

New Fiction by Eldridge Thomas III: Glitter



Sometimes I wonder if there's more Elvis in Vegas at Christmastime or if it's just my daddy getting to me again.

They got him on electronic billboards wishing everybody happy holidays. He sings "Silent Night" or "Silver Bells" *everywhere you go*. You can't walk the Strip without seeing ten Elvises in red coats and pointed hats on a unicycle or skateboard or making giraffes or big-boobed girls out of balloons.

Each year, they put out a twelve-foot Elvis in front of the Westgate. He's hunched, arms out, stuck mid hip shake. He's got on Santa's suit and pom-poms, but no white bushy hair or beard, and his coat's unbuttoned enough for everybody to see his muscled mannequin chest. His pom-poms and gold buckle bedazzle. Little red-nose Rudolph stands over to the side and stares up at him meekly, waiting for a pat, some kind of kindness.

I do the same: stare at him, not so much as twitch an eye, while tourists roll luggage around me or head out to wherever they're going, wherever that might be.

It's Christmas Eve, the only time there's a quiet, warm hum in the ER. Somebody's got hot chocolate. Somebody brought candy canes and sugar cookies with sprinkles. The overheads are at half-mast. Elvis sings "Jingle Bells" somewhere down the hallway. Hattrup is hanging lights in a window. He's only got one string, which isn't enough for anything, but I don't chastise. Today, I'm letting the spirit in.

"Georgia Boy is back," Hattrup says. He has a high, wispy voice and aluminum-colored eyes that flicker, making him seem

anxious at every second.

"We call state troopers Georgia Boys," I correct him. "Where?"

"Four."

"Thank you."

"You visit Elvis today?"

I walk, don't answer.

Georgia's asleep when I find him. With his hair and beard and bird chest, he looks like Gregg Allman Jesus. He's shirtless—left arm blue, blotchy, swollen—and hooked to an IV and air. He's from Valdosta, about an hour from Waycross, where I'm from, and we're only a few years apart, so we got connections.

Georgia's a frequent flyer and has already been told he'll lose the arm to sepsis if he can't keep it clean. It's hard for him, because he lives on the Strip, plays 90s alternative, hoping passersby will toss money into his guitar case. He sang "Come as You Are" for us once. His whole shtick was rasp. Hattrup didn't think much of it. I thought it was fine.

I pull his chart, and he stirs.

"Hey, Georgia," he says.

"When'd you come in, Georgia?" I ask.

"Last night."

"I was on last night."

"Tonight, then? Is it Christmas?"

I tell him there's about five hours yet.

"It always feels like Christmas," he says. "They keep the lights up year-round in these parts."

"We had some neighbors like that."

He giggles, says "Us too."

"At least the weather's Christmasy," I say. It's the only time of year South Georgia and South Nevada share a similar temperature, a frigid fifty/sixty degrees.

"Did it snow Christmas Day," he asks, "when you were about thirteen, fourteen?"

"Heck yeah. We got at least six, seven flakes."

"Us too." He smiles. "It was magical."

Winter is the time for clouds in the desert, when I sometimes drive ninety miles to lie on my car's hood and watch the sky. I get there at least a full hour before sunset, when the earth's the color of Spanish moss in October and the sky old beat-up jeans, and the chunky clouds billow up like skyscrapers, and the thin ones stretch across quilt-patterned, each bumping into the next. It's just like home, just right there, like you could touch them if only your arms were three times as long.

In swampy flat Waycross, you can see a storm's advance miles away with its gray showgirl's curtain.

Then the glittery night. They always said you can go into the Okefenokee and see the Milky Way with your own bare eyes, but I never did.

I miss the pines, how their branches hide with the moonlight, except for those at the tippy top. Under the moon, they smell like wood and mint and look like stick figures with triangle heads that lean with the wind, threatening to break.

At ten, the ER is called to attention, and Col. Mihata arrives to wish everybody a merry Christmas. Col. Mihata's husky,

wears wire eyeglasses, and comes across as friendly even though he smiles with gritted teeth. When he leaves, Hattrup is in my ear.

"You can't," he says. "Not safe."

"Mission already accomplished."

I walk back to the nurses' station with him on my heels.

"I don't mean the plane ticket."

"He doesn't have an ID, so I got him a Greyhound."

"To Georgia? How long is that?"

"Two and a half days."

"He's an addict. He won't make it."

"He says he's got enough stash for a few days."

"Jesus Christ."

"The reason for the season."

I open Georgia's songbook. He doesn't remember his dad's number, and he's scared to talk to him anyway. He said call his Sunday school teacher: the number's scribbled somewhere in the book. I learned this when we talked about how, growing up, we both liked Sunday school but hated church. His teacher was a gentle man who also taught him guitar.

"You can't drive him to the airport, a bus station, or anywhere. What if he has a flashback and kills you?"

"He's a heroin junkie."

"He was in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever the hell else. Put him in an Uber."

"You're free to come with."

The songbook is a mixture of random ink and pencil sentences and lyrics, his handwriting sometimes large and curvy, sometimes tiny and all caps. There're sketches of objects throughout: a fire hydrant, a traffic light, a Coke can.

"No, I'm going home to my sweet thing."

I find the number on the third page, at the bottom. He literally wrote out *Sunday School teacher*, then a colon, then the guy's name, Carl Thornton, then the ten-digit number. He drew a little guitar beside the digits.

"Call me and leave your phone on speaker the whole way."

"He's harmless." I turn to Hattrup, to his fluttering tin foil eyes. "It's Christmas. Let me do some good in the world."

I dial before he can say something else.

It's just after midnight when I hear a radio voice down the hallway. *Spend Christmas right here with Elvis. Put a country ham in the oven, an angel on the tree, and the King's songs—White Christmas or Blue—*

Georgia's awake, stares blankly at the TV, flips channels.

I tell him I talked to Carl, and he sits up. I tell him I talked to his daddy, too, and he rubs his face one-handed, hides his eyes. I tell him: Both men will be there when his bus pulls in. They've looked for him, knew he was in Vegas, even flew out a couple times, never could find an address.

I tell him the hard part: His momma died last year. Heart attacked her. She worried every day for him.

His shoulders heave. I hand him a box of tissues. He smacks it away, pulls out the IV, pulls off the nasal tube. He jumps up and bangs a leg against a chair, tumbles headfirst into the wall, clinches a fist, wants to punch the wall, needs to punch

something, slaps the wall open-handed instead. Slaps it a few times.

He turns to face me.

“What happened in Iraq,” he says, “he never understood I couldn’t be normal after that.”

I wait for him to say something else. He doesn’t. I ask if I can give him a hug. He thinks on it, his eyes droop then blink, then he says *please*.

It’s just after seven when we walk outside, where the sun already blazes, and I remember Hattrup saying we might set a record.

“Hot damn,” Georgia says. “You know how many times I wore shorts on a Christmas?”

His bus doesn’t leave until nine something, so I say let’s go see Elvis. He nods, doesn’t even ask.

We stare and listen to slot machines beep and chime their way across the Westgate’s breezeway, hear someone win a jackpot.

Georgia’s shirt hangs over his shoulders like a cape. He took a shower at the hospital, but his clothes are still filthy. Tourists make a point to walk around us.

“You dig the King?” he asks, finally.

“My daddy did,” I say. “Liked him so much he wanted to be him. Had the wave haircut, the sideburns. Even impersonated him.”

Georgia sniggers.

“Back home, the ladies’ auxiliary put on a Hee-Haw-type show every Christmas. The mayor dressed up like a woman, and everybody thought that was funny. They set a pig loose, and

some idiot chased him through the audience. Some beauty queen sang, and Daddy did Elvis.”

“Something happened to your old man?”

“I came home from bootcamp and told him I who I was, and he told me I was no child of his, and that was that.”

“Deep South strikes again.”

“So, I actually hate the King.”

He laughs.

“What you’re doing for me,” he says. “Thank you, Georgia.”

“You gone make it, Georgia?”

He shrugs. He’s honest.

He says he needs his music to live, so he has to keep his arm. I can’t tell if he really wants to get clean.

I just know he wants to get home.

New Review by Larry Abbott: Surviving the Long Wars



Surviving the Long Wars: Creative Rebellion at the Ends of Empire. Chicago: Bridge Books, 2024.

The 4-day 2023 Veteran Art Triennial and Summit in Chicago, held from spring into the summer of 2023, coinciding with the

20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, was held in various venues in Chicago. A variety of exhibitions at such venues as Newberry Library, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago Cultural Center, featured the work of over fifty artists. *Surviving the Long Wars* developed out of the summit and the exhibitions.

The editorial collective which oversaw the book, Aaron Hughes, Ronak Kapadia, Therese Quinn, Meranda Roberts, and Amber Zora, reflects various perspectives: veteran, non-veteran, feminist, Indigenous, and queer. They have put together an expansive volume that highlights the “profound connections between the two most protracted military conflicts in US history: the ‘American Indian Wars’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the twenty-first century’s ‘Global War on Terror’ (GWOT)” (1).

The roughly sixty contributors, vets and non-vets, are represented with photographs, installations, paintings, essays, poetry, and performance. There are also historical artifacts which illustrate the connections between the two “long wars.” The book gives broad exposure to writers and artists who may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

There are four major sections in the book, each with a brief introduction, a poem, essays and related artwork. “Residues and Rebellions,” for example, includes contemporary work by Monte Little and Miridith Campbell, among others, that are paired with selections from *Akwesasne Notes* and *The Black Panther* newspapers from the 1970’s and with Kiowa and Black Horse ledger drawings from the late 1800’s. The visual correlations are made explicit with a Black Horse ledger drawing displayed with a photograph from *Notes*, gouaches by Pakistani-American Mahwish Chishty, and a 2022 ledger drawing, “Enlistment,” by Marine Corps vet Darrell Wayne Fair. “Enlistment” is one panel in a series of ledger drawings depicting key events in his life. Also included in this

section (and in later sections) are Miridith Campbell and Melissa Doud's contemporary take on traditional dresses. Campbell's *Marine Corps Dress—Southern Style* (2022) integrates items such as vintage Marine service buttons on tanned buckskin. Campbell served in three branches of the military and the dress reflects her service and Kiowa heritage. Her *Counting Coup* (2002) uses a Civil War cavalry coat with "Kiowa-style beadwork" replacing the epaulets. Similarly, Melissa Doud, an Army vet, created *Bullet Dress* (2016), placing 365 bullet casings on a dress made from an Army uniform. The casings replace the jingles on a powwow dance dress. (Likewise, Monty Little's poem from his chapbook *Overhang of Cumulus* reveals hidden similarities between apparent disparate images through juxtaposition, thus creating unexpected connections:

Bullet shells drop on splintered
floors to mother's
cadence in her jingle dress).

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' essay, "Why is the United States the Most Militaristic State in History," takes a long view of American wars, while Meranda Roberts takes a close look at the major works in the exhibition.

These interrelationships are further explored in "Reckon and Reimagine," the second section. Rijin Sahakian's essay "Embedded Horizons" focuses on the Iraq War and the work of Iraqi artists Ali Eyal and Sajjad Abbas in particular. She is critical of the barriers to the broader exposure of Iraqi art in the West. She writes that "The works of Eyal and Abbas are acts of defiance against conditions designed to force surrender. . . . But will the art world, informed by and participating with war's image making and financial structures ever take the risk of remaking the rules of engagement?" (134). Amber Zora's essay "Disrupting Business as Usual: Transforming Bureaucracy into Art" surveys the ways that artists "have utilized the detritus of the military

machine—the mountains of bureaucratic paperwork, the ephemera, the piles of surveillance materials—to illuminate dark and forgotten aspects of militarism” (137). The artworks in “Reckon and Reimagine” exemplify her view. Gerald Sheffield, an Army vet, uses pages from the *Army Field Manual* to create *fm-05.301* (2016), which exposes “the underlying machinery of psychological warfare” (141). Other works in the section include Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani’s *Index of the Disappeared: Parasitic Archive* (2014) and Hanaa Malallah’s *She/He Has No Picture* (2019-20). The former is an installation with a huge filing cabinet behind a desk, suggesting impersonality, where everyone is just a card among thousands or millions of other cards. The latter memorializes the hundreds of victims of the bombing of the Al Amirayah shelter in 1991 by “featuring portraits of the victims crafted from burnt canvases” (142).

The third section, “Unlikely Entanglements,” focuses on “visual parallels [which] surface between artworks by civilians impacted by the US long wars and BIPOC veterans critiquing the military they once served in” (154). Laleh Khalili’s essay “Tomahawks, Chinooks, and Geronimo: Settler-Colonial Fantasies of US Navy Seals” analyzes the ways that Navy Seals, and the military generally, have adopted in various forms the names and symbols of Indigenous people. Junaid Rana’s “Life During War on Terror Time” discuss both individual artists and the ways that art sees “things anew when before they were unseen” (209). The strength of the section lies in the art. At first glance Bassim Al Shaker’s series *Moment of Silence* (2022) appears to depict the creation of the cosmos. However, a closer look reveals “an unfamiliar sky in the minutes of silence following explosions” (159) that Al Shaker survived. “‘I saw body parts in the sky. The paintings show what the sky looked like at that time. The works describe death and loss, but also a new life after a loss’” (159). Ruth Kaneko’s *Sutured* (2023) uses remnants of her time in the Army to cover a box that connotes a sense of

the futility of war. Army vet Rodney Ewing's "Faded," from a series on silk-screened ledger paper, *Planned Obsolescence* (2022), takes an image of Black prison laborers and superimposes an outline of wheels and gears, suggesting how the machinery of society abuses and exploits Blacks. A work from another series from 2022, *Come the Mean Times*, depicts a Black man with arms raised on the top part of the canvas; superimposed on the figure is an outline of a biplane with a naming of parts, like "elevator flap" and "right aileron." On the bottom half of the canvas, upside down, like a mirror image, is a Native figure holding a child. Superimposed on this lower part is a map of the Trail of Tears. In this series "Ewing creates a dialogue about the harm done to Indigenous and African American peoples by the interconnected histories of colonialism and white supremacy" (186).

The first part of the fourth section, "Surviving the Long Wars Summit," is comprised of numerous photographs of the various exhibitions, workshops, discussions, and performances that were part of the summit. There is also documentation of the Iraq War Memorial Activation, in which participants lay flowers into the waters of Lake Michigan. The section concludes with a short essay, "A Sweeter Future," two longer essays, "'When Black People Are Free, All People Will Be Free': Black Freedom, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Limits of Reparations Discourse," and "The Summit: Then and Now," and a conversation between Army vets Kevin Basl and Anthony Torres. Torres curated the performances in Triennial, and as he explains to Basl, his "vision was to create collaborative opportunities among performers and attendees and help build a community that would exist beyond the Triennial" (286).

Aaron Hughes' essay in the Conclusion, "Sowing Seeds of Resistance," discusses the life and work of White Mountain Apache artist Frederick Gokliz as a springboard to a broader consideration of the work of contemporary artists such as Monty Little, Mariam Ghani, Ruth Kaneko, and Darrell Wayne

Fair. Hughes sees in these and other artists “a web of interconnected exploitation” (313). He follows this up later in the essay when he writes: “However, I believe that when veterans move away from identities solely rooted in military service and American exceptionalism and instead embrace solidarity grounded in shared experiences of exploitation, new possibilities emerge” (321). His comment reflects the theses in some of the other essays, which call for the creation of new communities.

The concluding section, “Afterword,” includes an essay by Ronak K. Kapadia, “Afterword: Meditations on Survival and Rebellion,” which examines “three defining moments” during the three years of planning for the Triennial: the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the continuing U.S. role in the Palestinian War, and the self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell in protest of that war. For Kapadia these events are intertwined and “prompt a deeper meditation on the concept of ‘surviving the long wars.’” The compelling writers and artists in the Triennial, along with dozens, if not hundreds of others in the U.S. and throughout the world, such as Indigenous artist Richard Ray Whitman and Afghanistan War veteran Henrik Andersen of Denmark, are instrumental in prompting this meditation.

New Nonfiction: Interview with Adam Kovac

So that’s what I did. I sat down and attempted to write The Great American War Novel. I wouldn’t have sent the manuscript out on submission if I didn’t think I’d come as close as I was able to actually accomplishing that.

New Fiction by Josh Bates: Excerpt from The Baghdad Shuffle

The patrol was unsettling. The initial 'liberation' euphoria had soured. It was all bad vibes from the second we exited the Country Club. Hard brown faces casting the evil eye. Old men sitting in front of shuttered store fronts, sizing us up. We still didn't have an interpreter, but I tried to press a few locals anyway. I showed them Izzat's photo. I gauged reactions. No hints of recognition. Just hard stares and brusque wave-offs.

New Fiction by Matthew James Jones: Excerpt from Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures



I'd been in Afghanistan for three months when I saw the woman in the marketplace die. Thirty or forty men haggled the price of fruit as she skirted a low stone wall in her burka, stomach swollen in late pregnancy. Our drone was hovering overhead, studying the Pattern of Life, when the woman triggered the

bomb, which exploded in a white flash. The screen dimmed; we saw her legs had been severed, nearly at the hip.

Commotion: the men in the market scrambled to aid her, pouring water in her mouth, and we sent a helicopter, which landed in the marketplace a few minutes later. The men formed a protective circle around the dying woman. When the medics climbed from the chopper with their kits and stretchers, the villagers didn't let them get close.

Minutes passed. The medics arguing with the villagers as the woman's mouth stretched into a black 'O' and blood seeped into the sand and we sipped coffee and cracked cruel jokes until she died.

And I didn't even want to go here, because you can't make sense of the stupid awful waste of it no matter how you try. But back then I hadn't yet grown wise; after my shift, I stumbled back to the barracks in the pre-dawn fog and sat on the steps outside in the rear of the building to be alone.

I heard a whimper. A muted cough.

Pulled a little sailor's flashlight from my pocket, spun around, and poked my head under the steps. A black cavity yawned—more than large enough for a person to crawl into the building's underbelly. I inched forward, flashlight piercing the darkness, and discovered the Bigfoot.

On closer inspection: this was not a military-issued Bigfoot. It had wormed its way into the corner beneath the shower room where the floor got soggy and sagged. Shining my little light up and down its hulking body, dozens of greasy frogs hopped deeper into darkness. The creature huddled next to a drainpipe, where marks in the fungi suggested it'd been slurping the nourishing scum.

At first I had no idea what I was seeing: a bulkish white man-shape snuffling in the dirt, enormous hands pressed over its

brow like the light was a welding torch. Thick fur tufts, filthy and matted with sweat and frog oil. Some kind of tremendous gorilla-bear, eyes glittering with intelligence, whimpering and seeming to mouth language—what other word but Bigfoot applies?

The flashlight nearly slipped in my sweaty palm. A voice in my head told me to run, run far, sprint all the way back to Canada. Another voice said, get your pistol out, fool, and I complied, pulling my rusty 9mm from the holster, and flicking off the safety.

The creature, seated in the cellar's muck, peeked at me through its fingers, big pooling blue eyes, fuzzy eyebrows furrowing low, two great canine tusks jutting over a wolf-like muzzle. It grovelled: the saddest Bigfoot I'd ever seen, yet also the happiest, since it was my first.

I tried to keep my voice steady, but it cracked anyway. "Are you... with the Taliban?"

To my surprise, it responded in a twangy English with a voice deeper than a bear's. "Shit, man. I ain't with anythin' 'cept a hundred frogs, and 'bout four thousand fleas."

"You're obviously not from around here." I was looking at his thick fur, orange and matted, with patches of white, freckled skin peeking out. Summer in Kandahar the heat rises halfway to boiling, and just a bit cooler at night. "How the hell did you get onto the base?"

The Bigfoot hung its heavy head and sighed. "Took a nap on the wrong plane." It picked at a few rags that clung to its shoulders, that might have once been a woolen scarf. "I'm havin' a pretty shitty day on top of a whole stack of other shitty days. I know ya gotta job to do, but please don't shoot me. Please." He closed his eyes, waiting for the bullet, and clasped his hairy-knuckled hands. "I know how I look but I never wanted to hurt nobody." His lower lip trembled.

It could not know that it was pleading for mercy from a drone operator. That in the last month, I had seen eleven people killed by missiles and bombs. I hadn't ordered any of the strikes, but I had facilitated each one by lining up assets and passing information. If I hadn't seen that woman die in the marketplace, I would have wasted the freak. But watching without being able to do anything had been the absolute worst feeling, like a fabric in the chest tearing. Here was a living creature who needed my help, and a chance to prove to myself I was still capable of a good deed.

I took a whole sleeve of Saltine crackers, which my mother had sent me in a morale box, and slid it, and two bottles of water, into the crack at the back of the barracks, where his eyes glittered in the dark.

I felt for him, the big bastard. He was hot in his pelt and chomping the heads off frogs. "Don't let anyone else hear you crying," I said. "I can't protect you. Avoid discovery. Preserve water."

The Bigfoot nodded its huge head in thanks.

I made a promise to tell this story, even if it hurts. There will be drone strikes, monsters, barbed wire, and forbidden love in bunkers. Once I was a giant but now I sit in the wake of strength with the cripples. I have taken innocent life and nearly destroyed myself in grief.

But the story starts with a kindness, and that matters.

Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).

New Interview with Matthew James Jones

[Black and White Noah](#)

Predators, Reapers and Deadlier Creatures (PR&DC) is unafraid to be funny about serious subjects. Can you tell us some of the books that inspired you to write something as unsettling and wry as PR&DC? Or do you see it as a unique book in the history of military literature? Or is “military literature” even a genre of literature?

The humour of *PR&DC* has been one of the hardest things to pitch – the cover looks like a conventional war story; the back cover makes it sound like a surrealistic thriller. And it is those things. But it’s also a profoundly satirical book. All of the officer class is lampooned. I’m pretty sure the Colonels merge in a blur of light, transforming into a four-headed snake, which slithers up a vent. The pranks, the teasing, the playful barbs: we had to make war funny to survive it. Naturally, the humour darkens until it feels like violence. Naturally, the laughing makes us ache and feel like grabbing a shower after. Naturally, this was a thing we all needed to undo when we got home, so that sacred things could become sacred again.

One of my inspirations here is *Slaughterhouse V*, where Vonnegut uses the device of “getting unstuck in time” to undermine the chronology. Once he even erases the war altogether, briefly. This makes perfect sense to me. Our psyches circle traumatic experiences like unflushable turds whirling. You’re figuring out which brand of smoked tofu you prefer when your body decides it’s back in the war, seizes up; everyone’s too close; you can club your way past six or seven civvies easy, using a jug of maple syrup for a mace, leap the

checkout and dodge the police by scurrying up a tree. Right there in that hippie organic supermarket, your breathing has gone apeshit and your heart is hammering out of your chest. So yeah, trauma is your very own fucking time machine so why not put one into the story, in the interest of telling the truth?

Naturally, I could point to *Catch 22* as the classic military satire, again with its loops and loops. The bureaucracy forever pushing the yardsticks back. There's one scene in PR&DC, an interrogation, which is basically an homage to *Catch 22*, though I don't have the patience to circle around so much as Heller circled, and I inverted the logic: the main character Yossarian doesn't want to embark on another bombing run since he wants to be free of the fear of death. Jones, in my book, fears death (the rocket attacks, the Taser Rapist, the Shit Beast) but not as much as he fears killing. Both Yossarian and Jones are pulled inexorably into deeper complicity with the war, and so lose their agency to the bureaucratic mechanisms that give the war its shape.

All that to say PR&DC is part of a longer humanist conversation about war, which will and must continue so long as war distorts us. So, forever.

PR&DC is uncannily prescient when it comes to our current fitness moment, to somehow appreciate its outsize role on military installations and Global War on Terror (GWOT) culture. What role do you see physical fitness playing in this novel? How does this connect to your own experiences with mental health?

On one hand there's the Army conditioning, exemplified by the "Herculean abs" of the General himself, who promotes fitness as the means to better, saner, stronger soldiers, who can work longer hours, with worse food and less sleep. Others train to boost personal power, dominate others, never feel like a victim again. Another lifts because he feels like his head is

cracking apart, to numb and exhaust the body, to sleep without dreams. There's a lot of moving pieces in war – a lot of force flowing. The civilians and soldiers both get swept up into the momentum, become part of the mechanism, or its output. So we train to feel in control of *something* even if our dominion extends no farther than our grasp. One problem with the War On Terror is we often felt we were fighting shadows. No wonder we needed to lift literal concrete.

Ask my comrades who killed themselves how inextricable fitness is from mental health. It still isn't enough, naturally, but even the most testosterone-poisoned soldier, girded with fantasies of invincibility, permits himself to train the body. Meanwhile he scoffs imperiously at therapy, believing the mind is the only muscle born strong. Nagging feelings follow after the war – he drinks. To avoid his rages, his wife takes the kids away. Alone, he drinks harder – life becomes a wheel of grinding mirrors. He takes a long long bath and stuffs the shotgun in his mouth.

In a distant forest, we hear the recoil of our comrade's death – birds leap from their branches. So I started to train with the fallen logs. No matter the cascade of bark chips and centipedes. Lunge and circle the maple with a knobby trunk on the shoulder – squat a stump. I lined the logs up side by side like fallen soldiers. Other veterans started to join me on these workouts, and so the log gym was born, a shrine.

Why do you think so much military fiction tends to be strictly realistic or tend toward realism?

Because military service prunes creativity. That explains why my students at the École Militaire are trying to develop it so hard – a necessary skill for high leadership, but scandalous for underlings. If the purpose of art is to create emotions, than who is less qualified than the soldier, whose culture demands swift emotional amputation, often self-administered?

They worked hard to make us machines. The problem is it doesn't always take, or the life force cracks the sidewalk, like a stubborn flower. This is why the war-poet is a rare thing: the soldier who insisted on remaining whole.

I can expand further: you can describe horrors in detail but only the ones who've also seen horrors know how it feels. Naturally, in describing the emotions too obviously the writing gets heavy-handed, showing. If you want to tell a story with larger-than-life emotions, than you may have to break the rules. And how boring, anyway, to create a world entirely from your mind, like a book, and bind yourself in the same constraints as our tedious earth. Imagination is for breaking cages. That's one of the ways we took ourselves out of the war, by living it half in our heads. So, in my book I wanted the reader to be always wondering, "is this the real part or made up?"

—

You remember that scene in *Full Metal Jacket* where the soldiers, so callously, dress up (and even name) one of the fallen enemies? Soldiers often engage in this type of macabre puppetry, yet the war-writer wants to work with a bit more respect and self-awareness than this. All this realism makes things feel more solemn, more like Hemingway. But soldiers aren't solemn.

The current American vice president dismissed the role of other, non-U.S. countries in GWOT. The current American president dismisses Canada as a sovereign nation. How do you see PR&DC as part of this conversation? Or do you?

Once upon a time, America was the light. You intervened all over the world and stood against dictators, mashed democracy down throats because, ironically, freedom mattered. We forgave

you that part of the American dream where you all wanted to be idiot billionaires who lived without consequence – there's always someone else to blame. Now I slap anyone who cracks a 51st state joke. Nobody's fucking laughing. My people went to war when the planes struck the towers and America called on us. I fought alongside my American brothers in Afghanistan – fully integrated into an international force. I sent helicopters to pick up your wounded.

The news never reached Vance that other countries fought in your wars, despite [the fucking Wikipedia article](#). Or pick up [a copy of my book](#) if you want to feel it. Make America Curious Again – you can start by learning who lost legs when those roadside bombs burst. How we lost friends and it cracked our minds like overpriced eggs. How, when we watered the desert with our blood for more than ten years, we killed for you over and over. And we died again and again.

America has suffered history's greatest con – only the idiot billionaires will escape consequence – the rest will pay the price. The meeting with President Zelensky showed the world that Trump is Putin's ass-puppet. Only the dimmest refuse to see this. Meanwhile, that great light that once lit the world has guttered.

I know American veterans still cling to honour. The world sorely needs your leadership to overthrow your ludicrous pirate-king, who so gleefully sold your country to Russia. Meanwhile, the idiot-billionaire class divvies the spoils, and, in a climax of irony, calls the working people “parasites.”

Ask any Canadian, particularly the veterans who fought in your wars, how they feel.

It's quite simple. You betrayed us.

I especially enjoyed how PR&DC captures the sense that we already know what is going to happen in a war story, but knowledge of the event beforehand doesn't make it any less surprising. It also is stuck on one of the central facts of war: We kill people in them. Why do you think this is difficult for people to get their head around? What does it say about people? Should we celebrate our willful ignorance or condemn it?

Yes, the killing isn't the surprise. It's what happens after the killing, when the killed don't stay properly dead. We developed all these tools so that we wouldn't feel the grief: they weren't even humans, just blurry, pixelated blobs. So sure, foreshadow is one of the tricks up the sleeve, but I wanted a proper haunting, rainbow handkerchiefs for miles, a ghost that plagues the story and the point of telling. The killing isn't the surprise at all. The grief is the surprise.

I remember when I came back from Afghanistan and went back to school for my MA. Many of my colleagues in peaceful Ottawa questioned my service, like there was no way military service of any sort could be honourable, even to aid a then-staunch ally. "What's the point of having a military?" they wondered. "The US will protect us." Some bleated that they believed in peace. I shake my head – no one wants peace harder than a soldier.

Now our old protector is gone and Canada eats the bitter pill of its own weakness. I personally don't believe in war but I went to make tough choices that only a feeling human could navigate, not a killbot. After, I helped create training modules for officers on the ethics of drone war.

Certainly, wars for oil or precious minerals are an abomination of morality. Afghanistan, though? After 9/11, overthrowing the (ruthless, backward) Taliban for sheltering Al-Qaeda was justified. Only after a year or two in the war did things start to get fucked up, when the war became a

bizarre act of post-colonial nation-building. We should have left that place long ago. Or stayed forever.

All that to say, keeping your hands clean in life is a tremendous privilege. Everyone who has a problem with my service can go fuck his hat.

We noticed a lot of word play and fascination with naming throughout. Can you expand on the importance of nick names and naming in art and the military? Why did you choose to include boxes that include the definitions of words not usually defined in military manuals?

The book functions as a sort of geometric proof on the theme of dehumanization. So when the narrator meets Noah, the “monster,” the steps towards shared humanity are small: first, gender. Second, name. Third, an exchange of stories. And so forth, in little nibbles, until Jones must accept Noah’s humanity (and indeed, friendship).

The honourable Major, concerned that killing is becoming “too easy,” insists that all “targets” be given human names. At the beginning, the name-game achieves its purpose, with semi-plausible names chosen for the drone-strike victims. But soon these names devolve into the names of famous betrayers, and eventually, in the hyper-sexualized language of the killing, the targets are all given “fuckable” names, like pornstars.

Your pirate king, Putin’s ass-puppet, plays the name-game very well. He knows the power of the cruel, undermining nickname, or the facetious sub-title, savage soundbytes. The bully’s oldest trick: these names plant seeds in people’s minds.

You may also notice the fun I have with my own name. For the last decade, this shitty, ubiquitous name has done me no favours getting traction as a writer. Indeed, it’s hard to

compete on Google with Matt Jones, NFL quarterback or Matt Jones, cancer researcher or Matt Jones, homicidal madman. So I had to own it, in the book – my common-ass name becomes a way for me to speak for an experience beyond myself. We are everyone. We are legion.

I enjoyed writing those little flash-fiction boxes, allowing me to unpack complex issues like “rules of engagement” or “escalation of force” for a civilian reader in a way that appeared, visually, bureaucratic, like a military memo. I also appreciate that my readers, like me, have an attention span of twelve seconds so those formal interruptions give the mind a pause, and allow me to dodge a boring info-dump. Finally, this also became a place I could subvert – the boxes, through edits, became wildly poetic spaces, sometimes confessional, meta-narrative critiques, and/or zones of play.

Monsters play a large role in PR&DC, different kinds of monsters, robotic, human, and monster monsters. Where did this interest in the monstrous come from? Do you see it as an allegory or as part of a certain literary tradition? Why Sasquatch?

I think it's a bit too tidy to reduce my Sasquatch to an allegory or hallucination – Noah needs to be all these things and also more. One of my most enjoyable games I played writing this book was to prolong this debate as long as possible: is he real?

The funny thing is – none of the characters in books are real. I made everyone up; even the Jones character is a composite of better, gentler humans, with a slice of a younger Matt thrown in. I took the Major's beauty from a friend who killed herself; her drive from a soldier I admired; her ethics from another officer. Literally every character in every novel is a word-puppet dancing on sentence strings, so let's not get it twisted.

The danger of a non-human character is naturally that it will break the suspension of disbelief and readers will pop out of the book with sour looks on their faces like they smelled a fart. I say, if you want to write a character that doesn't seem real you have to double, nay triple, your efforts to make them real. Noah has a voice, a history, a mythology, a minutely described body.

And indeed, without him, it would just be a grizzly war story with scene after scene of heartbreaking ultraviolence. It's not the kind of book I'd like to read and I doubt I would have survived writing it. I wrote Noah to tell the story honestly. I wrote Noah because he's real.

Hold onto your asses: Jung writes about "the shadow" as the part of our own psyche that we frantically repress. So, as dudes we might repress our weakness or our cowardice or our kinks, or anything else culture said was wrong. Our efforts to hide our terrible qualities backfire; the things we flushed into the poo pond resurface; Guantanamo Bay lurks just over the horizon.

You might say the post-colonial legacy is a shadow of America. You might say Canada's is a smug, sanctimonious pacifism. You might say the fact they got conned is a shadow of MAGA. Noah takes it one step further – his shadow threatens to overwhelm him constantly, but this is simply life. That is me writing this and you reading this. Individual level but also our nations and institutions.

It's the denial of the shadow that fucks us up. It's the successful integration that indicates we've grown wise and let me argue this is the challenge of veterans everywhere. Our massive shadows, that deep world-weariness, the cynicism, the black humour, the contempt for softness: it's nearly impossible to integrate. That's why coming home is so hard.

The deployment no-fraternization policy plays a large role in PR&DC. So does sex. Why have there been so few military books concerned with sex? Or willing to talk about it in the honest ways that PR&DC does?

“Killing was quotidian, but touch was taboo.” Killing was right and just and true, something that “made a difference.” Meanwhile, even married couples, deployed together, were expected to maintain professional distance, Kevlar chastity belts. Not even allowed to soothe each other.

Science says monkeys fed from bottles dangling from wire frames will always prefer the metal skeleton wrapped in fur over bare steel. History says every time we dam the life-impulse it explodes into something nastier – the chastity of some infamous Catholic priests.

When I wrote PR&DC, it was under the working title “Drones.” On one hand, yeah, I was nodding to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. On the other, it was to us – the humans – who weren’t actually bees or ants in a hive, not controlled by the hive queen’s megamind. A drone follows orders; a soldier, often, doesn’t. A drone can kill without grief; a soldier, can’t.

Military culture strives to silence those empathy-producing nodes in our minds that inhibit the killing. A human being is more than a bundle of memorized processes that make murder easy. We are more than complex weapons, speaking in a sanitized language, feeling nothing. That’s how lovemaking became a radical act. How it became sacred.

PR&DC makes use of glossaries and helpfully defines military terms throughout, but also seems to be caught on an essential failure to communicate on the part of all the characters, maybe starting with the drones themselves. Everyone often feels very lonely even

though they are together all the time. Why? How come many veterans tend to remember deployments as moments when they were not lonely?

Some soldiers can't get enough of war. They keep running back to it, like a rat to electrified cheese. Perhaps because the civilian world is constantly screaming at soldiers to expose their emotional worlds, and by the time the soldier has a tour or two under his belt there's a whole iceberg of pain under the surface. But one can continue to incubate in the cocoon of the war, surrounded by other numbed-out dudes, and so feel nothing forever. Or this is the fantasy, until the soldier's personal life finally intrudes on his working life, the family stands in for the shadow, embodying the repressed parts of self, and spills into the waking world.

Or I'm projecting the loneliness thing. Maybe I was lonely in war because I was an empath who got lost, took the wrong plane, and ended up on Afghanistan by mistake. So naturally, being surrounded by shut-down humans is lonely. Or maybe I was lonely in war because I spent most of my twenties physically enormous and so loneliness is a wound I carry everywhere. Or blame the no-fraternization policy and the way we starved for touch for no reason. The walls they set up between us. Or maybe I worked the night shift, so the day-worker infrastructure didn't accommodate. Or maybe the most acceptable pastimes – video games, drinking, gambling, porn – are profoundly numbing and disconnecting.

I always feel stupid saying "trigger warning" as I promote this book, since there's a freakin' drone on the cover, but there is also non-sacred sex: a brutal predator who preys on men. There's one character who seems to go willingly into this situation, showing up a certain place and time, Stockholm syndrome. That probably seems impossible until you take a good look at America as the idiot billionaires busily dismantle the protections for the working class. I saw on the news last week they shut down the Department of Education. Because the

stupefaction of the people was only mostly complete, so I guess you needed a little shove. The MAGAs are right on the cusp now of realizing they've been duped, but look how they cum so obligingly, and beg for a second and then a third round, and shout down anyone who tries to intervene in their ongoing rape.

Did I mention Canada has no interest in joining your idiocracy?

I too have been haunted by the image of blurry bodies running away from our drones on Tactical Operation Centre (TOC) screens. Thank you for having the courage to see through this story of one person on the far side of the screen. It couldn't have been easy to write something as human and delightfully strange as PR&DC after a deployment experience you yourself describe as "an empty lake with jagged edges where nothing grows." Do you have any words of advice for any writers just starting out on this journey? Whether back from a war long ago or at the front line (or screen) of one right now?

For veterans who want to write: any new craft takes seven years for mastery – there are no shortcuts. I don't give two shits if your Commanding Officer praised your Progress Evaluation Reports, or your boss gave you a hundred attaboys for your incisive memos. Attend workshops ([mine is monthly, international, by-donation](#)) and read books on craft. Bounce your ideas off other writers and take their feedback. Go back to school. Read every book in your genre. Stop flexing in the mirror and try to look yourself in the eyes. Maybe you keep sliding away from yourself. Maybe along the path you became an emotional cripple, too. Water your withered wit with therapy, meditation, time in nature.

The goal, at some point, is to transition from being a veteran

who writes, into a writer who veterans. Somewhere along the path you'll find that writing, like any form of creativity, is one of the paths to protect and foster your mental health, too. You'll get so used to working through the knots in your mind that when you finally sack up and sit in front of the therapist, you'll chunder a spray of trauma, half-digested hotdog, and pure healing. I used that last oxford comma because I'm still pissed off at America.

You don't go into war with just a grenade, or just a sniper rifle – you want the best tool for the situation. Grammar is the same. Read “Eats Shoots and Leaves” and master the whole grammar toolbox; thank me after. Stab yourself in the leg with a ballpoint pen whenever you stumble into a comma splice, or let a lazy double hyphen replace a dash. When you read a book let a part of your mind hang loose, watching, observing, noting, and carefully stealing twigs. Soon you will discover all of life is a book and a sneaky magpie within builds a nest.

I mentioned Noah, in PR&DC, is the only character who's real. He's also one of the main storytellers. Finally, he suffers enough and gives up the craft. He throws a soggy, severed arm at the narrator and growls: “Stories don't bring people back to life.”

If you've lost some friends to war or suicide or whatever else, let me repeat that it doesn't matter how good you get in craft – those friends are gone. “But I just want to see them one more time,” you say. Fine, do whatever the fuck you want. I know from experience you'll be lonelier after. Maybe you gotta dig your friend up a few hundred times and bury them over and over to accept they're gone. Maybe you need to make a shrine like I did.

Don't let your writing give you an excuse not to heal. Stories don't bring people back to life.

Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).



New Fiction by Abu B. Rafique: The Madman of Sheen Bagh



The little mountain-village known as Sheen Bagh sat right on the border. So exact was the placement that the people in the village often did not claim either country that surrounded their home, but simply stated that they were from Sheen Bagh and that the borders had been built around them and not the other way around. Regardless, a tattered Pakistani flag waved from one of the walls surrounding the village, though it could never be certain who had placed it there and when. No local had ever cared enough to take it down.

Sheen Bagh and its people did not simply live in the space between borders, they also lived in the middle of countless conflicts. Twenty years ago, the government in Pakistan had decided that this region was where radical militants were based. This decision led to their allies also agreeing that this was, indeed, the area where their enemies must be. And in a turn of cruel fate, the militants they were looking for decided that since this region was frequented by several different enemy troops looking for them, it was the perfect

place to engage them.

No matter whose decision was more foolish or ill informed, the countless villages, townships, and other localities suffered as a result. Sheen Bagh, along with most of the valley and borderlands, had been torn apart by fighting. The land lay barren for the most part since continuous bombing and skirmishes had blasted apart the meadows and valleys, leaving them upturned and a dry brown, with only the skeletons of the oldest trees left standing. When the winters came, the fighting was stopped, since nobody but the people living in the mountains knew how to traverse the dangerous terrain in the snow and bitter cold. And come springtime, when the valleys thawed out, as the first flowers started poking through the cracks in the ground, the bombs would begin falling once again and smother them before they could fully bloom.

Even the Pakistani flag that hung on Sheen Bagh's wall was not green, but black from years of ash and dust settling on it. Only the crescent moon and star symbols on it retained a bit of their original white color under their now mostly brown hue.

As jarring as all of this was, none of this was the strangest thing about Sheen Bagh. The strangest thing about Sheen Bagh was a man named Ghamay Jaan, who was living in a crumbling and abandoned building that had once served as a jewelry shop. Ghamay Jaan was a man who was deeply in love but, to the people of Sheen Bagh, he was utterly insane. A tall, lanky man in his early forties who wore a dirty, gray turban wrapped around his long, mostly white hair and who dressed in a simple, blue tunic and shalwar. His boots were torn and their color was unidentifiable and on the middle and ring fingers of his right hand he wore two silver rings with faded, black stones.

The older townsfolk could recall the man's childhood, back

when he was as normal as anyone else. A quieter but still happy child who played football and went to school and raced horses just like the other children. When he was around fourteen or so, both of Ghamay Jaan's parents fell ill and within that year, both died. This left Ghamay Jaan to be herded around to different relatives for the next two years until he wound up right back where he had started, in Sheen Bagh. A cousin of his mother's had moved back to the village and had agreed to take the boy in on the condition that she be allowed to find him a wife when he turned seventeen.

The death of his parents had already triggered the beginning of what everyone would label as Ghamay Jaan's insanity. He hardly spoke back then and if he did, it was never more than a few words at a time. Despite still being a young boy, his hair had begun to whiten at the ends and this showed in his sparse, new facial hairs as well. 'Grief can color deeply sometimes,' an elder had remarked one day to a friend when they saw the boy walking home from the store.

He was also seen talking to himself quite often and after a couple of years of living with the aunt, Ghamay Jaan developed a habit of wandering off without any warning. Word of this, just like word of anything else in a small town, spread rather quickly and people began to regard Ghamay Jaan with a mix of pity and mild fear. All of this served to eliminate any chance of his aunt marrying him off to anyone from the village and so she spent another year or so trying to find prospective brides in other towns and villages in the region. Nothing ever came of these efforts; the families of the young women would find out one way or another about the young man's afflictions, or they'd see them firsthand if they made it to the point of meeting with Ghamay Jaan in person. There was no hope to be had and so Ghamay Jaan's final guardian simply packed up and left Sheen Bagh, leaving Ghamay Jaan behind, for a return to a less difficult life in the capital city.

It was shortly after this that the fighting began, and Sheen

Bagh fell victim to the continuous violence, that Ghamay Jaan's insanity took complete hold. Nearly every night, bombs and rockets and gunfire went off on the outskirts of the village, shaking the surrounding fields and lower mountain ranges. Shouts would echo through the night in vibrating tremors of Pashto and Urdu and English, all blending into the same dull ringing in the ears. And every few days, the destruction would breach the walls of the village and bring death with it. Bombs and rockets would explode in the center square; stray gunfire would rip through the stones of the wall and the stones of buildings and houses; the locals would scream and run and duck for cover. And they would pray: the loudest of the prayers being shouted out by those who found themselves engulfed in flames from an explosion, or blasted in several different directions from the force of a bomb, or torn through a dozen different ways by hot gunfire.

Sometimes, the militants in the region would storm the townsfolk, accusing them of helping their enemies, of betraying the Almighty, or simply because they needed to rob the locals of their supplies. It was like this in all the towns and villages of the region, not just Sheen Bagh, and it became a new cultural norm after several years for everyone, boys, men, women, and girls alike, to be taught how to swing a sword. This was not to fight off the militants, but simply to behead them as they entered through the gates. The locals learned the hard way that to shoot them as they entered came with the risk of setting off an explosive strapped to a suicide bomber.

Every morning, after the violence settled, the locals would tend to their dead. Ghamay Jaan would stumble around helping, just like everyone else. He would carry the mangled remains to the mosque so they could be buried, and he would grab a clean cloth and a bucket of water and go around the village, wiping blood off walls.

One evening, around the time the shelling and firing would

usually start, he saw a glimpse of dark hair from a rooftop right above him. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he looked in the direction of the distant, fading moon. It was right past the edge of the rooftop and he saw another glimpse of hair. It was fleeting, but curiosity urged him on and Ghamay Jaan reached up to the wall and then grabbed the edge of the rooftop. He pulled himself up to where he could just barely look over the edge and, in an instant, he fell in love. Letting go of the wall with a laugh, the man fell backwards onto the ground and lay there laughing and smiling up at the evening sky.

He had moved into the building that very night, hoping the woman would come down eventually, and this was where he had been ever since. The old jewelry shop, housing the village madman who fell in love at first sight.

The villagers, at first, could not figure out what woman had taken to the man enough for him to fall in love and apparently move in with her. In the moments of calm between the violence of their day-to-day lives, they asked each other; they listened for rumors, gossip, anything that might tell them the truth of this curious matter. A few men asked Ghamay Jaan himself one day when they saw him at the market, singing loudly to himself while he bought fruit. 'Let us meet your new wife, Ghamay Jaan. Let us congratulate her and welcome her to the village,' said one of the men.

Ghamay Jaan simply laughed loudly and said, 'F00LS! Do you think a beauty like Ghamay Jaan's is around all the time to meet the likes of you? Ha! Ha! No, no, she'll come at night. She only comes at night!' and he pointed up into the sky and the men along with some of the marketgoers glanced up into the air.

'What're you talking about, you madman?!' cried one voice.

'Last night her face was half hidden! Veiled! She was so high

up, how could none of you see?! You're all blind, BLIND! My eyes always find her, always!' and Ghamay Jaan laughed, throwing a few coins at the fruit stall owner before dashing out of the marketplace.

The villagers spent a few hours in confusion, convinced that Ghamay Jaan had lost his mind entirely and was now simply at a new point in his mania. Some of them wondered if the constant fighting and death hadn't finally shattered whatever remained of the man's psyche. It wasn't until the sunset prayers that one of the villagers pointed up in the air and cried out 'Look!' And immediately, everyone understood. 'The fool thinks the moon is a woman!' these words rippled through the village and, by nightfall, everyone was touched with a mixture of alarm and amusement.

'Maybe someone should see about getting that man to a hospital in the city,' said one of the elder-women of the village with concern in her voice.

'Oh please, Khala Jaan. This is no issue; we have bigger problems! We have to survive here, don't we? How can we worry about carrying some mad fool to a city? If he's happy, let him love his moon-woman. So long as he doesn't hurt anyone or get in anyone's way when we're trying to survive all this fighting,' said a young man who had realized the truth of the matter after prayers. Everyone else murmured in agreement and so it was decided, Ghamay Jaan would be left alone, as usual.

But Ghamay Jaan himself couldn't care less what the villagers decided to do; he was content. He would whisper snippets of poetry while laying on his back, gazing up at the moon every night. In his eyes, she turned her head and pushed her long dark hair back, blushing and smiling at his words. Sometimes she would even reach down from high up in the sky and touch his weathered cheek. 'I love you so much, my Ghamay Jaan,' she would say. And this would cause a warmth strong enough to make Ghamay Jaan think he could sit through the entire winter with

ease.

The problem became apparent to everyone the next time the village fell victim to shelling from the mountains. As usual, everyone scrambled for shelter. And Ghamay Jaan, laying in the jewelry shop, suddenly saw something bright fly out of the Moon's hands to the Earth below. He ran from the shop, heading in the direction of the fire and panting hard before someone tackled him around the knees and pinned him to the ground. 'Where are you going?!' cried the man who had tackled him.

'Let me go! Let me go!' cried Ghamay Jaan, 'She has sent a gift for me! She has! I have to go get it!'

'You'll be killed you fool!' But Ghamay Jaan would not hear it; he struggled and fought the man on top of him before the man swung his fist into Ghamay Jaan's face and knocked him out.

A few others were called over and together they all dragged Ghamay Jaan's unconscious form to the mosque where all the corpses were. 'The madman thinks his Moon is throwing gifts down for him!' said the man who had tackled him.

'What are we meant to do now? Is someone supposed to watch this lunatic every night now? Don't we have enough troubles?!' roared another

'Let him die! So what?'

'Ya Khudaya! Fear Allah, Ghamay Jaan is his creation like the rest of us. He cannot help what he is. You would just let him die?' said an elder who had known Ghamay Jaan since childhood.

The village people argued back and forth while they tended to their dead that night. Half were set on leaving Ghamay Jaan to whatever fate awaited him, the other half thought to shake the man out of his latest bout of insanity. So absorbed were they all in their dispute that they didn't notice Ghamay Jaan get

up and limp back to the jewelry shop. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he sobbed, staring up at the sky. Moon was not out yet, shadows of stars were beginning to peek through, and somewhere just beyond the lowest clouds, Moon was descending to her perch. Ghamay Jaan could not see her yet; he hobbled over to the ancient sink in the corner and washed his face and performed his ablutions. He prayed in the corner and by the time he finished, he could see her in the sky again.

Ghamay Jaan knew what he would do; he snuck out of the shop and circled the village, walking near the outskirts and watching as candles were lit in people's homes and fires in their courtyards. He knew they were preparing for the night, bracing themselves for what might happen. He knew the sandbags would be piled near what remained of the front walls to try and hold back any damage. And he also knew that the villagers all now kept their horses in an old building towards the back end of the village, as far back from the usual areas of damage as they could without setting the beasts free entirely.

He approached the building slowly, pulling some old sugar candies out of his pocket. It took him a little while to find a horse that didn't rear its legs up at his approach; it was a small, dark brown horse. And Ghamay Jaan spoke to it quietly, holding the candies up to its mouth and waiting for it to eat them before he reached out and patted the muzzle. Once the horse bowed its head, Ghamay Jaan led it out of the little hut and swung his legs over the back. He held the reins and looked up at the sky, waiting.

Moon turned her face to look at him; her head rested against her hand and she smiled, her lips parted, and she called out 'Ghamay...' and Ghamay Jaan felt his heart beat so furiously that he could taste it. She nodded her head, beckoning to him, her lampshade earrings bobbing between the stars in the sky. Ghamay Jaan praised Allah and squeezed his heels into his horse's sides; they began to trot along and Ghamay Jaan urged the horse along, flicking the reins with both hands. The horse

began to run with Ghamay Jaan crouching down low in the saddle. He sped through the village, alarming everyone who quickly dove out of the way or stepped out of their homes to see who was going by. Before the villagers could finish calling out his name, Ghamay Jaan sped through the village entrance and onto the dirt road leading through the mountains.

When he glanced up at Moon he could only laugh with triumph and he could see the bemused expression on her face as well; she knew her Ghamay was heading towards her. 'A gift! I want a gift! I want whatever you'll give me! I want you forever!' he cried up to her with happiness as he tore through the valley.

A short distance away, perched on one of the cliff edges holding the caves that surrounded Sheen Bagh and the rest of the valley, an American soldier held his rifle up to his gaze. Through the scope, he could see a man riding along on a horse at quite a pace, but it was a strange sight, for the man had no weapons on him that he could see. No ammunition or explosives at all either. The soldier's finger rested on the trigger and he glanced back at his commanding officer, who was busy some feet away going over a map of the valley with a translator. Was this worth getting the commanding officer's attention over? He looked back at the figure on the horse as it rode into a thicket of trees; he might have sworn he heard a voice crying out and saying something but there was no way to be certain. The moment had passed, the figure was gone.

The soldier took his finger off the trigger and shouldered the rifle. No threat at all, it seemed.

New Interview from Larry Abbott: “The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen”

Art After War: The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen

As the memory of U.S. participation in the Afghanistan War fades in the minds of most Americans (the report on the exit fiasco notwithstanding), there was probably even less awareness that the military did not “go it alone” but had NATO allies, including Denmark (which entered the war 2001), one of the twelve founding nations in 1949. In Afghanistan the Danish military suffered 43 deaths from combat injuries, with 214 wounded in action. The raw number is low compared to the U.S. but was the highest number of deaths any country suffered if considered per capita, and so had an outsized impact.

That the Danish participation in the war still looms large in the country is reflected in an installation at The Danish War Museum in Copenhagen, which developed *A Distant War – A Danish Soldier in Afghanistan* over 10 years ago. It reflects an on-going presence of the war and its aftermath, a memory embodied in a physical space.

Mai Stenbjerg Jensen, the curator, told me that “the exhibition was made in collaboration with the Danish Armed Forces, more precisely with soldiers from ISAF team 10. Objects in the exhibition have all been brought home directly from Afghanistan. The exhibition shows the Danish soldier’s journey during a deployment to Afghanistan. The story is told from the soldiers’ perspective” (personal communication, July 4, 2023). The exhibit follows a ternary pattern of a soldier

going to war, in country, and back home.

The return home to civilian life can be problematic, as soldiers of any country's forces can be affected by PTSD. In the same way that the war for the American public is largely forgotten, the effects of war on the individual are likewise ignored or misunderstood by the broader civilian population. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and alienation. For many vets, the arts can offer a pathway to understanding their feelings of estrangement upon return by creating a visual or verbal representation of those feelings. Another intention of veterans' artistic creation is to share their work with both the general public and with other vets. The artwork can provide the non-vet with a window into the veterans' war and post-war experiences, helping to bridge the vet/non-vet divide, while sharing their work with other vets can both inspire and create a sense of community, thus reducing that sense of isolation and estrangement.

Henrik Andersen, now 40, served in the Danish army for 15 years and was deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan from February to August 2017. He had the rank of Specialist. When he returned home he was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. He decided that he would use artwork as a way of dealing with the various levels of how the diagnosis affected his daily life. Starting on January 1, 2022 and until December of that year he created a new watercolor each day. He notes in an artist's statement: "Follow my painted diary for better or for worse with my daily companion PTSD. A new picture every day in 2022 that both describes my world in and around me."



Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen told me that “the diary concept was one my wife came up with, and for me a way to express myself daily through both good and bad days with a troubled PTSD mind, the thoughts, the emotions and sense of things which made an impact that particular day. I usually made the picture at the end of the day to make sure I got the most important impact of the day down on paper. It’s sometimes really hard to go to a mentally neutral place when you’re filled with anger, depression and loneliness. To empty your mind of judgmental thoughts and emotions and find that one thing that mattered just that day, that in itself can become therapeutic.”

He continued: “It would be really nice for me to be able to reach as many veterans as possible with my art. I hope that it will make a difference and maybe even inspire others and others like me, who are battling with the aftermath of their deployment, to inspire others to find new ways to express their daily struggle. Even though I have my Instagram account, I’ve still not reached out to as many as I would like to. I do think it is an important message to get out to veterans and their families, that there are other ways to express yourself than you might think. My artwork is very personal to me, and it was a big deal for me to go public with it. It is meant as a daily diary in pictures and every day a new picture in 2022. My wife convinced me to make it public through Instagram, so I would post a new picture, describing my day emotionally or physically.”

 Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen is not a formally-trained artist. He was adept at drawing and painting from childhood and was influenced by an eclectic mix of comics, the figures in *Warhammer*, movies, and the classical sculptures and paintings in museums. Regardless

of the medium or the genre he was always interested in how a thought, a question, or an emotion could be expressed. To him, the work begins with an idea and then the manner of expression evolves from the initial idea. The finished product, he says “comes from trial and error, both so rewarding and frustrating.”

He does not plan any of his daily images but rather allows spontaneous moments to guide his work. The images are diverse, ranging from the relatively realistic to surrealistic to expressionistic. Even though they are created to reflect what Petersen is experiencing on any particular day they are not merely solipsistic and self-referential; they become a visual correlative that take on a broader meaning. The titles to the works help in this regard.



Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

The early pictures set the tone for much of the rest of the year. “Angsten og Vreden del. 1/The Anxiety and the Anger part. 1” is dated January 2, 2022, and depicts a fragment of a face in profile, just a nose and a wide-open mouth in a scream, with a ball of reddish-colored smoke emanating from the mouth.



“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness”

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness” (January 3) depicts an empty chair in a barren room; a day later,

“Fjernsynet viser ingenting/TV is Showing Nothing,” a TV set in a bare gray room has a blank green screen, connoting that there is nothing worthwhile being presented. Each depicts a sense of emptiness and the inability of some vets to reintegrate into the broader civilian society. “Mareridt i rodt, derefter sort/ Nightmare in Red, Then Black,” completed a few days later, shows a bleak, war-torn landscape with a few burned trees in red, mirroring a burned-out psychological landscape.



“Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot”

The January 5 work “Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot” refers to the physical impact of PTSD, and suggests that PTSD affects the vet not just psychologically but also physically.

As the year progresses the imagery takes on different dimensions. A few works show recognizable scenes, like the river and bridge of “Ude for at se verden/ Out To See The World” (February 21), a floodlight on a lone power pole (“Sidst i rækken/Last in line,” March 6), steps going down a tunnel (“Sidst i rækken/ What happens if you look inside,” April 15), a dilapidated house with collapsed roof (“Ja der er brug for genopbygning/ Yes rebuilding is needed,” October 11), and an isolated cabin (“Hyggeligt uhyggeligt/Cozy Cozy,” October 14). Interestingly, none of these scenes include people, and even in “Cozy Cozy” there is a sense of isolation and remoteness, while in “What happens if you look inside” there is an intimation of foreboding as the steps lead to emptiness.

Faces, especially the eyes, and stylized bodies figure in a number of works, a few of which are self-portraits. "Sidder her bare del. 1, 2, 3/Just sitting here sharing 1, 2, 3" (August 26, 28, 29), is a triptych of sorts. The first two panels depict a skeletal figure sitting on a rock leaning its skull on its right "hand." In 1, the background is a washed-out gray. The same figure is in panel 2, but some color has been added. In the third panel the figure is in the same posture but is now fleshed out in green. There are three human figures in the October 21 "Bare en fornemmelse/Just a Feeling." The figures, in foreground, midground, and background, are dressed in brown and wear neckties, but are faceless. The two closest figures have flames around their feet, while the figure in the background is engulfed in flames. The figures appear impassive, accepting pain and death. "Sådan føler jeg mig/This is how i feel" (October 30) is a self-portrait. The figure is fleshed, not skeletal, yet the posture is reminiscent of the skeletons in "Just sitting here sharing 1 and 2." The eyes are wide and the face anguished, suggesting the pain caused by PTSD. Although the title "Trivialiteten er skræmmende/Triviality is scary" (February 8) might be considered a bit strange, it points toward the inability to fully reintegrate into the daily minutiae of civilian life. In this self-portrait, the predominant feature in the multicolored, somewhat blurred face are the eyes. Similar to other works, the eyes are wide, staring, fearful. In the July 23 "Selvportræt/Self-portrait" the face is disembodied, outlined in gray and framed by red, and seems to be floating in the clouds over mountains, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation from the world.



"Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection"

There is also a self-portrait entitled “Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection” from October 11. There is a disembodied head attached to tendrils with a green object next to the cheek. Both of these works connote a sense of loss, even a dissociation from one’s own body.



“Drukner på land/Drowning on land”

Much of the work has an abstract quality. “Drukner på land/Drowning on land” (November 10) depicts shapes of blue and brown, yet the title reveals a sense of struggle and suffocation. The November 2 “Tankespin/Mind spin” is a burst of reds, and represents both the explosions of war on the battlefield and in the mind. “Hvor brænder det ?//Where does it burn?” (August 20-22) is another series in three parts. In each piece, stylized and intermixed dark and lighter blue smoke rises from what could be hills. Looking closely at the first panel one sees what could be disembodied eyes in the smoke. In part 2 the eyes become a bit more pronounced. In part 3 an outline of a face in dark red, with what appears to be bared fang-like teeth, is revealed in the smoke. There is an agonized expression on the face. Again, the burning can refer to the destruction of war and also to a mind on fire.

Not all the watercolors represent negative emotions. The March 8, “Et sølsomt lille væsen er mødt op/A happy little creature has appeared” shows a rabbit in a field. In “Foråret kommer nu/Spring is coming” from March 9 a sprig of green grows out of a finger on a green hand, showing the regenerative power of Nature. There is the playful “Guleroden er der, jeg kan se den nu/ The carrot is there, I can see it now” (April 4); a teddy bear is the subject of the October 18 “Ren kærlighed/Pure love”; likewise, a bird is the subject of “Maskot/Mascot”

(November 10). These more “gentle” works indicate that even with the traumatic aftereffects of war there is the possibility for beauty and clarity.

As he looks back on his visual diary he told me “this picture [the April 1 “Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”] and others like it, of a withered, sick hand, gives a new meaning after I tried to take my own life in February 2023, and the attempt left me with exactly that, and really makes me think about the dual meaning in a lot of my pictures. I’ll admit that I didn’t succeed every day, but it was just as important to some days paint through a veil of tears or immense anger. I haven’t continued in 2023 with the diary but I am still painting, it is my little safe zone through the day and it has a calming effect to put paint on paper, the colors and the brush don’t expect anything from me, and as long as I don’t try to force something on to the paper it’s very fulfilling and stressless. My pictures surprise me in ways I would never have imagined.”



“Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”]



The range of Andersen’s images offers a broad insight into the post-war experience, including the effects of PTSD. His images reveal the uncertainty and tenuousness of what any particular day will bring. At the same time, the very act of creation becomes a shield or bulwark against this uncertainty and provides a sense of order, not only in the finished product but also in the process itself, which provides a structure that my otherwise be lacking.

All statements by Mr. Andersen were from correspondence with him on October 7, 10 and 11, 2023.

All artwork images courtesy of Henrik Andersen.

All photographs of Andersen courtesy of Mads Ullerup.

Images available on Instagram: [henrikerladetmedptsd](#)

References:

Danish casualties:
<https://politiken.dk/udland/art4788077/Danmark-mister-flest-soldater-i-Afghanistan>

A *Distant War*:
<https://en.natmus.dk/museums-and-palaces/danish-war-museum/exhibitions/a-distant-war/>

Mads Ullerup, "With Paintbrush and PTSD," October 22, 2022,
<https://www.veteracentret.dk/da/nyheder/2022/med-pensel-og-ptsd/>

The Oscar-nominated Danish film *Krigen* (*A War*; 2015, directed by Tobias Lindholm), with echoes of "*Breaker Morant*," examines the moral quandaries that war occasions and reveals that these dilemmas occur regardless of the size of a nation's forces.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/movies/tobias-lindholm-narrates-a-scene-from-a-war.html>

Peter Molin's "Strike Through

the Mask!": Interment at Arlington



The vet read that the hero's burial ceremony in Arlington Cemetery was taking place the following Tuesday. As it happened, the vet was going to be in Arlington, the county in Virginia, that day and he had known the hero. They had taught together at West Point, and thought the vet was senior to the hero and they didn't socialize outside of department functions, a couple of episodes had offered closer looks at him. Among other things, the hero was on the softball team coached by the vet in their last summer together.

The hero played left field, an important position in softball. The leftfielder has to catch the long drives hit by the opposing team's best right-handed hitters. That summer, the hero chased down those towering shots, or circled under them, until he reared them in. It never seemed like a sure thing, honestly, but the hero almost always got them. The hero was fast, too, so he batted lead-off or second in the line-up. He was not a home-run hitter, but could easily turn a single into a double if the opposing team did not field the ball cleanly or hesitated for a moment.

But the hero was not a hero for his softball ability. Early in the post-9/11 wars he had protested the interrogation tactics used by members of his platoon when they questioned detainees in Afghanistan. Brutality, let's just say torture, was forbidden by policy and regulation, but now appeared to be a tolerated standard practice. The hero sought clarification first from his chain-of-command and then from the highest governmental levels in Washington. He then took his concerns to a human-rights watchdog group in New York. The hero had been celebrated for doing so by many and was even been named a

“Man of the Year” by Time magazine. Others, however, considered him a troublemaker. Couldn't he have addressed the problem other than by writing politicians and advocacy groups? The vet wondered how he might have handled the same situation.

At West Point, the vet had seen the hero lead a philosophy workshop. He was laser focused, deeply logical, and profoundly aware of competing factors and viewpoints, which he would unpack in detail in front of the workshop attendees. As he spoke, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The furious physical expenditure of mental energy was endearing. The vet had read comments by the hero's former students and it was clear the hero's students had been in awe of him. In the workshop, watching him give birth to the intricacies of an argument, it was easy to see why. The vet also understood why a woman, a colleague, loved the hero and eventually married him.

At the end of his tour at West Point, the hero left the Army after 15 years on active duty. He said he had enough of the military and now wanted to study philosophy as a civilian.

But the years after the Army did not go well. First gradually, then quickly, the hero's life disintegrated. In the beginning, he excelled in graduate school, but then his work grew erratic and unsubtle. He picked fights with other scholars and his marriage fell apart. Eventually the hero lost his apartment and was several times detained by the police for public outbursts of craziness. He was hospitalized more than once, but because he had left the Army before retiring, and it was not clear that his present maladies were service-related, the VA was slow to assume care for him. Subject to the vagrancies of state-provided mental care, he was in-and-out of institutions.

Friends from the military tried to help. So did childhood friends and distinguished professors who had been impressed by the hero's early work and potential. The decline continued,

however, and as so often happens, the hero resisted efforts by others to help him. Toward the end, his grip on what Poe once called "the precincts of reality" was tenuous. In 2021, he was found dead in his room at a mental hospital. The exact cause of his death remains unclear. Was it too much or the wrong kind of medication? Was it suicide? Did his mind and body just give out?

Now the vet sat in his car alongside other cars lined up outside the burial office at Arlington Cemetery. He knew how these interments happened, because the previous summer he had been in attendance for the interment of a childhood friend's mother alongside her husband, a Korean War-era vet, who had died years earlier. The vet had known his friend's father well and knew how much his Army service meant to him, along with the prospect of burial at Arlington. He also knew the interment process to be an orderly and dignified one that respected the deceased and his or her family members. Still, that interment had been a markedly casual event, with little ceremony or eulogizing of the departed. The vet had enjoyed the company of his friend and his two children, who were now adults and whom he had not seen in decades. The cemetery official was a retired Army paratrooper, and the vet, who had also been a paratrooper, bandied with the official about their airborne days. Only when the cemetery official opened the columbarium "niche," as the square burial vaults are called, where the ashes of his friend's father lay waiting for his wife to join him, did the vet feel the momentousness of the event.

On cue, the procession of cars began to snake through the cemetery to the burial location. The hero was also to be interred in a columbarium niche, but there would be a service before the interment. A tent was set up among the gravestones to provide shade for the hero's immediate family, along with chairs for them to sit in. Others in attendance, about fifty, stood in the sun, though for a summer day in Virginia it was

neither hot nor humid. Off in the distance, the vet could see the Pentagon, which seemed ironically appropriate. An Army chaplain, a woman, stood waiting, along with a small detail of uniformed soldiers poised to fold the flag covering the hero's burial urn. About 100 yards away stood a platoon-sized honor guard and a military band. Also present was a firing squad and bugler. The vet recognized a couple of teachers from West Point with whom he and the hero had taught, but not anyone else he knew. The attendees seemed composed equally of family and friends who looked like they might have either served with the hero or been his students. Only a couple of attendees were in uniform—none especially high-ranking.

The chaplain called the service to order. She said kind words about the hero without shying away from the controversies that marked his service and his sad final days. She read from Romans 8:28: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" When she finished, the detail folded the flag and presented it to the hero's father. The bugler played Taps and the firing squad fired a three-round salute. Then the chaplain asked for a volunteer to carry the urn containing hero's ashes to the columbarium. At first no one volunteered, and the vet wondered if it was appropriate if he stepped forward. Then the hero's father said that he would carry his son's remains.

The vet had read that the hero's father was a former Marine Corps machine-gunner and a Vietnam veteran. He had also read that the father hated the military and had been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was the only male at the ceremony not formally dressed or in military attire. Confined to a wheelchair, wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, the hero's father exuded determination that his son's life was worthy of military honor.

As the procession walked to the columbarium, the band played a song that sounded like the Elvis Presley classic "Love Me Tender." It's a sweet song, but the vet wondered at the selection. Only later did he learn that the melody belonged

first to a song called "Army Blue" that predated "Love Me Tender" and was long associated with West Point.

The columbarium at Arlington Cemetery has its own kind of dignity, but it's narrow for the purposes of a ceremonial gathering. The previous summer, at the vet's friend's mother's interment, there was only the cemetery official, the friend, and the friend's son and daughter. Now the attendees squeezed into the row between the walls of burial niches or looked on from the ends of the rows. More words were said, but from the vet's position it was hard to hear them. After final remarks were completed, attendees filed past the niche and paid their last respects.

The vet had so far viewed the day's events abstractly, almost without emotion or consolidated articulation of his thoughts about the hero. But when his turn came to stand before the urn in its dark square final resting place, tears welled up and the vet suddenly found himself both short of breath and short of words. Conscious that others were waiting in line behind him, he stammered under his breath, "Good job man, good job" and moved on.

Following the ceremony, the vet spoke with his friends from West Point and a couple of others present. Someone pointed out former students of the hero's. Another pointed out the childhood friend who had gone to the most length to organize help for the hero in his troubled final days. No ready opportunity to speak with the hero's family presented itself, and the vet was hesitant to force the issue. A reception was announced, but the vet didn't get the location and had already decided he would not attend.

An official announced it was time to for the procession to depart and the attendees in their cars drove slowly toward the cemetery gates.

On the way out of the cemetery, the vet saw signs directing

traffic to the Marine Corps War Memorial. It had been a long time since he had visited the memorial, so he followed the signs to the parking lot. He walked around the grounds, read the signage, and contemplated the magnificent statue of the six soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The crowd was sparse: a few casually-attired tourists and some vet old-timers wearing ball-caps adorned with patches and pins representing military units. Unexpectedly, a wedding party, dressed in their finest, strolled by from a site farther off from the statue where they had gathered for pictures.

After taking it all in for a while, the vet walked back to his car.

Biographical details about the life of Ian Fishback not recounted from memory were obtained from C.J. Chivers, "Ian Fishback's American Nightmare." *New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/magazine/ian-fishback.html>



Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival,

has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in the Sand* "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* blogpost titled "Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?" I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie's resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn't state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments" is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between "Biodegradables" and "Seven." In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn't) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments,” Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida’s thinking and writing:



The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just this week I read an article about the danger of “micro-plastic” particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. He fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the “shelf-live” of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives, which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of

biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida's musing might be, the larger context of "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida's inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany's attitude and actions to oppress Europe's Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which de Man's journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida implies, is an abrogation of a "natural" process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That's a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as "cultural biodegradability" that structures the dissolution of a publication's ideas and import into culture over time. He asks, "Can one transpose onto 'culture' the vocabulary of 'natural waste treatment'—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the 'environment' in our societies?" In Derrida's formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls "the great organic body of culture."

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases,

fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida's) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuing decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but many knew of it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm, Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific "paradigm" in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the "male gaze" in a 1975 essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books, movies, and art about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis' article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the "good man with a gun" sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether "biodegradability" or "cultural biodegradability" best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I'm describing, I'm not sure, but I don't know what the better words are. Derrida doesn't clearly explain whether an important work (a "classic") resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there's also plenty of evidence that a book's reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida's formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture

into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today's cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man's expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can't have one without the other. As Derrida writes, "the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but 'the Deconstruction' of 1989."

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn't jibe with the values held by the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in

the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to All the War Vet Novelists? They've Moved On and So Have We." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 2023.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-12/what-happened-to-all-the-war-vet-novelists-theyve-moved-on-and-so-have-we>

Jacques Derrida, "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments." *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989. Peggy Kamuf, a frequent translator of Derrida, is here named as co-author.

Peter Molin, "Whatever Happened to American Sniper?" *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature*.

July 2018.

<https://acolytesofwar.com/2018/07/01/does-anyone-remember-american-sniper/>

Peter Molin, "Before *Time Now: Military Review Book Reviews, 2001-2009.*" *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature.* January 2023.

<https://acolytesofwar.com/2023/01/14/before-time-now-military-review-book-reviews/>

Peter Molin, *15-Month Adventure: US Army Advisor Service, Khost and Paktya Provinces.* 2008-2012.

<https://petermolin.wordpress.com/>

Fiction by David Abrams: "Thank You"



Thank you Thank you for your service Thank you for going Thank you for coming back Thank you for not dying Thank you for taking the bullet, the mortar round, the shrapnel that is making its way to your heart by micromillimeters every year Thank you for eating that god-awful food gritted with sand so we don't have to Thank you for eating Thanksgiving dinner on a paper plate Thank you for living in a metal shipping container for the first three months until they got their shit together and built proper housing for you and your men Thank you for driving a Humvee without armor while ambassadors and visiting senators and country music stars were going around in bulletproof SUVs Thank you for carrying a gun for slinging it

across your body for wearing it like a heavy necklace that, after the first week, you hardly noticed was there Thank you for the magazine of bullets you polished every night Thank you for dripping with sweat Thank you for leaving your wife for eighteen months Thank you for telling your children you'd be back before they knew it Thank you for punching the walls of your shipping container Thank you for your bruised knuckles Thank you for screaming Thank you for crying quietly in the porta-potty when you thought no one was listening Thank you for enduring the stink and heat and filth of that entire year-and-a-half Thank you for writing back to that fifth-grade class when all you really wanted to do was sleep after a hard day of walking Thank you for looking through the tear-blurred sights of your rifle Thank you for crying over the dead Thank you for the sucking chest wound Thank you for the partial loss of your leg Thank you for your blood caught in a sterile metal tray shaped like a curled cheese puff Thank you for hating and killing Muslims Thank you for the hard clench of your jaw Thank you for thinking of us back here in the United States of Amnesia going about our war-free lives Thank you for our amber waves of grain purple mountains majesty bombs bursting in mid-air Thank you for Fox News and the pretty girl who reads the headlines Thank you for the freedom to fill my lungs so I can howl across the bandwidth of Twitter Thank you for this Big Mac and this Whopper and this Domino's pizza Thank you for almost dying in order that I might live to gain another twenty pounds and then Keto myself back to normalcy two years later Thank you for the chance to marry Kevin S., to fuck him, to bear his two children, and to file for divorce when I was through with all of that Thank you for giving me the freedom to move from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon Thank you for my Golden Retriever Thank you for my God-given right to enjoy the rain Thank you for my new breasts and the blue pill which cures my erectile dysfunction Thank you for infomercials and the operators who are standing by Thank you for this cigarette and this beer and this fried pork rind Thank you for the chance to uncork this '41 Cabernet and eat this Bernaise-

smothered filet Thank you for the three Starbucks in my neighborhood Thank you for *American Idol* Thank you for my amazing Amazon Kindle Thank you for the Mall of America Victoria's Secret Dippin Dots The Gap Best Buy and the weight of shopping bags that turn my fingers white Thank you for my Prius and the \$3.34 per gallon which fills it Thank you for giving your blood for my oil Thank you for leaving and returning Thank you for limping through the airport on your half leg Thank you for that little American flag sticking from a side pocket of your rucksack (long may she wave) Thank you for your smile on a stiff upper lip and the way you tried to conceal your limp by swinging both legs in equal cadence like you were in a Sousa march Thank you for catching my eye Thank you for allowing me to stop you on the concourse Thank you for taking this stranger's hand Thank you for saying You're welcome No problem Glad to do it.

The original version of "Thank You" was published in F(r)iction Magazine in 2015.

New Review from Larry Abbott: Lauren Kay Johnson's "The Fine Art of Camouflage"



Camouflage can exist on a number of levels. There is the basic military definition of disguising personnel, equipment, and installations to make them "invisible" to the enemy. There is the idea of blending into one's surroundings to be unobserved,

hiding in plain sight. There is the connotation of pretending, concealing, falsifying. One could add that there is also self-camouflage, where one pretends or conceals or falsifies to others and even the self. These latter connotations are more relevant to Lauren Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. Indeed, her epigraph is a quote from Bryce Courtenay's *The Power of One*: “‘I had become an expert at camouflage. My precocity allowed me, chameleonlike, to be to each what they required me to be.’” The book follows the familiar three-part pattern of going to war, being in country, and coming back home. The twenty-five chapters in five major sections, utilizing copious flashbacks, interweave all three phases of her military experience, along with the gradual peeling away of self-camouflage leading to a more truthful vision of self and others.

Lauren Johnson comes from a line of familial military service. Her grandfather, his two brothers, her mother's father-in-law, and her mother, all served. When Johnson was seven, her mother deployed to Riyadh in December of 1990 as a reservist Army nurse in the first Gulf War. These months were a time of uncertainty and stress for the young Lauren. She feels emotionally disconnected and, of course, worried about her mother's safety. However, when her mother returns in March of 1991 “the world was whole again.” It seems as if everything has returned to normal: “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.” Her mother would give Veterans' Day talks at local schools, and Johnson felt immense pride about her heroic mom. However, what Johnson did not recognize at the time was her mother's struggle to re-integrate into “normal life,” the camouflage her mother wore psychologically upon her return: “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, . . . 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." Later in the book, her realization of her mother's war experiences comes again to the fore: "I saw the infallible hero that I wanted to see. I saw what I was allowed to see; because we needed her, and because she knew no other good option, Mom spent twenty years swallowing her trauma."

Eleven years after her mother's return, during Johnson's senior year in high school, that pact is nullified by 9/11. Upon hearing news reports that day she writes that "Something inside me awakened" and she feels "a latent patriotism, the subconscious pull to serve, like my grandfathers had before me, and to emulate my hero, my mom." She takes and passes a ROTC exam and eventually signs a contract to become a cadet during her four years in college. After graduating as an Air Force 2nd lieutenant she has a month-long post to Mali. Finally, in 2009, after three months of training, she deploys for a nine-month tour to Afghanistan. She is optimistic about the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) objectives, working with locals and actually helping people. At the same time, she is torn, because going to Afghanistan "felt like a betrayal . . . because part of me . . . wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter." The theme of split emotions is one of the major motifs in the book and reflects the idea of camouflage, putting a positive spin on a less than ideal situation. In one email to her family she raved about her living conditions at FOB Gardez in Paktia Province, but she also admits to herself that "Other details, like the knot corkscrewed around my stomach and the choke hold of fear on my mind, I left unsaid." Similarly, she also fears that, despite outward appearances and newly-minted rank, she would not measure up: "I was afraid I wouldn't be good at taking or giving orders, that I would fail, somehow, as a military officer, and in doing so I would betray my family history."

The book actually begins in May of 2009 while Johnson is

undergoing three months of training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana to prepare for deployment to Gardez. She is an Air Force public affairs officer, a self-described “desk job chick,” now armed with an M9 and M4. As a member of a PRT headed for Paktia she is not expecting combat, but the team has to be prepared for any eventuality. In this particular exercise she has to clear a village. The exercise ends on a mixed note: as she charges into a plywood room a “bomb” of pink paint explodes and covers her, leading to her new nickname, Combat Barbie. Even though there is laughter and a hint of humiliation in this result, at the same time the incident was a catalyst, giving her a sense of accomplishment: “When I charged into the room, I looked professional and confident, like I belonged. And for once since arriving in Indiana, I didn’t feel out of place. I didn’t feel like a displaced Air Force desk officer, or a city girl, or even a woman. I felt like a soldier.” Her feelings of achievement and optimism in pre-deployment training will gradually give way to doubts about her role and what exactly the mission in Afghanistan is all about.

For example, she writes an op-ed and a commentary about the August 2009 Afghanistan elections (“I commended the success of the Afghan security forces and the bravery of the voters”). In the back of her mind she seems to recognize that there was a discrepancy between the successful appearance of the elections as presented in her articles and the reality of what actually occurred: fraud, violence, desertion by the Afghan security forces. Her generally rosy view was countered by Thomas Ruttig, an observer for the independent Afghan Analysts Network. In his response he calls her articles “plain propaganda.” She writes that in September of 2009 she disagreed with his assessment but, she adds, “In April 2010, I agreed.” This is the start of her questions about her role in the mission to “win hearts and minds.”

Another incident illustrating the dissonance between “good

news” and reality involves an elderly detainee who is being compassionately released and sent home. She looks forward to interviewing the man, with coalition forces radio DJs, because he could be “an ally in our information war.” He could speak to local citizens about the merciful Americans and tell how thankful he was for his release. However, the man is not the terrorist she expected but an old man who did not know why he was originally detained. She admits: “And all I felt was pity.” The interview turns into a disaster and the public affairs team has to edit out awkward details from the interview. Johnson later writes a blog post which puts a positive spin on the incident by writing that the “detainee spoke kindly of his treatment,” adding “that his eyes ‘were also thankful,’” but admits that “I don’t know if it was a conscious lie. . . . Mostly, though, I simply wanted that line to be true. . . . More importantly, I needed the line to be true for myself.”

In October 2009, around the time of her 26th birthday, she helps prepare for a visit by the American ambassador (who never shows) by diverting resources and personnel to give the appearance of safety and progress (“For the ambassador, we flipped the notion on its head: our security mission was to *create an illusion*”). In addition, there was a communications failure in attempting to develop a media training session for government officials. She takes the brunt of the attacks on this failure. Gradually, as the negative incidents, blaming, and finger-pointing cascade she concludes that her duties were becoming more and more meaningless at best, counterproductive at worst, “the claims [the PR team were making] were starting to feel exaggerated, the efforts sleazy.” The title of chapter 14 succinctly represents her outlook on “the mission”: “F*#K.”

Part Four/chapter 16 opens in spring 2013 after she is well out of Afghanistan. But as she watches *Zero Dark Thirty* with a friend she flashes back to December 2009, the deaths of CIA

agents at Camp Chapman, which puts a chill of paranoia, loss of trust toward Afghans, and anger on Gardez. In January, 2010 threats escalated, including a possible suicide bomber at Gardez and mounting civilian casualties. She tells, in an extended sequence in chapter 18, "The Fog of War," of a joint U.S. and Afghan raid to capture a suspected insurgent. Unfortunately, three civilian women, one pregnant, were killed, and initial reports blame the Taliban for the deaths. However, as the story unfolds, certainty turns into ambiguity. As the possibility arises that American troops were culpable, she has to produce euphemistic reports: "I hated the way the words tasted coming out of my mouth, and how easily they came, even when I fought against them. I hated that there was nothing I could do but tap dance, stall, and repeat hollow command messages." She is in a continual psychological battle between telling the truth and loyalty to the mission ("Even when my emotions ran counter to the tasks of my job, duty always won out"). She continues: "A new kind of fear stalked me too. Maybe I was not only not changing the world for the better; maybe I was actually making it worse. What if my IO messages, radio broadcasts, and media talking points—all promoting support for the war, the American military, and the Afghan government— what if those messages sent ripples. And what if, on either side, people got caught in those ripples. And what if people died. My job isn't life or death, I'd always told myself. But what if it was?" As the chapter ends, though, she cannot bring herself to tell the truth, writing "I still wanted to be a good officer."

On March 2, 2010, replacements arrive at Gardez, she departs a week or so later, and after nine months in country arrives in Tampa, and 18 years from her mother's deployment reunion she re-unites with her family. Hovering in the background, though, is a sense of alienation. She writes that the first two weeks back, before returning to PA at Hurlburt, were "a period of numbness . . . driving aimlessly around town . . . my brain lingered in Afghanistan." She is caught between two worlds and

unable to reconcile either. She is hit hard by the deaths of friends, two by car accident in Scotland and two by a plane crash in Afghanistan. While earlier she was able to emotionally distance herself from death, she is now haunted by the faces of the dead: "Now, faces swam like holograms across my vision. Ben, Amanda, the seven CIA agents, the pregnant Afghan woman, the seventeen Fallen Comrades of Paktia Province."

She takes a short trip to Seattle as a "lifeline" but receives orders to South Korea. She faces a dilemma: report, or decline the orders and finish her military career. She chooses the latter, and "would be a civilian by Christmas." She also learns that U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths in the Gardez raid. This information, among other factors, begins her downward spiral into depression, excessive drinking, and PTSD. When she returns to Florida she decides to get help. The counseling seems pro forma and she does not immediately return for a second session, although the counselor does recommend that Johnson talk with her parents about her experience. Her "confessions" are the first step in regaining control of her life and stripping off the camouflage: "Talking to my parents was a catalyst for a conversation that would go on for years to come: an open discussion with my mom and often my dad, sometimes my siblings and grandparents, about our wars: how they'd affected us, all the ways they were different, and all the surprising ways they were the same." She also realizes that "War, I was starting to understand, was part of my inheritance too." Another step she takes is to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in Boston. Her writing has appeared in a number of newspapers, magazines, and journals, and in the anthologies *Retire the Colors*, *The Road Ahead*, and *It's My Country Too*.

In her Epilogue dated August, 2021, she writes of the traces that PTSD left on her: "In many ways, my brain has spent the eleven years since my deployment withdrawing from

Afghanistan.” She adds: “Still, the military always bubbled under the surface.” This included a dysfunction marriage to an Army veteran. It takes her five years to get her “bearings.”

As the book ends the “bearings” seem to have held: she is remarried and has two-month old twin daughters. But images of Afghanistan still cast a shadow. The year she became a mother was the year of the withdrawal. Reflecting on her daughters she recalls photos of Afghan children being handed over from their families for evacuation. She writes, “I try to wrap my head around the kind of desperation that would lead a parent to surrender a baby.” She wonders if her life took a different turn would she be standing on the tarmac of the Kabul airport; perhaps she would be interviewing heroic Marines and writing uplifting press releases. She wonders if she could, or should, dissuade her daughters from following in her military footsteps, and she wonders further about the young Afghan girl she met eleven years ago, and her musings speak to the unreconciled questions raised by “the mission”: “She must be a young woman now, likely with children of her own. I hope she experienced a glimpse of the brighter future we promised. I worry she is among those seeking refuge, and that she may not find it.” Have the promises, and the hopes, been fulfilled? There is no way to tell. But there is a lasting truism: wars are never over.

In 1939 Vera Brittain, in her notes to “Introduction to War Diaries,” ponders her World War 1 experiences as a nurse and how those experiences affected her post-war sense of self. She writes: “For myself to-day I feel sorrow no more; my grief is for those I have known & loved who were cut off before their time by the crass errors of human stupidity. I can only give thanks to whatever power directs the seemingly unjust and haphazard course of human existence that I have survived the sad little ghost of 1917 sufficiently long to know that the blackest night – though it never ceases to cast its shadows – may still change, for long intervals of time, to the full

sunlight of the golden day” (16). Over eighty years later Lauren Johnson echoes this sentiment in “War and Peace of Mind,” one of the final chapters in *The Fine Art Of Camouflage*: “In the eerie quiet, I thought about the ripples I sent in my IO job, imagining them joining with other ripples sent by other naïve soldiers and aid workers, feeding a tsunami that swept across the country, swallowing people like Ben and the seven CIA agents and the pregnant Afghan woman. I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing their faces, or conjuring other nameless faces yet to be swept away.” Yet she also speaks, if not of Brittain’s “full sunlight of the golden day,” of a dawn that can dispel the darkness of Afghanistan, depression, and PTSD.

[The Fine Art of Camouflage by Lauren Kay Johnson, Liberty, NC: Milspeak Foundation, 2023.](#)

Website: <https://laurenkayjohnson.com/>

Brittain, Vera. *Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary 1913-1917*. Ed. by Alan Bishop and Terry Smart. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982.

New Poetry from Amalie Flynn: “Married”



MARRIED TO A MORNING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

For twenty years I have been married
to a morning. Of blue sky that stretches
and pulls across me like water filling up
a suburban swimming pool. The pit that

formed a hole. The bodies falling down
as if bloodless dolls instead of kneecaps
and muscle shins and thighs hot fingers
letting go of metal or chests and ribs an
artery that runs down the length of a leg
like a hose cheeks that hold in teeth and
tongues jaw and soft palates or a brain
inside of a skull. How the sky was full of
bodies so many falling thoughts fell down
or how the word *land* crashes and breaks
breaks and breaks apart on impact. How
the day still drowns me.

Today my husband is crouched in our
garden calves flexed. Today I reach out
and I run my fingers across broad fields
of skin between the shoulders. Shoulders
of my two sons. And I know.

How I know beneath.

We are bones.

HOMEBOY: New Fiction from Mark Galarrita

I went home to Jersey only once since the enlistment. I had to see my Ma. Back in the summer of 2011 I finished Basic and Advanced Individual Training for Cav Scouts and thought I'd officially become a real patriot now. The son of Filipino immigrants transformed into a proud, government-paid U.S. Soldier. A real Soldier, though, I was not. Drill sergeant said that me and the rest of my squad back at A.I.T wouldn't experience anything too bad in Iraq or Afghanistan by the time we got in it. The War was almost up. When we deployed

overseas, it would be like a vacation to Thailand, too easy. "Y'all are the lucky ones," she said. "You'll never see anyone die violently in your lives. You can thank Obama for that." Joke's on her, though. By the time I was thirteen, I'd already seen a few dead people in my life. My Pops for example. I don't need to speak on that, though.



I showed up to Newark airport looking like a civilian, not in my ACU's or my shiny class A's like the Budweiser commercials have you believe we all come home looking like. Only pogues wear their uniform at the airport. Nah, I wore a grey fitted tee that felt snug and showed off my brown, ripped arms, and some boot cut jeans I picked up at the Fort Benning PX that were too baggy. It was like I was stuck in the early 2000s. Still, I had this image that Ma was going to be real proud of this new look on me. What I expected was love and admiration for the work I accomplished, the money I made, and the simple truth that I did it all on my own. Grown man now, no Pops needed, no bullshit. But when she saw me at the pickup gate with my assault pack and my Class A's in a garment bag, she stayed in her '93 ruby-colored Corolla as if she were a goddamn cab.

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

of the ride until Ma spoke up.

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

"Pretzels—"

"What?"

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

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

I had no answer for that. The main thing on my mind at the time was this: Big Jason Zobel was back in town, looking the part of a Cav Scout. There was a time when I did the whole college thing for a stint—even tried ROTC once—but enlisting turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did. When I completed Basic I went on Facebook and posted my graduation photo. My Facebook Likes lit up (104 to be exact) from a mix of people I never talked to before: high school people, Ma's side of the family, and even this one girl, Rebecca, who I crushed on all of my junior year but who never gave me a second glance in the hallways of Saint Barnaby High. Rebecca didn't just like my pic—she commented. She did more than just say, *Congrats!* She added: "You look so handsome, Jason." You best believe I saw that shit and sent her a message. I asked if she wanted to chill at Flannigan's Pub the day I got back to Jersey. Rebecca messaged back, "sure, let's hang," and yo, who am I to turn her down?

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

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

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

“This is an eighteen-year-old car, Ma. That’s what happens when things get old.”

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

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

Before Benning, Ma had checked out a bunch of books from the library on entrepreneurship and reselling crap on Amazon to turn a profit. She got really into it, first time I’d seen her happy in years. I didn’t stop her. Her ‘business’ had gone on

for so long, I almost felt guilty whenever she told me to just wait until “the money comes in.” But we’re both still waiting.

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

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

All him and Ma used to talk about was me being independent and successful one day because they were hard-working immigrants, but what did that mean? When I dropped out of college and told Ma I wanted to enlist, she pretended like she didn’t hear. Instead she avoided me by praying to Momma Mary’s statue plus her whole holy gang. Sometimes she’d leave me for hours at a time: lost in prayer or driving to different churches throughout the county as she never stayed at one parish for too long. I’m amazed I got through high school without asking for her help—like SAT prep, or which college I should go to, or how to interview for a job. That kind of small shit that adds up to big shit after a while. Sure, physically she was there, and she signed checks and authorized payments on bills (sometimes with my money), but on life advice or what I should be doing—she was a ghost.

As I drove, I tuned the radio until I landed on a public station. Two British women were in the middle of a discussion about troop drawdowns in Iraq and what that meant for Afghanistan. I tuned it up to a sound that was slightly short of max. They spoke in gentle voices about the history of The

War on Terror. They sounded as if they were reviewing a television show, and not their topic: the wedding massacre in Mukaradeeb by coalition forces. One of them asked, *What happens to our children during a time of War?* out of nowhere. The other lady paused for a bit and that's when my fingers turned the knob left, right, and back again before I tuned it off. I struggled to pull one of the Reds out of the box, but I yanked it out and smoked it until it was a brown stub.

—

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

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

My blue Army Service Uniform was unpacked, hung up on the frame of her bedroom. She wanted me to explain it all to her. Last time I'd worn it was for the AIT graduation party.

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

keys.

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

"What did you say?"

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

"Do not destroy my car."

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

Flannigan's was a remnant of a New Jersey bar that once was—a replica of what could've been a local's hub straight from a television sitcom, but the idea was scrapped after years of just trying to get by. Bartender didn't even look at me when I sat in a corner section, far from the Rolling Rock lights and the empty crimson red booths cushions that sunk and tore where your ass was supposed to be. Last time I came around, I was just shy of finishing off high school at eighteen. They didn't have a guard at the front checking ID's, it was up to the bartender, but everyone in school knew that no one checked; it made 'em more money that way. Now the staff changed, the only person still around was one of the regulars: a crusty-looking bald dude with blue eyes and dry skin. Didn't recognize me though. I ordered a High Life on draft and finished half of it before five minutes passed. The bar's floor hatch opened from below, and a white boy about my age with a short blonde crew cut emerged. He wore a fitted black tee with the pub's logo on the front and back.

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

The barback didn't say a word as he marched back down. I tried to listen to his voice to make sure it was him; but when he

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

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

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

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

"Murray's dad helped me out on that one. The Corps a hand in it too."

"Good for you."

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

Ben was getting off work in a few, so I told him I'd wait

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

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

"What about your G.I. bill?"

"What about it? Who needs college?" Ben said.

In the Marines, his role was in signal operations between the various services. He claimed to be a master of the phonetic alphabet, and when I called bullshit, he bought three shots of whiskey and drank them in a row—waited five minutes for it to settle—and proceed to utter each letter backward and forwards, twice. It was like putting together Legos for him.

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

I bought us a round of Miller Lights and he talked about Afghanistan, his last deployment. "We dropped so many rounds on the enemy, but I never got to see any of it up close. Pissed me off. They'd relay back to command how many targets they supposedly took out, or the LT's on the ground would radio back if they could engage a fucker, and I was pretty much the link between the green light and the action and—" Ben stopped to take out a Marlboro Red and offered me one too. "It

was all indirect, never up front, you couldn't see them. I know I got 'em because I'd hear the report on the comms or watch the video a few days later. Every shot hit home. One minute a dude is running for his life in a poppy field and then out of nowhere...his remains are painted all over the flowers. Yeah. Yeah. It was fun. Hey man that's sick you went enlisted man, you'll fucking love it and then hate it a few days later. What did you sign up for in the Army?"

I told him about the cavalry.

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

I offered to drive Ben home but he said, "I'm Good to Fucking Go."

He got in his green Jeep and swerved out of the parking lot while I waited past twenty-three hundred for Rebecca to show up, except she didn't. She didn't text or nothing. About an hour in, ex classmates from high school came into the pub and passed me by—they looked at me, squinted, and walked away. Few people remembered me, can't blame 'em. I only had about two hundred or so friends on Facebook, perhaps eighty percent or more of them I didn't even talk to. It could've also been the beer and Ben's shots that must've given me some kind of funk for people to keep their distance, but by midnight the buzz went away, and I started sipping on another light beer minding my own until this brunette approached me to say *hi* and she called me Eduardo, and when I said I wasn't him, she apologized, turned, and went to her friends by the pool tables. I finished another pint and drove to Ma's with the windows down. The night's chill pressed against my face and tickled my scalp. A Statey followed my ass on Route I-195 from Trenton to Robbinsville until it zoomed around me to pull over a speeding Camaro. An ambulance roared by in the other direction. Where it went, God knows.

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

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

"You said I could take it."

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

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

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

After extinguishing the candles, I helped her to the bedroom.

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

“When are you leaving me, Jason?”

“Soon. Back to Texas. Army life. Afterwards, maybe I’ll deploy. I don’t know.”

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

New Poetry from Frank Blake



Poet Frank Blake during his Army service.

We came home

And had nothing to do and nowhere to go and too much freedom and money and space and women and cars and booze.

No more mission

Like a marathon runner collapsed at the end of a race and

across the finish line and not really sure how to stop running or what to do next.



We missed each other

These other humans didn't get it and had never been in that place where it was not fun but we had fun anyway because we had the love of combat brothers

We were bored

Because no matter what, nothing we would do in a week back home was even close to being the team with unlimited government funding using state of the art weapon technology

And none of us yearn for combat

But we do wish we could go back to a time where our actions mattered and our friends were nearby and we all had a great goddamn adventure ahead of us.

And now we know

That "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire" and that everything that comes next will probably suck in comparison because life needs us to be paying cable bills and walking dogs

And it's hard

To find meaning in things of little consequence when we learned so early on that the world is big and scary and violent and can be filled with acts of valor and sacrifice and hate and love.

So our only option

Is to live such a great and full life of found meaning in meaningless tasks as to make the sacrifices of those who

didn't come home and don't get to walk the dog all worth it.

So we try

To draw as much life out of life and to execute a new mission
of a great and purposeful existence

Because not all of us can

Because some didn't make it back.

Tracer

There is one round among many
Painted with that iridescent color of night time illumination
Designed to mark the path
Of bullets flight in jet black fear fueled midnight battles

Zips towards the enemy
A laser of lead and anger

Ricochet path betrayed by a bright glow

The rule is

That for every one you see

There are many more you don't

Just like the veterans suffering back home years later
We can see one every so often
Glowing in pain

Tracing the path of alcohol fueled rage and family splits and
no jobs and hard times fitting in

But we all know
For the one we see
There are lots more



Descent

On the escalator at the airport

I saw a young man headed down as I was moving up

He wore that same familiar ripstop nylon rucksack that I knew
all too well

It had patches from his units and friends and adventures

It had the same contents as mine

He carried in it lots of sadness for the friends he had lost

And guilt that he had made it back

And fear for what to do next

And memories of things he should not have done

And dreams of little girls dying

And lessons about leadership

And instincts to make his bed

And tears from current day family strife

And resumes to find new jobs

And drinks for when times get hard

And pills from the doctors

But it wasn't his rucksack that made me know he was a combat
veteran

It was the knowing dead look in his eyes that gazed right past
me and through me at the same time in that one brief moment
where our missions intersected.

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn for the WWI Centennial

Zone Rouge

(for the centennial)



photo by Amalie Flynn

1.
When the land was.
2.
Full of bodies dead. And twisted.
3.
When the fighting was.
4.
Sustained.
5.
With bodies. Dead. Twisted on a riverbank.
6.
Wrist bent. Hand hovers. Over water.
7.
Dead bodies with fingers. Like feathers.
8.
Stretched feathers or the calamus.
- 9.

Attaching to bird skin.

10.

These are bodies. Bodies of war.

11.

Dead with. Feathered fingers.

12.

Wing of a bird.

13.

300 days of shelling.

14.

The shells were 240 mm. Full of shrapnel.

15.

Mustard gas.

16.

Hitting men and hitting ground.

17.

Making holes. Upon impact.

18.

Shrapnel bursting.

19.

Bloom and rip.

20.

Ripping through dirt and faces.

21.

Ripped skin. Ripping off tissue.

22.

A nose.

23.

Hole in the center of an ear.

24.

Exposing canal and bone.

25.

Missing teeth. One lower jaw is.

26.

Gone. A set of lips.

27.

The chunk of a chin.

28.

And the shells. Shells from Verdun.

29.

Are still there.

30.

Unexploded ordnance. Sunk.

31.

Into dirt pockets. Like seeds.

32.

This blooming. Metal war.

33.

Shrapnel that looks like rocks or.

34.

Smooth egg of a bird.

35.

Soil made of mud and men and metal.

36.

How. Metal leaches and clings.

37.

This soil of war.

38.

Chlorine and lead and mercury and arsenic.

39.

Where every tree and every plant and every animal.

40.

Each blade of grass.

41.

Where 99% of everything died.

42.

Ground stripped raw.

43.

Stripped earth tissue or how this is.

44.

What war also.

45.

Also does.

46.

Damage to properties: 100%

47.

Damage to agriculture: 100%

48.

Impossible to clean.

49.

Human life impossible.

50.

The government declared it *uninhabitable*.

51.

A *no-go zone*.

52.

Broken skeletons of villages.

53.

And the craters that bombs make.

54.

Deep and round holes.

55.

How the bomb craters filled with water.

56.

Making. War ponds.

57.

This is a place.

58.

Where almost everything died.

59.

But the land.

60.

The land was still alive.

61.

Grass stretching again and.

62.

Grafting itself over the bone.

63.

Bone of what happened.

64.

Stretching over trenches and scars.

65.

Like new skin.

66.

And plants and trees and vines.

67.

Rodents and snails and voles and mice.

68.

Deer. Wildcats with metal stomachs.

69.

Still living I say. To my husband.

70.

Who went to war.

71.

War that he did not want.

72.

Afghanistan.

73.

How he came home with hands and feet.

74.

Covered in blisters. *Lesions* the doctor said.

75.

Skin burning. Waking up to him crouched.

76.

On the floor and scratching. Saying *I don't know*.

77.

And I know.

78.

That this is how war is.

79.

Or later. I will lay in the darkness.

80.

And think about burn pits in Iraq.

81.

Black smoke and jet fuel and fumes.

82.

About Vietnam sprayed. The bare mudflats after.

83.

Defoliation of trees. And birds. Missing mangroves.

84.

How dioxin poisons wind. Sleeps. In a river or sediment.

85.

The fatty tissue of a fish. Atomic blasts in Hiroshima and.

86.

Nagasaki. The incineration of bodies and land.

87.

Tearing skin off people. Tearing trees out of ground.

88.

Tearing everything.

89.

Away.

90.

How black rain fell. Radioactive bomb debris.

91.

Into mouths. Of people and rivers.

92.

How radiation lives. In grass and soil. The intestine of a

COW.

93.

About the GWOT. Blood soaked years and streets and.

94.

How many miles of land. Where we left bombs.

95.

Unexploded or forever.

96.

I will think about Zone Rouge.

97.

Trenches like scars.

98.

My husband gardening. The tendons in his arms.

99.

Moving like trees.

100.

Or how war never goes away.

Amalie Flynn

October 2018

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



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

When it comes to narratives of the Forever Wars, interpreters consistently rate as some of the most important people working on the ground, frequently appearing in the novels and nonfiction works coming out of these conflicts, darting the intricately woven fabric of U.S.-focused narratives as charismatic, generous, and occasionally suspect men of two worlds. Very rarely, if ever, do they get to speak for themselves. This film gives them that opportunity.

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

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

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

Phillip Morris, Mujtaba, and Malik are three representatives of a significantly larger whole, men who were promised Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) by the U.S. government in exchange for their work as interpreters. They did this work at risk to their lives and the lives of their families. "When I started working with the U.S. Army, I was trying to help them to help us," says Phillip Morris. "We spent our lives suffering because of Saddam's regime." With the outside support and aid of his best friend, Minnesota National Guard veteran Lt. Paul Braun, Morris's SIV application moves through the doldrums of Washington bureaucracy and—after some tense back-and-forth traveling between the U.S. and Iraq—eventually sees Morris and his family safely relocated to Minnesota. According to the documentary, by law, the application and approval process should take no more than nine months. Morris's takes four years.

Were it in Hollywood's Midas hands, "The Interpreters" would be made as a kind of filmic victory lap with Morris as the only subject, a golden testimonial to the U.S. military's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and the generosity extended to interpreters by our government. Of the three subjects in the film, Phillip Morris is the resounding success story, and certainly carries the bulk of the narrative. But what Khan and Caballero have done—smartly, and well—is avoid the gilded trap

almost entirely. They choose not to rest on the laurels of Phillip Morris's story alone, and instead show a range of experiences that are far more indicative of what it means to be an interpreter marked for death while waiting, interminably, for a promise made by a foreign government to be upheld.

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

✘ Following their rescue at sea, Mujtaba and his son are returned to Turkey. Now refugees, they are forced to try and negotiate the SIV application process while simultaneously avoiding deportation. Mujtaba is adamant in his belief that his wife and two children are still alive, and enlists the help of a volunteer from a refugee organization to look for them. It's a painful thing to watch, knowing what Mujtaba is risking by living in denial and extending his time in Turkey because of it. The longer he stays behind to look for his family, the less tenable his refugee status becomes, and if his SIV is not approved, Mujtaba and his young son will be forced to return to Afghanistan.


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

Throughout the film, American voices—both military and civilian—maintain what is (or should be) abundantly clear to anyone watching the film: Iraqi and Afghan interpreters are

service members of U.S. and coalition forces, and they are being abandoned. It is an ongoing injustice, an ugly stain not only on the U.S. military, but the government that sent those Americans into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

Journalist George Packer, who appears in the film, authored one of the most significant contributions to the conversation surrounding interpreters, SIVs, and America's responsibility toward the people it enlisted to help fight its endless wars in 2007. Packer's *New Yorker* piece, *Betrayed*, drew back the curtain on what was already a messy issue at the time. Reading it eleven years later, one can easily imagine seeing Malik, Mujtaba, and Phillip Morris's names in place of those like Othman, Laith, and Ali, given how similar their stories are, the events and struggles of earlier years repeating themselves *ad infinitum* with each generation of interpreters looking for a way out. It could just as easily be Malik on camera in Afghanistan telling us what Laith told Packer in Iraq so many years ago: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."[\[1\]](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Interpreters" is a visually striking and narratively

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

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

But then we see Malik, in 2017. A long white line at the bottom of the screen illustrates the amount of time it took the U.S. government to grant him his SIV. It is a freedom moment, a cause for joy, as much as it is a long pause that carries the weight of six long years of mortal uncertainty. We see Malik, and his quiet reveal reminds those of us on the outside looking in that a face is just a face, except when it is a target.

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

Khan and Caballero have made a landmark documentary, a film that is by turns devastating, uplifting, enraging, and only too timely: as of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States has voted to uphold Trump's Muslim ban, sparking renewed outrage among American citizens and recalling the most

inhumane of Supreme Court decisions past. Having watched “The Interpreters,” I can only wonder what thoughts are on Phillip Morris’s mind. Is Malik at risk of being deported? How is Mujtaba—still a refugee in Turkey at risk of being deported back to Afghanistan—contending with this latest in a long series of setbacks?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acronyms and 21st Century Conflict

Some useful acronyms by which to understand 21st century conflict:

COIN: Counter Insurgency. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2003-2010. Broadly speaking, the strategy wherein a friendly force competes with an enemy force for the allegiance and support of a largely-neutral population. Unattractive to militaries because of the numerous paradoxes involved in successfully pursuing the strategy. Very attractive to democracies and advocates of human rights as, ideally, COIN involves pitting humanism and liberal, western ideas against some competing philosophy, and we'd rather believe that, properly marketed, our system will defeat any competing system.

CT: Counter Terror. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2010-present. Employed around the world by America. Championed most vocally by Vice President Joe Biden. The strategy wherein intelligence (gathered directly by humans or by technological means) identifies actual or potential terrorist threats to the U.S.A. or any of its allies (or strategic interests, including Russia and China), and that terrorist threat is neutralized. With a bomb or a gun. "Taken off the board." AKA "whack-a-mole" for its apparent ineffectiveness.

DEVGRU: Seal Team Six.

GWOT: Global War on Terror. The Bush Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that included OEF (the war in Afghanistan) and OIF (the war in Iraq). Intentionally imprecise.

GCO: Global Contingency Operations. The Obama Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that includes

OEF (the war in Afghanistan), and the unnamed operations in Africa, Pakistan, throughout South America and Europe and Southeast Asia. Terrifyingly, even broader and somehow more vague than GWOT.

ISAF: International Security Assistance Force. The group of mostly-NATO countries helping Afghanistan transition from tribal society into modern democracy. Also jokingly known as "I Saw Americans Fighting" among Scandinavian ISAF members.

OEF: Operation Enduring Freedom. The war in Afghanistan.

OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war in Iraq.

SOCOM: Special Operations Command (the command, now basically obsolete, responsible for organizing Delta, Rangers, Seals, and Special Forces).

TF -: Task Force [blank] – depending on the context, either a Battalion or Brigade-size effort, or a much smaller higher-echelon group of former SOCOM-affiliate soldiers performing deniable missions for which there are no names.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote [an essay](#) about the way politics was impacting the ways in which people used language. The basic idea was that unscrupulous people who had things to hide were manipulating how we communicated in order to deceive us into supporting people or policies that we would not otherwise want to support. That politicians lie was not a new idea in 1946, and is not surprising today. In a world with enough thermonuclear energy to destroy most life above cockroaches, though, the stakes are a great deal higher.

Orwell refined the ideas he expressed in 1946, and published them in a more broad fashion in 1984, when he described the language of "Newspeak." The language (a revision of English undertaken by a totalitarian state apparatus) would shift the way people thought by channeling their ability to express certain thoughts in public, the way they exchanged

information. Reading "Politics and the English Language" and 1984, it's not difficult to see how Orwell's ideas about thinking and language had evolved. Orwell believed strongly in the potential of democracy and humanism to create morally responsible, ethical, civic-minded individuals, and put his life on the line to that end in the Spanish Civil War, receiving a throat wound that kept him off the front lines of the Second World War.

One of the most important and relevant intellectual legacies that George Orwell bequeathed us was this idea that, either with or without malice, institutions routinely and *deliberately* attempt to shape public thought through language. Nowhere is that more apparent today than in the successive American Presidential Administrations responsible for beginning what we call the "Global War on Terror" (the Bush Administration) and expanding the definition and bureaucratic entrenchment of that war (the Obama Administration). Both Administrations make heavy, almost exclusive use of acronyms to describe every aspect of the conflict, from the weapons used, to the agencies involved, to the nature and scope of the military actions. Orwell would recognize the current "Global Contingency Operations" (GCO) as the apogee of post-modern "Newspeak" in action – a war that is made up of "contingency operations," less police action than police-intention, less of an effort and more of an idea. Something slippery, hopelessly slick, around which no counter-argument can be mustered.

The acronyms are constantly changing. When I got to Afghanistan, the Taliban were called "ACM," or "Anti-Coalition Militia." Eight months later, they became "AAF," or "Anti-Afghan Forces." A single fighter was a "MAM" or "Military-Aged Male," though many of the soldiers called them "FAGs," or "Fighting Aged Guys." As earlier pointed out, GWOT morphed into GCO sometime mid-2010. The CIA, with too much baggage, has lost much of its actual importance to various TFs, the NSA, DEA, DIA, and DHS, which in their turn will likely change

acronyms over the coming years.

The enemy carried AKs and PKMs and RPGs, while we carried M4s, AT4s, M240Bs, SAWs and M4-mounted 203s, which were later swapped out for 320s. HIMARS is good, but getting a GOMAR is bad, although one of the finest, most scrupulous officers I ever served with went on record saying that if you got out of combat without a CIB and a GOMAR, you hadn't done your job properly, a commentary on the higher-level leadership in the Army's unreliability and essential disconnect from events on the ground. One cannot understand the military without speaking its acronyms fluently—and each military branch has a separate set of acronyms, some so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

In short – to wage war on the side of justice and good (America, the west, humanism), one must first master a shifting language of words and acronyms which themselves change every few years or so. I can testify from personal experience that the effort involved in mastering that language is great, especially when one is actually in combat (and therefore not incentivized to do anything with one's energy save decipher the enemy's intentions). Mastering military-speak is the first step in confronting the realities of the war – one cannot effectively protest or criticize without understanding what it is one is protesting or criticizing. If one lacks the proper words by which to challenge a given political institution – especially when it is in the institution's interests to keep the nature of its goals and efforts obscure – one will simply rail away in a vacuum, doomed to appear to be protesting the last war, or some archaic problem that is irrelevant.

This is why the long-haired Vietnam-era protester seems so sad, so overmatched – he's saying “no war,” to which statement the Obama Administration can correctly say “we never declared war, but Iraq, which was begun on false premises by the Bush Administration, has been closed down,” and ignore the ongoing

engagement in Afghanistan, and the ubiquitous worldwide “Counter-Terror” operations targeting, among others, American citizens. College students and idealists who feel – correctly! – that we should be more careful about how much information we allow our government to collect have to sift through layers of obfuscation before they uncover an acronym – NSA? Not CIA, or DHS? – that gives them an entity, literally an *agency* against which to argue, with which to dispute.

And why, why does any of this matter? Because every political administration understands that if they were to place a new agency inside the Pentagon and advertise it by its true name – in the case of the NSA, for example, the “Office of Monitoring Everything Anyone Does Online to Profile and Preempt Terrorist Attacks,” there would presumably be a great deal of blowback. While some polls seem to indicate that a majority of Americans support sacrificing a certain amount of privacy to security, it’s not clear to me whether Americans would support such a program or agency – supposing that the majority of the population agrees that one should trump the other, we could have (given knowledge of the NSA’s programs) collectively agreed to discuss our way ahead as a nation. Even the CIA – the “Central Intelligence Agency,” which I will use as an umbrella acronym for those acronyms I should not divulge to the public in the interests of national security, could at this point more accurately be called the “CIA / DDSAT,” or Central Intelligence Agency / Department of Drone Strikes Against Terrorists.” Again, if the public had understood – understood, that we had kill teams in many third world countries, and were targeting individual human beings for assassination, oftentimes based on patterns of behavior, there probably would have been a spirited debate on the subject. These actions were *not kept secret*, but were buried beneath an avalanche of acronyms and double-speak. Newspeak, in fact.

One should not have to offer one’s credentials or explain one’s love of country when making such a statement, but it

still feels obligatory. In an intellectual atmosphere where substance is more important than words, I have to point out that I believe, like Orwell, so strongly in the potential for good in the west and our cultural tradition that I went to war, twice, for it – OEF VIII and OEF X (it may have been XI, I never got a clear answer on that). I believe that my country, a part of the cultural legacy of Kant and Plato, is an especially permissive and forgiving country in which to be a journalist and thinker, and despite the vitriol with which intellectuals are attacked from both the left and the right (the Williamsburg Hipsters on the one hand who see no wrong in President Obama, and the Fox News / Rush Limbaugh apologists on the right who see no wrong with anything the Neocons say or do), you can still live freer here than in any other large country of which I'm aware in the world. We can do better, though, as citizens – we should expect better from our government. Obfuscation and deceit are rife within our political community, and should be done away with. We must begin calling things by their true names again, and if we don't like how they look on paper – we need to be more responsible about how we exercise our global citizenship. On this, Orwell would agree.

Adrian B