

# New Nonfiction from Kiley Bense: Tell Me About My Boy

Here's an empty grave, where a body that had been a boy became bones beneath a wooden cross. They buried him with one set of dog tags hanging against his bloodied chest.

He bled in a field hospital bed not far from here, shrapnel buried in his skin. Is that what killed him—hot metal melting flesh, an unseen severing? Or was his body tossed limply from a jeep seat as it crossed the desert, the crush of cargo snapping ribs, a crackle of tinder at dusk? "Morale is very high," the morning reports said, on the day the boy disappeared into the horizon. The next day he'd be dreaming under several feet of sand. They couldn't have known. They couldn't have. They couldn't.

When he died, the boy was twenty-three and dark-haired, all shoulder and grin: my grandmother's little brother. It's one thing to consider his photograph on a mantelpiece, a charming kid wearing a tilted cap; another to imagine him becoming broken, hollows purpling beneath his eyes and a bloody bandage wrapped around one thumb where a cactus thorn was entombed in the soft pad of his finger. One thing to read "artillery fire" on a typewritten government medical form (death requires paperwork); another to watch a German gun spitting shells, coughing up sounds that rattle across time and sky. How fragile is a human body in the path of such certainty.

Here is that body: one-hundred-sixty-two-pounds, down from one-hundred-and-seventy since he'd filled out his draft card in an office in Philadelphia one year before. Seventy-five inches tall. Gray-blue eyes, like his father's. Freckles across the top of his nose blotted out by five months of sunburn and grime. One thumb now scarred. One uniform crusted with sweat, salt, blood and smoke, one rosary and an American

flag stuffed in the pockets. Feet stiff, callused and blistered. Lean jaw and face, angles cut sharper by sleeplessness and fear. Shrapnel lacerations unfurled like tattered red-black lace over his left arm and chest. This is the body they buried in Tebessa with a gunshot salute and a chaplain's murmured blessing.

Bury him at Gettysburg, his father said, when the government wanted to know where to leave his son's bones for good. There's no room in Gettysburg, came the reply, that meadow's already crammed with dead American boys. Choose another tomb.



Here is a letter about nothing: "Dear Sir," it begins. "Will you kindly change my address on your records? My son, Private Richard H. Halvey, 331356641, Headquarters Co. 18th Infantry, 1st Division, was killed in action in North Africa, March 21st, 1943, and I am anxious to have your records correct so that I may receive future correspondence regarding the returning of his body. Thanking you for your attention, I am, Very truly yours." Signed, Brendan H. Halvey, my great-grandfather. Here is pain, laid out on one creased sheet of paper.

He bled for us. But he will not rise. Here in Algeria the air is still, the night is silent. There is no weeping. The only cross at his grave was the slatted thing they stuck in the dirt above his head, one set of dog tags looped around its arms. He hated those dog tags. The cord bit at his neck, a reminder that the Army was trying, every day, to convert him from a person into a number. It took all of one day for him to die. Then he was inked into a serial code in some forgotten notebook. 331356641. 331356641. 331356641. Repeated till it stays.

Across the ocean from the skeleton his son had become, his father wondered where to bury what was left. Here is what the

government said: We can't tell you much about your boy, other than that he isn't coming back. They took his blood and his body, and all that's left is bone.

Maybe Brendan asked for Gettysburg because the government was bold enough to parrot Lincoln in the pamphlet it mailed to stricken fathers. "Tell Me About My Boy," the pamphlet was titled, though really it told nothing. The dead were valiant and heroic, said the pamphlet, they "gave the last full measure of devotion." There was no mention of Lincoln's next line: "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

Arlington, Brendan decided, finally, in 1947. So they shipped Dick Halvey's body (which was jumbled bones and dog tags) to Virginia, where the Army shrouded him in stripes and etched a cross on marble above his name. Not blood-soaked Gettysburg but Arlington, everything green and white except the roses laid on headstones. Here, across the river from the capital, we buried our boys in neat rows. "Our boys," they said back then, pleading with o-mouths at news reels for a glimmer of truth. Our boys aren't coming back the same.

*Note: Tebessa, Algeria was the site of a temporary American cemetery during World War II. Starting in 1947, soldiers' remains were moved from Tebessa either to the American cemetery in [Tunisia](#) or brought back to the United States, according to the family's wishes.*

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## **Interview with Matt Young,**

# Author of Eat the Apple



Matt Young is a writer, teacher, and veteran. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Miami University and is the recipient of fellowships from Words After War and The Carey Institute for Global Good. You can find his work in Catapult, Granta, Tin House, Word Riot, and elsewhere. He teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Centralia College and lives in Olympia, Washington. His first book, a memoir titled *Eat the Apple*, is out now from Bloomsbury Publishing.

*WBT: In Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist and World War Two veteran, discusses how he “gradually became aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.” Calvino then relates the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Perseus, Calvino argues, not only kills Medusa with his shield’s reflection, but must also carry the burden of his experiences—and Medusa’s head—with him indirectly; otherwise, he will, well, turn to stone. Perseus’s strength, Calvino claims, “lies in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden.”*

*I have found this a useful metaphor for the problem of relating war experience. Too literal, you kill the experience. Too abstract, you don’t say anything at all. It is also the first thing I thought of when I encountered Eat the Apple’s humor, diagrams, cartoons, and pronouns (“you” and “we” and “Recruit” and “Young,” instead of “I”). Can you talk to us about how and why you decided to recount your military*

*experiences indirectly?*

YOUNG: The change in POV started off as art imitating life. In Marine boot camp you're required to refer to yourself as "Recruit So-and-so" and it felt unnatural to write a story about boot camp using "I" so I let the third person do work there.

I struggled with the fact that most war memoirs I'd read had some kind of extreme circumstance at their center—that kind of Special Forces narrative that inundates the media these days. My experiences by comparison seemed tame and silly. But I thought about all the grunts I'd served with who'd had similar experiences over the four years we were together and I thought about all the battalions that had replaced us in country full of similar guys who'd also had similar experiences. Those two thoughts gave rise to that communal first person plural voice—I realized it was best to lean into that idea of not having a unique experience, painted myself as no different than any other.

Lots of early pieces I wrote were 'How to' stories. Some of those made their way into the final draft, but many more changed focus later on. That highly imperative second person, felt like it confronted both military and civilian complicity in Iraq. But ultimately, the second-person perspective loses its power quickly because it often forces the audience to acknowledge they're reading a story in ways other perspectives don't so I tried to keep it to a minimum and fit it with form to make it feel more natural.

I also found that those other perspectives helped me confront my past actions in a less direct manner and helped me be more honest about who I'd been and what I'd done. They made me feel less alone, took me off the page and put me next to the reader and let me show them something I couldn't have with just "I". There's something about the removal of the "I" that let me cut a little deeper.

*WBT: The essays in Eat the Apple are relatively short and incredibly poignant. I experienced each and every one like a punch to the gut. Did this economy come into your writing naturally? Or did you have to refine longer essays into the powerful vignettes they became?*

YOUNG: When I started writing I set off to write flash. I wanted the essays to mimic memory, and flash felt like a natural fit. It's often how I remember moments—a smell or image or sound recalls a tiny thing and sends it zipping through my brain for a microsecond and then it's gone, but I'm left thinking about it and reflecting on it sometimes for days.

I didn't write or journal during my time in the Marines so I had to do a lot of memory recall exercises, late-night texting of former platoon mates, and research online to find incident reports. That process itself felt fractured, which also seemed to fit what I was trying to do—piecing together four years of experience and emotion to make a narrative.

I love the lyricism that generally comes with flash essays—it felt like a fantastic way to spice up the sometimes complete banality of war. In the beauty of those lyrical descriptions the horror of what I'm writing about maybe becomes a bit easier to stomach for a reader as well—that's the hope anyway.

*WBT: In a Time Magazine essay, you write the following: "I tried to fictionalize what I'd done because I wasn't quite ready to acknowledge that I never fulfilled that manly heroic expectation people have of military service." As someone who writes fiction, I found this unsettling (in a good way). Could you expand on what you meant here and maybe tell us a little about what you consider the relationship between fiction and nonfiction?*

YOUNG: It happened on two levels for me. My senior Marines had fought in Fallujah. I saw them as the peak of manhood, real

heroes. They'd been in firefights, cleared houses, killed people. I wanted to have done those things then. I'd been told those men were the pinnacle of maleness and I was so uncomfortable in my skin and lacked so much confidence as a young man that I was an easy sell and bought in fully. Then, when I got home after my first deployment I didn't feel like I'd measured up to them and when I went to tell my family and friends about what war was like, I felt like I didn't measure up to their expectations, either. So I made up stories to tell them, made my experience more like my seniors'. I lied. And I kept lying for years because it made me feel good and it kept me from having to reflect about what I'd done and what had happened.

Then, by the time I got to undergrad at Oregon State and started writing I had those lies mixed up with my truth. When I tried to write stories about my experience I saw myself in the characters I created and immediately began to defend them, to make their experience mean something. I wanted them to be heroes, and so they turned into caricatures. They spent their time in my stories explaining "the real world" to civilians unironically. There was no truth in those stories, because I couldn't be truthful with myself.

It's a bit odd, maybe. You usually hear from writers that fiction is a more direct vehicle for the truth. But for me it wasn't writing fiction that got me there. It was using fiction writing techniques. Lines between fiction and nonfiction are super blurry a lot of the time. The moment an event happens and someone documents it, it's filtered through an individual's lens—that person's contextual place in the world. Are the things I recount and the stories I tell considered fact? Probably not, by most standards. Are they truth? 100%.

*WBT: Toxic masculinity is a topic much in the news recently. For good reason. We spend a lot of time of WBT debating and thinking about violence and its effect on communities. But sometimes we can forget how cultures of violence eat away at*

*men too, at how this toxicity is a two-way street. Eat the Apple bravely confronts this exact issue. For example:*

*“You’ve chosen the United States Marine Corps infantry based on one thing: You got drunk last night and crashed your car into a fire hydrant in the early morning and think—because your idea of masculinity is severely twisted and damaged by the male figures in your life and the media you surround yourself—that the only way to change is the self-flagellation achieved by signing up for war.”*

*I feel Eat the Apple responds to this “idea of masculinity,” and I encourage readers interested in this subject to buy and read the whole collection through (a couple times). Did you set out to write on this idea of what it means to be a man in the U.S. today or is this simply a byproduct of describing your particular experiences in the Marines?*

YOUNG:

Short answer? No.

Longer answer? I set out to write my experience as an infantry Marine and it was impossible to write that experience without writing about the antiquated ideals of masculinity and anti-feminism, which construct the ethos of both the Marine Corps and especially Marine grunts. It was delivered via Drill Instructors, School of Infantry Instructors, senior Marines, and higher-ups—a kind of disdain for everything feminine. Drop back on a hike? You’re a bitch or a pussy. Have a girlfriend back home? She’s fucking some other guy behind your back because you can’t trust Susie Rottencrotch. Women Marines—WMs—are dehumanized; called Wookies (which I never got) or walking mattresses. Those are the more overt portions of toxic masculinity I, and most, experience.

Then it hits you from civilians, too. Again with their expectations—what a soldier is supposed to be, what they’re supposed to have experienced and done, and how they’re

supposed to react to that experience. Usually civilians expect you to have killed someone, to be damaged irreparably by post-traumatic stress, to be that strong silent type, to be a hero.

But calling someone a hero negates their experience or their feelings about that experience. It tells them their individual feelings are wrong and replaces them with a narrative people are more comfortable with. Hero worship is part of toxic masculine culture and it's an act of silencing. It says, Shut up about your experience, smile when I thank you for your service so I can feel better about myself, and take the beer I just bought you. It perpetuates the tough guy military narrative—a thing I'd bought into so much I lied about my true experiences to family and friends when I returned home. I really couldn't write about anything in my life right now without confronting masculinity in our culture.

*WBT: Hard question time. That quote above. Isn't this exactly what happened? Didn't the experiences recounted in this book change you in ways that you both wanted and did not want? It's okay if you just say, "read the last chapters of Eat the Apple." Readers should.*

YOUNG: Unsatisfying answer time: For sure. Doesn't every experience do that? Before that quote I speculate as to what might happen if I don't join. Do I think now that becoming a Midwest caricature was the only other outcome? No. I could've joined the Peace Corps, or sucked it up and enrolled in community college, or reconciled with my parents, or hit the lottery. There are infinite futures I could've had that could've changed me and affected me in infinite ways, but at that time I thought I was a bad man on a road to even more badness. I thought the Marine Corps would give me direction and purpose. I thought it would make me a man. I'm impulsive by nature, so I went with it.

I spend most of the rest of the book examining how misinformed I was and how directionless I became. This is really the

problem I had with writing fiction about my experience when I got out. I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to know the world and myself better and more fully afterward—or wanted to pretend my military service had enlightened me to those things—but everything became more convoluted. It took being out and going to college and gaining education and language that I could use to articulate my experience to help me understand my experience and myself more fully.

*WBT: I teach Slaughterhouse-Five to students every year. Every year they get upset by the descriptions of masturbation, pornography, and the picture of Montana Wildhack's breasts. I ask them why they get upset by the masturbation and not all the massacres of human beings. Eat the Apple does not pull any punches when it comes to the sexual life of Marines. Can you tell us about Eat the Apple's reception? Have you had any pushback?*

For the most part people have appreciated the honesty. I write a lot about masturbation in the book for a couple reasons—one because I (and most of us) did it a lot. It really is a way to stay awake on post or pass the time or make you feel like you're still somewhat human, so it becomes part of the fabric of Marine grunt experience. But also, it's super intimate—in some respect more so than sex. You're at your most vulnerable when masturbating. All your shortcomings, your kinks, your dumb facial expressions, whatever. You don't have to hide any of those things when you're jerking off by yourself. I wanted people to see that part of myself. It helped me let down that masculine guard that's always up in military memoirs. Everyone masturbates. It's a great way to build empathy.

Some people see it as crass and childish or disgusting, which says more about them as readers and people unwilling to engage with difficult topics. Most of the pushback comes from older men who don't like me scuffing up the spit polished Marine Corps veneer. They're a dying breed I think—those men and the stories they love so much. People want more. If the festering

gash that is civilian/military divide is ever going to heal it's going to take acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of service experience out there.

That people clutch their pearls at sex and not violence is an issue of our puritanical and patriarchal roots. Sex is bad because it empowers women. Violence is good because it establishes dominance and power—regressive masculine traits.

*WBT: A fellow WBT editor and I have an absolutely unscientific generalization about war literature. There has not been, we contend, a war book published in the last fifty years that has not mentioned dogs, dead or otherwise. We have many theories as to why, none of them particularly insightful. Your work spends a lot of time talking about dogs too. Why do Americans write so many war books about dogs?*

YOUNG: Man's best friend, maybe? Relatability to the audience? Shock value? Killing a dog probably has some kind of purpose in the moment—to get them to stop eating corpses, or to get them to shut up, or out of boredom. In terms of literary merit, the killing of a dog is maybe more powerful than the killing of a human. We're so desensitized to human death. The killing of an animal, especially a dog, is much more rhetorically pathetic.

*Tobias Wolff has maybe the best line ever about U.S. war writing in *In Pharaoh's Army*: "And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart?" Of course, Wolff—being the brilliant writer he is—does not actually admire his sorrow, but interrogates it through the essay form itself—opens up the tensions implicit in recounting morally repugnant wartime experiences. I believe *Eat the Apple* to be one of the few memoirs since Wolff's that accomplishes something similar. I also believe there is little "sorrow" in *Eat the Apple* and even less patience with those who might admire it. Did you consciously reflect on the privilege of reflection when*

*writing these essays? How did you avoid falling into the trap Wolff describes?*

YOUNG: I love *In Pharaoh's Army*. One of my undergrad professors, Keith Scribner, recommended it to me when I was trying to figure out how to write about the Marines. Now that you mention that, maybe he saw me admiring my own sorrow in my fiction? Damn. My mind is kind of blown right now.

Anyway, after trying to fictionalize my experience I became very aware of the benefits and detriments of reflection. Honesty and humor kept me out of the trap. Those POV switches and different forms and styles were all working towards honesty and let me pull out the magnifying glass and pinpoint a sunspot to scorch the living hell out of my past self. Most of the humor in the book is self-deprecating—lacerating I suppose. I wanted the audience laugh at me. The humor at my own expense is naked honesty; the audience is laughing because of how horrible I am, which maybe makes me feel a bit of shame because of the rhetoric surrounding the military (“Support Our Troops!”). It creates a balance with those poignant moments and keeps me from verging into woe-is-me-I-signed-up-for-the-Marines-and-they-made-me-go-to-war-isn't-that-sad? territory.

*WBT: You teach writing. What do you tell your students on the first day of class?*

YOUNG: Anyone who gives you a prescriptive fix for your writing, and means it, is a cop.

*WBT: What do you tell your students on the last day of class?*

YOUNG: Go make art and be good.

Purchase *Eat the Apple* [here](#).