peace are standing in solidarity with Muslim Americans in their #vetsvshate social-media campaign.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor and Albert Einstein Institution founder Gene Sharp outlined 198 methods of non-violent action to resist the threat of hate looming before us. For now, mass protests are important to show the country how many of us oppose racism, sexism, and homophobia, but there is more work to be done. What stands out about these methods is that in aggregate they amount to the formation of an alternative society. Nonviolent methods can be performed by any of us, from members of the government to workers and consumers. Sharp's protégé Jamilia Raqib gave a TED talk on using these nonviolent methods to disrupt and ultimately dismantle tyrannical regimes like Daesh, but they could easily be applied to a Trump autocracy. She says, "The greatest hope for humanity lies not in condemning violence but in making violence obsolete." Our country needs us again, whether infantry, mechanics, or logisticians—our skills can build that alternative society together.

There is already so much hate in our country, and those of us who fought know that war is not a vicious cycle, but a downward spiral. The challenge before us is not to respond to hate with violence, but to foster a society that values community above enmity. My friend, Ali Dineen, a musician and activist, told me that we should not seek to call our adversaries out; rather we should call them in. I might have

asked that Trump supporter to talk instead of berate him. I might have simply asked him what his name was, undoing bigotry is a long process that starts with a conversation. In the coming years I fear that resistance may come to mean armed conflict, and though my soldier's heart sometimes yearns to fight again, I don't want to fight my own countrymen. Violence can only deepen the deep divide in America, but making violence obsolete, having a vision for the future that includes our enemies, that kind of resistance can bridge the divide in our country. I spent four years in the Army practicing the art of war; now in revolt, I have the chance to build rather than destroy.

Photo Credit: Ken Shin

Correction: A previous version of this essay stated that Gene Sharp was a professor at NYU.

Each Soldier a Thread

The violence that reached our shores left me at a loss—every attempt to conceptualize these tragedies failed to capture the emotions moving me. I tried to make sense of San Bernardino and Orlando by writing, but after a dozen drafts I realized that failure is at the heart of my shock and sorrow. We bore witness as attacks ravaged Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. I watched each attack unfold, felt each death defeat me. We fought for Afghanistan, for America, but it was for nothing.

My friends that served in Iraq echoed similar sentiments in the spring of 2014 when Daesh captured swathes of Iraq and

Syria. They watched everything they struggled for fall apart. It was a cruel turn to watch ISIS flags fluttering from American Humvees. We were warriors in the world's most powerful military, but most of us were helpless to act. More than six thousand of our brothers and sisters died, more than fifty thousand wounded—what will their legacy be?

Like many of my brothers and sisters that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, I poured my heart and soul into this war. I knew we were fighting an uphill battle when I joined, but I thought if we fought for the Afghan people, maybe the terrorism they faced wouldn't come home with me. I failed. I remember reading a Washington Post article about my area of operations—the Jalrez Valley in Wardak Province—mere months after we returned home in the fall of 2011. When we arrived, two girls' schools thrived just outside our outpost, our Afghan counterparts enjoyed good relations with the locals, and many local villagers helped us fight the Taliban shadow government. One girls' school is ruined now, the other beset by drive-bys and bombings. The article said Jalrez was named "the Valley of Death." My Afghan comrades—with whom I broke bread and bled alongside—despair that the population threw their lot in with the Taliban. The valley is theirs now, how long until they seize the province? The nation?

The day after Orlando was warm and sunny—the summer felt garish and irreverent against my frustration. I tried to explain to a civilian colleague what I felt, and she asked me how I could feel responsible for the attack. She said it seemed so removed from my deployment in 2010. Many of us were brought up in the military schooled in counterinsurgency, which taught us that what the "strategic corporal" did on the ground impacted the whole war. Indeed, leaders on the local level like Colonel H.R. McMaster influenced national policy. I learned that war is not just red and blue symbols on a map, but a complex and entangled system that includes every one of us. Each raid, each dollar, each soldier a thread in a web. It

connects a rifle to a villager, a villager to a valley, a valley to a nation—each strand leading to another variable, another effect. What implications did losing Jalrez have on the war? I can't pretend to know what Omar Mateen thought of the war on his family's country, but if it was mine I would be full of rage and sorrow. I can't say where those feelings would take me, and maybe that's why I can't make Omar into the enemy no matter how hard I try. Every attempt to understand his decisions dropped me into a void. I told my colleague that I couldn't draw a line from Jalrez to a mass murder, only that I felt responsible.

In a society so divorced from the implications of war and foreign policy, veterans not only bear the physical and emotional costs of war, but shoulder the moral responsibility as well. Only during the Global War on Terror has the term "moral injury" entered into the lexicon of mental health and trauma. One need only look to the International NGO Safety Organization or Team Rubicon to see veterans' commitment to duty and social responsibility. If one thing can be said of veterans it is our need to act, but there's something else driving us. In the words of Chris Hedges, war is a force that gives us meaning. Danger makes life simple—survival supplants wardrobe choices and cocktail selections. There is a singularity of purpose and a definition of clarity I have found nowhere else. It joins us irrevocably. Sebastian Junger's new book Tribe examines the bonds that come from collective hardship in wartime—one woman in the book, Nidzara Ahmetasevic, was evacuated from Bosnia only to make a harrowing return trip back to Sarajevo because it was too hard to keep going while her family suffered. "We were the happiest," she told Junger. "And we laughed more."

Like her, I miss much of my war. My brother, an active duty Infantry Sergeant and OEF vet, says he wishes he was back in Afghanistan. He holds out hope for another deployment, another opportunity to get back into the fight. The thought terrifies

me, I don’t know what I would do if I lost my little brother. At the same time, another part of me wishes I could go back with him. War gave me camaraderie and meaning, but it was an addiction. Karl Marlantes called combat the crack cocaine of adrenaline highs, with crack cocaine consequences.

I look at the attacks at home and abroad, and I wonder if the source of my despair isn’t the tragedy of each event, but a yearning for combat. We said we were in Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, but when fighting season came I savored the fighting. It came to eclipse the desire to build infrastructure, capacity, and governance in Afghanistan. It even eclipsed the beauty of the little girls that welcomed us into their schools. I lost Jalrez because I was too intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder and the power of calling Apache gunships to raze the valley. I kept the Afghans I was supposed to serve at rifle’s length out of fear, alienating them. When I came home I tried to pay penance for my blood lust by working for veterans non-profits and by working with refugees to the U.S. I thought if I could save enough lives, make a big enough difference, then I could eventually make up for leaving Jalrez in chaos. For a while I told myself I was doing good work, making a difference. Then a car would backfire or the neighbors would set off a string of firecrackers—I would break into a sweat, my glands taking me out of reality and back into the fight. After that the pathways addicted to adrenaline reactivated like reopened wounds, a bitter reminder of internal war between my compassion and savagery.

After Orlando, it feels as if there may be no way of erasing my guilt because we brought home the dualism we took to war. In many ways, the contradiction of duty and conscience against violence and war reflects the contradictions in our national narrative. When we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, we said it was to liberate the oppressed. At first that held true: many Afghans and Iraqis welcomed us, welcomed the opportunity we

appeared to herald—though our collective desire for revenge colored the decision to engage in both wars. The product is the despair of a failed enterprise of our own making. We say that all men are created equal, but black Americans are still murdered with impunity. We call for an end to violence in Iraq and Syria, but our only action is to drop bombs. We brought other things home—our police forces mutated into paramilitary organizations, our xenophobia morphed into something that politicians actively encourage to win elections with. Perhaps this will be the legacy of the war on terror that so many of us veterans and countless more civilians suffered for.

My good friend and confidant Kristen is a fellow vet, a Florida native, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. In the days following Orlando, she said,

"I fought for them. For the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. And it's come to this." Her tears fell.

I projected all my guilt, all my failure onto those words. In my head, I listed people I left behind in Afghanistan, the people that have to live with my mistakes. My guilt was immobilizing me into inaction, another failure. Kristen said something else.

"Why aren't we celebrating the resilience of gay communities? Why aren't we celebrating the lives of the people of color killed in this hate crime?"

I despair because I am complicit. We all are, yet despair and failure alone cannot define us. We must take ownership of our wars and their effects to face the future. We saw the consequences of war because we answered the call. For us, duty doesn't end when we take off the uniform. We must share our experiences lest we leave the nation deaf and blind. Tomorrow, we build. Leading voices like Phil Klay, call on veterans to make art for the urgent cause of cultivating a more responsible body politic. Our definition of community must

shift from the brotherhood of warriors to include voters, fighters, and victims of these conflicts. Then, we avenge the victims of these hate crimes, these terror attacks.

Then, when we fight it won't be for nothing.

The Burn Pit Registry

It started with a cough none of us could get rid of. Sure I smoked. Lots of us smoked but the non-smokers had it too, even the fitness nuts that worked out all day. We all had that cough. Whatever refuse we had, we burned in a shallow pit at the center of our outpost. We burned expended radio batteries, the non-rechargeable lithium ion kind, dirty mattresses, and food waste. Anything that might benefit the enemy, we burned. Anything we didn't want, we burned.

I didn't think much of it over there until my wife said that my cough worried her. Running was always hard, but it was harder when I came home. Before we deployed, I thought that the men who fell out were weak. It pissed me off when other platoons passed us during runs because we had to slow down or circle back to pick up a straggler. When we came back from Afghanistan, the number of men who couldn't keep up increased. Some of them used to be PT studs.

Our unit's physician assistant wrote about as many prescriptions for sleeping pills and anti-depressants as asthma inhalers and sleep apnea machines. We made fun of the contraptions. Darth Vader masks for the mouth-breathers, the booger eaters, the sham-masters—we thought they wouldn't mind since they were sure to receive high disability ratings from

the Army and VA. I coughed and hacked all the way through post-deployment leave, into winter holiday leave. I cut back on smoking but it continued. I had to take one of my wife's inhalers because running in the cold weather burned my lungs hard and closed up my throat the same way a bad allergic reaction might. Fuck it, I thought. I still maxed out my PT test. I thought I was just fine—cough or no cough.

Other things seemed more immediate. The men in my platoon all left the Army, or left Fort Polk for other units. The anti-depressants the Army prescribed made me erratic and impotent, straining my marriage. I went off my meds and drank as much as I could get away with. That year at Mardis Gras in New Orleans I watched the parades while sipping from a box of wine with a straw in it. I spent too much money, to the point that I had to ask my mother for extra cash so I could go out and party. I cheated on my wife. I got an article fifteen for mishandling property. I tried to kill myself.

Despite everything my wife stayed with me and kept me together. Despite the suicide attempt, the article fifteen, the adultery, and the alcohol, I left the Army with my rank and an honorable discharge.

There isn't one singular reason that drove me towards self-destruction; like the war I fought the true answers are complex and messy. I will say that one component of my condition was the guilt I felt over the violence Afghan civilians endured because of the fighting I willingly participated in. I failed in Afghanistan. Trash wasn't the only thing we burned while we were there.

After a string of failed interviews and a souring experience working with veterans non-profits, I found out that there was a resettlement agency where I could help refugees, many of them Afghan. Maybe this would be atonement, at least in some part. I took a position as a casework volunteer as soon as I could.

I languished for three seasons without a paying fulltime job. From our apartment in Brooklyn every morning I climbed the steps to the elevated subway track at Myrtle Ave. It was nice in the warm months, but as time passed and the bills stacked up, my breathing became labored, and my heart pounded in my ears. The colder it got, the harder it was—but I chalked this up to bad nutrition, lack of exercise and the stress of watching our savings account shrivel and wither.

The volunteer work at the resettlement agency was hard and thankless, but it was one of the few good things I did, even if it was as simple as advocating for a client at the food stamps office or processing paperwork. Sometimes the refugee families even thrived, although most didn't—the odds were always stacked against them. They were like my parents in many ways, just trying to get by so my generation had a chance to prosper.

I told my parent's story to clients every time they seemed to lose hope or when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. Eventually they became engineers, and owned a house in the suburbs, I said. I left out being house poor, the domestic violence, and abandonment. It didn't fit the American Dream. An Afghan family with two girls comes to mind—everyone in the office wished they would one day have everything they wanted from life. It was hard enough for the family to adjust to American life and make ends meet without the childhood blood-cancer that afflicted one of the girls. She had a smile that made my heart bleed, but she didn't have a single hair on her head, and fatigue from her treatment protocol meant she was conscious for precious few hours during the day. I remember the resettlement supervisor had to find an affordable apartment close to a cancer treatment center—apartments near NYU or Memorial Sloan Kettering were an impossibility. Can you imagine refugees in Murray Hill or the Upper East Side? So they settled in the Bronx near Montefiore, but far from everything else. I remember holding that little girl in my

arms carrying her up and down the steps to their fourth floor walkup. I sang *Boats and Birds* by Gregory and the Hawk to her.

If you'll be my star

I'll be your sky

You can hide underneath me and come out at night

When I turn jet black

And you show off your light

I live to let you shine

I live to let you shine

When I held her, face on my shoulder for a pillow, her arms limp at her sides, I knew that I was responsible for her illness. Maybe I didn’t drop any depleted uranium bombs, or institute the practice of burn pits, but I didn’t do anything to stop it. I was only a teenager on 9/11, but I wanted revenge. As an adult, I didn’t vote responsibly, or stage any substantive protest—I wore my convictions as a fashion accessory. If I couldn’t atone for those things that I was only indirectly responsible for, how would I ever atone for the things that I did? I remember that day well because after I carried her down the steps to the bus stop, I needed to sit down and rest. I caught a flu that wouldn’t go away, and if I so much as walked at a brisk pace, my heart beat in my ears again. That family left New York City for better prospects in a state with better jobs and lower rent.

A few weeks later my flu persisted, and I developed a painful abscess. Every passing day stairs were harder to climb, my breath harder to catch. By then, I knew no amount of cough syrup or acetaminophen could shake the fevers, so I went to the VA hospital’s ER, hoping they would give me some medicine and send me on my way. I expected to spend a few hours there, I knew how slow hospitals could be, but the doctors had to

call a hematologist to get a second opinion on my labs. Even the nurse commented that my blood looked so thin she didn't need a microscope to know that I was anemic. I panicked. I was supposed to be in good health. Anemia seemed serious. When the doctor finally came back, he said he was almost positive that it was cancer. Those labored steps, that unending flu, my heart beating in my ears—it was leukemia, a cancer of the blood that begins in the bone marrow.

My wife and I lived from moment to moment during those months, living on a shoestring. We applied for disability and Medicaid to make ends meet. I was ashamed; I never thought I would need Medicaid. Some days our budget was so tight and the chemo was so difficult that I wished I died in Afghanistan.

Our friends were there at first for us at first, but by the end most stayed away. I don't blame them—it's hard to be giving all the time. After I reached remission, friends I hadn't seen in a long time would say, *look at all your hair*, or *you look so healthy*, but it felt like they were saying *I'm glad it's over, let's not talk about it*. I don't blame them, but like a fellow survivor said to me, *cancer is like a criminal record that follows you around for the rest of your life*.

A friend of a friend had leukemia too—he didn't go to war, he never smoked, never smelled a burn pit his whole life. Just bad luck I guess. After chemo and a failed bone marrow transplant, his doctors attempted a new radical procedure using a modified HIV virus that taught his immune system to kill the cancer cells in his body. From all accounts it was a difficult battle. The procedure took a heavy toll, but once it was done he was cured. Although the doctors said there wasn't a single cancer cell left in his body, he died anyway. Pneumonia. After destroying his defective lymphoblasts, his immune system was too exhausted to fight off a simple infection. It happened so fast. I only knew this man through stories my friends told about him, and the one email I sent

his way offering him my moral support. I knew that he was an artist. I knew that he loved his son. That is all I will ever know of him, that friend of a friend. How many people disappear like him? How many become unremembered names, night, and fog?

I don't know what happened to that Afghan girl I sang to, I only know that our war trash didn't disappear when we burned it. We sowed the air with poison. Afghanistan and Iraq's capacity to treat victims of American burn pits dwindles with each day the war continues, especially as the security situation deteriorates. Only in 2013 did the VA recognize burn pit related illnesses, more than a decade after the war started. At least my name will be recorded in the Burn Pit Registry. It is a pyramid of human maladies—a dozen different cancers, Chrohn's disease, COPD, hypertension, hepatitis, chronic bronchitis, infertility, lupus, the list marches on. Who will list the names of that little Afghan girl, and everyone like her, still dying?

The Unusually Literal World of Bowe Bergdahl

Military hyperbole is at the heart of *Serial's* second season. Sarah Koenig has gambled that she can take a simple premise—man walks off a base in Afghanistan, is captured by the Taliban—and make it representative. Of the war, of the world, of human nature. The season has discussed how Army private Bowe Bergdahl came to leave his post in Afghanistan, was captured by the Haqqani network (a savage affiliate of the

Taliban), and the military's efforts to rescue him. Its focus was procedural as well as institutional, describing the military's bizarre, byzantine, and unrecognizably convoluted legal and social skeleton. The season's sixth episode, "5 O'Clock Shadow," extended that focus to the military's extreme linguistic habits.

It's difficult to imagine a world without metaphor or hyperbole. Try it—try visualizing a day wherein everything everyone said to you and everything you said to someone else, was understood as a verifiable truth claim. Conducted properly, the exercise results in confusion, absurdity, and a bewildering breakdown of communication. While metaphor and hyperbole aren't necessary for communication, we rely on these linguistic devices to describe thoughts or emotions that involve some discomfort, and as most people's lives involve discomfort—in work, in love, or in one's fragile ambitions—metaphor, analogy, and hyperbole become a kind of language within a language.

This is doubly true in the military. When one considers the context, it's not surprising—the military, and especially the Army (or Marine) infantry consists of a more or less constant indoctrination into the ideas that (1) a soldier is part of a collective, with limited value as an individual and (2) one should expect to get hurt very badly or die, and that so long as this occurs within a military-sanctioned action against one's enemies, that injury or death is desirable. Citizens of countries that have Western humanism and individualism at their cultural heart will find these thoughts incomprehensible at best—and those citizens who become soldiers of their humanist nation's militaries therefore take this linguistic tendency to speak in metaphor and hyperbole to dramatic extremes.

In “Five O’Clock Shadow,” Koenig made much of Bergdahl’s disillusionment when a prominent and high-ranking sergeant in his unit claimed that soldiers had joined the military to “rape, kill, pillage, and burn,” a claim that was not immediately disputed by others present. Apparently, Bergdahl took the sergeant’s statement at face value, and statements like it. This became evidence to Bergdahl that his unit’s leadership was unscrupulous.

Most people with military experience—and especially experience in the combat arms, where euphemism and hyperbole are most necessary for psychical well being—understand that the military is filled with hyperbole. The easiest example of this (described by Army veteran Nate Bethea for *Task & Purpose’s* Serial Podcast) is a popular way of saying that one is angry with a peer or subordinate: “I’m going to cut off his head and shit down his neck.” The correlation between American soldiers or officers promising this horrible and primitive manner of execution and actual executions carried out? A perfect 0.

Establishing that people don’t mean everything they say, in or outside the military, is one important component to see how Koenig understands Bergdahl. Another point is that the military itself is filled with double standards that could be (and in the case of Bergdahl, were) interpreted as hypocrisy. Hence Bergdahl’s conclusion that the official fixation on unit uniform standards (or standards in general) was arbitrary and unreasonable—a fixation with which every soldier in post-9/11 combat has had to struggle. The same sergeant was quoted in “Five O’Clock Shadow” as viewing unshaven soldiers in the same light as the Vietnam-era unit that committed the My Lai massacre. To Bergdahl, this was another confusing example of

hyperbolic rhetoric, but to the sergeant, the statement was intended to be taken at face value.

Bergdahl concluded that the military's priorities were honorable and decent, and that it was his unit's leadership that was intentionally or foolishly misinterpreting rules, regulations, and intentions in Afghanistan. Bergdahl concluded this because he apparently had difficulty interpreting metaphor and hyperbole, and was unable to reconcile the difference between ideal and real. This quintessentially human struggle, in Bergdahl's case, appears to have been insurmountable.

The seventh and eighth episodes of Serial elaborate on Bergdahl's literal-mindedness, and assign it a definition that fits it into the spectrum of mental illness: schizotypal personality disorder, a form of schizophrenia. In other words, Bergdahl's behaved like a crazy person because… he was a crazy person.

I have argued elsewhere that Bergdahl should never have been in the military to begin with, and that due to his uniquely unsuitable temperament, those officers responsible for adjudicating Bergdahl's case should view his crime with mercy and compassion. These episodes make it very clear that Bergdahl was never fit to serve in the Army infantry—from a social standpoint, as well as from a literary and linguistic one.

Wrath of UCMJ: Against Crushing Bowe Bergdahl

Americans have become jaded by injustice. Wealthy and elitist citizens like Robert Durst and John du Pont bully, rape, and kill their way through life like Godzillas, law enforcement seemingly powerless to stop or even slow them. Meanwhile, poverty-stricken communities are treated like hostile territory, and then get to watch as their citizens are routinely treated worse than we treated Afghan Taliban sympathizers on combat patrols. It goes beyond simple racism, too—the recent hit series Making a Murderer features an impoverished white man systematically framed and—frankly—fucked over by both the local law enforcement community and its criminal justice system. And the success of podcast *Serial*'s first season owed as much to its producers' skill as to a boundless cultural appetite for true crime stories where the criminal is the justice system. Enter the case of Bowe Bergdahl.

In late December, 2015, the Army announced that Bowe Bergdahl would face charges of desertion and "misbehavior in the face of the enemy" during a Court-Martial. The stakes are high—Bergdahl faces Dishonorable Discharge (loss of money and benefits) and a lot of prison time. Is hanging Bergdahl up by his toes the right move? While I believe he's guilty, and think he's a snake who deserved the misery he endured when he chose to walk off-post in 2009, I don't believe the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) should destroy Bergdahl. Actually, although every time he speaks on *Serial* I hope the Court-Martial panel finds him guilty and maxes his punishment, upon reflection, and considering the broader situation with how justice works in the military and society, I conclude that the court should go easy on Bergdahl. Justice and mercy are rarely the same. There's precedent for military mercy, though,

and in an unusual place for an institution dedicated to enforcing strict standards for its leaders: General Officers.

> I was a fan of General David Petraeus, and have positive personal feelings toward him as a leader. His punishment for divulging sensitive information was either a great precedent for mercy or a travesty of justice

What happened in March of 2015 is the most prominent example of this phenomenon that I can remember. General (retired) David Petraeus was offered a plea-deal to avoid prison time for allowing his biographer unfettered and unauthorized access to classified material (in espionage terms, a potential "honey pot" scheme). Whether one respects Petraeus, the work he did in the military and afterward as Director of the CIA, it's difficult to see how his crime could warrant such light punishment, especially given the sentence delivered to Chelsea Manning. Petraeus received what was, by all accounts, a slap on the wrist. This type of approach is normal when it comes to higher ranking officers found guilty of misconduct.

Views on Bergdahl and his legal predicament metastasized in 2014, mostly for political reasons. For conservatives, the trading of five Taliban was tantamount to Chamberlain ceding the Sudetenland to Hitler. To Progressives, getting Bergdahl back was an act of mercy. Then, members of Bergdahl's unit (veterans and active duty) broke their silence, condemning him as a traitor and deserter, and the discussion focused on the deaths and injuries Bergdahl's act caused. Obama walked away from what he thought had been a political triumph with egg on

his face, while an angry lynch mob clamored for the firing squad or the hangman.

A couple years ago my old Brigade Commander in the 173rd, then-Colonel James H. Johnson, III, lost a rank and was forced to retire (keeping all of his benefits) after furnishing his Iraqi lover's father with tens of thousands of dollars of contracts, engaging in bigamy, and some other hanky-panky that would actually be hilarious if it hadn't happened in real life.

Because the argument over what should or shouldn't happen to Bergdahl has become intensely politicized if you're a non-vet, and personal if you're a veteran of Afghanistan (and the closer you get in time and in space to the corner of Paktika Province, where Bergdahl deserted, the more personal and emotional it becomes), it might seem like this is one of those scenarios where there is no answer – perfectly suited for adjudication by justice. But there is an answer, and a solution. Here's how this needs to go down.

To begin with – it was good to get Bergdahl back. Regardless of his actions, he's an American soldier, and the military doesn't (and shouldn't) let its members languish in prison – Afghan, Iranian, Mexican, wherever. Trading five or five hundred Taliban to get Bergdahl back was worth it. By the numbers, we've been absolutely destroying the Taliban since 2001 – I can confirm that this is what I saw on both of my deployments to Afghanistan, 2007-08 to Paktika Province, and 2010-11 to Kunduz Province, Taliban getting bombed, shelled, mortared, and machinegunned when they stupidly came close enough to one of our forts, blundered into one of our ambushes, or blunderingly ambushed us when we had jets, artillery, or helicopters close by (as good commanders almost always did).

I sympathize with people who expressed fear that the 5 released Taliban would join up with ISIS or the Taliban or

some other rag-tag group of fighters that could not withstand a single day against the concentrated power of America's military. The Taliban and ISIS *seem* scary, and do horrible things in places that are far away. To those conservatives who live in constant terror that one of these anally fed five early-2001 former Taliban commanders, hungry for vengeance, will track them down and wage jihad on their patio: don't worry! Those Taliban are way more scared of you than you are of them. They're horrible shots. And if we ever want to kill them, we can. The trade to get Bergdahl back is not more reason to hate the soldier, even if it seems we could have got him back for less.

It was good for us to retrieve Bergdahl. But the military has placed itself in a bind. If Bergdahl doesn't receive serious punishment, some say, his trial risks turning UCMJ into farce.

Bowe Bergdahl Heroically Eats Food in the Captivity He Heroically Heroed Himself Into

As painful as it will be for veterans to hear, especially those personally invested in his adjudication, he should be allowed to separate with benefits, owing to the unusual and special nature of his case, and the fact that he's quite clearly out of his mind and always has been. The most important jury—the jury that really matters (members of the military community) already *knows* that Bergdahl's a deserter, a coward, and a man with no honor. That is already a fact, based on the facts as reported in venues like *The New York Times* as well as Bergdahl's own testimony on *Serial*'s second season (although subsequent episodes reveal that Sarah Koenig believes that Bergdahl's attempts to escape from the Taliban are exculpatory and mean that he was heroic rather than cowardly, this well-intentioned but ultimately hypothetical

argument is not compelling). Bergdahl admits (to an opportunistic Hollywood producer) during *Serial*'s first episode that part of his motivation in leaving OP Mest was to indulge a narcissistic fantasy with himself as a cinematic protagonist on par with Jason Bourne. Bergdahl wasn't a posturing intellectual who (as it turned out) created far more problems than he resolved—he was crazy. And the military never should have let him wear a uniform.

Bergdahl should keep his benefits, lose his rank (he is not a sergeant, and his appearing as such dishonors all non-commissioned officers), and face a fine and reprimand, as did Brigadier General Jeff Sinclair (who admitted to having mistreated a subordinate with whom he claimed he was having a consensual sexual relationship). This will be bad for Bergdahl, but good for the military. After all, he's immediately recognizable to almost everyone in the military-veteran community—every time he were to enter a VA clinic or hospital, he'd face a stony silence and turned backs. He is a pariah. The best thing that the military can do is make that most powerful of gestures—conditional mercy. *Something* must be done, nobody who's served would argue that he should be released from his choice scot-free, this is an absurd and childish claim. But what? Given the way the military handles high-ranking officer misbehavior, what should be done with Bergdahl isn't much.

The military of today uses rules that were designed for a draft military, where desertion was (and remains – see Afghanistan's military's problems with desertion) a major issue. For America's volunteer military, composed of (mostly) healthy young men and women, the problem with many young soldiers is keeping them engaged while they're *not* in dangerous areas. Restraining action is very different from *compelling* it – and the stories that infantrymen tell themselves and each other are how to get the Medal of Honor, not how to shirk or avoid the mad minute. I don't know about

Iraq, I was never there, but in Afghanistan, it was all about getting out and after the enemy as much as possible. Our military should not feel threatened by desertion – the idea of honorable service among soldiers is sufficient to compel good behavior. In other words, people serve because they want to, not because they're afraid of punishment, as they were in the past. Unless, of course, those soldiers are unhinged, as Bergdahl clearly was (and is).

Apart from the military not needing to enforce this archaic rule about desertion and misbehavior (although it seems prudent to keep the rules on the books) because soldiers and veterans will enforce it anyway as a matter of course, the best reason not to punish Bergdahl severely is the one I've been making throughout, which is that the military rarely does so in a meaningful way when it comes to its officer leadership. A great deal has been made of how Bergdahl may have been responsible for the deaths of those searching for him, and for endangering the mission in Afghanistan. So let's take the case of the Air Force Major General Carey, in charge of 450 ground nuclear missiles, or about 100 times what it would take to kick World War III off in style. What happened when (I could not make this up if I wanted to) he started drinking heavily, fraternized with two "suspicious women," and ended up on a three-day bender while on an official trip to Moscow in 2012? What happened to the guy who was casual around the apocalypse?

He was removed from his position, reprimanded, and moved to other positions of responsibility. No loss of rank, no fine. Just—a little hangover.

If we want to be real about justice in the military, in America, it's time to stop jumping at every opportunity to squash people whose lives are already miserable, and can only be made marginally worse. It's time to treat ourselves more seriously, and use the rules equally—not to pretend that money or power or influence can keep us from that ultimate justice,

which is death in a casual and uncaring universe. Bergdahl has already suffered enough, and will suffer more without the military lifting a finger. He’s a marked man, now—he will never be able to live a life free of fear that one of his comrades won’t track him down and beat him, or worse. Moreover, a brotherhood of which he desperately wanted to be a part has forever turned its back on him. Why rub salt in the wound? Give him an OTH discharge, treat him for the wounds he incurred in Taliban captivity, tighten up recruiting standards, and be done with it. That’s essentially what’s already been done with so many General Officers. Time to show a little mercy to the common man, even if the common man happens to be a one-of-a-kind nut-job like Bowe Bergdahl.

Thoughts on the Zombie Apocalypse

A piece about who finds zombie narratives compelling and why.

Some Thoughts on the Assassination of Osama bin Laden

During my first tour in Afghanistan in 2005, I was one of those who still thought that the war was justified and worth fighting. The search for bin Laden was ongoing and America held (or was perceived to hold) the moral high ground after quickly expelling the terrible Taliban and the terrorist network they harbored. The thing about war is that things do not go as planned, and throwing money and manpower into an unconventional fight does not usually work. When I first arrived in 2005, there were no more than 18,000 American military personnel on the ground—an insufficient number for the overly ambitious and under-planned nation-building strategy. Yet things were relatively quiet and there was little "action" to speak of—firefights, IEDs, rockets. A strange thing happened as this war continued and escalated while being grossly mismanaged at a political level—the number of troops increased greatly and so did the number of firefights, IEDs, and rockets, in correspondence with the number of casualties. By the time I finished my second tour in 2008, the situation had worsened to the point that the Taliban were stronger and more influential than any time since they were "overthrown" in 2001, despite a massive increase in American military presence.

Obviously, a huge part of this can be directly attributed the criminal negligence of the Bush administration in invading Iraq, which not only diverted resources and focus from Afghanistan, but also squandered the last bits of that perceived moral high ground and gave new purpose and life to the extremists we were fighting. So by the end of 2008, Bush left office with two messy and unresolved wars on his hands and the trail for Osama bin Laden ice-cold. The new president, Obama, won the election over Hillary Clinton and John McCain in large part because he had originally opposed the Iraq invasion and was perceived to be a president with the correct judgment to resolve those wars in one way or another. Obama, probably in spite of his own personal inclination, decided to send more troops to Afghanistan in another so-called "surge,"

but only after a deliberate six-month review and decision-making process.

I was disappointed at the further escalation at that time as I had now become totally pessimistic that much good would come or that a larger fighting force would make much of a difference. In fact, 75% of American casualties in Afghanistan have occurred since 2009 when Obama tripled the number of military personnel to 100,000, with little to show for all this in actual results. As it stands today in 2015, the war in Afghanistan continues as the longest in American history by far and with no immediate end in sight, leading me to think I was unfortunately correct in my prediction. The best case scenario for the "honorable" exit from Afghanistan involves some type of negotiation between the Taliban and the Afghan government in order to maintain some sort of peace. Let's not speak of the failed development and rebuilding of that country, but it involves hundreds of billions of dollars vanishing into thin air.

This brings me back full-circle to the topic at hand—the assassination of Osama bin Laden. When I first saw the news in May, 2011, I was quite overcome with emotions, but not in the way you might think. Far from feeling some sense of satisfaction, closure, or redress, I reflected on the 10 years we Americans had been in Afghanistan at that point, the two years I had personally spent there, and all the violence and hatred that such meaningless bloodshed brings. I did not celebrate like many Americans must have, but felt sadness at the emptiness of all our struggles. Did bin Laden deserve to die? Many people would say 'yes' without a second thought, but to me that is the wrong question. I would ask if he should have been assassinated without a trial. There is a reason America has basically zero moral authority with large swathes of the globe. A part of that comes from things like invading other countries on false pretenses. And a part of that comes from using unmanned drones and special ops teams to

assassinate people in other countries without so much as a trial. Whether they are innocent bystanders or international terrorists, these extrajudicial murders by the government of the United States do little more than create more future terrorists and enemies. We loathed bin Laden, and rightly so, but to hundreds of millions of people he was a hero and a freedom fighter. If America truly wanted to show strength and confidence and export freedom and democracy, it would have sent bin Laden to the International Criminal Court for a trial in front of the whole world. Let due process and the international community together decide his fate.

Obama, who gambled that a successful assassination would instantly make him unassailable with voters in the area of foreign policy and go a long way to his reelection, chose the cynical solution to a problem left by his predecessors (the Clinton, Bush I, and Reagan administrations all have blood on their hands regarding bin Laden as well). If Obama truly wanted his "soaring rhetoric" to still resonate with people in America and around the globe, he would practice what he preached and make the really difficult decision to put bin Laden on trial.

I wanted to say something about the recent article by Seymour Hersh in the London Review of Books, but I realized that my position does not change whether the government lied about the entire bin Laden story or not. In any case, the fact that Hersh's controversial article was almost totally dismissed by both the government and the press is not enough to disprove his story. The man who exposed the My Lai massacre and Abu Ghraib has been called a conspiracy theorist and a crackpot, and then the story just faded out of everyone's memory if they ever bothered to consider it in the first place. This is probably due to the fact that most people really don't care how bin Laden was discovered and killed, and most probably just suppose that ultimately he got what was coming to him.

There is one school of thought which says that the government

should have the prerogative to lie and keep secrets in the area of foreign policy in the name of national security. I do not follow that school of thought. I think that a democratic and open society relies on transparency and freedom of information. If a government cannot trust the people with the truth, then the people cannot trust the government with security, in my formulation. The official story of bin Laden's killing was always a troubling one whose details seemed not to add up, and there may very well be some truth to parts of Hersh's account—it seems that we will never really know the truth. My point is that the operation was illegal and immoral in either case. Whether the CIA had a walk-in source reveal bin Laden's location or was given the information in cooperation with Pakistan's ISI, as Hersh alleges, makes little real difference in the end. The point of the operation was always covert assassination followed by a cover-up of the details.

We must ask ourselves what this assassination accomplished other than helping in some part to guarantee Obama's reelection. Have terrorism and extremism abated or even slowed down at all since 2011? In place of a fragmented and possibly marginal terrorist group al-Qaeda, we now have an aspiring new "caliphate" of ISIL wreaking havoc across the charred remains of large parts of war-torn Syria and Iraq. Did the killing of bin Laden convince even a single person sympathetic to extremist or jihadi ideology to change their minds, or rather did it convince people already antipathetic to the United States and "Western culture" to intensify their support for the cause of global jihad?

One thing is for sure, and that is that every killing by the "infidel" Americans only creates more animosity and more future potential terrorists than the ostensibly guilty ones who were killed. That is why this strategy has been derisively called "whack-a-mole" or "the head of the hydra;" in traditional honor cultures such as in many majority Muslim

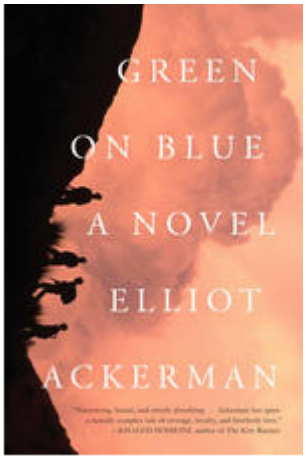
countries, kill one person and then all his family and friends are now your sworn enemies if they were not already. Such cultures predate the modern idea of judicial process and trial by jury, two things which would likely render this blood vengeance relatively superfluous. Some may say that in order to achieve justice with a group that does not share our idea of justice, we have to play by their rules—namely, the honor culture cycle of revenge and vendetta of which bin Laden was just the latest but not the last case in point. Rather than stooping to this archaic and cynical model of violence and deception, America could show its true power by helping to light the way to more modern and enlightened justice and openness.

America cannot simultaneously be both a free and democratic society, and a country which indiscriminately assassinates people in other countries without a trial. It is time for an end to the popular apathy and political expediency which has allowed this downward spiral of unaccountable war and killing in the name of security.

Why Don't Afghans Love Us: Elliot Ackerman's Green on Blue

There aren't many "literary" fiction books out about Afghanistan, and almost none authored by veterans. Brian Castner, a veteran of Iraq, published an essay in *Los Angeles Review of Books* that examines the phenomenon in more depth. Roy Scranton, another veteran of Iraq and a philosopher, claims in a different *LARB* essay that there are plenty of war

stories by American veterans already available, and that Western audiences should be looking for stories by or about the host nation. This claim has been made by writers like Joydeep-Roy Battacharya and Helen Benedict, as well.
Enter *Green on Blue*, a savagely honest, realistic novel about Afghanistan by Elliot Ackerman. Imminently readable and deeply subversive, *Green on Blue* draws on its author's extensive experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to paint a stunning and accurate description of why the West is losing and will lose in Afghanistan. The problem and solution both exist within the book's title.



"Green on Blue" is a military term that derives from the color of units on NATO battle maps – blue colored units are friendlies (America, Great Britain, *West Germany*), green are allies (France), and red are enemy (Soviet-aligned countries). Green on blue describes what happens when allies deliberately or accidentally attack friendly soldiers / units. The incidents, therefore, are incredibly troubling – they represent the failure of alliance, the prospect of new enemies arising from botched friendships. They hint at betrayal, in the context of existential struggle.

In *Green on Blue*, Americans are "blue" and Afghans are "Green," the allies. Crucially to the plot, there are no "red" – there are enemies, but this term, in the context of Afghanistan, is fungible. The plot revolves around an Afghan militiaman named Aziz, who navigates generations of human relationships between Afghans, while attempting not to be

crushed by the war. At its heart, the war is described as a competition between groups for social standing – respect from young men, and money from the Americans.

According to the capitalist west, money is supposed to buy respect and loyalty. This forms the basis of an important miscommunication between Americans and Afghans in the novel – a strategic cultural miscalculation of extraordinary significance. Money, in the context of the story, represents a sort of catastrophic idealism, which merely compels individuals to compete in a zero-sum game for resources. Ultimately, American dependence on the coercive power of tangible resources predicts the type of incident hinted at in the book's title.

On a local level, in Afghanistan, the most important thing is respect – the honor of a group ("nang"), which is under constant threat of insult. Once "nang" has been challenged, the group is required to respond to the insulter with revenge – "badal," which consists of appropriately violent action. The protagonist learns this essential lesson as a child: "*Once, in Sperkai, an older child had split my lip in a fight. When my father saw this, he took me to the boy's home. Standing at their front gate, he demanded that the father take a lash to his son. The man refused and my father didn't ask twice. He struck the man in the face, splitting his lip just as his son had split mine…*" On this plane, *Green on Blue* operates as a sort of slowly-unfolding national tragedy, wherein the Afghans become their own heroes and villains, and the Americans – representative of "The West" – are simply agents of catastrophe and destruction, casually and unthinkingly paying money to keep the feuds going, hoping to find "High Value Targets" in the war on terror.

Aziz is both nuanced and archetypal – a quintessentially Afghan product of the West's involvement in Afghanistan. At the story's beginning, his father (a fighter for hire), dies at some point between the Civil War period after Soviet rule

and NATO's intervention in 2001: *First there was the dust of people running. Behind the dust was a large flatbed truck and many smaller ones. They pushed the villagers as a broom cleans the streets… Amid the dust and the heat, I saw men with guns. The men looked like my father but they began to shoot the villagers who ran*. The gunmen are never identified – they destroy Aziz's village and move on, leaving Aziz and his older brother orphaned. After a difficult childhood where he and his brother struggle against the odds to improve their tenuous life at society's margins, another, similar tragedy involving a Taliban suicide bomber leads Aziz to join the "Special Lashkar," a CIA-funded militia on the border of Pakistan.

In the "Special Lashkar," Aziz learns to fight and kill. The group's leader is an Afghan named Commander Sabir, paid by the CIA to fight against the Taliban. Readers quickly learn that Sabir is enmeshed in his own struggle over "badal" and "nang" – Sabir is hunted by the brother of a Taliban fighter that Sabir killed, a Taliban named Gazan, in revenge for that now-dead brother having killed Sabir's brother, the former leader of the Special Lashkar. If that seems complicated, it should – alliances and enmities proliferate in the book, ensnaring all and forcing everyone to take sides in the conflict. Nothing is sacred, not love, not honor, not brotherhood – nothing. And behind it all stands the enigmatic, fascinating character of "Mr. Jack," the CIA officer who runs the Special Lashkar, and who seeks targets for America's war on terror.

Mr. Jack is my favorite character in post-9/11 fiction. There isn't much of him in the book, but his influence is seen everywhere – he resonates through the book's pages, exceptionally powerful, moving in and out of autocthonic settings like he belongs, while making obscene and absurd mistakes that lead only to more preventable strife. Mr. Jack is so unaware of the consequences of his actions, that he becomes an incidental antagonist. His hunt for professional success turns Mr. Jack into a caricature of a man, a careerist

who seeks professional success without any understanding of its human cost.

There are no heroes in this book, which could make it a World War II story similar to *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* – save that there are no antiheroes, either. There are believable human characters that find themselves at war in spite of themselves, forced to fight for meanings that shift and collapse until the only thing left is friendship, then friendship collapses as well. This resembles the standard Vietnam narrative, like *Matterhorn* or *The Things They Carried*, but the characters in Ackerman's book are not motivated by ambition or by ideology – rather they seek simply to survive, not to be killed. The characters in *Green on Blue* do not have space for the type of indulgent self-reflection imagined by the typical Vietnam-era author, such as Tim O'Brien or Tobias Wolff – this is a book where there is little room or space for interiors. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new type of fiction – a story that balances deliberately earnest *almost modernist* narrative plotlines, while acknowledging the infinitely expansive potentials of post-modern perspective and awareness of self- and other-ness, only to reject that literary and intellectual dead-end as (paradoxically) reductive. Or, as Aziz says in the opening sentence: "*Many would call me a dishonest man, but I've always kept faith with myself. There's an honesty in that, I think.*" Rather than opening a meditation on postmodernity, Aziz goes on to show us precisely, meticulously, how that opening statement could possibly be true, in the context of Afghanistan.

Green on Blue makes a series of bold philosophical, political, and literary claims, which are plausibly balanced and supported throughout. It is a powerfully realistic and exciting adventure; it is also a eulogy for the failed post-colonial ambitions of a capitalist society that believes it can demand service for money, as though the developing world is a whore or a dependent. It is among the best, most

accessible and accurate descriptions of Afghanistan available – and the single greatest critique of the West's policy yet written.

Incidentally, the most successful militia commander in Paktika Province for the last ten years – a wealthy man who has successfully played the role of insurgent, bandit, contractor, and militiaman on both sides of the fence? That would be Commander Aziz.

Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love – it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story,

then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek

offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: *"9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something."*

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that

the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he *was* exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's

dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: "*They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it*." As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: "*In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the air were being shocked.*" He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next life,* Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the

Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have “military training” and admires the trappings of Skinner’s service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she’s trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner’s credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner’s part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book’s unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei’s idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here’s one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: “*Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his*

fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles…" The primary antagonist, on the other hand, "*looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before.*" The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary here), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou's proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. "*What makes the world go round,*" she says, and Skinner answers: "*War… Actually, I'd say money first. Money and then war*." America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to

both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn't here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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American Sniper and the Hero Myth

American Sniper, a new film based on the book of the same name, is being released on Christmas Day. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring and produced by Bradley Cooper, it tells the story of Navy SEAL super-sniper Chris Kyle, widely-praised as the most lethal sniper in American history with at least 160 "official" kills, and apparently many more "unofficial" ones. The film's catch phrase is "the most lethal sniper in history", and the trailer shows Bradley Cooper undergoing a moment of moral doubt before (presumably) shooting a child carrying a bomb. The Hollywood studio is banking not only on

the film's popularity, but that Americans will want to spend their Christmas Day watching such morally questionable lethality. The trailer immediately reminds me of another Bradley Cooper role in *The Place Beyond the Pines* (a much better movie than *American Sniper*, by the way), where Cooper's entire character is built around the fact that he killed a man with a young son the same age as his own and felt guilt and regret for the rest of his life.
Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with "American" something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many, many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America's adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French Connection, The Italian Job, The English Patient, The African Queen, The Manchurian Candidate, The Good German*. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

Moving back to the original story, after 10 years in the military and four tours in Iraq, the real-life Chris Kyle left the Navy in 2009 and started a private security consulting firm in his home state of Texas. One of his priorities was supporting wounded and troubled veterans. When his book was

published, he donated the entire $1.5 million check to charities supporting such veterans. He was a devoted family man as well as a noted gun-lover and hunter (it remains unclear whether he killed more human or non-human animals).

Kyle, along with a friend, was killed in 2013 by a troubled ex-Marine who shot him in the back when Kyle took him for his own brand of “therapy” at a shooting range. The funeral was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas to accommodate the huge number of mourners. This man was a hero to millions of people in America. My purpose is not to disrespect Kyle in any way, but to point out some of my thoughts and observations about the circumstances which lead him to become such a hero to so many.

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle’s death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said “live by the sword, die by the sword”. Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord’s words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentally of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won’t be the last.

Another relevant thing I found out is that Kyle never expressed any regret or doubt over killing people on such a

Herculean scale (here is a quote from his book: “It was my duty to shoot, and I don’t regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn’t take any Marines with her.”). One must imagine that it would become quite routine after a while to aim, shoot, and repeat. This is no video game, however, nor is it aerial bombing, artillery, or even run-of-the-mill machine-gun fire. Every one of those kills Kyle would have previously and skillfully planned, calculated, and then witnessed in gory detail by means of a powerful telescope sight. That such a thing would be desensitizing is understandable. I would not take such a job, but if it were me I would also by necessity strengthen my personal convictions about my own righteousness if only as a way to avoid insanity (another quote from the book: “My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman’s twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.”).

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle’s story. First of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves “silent professionals” when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle’s book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label “war porn”, and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

Kyle also had problems telling the truth. Though apparently no stranger to garden-variety barroom brawls, he invented a story

about a bar fight in which he punched out former wrestler, actor, and Minnesota governor (and fellow Navy commando) Jesse Ventura. Ventura sued and was eventually awarded over a million dollars in damages. Kyle also apparently made up a story about killing two guys who tried to rob him somewhere in Texas, which never happened in real life. I wonder why he would feel the need to make up superfluous falsehoods when he was already well-supplied with enough martial anecdotes to win admiration from his armed acolytes. It reeks of the braggadocio and machismo that is all-too-common in the special operations communities. He was also a heavy drinker, like many fellow veterans. Alcohol is one of the most common and most readily available means for veterans to cope with the trauma of war and homecoming. Sadly, we should not be surprised by such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from the book: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there."). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

Chris Kyle was no super-hero, let alone hero, though many people (and maybe he himself) saw him as one. The world needs neither fake heroes nor mythical super-heroes with super-human powers or super-human killing ability to be able to solve the world's problems or kill all of the bad guys. The society that produced Chris Kyle and his unquestioning world view will sustain itself with tales of heroes like Chris Kyle who defend our "freedom" from the bad guys. The thing about bad guys is that, to them, the other guys are bad guys, and they are fighting for their own version of "freedom". Killing over 200 "bad guys" is just as ineffective a way to peace or freedom as killing two million "bad guys" if there is no reason why and

no plan to stop killing them. This false heroism creates more problems than it solves and multiplies the violence in the world. Chris Kyle did not protect or make anyone safer; his story is one small part of immoral (and probably illegal) war that has only increased the vicious cycle of violent retribution that exists in the world. Such a cycle will continue until someone, dare I say one akin to a real "hero", tries to stop the cycle with understanding, dialogue, and diplomacy. The world does not need heroes; it needs human solidarity.

Passive Aggressive: Understanding the Tenor of New War Literature

The suicide bomber came from the wrong direction. He drove a maroon Toyota Corolla into the middle of a group of Afghan police and militia – just an hour into a massive operation to help defeat the Taliban – and brought everything to a screaming stop. His car was packed with screws, nuts, nails, pots, ball bearings, and explosives, and when the shrapnel and overpressure shot into the crowd, it wounded five of my soldiers. It also killed fifteen Afghans (seven civilians, six police, two militia), and seriously damaged two vehicles.

My boss called me. I was told that if the police pulled out from our location, the mission was a scratch: we couldn't go forward alone. The policemen wailed, wept, and collected the pieces of their dead countrymen. I watched as they loaded the dead into pickup trucks and left, all but four of them – leaving us with a token force for our mission. I thought, *If*

we stop now, their lives, this all will have been for nothing – worse than nothing. We need more than ever to impose our will on these bastards. I told my boss that the Afghans were still with us, totally committed to the operation. I lied, bald-faced – without Afghan support, we should've stopped, called it all off. I insisted that we continue forward. I made that choice. More people got hurt, later. I made that choice, too.

If my experience were rendered in the style of most existing war literature, this engagement should've felt completely useless, a total waste. Writers with combat experience from World War II or Vietnam would likely characterize such an event as fruitless, hollow, or even criminal. Instead, when I was there on the ground, it felt like the most important thing in the world – and neither time nor perspective have changed my mind.

How do civilians take in the stories of war? War itself has evolved: information-sharing technology has helped turn Napoleonic squares of uniformed citizens into essentially fluid conflicts between professional soldiers and hidden insurgents. Civilians get glimpses of it through isolated YouTube videos of drone strikes or firefights, or Hollywood films of SEAL teams and Rangers riding helicopters into raid compounds. But the actual, real-time war experienced by soldiers on the ground doesn't have such a neat beginning and end: war is the omnipresent threat of chaos from any direction. Contemporary war – at least the one I saw – is a place in which nobody is safe, anywhere, ever.

But contemporary war literature has not kept up with contemporary war. We need to a develop a literature, one that escapes the limits of both glorified war narratives and cynical condemnations for how war crushes the individual soldier. Neither extreme on this good vs. bad trajectory is true to war today. We must create something new.

To be fair, things used to be different. They really did. Before the industrial revolution, war was smaller, more personal, and comprehensible. Even while nations were fielding armies of greater sizes – tens to hundreds of thousands of people – the means of procurement were villages, hamlets, and towns. During the American Revolution, for example, towns sent small groups of men armed with rifles to ambush British formations, and later to fight in European-style units. Even given the large numbers, however, most soldiers were fighting alongside people they'd grown up with. Communities grieved their losses together, and war was a social as well as personal calamity – the consequences of war were inescapable.

The industrial revolution made every aspect of human society narrower, more specialized, and distant. The Civil War was a transition point, and it catalyzed the growth of increasingly realistic literature, a marked departure from ideal, Romantic representations of war. Ambrose Bierce's story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is an example of this progression. In the spotlight is Peyton Farquhar, who is about to be hung from the Owl Creek Bridge because of his Confederate sympathies; his treasonous support of the Southern army is real, but the act he is being executed for was a set-up by a Union scout. Bierce's characters feel like real people, equally trapped by their institutional or cultural prejudices and the choices they've made.

World War I prompted the dawn of the modern literary modernist movement, which obliterated traditional forms of tradition and narrative. Nearly every memoir or fictional account from the modernists emphasized horror, disassociation, and individual impotence in the face of war on an industrial scale. As poet and soldier Wilfred Owen wrote about a collection of his poems: "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War." Owen was later killed in battle, a week

before World War I ended. Ernest Hemingway, meanwhile, drew from his experience as a wartime ambulance driver when writing *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel emphasizes the ambivalence of soldiers and the depersonalized destruction of war through his short staccato sentences and bleakly simple story. There is no room for flourish here.

Not long later, World War II veterans like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller wrote literature that confirmed and elaborated on those negative themes, describing mechanized warfare as fundamentally dehumanizing, while emphasizing the absurdity of heroism. In *Catch-22*, rational choice is circular, leading directly to combat, and death. Orr and Yossarian, two of the main characters in *Catch-22*, are Army officers who attempt everything they can to get out of flying additional bombing missions in WWII. The war is almost over, and the missions seem guaranteed only lead to more chances to be shot down by the Germans or Italians. Awards and positive recognition mean nothing to either of them. From the novel:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

Revelations about passivity and absurdity in modern war literature paralleled a recognition that similar situations exist in corporate structures; it has been fashionable to describe life within an institution using the language of sarcasm and irony ever since, from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest.*

But for all that, I didn’t see much passivity in Afghanistan.

Very quietly, technological advances (internet connectivity and smart phone technology) in and outside battle have returned soldiering and warfare to their personal, pre-industrial state. Each decision of every soldier can have strategic consequences for good or for ill. Instead of individuals overwhelmed by their inability to make meaningful choices, I saw an incredible, almost debilitating amount of agency and responsibility on an hourly basis, always. We risked getting torn apart by dull or sharp metal every time we left our bases, chucked high by overpressure. We risked the same when we were on our bases – as revealed by the Air Force officer killed by a rocket while jogging inside the perimeter of our base (known as FOB Kunduz).

After a suicide bomber destroyed so much in the middle of our mission, I’d decided to go forward, and we did. The bombing emboldened the Taliban, so as we walked forward under the blistering summer heat, we were moving toward a savage battle across a half-mile front. Armored vehicles, led by engineers, rumbled forward single file down the broad dirt road. The lead vehicle struck an IED, totaling it. The Taliban mortared one of my platoons and attempted to flank our position from the east, then west, blanketing us with bullets. Brass casings from my machine gunner rained down onto my helmet, a soft, hollow rain of clinking as I fed reports higher, and coordinated the defense. Two “Apache” helicopters arrived. The Taliban shot another two U.S. soldiers, and more Afghan police and militia. We pried two compounds away from the Taliban, but it was night-time before, finally, they stopped fighting.

My boss wanted to know if it was worth staying there, after all. What did we hope to accomplish when most of our Afghan allies were mourning?

We needed to stay, I told him. We’d held our own, and could move over to the attack in the morning. I requested more

assets, and more time. I doubled down, hoping, but not knowing, that if we could trade punches long enough with the Taliban, we'd kill or exhaust enough of them to make them quit.

But we could fail. This notion terrified and appalled me. It also reveals that my choice was a real one: it had consequences. Acting – taking ownership for a decision, not backing away from the moment – risks humiliation and high-stakes defeat. Pointing our guns and firing, running forward into the woodline, fighting our way into buildings: we could just as easily have accomplished nothing, or worse.

My experiences and those of, say, Tim O'Brien – who wrote *The Things They Carried*, one of the most important accounts of the Vietnam War – were different. For a long time after returning home, I did not know exactly what those differences were. I couldn't enumerate them. But when I sat down to try my own hand at contemporary literature – *Afghan Post*, a memoir – they began to crystallize before me.

By writing and reflecting on my experiences I discovered that the challenge in processing my experiences in Afghanistan was not due to a feeling of vulnerability or impotence, but to a stifling sense of horror that a thing I said or did might have terrible consequences. Rather than confirming the lessons I'd gleaned from Vonnegut or Heller or O'Brien – that I'd been trapped in a situation completely beyond my control, the proverbial "Catch-22" – my time in Afghanistan convinced me of the opposite. I was never forced or compelled to move forward into battle, and I never demanded that my soldiers move forward, either. The words "I order you" or "I command you" never crossed my lips, literally or implicitly. There were choices to act, every step of the way.

This is not to suggest that Heller and O'Brien and Vonnegut are now irrelevant. Not as humanists, or satirists, or historians. But they are cataloguing a thing, a state of

affairs that has no meaning for soldiers or officers like me, veterans who saw what I did. We are soldiers who chose to take a picture of dead Taliban, or not. Soldiers who chose to give their food or water out to impoverished villagers—in violation of orders, but gaining unexpected goodwill. Other soldiers may have made different choices. Still others may have been posted in cities or forts away from the borders or restive Pashtun areas – places that saw little fighting, where all they could do was observe action on a television screen.

For everyone back home, to whom this war must have been a received event on YouTube or at the movies, passivity really is the way to describe their experience of the war. Michael Lokesson, another veteran of current wars, described the prevailing argument best in an article he wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

As war became more mechanized and regimented, and fought on a far larger scale, incorporating new technological implements of death – rifles and cannons, planes and armor, drones and improvised explosive devices – the agency of the individual soldier, however lofty in rank, has diminished.

I wasn't with Lokesson in Iraq, and cannot claim to know his experience or that of his comrades. But while his logic may hold true up to Vietnam and in Iraq, it didn't hold true for Afghanistan, at the very least. Quite the opposite – the agency of the individual soldier has increased.

If there was a bottom to the "agency" parabola, it was likely during WWII, where entire armies and fleets were destroyed without any effect on the outcome of the war. The Japanese sank most of our fleet in the Pacific, and destroyed some hundreds of thousands of British, Americans, and Chinese. They endured the first and last atomic bombings. The German Wehrmacht gobbled up five Russian armies groups whole – some four million soldiers killed or captured over five months of significant fighting – the consequence of which was that four

years later, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. It is utterly plausible, among the firebombing of cities, dawn of the atomic age, and mechanized warfare, to imagine, as a soldier, that staying awake on guard wasn't going to make much of a difference on any collective individual or level.

Meanwhile, two military police soldiers in Abu Ghraib took pictures of themselves psychologically and physically torturing prisoners, and the world paid attention. Edward Snowden absconded with 250,000 sensitive documents from the NSA, and it had severe repercussions for international relations, repercussions that echo into the present, as former allies and democratic sympathizers such as India and Brazil side with a notorious tyrant (Putin) rather than America. And I and those like me fought through the dust and wet, humid heat, through thin air in the unforgiving mountains, under our own power, by our own choosing.

After that mission in Kunduz Province in early August, I wrote a letter to one of my best friends. Describing the circumstances surrounding the battle, I wrote that:

We really could've turned the mission into a success if we'd been postured to follow it up, but the way the assets were being committed was too piecemeal, there wasn't any organization or long-term plan. This was my fault. We'd planned to be on the offense for three days, and I made no contingency plans for follow-on operations; we should've planned for more.

The letter is a simple accounting of action, taken by individuals; it is not a nihilistic account wherein the characters are all helpless, subjective or mere tools of an uncaring fate. As it turned out, we were rewarded for the choices we made. Although we had to turn back without accomplishing our objective within the Taliban-held areas, the Afghan police and army came back with a renewed fervor after their mourning was complete, and the story of our desire to

fight on their behalf and fight along with them struck a chord with the population. When we returned to our fort after the last day of fighting, the roads of Imam Sahib city were lined with Afghans waving at us – families, children, little girls. Our efforts produced measurable, real effects, and laid a solid foundation that we drew on to go back, and back again, and again, until the Taliban were driven out.

Paul Fussell, an infantryman from WWII and a fine author, wrote a superlative essay for *Harper's Magazine* in 1982 titled "My War: How I got irony in the infantry." In it, among a great many other example of the roots of his irony (and that of an entire generation), he describes how the worst battle of his life went forgotten because of its relative unimportance in the overall scheme of WWII:

That day in mid-March that ended me was the worst of all for F Company. We knew it was going to be bad when it began at dawn, just like an episode from the First World War, with an hour-long artillery preparation and a smokescreen for us to attack through. What got us going and carried us through was the conviction that, sufferers as we might, we were at least "making history." But we didn't even do that. Liddell-Hart's 766-page History of the Second World War never heard of us. It mentions neither March 15 nor the 103rd Infantry Division. The only satisfaction history has offered is the evidence that we caused Josef Goebbels some extra anxiety.

In Khanabad, in Imam Sahib, every time we drove down the new, black paved roads, or along the dusty, cratered dirt trails, or walked into the marketplace, we had an immediate and noticeable effect – we were the war. And yet, current war literature like *The Yellow Birds*by Kevin Powers, asserts the opposite: "The war tried to kill us in the spring." This is a stance that lags behind the truth: The war was us, we chose and made it. And so far as I remember, we weren't trying to kill ourselves.

If one's primary interaction with Iraq or Afghanistan has been watching a ninety-second clip on the nightly news of a tiny fort being overrun in some nameless valley, or a firefight, or one of the ubiquitous recordings of sleek, black-metal American air power sniffing out and destroying nighttime Taliban infiltrators in black-and-white, I understand how one might conclude that war is sporadic or even forgettable. Maybe for people who were driving up and down the same road in Bradley light tanks, or Abrams, some of them getting blown up, some surviving arbitrarily – maybe for them the war was as absurd and unknowable as it was for Yossarian in a B-24 bomber flying over the skies of Bologna in WWII.

But I did not see absurdity where I was in Afghanistan – at least, not WWII-Albert-Camus-grade absurdity. I saw people making choices, for good and for ill. In the mountains and valleys, the places where the 173rd, 101st, 82nd, 3rd, 4th, and 10th patrolled, we didn't wage war with a nuanced appreciation for the infinite variables that affected every bullet fired on both sides. When we patrolled – scrambling over sun-baked walls, our poorly-designed, sweat-soaked uniforms ripping under the stress, down rocky, uncertain draws, clambering and dragging ourselves and each other up hills, behind the next piece of cover – it was conscious, earnest. The bullets zipping and *ker-twanging* around us were the least ironic of all. They had one purpose: to instruct each of us how fragile and sporadic a thing we were.

No. What I saw while firing my rifle from the trenches that the mujahedeen or Soviets dug to fight one another years ago was a series of intensely personal battles on a tribal level, for local security. The soldiers, sergeants, and officers I worked with helped stitch together the battles we fought in rural thirty-compound villages (with a solitary stream running through the middle for irrigation) into something bigger: security at a sub-regional level. When you're walking forward, putting one sore, boot-clad foot in front of the next, and you

know that the boom of a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade and chatter of Taliban machine-guns is minutes or seconds away, you don't feel (*I* didn't feel) passive. I felt that a thing was about to happen, a thing for which I was partly or wholly responsible.

More often than not, at the end of the day I felt content with what happened. After all, I couldn't account for Kabul, or Washington D.C., or Islamabad – those places with people I'd never see. All I saw was my own little slice of the broader struggle to give Afghans a chance at less corruption, a freer society, and a better justice system. By the time I left Afghanistan for good, the Taliban were gone, and I'd seen two women – *two* – wearing blue jeans in the cities under my unit's jurisdiction, Imam Sahib and Khanabad. That seemed like progress.

War literature as it stands today describes a kind of war that is foreign to me. According to Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and their contemporaries, war (*life*) is unknowable, mediated, somehow beyond comprehension (Wolff said that war made him stupider). Would that this were the case today! The fact that Iraq and Afghanistan have been more observed than lived by many citizens helps give the notion of passivity traction. I understand its logical roots, but its day as an organizing principle for war has passed. In fact, it's even worth considering whether the idea of soldier passivity during warfare always existed for its audience at home as a way to defend humans from facing their awful, bestial capability during legal, community-sanctioned violence; a way of denying the things that one permits one's sons and fathers (and now daughters and mothers) to experience. After all, even the legendary warriors of Homer were media constructs – the battle between Hector and Achilles is moderated entirely by the goddess Athena, who selects Achilles as victor.

In the end, I can only write the war I know: to try to characterize human behavior in our own time. I'm indebted to

those thinkers who came before, but am free from the constraints of their experiences and successes. The great writers of the past have done their part, but the war literature that will speak truly to this age will be as different from *The Things They Carried* as that great Vietnam story was from *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There are writers out there right now working on taking contemporary war narratives to the next level – among them are Brian Castner, Phil Klay, Brian Van Reet, Matt Gallagher, Kristen Rouse, and Mike Carson. This emerging generation of writers and war veterans (male and female) act, speak, and write – just as they patrolled, built, and suffered – in full possession of their faculties. Not victims of government or circumstance or passion, but, rather, agents who are ultimately responsible to themselves, and for their actions.

This is the legacy of the first all-volunteer American army to head overseas: whatever one's feelings on the invasions, the war didn't happen to us. We owned it, start to finish. It was ours – it *is* ours.

A Veteran Relooks at War

We have collectively learned much in the last couple years about a secret and frightful new war machine – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, aka drones. That is a topic for another day, however. The new awareness has generally increased since 2011, a year which witnessed the unexpected assassination of America's greatest terrorist nemesis, as well as the official conclusion of the American military presence in Iraq. Afghanistan has long been regarded by public opinion as the

‘good’ or ‘necessary’ war, while Iraq is mostly called (quite rightly) a war of ‘choice’ or even ‘American adventurism’, etc. Osama bin Laden and his rogue al-Qaeda network were based out of Afghanistan (after relocating from other less-than-desirable places such as Somalia and Sudan), which provided the rationale for a bombing campaign (what is there to bomb there, anyway?) followed by a seemingly interminable occupation of that unfortunate country. Here are the agreeable official euphemisms for these actions (which are without a doubt not “wars”, since war has not been declared by Congress per the Constitution; in fact, the last “War” that America officially declared was World War II): “Operation Iraqi Freedom”, which lasted from 2003-2011 (a *mere* 9 years), and “Operation Enduring Freedom”, which began in late 2001 and will apparently continue until *at least* 2014. This last one, ‘OEF’, is already America’s longest war at 12 years and counting. Any sense of “progress” cannot be measured except by often-misleading statistics, and, as usual, civilians have suffered the most (while, as usual, arms producers have benefitted the most). It did not have to be like this.

During my career as a US Army Officer, I spent two years in Afghanistan (between 2005-2008) as a part of ‘OEF VI’ and ‘OEF VIII’ (the Roman numerals signifying the change of command from one Army unit to another). On my second tour, I discovered and read a book by Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani called *Letters Against the War*. It is no understatement to say that it began to open my eyes to the nature of the conflict I was personally (and quite voluntarily) involved in, since it had, at that time, long been a taboo subject to criticize the war in Afghanistan (once again, the ‘good’ war). In fact, it was not until roughly 2008, after years of political mismanagement (by the Bush administration as well as Congress) and neglect (by the media and populace at large), that public attention began to change and people began to question why we are still sending money and soldiers to kill and be killed in Afghanistan. Terzani

wrote his letters in the months immediately after September 11, 2001, and he died less than 3 years later in 2004 at the age of 65. I find that even now, 12 years after their first publication during those heated months which followed *9/11*, they still remain relevant and are well worth reading by anyone with even a passing interest in world affairs. They are short, and here you can read a free English online edition.

Terzani was never well-known in Italy until his last years. He left Italy to study Chinese in America, and for the rest of his career worked as a journalist for the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and traveled around every part of Asia. He was often a war correspondent and reported on virtually every conflict in Asia from the 1970's until post- 9/11. He witnessed both the fall of Saigon to the Vietcong, and the fall of Phnom Pehn to the Khmer Rouge. Obviously, he was no stranger to bloodshed. That is exactly why he was a pacifist who spoke strongly against war.

This is the context that underlies his *Letters Against the War*. Rather than being swept up by the raw emotion (and a generous amount of bloodlust) of 9/11 like most of the West (including and especially the media), and passively accepting blanket Manichean dichotomies such as "with us or against us", he appealed to reason and understanding. He argued that the solution to violence is not to create more violence. Especially when much of that violence comes in the form of bombs dropped from nearly invisible airplanes onto largely civilian populations who have no idea what the Twin Towers were or what happened there. The letters were originally published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* as Terzani's rebuttal of a violent anti-Muslim invective by fellow journalist and Florentine Oriana Fallaci. Terzani traveled through Pakistan and into Afghanistan in the weeks after 9/11, and reports firsthand the mood of the people there and the situation on the ground. He demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of Asian history and politics to explain how things

work in a society that is so different from our own, and how we can trace the historical evolution behind radical Islam. While I may not agree with every opinion in the book, it is written with wisdom and circumspection, and I would recommend everyone read it.

At the very least, the point of reading and pondering such opinions is an important step for every citizen in a free society for any political action, but especially in the case of imminent war. We vote only for politicians, but cannot vote for each policy they enact after elected, and certainly not for wars or bombings or secret defense expenditures. Politicians will use every tool at their disposal to start a war if that is in their interest, regardless of the cost to the country, and the world, as a whole, not to mention human life. Methods to manipulate the public discourse are used as much as possible, with propaganda and misinformation the sharpest tools, in order to justify decisions that the electorate might not otherwise support (and cannot directly vote on). Would people still unquestioningly advocate the path towards war in the days after 9/11 if they knew the full costs that would be borne many years later? How many lives of Afghans and Iraqis and Americans (and other global citizens) is it worth to "avenge" the nearly 3000 mostly American lives lost on 9/11 (the true number will never be known, but must surely be at least two orders of magnitude higher)? How much money are we willing to spend on over a decade of war-making (an unthinkable percentage of which is for defense contractors, corrupt officials, or is still "unaccounted for"), when there are plenty of people in our own country and around the world who need food, medical care, and a fair chance to get an education? I think there are occasions in which war is either necessary or inevitable, but this is not very often, and should always be debated beforehand and entered into with caution and great reluctance (and not with emotion or bloodlust – the cheers following the death of Osama bin Laden attest to the latter). According to Steven Pinker's

recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, conflict and violence are gradually decreasing in the human species. I think and hope that this is generally correct, and gives us extra reason to question the need and circumstances of any new potential war. Iran and Syria are the latest examples. We should always be, by default, in the opposition to any political scheme that attempts to entangle us in wars, which are by nature destructive and unpredictable. Terzani made the case for peace (and still does so through his writings), and I think with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he was one of the few voices of reason.

TED talk of Alberto Cairo, an Italian doctor who has helped war wounded in Afghanistan since 1990 and who Terzani met and wrote about in Letters Against the War

On a lighter related note, my favorite book by Terzani is probably his most popular, *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* (*Un indovino mi disse*). This 1995 book tells about how in 1976 in Hong Kong, a Chinese fortune-teller told Terzani that he would face mortal danger in 1993 and should not use airplanes in that year. Terzani didn't pay much attention (as none of us would for a prediction 17 years in the future), but at the end of 1992 he remembered it once again and, either out of fear or as a game, he decided to travel around Asia that year only by ground (or sea) transportation. Over the course of trains, boats, donkeys, and other means, he makes his way around Laos, Thailand, Burma, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, Russia, and India recounting local history and legends, and testing each type of fortune-teller everywhere he goes. He is not a believer in superstition, and discusses in detail the many types of tricks of the trade of various astrologers, palm readers, etc, all of which are apparently quite popular in Asia. Most of all, he writes convincingly of the benefits of slow travel by ground, and how much deeper one feels a place with this method as opposed to hurried hops from one sterile airport to another. I have not

succeeded in totally making all of my travels so ideally slow and plane-free, but I have tried it on occasion when I can (such as a bus trip from Wales to Italy in one case), and it is a richer experience (not to mention avoiding the annoyances of the post-9/11 airport security). Terzani is an expert in all matters of Asia, and this book is worth reading for his anecdotes and unique perspective alone.

I recently had occasion to visit a place called Orsigna in the beautiful hills of northern Tuscany which was the setting for a film. The film was a German production based on the memoirs and final book of Terzani, *La fine è il mio inizio* (*The End is My Beginning*) (co-written and published posthumously by his son, Folco, in 2006). Terzani was born in Orsigna, and returned there from meditation in his Himalayan mountain hut shortly before his death (his stomach cancer caused his health to deteriorate rapidly). It is a very nice book, and the setting of the film itself is inspiring.

Thanks for reading, welcome to the new website, and please leave comments at your pleasure.

To put a hopeful paraphrase on a quotation of George Santayana: “Only the *future* has seen the end of war.”

(please watch John Lennon’s video below for a look at the true face of war)