

New Fiction by Matthew J. Hefti: "Jean, not Jean"



Illustration by Matthew J. Hefti

Jean, not Jean

by Matthew J. Hefti

When I look in the mirror, I think I look stupid. Otherwise, I don't even think of how I look. But when I do look in the mirror, it's like I can't look away. Also when I do, I pick a lot. Today is especially bad.

My mom said once that it's anxiety from stress.

My dad said, he's thirteen. What's he got to be stressed about?

I'm pretty torqued on the way to school. I don't really know why. I think it's because I missed the bus. I missed the bus because I couldn't stop picking at myself, and I think it's because I can feel everything—like how tight my socks are and how my feet are already a little moist and my socks aren't doing anything about it, and my shirt's a little tight in the armpits and it's pulling at my armpit hairs, and one of the hairs in my eyebrows is curled or something and it's really annoying me, and I think maybe I have a hair growing in my ear. I'm not sure.

My mom asks what she can do to put me in a better mood.

I tell her that she doesn't have to do anything.

She says my happiness is important.

It's important to you, I tell her.

Jean isn't at school today. He's probably my best friend. He had an allergic reaction yesterday. He's allergic to pretty much everything.

Mr. Rogers is subbing again because Mrs. Neumann is sick. Mr. Rogers hates when we call him that and tells us to call him anything but that. We called him all kinds of things for a while, like Mr. Fluffy Head and Poo Poo Bear, but it got boring because he really meant what he said about being able to call him anything. He didn't care.

You wouldn't guess it by his name, but Mr. Rogers is this tough looking dude that used to be in the military. He still has a flat top.

Mr. Rogers calls Jean's name three times, pausing for infinity each time as if it's not completely obvious there's an empty desk and no one is responding. But he says it like Jean, like something you wear or like he's a girl, but his name is Jean, like Victor Hugo's hero. It rhymes with Shawn. You'd think he'd know that by now.

I've never read anything by Victor Hugo, but that's what Jean's mother always says when someone says it wrong: It's Jean, she says. Like the greatest hero in western literature, drawn in full by Victor Hugo. Except she says litra-ture. And then if people say, who's that, she won't answer. She just snorts a little like they're stupid.

I asked his mom once if I could see the picture of the Jean in the book. She said, What do you mean? I said, the one drawn by Victor Hugo. She snorted. I guess she thinks I'm stupid.

Jean told me that his mom named him that because the Jean in the book is like a kind of Christ.

I asked him what that was supposed to mean since there's only one God.

He said, he's not Christ. He's a type of Christ.

I said, you can't be a type of something if there's only one of that thing.

He said he asked his dad about it once and his dad said that the only thing he's the hero of is the miserable ones.

Who? I said. Jean or Christ?

Jean shrugged. Both I guess.

I used to call him Jean too. Even though it's Jean, not Jean. Everyone did. He's small and kind of nerdy looking. Plus he's sick a lot, and saying Jean made us feel stuck up. But now most of us have gotten used to it. It's just his name.

I didn't call him Jean because he was nerdy. I called him that because he was my arch nemesis. He stole my job as milk monitor last year, when we were in sixth grade. Each of us had a class duty, and I had the best one.

It wasn't the best because counting the orders and getting the milks at lunch was so great or anything. But the milk monitor for the fifth and sixth grade classroom had to go with the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth grade classroom. And Heather Saint James was the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth graders. Heather Saint James didn't have the prettiest face—that was Jennifer Gohrman—but she did have the biggest boobs in the school.

The way it worked was, the older kid would bring the milk

crate and wait by our door. That was like the signal to Mrs. Neumann that she needed to wrap it up. Then she'd say, raise your hand if you want chocolate. Then, raise your hand if you want white. You'd count the hands and then go to the gym closet with the older kid to get the milks, and then you'd bring them back.

Heather Saint James would put the milk crate on the ground to slide open the big fridge door to get the milks and put them into the crate.

I could see right down her shirt where those big heavy things were hanging. While she waited for me to stammer the count for our class, she would stay bent over like that with her hand on the bottom shelf. Like she didn't even realize they were there.

To get to the gym closet, you had to walk through the whole school and then finally the principal's office. You could go through the gym instead of the principal's office, but we weren't allowed to go that way.

When I was in fifth grade and David Pfeiffer was the milk monitor, I thought they made them go through the office because they were afraid the milk monitors would start playing in the gym on the way there. That was before Jean even went to our school.

But then when I got older, I realized that didn't make any sense because all the balls and toys and stuff were stored in the gym closet, which is where you had to go to get the milks anyway.

After I had spent some time as the milk monitor myself, I realized they made you go through the principal's office because they were probably afraid that if you went through the gym, you'd probably goof off in other ways. I never did

though.

Jean says I chickened out and had plenty of chances, but that's not what happened. What happened is that he stole my job.

One day while I was doing the sweater stare—it was fall by then—I had forgotten the count when Heather Saint James asked me the numbers. I thought fast and gave her two numbers that added up to eleven. That's how many students we had in our class after all.

But Jean doesn't drink milk. He's allergic. According to his mom, deathly allergic. So the real number was supposed to add up to ten.

I should have guessed that anyway because that's how many kids had been in my class my whole life until Jean showed up. But I remembered the new kid made us eleven.

It wasn't the first time I had gotten the numbers wrong. It wasn't even the first time I made the mistake of bringing back eleven milks. But the first time I did it doesn't count. I just did it that time because I thought that Mrs. Neumann would let me have the extra chocolate instead of taking it back.

She didn't like that.

I told her I couldn't take it back because Heather Saint James already went back to her classroom.

She told me that she was sure I would find my way. She was always saying that, even when it didn't make sense in context.

The time I forgot the numbers on accident, she asked why I brought back the wrong number of chocolate milks again.

I told her it was because I forgot Jean was allergic to milk.

She said, you know who won't forget that Jean is allergic to milk?

No, I told her.

Jean. That's who.

So she made Jean the milk monitor.

When I told my dad what happened, he laughed and said, Well, there's dramatic irony for you.

I was pretty mean to Jean for a while. Then one day he asked why I cared about being milk monitor so much, and I told him it was obvious.

He said it wasn't obvious to him.

I mentioned Heather Saint James.

He said, that's it? Then he claimed he didn't care about that because he could look at all the boobs he wanted because they had the internet at home. I think he just wanted me to like him.

He offered to stick his finger in one of the milk cartons so I could get the job back. I think he wanted to be liked so badly that he would have really done it, but I told him not to because they might give the job to anyone. And if someone else got the job, he'd just be risking his life for nothing.

It made me feel bad that he was so obsessed with being liked that he would risk his life to get a friend and also give up the chance to sneak peeks down the shirt of Heather Saint

James.

So I said sorry for being so mean and that I wouldn't view him as my arch nemesis anymore.

After me and Jean became friends, I asked him why he came to our school.

Jean said the public school told him he missed too many days. He didn't want to be stuck in fifth grade.

So I asked him why he could be in sixth grade in our school when everyone said it was harder than the public school.

He said the state couldn't tell our school what to do. Then he said our school was just as easy as public school. But going to any school is a waste of time, he said.

He had a point there.

When I asked him why he didn't just get home schooled, he said his mom told him that all home school kids are weird.

He had a point there too.

But why our school? I asked. You're not even Christian.

Yes I am, he said.

But you don't go to our church, I pointed out.

Are you stupid or just brainwashed? he asked.

I told him he could use some milk of human kindness.

We both had a good laugh at that one.

It was milk that gave Jean the reaction yesterday, but it

could have been anything considering practically half the normal foods in the world are like phosgene or mustard gas to him. I learned about phosgene and mustard gas yesterday in history class, not from Mr. Rogers, but from Jean.

When history class started, Mr. Rogers asked what we were learning about from Mrs. Neumann.

Jean told him World War One.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand and said, why do we always have to learn about wars in history class?

Mr. Rogers told her it was because wars were like the epicenter of an earthquake in a country's timeline with seismic waves moving out in every direction. If you wanted to, he said, you could pick any given war and study the whole country's history just by studying that war. You could ask yourself what led to the war and then what were the consequences of the war. By asking what led to the war, you could go as far back into history as you wanted. By asking what the consequences of the war were, you could study all the history from the war until the present and then as far into the future as infinity if you wanted.

Tabby Gardner told him we'd already been studying World War One for infinity.

I have to admit, I was pretty bored myself.

Well, Mr. Rogers said, if a war is like an earthquake in a country's timeline, then wouldn't a World War be like an earthquake in the entire world's timeline? So doesn't it make sense to spend time studying it?

Okay, Tabby Gardner said, but we already know everything about it.

Then tell me what you know about the war, Mr. Rogers said.

Jean raised his hand, like always.

Mr. Rogers said, I want to hear from Tabby. But then she didn't say anything for a long time, and Mr. Rogers called on Jean, like always.

Did you know, Jean said, that in World War One, they used phosgene and mustard gasses? Also, did you know that the Germans would hit troops with gasses that could get through the gas masks? It would hurt their eyes and nose and stuff so bad that they would take off their masks, even though that could kill them. Then after taking off their masks, they'd inhale the phosgene and mustard and stuff like that. Their lungs would start to blister and their eyes would bleed or they'd start coughing so bad they could puke up their stomachs and all sorts of stuff.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand.

Mr. Rogers called on her.

Real prissy she said, can we please not talk about blistered lungs and puked up stomachs?

You could tell Mr. Rogers was thinking about it because he didn't say anything for a while.

Then he said, so like I was saying before about the earthquakes, I actually know a guy who got messed up really bad—big red oozing blisters all over his body—after he put a mustard round in his truck thinking it was a regular old projo.

Then he told us all about IEDs made with chlorine tanks, stock piles of mustard rounds, troops that got gassed that couldn't get benefits once they got home, and how the whole reason we were there was because some General convinced the UN that there were WMDs there.

Jean ate it up. He loved that kind of stuff.

But what happened with the milk yesterday was, after history class we had lunch. I was reading the joke on my milk carton, and I said, I don't get it.

The jokes were like numbered in a series. Everyone with a number five, for example, would have the same stupid joke. An example would be, Why was the cow jumping up and down? Because it wanted a milkshake. But that wasn't the actual joke yesterday.

Mr. Rogers was at his desk eating his lunch and drinking his milks—he always ordered two chocolates. He asked me what number I had.

Twelve, I told him.

Me too, he said. It's a pun.

But I don't get it, I told him.

He said, you know back when I was in school, milk cartons didn't have jokes. They had pictures of missing kids.

But these have jokes, and I don't get this one.

Instead of jokes, we'd have to look at pictures of these kids who were abducted, he said.

Jean asked what the joke was.

Mr. Rogers said, it's not a joke. It's a pun.

Then Jean said, well then read me the pun.

Mr. Rogers said, you wouldn't get a pun like this if I told it to you. You have to read it.

I can't read it myself, Jean said. I'm allergic to milk.

When I was a kid, Mr. Rogers said, we didn't have all these

allergies either. All this helicopter parenting. Kids are too sheltered these days. Protected from everything so they can't handle anything.

I think Jean didn't want to look weak in front of Mr. Rogers. He grabbed my milk carton to look at it for himself. And I guess a little spilled on him or something because it wasn't long before he started turning red and wheezing and everything.

It's a good thing Mr. Rogers was subbing that day, because Mrs. Neumann probably would have freaked out. She's the nervous type, but Mr. Rogers has all that war training.

Mr. Rogers acted all calm like it was no big deal. He asked Jean if he had an EpiPen and where it was. It was in his desk, so Mr. Rogers grabbed it in no time and gave him the shot. Then he pointed at someone and said, you, go down the hall and have the secretary call 911. Then he pointed at me and said, you, go in the top pocket of my backpack by the right side of my desk. There's an EpiPen in there. Bring it to me.

In pretty much no time, the ambulance had come to take Jean to the hospital.

Mr. Rogers said it was just a precaution.

Jean loves Mr. Rogers. Every time he subs, Jean spends all recess talking to him, and Mr. Rogers doesn't seem to mind.

But today at morning recess, Mr. Rogers just stands at the corner of the soccer field with his hands in his pockets. He swings his foot back and forth like he's kicking apart an ant hill or something, but he does it the whole time. He never looks up at the kids to make sure we're not fighting or anything.

Mr. Rogers looks pretty lonely without Jean there. But before

recess is over, the principal comes out and says something to him. Mr. Rogers doesn't say anything back. He just goes inside early and the principal follows after him.

I asked Jean once why he wanted to waste all his recess time talking to the teacher about boring stuff like history.

He said we had to study history because those who don't study history will be doomed to repeat it.

Sounds like the opposite would make more sense. If you don't know about it, it would be pretty random to repeat it, which makes repeating it seem pretty unlikely.

I told him so, and he said we should ask Mr. Rogers what he thought.

I told Jean I'd just take his word for it.

But I guess Mr. Rogers is pretty lousy at the whole not repeating history thing. What I mean by that is, Mr. Rogers isn't in the classroom when we get back inside from recess. While we're all just waiting around, I hear Paisley Schmitt say they fired him because he was talking about bleeding eyeballs and coughed up stomachs during history class yesterday.

That makes sense coming from her.

I say that because the first time Mr. Rogers subbed for us, he told us not to ask if he killed anyone unless we wanted him to kill us. Then the principal made him apologize to the whole class after Paisley Schmidt narked on him to her mom.

And it's doubly believable because Mrs. Neumann shows back up, even though she still looks sick and sounds like she's going

to cough up her stomach.

I don't think Mr. Rogers is as great as Jean does, but I think he's okay. He says bad words sometimes when he's telling stories, and you don't often get to hear a teacher say swear words. It's easy to distract him and his stories are pretty good. Better than Mrs. Neumann's anyway.

But that's kind of just how he is. He'll talk to you like you're on the same level.

Like when he started his apology speech after Paisley Schmitt narked on him. He said, apparently, you're not supposed to talk about killing with middle schoolers. You could tell he thought the whole thing was stupid by the way he said apparently.

Me and Jean had a good laugh at that too.

Passive Aggressive: Understanding the Tenor of New War Literature

The suicide bomber came from the wrong direction. He drove a maroon Toyota Corolla into the middle of a group of Afghan police and militia – just an hour into a massive operation to help defeat the Taliban – and brought everything to a screaming stop. His car was packed with screws, nuts, nails, pots, ball bearings, and explosives, and when the shrapnel and

overpressure shot into the crowd, it wounded five of my soldiers. It also killed fifteen Afghans (seven civilians, six police, two militia), and seriously damaged two vehicles.

My boss called me. I was told that if the police pulled out from our location, the mission was a scratch: we couldn't go forward alone. The policemen wailed, wept, and collected the pieces of their dead countrymen. I watched as they loaded the dead into pickup trucks and left, all but four of them – leaving us with a token force for our mission. I thought, *If we stop now, their lives, this all will have been for nothing – worse than nothing. We need more than ever to impose our will on these bastards.* I told my boss that the Afghans were still with us, totally committed to the operation. I lied, bald-faced – without Afghan support, we should've stopped, called it all off. I insisted that we continue forward. I made that choice. More people got hurt, later. I made that choice, too.

If my experience were rendered in the style of most existing war literature, this engagement should've felt completely useless, a total waste. Writers with combat experience from World War II or Vietnam would likely characterize such an event as fruitless, hollow, or even criminal. Instead, when I was there on the ground, it felt like the most important thing in the world – and neither time nor perspective have changed my mind.

How do civilians take in the stories of war? War itself has evolved: information-sharing technology has helped turn Napoleonic squares of uniformed citizens into essentially fluid conflicts between professional soldiers and hidden insurgents. Civilians get glimpses of it through isolated YouTube videos of drone strikes or firefights, or Hollywood films of SEAL teams and Rangers riding helicopters into raid compounds. But the actual, real-time war experienced by soldiers on the ground doesn't have such a neat beginning and end: war is the omnipresent threat of chaos from any

direction. Contemporary war – at least the one I saw – is a place in which nobody is safe, anywhere, ever.

But contemporary war literature has not kept up with contemporary war. We need to develop a literature, one that escapes the limits of both glorified war narratives and cynical condemnations for how war crushes the individual soldier. Neither extreme on this good vs. bad trajectory is true to war today. We must create something new.

To be fair, things used to be different. They really did. Before the industrial revolution, war was smaller, more personal, and comprehensible. Even while nations were fielding armies of greater sizes – tens to hundreds of thousands of people – the means of procurement were villages, hamlets, and towns. During the American Revolution, for example, towns sent small groups of men armed with rifles to ambush British formations, and later to fight in European-style units. Even given the large numbers, however, most soldiers were fighting alongside people they'd grown up with. Communities grieved their losses together, and war was a social as well as personal calamity – the consequences of war were inescapable.

The industrial revolution made every aspect of human society narrower, more specialized, and distant. The Civil War was a transition point, and it catalyzed the growth of increasingly realistic literature, a marked departure from ideal, Romantic representations of war. Ambrose Bierce's story "[An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge](#)" is an example of this progression. In the spotlight is Peyton Farquhar, who is about to be hung from the Owl Creek Bridge because of his Confederate sympathies; his treasonous support of the Southern army is real, but the act he is being executed for was a set-up by a Union scout. Bierce's characters feel like real people, equally trapped by their institutional or cultural prejudices and the choices they've made.

World War I prompted the dawn of the modern literary modernist

movement, which obliterated traditional forms of tradition and narrative. Nearly every memoir or fictional account from the modernists emphasized horror, disassociation, and individual impotence in the face of war on an industrial scale. As poet and soldier Wilfred Owen wrote about a collection of his poems: "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War." Owen was later killed in battle, a week before World War I ended. Ernest Hemingway, meanwhile, drew from his experience as a wartime ambulance driver when writing *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel emphasizes the ambivalence of soldiers and the depersonalized destruction of war through his short staccato sentences and bleakly simple story. There is no room for flourish here.

Not long later, World War II veterans like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller wrote literature that confirmed and elaborated on those negative themes, describing mechanized warfare as fundamentally dehumanizing, while emphasizing the absurdity of heroism. In [Catch-22](#), rational choice is circular, leading directly to combat, and death. Orr and Yossarian, two of the main characters in *Catch-22*, are Army officers who attempt everything they can to get out of flying additional bombing missions in WWII. The war is almost over, and the missions seem guaranteed only lead to more chances to be shot down by the Germans or Italians. Awards and positive recognition mean nothing to either of them. From the novel:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't

have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

Revelations about passivity and absurdity in modern war literature paralleled a recognition that similar situations exist in corporate structures; it has been fashionable to describe life within an institution using the language of sarcasm and irony ever since, from Ken Kesey's [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*](#) to David Foster Wallace's [*Infinite Jest*](#).

But for all that, I didn't see much passivity in Afghanistan.

Very quietly, technological advances (internet connectivity and smart phone technology) in and outside battle have returned soldiering and warfare to their personal, pre-industrial state. Each decision of every soldier can have strategic consequences for good or for ill. Instead of individuals overwhelmed by their inability to make meaningful choices, I saw an incredible, almost debilitating amount of agency and responsibility on an hourly basis, always. We risked getting torn apart by dull or sharp metal every time we left our bases, chucked high by overpressure. We risked the same when we were on our bases – as revealed by the Air Force officer killed by a rocket while jogging inside the perimeter of our base (known as FOB Kunduz).

After a suicide bomber destroyed so much in the middle of our mission, I'd decided to go forward, and we did. The bombing emboldened the Taliban, so as we walked forward under the blistering summer heat, we were moving toward a savage battle across a half-mile front. Armored vehicles, led by engineers, rumbled forward single file down the broad dirt road. The lead vehicle struck an IED, totaling it. The Taliban mortared one of my platoons and attempted to flank our position from the east, then west, blanketing us with bullets. Brass casings from my machine gunner rained down onto my helmet, a soft, hollow rain of clinking as I fed reports higher, and

coordinated the defense. Two “Apache” helicopters arrived. The Taliban shot another two U.S. soldiers, and more Afghan police and militia. We pried two compounds away from the Taliban, but it was night-time before, finally, they stopped fighting.

My boss wanted to know if it was worth staying there, after all. What did we hope to accomplish when most of our Afghan allies were mourning?

We needed to stay, I told him. We’d held our own, and could move over to the attack in the morning. I requested more assets, and more time. I doubled down, hoping, but not knowing, that if we could trade punches long enough with the Taliban, we’d kill or exhaust enough of them to make them quit.

But we could fail. This notion terrified and appalled me. It also reveals that my choice was a real one: it had consequences. Acting – taking ownership for a decision, not backing away from the moment – risks humiliation and high-stakes defeat. Pointing our guns and firing, running forward into the woodline, fighting our way into buildings: we could just as easily have accomplished nothing, or worse.

My experiences and those of, say, Tim O’Brien – who wrote [*The Things They Carried*](#), one of the most important accounts of the Vietnam War – were different. For a long time after returning home, I did not know exactly what those differences were. I couldn’t enumerate them. But when I sat down to try my own hand at contemporary literature – [*Afghan Post*](#), a memoir – they began to crystallize before me.

By writing and reflecting on my experiences I discovered that the challenge in processing my experiences in Afghanistan was not due to a feeling of vulnerability or impotence, but to a stifling sense of horror that a thing I said or did might have terrible consequences. Rather than confirming the lessons I’d gleaned from Vonnegut or Heller or O’Brien – that I’d been

trapped in a situation completely beyond my control, the proverbial “Catch-22” – my time in Afghanistan convinced me of the opposite. I was never forced or compelled to move forward into battle, and I never demanded that my soldiers move forward, either. The words “I order you” or “I command you” never crossed my lips, literally or implicitly. There were choices to act, every step of the way.

This is not to suggest that Heller and O’Brien and Vonnegut are now irrelevant. Not as humanists, or satirists, or historians. But they are cataloguing a thing, a state of affairs that has no meaning for soldiers or officers like me, veterans who saw what I did. We are soldiers who chose to take a picture of dead Taliban, or not. Soldiers who chose to give their food or water out to impoverished villagers—in violation of orders, but gaining unexpected goodwill. Other soldiers may have made different choices. Still others may have been posted in cities or forts away from the borders or restive Pashtun areas – places that saw little fighting, where all they could do was observe action on a television screen.

For everyone back home, to whom this war must have been a received event on YouTube or at the movies, passivity really is the way to describe their experience of the war. Michael Lokesson, another veteran of current wars, described the prevailing argument best in an [article](#) he wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

As war became more mechanized and regimented, and fought on a far larger scale, incorporating new technological implements of death – rifles and cannons, planes and armor, drones and improvised explosive devices – the agency of the individual soldier, however lofty in rank, has diminished.

I wasn’t with Lokesson in Iraq, and cannot claim to know his experience or that of his comrades. But while his logic may hold true up to Vietnam and in Iraq, it didn’t hold true for Afghanistan, at the very least. Quite the opposite – the

agency of the individual soldier has increased.

If there was a bottom to the “agency” parabola, it was likely during WWII, where entire armies and fleets were destroyed without any effect on the outcome of the war. The Japanese sank most of our fleet in the Pacific, and destroyed some hundreds of thousands of British, Americans, and Chinese. They endured the first and last atomic bombings. The German Wehrmacht gobbled up five Russian armies groups whole – some four million soldiers killed or captured over five months of significant fighting – the consequence of which was that four years later, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. It is utterly plausible, among the firebombing of cities, dawn of the atomic age, and mechanized warfare, to imagine, as a soldier, that staying awake on guard wasn’t going to make much of a difference on any collective individual or level.

Meanwhile, two military police soldiers in Abu Ghraib took pictures of themselves psychologically and physically torturing prisoners, and the world paid attention. Edward Snowden absconded with 250,000 sensitive documents from the NSA, and it had severe repercussions for international relations, repercussions that echo into the present, as former allies and democratic sympathizers such as India and Brazil side with a notorious tyrant (Putin) rather than America. And I and those like me fought through the dust and wet, humid heat, through thin air in the unforgiving mountains, under our own power, by our own choosing.

After that mission in Kunduz Province in early August, I wrote a letter to one of my best friends. Describing the circumstances surrounding the battle, I wrote that:

We really could’ve turned the mission into a success if we’d been postured to follow it up, but the way the assets were being committed was too piecemeal, there wasn’t any organization or long-term plan. This was my fault. We’d planned to be on the offense for three days, and I made no

contingency plans for follow-on operations; we should've planned for more.

The letter is a simple accounting of action, taken by individuals; it is not a nihilistic account wherein the characters are all helpless, subjective or mere tools of an uncaring fate. As it turned out, we were rewarded for the choices we made. Although we had to turn back without accomplishing our objective within the Taliban-held areas, the Afghan police and army came back with a renewed fervor after their mourning was complete, and the story of our desire to fight on their behalf and fight along with them struck a chord with the population. When we returned to our fort after the last day of fighting, the roads of Imam Sahib city were lined with Afghans waving at us – families, children, little girls. Our efforts produced measurable, real effects, and laid a solid foundation that we drew on to go back, and back again, and again, until the Taliban were driven out.

Paul Fussell, an infantryman from WWII and a fine author, wrote a superlative essay for *Harper's Magazine* in 1982 titled "[My War: How I got irony in the infantry.](#)" In it, among a great many other example of the roots of his irony (and that of an entire generation), he describes how the worst battle of his life went forgotten because of its relative unimportance in the overall scheme of WWII:

That day in mid-March that ended me was the worst of all for F Company. We knew it was going to be bad when it began at dawn, just like an episode from the First World War, with an hour-long artillery preparation and a smokescreen for us to attack through. What got us going and carried us through was the conviction that, sufferers as we might, we were at least "making history." But we didn't even do that. Liddell-Hart's 766-page History of the Second World War never heard of us. It mentions neither March 15 nor the 103rd Infantry Division. The only satisfaction history has offered is the evidence that we caused Josef Goebbels some extra anxiety.

In Khanabad, in Imam Sahib, every time we drove down the new, black paved roads, or along the dusty, cratered dirt trails, or walked into the marketplace, we had an immediate and noticeable effect – we were the war. And yet, current war literature like [The Yellow Birds](#) by Kevin Powers, asserts the opposite: “The war tried to kill us in the spring.” This is a stance that lags behind the truth: The war was us, we chose and made it. And so far as I remember, we weren’t trying to kill ourselves.

If one’s primary interaction with Iraq or Afghanistan has been watching a [ninety-second clip](#) on the nightly news of a tiny fort being overrun in some nameless valley, or a firefight, or one of the ubiquitous recordings of sleek, black-metal American air power sniffing out and destroying nighttime Taliban infiltrators in [black-and-white](#), I understand how one might conclude that war is sporadic or even forgettable. Maybe for people who were driving up and down the same road in Bradley light tanks, or Abrams, some of them getting blown up, some surviving arbitrarily – maybe for them the war was as absurd and unknowable as it was for Yossarian in a B-24 bomber flying over the skies of Bologna in WWII.

But I did not see absurdity where I was in Afghanistan – at least, not WWII-Albert-Camus-grade absurdity. I saw people making choices, for good and for ill. In the mountains and valleys, the places where the 173rd, 101st, 82nd, 3rd, 4th, and 10th patrolled, we didn’t wage war with a nuanced appreciation for the infinite variables that affected every bullet fired on both sides. When we patrolled – scrambling over sun-baked walls, our poorly-designed, sweat-soaked uniforms ripping under the stress, down rocky, uncertain draws, clambering and dragging ourselves and each other up hills, behind the next piece of cover – it was conscious, earnest. The bullets zipping and *ker-twanging* around us were the least ironic of all. They had one purpose: to instruct each of us how fragile and sporadic a thing we were.

No. What I saw while firing my rifle from the trenches that the mujahedeen or Soviets dug to fight one another years ago was a series of intensely personal battles on a tribal level, for local security. The soldiers, sergeants, and officers I worked with helped stitch together the battles we fought in rural thirty-compound villages (with a solitary stream running through the middle for irrigation) into something bigger: security at a sub-regional level. When you're walking forward, putting one sore, boot-clad foot in front of the next, and you know that the boom of a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade and chatter of Taliban machine-guns is minutes or seconds away, you don't feel (*I didn't feel*) passive. I felt that a thing was about to happen, a thing for which I was partly or wholly responsible.

More often than not, at the end of the day I felt content with what happened. After all, I couldn't account for Kabul, or Washington D.C., or Islamabad – those places with people I'd never see. All I saw was my own little slice of the broader struggle to give Afghans a chance at less corruption, a freer society, and a better justice system. By the time I left Afghanistan for good, the Taliban were gone, and I'd seen two women – *two* – wearing blue jeans in the cities under my unit's jurisdiction, Imam Sahib and Khanabad. That seemed like progress.

War literature as it stands today describes a kind of war that is foreign to me. According to Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and their contemporaries, war (*life*) is unknowable, mediated, somehow beyond comprehension (Wolff said that war made him stupider). Would that this were the case today! The fact that Iraq and Afghanistan have been more observed than lived by many citizens helps give the notion of passivity traction. I understand its logical roots, but its day as an organizing principle for war has passed. In fact, it's even worth considering whether the idea of soldier passivity during warfare always existed for its audience at home as a way to

defend humans from facing their awful, bestial capability during legal, community-sanctioned violence; a way of denying the things that one permits one's sons and fathers (and now daughters and mothers) to experience. After all, even the legendary warriors of Homer were media constructs – the battle between Hector and Achilles is moderated entirely by the goddess Athena, who selects Achilles as victor.

In the end, I can only write the war I know: to try to characterize human behavior in our own time. I'm indebted to those thinkers who came before, but am free from the constraints of their experiences and successes. The great writers of the past have done their part, but the war literature that will speak truly to this age will be as different from *The Things They Carried* as that great Vietnam story was from [Slaughterhouse-Five](#). There are writers out there right now working on taking contemporary war narratives to the next level – among them are Brian Castner, Phil Klay, Brian Van Reet, Matt Gallagher, Kristen Rouse, and Mike Carson. This emerging generation of writers and war veterans (male and female) act, speak, and write – just as they patrolled, built, and suffered – in full possession of their faculties. Not victims of government or circumstance or passion, but, rather, agents who are ultimately responsible to themselves, and for their actions.

This is the legacy of the first all-volunteer American army to head overseas: whatever one's feelings on the invasions, the war didn't happen to us. We owned it, start to finish. It was ours – it *is* ours.



The Espionage Act and the Cult of Secrecy

The most important compromise that allowed for the passage of the U.S. Constitution was that there be included a series of amendments called the Bill of Rights, which guaranteed certain freedoms to the individual, a counterpoint to the Articles of the Constitution itself which merely delineated the powers of the branches of government. The most important and revolutionary of the amendments was the first, which simultaneously protected from government censure the individual free exercise of religion, freedom of speech and of the press, and freedom to peaceably assemble and petition. These freedoms are the bedrock of civil liberties and have become universally accepted as the preeminent hallmarks of a free society. In practice, however, there have always been difficulties interpreting the limits of these so-called individual freedoms in relation to the authority of the State. This is especially true in times of war, in which it has often been supposed that nothing, not even freedom of speech or of the press, can stand in the way of State security, secrecy, and success in the war effort. Though these individual freedoms have been enshrined into the U.S. Constitution as the foremost rights of the citizenry, there have been many setbacks and the long battle to protect these very freedoms continues even into the present day.

For example, only seven years after the ratification of the First Amendment, John Adams signed into law the Sedition Act of 1798 in which it was made illegal to write or say anything "false, scandalous, or malicious" against the government. The legal basis for this was that, while freedom of speech was allowed, it did not mean freedom from prosecution for seditious or "dangerous" speech after the fact. This would seem to seriously undermine the notion of free speech itself.

Moving forward in history we come to another similar piece of legislation that is still enforced and impacts us directly today, and which will be the focus of the rest of this essay: the Espionage Act of 1917.

Woodrow Wilson, after campaigning in 1916 on the fact that he had “kept us out of war”, was elected to a second term as president and immediately brought America into World War One in 1917. Three months later, Wilson signed into law the Espionage Act, in which it was punishable by death or 30 years in prison to convey information that would interfere with the success of the military or promote the success of its enemies. This included the intent to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, or even to obstruct the recruitment of conscripts into the military. It was also intended to silence all dissent against the war, to monitor and punish any pro-German or anti-British sympathies, and to block the distribution of printed materials through the Post Office (this was a time in which the Post Offices were one of the most extensive arms of the federal government throughout the states and the Postmaster General was actually an influential and powerful position—made more powerful by being able to block or intercept anything sent through the mail). The Espionage Act has been amended many times since 1917, and is arguably stronger than ever in our own time. In 1933 a provision was added to prohibit the disclosure of anything sent in code; in 1961 a provision was removed that had restricted the law’s jurisdiction to U.S. territory or to American citizens; at least two times it was amended to increase the penalties it imposed; in 1950, during the McCarthy era and the growing militarization of the Cold War, the McCarran Internal Security Act changed the scope of possible crimes from the “intent” to harm or aid to “mere retention” of information. Not only open and free speech, but even secret information are now under the control of the Espionage Act.

Government authorities wasted no time after the law's passage to begin enforcement. A disproportionate number of its victims were Socialists and members of unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World, which were strongly against American intervention in the war. Eugene V. Debs, the four-time Socialist candidate for President, was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison for making a speech that "obstructed recruiting". Even a film called *The Spirit of '76* was seized and its producer imprisoned and fined; apparently the film portrayed too much British cruelty during the American Revolution which could undermine support for the current close American ally in the war effort. After the war, the law was invoked in order to arrest and deport several hundred foreign socialists and anarchists, allegedly due the bombing of Attorney General's house by an anarchist agent. If you are wondering how this broad limitation of free speech held up at the Supreme Court, I will direct you to the 1919 case of *Schenck v. United States* in which the Court decided that the law was justified if such speech constituted a "clear and present danger" to the government, the same as if a man shouted "Fire" in a crowded theatre according to the famous Justice Oliver Holmes. Schenck had denounced the war conscription law as "involuntary servitude" and his arrest as an abridgment of freedom of speech and of the press. Rather than Justice Holmes' "fire", could we consider Schenck's act more like warning people of a fire in the theatre before entering? Is not war itself a "clear and present danger", much more dangerous than a mere argument against it? What is the fine line in which citizens are allowed to object to war without creating a danger to the government?

During the Cold War, the McCarren Act and the red-baiting of Senator McCarthy breathed new life into the Espionage Act. While the Act was originally intended to apply only during wartime, it has been continuously in force since 1950 – the long years of the Cold War, the permanent militarization of American policy and economy, and even the recent "War on

Terror” show how far such justifications can be stretched to protect the government from its own citizens (not vice versa, which is the ideal). Public speech and print have been superseded by the possession of secret information as the main focus of the law. In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo were charged under the Espionage Act of publishing classified documents that came to be known as the Pentagon Papers. They consisted 7000 pages of top secret records of the Department of Defense’s involvement in the Vietnam from the 1940s-70s, leaked by Ellsberg and Russo to the New York Times because of their indignation about the crimes of the United States against the people of Vietnam. The Nixon administration attempted to block the publication but it was ruled freedom of speech by the Supreme Court; the administration then indicted the leakers under the Espionage Act. They would have almost certainly been convicted and served long sentences but were instead released because of a legal technicality – the Watergate scandal that caused Nixon’s downfall came about when Nixon’s henchmen tried to steal compromising information about Ellsberg from his psychiatrist’s office. The Pentagon Papers case obviously had major historical ramifications, but also made it clear that the government considered the distribution of secret information to the press for the purpose of exposing secrets of the same government to be espionage. We must ask ourselves which is the worse crime: sanctioning injustice, oppression, and murder around the world, or the disclosure of these secret indiscretions to the public?

The final section of this essay concerns the recent cases of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, both of which are related to the Pentagon Papers case. Manning has been sentenced to 35 years in prison for violating the Espionage Act by stealing government intelligence and diplomatic cables that revealed governmental corruption and giving them to WikiLeaks to be published. Edward Snowden has been charged with violating the Espionage Act for stealing and publishing secret government information that revealed the extent of the widespread secret

surveillance powers of the National Security Agency. Just as the Pentagon Papers, the crimes of Manning and Snowden only involved the transmission of information to the public that had been classified by the government as secret.

There are a few issues at play that we can discuss after this brief historical synopsis of the Espionage Act. You will have noticed the prevalence of the word "secret" in the examples I mentioned. It seems that the pervasive cloud of government secrecy is an excuse for any number of illegal or immoral acts to be committed. The reason the Pentagon Papers, the Manning leaks, and the Snowden leaks are such captivating events is not only that they reveal secrets protected by the state, but that the revealed contents of these state secrets are so shocking to the public. The government naturally wants the focus to be on the importance of maintaining secrecy and the punishment for violation of the Espionage Act, but polls show that the public is much more concerned with the harmful content of the secrets than the comparatively harmless crime of revealing them (harmless except to the reputation of the government). This is because the government is intended to be "of the people, by the people, and for the people", and many people still hold this democratic ideal close to heart. When it is revealed how much the government hides from its citizens, we have the right to be shocked, outraged, and demand accountability; the people to be held accountable are not the ones whose conscience and sense of moral outrage drove them to provide us with the secrets, however, and they should probably be rewarded rather than punished.

Another aspect is the fine line between Freedom of Speech and state security. The Espionage Act and the cases above show exactly where the line stands between what is considered the right to free speech and what is considered the government's prerogative to limit any expression that supposedly endangers state security. In my opinion, there is a clear solution to this problem, which is the absolute protection of Freedom of

Speech and the other freedoms of the First Amendment. Whenever state security is invoked in order to limit fundamental rights, it is a slippery slope that takes us further away from the idea of the open democratic society towards something on the opposite end of the spectrum that could be called either tyranny, fascism, or totalitarianism. If we imagine George Orwell's *1984* today, there would surely be a Ministry of Freedom which would limit Freedom of Speech to active daily repetition of the mantra: "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength."

Additionally, we should remember that a feature of the Espionage Act, however we feel about it, was that it was only meant to be enforceable and enforced during "wartime". This is a crucial point if we consider that the traditional idea of wartime changed after World War II to be replaced with the idea of the continuous "Cold War", or the state of being permanently on war footing against global enemies. The militarization of the American economy was central to its growth and success in the post-World War II years, and was important for protecting American corporate profits around the world. This did not change after the end of the Cold War; the Clinton Administration determined that the U.S. military must be able to fight two regional conflicts simultaneously, the Bush and Obama years have seen the invention and proliferation of the ill-conceived concept of the War on Terror. There are also at least 800 American bases and military installations in at least 156 countries around the world ([link](#)). If this still does not qualify as a permanent state of war, it is surely a state of hyper-militarization against enemies more imagined than real. It must be mentioned that the type of state and military secrets revealed by the aforementioned cases are not tactical, operational, or strategic in nature – I am not advocating something akin to reporting on troop movements to the Germans during World War II; rather, these are systemic and institutional secrets that hide crimes and corruption of government agencies and their corporate partners. In

comparison, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and executed under the Espionage Act for purportedly providing the Soviet Union with plans for nuclear weapons. However dubious the evidence against them, the nature of the crime is different from the argument I am attempting to make; giving detailed military information or weapons to hostile nations or groups is something else entirely from revealing moral injustices and atrocities of a government to its own people in the name of transparency and justice.

Let us now consider the Patriot Act and the system of state surveillance. In the weeks after 9/11, the Bush Administration and Congress created and easily passed a new law with the Orwellian name of the Patriot Act, which allows for a very broad interpretation of government access to any information that it claims could be used to maintain security (The Obama administration and a new Congress easily renewed the law in 2011). The last decade and a half has seen a huge expansion of the state security apparatus in general, headlined by agencies such as the new Department of Homeland Security, the infamous CIA, and the venerable National Security Agency (there are at least 16 separate government intelligence agencies and an untold number of private intelligence contractors, such as Stratfor, whose ignoble mission of trading secret information to governments and corporations was revealed in another recent leak by the hacker Jeremy Hammond). It was Ben Franklin who said that "they who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." Never has this aphorism been so apt. The most recent revelations of the Snowden case show us just how pervasive and perverse the NSA has become (or maybe it was always this way, but with less amenable technology and/or publicity). What we are dealing with is the interception, collection, and monitoring of personal email, internet searches, phone conversations, and more, all over the world and on American citizens in their own houses. The NSA, we have learned, has virtually unchecked power and resources with no limitations or

oversight. It is unclear who is being made more secure from whom.

In conclusion, we must remember that the things in this article are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg in the larger issue of Free Speech versus state secrecy and security. Indeed, the First Amendment has needed protection from government infringement since before the ink was even dry on the Bill of Rights. It will continue to be so in the future. A democracy (or what passes for one) will always depend on the active involvement of citizens to defend their own rights against the class of the Power Elite who would happily curtail those rights for their personal and financial gain. A government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" will be so in fact, as well as in name, only as long as its citizens force their elected leaders to work for them. A corollary to this is that citizens can only be involved in decision-making and accountability if they are in possession of relevant information on what exactly their government has been doing in their name (and with their tax money). This is why we should honor transparency rather than secrecy, and give courageous whistleblowers medals rather than prison sentences. We should not acquiesce in the expansion of the surveillance state and the cult of secrecy, giving up freedoms in the name of security. Such a systemic evil can lead only to an Orwellian future which must be avoided at any cost.