New Poetry by Loretta Tobin: “In the Dead Man’s Seabag” and “River City”

A blue ribbon marked
First Thessalonians,
where he had underlined—
Be joyful always;

Learning to Fly: The Army and The Airborne Mafia

Sometimes in life, one experiences a shock or a revelation so powerful that it stays with you for years. For me, one such shock occurred at the Yavoriv training area in Western Ukraine, in June of 2015, embedded with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which was training about 2,000 members of Ukraine’s National Guard. The shock was seeing Ukrainian troops (many of whom had been rotated back to training from the front lines) performing at a level of competence equal to *or even exceeding* what I’d seen in U.S. forces during my time as an airborne infantry officer (from 2006-08, with the 173rd).

Adrian and a former colleague from Afghanistan catching up at Yavoriv circa 2015. Photo by Jack Crosbie.

The Ukrainians were unafraid of speed. Going door to door clearing a village of “separatists” they demonstrated a

violence of action I hadn't seen in years. These weren't tier 1 units, they weren't Delta or Rangers, they were regular units, albeit those who'd already seen some combat. Their practice runs were filled with the type of urgency and energy every commander hopes for in troops on the offense. For the first time, an assumption I had about Ukraine and Russia – essentially, that Russia would inevitably win – was challenged. Moreover, an assumption I'd had *about American* military formations was challenged. When I tested that assumption of mine, that the U.S. military was there to train the badly equipped, demoralized, hapless Ukrainians, many paratroopers with the 173rd confirmed my suspicion, stating that they'd learned as much from the Ukrainians as they'd taught them. Some paratroopers went further, saying that the only thing Americans were really good for was as a delivery mechanism for bullets, that this was all the Ukrainians needed.

That was a bit much; Ukrainians I spoke with were deeply grateful for the training provided by the 173rd. More than the bullets, they were also grateful for the process that American paratroopers used to approach training – backward planning, the deliberate design of a program from the end result (outcome) to the beginning inputs. That process, that ability to project out desired results and carefully and methodologically build up to them in a way that took the trainees capabilities and desired end state into account, was not something that was part of most Ukrainians' experience. The extent to which serious and deliberate training had ever been part of the Red Army once upon a time had withered over years of corruption and disuse. The 173rd, for its part, put the lessons it learned from Ukrainians to excellent use, compiling a remarkable document covered by author and journalist Wesley Morgan in 2017.

There in Yavoriv, watching the Ukrainians train, and the 173rd

Airborne Brigade train them, I thought about how suitable it was for my former unit to be offering the training. It occurred to me there that an effective military reflects the culture and society of the country it serves, and also that a culture and society supports a military that reflects its values. There is a kind of virtuous harmony between the two. I also thought then, remembering my own service with the 173rd, how perfectly appropriate the airborne infantry (which prizes decentralized authority for decision-making and mission accomplishment) is for a people who prize democratic values and value as much political and economic authority as possible pushed down to the individual citizen level. Historically, those armies have always punched far above their weight.

Rob Williams, a former paratrooper with the 173rd – who, incidentally, deployed to Afghanistan at the same time that I did (2007-2008) though with the Brigade's 2nd Battalion (I was in its 1st Battalion) – has written an excellent book describing why and how that came to pass. *The Airborne Mafia*, out this March through Cornell University Press, covers the evolution of airborne operations from WWII to the present moment. It also examines how a small group of airborne leaders who emerged from WWII had an outsize effect on the shape and culture of the U.S. Army (and indirectly, on the military) after WWII.

> Rob Williams' new book explores how airborne leaders during and after WWII shaped the Army, and the military.

The history isn't simple, but the connective tissue is clear. Astonished by what it saw the Nazi military accomplish in WWII with airborne power, from the Wehrmacht's key (and tactically unimpeachable) deployment during the initial blitzkrieg of Belgium and the low countries to German paratroopers' Phyrric

seizure of Crete, U.S. war planners became obsessed with fielding their own airborne capabilities. Williams catalogues the development of those forces in training and in war, highlighting key lessons in combat from Salerno to Normandy and beyond. These experiences formed the "seed" of the Airborne mafia.

Over the coming decades, that seed, carried by those leaders who had practiced airborne warfare in WWII (names with whom military aficionados and airborne infantrymen are familiar, including Gavin, Taylor, and Ridgeway) guided and advocated for the evolution of that force within the Army even as they defended it from hostile and competing influences, including (I was surprised to learn) a recalcitrant Air Force that wanted full control over all air assets but was actively hostile to serving as a ferry for Army combat power it believed technology had rendered obsolete.

Through Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, the key principles of the airborne infantry (radical decentralization of mission control down to the individual soldier level) were emphasized and spread, until the active-duty military became, on a certain fundamental philosophical level, *indistinguishable* from an airborne unit. This was the case when I was in the military on active duty, and as far as I can tell – again, on a fundamental level – is the case today.

Moreover, though he doesn't put too much weight on this assertion (his focus is the airborne), Mr. Williams also makes a credible case for the importance of the airborne and the Airborne Mafia to the birth and growth of special operations. Both formally in terms of capabilities, and also culturally in the infusion of airborne noncommissioned officers into Rangers and Special Forces during Vietnam (the sort of career path described in *Apocalypse Now*), which in turn led to the development of CAG and other elite formations that form the heart of what people think of as America's warrior elite, the airborne was a vehicle that carried special operations forward

into the modern era.

The Airborne Mafia is a necessary work. Not only because it's always necessary to lay out important information that's visible with complete clarity in retrospect, but because in describing how the Army came to embody the ideals of the airborne infantry, Williams also offers a compelling defense for the airborne going forward in the 21st century. No force save the Marines has come in for as much criticism as the airborne; no force save the Marines has been faced with extinction as many times. The critics of Marines and the airborne are legion: too expensive, strategically unnecessary, tactically wasteful, worse than useless. But those same critics rarely (if ever) consider the upside. That upside: that decentralized 21st century warfare is most effectively trained by the airborne, in the airborne, and is most effectively prosecuted *by* leaders who have been raised and trained in that "paratrooper" mentality. Paratroopers embody combined arms warfare as much as they depend on it for survival; they are at the heart of a modern and effective combined arms force just as much as their leaders helped build that force. Without them, that force will crumble; without that combined arms military, the future of the United States becomes uncertain.

I will take it a step further. While Mr. Williams does not say it in the book, I believe the Airborne still has a role in the conventional Army for the 21st century *as the airborne* – that 20,000 or 30,000 paratroopers, descending from the sky by parachute, can ruin an enemy's defensive plans or blunt or parry an enemy's dangerous offensive operation. Recent hyper fixation in certain quarters on special operations "Sicario" style strike teams and the usual chorus of voices claiming that technology (drones, missiles, etc.) have changed warfare forever notwithstanding, I believe – I *know* – that so long as the U.S. fields a healthy and capable airborne arm, that the

military is in good shape, and reflective of the democratic values and principles our country still – for the moment – holds dear. When we cannot take to the sky to descend at a time and place of our choosing, it will be one more sign that the days of the United States are numbered.

New Nonfiction from Ciel Downing: “Burn Baby Burn”

“Fire in the belly!” “Be all you can be!” “Get fired up!” Slogans to incite, ignite, excite and encourage living on the edge—the thrill of defying death on the pages of peril. “Fire in the hole!” The acrid tang of sulfur and gun powder odor, the tympanic thrum in my ears. “Drive on!” “Hoorah!” Be honorable—I wanted that. “God! Duty! Country!” Be a part of something greater than yourself; ask what you can do for your country. “Lockdown, lockdown—fires take your position!” Words seared into my adrenalin. The Pavlovian response to leap from the warm comfort of my bed to draping myself with combat gear, bare feet to boots, racing to a foxhole.

Each time my Sgt. copped a quick feel, each time I screamed “Cover me!” the soft and good and kind parts of me fragmented and fell away making me sharper, more linear, more chiseled. Each leer and lip lock, each lock and load inventoried in perpetuity in my brain—tiny registers of offense, stacking up sandbags of resistance, numbness, defenses inside me precariously high—get ready, keep vigilant—always on the alert. Balance, balance—those sandbags teeter and threaten to topple unceasingly.

“Ruck up!” (time to move out). “Tits up!” (dead person ahead). “All one big Charlie Foxtrot,” (cluster fuck). Sing along with the cadence, “We’re gonna rape, kill, pillage and burn!” and the stack gets higher, sleep gets leaner, readiness gets sharper and the air gets thinner. Tight rope walking on concertina wire. It’s all about being one of the boys, only I’m not. It’s all about embracing the aggression and dismissing the vile, only I don’t and I can’t. It’s going all in…only I don’t belong “in.”

Silverfish in shower drains, rats and rodents running rampant in streets where school children play crawling on warheads, where raw sewage seeps into rice fields. It’s hookworms in the topsoil, cockroaches in the quarters, abandoned Amerasians, beggars, parasites and prostitutes—too much to keep up with. Jackhammering at my privilege, burrowing into my core, nicking away tiny shards of me. Increasing the pounding percussion in my ears, behind my eyes, throughout my head. Grinding my teeth unconsciously, knowing the expectations roll like an unstoppable boulder: higher, faster, smarter, more than, stronger, better, first place, tight group until yeah, that edge is now a razor; my nerves electric current, my heart in a chronic race with my respiration. The alert sirens and flashing lights of gray matter pinwheeling wildly, working their way into a tornado-like funnel of frantic preparedness. Ever vigilant, ever ready, every day, every second.

“So get fired up Kid—get that fire in the belly!” with a yuk yuk solid slap on the back. Aspirations of the American Way. But more of me keeps dying. Splintering off, bleeding out, disfiguring like a Picasso. Bits of me swept up and away like smoke off a moth’s wing; dust motes of shoulds and oughts with nowhere to go. A wail chafes my throat, “God! Help me!” But god is a hologram bubble here; visible one second, then evaporates and is gone. What would there be to help anyway? All that fire leaves—is ash.

New Nonfiction from Larry Abbott: Review of Joy Damiani's "If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'"

Joy Damiani: *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin' (and other lessons I learned in the Army)*

Available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback versions

You will hate this book. You will hate being compelled to finish Damiani's story in one sitting (you're excused if it takes two). You will hate spewing coffee (or other beverage) onto your computer keys if you are reading the book on Kindle, or sopping a few pages of the paperback, because of Damiani's humor and sarcasm. And you will hate that the story she tells is, regrettably, true, not only about her personal experiences but also about her analysis of military culture in general and the Iraq War.

Formerly known as Emily Yates, the author now goes by Joy (her middle name) Damiani (her family name). She "traded in" her "old name" to put closure on her divorce and to move ahead with new projects. As a musician and songwriter she has released a number of albums and music videos; a recent music video, a lively romp, is entitled "Brains in Meat Suits." She is also a poet. "I Am the Savage" relates to her time in Iraq, while "Yellow Ribbon" criticizes the empty patriotism of civilians who feel that a yellow ribbon on their car absolves them of complicity in war. Damiani has published essays on

veterans' issues, especially the difficulties faced by women vets returning home.

She now turns to memoir. *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'* (Joy Damiani Words & Music, 2022), "Dedicated to every veteran who has lived these lessons and to every young person who learns them for the first time here," is divided into thirteen chapters that describe Damiani's teenage pre-military years, the reasons she joined the Army at age 19, her six years in the military, with two Iraq deployments writing "Army news" as a Public Affairs Specialist, and concluding chapters that assesses her experiences and offers a bit on her immediate post-deployment life.

The book begins with a brief mention of 9/11 and then a flashforward to 2004, where Damiani, as a nineteen-year old Public Affairs Specialist, has to revise the post newspaper to include a KIA report and a photograph. She "mechanically considered" the change, "calculating the dead in terms of column inches." Then she learns that the KIA was actually a friend, Tuazon; he had only been in Iraq for two months. She had learned to separate herself from any emotions about her stories, especially about those killed, but she realizes her well-crafted professionalism is starting to crack when she thinks of all the dead and that she is just repeating a script: "A wave of nausea washes over my body . . . I was so proud of my well-rehearsed presentation—showing no sorrow, always professional! But now I seem to be playing the part without trying." She smooths over the crack with Jim Beam.

Damiani's journey to the Army is somewhat circuitous. Her sarcastic bent and dislike of authority lead her parents to more or less spirit her away to the Family Foundation School in order to cure her of her sins of sarcasm and rebellion. (The Family Foundation School, in Hancock, New York, closed in 2014 amid lawsuits and accusations of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse of its teenage students). In the eighteen months plus she spends at the school the only bright spot is a

class in folk music, where she develops an “affinity” for Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Kris Kristofferson, among others, and writers Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson. Sure cures for rebellion! Unfortunately, Damiani is not suitably cured of her sarcasm, and she faces another six months of “supervised rock-picking.” Eventually, she decides to leave the school and hitchhikes back home to Syracuse, where her parents put her on a strict regimen in order to live at home. She also enrolls in a local community college and after six months back home gets a call from an Army recruiter, offering her, for a five-year hitch, a journalism, or “Public Affairs Specialist,” opportunity. It takes Damiani all of twelve seconds to answer in the affirmative.

She goes to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. She stumbles through, with sprains, blisters, a broken nose, and two black eyes, but compared to her time at the Family Foundation School she writes that, “the Army’s attempts at indoctrination seem almost quaint.” Her rebellious tendencies are still in evidence: She does qualify in marksmanship but names her M16 A-2 rifle “Bungalow Bill” after the Beatles’ song. She also pokes her finger in the eye of the Army in other ways: “The drill sergeants ignore me when I hum ‘The Times, They Are A-Changin’’ while on guard duty, or when I use my turn calling marching cadences to lead the platoon in a rousing chorus of ‘War! What is it good for?’”

The next chapters detail Damiani’s first deployment to Kuwait for training and then to Iraq. When she finally reaches Baghdad her job “is to put out a decent newspaper . . . I’ve come to take it seriously.” Although she is still a rhombic peg in a triangular hole she does have the commitment to do her best; “the option of apathy has never even been on the table before.” She has integrity about her work even as she remains cynical about the “big picture.” At the same time her dream of being a real “war reporter” is evaporating: “Now, I feel defeated, rotting away in a combat-zone cubicle,

waiting—wishing—for one of those incessant mortar attacks to successfully explode the headquarters." After her complaints, bordering on insubordination, Damiani does get the opportunity to go out on joint U.S. and Iraqi patrols. Unfortunately, that assignment is short-lived. Because of her criticism of an incompetent co-worker on the journalism team, she is removed from her associate editor position and basically has to cut and paste articles from Google searches. She still has seven months to go.

After a year in Iraq Damiani's cynical side begins to emerge more and more. She writes: "I've already spent the better (or worse) part of twelve months in Iraq as part of what I have come to recognize as an illegally-invading force." She notes that Orwellian language needs to be used to present everything in a positive light. "'Interrogation' becomes 'intelligence-gathering'"; the "occupation" is "'reconstruction'"; the "war" is a "'peace-keeping mission'"; "suicides" become "'non-combat-related deaths.'" She feels herself to be a "foreign invader."

Interspersed with her time in Iraq, Damiani uses flashbacks to chronicle her disastrous marriage. She was married a few months before deployment and right before her return to the States after a year in Iraq she realizes that the relationship had devolved further, that she has become "expendable." As she sits alone in her trailer at Camp Liberty she reaches her nadir, writingthat she "eyed my assault rifle and let my mind wander . . . absentmindedly measuring the distance from the trigger to the barrel, the distance from my fingers to my head." Damiani does return home and the marriage hits bottom, involving her arrest for domestic violence and a stay in a psychiatric hospital after suicide threats. She is released after seventy-two hours and returns to work at [what base?]: "The information war must go on. The war inside my head will have to wait." Her resentment over assignments grows: "I've come to accept that by the time a typical day is over, I will

want to cut someone open and feed them their own intestines. I see this as a step forward in my quest for self-realization and inner peace."

When there appears to be light at the end of the military tunnel the threat of stop-loss is the oncoming train, to paraphrase poet Robert Lowell. Damiani believes that she will be out before stop-loss takes effect, and if she re-enlists she can choose her duty, but the Army comes up with a creative way to hold on to her. They devise an Orwellian "do-not-retain," but still deployable list, albeit a falsehood, which is a method to guarantee her second deployment to Iraq. Damiani agrees (without really agreeing) to return, and it is worth a look at her reason: "The thought crosses my mind that I would feel like a jackass if I tried to get out of the Army on time while everyone around me shipped out. Even if it was an option, could I bring myself to be that soldier? I'm not deploying because I want to, or because I think it's a good idea. I'm doing it because deep down, I believe that if I don't do it—if I get out of it on a technicality—I will be making light of everyone else's sacrifice. I'll be saying that I am special, that I deserve to stay home when my fellow soldiers pack up and go to war, and that the contract I signed is negotiable . . . Without realizing it, despite every effort to resist the Army's conditioning and retain control of at least my own mind, I have suddenly become the kind of soldier the Army has always wanted: even when given the choice, I can't quit the team."

She returns to Iraq for fifteen months, and the Public Affairs duties are not much better. Damiani's major project is photographing visiting morale-boosting cheerleaders. She also details the secretive drinking and an attempted sexual assault by two soldiers she thought were friends. Faced with an extended deployment, she decides on the (not so) subtle course of annoying her superiors ("Intimately aware of the drastic repercussions for out-and-out revolt, I've swiveled my sights

in the familiar direction of subtle rebellion. The delicate dance of expressing my displeasure while also staying out of trouble requires more finesse than I usually can claim"). This entails including quotes from Hunter S. Thompson and lyrics from Bob Dylan in official emails, to the consternation of a major and a colonel, and creating a custom-made ID badge with a decidedly unserious face.

As the memoir winds down, Damiani becomes more critical and somber about the whole enterprise, seeing failure everywhere. She writes: "As far as I can tell, five years after the 'surgical' airstrikes flashily-nicknamed 'Shock and Awe' leveled the nation's cities, government, and infrastructure, our presence in Iraq is a clear indicator that if an exit strategy ever existed here, it has to have gone horribly awry. Either that, or—I shudder at the thought that I don't want to believe—this whole debacle could be intentional." As a kind of bookend to the death of Tuazon mentioned at the beginning of the book, she learns of the death of a friend from her first deployment, Mele, killed by an IED. Choking back tears she is left with one thought: "*What is the fucking point of this? What. Is. The fucking. Point? Nobody is winning here*."

The book closes in 2011, three years after Damiani's return to the States. She is twenty-nine years old. She spends some of her GI Bill at Cal Berkeley, where one of her courses includes study of the Iraq War. Her fellow students are ten years younger. To them, the war is an object of study; to her, it is still "present tense." She writes: "My friends are still fighting it, after all. Sometimes I wonder if I am, too." She begins to second-guess herself with "what ifs?" and "maybes." But after all is said and done, she ends with the recognition that "The Army didn't make me blind. My sight is the clearest it's ever been."

Although she might protest my estimation, Damiani is the type of soldier the Army *needs*. She refused to take the easy way out, to fall victim to simply "playing the game" to make her

time more agreeable. Even with the disappointments, the misery, the betrayals, and the lies that she endures, sometimes with humor, sometimes with rancor, she retains the integrity of her commitment.

For further reading:

"Joy Damiani, Writer, Podcaster, Musician, and Army Veteran," Interview with Frank Morano, https://wabcradio.com/episode/joy-damiani-writer-podcaster-musician-and-army-veteran-11-11-2022/

A selection of music videos: https://www.youtube.com/c/JoyDamiani

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/joydamianimusic/

https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/09/artist-profile-musician-emily-yates/

"What Is The Name Of Your Dead Horse"

CHARGE TO THE SEA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

We start again:
With promises made for silver pass, platinum deferment,
tithing calls go out to the faithful wealthy,
subscribers to the graveyard newsletter.
Minute Men race for lifting choppers.
Laughing to say, "Your war this time,"
Buffalo Soldiers rattle dice on the hangar floor.
Bayonets strike when the Continental Army razes

river villages, hospital ships at the pier.
Raid command reminds, “Steel does not discriminate.”
Camping at desert’s edge, pilgrim rangers
lift prayers to the Judges, purity rings
glistening at rifle bolt and bandolier.
A burial procession pays praise,
follows a lynch knot regiment
through an air raid evening.

The River Sheriff wipes his cock
on a daughter’s dress, washes his hands
of a prisoner’s dreary clamor.
Bare feet twist in broken glass.
A favored son wobbles his feeble penis,
pees in a hunting field distressed at his trophy.
With bodies in a ditch,
evidence concealed in the weeds,
we have lessons located in news video.
Take a lie, a grifter’s spittle,
as the plan to beat a jury to the border.
Cross of Honor raised and burning,
The River Sheriff gestures to his girlfriends—
the weary one and the captive,
passes them a check and a signed bandanna.
The Humvees load under shelling.

In the February shock,
the Millennium March is a charge to the sea,
freed inmates a scarecrow caravan.
Drones departing overhead,
we find vehicles at the shoreline,
water lapping at burning suitcases.

New Nonfiction from Charles Stromme: “The Army Profoundly Regrets”

1972

I was back from a year of flying helicopters in Vietnam. The Army gave me a make-work job at Ft. Riley, Kansas, a base over-crowded with dejected Vietnam returnees. I hated it there, where they said, “Custer told us not to change a thing until he gets back.”

I was angry and disillusioned and clueless. A major called out to me in a hallway. “Captain, you’re going to be the notification officer next month.” He was an old major, a mustang combat vet in his last duty station. He wasn’t a bad guy and we had been working in the same battalion for several months without incident. But he hated me for being an aviator. I hated him for not being one.

“You’ll be on call for a month. When a new killed-in-action (KIA) report comes in you’ll visit the family with the chaplain and you’ll give the official first notice.”

I couldn’t bear the thought of inflicting that kind of pain on the good family of a good soldier. I was raw from the war. I didn’t want to live the back end of events that I had witnessed in Vietnam. My emotions scared me and brought back ugly memories. “No sir,” I said, “I won’t do that.”

He looked surprised. Likely no young captain had ever told him that he wouldn’t obey an order. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Do you understand that this is not a discussion, it’s an order?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I understand. But I won’t do that

job.”

“I can take this to the battalion CO if you want.” That was a profoundly underwhelming threat. I didn’t care, period, and I wasn’t going to do it. He brought out the heavy artillery: “I can court-martial you for this.”

“Yes sir, I know. You’ll do what you have to do but that won’t change my decision. I will not, under any circumstances, be the notification officer.”

I had unintentionally created a real problem for the major. He could, indeed, take this to the CO. He could certainly bring court-martial charges against me, charges against which there could be no defense. If he did, though, it would also bring to light his inability to control an officer under his command.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said. In the Army that means “I’m going to give you some time to consider the error of your ways before I decide on your punishment.”

We did talk again a few days later, but there was nothing for me to reconsider. My mind was made up. I wouldn’t carry out his order. I understood that I would be punished and I would accept whatever punishment he and the CO deemed appropriate. It would surely be a court-martial, I thought.

But he surprised me by asking, “Can we reach a compromise?”

I was suspicious. Compromise is not the Army way. “What kind of compromise?”

“We need a presentation officer for the rest of the month. There are no presentations scheduled. If you’ll take the job, I’ll forget about this problem.”

A presentation officer is not quite as bad as being a notification officer. The presentation officer visits the family of a KIA soldier after they have already been given the news. He delivers whatever medals and awards the soldier had

earned and expresses the regrets and condolences of the Army.

There were only a few days left in the month and the major, after all, had said there was nothing scheduled. It looked like I might skate on this yet. “OK, sir,” I said, “you’ve got a deal.”


Tracer round trajectories, Vietnam war. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The next day an order came down. I was to make a presentation in three days to a family in southwest Kansas. My first thought was to refuse that order too, but I had made a deal. I was honor-bound to carry out my part of it.

The newly-grieving family deserved more than the Army offered in the way of condolences and they deserved someone better than me. They deserved someone who knew exactly what to do. I was terrified.

I picked up the meager package of medals and awards that the KIA soldier had coming and the orders and citations that go with them. I would travel to wherever the family asked me to be, in this case to their home town in southwest Kansas, in time for the funeral. I would make an awards presentation.

It’s easier to describe than to do. No one tells you what to say. They just give you the medals, some dry military orders and a grieving family. You’re supposed to honor and comfort them, even if you’re only a dumb-kid captain like I was, with no experience in this sort of thing and no idea how to do what so obviously needed to be done.

It took most of a day to drive to the small farming town. Before I checked in at the local motel I drove out to find the family home where I was supposed to be in the morning. It was way, way out of town, a very large farm on flat wheat land that stretched forever. I went back to town, put on some

civvies, ate and turned in for the night.

I set a 4 AM wake-up time, common for me in those days. I had worn my Army greens on the way down, with ribbon bars, wings and service patches – First Division on my left shoulder, First Cavalry on my right. Today I would wear my dress blues, complete with full medal display. Even on a modestly decorated soldier like me, that uniform looked impressive. I loved the silver pilot's wings that symbolized the one great achievement of my life. I had paid dearly for them. Shave, instant motel coffee, re-spit shine my best low quarters (shoes, to the rest of the world) to a mirror finish and I was ready, or so I thought.

I drove out to the farm again. It was just past dawn but already a crowd of family, neighbors and friends was gathering. I parked in an out-of-the-way spot. Several men detached themselves from the main group and walked over. "Are you Captain Stromme?" one asked.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"We saw you drive by last night. Why didn't you come in? We thought you would spend the night."

Spend the night? That wasn't something I had imagined.

"Well, come on in. We're just starting breakfast. The newspaper editor will be a little bit late and we don't want to start before he gets here." The editor was a long-time family friend. People don't really come and go in small Kansas farming communities; they come and stay. The families had been close for generations. It wouldn't do for the paper not to cover the ceremony.

People came to meet me and shake my hand. Some asked about my patches and medals and wings, congratulating me for things they imagined I had done and making small talk, getting to know me.

The young soldier had been named Donald. I met his grieving parents right away. His mother shyly welcomed me, then went back to work in the kitchen with the other ladies. The father's welcome was a little warmer. What I didn't understand was that the fuss everyone was making over me wasn't about me at all. No, it was because I was a stand-in for their Donald. This was the welcome home that he would never have.

I sat with the father and some other men at a table reserved for the men-folk, a long, worn, heavy plank-topped table that could easily have been 100 years old. The women had their own tables; I caught several of them peeking over at me. They were normal in this world. I was the misplaced oddity.

Their men were normal, too. Most were brawny and muscled from a lifetime of hard work and heavy food, red-faced, calloused hands. Along with their wives they were straight out of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic.*

The coffee and breakfast were hot and good and I began to learn a few names. The father said, "So you were in the Infantry, too, like Donald?"

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes, sir. I was in the Infantry but I flew Huey helicopters. I didn't do any ground combat duty at all." And with apologies to my Infantry brothers, I still thank God for that. Most aviators do.

"Do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

"Well, sir, I'll do my best."

They asked me some ordinary questions. Where was I from, what did I do at Ft. Riley, what was Vietnam like?

What *was* Vietnam like? I still don't know, even though I had been there for 366 days minus an R&R in Hawaii. I had flown its skies at very low levels, walked in a couple of its cities, spoken to a few of its people. But that wasn't what

they wanted to know. What they really wanted to know was “What is war like?” and “Why did Donald have to die?”

Then his father, cut from the same rough cloth as his neighbors, asked me, “What do you know about claymore mines?”

I was surprised by the question. I happened to know something about claymores, but it isn’t a subject to be discussed lightly at breakfast. They are God-awful weapons, small, curved plastic packages of death on little steel legs. They explode violently when triggered, spraying 700 deadly steel balls in a broad arc. They have “FRONT TOWARD ENEMY” in raised letters on the front to remind GIs which way to point them when they’re setting them out. I had been trained with them but I had never deployed one for real. It’s not something that aviators often do.

I told them a little bit about claymores, though I didn’t tell them all of that.

The father nodded. “Donald was killed by a claymore mine.”

The room was silent, everyone looking at me and expecting… something. I was appalled, unable to say anything meaningful. What could I say? Not for the first time I lamely expressed my condolences.

“His coffin got here yesterday,” the father said. I had already seen it, on its bier in the front room. “It was sealed, you know, but we got it open.”

I thought, you opened your son’s sealed coffin? They are sealed for very good reasons.

Grimly, he said, “It took us a while, but we finally got it open. He looked pretty good. We just took a peek from the shoulders up.”

Donald had been cut in two by the claymore. They didn’t see the bottom half. The people who prepare KIA bodies had

apparently done a good job with his remains and his father wanted us to believe he'd seen what he hoped to see, the handsome young boy he had loved. But his eyes were full of stunned grief, and I wasn't sure even he could believe what he said.

He smiled a sad half-smile. "How 'bout I show you his room?"

I thought, "Please, God, let this be over."

The family had a huge basement. This was tornado country and most people had them. This one was finished in grand farm style. We entered Donald's basement bedroom. It was the room I would have slept in had I spent the previous night. Donald had left for Vietnam only a few weeks before. His room was fresh, clean, the bed made for him, or maybe for me. I imagined I could still smell a boy's scent.

He had earned a full-ride agriculture scholarship to Kansas State University, the leading aggie school in the region. K-State is located in Manhattan, Kansas, not far from where I lived. Shortly before admission he had decided to enlist in the Army. You know, before it was too late to see any action.

They showed me his yearbooks, his sports pictures, prom pictures of Donald and his girlfriend. She wasn't there yet. They brought down his Future Farmers of America awards, his 4H projects and certificates, his award buckles, his letter sweater. All for me to see, to bear witness that Donald had lived, that Donald was a person worth remembering. What I saw was a freckle-faced boy, a parent's dream, and I thought of a father's cruel last view of his son.

The minister arrived. The editor was late and we waited for him as though we were waiting for royalty. When he finally arrived he took me aside, asking "Did they tell you we opened the casket? God, it was awful."

Then we gathered in the front room with Donald's casket. This

wasn’t the funeral. That would come later in the day in the family church, with sermon and music, then the burial. I would not attend. This was the farewell, though. This was coming over to visit Donald like they always had, to say good-bye in much the same way they had said good-bye to him a few weeks before. Some friends and family spoke, then it was my turn.

The Army does little enough for its men and women but one thing it does well is train them to be soldiers. I was, am, a product of that training. It, and luck, had kept me alive when nothing else could have. Unfortunately, no one had taken the time to train me to be a presentation officer. Where was the Army Training Manual for this situation? What did it say?

When the father introduced me, I panicked. I was at a complete loss for words. I had only a few things to work with: the few minor medals themselves, the dry orders that accompanied them and whatever I could think of to say on the spot. I had thought of some words while driving down the day before. I even rehearsed them a couple of times in my motel room. I don’t know if they were appropriate because I couldn’t remember any of them.

I began, speaking directly to Donald’s father but loud enough for the room: “The Army profoundly regrets the loss of your son.” Where did that come from? What did it mean and why did I say it?

I spoke of the American commitment in Vietnam, the one in whose name their son and friend had died. I read the medal commendations, then shared what I knew about each of them. I was wearing nearly all of Donald’s medals and more myself and I spoke of the comradeship in arms signified by those medals, pointing out his and my own in turn.

Finally I ran out of things to say. Almost. My ad hoc performance needed an ending but what do you say in those circumstances, to those people gathered there?

I handed Donald's father the small group of medals with their accompanying orders. The words I chose were "Sir, on behalf of your son's comrades in the United States Army, I salute you." Then I raised my hand and saluted, a smart Infantry officer salute or so I imagined, one that would impress the women and children.

Since I had made all this up, the father had no idea what, if anything, he was supposed to do. A silent awkward moment passed, then he stood and slowly raised his hand, callused and scarred from a lifetime of farming, and returned my salute as though we had practiced yesterday.

The minister spoke again, then we prayed for Donald, for all soldiers, for America, for ourselves. I made my excuses and left, not looking forward to the long drive home. The day had drained me, saddened me, used me up.

I wanted a drink, but that was no surprise. Alcoholics usually do. I wanted to make love to my wife. Not out of lust or love. I owned some of both, certainly, but neither was in play now. No, I wanted her because I wanted to feel that I was human and alive, cleansed and renewed by the act and not in pieces in a stainless steel box forever in the ground. I didn't know how else to find that comfort. Mostly, I wanted to be held and loved, to be told that everything was going to be all right, that I would be OK. The Army doesn't tell you how to ask for that, either.

That 1972 day is long gone. Back then I thought I could see my entire life stretching out predictably before me. A career of some sort (the FBI, I thought), a home with 2.5 children, grand-kids eventually, strength and joy mixed with occasional sadness, and at the end the personal satisfaction of a life well lived. Nothing lay ahead for Donald. Everything lay ahead for me.

New Fiction from Robert Alderman: “Shaved”

This is how the fight happened: earlier that morning, while waiting on reveille to bugle from the loudspeakers across the blacktop, Harvey forced it on the new kid, Private Gilmore, as the rest of us watched, some gruff comment about his curly, black ponytail—the barbers hadn’t shaved him yet. Only two days into OSUT, Ft. Benning’s one-stop infantry shop, and the poor kid couldn’t catch a break. I remember shaking my head as Harvey yelled out to all the knuckleheads huddled there in formation, “What the hell’s this faggot thinking enlisting without a haircut?” And right along with every other shivering private, he laughed and laughed.

Gilmore had arrived late the night before from Hortons Bay, up in Michigan, and right from the start of that cold January morning, Harvey Coates had it out for him.

“Bet that bitch has some nice pussy!” Harvey slapped his battle buddy, Wilkins, on the arm. “Hey, you think the Army issues jungle-green tampons?”

Gilmore muttered, “Shut the fuck up.”

Just what Harvey wanted. That Alabama redneck wasn’t exactly looking for a fair fight. He just needed a quick release, all pent-up from the barracks. “Boy better not mind me tugging on that cute little ponytail tonight,” he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “‘cause he’s gettin’ *fucked* up.”

And just then, Drill Sergeant Malone emerged from HQ and snapped the entire column to attention, stomping into the asphalt with the heel of his polished black boot. Two other

drill sergeants followed close behind. When Malone spotted Gilmore, he let out a low whistle, advancing upon him slowly. “Well, ain’t you just the battalion beauty queen!”

Gilmore’s eyes glanced at Malone as he approached.

“Why your eyes flickering at me, private? You see something you like?” Then the drill sergeant leaned in to Gilmore’s left ear. “Oh, I think so, battle. I think this joker does see something he likes.” Malone’s voice got really low, then—I could only hear him because I was nearby. “Hey, private. Maybe, we can work something out, you and me. Maybe, I’ll slip in the barracks tonight, when everybody’s sleeping,” he whispered. “Maybe I’ll let you touch it. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, private?”

Sweating bullets, Gilmore said, “Drill sergeant, no, drill sergeant!”

“You don’t like my cock, private? What’s wrong with it?” Malone’s voice got louder and louder until he was screaming. “Why wouldn’t you want it in the palm of your hand? You think it’s ugly, private? Not big enough like you’re used to?”

That poor bastard didn’t know what to say. “No, I—uh, yes, drill sergeant?”

Malone threw his campaign hat at the ground and yelled down the rest of the line, “Hey, Bravo Company! Listen up!” Malone checked the kid’s name tag. “Private Gilmore here asked me to slip in the barracks tonight so he can rub my dick purple. That the kind of battle buddy ya’ll want in this Army? A special kind of ground pounder? Or is this joker just the typical slack-jawed fuck-face that makes up this training cycle?” He waited as the wind blew. “Answer me, faggots!”

Within five minutes, the drill sergeants forced Gilmore to wear his hair down around his shoulders. They dressed him up in a flamingo-striped civvy polo and then mix-matched it with

a pair of regulation BDU bottoms. And that was just the beginning. By the end, Gilmore was bear crawling up and down the hallway, with his ass up in the air, yelling out, “I want a big, gay Viking to ride me! I want a big, gay Viking to ride me!” Their fun lasted over an hour, turning Gilmore into a rock star, a company legend.

I didn’t get to see it all. And honestly, I’m glad I didn’t. Although my hair was a lot shorter than Gilmore’s and I’d cut it before heading to Georgia, it stuck out like a thick mane even by the laxest military standards. That was the thing. You didn’t want to be different from anybody else. And mine was just long enough to be different—ten minutes before that, while headed to the latrine for a shit, I’d seen Harvey smirking and pointing at me with Wilkins, who pretended to toss his hair like some Vidal Sassoon model. That’s probably why I kept so close to the Michigan kid. It was pack animal mentality: I knew they’d go after the longest hair first.

*

Gilmore finally caught up to me a few hours later. “Lookit,” he mumbled with that Michigan accent. He nodded down the hallway at this other recruit who’d gotten singled out by the drill sergeants. “Elliott’s got the mannequin.” Probably out of his instinct to survive—by finding someone lower on the totem pole than he was in that moment—Gilmore’d pointed out another company pretender, Tommy Elliott, who’d already skipped PT for sick-call three times in a row. Well, now they had that fat fuck sliding his duffel bags along the cold vinyl flooring with this ridiculous dummy-soldier slung across his back. A traditional hawes carry.

Officially, the dummy was known as Private Emanuel Ken—the drill sergeants always called him out during roll-call—but they told us he liked to go by “Manny” on the block. The top-half of a faded CPR dummy from the 70’s, the mannequin had been dressed up in old BDU’s to look like one of us. They’d

built the lower half of his body by stuffing flimsy pillows into the leggings of an Army uniform strapped to the dummy's waist, using olive-green utility rope and a spare pistol belt. A camouflaged patrol cap topped off his head. One of the supply sergeants joked that they packed half a sand bag in his crotch to help Malone pick him apart from the rest of us.

"Private Ken!" Malone would yell across the barracks at the dummy, which was propped up against the wall to make him stand. "Sound off with your name, Manny Ken!" The drill sergeant charged past us right across the bay as if he were going to hit him. "Why don't you ever sound the hell off?" Sometimes Malone yelled so loud at him, Manny's legs would cave-in at the knees like a raptor, his entire body deflating under the drill sergeant's shadow. "Since Private Ken ain't enthusiastic today like the rest a-you dickheads, I'll just have to make the whole company push!" And so, another smoke session would begin.


Wikipedia. "Drill Instructor at the Officer Candidate School."

But the mannequin wasn't just an excuse to regularly fuck us. The drill sergeants kept their eyes open for unattended TA-50. They said we were accountable for every last piece of our issued gear, so to hammer that home, when a private left a Kevlar at the water cooler and turned his back to crack a joke with his buddy, they'd swoop in, and God help you if Malone got his hands on your sensitive equipment before you did. It could be taken that quick.

The punishment was always the same: Private Manny Ken. You'd get 24 hours of light duty honing your fireman's carry, that familiar dummy weighing across the length of your back, that sandbag pressing into it hard. Made a long day even longer. I remember Malone crooning over me the one time I earned it, "That's good training, private!" hands on his hips like a

proud parent. “Damn fine training.” The mannequin was heavy against my body, and a layer of sweat had started to form, but even so, I pulled it tighter.

*

That afternoon, Malone marched our entire company to the PX, the Walmart of the Army. We’d get to buy phone cards there, and buzz cuts. As our feet loped along, out of step and undisciplined, the pine trees loomed along the road like an old frontier fort’s paling. The January wind had died somewhat. Then the PX came into view—a low brick building with the words *Post Exchange* in thick, bold lettering. Our phone privileges lay inside. A gang of drill sergeants stood on the street corner across from there, shooting the shit, and after taking one good look at our marching column, they shook their heads.

Malone greeted them. “When I get these jokers down-range next week, ya’ll gonna be happier than fags at a hot dog stand!”

“You sure right about that,” one of the drill sergeants shouted back.

“It’s just too easy, battle—too easy!” Malone pulled his belt up a little higher as he passed them on by and grinned.

The entire cluster of campaign hats doubled over, and they began talking fast to each other, just low enough so that we couldn’t hear them. I swear, even though they were laughing the entire time, they glared at us like a pack of hungry wolves tethered by invisible leashes, growling through rabid teeth.

To avoid mixing us with the rush of Army wives and old retirees, Malone filed the company into the PX through a side entrance, warning us: “You will all shut the fuck up and act respectful inside, is that understood? And you’d better not be cat-callin’ any teenage girls or officers’ wives. If I see or

hear any of that shit, it’s gonna be a long fucking night, privates—a *long* fucking night! I don’t give a flying titty if you’ve got a PT test tomorrow. I will smoke you retarded, trackin’?”

“Drill sergeant, yes, drill sergeant!”

“All your fancy handbags are locked up in storage, so the Army’s gonna give you a monetary advance.” The drill sergeant pulled out a stack of what looked like black debit cards from his pocket. “Each of you gets a 200-dollar money card. That’ll get ya’ll through reception until them first paychecks hit at the end of the month. Since Mother Army don’t put out nothin’ for free if she ain’t gettin’ something back, your earnings statement will show this amount deducted.”

Good ol’ Mother Army.

Shops lined the exchange’s main corridor inside—a women’s salon, vitamin store, uniform tailor, travel rep office, food court, and barber shop. The main department store had its own double-wide entrance, flagged with shoplifting detectors. After a quick glance inside, I could see designer clothing racks, a shoe department, grocery aisles, shelves lined with Harlequin romance novels, and even a big sign for home decorating and gardening. Everything a man needed to get by.

Malone snaked us around the entrance of the barber shop in long, orderly rectangles, packing us in elbow-to-elbow and nut-to-butt. When a few of us caught glimpses of the younger wives or the older daughters moving past, we kind of puffed up and all, being that we were dressed for the first time in our Army uniforms. “Move aside for them shoppers, privates. Eyes front. Mouths shut.” His inside voice was considerably lower than the one he used on the blacktop. The drill sergeant pointed at the main department store. “When ya’ll finished getting a haircut, head straight to them workers up front and buy a shaving kit.” He hesitated, then rolled his eyes. “You

can get phone cards, too."

"Holy shit," Elliott cried.

"We're really getting phone cards!" Gilmore said.

Our first chance to call back home. A collective sigh issued from the entire company as we grinned with excitement—all in agreement, for once.

Suddenly, Malone was up in Elliott and Gilmore's face, whispering loud enough so we could all hear: "Have you two dirty dick-beaters lost your damn mind? If you two don't shut the fuck up this instant, I'm gonna stick my foot up both your asses and wear you around like a pair of autistic flip-flops!" The drill sergeant looked the rest of us up and down, watching us squirm like kindergartners about to start recess as a pair of grannies shuffled by. He nodded his campaign hat at them politely. "Afternoon, ladies," which made them blush. When they were far enough away, he added, "And *no fucking candy*, privates. It's contraband. Makes your dick small."

The first recruits rushed into the barber shop as soon as Malone gave the word, and the old men inside directed them to the row of black leather chairs on the righthand wall, reserving the left side for non-recruits. This portly grandma wearing thick glasses waved me over after ten minutes of waiting. She was the only lady barber. "Get over here, son." My turn to get shaved and soldiered, I guessed.

I sat down and said, "A number one on the sides and a taper near the top—"

"Boy, you gettin' a monkey cut!" She palmed my head with her hand and flicked the razor on. It buzzed like a wasp as she brought it close to my ears. I felt it press against my sideburn and shave up my temple, a rush of cool air on my open skin. Clumps of hair didn't fall like I thought they would—the razor had this vacuuming device built into it that sucked the

loose debris down a thick tube. As she mowed up and down the back of my neck and head, the barber yelled over the razor's noise, "You got a lotta moles on your head, boy." I watched her in the mirror as she ran her tongue across the front of her teeth. "That's a sign of good luck."

I felt special. Then I felt a sharp pain.

"Oh. Sorry about that." She'd cut one of my lucky moles. A thin stream of blood ran down the smooth grooves on my scalp. "Just nicked you some. You'll be all right." She only slowed her handiwork to slop a hot, dripping wash cloth on my skin, rubbing it over the wound. "It'll heal." When she'd finished my hair, the barber spun me around to give me a good look in the mirror, holding a smaller one up behind me so I could see the back of my head's reflection.

I looked like a leukemia patient. My eyebrows were longer than what was left atop my head. She might as well have shaved them off, too! If there was one thing I'd taken pride in as a civilian, it'd been my thick, dirty blonde hair, all styled and gelled. Ma always said I'd never go bald. Apparently, a sliver of Cherokee blood ran in her family.

The barber slapped a cotton ball against the cut and fastened it down with white electric tape. "That's the only band aid I got, kid. Clean it tonight in the shower."

Next, I had to get my Private E-2 rank sewn on my uniform at the tailor shop. Because I was a university drop-out with over thirty college credits, the Army decided to promote me to a higher starting rank than the kids out of high school, but that meant I needed the E-2 patch sewn onto my BDU collars and my field patrol cap. This Korean lady behind the shop counter steadily worked at the needle and thread with her lined and thin hands. She seemed to know that I was in a hurry, but took her sweet-assed time. There was a moment, when she was about halfway done with her delicate work, that the patch just hung

there flimsy off my uniform as I watched. A single chevron rested on it. It made me wonder about the Asian ladies—swarms of them worked as grocery baggers, wives, and tailors on most military installations. They came from countries our soldiers had conquered. Now they labored to provide.

When she finished, I paid her the four-dollar fee and moved on to the main department store to get my shaving kit and phone cards, like Malone ordered.

Gilmore—still rubbing at his own landscaped head—nudged my arm when we'd finished shopping and formed back up outside. "Bro, you might wanna get back in there and buy some Selsun Blue," he said. "Your head's ate up with mad dandruff."

Elliott laughed. "He's right! Red patches all over your scalp."

"Sons of bitches," I muttered. That was the other reason I loved having a thick head of hair—they hid my skin flakes.

But there wasn't any time for that. Malone had returned. "Fall in!" The company formed up too slowly, and it made our drill sergeant grit his teeth. But something kept his anger in check. "Hurry up," he shouted at a few stragglers. When the company was ready, he looked us over. "I tell you what," Malone said, before ordering *column-right march*. "A company of fresh-bald privates'll make even the most grizzled old first sergeant weep. Goddamn beautiful."

*

"Phone calls!" Malone came storming into the bay. "You shit-birds get fifteen minutes, the whole damn company!"

Our entire bay of recruits dropped what they were doing and scrambled for their phone cards, stashed away in wallets and duffle bags, even their shaving kits. We pressed out the bay doors to a series of metal booths with black pay phones under

white artificial lights. We still wanted our mothers to save us. Each recruit jockeyed for position. “Every man gets three minutes!” Malone yelled. “That includes dialing time.” Then our fearless leader signaled the phone calls to begin, even as privates were already dialing home.

I was about halfway back in the third line. Gilmore stood in front of me, his face impatient and eager. “It’s pot roast night,” he said aloud to everybody and nobody. “Momma makes the best damn pot roast—I hope to God I can smell it.”

Elliott was huddled against his booth one line over, trying to hide the fact that he was crying. Some of the more respectful privates just turned away, pretending not to notice. It seemed the right thing to do. But a few made sure to rub it in good.

“Be gentle with her,” Harvey was saying to Wilkins. “She just needs a little something in the bay tonight to make her feel better.”

I hated that motherfucker.

“Twelve minutes!” Malone shouted.

Gilmore was up. I’ve never seen someone dial a phone number so fast. You woulda swore he called 911. That got me thinking about who I’d call on my turn so I could dial it just as quick. My girl needed a phone call, for sure, but I hadn’t told my parents that I’d enlisted yet. They still thought I was back home.

“Nine minutes!”

Gilmore’s back got animated. He was talking too low for me to hear, but I just knew he’d gotten his mom on the phone. Whatever he was saying sounded really happy. Family does that for you. No matter how many times you hurt each other, you can always push all that aside. Just be there for each other. I rubbed at the palm of my hand. The artificial lights hummed

above, and for the first time, it dawned on me how quiet Ft. Benning was. Above the still pine trees and the freshly mowed grass, the American flag, towering above our complex and wider than several cars, hung limp from its metal post.

“Hurry, man. Time’s up.”

Gilmore turned and gave me a dirty look.

“Six minutes!”

“You’re done, Michigan.” I inched forward to the booth, trying to be as close to that damn phone as possible so I could get a dialing head start.

“Back the fuck up,” he mouthed to me, pissed. “I’m talking to my momma!”

“We all gotta momma.” I flashed him my phone card, as if to reason.

Gilmore shook his head and turned back into the booth. “I gotta go,” he said. “Tell Charley and Liz I miss and love them. You need any money, mom? I’m gonna send you my first check.” He listened for a few seconds. “Nah, I’ll be fine. It’s going straight into your account. Just keep your eyes open for it soon—I know, I know. But I gotta go.” He let out a deep breath. “Love you, too.”

I heard her tell him, “My big strong young man! I’m so proud of you.”

Then I pounced on that damn phone. Gilmore started throwing sass my way, but I was too busy reading the dang instructions on the phone card. It took me over a minute just to get through to the other side.

And then she picked up.

“Hello?” Her voice sharp and suspicious—it *was* after eight

o’clock. I could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen sink.

“Ma.”

The sink faucet got quieter. “Danny? Is that you? Why are you calling from a strange number? You’re lucky I didn’t hang up.”

“Look Ma, I can’t talk long. There’s a line behind me.”

“A line? Did you drop your phone and break it again?”

“No, Ma. I didn’t drop it—”

“Well, no wonder you didn’t answer your phone last night. I tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. We can meet tomorrow at the mall and I can get you a new one—”

“Ma, *listen*. I’m a hundred miles away from there. Is Dad around?”

“You didn’t go on another one of those EMD road trips, did you?”

“It’s E-D-M, Ma: electronic dance music.”

“Oh, God, you’re at a pay phone and you’ve lost all your money again! Last time you lost your wallet I had to wire money into your account just to—”

“Jeez, it’s not *that*. I’ve got all my money, for cryin’ out loud!” My grip squeezed the edge of the phone booth. “I joined the Army.”

It sounded like a glass casserole dish struck the sides of her stainless-steel kitchen sink. “You did *what*?”

“They sent me to Ft. Benning.” I wrapped my finger around the telephone cord. “Same as Dad.” As I waited for her answer, I noticed that the metal phone booth had a clean look to it, like it had been wiped down recently by recruits that looked

too bored when Malone waltzed by. Those little smear marks you always see after.

It reminded me of this one time, back in high school, when my mother had called my little brother into the driveway to help Dad carry this heavy couch she had ordered from La-Z-Boy. She came into my bedroom right before and told me to Windex the front bay window, so I took the paper towels and went into the living room like I was told, spraying that blue shit all over the glass panes. Wiping and wiping at them. When I started working the double-hung on each side, I saw my Dad and brother out there, struggling to heave that big-assed piece of furniture up the sidewalk and through the front door. Even though he was in his late fifties, Dad kept up his old PT routine, hitting the gym pretty regularly. My brother sometimes lifted weights with him, too. Ma stood outside watching them, hands on her hips, the three of them out there working. I guess I really never liked the gym anyways. As I finished my chore, I went to set the Windex bottle on the dining room table, but just then, Ma came inside and took it from me, tucking it into the shadows of a kitchen cabinet as I watched.

“Three minutes!”

“Look, I gotta go. We only get a few minutes to call.”

“But—wait, Danny! When did you—? What does this mean?”

“Hey, get off, rawhide. I need my phone call, too.” Wilkins behind me.

I raised my elbow at him to fuck off and give me another minute. “It means—” I uncoiled my finger from the cord. “It just means I ain’t got no choice, Ma.”

*

Later that night, Harvey finally hit him. It was about a

minute or two into personal hygiene. Gilmore had walked up to his own bed and laid his uniforms on top of it, and as he adjusted the bags and tried to figure out how he'd store the things—maybe under his bunk, he'd said aloud—and as he talked with Elliott, who was sleeping on the mattress above him with that damned mannequin by his side, about how all the girls in the hick town he was from were easy to sleep with if you knew how to hunt or fish, Harvey rounded the aisle with a small, patriotic wall of eager recruits, their heads gleaming under the LED lights. Every last one of them savaging for a good fight. He locked eyes on poor Gilmore, that scarred eyebrow tightening on his skull as he picked up speed, and leaning forward, swung hard at the Michigan kid's baldness. Harvey's forearm bulged as Gilmore's head snapped back. The poor bastard slid along the polished floor until his body stopped. Gilmore lay there a moment, a puffy redness around his right eye that immediately began swelling. He palmed blindly at the metal bunk rails nearby.

"Get up, muthafucker," Harvey shouted. "You think I was playin'?" He reached down and grabbed Gilmore by the shirt and yanked him up, landing his rough, beefy knuckles on the Michigan boy's nose. Blood slung through the warm barracks air. "I ain't no liar—I said I'd fuck you up this morning, that's what I meant!" Harvey hit him again and Gilmore's skull whipped up and down like a fishing bob in the water. The poor bastard's mouth hung open in shock, his eyes wide with fear.

"Please—stop, Harvey!" he begged, panting heavy. "I don't want to—"

"The fuck you don't." He hit him one more time and Gilmore crumpled to the floor. Then Harvey hocked up a huge wad of spit. The phlegm shot from the roughneck's lips onto the naked scalp at his feet, and then, his face red and his blood pumping, he stomped on the poor kid's stomach. Gilmore heaved and whimpered and fell again to the floor. After finishing, Harvey shook his head with disgust and barreled through the

crowd, storming away to his side of the barracks.

The Michigan boy just laid there, crying.

We all stood around and looked at him for a while, waiting for him to get up. I went over finally and put my hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Someone muttered *man, he fucked him up* and then the crowd began to disperse, in ones and threes, until only me and Elliott stood around him. He helped me pull Gilmore off the ground and we tucked him in bed. I wrapped the sheets over his shivering form. Turning away to my own bunk one aisle over, I stripped off my uniform, piece by piece, covering myself in a thin towel. Then the shower heads in the latrine fired up, and listening to them, like a faraway rain, I drifted through the barracks until I stood underneath one, its hot lines of water tracing my exposed body and face. The thick steam roiled across the checkered tile flooring, and as the other privates lined the showers—saying little—their collective sigh rose above the running water. It came up heavy and joined the showers' mists.

Japanese Poetry Never Modifies

August 2011

I remember when you first joined, I used to tell you that the Army would be four years, the way that college had been four years, and that really used to help you. These days, I'm not so sure. You called me this morning on my way out the door. You know the routine, the sun's still not out yet so I go out onto the landing looking down on the parking lot to wait for the carpool of teachers so we can drive the hour north to

Clinton. Closer to Mississippi than Baton Rouge, but we don't pick where we're assigned, you of all people know that. I was smoking my morning cigarette—God, I'm turning into my mother—when you called me and told me you'd killed a man. I didn't know what to do with that—I don't know what to do with a lot of the things you tell me. So I told you to wait, wait until you got home. We would deal with it together. You said you didn't feel anything, weren't you supposed to feel something? But then Jimmy and Becky and Mormon Rick showed up in the carpool, headlights jumping at the speed bump and I told you I had to go. You said you knew. Hung up.

#

So why did I stay with you? Maybe because I remember the string lights hanging above us like torch flies when we'd kissed. The smell of the East River as you'd walked me to the train. The sound of your voice after midnight, how it felt like biting into something alive. The vacuous kinds of things people with marriages that never last say. Maybe because I looked at you, and there was a sadness on your face that you'd been born with, like the freckle beneath your eye or your fullness of your lips.

You told me about your mother, your father during the war, and I envied them. I thought your parents took up so much space in your heart, and I wanted to take up as much as they did, to be carried as you carry them. Maybe I'm just another white girl with a savior complex, but then, all those Peace Corps kids can always go home. It can't be like that for me; I need you. I'm struggling to figure out why. If you would just talk to me again in that open way you do like when we'd first met and it was like I'd known you all my life, if you'd topple those walls of sandbags and pull away those spirals of razor wire you put up around you, if you'd fucking say just one honest thing to me instead of going out there every day, rifle in hand, and pretending like you're doing something good even though you know you aren't.

When I hear your voice, I know that something else sits there in your heart, beside yours parents' memories. I should've known it was never them—a woman I'd met twice, and a man I'll never meet—who'd, like a festering tumor, plastered itself to that beating organ. It was always war, wasn't it? It grew, it grows, it will grow, and one day it'll kill you. I shouldn't have to compete with something so big for possession of you. Any sane woman would be long gone. But I wonder if that's what love is, a kind of insanity, an irrational urge to never wash your pillowcase and sleep in the dip you've left in the mattress. A mnemonic kleptomania of the way your hair feels between my fingers, the way your sweat smells stuck to all those worn out shirts, the way your eyes look in the sun—not black, but a deep, warm brown masquerading as the absence of color. A manic episode of binging on the way you smiled. A depressive plateau when I realize I may never see that smile again. I hoard these pieces of you and each one slices into me, bleeds me. It's the only thing that's real anymore, the pain of it. And I fear if I ever let go, I'll be letting go of a piece of myself.

#

Things That Quicken the Heart

(After Sei Shonagon)

How fewer egrets there were after the oil spill. Imagining you with an infant on your chest. Laying down to sleep and dreaming about waking up from this life into another. Looking into a broken mirror that splits me in two. A beautiful woman with a simple request who makes me forget you for just a moment. The weight of a camera, to spool a ribbon of cellophane into it and walk out onto a strange boulevard somewhere, and even if I'm nowhere special, I feel a drunken kind of pleasure knowing I can capture thirteen moments in time. After all this waiting, on a night someday soon, knowing that, like the summer rain, you'll come back to me and drown

the stifling sun with the heat or cold of your body, making my heart quicken.

#

You disappear for days or weeks at a time, and when I don't get an email or a phone call, I'll make whoever is driving us to work or home turn the radio to NPR so we can catch the BBC World Service or Steve Inskeep and Renee Montagne read the news. I'll hear things like, *five dead in Kandahar*, *drone strike in Helmand*, *bombing outside the embassy in Kabul*, and Becky or Mormon Rick might say, *oh God,* but I'd tell them it had nothing to do with you—probably. I often stew over their ignorance, tell them for the fiftieth time you're in Wardak province, *Wardak* goddammit, and they forget again the next time, but I guess I can't really blame them. They don't have maps of Afghanistan pinned to the walls of their bedrooms.

There was the week you sent me a short email, told me to check the news, and I looked up the *Times* and there was a developing story about that helicopter full of SEALs that'd been shot down, how it was the biggest loss of life in a single day since the beginning of the war. You called when you got back, told me how, on the last day there in that valley, you'd killed that dog—*a bitch* you called her. But then you surprised me and said you wished you hadn't. You said there were pieces of men scattered all through the branches like Christmas ornaments; how the valley smelled like raw crab and you didn't think you could ever eat crab again. I didn't know what to say, then. I guess I don't know what to say still.

Then there was the day bin Laden died. I came home, turned on the news, watching those fraternity bros and sorority girls partying in the streets. I thought, they're the ones who should get drafted and they're the ones who should be sent over there, because I wanted you back here with me. It should be them, not you, over there fighting. But you don't know that, do you?

We say so little when we talk, always speaking around and past and between one another. You want to know more about home, and when I tell you what's happening in Louisiana, back home in New York, it only makes you seem further away than ever. I want to tell you, instead, how tragedy magnifies beauty, how this pain stitches us together, how I hope that someday all this distance and lack and yearning will be useful, one day. I want to tell you that you need to survive so we can start a family together, like we always wanted. I want to tell you that I know you'll be a good father, no matter how afraid you are of becoming one. Instead I just talk about the radiators in my classroom cranked up to eleven and phone bills and what so-and-so said at that party I'd half forgotten because I drank too much. If I could go back, change anything, I think I'd like to say what I feel more often.

#

At the beginning of your tour, when we spoke on the phone, it felt like you were right next to me. Now you sound like you're on an entirely different planet.

#

July 2011

When you told me Sergeant Finley died, I thought of his straw-haired wife, that EMT. I wondered if she would get a flag at his funeral, seeing as they'd been divorced. Or would they give it to her boy? I wanted to give you all the time and space in the world to grieve, I wished you would cry, if only to remind me that the man on the phone was the same man I'd fallen in love with. It's selfish, I know. But you didn't, so I cried for you.

#

There's still time, that's what I kept thinking the whole time you were on mid-tour leave. Then it ran out and we missed our

chance. Now, with all this—a dead man on your conscience, all that fighting, all those moral compromises that have shaken you, I can't help but think of where I went wrong, what I could've done differently to persuade you to run across the Canadian border. Now I worry that even if you make it home in one piece, it wouldn't matter, because I've already lost you.

I know there would have been consequences if you had run. Maybe you would never be able to come back to the States. But it was never your country—not really—anyone could see that. Just a flag and a bunch of stupid rules everyone agreed to. But then again I'm not one to talk, am I? I pay my taxes and have a bank account and drive a car to work every day, I follow the rules just like you, like everyone else. Sometimes I wonder if you think I'm a hypocrite, turning my back on my convictions. You used to say my life was politics, but now, I wonder if you think you couldn't trust a college anarchist who'd once shouted about abolishing the state, only to become one of its many drones. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe telling you to run was selfish of me, a way for me to stay true to the woman I'd used to be. Or maybe this was a way to keep you all to myself.

I thought I knew your heart well enough—you were always selfless in a way that you refused to see—and if you didn't to it for yourself (how could I ever believe you'd do something for yourself?), then at least you'd do it for me. I forgot about your boys. You were thinking about them after Finley died, weren't you? What you could have done differently. But if you'd gone AWOL, you wouldn't have been there and it wouldn't have been your fault and you wouldn't have to carry that around with you.

I also forgot about Afghanistan. The first few weeks you were there, you'd write me, saying that you hoped there'd be peace soon so I could see it. *No place as beautiful in the world*, you'd said, you *could understand how people believed in God—just seeing how small it makes a man feel*, you'd said.

Sometimes you'd write angry e-mails or be flustered on the phone over how the people around you refused to see the Afghans as people. Mothers and fathers and children just like us. You'd wanted to do everything to help them, and I was proud of you, but now I wish I hadn't told you that, because I know your heart is over there, and not here with me.

Sometimes, I dream that you did run off, go AWOL. I see you rowing the little aluminum boat up Champlain, going north, and I'm worried you'll get lost or caught, but I'll remember that you're a soldier and I should have faith in you. In the dream, I wait months or years—impossible to say in that floating life—but I find you, we start our lives over. I go on teaching, you become an artist, we start a family—in Montreal, maybe. I dream our kids have miraculously red hair and wide smiles and you see them and forget all about that faraway country and the mountains that made you feel small. I dream this dream, and when I wake up, I half expect you to be in the kitchen making coffee, frying eggs.

#

I worry sometimes that you'll kill yourself and leave me all alone to put the pieces back together. Maybe you wouldn't do it by your own hand, but let the enemy do it for you. That way you get to die a hero. I think about you, sitting on the bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans, before you deployed. We watched the barges and container ships easing past as slow as honey. You joked that if you were killed over there, I'd be able to pay off my student loans with the life insurance money.

#

I've been thinking of writing poetry, like Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. I like the idea of a book composed of lists. I like the way that, in Japanese, every word stands on its own.

#

June 2011

When you were on leave, we developed rolls of your film and I saw all those smiling girls in the school you've been helping to support. I wish I could speak Dari and I didn't have asthma and I could come to Afghanistan and teach in your girls' school. I would teach math, just the same as I do here, teach them to make cranes from square sheets of paper, how to make garlands of them to hang in the classroom. We might have to share the same discomforts and dislocations and disappointments, but at least we would be sharing them together. At least that way, I'd be making a difference. Not like teaching to a test my kids will fail because they've got bigger problems, like grandparents on dialysis and electricity getting turned off and their unemployed parents and the revolving door of principals at the school.

If we actually did what we said we were supposed to—get kids to graduate and go off to college and rise out of this backwoods Jim Crow town, that'd put this whole white savior factory out of business, wouldn't it? I fantasize about flying away from this place every time I go to the dollar store to buy school supplies to send you. When I pack boxes full of crayons and notebooks and pens and coloring books, with a carton of cigarettes or a can of shag tobacco on top for you, I feel like I'm sending myself over there piece by piece. I wish that were truly the case; that I could just mail myself out of here.

I used to look forward to teaching, but these days I'm just looking forward to the end of the week. One of my kids has been acting up since her father left, and one day poured a soda out on one of her friends. I didn't want to send her down to the vice principal's just to get smacked around a bit. I told you about the vice principal, didn't I? Has this big paddle hanging on the wall with air holes drilled into it and a handle wrapped in leather. My student's grandmother, who has taken over raising her, told me just to whup her right there

in front of the whole class. That's what she'd said, *whup.* Said if I didn't want to do it, she knew enough teachers who'd be glad to. I thanked her and hung up. When I told it to one of the other teachers—a scab like me—she said I should've let the vice principal take care of it. *These kids can be animals*, she said. Her eyelids have become a sleepless shade of red, her skin—I used to marvel over how it was so clear she never had to wear foundation—was caked to cover up the way her skin looks like spoiled milk from all the stress. When she said, *animals*, there was a rusty creak in her birdsong voice. We were all so idealistic when we'd started. How much a year can wear on you.

I don't think you remember when I told you this on one of the nights we talked. Our conversation lasted only a few minutes—you'd just gotten back from a long patrol rotation. You didn't say much, but when you spoke, I heard that creak in your voice too.

#

May 2011

After you started helping that Afghan school, I felt something else. A little worse than envy. It seemed like your work was the most important thing in the world and I took a back seat. You, playing the man, the savior, the martyr, the hero. You get to be Odysseus. I'm typecast as Penelope.

You fucker, can't you see how hard I've tried, how much work I've done for you? I do the taxes, I pay the bills, I go apartment hunting, I manage the bank accounts. I'm the one on the phone with the rear-detachment commander every time we get a red message, a white message, seeing if there's anything I can do for the families of those dead and wounded boys. I'm not some shrinking violet in the damn wives club, and even if I were, they've got kids to raise while you men are off playing GI Joe. Can't I be the hero of my own story?

But I don’t suppose you know that. A little like how I can’t know what combat is like, how I can’t feel it in my veins. So how could you ever know what it’s like waking up every morning and wondering if today will be the day two men arrive on my doorstep to tell me you’re dead? How do we balance the two? How do we reach across these shores?

If I were the hero of this story, it would be the war at home, not the one over there that I’d fight. We’d march on the Capitol, throw off the government and hang the profiteers and politicians from their neckties, line Pennsylvania Avenue with their corpses and leave them for the crows. I’d build schools where we taught girls and boys that life isn’t money; it’s clear September days and the way the leaves are most beautiful before shedding in death and how finishing a book is as bittersweet as saying goodbye to a friend. If I were a hero, I’d go over there and rescue you, my damsel, and all the soldiers toiling and bleeding and dying. If I were a hero, I’d have a little agency, a choice to make, a journey with arcs and morals and an ending well earned, but this isn’t that kind of story.

#

March 2011

Here is a List of Things That Make My Heart Lurch:

-Strangers’ footsteps in front of my door.

-The country code +93 before a number beckoning on my phone.

-The word *Afghanistan*.

-The words *America* and *liberty* and *freedom,* and how I don’t know what they mean anymore.

-The words *Standardized Testing*.

-How the word *rifle*, which figures so heavily into the stories

you tell me, is so violating, as if a stranger goes through my things each time I hear it.

-A scowling parent and/or guardian.

-The sounds of police helicopters overhead and how I look up and wonder if you too are looking up at a metal bird beating its wings.

-The way I sometimes confuse your dismay at what you're doing over there with my dismay at what I'm doing here.

-Other couples with their cliches, couples who wonder if their lovers are looking up at the same moon. For you and me, that's impossible. The moon can't show its face to both of us at once, and my day is your night.

-Sleep deprivation combined the hour long commune to East Feliciana Parish at 5am.

-What waiting feels like.

-What nothing feels like.

-What knowing that no matter how hard I try, I'll fail feels like.

-The nightly news.

#

February 2011

There's one memory I save for special occasions. I hide it away, use it sparingly to keep its blade sharp. It comes out when I'm alone and the night is cold like it had been the night we'd met. When I see a couple all tangled up in one another's arms. When the news reports six dead in a suicide bombing at a remote forward operating base. In it, you walk me to the train. I wear your coat. You even swiped onto the platform to see me onto the car. Then I gave you my number.

Then the train took me home. You forgot to take your coat back. Then you called the next day. No one does that.

#

January 2011

I wish my great-grandmother Ada were still alive today, so she could tell me what it was like to see her husband enlisted in the Navy and sent off to the battles on the Atlantic. I wish I were as lucky as she; to learn that the war had ended ahead of schedule, sparing my great grandfather, sparing the generations that followed from meeting our ends at the hands of a German submarine captain. I'd want to ask her what was in my great-grandfather's heart when he'd sworn that oath of enlistment to a country that hadn't considered us Jews any more American than they consider blacks or Latinos or anyone or Vietnamese. I'd want to know what my grandfather's skin felt like when they reunited, if the sun had tanned and cracked his face, if ropes had calloused the palms and fingertips his large hands, if there were other changes—in his heart for instance—which took years to undo, changes which could never be undone.

#

November 2010

I sometimes wonder if it was right to follow you to this place. I wondered it the day you left, and I saw you march to the buses that'd take you to the plane that'd take you away. I had to drive the two hours back to Baton Rouge to get to work on time, and I got lost in a cornfield because I couldn't stop crying long enough to notice I'd taken a wrong turn, and I thought why the fuck did I follow you here? I don't mean Louisiana.

#

October 2010

I hadn’t been able see you when the whole brigade assembled on Honor Field, patchy with carcinomas of dead grass and barren dirt. You said you you’d be in the first rank, and that may have been true, but I didn’t see you. You said you saw me there, in my green dress with my Yashica in hand, waiting to snap a six by six of you, my soldier husband. I thought I’d show it to our children one day, and they’d say it was funny how daddy’s body blended into the bodies around him, your uniforms melting into the half-dead landscape. A hot day, and the medics had their hands full with soldiers passing out from standing in the sun so long. Everyone wore those bladders of water on their backs, and you seemed less like brave soldiers and more like brigade of hunchbacks. They played some Sousa march from speakers hooked up to a CD player. It reminded me of high school football games. I thought of our future children again, and what you said to me when your orders came through for Afghanistan—there was more danger here, in America. That I ran a higher risk of dying in a car crash than you did in combat. Look at the numbers, how few people died anymore. Saved by the wonders of modern medicine, all the clotting agents and cargo planes turned into ICUs and little strips of velcro and ballistic nylon used to stem blood from severed limbs. You told me about all these things that were meant to reassure me, but didn’t. You marched past and I couldn’t find you, so I snapped a photo of a row of soldiers, their heads turned to face the reviewing stand.

#

September 2010

At the cavalry ball, you men all wore your ridiculous cowboy hats and silver spurs on your shoes as if they made you like those horse soldiers on the plains, as if they tied you to history. It would’ve been amusing if I was drunk, but I stayed sober so I could drive us the hour home. I stewed. At our

table, Barker kept making jokes about the red snapper, and I told him to shut his mouth. I think his wife, Kelly, smiled at that, but I can't be sure. She didn't say anything all night.

You sang your damn songs and waved your damn flags, and I thought it was all a nice bit of trickery, all this ceremony and pomp. What is it Napoleon said, that he could persuade a man to die for a pretty piece of ribbon? You were getting drunk with your soldiers, who had their arms around you, pulling you towards the dance floor, and I could see how uncomfortable that made you; how you couldn't tell where the line was between fraternal love and fraternization. But they were—we all were—just a bunch of dumb kids.

I didn't talk to the officers' wives; we didn't have anything in common, not really. Tupperware parties and boozy breakfasts and needlepoint or whatever it was they did with their time. The enlisted wives—who were covered in tattoos with jobs as bakers or smile-worn shop girls or soon-to-be de facto single mothers—all reminded me of people back home, a little creased and windswept, even though they were, for most part, youngish. Two of them were still in their teens; they could've been plucked out of the graduating class of my anemic Upstate high school. They were both knock-kneeed and vine-armed and clinging to each other while their husbands—barely old enough to drink themselves—fed them booze for what I'm sure they thought would be a romantic night. They reminded me too much of home, so I kept to myself. I was alone, even then, even with you just a few yards away. That's not why I came to shindig, to sit by myself and watch a bunch of grown men act like kids who'd broken into their parents' liquor cabinet.

You and I used to sit in laundromats and make up stories about strangers passing by the big storefront window or eavesdrop on diners in the restaurants we could barely afford, whispering jokes about their problems and arguments and bougie sensibilities. We'd been so sure we would never be those people. I remember once, it had rained while we were out

buying books and it didn't let up, so we'd had to spring to the L and rode home soaked. You put my book—I can't even remember what I'd bought—and stuffed it under your jacket so it wouldn't get wet. We stripped out of our clothes when we got home and you made tea. I lay in bed naked, thumbing through a graphic novel—*The Photographer*—and there was something about all those images, the real contacts sheets and fictive illustrations, and the way the protagonist cried that'd given me the idea to give you a camera to take with you over there. You brought in the tea and we drank it. Got under the covers of your thin twin mattress, and stayed up talking about all the nothing we'd do after you were done with the Army, talking about where we'd live and what our kids might look like—if we wanted them. We'd talked about how, sometimes, the most important thing in an image wasn't its subject, but what lay just outside the frame. We'd talked until we stopped, and we stopped because we slept, and we slept through the soundless night in your windowless room and it felt like the world had ended and it was just the two of us in our abandoned city. When I woke, I was disappointed to hear your roommates shuffling around outside the door, to hear that life had continued without us.

Here it was again, all this life around me marching forward, but this time I was alone. Your men kept pressing drinks on you, and each time you refused, but took it anyway, and you were all were singing, *I wanna be in the cavalry, if they send me off to war.* So I went to have a cigarette, out in the air, which was somehow as sticky hot as inside, and found a bench out front. I hadn't noticed that Barker had followed me out. He asked me if I was okay, and I just shrugged, and didn't say anything. I gathered he wasn't used to that—not being listened to. He started talking about my dress, if this was one of those ironic things people my age did. Something about making a statement by dressing like a flapper instead of wearing a ball gown like all the other women. It was an A-line, a formal mid-century modern piece I'd found in a thrift store, but I

didn’t bother to correct him. I was a little afraid of him, the way he looked at me, the way he swayed ever so slightly. He was drunk, and I might be able to throw a mean punch, but he’s a large man and we were basically alone. I crossed my arms, like I was cold. He offered me his jacket, which I didn’t want. He sat down beside me, fanned himself with his Stetson. He said I shouldn’t worry, he’d do what he could to bring me back. He said it’d be hard, what I was about to go through, told me how when he’d come back after Iraq, *things with Kelly, well they’d never gone back to the way they’d been before*. I thought these were just the musings of a drunkard who’d stayed in the Army too long, who’d lost touch. These days, I wonder if he was trying to warn me.

#

~~Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You:~~

Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died:

~~-Drink~~ Find something less cliche to do, something warm and numbing, something that feels like early-onset dementia—and permanent.

-Find someone new to sleep with and feel nothing.

-Gather up a handful of blow-flowers and instead of doing what the name commands, set them on fire.

-Think about suicide without making a plan.

~~-Eat a handful of pills.~~ I *could* eat a handful of pills, but someone would find me because I’m a broke-ass teacher and we share everything, like cars and bar tabs and apartments and a pool of school supplies which always comes up short when you go looking for another manila folder or calculator battery—and yeah, we share pills too—so that’s out.

-Think about suicide and try not to look at the Huey P. Long bridge—the second smaller one, its steel bones oxidizing to

death—or the Mississippi. Think about how stupid people are when they believe water will somehow be softer than concrete at that height.

-Go to the funeral.

-Push everyone away.

-Quit TFA and leave all the future politicians padding their resumes and the twenty-two-year-old scabs who don't know better and the white saviors with their Jesus complexes behind.

-Nothing.

-More nothing.

-Enough nothing to get behind on the rent, which, as you know, is not at all like me.

-Live out of my car for a while.

-Consider moving to Arizona like my doctor had suggested when I'd been hospitalized for asthma for the fifth time in a year. Consider doing something with turquoise, maybe. Remember how much I hate sand and heat and the sun and fucking turquoise.

-Move back in with my parents.

-Climb the Adirondacks

-Try not to think about suicide when I make a climb in the rain. Try not to hope for an accident, a slip, a broken neck, a painless death.

-Write poetry, let one be titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died.*

-Write a poem titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You.*

-Burn everything I'd written.

—Never write poetry again.

-Never shave a hair on my body again.

-Never date another man again.

-Never look at anything that reminds me of you.

-Never start wearing makeup.

-Never date.

-Never say never.

-Drink, and try to think of less cliche things to do with grief.

-Apply to every job that'll take me to the place that took you from me.

-If rejected from every job for which I'd applied: book a ticket to Kabul anyway.

-Make a list of things to pack. A camera will be at the top of it.

-If visa to Afghanistan gets rejected, buy a ticket to Pakistan, plan to sneak across the border.

-Come home alive or die there or never come home at all or abandon all those plans—I haven't decided yet.

-Buy a hairless cat, name him/her/they Gefilte Fish. (I've always wanted a cat.)

-Live longer than my cat; remember that nothing lasts, especially not love.

-Find the shoeboxes and musk-laden clothes and books and 35mm negatives that remind me of you and start a fire and burn it

all and immediately regret what I've done.

-Find some small town—preferably in Vermont—with an empty role to fill, a need, a lack. Occupy that unoccupied space, and with time, become a familiar fixture, a woman with graying hair, a woman past her prime and alone. Become someone everyone wonders about, worries about. Become an enigma, a mystery. Let them say, *there's Old Lady Fishman, off to the library/animal shelter/schoolhouse/tollbooth, what a sad story*—even if they can only speculate. I'll put my lights on at Halloween and give out full-sized candy bars. I'll put out food for all the neighborhood strays and the town will try to stop me, but they won't succeed. I'll teach a class to the local kids on how to photograph, just like I'd taught you; I'd teach them to think about the picture plane and what lies outside it and how absence is sometimes more poignant. Maybe I'll find another lonely woman, let her fall in love, never her tell her anything. (She'll leave eventually.) And when I'm in my autumnal years, I'll think of how trees are most beautiful before they die and think about you and not think about suicide and fade and fade and finally go, and I'll die thinking that if I can let you go in this life, it'll make the next one, our next meeting, our next reunion, that much more sweet.

#

March 2010

Our honeymoon was one night in a fancy hotel. The next day, you drove two days south to your new unit.

#

Our wedding day, in the living room of my parents' creaky old farmhouse, was a string of mishaps. It was rushed. So much went wrong. My mother was sour that we hadn't asked the rabbi to conduct the ceremony, but a county judge. At least he looked Jewish, she said. When your family arrived, your

grandmother brought me a jade bracelet as a wedding present, but it wouldn't slip over my knuckles, not even with a little grease, so I couldn't accept it. Then I heard your little brother whisper to my brother how he'd just enlisted, and to not tell you, because last time you saw him, you'd told him not to join. Then we even saw each other before the ceremony, and my mother rushed you back into my bedroom where you were changing. It's a stupid tradition to keep bride and groom apart, but I guess that's what I'd signed up for. Some anarchist I am. Just to make sure, you practiced breaking the glass under the *chuppa* half a dozen times, and each time you did it perfectly.

But then none of it mattered, because I saw the tears in your eyes and heard the shudder in your voice when you recited our vows. I wasn't thinking of tomorrow or the next day, just this moment together. If you weren't wearing your dress blues, we could've pretended we were just like any other couple in the world. But I hold onto that moment, that idea that a wedding ring represents infinity—I hoped, for once, one of these damn symbols would hold up. My father put the glass on the ground. You brought your foot down on it, but it slid off, breaking only the stem. I wonder now if it was an omen, but you'd always been the superstitious one, not me.

#

After we got our marriage license, we threw ourselves a little engagement party. You were on leave. The old rad crew was all there, belting out *Defiance, Ohio* songs and dancing like the tomorrow would never come to that indie electronica garbage you like so much. There were gifts, even—like we were real adults. Sara brought us that Spanish wine that we didn't know would, turn to vinegar during the move to Louisiana. Daria brought us pralines from New Orleans without knowing I was allergic to all those tree-nuts. We got a few cards, a leather-bound edition of *Arabian Nights* from Ranya, which, if you're wondering, I call dibs on if we ever get divorced. I

don’t know why I joke like that. I don’t know if I could’ve stood any more gifts than that, and thank God all our friends lived on day-old bread and bottles of Four Roses and were too broke to give us anything but their presence—or pretended to be that poor, at least.

Everyone marveled at how we were getting married, how young we were—I was 21, you were 22. I guess we’re still young, in a way. I know some people judged us for it. Judged me, really. They were my friends, anyway. All those dreadlocked boys with their bandannas tied around their necks like their convictions and girls who’d thought freeing the nipple was the first step towards the revolution. That’s the thing, we were so young, believed so ardently that things like matrimony and jobs are quaint antiquities that belong in museums. But that’s not real life. They didn’t have to worry about the things we did to pay for college like holding three jobs or joining the military, and still leaving with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt. If I told them how it is now, waking up in the night, thinking there’s a knock at the door, and two men in their blues are waiting outside, what would they say? If it were them, what would they do? Anyway it was my choice.

Arianna was there. You already know all about us. You already know she was never right for me. But she’s loyal, and my friend, and I couldn’t just throw that away. She watched the two of us dancing our asses off, dancing and drinking because it all hurt so much was already on our shoulders. I found her crying in the stairwell, her voice bouncing off the breezeblocks. She’d told me she asked you why you were doing this—the Army and all that. You said you had to go. She told me, *he’s got you, Mir, and now what’re we going to do?* I didn’t know what she was talking about, but she was drunk, and I pulled her up and folded her into my arms. She held the hug for a little too long, pressing her nose into my hair. She pulled back and looked at me with her head tilted to the side, her eyes half-closed. I don’t know when I’ll ever get around

to telling you this, Dave, but she tried to kiss me. Like it was the easiest thing in the world to get me back, like real life and marriage and hardship and poverty were quaint things best left in museums. I dragged her back inside, told her she was drunk.

#

November 2009

I decided we'd get engaged, there in the whispering gallery with all those Metro North commuters buzzing past. We were going to my Aunt's place in Westchester. You were on pass; flown in from Armor School for Thanksgiving. I was thinking how we had so little time, how fast life was moving—and wasn't it crazy that two kids had to rush like this? But it wasn't rushing, it was the right time. How we knew, and couldn't explain it, but we did. I was thinking, *at least if he gets hurt, I'll get to come to the hospital. At least if he dies, I'll get a folded American flag. A Gold Star in my window. The excuse of a lifetime.* I was thinking how I'd look in a black dress and a black veil and what it'd feel like to watch your body lowered into the ground and how selfish I was—that's what came to mind, selfishness—to fantasize about your death.

And/or I was thinking of simple things—the ways your eyes snatch the light out of the room, how your face opens up when you see a film, the way your hair feels between my fingertips. How our words curl and nest into each other's and I feel like something missing had been found. Does that make sense? Let me try another way of saying it. When you speak, I can't help but listen. When I talk, I can't help but feel heard. And without you, I'm mute to the world, deaf to its music. How no one else in the world can do that to me. Fuck me, I'm drunk and you've got me talking all purple. I've always hated over-qualified language. But it's always the small things, the details.

I thought these things, and decided—in a split second—to tell

you to stand in one corner and press your ear to the tiled wall. I hushed my words up the vaulted ceiling and over the bustling commuters' heads and into your ear. I slipped those words in like my tongue, and I could almost taste the bitter wax and delicate hairs when I said *marry me*. I thought about how I could stick my tongue in your ear, and that's all I needed to get you going. I was thinking how much like foreplay it was. How our children might look, what features they'd steal from you, from me. What your body would look like beneath a closed casket, because I can't imagine it being anything but closed. How there'd be a hunk of me carved away and how I'd wake up each morning you were gone and be surprised that I'd waken up at all.

#

October 2009

As a birthday present, I sent you a copy of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. You said it was the best gift you'd ever received. Then, you sent me the diary you'd filled since you'd started training. I was dismayed at how often you'd sketched scenes of your own death.

#

August 2009

You went back and forth between the city and all those joint bases and forts and posts where you'd trained. Each time, you'd come back to me a little changed—though I don't think you'd noticed. After Fort Benning, your manner had stiffened. You told me how one of your training sergeants said you were too polite, that it just wouldn't do in combat. They asked which branch you'd been assigned to, and when you told them Armor and Cavalry, they laughed. No room for good manners among tankers and scouts, they'd said. Still, you spent nearly all your pay on flights back to me when they gave you the rare weekend pass. I thought that'd be enough to keep

us—this—going.

#

July 2009

There’s a photo you took of me in Montana, on the first leg of our cross-country road trip. That was supposed to be our send-off. The last hurrah between college and the real world. We’d agreed that this was how our relationship would end. I look at that photo now; I use it as the backdrop for my computer, and sometimes I think it’s a kind of self harm, like I’m carving hatch-marks into my skin every time I set my eyes on it. I’m the subject in the photo—a strange sensation. I’m wearing your plaid flannel, cleaning my camera. There’s a layering of images—you’re on the other side of the motel window, the reflection of a parking lot of cars superimposed on our room, the ghost of your silhouette imprinted on the pane of glass. I see me as you see me, and that makes the distance harder. Don’t ask me to explain how that works. I’m looking at the photo, and it’s only been a year, but I’m already thinking, *I used to have such good skin*, I’m already thinking, *we used to be so young*.

We went out to dinner that night at the motel bar, where they served us steak and fries, and when we were done, we got a six-pack of that skunky beer they called Moose Drool, which I hated, but which you liked just fine. When we finished it, we had sex on the motel bed with a movie flickering on our bodies, and it felt desperate, like something out of a neo-noir film, like we were on the run from gangsters or cops or both, and of course they’d all have ridiculous accents. *Cawfee. Shawtgun. Brawd.* I wished it was real—that we were on the run, I mean. And if the villains caught up to us at the end and we made our last stand in some seedy parking garage staring down a dozen goons with automatics, that would be fine by me.

At the time, I was thinking about how far we'd come to just end it. It couldn't; I couldn't. We saw Ohio and all that flat farmland, Chicago on the shore where you reached down and dipped your hand into Lake Michigan, the Twin cities where we imagined ourselves settling in a brick house if New York ever sank into the Atlantic, the Crow Reservation where I wanted to go one day, to teach, and past Billings and Bozeman and Butte and Missoula and into the Rockies. How much further we'd go. Past the mountains, into Idaho, through Coeur d'Alene, where you'd be terrified of the way down, coasting the whole winding descent. We'd strike forth into the Eastern Washington scrublands and desert, into the Redwood forests and onto the coast, the briny-aired Pacific coast. And I'd imagine it'd be a new beginning, just the two of us. I would've let that air stay in my lungs forever if I could, but it wasn't the start of a new life, just a brief interlude.

When you reported to your first duty station—a temporary posting to train cadets, just like you'd been a year ago—I flew back to New York to my para job at PS 21 and the ICP gig. You'd given me all those rolls of film and all those moments from out trip, and when I developed them, I was surprised to see how many you'd taken of me. That image of me in your flannel, the ghost of you on the window. I thought about asking you to marry me.

I'm thinking about that damn photo, and thinking about taking it down, replacing it with a black field, because when I look at it, I remember that what I'd felt when we drove across the mountains and forests and plains and cities of this God-forsaken country, how I felt like the last woman alone left on Earth with the only man in the entire world, and that hurts, Dave, you can't imagine how much that hurts.

#

May 2009

I gave you my dad's old 35mm before we graduated, and we went out into Carroll Gardens to practice shooting. You didn't load the film right—the sprocket holes hadn't lined up. I took it to the dark room and found one long, empty strip. I still have photos of you from that day—you on top of a traffic light control box, you at the edge of the F and G train tracks, you in front of Rocketship Comics aiming your lens at me. You thinking you'd captured all these moments.

#

I try writing about things, like they'll make them easier to say. All that comes out is bad poetry, fragments of memories.

#

Do you remember how you'd been saying that you knew distance was hard? You never said you were thinking about your parents, about the day your dad had left.

#

Do you remember our first date, not the time we met at the Waverly, but our first real date? Film Forum was showing *Sans Soleil*. You left the theatre in a haze.

#

I can't seem to describe a sun as a sun unless it's radiant. A spring is not a spring unless it's limpid.

#

I remember the first time you said, *I love you*. It wasn't when you thought, not at the top of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, but in your sleep when you came to stay the night in the dorm where I RA'd.

#

January 2008

I follow my friends to your place for a party, a rent party they called it. There you are, thinking you're so smooth, but you're drunk off your ass. Handsome in your own awkward kind of way, and not stringy like all the beanied bearded hipsters. At least you're not dangerous. At least I've got my friend around me.You ask if I'm Jewish, and I think that's an odd kink. I want nothing to do with you; I'm looking to hook up with another girl. I'd broken up with Arianna a few days before, but I won't mention that. And you're still here, acting like a schmuck. The music's playing, some David Bowie cover band. You pour me a beer that's ninety percent foam, grinning at me the whole time.

A few minutes later, I witness you making out with someone else. (Did you forget you'd been hitting on me?) You had the nerve to come back, trying your bungling German pickup lines (I'd told you I spent a semester in Berlin). I was a little down, and hell, you ask nicely, so I let you kiss me. We make out, and it's nice because I can forget about my two jobs and student debt and financial aid and Arianna. I can forget, and you've got wide, soft lips, and the press of your fingertips just wrap me up in this second. You try to convince me to stay the night. I laugh, tell you I've got work in the morning (I lie). Just a little make out session, that's all it's supposed to be. That's all I need. But you sober up. We talk a little, dance a little, there's a DJ on now. When I want to go home, you offer to walk me all the way to the train in the snow. It's not snowing, but it's a nice flourish, and that's how I'll choose to remember it.

You wear your flannel shirt, and I wear your workman's coat. The streetlights all take on fuzzy haloes and toss our shadows far ahead and behind us. You tell me you listen to electro-clash and hip-hop and folk music. I stare at the warehouses that go for blocks, the ones under demolition and the fishbowl condos taking their places. You tell me how when you hear Pete

Seeger play Frank Proffitt's "Going Across the Mountain" the banjo sounds just like a *dan nguyet*, how that song about the Civil War might as well be a Vietnamese song. We're all wrapped up in history, I say, and you ask me if you can hold my hand and I say yes. A hipster dive is still open on North Fifth. A Polish bar is still open on Bedford Ave. But they'll be closed soon. We're racing daylight for a few hours of sleep. The warehouses end on a block of vinyl-sides row-houses and shutters shops and restaurants. I expect you to leave at the corner of the station, but you walk down. I expect you to say goodbye at the turnstile, but you swipe in. We wait on the platform and I tell you about folk-punk, which you think sounds a little funny, but say makes sense anyway. You apologize for being so forward at the party, and ask to see me again.

The train won't be here for another fifteen, and you tell me about your future, what the next couple of years hold. The Army. I write my number in the notebook I find in your coat pocket, a fresh one with a few sketches—a dead rat, a woman holding a child, the facade of a brownstone being demolished, but the rest is still fresh, blank. It's the empty sheets of paper which appeal to me the most. I say I'd like to see you again, but what I say is overpowered by the announcement that the train is here. It howls into the station and the doors open and I enter and you're on the edge of the platform and I'm on the edge of the car and for a moment that's nothing between us and you ask to kiss me and I nod but the doors close. I try to tell you that we have all the time in the world for a kiss, but the announcer is too loud, the doors too thick. Then the train takes me away.

"Japanese Poetry Never Modifies" first appeared in the Columbia Journal*, November 12, 2018.*

Photo courtesy goodfreephotos.com.

HOMEBOY: New Fiction from Mark Galarrita

I went home to Jersey only once since the enlistment. I had to see my Ma. Back in the summer of 2011 I finished Basic and Advanced Individual Training for Cav Scouts and thought I'd officially become a real patriot now. The son of Filipino immigrants transformed into a proud, government-paid U.S. Soldier. A real Soldier, though, I was not. Drill sergeant said that me and the rest of my squad back at A.I.T wouldn't experience anything too bad in Iraq or Afghanistan by the time we got in it. The War was almost up. When we deployed overseas, it would be like a vacation to Thailand, too easy. "Y'all are the lucky ones," she said. "You'll never see anyone die violently in your lives. You can thank Obama for that." Joke's on her, though. By the time I was thirteen, I'd already seen a few dead people in my life. My Pops for example. I don't need to speak on that, though.

I showed up to Newark airport looking like a civilian, not in my ACU's or my shiny class A's like the Budweiser commercials have you believe we all come home looking like. Only pogues wear their uniform at the airport. Nah, I wore a grey fitted tee that felt snug and showed off my brown, ripped arms, and some boot cut jeans I picked up at the Fort Benning PX that were too baggy. It was like I was stuck in the early 2000s. Still, I had this image that Ma was going to be real proud of this new look on me. What I expected was love and admiration for the work I accomplished, the money I made, and the simple truth that I did it all on my own. Grown man now, no Pops needed, no bullshit. But when she saw me at the pickup gate

with my assault pack and my Class A's in a garment bag, she stayed in her '93 ruby-colored Corolla as if she were a goddamn cab.

Woman who popped me out almost twenty-one years ago wouldn't even get out of her car. She unlocked the passenger door to let me in and only glanced at me once before she drove off. Ma was about five inches shorter than me, a light-skinned woman with black hair that stopped at the back of her neck. She always wore light turquoise blouses, even when it was shy of being cold as hell. In the winter she'd switch between three turquoise hoodies all the time and never anything else, even if the heat was on blast. Two cars in front of us, this college-aged Latino boy was coming out the gate with his mother, girlfriend, and whole extended family in tow like a Pharaoh had just arrived. I wondered about that dude for half of the ride until Ma spoke up.

"Have you eaten anything, Jason?" First thing she said to me.

"Pretzels—"

"What?"

"I had pretzels on the plane. They gave me that and a Sprite."

"Sugar they put in those sodas will kill you. Do you want to have your heart burst so young like your father?"

I had no answer for that. The main thing on my mind at the time was this: Big Jason Zobel was back in town, looking the part of a Cav Scout. There was a time when I did the whole college thing for a stint—even tried ROTC once—but enlisting turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did. When I completed Basic I went on Facebook and posted my graduation photo. My Facebook Likes lit up (104 to be exact) from a mix of people I never talked to before: high school people, Ma's side of the family, and even this one girl, Rebecca, who I crushed on all of my junior year but who never gave me a

second glance in the hallways of Saint Barnaby High. Rebecca didn't just like my pic—she commented. She did more than just say, *Congrats!* She added: "You look so handsome, Jason." You best believe I saw that shit and sent her a message. I asked if she wanted to chill at Flannigan's Pub the day I got back to Jersey. Rebecca messaged back, "sure, let's hang," and yo, who am I to turn her down?

"You have to eat, Jason," Ma said. "I'll cook adobo for you at home."

I tried to turn the radio on, but she told me not to touch the dial or the air con. She claimed it would kill the battery. I tried to explain that that wasn't how cars worked.

"Those crooked mechanics changed my oil, and now half of the things don't work," she said.

"This is an eighteen-year-old car, Ma. That's what happens when things get old."

Ma immigrated to the Land of The Free in the middle of the Philippine dictatorship: President Marcos, military crackdowns on dissidents, drug violence in Manila—all kinds of shit. When I was about seven, she told me about a dude who owed this other dude a bunch of pesos and was straight up shot on the street. Not to say my family's blood country is Apocalypse Right-The-Fuck-Now but I'd trade Jersey smog over getting gunned down for bad debt. I'm fifty grand in the hole since I dropped out of undergrad and I ain't paying shit because Uncle Sam said he'd wash it all away if I went off to War in some place he felt like sending me to. Some men have the option to get their slates cleaned after pushing enough paperwork; others have the option to run away from it and never look back. I chose to give myself up to a cause—if you could call it that—and if I get lucky I'll never even deploy. If I did, I'd deserve what I signed up for. Right?

When we got home, Ma ordered me to pick up groceries since

there were no chicken thighs and vinegar in the apartment for the adobo she promised me. I would've said sure and gone off, but I got distracted by the horde of boxes stacked throughout the living room. They stretched from the front door all the way to her shrine of the Virgin Mary facing the parking lot. It was a warehouse. One side near the living room couch was stacked with cardboard boxes labeled by QVC, Amazon, and a bunch of stores I've never even heard of before. Cases loaded with questionably-made jewelry cushioned by styrofoam packing peanuts; old hardcovers from libraries across the country that rotted at the spine; vinyl discs from bygone musicians I didn't even know. A brown maze of receiving and no shipping.

Before Benning, Ma had checked out a bunch of books from the library on entrepreneurship and reselling crap on Amazon to turn a profit. She got really into it, first time I'd seen her happy in years. I didn't stop her. Her 'business' had gone on for so long, I almost felt guilty whenever she told me to just wait until "the money comes in." But we're both still waiting.

"Where did you get all of this stuff?" I said.

It had been a little over six months since I drove a civilian car, so instead of going to the Wal-Mart five minutes down the road, I plotted for the Target in Lawrenceville, a good half hour away. Some alone time was in order. First, I went to the Wawa for gas, a hoagie, tall can of Monster, and a pack of Marlboro Reds; wouldn't be a trip home without the essentials. Pops used to smoke a pack of Reds a day, they turned his heart black. Course he never knew about it until it was too late to quit. Unlike some fathers who change and give it up the day their child is born. I figure if Pops could live until the end of his days with tobacco and bad diets, why shouldn't I?

All him and Ma used to talk about was me being independent and successful one day because they were hard-working immigrants, but what did that mean? When I dropped out of college and told Ma I wanted to enlist, she pretended like she didn't hear.

Instead she avoided me by praying to Momma Mary's statue plus her whole holy gang. Sometimes she'd leave me for hours at a time: lost in prayer or driving to different churches throughout the county as she never stayed at one parish for too long. I'm amazed I got through high school without asking for her help—like SAT prep, or which college I should go to, or how to interview for a job. That kind of small shit that adds up to big shit after a while. Sure, physically she was there, and she signed checks and authorized payments on bills (sometimes with my money), but on life advice or what I should be doing—she was a ghost.

As I drove, I tuned the radio until I landed on a public station. Two British women were in the middle of a discussion about troop drawdowns in Iraq and what that meant for Afghanistan. I tuned it up to a sound that was slightly short of max. They spoke in gentle voices about the history of The War on Terror. They sounded as if they were reviewing a television show, and not their topic: the wedding massacre in Mukaradeeb by coalition forces. One of them asked, *What happens to our children during a time of War?* out of nowhere. The other lady paused for a bit and that's when my fingers turned the knob left, right, and back again before I tuned it off. I struggled to pull one of the Reds out of the box, but I yanked it out and smoked it until it was a brown stub.

—

When I got back with fifteen or so bags of groceries wrapped around my fingers, Ma was still on her laptop. As I stocked the groceries, she called me out.

"What took you so long? You're putting miles on my car." She clicked away without looking up. "Took your uniform out. So dusty! I cleaned it up a bit."

My blue Army Service Uniform was unpacked, hung up on the frame of her bedroom. She wanted me to explain it all to her.

Last time I'd worn it was for the AIT graduation party.

Ma stood by me and touched the uniform's lapel. I explained what every trinket stood for: the name tape, the rank, the flimsy ribbons I sort of earned just for being a living soldier. Ma's head shook once. Twice, maybe? There was a semblance of recognition I needed—balance, I guess. Part of her eyes got really big then super small, staring at the cross and silver on my upper left chest. When I told her it was a marksmanship badge, meaning I was a good with a rifle—the badge that I'm proud of the most, being a small town Jersey boy with no history of handling a gun, let alone an assault rifle—there was no wow or pause to congratulate me. She asked: How did I pay for this (out of my government stipend) and when do I wear it (things graduation, weddings, or military funerals.) Ma wasn't too pleased with that last statement. She went straight to bed. I put the ASU back and took her car keys.

"I'm going out, Ma," I called.

"What did you say?"

"I'm going out. See what's changed around town for a bit."

"Do not destroy my car."

I arrived at Flannigan's off 295 in Ewing shortly after 1800. By the time I got there, happy hour had started, an hour before Rebecca would show up.

Flannigan's was a remnant of a New Jersey bar that once was—a replica of what could've been a local's hub straight from a television sitcom, but the idea was scrapped after years of just trying to get by. Bartender didn't even look at me when I sat in a corner section, far from the Rolling Rock lights and the empty crimson red booths cushions that sunk and tore where your ass was supposed to be. Last time I came around, I was just shy of finishing off high school at eighteen. They didn't

have a guard at the front checking ID's, it was up to the bartender, but everyone in school knew that no one checked; it made 'em more money that way. Now the staff changed, the only person still around was one of the regulars: a crusty-looking bald dude with blue eyes and dry skin. Didn't recognize me though. I ordered a High Life on draft and finished half of it before five minutes passed. The bar's floor hatch opened from below, and a white boy about my age with a short blonde crew cut emerged. He wore a fitted black tee with the pub's logo on the front and back.

"Kowalski, can you go back and bring up two more Miller kegs," the bartender said as he changed the channels from ESPN to Fox News, "they're tapped out."

The barback didn't say a word as he marched back down. I tried to listen to his voice to make sure it was him; but when he came back around to face the door, we stared one another down. Ben Kowalski was a junior when I was a freshman and he used to harass me and other kids in school for the fun of it. We were on the wrestling team together but never got along as I was the most out of shape in the group, chugging behind while he led the team in sprints, suicides, and up-downs. Outside of the sport, he'd pick me out in the cafeteria and chide me, asking if I needed any food today or he'd say something to his group in the hallways whenever I'd pass by, something that made them laugh when my back was turned. It went on for a few months until he got a DUI one semester and he couldn't act a fool anymore, he'd become one.

At the bar we scanned each other for signs of life's wear and tear. The Marine was three years older than me, but looked twenty more.

"No shit," Ben said as he leaned against the bar. "Hey *sir*, I thought you were trying to be an LT? Least that's what Facebook said."

“And I thought you were in jail for selling pills,” I said.

“Murray’s dad helped me out on that one. The Corps a hand in it too.”

“Good for you.”

The two of us slapped hands and hugged, like all that past didn’t make a difference. Ben had developed into a sturdy, wood-colored deck of a man, polished with pink along the edges you can expect—the neck, the ears, and the side of arms. Once he got that DUI, he spent his senior year brawling with people over his ex-fiancé and doing pills with a couple of other oxygen thieves who were either in AA, in jail, or on house arrest now. Sometime after he signed up for the Corps and deployed a few months later.

Ben was getting off work in a few, so I told him I’d wait around. Rebecca was late anyway, I figured she was stuck in traffic or something. I thought about texting her or sending her a Snap, but I didn’t. On the TV, a Fox News reporter in Manhattan said that a former Marine fractured his skull at a California Occupy Wall Street Protest and when I finished my third High Life, the bartender shut it off and called them all a bunch of communists who got what they deserved.

It was Ben’s war anniversary, and also around the time he got out of the Corps, so he was thrilled to tell someone about it. After four years and two deployments on him, he got out so he could work a second shift job at Flannigan’s and third shift at the Buffalo Wild Wings on Route 1, slinging boneless fried chicken and watery beer.

“What about your G.I. bill?”

“What about it? Who needs college?” Ben said.

In the Marines, his role was in signal operations between the various services. He claimed to be a master of the phonetic

alphabet, and when I called bullshit, he bought three shots of whiskey and drank them in a row—waited five minutes for it to settle—and proceed to utter each letter backward and forwards, twice. It was like putting together Legos for him.

I was so impressed I offered to pay for the shots, but he kept saying no, no. “It’s OK, brother,” Ben said. “Too fucking easy. It feels like tricks like that are the only thing I’m good at anymore.”

I bought us a round of Miller Lights and he talked about Afghanistan, his last deployment. “We dropped so many rounds on the enemy, but I never got to see any of it up close. Pissed me off. They’d relay back to command how many targets they supposedly took out, or the LT’s on the ground would radio back if they could engage a fucker, and I was pretty much the link between the green light and the action and—” Ben stopped to take out a Marlboro Red and offered me one too. “It was all indirect, never up front, you couldn’t see them. I know I got ’em because I’d hear the report on the comms or watch the video a few days later. Every shot hit home. One minute a dude is running for his life in a poppy field and then out of nowhere…his remains are painted all over the flowers. Yeah. Yeah. It was fun. Hey man that’s sick you went enlisted man, you’ll fucking love it and then hate it a few days later. What did you sign up for in the Army?”

I told him about the cavalry.

“You went Cav? Cav? Why the fuck would you sign up to be a bullet sponge, homeboy? You should re-class and go M.I. They got the hottest chicks in the Army. Bar none.”

I offered to drive Ben home but he said, “I’m Good to Fucking Go.”

He got in his green Jeep and swerved out of the parking lot while I waited past twenty-three hundred for Rebecca to show up, except she didn’t. She didn’t text or nothing. About an

hour in, ex classmates from high school came into the pub and passed me by—they looked at me, squinted, and walked away. Few people remembered me, can't blame 'em. I only had about two hundred or so friends on Facebook, perhaps eighty percent or more of them I didn't even talk to. It could've also been the beer and Ben's shots that must've given me some kind of funk for people to keep their distance, but by midnight the buzz went away, and I started sipping on another light beer minding my own until this brunette approached me to say *hi* and she called me Eduardo, and when I said I wasn't him, she apologized, turned, and went to her friends by the pool tables. I finished another pint and drove to Ma's with the windows down. The night's chill pressed against my face and tickled my scalp. A Statey followed my ass on Route I-195 from Trenton to Robbinsville until it zoomed around me to pull over a speeding Camaro. An ambulance roared by in the other direction. Where it went, God knows.

I got home a quarter past one. Five thick red candles flickered along the apartment's window sill. The Venetian blinds swung in a lazy, steady motion, guided by the wind. I unlocked Ma's the front door and listened to the soft murmurs of prayer in a mix of Tagalog and English. She was in a nightgown, her knees pressed against the carpet, praying to the Virgin statue; tiny candles lit around Mary's ceramic feet like beggar children. Her eyes remained closed as her index fingers clutched the red rosary beads, her lips lost in the movement of The Lord's Prayer. She didn't stop or look over until I locked the door.

"You took my car without permission," she said.

"You said I could take it."

"No. I asked where you were going," she took a deep breath and turned back to the statue. "Come here. Pray with me, Jason."

My walk must've been awkward, gaited even, but I got on my

knees next to her. It must've been the smell of candles that had me all fucked up still. It had been a while since I'd done this. I tried to recall how to pray and what to pray about; Hail Mary, or Our Father, or The Apostle's Creed. They all sound the same. Ma tapped my closed fist. "Pray," she said.

Prayer is an eerie and intimate feeling with another person next to you. When Pops was still around, we went to Saint Barn's as a whole family. We knelt in the rows at the front, not too far off from big Jesus himself looking down upon us. We recited the rosary, bead for bead. When it was done, Ma went up to the rows of candles and lit one up for her sister, another for her home in Manila, and another for Pops. Come up, Ma said to me, and I lit one up for my future, whatever that looked like. Another for Ma. Another for Pops. The light glowed in front of me as if it were a power that only I could hold; a thing that I could control.

After extinguishing the candles, I helped her to the bedroom. Her body felt grainy against my shoulders, light in weight but uneven and hard. I laid her down upon the mattress, stacking the pile of self-help magazines and business textbooks on her bed to the floor. As I tucked her in, she grabbed my wrist.

"When are you leaving me, Jason?"

"Soon. Back to Texas. Army life. Afterwards, maybe I'll deploy. I don't know."

She rubbed my wrist. "You've always had dry skin problems," she said, "you need to put on some lotion. My boy. God, you're my only boy. My only boy is going away." Her hand flowed down onto the bed in a slow, fluid, motion like a fat droplet of Georgia rain water off an up-armored Humvee's roof. I closed her bedroom door with my body upright, my neck tight and my eyes salty with sweat from the whiskey or the candles or I don't know. In the darkness of her warehouse, I sat on the couch and wrapped my left hand around the straps of my assault

pack and tapped my fingernails against my knee with the other.

New Fiction from Andria Wiliams: “Polecat”

Camp TUTO, Greenland
1960

When Paul, a nuclear operator, had arrived in Greenland, the reactor at Camp Century was still not fully assembled, so he and a dozen other men were being held temporarily at another camp a hundred miles south. Everything he could see on the edge of the polar ice cap was white and brown like some kind of visual trick: dirt, and snow, and snowy dirt, and snowy air, and sometimes blowing dirt. The snow and dirt were constantly changing places.

He was in the mess hall when Master Sergeant Whitmore appeared at his elbow. Paul hopped to his feet, and Whitmore asked, with no preamble, “You ever drive a D8 Cat?” Whitmore had buggy, vein-scraggled blue eyes that seemed to intensify anything he said, giving any question he asked an oddly moral implication.

Paul hesitated. “Not yet.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to fill in,” Whitmore said. “It’s just like driving a tractor, except it’s a giant one. You’ve driven a tractor, right?”

Paul had not.

Whitmore forged on. “You’ll be towing a fuel canister. All you got to do is stay behind me and follow the bamboo markers. Do

not fall asleep and drive into a crevasse. We drive six hours on, six hours off. It'll take about a week."

Paul was relieved enough to simply get on the road, so he nodded, and when Whitmore left, his friend Mayberry appeared beside him.

"King of the road!" Mayberry said, grinning at Paul. Mayberry was the camp geologist, and this was his fifth tour in Greenland. Tall and thin, with a scientist's buzzing mind, he worked in an underground lab below the base, surrounded by rows of ice samples stored in what looked like oversized poster tubes. Because he spent his working hours alone, he seemed perpetually delighted to encounter other people. He said that Camp Century was a dream compared to his first base in Greenland, which had been called Fistclench.

"How bad will it be?" Paul asked.

But Mayberry was watching Whitmore, who stood across the room talking to the camp cook. Cookie, as they called him, had been in Greenland for who knew how long. He was as thin as a Confederate zealot, and while the men ate he stood smoking in his stained apron, watching them as if it gave him either grim pleasure or unabated pain.

"Good!" Mayberry said. "We get to bring Cookie."

"Should make for great conversation," said Paul.

"Oh, he talks," Mayberry promised. "You'll see."

The Polecat was idling next to several others just outside the camp's garage. They rumbled in concert, swathed in plumes of steam and exhaust. Paul identified his by the orange fuel canister attached to the rear and mounted on skis. The Polecats were Swiss innovations, specially adapted vehicles with huge track frames – Paul guessed twenty feet – and wide

track pads that could traverse uneven ice without tipping or breaking through.

There would be three other Polecats like his, carrying various types of freight in the middle of the caravan. Whitmore's D9 led the line, with a blade attached, to help clear a path. Then there was the Command Train, a huge tractor that pulled the cook shack, radio shack, and three refurbished old boxcars on skis called wanigans, where the soldiers relaxed or slept. Finally, there was the last boxcar on the whole train: the latrine, that foul caboose, following them like a bad thought. What an absurdly human predicament, Paul thought, having to cross the polar ice cap lugging literal shit behind you.

Whitmore strode up and slapped Paul on the back. "Good luck," he said. "Don't drive into a crevasse." This was becoming a common theme with the master sergeant, and Paul was beginning to suspect he wasn't kidding. To Mayberry, Whitmore said, "Quit smoking by the fuel rig. Here're your keys."

Everyone climbed into their tractors. Slowly, Whitmore pulled his D9 out into the lead. At this rate, Paul thought, we will never get anywhere. Then he pulled his own tractor in line and found it moved even slower than the boss's.

It seemed unbelievable they'd travel at this snail's pace for an entire week. Paul tried not to think about it. He wondered when he would break down and allow himself a cigarette. He wondered what his wife, Nat, back in Idaho was doing. He thought quite a lot about what they would do if they were together. Meanwhile he squinted to keep track of the pointed tops of the bamboo poles they followed, many almost buried beneath the moving glacier. Sometimes the poles would be so hard to see that an impossibly-bundled man would have to walk ahead, locate them, and then wave in the direction the trucks should go. Paul's Army career had started in petroleum supply, and stunts like this were one reason he'd left that field. Lugging massive canisters and a shitter across the ice felt

like some Neanderthal gig, the work of people without bright ideas.

photo by Ray Hansen

Between their shifts, the drivers sat in the rocking but well-heated wanigan, paging through month-old newspapers someone had brought from Fort Andrews. There they were joined by Cookie, who had never stopped smoking, his legs crossed and one foot jittering up and down. Cookie would wait until the men around him began to engage in any kind of interesting conversation—about sports back home, their previous tours of duty, anything—and then he'd suddenly interject his own litany of complaints against the Army and life in general, as if that had been the topic of discussion in the first place. "I wasn't meant to be here," he'd say, sucking on one cheek, his small eyes blazing. "I'm from Mississippi. No way was I meant to be here." He alternated this thought with its close cousin, "I wasn't meant to be in the Army" (he had initially attempted to get into the Navy) and also, "I was never meant to be a cook" (he had hoped to be a machinist, but failed some critical aptitude test). Cookie and his quibble with destiny had rapidly become tiresome, and it was impossible for the other men not to occasionally respond with wiseacre remarks.

"*I* was meant to be here," Mayberry said as he flipped the pages of the classifieds. It was the only section everyone had not yet read multiple times. "This, here, is the point in life I was born for." The wanigan gave a lurch and someone in a bunk cursed.

Cookie ignored him and continued, "I was a runner in high school. I ran cross-country. I wasn't meant to stand in one place, flippin' burgers."

Mayberry was reading the classifieds aloud. "Here's an ad for a home dental care system. It says, 'Polish Your Teeth on Your

Own Time.’”

“That’s what I’ve always wanted to do with my own time,” said Benson from a folding chair across the room.

“We could let Cookie drill our cavities,” said Mayberry. “Maybe he was meant for that.”

“I had three ladies back in Mississippi,” said Cookie. “Three of ‘em, who loved me. They cooked for *me*.”

“Hmm,” said Mayberry, in a placating way.

“I had five women,” said Benson. “They polished my teeth for me.”

Cookie snapped to attention. “You did not,” he said. “That’s stupid.” Then he lapsed back into thought.

The wanigan hit a deep groove, and the men steadied themselves. “Jesus,” said Benson. “And people think they get seasick in the Navy.”

“I was meant to be in the Navy!” Cookie said, with sudden interest. Then he stood from his chair and looked at the boxcar door with a focused expression, his hands on his hips, knobby elbows sticking out from white shirtsleeves. “Forget this shit,” he said. “I’m going home.”

Mayberry rattled his newspaper so it wouldn’t slump. “Great,” he said, without looking up. “Tell your three ladies we said hi.”

“Forget you,” said Cookie, very loudly, leaning over Mayberry who looked over the top of the paper in surprise. “Forget you, all you stupid food-eaters, who just sit around eating my food. Complainin’ and complainin’. I am a man! I was not meant for this shit job!” He stepped back and glanced around with flashing eyes, muttering, “Maybe you should cook for your damn selves is what.”

“Geez, I’m sorry,” Mayberry began, but Cookie strode to the boxcar door, unlatched it, and heaved it open. The air that entered the room felt as cold as rubbing alcohol.

“Whoa,” said Mayberry, getting to his feet also. And then the cook, in only his short-sleeved white uniform, jumped right out.

For a moment everyone stood and the room was silent. Paul looked around, as if this had just been some optical illusion, and Cookie would actually be sitting back in his chair where he’d been a moment before. But the chair was empty. The wanigan door creaked slowly toward closing.

“Holy shit,” Mayberry cried, and he and Paul scrambled. They reached the door at the same time and yanked it open. Mayberry leaped out first, and Paul followed. The force of the cold nearly spun him around, and it took him a second to gather his wits and begin running. He heard Benson hit the ground a few beats behind him. Cookie had taken off across the ice, surprisingly fast, heading for the white horizon.

“He’s a runner,” called Mayberry as they sprinted after the cook. “He ran cross-country.”

“He’s gonna die,” Paul cried. Any second he expected Cookie to slip from sight into the narrow cradle of an unseen crevasse.

The ice was hard and slick, and their feet slipped every few steps. Cookie, on the other hand, appeared to have magic shoes. He was loping ahead at a steady pace, his body a slim, efficient machine.

“Go back, Benson,” Mayberry said over his shoulder.

Paul could hear Benson’s heavy breath like a zipper being yanked up and down. “Someone will radio the boss,” he shouted encouragingly.

“That someone should be you!” Mayberry said.

This is ridiculous, Paul thought. He knew he had to give the chase all he could. He focused on pumping his arms and legs as fast as possible. He narrowed his vision on Cookie and raced all-out, his lungs burning with an intense pain.

photo by Ray Hansen

Cookie might have actually gotten away, run off to the top of the world, if he hadn't hit a ripple on the ice and stumbled. He caught himself and straightened, limping slightly, and Paul, feeling delirious and oxygen-deprived, gave his last burst of speed. The gap between himself and the cook narrowed. Paul took several long strides and flung himself against the cook's lower back, pulling the two of them down onto the ice with a painful slap.

The second Cookie hit the ice he began yowling. He fought like a wildcat. He kneed Paul in the gut and smashed the flat of his hand against Paul's nose. Paul realized that his only advantage was his greater size, so he fell forward onto Cookie and clung to the wiry man for dear life. It was like wrestling a greased snake. All he could see was Cookie's white-shirted abdomen, into which his face was pressed, the muscles twisting and bucking against his cheek. He gritted his teeth and waited desperately for Mayberry to reach them.

A moment later Mayberry sprinted up and fell on top of them both, and from a distance it must have looked like some ecstatic reunion, or the winning touchdown in a football game. "Sit on his arms," Mayberry grunted, and Paul, dazedly obedient, tried to find one to sit on. He crawled up Cookie's body and fought to pin down the cook's skinny, flopping limb, which jumped over and over again just out of Paul's reach like a fish on land. Finally, Paul pegged the arm and sat on it, and Mayberry sat on the other, and then there they were,

gasping for breath, the cook writhing and screaming on his back beneath them.

Benson finally jogged up, looking ill, and in the distance they could see Whitmore's D9 turn slowly, slowly, to come and get them. This seemed absurd; they could walk faster than it drove.

"I'm sorry, Cookie," Mayberry was saying. "We'll show you we care. We'll bake you a cake."

"We need to stand up," Paul said. "We'll freeze." He was concerned about Cookie's bare elbows on the ice.

They waited for Benson to catch his breath, and then they all grabbed onto an available part of the cook and lifted him to his feet. Cookie screamed; Paul winced to see the two lines of blood on the ice where his arms had begun to freeze to the ground. "Sorry," Paul said to the cook, and "Start walking," to the others. With mincing, difficult steps they made their way toward the line of tractors.

Sergeant Whitmore leaped down from his idling vehicle, waving his arms and shouting, "What the hay, Cookie?" for he was a man who did not curse. "What did you think you were doing?" Cookie stared at him defiantly, and Whitmore made a sound of disgust. "Tie him up," he said, "tie him to a bunk til we get to Century. We'll decide what to do with him there."

On the count of three, Paul, Mayberry, and Benson heaved the slender cook up into the wanigan and over to a bunk. Whitmore fetched a coil of rope. "Don't you tie me," Cookie began to shout, "don't you dare tie me!," but they did anyway, binding him to the bunk in a seated position with his arms behind his back. From there, he yelled half-sensible platitudes at them for hours. "You can't keep a man where he don't want to be," he said, and "This is my life, not yours, you rat bastards," and, cryptically, "You're just like all them, you know what." He hollered until he wore himself out, and then he stared at

them despondently from where he sat.

That night, after a dinner of cream of wheat and tinned milk, Paul tried to sleep, but every time he opened his eyes he could see Cookie's own, glittering back at him. Paul rolled onto his side to face the wall. Cookie's gaze crawled up his back. He yanked his wool blanket to his shoulders. "Cut it out, Cookie," he said.

Cookie's voice came across the room, plaintive, almost mewling. "I ain't doing nothin'," he said. "I'm just sittin' here like a good boy." A moment later he hissed, "Come on, untie me. I won't go nowhere. I'll sit just like this."

"Can't do that," Paul muttered.

Cookie's voice was hoarse. "My Leroy's itchin'."

"Sorry."

"Untie me, please," Cookie begged. "Come on now, you're the only nice one of them in here. You're the nice guy. The best one." A minute later he said, "Never mind, you're the worst one. You a priss is what you is. You prissy!"

Paul had never been called this before and felt actually startled.

"A man's body is his own," Cookie said. "It's the only thing he really got. You know, someday the rules are gonna be here for you when you don't want them, either."

Paul screwed shut his eyes. The wanigan lurched and groaned, and a coffee cup slid off a table, hit the ground with a thud, and rolled hollowly across the floor. Outside, the pitch of the wind rose and fell, a sound both strange and familiar: a waning alarm, distant machinery, blood roaring in the ear.

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photos by Ray Hansen

FOB by Daniel Ford

An excerpt of the debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!*

by Daniel Ford

Sid stepped into the desert surrounding the cramped forward operating base just as the sun surged over the distant mountaintop. He scratched his patchy, three-day-old beard. He inhaled deeply, the already warming air singeing his raw nostrils. The sand didn't crunch so much as slither away from the hot breath of desert wind.

Daniel Ford's debut novel Sid Sanford Lives! is now available from 50/50 press.

He eyed the line of beige Humvees parked by sandbags piled waist-high. He strode over and climbed into the makeshift garage. Sid propped himself against the tall front tire of the

closest vehicle. He stretched out his legs and crossed them, feeling the full weight of his still stiff boots on his ankle. He shifted his position just enough so he could awkwardly pull his notebook out of his back pocket. He stuck his pen behind his ear, sure the words that had been eluding him since the troubled descent through the mountain range would come before the afternoon sun boiled his internal organs. For now, Sid propped his head up against the hard, black rubber and tried to remember how he'd landed in this dusty valley.

Roger Ray's slamming door muffled the newsroom's buzz. So many conversations from which Sid had long ago felt disengaged continued in shouted whispers once Ray started howling in earnest.

"I'd be weakening my damn city desk in the middle of a mayoral election," the aging editor said. "On top of everything else, I'd be giving you, a little pissant, a promotion ahead of, frankly, a long line of more goddamn qualified reporters."

"Someone else can cover the Bronx borough president's philandering and embezzling," Sid said over Ray's incoherent grunting and molar grinding.

"Plus, I'd catch all kinds of holy fucking hell from the board…" Ray said. "Wait, what did you say?"

Sid patiently reached into his messenger bag and retrieved a blue folder that looked like an overstuffed jelly donut. He tossed it on Ray's desk and watched as he casually flipped it open. Ray rolled his eyes as he read the top sheet, but that hadn't stopped him from skimming the tax forms, illicit photos, and tawdry phone records bulging underneath.

"Sources?" Ray grunted.

"Waiting for a phone call from whomever you decide to assign the story."

Ray held Sid’s gaze, hoping his young reporter would wear his self-satisfied grin just long enough for him to slap it off his face with a hefty Sunday newspaper.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Ray said, slamming his hand on the pile of front-page fodder. “I could just as easily order you to write this.”

“I have a draft someone can polish if that helps,” Sid said. “You don’t even have to use my name. Actually, I’d prefer you didn’t, I don’t want to get banned from Harlem and its chicken and waffles.”

“Listen, son…”

“I believe you owe me one,” Sid said, his jaw stiffening.

Ray waited a beat before nodding weakly. He got up, sat down on the edge of his desk, and put a hand on Sid’s shoulder.

“A desert warzone isn’t an appropriate place to overcome personal demons,” Ray said.

“That’s not what this is about,” Sid said. “I’ve just moved beyond writing about tainted politicians and transit complaints.”

“You better hope so. You survive our security training and I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can do.”

Sid took the deal and flew out to the Middle East three weeks later.

A sharp pain in his shin brought Sid back into the present. He cursed his luck, certain he’d been stung by a scorpion. However, the pain dulled quickly, but not before another kick to his boots forced him into a crouch. His eyes burned red as he opened them fully. He put his hand against the sun and made out a camouflaged hulk wielding a wrench standing in front of him.

“Scared the fucking piss out of me,” the soldier spat.

A tobacco-infused glob of spit now sparkled in the sand between the two men like a brushstroke of oil puddled in a Queens parking garage.

“Sorry,” Sid muttered.

“You’re not supposed to be here. I could have put a bullet in your fucking head. Probably give me a damn medal considering you’re a reporter.”

“I get it,” Sid said. He brushed the sand off his pants as he stood. “I’m leaving.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” the soldier said, extending his hand. “I’m Mason.”

“Sid.”

“Oh, I know your name. We get daily briefings on how to talk to you.”

“Is that why no one has done it yet?”

“Fuck, easy killer,” Mason said. “PR is not our strong suit.”

“Funny considering that’s part of your mission.”

“Enjoying the heat while you’re preaching at me?” Mason asked, slapping a wrench into his palm.

“Had to get out of the AC,” Sid said. “Too small a space and too many closed windows.”

“You want to open those bulletproof windows for the enemy, be my guest, but make damn sure me and my friends are all in the latrine when you do. And try not to make too much of a mess for us to sop up later.”

“Yeah, well, never been a fan of central air. Messes with my

sinuses.”

“You been in a sandstorm yet?”

“No.”

“Might change a few of your preconceived notions about our little air conditioned shit box.”

“I didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

“Well, could you not offend anyone a few paces to your right. I’ve got to park my ass under the vehicle you’ve been using as a hammock.”

“Right,” Sid said. “Yeah.”

He moved out of the way and heard Mason slide under the front bumper. Sid rubbed the back of his head.

“Something wrong?” Mason asked from beneath the vehicle.

“Can I help you with anything?” Sid asked.

“You know much about auto repair?”

“Not really, no.”

“Then I’m good.”

“Well, how about I just keep you company then?”

“Like to work alone.”

“This is the longest conversation I’ve had in days,” Sid said. “Give me something.”

“I didn’t shoot you, what more do you want?”

“Son of a bitch,” Sid mumbled.

The clangs and grunts stopped. Mason wagged his boots back and forth.

“Coffee,” he said.

“Do you want anything—?”

“Black.”

“You got it.”

Sid headed back to the FOB. He found another hulking figure in fatigues leaning up against the counter, waiting for the coffee pot to finish gurgling.

“Lieutenant Núñez,” Sid said, keeping a respectful distance.

The officer growled something through his dark mustache that sounded like, “motherfucker.” Sid contemplated reaching for his notebook and peppering Núñez with questions before the man had even poured his morning coffee, but thought better of it.

“Given any thought to my, um, repeated requests?” Sid asked instead.

The officer’s severe, but sleepy, brown eyes motioned toward the coffee pot.

“Got it,” Sid said, grabbing two Styrofoam cups from the stack.

“Thirsty?” Núñez asked.

“Getting one for your mechanic.”

“Are you referring to Sergeant Ward?”

“This would be a lot easier if you didn’t break my balls every time we had a conversation.”

“But it wouldn’t be as fun,” Núñez said. He filled his mug and turned to walk out the door. “Don’t bother my men without my permission or I won’t talk to you at all.”

The officer knocked into Sid’s shoulder as he left.

“Sir?” Sid called out.

“You’re not ready to leave the wire,” Núñez said, pausing in the hallway. “Some of my men aren’t ready. Request denied.”

“Thanks for your time, Lieutenant…” Sid muttered.

He knew picking fights with commanding officers wouldn’t get him anywhere, but he hadn’t been raised to keep his mouth shut (or respect authority for that matter). However, Núñez had just confirmed Sid’s suspicions about the base’s preparedness. What Sid couldn’t piece together is whether that mattered in this country or not.

Sid returned to the Humvee and found Mason’s boots pointing out the opposite end. Sid pounded his fist up against the bumper.

“Jesus H. Fuck!” Mason yelled out.

Sid heard tools thump against the sand.

“Delivery,” he said. “I’m allowed to give you coffee, right?”

“Hell yes,” Mason said.

After climbing out from the car’s underbelly, Mason grabbed the cup and downed the coffee in one swallow. He tossed the cup back at Sid who caught it while preventing his own coffee from sloshing out.

“That must have felt good,” Sid said.

“Nothing feels good here. Needed a jolt.”

“Happy to help. Does this mean I can ask you a few questions?”

“Hope you’re not looking to fill column inches with me,” Mason said. “I’m a pretty boring story.”

“Yeah, I figured that out pretty quick,” Sid said. “But I’ll

take what I can get right now.”

“What are you writing about?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“See, you want us to engage, yet you have no fucking clue what your plan is.”

“I’m here, that is the plan. A lot of people have questions about what’s going on over here.”

“Tell you what, a lot of guys over here have a question or two on what’s happening.”

“Maybe we can learn from each other.”

“When can I say I’m off the record?”

“Whenever you want.”

“And you can’t use what I say?”

“That’s how it works.”

“Then I’m off the record.”

“Fine by me.”

Sid leaned up against the door, burning his elbow on the hot metal handle. He pulled it away, more pissed about the squad’s antipathy than by the glowing red blotch on his arm. Mason wiped his forehead with an oily rag and then got back to work.

Mason clamped his thick hand down on Sid’s shaking leg.

“Really? Still with the fucking nerves?” Mason asked. “The mission is over, fucking relax.”

Sid adjusted his helmet and nodded.

“Lieutenant, Bob Woodward here is still pissing himself,”

Mason yelled above the roar of the Humvee. “Any suggestions on how he can calm his delicate senses?”

In the passenger seat, Núñez turned his head slightly and growled something that sounded like “fucker.”

“Well, I wouldn’t do that to your mother,” Mason said. “Just sit tight, we’re almost home.”

Sid had hounded Núñez for nearly a month to authorize his first patrol. The squad now fancied itself a crack staff, impervious to the anxiety and turmoil endemic to other platoons across the desert. Outside of the occasional pop-pop-pop in the distance, however, none of the men crowded in the FOB had been in a firefight or had to halt a long caravan in order to investigate and detonate an IED. How would they react in the face of something more treacherous than cleaning out latrines or standing at attention for Reveille?

It turned out that Sid’s hands refused to stop shaking the moment he parked his ass in the Humvee. They shook all through the meeting with the hard-eyed, sun-scorched elders of the nearby village. Núñez listened patiently to the staccato Arabic flying off the leader’s rotten teeth like acid. He absorbed the overwhelmed translator’s stuttering and backtracking while nodding and trying to maintain eye contact with his counterpart. Sid watched as younger, more anxious men prowled along the back of the tent, shouting and pointing every so often. They had been stripped of their arms before entering, but their danger still permeated the cramped space.

“What are they pissed about?” Sid had asked Mason.

“No water. Limited food. Enemy offering it all at discount prices,” Mason had said. “It means we’re fucked. Now shut up and keep close to me or anyone else with a gun.”

Sid’s concentration was broken by Mason leaping out of his seat and climbing on top of a snoozing soldier in the rear of

the Humvee.

“I said move your hand, Bee,” Mason shouted, slapping his subordinate on the cheeks.

“Wake the fuck up, this ain’t fucking nap time.”

“Sorry, Sergeant,” Bee said.

“Up all night playing ‘Call of Duty’ again?” Mason asked.

“Nuh-uh, Sergeant,” Bee said.

“Christ, just what Uncle Fucking Sam had in mind when he signed your sorry ass up,” Mason said, retaking his seat. “Has more goddamn kills online than he does in real life. Put that in your article, Sanford.”

“Why do they call you Bee?” Sid said, ignoring Mason’s jabs to his bicep. “Hard to figure considering your nameplate reads Zdunczyk.”

Bee glanced at Mason, who nodded his approval.

“Real name’s Frank,” Bee said.

“I’m aware,” Sid said. “Why Bee?”

“Aw, tell him,” Mason said, throwing in another scoop of tobacco below his bottom lip.

“My first day in the mess I wanted to make conversation,” Bee said. “So I started talking about this article I read about bee hives being like a communist society. Then I started in on the similarities and differences between hives and military bases. Kind of explains it all.”

“You’re so fucking lucky ‘Queen Bee’ didn’t stick,” Mason said. “Whole squad was fucking howling so bad Núñez smoked the shit out of us. So worth it.”

Sid reached the pocket of his flak jacket and pulled out his recorder. He waited for Mason's affirmative before turning it on.

"Why'd you sign up?" Sid asked.

"No one needs to hear that fucking story," Bee said, wearily looking at the slim device. "No offense, sir."

"This is your penance for conking out," Mason said. "Be thankful it's not fucking licking my boot whenever the fuck I tell you to."

"Yes, Sergeant," Bee said. "It all started when my father was murdered…"

"Murdered?" Sid asked, the quake in his hands now having less to do with nerves or the Humvee's shimmy.

"Yeah, couple of townies broke into our house looking for shit to pawn to buy meth or some shit," Bee said. "My dad went to investigate and they dropped him with one to the head before he could raise his pistol."

"Holy shit," Mason muttered, spitting tobacco juice into a cup. "Where were you?"

"Getting high in the woods with a bunch of fucks from school," Bee said. "We all passed out there. Cops ended up coming out to find me. We all scattered thinking they were going to bust us for weed. Ran home and right into the yellow caution tape like a goddamn marathon runner."

"They catch the bastards?" Sid asked. "I mean…did they apprehend the suspects?"

"Nah, this is the best part," Bee said. "They stepped over my dad and started ransacking the rest of the house. Probably looking for money or trying to cover their tracks. Make it look like there were more than two shit kickers. My mother had

holed up in her closet and waited for them with a Remington 870 shotgun she bought on layaway from Walmart. Blew both motherfuckers away when they opened the door."

"My kind of woman," Mason said. "Shit, sorry about your Pops, but this is making my shit hard."

"So how'd that lead to you enlisting?" Sid asked, once again ignoring Mason.

"Despite being relieved, my mother was pissed as hell I wasn't home when it all went down," Bee said. "She told me that since she took care of my father's killers, the least I could do was go shoot some towelheads in the desert. Sorry, is that too crass for a newspaper?"

"I'll clean it up, don't worry," Sid said. "You regret it?"

"Only regret I have is not killing those pricks myself. And not having a chance to kill anyone here. Fucking glad-handing political bullshit isn't my thing."

Sid nodded and pressed the pause button.

"Thank you for trusting me with your story," he said, extending his hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh, I don't trust you for shit," Bee said, shaking Sid's hand. "But Mason does and I report to him. I'm just as liable to shoot you next time you come near me."

"Understood," Sid said. "Just make sure Mason's behind me when you do it. Takes care of both our problems."

"You fucks know I'm still fucking here, right?" Mason asked.

The Humvee's breaks squealed like a downtown bus as the hulking transport swerved abruptly. Sid tumbled into Mason's lap just as the cup of dip flew out of the Sergeant's hands and onto Sid's chest.

Núñez shouted something unintelligible from the front of the vehicle.

“Shit,” Mason said. “Look alive, fellas.”

Sid’s nerves actually calmed as the camouflaged men around him checked their weapons and reached for additional ammo. He heard a distant whistling that aggressively faded into dense thuds nearby.

“Fuck, we’re in the shit now, boys,” Mason said.

The Humvee shook after a mortar landed a few yards away, spraying sand and debris across the small windows. The whistle intensified as the enemy’s aim improved. Núñez’s orders came out in a stream of profanity and pseudo-Spanish as he exited the front seat. Sid could feel the ripple of steel and sand as the Humvee continued to race across the desert. Mason shoved a finger into Sid’s chest.

“What did I fucking tell you before?” He asked.

“Stay close,” Sid said. “Preferably next to someone with a weapon.”

“Good,” Mason said. “Don’t fucking forget it.”

And then the world went white.

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https://www.amazon.com/Sid-Sanford-Lives-Daniel-Ford/dp/1947048104

http://www.writersbone.com/

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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.

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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