O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

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"I was inspired to create *Phao Binh* (artillery in Vietnamese) honoring veterans of the Battle of Long Tan, Vietnam, that I knew when I commanded Battery A of American Artillery reinforcing the First Field Regiment of Royal Australian Artillery: John Taske (the Australian Regimental Surgeon), Morrie Stanley (New Zealand forward observer), Gordon Steinbrook (American forward observer), Barry Dreyer (New Zealander and liaison from the Australian Task Force to my battery), Chuck Heindrichs (Battery A liaison to the Aussie Task Force fire direction center), and Norm St. Laurent (who lives on the Outer Banks and with whom I share experiences from our Vietnam days with the Australians)."

Glenn Eure
U.S Army, retired
glenneureart.com

Glenn Eure enlisted in the Army in 1948 and served ten years as an enlisted soldier, including two combat tours in Korea. He received a commission in 1958 and served thirteen years as an officer, to include two combat tours in Vietnam. Glenn's commands included Alpha Battery, American Artillery reinforcing the First Field Regiment of Royal Australian Artillery. He retired as a major in 1971 after serving as Headquarters Commandant, 82nd Airborne Division. He is authorized to wear the Master Parachutist Badge and the Combat Infantryman's Badge, second award.

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Editor's Note

We're bookending this edition of O-Dark-Thirty with works by Vietnam veterans. Our cover art was created by Glenn Eure. I met Glenn at a Veterans Writing Project workshop on the Outer Banks of North Carolina in October 2013. He was one of a number of Vietnam veterans from the local area who participated. That seminar was a little different than many others we've run: there was only one Iraq-Afghanistan veteran in the group, everyone else was either a Vietnam or Cold War era veteran.

Our last two pieces in the journal are a poem by the renowned poet W.D. Ehrhart and an interview with him. Bill was a Marine infantryman in Vietnam who returned to earn a Ph.D. in literature and publish a slew of great poetry and prose. I saw one of his books recently in the L.A. County Museum of Art in an exhibit on Stanley Kubrick's works. Apparently Kubrick read Ehrhart's poetry as research for the film Full Metal Jacket.

While many new veterans service organizations focus solely on post-9/11 veterans, VWP seminars and workshops are open to all veterans, any service member, and to their adult family members. Still, we generally see far more recent veterans than older veterans in our workshops. So we feel lucky to have met Glenn, Bill, and all the other pre-9/11 vets and family members we've worked with. We're trying to strengthen the connection between generations of veterans. We think it's important to build one service and veterans' community rather than several.

Join us.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

The Bones of the Shaykhs

By Ernest Audino

The Zagros Mountains shoot up high and jagged over the Hawraman, a hidden, mysterious region tucked close against the Iranian border. Here the airless morning light casts sharp, long shadows that become softer and shorter below a blazing sun. There is no sound. A secret anguish seems to press all noise beneath the surface of this desperate landscape.

This should be unnerving, especially to the lone US soldier for hours in any direction, but as I am embedded in a small team of trusted Kurdish fighters, I could do worse.

"Brother, for you to get hurt, I will have to die first," my counterpart likes to say.

Earlier today we silently passed a tiny, trailside shrine. Not more than a knotted bush, its tattered votive strips of colored fabric fluttering as obediently today as they surely did from the first moment they were tied there months or years ago. This wish-practice is known as *miraz hasal boon* and is not uncommon in Kurdistan. The sites are frequently found near springs or natural pools on ground thought to have special significance to *khidir,* a benevolent spirit sometimes associated with water.

That we encountered the shrine did not surprise me, as the entire Hawraman region is shaped by an unusual mixing of religious histories, in particular, Sufi mysticism, of which the Naqshbandi order has predominated locally for hundreds of years. Occasionally referred to by some in the West as Whirling Dervishes, the Sufi are Islamic mystics whose practice of droning, repetitive physical exertion is said to enable a trance-like state wherein a personal experience with Allah becomes possible. Such an assertion is considered blasphemous to many Sunni fundamentalists, and those asserting it are frequently deemed heretics.

Our trail continues breathlessly upward from its low point in the Sharizur plain, which is kept flat and dark under the weight of the towering, ancient mounds left there by the Zoroastrians. These pre-Christian fire-worshippers are never too far out of mind, as their influence can be seen also in the 21-pointed sun on the Kurdish flag. Other past inhabitants of the plain thought it to be the precise location for the coming cataclysmic battles to be waged on Judgment Day. Given the Sharizur envelops the infamous Kurdish town of Halabja, the site of history's largest chemical weapons strike against civilians, perhaps there is some truth to it.

We gradually rise through the Zagros along draws that have surely been well trod by innumerable caravans of nameless travelers between Persia to the East and the dusty expanses of Mesopotamia stretching far to our west. Ancient traders, smugglers, bandits and innocents alike, their identities are now only eternal, inaudible whispers locked in the rock walls that surround us. Somehow, someway, I sense they are in murmured conversation with my soul.

I notice we are passing through gravelly fields populated by countless, piles of head-sized stones, each delicately stacked to a height of three feet and spreading in rough, ten yard intervals as far as the eye can see. Weird. Why are they here and who built them? No one answers, but they watch us as we pass.

Our winding trail eventually presses us towards a distant pair of stone dwellings pinned to the mountain above us. They are touched and united by a gorgeous, near turquoise hue, no less brilliant than the sky, but greener. This is a color I've seen commonly covering the domes and minarets of countless mosques, but in this case it graces something quite different.

The dwellings pull close enough for me to clearly see the subtle purple-red of their stone walls. A backdrop of snow-capped mountains over fields bathed in a welcome April vermillion provides a fitting complement. Beautiful. This cannot be Iraq, but it is.

I am surprised when the faces of three women and three small children appear over the edges of terrace walls to peek down at us. The women have been simultaneously working the earth immediately around their buildings and watching over the toddlers, and now they lay their hoes on the ground as we approach. They smile broadly at us, but do not speak.

With no provocation on my part, the eldest of the ladies nearly bounds from the others to approach me. Because I purposely wear a thick moustache and an older version of the US Army desert camouflage uniform to better blend with my Kurdish brothers in arms, I am impressed that the old woman so readily singles me out from the nine of them. She touches the small US flag sewn on my right shoulder, and in Kurdish, she invites us all into her home for lunch. "Thank you very much, Auntie, but I am sorry," I reply in the Sorani dialect, "We don't really have the time to sit and eat." She pleads, again and again, her smile growing wider each time.

Like the other two ladies with her, she is dressed in a simple, loose gown, hers a dark blue printed with a light gray floral pattern. On her head and worn in a graceful fashion likely familiar to many grandmothers back home, she has a bright white scarf. Her full, happy face beams at us from underneath. "Welcome, welcome," she

says, “If not lunch, then please come inside our shrine, my brother, and stay a moment. I want to show you something.”

Nothing like the tiny shrine we encountered earlier, her shrine is a substantial stone structure with a squat, pointed beret of a dome over what I presume is a Sufi *khtinaqd,* a lodge used for ritual practice. The striking turquoise I had seen from a distance wraps the dome and imparts to it a near royal gravitas. Three of us remove our boots, arrange them as is customary outside, and follow the old woman I now know as Fatima Khan, through the doorway. Two of her charming and friendly grandchildren tag along, a boy and a girl, but they stay close to their grandmother.

I am not sure what to expect I might see inside, but whatever it is, it certainly does not include the six gleaming crypts in the very center of the vaulted room I’ve just now entered. The headstones and footstones are engraved with Kurdish symbols and, in some cases, chiseled portraits of Kurdish men wearing on their heads the dashing *mishki* associated with men of great respect. Spotless, arched windows around the perimeter guide in stiff currents of brilliant sunlight which dazzles off the pastel green walls and white tile floors. I am certain an aura surrounds each of us.

The old lady breaks our silent moment with a bomb, “I want to thank you,” she says, “I want to thank you for destroying my home and the shrine I maintain with a cruise missile.” My eyes immediately shift from her face, first to the left, then to the right. Did I just walk into a perfect ambush? My heartbeat quickens.

Here, anything is possible, as this rugged, spine of a border has a history with *Ansar al Islam,* the *al Qaeda* ally that nested here after 9/11. Fatima Khan continues, telling me of *Ansar* coming down from the mountain one night to demand food and her refusal to feed them.

> “They responded by evicting me and my family from our home. We walked several kilometers down the mountain

to take shelter with another family. While *Ansar* occupied our home, they converted the shrine into a command post. Like animals they desecrated the interior of the shrine and disinterred the remains from their sacred repose, scattering the bones outside."

Her previously cheery face is now stony grave. I can say nothing.

After a pause she adds, "The remains are of six Sufi *shaykhs*." To the Sufi, *shaykhs* are holy men revered far more fervently than are even saints typically revered in Christendom. As I watch her face I think I see the corners of her lips begin to curl and her eyes start to brighten as she says, "After some time the *peshmerga* secretly visited us, this time with some Americans." The *peshmerga* are the legendary Kurdish fighters, and the term roughly translates to, "those who confront death." The Americans she mentions are surely members of the 10th Special Forces Group who, along with the *peshmerga* of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, participated in Operation Viking Hammer to eradicate the elements of *Ansar al Islam* dug into these mountainsides.

Her hands come together in front of her body to pantomime the operation of a GPS, she tells me, now practically delighted, her face grinning like a child. "And then came the cruise missile! Even though the Americans destroyed my home and the shrine I maintained, it was the happiest day of my life. Thank you, my brother, thank you. Thanks USA."

Having lived amongst the Kurds for almost five months at this point, and daily hearing the endless tales of atrocity seemingly visited on each Kurdish family, as here with Fatima Khan and hers, one might imagine I would be prepared to hear similar, terrible histories from other Kurds, too, but I'm not. Today with Fatima Khan is no different. My reply to her is consequently polite, but inadequate.

"I assure you, Auntie, I had nothing to do with it, but I am happy your family is safe. I will pass on your thanks to the Americans. God bless you." She responds with a simple, *"Zor supas, birakm. Khwad lagal."* Thank you very much, my brother. Go with God.

In the time elapsing between the moment of the strike and today Fatima Khan and her family had obviously rebuilt their shattered home and shrine. I learn they carefully searched the surrounding area to locate the bones of the *shaykhs,* and she believed that she had found most of them, dutifully reinterring them for eternity. It is a strange sadness that I feel. Sure, for her and her family, but also for those tragically committed to a lifetime of safety and guarantees, those who are not here to experience this humbling beauty, this pathos.

Ernie Audino recently retired from the US Army as a Brigadier General. As a soidier on the ground in Iraq he lived a year with Those Who Confront Death, the legendary Kurdish peshmerga, and considers that assignment to have been a great privilege and honor. His upcoming book captures portions of their story of triumph over atrocity, endurance under chemical weapons strikes and freedom after genocide.

Fiction.

Walking Point

By Jim Barrett

Sarge didn't usually make me walk point, but PFC Braveheart (yeah, that's his real name) stepped on a punji stake last ops. Now, it's not like you see in the movies. He didn't fall screaming into a bottomless pit of sharpened bamboo, but rather got fucked up by one of the little devices that Charlie loves. His foot went into a hole about eight inches deep, but that was enough for the spike to do its damage. Of course, it got infected because the gooks shit on those things before they put 'em in the ground. Primitive warfare . . . but it works.

Braveheart actually likes to work point. But I don't; frankly it scares the holy bejesus out of me. I like following behind because being second or third man down the trail meant that you aren't gonna stumble on a trip wire. But, Sarge told me it was my turn in the bucket, so bitchin about it wasn't gonna do no good.

I'm with the Fourth Infantry Division, the Funky Fourth us grunts like to call it. We're working the Central Highlands, which ain't like what most people think Nam looks like. I mean, it's real tropical, like most of this fucked up country, but we got mountains

too. And wildlife, lots of that . . . every kinda spider, snake, lizard and monkey you can imagine. The locals around here pretty much leave us alone. They live in the raised thatched roof hooches that are pretty familiar because I hear the television in country likes to show us burning them down. But we don't set fires around here; we're mostly trying to keep the NVA from killin' the locals.

When the company headed out, our squad went first, because that's how Sarge likes it. He's been in country for two tours, used to have a rocker, but is back to being a buck sergeant. He got crossways with the MP's while "vacationing" in Vung Tau, came back with a cop escort and a lower rank. But, he knows his business, which is a good thing because we got this brand new OCS second louie who don't know shit but ain't smart enough to realize it.

The lieutenant wanted to walk point when we started this morning, some kinda macho leadership thing, but Sarge told him to get his ass back to the rear. There was a moment when the kid thought he'd argue, but it passed. Hell, he'd only get his shit blown away and then we'd have to train another one!

After being airlifted into the LZ, we headed down the trail, knowing that contact with the NVA was highly likely. They'd been moving pretty consistently in our Area of Operations and we'd had several firefights in the last month. So, being in front, I was in hyped up gear, wishing Braveheart hadn't stepped on that shit-encrusted spike.

We were working our way up a slight slope when something bounced off my helmet, scaring the pee-wad outta me. I hit the dirt, yelled "contact," but didn't fire because I didn't see anything to shoot at. I heard everyone behind be doing the same, into the dirt, and the word passed south of me until I couldn't hear it anymore.

I waited for several moments, but nothing happened so I rose cautiously until I could see down the trail. Nothin' there; until

another rock came my way. It bounced harmlessly on the trail in front of me. I hiked my M-16 to my shoulder, clicked the safety off and sited down the barrel, waiting to see who had the nerve to assault a fuckin' trained killer with a rock. Nothing.

Several of the guys behind me began to chatter. "Whatcha got, Smitty?"

"Dunno . . . but something just bounced off my helmet and there ain't no trees above us."

I looked back, saw the troops raising their weapons as they looked up, and then pointing them outbound at the jungle. That part made me feel good because these guys knew their business.

Suddenly, two rocks hit the ground at my feet and I stood for several seconds watching them bounce down the trail.

I quickly looked back, "someone's throwing rocks," I yelled, feeling pretty stupid to put out that message. There was only silence, until I heard Sarge's pissed-off voice, "move forward, dickhead!"

I hunkered down and walked forward, my weapon at the ready. Another rock whistled past my ear, causing me to look up at a steep cliff on my left. And there stood the problem, or several of the problems would be more accurate. Apes, rock apes we'd eventually call them, hucking stones at us. And suddenly, it wasn't just a couple of rocks, but a barrage as more Apes worked their way toward the original number, chucking rocks as they advanced. I moved back and gave the "get down" motion with my hand.

Several minutes later, I heard Sarge making his way forward. I knew it was him by the string of curse words that preceded him. When he got to me, he hit the dirt and asked "what the fuck, Smitty?"

"Apes . . . they're . . ." I started to explain, but he cut me off.

"Shittin' monkeys are stoppin' us?"

"Yes, sergeant. They're pretty good with the rocks." And to prove my point, several rocks smacked the ground around us which

I was secretly thankful for because one thing I've learned about the 'Nam, timing is everything.

Sarge finally got to his knees, began looking at the animals which were now populating that hillside in mass. And they all had rocks in their paws . . . ah, shit, hands . . . I guess. Several hucked their rocks, passing over our heads but bouncing in among the troops behind us.

"Jesus H. Christ," Sarge said. "Let's waste these bastards." Sarge went to his knees and I heard the safety click off when, "hold it there, Sergeant," boomed from behind us. I looked around and it was our new LT, in bent over hustle-up mode; coming our way.

Sarge glanced back, rolled his eyes and lowered his weapon. "What's going on here, sergeant," the lieutenant asked, never even looking at me.

"A band of Rock Apes, sir," Sarge replied, his eyes flickered past mine and then moved on.

"Rock Apes?" the lieutenant went into his pack and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

"Yes sir, just there," the sergeant pointed.

The lieutenant tried to look through the binocs, but they were so clouded with moisture, he couldn't see shit. Another rock came in, hit the dirt in front of him and ricocheted off his helmet.

"Mean bastards, sir," Sarge stated the obvious. "I say we smoke the motherfuckers . . . ah . . .sir."

The lieutenant came to his knees, finally seeing the hoard of apes on the hillside, all of them well armed. They stood silently, watching us, probably gauging a target. He hesitated.

"Well, sir?" Sarge asked.

"Uhhh, is there a way around them?"

"No, sir."

Several more minutes passed as more rocks came in bound.

I could see that Sarge was starting to lose his patience. He flicked the safety on and off a couple of times, ducked when a rock nearly hit him, pulled the magazine out of his weapon and slammed it home again. When nothing had happened, he looked at the lieutenant and said, "Whatcha wanna do?"

The lieutenant went to his authoritative voice, one they probably practice in officer candidate school, and said, "We aren't here to be killing the wildlife, sergeant."

"Yes, sir . . . but this wildlife is holding up our forward progress."

"Granted," but now in a voice less confident. "Rock Apes may be an endangered species or something."

Sarge turned bright red, looked at me and spit into the ground. He finally raised his eyes to the lieutenant, "endangered fuckin' species?"

"Yeah, y'know we shouldn't be killing them."

I could see that Sarge was now beyond pissed. But he worked to modulate his voice, after all, he'd just left his rocker in Vung Tau and didn't need another pay cut. "Your call, lieutenant."

"Let's move back."

"Retreat, sir?" Sarge said, sarcasm heavy in his voice.

"Not exactly a . . ."

But before the loot could finish, Sarge got to his feet and shouted, "Retreat, men," to the troops behind him. Everyone got to their feet and began moving back down the trail. Of course, this was A-Okay with me because I'd rather hang around an LZ waiting for a chopper than walk point wondering when I'm gonna get my shit blown away.

Later, the scuttlebutt around camp was that the Fourth ID, whose motto was "steadfast and loyal", had their asses handed to them by a bunch of monkeys.

Once the general heard that, the lieutenant got his butt transferred. That evening Sarge and I went to the bar and got drunk.

Before we staggered to our barracks, Sarge said, “No shit, Rock Apes of all things. Someday this’ll make a great story.”

How true.

Jim Barrett is the author of four published books and several screenplays—one of which has been optioned. He served with the Army's First Aviation Brigade in Vietnam from 1968-69. After leaving the service, Jim spent 30 years in law enforcement which is the genesis for many of the short stories for his soon to be released book "From Darkness Into Light." His book, "Ma Duncan," the true crime story of the last woman executed in California, was recently showcased on Investigation Discovery Television Network. Jim can be contacted through his website www.maduncanbook.com or by e-mail at jimbarrett18592@aol.com.

Tin Cans

By Anica Wong

We hadn't said much in the hour we'd been together. It wasn't uncommon for us to have stretches of time filled only by the sounds of the radio or the stillness of the day.

I was curled up on the bed watching him clean his room, letting him tackle it by himself; he was particular about how he folded his shirts and I knew I could never get the creases just right. If his time in the Army gained him anything, it was that his closets would always be neat, his socks always bundled the same way.

The pile of mail sitting on his desk was the last thing to do. He opened a padded envelope and out fell the bottle. He looked at it, shook it, allowing the rattle of pills to fill the silence.

"What are those?" I asked, confused, concerned.

"They're my crazy pills."

"Really, what's going on?" This time, my tone was a bit more combative. I hated when he joked during serious situations.

"The nurse prescribed them for me."

"The nurse? Nurses don't prescribe medication."

"Yes, the nurse."

"Are you sure it was a nurse?"

"If you don't believe what I say, then don't ask the question." Anger rose in his voice and with a final shake of the bottle, he tucked it neatly away in the desk drawer.

"They're for my mood swings."

We met online and during our first official face-to-face date, he let me do all the talking in a hip, organic coffee shop in Santa Monica. He sat and listened as I rambled on about my family, my schooling, my dreams. I asked the requisite number of personal questions of him, but his answers were straight and didn't flow into personal essays the way mine did.

His online dating profile mentioned that he had been in the Army, but as I would learn throughout our relationship, he didn't like to divulge too much too quickly, so I didn't know the extent of his service until later. After that afternoon in the coffee shop, I Googled him to the best of my reporter abilities and was stumped when nothing of his military background came up. I thought it was a bit odd that there were almost no search results for him; didn't we live in a time when almost everyone had some sort of Internet trail? But I was still riding the high of meeting someone who I really connected with so while I continued to Google him every now and again, I had to rely on him to give me the information that I was looking for: his history.

I pieced together parts of when he'd served, doing mental math when I'd get a detail I hadn't heard before. Once, I asked him specifically to make me a timeline of where he'd been when, and it was the vaguest timeline I'd ever heard; he gave me the places, but no timeframe for the visits. Eventually, I was confident in telling my friends and family that he had been to both Iraq and Afghanistan and had fought as part of one of the special operations forces.

We continued on the same trajectory as our first date in the coffee shop; I talked (a lot) and he listened, offering snippets here and there only when necessary. I wasn't shy with sharing every little thought that popped into my head, whether he needed to know it or not. I thought that was how we would grow closer together and I hoped that if I continued to open up to him, he would do the same.

But as our relationship grew into an intimate one, I started to crave any sort of personal facts about him, especially the ones about his time spent at war. I was oddly curious about the situations he found himself in. I wanted to talk about it but could already sense hesitancy in how we communicated about his past. At points, I thought to myself, "Just ask him. What is the worst he could tell you?"

The scariest question hung in my mind for a long time. If I did ask him questions and he did tell me the horrific details, those stories wouldn't make me love him any less, right? Right?

Was I entitled to know what he had been through? Was I expecting too much? I wrestled with myself for a long time, hoping to build up any amount of courage to finally ask, but couldn't bring myself to just blurt the questions out. Instead, I came up with a scheme to try and get him talking.

I had read a magazine article written by a veteran discussing his time served and his thoughts on the war. I printed it out, underlined certain passages that stood out to me and wrote questions in the margins of the paper. I gave it to him and told him I'd love to talk about it when he was done reading it. I waited and waited—and figured he had forgotten about it.

On our way back from a trip to northern California, about halfway through our five-hour drive, he mentioned the article, jerking his head to the back of the truck where the stack of papers had been stashed in the side cubby. I pulled it out, asking if he had

read it, to which he replied no. I started to read the article out loud, skimming over the questions I had written in the margins with my eyes, realizing they were much scarier now as I was going to say them aloud than they were if he had read them himself. I was worried that he could hear my heart beating, there in the close confines of the car. But the opportunity was staring me in the face, and I used the article as my crutch, referencing what the writer had talked about and tailoring it to my soldier.

"What was it like going outside the wire?"

"Scary."

"Did you have a specific routine that you went through before leaving?"

"Yeah, we all did."

"Did you say a certain prayer or have a certain motto?"

"Not really."

And the most petrifying of them all, one I had worried about over and over again.

"Have you ever zipped someone up in a body bag?"

"You just can't ask things like that," he said forcefully.

The conversation was over with a huff from him and a sad realization that I couldn't just ask him for the facts like I had learned through my time in the two journalism programs at prestigious schools.

I don't ever remember asking him how enlisting and fighting *felt,* instead focusing on the minute details of the act of war. Maybe deep down I could only handle the facts and didn't want to know that this strong, hardened man who had stolen my heart spent a majority of his time scared shitless, worrying for his life and the lives of the men who would later become closer to him than even his own family.

I was a concerned girlfriend who was asking these questions out of love, wanting to understand. But to him I came across as a member of the media.

"You just act like a journalist."

"What does that even mean?"

"You ask questions differently."

"Like how?"

"I don't know, I can't give you an example right now, but they're different . . ."

I was taken aback. Journalism was my training, what I was comfortable with. And he was saying it was a bad thing? Looking back, I realized that he must have felt like I was trying to burrow deep into the secret dark space that he kept closed off.

I couldn't elicit conversations about his time in the military and he, by nature, wasn't used to offering up information on his own accord. "These topics just don't come up in normal conversation," he'd say when I'd wonder why we didn't discuss his deployments or training.

At every other point, though, our relationship was sweet and real. The notes he wrote on Valentine's Day cards made me realize how much we needed each other.

"You challenge me in ways no one else can and for that I am a better man." His cursive penmanship tilted to the right, his "love always" an ever present sign-off on the notes.

And when he bought my dog a backpack for our upcoming hiking trip, I couldn't help but melt.

But the lines of communication didn't exist when it came to war, killing and terror. I was curious; he felt badgered by questions that to him came out of nowhere. *You just can't ask things like that.*

I fell into a funk. My way of connecting was pushing us apart and making our communication muffled; we were like two kids at the end of a tin can telephone and the string between us had been snipped by PTSD.

And then came our first Christmas together. His gift to me had the weight and structure of a book. When I unwrapped it, the

word "WAR" and a man's single eye stared up at me from the cover. Caught off guard, I flipped it over, thumbing the pages as I read the synopsis: "His objective: to convey what soldiers experience—*what war actually feels like*." This was my boyfriend's way of telling me his story, of trying to explain the clearly unexplainable to me. It was easier for him to use someone else's words, someone else's experiences, to help teach me what it had been like during those lonely moments in war. He was giving me a primer into the life of a soldier.

"Thank you," I said. It was one of the most sincere thank yous I've ever given.

It was a start.

I dog-eared the page that describes the horrible tension that the troops go through right before the Chinooks come to take them to their next detail. "In some ways the anticipation feels worse than whatever may be waiting for them down in Yaka Chine or up on the Abas Ghar, and every man gets through it in his own quietly miserable way."

I couldn't help but imagine what my soldier would be doing at that moment. Would he be listening to music? If so, would it be a classical song or one that made his ears bleed with the roughness and power streaming through his headphones? Or did he go into himself, readying his body and soul for what was to come? For some strange reason, thinking about him in these situations, the calm before the storm, where your mind can turn on you and make you believe anything, these situations scared me the most. I had to believe that after going through special ops training, he was physically prepared for anything. What I didn't know when I read this book was that his training also made him mentally tough. And so I worried about him.

Next came "In the Company of Heroes" to read first-hand of what it takes to be part of a special operations assignment.

After that, he gave me "On Killing," which offered the science, psychology and training that goes into pulling the trigger. And a paragraph that I kept coming back to: *"Nations customarily measure the 'costs of war' in dollars, lost production, or the number of soldiers killed or wounded. Rarely do military establishments attempt to measure the costs of war in terms of individual human suffering."*

Out of all of the books I received from him, this was the one with the most underlined passages, the most folded pages, the one that really struck me because it gave in scientific detail and personal stories what it feels like to shoot and to shoot and kill. This book gave me a better look into what was going on in my soldier's mind, a place I had tried to tap into for a long time.

When I came to the chapter entitled "What does it feel like to kill?" I couldn't help but take a deep breath, preparing myself. My mind went back to that early time in our relationship when I had worried about how I would react if he told me he had killed someone, when I wondered if I would love him any less for it. And while I decided that his past would never change how much I cared for him, I couldn't help but feel that question welling up in me again.

I learned that there are such things as combat addiction and a sense of intense exhilaration and satisfaction after killing, a feeling that I'm sure could never be put into words that I could grasp. And then the book described a similarly intense remorse and revulsion associated with a close-range kill. I imagined my boyfriend on a seesaw of emotion, up one minute after adrenaline courses through his body, down the next as empathy for humanity weighs on his soul.

The handpicked books helped; they became quasi-therapists, bridging the gap when talking and remembering can be just too damn painful. But in reading, I realized I could never know fully, could never experience what he had experienced. I couldn't even comprehend—when I took the time to truly think about it—the very act of signing your life over to your country.

The books held us over for a while, but eventually, I needed *him* to talk to *me*.

He decided he needed to talk to someone who wasn't me, someone qualified.

He ventured to the VA for his initial intake exam and that's when a nurse wrote the script for the pills and when the therapist asked him whether he was suicidal in ten different ways, or at least that's how he described it to me later. "It was stupid" was all I could get out of him. All of those journalism-y questions, the ones that were built on only my desire to understand, started welling up in me again. I tried my best to push them back, remembering how attacked they made him feel. A few weeks later, after one of his sessions, we fought over text, a silly excuse for a real conversation.

"How did today go?

"Ok."

"Good ok?"

"Ok ok."

"You're gonna learn that ok often doesn't get rid of my questions." Combative. I couldn't help it.

"You're going to learn that no matter how you ask the question, if I don't want to answer it, I'm not going to."

It spread like wildfire, with me tormenting him that I was part of this relationship, too, and him saying that he needed his space, that I was being too pushy. I countered with the fact that I realized this was a really hard situation to be in, but that I was trying to balance being supportive of him even as I felt he was pushing me away.

For a whole 24 hours, my phone was silent.

In the darkness of that night, the guilt kicked in, as only guilt can late in the evening. The tears slid silently down my face as I tried to bury them in my pillow. I felt guilty that I wasn't around during

his deployments, that maybe I could have helped him transition into civilian life better than his ex. I felt guilty that I was making this more about me, even though his battle with his tormenting thoughts and memories was clearly about him. And then I felt guilty that I was betraying myself and my needs in a relationship. I almost felt like I needed to go to therapy myself, to just talk—to anyone.

I gasped for air, as if in a silent scream, and did my best to quiet my mind to get to sleep. Rest would bring comfort, I thought. But my mind continued to run to every dark place, every scary question and horrible scenario, dragging me behind until, finally, I was too tired and gave in to the shadows.

I started searching for groups that offered therapy sessions to military family and friends. I found a few and contemplated getting in touch with them. But I wasn't family. Did I deserve to talk to wives groups who had celebrated birthdays alone and worried every time the doorbell rang? I didn't know what any of those things felt like. I was only experiencing the post-war trauma, the invisible scars that manifest as constant anger and the inability to feel—anything. I didn't go as far as contacting these groups. Instead, I pulled away and wrote late-night emails to him:

. . . I am frightened that I won't be enough for you . . . that I'll ask too many questions . . . that you'll suddenly realize that I'm too annoying . . . I worry that I'm no good for you . . .

Those words scared both of us—me when I wrote them, him when he received them as the sun barely started to rise the next morning. But they weren't lies.

And suddenly, magically, we were talking.

On a late Saturday evening as we sipped pomegranate ginger margaritas at Ortega 120, as an old Elvis movie played behind us on a projector screen, we had a real conversation about pills and therapy sessions and expectations of one another.

With some tequila in our bellies and a freeness that comes from it, we could finally hear each other.

Anica Wong graduated from Colorado State University and Stanford University with degrees in journalism. After four years in Los Angeles working with Creators Syndicate, she recently moved to Denver to volunteer with Americorps and Colorado Reading Corps tutoring K-3 students in literacy. Her maternal grandfather was in the U.S. Navy in Korea and her paternal grandfather fought for the Canadian army.

Poetry.

Elephant Grass

By Doug D'Elia

They'll tell you that you can hide an elephant in it,
I'll tell you it was the biggest damn cobra you'll ever see.

When Thompson lost his mind, stripped off his clothes
and ran naked into the elephant grass, I yelled, Ah shit!
and was the first of the posse to run in after him.

The razor like edges of the bristled stalks
slashed at his skin, each step forward
earned at the expense of another
stinging wound

A blotchy redness of paper cuts canvassed his skin
as if invisible taskmasters, banshees
hidden in the tall grass, were wielding whips weaved
from thistles and thorns
as he passed between stations.

He stopped abruptly, turned,
and giggling like a mischievous boy
he staggered towards me
his mind set on stun and his eyes as still
and perfect as a pair of glass marbles.

The full weight of his exhausted body
collapsed in my arms. Instinctively the posse
crouched in the tall grass, and I heard the familiar
click and clack of weapons being readied, as
nervous eyes searched for signs of a sniper.

One good spit away, a massive cobra snake rose
above the grass, agitated by our presence,
puffing up its hood to look large,
making the grunting sound of a struggling
steam powered locomotive.

I felt bad for the snake really. We had encroached on
its home and it had defended its territory.
I guess the same could be said of the Cong.

Casey, his nerves strung as tight as an electric guitar,
was the closest to it. He fired instinctively, and like a
contagious nervous yawn, everyone fired.

The serpent's head exploded, pieces of reptile sprayed
in every direction, we ducked, covered our faces, as scraps
stuck to our bodies

The posse cautiously approached, staring at the long, headless,
bloody tail of the snake still squirming on the ground.
Final eulogies were respectfully given:
Damn! Fuck! It's as big as Johnson's dick!
Then they finished it, firing rounds till what remained didn't resemble
much of anything

Of course the snake was already dead when the final rounds were fired,
It was dead when it bit Thompson and then stuck its head above
the grass to see what all the commotion was about.
Thompson was dead too when he stepped on the snake, it just
took him four hours to take his final labored locomotive breath.

Doug grew up in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and served as an Air Force medic from 1965-1969. His war related poems have appeared in Evergreen Review, Line of Advance, *and* Contemporary Haibun. *His chapbook* "A Thousand Peaceful Buddhas" *is available via email through dougvandelia@gmail.com. He is co-owner of the Onondaga School of Therapeutic Massage, and a member of the Syracuse Veterans Writers Group.*

The Body Snatchers

By Doug D'Elia

At a coffee shop in Tulsa,
two soldiers in fatigues
occupy red and white
upholstered counter stools.

Their waitress looks them over with interest.
Her nametag says Juanita, and she speaks
with a border accent.
She asks them if they have served in Iraq?

They say they have.
She says her son had gone to Iraq.
They nod and smile until she speaks again.
He didn't come back.

Her sentence is delivered with precision.
Like a perfectly tossed grenade rolling to
a stop between counter stools.
There is no time to duck and cover.

No time to counter attack. It is final.
It is an explosive sentence
imbedded with quiet emotion,
and the unspoken anger and
disapproval of war.

Someone came back. He looked like my son,
but it wasn't him.

Winter Made Short

By Charles F. Thielman

Day-dream small windows, sun slats crossing
a wood floor to her statue, his eyes steadied
that instant by marble in her artist's reach,

a remedy for the soul vertigoes delivered
daily cubicle to cubicle. He steps out
onto their second floor porch and stretches

his arms below the red gauze of an April sunset,
ears following a train wailing towards
her factory, her crew soon taking

their first break, knotted shoulders ready for
the liquid songs of robins. Her legs, rippled hints
of a jazz dancer's spine, jut out of a denim skirt

and on into mud-crusted boots in the mantle photo,
both dogs claiming one stick, small town background.
No jobs there. This sky dropping red and saffron robes,

dusk stumbles across lanes with one eye open
as happy hour mimes the day-shift's truncated
ballets. Soon, city night will glimmer with strings

of sodium pearls, marquee and back porch lights.
They all will pile into the car and go idle outside
a factory gate, late buses being too dangerous.

Having shortened the winter with their passion,
sleeping back-to-back then turning, she'll be sharing
baby photos with her co-workers in 6 months.

Born and raised in Charleston, S.C., Charles Thielman moved to Chicago, was educated at red-bricked universities and on city streets. He worked at a Tripler Medical Center outpatient clinic helping wounded veterans. He is good friends with 2 Vietnam veterans, and his father spoke closely of leading the first Army Corps of Engineers company into Nagasaki after Japan's surrender. Thielman is a loving grandfather for five free spirits!

morning formation after fight-or-fuck night

By Anna Weaver

for the boys of the 861st QM, even though they never let me come along

Half-numb on barracks beer
they'd go out looking to feel
something, aimed like an M-16
at center mass of another body, hoping
to be understood in a language of vowels and gasp.

No surprise, fight-or-fuck night always ended
behind a bar in a post town gone dark,
when they could finally stop looking for trouble
because they'd found it, and it was grinding
hard against them.

The old soldiers would laugh every time as those boys
dragged ass into formation, pockets empty—
not a single phone number. Red eyes rising
over a half-perimeter of purple, guarded
by swollen knuckle salutes.

By the time the first sergeant called
us to fall in, each had retold the night
no less than three times, tongue tasting
fresh blood from his bottom lip, souvenir cut
drawn open by a wide, satisfied smile.

Raised in Oklahoma, Anna Weaver served eight years as a parachute rigger in the U.S. Army Reserve. She writes about big sky, old boyfriends, and occasionally her time in service, which fell between Gulf Wars. Currently living in North Carolina with her two daughters, she has performed at open mic nights in Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, and Savannah.

Return of POWs: Maxwell AFB, Montgomery, Alabama, 1973

By Alan Tessaro

I drive, they talk
leaning up on the back of the front seat
seeking the mundane of nearly a decade,
eyes never quite relaxing, like a rabbit
fears being cornered by a shadow.

I drive, they talk
as polite as grandmothers in Sunday school,
even Col. Roberts off to the whore house
for the third time this week talks to me
as a comrade.

I drive, they talk
to talk to make sense.
Lt. Col. Thomas needs his children to love
a faint memory but they miss their daddy.
His dreams dissolved, still
he talks ex-wife words
without bitterness. Every time
we're together we stop for a bottle of Jack.
I drive, he slumps talking between long pulls
of prayer eight years long.

Alan Tessaro is retired from the U.S. Air Force. He teaches English at Spartanburg Community College, Spartanburg, SC.

The Grass

By Tessa Poppe

I lie in a park and listen to inhabited dirt. It works,
and works and works, its indefatigable hands reach
towards the sky and eat bone below, making undetect-
able, indistinguishable sounds, as if someone were
chewing loudly in another room. I am as sleepless
as this grass, restless too, it crawls and consumes.
I want it to chew on my arms and skin, to eat the sin,
with its teeth, extinguishing my indecency. I can't get
closer to human. Suddenly, the fluorescent lights are
merciless, the grass goes quiet, a bug buzzes towards
the beam. I'm not dead. I get up to walk home, as the
evening strollers come to throw Frisbee and eat peanut
butter and jelly. As I walk, hand stuffed in pockets,
I stare up at the sky, there are no stars. This is Arnold's
Darkling Plain. Passer-by after passerby, heads down,
the glow of their screens light up wide eyes. I look at
windows, a blue hue is blinking, artificial heartbeat
of information, but we are no closer to God, and far-
ther from each other like boxes lined up on death
row, their blinking makes me feel static on my skin,

a frantic, frenzy of electric noise. I am home now.
I watch the blinking box, endless reel of panic pictures,
Syrian genocide, burning babies, the weather has begun
to weep, the floods are coming. I am walled in by these
images: they say "the devil is in the details," and every-
one is watching, but no one is paying attention. This
must be the world that eats the Golden Child. No one
can hear the grass anymore, its incessant chewing on
skulls, it will be eating long after we're gone, after
we've killed ourselves with artificial goo. I see soldiers
on the screen, snow and mountains and RPGs, it was
there in the Hindu Kush where I first heard the grass,
and watched drones fly towards the Khyber Pass, nights
as dark as ink, so that the eyes refuse to blink. But the
clip is three minutes of a ten year war, the ceaseless
blinking of the blue hue gone mad, the ticker lines
below: the names, the names, the names. I pull back
and see my face in the screen, the light glows hooks
in my eyes; I'm becoming this electric landscape. Soon
I'll forget the grass and the dread and the dark: the war
that left its mark. The grey now fills my heart, colorless
and tasteless as ash. I can't get farther from being human.
I am tired of being brave in the shadow of a thousand
graves, the devil is in the details, so they say.

Tessa Poppe enlisted in the Iowa National Guard at 17 and went to Iraq followed by Afghanistan as an MP. She recently graduated from the University of Iowa and currently attends graduate school in Washington D.C. Tessa mainly writes flash and short fiction as well as poetry.

Snow Leopard

By Jon Turner

It was instinct
to act in this way, embedded into
his soul—

he moved as grace, silently
crouched heal to toe
able to stop at a moments' notice

His heart,
sensitive to each emotion
each fear
became a metronome

and his gun was the instrument
remembering only one song.
A fierce glare fixed over the sites

over the barrel
waiting for that moment-
that first note

Behind him stood He who is like God
Calm—undistracted
cradling this poor boy's soul

near to his body
waiting for the will of his heart
to return, remembering home

His fatigues were faded from unforgiving suns
carrying memories they dare not speak of from
unforgiving bullets

His boots were worn and cracked
from walking in prayer for days
and nights through the desert sand

I watched him
staring off
He
the snow leopard
was away from his habitat

Jon Turner has used poetry and other forms of creative expression to understand his wartime experience in Iraq. He served two tours of duty in Iraq as an infantryman with the marines, as well as a humanitarian mission in Haiti in 2004. Currently Jon lives in Vermont with his family, working to build sustainable food operations with local farmers while further transcribing his memories with veterans.

Ft. Benning #2

By Jim Coppoc

they say the fields and hollers
are blood and more blood

that the landscape runs
in the veins

that the heat thickens
this syrup it makes into
slow, sluggish rivers
of red clay and old
water, that these too
run

they say Georgia is a peach-
laden plantation-laced
stomp dance of God, guns
tradition and fate

but to a soldier, a swamp
is a swamp, and Georgia
is the last mosquito
of the longest night
the diesel exhaust
of a convoy on the
horizon, deepening
the sunset into shades
even God left off the cosmic
wheel

to a soldier, Georgia is strain
and sweat and swat and stab

the hoorah of a hundred men
the union of their voices
the whole, which is greater
than the sum of its pieces

it is home, passing

a rite of passage

a long, slow, winding river
of boots and song, the whispered
imaginings of a nation
awakened

a fitted mantle
drawn tight against
the cold

Jim Coppoc makes his living by some strange-but-evolving blend of poetry, pedagogy and music. Each of these things pulls from all of his life experience, including a short stint in the Army in the 1990s, most of which was served at Ft. Benning. This poem comes from his time there, and his lasting warm feelings about that experience.

Patrick

By W.D. Ehrhart

He can't get out of his head the horrors he's seen
picking the pieces up and stuffing them back.
Like Lady Macbeth, his hands will never be clean.

But not like her: she murdered a king;
he was only an army medic, but now
he can't get out of his head the violence he's seen.

He only tried to put the pieces back
into broken bodies. It wasn't his fault,
but now he thinks his hands will never be clean.

His unit invaded Fallujah;
urban fighting's as ugly as fighting gets.
He can't get out of his head the havoc he's seen.

He can't sit still or even look at his hands.
He tried to save his friends, the dead and the maimed.
Now he's sure his hands will never be clean.
The army said he was fine and sent him home
with so much blood his hands will never be clean.
The VA gives him pills. Frozen in time,
he can't get out of his head the carnage he's seen.

W.D. Ehrhart is profiled in this edition of O-Dark-Thirty.

Interview.

A Conversation with W.D. Ehrhart

W. D. Ehrhart is a combat veteran Marine and Purple Heart recipient of the Vietnam War. He felt the calling to serve because he came from a patriotic small town—but also because he was sick of getting beaten up and "the Marine Corps builds men," as the recruiting posters of the time proclaimed. During his high school years, he realized he wasn't going to be a football star. So poetry was a way for him to meet girls, he guessed. The small foundation he gained in poetry as a youth helped kickstart a celebrated career as a writer, as highlighted by numerous publications including his memoir *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* and *Beautiful Wreckage: New & Selected Poems*. His poem "Patrick" is published for the first time in this edition of *The Review*.

O-Dark-Thirty editor (and combat veteran Marine) Dario DiBattista met with Ehrhart shortly before the Marine Corps' 238th birthday at Ehrhart's home in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania to talk about writing, poetry, and our wars. What follows are excerpts from that interview.

O-Dark-Thirty: Did you write when you were in Vietnam in a journal or anything?

W.D. Erhart: Only very briefly. I had this notion that I was going to be the Vietnam War's Wilfred Owen. I didn't fully absorb the fact that Owen didn't survive his war. Nor did I actually understand what was in his poetry even though I'd read it. It was all romantic to me as war often is to teenage boys . . . I very quickly stopped writing because the war began to make less and less sense to me; the more that I saw and observed, the more confusing things got and, didn't you reach a point where you don't think anymore? And if you're not thinking you can't write because writing is not a mechanical process; it's a thought process. And so really within a month I'd stopped writing and I did not start writing again until just before I got out of the Marines—about a two year period where I did no writing. The stuff I was writing high school imitation Wilfred Owen. And I wrote a poem at one point about blood dripping like tears from the blade of my bayonet. What?! I hadn't been issued a bayonet or put it on the end of my rifle let alone stuck somebody with it. I'd use it to bash open a can of C Rations if my Little John Wayne can-opener broke. But otherwise that's an image straight out of the First World War. But I had not yet understood that my own war had its own, hate to use the word "wonderful," imagery . . .

ODT: Mr. Dan Hoffman was someone who helped spur your writing when you first started seriously writing after the Marines. Can you tell me a little about him?

WDE: Very, very influential person. I encountered him early in my sophomore year. By that point he was teaching at Penn but he lived in the town of Swarthmore and he offered this writing workshop

which I took and I'm about halfway through the semester and I happen to walk into the college bookstore and here's this book *Broken Laws* [by Dan Hoffman] . . . Turns out this guy's a really good poet and he's taking me seriously. He's the guy who, later that year the course was over, but he sent me a note in campus mail, saying, he'd seen this thing in The New York Times saying they were looking for poems by Vietnam veterans. And that's how I ended up with poetry and that book, *Winning Hearts and Minds,* which was done by a bunch of Vietnam veterans . . . It's really an amazing volume because it's the first time in all of human history that the veterans of a war wrote poems in opposition to that war while the war itself was still going on.

ODT: What would your advice be for new writers as far as finding a mentor, somebody to motivate them?

WDE: Push the pen across the page and hope you're lucky. I mean, I didn't find Dan Hoffman. I just stumbled into it. It was just pure good fortune. I don't know how you make those kinds of things happen . . . The only thing you can do if you feel the urge to write is to push the pen across the page and hope that everything else eventually falls into place.

ODT: Do you think poetry has changed [since the poetry of the Vietnam era]?

WDE: Not really. I don't think it's changed, really. You find the major shift in American poetry taking place [with] the experimental poets right around the First World War. They weren't by and large guys like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. [They] weren't veterans, but what happens in the first half of the 20th Century is

that what we think of as poetry really broadens. It doesn't rhyme anymore, not necessarily. It deals with less stylized themes. I think this is a great blessing . . . I think if you look at what was being written in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, and you look at what's being written now, it's not really that different.

ODT: Do you think it's important, quintessential, or maybe even demanded, that if a writer comes home they express their political viewpoints regarding their war?

WDE: I might have thought that way 40 years ago. One of things you have to remember is I'm 65-years-old. I left Vietnam when I was 19. I got out of the Marines when I was 20. I'm a lot older and wiser than I was back then. And I've come to understand basically that whatever floats your boat, whatever gets you through the night, even if you come back and decide to be a writer and you choose not to write about that stuff—if that's what you want to do, fine. It's not my place to say, well you should be writing about your war experience.

ODT: You take a very straightforward approach [with your poetry]. Why did you make that conscious decision as a poet?

WDE: Somewhere along the line . . . I learned to never use a 50-cent word when a five cent word will work. And so I've also always had people say, 'Who are you writing for? What's your audience?' Basically, aside from me, my audience is anybody who can read or understand the English language . . .

ODT: I know you've written on a lot of other topics. [For your war writing in particular] do you ever feel that it was important that you were writing it and sharing it?

WDE: Well I always thought it was important. You have to have an enormous and magnificently inflated ego to imagine that anything I'm writing and thinking is worth somebody else's time. So yeah, I think it's important, but I'm probably fooling myself. But of course I certainly haven't been doing this because it's like really financially rewarding or because I'm famous and get to be on the David Letterman show. I think it's important because if I didn't think it was important . . . there's no other reason to be doing it.

ODT: Do you think it's important that poets learn traditional poetic techniques even if they're going to do more free verse kind of stuff?

WDE: That's a very interesting question and I don't know really. Dan Hoffman [once told me] if you're going to write in free verse, you really need to master traditional forms in order to learn how to handle and manipulate language. And already at that point in my writing life I had basically discarded rhyme and meter because I found myself looking for the word that rhymed with alligator instead of the word that said what I wanted to say, and it just got in my way. And I always for years and years remembered Hoffman's admonition and didn't feel like a real poet because I never mastered the traditional forms. And it was only in my later 20s and early end of my 30s, I would read interviews with writers and they would talk about their writing process and they're all different from each other; and not only are they different but I began to notice they contradict each other. One writer will say you have to do this and another writer will say the worst thing you can do is this, and I finally came to understand that every writer's process is different and you should listen to what other writers say, but it may not be what works for you. It's a long-winded answer to your question but

I think that it's possible to be a good poet without ever doing anything but free verse. Now at the same time, I do have to admit that whenever I manage to write a poem that is formally structured, I sort of feel like Wow! I am a real poet!

ODT: There are consequences to writing about things relating to national issues. Have there ever been any consequences to your own writing?

WDE: Sure, but nothing that was in any way, nothing that has impacted my life in any way that I can measure. I'm pretty certain that if anybody was really paying attention to the stuff I write, the government would probably find a way to shut me up because I'm pretty damn critical of most of what gets done in my name with my tax dollars. But the fact is, am I changing the way we do business in the world? No. So as long as nobody's really paying attention to me then no real consequences . . . In many countries in the world poets are taken out and shot for doing the kinds of things I do. I'm very grateful that I live in a country where they don't shoot me and there are days where I get really pissed off that nobody's paying enough attention to shoot me.

[A short conversation and shift in focus]

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Dario DiBattista is the nonfiction editor for O-Dark Thirty. *A combat veteran Marine of the Iraq War, he also camouflages himself as a poet sometimes.*

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