

New Essay: Axe by M.C. Armstrong

I met a woman on my way to Iraq. Just before I stepped onto the midnight plane to Baghdad, she asked me what should have been a simple question:

“Who do you work for?”

Her name was Moni Basu. She was a journalist. She had thick dark hair, an intense demeanor, and she wore a helmet that said “Evil Media Chick.” We were drinking coffee at a picnic table behind a beverage kiosk at the back of Ali Al Salem base in Kuwait. Her traveling companion, a photographer named Curtis Compton, had caught shrapnel from an IED during a previous embed. A moment before, Moni had given me, a rookie journalist, an important Arabic term: *mutar saif*. It meant lies, bullshit, summer rain, a thing that just didn’t happen in the desert.

I told her I worked for a magazine called “CQ.”

“GQ?”

“No. CQ.”

“You write for Congressional Quarterly?”

The questions never stopped with Moni. She could smell the bullshit.

“Convergence Quarterly,” I said. “It’s a new magazine. This will be our first issue. We’re sponsored by North Carolina A&T.”

“You work at North Carolina A&T?”

I nodded nervously. I’m white. A&T is a historically black

college in Greensboro, North Carolina. Many people argue that the student protest movement of the 60s began at A&T when four courageous young men conducted a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter on February 1st, 1960. This was the part of our history that we advertised to the world.

"Do you know who graduated from there?" Moni asked.

"Uh, Jesse Jackson?"

"Khalid Sheikh Mohammed?"

She said it like that, like a question, like she couldn't believe that I was here with her and didn't know this crucial fact. It was early March, 2008, the fifth anniversary of the Iraq invasion. I'd been working at A&T as a lecturer in interdisciplinary writing for the past three years, but didn't know a thing about Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

"This is the guy who masterminded the attacks on 9/11," Moni said. "You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

Moni glanced at Curtis who was applying a cloth to a lens with calm circular strokes. It was just beginning to dawn on me that I might be in way over my head, like maybe I was the man my father was afraid I was, a rube destined to die a ridiculous death in the coming days, my charred body hung from a bridge in some war-torn hamlet, men in loose-fitting garments cheering as my ashy corpse twisted in the wind. Or they'd put me in one of those orange jumpsuits and cut off my head, whoever "they" were.

I took a long sip of my coffee. Surely, whatever crush I had on Moni would not be reciprocated given my astounding ignorance about the war on terror. There I was, about to embed with Navy SEALs in Haditha, one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq, and I had no idea about the man who had started the very war I was trying to cover for a magazine that hadn't even released its first issue. Yes, I was the guy who

had traveled seven thousand miles to learn that the mastermind of 9/11 had been educated in my own backyard.

"Excuse me," I said.

Rather than behave like a good journalist and question Moni relentlessly about KSM, I retreated to the bathroom to attend to suddenly struggling bowels. I stared at the graffiti from the troops:

Chuck Norris doesn't consider it sex unless the woman dies.

Chuck Norris's tears cure cancer. Too bad he never cries.

Here I sit, cheeks a'flexin, ready to unleash another Texan.

Here I sit, upon the crapper, ready to produce another rapper.

Can't wait to go home.

Have a nice war.

They called my bus. I put on my army surplus helmet and bulletproof vest, jotted down a few notes about the jokes in the toilet. I sat close to Moni as the bus filled up. I didn't want to lose her. I felt like I needed her, and I wasn't used to that feeling, that fear. Basically, I didn't want to be left alone in Iraq. On the drive to the plane, I made small talk about the record-breaking drought back home.

"It's so bad in Atlanta," she said, "that I keep a bucket in my shower just so I can save enough water for my garden."

We walked across the tarmac and up the ramp into the loud bloated hull of a C-130 Hercules. It was me, Moni, Curtis, four soldiers, and two contractors. The C-130 is an exposed experience, a cabin stripped of padding and panel, the seats nothing more than net and pole, the lights a dim red, white, and blue, the floor studded with traction pads. After the plane took off, Moni fell asleep and so did one of the

soldiers. Another sat with his headphones blasting so loud it sounded like spit was coming out of his ears. I smelled grape Kool-Aid powder. I looked around at the seemingly calm faces occasionally jostled by the turbulence. There was no turning back. For the past six months, I'd been obsessed with seeing the war for myself and escaping the media-saturated mindfuck of left versus right, peace versus war, WMDS, beheadings and 9/11 conspiracy theories. I wanted to see the thing for myself and now that I was here I couldn't stop thinking about how blind I'd been to the very place I was escaping: America: my own backyard.

Other than KSM, what else had I missed? Was I about to get kidnapped and beheaded, my father dropping to his knees in our front yard with photographers clipping pictures all around him, just like the dad of Nick Berg, the famous decapitated contractor? And were contractors—these men snoozing all around me—were they the bad guys like everybody said? Was America evil? And why were our troops so infatuated with Chuck Norris?

All the lights went out in the Hercules, the cabin a dark tunnel of jiggling multi-national bodies as this massive airship began its spiral descent to Baghdad, the famous lights-out, corkscrew roller-coaster free-fall approach the military's way of evading RPGs and demonstrating to rookie journalists just how simultaneously colossal and agile America can be if she truly wants to keep herself a secret.

Baghdad seemed calm before dawn, more a dense constellation of sapphire lights than a bombed out wasteland. I pressed my cheek against the glass of the Blackhawk. Here was one of the oldest cities in the world, Babylon herself on a Sunday

morning. As a thirteen-year old boy I'd seen SCUDS and Patriot missiles doing their duty on the news, my country at war for the first time in this city down below, but Iraq meant nothing to me back then. In high school, I owned a bong named the Enola Gay. History was just a game, a trivial pursuit, a place to get names for marijuana paraphernalia. Now I was here, in the center of the mediated world, seated next to Moni and Curtis and two soldiers manning swiveling guns as we strafed over the dark crawl of the Tigris River.

We touched down on a slab of cement behind a barricaded building known as LZ (Landing Zone) Washington. Apparently most of the soldiers at this chopper terminal for Green Zone activity were employees of a contractor firm known as Triple Canopy Security Solutions. Moni, Curtis, and I walked into the office with two soldiers who were in town for a court-martial.

The first thing I noticed inside LZ Washington was a photo on the wall, an autographed black and white shot of Chuck Norris next to the sign-in desk.

"What is the deal with all the Chuck Norris worship?" I asked Moni.



Chuck Norris doesn't read, he stares at the words until they change into the meaning he believes they should communicate. If he blinks the whole process starts over again.

She shook her head and smiled, like I was paying attention to the wrong things. As we waited for a our ride to CPIC, the Combined Press Information Center, I stepped closer to the Norris board, the little flapping scraps of pink and green post-its framing the autographed photo, the post-its scrawled

with doggerel travelers had dedicated to this classic example of the Whitmanian American, that man who contains multitudes. Norris' life was actually quite remarkable, I realized at that moment. Not only was he an actor, but he was also a former contractor, a highly decorated martial artist who formed an entire school of Karate, and, on top of it all, he was a devout Christian political wonk who'd recently taken over William F. Buckley's conservative column in hundreds of newspapers, railing against premarital sex, gay marriage, and other such signs of the apocalypse. The picture of Norris I saw posted in LZ Washington had him seated atop a motorcycle that might as well have been a white horse. Beneath were bits of wit like:

Chuck Norris doesn't read. He stares at the book until it gives him information.

Chuck Norris wears cowboy boots. They're made of real cowboys.

Chuck Norris doesn't mow his grass. He dares it to grow.

I wrote down as many of these jokes as I could, determined to keep alive the lighter side of Iraq, but as we drove through the sunrise streets of Baghdad, I couldn't stop thinking about what Moni had told me just before we'd gotten on the C-130.

"You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

How bad is America's amnesia, its will to blindness? And to what extent is that blindness connected to our sense of humor, our addiction to nervous, absurdist jokes? Was I the only one who didn't know the names of our enemies? How little did we know about "them"? From the back of a Humvee, I looked for faces. We passed by monolithic cement barricades, flashes of street vendors with exhausted leers pushing bales of blankets, a statue for the soldiers who'd fought against Iran in the grisly chemical weapons fueled war of the 1980s. God, how did I not know that the man who started this whole "war on terror"

was a graduate of the school where I taught? Was the gap a function of too many rips off the Enola Gay as a teenager? Was I the only American who was this clueless about the Global War on Terror? Sometimes I felt extremely uncomfortable about just how much I had in common with the fool we'd elected President: George W. Bush.

My father gave me some advice before I left for Iraq. He said that Operation Iraqi Freedom was just as much our civil war as it was theirs. He said all anybody talked about in the press was whether we were the good guys or the bad guys.

"But what about them?" he said. "Who's their good guy? Who's their George Washington? That's the story you want to find. Talk to *them*."

That was my goal. I knew I had bigger fish to fry than the graffiti dedicated to Chuck Norris, but talking to actual Iraqis without intrusive oversight was easier said than done. After being in Iraq for more than a week, I still hadn't met a single Iraqi. On the eighth day of my tour, along with my military escort, a large mustachioed Mormon named Reynolds, I landed at Al Asad, a sprawling base that reminded me of summer camp, soldiers jogging and playing volleyball, fobbits zooming around in golf carts, a commissary store loaded with candy and chewing tobacco and cellophane wrapped soft core magazines displaying pin-up girls. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, under a shelter at the back of the base, as I was paging through a men's magazine, I heard a familiar voice.

"Eat Boy!"

I looked up from my picnic table and ran down to the

barricaded cul-de-sac where my SEAL platoon had parked their humvees. I hugged my old friend, now the Lieutenant for this platoon that was actually a Joint Special Operations Force (mostly SEALs mixed with contractors, CIA, and Rangers). Diet was a man I'd known since I was five years old. He looked different, his thick bristly mustache designed to create an air of gravity and power—what the Iraqis called *wasta*—but to me, it was pure comedy, a nod to the porn stars of the seventies or perhaps the viceroys of nineteenth century colonial England, Panama Jack.

“Nice stache,” I said.

Diet commented on the disproportion between the hair on my face and the hair on my head. Whereas he was growing a mustache, I was growing a beard, having learned from him that while mustaches suggest power to Iraqis, the beard suggests holy man.

“You're in the back,” Diet said, as we stepped towards a humvee with the name “Leonidas” spray-painted on the back. Leonidas was an ancient Spartan king, and also a fictional character from a recent movie, “The 300,” which followed one Spartan unit's heroic exploits during the battle of Thermopylae. According to historical legend and the movie, the Spartans died valiantly fighting against King Xerxes and his Persian horde, the Spartan story told only because Leonidas was wise enough to send a man named Dilios away from the platoon on the night before the decisive battle so he—Dilios—might tell the story of the soldiers' bravery to the masses.

“We're driving?” I said.

Diet nodded and smiled. I was surprised and pleased, and scared shitless. I'd enjoyed the aerial views of Iraq, the absence of Iraqis, but was growing a bit suspicious of the embedding strategy, the careful hopscotch from base to base,

the way we avoided all the spaces between, the people.

“You scared?” Diet said.

“Should I be?” I said.

“No,” he said. “That’s part of the story here.”

I put on my helmet and ceramic plated vest. *Complacency Kills*, said a spray-painted sign on the edge of Al Asad. A soldier named B. Dubbs was driving as we passed beyond the wire, the concertina and the cement barriers. Diet passed back a tin of Copenhagen. I threw in a pinch, feeling like high school, about to go rallying through the woods on a winter day, except we weren’t entering a state forest or the rutted lanes of an apple orchard. This was a war zone.



The Haditha burn pit. Part of the desert scenery.

Diet had described Haditha to me as the West Virginia of Iraq, a triad of tribal villages a hundred and fifty miles northwest of Baghdad. Unemployment was seventy percent. There was desert everywhere, many of the people making a living the way they had for thousands of years: fishing and farming, ghostly figures shepherding goats on the smoke-plumed horizon. There were men in robes selling what looked like lemonade from cheap collapsible roadside tables.

“That’s gas,” Diet said.

I nodded my head. Children ran along the shoulder with their hands outstretched. We threw them candy, jolly ranchers. I felt good. I loved the way the desert sky was skinning my eyes, the taste of my fresh chaw and its fiberglass shards tearing through my gums, the feeling of sharing a buzz with Diet in this surreal landscape that seemed to go back and forth between war-torn and exotic, novel and vivid on the one

hand, tragic and impoverished on the other. I listened to the gobble of radio communications, smelled the sweat of the men, saw fruit stands pass by along the road, date palms and eucalyptus, a graveyard of jets, a black burned out hulk of a sedan on the shoulder a reminder that I was not in the Disney version of Iraq anymore and that, at any moment, one of these swaddled and stoic-faced roadside strangers might decide to press a button on a cell-phone he'd converted into a remote control and thereby remind me that not everybody shared the enthusiasm of the children for the foreigners with their tanks and their sunglasses and their gargantuan guns and their swollen lower lips.

I tried to keep my head in the moment as we approached Haditha, my vision of the world at that moment an opaque dust-smear profile of Diet riding shotgun, his face a single sunglass eye and the edge of that thick mustache, a wire coming out of his ear, his lips mutely mouthing orders into a mic as we passed through a gate, and then we could suddenly see a lake to our left and the Euphrates valley to our right down below, this ancient river of grade school lore now a roaring spout from the cement jaws of a massive dam, the slabby Soviet architecture and the sulfurous smell of the Haditha Dam not enough to mute the feeling of ancient resonance, the awe of seeing distant cities of mud huts clustered behind palms on the east and west banks, a vast desert stretching out forever on the southern horizon, no billboards anywhere.

"Can we go for a swim?" I asked.

"You do not want to swim in there," Diet said.

I wondered what that meant. Was the river polluted or was he wisely discouraging the appearance of recreation, a spring break scene of buddies privileged white men splashing around in sacred waters while dark people downstream were cutting each other's heads off? I've always been a sucker for symbolic

baths, half-hearted ablutions. When I see a new body of water, I want to swim. I kept telling myself to shut the fuck up, to remember the wisdom of Mark Twain: "It is better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

We parked the humvees and stepped out, were greeted by a pack of sand-colored mongrel dogs that threaded their way through our dispersing ranks. I gave one a tentative pat, stretched my legs and spit out my dip, then looked around the base at black missile-shaped tubes of inflatable boats leaned up against the cement barriers that fortified the borders, red and green storage containers forming a wall against the southern end of the camp, an empty plywood watchtower like the first leg of a Trojan horse.

"Who's on the other side?" I asked Diet, as we stood on the bank of the river looking across at the camp on the eastern shore. He told me that was where the contractors slept. Sure enough, I saw the letters "KBR" sprayed in red on a cement wall, a few extremely thick men milling around. Kellogg Brown Root was a subsidiary of Dick Cheney's old company, Halliburton.

"What do they do?" I asked.

"They more or less take care of the trash," Diet said.

The great secret of my time in Iraq, I thought for awhile, was that trash, the burn pits KBR ran and the rash of scary symptoms discovered in soldiers and in Iraqis, or maybe, I came to think, it was a chemical weapons discovery at the Haditha Dam, a story one of those KBR contractors told me in a tent one night back in Kuwait. According to him, we never told the media about these "WMDs" because the serial numbers indicated American origins. This was a big story, I thought, as big as they come, but after I put it out in *The Mantle* the very week C.J. Chivers of *The New York Times* released a

similar story about such weapons being discovered all over Iraq, I realized people didn't care, that our complicity in Iraq's development of the very WMDs we'd used to justify the war meant nothing to most Americans.[\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) No, I now believe that the big secret of Iraq is still that thing my father told me to explore: the people.

Diet showed me the trailer where I could take a shower, then ushered me into a maze of corrugated storage containers. I followed him across a wooden plank past a dark empty plywood room. Behind this was another row of these metal containers, the "ConEx" boxes that served as the sleeping quarters for his men, each door sprayed with their nicknames, monikers like "Lurch" and "Tree." Diet's door was marked by two big black letters: "LT."

"Damn. Not bad," I said, as I walked inside and beheld strands of Christmas lights forming vines above a red bed and a wall decorated with an ornate tribal tapestry, the pattern a pointillist spread of teal and brown leaves. I saw trunks of care package goodies everywhere, a Macbook on a desk under a reading lamp. Behind Diet's computer sat a black and white photo of his father from his time in the Marines during Vietnam. Above the photo were Diet's books, including a tattered copy of William Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*.

As Diet took off his gear, I sat down in his black swivel desk chair and read through his Faulkner. I came across a line on a page that had been dog-eared, a passage I wrote down for some reason: "When a feller has to start killin' folks, he most always has to keep killin' em. And when he does, he's already dead hisself."

"You hungry?" Diet asked.

"What do you think?" I said.

"I know. Stupid question."

He laughed. Eat Boy's always hungry. Diet offered me one of his care-package nutrition bars, something with flax and honey and other progressive ingredients. It felt good to eat, to take off my shoes, to savor for a second the sense—the illusion—of finally having arrived.

"Fucking Eat Boy," he said.

"Bet you never thought this was going to happen," I said.

"No," he said. "To be honest. I didn't."

I looked at the cutouts of women from *Maxim* magazine he'd taped to the walls. He had a white dry board on the back of his door.

"Let's come up with a list of five stories," he said.

I didn't like the sound of that. I told Diet I could find my stories on my own. Diet, for good reason, looked at me skeptically, or perhaps paternally is the better word, or maybe it was close to the same look Moni gave me when I asked about Chuck Norris and told her I'd never heard of KSM. All three of them—Diet, my dad, and Moni—knew I knew nothing, and thought this was to my detriment, but sometimes I wondered if there wasn't a certain advantage to my naïvite.

"Just out of curiosity," I said. "Why does there have to be five?"

"It's a good number, Eat Boy. One story a day for a full work-week."

Three months earlier, after our local newspaper had backed out on sponsoring me because my father had threatened their editor (his patient) with a lawsuit if anything happened to me while I was in Iraq, Diet had called from me Haditha and challenged me to "be a man," to make the trip happen in spite of my father's resistance. So, like my president, I faked my way into Iraq, came up with a magazine of my own. I was proud of

this, my American ingenuity, but as Diet stood there telling me what stories to write, I felt like he was meddling.

“I wanna meet some Iraqis,” I said.

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

“You wanna meet Captain Allah?”

“Yes, I wanna meet Allah.”

That’s how the name first sounded to me—Captain Allah—Captain God. Like, sure, let’s go straight to the top. I had no idea who he was, but he sounded important and he definitely sounded Iraqi. Diet and I walked back through the maze of trailers that finally spilled out into the open air of the Iraqi night, some of the brightest stars I’d ever seen, the lighting of the base kept deliberately low, the vast miles of desert all around us offering no diffusing glow to the constellations, Orion stippled with a dress of chain mail armor, stars below his belt I’d never seen before. I spun around in the cool night air like I was stoned, saw a tall black SEAL walk out of the shower hut with a towel around his neck, saw the mongrel dogs play-fighting down at the southern end of the base by the red punching bag hanging beneath the watchtower.

We walked into the room of one of the platoon’s translators, a thick-bearded Jordanian named Rami who had a large American flag posted over his bed in the same fashion that Diet had a tribal tapestry tacked over his. Cutout pictures of women in skin-tight apparel modeling machine guns dotted Rami’s walls.

Diet was briefing Rami on what was about to happen and I was admiring a photo of a blonde woman in a black dress wielding a black rifle when a tall man with a feathered mullet and a gold tie walked through the door, his entrance worthy of a sitcom scene. I half expected a studio audience to explode into a

roar of applause. He was gangly, a silver pen clipped to his left breast pocket, his white dress shirt and olive suit freshly ironed, his eyes moving left to right in a furtive display of awareness and anxiety that evoked Kramer's character from *Seinfeld*. But this was unhinged, unrehearsed. Here was a man like me, who did not know his role, and no feature of his appearance suggested this more than the feathered mullet.

"Matt, this is Captain Al'A Khalaf Hrat. He's the leader of the thirty man Iraqi Swat Team we've been training over the past few months."

"Assalamu Alaikum," I said, rather proud of myself for remembering this rote greeting.

I shook the man's hand, felt a strong calloused grip. He responded with a deep voice and an abridgement of the conventional crib sheet Arabic greeting:

"Salaam."

He took off his jacket, revealing a shoulder holster, two pistols tucked beneath his arms. He took that off as well, spoke at length, looking back and forth between Diet and me, never once looking at Rami, which I thought was "interesting," as they say.

"He wants to know where you're from," Rami said.

Either Arabic is the most inefficient language in the world or Captain Al'A wanted to know more than just where I was from. Rami wore a tan jumpsuit with an American flag above his left breast. I was anxious, aware that a lot was going to be lost in translation. I had my journal in my hands with all of the questions I wanted to ask, but felt tempted, as I almost always do, to improvise, to throw my notes aside, and go with the feeling of the moment.

For the first time in my life I was not only in Iraq, but I was finally sitting with an Iraqi, the leader of a SEAL trained SWAT team, perhaps the Iraqi equivalent of Vic Mackey, Michael Chikliss's character from my favorite cop show, *The Shield*. Was it possible that Captain Al'A's mullet meant to Iraqis what Mackey's shaved head meant to Americans? Was I dealing with the alpha dog, the badass, a rogue cop, the sort of man who made his own rules? I kept getting this comic vibe from Captain Al'A, the ghost of the American mullet and its connotations of "I don't give a fuck, throw me another beer" mentality.

After telling Al'A that I was from a town close to Washington, D.C. I decided to forget my questions about statistics and George W. Bush and the fifth anniversary of the invasion and "the Al Anbar Awakening," and I elected, instead, to ask him about his hair. I told him I liked his mullet. I told him that I understood that different hairstyles meant different things to different people, that the mustache was supposed to mean power and the beard holiness, "but what does the mullet mean?"

I exchanged a quick look with Diet who shook his head in crestfallen disbelief. Captain Al'A crinkled his eyes and also looked toward his boss, perhaps not expecting the interrogation with the American journalist to broach such serious subjects as the symbolic significance of a mullet. I felt like such an amateur. I wondered what Moni would do. Over a hundred thousand Iraqis had already been killed in the war and I was asking questions about hair care. I looked down at Al'A's feet, determined to get serious with the next question, scolding myself for my improvisational approach, my belief in naïvete perhaps nothing more than the sophist's justification for laziness, a tragicomic foreshadowing of the America to come. In the seconds between my question and Al'A's answer, I noticed the Captain wore ankle length socks. There were subtle pin stripes in his pants, a sharp pleated

crease. He removed a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and offered me one.

I took it. We both lit up. And then he began to talk, his deep voice drawn into higher registers by the frenzy of his thoughts, glottals and hisses clashing, Rami listening from his desk, the Captain seated on the translator's bed, Diet standing over us. When Al'A finished speaking, he took a deep inhalation and blew a clean two-pronged stream of smoke out of his considerable nostrils, his face—his wide eyes and large nose a bit reminiscent of the Muppet character, Gonzo.

“He says that his men are not afraid of death,” Rami said. “He says that in some cities his haircut is not allowed, that it means a man is gay, and if you are gay you can get killed. But he is not gay. He just does what he wants. He is not afraid of death. He has lost eight family members, three brothers kidnapped and killed. His uncle, who was the police chief—he and his three children were murdered. It has been a terrible time for Hadithans. Hundreds of people leaving the city for Syria and elsewhere. Refugees. There was a man, an insurgent, who spoke to an American in public so everyone could see. Fifteen minutes this man and the American talk so everyone can see. Then the insurgent goes and kills an old innocent man, a barber. What do you think people thought? Do you understand the game they play? You cannot be afraid of death.”

Lately, I've given a lot of thought to this moment, the story that emerged out of that question about hair. Many of the men we armed in Al Anbar, men like Al'A, joined up with the Islamic State. Many of those who did not continued to flood Syria, contributing to the destabilization of that country and its civil war that goes on to this day. So I've thought about Al'A's words a lot, his story, the flood of death in his family. I've thought about these words specifically: “You cannot be afraid of death.” This value, what some used to call bravery, has not aged well in the twenty-first century,

or at least the American version. Sometimes we now call people who embrace death "cowards." The absence of fear in the face of death runs totally counter to the American way of life and the way it's so structured around careerism and self-interest, retirement and insurance and health care, keeping people alive into their nineties, banking their bodies in the faceless retirement communities we find near our beaches and deserts, Florida and Arizona.

That night I looked into the spaniel calm of the Captain's eyes as another divided slide of smoke issued from his nose. A million thoughts were rushing through my head. I thought of Native Americans, the ones who got the haircuts and joined us, the ones who didn't, the Shawnee who occasionally came to dance at my elementary school when I was a child. Was I engaged in a timeless rite in that moment, sharing tobacco with a Brave? How ironic was it that the white man, or at least the white man's corporation, was now the one to provide the tobacco? And who, truly, was the savage in this "game" of drones and beheadings, snipers, IEDs and WMDs? What would you think if you were in the Captain's shoes, an Iraqi man working with Americans in the heart of a war that might well be illegal and might possibly (and simultaneously) produce positive unintended consequences, your every move fraught with the implications of poverty versus complicity? A simple conversation could cost you your life.

I felt a tremendous surge of affection and pity for Captain Al'A. We continued the interview. I learned that he belonged to the tribe known as the Jughayfi. He was born the son of a worker at a local oil refinery. He witnessed the Iran-Iraq war and thereafter the first war with America. For a long time, like most Iraqis, his hatreds were pure, thoroughly controlled by an oppressive regime and its lockstep media, a government that kept tight control over the textbooks in the schools.

"You were not allowed to think," Al'A told me. "Everything was

military.”

God, I wanted to drink a beer with this guy and tell him about what it had been like the last five years in America, generals galore on TV, generals on the radio, CIA on NBC, assassins on Fox, anchorwomen cheerleading the war, military budgets exploding, everybody in the country shaving their head like yours truly, everybody with their support our troops bumper stickers and tree ribbons, every chicken hawk politician suddenly with polished flag pins posted on their lapels, country musicians turned to jingoistic sycophants for the war machine, everybody every day constantly reminded by the streaming ticker on the TV that we were living in code orange and it was all the fault of people like Captain Al'A.

“How have things changed?” I asked him.

“Come downtown with me,” he said. “Come see the souk. It used to be so small you could fit it into the back of a truck. Now it's like, it's like—it's like Europe. It's like Paris.”

Rami laughed, said to me, “Matt, it's not that nice. Definitely not Paris.”

“You should come to the market,” Al'A said.

I looked to Diet like a teenage son begging permission from his father to go to a party with the older guys, that archetypal convertible revving in the driveway. Diet looked back at me like I wasn't quite ready to take that ride, a long pointed blink.

“Don't worry, Eat Boy,” he said. “We're going downtown tomorrow.”

I was terrified—thrilled, intoxicated by war, confident in the seal of my spectatorial membrane, my security detail. I'd never been “downtown” in a place where barbers were murdered

in the streets, a city where there were “attacks” every day. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I was finally getting around to my father’s advice. I was talking to an Iraqi. But there was still a veil over the scene, a translator and a lieutenant, cement barriers everywhere outside. To go “downtown”—that might actually qualify as reality, an authentic “beyond the wire” glimpse of Iraq. Hot dog! Come on, Daddy-o! Can’t I see beyond the walls?

Diet told me to wrap it up. I suggested a photograph with the Captain before calling it a night. Then, in a moment I’ll never forget, Captain Al’A stood up and brandished a small bottle of “Axe” cologne. This baffled me. We’d been sitting incredibly close the whole evening and not once had he broken out the cologne. Smell, of course, is not conveyed in a photograph, so why the hell would a man spray himself with cologne prior to a photo? To comb one’s mullet or tighten one’s tie—this I understood. But as I flew back to America, I couldn’t stop thinking about this final gesture. Why had this man with a mullet sprayed himself down so profusely with cologne before locking arms with me? Was this a custom my crib sheets had neglected to apprise me of? And why, of all colognes, was he wearing Axe? And why do I focus on trivial things like haircuts and colognes when there are body counts and ideologies and elections and secret prisons everywhere?

Perhaps the answer is simple. I don’t know. I’m a coward. I’m an American idiot. But maybe that’s too easy, modesty to the point of dishonesty and disavowal. So let me try to step it back. Most Americans know Axe as the Walmart of colognes. Axe is the most aggressively advertised cologne slash body spray on the marketplace, a cheap and strong smell for young men looking to score. Axe is what we advertise to the young after advertising Viagra and Cialis to the old and Coke to all. As I sought Iraq, perhaps Iraq sought me as well, reaching out with the one smell that could not possibly be misinterpreted. Maybe Iraq, too, was befuddled by the multitudes Chuck Norris

contained, the strange mixed messages of our muse and our media.

Ultimately, whether Iraq and Captain Al'A were as confused about us as we were about ourselves, I think it's safe to say that I'll never forget either. Captain Al'A, the way his mullet brushed my bare scalp as we wrapped arms for the photo, his locks dusting me with a musk laced with body odor and American tobacco, his ribs for a moment in contact with mine, their texture uncovered by his absent holster, the awareness of those bones sharpened by that most pungent of musks; begging for my approval, hungry for my adoring stare.

[\[1\]](#)

<http://www.mantlethought.org/world-literature/spring-break-iraq>

[\[2\]](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/14/world/middleeast/us-casualties-of-iraq-chemical-weapons.html>

M. C. Armstrong embedded with JSOF in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. He published extensively on the Iraq war through The Winchester Star. He is the winner of a Pushcart Prize. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in Esquire, The Missouri Review, The Gettysburg Review, Mayday, Monkeybicycle, Epiphany, The Literary Review, and other journals and anthologies. He is the lead singer and rhythm guitarist for Viva la Muerte and lives in Greensboro, North Carolina with Yorick, his corgi, whose interruptions to his writing are frequent but welcome.