O-Dark-Thirty

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On the cover: *Under the Mulberry Trees,* oil on canvas
by CWO2 Michael D. Fay, USMC (Ret)
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Table of Contents

Non-fiction

Fiction

Poetry

Interview

Editor's Note

Welcome. This is the inaugural edition of *O-Dark-Thirty*, the literary journal of The Veterans Writing Project.

A dozen years into the 21st century, when e-books already outsell printed books, and everyone and his dog has a blog, you might be asking why in the world anyone would want to print a literary journal. We have ourselves asked this question numerous times. The answer we keep coming up with is that this writing deserves to be published, and in as many different formats, and on as many different platforms as possible.

On these pages you'll find what we think is some terrific writing by service members, veterans, and military family members. Some of it is raw and a little shocking. Some of it might just make you laugh out loud. Read it. Savor it. Share it. Pass the journal around. Let us know what you think. Join us in this endeavor as a reader, as a writer, as a comrade in arms, as part of our community, as a part of the family.

We have many individuals and groups to thank. There is a list of our sponsors and underwriters at the back of the journal. Up front we want to thank the writers for sharing their work with us.

Ron Capps *Editor*
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Non-fiction.

The Potato Factory

By Gregg Miller

Make bold sight adjustments. Every shooter knows what that means. When you know you're shooting straight but your rounds aren't hitting where they should be, adjust your sights. And not just a little bit. If you're way off in the left, crank the sights way to the right. Even if you overshoot the target, now you know how to get back to where you need to be.

I had spent ten years in the Marine Corps Reserve. I was in Rations Company, which does exactly what it sounds like. We cooked for units in the field or on the move. However, over the previous few years, we had been performing all kinds of missions from security to Mortuary Affairs. As my unit was finding a variety of ways to support the war in Iraq, I began looking for what I really wanted to do with my life. In June, 2004 I left my nice cozy civilian job and was planning to leave the Marine Corps Reserve to attend Washington College. I wanted to be a writer. At least I was pretty sure I did.

One sunny day in June I got a call, "The unit is deploying to Iraq as Mortuary Affairs. We need Staff NCOs. Can you go?" After a pause I said no. I was starting college soon and just wanted to let go of all of the responsibility. I hung up. Then I thought for perhaps a minute or two.

Why would a reservist with no obligation to deploy whatsoever, who was about to begin classes, choose Iraq over a soft bed, single girls, and a good education? How does a person get duped like that? I felt like Al Pacino in the Godfather series, trying to get away and getting sucked back in. But the funny thing is that it's not one bit like that. I wasn't ordered, coerced or cajoled. I was simply asked.

As I thought more about it, another question came into my head. What if someone else who doesn't care as much as I do is there instead? I thought about my guys, how much they trusted me, had asked me not to leave, had worked and sweated when I asked them to. I thought about the people who might lead them, who might put their own well-being ahead of my troops. My Marines. I still called them my Marines. I had my answer. I called back and was on active duty in two weeks. On September 11, 2004 I left America for the Middle East.

In November of 2004 there were about 175,000 Marines in the Marine Corps. Over 26,000 were in Iraq. Sixty-five of us were Mortuary Affairs specialists. We were sprinkled all over theatre in areas like An Najaf, Al Asad Air Base, and Al Taqqaddam. Our mission was to recover, process, and evacuate American and coalition forces that had been killed. A month prior to the attack, eighteen of us volunteered to move forward into Camp Fallujah where we would be better positioned to expedite the journey home for those we called Angels.

After about a month in Camp Fallujah, I received a new directive. Take a small detachment into the city. Our orders were not to recover coalition KIA, but to recover the enemy remains that littered the streets, risking our lives to collect people who had died trying to kill our brothers and sisters. It was a surreal request that could only be performed by volunteers. I asked my Marines a simple question. "Can you do this?" I had my answer. Eight of us, supported by a security element, would operate out of a potato factory to the north of the city.

We quickly settled into a routine of pick-ups, drop-offs, and

attempted identification which persisted for the duration of the month-long operation. After receiving our last remains for the day, we would close the huge doors (each about 400lbs) to the building and double-check the padlocks on the doors to the large refrigerated rooms, each perhaps 160 cubic feet, where the remains were held. Well into the operation, no remains had yet left the Factory to be interred. Then our resident uber-mellow mechanic would shut off the lights to the processing area until the next morning. So, with the exception of our loft and garage-like area we used for a movie and poker lounge, there were no lights. The Factory got quite dark.

There were nights where our commanding officer would be wworking late and I would be up writing. If she had questions, if she needed a bit of information from one of the remains because something wasn't clear in the paperwork, I would volunteer to go into the dark reefer rooms to check. It's the kind of thing horror movies are made of and I had to ask the powers that be (God or whoever) why I was in this place.

Picture this with far more detail than I plan to go into: I reach into my pocket and pull out a set of keys, which requires a small flashlight in order to verify the number. The smell is strong outside of the door, but I do not find a mask. This is not machismo but just a general discomfort in wearing them. They make me feel claustrophobic in the way gas masks do and I have never noticed any reduction in pungency for having worn them. I unlock the chain and slide one of two easily 200-pound doors open and step over a lumpy black bag into a room full of perhaps 130 such bags spread out in neat rows.

It is tar black in the room and I have to hold the flashlight in my teeth since my hands, wrapped in latex gloves, will soon be unsanitary. With the air circulation turned off and the space being encapsulated for so long, the smell inside is magnitudes worse than the hallway. The door behind me closes with a thud so that only the tiny window in each door gives any hint of external light. I step carefully around looking for

one particular bag, trying not to step on any them. For long minutes I fish around looking, because they are not in perfect order. Eventually I find the right number. Yes, he has red spray paint noting that he was found with ordnance. No, the traumatic amputation was not of his entire head. It was only of his face. He still has the back of his head. No, the remains are not semi-skeletal. They are, however, decomposed. The scarf is checkered. No ID. No name. These questions, at least, have simple answers.

Gunnery Sergeant Gregg Miller, USMC, a Mortuary Affairs Specialist who served in Fallujah, Iraq, largely writes fiction as blurrily swift moments reduced to painful slow motion, all to imbue the reader with an intimate sense of "thereness." He applies this same principle to his art and to his engineering.

Death Letter

By David W. Peters

Everyone writes one. At least, everyone who fights in a war does. Some of us seal it in an envelope and tape it on the door of our wall locker so our buddies can easily find it. When the First Sergeant, the senior enlisted man in the company, packs a dead soldier's shit, he makes sure to weed out all the porn and anything else that the wives or parents might not want to see. The folks back home receive a sanitized version of a man's wartime possessions. They also receive the death letter.

Its usually one page long and most are handwritten, although this war has also given us the e-mail death letter. These are just as moving and contain fewer spelling errors. I wrote one of my first death letters on some Red Cross stationary when I first arrived in Iraq. I composed my first letter because I thought I was going to die in the first couple of days. Every explosion and rifle shot sounds so close that I know, even though I am a chaplain and that God is on our side, I am not immune to the grim lottery of death.

I don't like the first letter I wrote. It is melodramatic and too short so I tear it up. A few weeks later, I write another letter when I start traveling on more dangerous roads to visit the soldiers in my battalion. My death letter is sealed in an envelope that says, "To be opened upon

the unfortunate death of David W. Peters." It feels strange to write these words.

In my letter, I tell my two sons I love them. I instruct them to obey their mother and that I will see them again. The second paragraph is about my funeral. I don't want my father, who is a pastor, to preside at the funeral of a second dead son. The third paragraph is written to my wife, Georgia. I tell her I love her and that it is OK for her to move on when she is ready. I sign it "Love, Dave."

My Mom, Dad, my now ex-wife Georgia, and most of my friends call me "Dave." My sons always call me "Daddy," my lovers usually call me "David," but in Iraq, they call me "Chaplain." I love the brave men and women who call me "Chaplain." They know my voice in the dark. They know I am with them. They know to get me when someone dies.

"Get the fucking chaplain!"

The first time I hear someone say this I have been at Fort Hood, Texas on my first assignment for about four months. A dump truck rolled over a soldier and he is pinned in the cab. The paramedics are saying that the soldier will die if they try to extract him. As I walk by the operations center of the unit, someone yells, "Get the fucking chaplain!" Later, when we are deployed to Iraq, the soldiers often come and wake me first when we receive a message from the Red Cross to notify us that a family member back in the States has died or when we lose someone in combat. When soldiers see me coming in the bewitching hours of the night, they know someone is dead. News of death travels fast and everyone knows about all the deaths that take place during our deployment.

Sometime, somewhere, in Iraq, I died.

A year after I returned from Iraq, I found the death letter I wrote during those first few days in Baghdad. I tear it up. It doesn't make sense anymore. I don't recognize the person who penned this letter or the God he wrote about. Even though his name is David W. Peters, he is dead. I am not sure if the God that David W. Peters had on his side made it out

alive, died, or just disappeared altogether. After I tear up my death letter into sad confetti, I begin to write another death letter addressed to the men and women who lost something in this war. For my brothers and sisters I will record the events that led to my death and the death of the God who was on our side in love and war.

David W. Peters served as an enlisted Marine from 1994-2000 and deployed to Baghdad, Iraq as an Army Chaplain in 2005. He is an Episcopal priest and Army Reserve Chaplain in Austin, TX. His memoir Death Letter: An Army Chaplain's Memoir of God, Sex, and War *is forthcoming from BCG Books.*

Brian and Me

By Jason Davis

We crept across the road while the holy city slept. Through dirt clod fields and manure-muck furrows, each trampling foot—left step, right step in time—brought us nearer the twilight objective. The infantry fanned out in front of Brian and me, set against a dark-green night vision sky. Only the silhouette fortresses of green-black boxes, stacked like building blocks, divided the twinkling expanse from the earth beneath our feet.

There was no sound but forty-five boots crunching the ground, and the gentle rhythmic sway of our rucksack straps rubbing against our protective vests. Even the air was still, until west of our objective, beyond the slumbering box city and across the great smelly river, six towed giants unleashed a three-round fury of indirect fire—fire mission! Immediate Suppression!

Sergeant Brian Colby's eyes glowed.

"Davis," he whispered, "that's one-five-five!"

For the ten years leading up to the war, since he graduated high school, Brian had been a "gun bunny," a dirt-shoveling, bomb-loading string puller. At eighteen, he enlisted as an artilleryman, and had traveled the world pulling strings—firing high explosive and incendiary artillery

rounds for the United States Army. Now, in the heart of southern Iraq, he was on the other end, with a bad back and knees, leading me into combat as a forward observer—the eyes of the artillery.

"Someone, somewhere is getting fucked up," he said.

It was our job to provide indirect fire support to the grunts of 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 2/502 Infantry. We were glorified grunts, occupying the line between Infantry and Artillery. As a Private First Class, I was trained to take command of Brian's Forward Observer position in case he was injured, or worse. I could calculate the distance and azimuth of the firing Battery's position in relation to the enemy, knew the maximum range and rates of fire for the Army's M198 towed howitzer, and was skilled in a variety of call for fire missions. As an observer, I counted steps, tracking our platoons distance through the corrugated fields, and I listened for the refractory period between distant artillery fire missions, predicting when some other observer's rounds shot out. But textbook rates of fire did not concern Brian; instead, on numerous occasions, he scolded me in a whisper yell, correcting my clumsy marching: "Davis! Get behind me!"

While I dazed off, picturing a battery of howitzer barrels glowing like cigarettes against the black sky, Brian demanded that I stay behind him as we walked, not next to him. It was his way of protecting me, fulfilling his promise to my wife the night he met her:

"Don't worry, I'll bring Jason back home."

Brian didn't bring me home a year later, but he got me through the combat invasion. When we were camped in the southern Iraq desert, guarding a fuel point and watching the nearby Bedouins and their tent homes and donkey-pulled carts, he talked to me like an older brother, not down at me like a leader. We laughed about life and love and of our families and childhood. I learned that beneath the sergeant exterior, a gentle boy who had grown up in the military yearned for stability after years of wandering. He often fell asleep staring at a picture of his two

young daughters each night while I pulled radio watch, my own mind dreaming of home and raising a family.

During those seven weeks in the spring of 2003, as the 101st Airborne followed the US Army's mechanized infantry into Baghdad, Brian and I became brothers. We ate cold MRE's together, slept in foxholes together, and pissed in the same ancient rivers. In Najaf and Karbala, we explored deserted and looted schoolhouses, searching for war treasures to mail home. As I marveled at grade school artwork taped to cement walls, Brian smashed the photos of Saddam Hussein that hung above the chalkboard in each classroom. Later, he nicknamed me "Princess" because I often plucked ingrown hairs from my neck with Revlon tweezers and picked dirt from my fingernails with the tip of a pocketknife. Most of the time, Brian just smiled, remembering when he too had been a dumb private.

Date night, five years later; children in strollers smiled and laughed and cried. Their hands, clutching brightly lit straws and fistfuls of popcorn, waved at wispy clouds of bubbles falling like snow from the sky beyond the castle. Lovers were bundled in scarves and black leather jackets. Shoppers, eyeing branded candies and festive knick-knacks, mingled at the registers with plastic bags and seasonal smiles. And in the tunnel beneath the Disneyland Railroad on Main Street, where vintage posters of Autopia and the Submarine Voyage hang as dreamy remnants of Yesterland, weary families trickled toward the turnstiles, leaving behind an empty artificial world.

In the sky, high above the castle, I didn't see the yellow ball rise into millions of tiny exploding embers. It wasn't the sight that set me off, but my knees buckled anyway. Dizzy from the noise and confusion, I searched for the familiar—a point of reference, something to fix on, or an image that would show me that everything was all right. The trees and the decorative awnings of Main Street USA screened my eyes from the

flickering shapes and colors, but it was the blasts echoing off the Penny Arcade and the Magic Shop that felt most real. We were five thousand miles from the cultivated fields in the Iraq desert, but that's where the noise sent me.

I don't remember families and children laughing: I remember panic and the artillery illumination, tee-tottering left and right like a light bulb dangling on a string. In the farm fields that night with Brian, after the distant 155's made a crater of men and enemy equipment, a single round of illumination arced into the sky, and I was the only one who saw it.

"Illumination!" I yelled, and hit the floor, hoping not to hear the squealing, spiraling sound of six metal footballs exploding around me.

Brian threw off his night-vision goggles and grabbed the Lieutenant by the shoulders. "Get them the fuck down," he screamed, motioning to the rest of the platoon, unaware they were backlit against the distant treeline.

The rounds were near enough that we could hear two more fizz as they lit into the night. Ninety seconds later, they popped and the black sky grew gray with entrails of smoke. For ten minutes, we crouched with our mouths pressed against the ground and our hearts thumping the inside of our stiff, protective vests.

Just like that night in Iraq with my face shoveled into the plowed earth, the blasts from the Main Street concession were sporadic and invisible. I grabbed Robyn's hand and motioned for the gate.

Months had passed since my last episode. When I fell at Robyn's feet and clasped my arms around her legs, she looked down into my eyes. Nine years ago in this same place, it was my blue eyes and curly brown hair had first attracted her. We were two kids selling gumbo and creamy clam chowder from behind a small window at the Royal Street Veranda in Disneyland's New Orleans Square. Several nights a week for nearly two magical years, we watched Fantasmic and the fireworks, look-

ing over the heads of the crowds in front of our window. Robyn knew that my eyes sparkled when I truly smiled. In those special moments, she could glimpse in them the charm and boyish wonder she fell in love with.

Now, she saw fear and suffering.

Post Traumatic Stress is an anxiety disorder caused by traumatic events. The more traumatic the experience, the more one can be affected by flashbacks, night tremors, and dissociative feelings. Many of the soldiers in my unit displayed symptoms of PTSD after returning from Iraq, but in 2004, our unit refused to acknowledge the symptoms. Tough commanders and senior sergeants thought their soldiers were malingering. Army physicians threw pills at us to treat the symptoms, sleep aids and mood altering drugs to fix the depressed and the weak. Some Veteran's Administration doctors maintained an unofficial policy to deny the validity of the disease. Tens of thousands of soldiers didn't receive adequate care or attention when they came home, and many claims for disability compensation were denied outright.

That's how Brian left the Army in early 2005. Despite being treated for severe depression and PTSD by Army doctors, he didn't receive disability compensation from the Army or the VA. Like other veterans, Brian used alcohol and violent video games as an escape, a way to cope with his troubles.

I first knew there was a problem in late April of 2003. We'd been in Iraq for five weeks—through Kufa, Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad—and I was receiving letters and packages from home almost everyday. At mail call, Brian watched in silence. "It's just a delay in the post system," I said. But several months passed before he received his first letter. In her letters to me, Robyn said she hadn't seen Brian's wife or daughters at any of the monthly Family Readiness Group meetings.

Before coming home, the FRG discussed the mental and physical issues returning husbands might have after combat. In Iraq, the chaplain

gave us a slide show that explained how we could reintegrate into life at home. But most of my brothers and friends had forgotten how to share decisions with their spouses. Some couldn't switch from combat soldier to off-duty dad, while others returned home to divorce papers and confrontations over infidelity—or worse, empty homes. When Brian left Iraq in late 2003 and landed at Campbell Army Airfield, no loving family waited; his wife and children stayed home. Brian hitched a ride from a friend, and three months later, his marriage was over.

I returned to Fort Campbell on February 19, 2004. After a short ceremony in the hangar, I rode to unit headquarters in one of those buses you see full of seniors on the way to a casino. I cleaned my weapon, locked it in the arms room, grabbed my bags, and left for home. For five straight days, I made love to my wife, turned off the alarm clock and cell phone, ate fast food and candy, and drank Bacardi rum—all the things I had missed while deployed. But it wasn't long before the homecoming happiness faded.

A lot of nights I woke up sweating, afraid that I was going to lose my M4. I'd carried it for an entire year. I slept with it, ate next to it and depended on it. In an urban combat zone, every sound from a dark alley would send arms and eyes to the iron sight above the barrel, scanning from corner to ledge to curb, trying to silence the threat. That nervous twitch followed me home. When I woke up at three a.m., the attachment remained. Instead of in my arms, or under my bed, my weapon stood in an arms room with other men's weapons, locked in columns, dress-right-dress behind steel doors and brick walls.

My days were no less stressful. I couldn't deal with the ambient noises of trash trucks and normal Army life. At work, where soldiers from different units practiced for "funeral detail"—of performing military tributes for the families of soldiers who had passed—the popcorn ricochets of blanks sent me diving for cover in the courtyard between two barracks buildings. I'd laugh, but not before checking to see that

other soldiers had reacted as I had. And the hydraulic tusks of the trash trucks which picked up metal dumpsters and slammed them onto the asphalt. To me, the thrashing was an IED exploding at the traffic circle, down the street from our fortified compound on the edge of the Mosul desert.

For the nightmares and sleepless nights, I drank. Everyday work in the artillery—cleaning weapons, inventorying equipment, working on the squad's HUMVEE—existed as a collection of repetitive scenes with me going through the motions, just shamming and waiting for the end of the day. I learned that if I drank fast enough, I could pass out by ten. Some guys snuck a shot of Beam before breakfast and lunch, and then doubled down with sleeping pills at night. All I needed was a half-liter of rum, and once I fell asleep I could stay asleep. But after a while, even that wasn't enough. That's when the nightmares started; that's when the boy came.

He watched me watch him. His eyes were black as the barrel of the AK47 hanging in his hands. He was lifeless and still like a four-foot-tall postcard. Mirrored in his eyes, I saw panic erupt from the petrified hollow of my mouth.

The cold sweat grew warm when convulsions shook me from sleep. Or when my frozen lungs blocked repeated attempts to scream. In the despairing moments before waking, light and darkness ceased to exist, and only exhaustion remained.

I wasn't afraid of the two-dimensional boy in a dirty, white man-dress with a cardboard machine-gun. What scared me was that his world had followed me home.

A few months earlier, I'd been the overgrown boy in dirty combat boots stomping across the threshold of another man's home. Now the favor had been returned. The apparition in the corner of my kitchen didn't move and neither did the gruesome and contorted face of my dream self.

When I awoke, rigid and ashamed in my wife's arms, I felt like I had been rescued but not saved from the boy's inevitable return. Watching him, I remembered every moment I'd walked uninvited into another man's home.

Stupid Kory didn't see combat, but when he went to the VA for PTSD in 2008, he received a 70-percent disability rating. Joey, Newby and Chris got the same. Hoagie saw combat in 2003, but went AWOL in 2005. He received an honorable discharge and a 70-percent rating. Dave got 80-percent, but he's also the only one who got blown up. My decision to seek treatment for PTSD wasn't initially motivated by disability compensation, but I found it hard to ignore when everyone around me was landing lifetime stipends.

"Dude, it's easy," said Stupid Kory. "I didn't hold back. I just went to a few counseling meetings and cried my fucking balls off."

But that game didn't come easy for me. I wasn't going to lie or embellish my story, and it took time and an increasing log of flashbacks for me to realize that I really did have a problem. I over-thought the process and couldn't understand how guys with similar backgrounds who experienced the same events could react so differently. And how could I explain to my buddies and friends and family that I, in twenty-four months of war—through the buildup, ground invasion, fierce combat in the streets of Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad and Mosul, and the violent backlash of a pissed-off post-war insurgency—never once fired my weapon? What claim did I have compared to those who hadn't seen half of what I'd seen, but who had popped off a few rounds when the opportunity presented itself?

"Fucking Davis," I thought those guys would say, "What's he whining about now? That soft-skilled pussy didn't do shit."

I didn't want to deal with the VA because I didn't want to appear weak. The Army taught me to "suck it up and drive on," and for years, I did. I tried to move on with my life, to forget the pain and depression

and the anger and frustration. I hated the person I had become but I refused to seek medical help. Like every other soldier I knew, I turned to alcohol to help me forget. But after the fireworks incident at Disneyland, I couldn't pretend anymore.

"No one is unaffected or unchanged," Robyn said. "I don't know what you saw or what you did, but it's obvious that whatever it was still bothers you. You don't need to compare yourself to others."

In November 2004, Brian finalized the divorce with the mother of his two children. Two days later, he remarried. Two months after that, he medically retired from the Army and moved with his new wife, Reggi, and her children, to Jerome, Idaho.

In Idaho, the fresh start for the newlyweds began well. Civilian doctors prescribed Brian Xanax, Prozac, Wellbutrin, Lexapro, and several other sleep and anger medications. They seemed to work. Brian and Reggi bought a house, and Brian enjoyed traveling the Southwest for his new job, installing paper towel, toilet paper and soap dispensers in airports and office buildings. When he wasn't traveling, Brian was a happy and loving husband and father, and numerous photos show him enjoying time outdoors fishing and tracking in the winter snow; the depression and anger and alcohol abuse he'd gotten treatment for in the Army seemed behind him.

But on the road, a different man appeared. After more than a decade in the Army, where Brian had a strict daily routine, the looser structure of civilian life dragged him down. His friends and family on the job, including our old platoon sergeant, tried to refocus his attention on family. But to others, it seemed that Brian preferred play to work, and his wandering eye and reckless alcoholism undermined the new life he had built.

On the beach one night in Galveston, Brian's cousin's husband, Beau Tanner, saw him spiral out of control. A girl that Brian met offered him Ecstasy and he took it. "Brian never sought out drugs," Beau said,

"but he never turned them down, either."

Tripping alone on the beach that night, Brian passed a group of people near the water right as they set off fireworks. "He looked hollow while standing alone in the sand with his eyes on the sky." By then, whether from the X or the sound of the pops and the crackles taking him back to Iraq, he was gone. "He hated his medicine and the way it made him feel," said Beau. "He didn't see the point in living a lie, an unhappy, fake life where he pretended to be happy, and constantly asked, 'What was the point?'"

Despite his internal suffering, Brian convinced friends and family that he'd be fine. He just needed time, and he was making progress. For a while, even Reggi was convinced. But his actions proved otherwise. He devoted less time to his daughters and family, and he became angry and violent when he drank, which was often.

In 2009, when the economy tanked, Brian lost his job and he fell into a deep depression. His marriage crumbled, and in January 2010, he left Idaho the same way he left the Army in 2005. Only, this time, Brian left "in order to get his head on straight." He felt he could do that living with his mom and step dad in Arkansas. With his parents' support, he believed he could rise above the depression.

In March 2010, after years of battling insomnia, night tremors, alcohol dependence—and how each had affected my work, studies, and life at home, I finally agreed to seek help. I didn't know what I wanted from the process, but I knew I needed to make a change.

With Robyn's hand in mine, I walked into the Long Beach VA Hospital to file a disability compensation claim for PTSD. Outside the main entrance, homeless veterans in BDU pants huddled on benches, smoking cigarettes and talking to themselves. To avoid eye contact, I stared at the ground, ashamed of my outward youth and ambulatory health. Inside, every awake face in the crowded lobby stared at TV's

hanging on the wall while others snored and snorted in their slumber. I felt even more of a fraud, thinking my Iraq nightmares paled in comparison to those of the homeless Vietnam vets racked-out on chairs inside the lobby.

Upstairs in the mental health office, a dozen more vets hacked and coughed while leaning passed-out in chairs against the wall. There were a few young guys, like me, probably Marines, who looked like they'd seen some real shit. One guy sat rocking in a chair with his head between his knees and a clipboard with a stack of ruffled papers next to him. A couple of large ladies in light blue uniforms appeared and carted him away. Another young guy walked to the bathroom with a small cup in his hand. The nurse stuck her foot in the door and I could tell he didn't seem optimistic about his chances.

I filled out the stack of papers attached to the clipboard. It asked for specific memories asking me to detail the moments "I felt I would die," and for names of people to contact to verify my claims. When I finished the stack, I ate a sandwich and waited in the lobby.

A half-hour later, a small, thin woman in light blue called my name. She brought me through a series of lefts and rights and back-arounds until we came to an open examination office. She sat at a computer and read the stack of papers attached to the clipboard. As she pecked at the keyboard, I played the role of dumb private—thoughtful, timid and polite, though that wasn't very far from my own mood. For 45 minutes she went through a list of questions to determine the urgency of help I needed—whether it was immediate psychiatric attention, or if I could get by with a scheduled appointment in sixty days. I told her about my nightmares and some of the graphic events I had witnessed in Iraq, and how I had been resolving those issues at home—mostly through alcohol and avoidance. She seemed concerned and said that I displayed symptoms of PTSD. Then she scheduled me an appointment to meet with "a doctor closer to home" in Santa Ana.

I met with Dr. Stewart in late July. She smiled what seemed like the first of a thousand for the day and led me to her office. I took a seat across from her. For the next 25 minutes, she typed into a computer and didn't look at me. She seemed indifferent and I felt like another name in her long list of patients as she played twenty questions.

"Do you smoke? Drink? Do drugs?

"Are you on any medications?

"Has your appetite changed?

"How do you feel right now?

"How are you sleeping?

"What is today's date?

"If you had to guess the date… pick a day…

"Who is the President of the United States?

"Have you committed any recent crime sprees?"

After the last question, she turned away from the computer and said that I displayed symptoms of PTSD. I told her that's what the last lady said, and she asked me if I wanted to join a substance abuse class. After we talked about my family and school obligations, she wrote me a prescription for Trazadone, an antidepressant used for depression and insomnia.

I returned for a follow-up appointment in late August. Dr. Stewart led me to the same room and she sat at the same computer without looking at me. Ten minutes later, after a blitzkrieg session of the same questions, she asked me about the Trazadone. I never took it, but lied and said it didn't work the few times I took it. Then she wrote me a prescription for Tamazepam, a hypnotic used by Air Force pilots to combat insomnia.

I didn't want drugs and I wondered whether I should forget the whole process. I thought it was a waste of time, and I wanted to talk to someone, and I wanted answers to questions I didn't have the courage to ask. Where were the caring doctors and couches and explanations for attempts to get to the bottom of my problem? I couldn't believe the VA

wanted to pump me full of drugs, as if loading up on a combination of pills, I could numb my fear and pain into smooooth jazz—"Yeah, baby."

"Fuck that," I thought. "I'd rather drink…"

On September 5, 2010, inside the gated community of Hot Springs Village, Arkansas, adjacent to Hot Springs National Park, Brian sat alone on his mother's balcony on 3 Medina Way. His family had left for Texas to attend his grandfather's memorial. Brian hadn't taken the death well and had decided to stay home to finish homework for his Welding Technology class at National Park Community College. Before the family walked out of the door, Brian bear-hugged his mom tighter and longer than he had in over twenty years. For one last time, he was her little boy—the blue-eyed, blond-haired boy smiling in the albums and frames on the wall.

For the previous nine months, while traveling between Idaho and Texas and Arkansas, Brian had hid his alcoholism from his parents. But on this day, in the empty house, he splurged one last time. When he finished making all of his calls and replying to all of his text messages, he grabbed his grandfather's Ruger 9mm pistol, feeling the weight of it in his hand and remembering all the times he and his grandfather had gone shooting. Brian studied the cool touch of the barrel and examined the loaded chamber. The gun may have rested on the ground or in his lap while he used the phone, but finally, it rested in his lifeless hand.

The sound careened off the trunks and branches of deciduous oak, hickory, and pine trees that filled the ridges beyond his balcony, but no one was around to hear. Later that afternoon, when Brian failed to answer his phone, his parents called neighbors. They found him on the balcony, a week before his 37th birthday.

In the Iraq holy south, we fought on rooftops and in muddy marshes and farm fields. In the capital, we fought inside dark hallways where shadows glided under locked doors and broken neighborhood

streetlamps. In the ancient north, we fought in the intersections of crowded markets and raced our Humvees through cemeteries to escape the ambush of roadside bombs. Some of us fought for peace or revenge or for college money, and others fought for their brothers and sisters and families back home. But mostly, we fought because we were told to, and when we were told to stop fighting—that it was time to go home—the battle raged on in our heads.

For Brian, only death could bring the end of war.

I found out later that evening on Facebook.

It was raining when I landed in Little Rock. I flew alone with my thoughts, an angry asshole seatmate to suited-up businessmen looking for their next southern sell. The puddle-jump flight and dingy airport reminded me of Lawton, Oklahoma, where I went to Fort Sill in 2002 for artillery Advanced Individual Training. The small, empty terminal reeked of mold and smoke and I wanted a drink.

Two hours southwest of Little Rock, I stopped at a liquor store to pick up some rum, hoping Baz and Dex—two of my oldest Army friends—would soon call or text to let me know they were on their way.

Three miles outside of Hot Springs Village, my phone rang. A few minutes later, it rang again. First, Brian's stepfather Fletcher, then his birth father, Frank.

I let the phone to voicemail; I felt I didn't have the courage to face Brian's parents, and so I checked into the hotel across from Hot Springs Village, America's largest gated community. I put the rum in the mini-fridge and then called Brian's folks for directions.

When I rang the doorbell, Brian's mom, Linda, answered the door.

"Is this Princess?"

She hugged me and held onto me and cried into my shoulder.

Walking into the house, I met Brian's family and his cousins and childhood friends. We sat at tables and couches, eating food prepared

by the empathetic community, talking about our memories of Brian. I learned that the "Princess" stories were family favorites and that a picture of Brian and I in Kuwait was the background image on his laptop.

I hadn't talked to Brian in months. He had traveled from Idaho to Arkansas to Texas to Arkansas many times since leaving Idaho in January, staying with friends for weeks at a time. Most of my conversations with him consisted of stray Facebook messages and comments, where I became another friend to appease. He always said he was "doing good."

Then he was gone and I wasn't one of the phone calls and texts he made on his last morning.

I wondered if it was because I had a happy marriage, or that I had succeeded in school. I knew what I wanted to do with my life and Brian didn't. Had he avoided me? Did my aspirations and choices bring him down, or did he move on?

After the suicide, Brian's family found his pill bottles full—he hadn't taken his medication in over 45 days. In the months and days before, he had deflected questions and told friends and family what they wanted to hear. He sought temporary highs and short-term pleasures to distract from the pain and confusion he didn't want to feel.

Goddamn you, asshole. Why didn't you call? And why didn't I know?!

Dex couldn't make it to the memorial, but Baz drove all afternoon from Kentucky. SGT Rolando Bazaldua was one of the first sergeants I'd met in the Army, and he never forgot what it was like to be a private, and I admired that. I hadn't seen him since summer 2005 when he left Fort Campbell for Drill Sergeant school. We bullshitted all night and stayed up to 4 a.m. drinking rum and Pepsis scrounged from hotel vending machines.

I couldn't get past the feeling that this would happen again—that from this point forward, life would exist as an endless succession of bad-trip Facebook messages from my closest battle buddies. One of

Brian's last status updates listed his new favorite song—"Suicide is Painless," by Marilyn Manson, a cover of the M.A.S.H. theme song. Brian and his sister, Lane, had watched M.A.S.H. for most of their childhood and this very obvious sign caught no ones attention.

We arrived at the funeral home a few hours later, Baz in his Army Class-A uniform and me in wrinkled business casual from flying light. The packed mortuary house watched as we took seats in the front pews next to Shawn and Davina Bass. I had served with Shawn in Iraq—he was an infantry squad leader for 3rd Platoon and a close after-Army friend of Brian's.

I spoke first after the chaplain's introduction. I had intended to prepare a speech, but it never came. After a sleepless night of drinking and catching up with Baz, I didn't feel ready. But in the crowd, I picked out Brian's youngest daughter Blake, and told her about how Brian kept a photo of her and Jasmine, her older sister, in a plastic zip lock baggie in his helmet. In those moments then, under the desert sky, tears fell from Brian's closed eyes. I told the crowd how much Brian had meant to me as a young soldier and brother. Then I stepped away, staring at the ground.

Moments later, the Old Guard began the military salute. I closed my eyes in anticipation, but I still wasn't ready for the piercing waves of sound as each round rang through the silent room. I stood at attention as Linda received the folded flag "on behalf of a grateful nation."

Jason Davis served for five years in the US Army's 101st Airborne, a stint that included two combat deployments to Iraq. After his military obligation, Jason used the Post-9/11 GI Bill and received a B.A. in Literary Journalism at the University of California at Irvine. He lives in Southern California with his wife and two kids, and works as an Automotive Journalist and Photographer for the Motor Trend Auto Group.

The Words I Read

S. Justin Platt

Gordon Cucullu knew why words mattered. In a year's worth of embedded journalists, over 80 in 13 months, he stood out as my favorite. He spoke using military acronyms in a way that was believable. He took notes on paper. He wore a complete set of ACUs. If it weren't for his white hair and his golden tan gained from retirement in a sunny climate, you would have thought he still on active duty. These qualities were rarities for the military embeds I've met as a Public Affairs officer. Most reporters favor lingo gained through Google searches, use voice recorders, and wear the trademark ensemble: Columbia cargo pants, a long-sleeve t-shirt, soiled ball cap, and the ubiquitous khaki-colored North Face expedition vest. But Gordon was different. He had Army-regulation name tapes. We knew his blood-type. He had an IR flag. We saw his identification tag laced in his left combat boot. He proudly displayed his Special Forces tab, Ranger tab, and Special Forces combat patch earned during his wartime command. We were surprised.

We were surprised because so many of our "journalists" were too high maintenance compared to what they offered the command. My media section chief, Staff Sgt. Jimmy Norris, coined a term to separate those who produce marketable, readable and relevant products from those

who merely take up space—"pseudo-indie-mil-blogger-journal-tourist-retirees." Heavy emphasis on the retired tourist aspect. Gordon was none of these. He was serious and had a plan. Gordon did most of the talking, pausing to adjust his glasses every so often to keep our attention.

"I see you guys always have books with you. Everywhere I look I see soldiers with books, magazines, whatever," said Gordon. "The MWR library kept me going in Vietnam. It's part of the reason I wanted to be a writer."

"Yeah—we read lot. The paperback exchange here is pretty big. It's down near the Green Beans and the morale phones—next to the chapel," Jimmy said, patting a well-thumbed volume from Terry Prachett's *Discworld* series.

"What do you guys read? Are war books still popular? You know I have written a few—just look up "Cucullu" on the internet and you'll find most of my stuff. Too bad there are so many pirated electronic versions of Inside Gitmo out there. I'm just glad I'm not doing this for the money. It's just sad, that's all," Gordon lamented.

We nodded in agreement. I double checked to see that my e-reader was stuffed completely inside my cargo pocket, as to not draw fire. But it was too late.

"I saw your PAO reading an e-book. And you too, Jimmy," he continued.

"Yes." I conceded, "we've gone over to the dark side, mostly on account of the lack of storage space."

A few weeks after his embed started, Gordon emailed me an article he had written for an online magazine, no doubt inspired by our recent conversation. His tone was playful, almost sarcastic, detailing for the general reader what we teachers, military professionals and bibliophiles have always known. Reading is important. It's something that transfers from civilian to military life quite easily. You don't switch off

your brain when joining the service. On the contrary, military service, if anything, expands your experiences. It gives you the opportunity and the time to pursue your passions. It gives you the life experiences to develop new ones. Gordon wrote in part about a misperception of soldiers being less-than-interested in reading, noting that:

"Not long ago we were told by a major book publisher that 'soldiers don't read books. They are too tired from driving their tanks around all day.' Really? The many soldiers we have encountered so far on the way to and inside Afghanistan, would laugh at such elitist naïveté. The road to war these days passes through airports and involves long hours of the kind of "hurry up and wait" activity that would be familiar to old soldiers, too."

He's right. We are new soldiers with old passions. We laugh. We read. We smile at how little many in our nation know of the choices we've made to be a part of an all-volunteer military and the skills and passions we bring with us into battle that don't involve killing people. I would spend the next several months thinking about the words I read and why they matter.

A former colleague of mine at West Point, Dr. Elizabeth Samet, understands this completely. As a teacher, author, and scholar, Elizabeth readily jumped on my request for better things to read, graciously providing my soldiers and co-workers at FOB Salerno with an assortment of scholarly journals, literary reviews, and popular magazines to help us through our tour. Besides the towering piles of mass market paperbacks supported on one side by the water cooler and by the wall at the opposite end, well-examined copies of Ok! and People were the only magazines we had. Considering I had no idea who graced their covers, it was doubtful I would be able jump back on the bandwagon of popular culture.

Being in Afghanistan for a year was one way to build a pop culture deficit. Knowing her passion for reading, I emailed Elizabeth about our predicament, and in a few short weeks, two large postal service priority

mail envelopes arrived from New York.

Cutting open the envelopes revealed a pantheon of prestigious publications for readers of all interests. I fought the industrial consistency postal packaging with semi-sharp scissors. My struggle caused the contents to explode onto the break room counter, revealing an elite sampling of America's best writing: the American Scholar, Armed Forces and Society, the Yale Review, the Economist, cascaded from one; the New York Review of Books, Foreign Policy Journal, and the New Republic, spilled from the other. About a week after the first shipment arrived I was walking through the Tactical Operations Center and noticed a copy of the Yale Review sitting near a workstation. I picked up the distinctively tan "YR" cover and searched to see if some of my favorite authors were in this issue. A young specialist, a real-time intelligence analyst on the night shift, distracted my investigation.

"Sir, there's a really cool poem in there," she said, as if she had caught me in the act of stealing a glance at her diary.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Natural waterfall or something. See here, sir," she pointed, spreading the pages open and flipping to the text, "By Charles Wright. It's so good. Did you know there are a whole bunch of poems by him? I looked them up online last night."

My heart jumped. My teaching self was now engaged in a conversation about literature, about a poet who existed for me not just on the pages, but in real life. It really didn't matter to me that she didn't have a clue about one of American's preeminent poets.

"What did you like so much about the poem," I asked, reading it more hastily that I should have. "I was at a lecture of his once. He did a reading as part of a staff and faculty development session I attended while in grad school at Minnesota."

"Did he read this one? I really liked the sounds, sir. And reading it is so not like work, ya know?" she said. "Do you like his poems? Like,

understand them and all?"

"He didn't read this one, as I recall. It's really hard to understand a poem. I usually find new things and new possible meanings each time I return to the stanzas. What I really got from listening to him read was his passion for words and feelings. It's a big part of why I'm a PAO."

"Do you have any more?" she asked.

Almost monthly until our deployment ended, Elizabeth indeed sent more journals, so many in fact that I dug a magazine rack out of a long-forgotten corner of the headquarters supply room to build a conspicuous display. In a combat zone time is always at a premium, and reading time is often scarce.

Making the most of time in a rushed environment has been part of my educational career since junior high, and certainly came to rule my life in the years I spent as a cadet at West Point. Cadets marked time by rushing to classes in full uniform, with shined shoes, and with all homework sets completed; then on to sports or rifle drill, next to company meetings, followed by five hours of homework, all executed under the threat of the cadet disciplinary system. At this frenetic pace I hardly had time to read anything other than required homework. This is why I looked forward to my English classes: we read things meant as entertainment. No poem I've ever read was close to as dreadful as reading the theories behind how to calculate centripetal forces for objects rotating about a fixed axis. At the end of the day however, what I personally derived from my relationship with a text was a truth unto itself, even if it only applied to me.

When I think of this truth, I think of Major James Langran's Steel Design class. In my four years dabbling in the mathematics, theories, and practicalities of engineering, he was the one West Point professor who saw my resistances to the rigidity of the engineering process and acknowledged them, albeit unknowingly. His class, more so than my required English courses, validated my love of the ephemeral nature of

"understanding" Literature as an antidote to "studying" Civil Engineering. On one occasion he did this from more than 400 feet above an island in the middle of two rivers.

In the fall of my Firstie year, Major Langran took his steel structure capstone design students on a fieldtrip to a construction site in lower Manhattan, not far from the World Trade Center. We were examining the construction process from the footings to pouring concrete floor decks. In formal cadet dress gray uniforms under raincoats, we descended hundreds of feet below the street level on this misty morning, trying to keep clean while ducking under low-hung beams and stepping over well-marked conduits filled with miles of wire. We crisscrossed many levels of the sub-structure, discussing elevator and machinery access rooms, windows sizes, ventilation ducts and construction logistics.

We crossed floors where crews installed sprinklers. In slippery Corofram shoes we scaled improbably narrow staircases which seemed to hang over the streets below by a handful of temporary bolts. Using the freight elevator, a temporary structure itself tenuously secured to the building, we rose hundreds of feet to see the work in progress. Sometime between observing the welders tacking corrugated decking to the stringers and watching concrete pumped at hundreds of PSI to fill empty the decking below, I realized I was studying the wrong discipline. Here, standing hundreds of feet above the Hudson River, looking westward into the hills of New Jersey and then east towards Brooklyn, I found Walt Whitman.

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!

He was here all along. Here, in the same place American left him 150 years ago, now here for me again above a place he frequented long before skyscrapers, subways, and several-lane streets. As I looked through the now-heavy drizzle I wasn't imagining drainage pipes snaking their way through the steel superstructure, funneling the water away towards the sewers far below. I was imagining the water adding itself

to the rivers and landscapes, still as real in their function as Whitman fictionalized them.

The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away, I remember staring at Major Langran as he was gesturing towards the beams above our heads; but I had floated elsewhere. Thinking of the poem's words I'd memorized in my Advanced Composition class, I knew I wasn't satisfied with the major I'd chosen. I was swept away by the West Point experience of being an engineer because it was expected. He was, I'm sure, explaining the practical application of the beams and how they translated to the formulas and modeling we were doing back in the depths of Mahan Hall. But I wasn't listening. I was imagining standing as Whitman stood, looking over the railing of the ferry that separated people from their destinies.

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Studying engineering graced me with knowledge that let me walk into a parking structure knowing the physics behind the types of beam connections and the equations used to calculate the required thickness of the supporting columns. But looking at life spreading out below me on the Manhattan streets, this knowledge was of little use. I was separated from my passions. True, I paid attention in class, enough so to be dangerous. But what I took away was how to arrange constants to develop the solution, rather than explore the endless possibilities that yielded an immeasurable number of right answers. Whitman's words whirled within my head as freshly as the day he wrote them from the shores of this island. I knew that building meaning(s) from the uncertainty of a stanza, single line, or singular word was ultimately more to my liking than building skyscrapers.

Who was to know what should come home to me?

Who knows but I am enjoying this?

I knew I wanted to teach—my education so far had been filled

with competent, compassionate, and inspiring teachers—and I wanted to do something I love.

Remembering Whitman's beautifully-crafted words, perennially applicable yet so far ahead of their time, gave me chills. I looked at my classmates and smiled. They were rapt with attention, notebooks and pens at the ready as cadets dutifully do despite dripping streams of water from their raincoats. I knew right then I was going to teach Literature someday.

What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

Looking back at this field trip, I can't recall the building's address nor do I remember its completed shape. I haven't tried to figure out whether it was destroyed on 9/11. I've also forgotten all the rote knowledge and surface learning from my engineering courses. But I remember Whitman's words:

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!

I read and remembered them. They moved with me. I discovered happiness I hadn't expected in a way I never imagined. I made a commitment to pass along my passions for reading and writing, for interpreting and discussing, for enjoying, remembering, and living. Perhaps it's part of the legacy I've already left my former students, many now Lieutenants, and part of what I'll pass to students I've yet to meet. My love for literature is a contentment, which lives in me still as I read through my passions in Afghanistan and think of home.

As a soldier, I think of home like previous warriors, sometime pondering the insanity of being somewhere my country has chosen for me. I know I'm doing something noble. I'm doing my duty. But my service

also echoes an uncertainty of place, existing in contrast to the idea that me, and those like me, shouldn't be "here-" wherever "here" happens to be. Teaching Literature as a soldier has giving me the opportunity to explore the creative expressions of disembodied connections to home, job, and family. Reading the works of soldiers past and present had been one of the great anchors of my personal and professional life, and a passion of mine I planned to drag my students into for a few weeks each semester.

It was getting towards the end of April, and being National Poetry Month, I decided to give my freshmen classes one or two surprise poems for discussion, knowing full well that a majority of them hadn't read the assigned reading from the previous class. My students had always seemed to do better when rushed for time and put on the spot. The academy's culture of hurry-up-and-achieve had ingrained many cadets with the misguided ability to pull off academic miracles at the last second; when met with a grade good enough to pass, these feats were perpetuated and absorbed into cadet lore, furthering the myth that procrastination until the last possible minute meant assignments only took a minute to compete.

Those who'd read ahead in my syllabus noticed we were finishing April's lessons with a few selections of war poetry from Iraq and Afghanistan, principally spending a few lessons with Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*. The previous year Turner had given a reading and discussion to the plebes enrolled in the accelerated Literature course. His poems had been so well-received that I chose again to introduce his modern expressions of the current war experience, an experience soon to be their own like Vietnam was for my parent's generation. Hopefully, Turner's poems would keep their interest as the weather improved and gradually broke into the graduation and summer leave season.

I opened the windows of the fourth floor classroom in Thayer Hall before we began. The room cooled off a bit, the fresh air providing a good distraction from our routine. As my students filed in and took seats, a few noticed the poem on the screen at the front of the room.

No title. No author. Just a simple poem. I left no clues and answered no questions from the early-arrivers. I stole the poem from my colleague who counted this poet, along with Marianne Moore, among her favorites.

I wrote "No Computers Today" on the blackboard—a rarity. It didn't take long for the class to get involved in the discussion after they took their seats. Most students were busy reading the lines. A few were mouthing the words out loud. At least one cadet was captivated by the opened window and was staring at a barge heading south down the Hudson towards Bear Mountain. West Point is filled with routines and having a poem displayed with no instructions or guidance was almost too much to ask. I let them read and talk for about 10 minutes then we began.

"Has everyone finished reading?" I asked, looking for nods and listening for mumbled affirmations.

"Good," I continued. "So what? Why is this up on the screen?"

"It's a poem, right?" ventured one.

"Yeah—it's a war poem," added another.

"Yes, it is. It's called 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'" I said, offering no additional comments to prejudice their analysis.

For the next 20 minutes or so I guided them with suggestive questions covering standards of literary analysis and common poetic devices. We explicated stanzas, lines and rhyme. We debated tone and voice. We examined phrasing, meter and diction; we theorized word choice and language. We noted alliteration, assonance and consonance.

Then I asked about the writer.

"Sir, he sounds like he's pissed at the establishment," said the first cadet more assertively.

"It's like he's missing the whole world he left behind in high school and isn't really sure being in Iraq is the right thing for him. He's saying being deployed sucks—but with too many fancy words," said the second.

"He knows he's going to die, too," added a third.

And they were off. Wanting to blend in with the popular opinion, most cadets were absolutely sure the poem was recent. It was by someone who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. A soldier with regrets. Someone who joined after 9/11. A kid who's parents wanted him to serve. This continued until nearly the end of class when I made my announcement.

"This poem was written in 1918 by a young second lieutenant. He was a British Infantry officer serving in World War I. A few short months after he wrote this poem he was killed in combat in France, just a week before Armistice Day. His name was Wilfred Owen—Google him," I said.

They looked a bit disappointed. Many felt tricked. There was a least one very loud "No fair, Sir!" The cynics shrugged it off, sticking with their reservations about poetry, no doubt vowing to survive the next 10 lessons and never have to take Literature again. Among a chorus of groans and sighs, I heard an occasional, almost inaudible "I told you so" or a "see, I knew by the language." Most of the students were a bit surprised, and I overheard discussions of the poem and of the day's lesson continuing as they joined the sea of classmates in the corridor on the way to Psychology, or gym class, or varsity sports practice. I knew it would be almost another month until I would read their final exams to see if my attempt at inspiring learning and open-mindedness had made any impact. However, in less than 55 minutes I had imparted my passion for poetry to at least a few students; whether they ever majored in English or read another poem outside my classroom, I felt as if I won a small battle.

Since I have been in Afghanistan, my days have become a series of small battles to keep balance between the daily battle-rhythm of war and operations on my personal home front. Reading and writing is a big part of it. When I was younger I would watch the TV show M.A.S.H. with my parents and grandparents. We'd laugh at the ridiculous ways

Corporal Klinger tried to get thrown out of the Army and how no matter how bad the enemy fire impacting around the hospital, a stiff drink, a good laugh, and some letters from home would make everything ok. And to some extent this still holds true, though we're in a Muslim country that prohibits alcohol, and email and Skype have replaced the traditional letter from home for most.

Perhaps one of my most touching letters was from my six-year old son Alex. He had been working on reading and writing for a few months and decided he wanted to practice his writing on an optional worksheet his kindergarten teacher sent home. With typical pre-spelling conventions and not-far-from-toddler confusions between lowercase "b" and "d," he answered the question "If I were President . . ."

"I wob dclare every every day a hilo day. I wob bring my dady bk from Afganstad. Alex"

I teared up, a few landing on the paper. I immediately put his writing on the wall next to my desk with a gold thumbtack. Reading these simply-constructed 17 words put my life in perspective. I had my mission and my duty, but I also had my family. Reading the musings of a kindergartner did as much for me in those 20 seconds as a lifetime of trying to understand Hawthorne or dissecting a passage from Emerson ever could.

The first thing I did every morning was read my civilian email, checking for Cathy's "Daddy Update" that chronicled our lives in my absence. It became a temporary ritual to replace morning kisses on foreheads or on lips. All told, her updates numbered 372, growing daily like their subjects. I read messages made in a haste to extinguish the chaos of the day. I read beautifully detailed paragraphs written late at night after they were sleeping, or crafted in the quiet, peaceful period between the silences long bedtime stories bring and first wakings for reassurance. She wrote of the mundane, the gripping, the sarcastic and the

humorous, all rolled up into a narrative as powerful and passionate as a passage from Proust; they are the among gifts I most treasure.

What I read in Afghanistan became more a part of me that any other literary inspiration I'd brought on deployment. I'm passionate about the words and letters from home because they make real the experiences family separation has temporarily suspended. Our family's words are rooted to my life in ways separate, but equally important to the novels, poems, and essays I carried with me to pass the time until I got back to my life. They echoed those words from letters of soldiers past, glorified in anthems, whose sacrifices to self, family, and country are memorialized and fictionalized in the literary or cinematic world. But these words are mine. In writing now, perhaps for my children, I'm giving my passions a turn to stand up like soldiers in formation, cautious yet confident, and ready to go wherever they are lead.

S. Justin Platt recently returned from a year deployed to Afghanistan as a brigade Public Affairs Officer with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He has taught Literature and Composition at West Point, and now serves on the Army staff. He lives in Northern Virginia with his family.

Fiction.

The Booze Rumor

By Phillip Thompson

Moonpie was laughing his ass off as we bounced all over the Pacific sky while our C-5 refueled from another plane. Guys were puking all over the place, and the guys who weren't were as green as St. Patrick's Day.

I was sitting next to Moonpie, jammed up against the tiny frost-covered window, trying to keep my feet from going to sleep. Across the aisle from us, a new guy, I think it was Webster, flopped over in his seat and barfed up the two MREs the sergeant had told him not to eat.

MREs—Meals, Ready to Eat to civilians and Meals Rejected by Everyone to us hardass Marines—were nasty before you chewed them up and choked them down. They were a hell of a lot nastier when you power booted them across your boots.

The splash of the puke sounded like a bucketful of water hitting hot concrete, and then the plane rolled over to our side, and all the slime came our way. We lifted our boots.

"Oh yeah, these guys'll scare the shit out of the Eye-rackees," Moonpie yelled through my earplugs as we watched Webster hurl all over the boots of the guy jammed into the seat beside him.

We agreed that what we'd heard was probably just a rumor.

It was.

That's the thing about rumors.

Drill instructors tell you that rumors can get you killed in a combat zone. And you believe it—but only because you believe anything those sadistic assholes say, from the time they scream at you on the bus and spray their Altoid breath all over your face on the first day of boot camp to the day they crush your hand with their own and call you a Marine for the first time.

But as soon as you step off the parade deck on graduation day, you forget that lesson. By the time you get to infantry school, you're a full-fledged member of the Rumor Mill.

Me and Moonpie Jones laughed about this on our way to the Saudi. We were on a humongous cargo plane with the rest of our battalion, a helicopter, tons of gear and a few humvees. We were on our way to kick Saddam's ass. Or so we thought. Actually, we sat around on our own asses for six months in the hottest fucking sandbox on planet Earth. But Rumor had it that we would be dodging bullets coming into the airport at Jubayl. And that's what got Moonpie to laughing.

Moonpie was a huge machine gunner from some kudzu county in Alabama. He was always getting these boxes of moon pies from his mother back home in Dogpatch, or wherever. That's why we called him Moonpie. He'd laugh when we'd bust his ass about it, then share the moonpies with us.

He looked the part of a Marine. He was way over six feet tall, musclebound, eyes the color of a laser beam, and he looked like a mean motherfucker with the M-60 machine gun around his neck. But he loved to party, too, so nobody was really intimidated by him. Which was really funny, because when it came to me and Moonpie, you couldn't have asked for a better study in opposites. He was this big country boy—an All-State linebacker and an honor student—and I was a loser from Long Beach

who cut class to go surfing and smoke dope. He could have bent me like a twig, but he thought I was cool, some sort of mystic like that surfing sailor in Apocalypse Now. Of course, I never argued with Moonpie, and I kind of liked being a mystic, so I rolled with it, and me and Moonpie became pretty good friends at Camp Pendleton, our base about an hour south of my hometown.

We spent a lot of nights in Oceanside and San Diego, trolling the strip joints on payday Fridays, and taking walking tours of the old mission on days when we didn't have any money. I taught Moonpie how to surf at San Onofre Beach, and he taught me that all that stuff that happened two hundred years ago means something today.

Anyway, when we landed at Jubayl airport in the Saudi in the middle of the hottest day I'd ever seen, there was nobody there except for a lance corporal who yelled at us to "Get On The Fucking Bus. The heat was like an oven, a serious blast of Death Heat that almost knocked us down. And everything was the color of the sand—the runway, the buildings, the lance corporal. Tan bland sand, everywhere. To this day, when I think about the Saudi the first thing I remember is that scorching, evil heat and the butterscotch color of everything in sight.

Once we were on the ground, we moved into these monster-size warehouses that were even hotter than the sand, and about a thousand times more humid. All we did was sit around and sweat on our cots, which is not a good thing for grunts to be doing. And when you put that many jarheads together doing nothing but sweating, drinking water, pissing, and sweating, rumors become a way of life. And we heard them all. Saudis were going through our mail before we got it. Saddam was going to attack us. We were going to attack Saddam. Female Marines were giving blow-jobs in the shitters for five bucks. I happen to know that last one is true, but that's not the point.

I was able to laugh off most of these wild tales, but not Moonpie. He had to check out every one. And I have to say that, after a few months in

that sorry-ass desert, it was a lot easier to just humor the big guy than try to argue with him, which I never liked doing, as I've already mentioned. Besides, it gave us something to do. It's not like we were fighting Eye-Rackees. And whenever Moonpie came around calling, I knew I'd spend the next few hours trying to find out if Iranians had really just nerve-gassed us, which was better than just sitting around sweating and pissing.

But of all the wild rumors we heard when we were in the Saudi, nothing beat the Booze Rumor. Nothing.

I should have headed that one off as soon as I heard it. But it was New Year's Eve, and we'd been in the fucking desert for four fucking months and we'd had enough of the Saudi bullshit. I mean, we'd suffered enough. By then, I hadn't seen a woman the whole time I'd been there—hell, we weren't even allowed to see a picture of a naked woman because all of our skin mags were confiscated. So, forget about a cold beer. No way.

So, I knew the Booze Rumor was bullshit, and I told Moonpie that. But I guess part of me wanted this particular rumor to be true, because I didn't put up a lot of resistance. After all, I really wanted to get buzz on. By then, we had become pretty tight, especially after he covered for me when our company commander, Captain Richards, caught me sleeping one night on guard duty outside our warehouse not too long after we'd come ashore.

Richards had me dead to rights that night. Snuck up on me and there I was, leaned up against the metal sides of the warehouse, snoring my ass off. He yelled my name, and I jumped about four feet high and came down locked and loaded, muzzle not an inch from his sweaty chipmunk face.

"Goddamnit, Wilson, I could have you court-martialed for this," he said around the muzzle of my M-16. "In fact, I think I will."

I was forming the words, "Fuck you," in my mind when out of

the thick air came Moonpie, in a soaked green T-shirt and camouflage trousers. Barefoot like Li'l Abner.

"Uh, sir," he says, very casual, very cool. "Sir?"

Richards peeled his glare off me and stared at the big man. "Yes, Jones?"

"Sir, this is my bust."

"What?" Richards said. I'm just looking at Moonpie, too scared to say anything.

"Sir, I was supposed to relieve Wilson here about twenty minutes ago. I overslept. So this really ain't his fault."

Richards started to say something, then clapped his jaws shut. He swiveled his head back to me, but I kept my steely-eyed glare fixed over my rifle like I'm still contemplating blowing his head off. Which was easy, because I was.

Richards shook his head, then stepped off to the side. "Next time, Wilson, your ass is mine."

"No sweat, sir," Moonpie said. "My man here is not to blame. I shoulda been here, and I'll take the hit."

Richards was already walking back into the warehouse. He threw up a hand either in disgust or resignation, I was never sure which.

Once he'd disappeared, I lowered my weapon and jacked the round out of the chamber. "Goddamn," I said. Then to Moonpie, "Thanks, Dude."

Moonpie shrugged. "No problem, man. We all got to watch out for each other. That's what keeps us alive."

Anyway, The Booze Rumor went like this: the regimental radio operators were living in a cluster of humvees we called the "ant farm"—short for antenna farm, where all the radios were set up. They had been brewing up their own hooch from peaches, sugar and yeast and had made up a pretty good batch of booze.

Yeah, it was illegal as hell. But, it was New Year's Eve, and we hadn't had a cold one in months.

"We gotta check that shit out," Moonpie said one night after chow. We were sitting on cots in our tents, a few miles south of the Kuwaiti border.

I just grinned and kept cleaning my rifle. "Come on, man, that ain't nothing but trouble."

"Flip, this is a sure thing."

I always hated it when he called me that. My last name is Wilson, and Moonpie thought it was funny as shit to call a white guy Flip Wilson. My real name is Robert, but he forgot that about as soon as I forgot that his first name was Higdon, which I always thought was a weird name for a guy, white or black.

Now like I said, Moonpie loved to party, and I knew this, and I knew he was going to get his ass on over to the ant farm with or without me. The dude was my best friend in the company, and I knew that if he went over there, I was going to need to be around.

Besides, as I said, I was ready for some partying myself.

We got a humvee from the anti-tank guys and drove to the regimental HQ. We didn't drive straight there—it was dark as hell and neither of us was real sure of where Regiment was located. But a Marine pulling road-guard duty hooked us up and pointed us in the right direction, and pretty soon we found the radio guys.

The ant farm was a collection of tents and humvees, with a whole bunch of antennas sticking up in the air. The poor bastards that ran the place always had to set up a long way from the rest of the regiment because all those antennas and radio transmissions made them a missile magnet. So, basically, nobody wanted to be near the radio weenies when the missiles started flying. Personally, I didn't care much for radio weenies when the missiles weren't flying.

They did this so that, in case of a missile attack, the ant farm would get blown up, but not the rest of the headquarters where all the officers hung out playing spades and writing letters to their beautiful wives. No wonder these guys were making hooch. It's not like people were hanging around them for pleasant conversation after dinner.

We stopped next to the humvees and scoped the place out. The moon was out, and the desert looked like the bottom of swimming pool on a bright summer day. You see everything like it was daylight, bright and blue and fuzzy.

Moonpie got out to do the negotiating while I stayed with the humvee. Now, here again, I had time to head this thing off, but I was Caught Up In The Moment. I just kept my eyes peeled for officers who would bust our asses if they found out what we were up to. After about five minutes, Moonpie came out with this mile-wide grin on his face and waved me out of the truck. I killed the engine and climbed out just as he started telling me everything's cool.

"We hit it big, Flip," he said.

I nodded and followed him back inside the tent next to the radio humvees. I knocked the green plastic flap back and stepped inside. The light blinded me at first. The radio operators had some Coleman lanterns burning, and when I looked around I could see why Moonpie was so stoked. Four or five Marines sat around a field desk with canteen cups, obviously grooving on a buzz. Their faces looked yellow from the light and their eyes looked like burned-out holes. It was like looking a bunch of jack-o'-lanterns, but that's not what caught my attention. It was the chick sitting on the tailgate of the humvee. She was this grungy-looking little thing with short blonde hair, kinda cute in a I'm A Marine But I Got Tits sort of way, but certainly nothing to get excited about, even after not seeing a woman in months. But she was a woman, and she was sitting there in a tight green T-shirt and camouflage trousers.

And Moonpie, he was a pussy hound. He had a girlfriend back in Alabama, and he talked about her a lot, but mostly he talked about pussy. Like the rest of us, but only more so. And Moonpie homed in on this girl. She was a private, and she looked real young, even with a tired face and dirty hands. She smiled at me, but her smoky gray eyes were on the big man, the Machine Gun God that was Moonpie.

"Folks," Moonpie said as he waved a big paw at me, "this here's Flip Wilson and he can drop a 203 round into a fucking helmet at three hundred yards."

That wasn't really true. I was what the Corps calls a grenadier, so I carried the M203 grenade launcher, which looks like a regular rifle with a big shotgun barrel underneath for the 40-millimeter grenade. At Camp Pendleton, I shot a grenade into a 55-gallon trash can once at a hundred and fifty yards, but Moonpie liked to tell stories. The radio weenies looked goddamned impressed, so I rolled with it.

"The Eye-Rackees don't stand a chance against my man from California here, so give this warrior a drink," Moonpie said. A little guy with one eyebrow stood up and walked to the tailgate where the chick sat. He reached behind her and pulled out a water bottle wrapped up in the green rag we all had in our first aid kits. He smiled at me, and I yanked out my canteen cup. He poured this piss-yellow liquid into my cup. I said to myself no fucking way am I going to drink this shit and go blind, but Moonpie must have seen my face, because he said, "Peach, boy. That there is peach liquor."

Eyebrow nodded. "We made it from peaches," he said.

I was like, yeah right, peaches my ass. But I drank it anyway. It was like gasoline. I mean that stuff hit me like a baseball bat between the eyes, and by the time I finished it off, Moonpie was ten feet tall and laughing like a maniac.

We chilled with the radio guys and the radio chick for a while and talked about the war, such as it was. These radio guys were basically

rear-echelon types who couldn't care less about taking it to the enemy. And me and Moonpie were trained killers. I could tell this bothered Moonpie, but I was feeling good and let it ride. No sense in killing the buzz, especially when it's New Years' Eve and you haven't had a buzz in months.

But it got to Moonpie after a while, these guys saying they couldn't figure out why we were all going to die over a bunch of oil.

"You stupid fucks," Moonpie said all of a sudden. "This ain't about oil. We ain't a bunch of hired killers. We're here to free the Kuwaitis."

He was kind of wobbly at this point, and I didn't want to bring up the fact that the Kuwaitis—and the Saudis for that matter—were a bunch of fat cat dictators who really didn't give a goddamn whether we got killed or not as long as they got to keep their money and their oil.

But Moonpie's statement on the American involvement killed the mood. His radio chick even started frowning, and I knew things were going bad, and that maybe we should head on back to our unit.

"Hell fucking no," Moonpie yelled when I suggested that. He stood there weaving, all ten feet of him, his face red and his eyes crazy. "We're going to get some tonight."

I'd never seen him so mad or so intimidating. Even without his machine gun—it was out in the humvee—Moonpie was a pretty impressive dude. He towered over the radio guys, and his war gear hung off him like Clint Eastwood in those Westerns. The same flak jacket that made me look puny made Moonpie look like the linebacker he used to be. So the radio guys were pretty enthralled by the whole thing.

But the radio chick and I were thinking the same thing, because she jumped off the tailgate, and I moved between her and Moonpie. Best friend or not, I wasn't going let him rape some chick just because he had a good buzz going.

"We're going to get some Eye-rackees tonight," Moonpie said.

Now, I was pretty shitfaced, but I wasn't that shitfaced. "Moonpie," I said, "you're talking crazy. Let's go on back to battalion."

He just looked at me and took another pull from his canteen cup. "Hell no. We're going to the border."

Everything got dead quiet in that tent for a solid two minutes. Even the lanterns seemed to stop hissing. The radio guys were all cutting their eyes at each other then over at us, as if they only now realized we were two crazy drunk combat Marines. Eyebrow looked up at Moonpie and said, "Chill out, man. Have a drink."

Moonpie looked like he was about to kill the guy. I eased over to him, hoping to calm him down. He looked back at me and said, "Let's go, man."

I nodded. I was thinking absolutely fucking right, but I just nodded and followed Moonpie out into the darkness.

He jumped behind the wheel of our ride before I could, so I crawled in on the other side. I was glad to be away from the radio guys. Moonpie threw the humvee into gear and shot away from the ant farm like a jet off a carrier deck.

I was still buzzing, so it took me a few minutes to realize that Moonpie was headed the wrong direction. He was going north toward the border, toward the Iraqis. I tried to tell him this, but he glared at me through the dark and the dust and kept driving toward that huge blackness that was Kuwait.

Oh shit, I thought, we gotta put a stop to this.

"Hey, Moonpie," I said.

"Shut up, Flip. I was serious."

"Yeah, I know, but maybe we ought to wait until we can at least see the border before we go across it."

He gave me this mean grin. The jack-o'-lantern look again. We bounced over a huge dune, and he jammed on the brakes so hard I slammed into the windshield.

I was rubbing my forehead when he said, "Yeah, that's what I'm talking about."

I looked through the windshield and there it was. The border. The Saudis had built this huge sand berm years ago that ran damn near the length of the Kuwaiti border, and in the moonlight it looked like a long pile of sugar. Off to the left, somebody had cut a hole wide enough to drive a humvee through.

"Don't," I said, but Moonpie had already hit the accelerator and in ten seconds we were behind enemy lines. My buzz was totally gone by now, and I was scared shitless. On instinct, I looked around the back of the humvee. The .50 caliber machine gun in the turret between us was loaded. I jumped up to check it out. With my upper body out of the humvee, I could totally feel and hear the emptiness of the desert. And that scared me even more. Moonpie thought I was being a Gung Ho Marine and said, "Get some."

That was the Iraqis opened up on us.

I never have been sure where they fired from. One second I was working the charging handle on the .50 cal and the next the windshield was exploding. I laid on the machine gun and went through half a belt of ammo, just spraying in all directions. I yelled at Moonpie to back the fuck up so we could get out of there.

When he didn't, I leaned down into the cab of the humvee. Moonpie was sitting with both hands on the wheel, but his head was leaning off to one side. I could hear him breathing. Then I saw the hole in his chest.

Christ, I could have put my fist in that hole. He was covered in blood, but he was still breathing, so I ducked back into the cab and pulled him out of the seat. I was close to panicking because the Iraqis were still firing, and I could hear them yelling in Arabic.

He tumbled over into the passenger seat, groaning and wheezing, and I got behind the wheel. More bullets tore through the cab, but I got

the damn thing in gear and floored it in reverse. I didn't care where we were going as long as it was backward, back where we belonged. We bounced all over the place, but I kept my foot on the gas until we shot past the berm back into Saudi Arabia. I guess the Iraqis knew their night was over, because the shooting stopped.

I spun the humvee around and stopped. Moonpie was in bad shape, gurgling and wheezing and bleeding all over the place. The noise seemed to drift across the sand forever, now that it was quiet again, as quiet as it had been with the radio guys when Moonpie had lost it. I crawled over to him and tried to find something to stuff in the hole.

"Flip, I got a son," he said.

"Shut up asshole," I said. "Just be quiet and let me get you back to the rear."

"I got a son," he said again.

Then he died.

Just like that.

I sat there staring at him for a long time. I don't know how long I sat in there in the dark desert, but it was long time. I just kept thinking that he never told me he had a son.

When I got back to battalion around sunrise, Captain Richards was waiting, with that look on his face that most of us hated

I didn't know what to say, but what the fuck can you say when you go AWOL to get drunk and your best friend gets blown away? Captain Richards said something about a court-martial but I really didn't hear him. I just kept staring at Moonpie laying there on the sand. He didn't even notice all of Moonpie's blood on my hands and face and clothes. He just shook his head and stomped off.

A couple of minutes—or it could have been a couple of hours—a corpsman came by and shoved him in a body bag, and I never saw him again. Two asshole clerks with rifles marched me back to the company headquarters and took away my rifle. One of them, a skinny guy with a big

Adam's apple, told me I was being charged with going AWOL, drinking on duty, and a whole bunch of other shit I just tuned out.

I spent the rest of the war in the back of a humvee with my wrists flexicuffed together, watching piles of dead bodies and smashed equipment fall away into the black clouds of the burning oil fields. Dead Iraqis were everywhere, gray against the brown smudge of the sky, like felled trees waiting to be collected for firewood. On one stop, I saw a guy crumpled up in the dirt, his trousers down around his ankles and his eyes wide open. His face was frozen in this what the fuck? look. Poor bastard had been out taking a dump and had gotten wasted by one of our bombs. I still see that guy on those nights when I wake up with the sweats.

After the war was over and we were back in the Saudi, Captain Richards said the command had decided not to court-martial me on account of the fact that we had just won the war and it wouldn't do any good to go airing the Corps' dirty laundry about two dumbasses who fucked up. But he busted me down from lance corporal to private, and I was discharged the day I got back to Camp Pendleton.

A few months later, I went to see Melissa down in Alabama. Moonpie's son was two at the time. I don't know why, but I go back every year. Kevin is a lot older now, and every year he asks me how his daddy died in the war. And every year, I tell him the same lie.

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Reintegration

By Beth Garland

This is what you didn't realize about war: it doesn't always end when your soldier comes home. Sometimes it rolls on, like the tanks and humvees still crunching against the desert earth thousands of miles away. Your soldier has come home wounded; your war is just beginning. Your war is sitting in bottles full of painkillers on the nightstand, in the broken body lying listless in the bed regardless of the time of day, in the unintelligible shouts and jerks in the night that make you hold your breath and lie there listening long after the silence and stillness returns.

In all the months that you were waiting for him to come home, you imagined how the first night back together would be. You imagined that after he'd grabbed you up in his arms like Richard Gere did Debra Winger in the end scene of An Officer and a Gentleman, you two would speed to the closest motel and rip each other's clothes off as soon as you'd closed the door, arms and legs still trapped inside sleeves and pantyhose as you fell upon the bed, hips arching, desperate to have him inside you again.

But the war can attack there, too, in the bedroom, find you lying on your bed beside each other, after the two days you'd spent in Fisher House waiting for him to be released from Womack Medical Center, after the two and a half hour drive back, after getting your daughter to sleep in her crib instead of in the bed with you, war can make it impossible to make eye contact with this too thin man, blue with bruises, who barely resembles your husband. War messes with your head, makes your husband's stony face, complete with a frown line that wasn't there before, hard to read. Should you unbutton his shirt, take yours off? Even when you've disrobed enough to climb on top and guide him in, the war can make you feel like more of an enemy than a lover. Every rocking motion, no matter how gentle, causes a grimace, causes agony to surge through his broken back and ribs. Even weeks later, sex is still painful for him, and you will long for the feel of his weight pressing you into the mattress, of his hips rotating against yours, the way they used to, before the war.

This "after war" will make you disillusioned and angry, so very angry. You will begin to find fault with everything your husband does. At meals, he now sits hunched over the table, using both hands to eat and chews with his mouth open. The man you married had had perfect table manners, and you wonder what kind of savagery he must have witnessed that took this refinement away.

You will resent him for all the many things he can't yet do to help you. You thought all you had to do was get to the end of the deployment, and then you would have a partner again; someone else to change diapers and give baths, take the trash out and bring the groceries in. You will go into the laundry room one day when he is knocked out on Tramadol and fling his clothes by handfuls against the wall from the basket where you had neatly folded them the day before. They will land in a wrinkled heap on the floor and you will stare at them, gasping for breath and horrified because what you wish, what you really wish after all the crying and

praying and worrying and waiting is that he wasn't here. That he was still over there. This is not the man for whom you counted down the days to his return. This is a stranger, one who barely talks when he's conscious, one who flinched and grabbed your wrist when you tried to brush his hair off his forehead one morning.

You will return to Fort Bragg a couple of weeks after your nightmare began for the homecoming of the men in your husband's unit, the ones who were not injured. You will not want to go, but you will go, because your husband really wants to, and he is not strong enough yet to drive himself. You will stand at Green Ramp on Pope Air Force Base with all the perfumed wives dressed in high heels and short skirts, their scents and appearances the epitome of foreplay, and the children waving tiny American flags. You didn't even bring your daughter. You'd both thought making this trip again so soon would be too much for her, and really, why would she need to wave a flag, her father was already home, standing among those welcoming, not returning.

The plane will land and you will feel sick at your stomach from envy that these families are about to experience the kind of reunion with their husbands and fathers that you and your daughter were denied. The men will walk up the ramp into the hangar and you will stare in amazement as many of them bypass their wives and children to come to your husband first, to hug him, to check him over, to see that he is here, really here, in one piece and standing, despite nearly being killed only a few weeks before. And then another feeling will rise out of your core and radiate through your limbs, a warmth that makes you want to cry as you watch them huddle together. You realize how proud you are of the shrapnel scars and broken bones your husband bears. You understand that what happened to and between these men is something that you will never understand. You know that if these men can love your husband enough to come speak to him first, to delay their reunions with their own families, after all they've been through, that you certainly can, too.

Months will pass. You will learn to accept that, given time, some things will again be the same. And some never will. The table manners will return, his silence will be relegated to occasional moods, and you will know when to press and when to stay away, his physical pain will become bearable, though it will never completely subside. Your love will reshape itself. What the war changed about you both you learn to view as a badge of honor, like the Purple Heart ribbon that adorns your husband's uniform.

On the first anniversary of your husband's Alive Day, the day he should've been blown into a million bits of nothingness amid the desert dust, you know that you are so incredibly lucky. A new life is growing inside you, a life that would never have been if your husband's had not been spared, and it all seems like it was worth it, all the pain and suffering, the war you both had to fight, that separated you and beat you and broke you and taught you and healed you and fused you back together, stronger than before. Only you know where the cracks are.

Beth Garland is the wife of a member of 20th Special Forces Group. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte and is currently working on a novel entitled What Separates Us. She lives with her husband and three children in coastal North Carolina.

Fear

By David Autry

Whoever said girls really go for a guy in uniform didn't know what he was talking about, not as far as I'm concerned, anyhow.

I mean, look around. Do you see any girls? I sure don't. Not out here in the middle of nowhere. Not in this god-awful heat.

Before I came to this place, I had no idea just how big and hot the sun really was. It's almost like I could reach up and get my hand burned if I tried to touch it. Not one bit of shade in sight.

Geez, I'm thirsty. Sweating like a pig all over, and I'm covered in dust and sand from head to foot. Hell, it's in my hair, my mouth. My underwear!

How long have I been out here, anyway?

God, it's lonely out here. A little while ago, we were all together, slapping each other's back and wisecracking about how we're going to kill the so-and-sos. Bring it on! And all that other crap you and your buddies say when you're scared and don't want to let on.

Seems like such a long time ago. There were twenty of us then. We didn't know each other very well at all, except for Tommy. I'd known him since third grade. But he's gone now. Hell, we never did find all

his parts after the explosion. Then, there's Boomer. He transferred in from someplace else that first week, and we hit it off real good right away. But he took a bullet in the neck. I can still smell the sticky, red-brown mud where he bled out before the medic could get to him.

Who knew when we first started the mission that so many of us would be gone in less than a month. Now there's only fifteen of us left.

Man, I'm scared. I just hope I can hold it together. I'd sure hate to have anyone—especially my mom and my little brother—think I was a coward. I think one or two of the guys would understand, though. I've seen the way they bite their bottom lip or chew their fingernails. Hell, we're all scared most of the time.

Nope. No use talking like that. I've got a job to do, just like everybody else. The guys are all counting on me, just like I depend on them. Can't let them down. I won't let 'em down, damn it.

What was it the captain said? "We're the best trained, best equipped, and most determined army there ever was." Yeah, a real pep talk, that one. Not exactly Knute Rockne, if you know what I mean.

Speaking of equipment, this helmet doesn't fit right. I'm not sure how much protection it would be if I took one in the head. Hope I don't get the chance to find out anytime soon.

Whoosh! Thump!

Holy shit! That was close. Man, oh, man, what am I doing here?

Nope, just hold your ground, rookie. Don't let it rattle you. Settle down. Hang loose.

Geez, what is that smell? Must be me. So, that's what everybody talks about: the smell of sweat and fear. God, that stinks.

Yuck! My palms are all wet and slippery. Maybe if I rubbed some dust on them. Yeah, that's better.

Okay. I'm ready now.

Those guys out there don't look so tough. None of them has any kind of uniform, just a mish-mash of stuff.

The big guy in the middle. Got to keep an eye on him, though. Christ, he's ugly. Kind of mean looking, but I can't let that bother me.

Jesus! How much hotter can it get? What I wouldn't give for a bucket of cold water to stick my face in. Sure would be great to blow bubbles through my nose and get some of this dust out.

Oh, man. I've got to pee something fierce. All right, grit your teeth. Bladder control's where it's at right now. Just like being potty trained all over again. Ha. Hold on, don't get distracted. Got to stay focused.

Sweat pouring out everywhere, dripping in my eyes. Stings like crazy. How much longer?

Kathump!

What the fuck was that? Couldn't see where it came from. Aw, come on, Haji, just let me see you one time.

All right, that's it. You don't want to get me mad at you. You're gonna be sorry if you do. You don't have any idea what I'm capable of. Just give me half a chance . . . if you dare. Get a load of my patented sneer. Grrrr! How do you like that shit, man?

Yeah, like I'm the baddest dude there ever was. Who am I trying to kid? All I want to do is get out of this heat and into the shade. I'm so dry I can't spit. Feels like my throat is lined with sandpaper. Ugh. Maybe if I think about lemons and suck on the inside of my cheeks really hard. There, that's a little something to swallow.

Still too damn hot. Oh, man, I'm getting kind of woozy. Wish there was a little breeze blowing.

Uh oh! Hold tight. Looks like something's about to happen. Focus. Be alert, but don't get too tight. Can't think straight or do anything if I'm all tensed up. Stay frosty now. You can handle it.

Like hell, I can. I'm out here in this miserable heat with the sun beating down on me like an oven. I'm up on this roof all by myself and can't nobody help one tiny bit. I mean, I'm all for doing my job—doing the best I can, and everything—but this isn't what I bargained for when I

signed up.

Man, this is some kind of shit. My heart is thumping real loud and hard like a crazy rock 'n' roll drum solo, but everything else looks like it's in slow motion. It's like I can smell every single grain of sand and each individual dust particle just hanging there in the oven-roasting heat. Funny, I don't feel like I need to pee anymore; I'm not even sweating like I was. Everything is clear as crystal; the silence is so loud it's about to burst my eardrums, and I'm sort of off to one side looking at myself standing stark still like some incredible Greek warrior statue poised for the attack.

This is marvelous. It's amazing and scary as all get-out. But I don't really feel it. All I can do is focus on what's happening at this very moment. There's a sudden blur from somewhere out in front of me, and I sense something coming toward me. Now I see it. A very small object with smoke trailing behind it. The thing grows bigger as it comes closer, and I know exactly what I have to do.

I wait. I lick my lips. Where did that saliva come from?

The object comes closer, and I stiffen up just a little. I shift my weight to my left side, tucking the rifle butt into hollow of my right shoulder. My breathing settles into a slower rhythm. The tip of my tongue peeks out from the corner of my mouth. I take aim and curl my finger around the trigger.

Whoosh! Tharump!

Gotcha, you little bastard. I see where you're hiding now. Come on, show your sorry ass one more time, and it's all over for you.

David Autry is a U.S. Navy veteran of the Vietnam War whose writing credits include both fiction and non-fiction.

Al Gomez

By Grady Smith

Anna was steamed. "All the good spots are gone. I told you."

Thirteen going on 35, Al Gomez told himself. When you're watching over a million bats drop from the underside of the Congress Avenue Bridge to start their nightly foraging, it doesn't much matter if you're picnicking right on the river bank or 20 feet back—that's one hell of a lot of bats.

Anna and his wife Connie had already been sending silent messages to him because he got home late from work. Now Anna huffed off to the riverbank with her camera, while Connie snapped open the picnic blanket and shook it out onto the ground.

"Ants, Mom." Their seventeen-year old, Isabel, who'd start her senior year in high school next fall, stared at the nest's entrance next to the blanket, showing fascination and repulsion. As she raised her foot to tromp down on it, Al stopped her, uncomfortable somehow at the prospect of all those little mashed bodies.

"Don't, honey," he said.

She looked at him quizzically.

"Not a whole nest. That'll just stir them up. Let's move the blanket a bit," and he pulled it about five feet over, farther away from the water.

Hopefully, Anna wouldn't notice.

As Connie and Isabel began setting out their picnic supper in the residual heat of the early July evening, Maria, 22 months, wrapped her arm around his leg at the knee, her thumb resting wet and secure in her mouth. He sat down on the parched grass and she immediately climbed into the lap he'd considerately made for her. As she leaned her head against his chest, he gave the top of it a little kiss.

He'd left work early. Today he was to remove two smaller windows from the kitchen wall of a house, retool the openings to take a single, bigger window, and install the larger model with its more efficient insulating glass. But termites stopped the project in its tracks. Al yielded the area to the exterminators, while the woman he was working for hovered and wrung her hands. He stayed till they started applying the poison. As some termites began to stagger out, obviously affected by the chemicals, he left.

His afternoon free, he guided his pickup along a meandering route across town. When the capitol grounds came in sight, he parked his truck and sat for a while, watching.

Two men well into their 30's crossed the street in silence and made their somber way up the drive. A balding, older gentleman followed them, his wife at his side. A car pulled up beside his truck and backed into the space behind him. The driver, a 40ish woman in a white nurse's uniform, got out and headed toward the entrance.

I wonder if she was there, too.

Three officers, probably from Bergstrom Air Force Base, soon followed her. They passed a woman and a boy coming out. He was obviously her son and looked close to high school age. She made her slow way back down the drive, dabbing a tissue at her eyes while the boy's face showed equal portions of gravity and awe.

Al picked up the newspaper from the passenger seat and reread the headline: "War and remembrance: Texas Gives Thanks to American

Veterans." The story went on to say how a touring replica of the Vietnam Memorial was in Austin. A photograph of a man in jeans and tee shirt and wearing a green beret rode above the fold. Eyes closed, he seemed to be steadying himself against the Wall with one hand, tears running down his face.

Al knew it wasn't a question of whether he'd visit the Wall. He would, of course. And it wasn't a question of wondering what might happen when he did. He knew it would open a yawning hole into a past he hadn't consciously visited in some time.

He dropped the paper on the seat and resumed watching the foot traffic going back and forth. He felt the earlier place and time rising slowly inside, gradually immersing him deeper in it. He thought about who he'd look for on the Wall, and began to remember faces. Ken Janowitz drifted by, but then, abruptly, Al found himself gaping as the exploding RPG round threw Ken into the air. Then it was Casey Jones. His eyes looked straight at Al, blinking in slow motion at him. Casey seemed oblivious of his own bleeding chest, hit by machine gun rounds as he fired off red smoke at the NVA.

With an effort, he pulled his mind back to his family's picnic. He didn't like taking these head trips back to Nam. Save it for the Wall.

Maria was more than half-asleep when Connie brought him a paper cup of sweetened iced tea. Their youngest daughter was his pet, no doubt about it. Her dark eyes went deep and she always seemed preoccupied with some serious issue or other. Connie would shake her head sometimes at the way he liked to hold her on his lap, but she always seemed pleased. Occasionally, when Al and Connie were alone, she would call her their little mistake. Usually, it was late at night and they were snuggling on the couch before going to bed. Her words actually expressed less the fact that Maria was the result of a torn condom and more that Connie didn't want it to happen again.

She'd gone on the pill—an assertive move for a Latina, even after

she'd left the Church behind in favor of their hasty civil ceremony—until it induced phlebitis and she had to spend four days flat on her back popping aspirin. So it was back to condoms, reinforced by spermicidal foam and a diaphragm. She seemed content, so he kept quiet about the taste of the foam. If they had another kid, he told her they'd call it Houdini.

She always called herself 'just a housewife' but was deep into both the local and the state women-for-choice movements. She had no patience with either the dried up, celibate old bishops, as she called them, who still demanded abstinence or the rhythm method, or with the right-wing politicians who loved to throw a saddle over the abortion issue and ride it into the legislature on election day. The weathered Gomez station wagon sported a bumper sticker that read, 'Keep Your Laws Off My Body.' And she carried the sense with her that it was a fight not just for herself, but for her girls as well.

His brother Ricardo, with two sons, would tease him mercilessly about fathering only girls. "What's the matter, Al? Not enough hair on your balls to make boys?" Usually, Al would respond with a head shake and a grinning "Fuck you, Ricky." But he once confided to him that Maria was here because in high passion he'd stressed the condom so much that it literally disintegrated—only a slight stretch of the truth—with nothing left but a few shreds of ravaged latex. Ricky had let his jaw drop despite himself. "Believe it," Al said conspiratorially.

Instead of going to Nam, Ricky went to school. He sheltered there until he didn't need to any more, and then his master's in sociology got him an immediate position teaching high school. Right now, he was an assistant principal. In another few years, he'd probably be running his own school.

Ricky never talked about sitting out the war. Partly, Al thought his silence on the subject must involve a little shame. But he was sure it also included Ricky's concern for his older brother as well, and Al's difficult period right after he got back. Still, he felt they should have long

since addressed the issue and laid it to rest. Such a huge thing looming up between hermanos carnales, blood brothers, ought to be talked out. But Al didn't quite know how to start such a discussion and he suspected Ricky was afraid to.

He was grateful, once he got back, that Connie never brought up the angry, puzzled arguments they had before he enlisted. His wife and small daughter were irrefutable grounds for deferment and she couldn't understand how he could turn his back on them. The truth was, he didn't quite understand it himself. When he tried to sort it out in his mind, he got fragments of newsreel images—Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, GI's getting 20 feet up the Normandy beach and collapsing into sudden stillness. There was some romanticizing of war, but it went much deeper. It was simple to him, yet he couldn't put it into words. Thinking about trying embarrassed him. He silently ridiculed the screen images for not having a John Wayne soundtrack. Yet, he believed their message. His first major firefight showed him the fine print in his own movie contract, but then it was too late. After that, it came down to surviving.

Anna was easier to get along with when she came back from the water. She'd gotten some good shots of the bats sweeping low along the surface and then up into the sunset. They were still emerging from under the bridge, and Al watched uneasily as the dense swarms set off with grim purpose on the hunt. He thought of his old grandmother and how she would sometimes tell him about the ancient ways—about the bat god, lord of night, winging the darkness. Or was he the god of death?

He managed to eat a portion of tossed salad, but only picked at the enchiladas that had cost Connie a lot of time-consuming handwork. Later, he broke a chocolate chip cookie into bite-sized chunks for Maria, hoping it looked like he was eating some of it himself. She ate with her usual preoccupation, while Connie watched him surreptitiously from under hooded eyes.

When Maria had enough of the cookie, he lifted her gently from his lap, then stood and handed Connie the keys to the station wagon.

"Can you get the girls home okay?"

She took the keys from him. "Where are you going?" she asked apprehensively.

"I need to walk."

"The Wall?" she asked. He nodded.

"Why don't you wait and we'll go with you."

"Better if I go alone, I think."

She looked at him a moment. "Are you all right?"

He smiled ruefully, then gave her the sign of affection he usually reserved for Maria and kissed her hair. "I'm okay."

As he walked up the hill, he turned once and waved in reassurance. When he got out of sight, he left Congress Avenue, the direct route to the capitol and the Wall. When he finally arrived at the foot of the drive, it was full dark.

The grounds were well lit. He moved gradually along, surprised at the number of people here after dark. The drive curved, leading him up a little rise. Then he caught his first glimpse of gleaming black emerging seemingly out of the ground ahead of him, its top edge straight and unyielding. He stopped and looked at the part of the polished facade he could see, knowing that the carvings on it, too small to read at this distance, were soldiers killed in the war.

He moved forward again, his motion making the letters flash and flicker on the dark Wall, shimmers of black on gleaming black. Each step broadened the width of the Wall, pushing its bottom corners farther apart and revealing more names. And each successive panel held a greater number of dead, thousands and thousands stretching across the glossy black.

He felt himself about to lose his sense of the separateness of these names, that the individual identities of Ken Janowitz and Casey Jones

and all the rest were about to be pulled into the vast and anonymous oneness of a collective dead. In resistance, he began to think of each name as a kind of container, cradling someone who had hoped, as he had, to survive across the time of his tour and return to a homecoming on the other side of the Pacific. Leaving Nam at last, Al had stared out the window for hours until the sun abandoned his eastbound plane to the night. But while he himself had finished his crossing to landfall and dawn, these had not. With savage cruelty, death had forced them onto a dimmer, vaster sea, pushed them into a deeper darkness. He walked more and more slowly toward the ranks of names, and farther and farther from any rational grasp of what had happened. With an almost bitter irony he found that the only way he could endure having been part of it all was to look on the Wall itself as a sea, an ocean of soldiers killed in battle. To force a corner, at least, of his reluctant mind to accept what he'd first resisted, and cast all of these individualities into a single great expanse.

And it was only the merest luck that his own name wasn't carved here. He knew that. In the final analysis, no action of his own had kept him alive in the blind chance of combat. So why wasn't he grateful he'd made it through? If he hadn't, where would Maria be now, conceived after his return? Would she be in some limbo for souls who never found their way to breath? But she was here, grave and lovely in her child's mystery. Why wasn't he glad? Eyes glistening, he stood stock still, caught whole inside the emotional core of something his mind was powerless to understand or even name.

From very far away, a voice was saying, "Can I help you find someone?"

"What?"

"I've got an index that tells which panel each name is on." She must have been 60, white-haired and just a bit heavy, but tanned and exercised. She held a book that looked like a phone directory. "If you

give me a name, I can tell you where to find it on the Wall." Was she the mother of one of these names? The damned war lasted so long, she could be a widow or grandmother or sister. Maybe she's just someone who wanted to come and help.

He hesitated a moment, then gave her a name. She found Matt Kessler right away. "Panel 15 E, line seven," she told him.

He located the name without difficulty. As he looked at it and touched it, his mind pictured Kessler out in the paddies, grinning gamely under the double load of radio and personal gear. The claymore had chopped him up badly, but at least he never knew what hit him. Not like Mingo Sanders—Al remembered how close Mingo came, how he was slowly suffocating and finally collapsed just as they got to the hospital. He would have died right there if that nurse hadn't instantly cut a hole in his throat and stuck in a tube.

Then a whole line of KIAs began to drift unhurried through his mind, mostly the men he got close to and then lost after he took over the squad from Paxton. Friendship always meant loss. It was that simple, no way around it. Again, he felt the incomprehension wash over him, and he wondered why he was standing here reading Kessler's name instead of the other way around. He shook his head, wishing he could explain it all to Kessler, and then decided to try.

He looked around for the woman. "Do you have a piece of paper and a pen I can borrow?" She did.

Dear Matt,

I'm standing at the Wall now. I touched your name and it made me remember you out in the paddies. I'm sorry it was you who had to die that day...

Pausing, he wondered who Kessler had left behind. He thought about Connie, his own strong pillar when he got back, and Ricky,

needling out of guilt and love—and the girls, especially little Maria, God's homecoming gift. Something still and lovely in this strange, alien peace. The deepest parts of his life were so simple now, but not for Kessler. Who would be in Kessler's life now, filling some small part of the void that Nam gouged out inside? If it was the other way around, would Matt press his fingers against the Wall? Would he come and touch Alejandro Gomez? There wasn't a doubt in his mind.

I'm sorry it was you who had to die that day instead of me.

Again, his eyes shimmered but refused to spill.

I love you.

Al Gomez

He folded the note twice and carefully wrote SP4 Matt Kessler across it. He knelt and, steadying himself on the Wall with one hand, laid it at the foot of Kessler's panel.

For a brief moment, he felt fulfillment at having written the note, but then the feeling slid impersonally away. Somewhere inside, an engine of emotional wheels and cogs was supposed to be responding, but was seizing up instead. Pulleys and gears froze, locking in place. He stood abruptly and spun on his heel. He laid down half a dozen quick steps, then realized he still had the woman's pen and went back to her. Thrusting it wordlessly into her hand, he stood there a second, looking into her eyes as their hands made brief contact. Yet, despite the vividness of this seeing and touching, he had the conviction that he was simultaneously somewhere else, somewhere not perceptible to his senses but so much more real that it threw into shadow everything merely seen and touched.

He had no idea what that other place was, except that it wasn't Nam. It must be somewhere in the void between there and here. He decided this was how people in science fiction movies felt when they

were being transported from one place to another, disassembled for shipping into the billion different electrical impulses they were made of. Still technically a single entity, yet radically different because the entire intricate web of connection linking all those impulses had been ripped out whole. Hands wouldn't obey, feet lacked any will of their own, and feelings that wanted to get inside each of those impulses couldn't penetrate even one. A thousand million infinitesimal charges, cheek by jowl yet total strangers to each other.

And what happens to somebody if those charges can't rewire themselves at the other end of the transport?

His feet turned him away from the woman and carried him swiftly down the drive. He walked north for a long time. Gradually his pace tempered.

Far up the deserted avenue, he glimpsed an illuminated church. Its Gothic spire was bright in the glow of several intense spotlights, a permanent testimonial to the congregation's faith and fiscal soundness. As he got closer, he could pick out the individual buildings of the church complex on both sides of the quiet street. He looked up at the tower. He had to admit it was impressive, even though he thought it would fit better in New England.

He passed a curbside oak, squatty from the unforgiving press of Texas heat, then leaned against a lamppost, gazing up. A hundred feet above the tower, a tiny flash of grayish black flickered against the darker sky. Soon, there was another, and then more. Snow in Austin on the second of July. He chuckled, until he realized what he was looking at. The tiny flashes of gray were the undersides of bats' wings caught by the spotlights. There must have been hundreds of them stacked above the blazing lights, wheeling and turning and darting, but why?

Then he knew. They were on the hunt.

Moths were being pulled in and held by the shafts of light. In their turn, the ravenous bats were drawn to the moths, to the kill. And

the flickers of gray winked above—hundreds of them, thousands.

Bat god, lord of night.

How long does this go on? Till dawn? The moths came on unresisting, drugged by the light, fluttering dazed to their slaughter. How many bats are hunting them? Thousands, hundreds of thousands. How many moths did one bat kill in a night? Anna told him once, but when he tried to do the math his mind had boggled. As he stared up now, his brain was seized with fresh incomprehension. All he knew was that every flash and flicker meant a death, while an intense snowstorm of gray was raging above the spire. They dipped and swooped, snatched and killed, and still the moths staggered onward, pulled oblivious into the light.

The carnage. The carnage.

Then, in the flickering above the tower, he recognized the letters shimmering on the Wall. All at once everything was clear to him. Suddenly he knew how it all fit together, and knew he had known for a very long time. Deep inside, things were breaking free. Pulleys and gears began to move, wheels and cogs turned recklessly. He felt a little whimper of sound explode into a gasping cry and tears began flooding down. For one last rational moment, he wondered how it had kept itself hidden inside him so long. Then it swept him mindless away, shuddering with sobs. He clung to the street light, sliding desperately down to the curb of the empty street, hanging on and shaking. Trembling there, weeping, alone. He knew now—lured, used, abandoned. He knew everything.

Slowly the racking sobs eased, then faded. His forehead, damp but cool, felt like a fever had broken. Gradually, he became aware of how calm he felt, how strangely free of the old, unnamed burdens, and then of how quiet the street was. The silence was almost profound.

In the distance he heard a single car, then watched it cross the street at the next corner. Beyond, he saw a lone bicyclist heading his way. He watched the rider's gradual progress from his perch on the curb, his arms still draped loosely around the street light. The rider turned out to

be a young guy sporting a back pack, probably a grad student cramming at the university library before it closed for the holiday. Al watched him as he neared, noticing a faint, strangely pleasurable warmth in himself from what he'd just gone through. Right now that was enough.

The kid rode by without even seeing him. Just as well. He'd probably have thought he was a drunk. Al chuckled at that from the vantage of his gentle little high.

Suddenly all the church lights went out. He noted he was startled, but not panicked. A normal reaction. Right after he got back, it would have released a monster charge of adrenaline, wiring him and keeping him wired. But tonight he was free of that. Normal.

He decided they must have the lights on some kind of timer. Must be midnight, maybe later. No wonder it's so quiet. Connie would be worried, or worse. And with his earlier track record, he couldn't blame her.

Up the way the bike rider went, a car turned into the avenue and started coming toward him. Time to head for home. He stood, steadying himself on the lamppost. Then he realized something was funny about the car. Coming that slow it had to be a cop, making sure doors were shut tight and there were no unwelcome flashlights moving around inside the church buildings. He started to walk the opposite way. What if the kid on the bike was a burglar? Or a rapist? He fought the urge to pick up his pace as the lights behind him grew stronger. He imagined the cop asking what he'd been doing at eleven o'clock, when Al couldn't even tell him what time it was. As the cop spotted him, he heard the car behind him accelerate suddenly and saw the headlights intensify. Brakes screeched.

"Hey!"

Please don't let it be an Anglo. He turned.

"Al! Where the hell have you been all night?" His brother Ricky hurried toward him—relieved, angry, but apparently mostly worried. His

car stood at a 45 degree angle to the curb, the driver's door wide open.

"Walking around."

Ricky put both his hands on his brother's shoulders. "Are you all right?" He thrust his concerned face into Al's and inhaled.

"No, I haven't been drinking," Al said, annoyed.

"Well, when you first got back..." Ricky paused, unable to find words that wouldn't get him in deeper. He shrugged.

"Yeah, I know," Al conceded.

"I'm sorry. We were worried."

"We?"

"When you weren't back at midnight, Connie called."

She must have gotten Ricky out of bed. "What time is it?"

Ricky looked at him strangely.

"I'm not wearing my watch, okay? What time is it?"

"It's after 2:00."

Al made a little face. "Gonna be a long day tomorrow."

"Connie said you left for the monument about 8:00. Where have you been for six hours?"

"I didn't go straight there. I walked around a while first. I don't know how long. Then when I left, I started walking some more." He thought a moment. "I wrote a letter while I was there."

"A letter? Who to?"

How to tell him? "A Nam buddy."

Ricky was frankly puzzled. "Couldn't he get to town for it?"

True. The wisp of a smile softened Al's mouth. "He's on the Wall, Ricky."

He watched understanding dawn, followed by a rush of emotion as Ricky realized Al had been corresponding with the dead.

"You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine."

Ricky paused. His eyes faltered and he looked down. "Well, I'm

not. Not by a long shot." He straightened and looked at his brother. "Not since you told us all you were going to enlist."

"What do you mean?"

"You and I have never talked about—the war and all that."

Especially 'all that,' Al thought. He looked at his brother. Ricky was scared. "It's late. Let's go home."

"If I don't do this now, I'll never do it." He took a deep breath.

"Ricky..."

"The war was wrong. I believe that." Ricky's eyes narrowed and his mouth went taut. "My classmates who didn't go to college—Pete, Chachi, Greg Andrews, Roberto—drafted, sent over, killed. Just like that. And I was a sophomore at U.T., sweating my way through finals." He shook his head. "Chachi and I—after school, we'd sit around the living room and play our guitars, remember? And then..." The pain of the memory seeped into his eyes. "I'll never forget that year, never. Funeral after funeral, I thought they'd never stop. And the flag on the caskets—as if that explained everything, made it all okay. If you dared ask why, people acted like you were sabotaging the war effort. Don't I wish. And you." Ricky's face twisted into a mix of anger and incomprehension. "Why did you enlist? The end of your senior year, you had Connie pregnant, and the two of you ran off right away that summer and got married. They never would have taken you—I never understood."

Ricky paused. His expression softened a bit. "And me," he said, sadness shading his features. "I was right about the war. Why couldn't that have been enough? But at night, when I was done studying and didn't have anything to keep my head busy, I'd think about Chachi and I'd have these—but I was awake for them." His anger at himself rose again. "Why couldn't I just be right? Why did I have to be scared, too? After Chachi I knew it could happen, so I stayed in school. And after a while, I felt okay with that. It was okay for me. But then you..." His struggle to understand was failing again and his eyes began to fill with tears. "That's

when I found out what it really meant to be scared. I never had a decent night's sleep the whole year you were there. You and Chachi would get all mixed up together in my head, and sometimes I thought maybe you went over because I didn't, and then..." Even as his anger flared, the tears began to slide down his cheeks. "God damn it, Al, I hated you so much that year, and I was so scared for you." And then the anger slid away. His eyes were pleading. "And I was...I was ashamed. I..."

His eyes were begging for a forgiveness he was powerless to give himself. Tears ran freely and his lips were trembling, while Al was dry-eyed and calm, and wondering how he could be this man's brother and not know he could feel such pain. Before his tour was half over, he'd known Ricky was right. Now he shook his head sadly. "Ricky," he said simply, and embraced him. "Hermano. Mi hermano."

They hugged tightly in the quiet street until Ricky was able to stop crying. The coming of this deeper part of the night had finally ended the killing above the spire. Although his sleep would be brief, Al sensed it would be sweet.

Ricky exhaled softly, brushing his hand across his eyes. Al hoped his younger brother had dropped an old and heavy burden tonight, as he had, but a shame like that could run deep. The choices of his past were in concrete now and could never be changed—just like his own.

But they'd talked it out. They'd come to a different wall tonight, the one between the two of them, and pulled down a good-sized chunk of it.

"Come on, hermanito," Al said. "Take me home."

Grady Smith was an infantry company commander in the Delta in 1968 and served twenty years in the army. His Vietnam novel, "Blood Chit," was published in August 2012.

Poetry.

Purple Hands

By Anonymous

Hands stained with blood
Dark purple blood
A brother in arms lies on the floor
Eyes wide open with a blank stare
A stare of the living or a stare of the dead?
His nametape tells me the name of the man behind the stare
Osheia stares at me
Osheia stares at the ceiling
Osheia stares at death

I stand over him, momentarily marveling whether he is dead or alive
His foot is blown off his leg dangling by a thread of flesh
I grab his face at the cheek
I snap his head left and right as hard as I can
I stare into his eyes and watch his soul step back
into his body

I'm thirsty! I'm thirsty! He screams
He who seems dead now craves water, that which gives life
Doc gives him two shots of the "spirit horse"
My fingers dance over every millimeter of his flesh, searching for entries and exits
My hands get wet as they search

My hands get soaked as they search
I remove my hands now purple dripping with blood
Blood that is purple, blood not red
Blood that gives life, its loss donates to the dead

We are on our feet and out the door
Into the hot Iraqi air
Ramps down and dismounted infantry fill the air with hate and pain
Cars on fire, the dead are in the street
4 Abrams belch death
6 Bradleys make their bullets drunk with blood
Cordite fills the air
The hydraulic whine of the ramps as they raise
Belt fed death fills the air
What a beautiful thing to kill those who hate you
What a beautiful thing, what an ugly thing
RTB

The ramp lowers and sunlight replaces the black belly of the beast we are in
My hands are sticky . . .tacky . . . yet dry
My hands are purple, caked with blood
My pants are purple
Osheia is alive

The author serves on active duty in the United States military.

Notes from the Frontline of Integration, Germany, 1977

S.M. Puska

Listen, Bitch Soldiers, I don't want you in my Army.
Spineless fools fear the draft, so send me girls to fight.

I'm in charge here to hold the Soviets at bay.
We don't need hippie Bitches with your sense of "duty."

Field strip your weapon now like a man! See?
I knew you couldn't do it. Go home—make babies for your Land.

I don't care your sisters drove trucks with supplies
To fight the bone chilling Korean winters.

I don't care your mothers nursed the wounded
On crowded D-Day beaches still under fire.

I don't care your aunts stood the line to build ammo
To clear the way into Rome, Berlin, Manila, Tokyo.

I don't care your grandmothers drove ambulances to
The Front; pulling wounded from the trenches.

I don't care your freak ancestors dressed in suits to stand
Shoulder to shoulder with men at Wilderness and Yorktown.

These are small acts; women wear no medals for valor.
Your duty is to make the soldiers to fill the uniforms of war.

I am a man. I am a soldier. I was born and bred for battle.
I am the General of Generals raised on duty, honor, country.

Bitch Soldiers are not worthy to serve with me. Go home.
I will help you fail. You do not belong in my Army.

Susan Puska enlisted into the Women's Army Corps in 1975, and was commissioned in 1977. She served as the U.S. Army Attaché in Beijing, China, during 2001-2003 and retired in 2005. She is an avid traveler and amateur photographer.

Room 3A: A Night in Saigon

By Richard Epstein

Beads of sweat run down my back.
Geckos on the white-washed walls
stare at me. Each blade
of the ceiling fan whispers:
What-do-you-wannado?
What-do-you-wannado?
I'm hungry and tired of you.

The water glass on the window sill
dances to the rumbling of B52's.
The window frames a deep red glow:
It's Cholon—on fire again. Parachute flares
float slowly down in streaks red, white, and green
While children light strings of firecrackers
in the street below. Cobra gunships
prowl at the city edge. Low and slow,
two prop-driven A1-E's make their
evening run. Sirens call softly
from somewhere out there.

Richard Epstein was trained in microwave radio repair and was assigned to a mountain-top radio relay site in Thailand and at Ft Monmouth, NJ. After his release from the Army, he worked in Vietnam and Thailand as a technical writer and field engineer. Richard hosts an open mic venue for veterans on the National Mall every Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

Aftermath

By Matt "Doc" King

cold gun in warm hand
enemies plot and plan
evil? good? or just man?
doesn't matter hand
stop your shaking and
shoot true kill that man
warm blood cools hot sand

hands now cold holding
a gun smoldering
young man shouldering
a burden sobering
slowly lowering
to his knees going
despair now showing

no time now brother
shit there's another
and still another
kill or be smothered
stay behind cover
shoot motherfucker
reload shoot recover
deal with it later
ask your creator
was he really there
did he hear the prayer
I prayed loud and clear
then why no answer
no fucking answer

coldness in my heart
wonder why it's art
that I chose to start
to help escape part
of reality so stark
when my soul is dark
will I find a spark

or will I move on
when novelty's gone
pretend I belong
can't last very long
reality's song
plays so loud and strong
even rights feel wrong

pushing those away
who love me each day
stuck in yesterday
making them all pay

for loving me today
will I go or stay
don't know let us pray

A two-time Purple Heart recipient, Matt 'Doc' King served in Iraq as an Army Scout Medic. Doc currently resides in Los Angeles and writes poetry for therapeutic release. When he's not on a film set, Doc can usually be found surfing off Venice Beach.

Three Pounds to Kill
By Jason Haag

Can you. will you…..pull it, its only 3 pounds,
3 pounds of pressure to end a life.
It Should be so easy. Its only 3 pounds, less than
what it takes to open the car door.
You've done it thousands of times. So easy, breath,
Relax, pull, 3 pounds….done.
Whats so hard? This is just like every other time.
Everything is the same.
The wind, the sun, the sand, the gun.
What is it so hard? WAIT,
The target is moving, why? What's going on?
It was so easy to pull the trigger. 3 measly pounds.
All you see is a blur, the target is moving.
Then he stops….
Everything stops, him, you, no breath, no time,
everything is frozen
nothing but his brown eyes, one foggy the other
clear, looking straight thru you
I have looked into the soul of a man
then Nothing, no more, him, his soul. Gone.
Only 3 pounds of pressure
He is on the ground.
the heaviest 3 pounds man has ever had to carry.
infinitely weighing you every step you take.

Jason Haag is a U.S. Marine captain who has served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Jason is also the director of fund-raising for the non-profit Helping Heal Heroes. He lives in Fredericksburg, VA with his service dog, Axel.

Delphi-Phocis.
Greek Civil War-1950
By Henry Niese

Having read the Epistle
of Paul the Apostle

I pissed in a puddle
passing Thermopyl

my mind made un-docile
by mine-made potholes

our progress to Corinth
hassled and jostled

as Greek
hostiled Greek.

><><><

Delphi, Sunday after Easter
joyous ghostly voices singing

in the brilliant sun above the Sacred Area.
Who was singing? Where?

The jubilant surging singers - invisible.
There, the boy said. Up there - pointing.

Above the Castalia Spring
1000 feet atop the Phaedriades cliffs

3 specks, sending their voices
into enormous space

over temples and treasuries,
down to the olives along the Gulf miles away

celebrating the blue,
the day, the precious air.

The Communists! Pimply lieutenant Gamisis
mustered moaning militia.

Carrying their Thompsons, US made,
they marched away.

All that beautiful Sunday they searched
the cliffs and meadows of Parnassus

returning dusty, exhausted, near sundown,
clifftop kids long gone, Arahova bound,

Delphians laughing,
Corinth hazy, distant, blue,

seen through blue-shuttered
white-painted mud brick walls.

We watched it, and the olives of Itea,
drinking retsina,

a sunset west of Missolonghi,
down the coast.

The war, far away,
The sacred, so close.

Henry Niese is a painter with works in several museums. During WWII he served in the 102nd Recon Cavalry, but never saw combat. His book, The Man Who Knew the Medicine: Bill Eagle Feather's Teaching was published in 2002 by Inner Traditions.

Bearing Witness

By Leslie Cooper

The dog's camouflage vest
covers his dark flank,
his tag says "Sergeant Archie."
He walks in lockstep with the wheelchair,
eyes alert, tail held high.

A child leans against her father's chest,
seated on his missing knees,
filling in his emptiness.

Where his legs once were they are
now an engineer's dream of
steel, bolts, toggles, movable joints
attached to sneakers, no socks in between.

His wife wears a
"Go-Army" tee-shirt
that he once wore so proudly,
now hers to cover her fear,
her loss of their dreams.

The war, its weapons,
the wins turned into
wounds so visible
that I can't look away
pretending not to see.

Leslie Cooper is the daughter of a World War II Army Veteran. A clinical psychologist, her work includes cancer patients and their family members, as well as returning service members. Dr. Cooper has practiced meditation for more than 20 years, a skill that she has found very useful in listening to her patients' stories.

The Guerrilla Stare

By Bradford White

"It just gets under your skin—
Evaporating your insides into that restless dunescape,"
Was how I tried explaining it to the psychiatrist.
She dutifully wrote it down and empathetically nodded,
But the explanation wasn't quite right.

At the party
Hands congratulated me—
(You're a hero)—
And they smiled.
I was a mirror smiling back,
But the locals were onto me
And whispered amongst themselves,
"He isn't quite right."

At night I get scared.
It's the same dream:
My buddy depressurizing between his fingers
From the throat
Like a window opened on a plane 40,000 feet up.
Panicked, I reach into the black for my weapon
Where my fingers grope the whiskey neck—
This isn't quite right.

I think that whispering gets back to my wife, because
She takes me to that old oak where I proposed a few years back.
She touches my chest, perhaps looking for a soul.
I look up through the branches to see
The nightbirds silhouetted on the moon.
Their eyes twitching, firm and hate-filled—
We called it the "guerrilla stare"—

She kisses me;
I feel nothing.
This isn't right—
And that's all the hurt
I have left to share.

Bradford White served in the United States Air Force as an intelligence analyst from 2001-2003

I'm Really Just Pissed About the Dishes

By Joseph Wade

I've left my studio for takeout
and hated trees and people
in front of bodegas or in them.
I am in their mouths judging
me, the gavel of a tongue click
in an old woman's cheek.
"You drank until four in the morning
and haven't filed the paperwork
at the college and you're spending
too much cash and your friend
sent the text, even they're disappointed."
Your father's beginning to ask questions.
They're worried again and so is she—
They're on to you crumbling again,jn
falling apart again, but this is stuff of legends.
But they'll whisper around the dinner table
about you, "So tragic, so talented,
Such a shame."

Now the bed where I lay is wretched.
Sun and birds and weed whackers
burst through my basement window
where the neighbor's old man
can stare at me through a broken blind.
For four nights I haven't slept,
just fell into movies on my laptop.
I didn't write a single poetic word,
use soap when I showered,
or clean anything but a single
ceramic plate. I've traced
the same circle of that plate
all my life, and the dish is dirty again.

Joseph Wade served three years in the Army and five in the Navy. He is very grateful to the many people who have helped him find his way into the "Celestial Cave." If you want to know about his awards, publications and current projects, go to www.josephwade.com.

Interview

A Couple of Hours with Gay Talese

Tom Wolfe, in a series of articles for *New York Magazine* in 1972, more or less credits Gay Talese with changing the world. Wolfe points to an article Talese wrote for Esquire in 1962 called, "Joe Louis: the King as a Middle-aged Man," as the genesis of what is known as The New Journalism, the use of fiction techniques like dialogue and scene in journalistic reporting.

Another Talese article "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," was selected by the editors of *Esquire* magazine as the best story ever published in the magazine. In that story, Talese profiles Frank Sinatra without ever actually speaking to Sinatra. Talese's total immersion in his subject matter, such as taking on a job running a massage parlor in order to research his book, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, is legendary.

On July 26th, 2012, Gay Talese sat down with *O-Dark-Thirty* editor Ron Capps at Talese's home on the Upper East Side in New York City for a two-hour conversation, parts of which are printed here. Talese was an Army officer from 1953 to 1956, and Capps was an Army officer from 1985 to 2008. Naturally the conversation started with the service.

ODT: So tell us about your military experience.

GT: I went to the University of Alabama 1949 to 1953. I joined ROTC, because I was concerned about the Korean War. ROTC guaranteed that I could stay in college if my grades were up, and I would serve afterwards. That's what happened. Graduating in 1953 in the month of June, I came to New York for a short while but I didn't know for how long because I didn't know when I would be called. I was briefly a copy boy at the *The New York Times*. In early 1954 I was called to Fort Knox to the Armor School to be trained as a tank officer.

After graduating from the Armor School, it was only a couple months before I was summoned to the headquarters for the arrival of a new chief of staff and a new general—that would be Brigadier General Creighton Abrams. For some reason they needed an assistant PIO (Public Information Officer) in headquarters because the PIO, a lieutenant colonel from San Antonio was close to retiring and he had a drinking problem. The WAC (Women's Army Corps) officer who was the second in command at the PI office was not eager to be a PI officer. So they needed somebody and they saw that I had some writing experience at The New York Times, I had some published pieces—I told you I was a copy boy for seven or eight months. I had some pieces published at The New York Times and I didn't make a secret of that. So I got it to be known, because I certainly didn't want to be sleeping in tanks in the rain any more because I had experienced that in the marshes around Fort Knox.

So, I was summoned and I became the Assistant PIO, or I was the third ranking. And As I got to know General Abrams a little bit, he sort of liked me. Not because there was anything about me that he should like necessarily, but because I was competent in writing speeches and fairly intelligent about communication. And I had a few ideas about what he could do to further the public relations importance of Fort Knox to

Louisville Kentucky, dealing as it did with the economy to Louisville.

When General Abrams would go to make a speech to the Lions Club or to the Rotary club or talk to the *Louisville Courier Journal*. I not only went but I got to know who the reporters were and the editors were. And I befriended these editors so I could get General Abrams to meet the right people and I get stories; I would write stories about him.

I wrote stories. I wrote a story about children, about Army brats at Fort Knox. I wrote a profile about an officer who was in the Armor School with me from Thailand. I wrote a profile, of course, about General Abrams. I wrote a profile of a soldier, a paratrooper that I heard about, who landed when his parachute didn't open and he survived. It went all over the country; AP picked it up.

I wrote about having children chosen from somewhere in Kentucky to be a general for a day. It was like Queen for a Day, an old radio show. They loved the idea. They'd have some kid come in and they'd get to ride in a tank. It was all PR stuff.

So when General Abrams was going to leave, a year or two later. I guess this was '55 or '56. The Third Armored Division was going to Germany for Operation Gyroscope in Frankfurt. I got tapped to go on there and do some advance publicity. So wrote from Germany for a while and after that General Abrams kept me with him until I got discharged in '56. Then I went back to *The New York Times*.

I came out of the Army with bylines, because I had been writing while I was in the Army for the *Louisville Courier Journal*, but also for *The New York Times*. I would just pick up stories, stories that might not be about the Army matters at all. They might be about a University of Louisville basketball player or tennis player, or the Bluegrass horse country around the Fort. I would get stories. So I came out of the Army with bylines. I was promoted from copy boy to sports reporter, then a couple years later to general assignment reporter. Then I started on magazine pieces. Quickly my life as a journalist reached nine or ten

years. When I was 32, I quit. So my life as a journalist for *The New York Times* was really from 1956 to 1965.

I was writing a lot of Sunday magazine pieces: covering civil rights, covering launching of astronauts from Cape Canaveral, covering the Saint Patrick's Day Parade—I was doing a lot of human interest stuff. I was also writing outside The New York Times for Esquire in my free time, doing a lot of magazine pieces. And then after I left the *Times* in '65, it was book writing. The first book I wrote after I left the *Times* was about the Times. It became a surprise best seller because the subject of journalism wasn't considered of interest. I've continued to this day, so at essentially the age of 80, writing and research the same way I did at the age of 26: go out on the road, don't use technology, on site reporting. That's it, pretty much.

ODT: What was it like for a kid from a relatively small town in New Jersey to go to the Deep South—to Alabama—in 1949.

GT: For me it was liberating. For the first time I was leaving town so no one would know me. I started all over, at seventeen I got away from everything. My grades were not good in school. I was absolutely alone. And it was interesting because I met veterans. GIs were still in college in great numbers in 1949 and 1950. So much so that there were housing shortages. There were these barracks on the edges of town for students and I lived in one of those. Some of the guys weren't studying too hard, you know, they were playing cards; it was like a military barracks. But they had a kind of casual way about life.

ODT: The level of research you do is legendary; it's taught as a model at universities. Do you think that in today's market there is room for writers who want to do this type of work?

GT: There is if they don't expect to be subsidized. If you want to be an actor or a dancer or a musician, an entertainer—some of the endeavors

that require not only talent, but patience and luck—these aspiring performers that might include writers might have to get other jobs to subsidize their research or their writing. Actors work as waiters, actors drive taxi cabs. You know, people sometimes hold demeaning jobs because they have no resources to practice whatever they want to be and sometimes they are never able to do it.

People go to journalism school and they expect to have a job. And then they want to have access to travel, and get an expense account —and they can't do it. So there are a lot of obstacles to this. And also because of the technology which is designed to make everything simple, cost effective and direct. There is something about the linear mentality now that encourages if not demands that one go from point A to point B without wasting a lot of time. Speed is of the essence. And while it is a cliché, it is dominating the thinking process of the communications business and journalism and magazine reporting.

But there is a way of doing things—which I'm not saying I'm the only practitioner or that my way of practicing it is the only way—but I can only tell you how I work. And how I always have worked was with the understanding that number one you had to be there. You had to physically be there to write about the people or the places that are the subject of review as a writer.

Do not use sources unless you quote them. Hold people accountable. In order to that, you have to build up a relationship of trust with people. That's time consuming. Everything I suggest is time consuming.

So the person who is interested in getting there and getting it fast is not my kind of person. My kind of person is the person who doesn't want to get it unless he gets it all, and gets it right. And does it in a way that will last, not only for tomorrow's newspaper, or tomorrow's television broadcast, or tomorrow's reader whatever the form or reading, whether it's a magazine of a book. But does it such a way that whatever you write today can be read next year, and still be readable, and still be relevant,

or have some historic value or some social message, or some point of interest that lingers in the imagination of intellectually curious people.

Let's start at the beginning: what I always had as a kid was curiosity, about other people. My life began as a boy in a store; my parents owned a store. It's a perfect observatory for watching people. Everything I learned as a kid in a store was of major importance in journalism. First you learn good mannars: how to deal with the public. Appearances: how do you look to the public? Curiosity: what are they talking about?

You learn from listening about peoples' lives. In the World War II period, in the 1940s, what did I learn? The store was divided in half: my father ran the tailor shop and my mother ran the dress shop. The women would come in they would look around the counters and try on dresses—fabric was rationed. They would talk about their daughter in the defense plant, or that someone got a pair of nylon stockings—how did they do that? They're rationed. Or they would talk food shortages of the gas ration; they would talk about the war. They would talk with anxiety. Maybe their son was in the Army somewhere. Maybe he's in Salerno; maybe's he's in North Africa. My town was a beachfront town, so we had patrols along the beach searching at night for enemy submarines. In fact during the wartime, I even remember as a boy the windows of peoples' houses facing the oceans were painted black. So even in this little beach resort there was anxiety about attacks.

Sometimes soldiers would come in; they would be on leave in Atlantic City. And there was a military hospital just ten miles away. They would come to have their stripes changed—from corporal to sergeant—and here was my father, who was a master tailor just exchanging chevrons on quick order and not charging anyone.

Sometimes someone would come in who heard that someone's son had been killed or hospitalized. So there would be a mournful sense across the counter expressed by somebody.

Also in my particular case, being an immigrant's son. During the patriotic years of World War II, it was not unlike post-9/11 in a way. Being the immigrant son of Italian parentage, made me even more aware and sensitive of the complexity of the human nature. Because when you are born into a family that is related to the enemy by virtue of their ancestry, it must be like being a Muslim today, or someone from Iran today who has a shop on Madison Avenue. I mean it must be something like that. But I was sensitive to the fact that my father's English, while he was well spoken, had an accent. And I had an Italian name. And more to the point, although privately known to me, was that two of my father's brothers were in the Italian Army.

Not only that, there were snapshots of them when they enlisted in Mussolini's Army in 1940. And I saw photographs on the bureau in the apartment above the store. We lived in the apartment above the store and at night they would talk more freely about the war—sometimes even in Italian. They talked at night. During the day they never discussed the war, they listened. So I as a kid saw that in this little two-story house—shop below, rooms above the international ramifications and the complexities of the war infiltrate this household and turn two people who, during that day had one set of characteristics, and at home had another.

Every morning at 7:30, my father and every merchant in this little town began the day by carrying the American flag to the sidewalk. Every curb along the street had holes and that fitted the American flag. And every morning my father, and the grocer on one side and the hardware store owner on the other would start the day by carrying out the American flag and setting it in front of the shop. All through the town it looked like July 4th all every day of the year.

And so [I saw] patriotism, commitment to the military, conscription, a sense of victory and a sense of loss, the news coming on the radio, the news in the newspaper, front page, the war, people involved in the

home front in the war.

And I as a boy, not yet a teenager, saw how news, far-away news, was also intimate. And how the homefront was involved in the warfront. And how even in the home that I had two people had a story that was interesting and not reportable.

So much of the journalism that I would later on cultivate and find particularly relevant to me if not to everyone else was private life—private life behind an apartment door at night or in the store during the day. That was not news unless you were able to bring it into a context that related to the time and place, the feelings of people, the fears of people, and the loss of life, and the hope for recovery.

All the elements that usually go into a short story, or a play, or a novel, I saw as potential journalistic material. So it wasn't what was on the front page, sometimes it wasn't even on the back page. If you paid attention if you listened to the customers, if you picked up the complexity between the customer and the merchant, in this case my father and my mother. If you saw as a journalist, as an observing, non-fiction, curious, chronicler, the potential material for communicating. As you were trying to get soldiers to communicate their private life maybe or their wartime life or their anxiety with the economy or the fact that when you take the uniform off you lose status, because you have to know who are you now? And you're not seen any more as a soldier as I used to see when a soldier could come in and take the jacket off so my father swiftly could sew on new stripes while they waited.

So this was the war being driven home to a boy who would become a journalist but would see stories not in the hard news sense. It's easy, hard news: plane crashes or somebody shoots and kills 12 people in Aurora, Colorado. But there are more interesting things about these stories if you think about other elements that are less obvious.

ODT: Are those stories harder to tell than hard news?

GT: Much harder. Even when I was in newspapers, I did everything I could to not get on the front page. I thought hard news wasn't hard. I thought hard news was easy news, hard news was obvious. What meant something today was replaced tomorrow by something new. I didn't want to cover anything that had a status that required daily attentions—the Senate, the Justice Department, the military, the Yankees. Within everything there are human stories: in baseball, there might be a grass cutter, write about the guy who cuts the grass at the stadium.

So what I wanted to do was to write about people you otherwise would not read about. I was one of the so-called color writers, so they gave me a feature like, cover the Saint Patrick's Day Parade. The Cardinal is in the front and the politicians—it's all bullshit. So I covered the parade from a different point of view. For example, one year I covered the back of the parade. The politicians and the prominent people were up front, the people from all the parishes were on the floats. The last band was from Queens and there was this tuba player, and not far behind him were the sanitation trucks picking up all the garbage from the parade. So I followed the entire parade and told the whole parade from this guy's point of view.

One time I was covering, I think it was Easter, the holiday traffic. I went to a bus station and I saw a young man near the escalator of the bus station at 43rd Street and 8th Ave. The municipal terminal, there, the port authority they call it. This guy had a guitar and he was near the escalator talking to a girl; I assumed it was his girlfriend. She had a tear in her. She was going back to school. He was carrying her guitar. She had a tear in her eye and she was talking about how they had to break-up. It wasn't working, she was going to school and she was staying here. I eavesdropped like I did as a kid in the store, and I got dialogue. His name was Harry. "Harry it's not going to work." She was soon to approach the bus up on the second level. She was going back to some little school up

the East Coast somewhere.

I wrote the story about departure on holiday—other students going, other people going—it was atmospheric, it was a short story. I got the information in on the holiday and accidents and traffic and that stuff, but it was all told from the point of view of people. Not that it was front page, but it wasn't really a front-page story. So you take a story and you turn it a short story. Short story meaning the form of the creative writer, of John Cheever, John O'Hara, Leo Tolstoy—what the hell's the difference. But you have real names and you have seen it with your own eyes, the possibility of taking a routine story and making it into a story that people can see and hear.

These are looking at news from the different point of view of, mostly the creative writer. But you're not creative in the sense of creating the thing. What you're creatively conveying upon news is a story mentality. That's journalism. This is what they call the New Journalism. So you see, my whole life evolves out of a boyhood in a store.

ODT: I think that dialogue and scenes set your writing apart so dramatically from the work of your early peers. Is that what you felt your work needed to tell those stories? Is that how you made the stories interesting?

GT: What made the stories interesting was that I read short stories.

ODT: Who else did you read?

GT: Well, in my day, which would have been the 1950s, I reading John O'Hara, Irwin Shaw, Carson McCullers... There is a collection of my sports writing, and in the introduction I describe how reading short stories influenced my journalism.

ODT: I'm only aware of one published short story of yours. Is that it? You only wrote one short story?

GT: Only one. I never tried it again. I promise you. So how did Carson McCullers write this story called "The Jockey?" It's a fine story, did you read it?

ODT: Yes. It's terrific.

GT: I once interviewed a jockey so that I could try to re-create that story about a jockey trying to lose weight and you could see the food in his belly. How did you come to read it?

ODT: I first heard it as part of the New Yorker fiction podcast and then went back and found it so I could read it on paper.

GT: I told David Remnick (the former *New Yorker* editor) about it about six years ago or five years ago, and he didn't know it. I bet he went and dug it up.

ODT: Who else did you read?

GT: My favorite novelist was a guy named Frank Yerby, a black guy who lived in Spain. He used to write, I guess it was soft-porn, romance like *A Woman Called Fancy* and *The Vixens*. It was low-level romance stuff. It was never considered high literature but I liked the colors in the prose, the story telling. He was a best-selling writer that no one ever heard of.

Then I got elevated a little bit when I went to college. I was reading paperback junk I guess you'd call it—always a little racy by the soft definitions of that time.

At Alabama, I couldn't quite get Faulkner—a little too obscure for me. But I got Fitzgerald and I got Hemingway. And when I read Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams" it really knocked me out. Greatest short story I ever read. It was a prelude to The Great Gatsby.

Then I read Hemingway as I told you. Then I read Thomas Wolfe. These were the big people of the '50s. Then I Came to New York and I started reading *The New Yorker*, so I read John Cheever, Irwin Shaw,

John O'Hara, of course McCullers. I wanted to in non-fiction what they were doing in fiction: telling stories through people.

ODT: ***Did you try to write like anyone?***

GT: There was one person I did try unsuccessfully to imitate. He was a dazzling magazine writer for *The New York Times Magazine* named Gilbert Millstein. He wrote a few novels later on. He wrote show business pieces. He wrote like S.J Perlman: stylistic, clever, long sentences. I was interested in that but I dropped it. I never tried to write like Fitzgerald. How could you?

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