New Review by Travis Klempan: Adam Kovac’s The Surge

Whether we wanted it or not, America was – up until this very moment, perhaps – truly the indispensable nation.

New Fiction from Cameron McMillan: “Call Me Nobody. Let Me Live.”

I can still see his smile as I settle into my desk and the normal morning wave shuffles in. First comes the pinstripes of the best and the brightest, carrying their expertise and experience like an expensive briefcase by their side, letting it swing around for all to see. They speak of exotic and noteworthy places all the same, making no distinction between a Washington and a Baghdad. Their presence and self-importance is ballooned by the special assistant that seemingly exists to fan the flames of their egos, oohing and awing with every detail of the important missions the guests recount, and gesticulating at the carefully placed references to impressive figures they dealt with on their travels. I tap on my keyboard to log into my computer and listen in on the personal odysseys of guests’ respective self-declared, world-saving pilgrimages. I place my second coffee next to the cheap frame at the corner of my desk and there it is, the smile.

Like every morning, I peer over at it and see the sparkle of Mulligan’s teeth above the sand-caked filth of our fatigues. I try not to smell the smoke or taste the dust, as I know that

leads down a dark road littered with smoke, fire, and demons. That I cannot stand. So, instead, I distract myself from the tightening in my chest with a gulp of the warm brew and some shuffling of papers. I blink hard and take a deep breath as the final straggling dignitary drones on about the misfortunes of his delayed connecting flight and the plights of business class. I think he's a former ambassador turned senior fellow of some kind with an expertise in economic development or the like. Just for kicks, I look at the special assistant's schedule to find the reason for the wayward ambassador's troubles. In block letters, I see the title of the conference he has been invited to attend: DIPLOMACY AND BUSINESS SYMPOSIUM: ADDRESSING POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH.

The worn down dirt roads and begotten mud huts along the banks of the Euphrates replace the calendar on my screen. The smell of wretched decay, sewage, and wastewater penetrates through the windows of our M-RAP. I hear the laughter of the little girl who chases a deflated and torn soccer ball down the trash-filled alleys of Al Baghdadi. She waves at our convoys as we pass by until, one day, she follows the ball onto an unexploded mortar cache that sends her flying high into the sky and litters her tiny bones and flesh across the same roadway.

"I'm Dean Miller's 9 a.m."

I look up to see another suit standing above my desk. This one is slim and powder blue, matching the relatively young man in it. He does not look at me. Instead, he is glued to his phone, which must contain urgent emails that will assuredly save little girls from blowing themselves up playing soccer. I begin to say that I am not a receptionist, but bite my tongue as I look at his expensive watch and down at his polished shoes. He's never been near Al Baghdadi or any town like it. Instead, I give him a smile and lead him to the Dean's office where they commence a discussion about their understandings of the harsh realities of intra-state conflict and prospects for

resolution after sucking down their French-press and marveling at the Indonesian artwork on the Dean's wall. From their air-conditioned haven, they will save the world, for they know war and violence.

Walking back to my desk, I try to guess the blue suit's age. He looks as old as D'Angelo was when he died. Early thirties. D'Angelo played guitar and had a Harley at home. He showed me a picture of his kids once, but I can't remember if it was one girl and two boys, or two girls and one boy. That's about all I can remember about him. I didn't know him well, but our few interactions were cordial enough. I wasn't there when the IED ripped apart his legs into a mangled mess, either, but I heard on the radio that he was still alive when they put him in the medevac chopper. He bled out somewhere over Al Anbar province. I look back at the frame on my desk, focusing on the American flag we're holding in front of a row of Hescos on our second week in country. We're wearing boonie caps and our full combat load, flaunting our weapons, ammo, and Kevlar. I wonder if it was one of the boys or one of the girls who was handed the folded flag at D'Angelo's funeral.

General Lee lies on its side aftrer surviving a buried IED blast in 2007. The Stryker was recovered and protected its Soldiers on more missions until another bomb finally put it out of action. Photo by courtesy of C-52 of 3/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team
see:
http://www.army.mil/-news/2008/06/06/9708-general-lee-rides-again/

The computer bings and I look at my email to see an announcement about a new security studies fellow. I scroll through and skim the highlights. *Army. Lieutenant Colonel. West Point. Intelligence officer*. Always intelligence officers. Sometimes pilots or JAG lawyers. But no grunts. That

must be the unwritten rule in the veteran's affairs office down in admissions and financial aid. I imagine a not so distant reality where the security studies fellow conducts an intelligence briefing. He details the security of a road in the Hit district of Al Anbar and deems it free of IEDs. He declares it safe for travel by convoy and foot patrol. He stands in front of a PowerPoint presentation in a faraway headquarters in Kuwait or Qatar. That's that, and so, off D'Angelo goes.

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It's 10'oclock now and all the suits have filed off to their respective conferences and meetings. With the fanfare died down, the stream of faculty trickles in. The pinstripes of the best and brightest are replaced with the tweed of the wise and prognostic. Reading some of their bios on the website, one wouldn't be alone in mistaking them as manifestly prophetic. A well respected professor of gender studies decides to engage is some small-talk with an associate dean behind my desk. I can't help but overhearing as I sort through expense reports of faculty research trips to Italy and Montenegro. They discuss her recent book on women in the US military and consider branding techniques to effectively showcase it on the website. The dean suggests a meeting with marketing.

"It's remarkable work, Kathleen. The section on women in combat arms units was so inspiring."

I hear the creak of Carhart's door flying open from her chu as the clash of metal pierces through the silent air of the desert night. Thompson runs out as he pulls up his OCP trousers by the belt and holds his rifle in his left hand. He swivels his head from left to right and scans the surrounding compound before he runs off and disappears from the moonlight. I hear Carhart's screams. But it's more than screams, like the unrelenting howl of a wounded animal about to die. I walk into her room and see her sobbing on the floor, cradled into a

ball, and notice the blood on her sheets and the gash above her eye. I follow the procedure. I get her to medical care, notify the commander, and pester him into opening an investigation. I tell her she can trust me. I promise her justice. “No probable cause” is the official finding. Three months later, we stand in the same rank of formation and watch him get promoted to first sergeant. I check my phone to see the last time she responded to one of my calls or texts since we got home. Three months ago, “don’t worry about me.” The second try at a sober living home hadn’t worked out. I hope she’s alive.

Professor Goff is next, the director of security studies, who is even more ancient than the academic institution itself. Carrying himself with a purposely relaxed gate and attitude, he emanates purported knowledge my way. He’s wearing his usual attire, knee-length khaki shorts, a wrinkled polo shirt, and his all-weather Birkenstocks. What’s Professor Goff up to today, I wonder, as he plods along the hallway towards the dean’s office. Pasted on the front page of the school’s website, I see the usual overbearing text and logo advertising “Great Power Symposium: Deterrence and Conflict in a Polycentric World.” Professor Birkenstocks is the headliner, calling all of the future national security leaders that roam the halls to be blessed by his presence in the large auditorium. I roll my eyes and take another sip of coffee. I think of the professor’s book about Iraq that launched him into the stratosphere of academia’s giants. It’s about Al Anbar Province, where my friends and I served, and deals with the Marines who “bore the brunt of the fighting.” I look up an op-ed of his from 2003. He’s arguing in support of the invasion. I find another from 2007 where he explores the logic and efficiency of the surge. He says losses are inevitable. I remember Mulligan’s obsession with reading. Sci-fi and flash fiction, I think it was. I see his smile. Don’t do it, I think. More coffee.

The dean comes out to greet Professor Goff with the normal platitudes and mutual self-congratulation. It's almost noon and I decide to leave for my daily walk around the quad before eating lunch. I like to sneak away from my desk for fifteen minutes to breathe fresh air and see the finely cut grass. I see a group of undergraduates playing ultimate frisbee outside and try to guess their age. Probably 20 or 21. With some quick math, I realize that Mulligan would be a junior if he lived long enough and his GI Bill paperwork went through. The undergrads laugh as they toss the frisbee back and forth and I see Mulligan's grin. I hear him chuckle as the older guys in the platoon mess with him. Thankfully, that's how I remember him, smiling. I'm grateful I wasn't there when they found his body. Blasted brains and blood all over his chu. His left hand still gripping the trigger well. No note. Nothing. Just Mulligan smiling one day and his own rifle in his mouth the next. I'm glad that I'm left with his smile.

Heading back into the school, I pass the framed awards and photographs that line the halls of the entrance to honor famed alumni who went on to shape world events. They include a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, an ambassador, and a head of the World Bank. I see the students scurrying about, cramming articles, academic journals, and other forms of knowledge into their brains as quickly as they can. I look back at the pictures and wonder which one of them will be on the wall next. I wonder if anyone in the building has taken the time to look at the picture on my desk, at Mulligan. I think of all the current, former, and future leaders of geopolitics that roam the halls around me that could benefit from having known him, from having known his smile. Maybe it would make the world a better place. Maybe not. The idea brings a poem to mind, but I'm not sure why. The author escapes me. It says, "Call me nobody. Let me live."

New Fiction from Colin Raunig: “What Happened in Vegas”

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had woken up too early and couldn’t go back to sleep—he couldn’t sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank’s body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank’s body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah’*d his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

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Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave, literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the

unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

"I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we're going to Vegas," Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. "You're coming with me. And don't you die before we make it back. Or I'll kill ya."

"Okay," Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn't die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before, trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

“What the fuck?” Cameron said.

“What?” Frank replied.

“Where are the fountains?” Cameron asked. “There are supposed to be fountains.”

“Where?” Frank asked.

“Where? Right fucking there. In the lake.”

“All the time?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Cameron said, upset. “I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don’t fucking see any.”

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

“Hey,” Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. “What?” Frank replied.

“The *fountains*,” Cameron said, incredulous.

“Must have just missed them,” Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. “The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it,” Cameron said.

“We’re only twenty-two,” Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. “Whatever,” Cameron said. “People pee in there, you know.”

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron’s luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

“Oh, look at the beautiful toes!”

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful off frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

“They’re wonderful! They are such little treats!”

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin, the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

“Is everything ok?” the shorter man whispered into Richard Simmons’ ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. “Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys,” Richard said.

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The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat to Richard's left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn't really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

"So, what'll it be?" Richard asked the table. "It's on me! It's the least I can do, for what you did."

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn’t know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:
Honor

Loyalty

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

Semper Fidelis—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn’t know what he would do. He wasn’t sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever. Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be in. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. “Jack and Coke for me,” Frank said to the waitress.

“Make it two,” said Cameron.

“Make it four,” said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us,” Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron’s politeness.

“Mr. Simmons!” Richard said, delighted, “Mr. Simmons is my dad’s name, and *he* didn’t like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir.”

“Really?” asked Cameron.

“Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things.”

“Oh yeah?” said Cameron.

“You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I’m fit,” he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn’t have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. “60 years old and I don’t feel a day over 30. I have my gym still. In LA. I can’t move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it’s fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that’s the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym.”

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in

the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. “Frank’s the real fitness freak.”

Richard looked at Frank. “The strong, silent type, I can tell,” said Richard. “Frank, what’s your routine?”

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard’s eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard’s gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

“Oh, thank you!” Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard’s assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard’s assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. “To the troops!” Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

“Bench,” said Frank, in response to Richard’s previous question. “Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that.”

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard’s question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drank way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

“Wow, and all the military training you do, too,” Richard said.

Frank nodded. “70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I’m kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago.”

“Two *weeks,*” Richard said. “So you really just got home, didn’t you?”

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank’s youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank’s—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard’s gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn’t remember anyone ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard

asked for Frank’s and Cameron’s number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank’s gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that’s not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn’t look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

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“Do you think he’s gay?” Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt’s Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

“Who cares?” Frank replied to Cameron’s question. “Why does it matter?”

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

“It doesn’t,” Cameron said. “I’m just asking, damn.”

“Well, if it doesn’t matter, then it doesn’t matter.”

“He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight.”

“He was just being nice,” Frank said.

“Whatever,” Cameron grunted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Frank asked.

“Nothing,” Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn’t been to very many strip clubs. He didn’t like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren’t so impressed or scared or jealous. The saying was “every Marine a rifleman,” the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn’t why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn’t quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He’d give it a try, at

least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron's suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank's elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

"Vanessa," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

"Do you want a dance?"

"Okay."

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa's coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn't help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and

admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn't able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

"You're body's so hot," she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks, smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls

from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

"Hey," she said. She stood right next to Frank.

"Hey," he replied.

"Sandra," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. "My phone is dead," she said. "Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you." Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them

out to Frank. “That should cover it,” she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

“Where are you going?” he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. “I just failed my audition,” she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. “They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won’t get surgery. I didn’t have to do any of this shit in Portland.”

“I’m sorry,” Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

“It’s different here, in Vegas,” she said. “The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you’re not.”

“I think you’re beautiful,” Frank said to her. He meant it.

“Thanks,” Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn’t know what to say anymore. “Don’t let them change you,” he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. “Thank you,” she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. “What are you in Vegas for?”

“Just got back from Iraq,” Frank said. “Here for some R & R with my buddy.”

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and

looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. “Welcome back,” she said.

“Thanks,” Frank said.

Franks’ phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra’s ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

“Thank you for helping me,” she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. “You’re so sweet.”

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn’t want it to end.

“Can I come with you?” Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. “Not tonight,” she said.

“Okay,” Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn’t come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when he didn’t, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard’s face again, the one where he had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard’s eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

*

Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes. At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours. His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

“I know it’s early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping.”

“I’m up early, too,” Frank said. “I’m sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation.”

“What are you up to?” Richard asked.

“I’m out walking the strip.”

“Oh, you are?” Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. “Where?”

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. “I don’t know. By some hotels.”
“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Come to the Bellagio. They’ll send you to my room. How does that sound?”

“Okay,” Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn’t know where Richard’s room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat and white gloves.

“Are you here for Richard Simmons?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Frank said.

“Right this way,” the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard’s room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the

window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.

“Frank. Come in.”

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn’t touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

“I got a little of everything,” Richard said.

“I can see that,” Frank replied.

“Shall we?” Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact, was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn’t seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn’t finish before Richard did.

“How was it?” Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. “Really good, “Frank said. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. “Did you have a nice night?”

“We went to a strip club, actually,” Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank’s embarrassment and waved away his concern. “It’s *Vegas*. I’d be worried if you *didn’t* go to a strip club.”

“I was worried to tell you, actually,” Frank said.

“There’s nothing you’ve seen that I haven’t. And I’ve seen *everything.* Did you have a good time?”

Frank thought about it.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Maybe not.”

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

“What about you?” Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. “Oh, I found the party, but the party didn’t find me, if that makes sense.”

It didn’t, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn’t going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

“Do you ever get tired of it all?” Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank’s question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. “Of this?” Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. “No, sorry,” Frank said.

“Oh, I can get tired of this,” Richard said. “It’s marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with.”

“And are you tired of it now?” Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. “Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I take a break, and then I’m good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years.”

“I think I’m getting to that point,” Frank said. “Of being done.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Ha!” Richard’s laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard’s laugh trickled down into a sniffle.

“I’m sorry,” Richard said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Frank said.

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Richard said. “I just –”

“It’s okay.”

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair

that was to Frank's immediate left. He looked in Frank's eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. "And so have you," Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank's comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed "Richard Simmons" into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, "Sweatin' to the Oldies." Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard's David Letterman's appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about

celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

“I’ve never seen them,” Frank said. “In person, I mean. I’ve seen them on YouTube or whatever.”

Richard whirled around on his heels. “You’ve never seen them?!”

“No.”

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. “Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please.”

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard Richard’s muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. “I’ve got good news!” Richard said. He started walking.

“They’re going to turn on the fountains?” Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. “Bingo,” Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

“How’d you do that?” Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks.* “One of the perks.”

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

“Any second now,” Richard said.

“Okay,” Frank said.

“What about your friend?” Richard asked. “Should we stop the parade and invite him?”

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his

response.

“Cameron doesn’t like fountains,” Frank replied finally.

“Oh,” Richard replied. “Oh, okay.”

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard’s.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn’t look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. “Don’t be scared,” he said.

New Nonfiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “Was His Name

Mohammed Hassan?”

I don’t want to keep going back there. I’m damn near forty years old; too broke and tubby to deploy anymore. It’s my kid’s birthday next week. I should be thinking about balloons, wrapping paper, last-minute toys to order off Amazon. I don’t want to keep going back there, to the dust up my nose from another bomb buried in the road, to the holes left in me, those feelings, the loss, but I do.

*

It’s eight months into my second deployment. August 2009. I’m standing in a guard tower sandwiched between two hesco bastions, looking out over a lush green carpet of terraced farms and qalats, all of it laid out before me with titanic, purple-brown, barren peaks rising up either side. Wheat grows down in the strip of green, apple and apricot orchards. Your night vision snags in their branches during patrols. I’m standing in my uniform, wearing a patrol cap, my radio tucked in my back pocket with the antennae whapping me in the shoulder. There are two other guys with me in the tower, wearing their mitch helmets, vests, ammo, however-many pounds of gear. I’m the Sergeant of the Guard, on light duty inside the walls of COP Blackhawk. My left hand looks like someone’s blown one of those purple latex gloves into a balloon, but the swelling’s been going down over the last couple of days. Within a week or so, I’ll be on patrol again.

One of the guys is talking about this new JSS—a Joint Security Something or other, I can’t remember my acronyms anymore. It’s a base. We’re going to build another base out at the far western nexus of that green carpet. Near a village named Omarkhel.

“Somebody’s gonna fuckin’ die,” he says.

I can’t disagree with him.

“You believe this shit, sergeant? We’re practically combat fuckin’ inoperable what with all the casualties we’ve taken and they want us to go out *there* and man another fuckin’ base?”

“Bullshit,” says the other guard.

“What’s gonna happen when this JSS gets hit, huh? I mean, we can’t even use the road without Counter-IED clearin’ the way. How’s anyone supposed to get out there to help us?”

“Hell, even Counter-IED got hit with an IED.”

This is all stuff way over any of our pay grades.

“What do you think, sergeant?”

I don’t say it but I think he’s probably right. Whoever came up with the grand idea of plopping another base even deeper into Nerkh Valley is going to get a rude awakening when they hear about yet another truckful of soldiers getting blown sky-high either on their way out to or back from it. It’s the road. There’s only one squiggly-ass dirt road in or out of that valley; a natural bottleneck. We’ve already lost so many because of that road. Hall. Ogden. Wilson. Obakrairur. Farris. I’m twenty-four years old and I’m tired of people dying. People I knew, ate with, slept next to, traded jokes and slaphappy bro-handshakes with.

Maybe my name is next.

But if the higher-ups want a base out in Indian Country then they get a base in Indian Country. That’s where the bad guys are at, hooah.

The guard flicks his cigarette. “Shit’s pointless.” His cherry somersaults through the razor wire, and down, out of sight. “We’re just shoving a stick in a hornet’s nest. These people aren’t ever gonna change.”

And it hits me that if a couple of grunts with probably nothing more than high school diplomas (and a Good Enough Degree, in my case) can see the fruitlessness of our endeavors in Afghanistan, then why can't the generals, politicians and think-tank analysts up there in the Big Beltway in the Sky? How many more grunts have to die until they do?

"What do you think, sergeant?"

"I think both of ya need to mind your sectors." Or, in other words, quit your bitching about shit none of us have any control over. "I'm headed to the other tower, call me if you need anything."

Within a month the JSS would be built, then abandoned. It happened on their way back. It happened on the road. Pellerin. That was his name.

*

Wait, no. What actually happened was that I was in the recovery tent on FOB Shank. It wasn't even twenty-four hours since I'd been wounded when a whole truckful of Blackhawk guys choppers in. Another IED. I beeline it into the triage tent and stand next to them, let them see a face they recognize, crack a joke or two. Some are still out of it. Specks of dirt in the creases of their faces. A couple in neck braces. One with a broken leg. Everyone's been thrown around the inside of an armored truck and, yes, the steel is just as hard on the inside as it is on the outside. Necks, backs, heads, spines—all discombobulated. I count five, total, in the triage tent. They're missing one. The driver.

It isn't until after nightfall that we send Pellerin home. No lights but the ghostly green out of a Blackhawk. The wind of its rotors. The medics, doctors and others create a cordon leading up to the bird. I'm unexpectedly grateful it's my left hand that's wounded and not my right since I have to salute with my right.

We salute Pellerin.

He floats between rows of saluting soldiers. A body shape inside a black body bag. Four carry him on a stretcher but I don't see them, I just see Pellerin sliding onto a waiting helicopter and the doors close and the engine rises in pitch as its wheels cease to touch ground and he's gone. The IED had blown him mitch-first through three inches of ballistic windshield. I pray it was quick.

In another day or two, after catching a rare hot shower—careful not to get too much water in the hole in my shoulder, or the one in my thigh, or those in my hand—I'm on my own Blackhawk to FOB Airborne in Maiden Shar, then on a convoy back out to Nerkh, where I belong. That's the order of events. A conversation with a guard in a tower about somebody dying actually happened *before* I was wounded. But it's all so twelve, thirteen years ago, it's like something out of a dream anymore. A gush of emotive images, smells, meanings. Takes a while for everything to settle into place.

Nettlesome memories, getting in the way of the story I want to tell and how I want to tell it, memories half-imagined anymore, memorized imaginings, best just forget about all of them, I got a kid's birthday to prep for—tap, ctrl + A, delete.

*

I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. This is what I write on my laptop in a not-so-diary word doc. It's mid to late August 2009 and I type this, and save it, because it captures everyone's frustration, my own particularly. A thousand lives equated to one. I write it because it feels so right, visceral, and I write it because it feels so wrong, vile.

At the beginning of the deployment, I spent months not in an infantry line company, where I felt I belonged, but behind a

desk in the Maiden Shar District Center trading scraps of intel with Afghan police and national army about what was happening where, which outposts were attacked when, IED reports, and so on. I learned to speak some Dari, shared meals and chai with one Afghan officer after the next, traded jokes, was guarded by them while I took my turn grabbing a few hours of shuteye in a connex no more than a few steps outside the door of our little intel-swap office. I came to admire a number of Afghans, their patriotism, their ingenuity, their faith, and to sympathize with them, with the obstinacy of Afghanistan's many hydra-headed problems, from corruption, to extremism, to poverty, to incompetence.

But now I'm back in an infantry line unit and things are a little different. I'm so tired of people dying. Everyone is. You deploy raring to kick some ass only to discover your entire deployment is turning into a line of losses, one after the next, like holes left in the road out in that bottleneck. You try to fill in the hole with something, anything, but it never fills.

Sure, we conduct a handful of night ops in retaliation, kick in some doors, find some IED-wire, but, soon enough, that hole's empty all over again.

We're rough with the people. Headed back to base, we're dismounted, when my team leader spots a guy on a cellphone. He zeroes in on the guy, smacks the cellphone out of his hand, shoves him up against a mud wall, pats him down, stomps his cellphone into pieces. Another soldier smashes their buttstock through someone's windows while we're searching their qalat. Oops. When another IED hits, more than a few of us squeeze our triggers off at anyone. Goat-herder running away from the explosion? Pop-pop-pop. Van getting too close, not responding to shouts and waves to stop? Put half a belt of 7.62 through their windshield. Guy digging in the middle of the road for no discernible reason? One shot, one kill.

Yes, there were good things we did, promises kept. Communication barriers overcome. But throwing bags of candy at little kids and drinking chai with elders and showing general good will at best papers over the bad stuff. When the Big Army comes down and an investigation ensues about why this farmer was killed, it's found that escalation of force procedures were followed. It's an unfortunate accident. Here's some money for the family.

But the people's grievances keep piling up. Whatever trust we build, it's erased with the single squeeze of a trigger. Try to paper over things but all that does is add fuel to the fire. It also doesn't help that the Afghan army is often more indiscriminate with their bullets than we are.

The people are convinced, the Taliban encourages them to think this way, that you can never trust a non-Muslim, a foreigner, an American, or the puppet government they're propping up. Trust is the hot commodity. You trust your brothers-in-arms over any Afghan stranger, but do you trust an American soldier's narrative over an Afghan's? Should you?

On another mission, a couple of guys wander into our perimeter, smiling, waving, out for a morning stroll—Oh look, Americans sprouted in our front yard overnight. We detain both of them, zip-cuff their wrists, put them in a row with all of the other military-age males we're rounding up. Because we don't know. We can't tell the difference between who's Taliban and who isn't. We don't speak the language, don't understand the culture, we don't really want to.

First day in country and they're telling you about counterinsurgency doctrine, winning hearts and minds, even the President of the United States can spout off buzz words like COIN and the people are the key terrain, but it doesn't make a dent in us. Not down in the thick of the ranks. From newbie

privates already indoctrinated to mid-career professionals to flag officers, the majority of us resist counterinsurgency. These people, the rank and file, the army with its sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels and kickass (kiss-ass?) corporate culture, they're never going to change.

I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. We put the people in our sights because, often enough, they were the only target we could find. The people, stuck in a no man's land between pissing off the Taliban, who will kill them for talking to Americans, and us, who kick in their doors in the middle of the night and make their children scream when we zip-cuff their fathers. Still hear myself screaming at ten-year-olds. Sit down and shut the fuck up! Is that me? Is this who I am? Where's my compassion?

I'm too tired of people dying, of worrying about one of my guys dying, or myself, tired of civilians catching the flak from soldiers frustrated with their role in a mean little war. It's only another week until my scheduled R&R and it can't come fast enough.

*

I'm on my way back from R&R. September 2009. I'm sitting in coach and reading the latest Stars and Stripes when there's an itch on the top of my left hand, on the meaty part between my thumb and forefinger. I scratch at it. It feels like the tip of a screw just starting to poke out the wrong side. What the hell? And I realize: it's my shrapnel. It's working its way out.

Don't pick at it.

Eventually, I leave it alone and return to reading my Stars and Stripes. The engines decelerate; we begin our descent. I finish my article and turn the—stop. *Remembering the Fallen*. Two full pages of photographs, ranks, names, places and dates of death, so many soldiers and marines, so many faces, names,

but I’m zeroed in on just two of them.

That’s them—isn’t it? That’s their faces, ranks, names, dates, place of—that’s fucking them. Cox. Allen. They’re fucking dead.

“Shit!”

Heads swivel. I’m on a civilian flight. I’m not wearing my uniform but one look at my high-and-tight and anybody can probably tell. I fold up my Stars and Stripes, open it back up, recheck their names, their faces. I stare and keep staring until I’m certain I’m not seeing things.

“Shit.”

I say it much closer to myself this time. I fold up my Stars and Stripes—don’t, don’t open it again—and drop my head back and close my eyes and try not to think anything, to hear anything, but it comes on, under the clunk of landing gear and the roar of decelerating aircraft, a whisper in my head, an incantation, repeating names, all of their names.

*

I’m standing in a shower connex with a pair of tweezers in my right hand. I’ve been in Kuwait a few days, waiting for a C-17 to shuttle me back to Afghanistan. My shrapnel’s made a little recess for itself in the top of my left hand, though initially, boom, it entered through my palm. My tweezers don’t even have to pull, it just snaps through the last threadbare bit of skin and rimming of puss and I’m holding it, looking at it, my shrapnel, under the phosphorescent glare of the light over the mirror. It’s like a tiny meteor, silverish, clean. The hole in my hand isn’t bleeding or anything. My body made a perfect little recess to spit out the contaminant. New skin’s even starting to grow down inside. Without waiting to think twice, I release my tweezers and watch as my shrapnel drops into the sink, clink, down the drain, gone. I don’t need any

token reminders. Their names are etched in my memory.

*

I also own a black bracelet with all of their names etched onto it. After we got back, roundabout January 2010, everyone in the company received a black bracelet with our fallen writ across it. Many Blackhawk guys were already wearing one; now even more wore one. I did not wear one, I still don't. My black bracelet is hidden in a box in the basement, along with all of my other army stuff. To meet me, to walk in my house, you'd never know I was even in the military. No awards or folded flags hanging from my living room wall. My scars and the beaten pathways of my thoughts remind me enough, thanks very much.

*

It's October and I'm back where I belong on COP Blackhawk talking to a couple of my fellow non-comms.

They're tolerating me, sort of.

"Remember back in February, back before we even started building the cop,"—COP, or combat outpost. "And there was this intel report about the AP3 checkpoint out in Omarkhel getting attacked?"—AP3, Afghan Public Protection Program, call them whatever just don't call them a US-equipped militia of half-Taliban good ol' boys.

"Sorta," says one of my fellow non-comms.

"What about it?" says the other.

"You remember the checkpoints falling? In February it was the checkpoint in Omarkhel. In March, the one in Karimdad. Then Mir-Hazari in April. By May, it was Dehayat's turn." I remember this because I used to work in that intel-swap office. A big map on the wall demarcated every AP3 checkpoint; I remember erasing them. "One after the next, west to east,

all through the bottleneck, those checkpoints fell like fucking dominoes, remember?”

They’re not sure, it’s October and this is all so four months ago. (I’m not even sure, umpteen years later.)

“But you see what I’m saying? Special Forces set up the local militias, equipped them, then set up the checkpoints to safeguard the road. But the SF are all over the place, they can’t back up the militias day and night. Those checkpoints didn’t have any support. Not even from us though we can literally *see* Dehayat from here.”

“Mac, what’s your point?”

“June was when we started taking major fucking casualties, right?”

“Yeah—and?”

“It’s the road, see? The Taliban wanted unfettered fucking access to the road. That’s why the checkpoints were attacked. That’s why building a JSS all the way out to Omarkhel was never going to work, cuz the bottleneck was already IED-fucking-alley by the end of summer. The Taliban *knew* the road was key, they knew it all along.”

“Taliban don’t know shit. Don’t go giving those goat-fuckers any more credit than they deserve.”

“Yeah Mac, sounds like you’re scrapin’ the bottom of the barrel on that one. Every road’s got IEDs in ‘em.”

And they leave me standing there in the dirt. Now I’m the one talking about stuff way above my pay grade. They didn’t quite say that, but they didn’t have to. And it takes me a cold minute to realize: they’re right. Stay in your lane, buck sergeant. Stop talking about shit you don’t know the first thing about. No one wants to listen to you, you make too many mistakes.

I look down at my left hand.

Sure, I do some things right. I've maneuvered my squad under fire, engaged the enemy, prevented my own soldier from firing on someone they weren't supposed to only to spin around at the shot from another finishing the job. Still, I'm nowhere near the level of competence I expect myself to be. I mean, no one is, but I've got one field-grade and two company-grades under my belt in my seven years in this man's army, and—

Only a divot of a scar left in the top of my hand, a pale slice in my palm.

They told us before the mission not to go near the road. There was intel about (yet another) IED. Don't go near the fucking road, they said. And what does Sergeant Mac do?

Thing is, it wasn't just me who was wounded that day. Our lieutenant caught one or more pieces of shrapnel, too. But because his were located near a major artery—which I believe he made a full recovery from, last I talked to him—the docs shipped him back stateside, just to be safe. Be glad it wasn't worse. That's what I tell myself.

And it hits me: I'm not cut out for this operational shit. It's October and we're not even pulling patrols out west of Dehayat anymore. We're doing odd jobs around COP Blackhawk, pulling guard, visiting "safe" villages like Kanie Ezzat and Dae Afghanan. Busy work. Minimal risk. Command doesn't want any more casualties, not this late in the game. It's October and all we're doing is winding down the clock, waiting for the next regular infantry company, the 173rd out of Vincenza, to begin rotating in. It's October and I'm less than a year out from the end of my enlistment, and I'm done. Done with Afghanistan, with the army, with all of it. If I make it back to Fort Drum in the next couple of months, I'm out.

*

It’s the day before my kid’s birthday and we don’t have any cream cheese. How’re we supposed to make frosting for his birthday cake? Who’s running to the grocery store? You? Me?

Please let it be me.

Going into it you think it’ll be easy, being a stay-at-home dad. You won’t turn into a frazzled wreck of your former self. You won’t end up desperate for a mere thirty-minute jaunt to Walmart, a slice of time, a guilty convalescence from the rabid lunacies of your toddler, a chance to feel, I don’t know, normal again, but you do. Transitioning to solids. A dab of toothpaste the size of a pea. Fucking potty training. Your spouse gets to go and do adult things like commute to work, talk to other adults at work, stress out about work, while you get to stay at home and watch Blippi the clown for the umpteenth time and fight to survive another day of it. Because when you’re a stay-at-home parent every day can feel like a losing battle. He’s teething (again). Only daddy can rock him to sleep anymore. Take that out of your mouth. Spit it out—now!

I’m standing in the dairy section at Walmart and I’m spacing out. I’m not thinking about the all-natural organic cream cheese in my left hand, a buck-fifty more expensive than the low-fat generic cream cheese in my right. The coolness of their cubes in my palms. No, I’m trying to remember the names of mountains.

*

It’s December and my last night in COP Blackhawk. The remaining days of twenty-o-nine, and our deployment, can be counted on one hand. We’re hours away from lining up in our chalks and hitching a ride up to Bagram. Midnight flights. Darkness the infantryman’s friend. The 173rd have already come in and taken over, pulling guard, running missions, sleeping in what were until very recently our tents. I’m standing down

at the smoke pit and the stars are above me, brilliant spangled sonsabitches like nothing you see back stateside. And there are the mountains, black crags tearing into the spectacle.

I recall a few missions where we scaled the mountains and when we scaled them, we named them. Names like Mount Outlaw, Chocolate Chip, Drag-Ass One, Drag-Ass Two-point-O, Blackhawk Point. Who knew, or cared, what names the Afghans had given them.

*

At least, those are the names I can remember. I doubt my memory and I absolutely doubt my own versions of events, biased and incomplete as they are bound to be. I don't really mention any heroics, mine or anyone else's. My mind doesn't dwell on standard heroics like it does the unpleasant realities, the blind spots in our collective rearview, the things that should not have happened but always do.

I'm damn near forty years old, staring into space, until I remember the cubes of cream cheese in my hands. Organic or generic? Price and packaging. What's the difference, really? Is there any difference between the mythic me, the combat story me, and the now me, the real me standing in the dairy section of Walmart in flip-flops and pajama pants with two leftover bits of twelve-year-old shrapnel still in him? God knows they may never work themselves out.

*

My cherry crackles in the midnight December chill. There's only a handful of us down at the smoke pit. None of us speak. We're all looking out at the stars and mountains. Each of us in our own way saying goodbye, good riddance and good fucking luck. It's only a few hours and we're walking across the landing zone of COP Blackhawk under the gusts of propellers. I count my guys aboard the Chinook. Then I embark and catch a

seat with a view out the back ramp. The only light is a green bulb in the fuselage. It details each of our faces. The only sound is the thrum of the double rotors. I give a thumbs-up to the crewman, then, in the next moment, we're leaving. Never get tired of that elevator-drop in the pit of my stomach when the chopper's wheels cease to touch ground.

I'm looking out the back of the Chinook, at the dark outline of COP Blackhawk as it circles below. The overall square of hesco bastions. The moonlit carpet of gravel from one end of base to the next. Armored trucks parked in rows. Light discipline observed. In a few beats of the chopper's blades, COP Blackhawk is out of sight and I lean back in my seat, and my gear, my carbine muzzle-down between my legs, and I'm looking back at when we first arrived in Nerkh.

COP Blackhawk did not exist back in January or February or whenever it was. We visited the Nerkh District Center, a stone's throw down the hill from where COP Blackhawk would be. The District Center wasn't much to look at. A handful of Afghan soldiers, a sprinkling of police. What caught our attention were the bullet holes riddling the walls around the outside of the compound. One sergeant looked at me, grinned and said, "It's like the Alamo." I grinned back at him. Hell yeah, the Alamo. That's what every infantryman really wants deep in their bones.

*

From January to December 2009, Blackhawk Company lost a total of eight killed in action. All of them to IEDs. Not to mention the dozens upon dozens of others who did not die but continue to suffer from paralysis, imbedded shrapnel, leg, neck and back injuries, PTSD, suicide. Their names are forever etched in my memory.

After we left, COP Blackhawk was renamed to COP Nerkh. Did the 173rd rename the mountains, too? Or the company after them? Or

the company after them? The names that stay with you, the names that wash away.

*

When I ask the Afghan army commander who had taken over COP Nerkh after the Green Berets' exit if there was any way that someone could bury a body 50 yards outside his perimeter without him being aware of it, he laughs. "There is no possibility," he says, pointing out that his guard towers have clear lines of sight in all directions over the flat ground. No one could start digging outside the base without attracting immediate attention. "The Americans must have known they were there."

—*The A-Team Killings*, Rolling Stone, November 13, 2013

It puts my hairs on end. I've walked over that ground. We, Blackhawk Company, built COP Nerkh. My ten toes tingling inside of my boots. Ten bodies buried under the ground. When a place you've known becomes a site of torture and mass burial, it's unthinkable, tragic, and then, all too familiar.

Many regular infantry bases, built up during the surge in '09, were turned over to Special Forces roundabout 2012. The surge was drawing down, the decade-long withdrawal from Afghanistan just beginning. Special Forces were sent in to assure Afghan allies we weren't completely abandoning them while appeasing taxpayers back home by supplanting thousands of regular troops with "pods" of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams.

ODA Team 3124 took over COP Nerkh.

In November 2012, Aziz Rehman was found under a bridge in a wadi, beaten, near death. He'd reportedly been stopped by Special Forces, on the road, earlier that day. He died right before reaching a hospital in Kabul.

Mohammed Hassan, in December 2012, was waiting with his family for the bus to Kabul. The bearded soldiers told him to come with them. Mohammed said to his family not to worry, that he'd meet them in Kabul. They never saw him alive again.

Nasratullah, a veterinary student, home on break in Ibrahimkhel, was abducted in a Special Forces night raid in February 2013.

I've read there was a box, on COP Nerkh. A plywood cube. The bearded soldiers put the men they arrested in the box. Agha, a fifty-year-old man and employee in Maiden Shar, described how Special Forces broke into his house without knocking and took him to their base. When he was electrocuted, buried up to his neck and left to freeze overnight, or dunked headfirst into a barrel of water, Agha said it was the Americans telling the Afghan soldiers to do it.

The SF went to Karimdad, to Omarkhel, to Dae Afghanan, to all of these villages I still see before me, the road twisting through them, golden mulberries drying in a wooden bowl, the apple orchards with the oldest trees and the deepest shade. There was a man I met in Dae Afghanan, in twenty-o-nine. We knocked on his door and he allowed us to search his home. It was a cursory search; peek inside. Clear. I remember I stood outside, just below the man, in his courtyard, my eyes feasting on his garden. A bee rummaging across the fiery head of a zinnia. Red-lipstick geraniums. The cool blue of cornflowers, or something like them. Salamalekum. You have a beautiful garden. I said this to him through our interpreter. He put his palm to his chest. Salam. Thank you. Was his name Mohammed Hassan? I don't know; I can't remember even asking the man his name.

In 2013, a military investigation was opened, shut, with "no evidence connecting US troops to allegations of abuse, torture, harassment and murder of innocent Afghans." Protests erupted in Wardak Province. Hamid Karzai demanded the Special

Forces leave Nerkh and, by April 2013, they did. Within a month, with permission from Afghan security forces, relatives began uncovering bodies scattered in shallow graves around the walls of COP Nerkh. Relatives who had searched, questioned and quested in vain to find out what had happened to their brother, father, son, as no record existed of their relation being detained in any official database, now knew.

Neamatullah wept when, with pickaxes, his three brothers, Hekmatullah, Sediqullah, and Esmatullah, were raised up out of the brown broken earth. He knew them only by their clothes—a telltale scarf, a shirt, a watch. All else was bones and barely decayed flesh.

Information is scant, but from what I can discern an investigation was reopened, per new evidence presented by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and it's still pending, or has gone stale, unresolved, or is closed again. Who knows? It's all so five, six, seven years ago. Many fingers point towards the Special Forces' interpreter, Zikria Kandahari, but, as a 2013 Human Rights Watch article points out: "Even if Afghan personnel are found to have carried out the killings and mistreatment, US personnel can bear criminal responsibility for war crimes and other violations of international law if they aided and abetted, ordered, or knew or should have known about crimes committed by their subordinates and took no action."

Things buried, whether in flesh or earth, have ways of wriggling themselves out into the light. Ten bodies buried under the ground. Another eight found dead or left for dead in wadis, under bridges, or what have you, in Nerkh Valley, Afghanistan. Come home, kiss your wife, go to your kid's birthday party. And what of the people you left behind who don't have their son, father, husband anymore? What memorial will come to stand on that ground? What plaque speak their names?

Mohammad Qasim. Nawab. Sayed Mohammad. Noorullah. Mohammad Hassan. Esmatullah. Sediqullah. Atiqullah. Mansoor. Mehrab Khan.

Maybe the tragedy itself needs a name for people to remember it by. Maybe we call it the Nerkh Massacre, or the Nerkh Killings, so it can join the long sad list of other massacres, named and unnamed, committed by US military forces, from Wounded Knee to No Gun Ri, from Bud Dajo to Bad Axe, from Haditha to My Lai. That village, or valley, or river, that ground forever in collective memory stained in blood. Or will their names, too, one day, wash away?

*

My kid's birthday goes off without a hitch. He's running circles around the yard with cream cheese frosting still stuck to his cheeks—organic, only the best for my baby. I'm sitting in a lawn chair, watching him, and imagining a future-me and a future-teenaged-him sitting at the table in the kitchen. I'm talking away about something or other, but then, out it slips, and he asks, "Wait, dad, you were in the army?" and I say, "Yeah, for… a little while."

"Why have I never heard about this?"

"Well, it wasn't anything to write home about—say, what're you doing with your friends this afternoon?"

That's how it goes. Divert and distract. Change subjects. It never works out that way. But I don't want my kid following in my footsteps. Chasing war, combat, strife, then growing into a forty-year-old man who spends his days trekking the fields of his memory, gleaning shoots of violence, reciting the names of others gone before him to prevent their dying a second death. No, not for my kid. If I could swaddle him in a bubble of innocence forever, I would.

Though, chances are, it'll all go to shit.

He’ll grow up wanting to join the army, the infantry of all things, he’ll go off to fight in some mean little war just like daddy-o. Because I can’t stop going back there. Because the United States can’t help itself from starting mean little wars it can’t finish every couple of decades or so. Because part of me is in love with the making of a myth of myself.

In May 2021, with only a thousand or so American troops remaining in Afghanistan, the Nerkh District Center is overrun. A Taliban spokesman claimed Afghan security forces were killed or captured in the taking.

I don’t know how to make it stop, or what remedy would suffice. I can’t bear to count the dead anymore. All any of it makes me wonder is: whose names are next?

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New Interview of Author Hassan Blasim, by Peter Molin

Hassan Blasim’s 2014 short-story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* captured American readers with its harrowing portrait of an Iraq wrecked by authoritarian rule, oppressive Islamic custom, American invasion, and sectarian in-fighting. The stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* were Poe-like in their ability to combine story-telling prowess—often humorous—with unexpected and sensationally graphic violence. Especially for readers familiar with the growing body of works written by

American veterans of Iraq, *The Corpse Exhibition* aptly portrayed the nightmare of recent Iraq history from the other side, while confirming the sense that however bad Iraq might have been for American fighting men and women, it was infinitely worse for Iraqis caught in the melee. Now comes Blasim's *God 99*, a genre-defying text from which signature-style Blasim short-stories emerge organically from a textual seedbed composed of memoir, auto-fiction, and transcribed emails. The narrator is "Hassan Owl," an Iraqi exile now living in Finland, who begins a blog titled God 99 to document the experience of other Iraqi refugees living in Europe, but that conceit is only the start-point for a wide-ranging set of story-lines and thematic concerns. Roughly categorized, these include descriptions of Hassan Owl's early life in Iraq, where the dream of a peaceful life full of artistic creativity are blasted by political and religious persecution and violence, the many-year exodus that follows as Hassan Owl makes his way out of Iraq to Finland, the texture of everyday life in Finland in which quote-unquote normal existence is elusive for Arab refugees still touched by enduring conflict in the Middle East, and, finally, Hassan Owl's attempt to reconnect with a beloved family member now said to be living somewhere in the Middle East.

Author Hassan Blasim. Photo by Katja Bohm.

That's a lot, and adding spice to it all are short interludes between chapters excerpted from a long email thread between Hassan Owl and a mentor, a fellow Iraqi émigré named in the novel Alia Mardan, who is based on the Iraqi expatriate writer Adnam al-Mubarek. Potentially intimidating, the hybrid mix is unified by Blasim's dazzling prose voice, which inflects descriptions of even mundane occurrences with funny and/or startling story-turns and moments of imaginative insight. *God 99* offers a profound sense of the connectedness of war in Iraq

and contemporary European life, and, even more so, a superb self-portrait of an artist in exile—a 21st version of James Joyce, Henry Miller, and the other revered expatriate authors of 20th-century literature.

I had a chance to speak with Blasim about *God 99* and his current life in Finland. We spoke in English via Zoom, and I have condensed and clarified his answers.

Molin: Do you have a particular audience or ideal reader in mind when you write?

Blasim: I never imagine that someone's looking over my shoulder while I write. But because I write in Arabic, I do consciously try to play with classical Arabic style, mostly by incorporating street language, to make an Arab reader feel the uniqueness of what I'm trying to do. Mostly though the fight is with myself, and I don't consider what any reader might think—there's just not time or space for that. When I send the book to the publisher, it's pretty much finished—to include the design for the cover and the lay-out of the text. That's very important to me. The publisher may suggest changes, but I'm not usually very receptive. Some readers and reviewers haven't understood *God 99*; I think they expected or wanted more short-stories since my previous book—a collection of short-stories—had been successful. I had more short-stories, but to publish them as stand-alone tales in a collection to me was boring. I wanted to incorporate the stories into a larger and more complex structure, which a novel allowed me to do.

Molin: How would you describe your reception in America and in Europe?

Blasim: I don't think world literature is popular in general in America, which means people aren't used to looking for Arabic books and probably don't understand real Arabic culture apart from what they get in the movies or the news, both of which are full of cliches. I especially don't understand the

publishing market and the intellectual climate. When I first published in America, I was happy like any author would be. But you need someone with energy to promote you to readers and newspapers and critics, and I didn't know how that works. Unfortunately, my first trip to America was not enjoyable. It was a huge problem getting permission to enter the country, both in terms of obtaining a visa and then going through customs, which made me feel like a criminal. And without going into detail, some of the readings and writing events were unpleasant, too. I'm not in a hurry to repeat any of that. In Europe it's better for me because I've learned a lot over the years and become more recognized by readers and book people. My books are translated into many languages, they've been adapted to theater often, and every month there are one or two book festivals somewhere where I'm asked to read.

Molin: How about in Iraq and the Arab world?

Blasim: When I first began writing stories in Arabic after arriving in Finland, I sent them to many publications in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries. But no one was willing to publish them because they said they broke too many taboos and the language was too coarse. So my first publications were online and then later in print in Europe. Only after I was translated into six languages in Europe did anyone in an Arab country publish me, even though I was already popular among young people who could read me online. But now with *God 99*, it's the same thing again. It's currently banned either officially or publishers won't touch it. I still feel my real work should be back in Iraq and helping Iraq understand itself better, but I'm not permitted to do that. It would be dangerous for me and my family still in Iraq to even try. It's still very easy to get shot by someone for expressing unpopular views.

Hassan Blasim and Peter Molin in one of the three Zoom

interviews conducted for this story. Screen capture by Peter Molin.

Molin: What about fiction attracts you?

Blasim: It's important for English and American readers to know that I don't only write fiction, I write poetry, criticism, plays, and essays, too, that haven't yet been translated into English. I also write a lot in support of refugees, gay rights, and Iraq and the Middle East. But as for fiction, it's what I have loved most all my life, from the time I was a boy. I always liked the way stories could contain extremes and opposites, such as how a story could be both a love story and a horror story, a funny story and a sad story, both tender and violent. Fiction is serious for me, but it's also play and pleasure. In my writing, I enjoy trying to make all these parts come together. A lot of my sense of how to write fiction comes from my love of movies, from which early on I was impressed by how easily they switched between different types of scenes and moods. In my stories I want that same effect, something unexpected happening, something changing all the time. That's how I try to write, too, I don't plan anything ahead of time, I just enjoy the rhythm of writing and the chance to play. I open my laptop and I type….

Molin: *God 99* pays tribute to many writers and movie-makers who have inspired you, both Arabic and Western. As a youth in Iraq, what attracted you to European and American art, film, and literature?

Blasim: When I was growing up, my friends and I loved European and American movies, art, music, and books, me probably most of all. It seemed so free—there were no taboos and everything was possible. A lot of it was easily available. Even after the first Gulf War, for example, in the early 90s, we were still reading Raymond Carver and Richard Ford stories. When economic sanctions were put in place by the US that limited imports and

forced us to restrict the use of electricity, we would still gather in apartments and have parties while watching Oliver Stone movies. We loved Arab writers and artists, too—we celebrated all art and artists, especially contemporary ones—they were heroes to us.

Molin: One writer referenced frequently in *God 99* is the Italian author Italo Calvino. What do you like about Calvino?

Blasim: Calvino is very popular in Arab countries generally. For me, I love him because he is my opposite. I'm very loud in my writing, like an Oliver Stone or Quentin Tarantino. But Calvino is so cool, and you can tell he's a slow and deep thinker, in a good way. I'm jealous of people who can sit and consider things without getting excited, because that's not me, nor is it like Iraq, which is so passionate and excitable, like heavy-metal music. The part in *God 99* where I describe fleeing Iraq and traveling through Europe making my way to Finland with only book, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, is true.

Molin: That's important—the book you carry with you when you are fleeing from one country to another! Another writer you mention is Henry Miller. How is Miller important to you?

Blasim: I discovered Henry Miller in the 1990s and read six of his books, all of which was a big shock for me growing up in a society where so much was restricted. He's a great fighter and he's honest.

Molin: When did your admiration for American and Western art become complicated by politics and war?

Blasim: From the beginning. As a teenager reading Western books and watching Western films, I learned many ideas about freedom—individual, cultural, religious, and political. My friends and I wanted to change culture and society as much as we wanted to be rid of Saddam, and we didn't like the restrictions of Islam either. Mostly we just wanted to do what we wanted, such as drink, which I started to do as a teenager.

I quickly learned that books could be transgressive, too—many were censored and you could get in trouble if you read them. So in the beginning, my love of Western art placed me in opposition to the dominant attitudes in Iraq.

That continued in college where I studied film. From classroom discussions and making short films, I learned that it was dangerous to complain about the government, so I kept quiet about politics, but I still got into trouble. After I made a documentary about poverty in Iraq, for example, I was visited by Baathist officials who questioned my motives. My teachers always complimented my ideas and work, but it was clear that they were also warning me about being too radical and too outspoken. Within the college there were lots of rumors about spies, and one of my teachers warned me that if I didn't keep silent, the police would send for me after sunset, which was an idiom for being executed, being sent "into the dark"—we knew many people were being shot in those days. Meanwhile, members of my family were also in trouble with the government, which was constantly watching us. This is when I knew that I would eventually get into trouble if I stayed in Iraq and it was important to find somewhere freer and safer.

After the American invasion in 2003, the problem for me changed. By 2004 I was in Finland, but I was hearing horrible reports from friends and family in Iraq and I could see things were going to get very bad. The sectarian civil war was breaking out, and the danger and violence were worse than ever. So now I began to speak out and write against the Americans and the religious violence the invasion unleashed.

So, my attitude toward America is complicated, like a crazy mystery. In terms of the culture and people, I don't know many Americans, but my Iraqi friends in America encourage me to visit again or think about moving there. They tell me the people are friendly and the living is easy, more so than in Europe. That wasn't exactly my experience on my first short visit, as I mentioned above, but the diversity of people, the

literature, and the music all are appealing. The politics and the capitalism are not.

Molin: During the period you were trying to flee Iraq and then settling in Finland (2000-2004), how did you keep alive the dream of being a writer and artist?

Blasim: In high school I wanted write and make films, and I studied film in college. I was always writing, but then my life was unsettled for a long time, but when I got to Finland I began to write again, and I had some small jobs that allowed me to write and translate, but it was boring and not creative. But fiction and public writing happened after I finished work and was sitting at home. After I discovered the Internet everything changed for me. The Internet gave me an outlet and allowed me to build an audience, and then led to the print publication of my books.

Molin: You must get asked about identity a lot—have you come to think of yourself as Finnish?

Blasim: It's funny because I'm a Finnish citizen, but I'm not considered a true Finnish writer because I don't write in Finnish and so am not eligible for Finnish literary prizes. Still, I now have a lot of good memories from living in Finland for many years, and when I travel around Europe, it feels good to return to Finland, where I am comfortable. But I also still feel like an exile, which doesn't make me sad. Exile can be a gift for a writer, or for any human being. When you think about it, reading is a form of exile—when you read a book about New York or Tokyo, you go into a temporary form of exile that takes you out of the boring daily life of your own country and allows you to see things differently. I've learned not to be become too attached to one place, so I treat any location I'm in like a hotel—one room is in Baghdad, another is in Helsinki, etc. That's also how I've come to think about my identity.

Molin: In *God 99*, it's written that Finns are very conservative except when they're in the sauna or at the bar. As someone who is one-quarter Finnish, I like the part about the saunas and the bars.

Blasim: Yes yes, I like it here a lot. The country is peaceful and the people respect free speech. That's good, very good.

Molin: In *God 99*, the chapters recounted by the narrator are interspersed with short interludes transcribing email conversations with a woman named Alia Mardan. In an Author's Note you explain that the emails with Alia Mardan are based on actual emails you exchanged with Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak, who lived for many years in Denmark before dying in 2017. Why is al-Mubarak important to you and how did you devise this form for the novel?

Blasim: As I began to write *God 99*, I had a lot of stories but no structure. I was also depressed about the death of al-Mubarak, who was my friend and mentor. When I was on the move from Iraq to Finland from 2000-2004, he would write me long emails full of talk about great artists, classical Arabian folklore, and philosophy. I didn't have any books or much time to read, and I was very desperate, so he was my best friend and teacher, an angel really. Those emails meant so much to me even when I arrived in Finland and was working in restaurants and was even homeless for a while. We often talked about writing a book together, but never got the chance while he was still alive. When after his death I was lost emotionally and thinking about how to bring the pieces of *God 99* together, it occurred to me to use our email dialogue to frame the stories I had written. It might make things difficult for the reader at first, but it works for me personally and I think for the book, too. The emails in *God 99* are all real, though I cut them up and made a collage of the thousands of emails we've exchanged.

Molin: You change the gender of your interlocutor from a man

to woman. Why?

Blasim: That's my ode to Scheherazade—the inspiration for a thousand stories!

Molin: Alia Mardan is interested in the 20th-century French-Romanian essayist Emil Cioran and writes frequently about her ongoing project to translate Cioran into Arabic, which seems to amuse the narrator. How is Cioran important for *God 99*?

Blasim: Cioran is not popular in Europe now, in part because he had a brief association with the Nazis, [an association he renounced and regretted]. Maybe he is just too dark for Europe, but he is widely loved in Arab countries. They love him so much it's crazy. It's his pessimism, his bleakness, his nihilism, his black humor. But I haven't read all his books, mostly I like his quips, many of which I got from al-Mubarak.

Molin: All right. Let's end with some bigger questions.

Blasim: Smaller questions are good, too. Just normal is best.

Molin [laughs]: OK, then, how about last thoughts?

Blasim: I wonder what your memories are of my visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where you were my host. Did you often invite artists and writers?

Poster made by Peter Molin for Hassan Blasim's visit to West Point.

Molin: Yes we did, at least while I was there, and before and after, too, I think. We brought in mostly Americans, and not all military writers, a lot of civilian writers, poets and filmmakers, too, including Oliver Stone. I would say you were pretty far out there compared to others in terms of your background, but you were a trooper—you gave a great reading and talk and were pleasant with everyone, even though it must

have seemed a strange thing for you, after the way war has wrecked Iraq. But you gave us our money's worth, and we all—faculty and cadets, including several international cadets from Arab countries—enjoyed hanging out with you.

Blasim: Some of my friends are surprised to learn I visited there, but I was encouraged to do so by my hosts in New York City, who knew West Point had a tradition of inviting writers such as Orhan Pamuk to visit. I just thought it was an interesting opportunity and was just taking things as they came.

Hassan Blasim at West Point. Photo by Peter Molin.

Molin: Well, I'm sure I was pretty inconsiderate about what it all meant for you—it couldn't have been easy. Maybe I was hoping for you to learn that we aren't all monsters or stupid idiots, at least not all the time. I mostly wish I could have given you a funner memory, like we might have gotten drunk in the barracks or something like that. You haven't written the visit into a story yet, for which I think I'm glad.

Blasim: No, no, that wasn't a bad day. Still, I hope that we can meet again sometime with that military stuff far behind us.
*

Hassan Blasim, *God 99.* Translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. First published in Arabic by al-Mutawassit, Milan, 2018. Published in Great Britain by Comma Press, 2020.

New Fiction from David P. Ervin: “Currents”

Grant crouched on the sandstone and leaned on his fishing pole. The sun warmed his shoulders as he stared through the clear, green water of the Sand Fork River. Shadows of particles on the water’s surface glided across the submerged, algae-covered rocks. A dragonfly buzzed over the water. There were no fish in the pool. His boots gritted against the rock as he stood. He took a deep breath.

He looked down the narrow valley as the hot breeze buffeted him. The green walls of the gorge hemmed the river into a space barely a hundred yards wide. Hemlock and sycamore branches shaded the whitish-tan rocks that formed its jagged banks. The water meandered around the boulders for two hundred yards before it dropped below the horizon into a rapid he could only hear.

He liked the river best when he was alone. There was only what he brought with him – no bustle, no people and their motives. No one trying to show off. No one trying to scare anyone. There was just the river and its own cacophony.

He listened to all the layers of sound. The river’s whoosh echoed off the sides of the gorge. The water lapped in a steady rhythm against the rock on which he was standing. It gurgled and tinkled around an exposed log a few feet away. Further down it poured between two rocks in a sloshing sound heavier than the gurgle. Then there was a steady thundering down at the rapids that reminded him that the river could change.

***

“This next one’s a bit crazier than the last one, man, but you’re doing good so far. Just keep it up,” said Brandon.

Grant looked behind him. Brandon’s tall frame was perched on the back edge of the three-man raft, eyes intent on the rapids ahead. His freckles were conspicuous on his fair skin. The swollen, muddy river stretched along the valley behind him. Spring had so far brought only rain. The valley was dead except for the evergreens and the beginnings of red and green buds on the other trees. They glided down a calm stretch between two rapids.

“Yeah. Right,” said Grant. He wedged his left foot tighter between the floor of the raft and its side. The roar almost a hundred yards ahead of them grew as they drifted toward it. “Man, are you sure we shouldn’t just walk the raft around this one? There’s nobody else out here if we tip over.”

“Nah, man. We’ll be totally fine. This one’s intense but it’s fuckin’ epic. Trust me,” said Brandon. He sat down and jammed his foot under the side. He nodded at Grant with a faint smile, then locked his eyes downriver. Grant said nothing and turned around. He gritted his teeth and shivered, wishing the clouds would break. He cinched the chinstrap on his plastic helmet.

He wondered how the hell he’d gotten here.

He’d run into Brandon on the campus of the state university. They’d graduated high school together, and he was a familiar face even though they’d run in different circles then. It was the second day of classes, the second day as a new college student just a few days removed from four years in the Army infantry and a tour in Iraq. The second day of bewilderment in a sea change. They got together on weekends through the spring semester, and Brandon took him the most laid-back bars, showed

him the best grocery stores and hiking spots. They talked and bonded.

When Grant spoke of Iraq and a little of combat, Brandon spoke of being a whitewater rafting guide. It was a lot like war, Brandon had said once. He'd read a lot about it, World War II mainly. You had to keep it together to survive. That took balls. This would, too. The river was like that. He'd invited him to take him rafting before the season opened, just them and the river. It'd be epic, Brandon had said.

It sounded like it could be fun. Brandon had showed him a lot so far that was. Maybe it would be like the cool parts of the Army, the air assaults and live-fire exercises. The adrenaline.

"You sure you've gone down this one when it was this high?" said Grant. The booming rapid had grown louder. "You're not bullshitting me, are you?"

"We'll be fine, man," said Brandon. "If you get thrown out, just curl up in a ball. You won't get stuck under a rock that way. The current will just push you downriver."

The image flashed through Grant's mind of being pinned against a rock by the force of the river and his mouth went dry. Brandon stood in the raft behind him. The rubber squeaked and the raft rocked. Grant turned around. Brandon was mumbling to himself and scanning the rapid ahead, eyes wide.

"Yeah," said Grant and faced front again. He pushed out a breath. The look on Brandon's face had tensed him up. It was always worse when the guy in charge was scared. His limbs felt warm despite the chilled water that hadn't yet dried from the last rapid.

Brandon dropped to his seat and the water sloshed underneath. "Okay, man. Comin' up! You ready?! We're hitting it from the left."

Grant rolled his shoulders and gripped the tee handle of the paddle. He jammed his foot further into the crevice until it pinched his toes.

“Got it,” he said, adding force to the words. He couldn’t see the course of the rapids, only a drop twenty-five yards ahead and a scattering of worn boulders. The whoosh had grown into a thundering. He crouched low. “Yeah I’m ready.”

His heart thumped in his chest. He heard Brandon behind him taking deep, deliberate breaths.

“You fuckin’ nervous, man?” said Grant. “Shit.”

“Huh-uh, nah. Remember, dig with that paddle. Push hard,” said Brandon. “Okay, let’s go two left!”

Grant put his paddle in the water on the left side, ensuring the entire paddle head was submerged, and pulled. They veered to the right, pointing at a narrow passage between two boulders. He dipped the paddle in the water and pulled once more.

“Okay, rest…Let’s do it, man!” shouted Brandon over the intensified roar in front of them Grant stared straight ahead. He heard Brandon’s paddle hit the water, then the current sucked them into the rapid.

“Left! Dig!” Brandon screamed over the din of the crashing water. “Now right!” Grant switched hands on the paddle and hunkered low as he dug the paddle into the water on the right of the raft.

They shot through the crevice. The front of the boat dropped and Grant felt weightless for an instant before it smacked the surface of the water. He stopped breathing when water came in the boat, dousing him, and then a gasp filled his lungs with air that smelled of mud. Boulders jutted out of the water and swirled all around them.

“Left, left!” said Brandon.

A wall of water to his left rose several feet above his head. His paddle was horizontal.

“Right! Right!” He flipped his hands around and leaned over the right side of the boat to get the paddle in the water. His left foot came loose. A wave underneath the boat bounced him out of the rubber seat. He scrambled to shove his foot back into the side and righted himself as the boat shot down the rapid. A wave threw the raft to the left and into a rock, stopping it and tilting them at an obscene angle.

This was it, thought Grant, and his heart fluttered.

“Back left, back left! Oh fuck back left!” said Brandon. Grant plunged the paddle in the water and pushed backward and his arms burned. The bottom of the boat hit rock then broke loose and bounced against another boulder. It sent them hurtling down the river to the left.

“Two right and two left!”

Grant caught a glimpse of calmer water further ahead as he paddled. A wave crashed against the left side of the boat and drenched him. He blinked the cold water out of his eyes.

“Two right, two left again,” said Brandon with a voice that had evened. He took a breath and paddled. The raft bobbed in the waves, and Grant heard the sucking sound underneath as it passed over them.

The raft slid down the remaining rapids, mere bumps, and reached the calm. Brandon whooped behind him.

“Holy shit, man!” he said. “We made it! Was that not awesome?!” Grant turned around in the boat. Brandon was taking off his helmet. Water streamed from his face and through his short, red hair.

Grant looked at the rapid behind him, growing quieter as they drifted, and traced the path they'd taken with his eyes. His stomach churned at the sight of the water pounding the sides of the boulder against which they'd bumped and the tremble began.

"Okay dude, you see that rock over to the right? Let's take a little break there," said Brandon, pointing to a long, flat rock that jutted into the water. Grant nodded and paddled.

The raft scraped against the rock as they approached it, then made an abrupt stop. Grant still felt the motion of the waves rocking him. He propped the paddle against the wall of the raft and unsnapped the chin strap. He lifted the light helmet off and ran a hand through his wet hair. Brandon got out splashed past Grant. He tossed his lifejacket onto the rock and put his hands on his hips, regarding the rapid behind them. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

When Grant climbed out of the boat his legs were wobbly. He sat back down on the edge of the raft and fished his water bottle out of the dry bag.

"That, my friend, is some fucking whitewater rafting," said Brandon with a satisfied smile. "You okay man? Looking a little pale over there."

"I'm fine," said Grant. He tensed his jaw. He took the life vest off and his sodden shoes squished as he stood. "Man, fuck. Is that it?" He took short, shallow breaths.

"Yeah that's the last big one. The rest of them are babies, nothing like that. Just an hour's worth or so until the takeout."

Grant nodded. "I almost came out of the goddamn raft," he said.

The old fear had returned in earnest, the gut-churning sense

of doom like passing a pile of trash on an Iraqi road and wondering if it would explode and kill you or nail your best friend's Humvee behind you.

"Ha! Yeah. Glad you didn't," said Brandon. "We'd have been screwed."

"Yeah, especially with no fucking medevac," said Grant. He wanted to scream at him for subjecting him to some kind of cruel, pointless trick, a measuring contest he'd never entered into. "At least in the Army we were smart about shit."

He stared at Brandon, whose smile ebbed.

"Well, I didn't know it'd be this high, but still, rocks doesn't it? Figured you could handle it."

Grant shook his head, feeling the blood rushing to his face and his back stiffening. "I sure fucking can. What are you trying to prove, man?"

"What?" said Brandon. His eyebrows shot up. "Nothing, dude. This is just fun. We beat the river, you know?"

Grant glared at him. Brandon shook his head, and then walked over to the raft and dug in his bag for a Power Bar that he ate in silence.

Just fun, thought Grant. Exactly. The war wasn't just fun. It had a point. He'd gone because people had flown planes into towers his senior year, and someone had to step up and do hard things. It wasn't about fun at all. All that fear – on the roads of Iraq, the raids, the incoming – it was about serving something other than ego.

"You hear that?" said Brandon with his mouth full. He nodded towards the rapid they'd just come through. "Listen close. That real low rumbling."

Grant cocked his ear toward the rapid. He homed in on the deep

booming of the water. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the sound.

“I hear it.”

“Know what that is?”

“No,” mumbled Grant. It was unmistakable now, a low, rolling knock beneath the higher pitched sounds of the rapid.

“Those are rocks moving along the bottom. That’s how powerful that current is. I forget the numbers on the volume of water the Sand Fork pushes, but yeah, it’s that powerful.”

“Rocks? Really?”

“Yeah man. This river’s no joke,” said Brandon.

Grant listened to the deep booms under the surface.

***

That was almost the last time he’d seen Brandon. He’d taken up his invitation for a celebratory drunk at McNally’s pub the night after the trip. Grant thought it could smooth things over. Maybe he’d overreacted, misread things when his blood was up.

The Sam Adams had gone down nicely. Easy conversation flowed. And they’d noticed a couple of attractive, seemingly single girls. This could be epic, too, Brandon had said. They sidled up to them at the long wooden bar and offered them shots. They accepted, but that was all. At the first sign of their disinterest, Brandon had regaled them with tales of the river, at how they’d nearly been killed if not for his expertise and calm. Should have seen how scared Grant was, he’d said. They weren’t impressed. And neither was Grant.

He’d avoided him since. He needed no measuring contests. He needed peace.

Grant picked up his fishing pole. He listened for the rumbling of the rocks along the river bottom but did not hear them now. He unhooked the lure from the pole and flipped it into the water. The ripples dissipated as they were carried downstream.

New Fiction from David Blome: “Bodies”

On a bright December morning, the lieutenant told me the news. An insurgent group in Latifiyah had executed about twenty Iraqi Shiites. Their unburied bodies were still rotting in the desert. We had to do something. We had to help. That’s what he said.

“What kind of fucked up bullshit do you have us doing now?” I said.

The lieutenant crossed his arms. “We’re helpin’ out, Doc. That’s why we’re here.”

“Sir, you can’t be serious. After six months, after everything we’ve been through, we’re gonna go risk our lives to clean up a bunch of dead Iraqis?”

“That’s right, we’re gonna go do our job.”

“Pfft.”

“Hey, Doc, you just do what you’re told.” The lieutenant loved that line.

“Roger that.” I turned and headed toward the tent looking for Logan. On my way I passed Talal, our Iraqi interpreter.

“Good morning, sir,” Talal said.

“Where’s Logan?”

“Inside, sir.” Talal pointed to the tent. “He is sleeping.”

I nodded, entered the tent, and walked straight to Logan’s cot. He was lying facedown underneath a poncho liner. I sat by his feet.

“Guess you heard,” he said, rolling over. I shook my head. Logan put his arms behind his head and grinned. “You don’t look excited. At least it’s something new.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t give a shit anymore.”

*

Three hours later we loaded up the Humvees, did radio checks, and headed toward the gate. As usual Logan and I sat in the back of the trail vehicle. He was smoking. I was staring at the casings lodged between the benches. Some of them were only a few days old. We stopped outside the medical facility on our way off the FOB where a young corpsman was waiting with a stack of body bags. He handed them to Logan then tossed me a box of latex gloves.

From there we drove at full speed toward our destination: a bombed-out munitions facility near Latifiyah. Right as the town came into view we veered off the asphalt and turned onto a dirt road. I kept my head down until Logan nudged my shoulder. “You gotta see this,” he said. I stood up and followed his gaze. He pointed to a gnarled mass of rebar and concrete the size of an SUV. It looked like a gigantic insect.

“Must’ve been a bunker,” I said, pointing to a few more in the

distance. We passed piles of rubble, the wreckage of various structures, a palm tree, and two burned-out vehicles. Tire tracks cut across expanses of dirt and brush. Not a soul in sight. “Hey,” Logan said, “this would be a great place to dump some bodies, wouldn’t it?” I nodded and sat back down. Then the lieutenant’s voice came over the radio.

“The road’s about to fork. Gunny, take your element south. I’m gonna head north.” Without slowing the lieutenant’s element bore right. We made a left and patrolled for another fifteen minutes until Gunny stopped the trucks. “I think we got something,” he said over the radio.

Logan, still standing, pressed his push-to-talk. “What do you see?”

“Don’t see anything, can smell it.”

I leaned forward to look through the windshield. Gunny stepped out of the lead vehicle, walked a few steps off the road, and stood still for a moment. He looked around then walked back to the truck. We started moving again. I stood up and took a deep breath. A sour stench filled my mouth and lungs. I shuttered. Logan wiped his nose.

“Can’t be too far away,” he said.

They weren’t.

“All right, stop the vehicles,” Gunny said. “About fifty meters to the right. Doc, Logan, go see what we got.”

Movement gave them away. Two mangy dogs circling a dark heap. We climbed out of the truck and they trotted off.

“I’m gonna shoot those dirty fuckers if this is what I think it is,” Logan said.

“Bro, I think we both know what this is.” I was breathing through my mouth to avoid the stench, a trick my mother taught me.

“Check it out,” Logan said, pointing with his boot.

An ulna or radius bone. Casings. I looked at Logan. Then at the heap of clothes, shoes, and decomposing flesh. I could see hair, blackened hands, and a few heads. The faces had rotted away.

“I guess we got our bodies,” I said, swallowing hard.

Logan shook his head and spit. “Seriously, man, how do we get stuck doing this shit?” He raised his M-4 and shot one of the dogs. The other ran off.

I reached for my push-to-talk. “Lieutenant, this is Doc, over.”

“Send it, Doc.”

“We have about five to ten bodies here in an advanced stage of decay.”

“Roger, you said advanced stage of decay?”

“Yeah, advanced.”

“Mark the location and keep looking.”

Logan and I exchanged looks. “Keep looking, sir? We found bodies.”

“Doc, we’re looking for a group killed in the last few weeks. Shouldn’t be seeing that much decay.”

Logan laughed. “Apparently the lieutenant’s a fucking coroner now.”

“You should tell him that,” I said. Then I pressed my push-to-

talk. “Roger, sir, we’ll keep looking. What about the bodies we found?”

“Just mark the location.”

“I got the location,” Gunny said, cutting in. “You guys head back to the trucks.”

Logan turned and left. I grabbed a handful of dirt and tossed it over the bodies. When I returned to the trail vehicle, Logan was lighting a cigarette. I sat down, still breathing through my mouth, feeling a little sick. The lieutenant’s voice came over the radio again.

“Gunny, need you to move to us, I think we got ‘em.”

I located the box of latex gloves. As we bounced down the road I shoved a handful into my drop pouch. About ten minutes later the other element came into view. They had stopped next to a circular brick building. Its roof had collapsed, the entrance lacked a door, and parts of the walls were crumbling.

The lieutenant was standing at the entrance, waving. Our truck stopped, and without a word, Logan and I made our way to the entrance. “They in there?” I said to the lieutenant. He nodded and we stepped inside.

Loose rubble covered the floor. A cloudless sky had replaced the roof. Against the bare walls leaned eighteen bodies, shoulder to shoulder. All men. Each shot in the head, some more than once. Powder burns speckled their swollen and disfigured faces. The casings said AK-47. All wore button-up shirts tucked neatly into dress pants. Their hands were unbound. One had a note lying near his feet.

We just stared until Logan said, “What do you think, sir, been dead a few weeks?”

“Yeah, Logan, I’d say so. Doc, would you agree?”

I leaned down and picked up the note.

“Doc, would you agree?”

“With what?”

“That they’ve been dead two weeks.”

“Sir, I’m a combat medic. I have no idea.” I held out the note. “Should we give this to Talal?”

“Why don’t *you* give it to him?”

“Be happy to.” I pressed my push-to-talk and walked toward the entrance. “Somebody send Talal into the building.” Talal came running. I handed him the note. He took it with both hands and started reading. “What’s it say?” I said.

Talal started nodding. “It say who did this.”

“Go show the lieutenant.”

“Ok, sir.”

I stepped out of the entrance, let Talal pass, and walked toward Gunny’s truck. He opened the door as I approached.

“We don’t have enough body bags,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re not cleaning this up.”

“You gonna tell the lieutenant that?”

Gunny stared at me for a moment. “Yeah, I’m gonna tell him that.”

I felt relieved. Then Logan and the lieutenant started shouting. We turned to see them sprint out of the building. They slowed to a trot, stopped, and looked back. Both eyed the building as they made their way to us.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Gunny said.

“Something started beeping,” Logan said between breaths. He pointed toward the building. Talal was leaning out of the entrance, motioning for us to join him. Logan shook his head. Talal motioned again.

I looked at Logan. “The place gonna blow?”

Logan smiled. “Maybe,” he said. “C’mon.”

We walked toward the building. Talal stepped out of the entrance, picking at his moustache. I faked a smile. “What happened, Talal?”

“Telephone, sir.”

“What?”

“Telephone.” Talal held a fist to his ear.

We stepped into the building. Talal took my arm and guided me to one of the bodies.

“Sir, this one. Here.” Talal pointed.

I leaned forward to look. Talal backed away. Sure enough, I saw a rectangular bulge in the dead man’s front pocket. I reached into my drop pouch and took out a pair of latex gloves.

“What are you doing?” Logan said from the entrance.

“What’s it look like?” I donned the first glove.

“Dude, seriously.”

I donned the other glove, stepped between the dead man’s legs, and tried to angle my hand into his pocket.

“Goddamnit,” I said.

“What’s the matter?”

I looked back at Logan. His face was wrinkled with disgust. “It’s not gonna work,” I said, “not with him sitting up.” I stood and surveyed the bodies. “Logan, you think these guys are boobytrapped?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. You need a pressure-release fuze to do that. Would’ve blown by now.”

“Okay.”

“Why?”

I leaned over, grabbed the dead man by his ankles, and pulled the body away from the wall. My efforts left a trail of gore and wormlike creatures writhing on the floor. Talal gasped. I held my breath and went right to work. Using my thumb and index finger, I wiggled my hand into the guy’s pocket, pulled out the phone, then turned away and exhaled.

I pressed zero on the pink Nokia and the screen lit up. The Arabic meant nothing to me but the battery icon was about a quarter full. I tried to hand Talal the phone but he backed away with his hands up, shaking his head.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “You want gloves?”

Talal looked at his hands. “Yes, gloves.”

“Let’s go then.” We walked back to the truck. The lieutenant, still holding the note, was talking to Gunny but stopped when he saw the phone in my hand. “Where did you get that?”

“Out of a dead guy’s pocket.”

“You’re serious?”

“What do you think was beeping?”

The lieutenant just stared at the phone. Gunny shifted in his seat and said, “You took it out of his pocket?”

I nodded and dug another pair of gloves out of my drop pouch. “Talal, here, put these on.” Talal didn’t move. “Hurry up,” I said. “Put ‘em on.” Talal took the gloves but started fumbling with them.

“I said hurry up!”

That got him moving. He donned the gloves, cupped his hands, and I handed him the phone.

“Hey, Doc,” the lieutenant said, looking at my face, “you okay?”

I tore the gloves off my hands and dropped them in the dirt.

The lieutenant took a step back and said, “Why don’t you go to the truck? We got it.”

“You wanna hear my suggestion first?” I said.

The lieutenant looked at the building. About five seconds passed. “Sure, what’s your suggestion?”

“Let Talal return that call. He can tell whoever it was where to find the bodies. We’ll leave the body bags and gloves. They can bury their own.”

“You know, Doc, before we left, you were ready to let these guys rot in the desert. I’m glad to see you still care.”

“I’m not sayin’ I care, I just wanna be done with this. Let Talal call that guy.”

“Let me handle this.”

I locked eyes with the lieutenant.

“You wanna handle it?”

“Yeah, let me handle it.”

My fists clenched. “All right, I’ll let you handle it.” I turned and almost walked away. Almost.

“You know what, sir?” I faced the lieutenant. “I’ll do better than that. I’ll let *you* take the body bags out of my truck and *you* do what you want with ’em.” I took a breath, ready to continue, but Gunny lunged between me and the lieutenant and gripped my arm. Hard. “Let’s go,” he said in a low voice.

We started walking. “I could kill him,” I said.

“You could, but what you’re gonna do is go sit down until we leave.”

Logan walked with me to the truck and we climbed into the back together. I sat down, leaned back, and shut my eyes. That stench filled my mouth and lungs.

“Logan?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Who do you think called that guy?”

Logan chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I sat up and opened my eyes. “Who do you think it was?”

“No idea,” Logan said, shaking his head, “but somebody’s still looking for him. Kinda sad when you think about it.”

“I know, I’m trying not to.” I leaned back again. “Can I ask you something else?”

“What?”

“How many more you think are out here?”

Logan sat down next to me. “Bodies?” He took out his cigarettes. “Honestly, bro, nothing would surprise me. Could be hundreds. Thousands.” He looked at me and smiled. “Tell you one thing though. Long as mine ain’t one of ‘em, I’m not gonna worry about it too much.”

He had a point. “What do we got,” I said, “two weeks left over here?”

“Sixteen days.”

I nodded and shut my eyes. “I just hope Talal calls that guy.”

American Exceptionalism: Quo Vadis?

In view of the failures of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, which has seen over 2 million cases and more than 115,000 deaths as of this writing, the very idea of American exceptionalism has unraveled. The expected arrival of the pandemic in the USA was met with overwhelming failures. A country with unmatched military and economic power came up with a shortfall of equipment to deal with the crisis, as well as a lack of leadership from the Federal Government, leaving states and hospitals to fend for themselves and even compete with each other. One nurse taking care of a doctor severely ill with COVID-19 stepped out of the ER weeping and cursing: “I felt incredible anger,” she said – at America’s lack of preparation, at shortages of protective equipment, at official

dithering that had left the doctor and other medical workers at risk."[1] According to an unofficial list kept by Medscape, at least 145 health care professionals died of Covid-19 in the USA,[2] and the pandemic is far from over.

A Brief Overview of American Exceptionalism

In 1630, even before there was a USA, John Winthrop delivered a sermon in which he called the Puritan community, "a city on a hill." This city upon a hill is a phrase from the parable of Salt and Light in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:15, he tells his listeners, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden."

The reference to this city on a hill was mentioned both by President Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. During an address delivered to the General Court of Massachusetts, President elect Kennedy said: "I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us."[4] On the eve of his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan said: "I have quoted John Winthrop's words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining *city on a hill*, as were those long-ago settlers."[5]

The term American exceptionalism gained considerable traction in the 1950s after World War II, when American historians hotly debated why their country escaped the violent disruptions that occurred in Europe, such as revolutions, dethroning of monarchies, class uprisings, two world wars and

genocide over the previous two centuries. Since none of this happened in the US, they attributed it to our exceptional qualities. Historian Joshua Zeitz notes: “They conveniently glossed over the violently repressive regimes of chattel slavery, redemption (the return of white supremacy and the removal of rights for blacks – instead of Reconstruction), war on Indian nations, and Jim Crow, which, of course, most historians writing in these years blithely did.”[6]

During the colonial period from the 16-20th Century, the world was Eurocentric. The end of World War II saw the rise of an American-dominated world. While European powers in–particular Great Britain and France–had used both their hard and soft power to dominate, colonize, and control the countries of the Far East, Middle East and Africa, the American approach of projecting global power has been different, tailored for a divergent time in history, as a consequence to the end of colonialism in the latter part of the 20th Century.

However, as US power accumulated in many countries including those of South and Central America and the Middle East, a double standard prevailed, supporting dictators and despots who did our bidding, and overthrowing democratically-elected governments that refused to abide by an American dictated economic agenda. Today, most young Americans, perhaps frustrated with the Iraq War and the lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, are less likely to endorse an all-encompassing global role for the USA. Similar views are held by the libertarian senator, Rand Paul. The recent polls showing a lack of interest in the US direct involvement in Syria and in the Ukrainian crisis, as well as Trump’s ‘presumed’ isolationist views, are a fallout of our long engagement in Afghanistan and the Iraq War championed by conservatives and neo-cons.

The 2016 Presidential election saw Trump’s trademark slogans: “Make America Great Again,” and “America First.” Referring to

American exceptionalism, he said: “I don’t think it’s a very nice term. I think you’re insulting the world.” That doesn’t necessarily mean that Trump shied away from the exceptional principle. He has replaced it with a different yet familiar tag line that conveys the same sense of national power and entitlement—America First, itself a term that was associated with opponents of the US entering World War II.[7]

The other single most important feature of American exceptionalism is that at one time, the U.S. was a classless society with considerable upward mobility—or, at least, for white Americans, though it did not apply to African Americans or Native Americans. Furthermore, in view of our capitalist economy—a presumed hallmark of exceptionalism—most Americans were not tempted by socialism, unlike their European counterparts. The fall of Communism, the acceptance of capitalist economies in such socialist countries like Sweden and government-sponsored capitalism in China, the opening up of India to foreign capital, all implied the ascent and the universal triumph of American capitalism over socialism.

The Exposé of American Exceptionalism: The Coronavirus Pandemic

Perhaps no other event in modern American history unraveled the very idea of American exceptionalism as has the Coronavirus pandemic. Its crushing arrival in the US—despite substantial warning—was met with failures in organization, lack of materials to handle the crisis, denial, and empty bravado. A country with unmatched hard and soft power failed to come up with enough cotton swabs, N95 masks, gloves, face shields, ventilators, special lab chemicals and enough ICU beds.

What was most distressing was that our paramedical and medical

personnel had to work with inadequate protection at the very risk of their own lives despite wartime manufacturing and supply powers assumed by the President. I saw doctors in New York City turned into beggars for ponchos because they couldn't get proper medical gowns. I have seen fear, anxiety, and trepidation on the faces of doctors and nurses as they surged ahead to care for COVID patients and when they had to keep away from their spouses and children following their shifts. Several dedicated doctors, my friends and colleagues, lived in their apartments in New York City caring for COVID patients while their wives and children stayed for weeks on end with in-laws or relatives away from the city and even left for other states. This was the norm of the day for medical personnel, rather than the exception.

It is deplorable that for effective diagnostic testing of COVID-19, the US was far behind many other countries, such as Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea. Indeed, Maryland's Republican governor, Larry Hogan, accepted a planeload of 500,000 testing kits from Seoul to make up for the U.S. shortfall. The aid was dubbed Operation Enduring Friendship and annoyed Trump, the "America First" president.[9]

There is no question that the pandemic has laid bare and ripped apart our patchwork health care system, even though it is the most expensive in the world, accounting for 27% of the Federal Budget. Indeed, in their latest report, The Commonwealth Fund ranked the US last among the most developed countries of Europe including Canada and Australia, whereas we were first in expenditure.[8] Undoubtedly, the US possesses high-end health care of exceptional quality that has been the envy of the world; however, the Census Bureau estimated that a total of 27.5 million people in the U.S. were uninsured in 2018. The controversial Affordable Health Care Act, popularly known as "Obamacare," was on the verge of remedying some of these inadequacies in our health care system; however, the recent Republican administration under Donald J. Trump has

ramped up its attack on the Affordable Care Act by backing a federal judge's decision to declare the entire law unconstitutional without an alternative plan.

The effects of COVID-19 have also exposed striking inequality within our health care system. Current data suggests a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minorities. In New York, the epicenter of the epidemic in the US, wealthy private hospitals, primarily in Manhattan, were able to increase bed capacity, ramp up testing and acquire protective gear due to their political and financial clout. The Mount Sinai Health System, the institution where I work, was able to get the N95 masks from China delivered by Warren Buffett's private planes.[10] On the other hand, a Brooklyn hospital which is publicly funded and part of SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University tried to raise money for protective gear through a GoFundMe page started by a resident physician. The patients attending the hospital are poor and people of color; furthermore, the hospital gets most of its revenue from Medicare and Medicaid.

The US had advanced warning of the possibility of a pandemic 15 years ago and still wasn't prepared. "If a pandemic strikes, our country must have a surge capacity in place that will allow us to bring a new vaccine online quickly and manufacture enough to immunize every American against the pandemic strain," President George W. Bush said in a call for readiness in 2005.[11] Nearly 10 years later, President Obama sounded the alarm: "There may and likely will come a time in which we have likely both an airborne disease that is deadly. And in order for us to deal with that effectively, we have to put in place an infrastructure—not just here at home, but globally—that allows us to see it quickly, isolate it quickly, respond to it quickly. So that, if and when a new strain of flu like the Spanish flu crops up five years from now, or a decade from now, we've made the investment, and we are further along to be able to catch it. It is a smart investment for us

to make."[12] Similarly, Bill Gates warned us of a COVID-19-like pandemic in 2015.[13]

The Future of American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism should not be defined or viewed as global political dominance different from Eurocentrism, as if we are superior to the rest of the world, nor should it be a rhetorical political slogan. Although Trump expressed the view that the word 'exceptional' is offensive, 'America First' implies a degree of arrogance irrespective of right or wrong—the interests of the US come First, rupturing the central pillars of multilateralism. In this regard, Trump's 'America First' more likely implies an isolationist view, a slogan to make his base feel good, even in this, our multipolar world.

In my opinion, American exceptionalism should be viewed as our immense contributions in science and technology in the 20th century to today, which have benefited and uplifted the lives of ordinary people the world over. For example, since its founding by President John F. Kennedy more than five decades ago, the Peace Corps has contributed to solving critical challenges alongside local community leaders in 140 countries. Similarly, the Ford Foundation—and more recently the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—aim to improve health and reduce poverty and could be considered forms of exceptionalism. And it's arguable that the American system of free enterprise and venture capitalism has fostered companies with a great positive impact on the modern world.

Most countries acknowledge that the USA is a nation with vast economic and military power, and its leadership role is widely accepted. The world needs America's global engagement and its stand on human rights by the force of example, not by rhetoric

and double standards.

The killing of unarmed African-Americans in liberal as well conservative cities and states—reaching a boiling point with the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police—has gone on far too long without accountability. This violence further exposes the lie of American exceptionalism. Protestors are now taking to the streets in the U.S. and worldwide. One transformational event has intersected with yet another—a once-in-a-century public health crisis overlapping with a nationwide anti-racism movement. As stated previously, these two elements are connected. Health outcomes across the US are linked to race and socioeconomic status, and are strong predictors of life expectancy.

Rather than engage in political slogans, the US needs to realize that the economic and technological command it has on a global scale cannot be sustained with the rise of other economies in Asia and Europe. It needs to pare down the economic divide in our country: the rich getting richer, the middle class getting poorer, and the working class losing jobs to globalization. This divide needs to be addressed, not necessarily by over-taxing the rich, but by the rich and multi-billion dollar corporations paying their fair share in taxes, by creating greater opportunity with afocus on education, by bringing back manufacturing, by rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and by creating new sources of energy to safeguard the planet from climate change. Globalization over the last several decades has shifted the country from a manufacturing to a service economy. Corporations and government officials who lobbied for tax loopholes and higher profits bear significant responsibility for these changes.

Our disorganized health care system has to be addressed seriously, devoid of political underpinnings and patchwork solutions. A bipartisan Task Force inclusive of scientists and health care professionals must be created to deal with future

pandemics.

The events of the last few months, the previous Iraq War and its consequences, our lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, gun violence, economic inequality and racism, all beg the questions: 1) Whether American exceptionalism currently conveys the concept originally proposed by Alexis de Tocqueville nearly two centuries ago, and extolled by politicians of both parties; and 2) whether the seeming end of exceptionalism discussed in this article might be a chance for a new awakening, allowing a path forward to a kinder, gentler, and more inclusive America.

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Poetry Review: Aaron Graham’s BLOOD STRIPES

1.

I’m reading Aaron Graham’s war poetry. And I think *violence is a volcano.*

How pressure builds. Between layers of rock. Trapped in a chamber. Or when magma pushes. Fissures like rivers. Up through the upper mantle. Finding surface. How it erupts. Spews hot lava and ash. How bodies can blow. Apart and across a desert named Fallujah. Hurtling and pyroclastic. Or the

aftermath.

Graham’s poems remind me.

How war is.

2.

This is Graham’s Iraq.

Come see the valley –

the death-cradle of civilization

(Boots On The Ground)

Iraq is where war is. Where Graham was. Deployed as a Marine. It is where I find him now. A soldier narrator. On the pages of *Blood Stripes*, his debut poetry collection. It is where his poems take me. To Iraq where. Violence erupts and

shells of men are spit out

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Skies are shrapnel

whose maw expands in the air

teeth like flame plumes

scorching gouts

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Soldiers learn

fresh-burnt flesh

smells like roast beef

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. There are

limbless boys

whose beautiful bodies

collided on football fields

in Iowa not six months before

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Where

infantrymen are now the law

and the law is a pack of white dogs

hunting high-value targets

covering bearded brown faces

with black bags

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. Children die and

There are bullets in young Sunni boys

mothers must take to a morgue

(Conjunctivitis)

Where the question. This question

did I bury a Sunni girl no larger than my arm?

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Dares to exist. This is Graham's Iraq. Where bullets pierce organs and

When a tracer round

becomes a collapsed lung

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How

breath

becomes a sparrow flapping

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham's poetry makes me think of J.G. Ballard. How he said *our civilization is like the crust of lava spewed from a volcano. It looks solid, but if you set foot on it, you feel the fire.* Graham's poems are full of fiery war. The violence of its eruptions. Graham's words forcing themselves up the throat of a volcano. Exploding like lava onto a page.

3.

Graham writes violence as a woman. How even before. War or enlistment. There is a craving

Until bent and jointed,

I hung

Between your breasts

(Midnight Runner)

Or how at war. Violence becomes anatomical. Between fingers. Coating tongue and gums. How

with each trigger pull

until death is a second skin to me,

is the film I rub

between my index and forefinger –

a charnel film I grind against

the backs of my front teeth with a raw

and bleeding tongue

(The Situation on the Ground)

And how after war. How it never goes away. Graham writes

I wear my violent acts

like a hand knit cap – reserved like a fossil fuel

a blubber slice

(Repatriation)

Graham writes of the aftermath. How after the eruption. Lava will flow. How even after. War can push into a house. Seep

into a marriage. How

I tell her there are things you know only

after you've seen combat, there exists depths,

intimacies, I cannot will into existence

even when in her arms

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

Magma cools and hardens. Forms new igneous rock and PTSD. How

Your curse is the hammer about to drop –

hyper-vigilance. Doors you always lock

when you're on the wrong side

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

For Graham PTSD becomes its own violence. One that violates but also beckons. Graham writes

I give thanks to the dead

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

And. How it is

Because so many of the dead

they're always here

at the table

I've set,

like a mother’s breast

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham’s poems tell a truth about war. Its intimacy. How

there’s nothing as intimate as bleeding

with those men in the desert. A devotion

you’ll never share with a lover, child, or spouse

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

War is not just what happens on the battlefield. War is what happens after. What keeps happening. To the soldiers who fight it. The civilians who survive it. After deployment is done. Armored trucks move out. Or a soldier goes home. Graham’s poems offer us the aftershocks of what explodes. And the truth. The truth that. For those it touches. War does not end.

4.

In Graham’s poems, the landscape haunts. Graham writes

I know my way around velvet

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How the air in Iraq is alive and cellular.

Electrons sway like the boiled wool

hides – hanging in Yezidi doorways

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Landscape is a language. The shape of it shapes meaning. On the pages of *Blood Stripes.* The desert stretches. Almost endlessly. Across Graham’s poems. Across a war. Across all wars. Years that span a history that can feel ancient. Endless like a horizon line or how

Still the magnitude hits.

A thousand years stretch

down this street

(Mythos (Deployment))

But Graham’s landscape is not endless. This is a landscape marked by war.

The golden sands

that appear

a cold dark green

an eternal crystalline lawn

surveyed by rifle scopes

(Funeral Pyre)

Here is the desert. Where war and dunes heave. Like dying lungs.

This is Graham’s Iraq. How it seems endless. And how. It is also a place of endings. A landscape cropped by the circumference of a rifle scope. Cropped by what happens when. Bullets tear through a chest wall. And hit heart.

This is the striking duality of Graham’s landscape. Because

the cost of invasion is

how something beyond

fathom is lost

or, rather —

comes to end

(Sandscape: Mojave Viper)

This is where. The desert nurtures.

Iraq sand holds your face —

like friends and family used to

(Repatriation)

And this is where war also takes and takes. Until everything is gone or dead. How

in deep deserts

there is only

the abrupt — blast —

cracked windshields

and punctured MRAP

husks. Their rhinoceros bodies —

(Footfalls)

This is where soldiers patrol streets alive. But almost dead.

We trod the pavement on dead

patrol. Deep desert has no edge.

Our third day over the line

outside the wire

horizons merge, a cusp

of bright sky bleeds into earth

where being and not

being

touch impossibly

(Footfalls)

Graham’s poems offer us the duplicity of war. It is the craving and the curse. The eternal and the instantaneous. The invigorating and the deadly. And when soldiers are lucky to live through it. War is a landscape they leave behind. Before realizing they took it home with them.

5.

There is a tension. In Graham’s poems.

Of whether to tell his story of war. Or not to.

I pulled back from the vastness

where nothing needs

– and does not need –

to be written

(Sandscape: Dunes Overlooking Balboa Naval

Hospital)

There is the question of how to write war. Because

Violence has a language all its own

(The Language of Violence)

There is a feeling. How war is

Just us bleeding in the desert

(Ode to a Wishing Well)

And that no one. No one else will understand.

Because. Americans do not know war. How they

probably learned

the words that describe

what happens to Marines

in the desert by watching

Anderson Cooper's lips –

round words

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

War for civilians is somewhere else. A running body of chyron.

About a third of the way into *Blood Stripes.* On page 32. A poem entirely in Arabic. I make a list of who I know who

speaks Arabic or how. I decide not to. Decide not to try to find out what it says. What the words mean. Because the poem speaks to me in Arabic. How I can read it in Arabic. Even though. Or because I do not know. What it says.

This is a truth of war. It belongs to those who fight it. The land it is fought on. The civilians who endure its wrath. How there are parts of it. Parts of war. That are hard to translate.

Still Graham does it. In poem after poem. He writes war. He writes war in its own language. Where

a statement is a scar

(The Language of Violence)

Where

The voice of the wound

has a flickering tongue

its syllables escape

with fine bits of lung –

falling wet, into sand

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

And where. A Syrian amputee standing on a road speaks. Speaking in scars

the sacred scars,

which are a language

I can read to you at night

(The Language of Violence)

When Graham writes

how to sing bombs out of the air?

How deep to listen?

(Repatriation)

This is the task. The poetic task Graham takes on. Arming himself with words and war memories.

The result is *Blood Stripes.* And war. Written into being in Graham's poems.

Vivid and startling and forceful.

6.

I wake up thinking about Baudrillard.

And how *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.*

It happened obviously. But it was something else. Something other than what we thought it was. Different from what we were told.

For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was a series of atrocities. Not a war. The Gulf War was a performance of war. Not a war. The Gulf War was a media narrative constructed. Not a war. Where even the word fighting defied its own definition. As Iraqis got bombed by Americans flying in a technological sky. For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was hyperreal. A simulacrum. It was a not-war war.

And yes Iraq.

How the Iraq War was like this too.

A war. Where American soldiers went. Because of *weapons of mass destruction.* To look for *weapons of mass destruction.* That did not exist. How the war they thought they were fighting. Was a war that did not happen.

And yet. Graham.

He writes

dry bodies

bloating and broiling

fattening in the desert

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How he writes

the purple lips of a wound

(Speaking Arabic With A Redneck Accent)

And I think to myself *there*. *There it is.*

Because war is not what our country tells us it is. War is what happens. To the soldiers who fight it. To the civilians. To the men and women and children and land it surrounds and engulfs and assaults. To the ripped bodies and roads. Roads of sun and bones it leaves behind. To everyone who carries it after. To everyone who carries war for days and weeks and months and years after. Long after we say *it is done.*

The Iraq War happened.

I know it did.

And not because my country told me it did.

But because it is there. Because I felt it. In the viscerally powerful poems of Graham's *Blood Stripes.*

—

Blood Stripes is available for purchase at your local independent bookstore or wherever books are sold.

An Interview with Brooke King, author of WAR FLOWER: MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ

Andria Williams: Brooke, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with Wrath-Bearing Tree. We are all excited to feature an excerpt from your debut memoir, *War Flower: My Life After Iraq*. In a starred review, Kirkus called it "an absolutely compelling war memoir marked by the author's incredible strength of character and vulnerability."

How long was this book in the making? How does it feel to finally have it out in the world?

Brooke King: It is a bit nerve-wracking to have it out in the world, but then I remember that it took me four years to get it there, and even longer to try and write the book. I

struggled with what people would think of me and what I have been through in my life, and then it dawned on me. The 19-year-old girl I was then doing all those things is not the same person that I am today, and so I gave myself permission, in a sense, to just let the criticism slide away. Yes, there are going to be people that judge what I did or shame me for falling in love with an officer when I was a married woman, but to me, that girl no longer exists. A mother of three no, I don't even know who that girl is anymore because I am so far removed from who she was and to me, that is what makes it okay to have this book out in the world for all to read.

AW: I have to ask, because my kids (especially my 11-year-old son) are magnetically drawn to the book's cover: what's the significance of Boba Fett? Is that your tattoo?

BK: So, it's funny you should ask. The Fett tattoo is mine. It's located on the inside of my left forearm. I originally got it because I wanted to get a tattoo that symbolized my nickname, "War Flower." And because I am a writer and symbolism is everything, the meaning behind it is kind of cool, but also very nerdy. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter form the Star Wars lore. And here is where my nerd shows through…. He ultimately was a war byproduct of his father Jango Fett who was a general for the Clone Army during the Clone Wars. The symbolism behind it is that during his hardships of growing up, he turned away from the traditions of the Mandalorians and chose to follow his own path, and so having him blooming out of a flower seemed to be a perfect metaphor for *War Flower*. The design staff over at University Nebraska Press asked for what my interpretation of *War Flower* was and I mentioned that I had it tattooed on me. I sent them over the image of my tattoo along with the meaning behind it and they loved it so much, they decided to use it.

AW: I'm a fan of the Fetts, so I think that's pretty cool. (I have even dressed as a Mandalorian, but that's another story.) Anyway, I love your tattoo, and it makes a perfect cover.

So, the book's synopsis begins, "Brooke King has been asked over and over what it's like to be a woman in combat." I found an intriguing hint of an answer to that in the line, "Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man." What does that mean, exactly?

BK: It means that there is a time in every female soldier's service where she is forced to grow up. But for me, as a female soldier who saw a lot of things that normally I wouldn't have, I was forced to grow up, but then thrown into a situation that normally is reserved for a male soldier sort of forced me to become emotionally and mentally like a male soldier. In a sense, I was forced into survival mode by adapting to what male soldiers would normally go through in the harsh condition of combat.

AW: And yet, even though many women have served in combat over the last decade and more, you share an anecdote about being driven by your grandfather to the local VA upon your return home and encountering not one, but two VA employees who meet your explanation of combat trauma with disbelief and even hostility: "A man comes in, asks me to follow him to the TBI and spinal injury ward. He points to the men inside the room, tells me to think long and hard about lying about combat before I tell him anything more."

First of all, what an asshole. But also: How is it possible that such a disconnect can exist, not only between female veterans and the civilian public, but even between women vets and the civilian professionals meant to serve them?

BK: I think it stems from the concern that women are supposed to be the bearers of life, so to think that a woman can be hurt in the same way as a man at war, it makes people uneasy. However, I think the disconnect about female veterans comes

from lack of knowledge. Civilians just didn't know to what extent women were involved in OIF and OEF, and because of that, they have a hard time believing when a woman comes in for help with combat PTSD or combat related injuries. In order for this stigma or misconception to diminish, the government and female veterans really do need to speak up and account for that missing link of information. I know that personally speaking up has helped thousands of other women because I was one of the first women to go through combat PTSD treatment from OIF. I went through a lot of trial and error for years until I was able to find a regimen that worked for me.

AW: *War Flower* alternates between sections of traditional first-person memoir, and brief chapters of creative nonfiction in which you imagine your way into the minds of other people—a teenage Iraqi girl, a tormented young boy—and even (as in "Dog Tags") inanimate objects. How and when did the structure of the book become clear to you? Did it begin as a more traditional memoir, or did you always know that you wanted it to be more of a kaleidoscopic view of war and homecoming?

BK: I began writing the book several years ago and it wasn't until I ran into a part of the memoir where I couldn't remember all the details correctly enough that I began to imagine what it would be like to be that person. I am referring to the section "Ghosts" where I imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi girl on the other side of the war. After I wrote this section, I realized that memories are a jumbled mess of information recollected over time, and someone with combat PTSD has memories that are distorted by their trauma, so when I went back to rethink the structure, I decided that the structure should mimic my memories; fragmented, disjointed, and at times kaleidoscopic.

AW: Your wartime experience appears to have given you an empathy with veterans of former wars, and particularly for Vietnam veterans. In the chapter "Legacy," you very sensitively craft a sort of plural voice of Vietnam vets: "I

am nothing, they would say. I am the fault of my government, my father. I am plagued with nothing but lies. I did what I was told."

This tone seems matched by one of your early observations about your time in Iraq: "We didn't know the names of the streets or which roads led to nowhere. When shit hit the fan, sometimes we didn't know which direction to fire the bullets…In the end the only thing we knew for certain was that we were all soldiers stuck in the same godforsaken country until the military let us leave or we died, whichever came first."

Do you think there is a particular understanding between veterans of Vietnam and the GWoT?

BK: I think there is a sort of "oneism" that comes from being a combat veteran. There is a silent understanding that even though your war was somewhere different, you can still share that bond of knowing they went through hell as well. So you adopt with it this perspective of empathy towards other combat veterans of foreign wars. You know their struggle because you are silently struggle with the same issue. Though by no means was the homecoming I received the same as the Vietnam veterans, but it is that quiet understanding amongst us that to suffer and see war changes you into someone else, that there is a slow coming back process that each veteran must take. Some get there sooner than others and some never find their way back to the person they were before war.

AW: You mention reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* while in Iraq. I'd love to hear more about your reading (and listening!) life during your military service—boot camp, wartime—because it seems that this kind of inner world is so linked to a person's state of mind at difficult or

transformational moments. (Did you listen to the Grateful Dead in Iraq, for example, or did that just bring back too many memories of your dad?)

BK: When I was deployed I listen all sorts of music. On days when I needed to unburden my soul a bit, I would turn on the Grateful Dead and listen to Jerry's guitar in "Stella Blue" crying out to me, allowing me to feel the emotions that I needed in order to get through another day. Other days, I would stare at a blank page in my notebook unable to write a single line. Halfway through my deployment, I stopped reading and writing all together. I stopped listening to the Grateful Dead and listened more to heavy metal like Cradle of Filth and Dark Funeral. Some of soldiers around me listened to Slipknot. Sometimes I went days without anything but the sound of mortar rounds exploding and helicopters flying overhead, soldiers laughing and arguing in the smoke area, and sometimes, I just listened to the wrench I was holding while I laid underneath a truck ratcheting a bolt down. The sounds of war and of home coagulate if you let them, so I made it a point to never let the two intermingle for too long because I become either homesick or pissed off that I was still stuck in Iraq.

AW: Metal! Were you a fan before you went to Iraq, or did you start listening to it there?

BK: I listened to Pantera and Slayer, and I think I even listened Iron Maiden, but I really didn't listen to it too much before. I was a punk rock kid growing up so I listened more to the Ramones, Rancid, Anti-flag, and Bouncing Souls, that sort of stuff. It wasn't until the guys in the PSD team put on Slipknot and Cradle of Filth that I began to listen to more mainstream metal. And even then, it was only because one day I was smoking a cigarette and I began to really pay attention to the lyrics and was honestly blown away by how poetic Corey Taylor's lyrics were, and it sort of resonated within my soul how I was feeling at the time and gave me some sort of tragically fucked-up sense of peace to know someone

else had a dissonance within themselves they were wrestling with, in a way listening to it made it few as though there weren't two different women inside of me trying to tear my body in half so that they could both be free. I felt that the war for me was a constant struggle between who I wanted to be as a human being and the person I had to be in order to survive, and for me, music sort of helped calm the tearing apart of my soul.

AW: Well, I think that's a really powerful explanation of what music does best.

Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish, in retrospect, that you'd included?

BK: I think every writer wishes they had put something in the book that they forgot, but for me, I struggled with whether or not to include more about my late ex-husband. He passed away right after I signed my contract and though he was happy that the book was getting published, I wish I had incorporated more about our marriage, more about how he was the one to save me in Iraq from not only the war, but from myself. He truly was a wonderful man and I wish I had incorporated more of that in there. The next book, however, does pick up where this one left off, so maybe there is time to redeem myself.

AW: I was very sorry to hear of your loss. For what it's worth, I think the book paints him in a positive light—as a mostly helpful, concerned person for whom life was not particularly easy.

What were the hardest and most effortless parts of the book to write?

You always want to say that the easiest parts of the book are the ones where you talk about your family, but for me, the easiest part to write in the book were the wartime sections. Because I had gone through so much therapy and introspective at myself and war, it became very easy to write it down. To

me, the hardest part was writing about my family. I really didn't want to write about my upbringing. It wasn't something I wanted to put in the book simply because I couldn't dedicate enough space to the matter that it needed, and so I ended up summarizing those parts and it really pained me to do that in particular because I knew I would be leaving huge sections of my life out that needed to be discussed fully. I also feel bad about it because I shed some of my family members in a very negative light, much to their dismay, and I have gotten flack for it by them, but in my defense, I did tell them that the next book was going to discuss more of family and less of war. It also was extremely hard to dissect my marriage that at the time I was writing the book was in steady decline. How was I supposed to write about falling in love with my husband when I knew he was somewhere else with another woman? But I found another reason as to why to tell that love story; my twin boys, who the book is dedicated to. I wanted them to know who their father was when I met him and even more so now that he has passed, so I wrote everything down as though we were still in love and tried to remember those memories instead.

AW: In the Sierra Nevada MFA program, you were able to work with writers who were not just talented at their craft but are also combat veterans. What did this mean for you in developing confidence as a writer? Do you think your MFA experience would have been different if it had not included other veteran-writers?

BK: Being in the SNC MFA wasn't just about being surrounded by combat veteran writers, it was about being surrounded by talented writers. I found that I was more so inspired to tell my story from the non-veteran writers than I was the faculty that were veterans. Of course, it helped that I had other vets cheering me on in my journey as a writer, but writers like Patricia Smith reading "Siblings." Gah! It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it now. Colum McCann. Rick Moody. Writers, truly amazing writers inspire and light a fire underneath your

ass, and I think the director bringing those writers is what really helped me become the writer I am.

AW: I love hearing that. I had a similar feeling when I went into my MFA program, too—that I was finally joining a creative culture that I felt I'd been seeing from the outside for a long time. And we can all use a creative fire lit under our asses, I suspect. What projects are you working on next?

I have started writing my new book, nonfiction of course. It really does pick up where "War Flower" left off, and traces the roots of my childhood while raising my children, the ups and downs of my marriage to James, my struggle with PTSD, and the death of James which damn near almost broke me. To say that this second book is going to be a hard one to write is an understatement, but I think will be almost like an emotional enema, and will really be interesting for readers who are struggling with PTSD, or the loss of a veteran to suicide, or even being a parent struggling to raise your kids. What made "War Flower" so unique was that I was a woman with combat PTSD, but having PTSD while trying to raise kids is a whole other beast that I really didn't tackle full on in "War Flower" so the next book is really going to explore transgenerational trauma and female veteran related issues that surround combat PTSD.

AW: Can't wait to read it. Thanks so much for talking with me, an sharing your work with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

Review of Jon Chopan's

Veterans Crisis Hotline

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a friend named Ted. Ted is a fellow veteran, and classmate of mine from the Air Force Academy who may be forgiven his obsession with *Moby Dick*. We were pushing our kids across the ice of Westchester Lagoon, a large pond here in Anchorage that the municipality grooms for ice skating, exhaling thoughts on books and writing into the winter air. Phil Klay's *Redeployment* had recently been released to critical acclaim, and our talk turned to authenticity in war literature. There was something about this war—this *forever* war—that we agreed was allowing for a wider interpretation of war. A public affairs officer, and not an infantry type, had written a well-received story collection that felt like it might end up as *the*book of our wars. It seemed to signal a paradigm shift.

Jon Chopan's *Veterans Crisis Hotline* (2018, University of Massachusetts Press) reinforces the idea that war literature is no longer the sole dominion of those who've participated directly in combat. A winner of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) 2017 Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction, the collection joins a growing canon of quality writing about war by authors who lack the first-hand combat experience traditionally associated with war literature.

As the title indicates, *Veterans Crisis Hotline* focuses on contextualizing war from the individual level. More specifically: how the Forever War affected those who voluntarily participated in it. This connective tissue links each story. With the exception of the first short story, which shares (roughly) the book's title, each story that follows begins with a title page that includes a partially redacted name, location, tour dates, and call duration that frames the stories as having originated from a call to a veterans crisis

hotline. It’s a somewhat effective artifice that allows Chopan to present narratives told, without exception, from a first-person point of view that establishes immediacy and narrative authenticity. I only say “somewhat” because the title story is the sole piece in the collection that relies on a fictional narrative built on interactions between a crisis hotline caller and operator. The crisis hotline itself does not appear in the remainder of the stories, which results tension between the collection’s physical narrative structures. I wasn’t looking for a collection built off transcribed fictional dialogue, but the greatest harmony between structure and narrative in the collection exists within the pages of the first story, titled “Crisis Hotline: Veterans Press 1.” It’s a haunting piece in which the narrator, a veteran named Byrne, works at a crisis hotline center, where he fields calls from not just veterans on the brink.

“[O]ld widowers. Some were lonely bachelors who were looking for dating advice. Others were fine, except they needed an audience to tell a war story to, someone who’d yet to hear it. Reliving it gave them a sort of pleasure, or maybe catharsis. One man who was in his nineties called me every week. Each time he called he asked for me by name, caught me up on the news from his neighborhood, “current events” he called it. Mostly it was gossip about the young soccer mom next door, the cheating husband. He talked about them so much that I felt like they had become characters in my own life. He was a veteran of the Second World War, but he never talked to me about that.”

Byrne goes on to establish a friendship with an amputee named Eddie who shares a bus with him, and the relationship progresses to an intense level of intimacy that Byrne cannot replicate with his girlfriend, a nurse at the local VA hospital. In one scene, Byrne finds Eddie in his apartment, sick for days and burning with fever. Before Eddie can go to the hospital, he asks Byrne to help him take a bath.

“Later, they would diagnose him with pneumonia, He would recover, of course. He was young and strong and had a great desire to live. I’d learned that much in my time with him. But there, in his dimly lit bathroom, as I scrubbed him and rinsed him clean, as I put shampoo in his hair and gently poured water over his head, he wept and I said nothing knowing, finally, that this was the only comfort he would ever ask of me.”

It’s a gorgeous literary moment that illustrates the bond that can exist between men who’ve shared war, and a stirring rejection of the unique brand of toxic masculinity the military tends to breed. This isn’t to say Chopan shies away from the ugly side of veteran homecomings. There’s the vigilante justice executed in “Men of Principle,” the wanton self-destruction of “Battle Buddy,” and the veteran suicide of “On Leave.” But Jon Chopan goes to great length to ensure *Veterans Crisis Hotline*peels back stereotype in his quest to understand the complex nature of military service.

The book suffers from a couple of little inconsistencies that rang hollow: the mention of a recently closed paper mill in Anchorage for example, when I’ve been unable to find record of a paper mill at any time (I live in Anchorage). But these are mere chips in the facade, and have nothing to do with Jon Chopan’s ability as a civilian to effectively convey the post-9/11 veteran experience. No, the trouble with *Veterans Crisis Hotline* is the company it keeps. As a short story collection that relies on first-person narration, it belongs on a shelf next to Phil Klay’s *Redeployment.* Sitting next to a National Book Award Winner, well that’s just tough.

The most audacious of Chopan’s stories, however, does not feature a veteran come home, but the son of a soldier whose father goes missing for some time before being declared dead. Child narrators, even the teenage boy of the story “The Cumulative Effect,” are tricky. Writers must walk a fine line between over-privileging their narrator with sophisticated

language that strains authenticity, and infantilization. Nothing about the story's narrator rang hollow, however, and at all levels, the story is a beautiful heartbreaker.

I've long argued that it's time to replace Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*as an example of good war literature produced by a civilian. The last time I read through, I found it a hackneyed appropriation of veteran material manipulated to further an individual viewpoint. I firmly believe it doesn't survive the modern era's standards for writing outside one's experience. And frankly, there's no time like the present—in which a fraction of the American society fights on behalf the rest—for a non-veteran to step into the arena. Jon Chopan has achieved this feat with *Veterans Crisis Hotline*. With great care, he has written outside what he knows, and in doing so proven willing to grapple with societal norms and uncomfortable issues. Viewed this way, *Veterans Crisis Hotline* is a welcome addition to my shelves of war literature, neighbors be damned.

New Essay from Jerad W. Alexander: An Exchange of Fire

I don't know your name, but we tried to kill each other once.

Do you remember it? It happened on November 5, 2005, on the second day of our big weeklong offensive in Husaybah, Iraq—a dense square of markets, mosques, and homes tucked into the corner where the Euphrates River meets the Syrian border. Nearly 2,000 U.S. Marines, me among them, had stormed into Husaybah before sunrise the previous morning. We had attacked

across the trash-hewn desert west of town with our eyes coated with the green electric glow of our night vision goggles. We quickly smashed into the first row of homes and shoved our rifle barrels into the faces of the sleepy men who opened the doors and blew apart the locked doors of homes that had been abandoned. Children startled awake by our voices and our boots shrieked against their mothers in terror. I remember that.

Husaybah had been a violent place for us then. Plenty of our Marines had died there before we came, and our leaders wanted Husaybah mollified once and for all, and so we searched through your homes, sifted through your cupboards and closets, through your unmentionable things with the anger of a raw nerve. We looked for anything that tied the houses and people living inside them to Al Qaeda-in-Iraq forces, or 'AQI'—just another letter set in the endless greasy sop of military acronyms.

On my second afternoon in Husaybah I stood on a roof and gazed out over the geometric madness of buildings that surrounded me. It was cloudy. Parts of the city crackled with rifle fire. You appeared around a corner of a wall that defined the small compound of a house the same way chain link fences surround our yards. I liked the walled compounds for their dominance and privacy—like fortresses. Gray metal fences are just ugly and noisy. Walls can last forever. You appeared from behind it wearing a dirty gray sweat shirt and pants, like the track suits worn by fat New Jersey mobsters. You already had the launcher on your shoulder. It was made out of white PVC pipe with a cheap wooden handgrip and a battery switch bound with electrical tape. We always laughed at them whenever we captured one. Compared to our shoulder-mounted anti-tank rockets, our wire-guided missiles, and our heat seekers, your homemade bazookas were shoddy and infantile, completely weightless against our intractable technology and sophistication. But we knew they could kill, and if we had found you before you fired it, or just simply found you

carrying it, building it, handing it to someone else, or even burying it in your cousin's backyard in a rage of benevolent rebellion against all war, we would have blown your body to pieces with high explosives that have been tested and refined and improved since the First World War. We would have scattered your atoms in a wide plume with a professional calculus learned and taught and relearned in the way of tradesmen, which is what the American military was and still is today: a profession of arms, trained to execute the final thousand meters of American foreign policy, which in this case was to kill you. We're good at it. American troops train for battle like athletes and our officers study war like scholars. To us you are dilettantes, a junior varsity team. Many still feel this way.

Yet given all this you pivoted around a corner in a dirty sweat suit and aimed your homemade rocket launcher at my friends and me. As I sit here now I think about the resolve it must have taken to do that, to build this cheap weapon and aim it with the hope and faith against the best weapons in the world created by some of the richest nations in history. Surely you must've felt it when you wheeled around corner. Yet it didn't seem to matter to you, did it? Was it God or money or hatred or maybe just boredom? You are an Arab man. An Iraqi man. A Sunni man, no doubt. Faith has driven plenty to violence. But so have debt, hunger, oppression, and just blind hatred. Did you shoot at me for those things? Can I blame you? There are many Americans, more Americans than I'm comfortable with, who stock their homes with firearms and talk as if an invasion is a real possibility, be it from some outsider or from their own government. But there is little chance of invasion for us. I am from a country that will likely wither and die by its own self-destruction.

But that wasn't a luxury for you, was it? We were in your country uninvited. You turned from behind a corner to see a real invader. What did we look like to you? I imagine we

looked like armored toadstools perched on your roofs with our black weapons held at our chests. I saw you. I saw your eyes. They were wide and filled with terror. Did our sight scare you? Your face was haggard, your hair and beard short and ragged. You looked like you were in your late twenties, perhaps older. It's hard to say. I only saw you for a few seconds, but looking back and remembering . . . Yes, I'm certain you were maybe twenty-eight, thirty at the latest. You were older than me. I was twenty-five then. Thoughtful, but brash. I could almost hear you chanting your battle cry—*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*—over and over and over again, begging your God for victory or maybe just to spare your life, your breaths short and fast as you quickly aimed and fired. Were your palms wet? When the circuit closed on your launcher your body was surrounded with a wispy cloud. I heard the rocket motor fire. A Marine near me yelled "RPG!"

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Surely you remember the Persian Gulf War. How could you not? I was ten years old. My stepdad was in the U.S. Air Force then. He was sent to the Emirates to fix the American fighter jets we deployed after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. I was in fifth grade then. As I turned and walked up a broad snowy path between a set of houses on my way home from school a cold afternoon in January, I noticed my friend Chris trudging through the deep snow toward me.

"Come on, dude. Something's going on," he said. "I think it's started!"

We waded through the snow and plopped cross-legged in front of the television in his living room. We watched titillated as the special news reports showed grainy night-vision video of your anti-aircraft tracers arching toward our fighter jets high above your capital city. Whenever the screen erupted with the white flash of an exploding bomb we cheered because we knew we had killed some of you. There was nothing gory about

it. We didn’t see your blood or your body parts. It was clinical and precise. Even later, when we began to see the fuzzy bomb camera footage aired on the nightly news as 1,000 pound bombs crashed into bridges and factories and aircraft revetments, we saw the thermal signatures of your people—maybe your soldiers, maybe not, but all unlucky unlike us—become engulfed in the smoke and fire of our long-learned ability to destroy the human body.

Soon your whole army fell apart in front of us. When our tanks and armored vehicles crossed the border, you surrendered to us by the thousands, trudging across the desert half-dazed with your hands above your heads, flapping coalition leaflets imploring you to surrender. When you did fight us, it was almost cartoonish. Stories came back to us from the desert, or “The Sandbox” as we called it, of the shells from our main battle tanks punching through two and three of your tanks with a single shot and of bulldozers burying your troops alive right in their trenches. Just over 1,000 of our troops were killed or wounded fighting your country. To die as an American in the Persian Gulf War quickly became the unlucky punchline of a sad joke. We were so good at killing you that within four days of launching the ground offensive we annihilated an estimated 20,000 of you like we annihilate anthills in our backyards or roaches in our cupboards.

Our whole country felt as if we had returned to the heady day’s right after World War II, when America basked in the destruction of two of the ugliest regimes in the history of the planet. We used your body to eradicate the ghosts of our mindless destruction in Vietnam. We felt as if we had returned to glory, that a curse had been broken. Our money had killed the Soviet Union. Our bombs had killed your fellow Iraqis. Our army was confirmed best in the world. We were Americans, natives from the “city upon the hill,” citizens of God’s Country. We sang Lee Greenwood songs at school recitals. Your destruction was our absolution. We felt invincible.

Americans rarely seem to make the connection, but the two wars—the one our fathers fought in and the war where you and I finally meet—are really all part of one big war, at least in a spiritual sense. Our victory over the forces of your dictator gave us carte blanche to press our moralistic notion of empire upon your people through the use of our bolstered military confidence. Because of your indomitable dictator, coupled with a strain of American Exceptionalism, we despised you all collectively. After your generals surrendered at Safwan in March of 1991 we restricted your airspace and suffocated you with the boot heel of economic sanctions. We dangled food before your face in exchange for your precious oil. Sometimes Saddam Hussein took it. Other times he did not.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 had nothing to do with your dictator, and certainly not your country, but I can't help but think that many of your citizens saw the smoke and ash of the fallen World Trade Center, the cavity drilled into the side of the Pentagon, and the detritus of Flight 93 scattered across a field in Pennsylvania and realized with a quiet dread that your country, as proxy for your dictator, would inevitably be called to stand tall and answer for crimes real or imagined. If you didn't, the subsequent rumblings and fist poundings from our punditry would have certainly signaled our brutal intentions. Americans wanted blood for the death of our citizens, and in many ways it was a completely justifiable desire. Our people were killed because of religious extremism, by Bronze Age clerics and zealots who failed to understand the concept of free will, and who harbored just as much sanctimonious moral superiority as the Western governments they claimed to loathe and sought to punish. You had nothing to do with it, but we came and made our demands anyway, and then we dropped more bombs.

I was a Marine by then. In late March of 2003 I watched our "Shock and Awe" air campaign smash Baghdad into rubble on CNN. I watched fire and high explosives rubble the skyscrapers of

your capital with clarity of a dumb Michael Bay action flick. None of that grainy bomb camera footage that marked the opening moves in 1991. This was the modern era of the mass media spectacle. The scene felt like a cheap gratuitous facsimile of the first time, like a movie sequel that tried cover up a cheap plot with high-powered special effects.

Our leaders paraded themselves on television like conquering warlords before our troops had even crossed the border from Kuwait, counting the gold their hordes hadn't even pillaged yet. We never discussed your plight or what you may have wanted for your own futures. You were never even considered. We just shrugged it off. We told the world we were coming to rescue you from the clutches of an evil dictator and that we would be greeted as liberators. It was only by sheer luck that the results of our hubris briefly matched your exuberate expressions of freedom when your fellow Iraqis beat on the statue of Saddam in Firdos Square with fists and the dusty soles of their shoes. But that exuberance didn't last, did it? That same dumb hubris prompted a U.S. State Department toad named Paul Bremer to fire your entire defense industry, a move which put hundreds of thousands of trained Iraqi security personnel—men who wanted to rebuild your country, perhaps even you—right out of work and single-handedly created an insurgency (up to and including ISIS) that locked us into a quagmire for the rest of the decade. A hubris that killed and wounded so many of us and exacted a still-untold cost on you. It was the same hubris that put you and me at odds with each other.

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And so here we are, back to the moment you closed the circuit on your homemade rocket launcher and tried to kill me. I might say you were brainwashed by psychopaths who arrived in the chaos of our occupation and who used the intellectual shackles of religion to make you a willing participant in my death. There is also the hard possibility these same psychopaths

dangled a few hundred American dollars before your impoverished eyes, or maybe just pressed the hot blade of threats against the lives of your family in order to accomplish their bidding, which in this case was to kill Americans with a rocket propelled grenade.

Before I could seek cover behind the wall that surrounded the roof, your rocket exploded with a sharp crack against a building nearby. My veins were flooded with adrenaline and terror. My eyes had widened and my mouth drooped slightly. The sound reverberated across the madness of Husaybah for a number of seconds before it blended into the chatter of distant firefights. My joints felt stiff. I breathed slowly and began to unravel a knot of fear in my gut.

None of the others said much of anything. I suspect we were all ingesting just how lucky we had been. Had you raised the tube a few more inches your rocket might have carved a path right to the wall that surrounded the roof we commandeered, right to where we stood, and exploded with the same flash, spraying hot slivers of metal that might have pierced our bodies and punched frothy little holes into our livers and lungs. The sudden overpressure under our Kevlar helmets might have burst our eardrums and detuned our synapses. You might have killed us. But you were nervous and afraid, so you didn’t.

You appeared again a few seconds later. I saw you in a gap between two buildings as you ran. I knew immediately it was you who had fired the rocket because you looked back over your shoulder at us with wide eyes and a face that seemed to me as if grayed by terror. The emotions that arose in me in a millisecond I can only really describe as a crossbreed of disgust and atavistic rage, backed by the same glaze of self-righteousness that put us in your country to begin with. I was a member of the most skilled military on the face of the planet with the largest reach of any dominion since the British Empire. You were a terrorist from a broken nation. I

raised my rifle.

Though it happened too fast to do so then, as I brought my rifle to my shoulder I could trace a trajectory of wanton caveman stupidity from your body to my barrel, through my rifle, and into my shoulder and beyond, all as a dark timeline of American foreign policy misadventures and the stone-crushing hubris of empire that created them. I could trace a hard red line back to the elected officials—thereby including many of us—who had read just enough glorified history to think America was somehow anointed with the right to interfere and manipulate the fates of other nations, as if your wishes, hopes, and aspirations for the future of your country seemed to be of little worth if they didn't match our own. I can't help but believe that to be true. We found nothing in your country. No weapons of mass destruction. No nuclear program. No terrorists but for those we ultimately brought with us, in part because of opportunistic religious thuggery, but also because of our ham-fisted American bombasticism.

For many years after 9/11, the United States, in many ways, became Captain Ahab from Moby Dick, chasing the White Whale of our national security through the "War on Terror" to all corners of the world. Like Ahab, we're a nation with a wounded soul. A whole subset of our population refuses to allow itself to heal. Many of our people gnash their teeth with blood-thirsty indignation and rage, shaking their fists at lands they've never seen or even understand. Every anniversary of 9/11, we beat against our sores with old reels of doom and loss. Civic leaders, campaigning politicians, and even sitting statespersons routinely trumpet the call to arms with the fear of your hordes running through our streets with zealotry in your heart and a bomb strapped to your chest. They bang their gavels and shovel money and citizenry into the black maw of war to kill you, hoping that one more body—more than 200,000 civilian casualties in Iraq, so far—will pack that festering wound and finally bring peace. They do this in spite of the

understanding that coming into your country was just a few short semantics away from being an outright war crime. But every time we lash out with drones, precision bombers, and surveillance measures the thin vindication that follows clouds a realization that every single bomb we drop, every bullet we fire, and every person we kill in the name of security only chips away at our overall safety. We will simply never be able to kill enough to bring about peace. But we'll certainly try.

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And so, with my rifle in my shoulder, I fired three shots.

My bullets struck out with the same thick vitriol that left my mouth when I saw you running away. I don't remember what I said, but it was undoubtedly profane. My eyes were wide and white with controlled, but crystalline rage. The brass shell casings jingled against the concrete roof and settled. I clicked the rifle safety and let it rest against my body armor. I lit a cigarette. All that bile settled inside me and my heart rate slowed. The rage and indignation was suddenly replaced by a hollow sense of futility.

What am I doing on this roof with a rifle trying to kill you? I wondered. The thought left as quickly as it came; there was no sense in asking. But the hollowness remained and later grew, fueled with similar experiences. For many years after there was a small part of me that grew angry when I thought about you trying to kill me with a rocket propelled grenade. RPG's are serious business, and you tried to kill me and my friends with one. Over the next few years I would think about you with the same self-righteousness that carried us to your country. Slowly, though, after I put away my rifle and left the service, the self-righteousness morphed into emotionlessness, then finally retrospection.

Regardless of my feelings, I've always wondered if you are still alive, and I have to recognize the odds are not in your

favor. If we did not kill you before we left Iraq in 2011, then perhaps you died in Syria. Or maybe you were forced into ISIS—the monster that filled the vacuum once we finally left—and the threadbare Iraqi military cut you down, or perhaps we finished what we started and bombed you with our own airpower in our campaigning. Maybe you were killed by Kurds, or by pro-Syrian forces, or Syrian rebels, or perhaps by Russians. Or maybe you're still out there, lost to the blinding winds of the Forever War, trapped by the flippant whimsy of our commitments.

I'll understand if you don't wish to hear any of this. Many things I write here are for you; some of them are for me. I cannot expect either of us to forgive the other for our intentions, nor can we reasonably ask for it. We intended to kill each other for reasons that were both out of our control.

Sometimes I daydream that perhaps the same futility that flooded me after I shot at you also filled your veins, and that you fled the war. I like to think you have a family, maybe a business, and you're living in peace somewhere. Sometimes I wonder if there is ever a chance when you and I might walk through Husaybah and marvel at the stupidity of our insignificant little battlefield. I wonder if one day I will be able to talk with you, to explain to you how the world I lived in brought me to the world you lived in to destroy your life and finish ruining the lives of those who might have loved you. I want to explain to you what it looked like to see you in your town as I stood on its rooftops with the weight of an empire pressing me toward you. I want to show you the world we lived in when I came with my friends to kill you and others in the name of security for my people. We call it freedom and liberty, but what we really mean is security. I want to show you all the neuroses that fueled the tanks we sent rumbling across your streets and sent high explosives blasting into your home and the homes of thousands of others, neuroses that loaded the bombs onto our jets and dropped them from the

clouds and turned to rubble the bones of so many of those you may have known. I want to show you how afraid of the world we had become and in many ways still are today. I want to show you the worth of all the tin gold trying to kill you has earned me, has earned us all. Unfortunately, that will have to wait; I'm still trying to tally its value.

But all these thoughts are nonsense and so I cashier them, yet I know they'll return at bored moments while I am driving to work on a cloudy Tuesday morning. They'll show up when I'm jogging, reading a book that I've grown bored with, or walking home from a bad date. But no matter how often I think of these things, whenever I think about those three bullets I shot at you and the fear and rage and blinding national stupidity that fueled them I'm always glad about one thing:

I'm glad I missed.

In war, it is not difficult to illuminate the darkness. Understanding is harder to come by. Photo by Jerad Alexander

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New Fiction from Patrick Mondaca: "The Ministry of Information"

Too often your mind wanders back to those places where God has turned his face away. For example: the prison your platoon guarded in Baghdad in the early months of the war. Displaced Iraqi families were making new homes under the comforting shadows of your machine guns and you kicked soccer balls around the dusty yard with delighted Arab children like you would have had they been your own nieces and nephews.

But they were not your nieces and nephews, and at the end of the day they would sleep in jail cells stained and streaked with the blood of their countrymen, tortured and executed by now-deposed Saddam Hussein and his two crazy sons. When you walk down the narrow hallways, peering through iron cages, you marvel at the claw marks in the walls, made by human claws, and at the shoestrings and bootlaces and belts, broken and frayed, tied to the window grates where the doomed had tried to hang themselves, where desperate people would now be grateful for the shelter.

As you lounge on the roof of the prison, baking within the overwatch position on the roof—which is just a makeshift tent rigged from ponchos encased in sandbags with cheap folding camping chairs you've purchased at the PX back in Kuwait—smoking shisha from a hookah in the heat of the afternoon sun, you begin to better understand why you are there.

Marwan, the Iraqi kid from across the way who's been acting as an unofficial translator, tells you more of what you've heard on CNN and Fox News and read in the New York Times and Stars and Stripes. The torture and the death. The rape and pillaging. The opulent wealth and endless greed.

One late afternoon, after you've been in place for a few days and the locals start wandering over to barter, or look on curiously, a couple of girls come to visit. They look to be in their late teens and they don't have their heads covered. They come asking for cigarettes, or Pepsi, or something of which you wouldn't have thought that's the thing they'd be looking for after having been invaded just a few weeks earlier, but they do and they stick around to chat in their limited English. One is blonde, probably dyed, and they are unafraid to talk to American soldiers, they ignore your weapons and body armor, and they ask things that every girl would ask a

soldier, about your wife or girlfriend and if you have children, that kind of thing.

Marwan has seen this before. Maybe with the Marines in the weeks prior. “Turkish,” he says, and makes a face. “Prostitutes, I think.” They invite you for tea in their apartment, on the tenth floor across from the prison. That’s high up. You have an image of yourself spiraling face first to meet your death from blunt cardiac trauma while Turkish whores rifle through your wallet, your squad leader gingerly rolling over your smashed head with a gloved hand and wondering where your BDU pants are. What his after-action report would sound like. You think that this is not a good idea.

“Come on, man,” says the PFC most enamored with the girls. “We’ll go and come back before anyone knows.” The girls follow the debate with hopeful expressions. For tea, they insist. Yeah, right.

You do think about it. The logistics of it. One up, one down. Cover me while I cover you, that kind of thing. What the hell, right? You could all be dead by morning. You don’t even know what you’re doing here besides babysitting an empty prison rapidly filling up with displaced Iraqis.

But the Turkish girls go home, much to the disappointment of the PFC.

The shift is over, but because there is nothing else to do but sleep, this is where you stay. The next team takes up positions in another spot, eating the good parts of their MREs and tossing the remainder to the kids below. You smoke hookah until the sun goes down, Marwan heads back to his apartment, and eventually you drift in and out of a fitful sleep on a poncho liner underneath the stars for a couple hours before waking up to drink water and rinse the dust off your face and out of your mouth and eyes again. Some of the guys are

sleeping in the trucks still, but you and your team will sleep on the roof because it’s both easier and minimally more comfortable, at least at night when it’s about thirty degrees cooler.

This is a strange place for a prison, you decide: behind a government complex and smack in the middle of a residential street. You suppose Saddam Hussein had them everywhere, so probably people just forgot they were there. Until the invasion when he gave the order to empty the prisons and release all the prisoners, and the inevitable chaos that followed such a directive when criminals, psychopaths, dissidents, and whoever else were now back out in the street. You wonder what condition these prisoners were in. Did they just stagger out, the ones that could, blink into the sunlight and fall back down onto their knees into the sand in despair? Did they dash from their cells and out the prison gate into the apartment complexes and beg passersby for a bite to eat, some money for a taxi, or a cellphone to call their loved ones? Did they just run outside and murder the cellmate they hated, or track down the guy sleeping with their wife and kill him amidst the chaos of the American invasion or join in on the citywide looting sprees with their countrymen? You wonder these things for a while, smoking cigarettes on occasion to pass the time.

You stare at the now vacant Ministry of Information building, hulking, towering above the prison yard. What kind of government information ministry has an onsite prison? You think it would be like if the Voice of America office in Washington D.C. had its own prison behind it for anyone accused of crimes against it. Voice of America dissenters all locked up and forced to listen to Armed Forces Radio deejays and shitty Brittany Spears pop music on a loop twenty-four hours a day. The horrors, you think. What if, though? What a weird fucking place, you answer your own question. That’s the

only answer.

You think about “Baghdad Bob,” Saddam Hussein’s comically misinformed Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, who spent the last days of the war broadcasting that the American infidels were committing suicide outside the city gates while American tanks rolled down Baghdad’s streets. What’d Bob do in his off time? Stroll casually through the backyard prison kicking at the cell doors of prisoners and late-for-work newscasters, calling them imperialist dogs and commies and stopping occasionally to administer the usual electric shock or to rip off a fingernail or two? Where’s old Bob now? Where is that crazy fucker?

What’s Baghdad Bob going to do with himself now that there’s no war to rattle on about? You picture him hosting Iraqi Jeopardy in his retirement, some sultry Iraqi swimsuit model flipping clues on the game board. “Weapons of Mass Destruction for $200,” he announces to the audience, his signature black beret still plastered to his head.

You wonder if Baghdad Bob had a fancy office, all gold and gaudy and plastic-treed, with ornate massive chairs like at Uday’s palace where the platoon first was camped out. You think maybe you’d like to go look for that office, kick your boots up on his desk, take a picture with his favorite beret on or something. Maybe tomorrow.

“Where you wanna go?” asked your buddy Jay from home, another sergeant who’s come up the ranks just a couple years before you.

“I’m just going to go to see what kind of cool shit’s left behind that the Marines didn’t get,” you tell him. “You know, like flags and uniforms and bayonets and shit. Stuff to send home.”

“Yeah, let’s do it then.”

And so the two of you go in the morning. You stack your rifles in the overwatch lean-to—bringing pistols only; you want to be light and unencumbered—and tell the specialist on watch you’ll be back in a bit.

This is how soldiers die, you decide. Boredom, the age-old killer. Boredom and curiosity and kleptomania combined. You’re still going to go in, though.

When you step inside the exterior door to what must have been the basement loading dock, all you first see is what looks to be an abandoned storage room, desks and furniture tipped over, papers scattered everywhere, nothing too exciting. Because it is dark and there are few windows on this floor, the two of you alternate using your high-powered Surefire flashlights as you sweep the corners of the room, peering into the shadows, stepping gingerly over spilled boxes of binders, files, gas masks, breathing canisters for gasmasks, and piles of other stuff you can’t quite make out.

“This is pretty fucking stupid, man,” you whisper to Jay who grins and whispers back, “So, fucking go back out, then,” nodding in the direction you just came. But you don’t. And you know neither of you will. The two of you are going to the top of this thing, and you both know it, stupid or not. And so, you sweep left to right, right to left, Surefire flashlights in your left hands and Beretta 9mm pistols in your right, wrists and backs of your hands together in the traditional police “ice pick” grip, and the two of you move slowly shoulder to shoulder, back to back, toe to heel, trying not to make a sound.

There are definitely people still in there, though. Or close by. You can hear other voices somewhere else around the building, muffled, but human nonetheless. Considering the

population of displaced persons now living in the prison cells next store, you wonder if there are displaced persons doing the same thing you are, looking for cool shit to steal, or maybe food.

Yeah, you think if they're displaced persons, then they're probably looking for things they can live off of, food and water, things to sell maybe.

Unless they're Fedayeen hiding out still, or wounded Ba'ath Party Ministry officials biding their time, waiting for the right moment to escape. You feel the hair tingle on the back of your neck and the muscles in your forearms tighten and the flexor tendon connecting that muscle to your trigger finger twitch. If someone comes around that corner screaming "Allāhu akbar!" you'll be prepared to double-tap that motherfucker and hope for the best. You flick the safety off the Beretta and look at that little reassuring orange dot that says it's ready to do its job, and you hope that this is one of the days when it doesn't jam.

Jay does the same and you say "Shhh…" with your pistol barrel to your lips instead of an index finger, but it comes out as more of a nervous "Shhh…" giggle and he suppresses his own nervous laugh.

"We're fucking assholes," you say under your breath.

"Yeah we are," he smirks.

It occurs to you briefly that any one of the boxes or drawers or corrugated metal filing cabinets that you've just kicked open might have exploded in your faces, and you might be nothing more than a pink mist clinging to the thick morning air right now if you kicked the wrong box, and then you see it and any thoughts of tactical awareness evaporate the second you glimpse that red, white, green, and black fabric wedged between the box of photographs and flipped over desks.

You will have no thought whatsoever that those photos of men women and children are most likely of prisoners who have been tortured or killed while you're hurriedly pushing aside the only evidence of their existence with the hopes that you will get your greedy little dirty mitts on the discarded colors that represent their homeland.

But you don't give a shit about that. You want your souvenir. You kick that box of Iraqi humanity right the fuck out of your way, and you pull that Iraq flag out from under all that shit and hold it up. "Jackpot. Look at this thing," you say and it's intact other than the line of successive holes singed around the edges where it appears that a Marine or some other fucker went full auto with a small caliber rifle.

"Damn, son," Jay shakes his head, "Fucking jackpot."

"Don't worry, man," you say, "We'll get another one." And so, the two of you clear all twelve floors left to right, right to left, ceiling to floor, floor to ceiling—looking not for enemy fighters, or hidden caches of weapons and evidence of the Saddam Hussein's regime of tyranny, but because you are looking for garbage quality mementos like flags and unit insignia and bayonets that the Republican Guard has discarded to send home to your colleagues in suburban Connecticut.

When you get to the top, the sun is blinding, the blue skies are clear, there are only a few burning buildings in the distance, and the effect is surreal. You have a butt pack fall of Iraqi flags, Republican guard insignia, and other Iraq military paraphernalia in your U.S. Navy-issued Kevlar vest under your Connecticut National Guard-issued flack vest and you're not dead.

It's a beautiful day in Baghdad, you think. "Good morning Baghdad!" you scream into the wind doing your best Robin Williams in Vietnam impression. Jay laughs and points to an abandoned anti-aircraft gun emplacement at one of the corners

of the rooftop, and the two of you gleefully climb into the gunners' seats completely forgetting to check the thing for booby traps. You get up to set the timer on the camera that you brought with you and the two of you take celebratory photos sitting in Baghdad Bob's anti-aircraft gun on the top of his wrecked and looted and bombed-out office building. Just a couple of buck sergeants hanging out on the roof like fucking tourists.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, man," Jay says, and so the two of you descend the twelve stories in a much less guarded fashion than you climbed it.

Years later when you are home again and you have dragged that same Iraqi military shit around since that day in the Ministry of Information building well over a decade ago, you will wonder why you still have it. Why you still schlep it from place to place, apartment to apartment, state to state, and country to country so many years later. You will want to know what it means, what value it has, this box of war tokens still smelling of smoke and dust and fear and stupidity a decade and a half later.

But you won't know why you hold onto it, of all things. The footlocker that holds those things that you took so long ago is the only thing that you would never part with of all your earthly possessions. You think that these are the things that should be buried with you when you finally go. That this should be the rule: whatever remains of any war ought to be buried with whoever has been a part of it. That maybe this is your final penance, to be buried with your stolen Iraq War paraphernalia. Your dinars and your insignia and your bayonets and your flags. Bury it with you, and you with it; and bury the war, and forget you and it and your part in stealing it. Forget your part in a dirty war.

New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON

STORM

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It’s not that they’re hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it’s a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

“It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong,” she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don’t whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

“Nothing’s wrong, little bean. Maybe we’ll get a summer storm, that’s all. Come, eat.”

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

“More milk, please.”

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse, she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

“I want to go weed,” she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows, sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her

fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede's, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. "Mommy, what are we doing today?"

"Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let's feed the critters."

"Which clinic?"

"Yours."

She hesitates. “Have I got time to do the birds first?”

Juney’s favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear’s every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she listens and listens. “Shh,” she says this morning. “There’s a nest of baby catbirds over there.” A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. “Three of them. They want their breakfast.”

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.

Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf,* 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. “Time!”

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin’s chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother’s fear even before she hears it in her voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop’s flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin’s neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay’s mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and

wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rackety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin's arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she's retarded—but she doesn't have the heart. Juney rocks when she's happy

"Tweetle tweetle sang the bird," she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

"Twootle twootle sang the cat.

You can't get me, sang the bird.

I don't want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and twootle, tweetle and—"

"Juney?" Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. "You're going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?"

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. "I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle." She takes up her song once more, then stops again. "Are they going to stick me

this time?”

“Soldiers don’t mind needles. It’s just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles.”

“Yeah. Who cares about needles?”

“It’s just an annual checkup to see how much you’ve grown. Nothing to worry about. They’ll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you.”

“That’s ’cause you won’t let me have candy. I’m going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy.”

This is an old battle, Rin’s strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin’s efforts, Juney has caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney’s daddy would approve of how she’s raising her: Jay, the only man she’s ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who won’t be tamed, won’t be polluted, won’t be used.

It was Jay’s idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. “They need us, Rin,” he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. “And we need them.” So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two

newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. “Never try to break wolves,” Jay told her. “They’ve got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They’re wild animals and that’s how it should stay.”

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn’t decided which.

“We’re here!” Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it’s midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin’ Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won’t. She sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Mommy, we’re in America.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” One breath, two. “Okay. I’m ready.”

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard,

his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney's fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafing rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center's Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

"Department of Vaporized Adolescents," she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step inside.

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Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

"Doctor?" Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. "Your nine a.m.'s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane's due around two."

"Yes, the rain, it has already come." Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous

white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat’s. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic’s air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust, splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

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Rin grips Juney’s hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot

fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

"Stop." Juney pulls Rin's hand to her chest. "Mommy, stop."

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps telling herself she doesn't need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses' uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother's alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney's narrow chest. Juney's heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women's eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. “Rin Drummond,” she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

“Mommy?” Juney lifts Rin’s hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. “We’re ready,” she tells the nurse and pulls her mother’s arm. She and Rin follow the nurse’s broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

“Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here,” the nurse tells Juney. “Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy.”

“Thank you. I know what to do. I’m nine years old and my name is June Drummond.”

“Of course it is,” the nurse says, unruffled.

“Did you say ‘Jassim’?” Rin asks, finding her voice at last. “Who’s he?”

“Doctor Jassim is a woman. She’s been a resident with us for half a year now. She’s very good, don’t worry.”

“Where the fuck is she from?” Rin’s hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body

in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

***

The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn’t know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend’s house, the boys’ summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients’ parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents’ ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

“We better hurry, storm’s coming on quick,” Wendy says when

Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. “Watch out for this one,” she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. “Room three.”

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

***

Rin can’t believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?”

Rin takes a breath. And another. “It’s okay. It’s just this place.” She strokes her daughter’s hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin’s every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she’s a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there’s that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She’s carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

“Good morning,” the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. “You are June, right?”

But Juney isn’t listening. Her head’s up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. “Mommy?”

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short

and airless.

“Mommy?” Juney’s voice is more urgent now. “I hear something.”

“There is no need to be frightened, dear,” the doctor says, and Rin can’t tell whether she’s talking to Juney or her.

“Mommy!” Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. “Something bad’s happening!”

“Get out of here!” Rin yells at the doctor.

“What is the matter?” The doctor looks confused.

“No, not her!” Juney cries. “Run!” And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. “Let us out!” she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can’t hear because at that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin’s soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juney around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

***

Lady Bird's Pain

There's an odd narrative thread in Greta Gerwig's 2017 *Lady Bird*. The titular hero lives out her senior year of high school against the backdrop of the Iraq War. Characters watch the war's escalation on televisions while debating boyfriends, mothers, friends, school plays, and sex. But the war has no direct bearing on the narrative—it is static to lower-middle class economic desperation in the aughts United States; a violent echo, a joke and a punch line, like the posters around Lady Bird's school encouraging students to remember 9/11.

Except for one scene.

Lady Bird loses her virginity to a boy who reads Howard Zinn, hates Dave Matthews, and rolls his own cigarettes. All the tics of suburban aughtian "rebellion." She is under the impression that he is a virgin too. Afterwards, he lets her know this wasn't his first time. She gets upset. He can't understand. "I just wanted it to be special," she says. "Why?" he asks. "You're going to have so much unspecial sex." He then gets upset when she gets even more upset. "Do you know how many innocent civilians have been killed today?" he asks, pointing to the television and news of the Iraq invasion.

"Different things can be sad," she says. "It's not all war."

War has a way of negating the particular. When used

rhetorically, extreme violence shuts down conversation, or, worse, turns it into an endless series of self-justifying repetitions. It does not clarify; it excuses. Politicians point to military sacrifice as often as they can for a reason. Partisan advocates on Facebook wax hysterical about the suffering of our fighting forces for a reason. To point to mass violence distorts particular violence, makes it absurd—trivial and sentimental. Impossible.

But the particular is everything.

The boy Lady Bird sleeps with hates anything mainstream. Lady Bird also tries to separate herself from her peers and family. Not only does she take on a pretentious name, but she wants to leave California, to escape the horrors of suburban Sacramento, her given life, for something else, anything and anyone else other than the here and the now, this present.

Her boyfriend's father is dying of cancer. Lady Bird's father is dying of poverty. Her priest is dying of grief. The larger sweeps of history, these violent abstractions, weigh down on the details of experience. Make them silly. Banal. Sacramento rather than a sacrament.

Greek tragedians assumed pain brought wisdom or spiritual growth (*pathei mathos*). This is not necessarily true. Suffering can also make it impossible to think clearly about the relationships around us—it can pervert rationality, turn us into monsters possessed by the infinite and incapable of loving the finite. Worse, when we reference pain that is not ours—greater pain, greater suffering, bigger wars, bigger genocides—we risk excusing the specific pain we ourselves give on a daily basis.

"O Reason not the need," King Lear begs his daughters. "Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous./Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s.”

Confronted by his daughters’ irrefutable logic, Shakespeare’s Lear warns that if we abandon ourselves to mathematical logic, if we insist on necessity, on reducing our experience to the quantifiable, proportion out our pain and empathy, we become blind to what we are, what makes us different than everything else that is. Deprived of particular wants, desires, and love, our human life becomes “as cheap as a beast’s.”

Lady Bird takes increasingly stupid risks to escape her life. She sabotages her mother’s love by insistently pointing out her mother and father’s failure as parents, their inability to meet the economic expectations of American “success.” As she does her name, she denies the life she has been given. But, in the end, Lady Bird discovers a mysterious opening in the curves of her hometown roads, the lives lived there, the memories living there. She stops setting up a false contrast, what the rhetoricians call an either/or fallacy. She takes her given name. She accepts the “isness” of experience. She is able to say thank you. To be grateful for existence.

“You’re going to have so much unspecial sex in your life,” her boyfriend says.

This is true, but it misses the point.

In the last few month’s allegations of sexual assault have dominated the headlines. Many in the United States are waking up to the particular pain silently endured by many for decades. This is a positive development. But the counterassault will soon come. Propagandists and their media teams will point to the big and the broad and the violent. They will talk much of the real world, of the truth, of people suffering in the Middle East and Middle America. They will scream about the big picture, about men in positions of power making hard decisions. They will tell us many stories about War, of missile-button pushing and beaches stormed. They will

teach us about History. They will preach Necessity.

They will say you don’t know how good you have it.

Many of the accusers will begin to doubt the validity of their own pain. The victims will begin to wonder if they were selfish to be hurt in a world where people die in horrible ways and suffer so many horrible wrongs. How can their pain be special when there is so much pain? How can these violations mean anything in a world defined by greater violence? Greater violations?

But this misses the point. Pain is not quantifiable. And those who attempt to do so should wonder why they feel the need to do so, what they want to celebrate and what they want to excuse.

Like King Lear, Lady Bird, this confused suburban teenage girl, is a fool. She knows she is a fool and she persists in making a fool of herself because she cannot see any other way out (I was often reminded of Terrence Malick’s *Badlands*, another story of American youth finding a dangerous self in a wilderness of media, poverty, and self-loathing). And she wants out. The other characters—the priests, the nuns, her mom, her father, her brother—endure great pain, great tragedy. She dances on, this fool, knowing nothing of death, of civilians dying halfway across the world, of the suicides in her midst, thinking only of herself and her pain and her escape.

But is her dance foolish? Are her trials necessarily lesser, less substantial, than those who deal out and insist on pain because they see the world as so much pain? Should her agony be measured out, meted, compared, excused and denied by the pompous ineluctability of History and War? Don’t her experiences, the extremity of her definite emotions, contain the radical possibility of all that is singular and incomparable? Can different things be sad? Is it all war?

Lady Bird begins with the very last line of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—"she put her lips together and smiled mysteriously." In the novel, Rose of Sharon's baby has just died. She feeds a dying man with her breast milk. Her lips. Her breast. Her smile.

Faced with the immensity of history, the refuge of the particular is not escapism. It is the thing itself. And so too this satisfying movie. It is the thing itself. Life.

New Fiction: "Plink, Rack" by Steven Kiernan

There are many moving parts in a gun. There's the trigger, which most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They're the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you.

Sometimes not.

***

Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn't hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands. Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack*. *Plink, rack*. Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen

comrades. For a few days after the bricks were lain, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack*. He swiveled towards the other soldier. *Plink, rack*.

"Doing alright up there, Hal?" J asked from the driver's seat.

"Just great," Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I fucking hate pulling security for 1st platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound," J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

"Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer."

“I got ya, bro,” Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn’t yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

“This is just getting ridiculous.” J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

“You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted.” J said.

“No shit?”

“Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I wanted to be.” He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. “Then I got this great fucking idea, *I’ll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film*,” he said in a nasally voice. “Even told my recruiter about it.”

“I bet he fucking loved that,” Hal said. “Why didn’t you go combat camera? He get you with the old ‘Infantry is the only slot open right now’ line?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“So, how’s your ‘epic war film’ working out? I bet it’ll be realistic as fuck.”

“Don’t you worry, I got it all planned out. It’s gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic.”

“Yeah. But those ten minutes though…”

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

“My grandfather fought in World War II,” J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. “Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn’t until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what’s it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

A man kicked his brother down the street.

A policeman shows up and says, “Hey, why are you doing that? You can’t do that.”

The man turns and says, “It’s alright, he’s dead anyway.”

“I didn’t get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it’s pretty fucking funny.”

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side

of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see him."

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, shit. He's got an RPG!"

"What?!" J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. "Shoot him, man. Shoot him!"

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

“Shoot him!”

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn’t really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn’t breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He

exhaled. *Plink, rack*. There was a knock on his door. “Hey, Hal, ya in there?” Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack*. “What are you doing, man?” *Plink, rack*. It’s alright, Hal thought. It’s alright.

Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps

New Poetry by J.J. Starr

Concerning whether or not I am a horse

I strap torso & press arms

to diaphragm with breath

deep the distressed
voice of mistress
mumbles wishes
amid plum trees
& white headlight
bum-rushes the alleyway—

Am I a horse

kicking at its leathers?
How many full rides & how should I count?

Thought made in moonlight appearing
cogent, succinct behind glass
what makes a full ride?

Pulling hard & pulling harder, making iron
break soil, dancing in dirt, hooves
wet, mane draping the strength of a neck—

Am I

   if no bit made better a turning
   head? No harm but tightened
   hips? & if my breast hardened by use?
   My rump sheened in sunlight

Am I a horse?

   Many hands have made my length
   & I’ve never been bought.

   Many hands have made
   my length. Many hands.

God Between Us & All Harm

Lighted hallway, delighted guest,
the television the
lens of it, lends itself to you.
Trump again, brackish, weighted
eyes dilated, throat-moaning

“The beauty of me is that I’m very rich.”

Beleaguered, who can even remember a face
these days? My grandfather used to say things
like you can drown in a teacup of water
if you fall right. He was gladly on his way out.

Sometimes I see his point:

LSU live tiger-mascot dies of cancer at age eleven
his empty cage strewn with flowers, paper cards
a student says, “”nobody else had a live tiger.”

company shares tumble by 8%
top of the news feed
taking so much light
I’ve forgotten there’s war in Ukraine •

Afghanistan • Iraq • Nigeria • Cameroon • Niger •
Chad • Syria • Turkey • Somalia • Kenya • Ethiopia •
Libya • Yemen • Saudi Arabia • Egypt • India • Iran •
Myanmar • Thailand • Israel • Palestine • Philippines •
Colombia • Armenia • Azerbaijan • China • Bangladesh •
DRC • Algeria • Tunisia • Burundi • Russia • Mali •
Angola • Peru • Lebanon • Mozambique •

where &

& where else?

L asks what I think of the song

Listening with ears pricked upon
to Young Thug’s Wyclef Jean
I cannot be sure where I meet it

when he says let me put it
& I think of course not—but then
fingering the hem of my skirt

do I reject his desire to squirt
his cum on my face slick as a ghost
because I’m honestly or dishonestly

deposed? I want my skin touched—
perhaps it's how he asks,
telling me to deny my desire to bask

In the wet filth & become
part perversion myself. Because it was me
that morning who told

my beloved to do it & yes, I did want
kneeling deep in the tub looking up
all my skin like a socket, drooling mouth

blossomed, filled like a pocket.
L said to me, You don't think
about the implication, the intention.

I said, I don't think
of the gesture as blind contravention
or anything more than body & mess

upon mess in the deluge of sex. I confessed
I want to be seen as a canvass.
She said, I don't want to be mean,

with the swat of her hand, but
he's no Jackson Pollack.

Photo Credit: Cesar Ojeda

New Poetry by Randy Brown

PHOTO:
Marie-Lan

Nguyen. Bust of Homer

Toward an understanding of war and poetry, told (mostly) in aphorisms

Poetry is the long war of narrative.

Poetry, like history, is subjective.

If journalism is the first draft of history, poetry is the last scrap.

Poets set the stage of victory. Just ask Homer: Who won the ball game?

Do not make fun of war poets. A war poet will cut you.

War is hell. Poetry is easier to read. But each takes time.

Any war poem is a final message home.

Poetry can survive fragmentation. Irradiation. Ignorance.

Poetry can cheat death. Poetry has all the time in the world. Poetry will outlast us all.

Poetry is a cockroach.

“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”—Mark Twain

“Twain didn’t actually say that.”—John Robert Colombo

John Robert Colombo is a poet.

Notes: While John Robert Colombo incorporated the popular "history rhymes" quotation—which he then attributed to Mark Twain— into his 1970 work, "A Said Poem," he later privately reported he was uncertain of its origins. And, despite the poetic construction here, Colombo himself never said, "Twain didn't actually say that."

In an 1874 introduction to "The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day," co-written with Charles Dudley Warner, Twain apparently did say, "History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends."

History prefers Colombo's version. So do I.

PHOTO: Spc. Leslie Goble, U.S. Army. A soldier peeks out of the "Death Star." The outpost overlooks Combat Outpost Najil and is manned by soldiers 24 hours a day.

the bottlefall at COP Najil

in summer sun, a plastic waterfall cascades,

the emptied residue of our Afghan brothers

encamped along the ridge just across from the fortress

we call the Death Star.

above and below, a Scout Weapons Team buzzes up

and down the valley, TIE fighters searching for a truck

full of fertilizer, a bomb waiting for us

to happen.

we have taught the Afghans well: That water

comes only in bottles. That cowboys don’t

care for the desert. That our brand of war

is sustainable.

———

Notes: The acronym “COP,” pronounced “kahp,” stands for “Combat Outpost.” A “TIE fighter” is a fictional spacecraft—one that is powered by “Twin Ion Engines”—that first appeared in the 1977 movie “Star Wars.”

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the homecoming game, a war sonnet

PHOTO: Jessica Blanton. Navy Petty Officer Jeff Howard surprises his mother and grandmother at a Falcons Preseason Game at the Georgia Dome. Petty Officer Howard’s mother,

Tina, thought he was still in Afghanistan. DVIDS worked with the Falcons to coordinate the emotional homecoming.

Friends and countrymen, lend us your eyes

—the half-time tribute our G.I.s deserve!

For patriots’ love, a gladiatorial surprise:

one family’s tears on your behalf observe!

Our man behind curtains will soon appear

to his kids and young hot wife transported

from Afghanistan to home so dear,

their kiss upon a Jumbotron distorted!

Then, attend these soapful sponsored messages:

Your focus on this spectacle so pure

will wash your laundries and your sins in stages

gentle, scent-free, and all-temperature!

    For we, about to cry, salute our troops—

    their sacrifice played in commercial loops.

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three tanka from Des Moines,

Iowa

Spring 2016

1.

PHOTO: Spc. Emily Walter, U.S. Army. Cadets file into a Chinook helicopter to begin the Ranger Challenge, Nov. 3 at Camp Dodge, Iowa. The challenge consists of several tactical training events that test the soldiers' physical and mental capabilities.

A flock of Black Hawks

thudding through our barren trees

announces March drill.

In springtime, comes the fighting,

but we wait for the Chinook.

2.

With ceremony,

Old Man assembles his troops.

It is Mother's Day;

sons and daughters are leaving

in order to sustain war.

3.

Conex boxes stacked

in the Starbucks parking lot

bring back memories

of making war and coffee.

I miss the old neighborhood.

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New Fiction – "Iqbal" by Dan Murphy

Across the eight-lane roadway from the observation post was a gas station where Iraqis waited for days, siblings and cousins

trading shifts and standing guard, eyeing the other clans and tribes. Pierstein crouched behind a chest-high wall of dusty sandbags and hugged the shade it created just outside the post's front entrance, a long piece of floppy plywood propped against the doorway and secured with a string on a nail. Trash tumbled in the road, clung doubled-over to the curbs. He wiped his brow and watched them mill around through the line. They paid no attention to the Detroit chug of turbo-diesels pulling up on Pierstein's side of the road.

He called back into the OP, "Log run's up." His voice skipped off the ceramic floors of the three-story mansion's interior and wound up the marble-columned atrium to the upper floors, finally muffled out against the sand bags stacked in the window frames. The roof had fortified posts with bulletproof glass, and central Fallujah and its desert environs spanned out unbroken but for minarets and crackling calls to prayer that mingled with smoke clouds from burning garbage.

Pierstein heard Corporal Baylor's throaty notice to fall out followed by the heavy-laden footsteps of 1st Squad scuffing down the tiled stairway inside.

Pierstein walked out into the nascent daylight as the first truck stationed itself in front of the house next door. The turret gunner swept his weapon outboard, slumped and mechanical. A covered trailer hauling cases of water and rations followed the second truck, and Cullen stepped out of the passenger side.

"Any ice today?" Pierstein asked.

"Negatron, dude. Generator's still down."

"Well, fuck our lives," said Pierstein.

Cullen snapped to attention and saluted, "Fuck our lives, aye-aye." He let the trailer hitch drop and clang against the frame. "Plenty of piss-warm water though."

Pierstein's squad filed out to the trailer. "Got another surprise for you though, Piers."

"Finally get your dick hard?"

"You'd like that wouldn't you? Nah, but this might get you up." Cullen opened the rear door. A gaunt man, blindfolded and soiled, with a patchy beard and big goofy ears sat with his hands zip-tied behind his back so that he had to slouch deeply, his knees crammed into the back of the driver's seat. A black gash poked out from under the blindfold. His left cheek was a dark pulpy purple and his lower lip was split, the corner of his mouth pinched red and raw. A silty mist swarmed the sunlight passing through the truck around the man's face. "Think you two have met." He shrugged."Sorta."

The man's stench cut through the burning garbage and diesel, and Pierstein gagged and turned to his side and spat.

"Yep. This piece of shit smells like straight shit." Cullen leaned past Pierstein and gave the man hard shove. "Don't ya, you fucking Muj fuck?" The man was stoic. Pierstein was not impressed.

Pierstein was unsure at first but then recalled the elvish ears from the posters all over the FOB. Iqbal bin Hassan. S-2 said he was the guy behind the scope, shadowing the battalion's movements throughout the city and pulling the trigger at choice, vulnerable moments. Pierstein recalled the hole where Ben's face should have been, his battle buddy like a mannequin propped up against a heap of rubble. Pierstein had scrubbed his trousers for an hour but couldn't get the blood out. He was down to two pairs now. S-2 said a lot of fucking things.

Iqbal's breath was slow, tidal, though he must have known where they were taking him. It occurred to Pierstein that Iqbal probably knew better than he did. This was a confrontation Pierstein knew he was meant to relish. Another

platoon had picked him up three days before, and the CO had come to find Pierstein to tell him They got the son’bitch, but Pierstein was relieved that they would not let him see Iqbal.

Cullen tried to fill the space opposite the open truck door like a valet, peering around, scanning behind the truck and checking the windows of the neighboring homes. Pierstein stared. “That’s him?”

“That’s him,” said Cullen.

Pierstein stepped closer to the truck. He started to reach out to touch Iqbal, looking for a parallel to how Iqbal had reached out and touched them. His heart beat dragged. No cry for blood rushed to face or his fists. Looking at Iqbal, defenseless and whipped, he felt like retreating, like dropping his gear and shutting his eyes.

“That’s the dirty haji fuck right there, bro, fucking Muj motherfucker.” Cullen peered around some more.

Pierstein stepped closer. The diesel hummed, and a gust of wind sprinkled a glittering of sand through the open doors. He watched it collect on Iqbal’s swollen lips. Pierstein let his rifle hang loose and shifted it to his back. The scents of gas and sewage danced back and forth. He could see a thin piece of string tied in a simple knot around Iqbal’s wrist. Too slight to serve a tactical purpose, Pierstein wondered if it meant something, a friend back home or a reminder not to bite his nails. He wondered for a moment if Iqbal ever jerked off during the long hours hunting behind his gun, waiting for a Marine to wander into his aperture, the same way they all did on post. Did he feel guilty about it after? Like he had sullied the mission?

Pierstein pumped his fists, rolling his fingers in and out of a ball, wishing his arms would leap out on their own, but somehow Iqbal’s placidity was contagious, and Pierstein could not find the way to violating it. The failure huddled in his

stomach. He tried to believe he would stay as calm as Iqbal was if the roles were reversed and winced the question from his mind, a new failure altogether. It was not like he would ever get his trousers back.

Was it even calm he was seeing in Iqbal? Hard to tell with the blindfold, without knowing what his eyes were doing. His even breaths and slouched posture could just as easily be his body opting out. Probably he had not been allowed to sleep for days. But Pierstein was inclined to believe it was fear that held Iqbal in check, the second-to-second will to not make another mistake, to not invite more pain or abuse, to breathe each breath so that it will leave room for the next. In the three previous days, the man, whoever he was, had learned not to beg or cry, learned only to survive the next minute.

The working party stopped, the drivers, the guys up in the turrets, his squad cradling cases of food and water mid-step, all watching him, all waiting for the show.

“That’s the motherfucker.”

Pierstein heard his squad leader from the house. “That’s him?” Corporal Baylor trooped across the dirt lot from the house wearing only a t-shirt under his flak, arms sinewy and bulging. Baylor didn’t say anything else as he dropped his rifle against Pierstein’s chest and went in. Cullen peered around again for onlookers.

Baylor did not touch Iqbal’s face. Gripping the nape of his neck and shoulder with one hand, he put his other to the spot where abdomen meets oblique, about a fist’s width in front of the kidney. Pierstein watched Baylor’s uppercut land over and over again, ashamed of his relief that someone else was doing his job for him. Iqbal let out a couple involuntary grunts and yelps, but he never cried out. After the fourth or fifth punch, Pierstein looked away and all he heard were muffled gags and impacts like fruit splattering on the sidewalk from

fifty stories up.

Pierstein wondered about that: why the gut? Wasn't the face more satisfying? The one whose effect you could measure and say That spot right fucking there? His blood on your knuckles? The one he will see in the mirror and recall the exact moment he received it—from you—and wince when he turns his head over his pillow and wakes up because of it? Feel it chewing food, dragging on a cigarette, bending his forehead to the ground. Chuck Norris never round-housed dudes in the hip.

When they finally pulled Baylor off Iqbal, he was not throwing punches anymore. He had Iqbal by the collar in a sort of combat conference, practically mounting the guy in a cultural exchange of sweat. It sounded like growling at first and strings of Baylor's saliva unfurled on Iqbal's swollen face. It was only when Pierstein and Cullen were pulling him off that Pierstein heard what he was saying to Iqbal, over and over again through his teeth: Baylor.

Later, thinking back on it, Pierstein realized why Baylor had chosen the gut. The face was already bloody and bruised, a pulpy blast zone previously claimed. Baylor wanted agency, and his wrath would not be felt on the face. If he had the time, he would have tattooed his name on Iqbal's oblique or anywhere else. But all he had was a few seconds, so he claimed his spot.

Free of Baylor, Iqbal crumbled out of the truck and started puking in the gutter, the mealy bile nestling in the bright green household sewage. Somebody said something about a corpsman. They let him linger there a minute unmolested. Pierstein was not sure if this was a deliberate mercy, that Iqbal should have this respite to reflect on his misery and talk it out with someone in his head, or if it was an exhibition in its own right—the dominated bared at the pleasure of its dominator.

Cullen eventually hooked him under the arm pit, said, “Get the fuck up,” and crammed him back in the truck and slammed the door home. Baylor told the squad, “Let’s get these guys out of here.” Pierstein still had Baylor’s rifle, and he watched as Baylor slapped the dust from his hands off on his trousers before reaching for it.

Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love – it’s a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any

momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary

relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.
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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: "*9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something.*"

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We

meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he *was* exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal.

They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: "*They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it*." As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: "*In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the air were being shocked.*" He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next life,* Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization

phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have “military training” and admires the trappings of Skinner’s service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she’s trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner’s credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner’s part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book’s unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei’s idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here’s one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: “*Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful*

powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles…" The primary antagonist, on the other hand, "*looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before.*" The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary here), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou's proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. "*What makes the world go round,*" she says, and Skinner answers: "*War… Actually, I'd say money first. Money and then war*." America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit

of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn't here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

Preparation From the Next Life is by Atticus Lish, published by and available through Tyrant Books.

American Sniper and the Hero Myth

American Sniper, a new film based on the book of the same name, is being released on Christmas Day. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring and produced by Bradley Cooper, it tells the story of Navy SEAL super-sniper Chris Kyle, widely-praised as the most lethal sniper in American history with at least 160 "official" kills, and apparently many more "unofficial" ones. The film's catch phrase is "the most lethal sniper in history", and the trailer shows Bradley Cooper undergoing a moment of moral doubt before (presumably) shooting a child carrying a bomb. The Hollywood studio is banking not only on the film's popularity, but that Americans will want to spend

their Christmas Day watching such morally questionable lethality. The trailer immediately reminds me of another Bradley Cooper role in *The Place Beyond the Pines* (a much better movie than *American Sniper*, by the way), where Cooper's entire character is built around the fact that he killed a man with a young son the same age as his own and felt guilt and regret for the rest of his life.

Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with "American" something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many, many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America's adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French Connection, The Italian Job, The English Patient, The African Queen, The Manchurian Candidate, The Good German*. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

Moving back to the original story, after 10 years in the military and four tours in Iraq, the real-life Chris Kyle left the Navy in 2009 and started a private security consulting firm in his home state of Texas. One of his priorities was supporting wounded and troubled veterans. When his book was published, he donated the entire $1.5 million check to

charities supporting such veterans. He was a devoted family man as well as a noted gun-lover and hunter (it remains unclear whether he killed more human or non-human animals).

Kyle, along with a friend, was killed in 2013 by a troubled ex-Marine who shot him in the back when Kyle took him for his own brand of “therapy” at a shooting range. The funeral was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas to accommodate the huge number of mourners. This man was a hero to millions of people in America. My purpose is not to disrespect Kyle in any way, but to point out some of my thoughts and observations about the circumstances which lead him to become such a hero to so many.

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle’s death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said “live by the sword, die by the sword”. Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord’s words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentally of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won’t be the last.

Another relevant thing I found out is that Kyle never expressed any regret or doubt over killing people on such a Herculean scale (here is a quote from his book: “It was my

duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her."). One must imagine that it would become quite routine after a while to aim, shoot, and repeat. This is no video game, however, nor is it aerial bombing, artillery, or even run-of-the-mill machine-gun fire. Every one of those kills Kyle would have previously and skillfully planned, calculated, and then witnessed in gory detail by means of a powerful telescope sight. That such a thing would be desensitizing is understandable. I would not take such a job, but if it were me I would also by necessity strengthen my personal convictions about my own righteousness if only as a way to avoid insanity (another quote from the book: "My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.").

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle's story. First of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves "silent professionals" when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle's book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label "war porn", and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

Kyle also had problems telling the truth. Though apparently no stranger to garden-variety barroom brawls, he invented a story about a bar fight in which he punched out former wrestler,

actor, and Minnesota governor (and fellow Navy commando) Jesse Ventura. Ventura sued and was eventually awarded over a million dollars in damages. Kyle also apparently made up a story about killing two guys who tried to rob him somewhere in Texas, which never happened in real life. I wonder why he would feel the need to make up superfluous falsehoods when he was already well-supplied with enough martial anecdotes to win admiration from his armed acolytes. It reeks of the braggadocio and machismo that is all-too-common in the special operations communities. He was also a heavy drinker, like many fellow veterans. Alcohol is one of the most common and most readily available means for veterans to cope with the trauma of war and homecoming. Sadly, we should not be surprised by such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from the book: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there."). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

Chris Kyle was no super-hero, let alone hero, though many people (and maybe he himself) saw him as one. The world needs neither fake heroes nor mythical super-heroes with super-human powers or super-human killing ability to be able to solve the world's problems or kill all of the bad guys. The society that produced Chris Kyle and his unquestioning world view will sustain itself with tales of heroes like Chris Kyle who defend our "freedom" from the bad guys. The thing about bad guys is that, to them, the other guys are bad guys, and they are fighting for their own version of "freedom". Killing over 200 "bad guys" is just as ineffective a way to peace or freedom as killing two million "bad guys" if there is no reason why and

no plan to stop killing them. This false heroism creates more problems than it solves and multiplies the violence in the world. Chris Kyle did not protect or make anyone safer; his story is one small part of immoral (and probably illegal) war that has only increased the vicious cycle of violent retribution that exists in the world. Such a cycle will continue until someone, dare I say one akin to a real "hero", tries to stop the cycle with understanding, dialogue, and diplomacy. The world does not need heroes; it needs human solidarity.

Reaction to Helen Benedict's "The Moral Confusion of Post-War America"

Thought experiment. Someone you know, and who knows you, but not very well, says in public that you have no integrity. Like this: "You have no integrity. Zero. None. That's what I think. This is my serious face." How would you respond? Take a second with that thought.

According to a piece in Guernica, during a talk between Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* (an exceptional piece of writing, according to many whose opinions I trust) and a veteran moderator, one such moment occurred recently. Blasim asked the veteran: "All the time, I hear American soldiers say they are proud. But how can you carry a weapon and invade another country and call yourself proud?"

Helen Benedict, the piece's author, and the one who relays that quote, is an author herself, and a professor of writing at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. She makes many

statements in her essay, titled *The Moral Confusion of Post-War America* that develop from Blasim's question. She seems to feel that the choice to serve in war is an inherently bad one, and doesn't understand how one could see or do or choose to see and do those things and still feel good about the experience, to honestly claim that one is proud. Of country, of self.

Helen is a friend. I don't know Blasim, or his work, but I've read enough about it to have a healthy respect for his imagination and his talent. I'm going to attempt to answer the question, now, of why I believe what I did was – not just necessary, but *good* – despite the horrors – perhaps because of them. I should preface it by saying I have the utmost respect for Helen and her point of view, which is a view shared by my father and most of his friends, so far as I can tell – this is not surprising, given that they grew up during the Vietnam era, when the moral choices available to citizens and draftees were very different from the choices available to us today.

Assuming that Blasim really wanted an answer to his question, and wasn't merely trolling the vet with a paradox designed to introduce intellectual discomfort, which is also fine. Blasim's native Iraq (he lives in Finland) was invaded and plundered and destroyed by war. He's entitled to his ideas about things – I'm not challenging his logic, or his position. He is correct.

I am an American soldier, and I carried and shot a rifle, and fired artillery and dropped bombs, and ordered people forward again and again, mostly to attack, and people died by my hand and by the hands of others who obeyed my orders. And I am proud of my service.

I didn't get to go to Iraq. The first time, my unit was supposed to go and then, a month before the departure date the surge pushed us off the chart to Iraq and we were rerouted to Afghanistan. Everyone had been learning Arabic. The second

time, my unit was supposed to go and then, three months before the departure date, the surge pulled us onto the chart to Afghanistan, so I didn't see Iraq. But I joined to lead soldiers in Iraq, so that should count for something.

I also protested Iraq. I was on 1st Avenue with Aidan McGlaze, blocks from the UN, near 50th street. We watched Desmund Tutu. There were over 100,000 of us. I vocally and actively participated in this demonstration, and other smaller events, and felt fully committed to the notion that we should not invade. When we did, anyway, it was a bitter blow, and disillusioning in the way one probably imagines such things are for young men.

Blasim might ask why I didn't do more, or less, and the answer is that it wouldn't have mattered. America invaded Iraq despite my wishes, against my better judgement. This is the point at which he and I, and Helen and I part paths. Because once it became clear that the war was not going anywhere, that it was happening, an indisputable fact of our lives – that it would not end any time soon – I went to the Army recruiting station. Late November of 2004. Bush had four more years. Abu Ghraib was blowing up (though the original incident had occurred in May). We were still in Afghanistan.

In a country with a professional Army, the choice is not whether or not to avoid service. Everyone avoids service, by not being presented with a choice to avoid it or not. You get to not serve unless you really want to or need to. That's fine, and acceptable, and in many ways all to the good. Save that in a country of rampant economic inequality, many more people need to than want to, and, ultimately, service becomes an economic obligation for some, while others can do as they like.

I felt that under such circumstances, I needed to serve, and this idea caught ahold of me like a conviction. I knew that war was wrong. I knew that killing and carrying a rifle would produce moral injury. I also understood that the people in my society, like me save for a trick of biographical history, who'd been compelled to serve for a variety of reasons, would return with moral injury, and I'd never be compelled to endure any privation.

My friends will tell you that I talk a lot about loving America, mostly in ironic terms. In truth, I feel a great affection to the country that my ancestors helped found, for which generations of ancestors have fought and toiled and bled, the country that allowed me to have a peaceful, moral upbringing, and the best education in the world, at a fantastic prep school (Hopkins) and a fantastic college (Yale). I feel, strongly, that the red, white and blue – the best of it – flows in my veins. I don't begrudge that feeling to anyone – it's an inclusive feeling. The best part about America, my favorite part, is that the *promise* is that anyone can share in that dream. My ancestors were peasants and nobility and drifters and criminals and schemers and farmers and lawyers. Like everyone. Come to America, take part in the dream, you're welcome to be my brother and my sister.

I like that idea, although I know that in practice it rarely works out that way, and less and less as time goes on. So – why am I proud of my service? Because in every era, there is a war. Each generation faces its struggle – to participate or not. I chose to participate in the proper way this generation, which is correct for this generation in a way that it wasn't for the Vietnam era, or for WWII, or for the Civil War.

I sympathize with Blasim, whose country has been ravaged by war and dictatorship and injustice, systematically – whose native country has been exploited by successive empires for centuries – whose birthplace, Iraq, was doomed by the British and French decades before he or I first drew breath. He talks

about war, I'm told, as a series of ghosts that haunt the living, and each other. Well – I don't feel particularly haunted by my ghosts – they are my guardians, the certainty that I will attempt to act a little bit better than they did, that I will avoid making the same mistakes they did.

And in Afghanistan, we did avoid those mistakes. We did make progress. We did good. I did that, carrying a rifle, because I represented the strong, and I was willing to stand up to the bullies in the areas where bullies called themselves Taliban, and they were defeated. They would not have been defeated without weapons. I suppose someone could talk about how the Taliban was given weapons by the CIA in the 80s, or through funding to Pakistan's government, but that's a ghost speaking. In the 1980s I was watching schools of minnows in a tidepool, or reading, or riding my bicycle. I don't know what the 1980s are.

I'm sorry things have worked out the way they did in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and many places in the world. I understand now that the role of the writer is to help present people with truth, and I think Blasim has probably done that. Helen certainly has. In my opinion, the world is complicated, and one must sometimes hold opposing ideas in one's head simultaneously. Like carrying a gun, and murder, and pride, and kindness. That's not jingoism – that's life, and participating in life.

Helen is correct in her view that war is awful, and should be avoided at all costs. I believe that and agree with her. I can't disagree with any of her points, and I will stand side-by-side with her shouting against war until the day it breaks out. Once it has broken out – once Wotan's spear has been shattered, and all the old alliances and civil obligations we owe each other as humans are gone, and the great calamity has returned for any reason, I believe that one must choose to participate if one can – if one is physically or emotionally able, if one is free from familial responsibilities (as I was)

– to help bear some of that moral injury, to bring it home, and to digest it and move on with one’s life.

Blasim and Helen disagree with me on this point. I hope that Blasim wouldn’t hold it against me, and that Helen doesn’t, because I have great respect for them both as thinkers and writers – Helen through experience and Blasim by reputation. I’ve made choices in life, and am proud of them.

Yes.