

New Poetry by Matthew Hummer: “Amortization”

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New Poetry by Almyr Bump: “Plowing Water”

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New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”

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

New Fiction by Adrian Bonenberger: “King Tide”

We'd been expecting the fascists for a few days but they'd gotten hung up on Newark. Usually they moved fast. Camden had gone quiet just a week after the government had evacuated from

Washington, D.C. to some secret location. Then, abruptly, the fascists flowed south, a growing mob of pickup trucks and tractor trailers bristling with guns, fuel, flags, and ammunition: to Richmond, although Baltimore was closer; finally hastening back northward after wrecking that old city, the capital of The Confederacy. Each of those cities had fallen in weeks, carved into pieces and starved, capitulating before the threat of fire and murder that appeared to have come anyway, in spite of surrender. Here and there the cities of the South and Midwest still stood, but were cut off – separate from each other, separate from us, isolated by long stretches of forest and strip malls patrolled by men in multicam holding AR-15s and shotguns, lines of utility vehicles across tracts of the largely deracinated terrain.

The suburbs across the river in New Jersey were filling up with refugees and transients, huddled between the homes of New Yorkers who could afford to live outside the city. Hedge fund managers, software engineers, salesmen, bankers, cops, lawyers, university faculty handed out blankets and food at first. Then later they became stingy, alert to any word of crime. These people were of the city but not in it – their loyalty, dubious. The thousands and later hundreds of thousands fleeing the fascists were bound for sadness and tragedy, driven from homes that would likely never be seen again. Once the center began to crumble, none but the bravest returned to their previous lives, and the bravest were not those running headlong from the hatchet and gunfire.

Many of us still half-believed the whole thing was a joke taken too far, a mass hallucination or something illegal rather than outside the law, a matter for police or maybe the FBI. Even after D.C. and Richmond and Camden we felt that it would be stopped somewhere, by others. Certainly not by us. Psychologically we were in the denial stage of grief, preparing, though far too slowly for what was coming. In that moment they had laid siege to Newark. While we'd been waiting

for the fascists to mount their inevitable northern push, the push had happened; like a bullet, or a hypersonic missile, they'd moved too fast for us to track.

This sent us into a frenzy of preparation. The George Washington Bridge came down, and the Tappen Zee. All week, tens of thousands of anxious eyes stared round the clock at the western approaches to New York. But once news from Newark slowed, it was almost a week before we saw the first movement from our perch in Manhattan, across the Muhheakunnuk River.

I'd dropped out of my fifth year at Muhlenberg college to join the 1st People's Revolutionary Corps. Academics came slowly to me so college was taking more time than it should have. My dad didn't believe much in getting a bachelor's degree. He'd done fine for himself in construction without one. But it was important to my mom that I graduate from college. That's how I ended up at Muhlenberg instead of the Army or Marines like my dad wanted. As far as I knew, my folks supported the fascists. I hadn't heard from them in months.

Now I was in a reserve detachment of scouts stationed at an observation post (or OP) in what used to be called Washington Heights. We'd renamed it Canarsee Hill. The OP overlooked the Muhheakunnuk. Mostly we were watching to the northwest but just before the weekend, Smith, another scout, who had come down from Yonkers, spotted men moving on the bluffs opposite us due west. Smith called Vargas over to the telescope to confirm.

Vargas was our leader, though our unit's military hierarchy was still inchoate. We didn't have ranks, we were all volunteers and organized in a broadly egalitarian way. He was our leader because he'd been (or claimed to have been) an Army Scout during the 1990s, and had definitely been in the fighting that first broke out south of here. He seemed to know his business and we respected him for his quiet competence and willingness to teach us basic fieldcraft. His crypto-

reactionary loyalties and remarks we overlooked with trepidation.

"That's them all right," he said, his flat, battered mug pressed squinting and grimacing against the telescope. Vargas's life hadn't been easy since leaving the military, and in addition to a scar running across his face from eye to cheek, his nose had been mashed in a fight and never fixed. He motioned to me. "Take a look kid. See how they move? That's discipline. They're out of range but they're spaced out, two by two. Way you need to remember to do things. Understand?"

In the round, magnified slice of world across the river, there they were: camouflaged shapes hunched over, moving tactically in pairs. One would stop while another moved, rifles up and at the high ready, in both pairs, presenting an appearance of constant motion and menace, rippling like a snake.

"Here, you've had enough," Vargas said, taking back his position. "Ok: total 8 troops, that's a squad... one tactical vehicle. Looks like an M-ATV. Must be another back there somewhere, or a technical. Smith, you report that up to HQ yet?"

Smith gestured at the radio. "It's offline. I think the batteries are dead."

"Christ," Vargas mumbled. "Well call them with your phone. Look this is important. Tonight get new batteries from the command post."

"I'll get the batteries," I said, wanting to impress Vargas. Also my girlfriend, Tandy, lived down near 180th. It wasn't far off the way to her place, an excuse to drop in and get some home cooking.

"You think we'll see some action?" Smith said.

"Action, action, all you want is action," Vargas said. "If

you'd seen what I did in DC, you wouldn't be in such a hurry to get your gun on. But yeah, if there's one thing the fascists mean, it's action. Sooner or later."

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orps at that point was mustered mostly from New England and the suburbs of NYC itself. It hadn't seen fighting in the winter and spring since the contested election. Smith and most of the others (myself included) hadn't been there in D.C. when the fascists had made it almost to the White House and a motley, improvised group of citizens, soldiers, and loyal law enforcement had gone street to street pushing them back so the government could escape. Vargas was there – he'd been someone's bodyguard. Who – a Senator – a woman from New York? The Midwest? What was her name... It doesn't matter any more, though at the time it was an interesting anecdote...

Like everywhere, New England had seen violence when the fascists rose up, but nothing like what happened on the West Coast, the South, or the mid-Atlantic. Up in New England things had been resolved quickly. There weren't enough

fascists to make a go of it outside New Hampshire, and those fascists who did rise up in New Hampshire were brutally repressed after their comrades were defeated in Boston, Springfield, and Hartford. Enough police forces and national guard units had refused to betray their oaths to the Constitution, enough of the democratic revolutionary spirit remained within the breasts of New England men and women, that the reactionaries there had floundered and failed early – spectacularly so, even.

Whether they did so as part of a plan or not, what the fascists of New England accomplished was to tie northern pro-democracy states up with fighting internal enemies instead of helping their neighbors. We didn't know that at the time, but at moments when swift and decisive help might have forestalled great bloodshed, the attention on potential local foes consumed everyone's attention. It wasn't long before a second wave of those enemies would appear at their borders, a howling, hostile army.

But in most other places the fascists had translated their quick offensive into victory more often than not and with surprising scope. Perhaps they sensed their vulnerabilities lay in us being able to organize our superior strength in manpower and industry. They'd been chewing the national and most state governments up since January, keeping the legitimately elected authorities and their forces on their heels, hitting them over and over where they least expected it. In our region Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had time to brace and fortify, so the fascists ran at Camden with full strength – wiped it nearly off the map. In their haste to capture Newark, they'd surrounded nearly 22,000 anti-fascist volunteers there, the entire 3rd People's Revolutionary Corps. Most evenings one could see flashes and hear the fascist artillery thumping in the distance.

Smith and Boucher and a few of the other guys had been excited

to see the fascists arrive. To them it meant taking part in a battle. Boucher, a Marxist from New London, compared them to the Germans outside Moscow. Morale was high, and Vargas didn't do much to pour cold water on it.

A few hours after reporting their scouts up to higher, we'd observed several armored fighting vehicles and a tank maneuvering on the bluffs. The fascists put up a couple drones and tried to fly them across the river, then sent them high into the air when they realized we were outside the drones' range. What struck me more than the size of the group was its cohesion, and its audacity. They moved up to a point and acted. They didn't ask for permission or wait for orders from higher. We had armored fighting vehicles, we had tanks, just like them. We didn't have artillery – only the Army had artillery – but we had drones. Seeing the fascists there, flying their black and white flag with a blue stripe down the middle, made me nervous. They'd reduced the space between them and us to that narrow band of water on which so much depended. A free and diverse New York City, the heart of our revolution, was exposed and vulnerable. How had this happened?

A half hour or hour later, further down the river, the fascists launched a motorboat. Vargas told me to observe its progress through the telescope and report movement to him as it crept across the sun-dappled surface. The boat circled wider and wider, seeing how close it could come to our lines. At the middle of the river at the apex of its approach it abruptly beelined for the city. An old red "MAGA" flag was visible on its stern, flapping in the wind. The boat's three occupants wore tactical vests and helmets; one was scanning our side with a sniper rifle, another was piloting, and the third was talking on a portable radio, probably doing to us what we should've been doing to them.

I appreciated their daring. They presented a confident, professional air, like they were straight out of a movie or video game about the Navy SEALs. They knew exactly what to do.

Slapping across the water at high speed, these fascists, veterans of the bigger battles to the south, were getting down to business, getting it done.

We were far enough upriver from the source that we saw the boat tossed high into the air, tumbling end over end from the explosion before we heard the shot and the boom. No forms emerged from the wreckage, and the boat sank slowly into the river. This was the first time I'd seen our side fire first. I was glad we had.

Shortly after the fascists had turned their attention to Richmond, while New England, New York, and Pennsylvania were wrestling with their own fascist problems, New York City had declared itself a free city. Run by an alliance of Democratic Socialists, progressive Democrats, anarchists, and independents, the historic agreement put an end to strikes and labor walk offs, stabilized a questionable police force, and, in short, unified and anchored what we all hoped would be a fresh start for the city and maybe for America, too. Hopes were high for a nonviolent revolution ushering in the promise of a full, meritocratic democratic polity.

Many people left the city, but many more came, attracted by the promise of a just new world. One of the first things we did was rename things: The Hudson River became The Muhheakunnuk, or "River that flows two ways," in the original Lenape. Madison Avenue became Liberty Avenue. Rockefeller Plaza, Veblen Plaza. Trump Tower became Mohican tower, for the indigenous Mohican peoples. And so forth.

Where we could reduce the damage done by naming places and things for white European settler colonialists who caused real and literal ethnic cleansing and genocide, we remedied as best we could. While the fascists were shooting and murdering, we were getting resolutions passed in bipartisan committees. As

the shitlib pro-government forces were fighting desperate retrogrades, we were setting up a new way of compensating labor on the blockchain: Hours (pronounced "ours") of labor were our new, profession-blind currency. A person worked the hours they did and were rewarded based on that flat rate, digitally, plus a small bonus in consideration for specialty labor or difficult labor nobody wanted to do. My daily wages, for example, were 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ Hours per day: 12 Hours for the 12 hours of work I did for the militia, plus a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Hour bonus for the hazardous nature of my work (though I had, up until that point, done little hazardous duty – that would change soon).

What a sound and simple system; what a fair and just means of compensation. I'd never seen anything like it, and haven't since, though home ownership and other realities of adult life have given me a better appreciation for modern economies than I had in my youth.

The People's Council of New York had compensated those New Yorkers who had stayed in the city with Hours on a prorated basis for the dollars and real estate it confiscated in order to trade with external partners, and signed an alliance with its neighboring states, the state of New York, and the federal government. Everyone was relieved it hadn't come to shooting. Putting nearly 120,000 people under arms, such as myself, made the city by itself one of the largest standing armies on the territory of the former U.S.A. We were all proud of what we'd accomplished in such a short amount of time.

At the end of our shift, I took the spent batteries from our radio and headed down to HQ. The arrival of the fascists had sent everyone into a frenzy of activity and worry. When I poked my head into the command tent, I caught our commander, a woman who had flown C-17s for the Air Force, yelling at our XO for the comms situation. I saw that there weren't any fresh batteries to be had, then made a swift retreat from the scene

so as not to contribute to the man's confusion and embarrassment.

"Where's the RT0," I asked one of the guards who was vaping and lounging outside the entrance.

"Over there," he said, gesturing upslope toward another tent about 50 meters away. I walked over, passing three soldiers setting up some sort of fortified machinegun position.

"Look downhill at the road. Now look at the sandbags. Now look at the barrel of the gun," the first soldier was saying. "Aha! Aha! Now do you see the problem? Move the machinegun around, like so... now you see more problems. Do it again!"

Scenes like this were common. None of us had more than a week's training – it wasn't even formal training, more like pre-basic. While there were more leftist veterans than many had probably thought before the war, in general the stereotype of veterans as moderates or pro-fascist was pretty true. A small group of sympathetic veterans were running round-the-clock training ranges up in Connecticut and Long Island, and NYC's soldiery was permitted to access this as part of our agreement with our neighbors.

At the signals tent, I found the commander's radio operator fiddling with two banks of battery rechargers. "You need to get these up to your position ASAP, the CO's on the warpath about bad comms and using smartphones," he said.

"I'll be back in six hours," I said, and left the heavy green blocks on the black recharger alongside several others, while the recharge status blinked red.

Next I headed north to Tandy's building, a fin de siècle mansion that had been converted to high-ceilinged apartments, and was now housing for students and workers. It was a 10 minute bike ride from our positions, or a 25 minute jog, easily accomplished if the sirens signaled an attack.

I checked my Hours on my phone which promptly updated on the hour with my day's work, plus the bonus for military service. Then I stopped at a bodega for provisions. One of the best-managed parts of the city was its city-wide revolutionary food cooperative. Food came in from upstate and Connecticut, and was rationed. There was enough of it on any given day, but hoarding was strictly forbidden so what was available was whatever happened to be on hand, often local produce.

The proprietor of this bodega was an Iraqi man who'd immigrated to the U.S. after the war there, Ahmed. Together with his family he supervised the bodega's co-op labor, and had a keen eye for organizing. He greeted me when he saw me walk in, much as he greeted everyone in uniform.

"My friend, thank you for protecting us! You must be hungry: what would you like? Eggs, corn from Poughkeepsie, sausage? Please, take what you need, eat, stay strong and healthy! And say hello to your beautiful girlfriend! You're a lucky man!"

Ahmed may or may not have known me, but he certainly *seemed* to know me, and that was appreciated in a strange city. I picked up a couple sausages, a quart of milk, and a half dozen eggs. There wasn't any cheese, so I had to hope Tandy or one of what she called her "mates" had some at their place. Then, in the back, I procured a glass bottle of Long Island red wine.

"Five and one half Hours," Ahmed said. "Did you hear our forces repelled a fascist invasion today? Maybe you were part of that?"

He was talking about the boat. "We spotted them," I said. "It wasn't anything serious."

"Please, it wasn't serious, you sound like me when I was in the Iraqi Army. I helped liberate Mosul from ISIS, you know. It's never serious. Until you're in the hospital!" He raised his shirt, and pointed at several scars near his abdomen. "Here, take some chewing gum, free. It helped me stay awake

during long nights. When you don't have your girlfriend around," he said, winking conspiratorially.

Tandy was still at class when I arrived. James, a PhD candidate in Political Science at Columbia greeted me at the door and when he saw what I was carrying he invited me in, shepherding me to the kitchen where Vince, a militiaman from Danbury, Connecticut, gladly took my contribution to the dinner. "You're always welcome here," Vince said, "when you have food and wine!

This was one practical way in which being a militia volunteer translated into good social standing, but I didn't lord it over people, just showed up with what I had and got whatever amounted to a single portion in return.

This particular collective was mostly students, so my portion was usually appreciated, in spite of my taking part in what was a violent endeavor. Only the most radical students felt that in defending our political ideals, I was participating in an immoral and unethical war, but even they sat down to eat with me. The main course was a cabbage- and barley- based soup with my eggs and sausages as a garnish— again, no cheese — food wasn't in short supply, but the variety had significantly diminished thanks to the war. The Californians and Midwesterners were probably eating great.

Seven of us sat around a small round table. I was briefly the center of attention as I talked about the motorboat reconnaissance, and the arrival of the fascists. Before I offered my eyewitness account, I was treated to another more outlandish product of the rumor mill I'd first encountered at Ahmed's: the fascists, I heard, had attempted a crossing in force, and were driven back only by the killing of their general in the lead boat. I was glad to correct the record.

My much more prosaic account of the fascists' arrival was held up to the various perspectives present at the meal. Some felt

as my fellow militiamen did, that this was an opportunity to strike back while the fascists were few, that we should take the fight to them. Others that the fascists were too strong – that they'd make their way across the river sooner or later and so we should head up to Canada while we still could. Most held the opinion that nonviolent resistance was the way to resolve this, that fighting would only lead to more fighting, that perhaps the situation could be resolved through discussion and diplomacy. Reports of atrocities, this last group dismissed as liberal, pro-government propaganda.

The apartment's owner, who also owned the building and had been well liked and admired before the war for his egalitarian and attentive approach to ownership, asked why we couldn't come to some accommodation with the fascists.

"Let them have their wretched dystopian hell. Let them live in the rot that accompanies dictatorship, fascism, and all abominable authoritarian places," he said. "Give them the land they have and tell them not to come any further."

"What about our comrades in Newark?" said one of his tenants, Jenny, a black girl whose parents had moved to New York City from South Carolina in the 1960s for work. Jenny worked at a small factory sewing uniforms for the militia, and was one of the more prescient of us when it came to the threat of the fascists, and the importance of fighting. "If we abandon those like us in the South, or in Newark, why did we abstain from voting for Biden? If we don't fight for our convictions, to help each other, shouldn't we just join the fascists?"

"I voted for RFK Jr.," said the former apartment owner to good natured jeers and boos, "*I voted for RFK Jr. and I'd do it again*" he yelled, with similar good-natured energy. Here, having voted for RFK Jr. was far less objectionable than voting for "Genocide Joe Biden," which was tantamount to heresy.

Vince spoke in the lull that followed the yelling. "Anyway the fascists have started and they won't stop. The real choices are Canada – assuming they don't roll up there next – or fight. Fight or flee and hope someone else beats them. They'll chase us to the end of the earth, they'll never halt. Might as well be here."

"They'll negotiate when they're punched out," said Christina, a journalism student at City University of New York and one of the more moderate people in the collective. She was a bit older, in her 40s, and had been a public school teacher during an earlier life that hadn't quite worked out on Long Island, near one of the Hamptons. "If we make a deal they agree to – ceasefire, a demarcation of borders – they'll just rearm and keep going. These people are always the same – Hitler, Genghis Khan, Putin, Alexander the Great. Read history. They stop when they're stopped, which is when they die. Because they know stopping means dealing with the violent energies they've unleashed, and they want to be fighting external enemies, not internal enemies."

"It would have happened sooner or later," added Jenny. "The moderates, the Democrats and shitlibs spent the years since the end of the Cold War selling everything as fast as they could, and supporting global racism and genocide. They're as responsible for creating this movement as anyone else."

Sometimes I wished I was confident and practiced in my public speaking, like the students. My first day with the unit I'd brought this line of reasoning, about Biden and the Democrats and the shitlibs, to Vargas, and he'd scoffed at what he called my naiveté.

"What happened in D.C. was, when they couldn't get to the people they said they were mad at – the government, the globalists – the fascists made do with the vulnerable. They headed right for the poorest neighborhoods on their way out of the city and just about wrecked them," he'd said. "As bad as

Biden and the Democrats were over the years, I've never saw the suburbs where most of his supporters lived reduced to a smoking ruin, their inhabitants murdered, captured, or fled."

I didn't mention that perspective here at the table. It didn't seem like the time or the place for it. Besides I wasn't sure what I thought about it all. Sometimes in describing the fascists as intolerant of other viewpoints and dogmatic in their application of violence, I thought maybe we were guilty of that, too, in some ways. Certainly nothing like what the fascists did, but still... when I thought about our project, sometimes I questioned its wisdom or justice.

"You'll never convince me violence is the answer," said James. Soft-spoken and charismatic, when he spoke, people listened. His father was a first-generation immigrant from Cuba, and his mother, a Chinese immigrant. They'd met in Flushing, Queens, a real American love story. "Violence begets violence. Without anyone to fight, the fascists will fight each other. Ultimately they'll lose interest in the cities and fall to quarreling among each other. You'll see."

We did see, just not in the way James meant. But those dark days were yet to come.

After dinner I waited around for Tandy, but she still hadn't come home. After an hour, still restless after the day's events, I decided that rather than hang around and look desperate, I'd put in some volunteer time. It was still too early to get the batteries. I picked up my rifle and wandered down to the Muhheakunnuk. It was summer, and the weather wasn't bad. Ideal for nighttime strolling provided one had the proper identification so one wasn't accidentally shot.

At the river's edge I stopped and stared at what remained of the George Washington Bridge. The moon illuminated the ruined structure's contours, rendered its demise somehow more tragic,

more human. Its skeletal wreckage jutted up from the river's calm surface, like ancient ruins. In places, the bridge had twisted as it fell, partially damming the river's flow. Now it resembled nothing so much as a memorial to America, the ruins of a vision for peace and prosperity that could not last forever, because nothing in this universe ever does.

Destroying the GW made sense from the perspective of guns and firepower; the fascists had an edge in that department owing to personal stockpiles as well as those seized by various police and traitorous military units, but weapons require people, and they had far fewer volunteers than we did. In spite of their military successes, their victories over larger but poorly-led, poorly equipped units, everywhere they went they engendered fear and hatred, an occupying force that looked and talked like your racist neighbor. The strategy, then, was to attrit them, draw them into the cities, grind them down until there weren't enough of them to the point where we could start pushing back. Of course as I mentioned earlier the hope at that time was that some disaster or calamity or miracle would forestall our having to fight them at all.

The fascists fielded excellent soldiers and combat leaders. Their units moved quickly and punched hard, and wrecked or absorbed local and state law enforcement organizations wholesale. Their units hung together well, and were led (mostly competently and capably) by veterans and former police officers.

Further down toward the bay loyalist Army units kept the Verrazano intact and were fortifying our side. I didn't understand the logic behind keeping that bridge but taking out the much larger GW and Tappan Zee. Maybe the destruction was partly for the symbolism. The fascists claimed to stand for law and order and tradition, and part of how it had all started (insane as it sounds to say it now looking back over the great Golgothas we made for each other during the

fighting) was over statues and names. What was an iconic bridge between New York and New Jersey, named for one of America's founders, if not a statue, a monument to an idea like traffic, interstate commerce, a community based on trust and the exchange of goods?

Then again, it was also a symbolic loss for us—if we couldn't control the George Washington Bridge, what did that say about our long term prospects? Vargas said slowing the fascists down was our best shot and the people who were placed in charge of our efforts at first – people who as time would demonstrate were not up to the effort – were a little too enthusiastic about doing so, and less enthusiastic about actually preparing us for what came next.

Loyalist Army units had sealed the Lincoln Tunnel, which was similar to blowing it. The decision had been made with some procedure for removing concrete in mind, but when you walked down near midtown and saw the familiar entrance, saw the white and gray spill as though trolls had melted the world's biggest marshmallow, it was hard imagining that tunnel ever working again.

From the bones of the fallen GW, I walked south for 5 minutes until I came to one of our fortified positions, down near the water, forward and downhill from HQ. It was crewed by my unit, but not one from the scouts, conventional infantry. We all had the same challenge and password. I didn't know this group, but stopped in to chat about the motorboat, ask if they'd seen any other movement. They hadn't. Didn't have thermal scopes down here, were worried about night landings and infiltration. I was shocked – I thought frontline positions would have thermals for sure.

"One every 5 positions," said the duty sergeant. "We rely on them and tracers to figure out what's happening. Moonlit night like tonight, seems unlikely we'll see any more action. Especially considering the tide."

I asked why the tide was significant. Prior to the war I hadn't spent much time near the ocean.

"Oh, a full moon corresponds with high tide. This particular high tide is what they call a "king tide," get them in winter and summer," the sergeant said. "Higher water means a longer distance to cross, and stronger currents. Groups trying to cross in boats would be pulled far upriver or downriver of where they were hoping to cross – maybe even swept out to ocean."

"You think the fascists know that?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it... they're mostly country folk, people who know things like the tides, and hunting. No that's not going to throw them. Sad to say it. That's the sort of thing our generals would probably fuck up."

We stood there quietly in awe of the sergeant's demoralizing statement, one we both felt to be true, the GW's shredded metal beams and cables clanking and squealing upriver. A rumble of artillery in the distance and flashes of light roused us from our reverie.

"Won't be much longer. No way they can hold out without reinforcements."

"How do you know? How do you know they won't grind the fascists up street by street and block by block?"

The sergeant gestured toward the southern end of Manhattan. "Brother works at one of the fish markets. Buddy of his is a fisherman, solid American and New Yorker, told him he's been in touch with fishermen out of Newark. Apparently they're getting pummeled. Never seen the fascists put so much work into destroying a city."

"You think we should move down, try to help them?"

In response, the sergeant now nodded up at the GW's ruins.

“Not part of the plan. Anyway, we barely know how to hold a defense. Most of the guys here have never fired their rifles, it’s all we can do to point them in the right direction. How are we supposed to move to the attack?”

For this question and all the others, I had no answers. I’d joined the movement, I was a scout, and all I knew was that if the fascists wanted a fight, we ought to give it to them. Even then I sensed that simply to accommodate their desires would be a mistake. I looked out at the river, to where the boat had been earlier. The fighting would get so much worse in the days and months to come, far worse than almost anyone could imagine. But on that day, the thing that I noticed was the water – how high it had come up the pier – how close we were to it, lapping at the moorings and the concrete stairs, closer to our boots than it had ever been. And what terrible creatures teemed beneath its opaque surface!

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

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New Poetry by Kat Raido: “Blood Goggles”

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New Poetry by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

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New Poetry by Abena Ntoso: “Dear Melissa”

New poem by Abena Ntoso: “Dear Melissa”

New Poetry by Sofia Tiapkina: “To Forget or Not

Maybe,” “Grasping the Sky,” and “Airless Embrace”



THE SILENT SKY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

to forget or not maybe

to forget or not maybe
to fight for memory or not
i'm here i'm she
lying on my back underneath me
blue cherries of bruises ten backs
all pierced by bullets all riddled
no one seems to cry here this defenseless death is unshared
with any and all
i look around at people all around still people these old
trees outside what a spring so wildly

blooms and dies with a scream
i rise from my knees or maybe just
think that i rise i was a teacher
what remains of the school now
walls shrubs suckle blood from the soil
i taught them to never
kill people and now
i'm face to face
with the killers of children hands and face changed the maples
turned perfectly crimson too soon
broke my
spine and soul i would tell them if i still taught never kill
anyone
i rise from my knees call out to god
god i accept everything i
understand the end of life
i accept it i am desecrated
why do you punish me
with this life
after death

Grasping the Sky

Inside us: a piece of
sky, blue and rusty,
smelling of winter and
gunpowder.
Who will see us as we crawl, chasing
the shadows of the clouds?
She reanimates the land.

The bombs, and bullets, and bodies took
its breath away and send it straight into cardiac arrest.
The scars of war are on her palms and tongue,
but she keeps going because without the land,
her heart will stop, too.

Land—земля—zemlia: a greenplace, a birthgiver, our bread.
She puts her hands around it and tries to close off
the wounds of horror and destruction and
deathdeathdeathdeath
that the inhumans opened with their hungry teeth.
Sometimes, when the blood stops rushing through her ears
or between her fingers,
she hears the echo of “brotherly nations,” “local
misunderstanding,”
“child actors.”
The land moans under the weight of
countless bones.

We carry no
prophecies under our skin.

The silent sky
floods our mouths.
Who will hear us climb up
the lifeless mushrooms?

He rebuilds the house.
A new foundation in place of his ancestors’
home built with tears. The missile took
the walls, but the kitchen table is still
standing in the middle.

House—будинок—budynok: a warm place, a safehold, our nest.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table.
One year anniversary,
he feels the explosions
reverberating through his ribs.
His daughter would have turned three.
His wife would have put a pot of
lilacs by her crib.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table of a murdered house.
It’s hot and bitter, and for a minute, he forgets
a new future of new houses with

no one inside.

Everything we wanted
was in the sound
of the sky without
the stench of corpses.
Who will remember us if
the task ahead will take a generation?

They reconstruct their homeland.
Too many questions, too little time: where
do they fit between now and then;
how do they embezzle millions yet fight corruption
as never before; what are dignity and justice and fairness
if the debris of a shelled hospital hide
the broken pieces of mothers and newborns.

Homeland—Батьківщина—Bat'kivschyna: a free place, a seeing
glass, our hope.

They won't live to see it without blood and tears
soaking its black ground. How do they repair machine-gunned
hearts?

How do they rebuild a cracked-open sky?
They reconstruct their homeland as the bombs
try to bring them to their knees. Too many
questions, too little time. But the question,
"Will we live?" is not one of them.

Millions of hands breaking the chains
shout the answer louder than
air raid sirens.

Inside us: a whisper
of summer, when sunflowers
grow from the ash.
Who will catch the birds
pecking out a path between
the sky and wheat fields?

No one. Our wings hold the glory of freedom.

airless embrace

i miss you like i miss the sky
cold so painfully blue
angels must have
dripped blueberry juice
from the clouds
i want to tether myself
to the sky-whispers
embrace them bury my
face into their warmth
but it doesn't make you here
i stalk the shore scooping
up birds beaks
black with blood
you used your skirt
to wipe off the
red from their feathers
why did you
let go
the earth drinks soot
i'm thirsty for
the sound of
your smile
under the winter sun
on the shore
i pick the nightingales
curl my toes to find
the damper sand
the soft homes of crabs below
i hold the memory
of your hair
between my fingers
i miss you

until i fly out of
the soil's arms
and the sky
catches me
in its thousand
blue hands

New Poetry by Luis Rosa Valentin: “Desperate Need of Help”

Desperate Need of Help

[Luis-Rosa-image](#)

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

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

New Poetry by Todd Heldt: “This Is A Drill, This Is Only A Drill” and “Suffer The Children”



ACTION IS PRETTY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

This is a drill. This is only a drill.

They voted to abolish history.
There had been no commercials.
We didn't know which wrong to fear most,
and nobody got the joke.
When the polls ran out of ballots,
somebody hurled a beer bottle
through a church's stained-glass window.
Peace officers deployed
pepper spray for the white kids
and bullets for the black.
You should expect to see things
like this in democracy. Because
the cost is always
what the market will bear.
We all went home or to jail,
or to hospital or morgue, grateful.
America in action is pretty,
the Blue Angels swooping in for the kill
as spectators cheer from the beaches below.
We don't even know who we are fighting.
Someone is crossing himself.
Someone is crossing the border.
War is just how we learn geography,
and someone scaled a wall
to pick your corn. Good people
are unarmed and
defenseless in church,
and no one will tell us straight
which group of not us we should bomb.

Suffer the Children

12000 kids in detention
300 shot dead in their schools
200 bombed by drones
the ones we don't know to mention

and the ones the future will starve
my two who are safe in their bedroom
who cry when they are scared

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



PRESSED AND WITHOUT / *image by Amalie
Flynn*

There Will Be No Irish Pennants

“Discipline organizes an analytical space.” [1]

Field Day & Inspection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Irish pennants are not permitted.

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

Eyes. Click.

Ears. Open.

Attention.

[1] Michel Foucault. Discipline and punish. 143

[2] Two faucets in each barracks room.

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

New Poetry by Jehanne Dubrow: “Poem for the Reader Who Said My Poems Were Sentimental and Should Engage in a More Complex Moral Reckoning with U.S. Military Actions”; “Epic War Poem”; “Tyrian Purple,” and “Some Final Notes On Odysseus”

When the goddess cries out,
her voice is a mountain against
the fighting. But the old soldier
keeps running—war like weather
in his ears, a summer storm,
in his pulse the tossing waves.

New Fiction from Lucas Randolph: “Boys Play Dress Up”



When visiting

a friend's grandpa, the Boy learned that the grandpa liked watching football games on the weekends instead of the black and white western movies. His favorite football team was the Kansas City Chiefs. Their team colors were—red, white, and yellow. Some of the fans had feathers on their head and they chanted and made a chopping motion with one of their hands when the game started. Sometimes a man who was dressed up in a pretend costume would beat on a giant drum. The grandpa said it was tradition and traditions were good. The Boy asked the

friends grandpa if he ever watched western movies, but he said those were all fake and weren't worth the copper they were printed on. That's why he liked watching football. Real men. Real blood. Real consequences.

None of that fake cowboy horseshit.

Sometimes, though, if it was late at night, the friend's grandpa said he liked to watch military documentaries, but only if everyone was already asleep. The Boy didn't ask why. The grandpa had an American flag that hung from the front porch of his house—red, white, and blue. The Boy's own grandpa didn't have one. Neither did the Boy's father.

Were you in the War too?

No, my parents wanted me to go to college. The same college my daddy went too. In fact, we even played ball for the same team. That's my old jersey there.

The friend's grandpa pointed to the wall. Two framed black and white photos with wooden frames that bent and curved all fancy like hung next to each other. The Boy knew one photo was older because it had a football team where they all had leather helmets on, and the image was faded. There was also a framed football jersey on the wall with the same last name that his friend had with stitched together letters on the back of it. The team colors were—green, gold, and black.

I almost volunteered for the military. I wanted too—hell, they almost got me in the draft! Maybe I wish they would have. Just wasn't in the playbook, I guess. Your grandfather was in the service? World War II?

Yes sir. Well—no, he fought in Korea. My dad too. Air force. He didn't fight in any War, though.

That's okay son, you should be damn proud. We all have our role to play. That's what my old man used to say.

I'm going to join too—when I'm old enough, anyway.

The grandpa smiled and put a hand on the Boy's shoulder.

That's a good boy.

The grandpa reached over and grabbed an old football that sat on a wooden mantle with some sports memorabilia underneath the old photos and the jersey. He held it in front of the Boy's face close enough for him to smell the aged pigskin leather, letting his eyes wander over the scars from the field of battle. When the Boy's hands moved to touch the football, the grandpa reached back in an old-school football pose like the quarterback does and threw the ball across the room to his grandson who caught it above his head with both hands.

Nice one! Just like your old man!

He lost

his favorite coffee mug. The Old Man poured dark roast into a short glass mason jar mixing it with the golden liquid already left waiting at the bottom. It wasn't meant for hot liquids and the Old Man reached for a red trimmed potholder with a green and yellow wildflower pattern to hold it with. He sat down into his favorite corduroy rocking chair, one hand against his lower back for support. He smiled with the jar between his legs letting the glass cool, the steam from the roasted beans rising to his nose. Smells of earth and sweet honey warmed the room. The sting of diesel was nearly absent.

Please, just one-story Grandpa. I promise I won't ask for more. Please—

Well shit, you're old enough by now. I promised your dad I wouldn't, but hell in my day you could drive a tractor at ten,

and you're nearly that. It can be our little secret. What do you want to know?

About the War, about—Korea. Like, what kind of gun did you use?

A few, but mostly the ole Browning M1919. I bet you don't even know what that is, do you?

The Boy shook his head no.

It's a light machine gun. L.M.G. It took two of us to shoot and two more to carry everything. It was a real son-of-a-bitch to get around.

Did you have to shoot it a lot?

I never shot it once, to tell you the truth, not at anyone anyway. See, I just fed the ammo to keep it firing. Do you know what that means, to feed the ammo?

The Old Man didn't wait for the Boy to answer.

I was what they called an assistant gunner. Corporal did all of the shooting and stuff for us. He liked that kind of thing.

The Old Man grabbed the hot mason jar from between his legs and took a long drag of his coffee. The rounded glass edge burned against the crease of his lips, but he drank it anyway. He remembered the Corporal well. They grew matching mustaches; they all did. The lieutenant dubbed them his "Mustache Maniacs," which later got shortened to just "M&M's." It was a real hoot with the men. The Old Man shaved it shortly before returning home. He felt stupid with it by himself. It didn't feel right without Corporal Lopez and the rest. He wouldn't tell that story today, though.

They didn't deserve it, the people. Not too different from us you know—some of the best God-damned people I've ever met, actually. They fought side by side with us. Those Koreans,

real God-damn patriots. We suffered together; I remember how hungry they were. How hungry we were—and cold, for shit's sake was it cold. Colder than a well digger's ass, if you ask me. You have to understand, it's a different kind of cold they have there in Korea. It's all any of us thought about most of the time. We weren't ready for any of it. It was a terrible War.

Why were you fighting then Grandpa? If they weren't bad?

It wasn't them we were fighting; it was those god-damned Reds! You see, retreat was never part of the plan, hell, War was never part of the plan—we just killed that other bastard five years earlier! You have to imagine, when they first came over them mountain tops, millions of 'em, I swear to God, the God-damned ground disappeared. I don't know if they shot back, or hell, if they even had guns. Corporal [REDACTED] just kept firing. There was so much smoke you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. I loaded until my hands charred like wood. We could hear them breathing they was so close. A wave of glowing lead to the left. A wave of glowing lead to the right.

The Old Man's arms followed waves of bullets from one side of his body to the other in a repeating pattern. The aged wood from underneath his corduroy rocking chair snapped with the weight of his story. Liquid from the mason jar in one of his hands splashed over the rim.

The Boy breathed hard, too afraid to look away.

We screamed for the runners to bring more ammo; I don't remember when they stopped coming. The Reds didn't. They never stopped. When they were right God-damned on top of us, Corporal [REDACTED] handed me his pistol, a Colt 1911. Just a small little thing. He picked up that son-of-a-bitch Browning with his bare hands and we fired until we both had nothing left. And then, we ran. We all ran. Everyone did. And we kept running. When the order finally came to stand fast; we already

made it to the God-damned ocean.

The Old Man drank from his mason jar again, the amber glow of liquid not able to hide behind his lost porcelain coffee mug. He nearly spit it out when he started laughing from somewhere deep down in his belly. He had to use his free hand to cover the top of the jar to keep the liquid from spilling everywhere.

You know, when we finally did stop, there were these two supply crates, just sitting there waiting for us. One had ammo, one had food. We hadn't had a single round of ammunition to fire in over a week and no one had eaten in at least double that amount of time, probably longer. But wouldn't you God-damn believe it, I was the only shit-stick dumb enough to go for the ammo first. I was more scared of those god-damned Reds than I was of starving to death. Go for the ammo first, that's what Corporal [REDACTED] would have done, so that's what I did. He always knew what to do.

Invitation to a Gunfighter, starring Yul Brynner and George Segal, played at a low volume in the background on a black and white television screen. The film ends after the hero takes a shotgun blast to the chest and one bullet through the stomach. The hero manages to jump from his horse in a dramatic roll before single-handedly disarming the bad guys in one swift motion. An entire town watches from the side. The hero then spends the next two minutes and thirty-four seconds forcing the bad guys to apologize in front of all the town's folk for their crimes against their own neighbors. Eventually, the hero succumbs to the injuries and the people carry him away on their shoulders. The Old Man and the Boy sat in silence until the credits finished and the screen turned to black.

The Boy wasn't sure what was meant to be funny about the ending to his grandpa's story. He waited for the rest of the story to finish, but it never came.

The Sheriff

first met the Boy when he was still just a boy. The Sheriff took the Old Man away but said he could come back home once he was feeling better. The Old Man said it was the bitch's fault. The Sheriff also gave the Boy a pack of Colorado Rocky baseball trading cards and a golden sheriff's sticker that he could put on the outside of his shirt. The Boy wore it to school the next Monday and everybody wanted to know where he got it from but he told them it was a secret.

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

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

New Poetry from Tanya Tuzeo:

“My Brother, the Marine;” “My Brother’s Shoebox;” and “My Brother’s Grenade”



WAR HAS DONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

my brother, the Marine

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

and cries

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

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

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

my brother's shoebox

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

i want to remember who this person is,

or at least, find out what war has done.

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

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

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

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

my brother's grenade

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Poetry from Shannon Huffman Polson: “On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol”



BETWEEN THE CRACKS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol

We finished our jelly beans
red and yellow, purple, green,
the last bite of chocolate, unaware

that over in Mariupol
on this most holy day
sleepless mothers cradle children
on a steel factory floor.

Christ is Risen!

But in Mariupol people lie crushed,
the crossbeam too heavy,
cold factory chimneys rising cruelly
against the grey sky.

Nobody steps in from the crowd
to carry the cross.

There is no crowd
but circled tanks

in Mariupol.

Where is the Risen Christ
in Mariupol?

Outside the factory
mud is drying, small flowers
pushing up
between the cracks,
the birds returning, unaware

that inside people wait
in darkness,
the factory made for steel,
not people—
they sit
in vigil,
waiting.

New Poetry by Michal Rubin:

“I Speak Not Your Language” and “Omar Abdalmajeed As’ad of Jijlya”

I, born from the womb of
my mother’s remembrances
wrapped in the cocoon
of her story[...]

New Fiction from Cameron Manning: “Glory Chasers”

May 3, 2009

After Captain Short returned from his training with the Australians, he scheduled himself to take leave the following week, which meant he’d be gone all of May. While I waited for him to go, I didn’t do shit except play Axis and Allies with the guys and cook for everyone.

Until this morning, that is. At about oh-three-hundred, I jumped out of my bed to the sound of gunfire and a helicopter. When I ran outside, I found Sargent Doran and a few of the soldiers peering over our northern Hesco barriers through their Nods. The noise was coming from Shahr-e Safa, and I darted to the Tracker in my truck to see if there were any blue icons on the screen. There weren’t.

Short came over to me, dazed and confused. “What’s going on, Lieutenant?”

"I think it's the Colors," I said without hiding the enthusiasm in my voice. If I was right, this was exactly what we needed. No use in relying on a mismatched team of weekend warriors to exterminate the enemy when we could depend on the most elite fighting units ever developed. Maybe the Colors had caught some Taliban traveling through Shahr-e Safa. More dead Taliban meant a securer Jaldak. If Taliban were staying over in Shahr-e-Safa, maybe the Colors could also tell us who was hosting them—or being *forced* to host them. I called Zabul Base, but they didn't know what was going on.

While our soldiers geared up and started the engines, Zabul called back a few minutes later and told us to stand down. Thirty minutes later, I got a message confirming it was the Colors, and I asked for more information on the nature of their mission and who they'd engaged—maybe they killed the Dad—but they had nothing else to share. I called Dickson later in the morning, but he said he didn't know about any operation in my area either.

Around oh-eight-hundred, our mixed patrol of Cobra soldiers and Jaldak police walked into Shahr-e Safa and up the beaten path to the top of the hill. Instead of running up to us asking for candy, the children avoided us this time, and the ones who came out of their huts were crying.

"What happened?" I asked a cop.

Rocky translated. "He says the U.S. came in helicopters and murdered six men from the village last night."

"Murdered?" I said.

"Martyred," he said, before immediately correcting himself again. "They were *killed* when the U.S. broke into the compounds of the men and shot them."

"The men they killed lived here?"

"Yes, sir."

"They lived here?"

He confirmed again with the cop. "Yes, sir. They lived here with their families. They were part of the Dad's team."

What the fuck? "Where's Ghani?" I scanned the crowd and the mud huts looking for the man we'd so often relied on to provide us with Taliban intel—nowhere.

"Sir, this is very bad," Rocky said. "An Afghan's home is his sanctuary. It's a terrible message you're sending to the people here. You need to tell your people to stop raiding homes at night and killing villagers."

Un-fucking-believable. We've been living next door to six Taliban families this whole time.

On our way up the hill, two women burst out of a nearby hut and ran over to us, with crying children following after them. They tore the heads of their burqas off and began screaming and yelling. Two of the cops stood between them and us, and Short kept walking forward. I drifted toward the women, though. One was old—a mother of the dead, I assumed—and the other was younger than me. The old one shouted and wailed at the cops and me, wagging her finger as tears ran down her face. I didn't need to speak Pashto to understand the vulgarity streaming out of her mouth. And then she stopped to spit on me. It hit my forehead and began rolling down my cheek, and I wiped it off with my sleeve and headed back toward the front of the patrol.



My stomach ached as I remembered marching with Freeman through Kakaran and the home of Abdul Kabir and the Dad, listening to their mother yell at us and our police. That had been satisfying, rewarding almost. But this was different now. Here I felt guilty and sick. But why? The men we'd just killed were no different from any of the others who'd tried to kill us. Or the ones who murdered their fellow Muslims in the streets.

And then it hit me—no matter how justified the killings were, we shouldn't have been here. Our patrol shouldn't have been taking a victory lap. Spiking the football right in the villagers' faces. Taking a self-congratulatory tour of the destruction we'd caused. Freeman would have known better than to come and do this today. He would have sent the cops instead and brought the village elders back to talk. I should have known our presence now would feel like a spit in the face.

When we got to the top of the hill, close to where the groundbreaking ceremony for the well had been, Short approached a village elder. It was Razaaq—the father of Naney the pedophile—and he asked what we could do to help in the aftermath.

I wished we could have killed his son, too.

I walked to the well and looked up at the top of the tower where the solar panels used to sit.

Fucking bastards.

Even though I knew what would happen, I pulled the lever on the faucet beside the well and watched as nothing flowed out of it, symbolizing my failure. I headed over to Doran and Lane.

How could we have been so close to the motherfuckers? For almost a year, I'd slept next door to a village of insurgents. These guys weren't Taliban from Pakistan traveling through the area, forcing villagers to feed and host them—they were our fucking neighbors. After eight years, we hadn't even "cleared" the village beside our base. "Clear, hold, build" my ass. And if there were six Taliban living in Shahr-e Safa, guys whose children I'd spent a year throwing candy to, how many lived in the other villages in Jaldak? Jesus Christ, they're everywhere. They'll never leave this place.

"It's pretty fucking hot, LT," Lane said.

"Yeah, pretty fucking hot."

"We gonna be out here for a while?"

"Look, dude, I don't know. Pull security."

He made a face and headed off.

I walked back to Rocky, lost in my own fog of disgrace. "Let's get names of the Taliban killed," I said as I handed him my notebook.

I watched as he stopped a policeman and talked to him for a while, writing in the notebook. When he returned, I scanned the list of names but didn't recognize any of them. Across the way, I noticed that Short was still talking to Naney's father.

"The police are saying the U.S. who came in the helicopters stole a bunch of weapons and explosives from the men they killed," Rocky said.

"Stole?"

"I mean confiscated."

Fuck this.

Rocky turned to leave, but I grabbed his shoulder. "They were bad guys, Rocky. Taliban. If they had guns and explosives and—"

"It doesn't matter, sir." He pointed to a boy standing beside his older brother, both of them crying. I got the message.

I surveyed the mud huts on the slope of the hill we'd just hiked up. These were the people we'd been trying to make life better for? The people we fed and provided running water for and whose children we built schools for? The people who'd never told us about the six Taliban living in their village—the village that neighbored us?

But why would they tell us? These men were their sons and fathers.

This is fucking hopeless.

By now, Short was done talking to Razaaq, and we headed back down the trail to the highway, where I put myself on the south side of the patrol. The side away from the woman who'd screamed and spit on me on our way up. But there was no escape—more women came out of another hut and started in on me and the cop beside me, wailing and cursing in Pashto, more orphaned children behind them. Their bare faces streaked with tears, they made wide menacing hand gestures whose meaning I could only guess at. I could feel their hatred just like I could feel the heat of the sun.

Fuck all this.

At the road, Ghani was waiting for us. I ran to him, and Rocky scurried along after me.

"Did you know these men?" I demanded.

There was a pause.

He said something to Rocky. "Yes, for many years."

I glared at Ghani, the crooked bastard. All this time I'd thought he was the kind of guy we needed to save this place from Taliban, but he must have only been using us because he hated Zahir. Not because he hated Taliban.

"Why?" I stepped forward, my face close to his "Why not tell us?"

Rocky didn't hesitate. "He knew them well, sir. They were part of his clan."

Ghani just stared back at me sheepishly.

I wanted to spit on him. Instead, I turned and walked down the driveway as our crooked fucking cops opened the wire gates for us.

All this work for the sake of the women and children and this was the result? A police force corrupt to the core and a well that didn't work and a generation of fatherless sons and daughters? Sons who would grow up to join the Taliban and kill us if we were stupid enough to still be around? Daughters who would be forced into marriage as soon as they menstruated? Imprisoning their faces behind those suffocating burqas for their entire godforsaken lives?

Why the fuck are we still in this place?

The people would never support the police as long as we were here. But if we left now, the Taliban would replace the police force we did have. Every man and woman who died in this country for the sake of this war would have died in vain. None of it would mean anything, to anyone. Vietnam all over again.

What a tragic fucking joke.

I kept walking, leaving the wailing and cursing behind. If only till the next time.

*

Back at base, we debriefed in the Toc even though it was hotter inside than out and there were just as many flies.

"You see how empty the whole place was?" Kilgore said.

"The elder I talked to said just about everyone's left, and tomorrow they'll *all* be gone," Short said.

I slapped a fly on my arm. "The business owners *and* the villagers?" I grabbed the flyswatter from my desk and waited for the next one.

"Everyone. They're all afraid of U.S. in helicopters coming to kill their sons and husbands again."

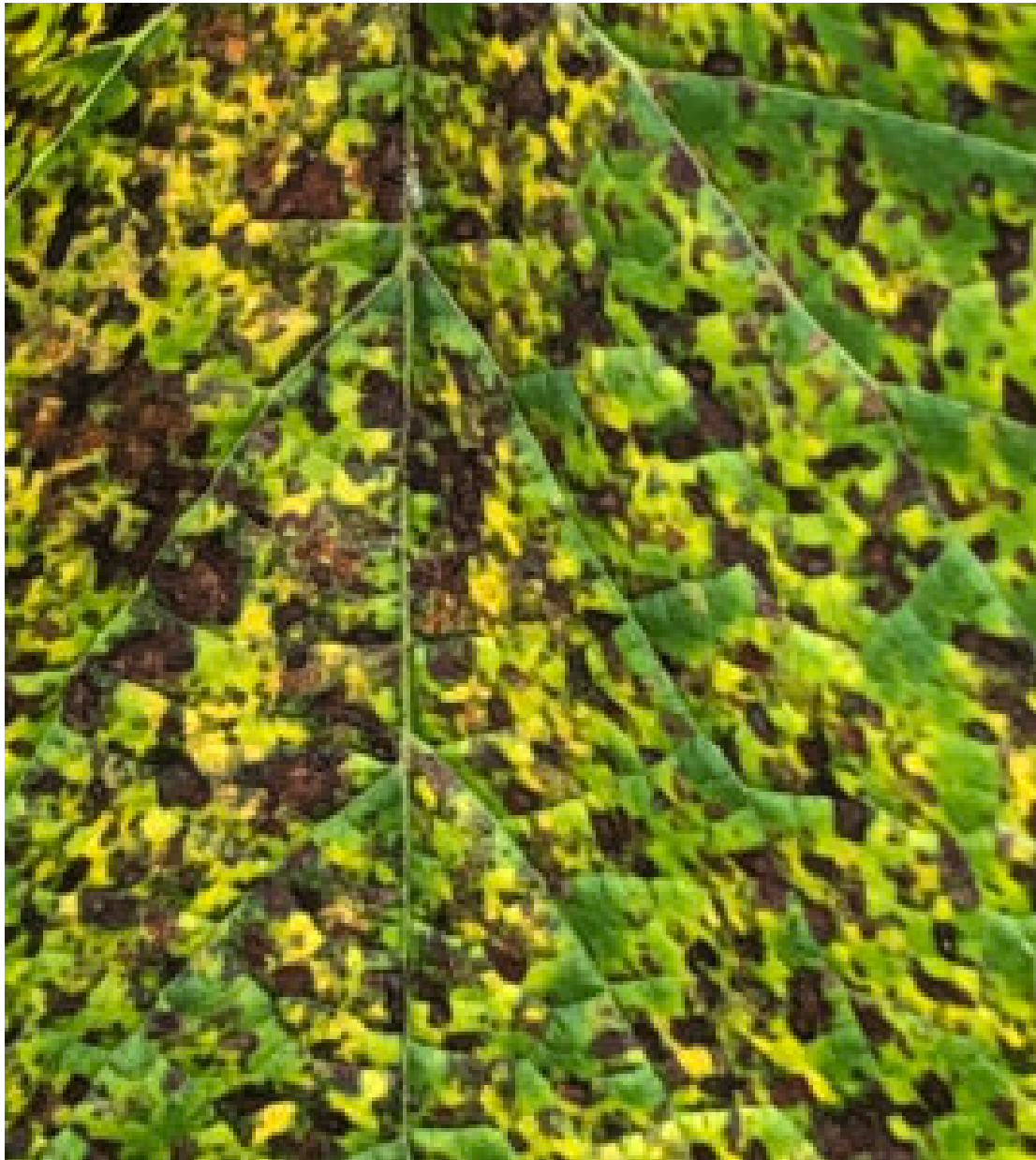
"Well, if their sons and husbands are fucking Taliban trying to kill us, stealing solar panels—"

"God, you really got a hard-on for that solar panel thing, don't you, LT?"

Kilgore laughed.

"If they're fucking Taliban, they ought to die," I said, glaring at him, knowing that I wasn't going to bother trying to explain to him the complicated truth I'd just learned. The fact that we'd just given every child in that village a once-in-a-lifetime experience that would shape their decision-making for the rest of their lives. The invaders had just killed their fathers and brothers, and they'd gladly take up arms against us as soon as they got the chance. The truth that killing more bad guys could never be the answer to winning this war.

New Poetry by Chris Bullard: “All Wars Are Boyish”



THE MELTDOWN MEADOW / *image by Amalie Flynn*

All Wars Are Boyish

Autopilot on self-destruct,

we went joy riding on tanks
into the thermal wasteland.

The static of roentgens played
like parked ice cream trucks
on the detection equipment.

Playgrounds went incendiary
as squalls of cluster bombs
skipped over the pavement,

but our camo HAZMAT suits
insulated us from the acts
we had been ordered to take.

They were on the run, maybe,
or counterattacking. We took
rations beside a napalm campfire.

Jets among the sweep of stars,
scorched amphibians peeping
in the meltdown meadow,

what more could a kid ask for,
except dinosaurs? They were
already working on them in the lab.

**New Fiction from Adrian
Bonenberger: “Fort Mirror”**



Getting posted to Fort Mirror was a death sentence. The most coveted of all postings, soldiers jockeyed for the honor, begged superiors to send them to the fort on patrols or did what they euphemistically called “drug deals” to get assigned to units deploying soon. You went there, you died. Or you didn’t. Some people got hurt. Many of the people who spent time at Fort Mirror came away unharmed. Others went mad.

Officers were the worst. Ambitious young men and women subjected themselves to demanding and physically exhausting trials, hazed themselves brutally just for a chance to deploy

to Fort Mirror. Knowledge of which units were headed where was highly sought after. If based on rumor and forward planning at headquarters it looked like there was a 20% chance a particular unit was going to Fort Mirror, that was considered quite good, and the officers lined up to serve. Over time, officers became conniving, wheedling things, strong from their training, ruthless in their networking. Most of them (save for the luckiest who knew somehow they were going to Fort Mirror) lost themselves completely trying to get there.

But Fort Mirror was worth it. That's what everyone said. People knew that at Fort Mirror whatever else happened, the enemy would attack in strength—they'd come in the night, from some direction nobody thought possible. Or they'd come during the day in overwhelming numbers, and it was all hands on deck, fighting from one side of the fort to the other with a box of hand grenades to share on those occasions the enemy attacked at the place defenses were strongest, and still got in, punched their way through, although the base commander had anticipated that very move.

People went to Fort Mirror because catastrophic, once-in-a-decade attacks were bound to happen. Soldiers and officers went there in pairs, with their best friends, each knowing that the other would likely die, and it would be a formative tragedy. Each man secretly believed it would be the other who perished. Sometimes, a man went to Fort Mirror to die, and formed a friendship with a soldier or officer whom they believed would make it through, thereby keeping their memory strong. It actually played out that way a few times. A few times it played out the opposite, with the person who went there to die living, and the person who went there to live dying unexpectedly.

Those were the glory years for Fort Mirror. Rumors spread from the military to the writers obsessed with military affairs. Journalists began showing up to write stories and record television spots, to film for documentaries. This furthered

the fort's fame, spreading its name far and wide among those paying attention. The more that soldiers and officers were recorded or written about at Fort Mirror, the greater the numbers of ambitious young soldiers and officers clamoring to join units going or staying there. To a certain type of man, this notoriety was reassuring, knowing not only that one would perform brave valorous feats, but that afterwards, there was a reliable chance that one might read an article about it in the newspaper, see themselves on television.

For the career minded, Fort Mirror became a rite of passage. Promotion was assured for those who could deploy there and turn it to their advantage. Many junior officers went on to distinguished careers after serving at Fort Mirror, likewise with the sergeants. Medals for bravery were handed out there like pieces of candy at Christmas. Every other year or so, a soldier or officer would earn the highest honor their country had to give.

*

The military hierarchy hated Mirror. Its existence repudiated so much of what the war was said to be about in the generals' press releases. It was the grain of truth in the myth of the war, it was the persuasive argument justifying some new barbaric action. Academics wrestled with it as a problem, conceding that its being an outlier to their models spoke to some more essential lesson about conflict. Meanwhile outside of government and the military, few had heard of Fort Mirror—and that's because few had heard of the war, in spite of the journalists writing stories about it, in spite of the television spots and occasional documentaries. Even though there was no specific awareness of Fort Mirror, it's safe to say that without it, the war as a phenomenon would not have been possible.

Operations at Fort Mirror were sometimes mission driven, but they were never metrics-driven or data-driven. It had not been

optimized for search results, there were no subheds partitioning it into sections or dragging readers' eyes from one section to the next. It had no keywords. Its reading level could not be assessed. It was not hyperlinked or back-linked to other pages. Its domain authority score could not be established.

In terms of its layout, Fort Mirror was not exceptional. It consisted of walls, and an entrance, and guard towers, and a dining facility; all the things you'd expect a fort to have. Still, because of the terrain on which it had been built, part of Fort Mirror extended onto a flat plateau—a brooding section that seemed to gaze out at the surrounding countryside like a man lost in thought. There was a second, lower section at the base of the plateau. A trail cut into the stone cliffside centuries before by some farsighted builder or military commander connected the two positions and had been expanded and fortified over the decades. In its whole, Mirror was remarkable, a shining, demented visionary, a Castle Frankenstein or one of Frank Lloyd Wright's lesser-known experiments; a part of its surroundings, and also totally apart from them, impossibly alien.

When the military arrived they stationed artillery and mortars on the plateau, and had a place to land helicopters full of food, mail, and other sundries needed to keep a fort going. Around 300 soldiers lived at the fort at a time though occasionally the number would grow for bigger operations.

The terrain deserves more consideration. Because of its appearance in various print and broadcast media across various seasons, it's possible to get a sense of the place, but in *spite* of widespread coverage, descriptions of it conflict and can even at certain points as was the case in a feature in *The New York Times* and another in *Der Spiegel*, explicitly contradict each other. In some recollections the plateau on which the fort was founded grew out of a hill within a valley, ringed by foreboding mountains. In others, the plateau jutted

out above a deep river that cuts through what appear to be plains, or emerged from buildings in a town or bazaar. It was compared favorably and unfavorably with a decayed New England industrial center, hollowed out by offshoring. Others saw in it the mountains and rivers of Central and Eastern Europe. One thing that everyone agreed on, in describing the milieu in which Mirror occurred, was that the weather in the place varied wildly, with sunny calm often replaced with no warning by torrential downpours. Fog, too, often obscured the fort, rendering it vulnerable to attack, but also difficult to detect.

There were several Observation Posts or "OPs" higher in the hills, manned by soldiers and local constables in groups of 8-12, total. The precise number of OPs varied between three and five, depending on the goals of the commanding officer. At first the OPs were named for cardinal directions, but over time, took on the names of soldiers who fell in fighting. One was even named for a heroic local constable who sacrificed himself during a particularly desperate action, unexpectedly saving the lives of eight soldiers. This act of love was seen as something of an exception to an unspoken rule to acknowledge the local residents as little as possible; in general, places were named only for military soldiers or officers, or cultural signifiers or signposts from home. Locals had their own names for things. They even had their own name for the fort, though it was deployed as trivia and assigned no particular importance, save to the occasional soldier or officer who thought taking local matters seriously ameliorated their complicity in the war, or because it reminded them of a spouse or partner.

*

The oddest thing about Fort Mirror, and the thing that most people remarked on when they first arrived, was that every inch of the fort was covered in mirrors of the sort one might find on the local economy. The walls were covered with mirrors

outside and inside. Instead of windows, there were mirrors, instead of paintings, mirrors, instead of doors, great opaque slabs of reinforced glass, in which one could see one's own reflection and that of one's surroundings. The outside of the fort was draped in mirrors which were affixed by metal wires or placed into stone or wooden fittings designed for the purpose. This was true of the lower and upper portions of the fort, with the exception that the mirrors hung in the lower part of Fort Mirror were in general larger and heavier than those above. Some suggested that this was owing to the difficulty of porting larger mirrors up the cliffside; prior to air travel there was no easy way to bring mirrors up from the surrounding valley to the plateau.

When mirrors were damaged by the fighting, as they often were, they were quickly replaced. Mirrors had been built into and onto the fort long ago—more credulous soldiers said that this was done by special operations during the initial phase of the war, but the special operators who had seized the fort from enemy forces maintained that the mirrors had been there when they arrived. Earlier accounts from militaries of other, older armies, had also described the fort as having been draped in mirrors or “reflective glass,” and hypothesized that it had at one time been the residence of a great king or emperor.

One officer developed a friendship with a popular and well-educated interpreter, “Johnny,” who said that the fort was a place of great religious significance. According to him the fort was on very old ground, perhaps predating monotheism—perhaps, indeed, contributing to it in some obscure way. The local villages all regarded the fort with dread and superstition, and the fort and its occupants played significant roles in myths of the sort still regularly encountered in distant rural areas even in the 21st century. Furthermore, the fort factored into local religious stories, which attested to its durability, as myths of a certain power and endurance were always incorporated into orthodoxies rather

than destroyed. Every time the enemy attacked, they would leave behind new mirrors to replace the ones they'd damaged. With time, it became a tradition among soldiers as well, with new units bringing new mirrors of all shapes and sizes, and purchasing quantities on the local economy at a significant mark-up.

In the arts, Fort Mirror inspired many essays and fictional stories focusing on its construction and layout, and the effect that living there produced on many soldiers and officers. Journalists helped lead the way by writing about it in public, and always seemed eager to consider its significance in terms of what to them was a unique experience. There was invariably a part in every article or video where the author or narrator would show how little most soldiers and officers cared about living among their own reflections, as well as how odd and disorienting it was to new arrivals. Many soldiers and officers took it upon themselves to understand the significance or consequences of living on Fort Mirror through graphic novels, fiction, memoir, movies, video games, and art.

"I wake up in the morning blinded by the light of thousands of suns, trapped in a funhouse maze of my agonized and distorted, shattered body," wrote one reporter, "while a sergeant walked by me in flip-flops to the showers, totally oblivious, as if this were the most normal thing in the world. A mortar boomed in the distance, and as I dropped to the ground, he reached the bathroom and opened the mirror, then disappeared nonchalantly inside as an explosion burst a few hundred meters to our south..."

It was a strange place. Legends grew up about and around it over the years within the military, though you truly had to have lived it to understand many of them. Some soldiers fell in love with local women, others, with each other; others still, with the idea of escaping Fort Mirror, which while one was posted there was almost impossible. Some went mad sitting

in their barracks rooms, at night, flicking a small flashlight on and off, staring at themselves in the mirror-walls, wondering about what they might have done differently during the previous day's patrol, or how they'd perform on the upcoming operation. It was said that one could see the past in the mirrors, dead soldiers from wars long past or from actions just months old. Perhaps those who died within Fort Mirror's walls were doomed to walk within forever. A persistent but idiosyncratic story was that one could see the future in the mirrors, given credence by the many soldiers who experienced professional success in their subsequent civilian lives. Another story concerns a distinctively squat and strong-willed but disliked colonel, who disappeared from the fort, but who was subsequently reported roaming the mirrors of the fort too many times and by too many different sources for it to have been coincidence.

*

One might think that there would be some taboo against breaking mirrors while posted to the fort. There is some truth to this, to deliberately destroy a mirror needed some justification. If, for example, one broke a mirror accidentally, firing at a perceived foe, this was permissible. To destroy a mirror in order to "liberate" the image within was also viewed as understandable, though officially it was frowned upon and never encouraged. Breaking mirrors out of an instinctual desire to wreck or destroy was also dissuaded even though soldiers and officers caught doing it were rarely punished. As with all things Mirror, justice bent toward mercy and understanding when it came to acts of violence.

Adjusting the mirrors – changing their orientation or marking them with paint or markers – was something that inspired instinctual revulsion by all, soldier and local alike. Soldiers caught changing the mirrors in any way would be transferred out from the unit after a quick investigation to determine the facts. Locals caught changing the mirrors in any

way were never seen again.

Another notable characteristic of the fort was that having struggled so mightily to be posted there, as soon as a soldier or officer would leave, they'd be filled with a burning desire to see the place closed. They justified this desire by explaining that no more people should die or be injured in so pointless and strange a place. Meanwhile, the soldiers and officers who'd yet to deploy to Fort Mirror maintained that this was bitter jealousy, that Fort Mirror veterans wanted to hoard all the glory for themselves; that they only wanted to close the fort so that nobody else could get medals, so they'd be the only ones who were special.

Would the war ever end? Would the soldiers stop flowing into Fort Mirror, fighting desperate battles at night or in the day? Would the junior officers stop competing for posts there, stop gazing into Mirror's walls to regard their square-jawed future political campaigns? Would journalists stop writing nuanced pieces balancing the reality of the war with the idealism of the energies that had brought the military to occupy the fort in the first place? Would the timeless myth, whispered among the oldest locals, ever come to pass: that someday a line of light would appear in the middle of the fort's mirrors and all the mirrors of the world, accompanied by the thunder of countless horses hooves, before the people of the mirror world burst their magical reflective confines to enter our own world? And what would happen if they did?

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner: “Death Takes a Temporary Duty Assignment”

Death had narrowed his search of potential candidates down to two soldiers, both with high kill counts. Qualified applicants were always military men assigned to the line. Death had been a knight under Robert the Pious. His predecessor had been a Centurion under Augustus. Snipers, artillerymen, and pilots were ineligible, too much separation from the butchery. Intimacy and closeness were necessary for a harvester of souls.

Blackburn and Rojas. Each man had seen the whites of enemy eyes before pulling the trigger. Death had brushed shoulders with each of them, literally and figuratively.

Death sat beside his laptop computer, his bony finger pressing SEND on the last of his 555,000 emails: intercessions, near death experiences, and miracles forwarded to him by God. “Finally,” he said as he rose and grabbed his scythe, “I’m all caught up.”

Death had been granted a two-hour Temporary Duty Assignment to pick a successor. Having completed his thousand-year tour of duty, he had extended for three more years to clear up a client backlog. The twentieth century had been a busy time for the Grim Reaper, perhaps the busiest in history. With the invention of the cell phone and internet, the incumbent Death received a constant barrage of text messages and emails which—considering his birth 400 years before the printing press—he managed adroitly.



As a spirit operating outside the bounds of space and time, Death's job granted him near omnipresence: only a fraction of a second later he was standing within a concertina-lined forward operated base in Northern Iraq. He checked his watch—1300 hours.

Invisible to the Living, Death strode through Task Force Warrior's Tactical Operating Center, spotting Sergeant Major Muerte haranguing a long-haired private. "Sergeant Major," he said to himself as he stepped into Muerte's body, "I hope you don't mind me possessing your soul for a tick."

The private reeled as Muerte's Aztec hue shifted to a bloodless pallor and his face, previously the picture of health, deflated. Staring through opaque eyes, Muerte—now Death—snapped his fingers, and his scythe instantly appeared in his pale hand.

The private straightened up, eyes trained on the razor-sharp scythe. "No need for that," he said, backing out of the TOC, "I'll cut my hair, Sergeant Major."

Scythe in hand, Death, now Muerte, walked around Warrior Base, finally locating Charlie Company's first sergeant. He had little time to dawdle.

"I need to speak with Sergeants Blackburn and Rojas, First Sergeant."

Staring at the large Scythe, the square-jawed first sergeant hesitated. "What about, Sergeant Major?"

"A promotion."

"A promotion? To what?"

"The Angel of Death."

"Oh..." he said, exhaling in relief. "I thought I was getting transferred."

Located in a derelict guard house, Muerte's office was the epitome of military austerity—desk, two chairs and a laptop computer, the antithesis of Death's Victorian-era quarters. Muerte set his Scythe against a bullet-riddled wall and took a seat behind his computer. He logged onto his email and sighed at the 300,000 unread messages in his inbox. He downloaded Blackburn's file.

Just as Muerte was about to call in his first candidate, the report of a mortar round rocked his office. With less than ninety minutes to conduct his interviews, he couldn't afford any distractions. Within an instant he was outside Warrior Base's perimeter standing beside a truck occupied by three insurgents and a mortar.

Upon seeing the now manifested scythe-wielding, eight-foot tall skeleton draped in a black robe, the insurgents' faces froze in silent screams. "Do you mind?" he said in perfect Arabic. "I'm conducting interviews."

"Malak al-Maut![\[1\]](#) Malak al-Maut!" yelled the driver as he

stomped on the gas, covering Death's robe in a brume of powdered dust.

Transposing himself back into Muerte's body, he checked his watch. 77 minutes. Barely over an hour left to select a candidate for a thousand-year tenure of abject grief and hopelessness. He'd kill for more time.

Sergeant First Class Blackburn stood in his doorway as Muerte reviewed his file, "You asked for me, Sergeant Major?"

"Take a seat, Blackburn."

Standing a portly 5' 2", Blackburn's stature was exacerbated by his unusually long arms which necessitated his wearing gloves to protect his dragging knuckles. Blackburn took a seat across from Muerte and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest," said Muerte, "Can I bum a square off you?"

Blackburn offered Muerte a cigarette from his sausage-shaped fingers. Muerte took a deep drag, relishing the tobacco, tar, and carbon monoxide as it entered his lungs. Cigarettes and Death. Death and cigarettes—like ham and cheese to the Living.

Muerte gazed at his laptop. "It says here you killed 22 insurgents."

"23, Sergeant Major."

"No, Sergeant, 22. One was shot by friendly fire."

"Oh..."

Muerte leaned back in his seat and took a deep drag, sizing up Blackburn's homuncular appearance. "What does that mean to you, to kill 22 men?"

"Are you with JAG?"

"No, I'm not with JAG."

Blackburn's eyes darted around the room. "I don't know if I should answer that."

"Anything you say here stays in this room."

Blackburn leaned across the desk. "I'm the Angel of Death," he whispered.

"Say again?"

"I'm the Angel of Death."

"*You're* the Angel of Death?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major."

Muerte was taken aback by Blackburn's hubris. Boasting was bad form even among the Living.

"That's awfully presumptuous, isn't it?"

"Presumptuous?"

"Can you answer two million emails in a single day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"Can you answer three million phone calls a day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"How about travel? Can you be in a million places at once?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

Muerte stood. "Thank you, Sergeant. I've heard enough."

Blackburn offered a handshake, but Death politely refused. He hadn't come to collect Blackburn, only to interview him.

Muerte returned to his chair and checked his in-box. 700,000

unread emails. Never a moment's rest. Death gave the Rojas file a quick look. Just as he was about to call him in he heard a truck turn sharply into Warrior Base's entrance. He rolled his eyes, "Here we go again."

Materializing beside a pick-up packed with explosives, Death killed the engine. He had dominion over the Living *and* all forms of technological devices, including internal combustion engines. Few were aware of this.

The suicide bomber sat motionless in the driver's seat, horrified by the cloaked figure towering over the hood of his truck. Death walked to the driver's side and tapped his bony finger on the glass. The suicide bomber rolled down his window.

"Kinda busy right now," Death said in Arabic. "You mind coming back later?"

The suicide bomber nodded and put the truck in reverse.

Death returned to Muerte's body. 1,200,000 unread emails in his inbox. He'd give his soul for a personal assistant. He checked his watch—30 minutes. He was out of time.

"Next!"

Sergeant First Class Rojas entered Muerte's office. Five-foot ten with a rail thin physique, Rojas looked like he'd be ground to powder by a sandstorm. His freckled face was capped by a thatch of red hair. Death smiled at his surname. *Rojas*.

"You summoned me, Sergeant Major?"

Muerte motioned for Rojas to take a seat. He stared at his laptop, then turned to Rojas. "25 insurgents. It says here you killed 25 insurgents."

Rojas sat silently, running his hand over his ginger brush cut.

"How does that make you feel, to kill 25 men? "

"Are you with JAG?"

"I'm not with JAG," Muerte said. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"It's a loaded question. If I said I felt nothing I'd be a sociopath. If I said I enjoyed it, I'd be psychotic."

Muerte chuckled. "You Living, always putting labels on your own agency."

"Living?"

"I'm not here to diagnose you."

"Honestly?" said Rojas as he straightened up. "Part of me felt good to kill those men."

"Good?"

"Yes. They were trying to kill me, but I killed them first. I suppose it's primal."

Muerte leaned back in his seat, "Please elaborate."

"It felt good, but I don't get any joy out of taking another man's life. I simply did what had to be done."

"And that is?"

"Bring my men home. Those men I killed, they have families, but so do the soldiers in my platoon."

"So, in a way," Muerte said, closing his laptop, "you view death as simply a consequence of your chosen profession."

"Yes, Sergeant Major. And I take that profession very seriously."

Muerte ruminated on his words, sizing up the freckly-faced,

red haired non-commissioned officer. There was no doubt about it. He'd found his replacement.

"Congratulations," Death said as he rose and offered a handshake. "You've got the job."

Rojas stared at Muerte's pale fingers. "Job?" Rojas asked as he rose and offered his hand in return.

"Yes, a job," supplemented Muerte. "But I must warn you, the workload will kill you."

[\[1\]](#) Angel of Death

New Poetry by Kevin Honold: "A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest"



RADIANT AS NOON / *image by Amalie Flynn*

A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest

Tell me again of that fabulous
kingdom where a single
ear of corn is more
than two strong young men can carry, where cotton
grows untended, in colors never dreamed of,
to be spun by gorgeous slaves
into garments that lie
cool as cornsilk against the skin and shine
radiant as noon.

*

How sordid and predictable history can be.
Within sight of the prize
but out of ammunition, they
lowered three men down the volcano's throat
to fetch sulfur for gunpowder.

This

was the vision
prefigured in the prophet's eye:
three men curled in a basket peering
back across the centuries,
their dewy starving faces so
desperate with hope
as they dissolve in a yellow mist,
felons set adrift.

*

North by west toward the cities of gold,
the soldiers in rags walked half-bent
with hunger and dysentery, nursing
grievous wounds sustained in hit-and-run attacks
by moss-troopers talking Choctaw.

Beside the mother of rivers, the horses sickened and died
but the soldiers, being less reasonable,
proved less destructible.

At disobedient towns they dragged out
chopping blocks to punish malefactors
and departed in a shower of ash, their legacy
a heap of severed hands slowly
clutching at flies.

*

But the much-sought golden cities sank below the horizon
like the tall ships of fable. For the Spaniards,
the age of miracles ended
somewhere in southwest Arkansas. The palaces of silver

turned Outlaw Liquor Barns, Triple-X Superstores,
the stuff of vision a mustard-colored mix

of smoke, dust, emissions
from riverside refineries and coal
plants along the Mississippi where squadrons
of John Deere combines like barn-size locusts
roll in drill order over the dry land,
half-effaced by squalls of chaff.

At night the fields burn.
Stray flames browse the blackened
shoulders of the interstate,
crop the stubble beneath the billboards.

*

In the state park south of Hot Springs
I fell asleep in a chair in the heat and woke
to a titmouse perched on the toe of my boot
with that peculiar weightlessness
shared by birds and planets

and I searched without hope for my place in the book.
Buzzards killed time there, their shadows
slipping across the iron ground
like fish in a shallow pool
while Time gaped
 at the spiders that battened
 on the flies that
swarmed the rotten
windfall apples.

*

Tenochtitlan.
At the imperial aviary, we found
a pair of every kind of bird in the world:
parrots and finches in profusion, brooding vultures,

egrets, ibis is sacramental scarlet.

Seahawks stooped and banked

through that hostile truce and we marveled

at God's prodigality, His exuberant

inventiveness, then piled tinder

to burn the thing to the ground.

Flames sheeted over the soaring

lattice dome like the fleet

shadows of clouds. For a time,

the structure smoldered,

a hissing wickerwork steaming as it cooled.

Here and there, a bird crashed the skein of ash

like a rogue comet bursting

the flaming ramparts of the universe.

Charmed in place, we held our breath,

beside ourselves, like couriers

trapped in a snowglobe, blinded

in a tempest of embers,

astonished at the work of these hands,

the everyday miracle of destruction.

New Fiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: "A Sleeping Peace"

Author's note: I arrived at this story after reading an article in Rolling Stone called 'Highway to Hell: A Trip Down Afghanistan's Deadliest Road' and I thought, what if what's happening in Afghanistan ended up happening here, in America? Would Americans finally "get it" then?

*

Sometimes the weariness in my bones was so bad it took near everything I had just to get out of bed in the morning. Captain Hernandez tapped on the front door at 0400. I was already packed and dressed. I slipped my nose out of Zachary's doorway. His bedsheets were tousled and I wanted to tuck him back in, but I didn't want to risk waking him. Let him sleep. I slid his door shut and turned the knob. Matt was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, as he was every Monday morning. He handed me a thermos of Klickitat Dark Roast.



photo: Andria Williams

"Thanks."

"Text me every hour on the hour." He hugged me close.
"Please."

His beard was just the right length, not too scratchy. "Go back to sleep. Try to grab another hour or two before Zachary wakes up."

"I'll try," he whispered in my ear and squeezed me closer.

Captain Hernandez tapped on the door again.

"Gotta go. Remember to ask Teacher Julie about Zachary's—"

"I'll remember."

"And you've got another doctor's appointment this—"

"I've got the home front covered, Charlie-Echo."

"Okay."

We kissed. Matt made sure I had my briefcase, bulletproof vest and everything else, then opened the door. The damp predawn air blew in with the sound of idling engines and Captain Hernandez's voice. "Morning, ma'am."

"Morning, Captain. Latest intel?" I knew Matt liked hearing the Captain's briefings. It was practically every other week that Matt was trying yet another prescription for his anxiety. None worked.

"Contractors for ODOT took an ambush on Saturday, trying to patch up that one crater near mile marker 270. No casualties. The hole's still there, though."

"Any IED's?" Matt stepped onto the threshold.

"Four, sir. EOD's taken care of them though."

"Maybe you guys mix up your route a little bit? Take one of the bridges across the river, or several, crossing back and forth."

Shaking my head: "I'm already leaving at the crack of dawn as it is. We'll take eighty-four all the way out."

Captain Hernandez agreed. Matt shifted uncomfortably; he didn't like being reminded that in a very real way he didn't

know what the hell he was talking about. The Captain knew when to take his leave. "Clock's ticking, ma'am." He tapped his watch and stepped his combat boots down the front steps.

I glanced back at Matt, hoping he wouldn't but knowing he would.

"I don't see why you can't just deviate your route a little. These National Guard guys don't know their ass from a hole in the—"

"Matt, honey, please. I gotta go."

"Why's the Governor making you do this? Plenty of other County Executives don't have to travel out to the sticks. In Baker, in Grant, in Malheur, in any of the eastern counties there's not even any county government left to speak of."

"You know why. There needs to be a government presence in Umatilla. It's the bridge. It's the dam. It's the interstate."

"I don't want to lose my wife to some goddamned—" I saw how much it took him to swallow his worries down. He couldn't help himself; he always grew so anxious right at the last minute. "I'm sorry, you gotta go."

"I'll see you Friday."

Matt nodded and sighed. "We'll be here."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Zaniyah?"

"Yeah?"

"Text me, please."

Emails were already rolling in on my phone. Captain Hernandez was waiting, holding the armored door to my SUV open for me. "I'll text you when we make it past the Hood River base."

*

My phone scrolled with endless memos. Everything Umatilla County—population 43,696 and dropping—from road maintenance to school renovations. Reviewing and e-signing as much as I could in the back of my de facto mobile office, a hulk of an SUV outfitted with bulletproof windows and steel-plated undercarriage.

We picked up Muri, my counterpart in Wasco County, before taking I-5 to the I-84 interchange. Our order of movement was lead Humvee with a gunner and a .50 cal in the turret, my SUV, a second Humvee, followed by Muri's SUV, then a rear Humvee. We hit the interchange at a smooth 70 mph maintaining a strict 20-meter interval between vehicles.

I yawned and glimpsed the shadow of someone standing under an overpass. They were holding their phone to their face and tracking our convoy with it.

"D'you see that one, Captain?"

"I did, ma'am." He commanded the convoy from the passenger seat. "Third lookout this morning."

"They know we're coming."

"They always do."

I suppressed another yawn and tried not to think about it, bending to my memos again, sipping my Klickitat Dark. Portland swirled by my window. Even at this hour the streetcars were running, bicycle lanes filling up, another day in the life of a great American city no doubt suffering its fair share of contested neighborhoods, crime, refugee-packed stadiums and smoke-filled summers where the air itself became an enemy to defend against. But the insurgency held little sway here. Portland, Salem, the coast and anything within artillery distance of the I-5 corridor was *safe* insofar as the National

Guard continued to pour manpower and materials into defending it. As for any territory east of the Cascades, however, the same could not be said.

The first couple hours of our trip sped by, the lead truck passing smoothly around the handful of semis still making runs into contested territory, the whole convoy flowing apace. The question, the one question that always gnawed its way into my brain every Sunday evening, before even waking Monday morning, before saying goodbye, hit me, once again. Why not turn back? It was the sight of the first military outpost atop Tooth Rock that brought the question on. The Tooth Rock outpost was, for me, the western entry point to the Columbia Gorge, the Cascades, thickly forested, magical, wet with ferns and moss, riven with canyons and waterfalls, a fairy tale place of my youth, a place to camp, to hike, to explore. But it wasn't that way anymore. Now, I saw only violence. The way the Columbia River had once upon a time blown a mile-wide hole through the mountains. The way the land was torn apart and uplifted, itself a testament to the hundreds of thousands of years of earthquakes and eruptions from the resident volcanoes at present asleep under their cones of ice.

Tooth Rock disappeared around another upthrust of rock. A spattering of headlights on the westbound lane, some people still commuting into Portland. Why not turn back? Herrera, the County Executive for Gilliam County, was not in the convoy. He called in sick, as usual. The Hood River CE, Jules, slept in a bunker in the base there. Sherman County's CE was a no-show, probably nursing a hangover, the stress of the job driving her to drink her way out and drink her way back every week, or so I heard. The only other county besides my own along I-84 was Morrow County. That was Henderson's territory, or had been. He boasted of being born and bred in Morrow County, knew the people and the hills like the back of his hand. He once said to me, "Zaniyah, just be yourself. Don't be the Governor's lackey. Don't be the authoritarian dictating curfews and

martial law. Don't be the savior. Just be yourself, the girl from Umatilla. You're from Umatilla, right? That's why the Governor appointed you, wasn't it?" He was right and he was dead. Insurgents ran a Corolla rigged with fertilizer and a suicide bomber straight into his SUV as he was leaving the compound down in Heppner, the county seat.

"We should have choppers."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Nothing, Captain. Just thinking aloud."

Choppers were too scarce and expensive to fuel. The winds in the Gorge too treacherous for most aircraft, the weather too unpredictable.

The Bonneville Dam slid into view, its turbines and buttresses stretching across three separate islands. It was soon followed by the white-trussed expanse of the Bridge of the Gods which seemed to hover midair under a blaze of spotlights. A checkpoint searched vehicles before allowing them to cross. Why not turn back? Even this lake of a river fell dam-to-dam down to Portland and out to the Pacific. To travel east was to go against gravity. "I'm appointing you all to be my eyes and ears on the ground," said the Governor. "The mayors and county commissions elected locally, well, they're not what I would call cooperative all of the time, especially in the eastern counties." My phone vibrated with a new email from the Mayor of the City of Umatilla. His email was mostly a rant interspersed with all-caps saying that I did not have the authority to direct road maintenance, though they were state funds and the State Legislature explicitly directed CE's to monitor all state expenditures. I did not have the authority to make the curfew start earlier and end later. I did not have the authority to ration medical supplies or food aid. Mayor Pete even brought out the big guns, the telltale codewords and innuendo of popular insurgent threads, the language of which

was now near ubiquitous across much of eastern Oregon. "It's only because of the Governor's MILITARY DICTATORSHIP via stationing TROOPS in our backyard that YOU even survive your little trips out here!" Was that a threat? What else could it be, in times like these? "Where are you anyways?" he wrote. "Why aren't you in the office yet?" I replied with only an "En route. - Z." and pictured his face reddening at the screen. Why keep going? Why fight for people who did not want you to fight for them?

The interstate slithered its way between the dark river and darker upthrusts of rock. Exits were blocked off and closed. Corporal Barnes, ever the silent driver, clicked on the windshield wipers as the air congealed into a mist of rain. A prominent slab of rock jutted out over the right side of the road and when our headlights passed across it, I saw the message, we all did, could read those white letters spray-painted across the wet black of the rock plain as day. We Will Never Stop, We Will Never Tire, We Will Fight Until Our Blood Runs Dry.

No one said anything, hearing only my own voice in the back of my head repeating a question.

*

"What's that, sir?" Corporal Barnes pointed up ahead.

The sky was still black but for a rimming of cobalt. In the mountains across the river, in Washington state, the subtlest red sparks arced back and forth like a mini meteor shower. "Tracers," said Captain Hernandez. "One of our own out of Hood River."

We saw the glow of Forward Operating Base Hood River before we saw the base. The jade trusses of the bridge, too, popped out of the dawn, its floodlit reflection shimmering across the water. FOB Hood River sat on what was once a waterfront park. It was the operational and logistical hub of the entire Mid-

Columbia region. The main employer, too. Our convoy slowed as traffic thickened and then crawled and then stopped altogether, the line to get on-base overflowing onto the interstate.

Captain Hernandez yawned.

"Get much sleep, Captain?"

"No, ma'am. The baby woke up two, three times before I got up to leave. Hungry little guy. Tell me, when do they start sleeping through the night?"

"It takes a while," I said, "but they eventually do."

The town of Hood River sloped uphill on our right, broad yellow windows capturing the view, though more and more of those houselights never switched on anymore. Whoever had the means moved east. Ever since Town Hall was pipe-bombed people just didn't feel safe anymore. That happened despite the nearness of such a massive base with its five-meter-high Hesco walls and thousand-or-so troops and reams of concertina wire and guard towers bristling with machine guns. Begged the question: how much did all this military might actually protect anybody? Still, I'd be returning to FOB Hood River before sundown to spend the night on a cot in a tent. I never expected I'd be sleeping four out of every seven nights inside of a bunker, but whose career ever goes according to plan? The cooks in the chow hall made omelets for everyone pulling midnight duty and for the rest of us who couldn't sleep.

"There they are," said Corporal Barnes. I was about to text Matt but stopped to stare out at the platoon of Humvees limping their way across the bridge. One had a cockeyed wheel and half its bumper blown off. Even from where we were on the interstate you could see the spiderwebs in their windshields, the smoke stains across their hoods.

*

Terraces of rock stepped into the clouds. White threads of rain-born torrents wound off their green flanks and spilled onto the broken and tumbled basalt below. We rolled at a steady 55 mph. The trip always felt a little less perilous once the sun broke and I could watch the sides of the Gorge panning by, at least for a while. We sped through The Dalles, with its orange-trussed bridge and hydroelectric dam. Muri and one Humvee peeled off, taking the second-to-last exit. I texted Muri a good morning because I knew he'd be just waking up. He replied with a good luck.

I resumed my work: sewer repairs, budget shortfalls, a new zoning ordinance to prohibit illegal squatting. Another email from Mayor Pete discussing an upcoming committee vote to move the county seat back to Pendleton, an hour further east down I-84. Out of the question. A teleconference with the Governor, tedious logistics details for air drops to the Yakama and Umatilla Indian Reservations, their militias still holding their own, even regaining territory previously stolen by the insurgents who wanted access to salmon fishing hotspots. Then came another spray-painted rock outcropping. The Government Does Nothing For Us. Absolutely Nothing. Why could we not hire someone to cover those up?

"These cams have all been spray-painted," said Captain Hernandez. The entirety of the interstate was under surveillance, except when the insurgents managed to jerry rig one of those drones you could buy at Walmart and rig it with a can of spray paint and a funny robotic finger to depress the nozzle. "They'll be out till next week, at a minimum."

Beyond The Dalles traffic virtually disappeared. We passed the half-sunken remains of the Union Pacific train that had derailed last year, waves lapping at the sides of empty boxcars. Trains could use only the Washington side of the river now. But for how much longer? The Trunk Rail Bridge slid into view next. Its middle section was missing, it had been blown apart and sunken into the river, only twisted fingers of

steel reaching through the air like two rheumatic hands straining to grasp one another again. I was still half-listening to the Governor in the teleconference. “—strong intel that the infrastructure through the Columbia Gorge remains a top target. We must—” but I already knew what he was going to say. The carcasses of vehicles, both civilian and military, began to propagate across the shoulders of the highway like roadkill, just pushed off to the side, no time to get a wrecker out here to remove them. We groped our way around the blast crater leftover from a recent IED, then another crater, and another, then a few more hastily filled-in ones. “We must remain committed,” said the Governor. “We must keep moving, keep pressuring the enemy even if they’re people we grew up with, even if they’re family.”

The lead truck slowed and maneuvered around something like the tenth blast crater in a row. Corporal Barnes followed in its tracks. We regained a 45 mph speed and kept moving.

*

“Why’re we stopping?” The windshield filled with brake lights, more than you’d expect on a seemingly empty highway.

“Don’t know, ma’am.” We came to a dead stop. “I can’t see beyond those semis up ahead.” Captain Hernandez touched his hand to the mike on his throat. “Alright, TC’s dismount, drivers and gunners remain in your trucks. Let’s go see what’s going on.” The Captain got out. Three other soldiers linked up with him, everyone kitted in their helmets and vests. They locked and loaded before disappearing into the mingled glares of the sunrise and the red taillights up ahead. It was just Corporal Barnes and me. I slipped my own vest on though it didn’t fit well and the plates were heavy and the velcro scratched my neck. Other vehicles—civilian cars and trucks—began piling in behind us. Locking us in. Trapping us.

It all started coming back to me, flooding in like a waking

dream. It had been over a year since the attack on my life but an attack of another kind made it real again, made it now. Those woods were these woods. Thickets of gangly black oaks. Cloaking the multiple ravines the enemy used to ingress and egress. The insurgents knew that if they simply kept shooting at one portion of bulletproof glass at some point it was sure to fail. They prevailed. One bullet made it through, exploding stuffing out of my seat, missing my head by mere inches. Then the enemy broke contact, the sound of their four-wheelers fleeing into the hills. The bark of our .50 cal as they returned fire. Captain Hernandez shouting into two hand mikes at once. Me, just lying on the floor, touching my trembling fingertips to the side of my head, my temple, my ear, my hair—just to make sure it was all still there.

I realized I was doing controlled breathing like when I was in labor with Zachary, twenty hours in that hospital bed, Matt counting my contractions for me. I counted the seconds, minutes, until Captain Hernandez returned.

“Shit.”

“Ma’am?” said Corporal Barnes.

“Nothing, nothing.” I had only forgotten to text Matt. Texting him now. I’m alright, we made it past HR. Smooth sailing so—

“Another crater,” said Captain Hernandez, huffing back into his seat, slightly wet from the rain. He slammed his door shut, locked it. “Big one. Both lanes. Same one as last week. Contractors still haven’t filled it in yet.”

“They’re tired of getting shot at.”

The Captain ejected a bullet, catching it out of the air. “I would be, too. In the meantime both lanes are squeezing onto the shoulder to get through.”

“State patrol up there?”

Captain Hernandez only chuckled and shook his head.

"Figures."

"It unfortunately does, ma'am."

We waited, everyone's mufflers chugging in place. Captain Hernandez peered up the cliffs looming over our righthand windows. He radioed Hood River. "Hot Rocks, this is Charlie-Echo-Six, over." Garble in his earbud. "Requesting a UAV flyover on the high ground to my south, break. Our position is whiskey-mike-niner-four..."

I tried not to count the seconds ticking by on phone. Other vehicles were inching forward. Why were we still stopped? Not moving at all? I could smell myself I was sweating so bad, forcing myself to breathe in my nose, out my mouth, closing my eyes, unsure how much longer I could continue skating along the edge like this until—"Wake the fuck up."

The Captain slapped the back of Corporal Barnes's helmet.

Barnes snapped his head up. "Huh?"

"We're moving."

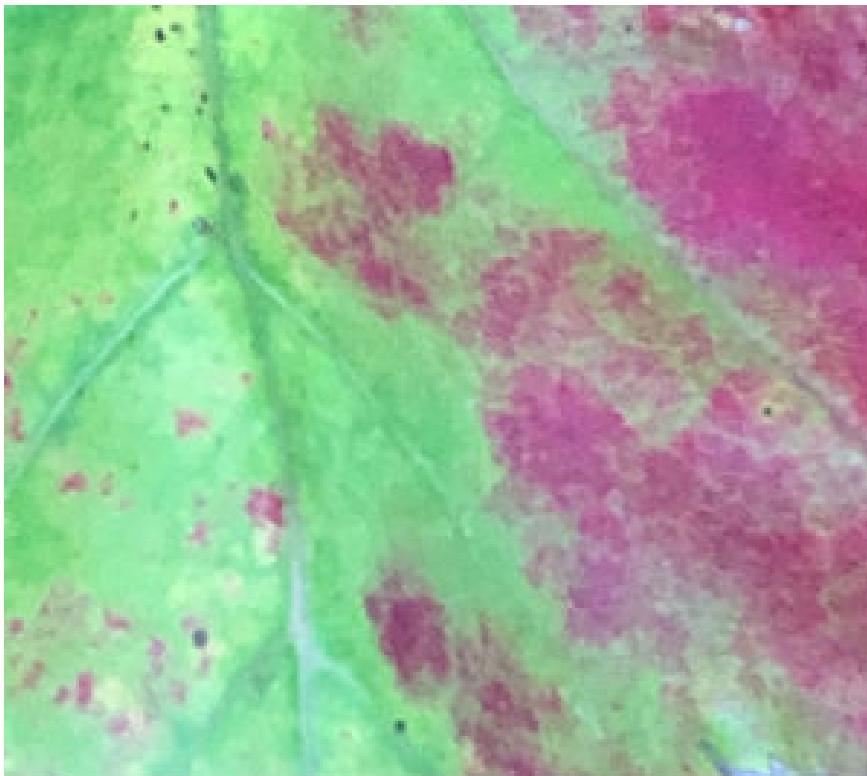
"Sorry, sir."

It took a minute but we finally made it past the blast crater, its hole so deep and wide we could have fit our entire SUV inside of it. Then we were moving again and all I wanted was to take the next exit, turn around and beeline it back home. I wanted to be there for my husband, for my son. So what if these people wanted to deny election results? So what if they wanted to set up their own shadow governments and threaten, coerce, kidnap or kill their own elected officials? So what if they wanted to build shooting ranges and IED-making academies out in the pathless hinterlands? What difference was fighting them year after year after year ever going to make? Even once we arrived in Umatilla, I wouldn't be allowed out of the SUV.

Our convoy would roll straight into the Municipal Compound, behind the blast barriers, and there I'd sit, stuck, working what I could until nightfall, unable to so much as steal a glance out of my office's sandbagged windows. I couldn't walk the streets, couldn't talk to people, and the people knew it. All they ever saw of me was my tinted silhouette as the convoy drove by. God knows it wouldn't have mattered. Even if I could meet them where they were, still there'd be that wall of suspicion, that resentment in their eyes. I knew it, heard it nonstop growing up, that bile, that bitterness, that anti-government propaganda tinged with racism, the whitewashing of history, the so-called patriotism of "real" Americans, and so long as the supply of guns remained unchallenged, so long as the schools suffered in these blighted depopulated areas where an eighth-grader in Portland on average possessed a higher math and reading competency than any high school graduate in Umatilla, so long as there remained an endless supply of disaffected white boys willing to shoot up a shopping center or plant a bomb in the road or runoff and join the rest of "the boys" to stick it to the government treading all over their rights, this war, this insurgency, was never going to end. But it had to, it had to end, the hate at some point had to stop. Because I couldn't stop. The convoy couldn't stop. Even as the interstate raised and the Gorge ended and a clear blue sky beckoned and the land smoothed into familiar expanses of tumbleweed and rabbitbrush, dry empty capacious lands, the dual bridges out of Umatilla sliding into view, I let myself hope. I let myself drift, reminding myself of why I could never turn back. Because just above the bridges, beyond the McNary Lock and Dam, maybe another hour's drive along the river, there was a spot where the sounds of traffic died away, where there was just the wind on the water, in the grass, and the feel of the rounded rocks under your galoshes as you stood ankle-deep in the blue, where my father had taken me when I was young and we had thrown our lines in and waited, waited for what felt like decades, till a fish nibbled and finally snagged upon the hook. I was going to take Zachary to that

place, whether it be next year or two years or ten years from now, he needed to know that place, a country, a land where things weren't violent or contested but resounding in its quietude, abiding in its own mysterious slumber, that waited for us if we'd only waken to hear its singing soul once again, a song of sleeping peace.

New Poetry by Michael Carson: “Politics”



BLAME OUR BRUISES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Politics

Every 20 years or so boys dress up
And kill each other for fun.
It's the way of the wrack of the world

The wind of our imagination and our love.
To blame our costumes for our beauty
Is like to blame our bruises for our blood.
The chime is what drives us, what ticks
Our tock forward to the next spree.
The foreshortened humiliation,
The immaculate imprecation,
Is neither what we fear or what we covet.
Man is. Rats are. Take what you can
While the day is rough
Move lengthwise into the past
And blame god for never enough.

New Nonfiction from Jon Imparato: “You Had Me at Afghanistan”

“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.” –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My

skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I'm taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

*

I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my

direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this

sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish- gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and

cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good

and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain.

He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss

him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a “cold” voice but a crying voice. I mutter, “Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared.” I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don't care if he can't see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It's a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other's brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, "roadside" seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

Interview with Navy Veteran and Artist Skip Rohde, by Larry Abbott

[Skip Rohde](#) was an officer in the Navy for twenty-two years, with four submarine deployments and service in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Bosnian peace-keeping operations in 1996. After retirement (as a Commander) he attended the University of North Carolina at Asheville and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting in 2003. He opened a studio in Asheville and became a full-time artist. After five years of civilian life in 2008 he was tapped by the State Department to go to Iraq for eighteen months as a Program Management Advisor to manage reconstruction programs in country. He then went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2011 for a year to again help the citizenry with government and business management. While in Afghanistan as a Field Engagement Team Advisor he sketched the faces of various individuals, like merchants, local officials, and elders during meetings, which led to some eighty drawings and pastels in the *Faces of Afghanistan* series.



These works are now in the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History. He has said about these works, *"For an artist, these people are fabulous subjects. They have wonderfully unique faces, great dignity, passion, and expressiveness."* Rohde returned to the States in 2012 to resume his career not only as an artist but as a teacher and mentor to young artists.



His oeuvre is diverse, but one of his primary interests is the human face. In addition to the Afghanistan series he has a series of portraits of men, women, and children. To him, faces are revelatory and can uncover the truth of the person's experiences and disclose their inner lives. He feels that faces can reveal the individual's story and has noted that he draws and paints people "to tell their stories. Not mine." The Model in the Studio paintings follow up on this interest by

depicting figures in various poses. The Stories and Mysteries series go in a bit of a different direction, although the human figure is still predominant. "The Three Primary Graces" references Greek mythology. "Aftermath" shows an apparently carefree young woman in a summer dress walking on a dirt path with a destroyed city in the background, while "The Conversation" is ironic in that there is no conversation portrayed. With echoes of Hopper, a woman sits in a chair in isolation, aloof from those around her. He has said about these paintings: "Stories come to me from all sorts of people and places. Sometimes they are very real: the actual people involved in the actual situation. Other times they may come from something I need to say on my own. And sometimes, I don't know where the hell they come from. But they do."

Many of these works capture a moment of human emotion that resonates beyond the canvas.

Although he feels that the works in the Twisted Tales series lack relevance, I would argue that although the paintings are a "moment in time" they are far from mere curiosities of a bygone era. Ann Coulter is still a presence in contemporary culture (for good or ill). Although the reputation of George Bush has been somewhat rehabilitated in the eyes of some, he is still responsible for the Iraq War, and the aftereffects of that war are still being felt today. I would also argue that Karl Rove's legacy of divisive campaigns is responsible for state of politics today. He is also a commentator on Fox News so his "philosophy" is not a thing of the past. And Dick Cheney? Well, avoid duck hunting with him. In "Pleasantville" and "Ma Petite Femme" the presence of guns as a normal and essential part of American society has more bearing today, perhaps, than in 2008.

In the former work, the smiling family of dad, mom, son, and daughter (and dog) pose happily in their suburban backyard (with razor ribbon strung on the property's fence) holding M-4's. In the latter, the painting looks like an

advertisement for a high-end handbag("Fine Leather Accessories") but in place of the purse is an M-4. There is also ironic juxtaposition in some of these works. "American Style" could be a postcard image ("Let's Go!") as it depicts a snazzy red 60's coupe with a snuggling man and woman out for a cruise. In the near background, however, is a burning tank, and further back there appears to be smoke rising from a bombed-out city. Similarly, "American Acres" depicts the entry to a gated community ("A Halliburton Development") with an American flag on the massive stone wall with "No Trespassing" prominently posted on the padlocked gate. However, behind the gate is the Statue of Liberty, inaccessible, co-opted and for sale by Bush and Company to, presumably, the highest bidder.

The *Meditation on War* series is Rohde's most powerful. The eighteen paintings in the series depict various aspects of war, about some of which he says "I found that the quiet things are just as important as combat itself." Some show the effects of war on places, such as "The Wall, Gorazhde" which shows the side of a building, windows blown out, bullet holes in the bricks; in "Terminal" a bus sits by the side of the road, a derelict hulk; the lone building in the ironic "Welcome to Sarajevo" has its roof blown off. Other casualties of war are more compelling with their human subjects. "Warrior" depicts a legless veteran in his Army uniform in a wheelchair looking at the viewer. Are his eyes asking us not to look away? The human costs of war are also shown in the diptych "You Don't Understand." On the left side of the canvas, a woman (girlfriend? wife?) stands with arms folded, looking away; on the right-hand side a seated soldier in uniform (boyfriend? husband?) also looks away.



At first glance the painting might suggest irreconcilable differences with neither figure able to “see” the other. However, the soldier’s cover is in the woman’s frame, while he holds a piece of her clothing. Perhaps there is hope for mutual understanding?

“Lament” is Rohde’s most poignant piece in the series. An African-American mother cradles her dead son, still in uniform, who lies upon an American flag. Although the painting may reference the Iraq War the visual analogue to Michelangelo’s *Pieta* transcends a specific war to become more universal: a mother’s grief over her fallen son, the irreclaimable loss of life.



These paintings suggest that war doesn’t end with treaties and troop withdrawals, or end with dates and tidy proclamations. Instead, a son is dead, a mother suffers, and her suffering will continue well beyond the official pronouncements about “Mission Accomplished.”

Rohde's landscapes are at the other end of his artistic spectrum. These are usually unpeopled natural spaces of rivers, mountains, rural dirt roads, vistas, sunsets, and animals. There is a sense of calm and repose here that are counterpoints to the scenes of war and destruction, the dark irony of the *Twisted Tales*, and the anxiety and unease in numerous portraits seen in other work. "Clouds Over the French Broad River" has echoes of the Hudson River School with the billowing clouds of pink and white, while "Old Church on the Hill" recalls an earlier more peaceful time. Rohde calls these paintings "liberating," with *"usually no carefully thought-out narrative, no ulterior motive, just the enjoyment of trying to capture the essence of a particular place at a particular time."*

This idea of particularization is important in a consideration of Rohde's work. Whether an image be of war and its aftermath, or models in a studio, or faces, or scenes of nature, he grounds his images in a specific time and place while at the same time creating a sense of the universal.

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LARRY ABBOTT: What was your military experience and background?

SKIP ROHDE: I went to Navy OCS in late 1977. After commissioning, I spent four years as a surface warfare officer. Then I transferred to the cryptologic community and had a wide variety of assignments: surface ship and submarine deployments, field sites, and staffs afloat and ashore. I was at sea during Desert Storm and later was part of the Bosnian peacekeeping mission. I retired in late 1999 with twenty-two years of service.

ABBOTT: How did that influence your work?

ROHDE: Some of the influence was obviously in military-related subject matter I'd say the biggest influence was in how I think and in how I approach a new artwork. Twenty years of military life made me a very linear and logical thinker. The military has no time for ambiguity: it's "make it clear and make it concise." And that's how I tend to think about subject matter and how to paint it. I've had a difficult time trying to back off that approach and give viewers more room to find their own interpretations.

ABBOTT: What are you working on currently? *A Possible Future* is scheduled for Spring 2022.

ROHDE: There are several lines of work going on right now. I have a show scheduled for spring '22 with the working title *A Possible Future*, which I think is accurate but a terrible title and I'm wide open to suggestions. The theme is what this country might be facing in the future if we don't get our collective acts together politically, economically, and ecologically. Admittedly, it's a bit of a "Debbie Downer" theme, but one I think about a lot. The show will include paintings done over many years as well as some new ones. Another line of work is that of wedding paintings. I'll talk about that more in a minute. And a third line are my figurative works, some charcoal and pastel, others oil. Those are personal works, trying to capture a specific individual's personality, or capture an emotion.

ABBOTT: What is your art training/background?

ROHDE: My parents were very supportive and enrolled me in private art lessons starting in about the sixth grade and continuing through high school. During my first time through college, back in the 70's, I was an art major for a couple of semesters, but they weren't teaching me anything and I thought artists were just weird. I got a degree in engineering and went into the Navy. I continued to take classes when I could while on active duty. After I retired, we came here so I could study art at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with a concentration in painting, in 2003.

ABBOTT: You also do commissions and "event paintings." What is your approach to these?

ROHDE: I've always done portrait and other commissions. About four years ago, I had a lady call me up and ask if I could be the live event painter for her sister's wedding. I said absolutely, I could do that and would be happy to. Then I was immediately on Google trying to find out what the hell a "live event painter" was. I wondered if it was too cheesy or kitschy, or if I'd even like doing it, and whether it was something I really wanted to try out. So I did a couple of trial runs, making wedding paintings based on photos that I already had of the weddings of friends and relatives. I decided it seemed like fun, so I gave it a go, and now it's an ongoing line of business. Yes, it's kitschy, but it's also a celebration of one of the biggest moments in somebody's life. If I do my job right, this will be something that will hang on their wall for years, and be handed down to their children, and then *their* children, and in a hundred years somebody might be saying "that was great-grandma and grandpa when they got married way back in 2021." That's a pretty cool thought. I do about eight or nine events a year. I turn down a lot more than that. If I do more, it will turn into a "job," and that will suck the life out of it.

ABBOTT: You seem to have great interest in the human form and faces, like in *New Works 2016-2021*. You've said they are "more than just simple figure drawings," maybe more "stories and mysteries."

ROHDE: It's all about people. I like talking with people and finding out about who they are and what they've seen and done. You can walk down the street and have no clue that you're passing people with some of the most amazing stories you'll ever come across in your life. Trying to capture some of that on paper or canvas is what really excites me. And yes, that applies to the wedding paintings, too.

ABBOTT: Related are the sketches "*Faces of Afghanistan*," which depict the people you interacted with. How did these come about?

ROHDE: In 2011, I went to Afghanistan for a year as a temporary State Department officer. I was stationed in a remote district in Kandahar Province to be a "governance advisor." And no, I don't know anything about governance. Our mission was to help the local government and businesses to improve their capabilities to run their district and improve their lives. I was regularly in Afghan-run meetings as an observer, supposedly taking notes. Afghans have the most amazing faces. These are people who'd been in a war environment almost constantly for over thirty years, and who lived in a very difficult environment on top of that. So instead of taking notes, I'd often wind up sketching the men in the room. Sometimes I'd give the drawing to the guy I'd drawn. Maybe a little "diplomacy through art"?



ABBOTT: What were you concerned with in the *Meditation on War* series? I thought that “Lament,” “Warrior,” the diptych “You Don’t Understand,” and “Empty Boots” were extremely powerful.

ROHDE: The paintings you noted were all done around 2006-8. I started doing paintings about the Iraq conflict in 2005. This was early in the war and there was a lot of effort in trying to build up enthusiasm for going over there and kicking ass. It was “you’re with us or you’re against us,” questioning your patriotism if you thought it was a mistake (which it was). My intent with *Meditation on War* was to say “look, if you want to go to war, here’s what it means: people die or are mutilated, stuff gets destroyed, things go wrong, and it never, ever, goes to plan.” The paintings were based on my own experiences in Desert Storm, Bosnia, and military life in general. “Warrior” is a man who really has lost his legs. “Lament” is based on Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. Every military member who’s been deployed, especially to a hot zone, has lived “You Don’t Understand.” “Empty Boots” were my Desert Storm boots. The individual in “Saddle Up” was a Marine sergeant in the Au Shau Valley in Vietnam in ’67-68. I still add more paintings to this series whenever a particular idea comes to me.

ABBOTT: On the other end of the spectrum are the landscapes. What is your interest in these “unpeopled” spaces?

ROHDE: These are more relaxing than my people paintings.

They're just paintings for the sake of painting, to capture a moment in nature, experiment with getting the effects of light while using paint, working fast while trying to get it done before the light changes and always failing. But that experience feeds back into my other paintings. So maybe it's a form of painting exercises.

ABBOTT: What was the impetus behind *Twisted Tales*? There is a bitter edge to them, like "American Style," "Pleasantville," "American Acres," "A Pachydermian Portrait," and "Ann's Slander," referencing Ann Coulter.

ROHDE: Anger and sarcasm go together, don't they? And where can you learn sarcasm better than from your military compadres? Most of those were done around 2005 when I was really angry about the country's direction. I eventually had to stop. To do those paintings, I had to get really pissed off and stay that way in order to get the emotion into the artwork. Plus, they were very much of a specific moment in time. The "Pachydermian Portrait" was about George Bush and the Iraq invasion, but Bush has been gone for years and who cares anymore? A lot of work went into each of those paintings and they aren't relevant anymore. In '06, I decided to shift to something that was more timeless, about military life in general, and that started the *Meditation on War* series. Regarding "Ann's Slander," Coulter had just published a book called *Slander* (2002) in which she said that people like me were traitors. I took that very personally, so I called her out on it in paint.

ABBOTT: Any final thoughts on your art—where it's been, where it's going.

ROHDE: I'm very fortunate to be able to do what I do. I really am. I'm trying to follow the guidance that my parents instilled in me: to leave things better than the way I found them. I'm doing some paintings that are celebrations of great things, and some paintings that are cautionary tales, and some

that are just my own impressions of the way things (or people) are. Sometimes they turn out well.

New Poetry by Ben Weakley: “In Some Distant Country” and “How Will You Answer”



STRAW-BLONDE HAIR / *image by Amalie Flynn*

In Some Distant Country

We have seen this before, in books
and on the screen, like dust plumes rising
in some distant country. Except,
some distant country is Michigan –
armed patriots (terrorists)
in the marble halls of a statehouse.
Long guns and body armor.
Stars and bars on the flags they carry

and nooses for the nervous traitors (lawmakers)
who can read the signs on the lawn outside –
TYRANTS GET THE ROPE.

Now they are here, inside
the United States Capitol Building,
these armed patriots (terrorists)
smearing their urine and their fecal matter
on the floor and the walls, roaming
the halls with zip ties and body armor,
looking for traitors (lawmakers)
to bind, to carry outside,
where the gallows wait.

Their work is not finished.
Tomorrow, these armed patriots (terrorists)
will return to their homes, victorious,
triumphant. They will return
to towns across the fifty states
where they work at hospitals and gas stations,
at schools and police stations. They will smile
when they greet us in the grocery store
while they do their shopping.

They will tell us to unite.
They will tell us to listen
and be calm, that time
will grant amnesty (without repentance).
They want us to forget, but
their work is not finished.

Who will tell us how to love
our neighbors now?

Who can show us how to rescue
our would-be executioners
from the gallows they built?

How Will You Answer

What is the word for *home*
after houses become bombs
as they did in Baqubah and Mosul?

One afternoon your wife
has you drill pilot holes
to hang a flat screen-tv on the brick wall.
The mortar dust and shards of clay
erupt from the spinning bit
like bone ejected from kneecap
and skull in the Baghdad torture rooms.

At night, you put your son into bed
and draw the blankets up
over his freckled shoulders.
You stroke his straw-blonde hair
and wonder, what
is the word for *son*, now?

What can you call your son
now that you've seen another man's son
burning?

How will you answer
when your son calls you *father*
in the world you turned
into ash and bone?

**New Poetry by D.W. McLachlan:
“Tanana River” and “The**

Heaviness of Age"



THE RIPARIAN ZONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Tanana River

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

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

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

There was something above elegance in those motions

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

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

And I remember my commanding officer's laugh when half of you was dragged gently under a shade tree. I remember the grip on my shoulder as he told me that it was a damn good job, a fuckin' good job. I remember the way his boots rested on the desk, and how he donned his number twenty-four hat, and how he drank his coke, turning his attention to the NASCAR race circling on the other screen. I remember the way the other man laid you back, how he talked to your body under that shade tree. I still to this day wonder what he was telling you.

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

The Heaviness of Age

Sometimes in my dreams the world is covered in sand and I wonder why no one cares.

I can feel it in my sheets as I sleep, in my mouth and crusted in my eyes. I kick and brush it away, but it's never gone, and the sand always returns.

But no one cares and they act like they don't see it.
Why is it then that I'm treated so funny?

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

I don't even remember why we killed the man.
I don't remember anything but the face
That's mostly all I remember now.
His mouth blood black and tongue lolled in a dog pant.
And I don't know why we had to take pictures of them all.
It'd be much easier if they hadn't taken the trouble
to fly out there and take their god damn pictures.

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

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

I see paintings of heaven
and I never see any children in the paintings.
Where are the children?

Homer has no children in his underworld.
Just indifferent or spiteful adults.
Sometimes I think it must be the heaviness of age
that allows us to sink down and rest.

New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: “Javid”

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid’s dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

“My baby sister grabs it whenever I’m not looking and she licks it clean.”

“Wow!” he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

"Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!"

He didn't have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka "Mr. Psycho," was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

"Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants."

Javid opened his book and started reading.

"Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain."

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

"Why did you stop? Go on," snapped Mr. Psycho.

"Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don't cry inside?"



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

"Are you mocking me, kid?"

He twisted Javid's arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn't own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with Captain America and drew the superhero's pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran's Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung

damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy," He wheezed.

"You'll be fine," I lied and tried to change the subject, *"Tell me about Javid."*

"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, *"We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."*

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, *"after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."*

*

Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery

wondering what others would put on my grave.

New Fiction from Adam Straus: “ANA Checkpoint”



Sergeant

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

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

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

I copied down all of the meteorological data, along with the same enemy situation and the same friendly situation that had held true for the previous three months of deployment. I wrote word for word "the Taliban are active throughout Washir. I expect them to mass to fireteam size in order to carry out hasty ambushes if they are alerted to our presence" and "the ANA maintain checkpoints along Highway 1. At night they are

often high or asleep, so we can't count on them for help. 3rd squad will be on QRF and they'll be able to reach us within 30 minutes." I glanced over at Haggerty's field notebook. All he'd written down was "ANA checkpoint, Highway 1." In his defense, that was all any of us really needed. We'd already done this exact same patrol at least ten times.

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

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

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

*

Everyone killed their alarms on the second or third ring. We got dressed and kitted up in silence, each set of bunkmates in an island of light from the bare bulbs that hung from the

canvas above our racks. I chugged one of my RipIts and pocketed the other, in case I started nodding off later. The center of the tent was still dark.

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

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

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

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

"I think Gabby's cheating on me."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, I'm not 100% sure. It's just little things. Like I saw on her Instagram story that she was at a party on Saturday night. When we talked on Monday and I asked her what she'd

done over the weekend, she said 'nothing.' And the other day some dude commented on one of her photos. I asked her who he was, and she said it was one of her cousins. But I remember her telling me like six months ago that all of her cousins are girls. My point is, why lie if there's nothing going on?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Goddamn Aziz, you always keep it heavy."

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

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

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

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

No matter how many times I'd done it, I still got a bit of a rush from leaving the wire. Even though there was no real difference between the desert we'd just crossed and the desert we now entered, there was something unmistakably different on

the north side of that guard post. An undercurrent of electricity ran through the air. We were out and about in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; anything could happen. It could be the last ten minutes of our lives and we might not even know it. I straightened in my seat and craned my neck to see out the MaxxPro's portholes. I could just discern the outline of a cluster of mud huts some 800m distant, the hamlet we called "Little" (to distinguish it from "Big" on the other side of the highway).

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

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

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

“At least it looks like an ID. Yours looks like one of those fake permission slips kids try to make where they sign their mom’s name in crayon, saying they were late to school because their dog escaped or whatever.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I dropped my night vision goggles down for the short walk. Our NVGs worked by magnifying ambient light, but it was a new moon, and with no light to magnify, I could barely make out where the buildings ended and the sky began. Looking up,

though, I could see all of the stars that were normally too dull to be visible. I thought of an old Incubus song I'd liked in high school: *The sky resembles a backlit canopy, with holes punched in it... I wish you were here.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We said our goodbyes and filed out the door. I went last. The

Afghan stared up at me from the floor, and before I turned to leave, he flashed a toothless smile. I waved back awkwardly and closed the door behind me.

Haggerty was waiting for us outside. "Sergeant, are we going to go over to the other compound?"

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

"Good to go, Sergeant."

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

"Anything happen in there?" Haggerty asked.

"Nah. You see anything?"

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

"Cool."

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

"Yeah?"

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

"Really?"

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

"I feel that."

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

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

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

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

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

The one time he knows about was impossible to avoid. She came

to our farewell before we deployed, and I obviously had to be there, too. The parking lot cordoned off for our goodbyes was pure chaos. Some of the wives were bawling, a bunch of overtired toddlers were running around, and guys were trying to chug final beers without their leadership seeing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You good?" I asked.

"Yeah, man."

And then the bus lurched forward and we were gone. Gabby stood

in the middle of the crowd of crying women, waving goodbye until they melted together and vanished behind us into the desert. I thought to myself that I'd see her again at our homecoming.

*

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

"You see anyone, McClellan?" Sergeant Reiss asked.

"No, Sergeant."

"Fuck it, let's just head back to the FOB."

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

"Are you alright?" Aziz asked me.

"Yeah, just trying not to fall asleep."

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

*

It was almost dawn when we got to the tent and dropped our flaks with a collective groan of relief. Sergeant Reiss told us to hang out for a minute while he went over to our platoon commander's hooch to debrief the patrol and get some word on what was next for us. While he was gone, I brushed my teeth with a water bottle and got into my sleeping bag, ready to pass out the moment we were allowed to. By the time Sergeant Reiss returned ten minutes later, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. He said we were going to the same checkpoint on our next patrol, departing at 2200 that night. I rolled over and went to sleep.

New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: “Triple X”

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.



"Turn that shit down. NOW!"

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder, and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I'm not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren't already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Keep it down now."

"Yes, Sergeant."

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled '*thank yous*' that drift to me through the anonymous dark don't lessen the buzzing in my head.

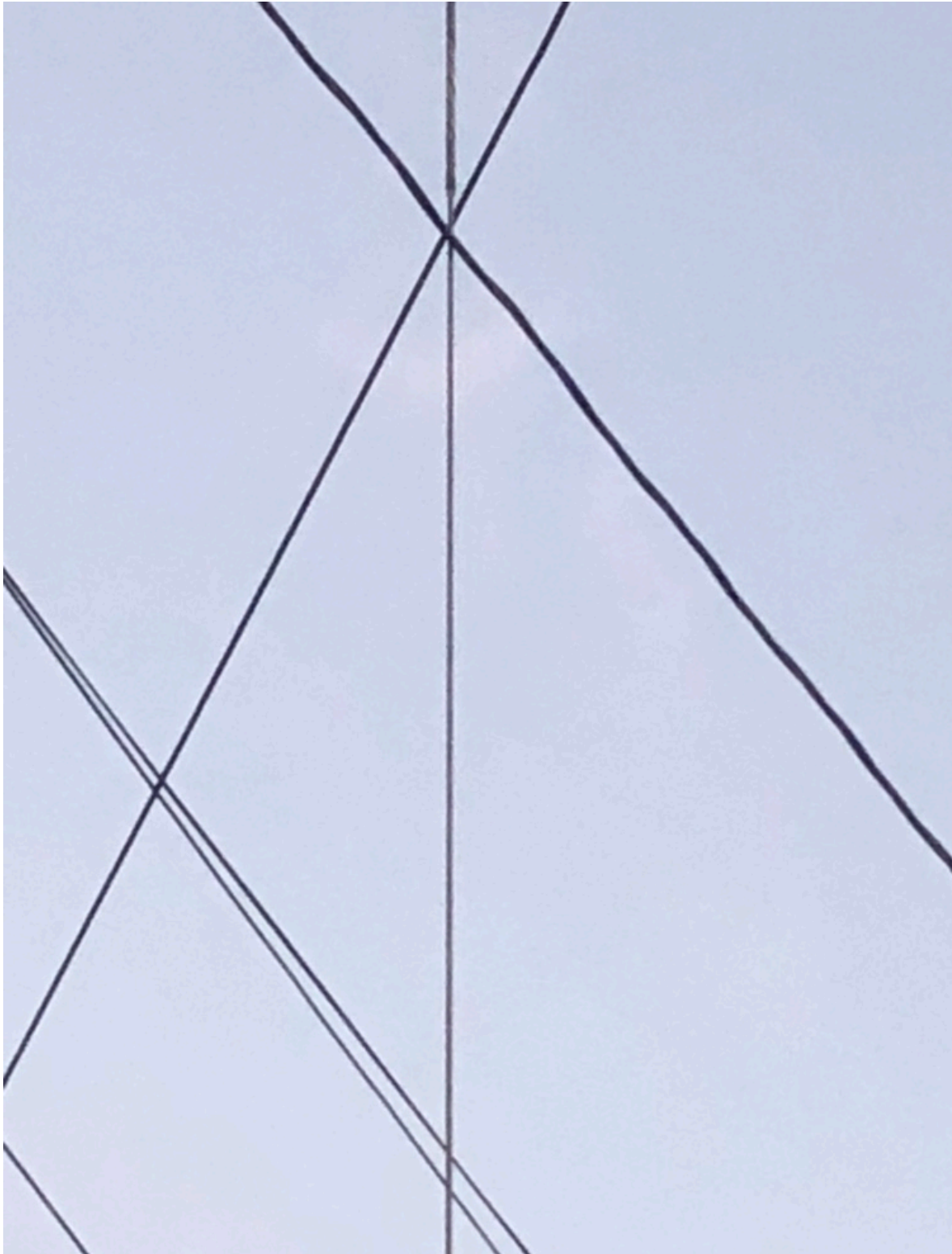
The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes

as rusted as the spent casings they've left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won't allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don't know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.

New Poetry from G.H. Mosson: “Warrior With Shield”

after Henry Moore



AN X STILL / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Blasted, broken to frag-
ments, left arm won't-
both legs blown &
absent, the spaces abuzz
w/ anger-but I edge
forward, shield up

as leg-stumps toe
for foothold. My mouth
is an X. Still-
ness. Yet I see.
I've been left.

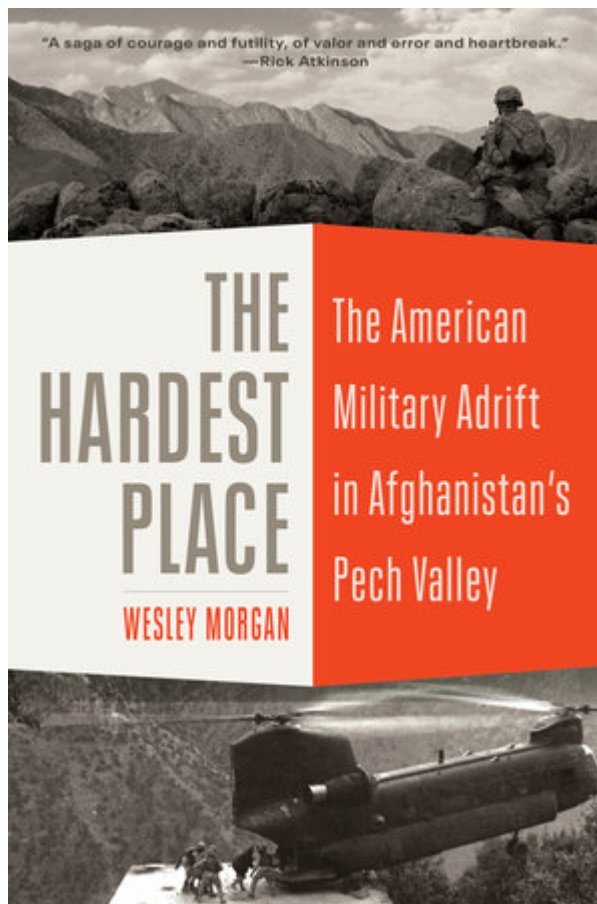
Moonlight empties
onto my chest,
rivulets down
in a branching sheen
& I swell w/ a hunch
I'll make it
as if an old tune
warms the heart,
as if I too
might sing
again to Shelly.

I've been
 some-
 one
else
 once
 some-
body
 other:
 a child.
Dandelion
 pods
 tumble
past my
 open
 palms.

New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: “‘The Hardest Place’: Wes Morgan’s Post-Mortem on Americans in Afghanistan’s Pech Valley”

If I were to write a morality tale about America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan—something in line with Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* or John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, I’d make heavy use of allegory. That’s what people did in the 16th and 17th century, they named monsters for the seven deadly sins, and great heroes and ladies for the seven optimal virtues. So using that principle, I’d probably make a valley in some hard-to-reach location, and place a village of strategic necessity there, and name it Want. And the Americans would fall all over themselves trying to take and hold Want, and they wouldn’t be able to, because Want is, as everyone knows, simply the state of desiring a thing or a state or a person—it can never be fulfilled.

Well, I suppose if this were a true morality tale, the way out of Want would be Faith, or Chastity, depending on the context. That’s how those books were written back in the day.



Wesley Morgan is a journalist. His debut book, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* is not a morality tale, and there's no need for the type of heavy-handed writing or obvious analogies popular a few centuries ago. Morgan simply writes what he sees in interviews, documents, and research, as well as what he observed during reporting trips to the Pech, which he covered as a conflict journalist about a decade ago.

As it turns out, there *is* a valley, and the valley *does* have a village of great importance to the Americans, and the village's name *is* Want (the Americans transliterate its name from an old Soviet map to "Wanat" which could also be styled "why not?") and sure enough, filling the village with soldiers does not satisfy anyone's objectives or ambitions. Want—the place, the village—is a kind of bottomless pit, and, essentially, an allegory for itself.

Everyone, and I mean everyone who deployed to Afghanistan on a

combat mission and observed the purposeless and absurd nature of the war should read this book. There are Americans and Afghans who are thoughtful, and optimistic, and earnestly try to make things better, and Americans and Afghans and other foreigners who are cynical and egotistical and through their busy, careless actions make things exponentially worse. There aren't heroes or villains.

The Hardest Place is exhaustively researched, pulling on hundreds of interviews and many more sources and documents to paint a comprehensive portrait of the area—a hard to reach place in the northeast of Afghanistan, on the border of Pakistan. The soldiers and officers who are quoted and described offer vivid portraits of typical American servicemembers presented with a harsh and unusual challenge. Morgan doesn't limit his scope to the American or Afghan side of things—he talks wherever possible with Afghans, and Taliban, and other local residents of the area. It is often during these discussions that some crucial fact or perspective missing to Americans clicks into place, such as the significance of the lumber trade and the various families engaged in that pursuit in the Pech river valley. Morgan's familiar with the Soviet experience of the place, and he relays his own experiences, too, that cannot be fully put into words, but may be described as a mixture of awe and dread.

Reading *The Hardest Place* was hard to do and people with PTSD ought to be warned. One will see one's officer leadership in its pages—one will see one's units—one will see successes and failures, noble and wise visions to improve the place, and naked, disgraceful ambition. Morgan looks at the actions and events plainly, and without judgement. He writes about significant actions and results and the evolving context of the place.

Careful readers will note that there were places and schemas where it seemed like progress was being made, and that progress could be made. Those of us with multiple combat tours

to Afghanistan under our belt know this phenomenon well; one sees or experiences a failure of a deployment where everything becomes worse, and decides to turn things around during a subsequent deployment, to learn from the mistakes of the past. An empathetic battalion commander and a visionary brigade commander make progress in a place for a year or two. Eventually, inevitably, a dumb guy wants to see action, wants to see combat, and jumps in and shoots the place up, and everything goes to hell.

Morgan lays bare a couple of illusions: first, that the good officers or good plans would work without the bad officers and cruel plans, and second, that the military is capable of selecting good officers to do good planning—as often as not, these people seem to leave the military, and the ones who remain are (as often as not) the dumb and cruel ones.

Even those officers who are neither dumb nor cruel, like Stanley McChrystal, come in for criticism. McChrystal's impulse to do something rather than nothing when faced with doubt contributed to unnecessary catastrophes in the Kunar Province of which the Pech is a part. An entire mindset that has begun permeating the corporate world, depending on ideas like "data-driven" and "metrics-driven" and which earlier generations would have described as "results-driven," led to avoidable blunders and worse. Americans, it seems, murdered in the name of progress. This type of behavior and mentality could be seen everywhere in Afghanistan, and plays out here in the United States.

A morality tale might have worked out differently for the people described in *The Hardest Place*. Some veterans of the Pech leave the military, others are promoted to greater levels of responsibility. The U.S. was drawing down from Afghanistan under President Trump; it seems that drawdown has been placed on hold under President Biden. In a morality tale, there would be some clear lesson to be learned. The lesson—that America's business in Afghanistan concluded years ago and that we ought

not to be there today—is present, but Americans seem incapable of learning it.

But *The Hardest Place* isn't a morality tale; its protagonist is not named Christian, and nobody is trudging slowly toward the Celestial City. The book is long-form journalism at its best. Reading about America's sad and doomed involvement in the Pech, one feels that the valley acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting the essence of the people and units that enter. What those units encounter, ultimately, is themselves—bravery under fire, civilian casualties, idealistic dreams of a peaceful Afghanistan, Medals of Honor, victory, defeat. The place eventually resists every attempt to change it, defeats efforts to shift how America's enemies use it. What does that say about American culture? That America actually hoped to succeed, patrolling in a place named Want?

Morgan, Wes. *The Hardest Place* (Random House, 2021).

You can purchase '*The Hardest Place*' [here](#) or anywhere books are sold.

**New Poetry from Andy Conner:
“Apples,” “Untouchable,”
“Remanded In Custody”**



YOU MEAN NOTHING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Apples

'The landmines are just like apples'

Khmer Rouge survivor

Apples can peel your skin
Like it isn't there

But more often than not
The cruellest fruit
Sucks the rusty blade

And leaves threads

Dripping

Threads of skin
Threads of your life
Dripping
Seeds onto barren ground

You mean nothing to the apples
You mean nothing to the apples
You mean nothing

Their anaesthetic minds
Hold no sense of time
No sense of pain
No sense
No sense of what remains

And if you
Are one of the hand-picked
Who escape in a step-right-on-it flash
Give thanks for this windfall

Which leaves survivors
Green
To the core

As they crawl
With the worms
With the worms
And the decay

Praying
To scrump a handout
With no hands
For the crumb
Which may or may not come

As they sit
In their own shit
Begging
On their stumps
For a friendly worm
To turn
Up
And eat it

Untouchable

On my recent trip
to Gujarat

I took
numerous
pretty photographs

of Modhera
Palitana
Dwarka
The White Desert

and other pretty places

but

the image
I can't delete
from my heart

my hard drive

is of a ragged street child

at Vastrapur Lake
who stepped out
from the promenading crowd

raised
his left
index finger
into the stifling
late afternoon

air

and drew
a rectangle
to take
an imaginary selfie

with me

Remanded In Custody

How can you talk
Of an even split
When you're parents
Of three kids

How can you ask
For understanding
When you won't say
What you did

How can you demand
We keep calm
When all you do
Is shout

And scream
It's your own business
When we're what
The fight's about

How can you plead
You need your freedom
When you've built
Our jail

Whose four sad walls
Have heard it all
Every selfish
Last detail

How can you think
We're stupid
'Cos we don't know
What it means

To move on and
Make a new start
When we're not yet
In our teens

If you two
Are so clever
And know what
Life's about

Why must it
Take forever
To sort
Your problems out

You've no thought
For our feelings
Or respect for
What we think

While you resent
That we need feeding
When you don't have
Cash for drink

You complain
We're far too young
To understand
Your trials

Well in this case
It's not the children
Who're acting
Like a child

You both believe
That you're the victim
Of the other's
Poisoned mind

But if your eyes
Can still open
You might see
The only crime's

Neglect of
Your own kids
All three
Ripped apart

By being used
As silent weapons
Against your
Other half

How dare you
Claim us as conscripts
To fight
Your filthy war

When the offence
That we committed
Was only
Being born

You'd never think
You're guilty
But if you'd any
Common sense

You'd see the last thing
Left in common
Is we've all got
No defence

New Poetry from Scott Janssen: "Bottle Tree"



VIETNAM DID I / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On my first visit I asked
A stock question about
Whether you'd been in the military.

Marines, nineteen sixty-six, you said,
A hint of menace in your eyes.
I never talk about it.

On my way out the door
I asked your wife about a
Tree in the front yard,

Its branches capped with
Blue and green and pink

Bottles made of glass.

It's a bottle tree, she said.
Pointing at a cobalt blue bottle
Glinting with sunlight,

She told me it had
Special power to lure in
Ghosts and lurking spirits.

They get trapped in there, she said.
Then sunlight burns them up
So they can't haunt us anymore.

Eight months later
You could no longer walk.
I rolled your wheelchair

Onto the warbled porch
Where we sat and talked
About how rough life is.

I never told you about
Vietnam, did I? You whispered.
I shook my head.

As you spoke,
Your eyes averted,
I looked at that cobalt blue bottle

And imagined it slowly filling
With blood and shrieks
And grief and the sound of

Rotor blades and the smell
Of burning flesh and the
Taste of splattered gore

And the sensation of
Adrenaline pulsing and

Memories of home and

Buddies who were killed
And of fear and rage and
betrayal and weeping

That lodge in your throat
Before you swallow
It all down

Into your belly.
Don't ever tell anyone
About this, you said,

Your hands trembling,
Jaw shivering.
I asked if there was

Anything else.
You started to say something
But stopped yourself.

No, you said.

**New Poetry from Nestor
Walters: "Homecoming"**



FLATTEN TO BREATHLESSNESS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Only the dead have seen the end of war –Plato

he lies down, finally to rest.
grey light bands his closed door
with no silver at the edges. They said he left
one foot in the sand. wait, a head
no, a hand. the pale orange bottle, only
dust at the bottom, slips from his
fingers. one missed his mouth
small, white, and round, it
shines from the dark floor like
a little moon. In the space
between shadows and dreaming
his way to death, he smooths a dressing on
the hole in Seth's neck, he wraps
a scarf on Nick's face, still
burning with chemical fire, he
lowers Jeremy's hand, still gloved,
into a black trash bag. His
pupils sharpen to pinpoints, his

chants flatten to breathlessness, these,
his friends' names, hammered into
cold steel necklaces
Jeremy, Seth, Nick
beckoning
from darkness

won't someone tell him
you're not crazy
you should want to go home but
stay a while
stay and be here with me

New Poetry from Sheila Bonenberger: "They Gave Their Lives"



UNDERGROUND FORGETTING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The brass buttons are piled in a bowl
that sits on the shop counter
beside the cash register,
so I buy one,
watch as the clerk drops it
into a paper bag, gently
folding the open end over
so the button doesn't fall out.

Such are the tender considerations
we resort to when it comes
to Union buttons mined

from Marye's Heights, the field
blood transformed into a massive
trauma center, and those many
soldiers, hastily tipped into graves
scratched higgeldy-piggeldy in the earth
and quickly left, without markers,
abandoned to the underground,
earth's crowded room,
to work its magic on the soldiers
and their uniforms under
the same gibbous moon
shining down on life going on,
so that one day a treasure hunter
turns the detector's sensitivity
to high, reaching well past
unreadable trash,
finally capturing a deeper
signal to shovel through grass,
past stones and worms, into dreams
of wealth or glory, pulling up
a solitary, now verdegris button
bent slightly as the soldier
fell hard perhaps against a rock
that would sleep unchanged beside him
until the treasure hunter conspired
to craft a stranglehold on history
proclaiming that this discovery
announced an end of sorts to the story
of a fallen soldier,
one that can be labeled,
one you can put a price on,
but the truth is that buttons
cannot be counted on
to hold a jacket snug, can even
loose their hold on the fabric
of dignity, on the fable
of victory, if what they hold

has been released to flourish
underground forgetting
that perfection is elusive
and we are not perfect
though we hurl ourselves at it
again and again.

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



PRAY FOR THE BLAST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Checkpoint

The car came from nowhere, it came
from everywhere –

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

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

Doc cuts his shirt.
His face is weathered by years
of this. Layers
of skin and yellow fat pucker
from his open side.

He breathes.

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

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

There are Four Ways to Die in an Explosion

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

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

Heat from the explosion starts fires.
Vehicles Burn. Ammunition
burns. People burn,

alive. When a driver is trapped inside
white-hot steel, prayers
must be said silently for the smoke
to take him first.

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

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

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

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

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

Over the horizon,
where the beginning and the end

meet and disappear, Friday arrived.

We saw the jeering crowds, the scourge
and spear-tip, the crown of thorns
and the crucifix, waiting.

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

**New Poem from Nazli
Karabiyikoglu: “Hymn: A
Coffin at the Gates of
Topkapi”**



COLD SONGS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The head, decapitated,
it sits on a shore, at some corner of the world.
Desperation is what they feel as blood gushes out from the
half-neck.
Death, however, has always been there,
nothing new, an enslaving event.
The name of the deal was predefined –
“flight”. It has been around since the Order of Assassins.
Part of us see the beauty in all this, even when the tortures
last
till the moon starts to shine over us.
Sir!

There you lie, your frail length almost pours out from the bed.

And here I am, by your side, barren inside,
yet my mind replays a moment with you,
where you feed me freshly-picked strawberries.
My worst nightmare is finding a way into my life,
into you, through your flesh and bones
yet my heart replays a moment with you,
where you dress me with freshly-picked strawberries.

Sir!

Many calls for prayer have been sung.

And here I am, can't look away.

My devotion may be in vein, but what I'm losing now is transcendental.

You missed most of it, as they held a mirror to your nose
and checked if you still breathed. So beautifully you lay there.

Before this fate, I was as effective as a human shield.

Here I am, bitter as rock, by the frilled duvets,
thinking how we must keep you alive
and not sickly-yellow and quiet like this.

See? I'm here by the frilled duvets, ice cold,
thinking how I crave to coil up next to you.

Sir!

We finally made peace with death. First our eyes watched the floors, then our fists beat our chests. Distances reached, horizons obtained, flasks of scarce water and worn sheaths. Almost everyone lost their sons to this war. Our sons. Our people. They believed in the protection of their shields and wanted to go as far as it got them, is that why we say our hymns for our sons, on and on for days? Is this our fate?

I decided I'll surpass fate and kismet and luck or

whatever. So here I am, standing before that reckless hope. I grabbed it by the chin, pushed it against a wall and I let anger take control. I asked it, and I was quite sincere about it too, "How is it that death gets in?"

The way you put your head on my head,
lifeless, breathless, heavy.
Your word is my law, and I stand by its chime.
With largest oceans behind my back,
you were my creation, and I gave you away.
Your first steps, your first words, have been my challenge.
And the way you put your shoulders on my legs.

Sir!

Greatest storms whirled inside me, and, oh, I prayed
to the Almighty; to His holiness, I presented all of my
organs,
but they pulled out my womb, or what's left of it,
and even then, all that mattered was you, sir.

Something penetrates, once, twice, my spleen
watches it happen, smells pleasant, like linden, my
favorite, something to go for a child is being
created, from the char of my liver, my flesh puffs,
my flesh grows fat,
count those things that penetrate me, arms maybe,
one, two and three,
stop there, stop at the second syllable of my name,
I did not do this to
me, I did not choose to carry this burden

Beings must produce, yet I'm barren inside.
Your look is my law, and I stand by its tingle.
With vastest moors behind me
you were my darling, and I gave you away.
Your first words, *my sultan, your highness*, have been my
challenge.

Beings must produce, yet I'm barren inside, and you're lovely inside.

That's what you said

All this glory and all these gifts, what use do they serve, I pondered for a long time and I could not find the answer. I knit for a long time, laces and wools too, wore them in the cold maroon rooms of this palace, in the cold of my own body, cold, songs were cold, my violin was warm, only to me. They took me right away, and no surprise there, I was pretty, I stayed quiet when they split my legs, but I'm known for kicking quite hard. How funny, the way things change so much so fast, we were a thousand and now I'm just one, do the winds always bring injustice with them or does it travel in the pockets of soldiers?

Crying my lungs out, biting my tongue, fires scorching my stomach, do these all go together for me now?

Or have I just comprehended death and broken apart while at it?

If we can't breathe where the dead go, tears can flood, for the duration of the earth's age even, quail with rice or grape compost.

He found his place in the history books as did I.

It takes courage to stand before a dagger; I did, I stood still as a brick and I shed tears.

If it wasn't for your shadow, I'd call you my child, my life, my signature, the one that makes me get lost in those oceans.

Don't be hurt, because I'm ordinary, I think you'll outlive

me.

You'll have no idea though how we managed to get that life out of you.

I bit my tongue, held back at every chance, and saved the pain along my spine.

My womb dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out, but I will not give up on your scent.

I yearn for your chest to rise up to the highest,
for you to take one deep breath.

If it wasn't for your soul, I'd call you my child,
my flesh, my bone, the one that makes a prisoner out of me.

Don't be hurt, because I'm ordinary, you'll outlive me.

I think I see the blue of your eyes again, yes.

You'll have no idea though, what getting that life out of you cost us.

I bit every part of me within my reach, saved the pain deep in me.

The nightingale dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out of me,

but I will not give up on you.

How hard it was to bring you to life!

If it wasn't for your soul, I'd call you my child.

Sign off my sentence, my tears are my sin.

Tightly tie the rope around my neck

and tightly tie a knot to the rope that goes nowhere.

Translator's Note: The story, although fiction, sits in actual history, and gives us some pointers towards having an understanding of era and geography. Topkapi Palace is in modern day Turkey, and was mostly used as the emperor's residency during the Ottoman Empire's rule between 13th and early 20th century. The Order of Assassins, Hashashiyah or Hashishiyya, was a radical Nizari Isma'ili sect that assassinated Muslim and Christian leaders before that time period. The ordeal of flight, as in the work towards enabling humans to fly by any means, caused controversy in the Muslim world in

the past, since it is simply unnatural for humans to fly, but attempts are encountered in Ottoman history. The story, too, is likely placed in a time period where such attempts stir political balances.

New Poetry from George Kramer: “Three Snapshots of Superman’s Mother,” “Google Earth”



ASTRONOMICAL DISTANCE OF LONGING / *image by Amalie Flynn*
Three Snapshots of Superman's Mother

Budapest, Hungary. December 1944.

This stagnant end squats over its vile start
Faster than a speeding bullet!

from the slag pile, the louse waste
More powerful than a locomotive!

the fecal secretions of war
Leaps tall buildings in a single bound!

the girl's father was sought for
It's a bird, it's a plane, its Superman!

the column of Jews being
Truth, justice and the American Way.

marched to the river.
This is a job for Superman.

It was then that God stole her belief
but left her fraught wonder.

Fort Collins, Colorado. November 1963.

The vertical hold hop-skips,
horses drawing hearses
plod inside the droning box,
fusing to the vitreous reflection
of his mother's tear-streaked face.
Preschool Superman stews.
No president calls Him to Dallas.
He was not consulted
on preempting His TV show for this
dull parade.
His caped powers, though mighty,
are no match for the elegiac bagpipes or
the morose Kennedys on this untuned Magnavox.

Alexandria, Virginia. April 2016.

Floating in my feeble galaxy of lost atoms,
I peer at an old picture frame.
Behind glass the girl's silver halide half smile
issues a cautious greeting across
this astronomical distance of longing.
I orbit that smile's twilight glow –
a planet where love has nowhere to go.

Google Earth

Somewhere Gerardus Mercator
met on an equator
the ragged hunter who first drew
from warm pitch and raw whisk
the rugged path she found
to the grazing grounds.

Their compasses agreed:
on friable parchment
mapmakers must have
their maniacal dragons, their
flawed seas, and their ranges
of rumpling blunders.

An old wall was woken by
a flattened paper globe,
a remnant copy etched
by an ancient calligrapher
with a cliff grip
chiseling a copper plate.

It is easy to see what is lacking here:
a map's crinkle, or its volcanic dimples,
green alpine frock, sweat of ocean.
No chance for glass-headed pins,
and lands not thick nor lean are plially lying
on a polarized screen.

Swipe past the displaced perspective
and its warning of the asphalt assault,
sharp canines snapping
at the ribs of gated jungles,
as the electric sky thunders
down boundless data.

In this benign monitor light I read
about the first arrow and its story
of the bloody hand that held it

and the slaughters that it stopped.
We daily stride newly into changeless air
on the journey to pixel from dot.

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



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

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

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

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

*

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

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

*

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

On Not Dying

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

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

Walking at night along
the handrails of bridges, backwards,

to entertain laughing friends.
Drinking rotgut whiskey

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

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

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

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

secure, everyone's safe.
Finding no threats, I'd sit

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

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

Nocturne

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

I feel the warm wet
on my legs but it isn't blood.
I throw the sheets in the washer,

retreat to my favorite chair.
Flipping through reruns,
I settle on a comedy I've seen.

It's dark. I hear his breath
wheezing slow. The odor
of cigarettes as he drives the blade

deeper. I scream—my dog barks.
The windows blush:
I'm on the floor, the TV

flickering the news of a new day.

**New Poetry from Jacqlyn Cope:
“Mission 376: Patient X,”**

“Prolonged Exposure Therapy,” “Doxies and Rum”



THERE'S EARTH INSIDE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

MISSION 376: PATIENT X

There's dirt in his mouth now

you

know that for sure.

There's Earth inside his bloated belly

you

know that for sure.

The worms might have eaten away his ragged skin by now

but the metal is still there.

Splayed on the satin or cotton lining
like sad coins of a wishing well.

His casket might be oak, or cherry wood

you hope it was something sleek
and aesthetically pleasing

you hope the flag was soft enough
for hands and cheeks that needed touching.

PROLONGED EXPOSURE THERAPY

Ten minutes staring at
a fountain pen stabbing,
scribbling paper.

A rocket hit a concrete wall
I told her.

Water spots on bifocal glasses
blurring iris's, flickering like
burnt out pixels on a screen.

A desk placard bolded
with professional credentials
hooraying the study of mental illness.

A rocket hit a concrete wall and

Tic-tacs shaking in my red purse
snapping the container at its neck

revealing the candied-mint nonsense
delaying my esophagus to stretch
in the direction of answer.

A rocket hit a C-130 fuel tank spraying
shrapnel

Her voice dives
down into the depths
of her vocal cords
pulling out
forced tonal sympathy
an octave of care.

*If
you'd like, I can prescribe you Zoloft today.*

The rocket hit a concrete wall
the metal
a rocket
hit
the fuel tank
a concrete
w
a
l
l

DOXIES AND RUM

My Dachshund

watches me pour

third

my

rum and
Coke.
His
bowed legs sit
firmly
under
his robust
chocolate colored
chest.
Eyes
beaming
not
in judgment
but acceptance.
Captain
Morgan's
leg
swung firmly
resting on
a barrel
he winks, opens his mouth
and
howls a whistling screech
a

rocket's screech.

A
hand over his mouth

him. I quiet

Pouring
the rest in the empty glass

ice breaks up the

dissolving
into
themselves.

Spice,
sugar, caramel,
washes away the
dryness in my throat
and
salt from the sinuses stuck there.

Salt that I refuse
to expel
any
natural way.

My Doxie jumps on
my lap

smelling
distinctly of corn chips
for
no reason at all.

He rests his head
in the crevice
of my arm
sighing deeper
than
I thought he could.

**Poetry from Dennis Etzel:
“The War in Coming Out,” “The
War in Men,” “The War in
their Duties”**



SELF-ASSURANCES FENCED IN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The War in Coming Out

Today we honor those soldiers who fought for our country against oppressing forces. It was a matter of showing up. Like Leonard said, *They gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.* Howard told me how it was a point-blank question in the draft line for Vietnam: *Are you a homosexual?* Howard didn't lie. The man started screaming, *We have another f-g here. We have a queer one here.* It was a matter of showing up.

The War in Men

When they enter, the guards strip them down and beat them. The guards shout, demanding compliance. They are shown their quarters. The guards continue, tell themselves, it's either us or the prisoners. They don't care why they are here. The guards didn't choose to be here. They say, *The prisoners must have done something, or they wouldn't be here.* As small as serving time to be sent back to the front or as big

as

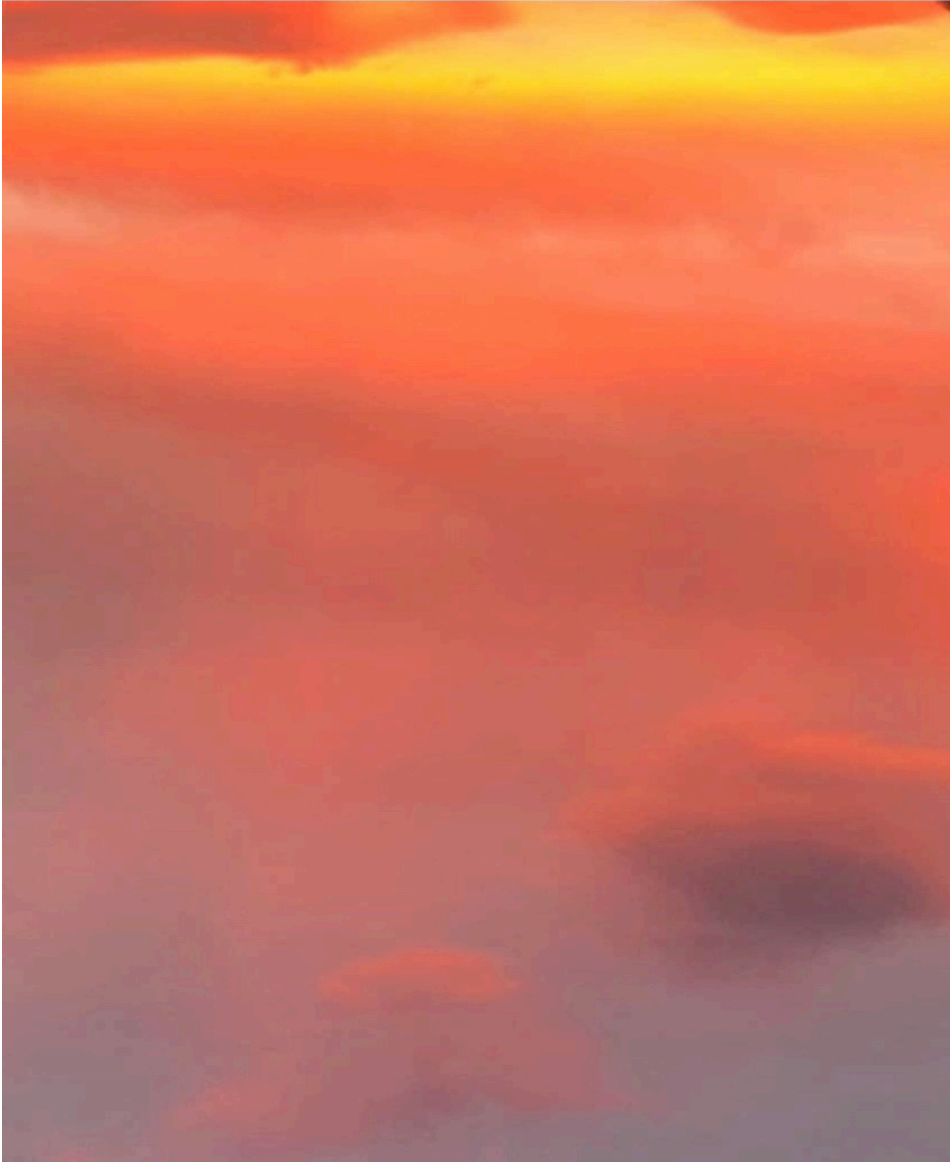
waiting to face prison in the US. Little self-assurances
fenced in and in solitary confinement.

The

War in Their Duties

My father joined the National Guard to avoid being drafted.
When the draft came, the National Guard was sent over.
Same old song and dance. Cliff said he saw the action
through the helicopters. He saw the bullet holes and repairs
needed, as his duty was to fix them. Cranked up I Can't Get
No Satisfaction. Gordon told me he served in Vietnam, too.
He played French horn. He played Reveille. He played Taps.

**New Poetry from Mbizo
Chirasha: "Casava Republics,"
"Sad Revolutionary
Lullabies," "Rhetorics"**



SUNSETS OF POLITICAL MASTURBATION / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**CASAVA
REPUBLICS**

Juba

Child of lost sperm in sunsets of
political masturbation

Wagadugu

Deadline of our
revolutions

Darfur

Constipated stomach ,disease ravaged,

bloodless dozing monk.

Nairobi

Culture lost in the dust of Saxon lexicon
and gutter slang

Soweto

Xenophobia
Drunk and Afro-phobia sloshed.

Marikana

Cervical blister of the unfinished
revolution fungi.

Harare

Corruption polonium deforming elders into
political hoodlums

Congo

Lodge of secessionists and human
guillotines

SAD REVOLUTIONARY LULLABIES

.....Sing songs of afghan circumcised,

Damascus masturbating bullets

Sing *Belafonte* Sing!

Of
revolutions that never crawled, sing!

Lumumba, see whiz kids castrating
political gods

Nkurumah, see them mutilating
revolutionary goddesses

Sing *Kunta*, Sing *Kinte*

I am tired of revolutions importing
colonial mood,

Propaganda decayed pimps frying anthems
like *frikadels*

Tired savages roasting constitutions in
corruption oil pans

Sing songs of freedoms that never walked,
Sing!

RHETORICS

Mandela, the summer sun that rose through
rubbles of our winter

Gadafi and Sadamu making *shadufs* and
pyramids

..... . another spring

Obama and Osama pulling rich political
carrot in *Segorong*

Robin Island slept golden nightmares and
charcoal dreams,

Soweto virgins cracking their under feet
in the long walk to freedom

Faces carrying the burden of freedom and
anthems.

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Mosul Reflections,” “St. Martin in the City,” “The Rearview Has Two Faces”



STOMACH OF A COUNTRY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Mosul Reflections

Ten years and the place is not the same.
Memory of green hills in a dry land,
cratered by what fell from the sky.
I don't know whether to trust the image
on the screen or the one in my mind.

One I only knew as Sayyd gave well water,
sweet tea and mince meat on laffa.
We were tired from the spring rains,
three days in the stomach of the country,
we sank into the hard wooden benches
and we ate.

I thought of Jonah, not wanting
to travel here, and when he did, enraged
at an apocalypse that never came –
how he rested under a bush then watched
it die.

The father of the family smiled
as I ate – both of us, with time, smiling.

Dost thou well to be angry?

His child in the corner never took her
eyes off me. Her mother would glance
over, expressionless, as if waiting
for something that never happened.

Rain fell like mortars, knocking the edges
from the dirt roads, craters in the middle.
In a few minutes it would take us with it,
descending. We'd see the fragments,
some carved reliefs; we'd wondered
what we'd destroyed, what we'd left
the world – an image of broken rock
in need of a makeshift savior.

St. Martin in the City

Hunger sometimes reaches up
grabs your cloak while you're riding.
You can't shield your eyes,
or go into hiding.

Every treasure you've carried home,
is never enough.
A beggar beside the road, lifts his head;
loose skin and sullen,
he shivers and so do you.

* * *

The day before we shipped
I was walking with Preacher
into the Walgreens for cold
medicine and we saw a man
asking for change. 'Pity it
couldn't be him,' Preacher said,
not waiting while I fished for coins.

Since returning the eyes
of every refugee leap
out of every face.

* * *

The stuff of nightmares.

Suffering
you thought you knew.

Sometimes it happens, a hand
reaches out and causes
you to draw back – until
you see your fear in their eyes

both surprised how easily
the veil between you parts.

The Rearview Has Two Faces

Your memory has two faces. The thought occurs
as you adjust your mirror in the chapel parking lot.

The eulogy's done its job, a few tears from even
the most stoic, stone-faced ground pounders,
the cracks in the First Sergeant's voice as he belts
'Smithson,' once, twice and again – as he waits
for a response that never comes.

If you believe
the words-

he defended the abstraction of freedom with every fiber,
never showed late, said his prayers, and flossed.
You remember an emails he sent. 'When I get back,
there's a lineman job in Oklahoma. And the houses
are cheap.' Days before he did it.

You remember
the night
on your property, shooting empties off fence posts.
'I'm not going back,' he said. And you knew he would.
Frustrating as hell but reliable. And you'd rather
have sincere doubt than cocksure and careless.

The sun from the East burns the side of your face
through the driver's side window. In the rearview
you can see your left side turning red.

Yeah.

The night he told you, you didn't sleep, agonized over
what to do about what he hadn't done yet.
And when he showed that morning, early,
two full duffel bags and a goofy grin, you chided
yourself for doubting.

You look one more time.

Sometimes he's there sitting in the back seat,
an afterimage lingering after the flash has burned,
you still trying to regain your vision.

“What Is The Name Of Your Dead Horse”



CHARGE TO THE SEA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

We start again:

With promises made for silver pass, platinum deferment,
tithing calls go out to the faithful wealthy,
subscribers to the graveyard newsletter.

Minute Men race for lifting choppers.

Laughing to say, “Your war this time,”

Buffalo Soldiers rattle dice on the hangar floor.

Bayonets strike when the Continental Army razes
river villages, hospital ships at the pier.

Raid command reminds, “Steel does not discriminate.”

Camping at desert’s edge, pilgrim rangers
lift prayers to the Judges, purity rings
glistening at rifle bolt and bandolier.

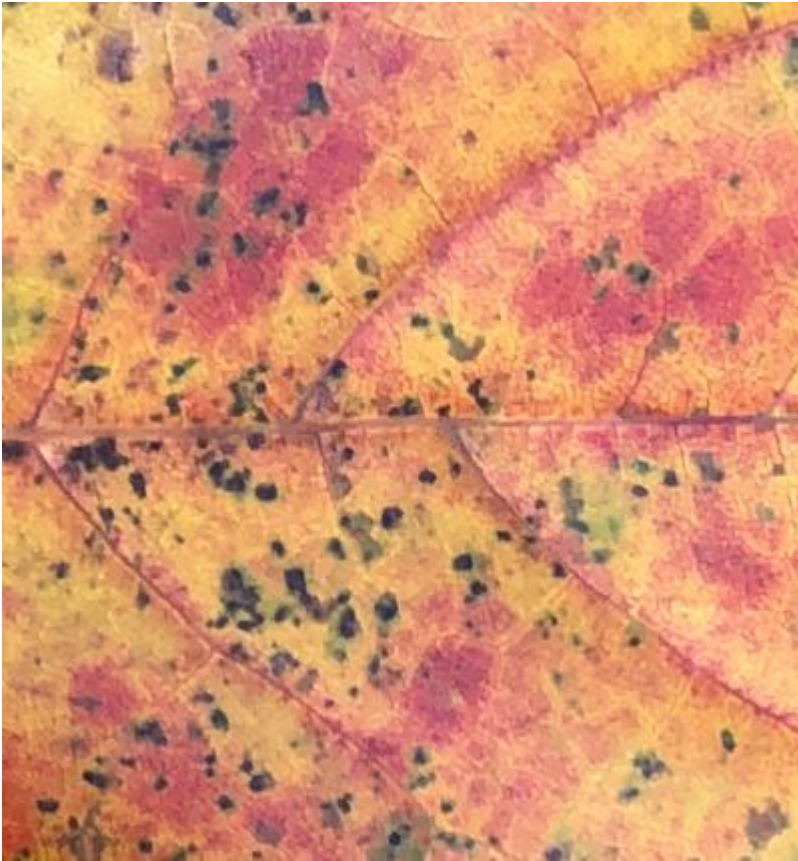
A burial procession pays praise,
follows a lynch knot regiment
through an air raid evening.

The River Sheriff wipes his cock

on a daughter's dress, washes his hands
of a prisoner's dreary clamor.
Bare feet twist in broken glass.
A favored son wobbles his feeble penis,
pees in a hunting field distressed at his trophy.
With bodies in a ditch,
evidence concealed in the weeds,
we have lessons located in news video.
Take a lie, a grifter's spittle,
as the plan to beat a jury to the border.
Cross of Honor raised and burning,
The River Sheriff gestures to his girlfriends—
the weary one and the captive,
passes them a check and a signed bandanna.
The Humvees load under shelling.

In the February shock,
the Millennium March is a charge to the sea,
freed inmates a scarecrow caravan.
Drones departing overhead,
we find vehicles at the shoreline,
water lapping at burning suitcases.

**Poetry by Stephen Mead:
Remembering Beirut, Halloween
'83; Map Pins; Forced Labor**



STOMA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Remembering Beirut, Halloween '83

The ground beds a stuffed effigy with bulging leaves.
Through peculiar affinity
it resembles some soldier.
Notice the guise of these clothes.
Consider its uniform grubbiness. Be a witness.
Here is frailty.

I lug the dumb body as if carrying my own reflection.
In another land some marine is dragging the dead weight
of his friend from the steepness of a ditch.
Hear the solstice hour toll? It's the season of reaping
soon to be celebrated, full-fledged, on All Saint's.

Jack O' Lanterns gape from their pumpkin infernos.
They tug at my form, a sinewy candle lending motion to dusk.
The moon wears the same face of negligence,
staring directly through, perpetual, obsessive.

Skulking beneath it I haul my likeness on a cross

of dried corn stalks. In the garden a fire rages.
Leaves crackle, russet, auburn, yellow. Witches burnt pure
of skin, the singed autumn embers ascend and I let,
with a gasp, my twin fall to be caught.
In stacked grass, the silhouette burns and smolders.

Let flames state metamorphosis, take change
from the depths, their swaying shadows.
Let them be purged, untouched by harm and rise fertile
from earth to winter the long haul of a death and a grievance.

Tonight something in me was sacrificed but saved by the
struggle.

Let it be just an event ritualized for one night
and not a sequence, serpentine, leading to another whole era
of hell.

Map Pins

& photo opportunities—
A world between say, this
President's address & some plane's covert
loading. Operation
Heartbreak. That's
melodrama, effete
emotionalism. Stick with
facts. Contracts. Point A
& Point B, land masses &
bodies of
water, the planetary typography
worn on a polyester shirt. There's

import, exports. There's the dollar
value status, the stock market
resources who happen to be human,
each significant as a billboard

but not all necessarily advertised.
An after-thought that would seem, the
boardroom memo, a game of

telephone,
the press (cover)
reports (up) inside leaks (dodge)
a thousand pricks (question &
answer) of light (the cameras)
fastened by (flash) brass tacks

Forced Labor

The long haul is the term for strain.
To go in, sweatshop ore digger, your colony owned
by a bigger government who, in turn, is at war with a
different one...
Sure, to go in, after the Big A & surrender subsequently:
reality a mirage but for body counts, headaches,
the daughter, photosensitive who can't leave darkened rooms &
dies
anyway, at 39, her siblings, one female born without bones,
& the next, presently 50 but burying his youngest,
such recessive aberrations passed on by their Mom,
a Korean import from Japanese mines...

Sound
familiar?

To put bombs behind us, prejudice, an epidemic,
look at Bikini Island on film:
the natives packed up, the burned homes,
and those natives told, shown diagrams:
"Testing Site. " "You are at war."
Foreign phrases. News to them. The pictures helped
while they smiled, waved at cameras none had ever before seen.

Next in came the Navy, understanding perhaps as little,
leaving 2 goats shorn and placed in metal crates:
no hemp to chew through or bolting when meters hit red.

To many, in tinted goggles, watching, the blast was:
"Magnificent." "A firecracker". "A sunset."

Others thought it "a let down."

Still, all the votes were not yet in—

There were still those sailors swimming through such liquid
marble,

the clean-up crews, the witnesses touching charred Palm,
their uniforms Geiger-clicking & their flesh as well,
having to shower, be re-tested & wash wash again
to get radioactivity off.

The same happened elsewhere, only to town-folk.

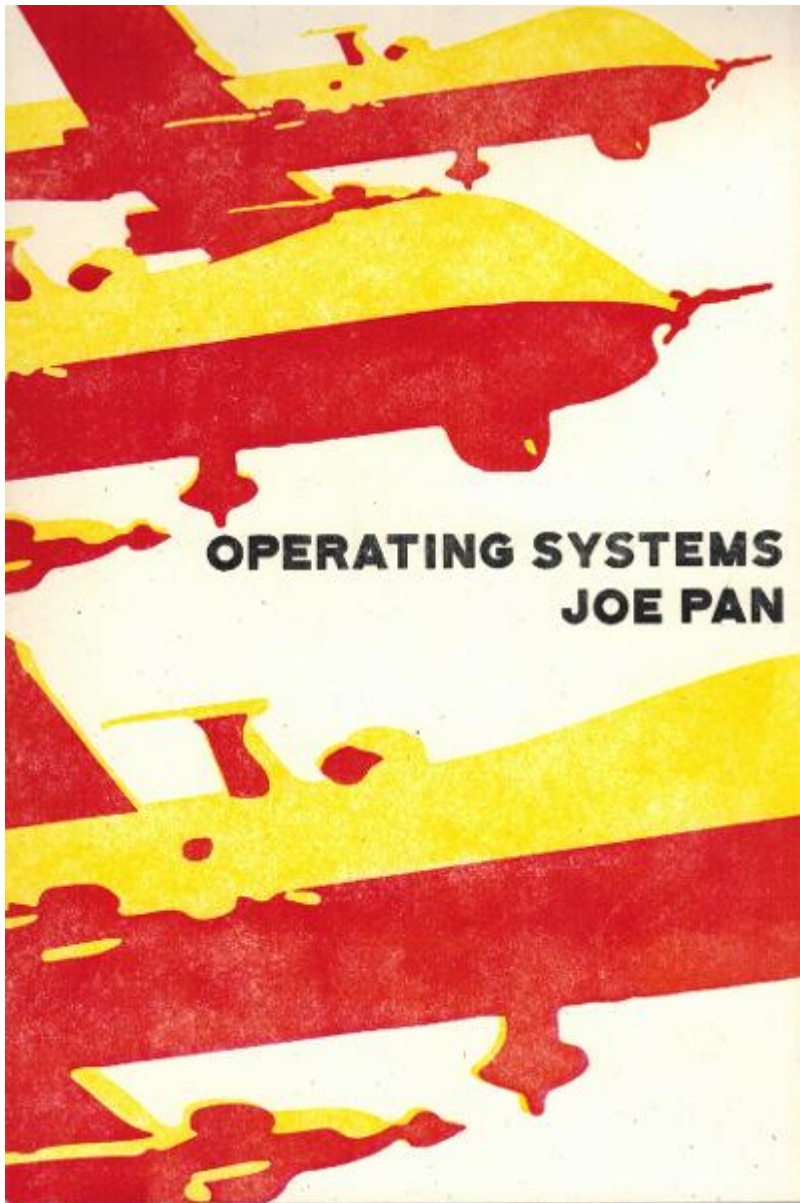
This is the humanity within inhumanity, that, in ignorance,
we bombed ourselves, & this is the knowledge:
genetics, marrow-solvent,
a tunnel pushing to upturn the stone fetuses.

In P.S., another news item my fingers squeeze:
a photo, its caption snatched from the TV page.

"Mushroom Cake, Navy Admirals Blandy, left, & Cowery,
assisted by Mrs. Blandy, celebrate first atom bomb test,
1946."

Here's the close-up: two hands, the Blandy's,
joined by a knife slicing frosting, the confection rising,
a cloud of froth as washed out as Mrs. Blandy's hat.

Hostile Threat Detected: Adrian Bonenberger Reviews Joe Pan's "Operating Systems"



Joe Pan popped up on many veteran writers' radars in 2014. He had recently written the first great poem about what let's call the Global War on Terror, "Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper." At that time it was possible to find the poem in pdf via [Pan's website](#); it may be that this is still the case. Many downloaded it and read it, and reread it, and were carried away by its vision and drive, and talked about it over beers

in trendy taverns. It is a powerful poem, urgent, reckless; it is also, in its own way, scored through with hope and possibility. In the MQ-9 Reaper's flight one hears the screech and wail of Hart Crane's "The Tunnel"—one also sees the flash of a seagull's wings, turning over the Brooklyn Bridge and out to sea:

& I get why we heart the hype. Your sleek iBomb design is haute Apple adorable: the extended wingspan, the ball turret cam. Viewed full-frontal, Hellfire missiles hang loosely clamped to the horizon of your asterisk body, itself a fusion of X-Wing Fighter & Lambda-class Imperial Shuttle from Star Wars, a sexy sort of curvilinear Geek Goddess whose forehead slope recalls the stately dolphin fish, rear propeller the whirr of a rubber-banded planophore. Behold our Indian Springs Sphinx, riddled with weapons.

The MQ-9 Reaper is a type of drone capable of firing missiles. It was well known to soldiers who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan between 2005-2012, and also to people who played the video game "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2."

"Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper" is simultaneously the drone itself—its physical characteristics, an accounting of its capabilities, its uses—and a way of looking at the world when one is an American. The poem is an exploration of the specific type of systemic power capable of producing a thing like a drone. It begins with the narrator's third-grade, childhood self dreaming the Reaper into existence, and then wanders through the past and present, shifting perspectives and narrators to catalogue the ways in which seeing and thinking about the Reaper has come to dominate modern life.

As a collection of poetry, "Operating Systems" elaborates on the Ode (the collection's final and ultimate poem) as an extended preface, delving into how people think about and communicate with the world around them. Written mostly in free verse, "Operating Systems" offers an unsparing look at how

people live in a world predicated on well-meaning urges, and desire, and hope, and need. It is less a manual than a guidebook to a world where subjectivity and perspective shift along with the narrator. Each poem is a formula for a moment in time, a mechanism by which that moment plays out.

The collection is organized into five sections of six, six, five, seven, and one poem, respectively. Each poem is assigned an OS or "Operating System" in code, that offers some insight into the poem's meaning and tone, from the serious (*Thanat*OS*) to the whimsical (*Whack*OS*). It's meticulously organized, which helps orient readers on the one hand, and gives one a sense of confidence and security that Pan's poetry is deliberate, in addition to beautiful. One can sometimes become lost in a collection of poetry, especially when it is sincerely felt and written; Pan is one of those rare poets who balances the intense emotions he evokes with careful attention to how each poem's construction.

In spite of the overarching concern driving the collection—the worry that when we aren't using operating systems to govern our own behavior, we have given over our agency to a series of literal operating systems that choose our friends, and our news, and the things we buy, the poetry we read and (worst of all) the wars we fight—in spite of that all, "Operating Systems" maintains a dogged optimism. In poems like *In "Tattoos,"* where a garden thrush that endures the stings of bees for a meal becomes an avatar for desire, and *"Bedford Avenue L,"* where Pan shows how in spite of the formulaic modes of language and mechanics of social interactions, the impulse to help or assist others can be sufficient in a moment of crisis:

*This is the moment I tell you you will be okay
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am telling this to.*

*I do not know myself in this moment,
& I do not know you. But hey buddy, hold on.*

This underlying redemption exists in the Ode as well, as when its narrator discusses one of the oldest operating systems to appear in the book: the story of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain, envisioned from the perspective of a son having the story read to him in bed by his father.

“Operating Systems” should be read and considered at length. It is not easy or accessible, in contrast with the systems that almost everyone uses to facilitate the minutiae of their daily lives. If much of life is an effort to simplify communication, and the acquisition of those things that bring people satisfaction, isn’t it necessary and good occasionally to step back with a good collection of poetry, to pose the question?