

# **New Poetry by Peter Newall: “Deserters”**

New poem by Peter Newall: “Deserters”

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# **Poetry by Amalie Flynn: “Ours”**

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# **New Poetry by D.R. James: “Stunned”**

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# **New Poetry by Jason Green: “Winter Haiku,” “Spring**

# Haiku”

New poems by Jason Green: Winter Haiku and Spring Haiku

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## **New Poetry by Kyle Hanton: “Deployment, 2017”**

New poem by Kyle Hanton

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## **New Poems by Rachel Rix: “Experimental Simulation of Joint Morphology During Desiccation;” “Second Deployment;” and “CO’s Canon”**

New poetry by Rachel Rix

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# **New Poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”**

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# **New Poetry by Patricia Hastings: “Dad”**

New Poem from Patricia Hastings: Dad

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# **New Poetry by Faye Susan: “I am the Daughter of a Storyteller”**

New Poetry by Faye Susan: “I am the Daughter of a Storyteller”

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# **New Poetry by Celeste**

# **Schueler: “In Oklahoma, Another Air Force Spouse Tells Me Starlings Are An Invasive Species” and “I First Compared You To A Blue Jay”**

Three years before we met,  
Friends tell me to stop reading  
Virginia Woolf after my suicide  
Attempt and an ex-boyfriend  
Gifts me a burned CD of  
The Beatles at Easter—

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# **New Poetry by Benjamin Bellet: “What Was It Like?”; “Zero Five Thirty”; “West Point”**

New poems by Benjamin Bellet

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# **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;

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# **New Poem by John Thampi: “Ad Memoriam”**

New poem by John Thampi: Ad Memoriam

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# **New Poetry by Layle Chambers: “Becoming a Lighthouse #1;” “You Find Wonders;” “Pilot Air”**

cold laps the shore  
no choice but to step in  
stride out, stake my place  
transmute into tower

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# New Poetry by Kathleen Murdough: “He Signed Up”

“This is what he signed up for,”  
my mother says when  
my brother graduates from West Point.  
He always wanted to be a soldier,  
so she and I pin the bars on his shoulders.

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# New Poetry by Devin Mikles: “Telegram to Mrs. Sargent”



BLUE POWDER SMOKE / *image by*  
*Amalie Flynn*

ONLY MUDDY BOOTS AND HELMETS CAKED RUSTING  
ROTTING IN STEAMING GREENHOUSES STICK UP  
FROM DECAYED REMAINS CAUSED BY DETESTABLE  
HUMAN ANGER VENT BY WORLD POLITICAL  
COMPANY FOUNDED ON INORDINATE DESIRE. STOP.  
BLUE POWDER SMOKE SIFTS THROUGH THIN LIGHT  
RAYS AMONG MANY OTHERS YOUR SON ARRIVED HERE  
TODAY SHORTLY AFTER MORTAR FIRE  
STOPPED ON PHENOM PHENH. STOP.

GOD

Devin Alaric Mikles

Colorado Springs, Colorado 1976

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## **New Poetry by Aramis Calderon: "Loyal"**

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## **New Poetry by Nathan Didier: "Hearts and Minds"**

New Poem by Nathan Didier: "Hearts and Minds"

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## **New Poetry by Rachel Rix: "Experimental Simulation of Joint Morphology During Desiccation," "Second**

# Deployment," "CO's Canon"

New Poetry by Rachel Rix: "Experimental Simulation of Joint Morphology During Desiccation," "Second Deployment," "CO's Canon"

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# New Poetry by Richard Epstein: "The Dance"

New Poem by Richard Epstein: "The Dance"

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# New Poetry by Peter Mladinic: "Fist"



AIR THICKER THAN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

In Okinawa I made a fist  
and my fingers stuck together  
that stop over night  
my one stop before Danang,  
between two worlds,  
the flag burning, tear-gas

U.S. and the Vietnam rat-tat-tat  
automatic fire, the LBJ  
How many kids ... and the sandbag  
fortified bunkers. Didn't  
see anyone die, only the dead.  
In Okinawa, planes  
on the runway, the air thicker  
than Danang's.  
The smell of napalm,  
how real for some.  
I stood holding a metal tray  
in a chow line, slept  
in a top bunk, spit-shined boots  
so their tips were mirrors.

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## **New Poetry by Shawn McCann: “All I Can Do Is Watch” and “No Way To Fight Back”**

New Poetry by Shawn McCann: “All I Can Do Is Watch” and “No  
Way To Fight Back”

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## **New Poetry by David Dixon:**

# **“Last Night, I Dreamed of the Korengal”; “Look at This Thing We’ve Made”; and “War Poetry”**

New Poems by David Dixon: “Last Night, I Dreamed of the Korengal;” “Look at This Thing We’ve Made;” and “War Poetry”

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# **New Poetry by Cheney Crow: “The Grey Phone”**

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# **New Poetry by Joshua Folmar: “Sudoku”**

New Poem by Joshua Folmar: Sudoku

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# **New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”**

New Poem by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat (Loyalty)”

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# **New Poetry by Ben White: “Cleaning the M60 – 39 Years and January 26, 1984”**

New Poetry by Ben White: “Cleaning the M60 – 39 Years and  
January 26, 1984”

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# **New Poetry by Abena Ntoso: “Dear Melissa”**

New poem by Abena Ntoso: “Dear Melissa”

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# **New Poetry by Luis Rosa**

# Valentin: “Desperate Need of Help”

Desperate Need of Help

[Luis-Rosa-image](#)

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# New Poetry by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career?”

New Poem by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career”

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# New Poetry by Justice Castañeda: “There Will Be No Irish Pennants”



PRESSED AND WITHOUT / *image by Amalie  
Flynn*

**There Will Be No Irish Pennants**

“Discipline organizes an analytical space.” [1]

## Field Day & Inspection.

Windows shut blinds open half-mast. Sinks will be bleached, faucets are to be pointed outward, and aligned. The toilet paper roll will be full. The shower handle will be left facing directly down towards the shower floor. Waste basket will be empty, cleaned out with no stains or markings, set between the secretary and the window, where the front corner meets, farthest from the door.

Beds will be made showing eighteen inches of white; six beneath and twelve above the fold. The ends will be neatly tucked at a 45 degree angle. One pillow will be folded once and tucked in the pillow case.

A shoe display will be at the foot of the bed and will consist of one pair of jungle boots, one pair of combat boots, go-fasters and shower shoes, in this order. All laced left over right.

Each lock will be fastened on each locker and secretary, all set to '0.'

Inside one wall locker, hanging up there will be: one all-weather coat, one wolly pully sweatshirt, one service 'A' blouse, two long sleeve khaki shirts—pressed with the arms folded inward, four short sleeve khaki shirts, three cammie blouses, two pair of green trousers, three pair of cammie trousers, and one pair of dress blue trousers, in this order. All shirts will be pressed and buttoned up. All trousers will be pressed and folded over. All clothing will hang facing

right. All hangers will face inwards, separated uniformly by one inch. On the shelf inside the locker, starting at the inner most edge, there will be six green skivvy shirts and three white skivvy shirts—folded into six-by-six squares, six pair of underwear folded three times, six pair of black boot socks, folded once.

The markings will be last name, first name, middle initial, stamped on white tape, no ink spots or bleeding. All collared shirts will be marked centered on the collar; on all trousers and belts on the left inseam, upside down so when folded over they read right side up. On all underwear markings will be centered along the rear waistband. On all socks markings will be on the top of the left sock. All covers will be marked on the left inner rim.

On top of the wall locker covers will be placed, from left to right as staring at the wall locker, one barracks cover with service skin, one piss cover, one utility cover—pressed and without Irish pennants.

Irish pennants are not permitted.

Stand up straight. Arms to your side, thumbs along the seams of the trousers, shoulders back, chin up. Heels and knees together, with feet pointed outwards at a 45 degree angle.

Eyes. Click.

Ears. Open.

Attention.

[1] Michel Foucault. Discipline and punish. 143

[2] Two faucets in each barracks room.

[3] Irish Pennants are loose threads or strings coming out from the stitching.

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## **New Nonfiction from Lauren Kay Johnson: “Inheritance of War” an Excerpt from The Fine Art of Camouflage**



I swore I would never become a soldier like my mother.

She called it a blip, a few months out of an otherwise enjoyable career with the Army. No one saw the blip coming. Both of my grandfathers served in the military, but their wars stayed cold. My mom’s reserve unit, Seattle’s Fiftieth General Hospital, with 750 personnel, was too big, too expensive deploy, the very reason she’d chosen the unit. After three years as an active-duty Army nurse, she wanted to start a family. The Fiftieth promised stability; for them to deploy, it would take World War III.

On Thanksgiving weekend of 1990, my mom got a phone call. She had been receiving practice calls ever since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, drills to make sure the phone tree was accurate, to keep everyone prepared. This time, the call wasn’t a drill. The unit was put on alert for deployment orders. My sister, brother, and I were asleep, so we didn’t see the white-faced shock when Mom answered the phone. We

didn't watch her crumple into Dad's arms when she told him or see the shock mirrored in his own face as questions of her safety, the family's well-being, single parenthood flooded his mind.

Mom and her hospital unit wouldn't receive orders right away. They would spend Thanksgiving with their families, worrying and hoping—hoping World War III would dissipate with the holiday weekend; hoping their orders would leave them as local backfill for active-duty soldiers who deployed or send them to Germany, the unit's assigned overseas operating location based on the Cold War model; hoping their orders would be short.

None of these hopes materialized. Mom's orders were for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for an undetermined length of up to two years.

I hardly recall the Army's presence in our family before Desert Storm. The Army slipped in and out one weekend a month and two weeks a year when Mom put on green clothes and went "camping." Sometimes we ate hotdogs and pretended to camp too. With that Thanksgiving phone call, though, the Army consumed us. I had just turned seven, my sister, Shavonne, was eight, and my brother, Matt, barely two. Suddenly, we were no longer a regular young family. Mom had always been the center mass around which we all orbited, and now our gravity field had shifted. In preparation for the deployment, she took frequent trips to the local Army base, sometimes for days at a time. Big green Army bags piled up in the living room where we used to build puzzles and pillow forts. Instead of driving to school with Mom, Shavonne and I went to daycare with Matt early in the morning when Dad left for work. Neighbors stopped by our house to drop off funny-tasting casseroles. They said nice things like, "We're praying for you," and "Let us know if

you need anything.” I just needed my mom. I was restless in school and gymnastics practice, anxious to get home and hug Mom and hold onto her forever.

Before she left for Saudi Arabia, I told my mom I hated the Army. “Oh sweetie,” she said, “I know it feels like the Army is being mean, but it’s the Army’s job to go help people. A bad man invaded another country, and we need to go help the people there and get him out.” With that, she redirected my hatred to Saddam Hussein. The Army wasn’t taking Mom away; a bad man was making her leave. Shavonne and I even learned a song about that man and how much we all hated him. We sang the song over and over, and Mom laughed the hardest:

*Joy to the world, Saddam is dead!*

*We barbequed his head!*

*Don’t worry ‘bout the body*

*We flushed it down the potty,*

*And round and round it goes . . .*

I don’t remember this, but my parents tell me that before she deployed, I asked Mom if she could die. I imagine myself climbing into her lap. In my mind she’s wearing the soft blue bathrobe she had when I was growing up. I’m clutching it, nuzzling into her brown permed curls. Mom wraps her fuzzy blue arms around me, and I can feel her heartbeat, strong and serious. She gazes out through her thick-framed glasses, her eyes light like mine above the long, sharp nose and freckles inherited by Shavonne. Mom purses her lips. She’s thinking about my question, about my life—all our lives—without her. She’s thinking about the briefings the hospital unit received, the expectations of chemical weapons and massive casualties, the potential for an attack on Israel and an ensuing holy war of nuclear proportions. She’s thinking this might be a suicide mission. Mom pulls me closer and strokes the top of my head,

trying to memorize the feel of me. She's weighing her need to protect her child with a desire for honesty.

She answered my question: "I'm going to do the best I can to come back to you as soon as I can."

"Don't tell her that!" my dad said. "Tell her no!" But my mom couldn't lie.

Just before she left, Mom wove Shavonne's and my hair into double French braids, like she did when we had soccer or T-ball games, the only thing that would keep my thin hair and Shavonne's unruly curls in place under helmets and through trips up and down the field. These braids were special, though. They held the memory of Mom's touch: her gentle fingers brushing across my scalp, the nail of her little finger drawing a part down each side, her soft breath on the back of my neck. I wanted to keep the braids forever. I promised Mom I would. It would be our connection while she was gone, and every time I looked in the mirror I would think of her.

Mom deployed right after Christmas. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, and the occasion carried extra weight in 1990 because we had Mom with us. The Christmas morning snowfall seemed magical to us kids but made a treacherous drive for our relatives, who commuted several hours for everyone to be together. I don't know if our house has ever been so full; it's funny how war brings people together. We had an epic snowball fight with my cousins, opened presents, ate roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy, and took pictures around the Christmas tree, just like every year.

A few days later, we watched Mom board an Army transport bus. She waved to us through a grimy window until her pale face was

lost to camouflage and dust and distance. On the bus she was surrounded by other moms and dads, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and a single twenty-something medic. The medic had no family to wave to through the grimy window, but he saw us: a man with red-rimmed eyes standing next to two girls with double French braids. Both girls clung to the man and cried. In the man's arms was a small boy. The young soldier couldn't hear it, but the boy repeated, "Where's Mommy going?" over and over, long after the bus rolled out of sight.

"Looking at your family when we left was my war moment," the medic later told my mom. "Seeing how heartbroken they were."

My memories of Mom's deployment blur into a fuzzy background, punctuated by snapshot images of clarity. I remember cheese quesadillas, "cheese pies" I called them, cooked in the microwave. A neighborhood mom who watched us after school served them to us while we waited at her house for Dad to pick us up. One day while there, I got the stomach flu. The neighbor tucked me into a nest of blankets on the couch with Gatorade and a bucket, but I kept getting up. I walked to the hallway and threw up. I threw up in the living room. I kept walking, looking for my mom.

As the days passed, oil slickened my hair and my precious braids started to unwind. I remember an angry fit of protest, and an ultimate compromise. Every few days the gracious neighbor cleaned and re-braided my hair. It looked exactly the same. But it wasn't.

I cried every night in bed after Mom's tape-recorded voice finished reading a bedtime story. I saw the school counselor for a few weeks. I don't recall her name or what she looked like or even what we talked about, but I remember staring out her window at the snow-cruled ground. My classmates were at

recess, throwing snowballs, having fun. For the first time I did not feel normal.

We were the only local kids who had a parent deployed. Neighbors took turns babysitting and delivering meals. A yellow ribbon hugged the big maple tree in front of our elementary school. When she returned, my mom would cut the ribbon off to a whooping chorus of cheers from our classmates. But while she was gone it hung there, through rain and wind and snow. I saw the ribbon every day, and I hated it.

We lived for weekly calls from Mom, letters, occasional pictures, anything to let us know she was safe. Each trip to the mailbox was its own tiny Christmas, marked by expectation and, too often, when no letters came, disappointment. At one point, Mom sent Shavonne and me matching T-shirts with pictures of camels wearing combat boots and gas masks. I still have that shirt, a child's size small, buried in the back of a drawer. Dad pointed out Saudi Arabia on our office globe. Mom was there, inside the little star that represented the capital of Riyadh. It didn't look very far away.

We watched news reports every evening on TV. Headlines that spring covered topics that interest me now as an adult: an escalation of violence in Sudan following the imposition of nationwide Islamic law, an historic meeting between Nelson Mandela and Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Haiti's appointment of its first elected president, the controversy over Dr. Jack Kevorkian's assisted suicides, the Exxon Valdez oil spill. In 1991, I could focus only on the war. My world expanded exponentially when Mom deployed; I wasn't yet ready to stretch beyond the Middle East. Besides, the Middle East was everywhere, dominating TV, radio, and newspaper reports. In a letter home Mom noted that we were probably getting more news of the war than she was; TV was censored in Saudi Arabia, and she didn't have free time to watch anyway.

In the States, we witnessed a new era in broadcasting, the

first time war received real-time coverage from reporters on the ground. They showed awesome footage of planes taking off from aircraft carriers and terrifying shots of exploding missiles. All around were people in camouflage, but not the green and black my mom wore on Reserve duty. These uniforms were brown like dirt. There was a lot of dirt on the news when they talked about the war. I thought it must be hard for Mom to stay clean. I had never watched the news before. Sitting on the couch, my legs curled beneath me, I got my first exposure to the industry of which one day I would be a part. As a public affairs officer I would be there, against the dusty brown backdrop of war, ushering reporters, directing camera angles, providing talking points to the people in camouflage, filtering conflict for the families back home.

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm represented a new era in warfare too. Mom was part of the largest reserve component ever activated in support of an armed conflict, and the first involuntary call requiring reservists to report to active duty since the dissolution of the draft. In total, the government activated more than 227,000 reservists. The Army provided the bulk of personnel, nearly 140,000, with around fourteen percent in medical specialties like Mom's hospital unit. Mom was also part of the largest contingent of U.S. military women ever to deploy. By war's end, 40,000 women had served overseas, almost as many as had been on active duty during the height of America's last large-scale conflict, the Vietnam War. Desert Storm saw two American women held as Prisoners of War, and thirteen killed in action.

Sometimes on the news they talked about people dying. At recess one day I was by myself, as I often was during that time, wandering along the edge of the concrete basketball court, when my class bully sauntered up to me. "Hey, I heard about a lady that got killed in the war," he chided, "Do you think it was your mom?"

I hadn't heard about the lady. Had she been on the news the

night before? No one had called to tell us something bad had happened. Wouldn't they call? But what if they had called; what if Dad answered and didn't want to tell us before school? What if they knocked on our door but no one was home? Maybe the bully had seen a news report that I'd missed? The thought of never seeing my mom again overwhelmed me, and I sat down on the concrete and cried for a long time.

While Mom was gone, we made up games to make time and distance not seem so massive, to trick ourselves into feeling like we might have some sort of control. For "When will Mom come home?" the whole family—my dad, sister, brother, grandparents, and I—scribbled our return date guesses across the calendar. My sister's prediction, March 12, 1991, was the earliest, three and a half months after Mom's departure. The rest of us hoped but doubted she was close.

As March arrived, we only got a couple days' notice that Shavonne's guess was exactly right. As suddenly as war had swooped into our lives, it ended. We let ourselves be consumed by frenzied preparations for Mom's homecoming, spending hours tracing letters and gluing glitter onto bright sheets of poster board. There were trips to Party City to buy trunkloads of yellow ribbons and American flags. We must have alerted the relatives the elementary school, my Girl Scout troop, the whole neighborhood, and Mom's college roommate, because hordes of them showed up at McChord Air Force Base outside Seattle on the morning of March 12.

Together we stood behind a chain link fence, a crowd of hundreds, watching the empty runway. Shavonne and I held signs and chattered with our classmates. Matt, too young to understand where Mommy had been or why, just knew that this was the day she was coming home. He coiled his tiny hands

around the fence and rocked back and forth, back and forth, eyes glued to the tarmac. His expectant little face, framed by a puffy black and red jacket, became a popular clip on local news segments.

I don't know how long we waited before we heard the drone of an approaching aircraft. The crowd hushed. We twisted our heads frantically and shielded our eyes from the sun. A dark speck emerged on the horizon, and we erupted into a cacophony of cheers. The dark speck got bigger and turned into a plane that drifted slowly across the landscape. As it inched closer, the crowd grew wild. We screamed and shook the fence. My dad scooped up my brother. Someone, a grandparent maybe, grabbed my hand. Reporters yelled into their microphones. We were supposed to stay behind the fence, but when the plane landed and the first camouflaged figure emerged, we stampeded the runway. All I could see was legs: jeans and khakis and sweats, then a trickle of camouflage moving upstream, and then a pair of legs that stopped and dropped a bag and bent and hugged and cried, and then I was in her arms and nuzzling my face into her hair and the world was whole again.

For a while after her deployment, I screamed every time Mom put on her uniform. Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there.

We were extra thankful on Thanksgiving when the phone didn't ring. We got teary-eyed whenever Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." came on the radio, an anthem for Mom's unit. For years, our schools asked Mom to give Veterans' Day speeches, and Shavonne and I modeled Saudi Arabian clothes she'd brought back as souvenirs: black draping capes and veils that covered

everything except a square around our eyes, similar to the burqas I'd see eighteen years later in Afghanistan. I loved being a part of Mom's experience, if only from under the veil. I liked to twirl and see the fabric billow around me. Mostly I liked watching my mom.

She talked about how difficult life was for women in Saudi Arabia. "They have to cover all their skin, even when it's really hot outside," she said. "If they don't, the police can arrest them! And they aren't allowed to drive!" Even as an American, Mom said, she couldn't go certain places because she was a woman. She told our classmates about the armed guards on the hospital buses and around the compound to help keep the doctors and nurses safe. Mom shared that she was afraid at first to take care of Iraqi prisoners, but she learned that they only fought because their families were threatened by Saddam Hussein. I thought how brave she was and how lucky I was to have a mom who was more than just a mom, but also a soldier, a healer, and a hero who helped save people from that mean man. After Mom finished speaking everyone clapped for her, and I beamed under my veil.

I didn't know how painful those events were for my mom. I didn't realize she struggled diving back into her roles as wife and mother and everything else we heaped on her. She didn't discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn't know she carried trauma with her every day, even after she returned home. I didn't understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough.



# New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

New Poetry from DA Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

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# New Poetry from Tanya Tuzeo: “My Brother, the Marine;” “My Brother’s Shoebox;” and “My Brother’s Grenade”



WAR HAS DONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **my brother, the Marine**

the recruiters come weeks earlier than agreed—  
arrive in alloy, aluminum with authority,  
military vehicle blocks our driveway  
announcing to the neighborhood  
they’ve come for a boy here  
who will have to go—  
though he sits at the top step

and cries

i follow them,  
strange convoy to Staten Island's hotel  
where all the boys are corralled—  
farmed for war, becoming weapons  
of mass destruction  
when before they picked apples  
at family trips upstate

a hotel lobby—last stop before using lasers  
to blow off golden domes,  
silence muezzins in the crush  
of ancient wage and plaster—  
Hussein's old siberian tiger left thirsty,  
watches other zoo animals  
being eaten by the faithful—  
just like a video game

i clamp onto my brother  
beg him not to go, we could run away  
he didn't have to do this—  
recruiters quickly camouflage me,  
am dragged outside—my brother lost  
did not say goodbye  
or even look at me.

### **my brother's shoebox**

the room across the hall is inhabited again,  
home now from another tour  
like sightseeing from a grand canal  
where buildings are art  
and storied sculptures animate street corners—  
my brother returns a veteran.

i want to remember who this person is,

or at least, find out what war has done.

he leaves with friends to drink—  
that is still the same,  
later tonight  
he might howl at our parent's window  
or jump on my bed until the sheets froth,  
uncaring and rabid.

but i don't wait for him to come home  
and begin searching the room  
that is his again.

it is simple to find  
where people hide things—  
a shoebox under his bed  
that wasn't there all these years  
furrowed by sand  
and almost glowing.

i open to find drugstore prints,  
rolls of film casually dropped  
for a high school student to develop—  
silver halide crystals take the shape  
of shattered skulls  
goats strung and slit  
a school made of clay  
blasted in the kiln of munitions  
"KILL ZONE" painted across its foundation—  
each 4×6 emulsion a souvenir  
of these mad travels,  
kept to reminisce and admire.

### **my brother's grenade**

my brother's room in our family vacation home  
has embossed wallpaper, indigo or violet

depending on the light that filters through the mountains—  
and his grenade in the closet.

i saw it looking for extra blankets,  
thought it was an animal resting in eiderdown  
kept by my mother in one of her tempers  
but it didn't move  
and so  
i picked it up.

inhumanity held beneath iron's screaming core—  
a pleasant weight,  
like the egg i threw across the street  
detonating onto the head of boy  
who said i kissed him but i didn't,  
is it like that for my brother?—  
fisted mementos of thrill?

seasoned by cedar sachets,  
neatly quilted metal shimmered as i turned it  
forbidden gem, his holy relic—  
i placed it back in the closet and began making dinner,  
said nothing.

the slender pin preserves this household  
where our family gathers  
unknowing a bomb is kept here—  
my brother roasts a marshmallow  
until it catches fire, turns black,  
plunges into mouth.

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# New Poetry by Michael Carson: “Politics”



BLAME OUR BRUISES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## Politics

Every 20 years or so boys dress up  
And kill each other for fun.  
It's the way of the wrack of the world  
The wind of our imagination and our love.  
To blame our costumes for our beauty  
Is like to blame our bruises for our blood.  
The chime is what drives us, what ticks  
Our tock forward to the next spree.  
The foreshortened humiliation,  
The immaculate imprecation,  
Is neither what we fear or what we covet.  
Man is. Rats are. Take what you can  
While the day is rough  
Move lengthwise into the past  
And blame god for never enough.

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## New Poetry by D.W. McLachlan: “Tanana River” and “The Heaviness of Age”



THE RIPARIAN ZONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **Tanana River**

We followed your Hilux along the riparian zone,  
a green snake blooming through the desert brown,  
when you met in secret like lovers, and the way you  
hugged each other in greeting showed an intimacy  
I didn't particularly want to consider at that moment.

The second before the Hellfire splashed down, you  
looked into the sky, and I still wonder if you thought  
it was a sign from god, but when your world went  
black I think it must have confirmed your suspicions.

My first full memory was standing on a grassy shore  
watching my father catch a salmon in the Tanana river.  
And I can still see the coil of the fly line snapping silent  
and how it unfolded and laid out onto the silty sheet.

There was something above elegance in those motions  
as the salmon breached, and I saw the slick of its back  
as it stretched the surface, the rippling kick of its tail,  
and then it shot back down, the line gave, my father's  
back bent, the line went in, went out again.

As a modest crowd grew slowly along the muddy banks  
watching my father race up and down the shallows,  
it seemed to me that he was going to pull up a demon  
straight from hell, and I remember the shouts and jeers  
when my father finally dragged the salmon on shore.

And I remember my commanding officer's laugh when  
half of you was dragged gently under a shade tree.  
I remember the grip on my shoulder as he told me  
that it was a damn good job, a fuckin' good job.  
I remember the way his boots rested on the desk,  
and how he donned his number twenty-four hat,  
and how he drank his coke, turning his attention

to the NASCAR race circling on the other screen.  
I remember the way the other man laid you back,  
how he talked to your body under that shade tree.  
I still to this day wonder what he was telling you.

I was scared when I stepped close to that salmon,  
dancing and darkening the dirt with wet slapping flops,  
its mouth opening and closing, sucking in nothing.  
The great gibbous black mirror of its pupil asking  
for something, something that I knew I couldn't give.  
I felt small and shameful in that goggle-eyed stare,  
so I picked up a long stick and gouged out its eye.

### **The Heaviness of Age**

Sometimes in my dreams the world is covered in sand  
and I wonder why no one cares.  
I can feel it in my sheets as I sleep, in my mouth  
and crusted in my eyes. I kick and brush it away,  
but it's never gone, and the sand always returns.  
But no one cares and they act like they don't see it.  
Why is it then that I'm treated so funny?

The custodian on my floor looks like a man  
we tracked down and killed in Helmand province.  
The custodian on my floor thinks I'm racist  
because I avoid him and never look him in the eyes.  
I have to sit in my chair to get over the nausea sometimes.  
He once told me I'm not gonna bite you and laughed  
and I laughed and I asked him about football  
and then he walked away, and I took my fifteen minute  
break to step into the utility closet and cry.

I don't even remember why we killed the man.  
I don't remember anything but the face  
That's mostly all I remember now.  
His mouth blood black and tongue lolled in a dog pant.  
And I don't know why we had to take pictures of them all.

It'd be much easier if they hadn't taken the trouble  
to fly out there and take their god damn pictures.

A child still visits me at night.  
I see him sitting at the edge of my bed  
He's always looking away, out the window  
and when my wife wakes up  
and asks: what's wrong?  
I tell her nothing, it's just a bad dream.

But he's not a bad dream,  
he doesn't deserve that epithet.  
I sometimes want to hold him like I hold my son  
when he feels betrayed by the world.  
I like giving that feeling of love and security.  
I'd give it to him if I could.

I see paintings of heaven  
and I never see any children in the paintings.  
Where are the children?  
Homer has no children in his underworld.  
Just indifferent or spiteful adults.  
Sometimes I think it must be the heaviness of age  
that allows us to sink down and rest.

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## **New Fiction from Adam Straus: “ANA Checkpoint”**

✘ Sergeant Reiss insisted on giving a full patrol order every  
time we left the wire. I thought it was overkill, but I didn't  
mind as much as some of the other guys. Haggerty especially

was always going on about how it was a waste of time. It's not like there was anything else to do, but he was obsessed with efficiency. Back in Twentynine Palms, he had a million little projects he would work on in our barracks room during the endless hours we spent waiting to be told what the plan for the day was, waiting to be released in the afternoon, waiting to deploy. While I'd sit and play video games like a normal person, he'd try (and fail) to learn foreign languages, do hundreds of pushups, and pace like a maniac. Haggerty just couldn't accept that some time wasn't his to spend.

On deployment, he had the bunk above mine in our squad's platform tent. Inside, there were six other racks and a beat-up TV that the guys we relieved had left for us. Outside sat a generator that sometimes coughed exhaust into the tent. Our stained sagging mattresses had been around since the war started, and I could feel the bedframe's springs under my ass as Haggerty and I sat side by side on my rack, taking notes while Sergeant Reiss briefed.

"Fuckin' simple shit tonight, gents," he began. "We're going to depart the east ECP, swing by the ANA checkpoint on Highway 1, and return via the airfield. Orientation remains the same. We've still got Little to our east, the highway to our north, Big just past that, and fuckin' nothing to our west and south. Weather tonight will be clear, with 6% illumination..."

I copied down all of the meteorological data, along with the same enemy situation and the same friendly situation that had held true for the previous three months of deployment. I wrote word for word "the Taliban are active throughout Washir. I expect them to mass to fireteam size in order to carry out hasty ambushes if they are alerted to our presence" and "the ANA maintain checkpoints along Highway 1. At night they are often high or asleep, so we can't count on them for help. 3<sup>rd</sup> squad will be on QRF and they'll be able to reach us within 30 minutes." I glanced over at Haggerty's field notebook. All

he'd written down was "ANA checkpoint, Highway 1." In his defense, that was all any of us really needed. We'd already done this exact same patrol at least ten times.

Sergeant Reiss read off our mission statement ("On order, 2<sup>nd</sup> squad interdicts the Taliban in the vicinity of Highway 1 in order to deter enemy activity and strengthen our partnership with the Afghan National Army") and walked us through the patrol route, using empty cans of dip to signify our vehicles on a mockup of the surrounding grid squares he kept in the middle of our tent. He finished by listing all the frequencies to program into the vehicle's radios (the same frequencies we'd been using the whole deployment) and telling us the succession of command, in case he went down. Sergeant Reiss asked for questions. There weren't any.

"Alright. Check your shit, then get some sleep. We're pushing out at 0200 so I want everyone at the vehicles by 0130."

The brief over, we turned to personal preparation. My pre-patrol routine was automatic: I kept my kit staged in the same spot, with my rifle hung from the same bedpost and my boots pointing the same way with one sugar-free RipIt (the caffeine equivalent of two cups of coffee) stashed in each of them. Everyone had their own way of getting ready, from the rosary Schumacher prayed to Doc Warrington's habit of jerking off before bed. Whatever it was, we'd all had plenty of practice, and 30 minutes after Sergeant Reiss' order ended, the squad racked out with our alarms set for 0100.

\*

Everyone killed their alarms on the second or third ring. We got dressed and kitted up in silence, each set of bunkmates in an island of light from the bare bulbs that hung from the canvas above our racks. I chugged one of my RipIts and pocketed the other, in case I started nodding off later. The center of the tent was still dark.

February nights in Helmand are cold as fuck, and we shivered underneath our flaks and kevlar during the five minute walk to the motor pool where our up-armored MaxxPros sat waiting. Haggerty and I took our seats in the back of vic one, with Sergeant Reiss in the passenger seat as vehicle commander, Donahue driving, and McClellan in the turret.

Our interpreter Aziz was already in the vehicle. He rolled with our fireteam, but he never came to Sergeant Reiss' briefings. He'd already been working out of our FOB for nearly two years. His job was to sit inside the vehicle, get out when Sergeant Reiss told him to, repeat whatever shit Sergeant Reiss and the Afghans were trying to say to one another, and then get back in. He was older, with bifocals and flecks of gray in his well-trimmed beard, and he wore a knit sweater under his castoff flak. He looked like a college professor.

Like Aziz, Haggerty and I didn't have anything to do until we got to the checkpoint. There, our job was to get out with Sergeant Reiss and Aziz and make sure none of the ANA shot them in the back of the head. An implied task was to not get ourselves shot either.

While Sergeant Reiss got comm checks with the operations center and requested permission to depart friendly lines, Haggerty bent towards my jump seat and motioned for me to lean in.

"I think Gabby's cheating on me."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, I'm not 100% sure. It's just little things. Like I saw on her Instagram story that she was at a party on Saturday night. When we talked on Monday and I asked her what she'd done over the weekend, she said 'nothing.' And the other day some dude commented on one of her photos. I asked her who he was, and she said it was one of her cousins. But I remember her telling me like six months ago that all of her cousins are

girls. My point is, why lie if there's nothing going on?"

"Fuck, dude. Do you know anyone she's going to school with who could keep an eye on things for you?"

"The only people I know there are her friends, there's no point asking them."

"Fuck. I don't know what to say."

I really didn't. But I did know that Gabby was a junior at UC Riverside. She had two older brothers that she got along with well, her parents lived in Palm Springs, she was majoring in biology, she wanted to be a doctor someday, and she played on the club volleyball team. She was tall for a girl, she almost always kept her hair tied back in a ponytail, and she wore the same floral perfume as my sister. Gabby chewed gum constantly, which made kissing her taste like spearmint.

Haggerty knew all of this too, except for the fact that I knew any of it. He turned to our terp.

"Aziz, you're old. You got any girl advice for me?"

Aziz laughed. "I am maybe not the best to ask. My wife, I have not seen her in more than one year. The Taliban came to my house and said they would kill me next time I come home. So she tell them I'm already dead. Now, she pretends to be a widow until I make my three years and get our visa. Then, both of us go to America." He wiped his glasses on the sleeve of his sweater. "I still send money home and we talk on the phone. So that is maybe my advice to you. Call on the phone and send money."

"Goddamn Aziz, you always keep it heavy."

He shrugged. "You ask me, this is what I tell you."

We fell silent, listening to the low throb of the MaxxPro's engine as we left the FOB. Our route took us through what used

to be the largest American base in Helmand. We'd turned over most of it to the Afghans, and our perimeter was now a square postage stamp in the corner of their envelope. The Afghans manned the outer fence, sort of. In between our walls and theirs was a wasteland of materiel: Old canvas tents, rusted out vehicles, coils of barbed wire protecting nothing, long-empty concrete bunkers. The Afghans had taken anything worth the effort years earlier, when the American tide had first receded. All that was left now were the equivalent of tidal flats, wide expanses of dust reeking of dried piss and rotted wood.

We crossed this nothingness and reached a small guard post with a metal arm blocking the road, the main entry control point for the Afghan base. Beyond was Afghanistan. The real Afghanistan, not the FOBs on which most Americans spent most of their time. To be fair, in our armored vehicles and flaks we were basically tortoises who took the FOB with us like a shell. Still, beyond the ECP was something closer to reality. A small Afghan in tattered camouflage trousers and a yellow t-shirt that glowed under the shack's lights jumped up from a plastic chair and lifted the arm for us.

"MANANA!" McClellan yelled from the turret. Sergeant Reiss was big on making us say "thank you" to the Afghans. He was kind of a boner about counter-insurgency stuff. The way I saw it, if saying "please" and "thank you" was all it took to win this war, we would've been out of here fifteen years earlier. But it couldn't hurt, I guess.

No matter how many times I'd done it, I still got a bit of a rush from leaving the wire. Even though there was no real difference between the desert we'd just crossed and the desert we now entered, there was something unmistakably different on the north side of that guard post. An undercurrent of electricity ran through the air. We were out and about in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; anything could happen. It could be the last ten minutes of our lives and we might not even

know it. I straightened in my seat and craned my neck to see out the MaxxPro's portholes. I could just discern the outline of a cluster of mud huts some 800m distant, the hamlet we called "Little" (to distinguish it from "Big" on the other side of the highway).

Even outside the wire, Haggerty couldn't keep Gabby off his mind. He whispered now, having gotten bitched out by Sergeant Reiss plenty of times for talking about bullshit on patrol. Haggerty was saying something about how he didn't want to waste his time, and if they were going to break up, they might as well do it sooner rather than later. I pretended to listen, muttering that if that was the case he shouldn't date anyone he wasn't going to marry. But the truth was I couldn't keep Gabby off my mind, either.

I remembered sitting across from her at a table in the back corner of a bar, comparing the fake IDs we'd used to get in. Hers was from New Jersey; it was a joke between her and her cousins (yes, they were all girls) that they'd used the same uptight single aunt's address in Cherry Hill for their fakes. Mine was from Minnesota, a hand-me-down from one of the older mortarmen. It'd cost me \$100. Gabby's had run her five times that, and it was laughably bad. But a perk of being a girl that looks the way she does is that bouncers could give less of a fuck whether her ID is any good. So we'd both gotten into this bar, a fifteen minute walk from her dorm and a two hour drive from my barracks. I'd insisted on making the trek, partially to be a gentlemen and partially on the off-chance she'd invite me back to her place. After a round of drinks, she was laughing at my jokes and leaning towards me while she compared our IDs side by side.

"This doesn't even look like you," she laughed.

"At least it looks like an ID. Yours looks like one of those fake permission slips kids try to make where they sign their mom's name in crayon, saying they were late to school because

their dog escaped or whatever.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad. It worked, didn’t it?”

We mostly just joked back and forth like that. It wasn’t one of those epic first dates you read about where the couple talks until dawn and gets married as soon as the courthouse opens the next morning. But we didn’t hate being around one another and she was seriously cute, both of which are big wins whenever you meet someone off a dating app. Still, we only had two beers, because I was driving, and there can’t have been more than an hour between our awkward “nice to meet you” hug and when I settled the tab.

The part I think about the most is the last twenty minutes or so, beginning with when I asked to walk her back to her dorm. It was the sort of thing I thought grown men were supposed to do. The entirety of my experience with women up to that point consisted of a long-term high school girlfriend and a handful of one night stands in San Diego; I didn’t know how to handle a real, no-shit date. But walking Gabby back to her place felt right, and she agreed at least enough to have me along.

I still had some vague idea of fucking her, but as we traced the leafy edge of her campus, it became more like a fantasy than something I could be doing within the next hour. I felt like I was carrying a priceless Ming vase in my hands, and the only thing on my mind was not messing it up. Not tripping on a crack in the asphalt and splitting my face open, not saying the wrong thing, not pushing too hard too fast.

When we reached the stone steps of her dorm, Gabby paused, looking down at her feet. My heart pounded in my ears and I found myself breathing hard, like I’d just run the half-mile from the bar to her place.

“Well, thanks for the drinks. I had a nice time.”

I don’t think I said anything back; I just kissed her.

Normally, driving up the hill to Twenty-nine Palms is the most depressing shit in the world. First the road weaves between these angry-looking mountains, and then for the last half-hour civilization slowly fades away until you find yourself in Two-Nine, a town with a "Hundred Miles to Next Service" sign on its far edge. But for once I didn't mind the desert. I was blissed out, my truck's engine wailing to maintain 85 MPH going uphill. I thought I'd found an oasis with Gabby, I really did.

In a different desert, far from the smooth asphalt of Highway 62, we turned off the gravel access road leading in and out of base. Our command didn't want us driving on the Ring Road itself. The shoddily constructed highway could barely handle the weight of our vehicles, and the few long haul truckers who kept Afghanistan's economy running hated having to slow down for our convoys. At Sergeant Reiss' direction, Donahue eased our MaxxPro onto a washed-out dirt path that led to the Afghan checkpoint we were visiting. As we bounced along, I could hear the occasional truck fly by on the highway 200m to our north.

The checkpoint consisted of two buildings, a new guard shack made of corrugated metal reinforced with sandbags and an old, abandoned mud hut that the Afghan soldiers had claimed as their hooch. Our squad seamlessly brought the three vehicles into a tight 360 degree security perimeter between them, forming a peace sign if viewed from overhead. Donahue lowered the back stairs, and Haggerty, Aziz, and I walked out to link up with Sergeant Reiss and head inside.

I dropped my night vision goggles down for the short walk. Our NVGs worked by magnifying ambient light, but it was a new moon, and with no light to magnify, I could barely make out where the buildings ended and the sky began. Looking up, though, I could see all of the stars that were normally too dull to be visible. I thought of an old Incubus song I'd liked in high school: *The sky resembles a backlit canopy, with holes punched in it... I wish you were here.*

I pulled my NVGs up and off my face when we arrived at the guard shack. The four of us stepped inside and were greeted with the overwhelming smell of hashish. An Afghan soldier sat on the floor, reclining against the sandbags that lined the wall. His back was to the highway.

“Salaam aleikum,” Sergeant Reiss said, placing his hand over his heart in the traditional Afghani greeting. The Afghan nodded and smiled. He didn’t stand or gesture for us to sit. Sergeant Reiss told Haggerty to post up just outside the door. He’d brought both of us because there were supposed to be two ANA soldiers inside.

With his own knowledge of Dari exhausted, Sergeant Reiss turned to Aziz to translate. They made small talk with the Afghan, discussing how cold it was outside and how much traffic had been coming by on the highway. The purpose of the checkpoint was to deter the Taliban from moving around freely on Highway 1, but short of stopping every vehicle and ripping it apart to search for weapons, there was no real way to do this. The actual value added of this particular spot was to serve as a bullet sponge, drawing attackers away from the larger base half a mile to the south. This guard shack was a reincarnation of one that had been leveled by a vehicle-borne IED a year and a half earlier. The Afghan seemed to accept this, replying to Sergeant Reiss’ questions with the tired air of a man who knows his answers don’t matter. Or maybe he was just stoned.

Sergeant Reiss eventually cut the shit. “Aziz, ask him why there aren’t two guys in here. Tell him we know they’re supposed to have two guys in here.”

Aziz and the Afghan went back and forth in fast, lyrical Dari. The Afghan punctuated his sentences with a series of shrugs and flicks of his hand.

“He says it is because two of their men are home on leave,”

Aziz explained. "They were told to be back two days ago but they could not travel because of violence. At the checkpoint, they do not get a replacement and now only four are here. If they have two awake all night then there is no time to sleep."

"Alright, whatever." Sergeant Reiss shifted his shoulders under the weight of his flak. "Ask him all the oversight questions. You know, last time he was paid, last time he got leave, last time one of his NCOs came out here to check on him, all that shit."

While Aziz and the Afghan talked, I continued to scan the room. Besides a ceramic bong, the only other furniture was a chamber pot. Thankfully, it was empty. The walls were lined with sandbags stacked up to waist height. A light machinegun stood on a fixed post, pointed out along the short strip of dirt road that led from the checkpoint to the highway itself. It wasn't loaded. Belts of ammunition sat coiled in a rusted can on the floor.

Aziz finished with the Afghan and turned to Sergeant Reiss. "He says they were paid last week but not enough. I do not know if this is true or if he just wants more money. They have not seen any of their leadership in two weeks. He says it is because they are with the operation in Marjah right now. And he has not been home in six months. He is from the north, near Mazar-e-Sharif he says, and he wants you to know that there, the people are very good, but here, in Helmand, they are very bad."

Sergeant Reiss nodded. "Alright. Tell him we say thanks for his time or whatever. Let's get the fuck out of here."

We said our goodbyes and filed out the door. I went last. The Afghan stared up at me from the floor, and before I turned to leave, he flashed a toothless smile. I waved back awkwardly and closed the door behind me.

Haggerty was waiting for us outside. "Sergeant, are we going

to go over to the other compound?"

"Nah, they're just sleeping in there. No point in waking them up."

"Good to go, Sergeant."

Donahue saw us coming and dropped the stairs. We took our seats and began the drive back to our FOB. While the vehicle turned, I looked out the porthole and caught a glimpse of the Afghan highlighted through the checkpoint's window. He was standing up now, but instead of watching the highway, he was watching us drive away. I thought to wave again, but he had no way of seeing me in the dark.

"Anything happen in there?" Haggerty asked.

"Nah. You see anything?"

"One of the guys from the hut got up and took a shit, like, right outside. That was it."

"Cool."

"Yeah. I got some good thinking done, though."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not gonna break up with Gabby."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, what's the point? I'm over here. There's nothing I can do about it. I guess it's nice having someone to talk to. I'll see what the deal is when we get home."

"I feel that."

"It's not like I have any other options, you know?"

I told him I did. I hadn't chosen to end things with Gabby, either. We'd actually made plans to hang out again the weekend

after our first date. She was going to take me to a house party off-campus. I wondered what she would introduce me as. Friend? Acquaintance? Something else? We'd be drinking, obviously, so she probably didn't expect me to drive back to Twenty-nine Palms that night. I hadn't told any of the guys, not even Haggerty, because I didn't want to jinx anything.

But then one of my seniors decided he wanted to go to LA that weekend, and he voluntold me to stand duty for him on Saturday. Gabby was busy Friday night, and I would be in the field the following weekend. So we had to slow our roll for two weeks.

And then two weeks turned into forever. It was day three of the field op we went on the week after I had to stand duty. Our platoon had some downtime between shooting all day and shooting all night, and a bunch of us were hanging around on our packs. Haggerty was bragging about this girl he'd been talking to on Tinder, an absolute dime he said, and he passed his phone around so we could all admire her profile.

It was Gabby. I didn't blame her for that; I still don't. We'd only hung out once, it wasn't like we were exclusive. And I know that's how the game works, that you have to keep your options open until you really commit to someone. I just felt weird about the whole thing. Which is why I tried to change the topic every time Haggerty brought her up after that, why I made a point of being at the gym while he got ready for their first date, why I avoided hanging out with them on the weekends once they started seeing one another, and why as far as Haggerty knows Gabby and I have only met each other once.

The one time he knows about was impossible to avoid. She came to our farewell before we deployed, and I obviously had to be there, too. The parking lot cordoned off for our goodbyes was pure chaos. Some of the wives were bawling, a bunch of over-tired toddlers were running around, and guys were trying to chug final beers without their leadership seeing.

Haggerty, of course, insisted I meet Gabby. I followed him to where his truck was parked. I realized that, for the moment, I was more nervous about seeing her than deploying. She seemed at ease, though, sitting on the tailgate, chewing a stick of gum and kicking her feet in the air.

“Gabs, this is my roommate Joey that I told you about.”

A flash of recognition crossed her face. Having had more time to prepare for our reunion than she had, I covered for her by introducing myself and saying I’d heard so much about her. The three of us made small talk, trying to focus on anything other than the fact that Haggerty and I were potentially heading off to our deaths and that the last time I’d seen Gabby she’d been running her hand through my hair while we made out.

Our platoon sergeant saved us from any further conversation, shouting with his gravely former drill instructor’s voice that we had two minutes to get on the fucking busses.

“Well, you two keep each other safe over there, ok?” she said, voice quivering.

We both nodded. I took the hint and boarded the white prison-style bus to allow Gabby and Haggerty a private goodbye. Somehow, I managed to resist the urge to spy on them through the window of the seat I’d claimed. Haggerty seemed shaken when he sat down next to me.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah, man.”

And then the bus lurched forward and we were gone. Gabby stood in the middle of the crowd of crying women, waving goodbye until they melted together and vanished behind us into the desert. I thought to myself that I’d see her again at our homecoming.

\*

The same Afghan with the yellow shirt let us back into base, but this time we took a hard left along the fence line. Sergeant Reiss refused to take the same route out and back, so even though we were inside the Afghan wire, we had to take a dog leg by the airfield. Our FOB was too small for anything bigger than an Osprey to land, so we still relied on the Afghan flight line for most of our troop movements. They were supposed to have a guard posted 24/7, but as we drove by, the tarmac was empty. A random assortment of runway lights blinked on and off. The control tower was chained shut.

“You see anyone, McClellan?” Sergeant Reiss asked.

“No, Sergeant.”

“Fuck it, let’s just head back to the FOB.”

Donahue reversed our MaxxPro onto the muddy road that skirted the perimeter of the airfield and turned towards home. I caught myself starting to drift off, but I didn’t want to drink my second Rip-It this close to the end. Instead, I smacked myself in the face twice, hard enough to make my eyes water, an old stay-awake trick I’d learned in boot camp.

“Are you alright?” Aziz asked me.

“Yeah, just trying not to fall asleep.”

He laughed. “Yes, I know you do not want to miss a second of this.” Aziz spread his arms wide to encompass the MaxxPro, the checkpoint, all of Helmand Province, the whole country, the whole war.

\*

It was almost dawn when we got to the tent and dropped our flaks with a collective groan of relief. Sergeant Reiss told us to hang out for a minute while he went over to our platoon commander’s hooch to debrief the patrol and get some word on what was next for us. While he was gone, I brushed my teeth

with a water bottle and got into my sleeping bag, ready to pass out the moment we were allowed to. By the time Sergeant Reiss returned ten minutes later, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. He said we were going to the same checkpoint on our next patrol, departing at 2200 that night. I rolled over and went to sleep.

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## New Poetry from Jesse Frewerd: "Symphony"



OUR TARGETED HEADS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Ballistic medleys project ambition, while dancing tones find their pitch. There is unexpected buoyancy in our youth. March, advance, train, drill, prepare, disseminate. It's the 4am ensemble, time to crescendo awake for guard duty. Report to post, front gate, alert and ready. Hours, minutes, seconds, tempo depends on the action. The symphony begins with an RPG flying over our targeted heads. Return fire. Bullets staccato the enemy location. A cappella commands over the comms. Write the counterpoint, execute. Threat neutralized, they retreated. Though my heart is playing allegro, via adrenaline. Dynamics decrescendo the scene, bringing it to normalcy. I return to my life as it is, my new normal cadence amid syncopated pop-shots, RPG's, mortar rounds, and IED's.

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# New Poetry from Nestor Walters: "Homecoming"



FLATTEN TO BREATHLESSNESS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

*Only the dead have seen the end of war –Plato*

he lies down, finally to rest.  
grey light bands his closed door  
with no silver at the edges. They said he left  
one foot in the sand. wait, a head  
no, a hand. the pale orange bottle, only  
dust at the bottom, slips from his  
fingers. one missed his mouth  
small, white, and round, it  
shines from the dark floor like  
a little moon. In the space  
between shadows and dreaming  
his way to death, he smooths a dressing on  
the hole in Seth's neck, he wraps  
a scarf on Nick's face, still  
burning with chemical fire, he  
lowers Jeremy's hand, still gloved,  
into a black trash bag. His  
pupils sharpen to pinpoints, his  
chants flatten to breathlessness, these,  
his friends' names, hammered into  
cold steel necklaces  
Jeremy, Seth, Nick  
beckoning  
from darkness  
  
won't someone tell him

*you're not crazy  
you should want to go home but  
stay a while  
stay and be here with me*

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## **New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Checkpoint,” “There are 4 Ways to Die in an Explosion,” “Good Friday,”**



PRAY FOR THE BLAST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### **Checkpoint**

The car came from nowhere, it came  
from everywhere –

white blur and tire squall,  
a four-door payload  
of heat and pressure and steel.

When it is over, there is just  
the tinkle of falling brass and a man  
slumped  
in a pool of broken glass  
and coolant on hot asphalt,  
calm as a corpse.

Doc cuts his shirt.  
His face is weathered by years

of this. Layers  
of skin and yellow fat pucker  
from his open side.

He breathes.

In the trunk of the rusted-out sedan,  
where the bomb  
should be,

there are only two tanks,  
an oxygen mask, and a box  
filled with apricots and dates.

## **There are Four Ways to Die in an Explosion**

First the blast rips limbs  
from the torso. Throws tender bodies  
against concrete walls. Pulverizes  
bones against pavement. Those closest  
to the bomb are never found  
whole.

Then the fragmentation.  
Little pieces of metal debris,  
like the one that punched  
an acorn-sized hole through the back  
of Sergeant Gardner's skull.

Heat from the explosion starts fires.  
Vehicles Burn. Ammunition  
burns. People burn,  
alive. When a driver is trapped inside  
white-hot steel, prayers

must be said silently for the smoke  
to take him first.

Pressure collapses  
lungs and bowels. The bleeding  
happens on the inside.  
It can be hours  
before the skin turns pale  
and the bulk of a person  
drops.

None of the anatomy is safe,  
  
so when the time comes, pray for the blast  
or fragmentation. Pray for the heat that vaporizes.  
Pray for the kind of pressure  
that makes the world dark and silent  
before the bitter taste of iron  
and cold panic.

**Good Friday, Udairi Range Complex,  
Kuwait**

The first time I saw the sun  
rise over the desert  
it was 4 a.m.

Across miles of sand  
and rusted hulks, the throbbing  
of heavy guns echoed.

Over the horizon,  
where the beginning and the end  
meet and disappear, Friday arrived.

We saw the jeering crowds, the scourge

and spear-tip, the crown of thorns  
and the crucifix, waiting.

What could we have known about atonement?  
What did we know, then, of judging  
the quick against the dead?

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**Poetry from Westley Smith:  
“Homecoming,” “On Not Dying,”  
“Nocturne”**



THE SHOTGUN, BREATHES / *image by Amalie Flynn*  
**Homecoming**

He doesn't feel quite right, being there—  
same house, a little run down, dirtier  
than he remembers. They smile and shake his hand,  
escort him to his room—with everything  
just where he left it.

Then, they surprise him—  
they leave. He hasn't been alone in years.  
When night arrives with no boots to shine,  
no weapon to clean or letters to write,

he listens for threats that never come.  
He's up and moving before everyone  
to stalk the house, lock and relock each door,  
his family asleep in separate rooms.

\*

Days later, he finds a retail job at Sears,  
takes orders from some stateside twit named Greg.  
When he's had enough, he slams Greg into a wall—  
Then, no more job.

He starts to drain his savings.  
His family adjusts to him being home.  
They start ignoring him, which he prefers.

\*

Deer season now. He packs his rucksack, grabs  
the shotgun, leaves the family a note  
and hikes out to the deep woods of Ohio.  
First time he's felt himself: carrying  
and wearing his BDU's, scarfing MRE's.

He sets up camp near where he tracked a deer—  
swatches of scraped oak-bark and tramped ground  
mark its territory. On the cold, hard ground,  
he sleeps the best he has in months.

\*

He wakes, packs up his gear and climbs the oak.  
Wandering back to friends, to when he knew  
what was expected, back to when he had  
a purpose, when he knew his life mattered.

In the tree stand, he sees the shotgun's dirty—  
a stick jammed in the slide and around the chamber.  
He pulls it out, unloads the shells, and wipes  
the weapon down with the pre-oiled rag

he carries in his pack. He does a functions check,

reloads, then sees a deer, a five-point buck  
breaks cover and stands, looking him in the eye.  
He aims the shotgun, breathes. The deer just stares.

## **On Not Dying**

I'm glad I didn't pull the trigger  
on the .44 magnum while

the barrel was in my mouth.  
Oh, I've done crazier shit—

Walking at night along  
the handrails of bridges, backwards,

to entertain laughing friends.  
Drinking rotgut whiskey

on top of abandoned buildings, hoping  
never to wake, but always waking again.

After the war, during a protracted  
divorce, unable to see my kids,

I'd wake from a nightmare to grab  
my gun and patrol the perimeter

of my ranch-style in Richmond,  
Indiana, to make sure everything's

secure, everyone's safe.

Finding no threats, I'd sit

on the couch, in the dark, feeling  
stupid, still fighting—

for what? I didn't die there  
and I refuse to let it kill me now.

## Nocturne

I'm awake-the bed shakes  
as I bleed out, alone, a blade still  
buried in my thigh.

I feel the warm wet  
on my legs but it isn't blood.  
I throw the sheets in the washer,  
retreat to my favorite chair.  
Flipping through reruns,  
I settle on a comedy I've seen.

It's dark. I hear his breath  
wheezing slow. The odor  
of cigarettes as he drives the blade  
deeper. I scream—my dog barks.  
The windows blush:  
I'm on the floor, the TV  
flickering the news of a new day.

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**New Fiction from Lisa Erin  
Sanchez: “Signatures of**

# Ghosts”

He had one scar when I met him, a single blow to the back of his neck in the soft fleshy space between head gear and body armor. He liked to say, I’ll tell you this for free. I’d move in close and listen. His voice was a lyric tenor. A murmur, a whisper, sometimes a songbird’s call. In the medic’s kit were the trappings of his profession: butterfly clamps, a triangular scalpel, and three items for clearing a blocked airway. He packed these into a metal case the night before he left.

Another case was filled with antibiotics, antifungals, and the antimalarial drug Mefloquine, which caused one soldier to have a psychotic break and go on a rampage in Qandahar. In the third and final case, he kept morphine, oxy, and a handful of drugs whose names I can’t recall.

That whole case was reserved for pain. He was constantly having to refill it.

The medic had a silver star, a purple heart, and an enormous pair of jump wings. On his neck, he had one scar. I wasn’t his wife or life partner. I was just his girlfriend but I loved him. For six blissful months I loved him. In the Carolina woods, on the Roanoke dunes, under moonlight and firelight, in oceans and cars. We had our own special places, our own secret codes. We had summer and sand, and autumn and wind. We had indigo and sepia, and waves and retreats.

By Thanksgiving I learned to play first-person shooter games. *Left 4 Dead*—his favorite.

I’d get shot or lose a limb. He’d pick it up and replace it. After that, he packed his metal cases. The first month of his tour passed quickly. He called to say his team had arrived safely somewhere between Kabul and Khost, but soon they’d have to move. South, I figured, then we lost contact.

I spent the next few months feverishly knitting. I didn't know how to knit, but I couldn't think or stop thinking, so I taught myself to knit and I made three sweaters. By the time he called, I had started an afghan blanket. It was the color of a storm cloud, between black and white.

Mela? he said.

He drew out the vowels in his sing-song voice. He knew not to say Philomela. My parents had been cruel to name me after the bird-princess who lost her voice, and let's face it, I was no princess. Still, I felt some affinity with the bird-like qualities of the fallen Athenian. I admired her metamorphosis and had chosen for myself a perfect match: an airborne army medic who could heal people and fly.

I could hear the medic breathing and pressed my ear to the phone.

Mela, he said. Can you please pick me up?

I drove to airborne headquarters, parked my car, and ran to him. We crashed into each other like dive-bombing birds tangled in flight. He cut his lip on my kiss; I tasted his avian blood.

Yes, I did pick him up, but we didn't quite make it home. We stopped at a co-op for migratory creatures where we loved for hours on end. He brushed a lock of hair from my eye. It caught on an eyelash, which was thick with mascara and fairy dust and moonbeams and tears. I mirrored his motion, sweeping his brow. That's when I noticed a fresh scar. I ran my finger along the jagged edge. It fell from his face but I caught it. I was cradling his wound in the palm of my hand. I wanted to mend his cut, put everything back in order, but I couldn't.



Leda and the swan, from ruins at Argos.

For the next six months, we tried to remember. We took long walks in the steel blue fog of the Great Smoky Mountains, but only the ravens and the falling leaves spoke. We drove to Roanoke Island and waded in the sea foam, but the cold bit our toes and a massive cloud formed, dumping hard wet rain atop our two heads.

By spring, the medic started train-up. All the things a smoker loathed: running, climbing, jumping out of planes. Schlepping his shit through the Carolina swamplands. For weeks, he was a tortured, exhausted, sweaty mess.

Then came the desk sergeant with the paperwork.

Death preparations, the army called it. Where was his property? Who was his beneficiary? Who was his next of kin?

The closer it got to go date, the more detailed the process became. What type of casket would he like? What song should be played at his funeral?

He came home furious that day. He'd picked a tune by Alice in Chains, it was my favorite, too, but the admin didn't know it, so he told her to play Bad Romance. Lady Gaga, he'd said. Play fucking Gaga.

Nowhere on the forms was a place for my name. I wasn't his wife or the mother of his child. I was just his girlfriend and that's the way the army liked it. Stateside commanders had learned a thing or two since smiling housewives were used to sell war bonds and make hungry young men think they wanted to fight. Girlfriends, they reasoned privately in their secret quarters, were cheap. Why buy the bird when you can rent the feathers?

I didn't care about any forms. I held my lover's wound in the palm of my hand.

When it was time for the medic to redeploy, I drove him to

post, went home, and picked up my afghan. The thing was ten feet long by then, witness to my waiting.

I thought about giving it to a family member or friend, but what would they do with a woolen blanket? I considered this for several minutes before deciding I would send it to no one. The blanket was a harbinger, more salient for the absence it signified than the object it had become. Each stitch echoed the promise of return, and even though the medic had left voluntarily, I felt like he'd been taken.

Halfway through his second deployment, the afghan had grown another ten feet. Why hadn't he emailed or called? Was he sick? Was he hurt? Had he lost his men or his mind? I scoured the internet for information. If you can estimate a soldier's whereabouts within a fifty-mile radius, you might get some information. You might find a newswire about a firefight or an ambush. A special missions team can usually survive those. What you don't want to find is an accident like a Humvee over a cliff or any kind of explosion. What you don't want to find is a roadside bomb planted by a starving Afghan who's been paid ten times as much to blow up your boyfriend as the Afghan National Army can pay him to guard bases.

I sat at the computer with coffee and cigarettes, digging for an Associated Press report or two sentences from a military embed. All I could find were things like, *Predator drone kills twenty civilians in South Waziristan*. Or, *Suicide bomb kills eight U.S. soldiers in Khost*, followed by, *A spokesman says the attack was waged in retaliation for the death of twenty civilians killed in South Waziristan*.

With no further contact from the medic, I decided to take action. I purchased the sequel to *Left 4 Dead*, threw myself into the zombie apocalypse. When I could fight no more, I went back to my knitting: knit two, yarn over, slip slip knit, knit three. I had altered the pattern midstream and now half of the blanket had the tightly-woven look of knit stockings and the

other half was an intricate lace with empty spaces forming the shape of inverted wings. The transformation had come about quite by accident. I had slipped a stitch and decided to work in the mistake. It was pleasing to see the little holes, I wanted it to be more transparent. This is what I was thinking as I held the afghan to the light, and when I did, I realized I could see my way through, and I felt a charge in my body, a quiet yearning followed by something more vexing. The sensation was overwhelming. It had a distinctive taste and smell, a clean, utilitarian scent with an aura of hand wringing and finality, of having been useful to the entire enterprise.

The medic would understand this, I thought. For, he had been utilized too. Except, I never told him anything. When finally he called, I had traveled very far and had reached the state of Catatonia, overcome body and soul by a force with the strength of an entire army.

Still I picked him up. This time we didn't go to any hotel, co-op, or Outer Banks beach. The medic was exhausted so we went straight home. He stumbled through the door and fell on the bed, a heap of defeated manhood, nothing but feathers and bones. I took off his Danner desert combat boots and his jacket. He was still wearing his bird tags: name, social security number, blood type, religion. All the important stuff.

I removed the tags and set them on the nightstand. I'm not going to tell you his name but I'll tell you this for free: somewhere downrange, his wings had been soldered to his armor and he'd converted from Catholic to Holy Order of the Jedi Knights. Said so, right there on his tags.

I removed the rest of his clothing—his army gray t-shirt and ACU combat pants with the pixilated universal camouflage pattern, a mix of desert sand, urban gray, and foliage green, which made him invisible in any battlefield, all contingencies

covered.

His feathers came off last. That's when I saw the scars. Every inch of him was marked, and there was a deep black gouge beneath the skin, on his soft, fleshy heart, which was barely beating.

I reached for a salve and rubbed it over his body, counting the scars, dividing wounds over time. There were exactly three thousand scars, a thousand a year for his travels, each one concerning a distinct war story. How could his commander have missed these? I decided I was the only one who could see them or the only one who cared.

Another season changed and it started again. Fourth deployment for him, third for me. The medic dragged himself to train-up, this time coughing and hacking, sweating alcohol from his pores.

Did I forget to mention his drinking?

He came back nine months later. Families were gathered in the parking lot of the great airborne fortress, waiting for their beloved songbirds. Some came home walking, some were sitting in wheelchairs, others were missing entirely.

I stood beside my car as the medic ambled toward me. A line of cars extended behind me, each one with a lone woman sitting in the driver's seat. The line wrapped all the way around the garrison and out the gate to Bragg Boulevard, a yellow ribbon of girlfriends all the way to the

Atlantic Ocean, not one of them crying because, let's face it, who would hear?

The medic got in the car.

Paddy's? I asked.

He nodded. I drove.

We walked inside and sat at the bar. He motioned the barkeep and then he looked at me and then I looked at him.

How was your tour?

Not good.

I missed you.

Me too.

I sent you an email.

The internet was down.

Where were you?

Can't say.

Did you receive fire?

We had an accident. And the team hit a roadside bomb.

The bartender stood before us, arching his brow.

Straight up, the medic said, and knocked twice on the bar.

The man poured two glasses of whiskey and the medic downed them both. You should find someone else, he said. He had nothing left to give.

I cleared my throat but I couldn't speak. *He* had nothing to give?

He put his hand over mine. He was staring into an empty glass like he wanted to dive in.

What'll you have, he asked.

He drank another shot before I could say beer then knocked once more on the bar.

My eyes traveled the room. Photos of fallen team guys lined

the walls, their names carved for posterity like signatures of ghosts in the great mahogany countertop.

The bartender poured another whiskey and the medic turned to me. Light or dark, he asked.

I knew which one I wanted but my vocal cords were frozen, and as I watched him swallow, I thought about flying away.

Your beer, he said. Light or dark?

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## **New Fiction from Brian Van Reet: “Lazarus”**

We were the HMDs: the human mine detectors. In a sense the job was easy, but impossible to do well. There was no good method, for example, by which to differentiate animal carcasses packed with high explosives from those concealing only bloat and maggots. If roadkill was sighted, rather than stop to investigate, one of us gunners would shine a spotlight to indicate the location of the foul thing that might kill us as we drove past, taking the widest possible berth, clinching, waiting. If nothing exploded, we had not found an IED.

That was the job, repeated most every night, with every fresh patch of asphalt, each curb that looked like it might've been sledgehammered and pieced back together, every mound of garbage dumped on the roadside, each stray, suspicious length of wire. We didn't have the time or resources to search it all properly. We spotted the vast majority of devices when they were triggered, not before. It didn't take much more than a few catastrophes like that for us to reach the conclusion: the army must not mind us finding them that way. Why else would

they keep sending us out there, if not for a deep appreciation of our talents as HMDs?

It was on one of these IED sweeps, not long after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, that I was standing in the gunner's hatch of our truck and someone first tried to kill me—I mean, deliberately tried to do it. I was fortunate enough as a cocky young volunteer soldier to sort of want that to happen, but wasn't awake enough to realize it had. I had nodded off on my feet, my IED-finding spotlight wedged between the roof of our truck and the gun mount, so it appeared I was doing my job, scanning the pavement and rubble for the fourth consecutive overnight hour, when in fact my head was drooping, bobbing, snapping up every so often with that sudden falling feeling you get when you drift off someplace you hadn't meant to.

We were on the return leg of the sweep, nearing Checkpoint Delta, a traffic circle, when the first RPG woke me, the rocket engine hissing and shrieking as it flew like a high-powered Roman candle, missing the truck ahead of ours and striking an adobe shanty just off the road where it exploded in a flash of orange and dust. Half a dozen heartbeats and another rocket, this one missing our truck, brought me fully awake and cemented the idea. They were trying to kill me. Who, I didn't know. Someone I couldn't see and had never met hated me or the thought of me enough to want to end my life right there in an instant on that lonely stretch of road, like something out of loneliest New Mexico, if you must place yourself somewhere more possible than Iraq.

Below me in the truck our lieutenant was hollering, "Turn that shit off, man—turn it off!" and when he grabbed my leg, I saw he meant me, my spotlight. Not so effective at locating hidden bombs, it was far more useful to the enemy as a million-candle-power bull's-eye.

I switched off the light and set it on the roof of the truck, taking the gun off safe and fumbling with the tension knob on

the gun mount for a few seconds until it came loose. I swung the mount toward the east, the direction I thought the rockets had come from. I couldn't see much past the starlit road. Beyond it was a farmer's field growing some kind of summer crop—muskmelons, I think it was—and on the far side of that, an irrigation canal I'd noticed in the day but couldn't pick out now. A cluster of electric lights on the horizon marked a squatter village we called Squaretown for no other reason than its geography.

One of the other gunners started shooting into the field, and even though I couldn't see anything out there, I followed his lead and opened fire, letting off a wild burst from my machinegun, I don't mean an M-16 but a truck-mounted machinegun that could send bullets the size of fingers through engine blocks and concrete walls. Every fifth round was a tracer and there were several burning in the air at any given time, the smell of hot brass and powder, shell casings streaming out of the ejection port; somehow, one of them was ejected in such a way as to kick back and lodge under the collar of my Kevlar vest.

I had no idea what had happened. I yelled, my neck suddenly on fire; I ducked through the hatch into the truck's cab with the rest of the crew. In the front, Yarrow was passing the lieutenant a hand mic, while in the rear, Lorcin was discharging his M-16 rapidly on single shot out the passenger's side window. Martinez sat opposite him with his rifle between his legs and his hands placed calmly over his ears to muffle to noise. Ducking and stooped on my knees in the center of the truck, roughly at the midpoint between all of them, I spun toward Martinez.

"I think I'm hit! Can you see it, can you see it?"

The immediate burning sensation had subsided some, but it still hurt, and I was freaked, frantically lifting my chin to expose my neck to the medic, who always rode in our truck.

That wasn't by accident. The lieutenant, top man in the platoon, also always rode in our truck. The lieutenant was slick like that: keep your friends close, your first aid closer.

Martinez leaned toward me and swept his hands over my neck and shoulders, feeling for blood and in the process discovering the hot shell casing, which had migrated off my skin and down between my uniform and vest.

"You're not shot, bro! It's just some brass!" Martinez shouted over the deafening report of the rifle firing inside the truck. Lorcin had dropped a mag, reloaded, and resumed shooting. He was nineteen, a typical age for a private, but unlike any other I had met, he was technically still a French citizen, working on his U.S. citizenship (a fact he had been able to keep hidden from most of the platoon, not having a discernible accent, and which he had sworn me to secrecy about after confessing it one night on guard duty). The kid, Lorcin, had spent most of his life in Vegas where his dad worked as a chef. He was a good soldier. Martinez was, too. He actually was from some lonely place in New Mexico; I forget the name of the town but remember him turning twenty-two later that summer, making him about my same age. To my knowledge, it was the first time any of us had been shot at.

"Brass, what?" the lieutenant roared indignantly, turning his attention from the radios to the commotion over me in the turret. The LT was a big man who had played some college ball and was very physically brave. I'm not suggesting, with the thing about Martinez always riding in our truck, that the lieutenant was a coward, only that he was not above taking advantage. He distrusted the competence of others, is one way to put it.

"Goddamnit!" the LT yelled. "Get your happy ass back up there!" He slapped me on the helmet to hearten me. I got to my feet in the hatch, and he went back to making his radio report

about the shit we were in, carrying on three simultaneous conversations: two by radio, with the platoon and higher headquarters, and also one with us, in person, in the truck.

No more rockets had been launched after the initial volley, but that didn't stop us from shooting up the landscape a while. I don't trust my memories of time in those situations, but it couldn't have lasted much more than thirty seconds after the point I'd mistakenly thought I'd been shot, burned by my own brass. You could try consulting an official report to get the army's stats on the engagement, rounds expended, an exact timeline, but that information, even if it weren't classified, would be no more reliable on the whole than what I have put down here. What happened at Checkpoint Delta was altogether unusual but ordinary in at least one respect. The official version was riddled with omissions, errors, and lies.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" the lieutenant ordered. "Punch it around these fools! No, that way!"

Our driver, Specialist Yarrow, sped past the other trucks, leading them to the checkpoint, out of the kill zone, the roar of gunfire petering away to ringing ears and scattered pops. A short time later we pulled into the traffic circle, one truck stopping off at each of the four cardinal directions. To the west lay our camp; to the south, Baghdad proper; to the east, Squaretown; and if you took the northern spur, after passing through a number of other hardscrabble villages, you'd eventually reach desert as open and empty as the surface of Mars.

Some of us dismounted at the checkpoint to assess the damage, of which there was none. Not a single man or truck had been hit. No one had seen who had shot at us; many guys had seen the rockets, but our descriptions of their points of origin were in disagreement, and none of us had seen "an actual fucking bad guy firing an RPG," as the lieutenant eventually put it, ending that line of speculation. Battalion ordered us

to hold the checkpoint and wait there for the quick reaction force to arrive from camp. Only the throbbing red mark on my neck and our warm gunmetal yet proved the firefight was something other than a collective hallucination.

\*

Our reinforcements were late. According to the latest from battalion, the QRF was "spinning up," whatever that meant. The transmission on their status was a bad turn and it came through on the radio not long before a pair of headlights appeared on the road leading to the traffic circle from Squaretown. The eastern road. We had been fired on from the east. There was a sundown to sunup curfew in place, and no civilians were supposed to be on that road at that hour. Even without the preceding ambush, the sight of headlights approaching would have been alarming.

We prepared to face round two alone. On the lieutenant's orders, Yarrow moved our truck to the eastern spur, supporting Sergeant [Redacted]'s position there. [Note: The occasion for this account is truth-telling and the airing of long withheld grievances. With that being the case, I do not take the decision to redact lightly. But I've recently learned from a trusted source that this former sergeant is, for whatever reason, struggling with severe addiction. I make it a point to say Sgt. R. is addicted *for whatever reason* because, by his own admission before going to war, he was a drinker. The lingering effects of combat could not have helped his disease, which was nevertheless preexisting: who knows why he originally took to drowning his sorrows? I don't feel sorry for him, either; that's not why I've redacted his name. I've got enough on my conscience as it is, and the small portion of the truth that I'm blotting out is not worth being questioned someday by another ghost. His, waiting in the wings, whispering to me that I got it all wrong. What would be the point in opening myself up to that? There are untold thousands like the old sergeant, wandering free in the United States of

Amnesia, and I have no evidence compelling enough for any prosecutor to pursue charges against him for something that happened fifteen years ago in a foreign country. If my source is correct about the state of his health, the judicial system might be the slower route to justice, anyway, depending on how you define it. Either way, I can't stand the thought of becoming entangled with his fate any more than I already am.]

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said, never taking his eyes off the approaching headlights. "Throw a couple flares out. Far as you can."

R. opened the hatch of his truck and found a stash of road flares in an oily canvas bag he kept there. He struck a flare to get it going and lobbed it end over end, burning bright red into the spur ahead of us. He did another, and another, a line of flares intended to signal to the approaching driver that the traffic circle was off-limits: turn back immediately.



The driver did not turn back. He did slow down, then stopped, then lurched forward again but slower than before, and continued to vary his slow speed erratically after the appearance of the flares, as if he had obviously seen them and our position, yet still insisted on approaching, albeit indecisively.

"Hold fire! Fire on *my* order!" the lieutenant yelled up and down the line. "Don't come any closer, you dumb son of a bitch," he said to himself. Only those of us near him—meaning Yarrow, Lorcin, Martinez and me—heard him say that last part.

The driver stopped again at about a hundred meters. Redacted had gone out ahead of our trucks to toss the flares, which were at fifty meters. In their backlight I could make out the shape of the car, which looked like an old Volkswagen sedan. Those were everywhere in Baghdad. We were thinking it might be

nothing, but who knew. Worst case, the car was rigged to blow, the driver getting cold feet, or maybe stalling purposefully, and the second wave of the ambush would hit us at any second, a mistimed Trojan-horse-style scenario.

The driver rolled down his window and stuck out an arm, waving in apparent distress. None of us budged. He took his foot off the brake and idled forward.

“The fuck’s he doing?” Yarrow said.

“Could be wounded,” the lieutenant said. “Could be one of the guys who shot at us.”

“Or some random drunk asshole.”

“Flash your brights at him.”

It was at that point—the lieutenant telling Yarrow to flash his headlights—that I remembered my own spotlight. We carried no brighter light than the one I had with me up in the hatch, and I flicked it on and shined it at the Volkswagen. The car dipped to a stop. Another gunner turned on his light. Our crossed beams penetrated the windshield to meet on the driver, no longer a dark silhouette but a young Arab man squinting and turning his head. The hand that had been held out of the window was now raised to his face, shielding his eyes. He appeared to be alone, upset, confused or traumatized or drunk or all of the above, dazzled by the spotlight’s glare. Nothing changed from one moment to the next. Then, Sergeant R. opened fire.

Only a handful of people have ever read the official report on the incident. This exclusivity should not be attributed to its juiciness, more the opposite. It’s hard to overstate how successfully the army reduces even spectacular violence to a series of boilerplate phrases that signify little about the reality of war other than its essential bureaucracy. Like all such reports, if this one still exists, access is restricted.

It's not in the trove of documents famously leaked in 2010, not even tracked there as a serious incident in the master list, as no U.S. personnel were wounded. I haven't seen the report since 2004, when the lieutenant asked me to proofread it before he submitted it to our company commander in the form of a sworn statement, but I remember it, and other similar reports, well enough to recreate the crux with some accuracy.

*The local national driving the vehicle approached a U.S. position after an RPG ambush on Route Predators near Checkpoint Delta. The vehicle failed to stop after being warned repeatedly to do so with flares and lights. Deadly force was subsequently used by soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Alpha Company, 1<sup>st</sup> of the 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, who reasonably believed they were at risk of death or imminent great bodily harm.*

Once R. started shooting, two other men in the platoon did as well, and between them they discharged a dozen or more rounds before the lieutenant could scream "Cease fire!" loud enough to stop them. Our rules of engagement stated that a vehicle or person could be declared hostile simply by the act of one of us shooting at him/her/it. So, when R. opened fire, those other two soldiers followed their training and his lead. The sergeant might've seen something they had missed: a detonator in the man's raised hand, wires running into the car's trunk, a group of insurgents creeping toward us in the dark muskmelon field.

I had seen nothing like that and was not one who fired at the car. I might've done it—probably would've, by twitchy nervous reflex—if my finger had been resting on the trigger when I'd heard the shots, instead of being curled around the handle of my spotlight. Unintentionally, it had served to pinpoint the target, increasing the accuracy of R. and the others, their gun smoke wisping and curling in the unsteady beam that magnified the trembling of my hands into the world.

The Volkswagen's windshield, now frosted with bullet holes, obscured the man inside, slumped over the steering wheel. The car's horn bleated pathetically and continuously under his weight.

"What happened?" the lieutenant asked, his voice missing its usual bravado. "What the hell'd you see?"

"He wouldn't stop, sir." R. said it with such perfect conviction that—though I'd just seen the car was stopped, had been completely stopped and the man had had his hand up, shielding his eyes—I wondered if I had missed something crucial.

"He was stopped," Martinez said.

"Bullshit," Redacted said. "He did for a second before he floored it."

"Yeah, *after* you started shooting."

"Bullshit."

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said sternly, "You and Yarrow go clear that vehicle."

R. gave the lieutenant a questioning look that turned sour as the lieutenant made no move to reconsider his order. Typically, a squad leader like R. would not have been given such an immediately dangerous job as clearing a possible suicide car bomb. The lieutenant was breaking protocol and assigning this duty to him as a kind of rebuke, I thought. The implications of that were disturbing, but at the time no one said anything more about the circumstances of the shooting. We were not out of the woods, providing over-watch as R. and Yarrow hunch-walked down the spur toward the Volkswagen, which had come to rest with one of its tires wedged against the curb.

"There's someone in the backseat!" Yarrow said. "Some dude

hiding in the backseat!”

“Get out, now! Ishta!”

“I think he’s dead, man. Fuck. I don’t know.”

“Open that door. I’ll fan out and cover you.”

“*You* open the motherfucking door, brah. You’re the one shot these motherfuckers.”

R. outranked Yarrow but put up no more argument. He crept against the car and popped the rear door latch. Nothing happened. He nodded at Yarrow, who took up a good angle. He flung the car door open. Still, no movement, and Yarrow repeated his opinion: the man in back looked dead.

Hearing that, R. glanced in the car, stood to his full height, and poked around in the backseat with the muzzle of his rifle. I was a ways off and didn’t see it clearly, but heard Yarrow tell it back at camp. R. poked one of the dead guy’s eyeballs with the muzzle of his rifle. Not hard enough to pop it out of his skull, but hard enough. I was told it’s what hunters do with large animals they’ve shot, to make sure they’re truly dead before letting their guard down. Now satisfied the man in back was not merely unconscious or faking, R. went to the driver’s side door, opened it, and pushed the other dead man off the steering wheel to stop the horn sounding. The noise had been uncanny, the steady accusation of a machine.

“Ain’t shit in the trunk but trash and shit,” Yarrow said. “It’s clear, LT.”

The lieutenant and the rest of our crew moved closer. The inside of the car stunk of burnt cloth and blood. The man in the driver’s seat who’d been shot was in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore a wedding ring. His eyes were half-lidded, and the expression on his face made it look like he’d died in agony. It was the first time in my life I’d ever seen

anything like that, and it shook me up, but not how you might expect. The lows came later. In the moment, the feeling was nearly the opposite. I felt so high I was almost sick, not from disgust, but the nauseating thrilling impossibility of being alive while this other human being was suddenly not.

“Gimme a hand here,” Martinez said. He was attempting to drag the other dead man from the backseat. That guy was older than the driver, not quite elderly but almost. Though the two were separated by decades, some of their features bore a close resemblance, too much for a coincidence, I thought. They were probably a father and his son.

We dragged the old man out of the car, onto the road. He looked beyond saving, his skin the color of a pale blueberry, but Martinez went through his checks, patting him down systematically, searching for blood by touch. He turned his head and held it over the man’s pale blue lips, feeling for a wisp of breath, using two fingers to check for a pulse on the carotid. Nothing.

“He ain’t shot,” Martinez said. “I think he had a heart attack or something.”

“Because of the firefight?”

“I doubt it. Probably just bad luck.”

To me, however, it remains an open question, one of many from that night. Did we (and the militiamen who’d ambushed us) literally scare that old man to death as he slept in his bed and we sent rounds downrange in the vicinity of his home in Sqauretown? Was the driver of the car really his son? Had he brought his dying father to us at the checkpoint in the hope we could save him? Iraqis sometimes did ascribe miraculous technological powers to U.S. foot soldiers, including when it came to medicine—or was it just the driver’s terrible fate to have taken a route to the nearest hospital that happened to cross our path? Was it a series of unfortunate coincidences,

or a tight chain of cause-and-effect? In the end, no one could say. They couldn't tell their story.

Martinez unzipped his aid bag. He removed a ventilator mask for CPR and three clear packing tubes that held epinephrine autoinjectors for the couple guys in the company who suffered from dangerous allergies. He cracked each tube and shot the injectors into the old man's thigh. Then he straddled him and with the heels of his palms started chest compressions, counting them out. Something like a tree branch snapped in the dead man's chest. Yarrow gagged. He was holding the mask over the man's nose and mouth, pumping the ventilator ball to breathe for him when Martinez said to.

They went through one cycle of compressions and ventilations, then another.

"He's gone, Martinez," the lieutenant said respectfully.

The medic acknowledged that likelihood but kept working. We were still waiting for the QRF to arrive and there was nothing better to do, so the lieutenant let him work. Someone actually said it was good training, like it was good the guy had croaked so that Martinez could practice his CPR on real flesh. Some of the men stood watch, facing out on the perimeter; others followed the lieutenant's lead, drifting away from the Volkswagen and its gruesome scene to attend to their trucks; and still other soldiers lingered or moved closer to the bodies, beginning to get comfortable in the presence of death. Sergeant Redacted went back to his truck and found a digital camera he'd bought in Kuwait. The lieutenant stopped him on his way back to the Volkswagen.

"What're you doing with that, Sergeant?"

"We should get a few pics of their faces," R. said. "We might have to ID these guys. They could be important."

"Put that shit away," the lieutenant said.

“Sir?”

“I said stow it. Now.”

R. pocketed the slim silver camera. He elaborated no more on his intentions but it seemed unlikely he had meant we might have to identify the dead men to their next of kin. Either he was lying about his reasons for wanting a photo or he genuinely believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that he had just shot two insurgents who were big-time enough to be known by face to military intelligence.

I have an opinion on why the camera came out, but it's only that. By way of factual background, I can say R. was a self-described good old boy from Tennessee who liked to hunt and fish and whose dream, after serving out his twenty years, was to open a bar with a veteran's small business loan and his pension. He hated politicians and especially liberals. Along with his outdoor hobbies he liked all things Star Trek, pulp sci-fi, tabletop wargames, and was, surprisingly, a gourmand: sort of a dorky redneck, you might say, if forced to sum up a personality in a few broad strokes.

Once, in the lead-up to our deployment, I'd heard the sergeant say he wanted to “stack a few bodies over there” as revenge for 9-11. As far as he was concerned, that was why we were in Iraq, and he was fine with it. There'd been a lot of that kind of talk going around, and it was hard to know who to take seriously. It seemed incredible to think his vicious streak ran strong and dumb enough for him to murder a man in cold blood in front of fifteen witnesses before attempting to photograph the evidence with his own camera. Then again, a state of war does afford the psychopath much leeway.

A few days later, I brought up my concerns with the lieutenant in the privacy of his room when I returned the incident report with typos and awkward phrases marked in red.

“You don't think he did it on purpose,” I said, somewhat

between a statement and a question.

"Of course he did it on purpose," the LT said.

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant."

"Oh."

"Listen. I've talked to Sergeant R., okay? I talked to him for a very long time. I have no doubt he was in fear for his life when he made that decision."

"He didn't seem that afraid to me," I said, skirting the edge of insubordination.

"You're forgetting that two other soldiers fired as well."

"Only because he did."

"You weren't afraid at all then, Corporal? Can you honestly say that?"

I shrugged, not knowing how to answer that question without sounding snippy or absurd. I was afraid every single time we went outside the wire. You learned to deal with it. Fear didn't give us a license to kill.

"Well I was," the LT continued. "And you know what? If I, as a reasonable person, believe R. might've been right—not that he was, but *might've been*? Well, you better believe I'm not gonna accuse him, or any of you guys, of a thing like that. We need men like Redacted. I can't have you all hesitating in a decisive moment."

"Sir. The car was stopped."

"Briefly. You saw the guy; he was driving all fucking...herky jerky and weird."

"You said to fire on your order, sir."

"Do you know something I don't, Corporal?" he said, a tired-sounding challenge.

"No. I saw what you saw."

"Exactly. So we're done here. Go tell the guys we've gotta go out tonight at zero three hundred. Another IED sweep."

"Roger, sir."

"Hey. Wait. I know this isn't easy, okay? It's a terrible thing, but we have to put it behind us. We don't have a choice. How do you think Sergeant R. feels about it?"

I said I didn't know, while secretly doubting the LT's considerations were all so selfless as he made out. We were at the very beginning of our tour, with forty-some-odd weeks left to suffer the war and each other. Any serious accusation or investigation would've torn the platoon apart, guaranteeing discord, scandal and ruining the lieutenant's command reputation, no matter what, if any, justice was ever done. Given the circumstances of the shooting and our rules of engagement, the scales were tipped toward R.; without a confession, there was no hard evidence he had acted with malice. The sergeant wasn't exactly popular among us, but there were those in the platoon who would've had his back with testimonies of the shooting to counter any accusing witnesses, which, though some of us talked privately about our misgivings, never emerged publicly to point a finger. Even those men who had misgivings and didn't care for the sergeant on a personal level were reluctant to inform on a fellow volunteer-prisoner, both for the sake of upholding the inmate's code—you don't rat, no matter what—and for fear of violating it and incurring reprisals.

There were none for the shooting. Nothing formal, at least. The killing near Checkpoint Delta went unpunished and was only

avenged in a proximate and random way by the IEDs that picked us off by ones and twos every few months for the rest of the year. R. was never so much as wounded on that or any of his deployments. We are not friends, but I can see his profile pic on Facebook. It's him looking sharp in his dress blues; the photo might have been taken at his retirement ceremony, two years ago. He made it to the finish line and got his pension, but from what I've heard, he blows it every month on bar tabs, and not at his own watering hole, which he's never gotten around to opening. I think his drinking picked up so dramatically after he left the service, not because he was so torn up about what had happened overseas, but because he thrived on that sort of thing, missed the thrill, the absolute sense of purpose, and felt bored and aimless without it. He is doing now what he did back then, times he was bored and free to drink, only, there are many more free nights now, post-retirement, for him to burn out his liver with Old Crow and hillbilly heroin, neither of which should be mistaken for karma.

The only other time I heard the sergeant talk about the shooting was the day after. He was eating chow with a few of the other squad leaders from our company. One of them asked him about it, and after a little prodding, he told them the story. The way he told it made no mention of the car being stopped. Instead, he focused on its erratic approach, how close it had gotten.

"You know the deadly radius for exposed personnel in a car bomb blast? By the book it's like three hundred meters. Dumbass hajji—how was I supposed to know?"

His story had changed in a day's time. Whether or not the car was stopped had been the sticking point in the immediate aftermath. Now, that point had been dropped entirely, in favor of the maximum effective range of car bombs and the situational difficulty in determining whether a stranger's baffling actions indicated hostility or foolishness.

If the Volkswagen really had been loaded with explosives, it might have killed some of us, it's true. The sergeant's new explanation for why he'd fired was stronger and more valid than his original one, but mostly it struck me as a red flag, upon hearing it in the chow hall, precisely because the explanation had changed. To my mind, this shifting logic suggested R. had been lying from the beginning. He had refined his initial story into one more plausible with the benefit of another day to think it through.

In that case, he is guilty of a war crime: shooting a civilian, knowing the man was probably not hostile, exploiting the uncertainty of that night's events to get what he had wanted all along. Here was his chance to stack some bodies. The facts do fit that scenario, but I must admit they also fit one in which the sergeant acted honestly (and stupidly). It could be the lieutenant was right and R. truly had believed we were in imminent danger when he pulled the trigger. If so, the conversation I'd overheard in the chow hall was not evidence of premeditation; rather, a state of denial, which had lifted enough, in a day, for the sergeant at least to acknowledge he'd not killed an insurgent, while at the same time continuing to blame the dead man for what had happened.

Enough conjecture. It can be tediously endless and abstract. I was an eyewitness and should lay my cards on the table. In my opinion, the man is a murderer, though I don't believe he's ever thought of himself as one. To this day, I imagine he remains the beleaguered hero of his own story, or the victim, or something like both, simultaneously. Anything but the villain. Few of us can stomach being that.

\*

"I've got a pulse!" Martinez said. I had moved off from the Volkswagen to monitor the radios, listening for any word on our reinforcements, but now I rushed back to see for myself. The old man remained unconscious and laid out in the road but

his skin had lightened up, no longer so blue, and his chest was rising and falling rapidly.

“Holy shit. You brought him back.”

“What were those shots you gave him?”

“Epi-pens. Basically, pure adrenaline.”

“Good work, Martinez. Yarrow. Goddamn outstanding work, you two.”

“He’s not out of the woods yet, sir. He needs evac’d. Like, now.”

“The QRF are two mikes out. Soon as they get here, we’ll take him to the CASH.”

And so we did. And I cannot tell what happened to the old man after that. He was alive and unconscious when we left him at the combat support hospital. For all I know, his heart might’ve stopped again, shortly thereafter, or he might’ve wound up living for years but as a vegetable. I suppose he could have recovered from the episode only to have suffered another, more horrible death in wartime Baghdad, anytime from 2004 to this writing. Statistically, it’s unlikely, but he may still be alive. He would be a very old man for Iraq in 2019.

His revival was one of the more incredible things we were involved in during our deployment. Throughout the rest of the year, the story came up often. Hard and cynical as some of us were, I think we liked to fall back on telling it to feel better about ourselves, if you can believe a person might be comforted by the events I’ve just conveyed. Like any story, how it’s received depends on how it’s delivered, the focus of it, and where the listener is, the context. We were all eye-deep in the shit and generally proud of Martinez for what he’d done, one of the few acts of redemption we accomplished in a year of waste and toil, or so we thought. With more distance,

it's easy to realize the old man might've rather stayed dead of a heart attack than come back to life to learn of his son, killed while delivering him to an unlikely salvation.

We left a dead son and, in the best case, his father to live another twenty years with a cruel debt he couldn't repay. From where I stand now, our one act of grace, that resurrection, seems closer to a tragic curse. I can't remember anyone insisting on that obvious point, back then. Nuanced consequence was lost on most of us. We were in our teens and early twenties, even our leader the lieutenant, and the stakes were too high and stark to accommodate the over-contemplation of grey-shaded outcomes. I imagine we all would've preferred to be revived if it came to it, and so naturally, whatever we thought and said privately about the shooting itself, when we recalled the story as a group or to outsiders, we focused on conjuring the thing we most wanted from its elements that were actually true.

That was life. Survival. Fortunate, unexpected, persistent life, snatched from the jaws of death by a feat of willpower and know-how. A charm against death was what we all wanted, and we told our buddies in other platoons about Martinez and the old man, the incredible thing we'd seen with our own eyes, while minimizing the tragedy of the dead son and R.'s role in making it a tragedy in the first place. Instead of the one time over there when we might have saved a life without taking more.

"You hear what happened the other night?"... "Naw, he wasn't the one shot. Heart attack or some shit."... "It was crazy. Freakish, really. Dude was fucking blue, right, like his ticker *had been* stopped, and this sumbitch right here, *this* motherfucker, he brings him back from the dead, man." "Best medic I ever saw." "For real. Dude's a miracle worker."

"I don't do miracles," Martinez said once, fed up enough to overcome his usual reticence. "I did what I could, and it

worked. He wasn't meant to die. That's all it is."

As word got around, someone started calling Martinez, Lazarus. The nickname stuck and was perpetuated within the platoon by a certain dominant clique that referred to him that way almost exclusively for the remainder of the tour, even though Martinez hated the name, and even though, according to the Bible, Lazarus was the man Jesus raised from the dead, not the one doing the raising. For the allusion to make sense, we should have called the old man Lazarus. More than once, I said as much to the guys, but nobody who had gone over to using Lazarus, primarily, ever changed his behavior and went back to "Martinez" as a result of me pointing out the inherent error.

"Come on, Professor," they said, using their nickname for me that I hated. "We're not calling him Jesus. That's just dumb. He's Lazarus, brah. Seriously. Don't overthink this shit."

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# 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 do 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-kneed 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 cliché 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 cliché 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 our 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 beanieed 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](http://goodfreephotos.com).

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# New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Welcome Home, Brother”

My arm burned red resting out the window in the summer sun as I drove east out of the mountains. I passed through the shade of centuries-deep bluffs carved by the Yellowstone River, then curved south into open, tall-grass prairies.

A road sign for Little Bighorn Battlefield flashed by with its mileage—more than once a “stop along the way” during road trips when I was young. A few cars passed with the vanity license plate of General Custer staring across the plains at Sitting Bull. I tried to picture the battle, as I always had, hear the rifle-fire and war cries. I tried to picture my great-great grandmother, speaking no English, boarding a passenger train with her children en route to a new life in Montana. What might she have been picturing? What did she hope for and fear, studying the strange landscape into the West, into *Indian Country*, news of Custer’s defeat no older than her youngest daughter?

Being a fifth-generation Montanan had always nurtured in me a special kind of pride and ownership. But nothing felt that way anymore, not since I got back.



My brother-in-law’s penciled directions read *end of the world gas station – L*. I turned the wheel as I took in the derelict old building, scrawled with graffiti, a sunken canopy over absent pumps, pointed shards left in the windows. The truck bumped a few more miles through open range where sparse groups of horses pondered the ground and swatted flies with their tails. One tan and bony mare ambled along the shoulder of the

road, unfazed by my passing.

As I drove through town past pairs of following eyes, I had to reassure myself that I'd been invited. Feral dogs with taut stomachs trotted through alleyways, cowed as if under an invisible raised hand. In a dirt lot a girl of maybe three sat alone on a swing, pumping her legs and grinning vibrantly. I caught her eyes and smiled. Behind her, two shirtless teenage boys with long braided hair played basketball under a netless hoop.

Turning onto a dusty two-track, I saw the first sign and slipped the directions into my shirt pocket. Through sagebrush up the hill, spray painted in safety-orange on scraps of plywood with arrows at the turns, they guided me to the *Other Medicine Sun Dance*.



I woke in the bed of my truck to the first rays of light and the sound of drumming, rhythmic and steady, above which men's voices sang in solemn unison, one occasionally leaping from the rest, a piercing wail which made my blood rush. The first of the four-day ceremony had begun and the many family and friends who'd come to support the dancers and offer prayers gathered around the lodge, which was constructed of numerous tree trunks stripped and re-planted in a large circle around a much taller center-tree, all of them linked with draping boughs and long strips of thin fabric which wavered in the gentle morning breeze. I stood a distance away and waited. No one regarded me with scorn, nor did they encourage me to come closer, until a man in a wheelchair rolled up from behind me and told me they didn't bite, "...most of them anyway."

I followed close behind him and stopped at his side in the shade just outside the lodge. He wore a black hat with "Iraq War Veteran" embroidered in yellow around a Purple Heart. His face was puffy and badly scarred. Both of his legs were

missing above the knee. When he turned his head to look up at me he seemed to smile and spoke so as not to be heard over the singing: "An Offering Song."

I nodded.

He extended his massive calloused hand and said even softer, "No Mud."

I took his hand and told him my name.

"So," he went on, keeping his grip, "how many years did they get out of you?" At my hesitation he explained, "I saw your vet plates last night when you drove in."

"Oh, right. Just three. One deployment."

His dark eyes were watery. He seemed to be looking vaguely beyond me. I asked him the same question.

He applied more pressure and pulled me closer as if to tell me a secret and breathed warm into the side of my face, "They took years I ain't even lived, little brother." He loosened his grip and disarmed his voice, adding a quick, "Hey!" before dropping my hand as if forgetting why he was holding it. A couple people glanced back with looks of restrained concern then sent their eyes in search of someone else.

A tall woman approached No Mud, crouched and put her arm around his shoulder, lowered her face to the side of his and said something softly in another language. He appeared to weep momentarily but quickly composed himself and kissed her on the cheek. She squeezed his shoulder as she stood up and then the back of his neck, glanced a courteous smile at me and returned to what she had been doing. We waited in silence until there was a change in drumming and the singers began a new song.

Four men emerged from a small tent behind the lodge and filed toward the center tree. They wore only red and white cloth around their waists and a whistle-like piece of bone with a

feather at the end around their necks. No Mud nudged my leg and leaned towards me: "Eagle Dancers," he said. I didn't tell him one of them was my brother-in-law, but I figured it was obvious enough. Seeing him made me blush with the heat of a hundred eyes.

Each dancer stood his turn before the center tree as a long-haired elder wearing aviator sunglasses and latex gloves, used a surgical scalpel to make two inch-long incisions down each of their pectorals. Then like a lace through a stiff leather boot-tongue he pushed the sharpened end of two three-inch sections of deer antler under each bleeding loop of flesh. Four ropes hung from the top of the center pole, each split at the end like a Y. He attached these ends to either side of both antler tips thus marrying each Eagle Dancer to the tree. For the next four days they would go without food and be called upon to dance when the drumming and singing began, their sacrifice shared and elevated by the presence and prayers of their family and friends.



My brother-in-law had ridden bulls in a semi-pro rodeo circuit for a few years until finally giving in to the doctor's insistence that his body wasn't going to last another eight seconds up there, let alone under hoof and horn. He moved to Montana to cowboy with a vision in his head he gathered from accounts like *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sundance Chief*, a book he would later present to me as a gift. The author spent months with the Crow leader recording everything he was told. He was adopted by the Yellowtail family and in time participated in their Sun Dance. For my brother-in-law it was more than a romantic notion, it was a calling from a time he felt he was meant for, but by some tragic cosmic glitch had ended up fair-skinned and red-bearded in a world of credit cards and cell-phones.

He hunted elk, deer and antelope with both rifle and bow in

the valleys and eastern plains of Montana and alone deep in the Tobacco Root, Beartooth and Crazy Mountains. Each time was a spiritual attempt, he insisted, to dislocate his *self* from his body and reintegrate with the universe. Though I barely knew him then, he would send letters to Iraq, to the brother he never had, a brother fighting in a war, also in pursuit of something beyond his sense of self. I received envelopes with return addresses of *Deep in the Crazies* and *The teeth of a Chinook*. I imagined him crouched behind a boulder high above the timberline gripping the paper and pencil, jotting down a few words between gusts. He was almost mythical to me, as I would learn I was also to him.

I read of his friends, the sweat lodges, feasts and the Sun Dance. The new-old way. I allowed myself to escape through his descriptions of rituals and celebration, of the *eternal hunt* and finding his *forever eyes*. Under stars after a night patrol through open desert, where there was no thing nor body, where officers would call for fire from artillery to explode in the emptiness, I'd relieve myself of armor and ammo, light a cigarette and try to imagine myself stalking elk in knee-deep snow through the mountains or crawling naked into a sweat lodge, into the *womb of the universe*, as he said it was called. I tried to imagine it and hoped to dream of it when I fell asleep—though dreams were rarely anything but fevered scenes of some repetitive task like cleaning a combat-load of bullets one-by-one after a sand storm.

People ask how hot it was over there and I tell them many nights failed to sink below triple digits and we patrolled often in a hundred-and-thirty degrees during the day. They raise their eyebrows and I don't tell them of the eighty-plus-pounds of body armor, weapon, ammo, food and water. I don't tell them how unnatural it all felt. And I don't tell them how our suffering seemed almost absurd reflected in the stare of a shepherd, a shop keeper, a mother standing in the doorway of her home as we passed, assuming the worst of them. Theirs was

an ancient suffering most of us could only wear like a costume. Whenever I locked eyes with them I found it nearly impossible to pretend they weren't beyond us somehow, seeing us not as we imagined ourselves but as we truly were. They were willing us away.



Official U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson.

Every day I wanted to leave more. And every day it was less from fear of dying. It was a feeling that slithered around inside. The best you could do was try and shake it loose and hope it coiled up in a different part of your body.



A stern wind carried dust from the road and drove it through the lodge. Thin strips of fabric tied to the tips of each tree thrashed at nothing from their knots. The drummer's song fled out over the sage brush and a distancing presence was felt. New resolve seemed to rise in the dancers against the assaulting air, each of them tasting the ground in it with dry tongues, reassured of their purpose in the sting of splitting lips.

*No sacrifice can be made if doubt is not confronted.* No Mud assured me of this. I saw it in the dancers when they closed their eyes and gathered themselves against visible inner friction, lifting and dropping their bare feet as if to draw the song back from the squall driving it away. I imagined myself an Eagle Dancer, the person enduring suffering that it might be undone, though vanity banished the vision like a swirl of fine earth to some unseen end. The wind tore at us in gusts and No Mud secured his hat on his head with one hand.



As a boy I rode a dreamed horse through desert washes, open plains and timbered mountains with a carved tree branch for a rifle. I imagined ambushes and firing lead into swift animals, into enemies as they rose from behind boulders and thickets with bows drawn. I'd mouth the explosions of my rifle and fall from my saddle with an arrow sunk deep in the muscle. Invoking the movie scenes which most haunted my sleep, I'd break off the fletched end, clinch it in my teeth and push the tooled stone out the other side and pull it free, wincing with great drama at the tragedy of my own blood. I'd pack the entry and exit wounds with gunpowder and taste the bitter chokecherry wood as I brought the flame to each wound and my eyes would roll back in my head with the pain and smell of carbon and seared flesh and I would fall into sand, into pine needles, and follow the merging and dispersions of clouds.

After carrying my rifle for almost a year through the desert, the day finally came when I switched it off of *safe* and squeezed the trigger. It was not an ambush, not a battle, not movie material. It was a serene afternoon in late October. We were patrolling outside a rural village when someone spotted a tunnel entrance dug into the side of a canal. Ordered to *recon by fire* I prayed my bullets would find a meaning there. For months I tried to convince myself I was disappointed that the only thing I ever shot while at war was a hole in the ground.

"Come to the Sun Dance," my brother-in-law wrote in his last letter. "As a warrior you are invited to help cut down the center tree for the lodge." Even though most people I met seemed obliged to convince me, or at least themselves, that I was a warrior or some kind of hero, I had stopped trying to convince myself. When anyone shook my hand and thanked me for my service, or worse, for their freedom, I became vaguely nauseous as if shallowly buried beneath our feet was a decaying corpse we both pretended not to smell.

By the third day the Eagle Dancers seemed to have transcended the failure of their bodies and rose each time from the grass to pledge their feet to the drums and move in toward the center tree then back, breathing rhythmically through the eagle-bone whistles between their teeth with the drummer's voices urging them in song to dance "for their heart's deepest wound," No Mud told me, "and pray for healing."

The sun was high behind us and burned the back of my neck. I drank guiltily from my water and watched my brother-in-law. His skin was badly burned, as if bruised by exposure and peeling from his forehead and shoulders. His lips were visibly cracked and bleeding, the loops of skin in his chest stretched and raw from being pulled taut repeatedly by the weight of his body as he danced away from the center pole to the full extent of his rope, sometimes leaning back, his points of flesh pulling skyward as he sunk into the pain.

A breeze occasionally wafted smoke by, giving the air a burnt sweetness. Anyone entering the inner portion of the lodge received the attention of an elderly woman holding a bundle of smoking sage, which she would pass over and around the individual's body in a motion that reminded me of an airport security guard scanning someone with a handheld metal detector, which she performed with similar practical efficiency. I followed No Mud's gaze to a line of women approaching the lodge. Each stood before the elderly woman as she drew the smoke over their heads with a cupped hand and under each of their feet, indicating when she was finished with a hand extended in the direction of their next steps toward the long-haired elder wearing latex gloves.

"The women will make flesh offerings," No Mud said to me leaning closer but not turning his head. Then looking at me askance and patting his stumps he said, "I already made mine," managing an upside-down grin. His eyes returned to the elder who was pushing the root of a feather through the incisions he had made in a woman's shoulder. "That's my sister," he said,

“the tall, pretty one.” She waited her turn behind two other women. I remembered her measured smile and feeling politely tolerated. The elder held both ends of the feather and made a quick jerking motion breaking the loop of skin holding it in place. “I made her a promise,” No Mud continued. “I’m here to honor that promise.”

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The Eagle Dancers laid in the cool grass under the first stars blinking into sight. A drumless song was being sung almost like a lullaby by two elderly men, both with long braided hair and wearing pearl-snap western shirts. No Mud invited me to eat with him. We filed through the tent and filled small bowls with elk heart stew and a piece of fry bread. Crickets seemed to sigh with relief in the cool stillness as we made our way across the matted grass of the field turned parking lot. I lowered my tailgate like a table and waited for No Mud to finish before asking him what had been bothering me ever since I decided to come to the Sun Dance. He laughed to himself and told me other tribes have made declarations of war against non-Native participation in their Sun Dances, calling it a desecration of their sacred ceremony. “Some people don’t think your brother should be here,” he told me plainly, “or you.” Feeling the blood run from my face I asked him what he thought about it.

He looked away past the lodge up a darkening hillside, tilted his head back slightly and spoke from a different place, “My grandfather says some people have blind sorrow, and they abuse us with it. They make themselves feel better by honoring us like ghosts. But they honor their own guilt.” Then leveling his eyes after considering this he continued, “Sometimes I wish I was a ghost.” He was quiet again and seemed to be listening to the men singing, who could be heard faintly. “If people tell you what you are for long enough then that’s what you can become in your own mind if you’re not careful... But I think your brother has a good heart. Maybe he wants to

assimilate to our ways for the sins of his people. *Your* people." He laughed again, hitting my leg with the back of his hand. "Maybe it's a sin for my people to let him think he can."

Late in the sun of the final day the singers struck the drum with a tempered fury and dug for their most naked voices. The long-haired elder approached my brother-in-law, standing as if in a lucid dream, and removed the tether-loops from the antler ends letting the rope swing back to the center tree as he pulled out his scalpel and stepped around to face his back. Of the same size and depth as the chest incisions he calmly made six, three down the right, three down the left side of his back, pushing then the sharpened antler tips through each and attaching to them the six split ends of another rope which hung slack like a tail on the ground behind him.

A man from the far side of the lodge labored slowly toward them, his fists around a rope at his chest and slung over his shoulder pulling behind him six horned buffalo skulls linked and dragging the well-danced ground by their teeth, dust rising around them in the dry heat. This man collected the rope from the ground and tied them together so the chain of skulls lay only a few feet behind my brother-in-law. A third man draped a buffalo hide over his shoulders like a blanket and gave him a tall staff.

His first attempt to move forward summoned a kind of impossible acceptance to his eyes as the rope pulled taut and he planted the end of the staff, clutching it with both hands and leveraged himself forward, each step holding that acceptance as if too close to a flame. Sharp, deliberate breaths left his mouth as he pulled the skulls around the center tree, eyes cast to the ground, blood staining the white of his cloth and running in thin streams down the backs of his legs. The singers sent their drum sticks into the stretched hide as if to drive it into the ground and the high, clean voice of a young child sprang from among them singing with un-

lived years. I heard the murmuring pleasure of proud parents.

My brother-in-law made his way around the inner lodge and soon he was near me and he lifted his eyes from the ground as he approached and held mine as if to pull himself closer. I shuddered to be recognized and though I wished to shield my heart from the piercing eyes I imagined all around me I could not. Righting himself before me, seeing me from some burning emptiness, he extended the staff to touch my shoulder, and spoke his only words in four days as if speaking them made our bodies present and visible again. Standing next to No Mud, who did not so much as shift his weight, my skin flushed to be so spectacularly recognized.

As the skulls were drug out of the inner lodge my brother-in-law was reattached to the center tree. Before the pounding of my heart could subside I was asked to participate in a final ceremony where a sacred pipe would be passed between anyone with a prayer before being given to an Eagle Dancer that he might finish his dance with those prayers in his guard. No Mud urged me to do it.

The elderly woman drew sage smoke over my head and under my feet and I again tried and failed to shield my heart. We lined facing one another as the lit pipe was passed down the line alternately, each individual placing it to their lips briefly and inhaling. At the mouth of the line where the pipe would be handed to a dancer, my brother-in-law stood waiting.

The final dance is a rite by which each dancer prepares their heart to break free from their rope by moving methodically, prayerfully into the center tree then back, gathering the strength and resolve needed to honor their sacrifice before sprinting backwards from the tree with enough force to break the loops of flesh, as foreshadowed by the women's offerings. Each dancer in their own time did this, the sound of their separation a visceral snap in the dry air.

As the pipe-bearer, he went last. With it cradled in his arm he moved in toward the tree, his bloody legs tensing then gaining speed until meeting the full purchase of his rope. But instead of breaking free, his body bucked forward, sending its extended length past parallel with the ground and six feet above it then down on his chest with a dusty thud. Returning to his feet and immediately back to the center tree he danced without noticing half of the pipe lay broken behind him. A second time running back and he met the end of his rope as if being shot in the shoulder, one loop breaking sending that half of his body in a violent twist hinged off the other. On his third attempt, he broke free and stood panting for a moment before looking finally at the pipe.

His eyes searched back to where he had first impacted the ground. Kneeling there as if to make himself as small as possible he retrieved the other half. I looked at No Mud and knew nothing would be said. The collective silence was static like that of dry lightning and followed me back down the dusty two-track onto the highway, through the tall-grass prairies along the Yellowstone River, into the low sun.

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We all crawled naked into the lodge, No Mud using his fists like feet, the rest of us on our hands and knees, shoulders and thighs pressing together as we formed a tight circle inside. The elder shoveled stones from the fire outside and placed them in the pit between us. Once full he crawled in and closed the flap behind him, sealing the lodge in darkness. At his side was a pile of beargrass bundles which he passed around one-by-one. "It opens your pores," my brother-in-law whispered as he handed me one. Into a bucket of water at his side the elder dipped a cup and poured it over the rocks which hissed and steamed and he began to sing.

The heat was instantly unbearable, the vapor burning the back of my throat, searing my skin. I clinched my eyes shut and

rocked back and forth begging myself to endure it. Everyone sang, their voices moving through my head with a submerged, burning singularity and I felt myself sinking into the ground. They soon began using the beargrass like whips over their legs, stomachs, shoulders and backs. I bent to the dirt in search of cooler air. Finding none I sat up desperate for breath. I gripped the beargrass and whipped my face reflexively then my chest and shoulders. I whipped my back repeatedly as if the thin clean sting of it might drive the deeper burning away. This went on until it seemed there was no time nor space and I was certain my muscle shone exposed beneath the skin.

The singing eventually ceased and the flap was peeled open, flooding the lodge with light and cool air. Relieved and suddenly proud, I watched for the men near the entrance to begin crawling out. But they remained seated with their eyes closed, inhaling sharply through their nostrils then letting the air out slowly, silently. No Mud clutched the beargrass between his legs. His chest rose and fell, glistening, spotted with the scars of many Sun Dances. I looked to the entrance and saw the elder watching me. He turned, reached up behind him and pulled the flap closed, sealing the lodge in darkness. There was only breathing until my skin became warm with it. I heard the cup emerge from the bucket and the thin, seething hiss of the stones.