O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

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On the Cover: *Halt*,
graphite and colored pencil
on bristol board
by Christina Sanders.

Christina Sanders served in the Marine Corps
from 2003-2007 as a combat engineer.
She is best known for her realistic pencil drawings,
which primarily depict U.S. military servicemen
and women and focus on the vulnerability of their
human condition amidst the paradoxes of war.
Most of her drawings are adapted
from photographs and still images
from video footage collected
during her tours in Iraq.

Halt was adapted with permission
from a photo taken by John Higgins
while he and Sanders were deployed together
as members of a convoy security platoon
in 2006.

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Editor's Note

As we compiled the work for this issue, we were struck by many of the inherent contradictions within the human condition that writers rely upon to create compelling characters and situations. In war, such contradictions can often define the experience of participants even as they fascinate—and confound—nonparticipants. Such contradictions can span from the extreme—where a soldier or Marine marches *toward* the sound of gunfire and danger—to the mundane. Our cover demonstrates a subtle contradiction that might exist during a combat patrol, where the tiny hand of friendship—like the red poppy that grew in no man's land during World War I—appears incongruently within a barren and hazardous environment.

Perhaps no writer better captured these contradictions than Erich Maria Remarque in his World War I masterpiece *All Quiet on the Western Front*—the title of which is itself a contradiction that evokes a picture of serenity when life on the Western Front was anything but. In one particular scene that many contemporary veterans would recognize, Remarque shows us his protagonist, Paul, returning home on leave after months of immersion in the horrors of trench warfare. Rather than finding comfort in this safe and peaceful environment, he instead finds himself surrounded by "strangeness" to the point that he becomes desperate to return to the front, to be with his comrades, to be in what was at that time the most dangerous place on earth.

We believe that the stories, poems, and nonfiction within these pages also carry such contradictions—some subtle, some extreme—and drive the work forward in compelling ways, through the eyes of compelling characters, and toward compelling conclusions. It is our hope that you will also be moved by what you read.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

Freak Accidents

By Lori Imsdahl

Sergeant First Class Rocky Herrera, Sergeant Cory Clark, and Sergeant Bryce Howard died in Jaji Province, Afghanistan on the morning of August 28, 2007, beside a bridge that they were constructing over a dry streambed.

I was sitting in my Humvee, one hundred meters away from them, when it happened.

Moments later, I saw Sergeant First Class Herrera on the ground. Our medic, Specialist Gary Olund, knelt beside him and felt for a pulse. "He's dead," the medic announced. Then I helped heave Sergeant Clark from a ditch. There was a hole in Clark's head and his body was still warm. And then I watched Corporal Howard gasp for breath and bleed out in the arms of Specialist Olund.

I felt nothing.

I woke up the next morning, expecting to feel something, but again I felt nothing. I felt nothing at the memorial service, either.

They died in Jaji Province, Afghanistan, a farming district on the Pakistani border.

In May 1987, Jaji Province, was a place where Osama Bin Laden came to prominence by leading Afghani forces against the Soviet Army. Twenty years later, in August 2007, it was a place with no borders, a place where people trafficked opium and passed across the Pakistani border unimpeded.

I was Third Platoon Leader for 585th Engineer Company, 555th Engineer Brigade from Joint Base Lewis-McChord. In the summer of 2007, my company's mission was to build a Forward Operating Base (FOB) on high ground near the Pakistani border. The Army believed that the soldiers who lived at that FOB could assert control and bring stability to Jaji Province.

In July 2007, we convoyed to the area from Logar Province where we had begun construction of FOB Shank in April. We drove over miles of rutted roads. The landscape of undulating woods and farmland was strangely idyllic. Our convoy passed streams, fields of flowers, mud buildings, and plots of wheat and corn. We observed forlorn goats tied to trees and wild dogs panting in the summer heat.

A few kilometers from the area where we would establish the base, we came over a hill and entered a field of marijuana. The field was larger than a football stadium and the plants were six feet tall. The musky smell of cannabis seeped into my vehicle through the gunner's hatch. After the marijuana plot, we crossed a barren field, a dry streambed, and a local village. Then we crested another hill and arrived at the place we'd call home for the next four months.

The area was on the edge of a cliff, and Pakistan was the landmass on the other side of it. The topography changed at that cliff, going from undulating woods and farmland to miles of mountains, desert, and desolation.

After we parked our vehicles, I stood in the dirt and stared out at Pakistan. One of my soldiers operated a grader, leveling the place where we'd live while constructing the outpost. The Army had

attached an infantry platoon to 585th Engineer Company and the infantry had come just ahead of us and erected a perimeter. They were still living out of their vehicles.

I saw their platoon leader talking to First Sergeant Meyer and I walked over to introduce myself. I can't recall this lieutenant's name but I'll never forget the look of anguish on his face, later, when the helicopters were landing to pick up the injured and the dead. His job was to provide security, but three soldiers had died on his watch.

After the lieutenant and I exchanged hellos, I continued to look at Pakistan.

This is the edge of the world, I thought. This is the furthest I can get from home. It was a feeling both profoundly thrilling and profoundly sad. Now that I've traveled more, I'm aware of how little I've seen. But I still wonder if I'll ever stand at the edge of the world and feel that far from home again.

On the morning of August 28, 2007, I woke up at around six a.m. and coaxed myself out of my sleeping bag. That morning, I was running a logistical convoy to FOB Shank to drop off soldiers and supplies. Including myself, there would be nineteen soldiers in the convoy.

First I changed into a tan T-shirt and the top and bottom of an Army Combat Uniform. Then I sat on my cot and put on wool socks and combat boots. I wound the laces around the backside of the boot and tucked the ends inside the shoe as my squad leader had taught me to do six years ago, during Basic Training.

Then I put on a patrol cap. Afterwards, I gathered my Kevlar helmet, gloves, sunglasses, and flak vest. I stopped to ensure that my neck, groin, and shoulder protectors were attached to the vest. I also gathered my M16 rifle and an assault pack with a notebook, toothbrush, and a change of clothing. Then I walked outside.

A line of vehicles was staged in front of my tent in marching order: senior squad leader's vehicle, platoon sergeant's vehicle, my vehicle, and heavy vehicles interspersed with Humvees. The sun was starting to rise and I could see pink smears across the sky. I put my gear into the passenger seat of my Humvee, then walked to the mess hall for a cup of coffee. On the way inside, Sergeant Howard intercepted me. "Ma'am, this is for Staff Sergeant Jimenez," he said, handing me a white, three-ring binder to give to my platoon sergeant. Sergeant Howard was a surveyor in Support Platoon and the binder was full of measurements he'd taken of the hill on which we were going to build the FOB.

"Thanks," I said and took the binder. I gave Sergeant Howard a passing glance. He was young and there was a rugged attractiveness to his face. There were bags beneath his eyes. He looks tired, I thought. And four hours later, he was dead.

On the morning of August 28, 2007, our convoy was scheduled to leave at around seven or eight a.m. However, at the last minute, the company commander instructed me to bring along additional supplies to FOB Shank—several light sets and a generator.

The light sets and generator were too heavy to be lifted manually, so a forklift operator would need to load them on the back of an M870 trailer. At first it seemed like a quick task, but then everything went wrong.

First, our supply sergeant couldn't locate one of the light sets. Then it was determined that our forklift had mechanical problems. A functional forklift was located, but before the operator could get to work, soldiers needed to shift around the equipment on the back of the M870 trailer to make room for the light sets and generator.

As a result, we departed for FOB Shank later than expected. I think about that a lot. About chance, luck, and fate. About freak

accidents. About how we wouldn't have been near the bridge if we'd left earlier. About how we were the first responders to the scene because we departed late.

Around nine or ten a.m. on August 28, 2007, our convoy drove out of the COP, past two soldiers with M240Bs manning the entry control point.

We wound around barriers that were arranged in a serpentine formation to slow incoming traffic. Then we headed downhill, the roads rutted and edged with weeds. We drove through the village, the streets lined with mud buildings. Barefoot men wearing *salwar kameezes* sat cross-legged outside of storefronts besides boxes of produce, bottles of soda, and trinkets. A few children frolicked in the streets.

Women were absent, as they usually were, in every village and encounter.

Through the village, we drove into the barren field and across the dry streambed that was prone to flooding in the winter. That was where we saw Support Platoon building the bridge. They'd erected a perimeter of up-armored vehicles around their job site and soldiers with automatic weapons were standing in turrets and pulling security. Other soldiers were building the bridge. Everyone was wearing a flak vest.

Sergeant First Class Herrera, Support Platoon Sergeant, was standing near the road, supervising soldiers. He was a stocky fellow with white hair and a rosy complexion. In the final moments of his life, Herrera turned to watch our convoy and raised his arm to wave. Some of the soldiers in my convoy waved back. But we kept driving.

I was looking straight ahead at the rutted road when I heard the explosion. It rocked the ground. The lead vehicle in our convoy came to a halt and the other vehicles followed suit. And then it was silent.

In the moment after the explosion, I thought, *I don't know what the hell that was.* And then, *I don't want to deal with this right now.* But I knew I had to deal with it, whatever it was, and I had to deal with it now. Seconds after this realization, my driver, Sergeant Adriel Moreno—who was on the bridge side of our vehicle—swiveled toward me. Wide-eyed, he picked up the hand microphone and said into the radio, "I see casualties."

A moment later, we saw the medic running out of his vehicle and toward the bridge.

I took the hand microphone from Sergeant Moreno. "Gunners, stay with your vehicles," I said. Then Sergeant Moreno and I got out of our vehicle and started running, too.

The first thing I saw when I stepped out of my Humvee was a foot.

It was not one of my soldiers'. This foot was brown, dusty, calloused, and wedged inside a gray sandal.

The style of sandal was familiar. I'd seen other Afghani men wear it. The foot was severed at the ankle. As I ran toward the bridge, I noticed hundreds of shards of skin scattered across the ground like confetti. The entire job site was permeated with the smell of blood. It reminded me of tampons, but different. This smell was more than blood. It was damp, fishy, fecal.

The next thing I saw was Sergeant First Class Herrera. When I'd seen him a few seconds earlier from inside my Humvee he'd been supervising soldiers. The blast had thrown him twenty feet away, and he was lying on his back in the dirt.

Herrera, forty-three, was a gentle, soft-spoken leader from Salt Lake City. After he died, a soldier from Support Platoon characterized him as "that rare individual you meet and trust five minutes later." Herrera had a wife named Traci, four children, and two grandchildren. Traci's name was tattooed across his chest.

The medic was kneeling beside Herrera. First, he checked for responsiveness. "Can you hear me?" he yelled, shaking Herrera's shoulder. Herrera was unresponsive. Next, the medic pushed on the back of Herrera's neck, raising his chin and opening his airway. He checked for airflow by placing his ear close to Herrera's nose and mouth. He couldn't detect any breathing. He traced the contours of Herrera's body, sliding his fingers beneath the man's back and legs. There was no pulse and he felt dampness. He discovered that shrapnel had penetrated Herrera's body. Brain matter was dripping into the dirt. The medic got to his feet and faced me. There were more pressing matters to attend to. "He's dead," he said. And he took off running, again.

Instinctively, I headed to the hub of activity: a ditch near the bridge. That's when I encountered Staff Sergeant Jimenez. Jimenez was staring into the ditch and moaning. Another soldier, Sergeant Bubba Pickren, was doing the same. I stood next to them and peered down. The ditch was five feet deep, and Sergeant Clark was lying at the bottom of it.

For weeks before the incident, Sergeant Clark told members of Support Platoon about a recurring nightmare: he would be blown up by the enemy and die from a head wound. Sadly, on August 28, 2007, sometime after nine a.m., this is exactly what would happen.

Twenty-five-year-old Clark had a wife named Monica and four children younger than six. He came from Plant City, Florida, where he'd joined the Army a few months before September 11th to escape his job in the freezer warehouse of a Food Lion. After his death, Clark's mother, Wrenita Codrington, told the *Military Times* that Clark had told her he'd "rather get a little dirty than a lot cold all the time." Clark's dream was to go to culinary school and open a

restaurant with Monica. He had last tried to contact her on August 26, 2007, but she had not been at home, and he had left a voice mail telling her that he loved her.

After I saw Clark's body, I lowered myself into the ditch and knelt beside him. There was no need for me to run through the steps of evaluating a casualty as the medic had done with Sergeant First Class Herrera. There was a large hole in Clark's temple and his brain was visible. It was clear he'd died on impact. "We need to get him out of here," I yelled to Jimenez and Pickren. "Help me lift him."

Jimenez slid into the ditch. I grabbed Clark's legs and Jimenez grabbed his torso. Pickren reached down and took hold of Clark's head and shoulders. "Lift," I commanded. We lifted. Because of their strength, Jimenez and Pickren did the majority of the work. I may have lifted thirty pounds of Clark's weight. I'd never touched a dead body before, and Clark's legs were still soft and limp and warm.

We got him out of the ditch. Then I scrambled out of it, heard yelling, and turned to my left. The medic was kneeling next to Sergeant Howard.

Howard, twenty-four, was a snowboard and motorcycle enthusiast from Washington State. He'd joined the Army in 2002 and had served another tour in Iraq. He had a wife named Amber and two sons named Caleb and Ryan. He was mathematically gifted and hoped to become a mechanical engineer after the Army.

Later, I was informed that Howard died of a sucking chest wound. Jimenez told me that after he exited the ditch, he knelt next to Howard and the medic and tried to ask Howard a question. Howard tried to respond to Jimenez, but no words came out of his mouth, only blood.

The medic managed to open Howard's flak vest and unzip the blouse of his Army Combat Uniform. The only thing standing between the medic and Howard's skin was a tan T-shirt. "I need a scissors. I need a scissors. I need a scissors," the medic said.

I was acting, still, a player in a video game. "Who has a scissors?" I yelled to everyone in earshot. Specialist Tanya Vitacolonna, our only female gunner, was standing in the turret of her Humvee. She swiveled to face me.

"I have scissors, ma'am," she said, reaching down to unclip them from her flak vest. She threw them to the medic and he started cutting off Howard's T-shirt.

That's when I thought: What the fuck are you doing? You're the fucking convoy commander. Your job is to be on the radio. I ran back to my vehicle. Along the way, I surveyed the perimeter. I noted that there were holes in it. I ran up to one of my convoy's Humvees. The gunner was still inside as ordered. "Move your vehicle over there and man the area between those two trees," I said, pointing. I ran up to a second vehicle and a third vehicle and told the gunners inside where to move and what their field of fire should be.

Again, I'm not sure how much time had elapsed since the explosion. Looking back, I'm sure that it was no more than five to ten minutes, but at the time that was difficult to gauge. I thought that maybe someone had remotely detonated an improvised explosive device or that a soldier from Support Platoon had stepped on a pressure-triggered mine. I still hadn't figured out that the foot I'd encountered was the foot of a suicide bomber.

I don't know personal details about the man who killed our soldiers: his name, how old he was, where he lived, who his parents were, or what he did for a living. All I know is that he strapped on a suicide bomb vest and convinced two local girls to accompany him to the bridge site. He walked behind them, hunched over, trying to conceal himself.

In their sworn statements, several members of Support Platoon noted that they saw the girls standing beneath some trees. The soldiers

didn't think that was unusual; many children came to observe construction, bringing along animals and infant siblings. But that day, the area was noticeably devoid of children. Besides the two girls, no one had come to watch, and the soldiers did not see the man behind them.

But the girls suspected something, or maybe the suicide bomber gave them a warning. Either way, they suddenly ran, shrieking, into a scrubby field that, moments later, we would use as a landing zone for a medical evacuation helicopter.

In his sworn statement, Sergeant Chris Taylor wrote that he saw the two girls running into the field, and a man behind them, that he hadn't noticed before, clearing the trees and entering the job site. It happened quickly. Sergeant Taylor raised his weapon, but before he could shoot he was knocked over by the blast.

After ensuring that the perimeter was secure, I threw open the door of my Humvee and grabbed the hand microphone. "Rough-neck TOC, Roughneck TOC, this is Roughneck 3-6, over." The company communications guy, Specialist James Bartron, responded.

"Roughneck 3-6, Roughneck 3-6, this is Roughneck TOC, over."

"Roughneck TOC, we have two casualties at the bridge site."

I could hear rustling in the background. I expected to hear the commander's voice, but it was the voice of Lieutenant Grayson Pranin. I told Pranin the names of the two dead soldiers, one of whom was his platoon sergeant. I told him that Howard was possibly dead, too.

"What is the status of the rest of the platoon?" Pranin wanted to know.

I couldn't tell him. I'd only encountered the bodies of Herrera, Clark, and Howard. I hadn't seen anyone else. "I'll find out," I said.

I grabbed the notebook from my assault pack and ran back to the bridge. Staff Sergeant Jimenez was establishing a casualty collection point in an open field near the bridge. Soldiers from my convoy were

transporting injured members of Support Platoon to the casualty collection point on stretchers or by fireman's carry. Some of the injured were able to walk on their own. "Sergeant Howard just died," someone informed me.

Every time I encountered an injured soldier, I wrote his name in my notebook and jotted notes next to it. After collecting data, I returned to the radio. "There are twelve injured," I told Pranin. I told him their names and type of injury. I told him everything I knew.

"We've called in a helicopter," Pranin said. He told me the estimated time of arrival. Then he asked me to switch to the helicopter's radio frequency and give the soldiers on board a better description of what I was seeing.

After I spoke to the soldiers on the helicopter, I stepped away from the radio. One of my soldiers approached and handed me a purple smoke grenade. I carried it to Staff Sergeant Jimenez at the casualty collection point.

On the way to Jimenez, I passed the lieutenant from Arkansas. He was sitting cross-legged in the dirt, talking with someone on a radio. I'm not sure when he'd arrived. I also noticed that First Sergeant Meyer had shown up. First Sergeant Meyer stood solemnly over Sergeant First Class Herrera's body, mouthing the words to a prayer and rendering a salute. The men had grown up together in the Army and had met one another as young privates.

Someone in the Tactical Operations Center told me that after I radioed in about the two casualties, the commander had dropped to his knees and began moaning. First Sergeant Meyer had run past the commander and outside, grabbed the nearest soldier and told him, "Take me to the bridge."

The soldier and First Sergeant Meyer threw on their flak vests, jumped into the nearest Humvee, and raced downhill without the commander. They wound their way through the village, sped across

the barren field, roared over the dry streambed, and reached the bridge site. This makes me believe that only a few minutes elapsed between the explosion and the time the helicopter arrived. However, it still felt like hours.

I reached Staff Sergeant Jimenez. He was standing at the casualty collection point surrounded by the injured. The bodies of Herrera, Clark, and Howard were nearby. Jimenez's combat boots were covered in blood. I handed him the purple smoke grenade. "The helicopter will be here in a few minutes," I told him. "They told me there are going to be two: one for the injured and one for the dead."

"OK," Jimenez said. He took the smoke grenade from my hands. I watched him pull the pin. Purple smoke swirled up and over the tree line, alerting the helicopter of our location.

Seven or eight minutes after Staff Sergeant Jimenez pulled the pin on the purple smoke grenade, the first helicopter arrived, picked up the injured soldiers, and took them to a hospital at Kandahar Airfield. Two or three minutes later, the second helicopter picked up Howard, Herrera, and Clark.

The helicopters lifted off with a roar of their blades, creating a cloud of dust. And then it was just members of my convoy, First Sergeant Meyer, the lieutenant from Arkansas, and the soldiers from Support Platoon who weren't dead or injured.

First Sergeant Meyer gathered the soldiers who were not manning the perimeter around him. He was a grizzled man who harkened from a generation where women were a rarity in the armed forces and non-commissioned officers could physically abuse a private for not complying with orders. Some soldiers in 585th Engineer Company found him intimidating, unflinching, and archaic, but none of that seemed to matter now, in an open field by a bridge in eastern Afghanistan.

"You all did the best you could," First Sergeant Meyer told us. "Now it's time to go back to the COP. Everyone get inside your vehicles. I'll bring up the rear."

We got back into our vehicles. I got on the radio and told the gunners to stay low in their turrets. We'd barely crossed the dry streambed when someone I didn't recognize came on the radio."Roughneck 3-6, Roughneck 3-6, this is Crazyhorse 18, over."

"Crazyhorse 18, Crazyhorse 18, this is Roughneck 3-6, over."

"Roughneck 3-6, would you like us to shadow your convoy, over?"

I turned to my driver for help. Sergeant Moreno was in his early thirties and had deployed multiple times.

"Who's Crazyhorse 18?" I asked him. "And why are they shadowing us?"

"It's an Apache helicopter," Sergeant Moreno said. "They want to know if we want them to pull security for us while we convoy up the hill."

The AH-64 Apache is an attack helicopter with a nose-mounted sensor for target acquisition and night vision systems. It's armed with an M230 chain gun carried beneath the aircraft's forward fuselage. It has four weapons systems, typically a mixture of AGM-114 Hellfire missiles and Hydra 70 rocket pods. I got back on the radio.

"Crazyhorse 18, this is Roughneck 3-6. That's an affirmative. Please shadow us until we reach our COP."

We headed uphill slowly, dismally, while the Apache helicopter hovered overhead, silhouetted against the mid-morning sun.

After their memorial ceremony, I kept on waiting to feel something, some validation that I was not a sociopath. It's been seven years, and I still haven't felt anything. And, in the first five years after the incident, I only told their story four times.

The first time I told their story was in a sworn statement on the day it happened.

The second time was in an e-mail to my father. It was a few days after the incident. I wasn't sure if he'd already heard the news through the Family Readiness Group, but I wanted him to hear it from me, also. In the future, when I was depressed, my father would sometimes mention their story and ask me if I was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and I would tell him "No" or "Nothing's changed."

The third time was to Michael Oktavec in Bagram, Afghanistan. It was October 2007 and Michael was a man I'd loved a little at West Point. I hadn't seen Michael since our graduation, and while I told Michael their story, I floated outside of myself, remembering a time at West Point when I'd sprained my ankle. Michael had told me to stay put that day, and he'd returned with ice cubes wrapped in paper napkins from the mess hall. And I recalled the feel of those napkins when they were applied to the place where it hurt.

The fourth time I told their story was to my sister in Old Town, San Diego. It was March 2008 and we were drinking tequila at El Agave on San Diego Avenue, and I only told her because I was drunk. I was so drunk I barely remember her reaction. After El Agave, the two of us walked to our car, rolled open the windows, and sprawled across the seats. And we slept until we were sober.

Sometimes, I tell myself that my feelings are simply dormant. They'll surface when I'm thirty-seven or fifty-two or eighty-six. They'll surface, and they'll debilitate me, but it will be okay, because then at least I'll know I'm not defective.

Other times, I resign myself to the idea that they don't exist. Because I remember moments before I went to Afghanistan when I felt no emotion, or was unable to express the emotion I felt.

Maybe it's genetic; even from a young age, I was less emotionally expressive than my sisters. The human narrative inherent in

playing house and dolls bored me. I preferred riding my bike and climbing trees.

Maybe it's environmental. I come from a family of seven. It was imperative to differentiate myself, to have an identity. My identity was the Tough One and I demonstrated it repeatedly, like the time in elementary school when my younger sister and I crashed our bikes. My abrasion was large and littered with gravel. Hers was only a scratch. I still recall her sitting in the bathtub, screaming, as my mother ran the faucet. My leg hurt, but I told myself I wouldn't cry. I had to be the Tough One. So I didn't.

And I won't.

Emotions aside, the incident did leave me with a strong conviction. Afterward, I told my dad that I didn't believe in freak accidents anymore. "When it's your time to go, it's your time to go," I told him.

I came to this conviction after analyzing every moment between the explosion and when the helicopter arrived.

Even though there was chaos at the job site, I had also detected a strange calm. I had the distinct impression that the dead were looking down at us, calmly surveying the scene, and that they were enlightened.

They were not like us anymore, who, at the time, were caught up in the moment and seeing everything in tunnel vision. They could see the big picture about everything—about racism, sexism, classism, war, and all the other issues affecting society. Everything they had been ignorant about was clear. Death did not equate to hell and punishment. Rather, it was an experience of love, forgiveness, and enlightenment.

After detecting this strange calm at the job site, I realized I wasn't scared to die anymore, because nothing about the experience seemed terrible to me. Though I wasn't scared to die, I wanted

to believe that death was not in my near future, for I felt that I still had things to accomplish: words to write, issues to be an activist about, and children to raise. But I understood that Herrera, Howard, and Clark must have felt that they still had things left to accomplish, too. For this reason, I came to believe that whether or not I lived was not my prerogative, but the prerogative of something bigger than me. My time to die would come when my purpose had been served, whether or not I knew it had been served.

Thus my conviction: there are no freak accidents.

I'm sure that most would argue that this conviction was the stress response of a young lieutenant. A young lieutenant trying to make sense of the horror she saw in Afghanistan and not wanting to comprehend that this horror could just as easily have befallen her. I've analyzed the merits of my conviction and I understand that my reasons for believing it are based on my feelings, intuition, and personal experience rather than scientific evidence.

Scientific evidence notwithstanding, I still hold the conviction today.

Lori Imsdahl was born and raised in Minnesota, attended West Point, and spent five years in the United States Army. In 2012, she was runner-up for the Melanie Hook Rice Award in Creative Nonfiction at Hollins University, where she completed her MFA in 2013. Her work has appeared in Emerge Literary Journal, Green Briar Review, *and* Slow Trains Literary Journal.

Heavenly Shades of Night Have Fallen

By Nathan Webster

Stars shimmering above Bayji, Iraq, invite an ageless prayer; a wartime whisper of a spell, cast with faith in all the desert's superstitions:

Wish I may, wish I might, have the wish, I wish tonight.

Wish to get home, wish to see a girl again, wish for a little midnight payback.

I look skyward, standing on the starlit roof of this joint Iraqi police station and US Army outpost. Around me, a dozen soldiers direct their attention elsewhere, down a dark two-lane road leading north out of the city.

For safety, most of the men trust the concealment of the darkness and the sandbags and the plywood bunkers and set aside their body armor and Kevlar helmets. As a photojournalist embedded with this unit, Charlie Company of the 82nd Airborne Division, I don't have that confidence, so I wear both.

Some peer through observation portholes built into the green sandbags, rows stacked head-high along the roof's edge. On the

ground below, a circular perimeter of fifteen-foot-tall, three-foot-wide concrete barriers separates the outpost from Bayji's 125,000 residents, quiet in the hours of late-night curfew.

I look through a porthole now, with a northern view of a sewage-soaked street; look a half-mile or more away toward three Iraqi men I'll never see, but I know are there, despite the distance and the dark.

Among us, only Staff Sergeant Brian Wilson truly witnesses these three Iraqis, plainly visible to him through the green glow of his night vision telescope. He keeps up a commentary of the Iraqi men's activity as they walk around a certain spot on the road: they sit; they gather in a group then split apart; they briefly disappear down narrow alleys between the shuttered and silent street-side buildings.

Maybe this trio thinks nobody can see them. Maybe they think nobody will care.

The rooftop soldiers *do* see them. The soldiers *do* care.

After curfew, innocence matters far less than perception. The three men's actions seem without benign form or practical purpose. Assumptions are being made.

Roadside bombs hide beneath pavement split apart with pick-axes, then re-covered, with each slab of broken asphalt carefully lined up and dusted over with sand to hide the fresh cracks. Wires snake off highways to hidden rat's nests where a triggerman will wait for a passing vehicle like an Iraqi police truck or an American Humvee.

Someone lays those bombs on dark nights, like tonight, and the act would look just like this: men behaving strangely, after curfew, along a well-travelled and important road. Without a better explanation for the Iraqis' behavior, the soldiers must fill in the blanks. The soldiers lack the luxury of doubt.

For these three Iraqis, time begins compressing.

Time condenses, pulling in life's moments with an unforgiving gravity.

Each breath we take lasts just a second.

But the last breath of a drowning man, that breath takes forever, takes a lifetime.

What could these three men be doing? It's the question we all ask, here on the roof, out loud or in our heads; but everyone has known the real answer since we started filtering up here, climbing the ladder into the hot midnight air.

Dying. The Iraqis have been dying with each strange step they take, every choice they make that the rooftop soldiers can't decipher.

The Iraqis' simplest actions carry this new and heavy weight. Each breath takes far too much of their time, each gulp of air fills too much space.

But the Iraqis breathe easy, I suppose—they don't know.

The radio crackles next to Wilson, his face glowing in the green of the telescope's electronic haze. I could ask to look, to see what he sees. He would probably let me, for a few seconds anyway. But I don't ask. Killing is too serious a business.

First Sergeant Michael Green's voice, flat and calm, comes over the radio. He's only just downstairs, in the command center, coordinating the air support.

"The attack will come east to west, ninety seconds after confirmation," Green's voice says.

Meaning the attack will come from our right to left, directed from an Apache helicopter. We've heard the rotors, a distant rumble. A noise the Iraqi men apparently ignore.

The darkness must feel complete to them, a phony blanket of security.

Staff Sergeant Aaron Flinner charges the heavy machine gun, nestled into the sandbags next to me; he pulls a metal handle all the way back, puts a two-inch round into the big rifle's chamber. He doesn't plan to fire–just staying busy. But, maybe.

"Don't they hear the helicopter?" I ask Flinner. "Don't they know we can see them?"

"Nah, they don't know," he says. "Even after all this time, they still don't know the capabilities of these birds."

The night vision, the helicopters, satellites and hidden cameras. Darkness doesn't mean a thing.

But roadside bombs are common, near daily occurrences. Iraqis have gotten away with it before, so why not again tonight, same as last night and the night before? If that's what these three are doing.

But *are* they?

The radio crackles again.

"Confirm they're laying an IED," Green's voice says.

He waits for Wilson's reply.

I wait. We all wait.

I am certain the fireball will be spectacular.

Come on, I think.

It's easy, wishing for what will happen next. So easy I think I can get it for free.

Come on already.

Time slows down.

Slows way, way down.

The soldiers on the roof are all on the same page about what they want: A rocket attack, killing these three presumed insurgents laying a presumed IED under what the men foolishly believe is the cover of darkness.

The Iraqis had been spotted about twenty minutes before. A curiosity at first, then more questions as their behavior became more suspicious, all leading to firmer wishes.

"*Please*, let us blow them up," one soldier said to me, but mostly to nobody. He clapped his hands together with unhidden anticipation.

The soldiers have the right to hope for honest violence. Here for a year, Charlie Company has lost several men killed by snipers—the most recent only a few weeks ago—and others to injury. One was

shot on this roof, paralyzed from the waist down, while piling the sandbags stacked all around.

Al Qaeda-linked insurgents attacked this compound with a 1,500-pound suicide truck bomb that successfully destroyed one barracks, killing twenty-seven Iraqi policemen. Ruined remnants, mangled steel rebar and shattered concrete lie crumpled down below. That now-flattened building buffered the huge blast, protected the adjacent two-story structure where all the Americans sleep.

Mortars land and explode here every day, not yet within the compound perimeter, but rarely far away. An insurgent mortar crew launches them from the desert by the railroad tracks; they jump out of a car, toss the tube on the ground and fire away. No more than four small rounds before piling back in and speeding off. Too quick for a US response, even though the mortar counterfire radar tracks exactly where they fired from.

So the soldiers earned the right to stand up here and wait and hope for the helicopter's attack.

No soldier trusts these three Iraqis' late-night intentions. I don't either.

But I do trust karma, and karma says *What goes around, comes around.*

Karma joins me now, while I drum my fingers together, keeping my mouth shut, not adding to the conversation. I know why I'm on the roof, waiting with the rest of them, looking out to that spot a half-mile away. I just never say it out loud. Karma lets me know it isn't fooled.

Be careful. Be careful what you wish for.

Karma is all about deserving, for what we do, and the fates we earn.

Karma and luck, hopes and wishes. Distinctions all shade together.

I try reeling my thoughts back to a neutral balance, but it's not easy. I believe the Iraqis plan something ominous, but journalists

shouldn't dictate events or offer opinions. Or favor one course of action over another, even on the inside. I want to stay detached, aloof.

I felt more honest when I was a soldier like the men surrounding me. That was a long time ago.

The 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade began the morning of February 24, 1991, just across the Saudi Arabian frontier, in Iraq; our first objective, the town of As Salman, about seventy miles north.

I ate a peanut butter-covered cracker off my lap, in my Humvee's driver's seat. I listened to the BBC broadcast of President Bush's speech announcing the commencement of the ground war we were already participating in. I was ready to do my job as a "combat photographer" with a historical documentation unit led by a National Guard major, assigned to take pictures of the invasion for the official military record. I was active duty Army, shunted around to fill a personnel gap in this Guard unit.

I hadn't showered in the month spent waiting in the desert since the "Air War" had begun in January. I'd only eaten a couple of hot meals; my one pleasure was hoarding peanut butter from the plastic-wrapped Meals-Ready-to-Eat that I could trade for instant cocoa packets with my two tent mates and fellow photographers, Jackson and Wehyrich. It wasn't that bad; I was where I wanted to be.

The major, now in the Humvee passenger seat, had dropped Jackson and Wehyrich off with separate platoons of soldiers they would spend the first few days of combat with, videotaping the action up close. We had shaken hands; I told Wehyrich good luck.

"What you do if shit gets bad," he said, covering his eyes, "is say. 'Calgon, take me away!'"

I held no grudge against the enemy. The Iraqis hadn't done anything to any of us, except be in the way. I felt nothing personal.

When the invasion started, I sat in my Humvee on a two-lane stretch of Iraqi highway with hundreds of other vehicles ahead and behind us, all packed into the same northbound traffic jam. On either side of the road, 155mm howitzer cannons blasted away at the Iraqis waiting ahead of us. I wasn't sorry we were killing them—though we weren't; the positions being shelled had been abandoned days before.

"It's a turkey shoot!" the major, a Methodist minister in his civilian life, laughed—giggled, actually—while we listened to reports of the mass Iraqi retreat from Kuwait, which led them headlong into the armored divisions of the U.S. VII Corps and our constant airborne attacks.

Inwardly, I cheered the artillery fire being directed at the Iraqis in our path. I thought they were waiting to take a shot at us, after all, maybe take a shot at me. All the same, the major's sentiment did not impress me. I might have felt differently if we'd been in combat, doing our part. At least Wehyrich and Jackson were with the infantry platoons for real, not sitting behind a steering wheel.

The Iraqis I saw from my driver's seat vantage point couldn't surrender fast enough. Huddled behind hastily-erected roadside prison camps, they looked pathetic. A few strands of barbed wire surrounded them like a bad joke. These clowns weren't going anywhere.

So I said nothing out loud, nothing when the major cackled in the passenger seat, gleeful about death he had no role in. *Bad juju*, I did think, *tempting fate like that*.

A few days later and the Iraqis finally managed to kill a bunch of us: twenty-eight fellow soldiers in a sheet-metal storage building put into service as a temporary barracks. A Scud missile broke apart—didn't even land on purpose—and the warhead fell right on top of them.

When I heard the news radio, I stopped rolling up the tarp we wrapped against the doorless Humvee, to block the wind-driven

sand when the convoy halted each night. The twenty-eight soldiers were in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, had arrived just a few days before to a war ending before it even started. *It's not fair*, I thought in a strange non-sequitur. *How do they hit Dhahran and not us, when we're actually eighty miles into Iraq?*

The major and I packed up and took our spot in the convoy, listened to more news about the Scud attack on the BBC. "I hope it wasn't guys from North Carolina," the major said. That was where his Guard unit was from, and the news said the casualties were re-servists or Guardsmen. Then he said quietly to me, but mostly to himself, "Well, doesn't matter. It was somebody."

He did catch himself. He tried. But karma isn't kind, and it can be arbitrary in evil ways.

So a few days later, it was the major's job to take Jackson aside and tell him that his brother had been in that barracks in Dhahran and that Jackson would be going home because his brother was dead.

Jackson stayed in the Humvee later that same afternoon, when we rolled up on an Iraqi troop truck on Highway 8, somewhere around Nasiriyah. Abandoned and destroyed vehicles littered the highway.

This truck was destroyed but not abandoned. The passengers were strewn about, some lying in bits and pieces on the roadway, other bodies more or less complete. One leg landed not far from its previous owner—no shoe, but still wearing a black wool sock the owner had pulled up his calf on his last morning.

The rest of the body had settled nearby: the face was dull green, waxy; his eyes open, dried and sunken; a balding hairline receded into a widow's peak; a bristly black moustache grew over his lip.

Another man lay face down, frozen where his crawl had ended, resting his face on hands clenched into fists below his forehead. A dried track of rusty blood trailed behind him.

The truck's driver had never escaped the cab. He might have tried to flee through the open door, but maybe it was just the way the

body twisted that direction, contorting as it burned, muscles drying and stretching taut, pulling bone into unnatural, impossible positions. Charcoaled teeth jutted from his blackened skull. The winter air of March was dry and cool. There was no smell.

Probably a Hellfire missile, fired from an Apache in the middle of the night, probably from miles away. They never had a chance, would have never seen it coming.

I looked at the Iraqi in the truck, took a picture, took another; I knew what Jackson's brother probably looked like too.

A helicopter would take Jackson away, back to Saudi Arabia, to the airbase at Dhahran, and from there, away from here.

He and I waited in the rocky dust of the helicopter landing site. I gave him a chocolate-covered cookie and a packet of peanut butter.

"For the flight home."

He smiled, half-chuckled, put both away. His flight got delayed. He ate them while we waited.

Despite all the time we spent with cameras around our necks, I only have three pictures of him. In the best one, he sits by our three-man foxhole on the Saudi Arabian side of the frontier. The photo-graph shows the open hole as we pack up to leave, about twelve feet long by six feet wide—without the canvas tarp roof it's just a tiny, naked pit.

Jackson stretches his arms out to either side and he grins, taking in this absurdly small space that he, Wehyrich and I made our home for a little over a month. "This is it!" his arms say.

The tarp roof blew noisily in the chilly desert wind. At night we sealed the entrance, closing gaps against both the wind and release of light. Mere miles from the Iraqi border, we at least tried to operate under the supposedly strict blackout conditions.

There were no artificial light sources after dark, but the sky was filled with stars.

Under that sky, I waited. I waited for the war and I waited for dusk, for the sun to settle beneath the sandy hills, for a tiny twilight flicker high above, for the first star I saw each night.

I wished to see a girl again: a girl then stationed in South Korea, an American soldier from West Virginia, far from home and far from me.

Wishes on these stars *had* to come true. Out here, where stars went on and on, a place and nights like this were what made men wish on stars in the first place. This was the ancient Mideast, of legend and the Bible. These were the *original* stars.

I made a wish every night. With my fingertips, I traced her name, written in handwriting she had spelled out on the other side of Asia, onto the envelopes holding letters that she sent. I held the paper of her letters to my nose, hoping that over these thousands of miles there still lingered a trace of her shampoo, her soap, her skin. In the dark, I wished for *anything*.

The letters, I stored in my rucksack. They rested there, against my heart. I knew they would protect me.

The wish came true eventually. But time and wishes shift like desert dust, until things we think we see and want are already long, long gone.

Still, every boy's first love should be a wartime love. That karma never dies.

So one of her letters made a return trip in 2007, in my backpack, against my heart. Walking off the plane, into the devilish Baghdad heat, I knew it would protect me once again.

So here I am, sweating buckets in the 125-degree heat of July 2007. My first day with the paratroopers, I've slung on my body armor and strapped on my helmet and headed outside to the Humvees,

ready for my first trip into Bayji city itself. A friendly lieutenant good-naturedly warns me.

"Be careful, Nathan," he says. "This isn't 1991 any more."

For a month, I sweat on the rooftops, the streets, and inside the compound. Hidden behind the fifteen-foot-tall concrete walls, the only visible sign of Bayji is a mosque tower a half-mile away, its speakers announcing the daily calls to prayer in guttural Arabic. Gunfire, sweat, and the incoming mortars remind everyone exactly where they are.

"Is it too much to ask," says Sergeant Jake Utley once, putting into explicit words what everybody thinks and everybody asks, though *who* they're asking is always left unsaid, "to get out of here in one piece?"

Utley's patrol had walked by a circular-shaped piece of plastic that, when they noticed it on the return trip, looked suspicious, maybe like a land mine. Just plastic, it turned out, only harmless junk. But what if it hadn't been? Nobody noticed it the first time. Utley's anger reminded his men that you don't get any second chances to make your first mistake.

My superstitious nature had not faded with the years.

A mortar almost gets me, landing on one side of the concrete T-walls, while I'm in the sheet metal shower trailer on the *other* side. Just a few feet of difference—drive you crazy if you think too much about it. Even the soldiers say it was a close call, but so is getting up in the morning, for the paratroopers deployed a year to this terrible place and for the Iraqis caught in the middle with nowhere to go.

A soldier laughs at me a few minutes after the mortar attack, in the last seconds before it's entirely forgotten by everyone but me. "You're bad luck!"

"Oh no, I'm not," I reply. I laugh back, but with an edge, because I'm not kidding. I will *not* have anyone tag me with that identity. "It missed, didn't it? I'm *good* luck."

Every day brings something new and awful.

Two Iraqi cops get kidnapped, and their heads end up in a canvas sack, tossed into the broken fountain downtown. A boy, maybe eight or nine, displays his new plastic legs, attached below the mess a bomb made of his knees. An Iraqi insurgent bleeds to death after a gun battle with Iraqi police, struggles with the U.S. medics on the aid station table.

He was no hypocrite. He fights the Americans right to his literal last breath.

"You can take pictures if you want," a medic tells me matter-of-factly before the wounded man arrives. He speaks without emotion, just letting me know I can do my job. "Gonna be a lot of blood."

An Iraqi policeman arrives soon after, also shot, but less serious. They pull him out of the ambulance and move him into the medic shack. I take a few pictures from afar, but no detail is visible, just a body on a stretcher, mostly obscured by cops and soldiers.

A few minutes later, and the medevac Blackhawk helicopter swoops in, kicks up dust on one pass before swinging down to land. Medics hustle the policeman to the landing site within the encircling concrete barriers. I could run and follow them, take some more pictures, but I don't.

"You didn't take any pictures of the medevac?" a soldier asks me later.

"Nah, by the time I saw what was going on, I didn't have time."

"What do you mean? You had plenty of time. You were right there."

"Uh . . . that blowing sand would mess up my camera."

But that's all a lie. Later, I tell another soldier that I didn't take any more pictures because I didn't want to be the guy leaning in, snapping shots of a gunshot victim being loaded onto a helicopter, while all his policeman friends stood around and looked at me.

If it had been an American, I could have told the other guys what I was trying to do. It would have been unseemly either way.

More than "unseemly." Sticking a camera in a gut-shot Iraqi cop's face is the kind of thing I'll wish I hadn't done—the sort of action a payback comes due for, way down the line, or maybe an hour later. Maybe in the shower when the mortars start landing. Maybe on a patrol walking by a piece of plastic that isn't plastic.

I made a mistake, though. The Iraqi cop got shot in defense of his city and country. No one would have liked me if I had taken those pictures; I know that. I would have gotten some dirty looks; if it were me, I would have *given* a dirty look. But his sacrifice deserved some of my effort, to show the story of all the pain and blood. He deserved my bravery, but I hid.

The insurgent had died on the medic's table, separated from me only by a sheet of plywood. I know what happened, but I can't show what happened. Maybe he deserved a record of his last fight.

It's a war full of tough choices.

I choose to be careful about what I do, careful what I hope for.

Now I'm on the moonlit roof, waiting with soldiers who do hope, honestly and clearly.

They hope for a little bit of payback, for the roadside bombs, for the snipers, for the heat and for the fear.

"The attack will come east to west, ninety seconds after confirmation," Green's voice says to Wilson. "Confirm they're laying an IED."

If it happens, it happens. But don't you wish for it. I repeat it in my head to overlap the opposite thought that I know is there; a hum I think maybe leans toward evil, but feels so good.

Time stops. Stops for the three men out of sight but not out of mind; stops for the soldiers wishing and waiting for righteous killing from the sky. Stops for me, trying to stay neutral and detached, but I want what's coming as much as anyone.

Wilson keeps his gaze pinpointed through the green haze of the night vision equipment, finally spitting out the words.

"I *can't*," and his voice spikes with frustration. He clenches his fists and keeps glaring through the telescope. "I don't know what they're doing, but I can't confirm they're laying an IED. It's something, but I can't say what."

The mood deflates. Nobody says anything or grumbles. But soldiers shift, where before they stood still. They lose interest in the sniper rifle, in the .50 Cal machine gun.

A few more radio exchanges pass between Wilson and the first sergeant, a few more questions about what he thinks he sees. It's over, though, and everyone knows it. The helicopter will return to its base, or go hunting somewhere else. No one gives any vocal blame, no disappointment.

"I'm going downstairs," Flinner says, dryly drawling out the words.

A convoy of Humvees rumbles through the compound's exit soon after, heading down the road to investigate. But the three men hear them coming and have plenty of time to flee, skating between buildings and down the twisting alleys. Night vision's good, but it can't see everything.

And who knows what they were doing? The Iraqi national soccer team had won the Asian Cup championship that afternoon, setting off celebratory gunfire all across the city. Maybe they were just three drunks, stumbling around a friend's house, unmindful of the curfew, letting that unprecedented 1-0 triumph briefly blind them to the deadly seriousness of their everyday Iraqi life.

The next morning, I draw some cold water from the metal tank by the latrines, splash it on my face, try to do at least a half-assed job of shaving. In the near-distance comes the rumble of a mortar blast—not close, but not that far. They land in groups of three or four. I know the way to run, and I head for the nearest barriers.

Specialist Daniel Bishop lies back on three long rolls of plastic tarps that serve as a makeshift couch, and doesn't move, hands behind his head. His eyes follow me as I run. I slow as I pass him.

"What are you doing?" I'm embarrassed. If he's not running, why am I? "You're not moving?"

"That's not a mortar," he says. "It's an IED."

Another explosion has not followed.

"How can you tell?"

He explains that I'll hear one small, distant blast when a mortar launches from its tube, and of course the much bigger explosion when it lands. A roadside bomb explodes just once. I'm not sure his analysis convinces me, but who am I to argue?

He shrugs. "I was mostly too lazy to move."

I talk to First Sergeant Green later, our first conversation in the few weeks I've been there, since the first day when his cold-fish handshake and complete lack of eye contact made his feelings about journalists perfectly clear. He's built like an Oakland Raiders linebacker, bald, stocky and muscular. At just thirty-two, he's very young for a first sergeant, the top enlisted position within an infantry company. It makes me think he's being groomed for bigger things.

His soldiers are not fans. One mutters to me that "he's the worst possible guy to have in charge of a bunch of twenty-year-olds." He yells at the soldiers to go to bed, to stop messing with the barely working refrigerator, to get off the Internet—often treating them like twelve-year-olds instead of combat infantrymen. But he seems immensely capable. He taught himself to drive a *crane* of all things, always pitches in with the physical work, is always moving, always doing and demanding action. Maybe their universal dislike of him keeps his men focused on one central thing, one emotion the young soldiers can agree on, keeping them from worrying about things they can't control. Tonight, he's sort of friendly.

"You're not like the other reporters we've had out here," he tells me.

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's good." He doesn't elaborate.

I ask him about the decision against launching an attack on the three men. The way I understand him telling it, a helicopter spotted the men first, with Wilson on the roof subsequently acting as a "better set of eyes," looking through the telescope to see if the men might chop at the pavement with a pickax, or lay a wire across the road.

"If we think we have a shot, we'll take it," Green says. But terrorist behavior couldn't be confirmed, and that was it: a no-go for attack, at least out here, under this command; at least that night. "Were the three of them doing anything they weren't supposed to be? Don't know. We pushed out the mounted element; didn't find anything," he says. "Once they knew they were compromised, they rolled out."

He shrugged.

"Then an IED goes off seventy-five meters north of there, so . . ."

The morning's blast that Wilson and I overheard had injured a few Iraqi policemen riding in their unarmored Ford pickup truck. One died.

"That IED went off near where those guys were last night?" I ask.

The midnight decision ripples outward. Karma chose from all the starlit wishes, and we aren't the only ones looking up into night skies, wishing the only wartime hope that really matters—*please, let this go my way*. Karma shifts among countless alliances, each phony and misperceived.

Green nods, smiles without humor. "So, who knows? You know?"

Nathan Webster, an Army veteran of Desert Storm, embedded several times with US soldiers in Iraq from 2007-09, and his reporting appeared in dozens of

newspapers nationwide. His current work has appeared in the New York Times *and* Daily Beast. *He is currently a Lecturer of English at the University of New Hampshire.*

Fiction.

A Hushed Cadence

By J.D. Hibbitts

The ceiling Harvey tried not to stare at was the underside of someone else's assigned bunk. A weeklong bout of insomnia replaced what had been a four-day struggle with constipation at Lackland Air Force Base. It was as if the gears that ran his mind and stomach had switched their functions on him whenever the time for sleep arrived. Despite this, his eyelids were thick and felt like someone clothespinned them shut. Then, in what felt like standard practice, several training instructors invaded the barracks for a 3:00 a.m. locker inspection. Technical Sergeant Russell, a man who made up for his squat height by having the widest shoulders Harvey had ever seen on a man, dragged the mattress Harvey was on to the middle aisle and flipped it. During the roll, Harvey banged his ankle on a bed frame and tried to bring himself to attention while the drill instructor checked a clipboard. Harvey heard TSgt Russell open his locker behind him and mutter. Harvey's unpaired boot socks flew high and around his side like spooked birds. Seeing his scattered belongings on the floor made Harvey feel like the worst was over; all that was left for him now would be the

shameful quiet of returning his regimentals to their allotted space. All of the tension around his eyes relaxed, and he sank deeper into the kind of intimate half-sleep that held him. So much so that he barely noticed the top of TSgt Russell's navy blue campaign hat suddenly a few inches from his chest. The chop from the stiff brim of it halved Harvey's Adam's apple perfectly. Then TSgt Russell ordered him to sound off about why there were several unsecured buttons on his uniforms.

"I don't know," Harvey managed to choke out. In a loss of bearing, Harvey reached up to rub away the rippled sting in his throat.

TSgt Russell threw his clipboarded sheet against the wall. He yelled for Harvey to kiss ground. Moving while at attention and forgetting to say his reporting statement demonstrated an inability to conform—the worst kind of offense. Since arriving, the phrase, "Sir, trainee Davis reports as ordered" was the first sentence expected from him whenever he addressed a training instructor. Harvey kept forgetting how quick they were to drop you should your memory falter.

Harvey fell into the up position and stiffened his body for the shock of exercise. Lowering himself into the down position, Harvey smelled fresh polish from new boots the shoe aligners flushed against a line in the tile. As he brought his nose closer to the floor, the cool sting of industrial cleaner leached the warmth from the room. After the first ten, Harvey smelled nothing. He didn't mind pushups. They were one of the few things he could perform on command. He would give himself over to his body, feel the pressured heat build into his biceps until they shook with exhaustion and he collapsed. Though he'd never been with a woman, Harvey imagined sex to be something as fulfilling as the burnt-out haze his entire body felt after he drove it into exhaustion. With TSgt Russell watch-

ing him still, Harvey executed another push up, wondered what the sound of a satisfied woman beneath must sound like. Far off to his right, through the waxy dark of B bay, rough squeaks from another trainee were the only noises that answered his curiosity.

He didn't have to guess who it was. A lanky Russian the instructors called Smirnoff—since none of them could pronounce his real name—would be wrestling his own body. His ass would be lifted in a sharp arch and the quivering hinges of his elbows wouldn't be able to keep his pale face from rupturing one of its many pimples in the inevitable ground smash. Harvey knew Smirnoff would be the first one recycled out of Flight 207. Earlier that week, when the training instructors were handing out extra duties, TSgt Russell took Harvey into his office and assigned him house mouse detail. In addition to helping with dorm guard assignments, he told Harvey that the military knew how to make use of a person's skills and that Harvey's insomnia was mission critical. Then TSgt Russell had brought out two Ziploc baggies from his desk. One was filled with several different brands of candy wrappers. The larger bag contained small inspection tags; each one represented an article of uniform clothing. Eight tags comprised the early weeks of a recruit's life. How many lives had been measured out in those tags only to be sealed inside a desk? It would be Harvey's weekly task to betray the trust of his fellow recruits by slipping these into lockers to maintain inspection standard. The wrappers, TSgt Russell told Harvey, would be reserved for those unfit to receive his instruction.

Though Harvey knew that he was probably not the lone cause of Smirnoff's suffering, he felt responsible for this incident. Earlier that evening, while on dorm guard duty, he tucked a Snickers wrapper in the left breast pocket of Smirnoff's BDU blouse. To make sure an instructor would find it, he'd draped a few threads of pink string over the shoulder.

With his face a few inches from the floor, Harvey caught a quick and distorted reflection of himself in the mirrored heels of TSgt Russell's boots. His eyes adjusted and took a snapshot of the hairless face looking back at him; the oblong curve of his bald head, soft as any baby. He was not a newly reborn thing though. Not yet, anyway. From what the old vets his uncle drank with at the VFW hall had told him, you shed your boyhood skin at boot camp for the shell you would wear the rest of your life as a man. Harvey thought of the first and only beer he'd tasted. The week before he left, his uncle bribed the VFW bartender with a twenty to serve it to him and he took slow pulls of foam between the backslaps and handshakes his uncle's friends offered. He didn't like the shape he was taking.

Further down the bay, Harvey saw that TSgt Russell's boots stopped at the collapsed body of the Russian.

"You better by God have one more in you, Russki," TSgt Russell yelled. "I'll even give you something to aim for." He let his foot hover eight inches above Smirnoff, right between the elevated blades of his shoulders. "Once I feel your back you can recover."

Two other instructors Harvey didn't recognize posted up at Smirnoff's head, leaned over and screamed for him to quit mopping the floor with his failure.

"You going to make me hold my leg up here all night?" TSgt Russell said.

Smirnoff stammered through a reporting statement, forgetting more words than he remembered. Some of the other recruits, who were still at attention in front of their lockers, forgot their training and snuck looks at the scene just out of sight. Harvey took advantage of the distraction and angled his knees low so he could rest in the up position.

Everyone was waiting to see if the Russian could do it.

Smirnoff huffed out a few sharp breaths, repositioned his el-

bows for one last explosion of energy. The movement came slow, jerky. But the Russian was picking himself up. A few of the recruits cheered, then, realizing that they were extending themselves too far beyond support for their brother-in-arms, stiffened themselves back to attention.

Only Harvey bore witness to Smirnoff's triumph. The other two instructors exchanged nods with TSgt Russell, and disappeared into the other bay.

"Well done, trainee," said TSgt Russell. Then he drew back with his boot and buried his toes along Smirnoff's exposed ribcage. "That was for striking a superior officer," he said. Within a minute, he and the other two instructors were gone from the dorm, leaving the soon-to-be-airmen to their homesick and brief dreams. Harvey and the dorm guard helped Smirnoff climb into bed. It was a top bunk, and Smirnoff did not make it easy for them. Both the candy wrapper and the strings were piled in the middle of Smirnoff's bunk like model houses in the gray wool desert of his blanket. It was a land of Harvey's own creation.

Midnight. Just over two weeks later, inside TSgt Russell's office again, Harvey stood six inches off center in front of the desk where the Ziploc baggies had gone untouched since the night of Smirnoff's punishment. TSgt Russell held both of them up as though they were a pair of scales. He had a face like chewed steak, and the way his pockmarked cheeks smoothed out when he was angry told Harvey that TSgt Russell was about to let something go.

"You want to tell me why Smirnoff is still stammering around my dorm like some kind of waterhead?"

"Not my doing, sir," Harvey said, remembering to give his reporting statement first. Instead of looking at TSgt Russell directly, he stiffened his neck, not letting his eyes roam, and imagined that the empty wall in front of him was a theater screen. The only girl

he'd been out with was his neighbor, Tessa Wilkins, and that had been to a daytime matinee where his uncle tagged along and waited in the car to give them space. They'd sat with an empty seat between them without talking until the film melted into an iridescent blob, right before glowing white. Tessa let him place his hand on top of hers while they waited for the projectionist to reload the screen, so long as he didn't try to open her fingers. After the movie started again, and she seemed sure no one would see, Tessa turned her hand so that the soft meat of her palm grazed his own for a few moments before she returned it to her lap. That brief disaster had filled Harvey with an unexpected sense of optimism in the wake of ruin. He kept looking at the office wall, half-expecting his movie to start again. Harvey was forced from this dream when he noticed the pine shadowbox that filled the space where a picture of TSgt Russell's wife had hung the last time Harvey visited. The two Bronze Star Medals he recognized from his study handbook. The Purple Heart he recalled from seeing a similar—though threadbare and soiled—one Harvey's uncle kept in a mason jar in a tool shed.

"Horseshit," TSgt Russell screamed. He leaned over his desk, being mindful of his voice. "Our red line inspection is in two days." He dropped the Ziplocked inspection tags on the floor in front of Harvey. "The next time I see that, it had better be empty," he said. "Or I'm going to make sure you get sent so far back into zero week that it takes you a year to graduate."

"Yes, sir," Harvey said.

Then TSgt Russell returned to his chair, swiveled around to his printer. He read out the charges on Harvey's letter of reprimand: insubordination, failure to go, and not maintaining the uniform standard. "Sign this," he said, pushing the form to the edge of the desk. "You obey this order, and the paper trail disappears."

Harvey couldn't swallow enough. It felt like his throat was

sweating and that his words would drown him if he tried to speak. He signed. Before he executed an about-face, Harvey made sure to stuff the inspection tags into his cargo pocket, taking extra care to fasten the two buttons along the thigh that kept it closed.

"And trainee," TSgt Russell said as Harvey pushed open the door. "Get some sleep."

B bay was a murky file of beds lined in two columns with lumps of sleeping trainees in every bunk save his. At his wall locker, Harvey stuffed his BDUs into the laundry bag and changed into his PT gear. He looked around the dorm. A muted glow from a flashlight shining through Smirnoff's blanket colored the ceiling yellow. It would be a lighthouse to anyone. Harvey untucked his mattress and eased down to Smirnoff's bunk.

"Been lights out for a while now," he whispered.

There was a crackle from several leaves of paper being shuffled before the light went out. Smirnoff's head squeezed out one end of the blanket like a bead of toothpaste as his body flattened into sleeping position.

"That you, Hick?"

Harvey paused. Sometimes his nickname did not resonate and he found his mind stuttering to catch up to what he heard.

"We're not safe here," Harvey said, lifting an index finger to his lips.

"Brother," the Russian answered, not lowering his voice, "It's not safe for us anywhere."

Harvey pointed in the direction of the latrine. "There okay?"

Smirnoff's feet slapped the tile in a spongy thud when he dropped from his bunk. Harvey led them through B bay, exaggerating his gestures with hopes Smirnoff would pick up the cue to tread gin-

gerly. Inside the latrine, Harvey opened a stall, let down the seat, and slid the door bolt behind them to muffle as much noise as possible. The Russian squatted and leaned against the stainless steel flusher with his shoulders drooped forward. His posture had an abrasive influence on everyone in the flight. His joints seemed like loose bricks that never settled into their mortar, and no matter how loudly he was told to square his shoulders or draw in his gut, Smirnoff never took command of his body. He seemed satisfied in his indifference to instruction.

"Sit up and listen close," Harvey said.

"Relax," Smirnoff answered, his deep accent seasoning his English in a throaty film. "I know why you don't sleep. Why you sneak around."

"You need to worry about you right now," Harvey said. "I'm not the one who'll be packing his shit if he's not careful."

"My family has a saying in Russian," Smirnoff said. "*Byla ne byla*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Smirnoff grinned. "Just that Hick should worry about Hick. I'll be fine."

Harvey stepped back, studied the Russian's unnatural indolence about their situation.

Like the fluorescent lights that brought out otherwise imperceptible flaws, Harvey scanned the stall for any evidence of smears or smudges. Oily waste from the back of the Russian's neck fogged the stainless steel. Harvey noticed the grain of his own fingerprints on the latch. And he noticed the dirt crumbs Smirnoff's shower shoes left as the Russian skimmed his feet under the stall door.

"Wait a sec," Harvey told Smirnoff, pretending to hear something stir to life in the bay area. "I think we need to leave."

The Russian drew his heels to the toilet and, for a moment,

Harvey felt confident his ruse worked. That there was still enough fear inside Smirnoff to gain an edge over him. That for all of his misgivings, Smirnoff was still capable and open enough to follow the tradition of military curriculum—to fill the established mold. But he soon realized the Russian was listening to something he hadn't noticed. Smirnoff pointed to a place on the wall, as though he were looking through it and directly at the disturbance. It was nose breathing, the sound of someone not wanting their presence known.

The voice of an element leader came sharp and low through the latrine: "You ladies best wrap up what you're doing before I write you up. Lights out means lights out."

"Shit," Harvey muttered.

"What did you say to me?" the element leader hollered.

"Wondering if you remembered to tuck in his sister after you fucked her?" Smirnoff said to Harvey. He chuckled to himself as he rose from the toilet seat.

Tucked into the element leader's front waistband, just beneath his skin-tight PT shirt, Harvey noticed the rectangular bulge from several Number 10 envelopes covering the place where the navel should have been. The element leader, yet another face whose name Harvey could not place, stayed in the latrine, and watched them leave.

In his bunk, Harvey rubbed his eyes, tried to sleep. His eyes dug through the other bunks, searching again for the gray glow of Smirnoff's blanket. Harvey fell asleep looking.

The next day, instead of marching drills, he had to chip old paint from monkey bars with a screwdriver. Smirnoff sat across from him on the ladder's top rung, whistling. Harvey's thoughts were on denunciation. Before writing his letters to girlfriend and home, the element leader had written a detailed report regarding the plans he thought Smirnoff and Harvey had for going AWOL.

Though TSgt Russell used it to justify the detail, Harvey first learned of denunciation on his second date with Tessa. At his uncle's insistence, Tessa visited and all three of them spent an entire Saturday watching WWII films, throwing popcorn at the TV whenever an image of the Germans appeared. And though he remembered very little else, one thing he learned about the Gestapo had proven to be true about his own military: it was not a system of officers delegating commands from their superiors, but a thriving order of manipulation influenced by those on the bottom. With each drive of the screwdriver, Harvey curled the latex away from him, revealing a new layer of paint that needed to be stripped. Gradually, he became aware of the Ziplocked trash still lining his cargo pockets. Their weight a sudden reminder of his orders and of the half-written notes that would never become letters.

Not breaking tune, Smirnoff swung out and started crossing, his long arms skipping three and four bars at a time. Halfway across, he looked down and let go. Because of his height, Smirnoff's boots barely scuffed the pavement when he landed. He bent over and feathered back a grass sod with the gentle way you sweep hair from someone else's face.

"Lose an earring?" Harvey said, switching hands with the screwdriver to work out a cramp. He squeezed a fist, released. Made another and held it.

Smirnoff held up a red Lifesaver, still wrapped in cellophane. The Russian lobbed it in his direction and Harvey nearly fell backwards catching it.

"Never say you never got anything from me," Smirnoff said.

"How long you figure it's been out here?" An edge of the plastic had been torn off and a few dead ants lined the bottom. He flipped it in the air like a toy coin. "You really want to eat this? Looks like someone already had their mouth on it."

"I've licked worse holes," The Russian said. A shit-eating grin spread across his face. "Go halfsies on it?"

Harvey pondered long enough for Smirnoff to take the silence to mean yes. "It's settled then. Straight down the middle."

"Better let me do the cutting," Harvey said. He didn't trust the Russian's work.

Multicolored streaks of old paint veined Smirnoff's side of the monkey bars and not one spot of metal gleaned through. "Look out for any TIs."

Harvey started to point out what direction he wanted Smirnoff to watch, but the Russian already started the visual sweep.

Harvey centered the Lifesaver on one of the support bars he'd just stripped, placed the screwdriver's head against the wrapper, and halved the candy evenly with two quick pops from his palm. Seeming satisfied that he'd ensured their safety, Smirnoff walked under where Harvey sat and tilted back his head. Harvey tore away the wrapper with his teeth, then dropped Smirnoff's share of the wealth into his mouth. He climbed his ladder seat on the other side. Both sucked at their candy in dry silence. Smirnoff tinged the metal with his screwdriver, and the sound vibrated little waves of excitement into Harvey's forearms. While Harvey dreaded talking for fear of spitting out what had been his only treat since arriving, the sticky tartness made the work a little less tedious.

"How long you think it's been since they used these?"

Harvey paused to tongue the candy to the back of his mouth. "Never."

"Why would they have them if not to use?"

Harvey freed several more layers from a bead of welding spatter. More than five colors flaked off in his hand and drifted like

confetti in the hot breeze. "The way I see it, they get a couple of people to paint them one week just to have some poor bastards strip them a week later."

"What color you think it will be next?," asked Smirnoff.

"Hot pink for all I care."

"I like that," Smirnoff said. "Maybe me and you can volunteer for that detail in a few weeks."

"And you can shit right where you are and fall back in it," Harvey said. Though he barely clenched his teeth, the Lifesaver exploded into tangy shards. He let his mouth hang open until it was as dry as the pockets of his BDUs because he didn't want to swallow what he'd done.

Long after Taps played that night, faint artificial cherry along the roof of his mouth, Harvey stood at his dorm guard post by the control center door and thumbed candy wrappers. He wondered which brand would be appropriate for treason. Unconsciously, he'd added the cellophane wrapper from the monkey bars to the Ziploc. And though it seemed logical, it felt too personal a tool for conviction. He couldn't look at Smirnoff without the influence of training anymore. Here was a weak and unmalleable thing treating him as though they were not only equals, but also friends.

Harvey buried his face into the corner and spread his feet to doze while standing up—NASA napping, he'd heard it called. The sleep of the weightless. Behind him, voices and bare feet scampered toward the latrine. More letter writers. From inside the latrine, Harvey made out the indistinguishable voices of the brash and close-quartered. After making a quick round, he realized that all the element leaders were missing from the bay area.

"Dammitall," Harvey said to himself. He knew protocol on this behavior would be to write TSgt Russell a detailed report, but there would be little chance he'd be believed—even with the red line in-

spection on them. Harvey leaned against the wall by the latrine, felt its coolness seep into his back as he kicked his feet out and slid down.

"Sergeant Russell told me who'll be packing their shit after the inspection tomorrow," one of the voices said. It was the same one Harvey and Smirnoff met in the latrine before.

Harvey tilted his head into the entryway.

"I've got five it's Smirnoff, at least," another voice said.

"That's a given," said another. "Tell me something worth throwing money on."

"Enough," came the familiar voice. "Sergeant Russell told me he wants reports from all of us on these names. Make up whatever suits you, but just make sure it's enough to glue some paperwork to them."

Among the names of trainees the element leader read out, Harvey heard his own.

"Why are we getting rid of Hick?" someone asked.

"Doesn't matter to you one way or another. Someone write the report."

With his body so low to the ground that he fell to his hands, Harvey crept away from the latrine. He didn't stop until he was at Smirnoff's bunk. He felt the Russian's breath across his face, rancid, sifting cool through the sheet. Harvey cupped Smirnoff's mouth, shook him awake. He felt the coarse hairs on the side of their heads bristle like Velcro when he leaned by Smirnoff's ear. "Bring money and a jacket," Harvey whispered. "We're leaving."

In the young recruit's eyes, Harvey read the questions he expected anyone might ask him. Questions he wouldn't answer until the two of them were safely away.

He briefly considered picking the closet locker for his personal belongings—a small suitcase that contained his civilian clothes and a book whose title he couldn't remember, but the risk didn't seem worth the payoff. Instead, he pulled on a beige uniform t-shirt and

flipped his field jacket inside out to turn attention away from camouflage. With just under $300 in his account, Harvey estimated there would be enough for a cab and one-way bus fare. Not forgetting the candy wrappers on his way out of the bay, Harvey opened the drawstrings on each element leader's laundry bag and divvied wrappers accordingly. It was the best adequation he could offer the rest of the flight.

Minutes later, Smirnoff met him by the steel door, holding a ball of loose clothes. Harvey was quiet with the opening, leaving just enough space for a body to whiz through. The two of them descended the stairs in silence and double-timed across the drill pad of the 331st Training Squadron. When they were within eyeshot of the parade grounds, Smirnoff squatted to tie his laces and bundle his clothes proper. Surrounding the perimeter of the grounds were numbers of planes Harvey recognized. Aircraft Harvey knew he wouldn't see in the graduation march weeks away. To his left, Highway 90, with its buzzsaw of cars halving the road. The only obstacle left for them to negotiate was the security forces gate. He would have the Russian safe soon.

"Wear what you don't want to leave," Harvey said. "They can't think we're going AWOL."

"But Hick, we are going AWOL."

"Only if they catch up." Harvey drew his jacket as close to his throat as the turned zipper would allow. The empty weight along his thighs made his legs feel like clouds that threw heat lightning. They could and would shatter anything beneath them.

"We can turn back now," Harvey said. He stretched his calves by standing on the tips of his toes. "You should know they're going to use your ass for a grindstone."

Smirnoff stuffed an extra shirt into his PT shorts and left the rest of his clothes in a scattered web on the ground. "We go as a team, buddy."

A sidewalk led off base into the cracked earth of a bus stop. Beyond that, nothing but dull grass and pavement. Harvey had to work hard not to fall into cadence with Smirnoff. He'd forgotten the rhythm of his own stride. Passing through the gate, Harvey noticed only two security forces airmen. Both reading over paperwork. Smirnoff waved. Harvey spiked a quick jab into Smirnoff's hip. As they turned the corner of the bus stop, Harvey looked back and saw one SP standing outside the gate office, radio covering his mouth.

Smirnoff had fallen behind him. "Keep moving," Harvey said. "Wait until we are out of sight and then run like hell."

"You, my friend, worry too much."

"Tell me that after we're sitting in a booth at IHOP."

In the shared laugh between them, Harvey craned his neck enough to see the security forces car shooting from of the gate behind them like a racehorse. The tension in his legs popped with adrenaline. Though he ran as fast as he could, the landscape around him seemed inanimate, rigid. It was not until the car veered onto the grass in front of him, lights and siren in a raw howl, that Harvey felt the earth catch up with him. The second thing he felt was the weight of the Russian charge the middle of his kidneys, hammering him into clumped sod. Harvey felt all the air go out of him. He placed his hands behind his head, waited.

In the edge of his sight, straddling the left lane of the interstate, Harvey could see Smirnoff standing sloppily at attention. A car swerved into the right lane and the driver grinded down on the horn in passing. The Russian held strong. Something, finally, had rooted itself.

As the handcuffs ticked on his wrists, Harvey closed his eyes. By now, someone's accountability numbers would be in question. By now, Harvey thought, his ears weeding through the siren and slowing traffic to pick up the reveille buglers, by now the CQ box will

be thrumming with the voice of TSgt Russell. Though above all other static, Harvey could hear the empty thuds of his lone march ahead. It came in hollow echoes he could measure with all of the wrong steps his life would take before he was free of this.

J.D. Hibbitts received an MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. His work can be found in Thuglit, Forge, The Kenyon Review, *and* Pacific Review. *An Air Force veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom, he is currently working on a collection of short stories.*

Flop Sweat

By Jeffrey Paolano

At the rattle of arms he flops.

His shirt blouse sponges fetid muck as he clenches to hold his piss, *Jesus how they'd hassle him if he wet his pants.*

To his mind the most horrific of events.

Prone, trembling, he sweats in his ineptness awaiting events.

The discovery of the obliteration of his unit is before him as well as the realization of the lessened possibility of his reuniting with his Little One.

As he lies in the filth, he reflects on seven days prior when he was still in the world.

Amidst the carnival of troops massing, plump Juanita of liquid eye bids him farewell.

"Honey," she whimpers, cleaving to his chest with her right hand on his cheek and her left at the nape of his neck. "Promise me you'll come back to me."

He senses rather than feels her nails.

"All I want is for you to come back to me, please?"

Twice her eyelids shutter. A tear tumbles down her cheek. His hands rest upon her shoulders. The muscle judders beneath.

With a deft weightlessness, he moves his palm over her raven hair, akin to silk.

Her eyes beam from her uplifted face. His hand slips down her back. The air perfumed with a vanilla whiff.

She is crowned with swollen dark lips, and in her graceful nose and elongated chin, he perceives an inheritance.

He conjures a vignette populated by a Castilian conquistador and a Mayan maiden, a mingling that creates the exquisiteness of her line.

Her tears evoke her fair nature initiating his reciprocal welling up. This he fights off by tensing his fists. "Inamorata, I will come back, we will have our life, I promise."

Machismo on display for his fellow Marines compels him to pull away from her and lift his duffle bag. He hefts it to his shoulder and backs away.

She runs towards him, throws her arms about his neck and kisses him full on the lips with intensity. This desperate act expresses her futile attempt to force his acknowledgement of her unquenchable thirst and want of him.

Juanita withdraws enabling her to see his face in full, "I love you, you are my life, please come home, fill my belly with babies."

"I will Juanita, I will," he says. The cause of her desire is a mystery to him, but he loves her all the more for it.

He harbors a deep appreciation of her expressions although exposed as he is to the probability of mortification should his fellow Marines become aware of the sweet nothings murmured one to the other. He's cautious.

So whispering, childlike, absorbed in his timidity, avoiding embarrassment as his comrades are within earshot.

Still reversing, he conveys to her she has not touched him and surrendering, she allows her arms to release him and fall while his anemic assertion is as a balm to her ears. "I love you too, Little One."

With that the formation absorbs him.

Two days later he is standing at attention honoring the patriotic dead, his predecessors in country.

He watched as they were loaded into the plane he and his compatriots so recently vacated for their flight back to the world.

There, to be bathed in their loved ones' blubbering.

The next day he reports to the gunny sergeant.

He stands at rigid attention while the gunny's nose is positioned six inches from his own.

The gunny points at Diluva, who has been ordered to stand with his back to the pair with his upper torso bent forward and away.

This position provides him with an unobstructed view of Diluva's ass, and he knows full well that if he looks any way other than eyes front while at attention he will invoke the ire of the gunny.

So situated, the gunny snarls, "Look at Diluva's ass. Keep your eye on it. When Diluva pisses, you piss. When Diluva shits, you shit. When Diluva eats, you eat!"

The sergeant's head turns towards Diluva but with eyes still fixed upon him. "Diluva, don't do anything stupid and get killed. I don't want this candy ass to get hurt. Get with it."

A patrol of nine went out the next day. He kept his eyes glued to Diluva's ass. They carried M-16s, a grenade launcher and

an M-60 machine gun. One fella had a .45 pistol. A truck conveyed them out of Chu Lai to the jump off.

What scuttlebutt did he hear? They are to be in the grass for several days.

They amble along, seemingly disorganized. However, he notices they preserve an interval, maintaining exactly the same order, with scouts out to the front, sides and rear.

There is a strict discipline to their shambling.

Deep in the shit on the third day, they get hit.

Foul sludge cakes his face. Grenade bursts ring in his ears. In his nose, the jungle's musty earthiness is overpowered by the reek of blood, ripped muscle, broken bone, tattered sinew, exposed intestine, the strident tinge of burnt nitro, and the stench of piss and excrement.

Sweat courses from his temples and soaks his blouse. Flies similar to the bluebottles back home invade his nose and eyes. He snorts to expel them.

A throttlehold on his sixteen squeezes the blood from his hands, paling them. With knees pulled up to his chest, his breath will not catch. He gasps automatically. A dry tongue licks at his mouth cotton. Fear forestalls an unclenching, preventing him from grabbing a canteen to relieve his dry mouth.

The sergeant's admonition to maintain sight of Diluva's ass prompts a thought: *I should get a line o' sight on Diluva.*

Minutes pass and fear petrifies him, erasing from his mind what he has been taught.

Fists lay to his head. He pounds his forehead in a vain attempt to make his mind recall the teachings.

What he fails to remember is that the V.C., having learned that after an ambush the Americans will rain napalm down on the offending troops, quickly melt away. Later, snipers will clean as necessary. He might remember if the napalm came but it did not.

The terror of his situation paralyzes him. In desperation, he wills enough courage to raise his head to locate Diluva.

His field of vision is obscured by a corpse lying just in front of him.

Reluctant to reposition, so as to be able to observe further afield, he compensates by listening intently.

The bugs buzz, the birds sing, and the monkeys howl but there is no sweet sound of English. He can hear the breeze through the trees. Frantically he bears down to listen for his companions' voices.

Fear constricts his abdomen and thrusts him back into his refuge. The cramps force him into a ball, compelling him to release his weapon.

All the while the refrain *This is my rifle, there are many like it, but this one is mine. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life* runs through his memory.

The spasms in his midriff induce an ache. He lies back in the hopes of its easing. His contracting stomach radiates an excruciating pain, primal in its potency.

Closing his eyes, he is transported to an illusionary world. He frets over the kind of house he will be able to buy for Juanita. The basics include a Cape Cod with louvered shutters, a fireplace and a real dining room. The front door is painted Gettysburg barn red.

Slumping back against the edge of his hollow, he thinks of the myriad of grisly sights to which he will bear witness.

Will he keep these experiences from Juanita? Will he fold them into the plethora of secrets withheld for the protection of their relationship, for the protection of their sensibilities, for the protection of their love? Will she not do the same? Will these hidden enigmas protect them or will they putrefy, corrupting their love?

His hand goes up to assure himself his helmet is in place. He thinks to wring out his bandanna even as he realizes the futility of the act.

Twisting around, he reaches for his canteen. He takes a swig, then spits out the water along with the accumulation of dried saliva caking his tongue and the insides of his cheeks.

Swallowing a draught, he places the canteen where it will be handier. With simple delight, he runs his moist tongue around the inside of his mouth, smiling at the pleasure.

The humidity of the forest floor steeps all, exciting in him a perception that the air is water, fine mist. But it's a vapor that prevents him from cooling. Grogginess grips him.

He wonders that people choose to inhabit such a hellish land. Compared to his world, this bug infested, sweltering stink hole is like something Hollywood types would dream up for a horror movie.

Occasionally, his fear boils up. When it overwhelms him he fades, loses control of his faculties. Sweat soaks his utilities under his body armor and his lungs fail to process his breath. He sits with his back towards the eviscerated man.

At this remove he is able to calm himself with the soothing view of the green, brown, and yellow foliage backlit by shafts of sunlight.

Myriad animal sounds form a backdrop symphony.

He imagines sitting on a garden bench awaiting Juanita.

He waves the flies and no-see-ums from his face. With revulsion he begins to ponder leeches.

He thinks there should be a sufficient backyard so the children would have a place to play. He wants a workshop in the garage. He does not find it pleasant to work in a basement. There better be a room for Juanita to do her hobbies and crafts.

In short order the multitude of agonies begin to tear at his already-stressed nerves, fraying them further. He wonders how much of this he will be able to endure before he gives over to lunacy.

Leaning back on the edge of his pit, blowing, with thoughts of how he should build a play set for the kids, he contemplates metal, and then thinks that wood will be best.

He considers how to design the platform. The slide will have to be metal. A rope to climb is required, as well as a ladder. He must keep a pirate's ship rigging in mind.

Subconsciously, he hazards the remainder of the patrol is dead but as yet he cannot or will not admit it. He continues to focus on finding Diluva so that he can keep an eye on him and be safe.

He will probably have to rebuild the garage. Garages of those older homes are too small for the kind of workshop he has in mind.

Lying back, looking up at the millions of stars in the blackening sky, he is unable to recall the heavens thus arrayed in the world.

He reminisces of evenings when he and Juanita, having finished dinner, would lie on a lawn by a church or in a park. They would lie on their backs on a blanket, looking up at the stars and holding hands, her leg across his.

She would say something like, "Aren't the stars beautiful, honey? Aren't those astronauts lucky to be able to go up into space? Wouldn't it be great if before we die we might be able to take a ride in space?"

"Yes, Little One, it would," he'd mutter, conscious of the danger involved in such an activity and not quite sure he would care to risk his life for the sake of a skylark. His style is more a drive in the country on a Sunday afternoon, maybe a stop at a farmer's market or an ice cream stand.

He fantasizes about how Juanita will give him instructions. "You have to paint the basement with water sealant paint so it will not be damp down there," Juanita says as she explores the house discovering all that needs doing, "and the floor too, you have to paint the floor with epoxy paint to give it a nice finish."

"Yes, sweetie, that is on my to-do list."

"Well, honey, I want it done before they bring the washer and dryer. Once they're installed I don't want to have to uninstall them and then reinstall them again."

"Yes, I understand," he'd tell her. She really doesn't know what is involved in installing and uninstalling but from somewhere she has gotten the idea that it is not the thing to do.

A surge of dread immobilizes him. Previously his fright focused on his not knowing what the enemy might do to him. Now he fears that he will have to rely on himself alone.

Sweat bursts from his pores. In short order, his face and greens are soaked afresh.

Laying his head on the fetid earth, he breathes the odor without recognition, his mind not functioning.

The craving to slide away into oblivious sleep blankets him.

Panic induces panting. Fright amplifies his thinking that Charlie can hear him. He forces himself to belay his gasping. The use of seasoned Marine terminology emboldens him and he lies quietly.

Then realizes if they can hear him, he can hear them. Listening, with extreme focus to the slightest sound, he searches for their presence.

The thought occurs to him that there must be a talker on the other end of the radio waiting for his patrol to check in. When they don't, someone will be sent to find out what happened. If he waits, they will show up and find him.

Of course they will have to wait until it is light to make such a foray but surely they will do it in the morning.

It'll be best if he just stays right here and waits for them to come.

The idea a superior power exists and could rescue him morphs into the idea that God will attain his relief. Given his lifelong aversion to religious beliefs, he smirks at the thought.

It seems nonsensical to trust in some magical sky being who possesses the power to alleviate all suffering but withholds His hand because He wants man to exercise free will when in fact many of the calamities that accost the human race are well beyond any remedy to be obtained by the exercise of adherence to His word.

He thinks about what a laugh the mythical God will have, observing him repudiating his belief system because he finds himself in a circumstance from which deliverance does not appear imminent.

No, he will not spit on his life to assuage his fear.

Nervous exhaustion has got the better of him. Falling into reverie he hears Juanita saying, "We need a house with a bedroom for us, a nursery and a guest bedroom. Anything smaller just won't do."

"Yes dear, I believe that is doable," he answers, thinking of the money he can save from the extra combat pay.

"I like your idea of a dedicated dining room. It will give the place a sense of elegance," she says as she smiles and runs her hand over his hair.

Released from his reverie he returns to reality and surprisingly, he senses he can feel the weight of her ample breasts. The authenticity of the simulated realism startles him.

Juanita complains about her weight occasionally but she knows he likes an extra bit of meat just fine. She feels really good to him—her full ass, the soft feel of her all over. He appreciates the heft of her.

"We are going to need a patio out back."

"Yes, Little One." Here is something he has no idea how to do. The patio will require a self-help book from the library or maybe the hardware storev.

Juanita's interest in the house and conformity of their thinking pleases him. It is in this mode that he sees Juanita in the most favorable light, her naked intelligence shining.

There is about her none of the cuteness of women who propagate coquettishness. As those who don with dark intent a cloak of false skittishness and precious manner.

Juanita walks boldly in her aptitude and pluck. She is a woman of substantial value who will brook no depreciation. He is wonderfully proud of her.

Roused by what he does not know, he looks out from his lair, peering into the black ink without effect.

He listens, straining to separate the sounds and identify one that will indicate men as opposed to the chorus that indicates animals.

His nostrils register the decomposing compost.

The ether carrying its load of humidity adds weight to the atmosphere and suffocates him. It makes him gather his breath as though the air lacks sufficient oxygen to satisfy his lungs.

Juanita shares his comprehension that they will have to start small and work their way up. The days of privation will prove to be the incubator of their life stories, anecdotes for future lunches, dinners, parties: a treasure-trove of memories.

He envisions time to enjoy the ecstasy of the shared piece of sweet, succulent cake or chocolate breakfast donuts, or the once-a-month steak dinner with cocktails followed by the slow walk home from the bakery or the steakhouse, hand in hand, her head on his shoulder.

Sometimes his arm is around her neck as she giggles about piddling matters, filler for the fundamental joy of one another's company. They bathe in the warmth of their ever-evolving love.

Her practicality lends itself to purchasing the first round of furnishings for the house at flea markets, tag sales and auctions. They go together. "Look, honey," she says, pointing to a three cornered stand with carved legs, suitable for a spot at the end of the couch towards the big window. "Wouldn't that be perfect?"

"Yes, sweetie, that would be great at the end of the couch. Let's see how much the man wants."

"How much do you want for the triangular stand?"

"You have a good eye. That is a fine piece. It works in a number of places. I don't know. I have twenty-five in it, so I would have to have fifty."

They shoot a shocked look to one another. "Well, Juanita, let's keep shopping."

He touches the top of the stand with his fingertips, gazing wistfully at it, and then looks back to Juanita.

Juanita, hesitant to go, lingers by the stand. "Okay, honey," she concedes.

The gentleman steeped in the art of negotiations is impressed by this display. He wonders whether they rehearsed this drama or if they have been antiquing so long that this salacious routine evolved organically. The possibility it is sincere does not enter his mind. In deference to their skills he says, "Make me an offer."

Juanita, with bloodhound face, looks at the man, "Oh dear, we couldn't do more than twenty-five."

Now the man is truly intrigued. These two seemingly have no scruples. Making a bid for what he told them he had in it. As much as calling him a liar. "You seem like a nice couple, just starting out, so I guess I can do thirty."

Juanita jumps forward extending her hand and yelps, "Deal!" She grasps the man's hand before he can rescind the offer.

The man is paid and they dance away with the piece, hearts brimming with joyous avarice.

They place the piece at the end of the couch. "Isn't it grand, honey? I polished it up and it looks even better than before," Juanita says as they pause. His arm is about her waist. They admire the piece and indeed the whole room.

Their world is being slowly assembled from the castoffs of their community blended by their imagination. They are appropriately proud of what they are accomplishing.

He can now feel the thumping of his heart, thinking at times he can actually hear it. Believing the tension of the night is beginning to unravel his psyche, he considers what he might do to calm himself.

He doesn't even know which way is out. Instinct suggests south, but which way is south?

He must haul himself out amongst the dead and search about in their blood-sodden clothing for a compass. The thought disgusts him.

Picturing the congealed blood resembling the lubricant pools on the floor under the machine tools at work, he can hardly imagine how it will be now after the passage of several hours.

Casting about in his mind, he tries to develop another method —he can guide himself by the sun, he can follow a stream—but in the end he knows the compass is best. He must find one.

Pulling himself forward on his belly, he inches along crab-like. He searches the nearest body as carefully as he can. He keeps exposure to the thickening blood to a minimum, and then wipes the gore on the corpse's clothing.

On the third man he finds a compass. Scurrying back to his crater, he gathers up the M-60, ammo, a sixteen, the grenade launcher and rounds.

In the compass face glow he is able to detect the needle against the rose and determine south.

He considers what he should take with him. Water is a no-brainer. Although the canteens are heavy and will weigh him down, tiring him, they must be borne.

After considerable thought, he decides three canteens will be sufficient. If he runs out, he can risk collecting water from a stream. Any bugs he contracts can be killed by drugs when he reaches the base.

His previous thought to stay put and wait for a rescue no longer carries any appeal. The Viet Cong could attack and waste him long before any rescue force arrives.

Now it is clear to him that he must move, even with the chance that he will move right into them. Better than sitting here where they know his exact location and he risks being overrun. If he moves into them he has a chance to fight his way through and evade them.

Juanita would want him to move. Not one to wait for something to happen, she makes things happen. That is her way.

When they first met, she said, "Hi, my name is Juanita," as she stood up from her desk chair and offered her hand.

He was so taken. He was a little stunned. Her hair was pulled tightly back into a bun so that the hair on the sides of her head shone. Her makeup brightened her whole face without being overdone. Her dress looked expensive to his untrained eye, with large pleats in the skirt and a fitted bodice. He could not see her shoes. She looked like a model in a magazine. "Hi," he answered, extending his hand to grasp hers, a little too tightly.

"You have quite a grip," she smiled. Her teeth were white and even, her lips dark and smooth, her hair shiny black. Her dress was so crisp and clean he thought he could smell flowers. He had to shake himself from his musing.

"Please take a seat and tell me how may I help you?" She sat and continued to conduct herself in a completely professional fashion, surprising for such a young lady.

His inclination to jest was obliterated by her style and bearing. Thus he was disarmed and off balance.

"I would like to open a checking and savings account."

"Have you ever had either before?"

"No, this is my first."

"Do you know what kind of accounts you want?"

"I want a checking and savings account."

"I understand that," she smiled again, taking the sting out of her remark. "However, we have several types of each. Have you done any research to understand the benefits of the various types?"

"No, I haven't done any research. I want just the regular kind of checking and savings accounts."

"Here. Let me explain to you the various plans."

"No, I don't want an explanation, just the basic, regular checking and savings account," he said with the slightest show of touchiness.

Maintaining her grace, she responded, "Okay, there is the non-interest bearing checking account, where you just keep a minimum of five hundred dollars and there are no fees. If the balance falls below five hundred dollars then there are fees, understand?"

"Yes, I understand," he said, chastened.

"With the savings account, you keep a minimum balance of two hundred dollars and receive an interest rate of prime minus one, understand?" She tweaks him along with her pleasantness.

"Yes, I understand," he said, now charmed.

After several minutes of filling out various forms and the issuance of checks and a check holder, the deposit of funds into the two accounts, they rose to say goodbye. “Should you have any questions, here is my business card,” she says.

He couldn’t help noticing her height. Her eyebrows were at his nose level. “I have written my home number on the back of the card in case you want to call,” she said demurely.

He looked down at the card, turned it over, and looked back at Juanita saying, “I am certain I will want to call. Goodbye.”

“I look forward to it. Goodbye.”

He held the card in his fingers inside his pants pocket as he left the bank, confident that his feet never touched the ground.

He has but to wait until dawn to execute his plan. Settling in, his mind flows to the times they were abed, his arm over her side, his hand nestling her soft, hefty breast.

Lying in the morning fog, he’s convulsed by a chill, soaked as he is from the sweat and humidity. He wonders that in all this time he has not had to take a shit. Now thinking about it might compel him. He hopes that he will not have to struggle through that mess.

Waking from a doze, he blinks to clear his eyes, imagining an eerie light suffusing the jungle. Quickly, he realizes that it is not his imagination but the false dawn. The sun is not far off.

Rising up on an elbow and inventorying his supplies, he racks his brain for any error he will regret once he is in the jungle and beyond redemption.

A ubiquitous increase in light without any source helps him settle in again. He will wait for the source to arise, and then begin.

He thinks of the jungle, unable to differentiate between this tragedy and the thousands of others that have taken place throughout the night within her bosom.

Thousands of predators have successfully stalked their prey. The quarry keeps a constant vigilance, always at a heightened state of anxiety, ready to bolt at the slightest suggestion of danger. Once aware of the hunter, the hunted's fear is ineffable. The chase, with its almost inevitable outcome, links the prey transmuted to victim in death throes.

How is his case different? How is the jungle to know?

He stabs the ground with his knife, shouting inside his head, *I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die.*

He grips the wrist of his left hand, which holds the knife, with his right hand as tightly as he can. The pressure focuses his emotion, brings his ranting to a close. Now the tears come in full flood. His only want is not to piss his pants.

The creep of time maddens him. An eternity passes until the sliver of sun shines above the trees. Then it broadens, freeing him to go.

But he hesitates, contemplating again the rescue mission that is sure to be sent. He mulls the foolishness of venturing out when he need only stay put to be found.

Once in the jungle there will be no way for him to be located. If an accident should befall him, should he break a limb, should he be unable to move, he would lie there while his rescuers might miss him by yards. No, he should stay.

Then Juanita speaks in his mind. *Get going, make it happen, you can't rely on others. Make your own destiny. I want you back in my arms. I want to have your children. Get up, and get going.*

Her voice in his head is so real he almost says, "Yes, Little One."

With that he drops to his knees and begins to crawl up and over the edge of his refuge. As attuned to his surroundings as any of the other victims who have fallen throughout the forest that night, he hopes Juanita . . .

Du'o'ng lies frozen after the shot. Fifteen minutes pass. His target does not move, nor do any of the other Americans. The site is clean.

Arranging his sniper rifle across his arms, he slithers backwards through the underbrush towards his troop.

He is hopeful of a breakfast of croissants baked by the old lady whose mother had been a pastry chef for the French.

Wondering fleetingly what the remnant of the Americans will be. That is the old.

Du'o'ng crawls along. The sweet bouquet of his homeland's rich earth fills his nostrils.

His thoughts are of his mother sweeping the ground in front of their home with Lanh, his beautiful wife, sitting at the entryway, her belly round with the baby they eagerly await. This is the new.

Jeffrey Paolano served in the U.S. Navy from 1964 to 1968. Thereafter he was a labor economist for thirty years. Upon retirement, he took up writing. His work has been accepted by a variety of publications.

Leave No Man Behind

By Joseph Pete

The convention hall could have swallowed a jumbo jet and burped out a single engine prop plane, but the rows and rows of banquet chairs in the hangar-like space were sparsely peopled. The few that showed up to the 8:00 a.m. panel discussion on the state of the industry glommed outside the hall around the silver-plated coffee urns, the way Hoyt's battle buddies used to when they were about to rat-fuck a fresh haul of MREs, or even those halal MREs for the detainees, the ones with chickpeas in everything. The emcee gave the two-minute warning, and the stragglers all adjusted their ties, felt the back of their collars to make sure nothing was poking out and dutifully filed in.

Bleary-eyed and a beat slow from last night's libations, Hoyt nodded and clapped throughout the symposium, as did all the other go-getters who also had bosses sitting on the panel. The loud graphics behind the sport-coated but tieless speakers who dynamically roamed around the stage looked like billboards.

During the question-and-answer session, the Jumbotron screens piped in pre-recorded questions from industry luminaries who all, of

course, regretted they couldn't be there in person. One chairman emeritus—who was quick to plug how he now blogged his insights about the sector—prattled on about the red polo shirt he was wearing in his C-suite office, saying it honored veterans, and that his whole company wore red shirts on Fridays to recognize the brave men and women in the Armed Forces, those who sacrificed so much and asked so little in return. He encouraged everyone in the industry to follow his lead.

Hoyt supposed he should be flattered or grateful for such a gesture of support, but it just seemed to him like the company was trying to elevate a Casual Friday into something loftier. He didn't get the red shirt. Shouldn't there also be blue and white to complete the flag color scheme? Did it have something to do with blood, a reference to *The Red Badge of Courage* maybe? Weren't red shirts worn by Star Trek ensigns who always got killed? Wasn't it what you called college athletes who would otherwise just squander freshman year riding the bench? When did soldiers ever wear red shirts? Not since Redcoats stood steadfastly as volley after volley of musket fire cut them down, probably. Why not a camo shirt or a desert camo shirt or something with a more instantly recognizable military denotation, something the average man on the street would associate with a soldier? Also, what happened to the yellow ribbons—wasn't that the way to show support for soldiers a few years ago? What was wrong with yellow? When did yellow stop being a thing?

He tried to knit together some meaning for the red shirt, but that skein of thought unraveled when the panel discussion ended, the hall emptied out, and he faced the choice of a complimentary lunch of roast turkey breast sandwich or a Philly cheesesteak. The convention center signage identified the space where he lunched as a bistro, but it was more of a vast agglomeration of paper tablecloth-draped cafeteria tables where harried and hair-netted food service

workers handed out heat lamp-warmed food. He ate alone at a table, surrounded by seventeen empty plastic chairs.

Later that night, in the hotel, on his fourth or fifth tallboy, with damp malty breath and the same angry song thumping on repeat on iTunes over his notebook computer's tinny speakers, Hoyt scrolled through the contacts on his phone and debated whether to delete O'Bannon. That short Irish bastard was never coming back, and his old number would be reassigned to someone else eventually. Hoyt might pocket-dial some stranger, and have no explanation for why he called. He foresaw dead air, awkwardness and supposition of some sort of untoward creepiness. He cringed a little. No matter. It was a dead number with nothing at the other end, but he couldn't consign O'Bannon to oblivion again. So few mementos were left. It was a relic of a sort, if an impermanent one that could be inadvertently dialed or deleted or lost forever if he dropped the phone in a toilet or off a balcony. But it was what he had. It occurred to him that he could copy down the number, the way he would if he were changing phones. But the sequence of digits did not itself matter—it was the memory preserved in context, in its proper place, in glimmering amber. How much longer could he keep the phone? Years surely, long enough.

The number on his faintly glowing phone face brought him back to that afternoon when they last spoke. Hoyt was bronzed and beaming in the army PT shorts he had repurposed as swim trunks, surveying the sun-glinted pool behind the front office of his apartment complex, a series of low-slung, generic-looking buildings that had been slapped up on the ragged edge of the metro sometime in the last decade or two. He came to swim laps for exercise, but spent the past twenty minutes mainly focused on furtively eyeing the single mom splayed out across a deck chair in a black bikini. She radiated like a rotisserie chicken.

That was the inopportune moment when O'Bannon last rang him up, when his attention was fully and firmly elsewhere. In Hoyt's recollection, he pictured himself as arch and blasé, comically so. In his mind's eye, he was so tan and bare-chested he could have been a comeuppance-deserving movie villain on a yacht somewhere off the coast of Douche Bay.

With no hello, O'Bannon started right in, telling Hoyt he would not believe what happened at this boxing match he just went to. The fights were okay, he guessed, and there was a wicked sick, split-second knockout on the undercard, but that was not the important thing. That was not what he was talking about. Hoyt had to hear it, that the coliseum where the boxing had been was in a bad neighborhood, right, a real shady neighborhood, the kind of inner city graffiti-covered nightmare ghetto they had out east, not like anything Hoyt would ever have seen in the Midwest because the Midwest was just not as hardcore as the East Coast—well, maybe Detroit from what he heard, but that was it really. Anyway, pushers were standing sentinel on every corner, literally every corner, no kidding. They were just standing hard-eyed and stone-faced out on the sidewalk, not even trying to hide it, cops be damned, and he was so, so tempted to score, but didn't. He didn't. He held out. There was hope yet, and he was going to turn it around. He had willpower. He had resolve. Hoyt had to hear this, he had resolve now. It was all different now.

O'Bannon never shot up heroin in the rmy as far as Hoyt knew. He drank a lot but so did everyone. Soldiers in their platoon holed themselves up in their barracks rooms on weekends and played *Grand Theft Auto* until the supersized thirty-can cases of cheap 7.5 ABV Canadian beer were empty. They polished off fifths of whiskey in a single night. They drank until they wet themselves and couldn't stand at attention during morning formation.

Even during the week, they emerged blearily from the barracks before formation with misshapen trash bags swollen with beer cans that lightly clinked as they shifted tectonically. They sweated pure bourbon and gave off dank starchy liquor breath as they ran around the airfield, or hoisted heavy logs while doing group sit-ups. Dark bags gathered under their eyes as they sat slumping at the chow hall after PT, pushing around slimy instant eggs with their forks while they waited for the watery coffee to take hold.

Still, it was a bit of a shock when O'Bannon confessed to him during a random phone call about a year and a half earlier that he was hooked on junk.

"That's right, Hoyt," he said. "I was a shitbag in the army, but now I'm nothing but a shitbag, piece-of-shit junkie."

They had been talking almost every night on the phone before that last call. It had been a while since they previously spoke, but O'Bannon had gotten out of prison a few weeks earlier and made a daily habit of calling him. Hoyt figured he needed a cheerleader to support his efforts to stay straight. O'Bannon was also, clearly, prone to habit. State prison had been a wake-up call, he insisted. According to his account, the clink had been the end destination of a convoluted chain of events that involved him—while working for his dad's plowing company—inadvertently defying police orders and dumping polluted snow on a beach where that was verboten, and then getting pinched on an outstanding warrant for his arrest that he hadn't even known about, or he would have done something about it earlier.

Who would have thought, O'Bannon asked, that a decorated soldier with a combat infantryman's badge and a Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and a National Defense Service Medal and, um, other awards—many, many other awards and ribbons—would end up in prison like some shitbag off the street? He enlisted

after 9/11, served his country during wartime, and in fact fought a war for all these weak, cowardly, ungrateful civilians who were sitting at home eating ice cream bars with their thumbs up their asses, and yet he had to go to prison like some street thug! Did Hoyt realize what an outrage it was? Did he? But prison saved him, it really did, he said. The experience probably saved his life, because it forced him to stay clean. Of course, he probably could have scored in there, since he knew a guy and saw other guys were doing it, but it was an opportunity to get off the stuff. It was an opportunity he had to take because his world was small and he had a rare chance to step outside it. Prison stripped some guys of everything, did Hoyt know that? Did he realize that? It deprived some guys of any hope for the future, of any chance to see their kid or kids grow up, of everything they ever loved in the world; but for him, it was an escape. It was a way out.

Now O'Bannon was going on about how much he missed heroin, but how he had so much more to live for, though it was hard, no one could really appreciate how hard it was. Hoyt could not really ever understand how hard it was; he had never shot up, after all. He didn't know, and could never know how deep it wormed in there, how bad and febrile and throbbing the need could get.

Hoyt cast a glance at the single mom's shock of glistening flesh, still pale in those early summer days, and saw the sun's heat rippling up off the apartment pool's concrete deck. He was suddenly overcome with an urge to get off the phone. His limbic brain raged with impatience. He ground his incisors, then his molars. His temple jutted like a lawn mower primer bulb refilling with air.

Glancing around, he contrived an excuse about having to run to the Chin Burmese grocery before it closed because he had to pay a bill and needed a money order. He said it was a credit thing that made life a hell of a lot harder. Yeah, and the store had weird hours because it was ethnic or whatever. And it was the only shop he knew

of in the area that did money orders, did he mention that? He knew O'Bannon would understand—in fact, if anyone would understand, it would definitely be him. He promised he'd call back soon.

He didn't.

A week or so passed. Another old platoon mate, Rodriguez, called to tell him O'Bannon overdosed and the funeral would be later that week. Could he could get out to Bridgeport? They could fly in through New York or New Haven. Rodriguez was going. So were Nedic, Daniels, and Retzlaff. Sanders was a maybe. McFadden and Wilson were also maybes, though definite maybes. They just had to see if they could get off work or find cheap-enough plane tickets. Terpstra just had a baby and probably couldn't get away. Nuncio would obviously want to be there, but he was in Afghanistan. Rodriguez was still working through the call list. He was checking off names just like with the phone tree in the old days, if First Sergeant or Sergeant Major made an after-hours decision to move up morning formation to an even more ungodly hour.

Hoyt would be on the other coast that week, at a convention that it was too late to finagle out of. He wouldn't be able to pay his last respects, to get drunk with the others and reminisce. He was sorry. He was so sorry. He just couldn't believe this happened, and in fact he had just talked to O'Bannon not that long ago. It sucked. It just really sucked, and he didn't know what to say.

His platoon had now lost as many men back home as they did during the war. Glover wiped out, game over, on his brand new crotch rocket while ripping down a winding ribbon of California highway about a month after they got back. Back in Iraq, Reyes had been shot in the head when out on patrol, and Myers died on the forward operating base in the middle of the night. He was scurrying away from mortar fire in his dung-brown cotton briefs. It was a closed casket service.

All the deaths pained Hoyt, but none more than O'Bannon's.

For more than a year, he had had plans to reunite with O'Bannon and Nuncio in grand fashion in the Big Apple. They had been an inseparable trio in the Army, bonded like atoms in a molecular group hug. They had a natural affinity because they were all a little nerdy. They all lacked the alpha male aggression of many of their army brethren. All the time they shared hanging out around the Xbox console, jawjacking over beers, and enduring the hardships and humiliations of army life only brought them closer.

But after the Iraq deployment and their enlistments ended, they scattered geographically. O'Bannon had drifted into hard drugs and Nuncio had been recalled into another tour of duty. Hoyt was caught up in his career, and drinking alone almost every night. After every long day in the office, he always felt frenzied or drained.

Hoyt took another swig of his malty beer and cracked open his laptop, searching the internet for any traces of O'Bannon other than the obit he had read so many times he could probably recite it from memory.

Staring out the hotel window at a largely obstructed view of a modest skyline, Hoyt thought back to when he, Nuncio and O'Bannon marauded from dive bar to dive bar all across the Puget Sound region. Those nights were wild. O'Bannon once even got them kicked out of Seattle city limits for forty-eight hours after he drunkenly kicked over a hipster bartender's Italian scooter and the cop, who was likely an army vet himself, decided to give him a break. O'Bannon was so black-out drunk that he didn't believe the story later, no matter how much they insisted on its veracity. They knew—of course they knew—one random patrolman had zero chance of catching them if they returned that weekend to a city that big, but that was what he said. It was an official decree, official enough anyway, because he was a cop. He was a sworn officer who took an oath to uphold the law—who was in uniform and on duty when he banned them from the city.

Then there was Iraq. Hoyt, O'Bannon and Nuncio suffered together through the shit details, literally. They burned soldiers' feces in sawed-off metal burn barrels filled with diesel fuel while guarding a remote radio outpost up on a hill, complaining every moment as the putrid fumes swirled and danced in the oppressive, arid air. They dragged the barrels out from under the field-engineered wooden outhouses, trying their best to not get splattered by any urine that splashed over the jagged metal rim. They had to stir the flaming fetid waste, to make sure it burned evenly.

They spent long hours on uneventful overwatch missions, and even longer hours staring down visually static firing lanes while pulling guard so the lieutenant could sit down over tea with some imam or mukhtar or muckety-muck. They served on quick reaction forces that always arrived on the scene too late and chased after unseen enemies through ankle-deep marshland near the Tigris River, through dusty unpaved village streets, or blindly into buildings where death could wait in any doorway. They flinched at distant gun shots, at backfired car exhausts, and at bombastic, deafening IED blasts that clenched their diaphragms and rattled the K-pots on their ringing skulls. They sprinted across their forward operating base in the dead of night, rushing from their living trailers to prefabricated concrete bunkers when mortar shells rained down from above. They quickly mobilized and stormed outside the wire to find abandoned 60mm mortars that had been unloaded from the beds of pickup trucks with ice-encased rounds that fired when the ice melted and the gunners were long gone.

They walked together on patrol, scanning the rooftops for snipers. They fiddled with their night vision goggles until they were fixed somewhat in place, raided homes and cinched zip ties around the wrists of any males of military age. They manned the .50 Cal machine guns in their Humvee turrets, suspiciously eyeing any roadside litter

for coke bottle IEDs that could rip a leg clean off. They were alert, alert, alert, always hyper-alert. In downtime, they talked endlessly about TV shows and movies and video games and sexual triumphs and near-sexual triumphs and embarrassing sexual disappointments and outright romantic failures and hope for the future and all the restaurant meals they would eat and all the liquor they would drink if they went home tomorrow. Inside the wire, they were confidants and tireless conversationalists who shared the common dream of going home. Outside the wire, they knew they could count on each other. Sure, there were harder guys in the platoon, tougher guys, guys who could clamber up an obstacle course wall faster, do more pushups, or punch more tightly grouped rounds through the chest of a pop-up target at 300 meters on a firing range. But no one cared more, and that meant something in an indifferent place that left so many men dead or disfigured, sometimes in ways no one could see.

The war eventually ended, their war anyway. They spent a whole year counting down the days, and then the deployment was suddenly over. After the last shipping conex got unloaded and the last DOD form was filled out at the last out-processing station back on post, they gravitated back toward the orbits of their scattered homes, each looking to launch a new life.

After selling his last duffel bag of gear to an Army-Navy surplus store and burning the undershirts and underwear and woodland BDUs he could not, Hoyt finished college, and found a fresh start at a company. He moved on.

In the hotel room a block from the convention center, Hoyt tried to think back to when he lost patience, to when he started to cut O'Bannon's calls shorter and shorter so he could go about his new life. He tried to recall why he never called back. Was he that weary of O'Bannon's self-aggrandizing, self-pitying blather, that jeroboam of words he could uncork like that? Was it really that much of an

imposition on him to just listen for a while? He chastised himself for not spending more time with O'Bannon on the phone, and never following through on their grand plan for a New York City reunion, when they would run rampant like in the old days, for a week or even a weekend if that was the only block of time they could all work into their schedules.

But in reality, Hoyt thought as he pulled from the tallboy, no visit would have saved O'Bannon. No words, no oft-quoted wisdom, and no amount of conversation late into the night would have steered him along another course, to a better outcome. Hoyt lived hundreds of miles away, and couldn't really intervene in O'Bannon's trajectory, which was about as fixed as an Excel spreadsheet formula after the soldier-turned-junkie collapsed enough veins. But it still felt like a betrayal, like he had left a man out there on the battlefield. The homefront was a different kind of battlefield, mined with aimlessness and alienation and self-medication that could never make the memories less vivid or the guilt less sharp, but it was nonetheless a battlefield, and Hoyt had left a man behind. He hadn't called, hadn't visited, and hadn't kept his promise. O'Bannon wouldn't have hesitated to step into an AK-47 barrage to shield Hoyt if something went south in some house they were raiding, or so Hoyt imagined, and yet he couldn't be bothered to pick up the phone, or to log onto Travelocity and muster the balls to take a few days off work.

But it went even deeper than that. In some fundamental way he couldn't articulate, he had failed O'Bannon, like he had failed Glover, Reyes, and Myers. He had failed Nuncio and everyone else. Hoyt knew, at some level, he bore some responsibility for their death or loss. He had failed them, their wives, girlfriends, children and parents. He had failed their grieving grandparents who didn't know what to make of it, just didn't know what anyone could make of it. He had failed their aunts and uncles and cousins and childhood

friends and third grade teachers. He had failed their mourners and the indifferent masses who skimmed through a newspaper article about yet another dead soldier. He had failed his country, and failed the Iraqi people. He had failed the street urchins who begged them nonstop for chocolate and money, the Iraqi police officers they trained so poorly, and the interpreters who had their throats cut in the dead of night for collaborating with the Americans, who were never really safe behind their balaclavas. He had failed the shoe-gazing, hijab-shrouded women. He had failed the shiftless men in sweat-stained dishdashas who loitered in the streets and public squares. He had failed the millions of unemployed would-be taxi drivers in rusty run-down Opels. He failed the Iraqis they were supposed to protect, and those who were never supposed to get hurt.

He failed the soldiers who came before him, who invaded the place without the comfort of ready-built forward operating bases where they could buy Jay-Z CDs, eat imitation crab meat, and maintain their bench press routine. He had failed the soldiers who followed him, who arrived with fresh units and brand new ACUs, that rotated through that sun-broiled hellhole after his tour ended. He had failed them. He had failed them all. But he would redeem himself somehow, someday.

His tallboy was nearly empty, and the dregs sloshed around the bottom when he shook the can. The beer was running low. Hoyt cracked open his last can and strode out into the discordantly carpeted hotel hallway with purpose, with resolve. He would find more beer and bring it back. Surely he owed that much to O'Bannon. He owed him something. He owed that poor kid something.

Joseph S. Pete is a veteran of OIF III, a VFW member who was kicked out for not paying annual dues after the first year of realizing everyone was way older than and seldom interested in talking to him, a Peter Lisagor Award-winning journalist, and an Indiana University graduate. His literary work has appeared

or is forthcoming in The Five-Two, Ex. Ex. Midwest, Flying Island, Dogzplot, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Pulp Modern *and* Punchnel's, *among other publications. Unlike John Donne and Emily Dickinson, he won a four month's supply of Pabst Blue Ribbon by once placing second in the poetry category of the PBR Art Contest.*

Poetry.

For My Wife

Matthew Angelicola

I'm marching again
Towards that most honorable of deaths
Brother to Brother
Covered in confetti.

I'm afraid to be without you
The sum of your soul is greater than mine
Years of sin clog my road to providence
Heaven is your reward.

I'm not promising that I will prevail
There will be no swift or hasty return
Moving onward
My end is written.

You have ever stayed the course
A rock
I have swayed and dipped and dragged and sputtered
Like a sailboat struggling to catch a breeze.

A kind word, a kiss, a touch
Your eyes always looking into mine,
Green with brown and purple
Mine taking up thousands of yards of blank space

If this is the last time that we speak
Know that there has never been
A more completely incomplete love than
The one that I have felt for you

Matthew Angelicola enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2000 as an Intelligence Analyst and supported several major commands during OIF/OEF. Once his military service was complete he relocated to Virginia to continue working on national defense related issues in a civilian capacity. He and his wife currently live in the Old Town section of Alexandria, VA, where he writes poetry and is currently working on his first book.

If I'd Gotten a Purple Heart

Samuel Chamberlain

She'd know my wound was tangible—
The violet ribbon adorning my uniform
Before I hung it up for good.

And though scars fade, it would say
They hurt me, and I'd get a
Monthly check or a license plate—
Maybe.

Instead my wound is a ghost.
An enemy she can not see but
Must live with, as long
As she lives with me.

Samuel Chamberlain is a writer, teacher, and advocate for at-risk youth living in Fairbanks, Alaska. He served as a paratrooper and combat engineer in the 4-25th including a tour in Iraq from 2006-2007. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Writing from Pacific University in Oregon.

Leaving Saigon

Vladimir Swirynsky

Were we really heartless bastards?
Everyone was trying to get out
of Saigon. I wasn't leaving,
I had memorized every bullet hole
in the American Embassy walls
that tried to reach the deepest water,
the school-house of our
sorrowful beginnings.

Take me back to your home.
i make good wife. i cook, clean,
I fuck you all time.

Home. I watched as her dreams walked
out the door, the first sergeant getting
on the bus to fly back to Seattle.
Days later I was in the Cholon district, I met
her in a bar, she was a mixture of Chinese,
French, just enough of southern California
sunshine to make her beautiful.

I couldn't get enough of her, I was Capt. America
without his shield, talking in tongues, stuffing
my face with apple, pumpkin & peach pies.
I had never seen breasts like hers, never
felt the softness, the half darkness
of heaven that was her skin.

I left the Nam—
Some part of me is still in the hotel room,
I want to feel the buttons on her blouse again,
teach her how to sew the ends of the earth
together, for her to pardon my stupidity.
Kindness & war such odd fellows, none of us
avoid the trip wire called regret. I am waiting
for her to come back to bed, to kiss me until
I'm a paperboy again and know nothing of war.

I seem to remember that the rain season
lasted four months, the heat nothing
more than a flesh flaking moan.

Vladimir Swirynsky was drafted in April of 1968. While stationed at Fort Bragg in August 1969, he volunteered for and was shipped to Vietnam and sent to HQ Long Binh. He spent weekends in Saigon and helped out on Sundays at an orphanage.

Interview.

A Conversation with Colin Halloran

Colin Halloran is a veteran of the Afghanistan War. He is also a poet. One of a few liberal arts professors in all of America who has military experience, he uses literature to "triangulate history," and believes in the power of words to help reveal the truest and most full narrative regarding the human experience. He does this, in part, in his award-winning book of poetry *Shortly Thereafter*, which is a memoir in verse and covers his journey to war and back. *O-Dark-Thirty* editor Dario DiBattista, a friend and peer of Coli, recently caught up with him to talk about his work. Maybe not coincidentally, Colin and Dario met years ago at a writing conference led by another veteran writer, Anthony Swofford, author of *Jarhead*.

O-Dark-Thirty: You are a veteran writer. A distinction you choose, and even seek to start conversations about, like you did at a symposium you'd convened recently at Fairfield University. For our alums and readership, often veterans themselves, what is so important bout this distinction? Why?

Colin Halloran: Well there are two pieces to it, and then obviously the whole. I basically see this as three separate identities. I am a veteran: that one's pretty obvious—US Army, Afghanistan 2006. I am a writer: writing is a passion, a career, an identity. I am a veteran writer: I am someone who writes about war, my war, having experienced it. I cannot speak for this entire generation of vets, but I am in a unique position to add my individual story and perspective to what will hopefully become an expansive narrative tapestry that will help our generation and those to come understand what it is we did there and went through when we came home.

As a writer, I don't always write about my experience as a soldier and veteran, though surely those experiences tint everything I do. Similarly, not all veterans write, and not all veterans who write write about war. Likewise, not all writers who write about war are veterans. That was one of the reasons behind the conference at Fairfield University, to explore the various voices and narratives that will represent these wars.

ODT: How does literature triangulate history?

CH: Triangulation is the process of using known points to discover unknown points; the more known points you have, the more accurate a position you get for the unknown. I apply this concept to forming an understanding of history. Because we all have different realities and perceptions of events, it is impossible to come up with a True (with a capital T) version of history. So we need to gather as many narratives as we have available in order to reach the most accurate possible understanding of history.

Historical texts and news media can only go so far in capturing events. Literature, I would argue—and poetry in particular—can provide more points of contact to help us triangulate. Think about it:

If every major event in human history, minus natural disasters, has been perpetrated by, influenced by, carried out by, or otherwise impacted by at least one human, and all humans, on some level, experience emotion, then essentially emotion drives history. A prime purpose of poetry is to boil an experience down to the very essence of understanding, often emotionally. Therefore, poetry and literature, when combined with historical and media documents, give us a far more rich and complete understanding of historical events. That's one of the reasons I write.

ODT: What set into motion you becoming a writer? Or choosing to be a writer?

CH: I've always written. Ever since I was a kid, starting with journaling about the death of my father when I was five years old and then carrying into really terrible poetry about animals in elementary school, awful "love" poems throughout middle school, and finally angsty teen rage songs in high school. I pretty much stopped writing when I joined the Army, though. And I can't really tell you why. Then, maybe a year and a half after I got back from Afghanistan, a time in which I was really struggling to readjust, my therapist suggested that I go back to writing in order to start sifting through my emotions and experience from the war. At that point I had no idea that I could actually be a writer—like as my job—but when those poems about my war experience started taking shape into something that was clearly more than I intended, I found myself on that path and followed it to where I am now.

ODT: As your poems were taking shape, what were some critical elements of learning the craft that became cornerstones for your work? How would you describe your poetic style?

CH: Writing, like any art, is all about imitation in the beginning. At first I felt that I had to tell these grandiose, epic tales within my lines, to fill them with the rawest emotions I could drag up. As I studied the craft, I began trying to fit all of that into a wide variety of forms, often influenced by those I was studying under. But the more I read, the more I studied, and, most importantly, the more I wrote, the more my stories, my style, and my voice became my own. Discovering my voice and then learning to be authentic and true to it was the most important thing I learned in my MFA. That being said, how would I describe that particular style? It's all my own. I guess if I had to put myself into a "school" of poetry, it would be the Organicists, who aren't discussed very often. Essentially, I have a strong belief that form and content should serve as a reflection of each other, which means that some of my poems are in very traditional and strict forms like sestinas and sonnets, some are highly experimental, and most are free verse.

ODT: You mention education—in your case, earning an advanced degree in creative writing. How important do you think the traditional models for writing education—workshops, craft classes, techniques classes—are for someone who wants to become a writer?

CH: It sounds like a cop-out, but as far as education goes, it really does depend on the individual and how far they want to go in the world of writing. Part of being successful as a writer is a deep understanding of craft, part is natural ability, part is persistence, and part is just sheer luck. The most effective way of learning the craft end really is up to the individual, though. I definitely needed my MFA to get me, not only to where I am in my writing but also in my understanding of writing and the contemporary landscape in which it exists. I went through a low-residency program, though, meaning most of the work

is done through sustained correspondence with a mentor with whom you hand-tailor a reading list and workshops are conducted for ten days each in the winter and summer. Other writers I know went through full-time programs where it's a more traditional college set-up and workshops meet at least weekly. Some people just take short run or one-off classes at conferences or through organizations like Grub Street. The value of the "academic" approach to creative writing is going to vary, but for me it was necessary and invaluable.

ODT: Three poets aspiring writers need to read: Go.

CH: Walt Whitman: Contemporary poetry simply would not exist without his work.

Emily Dickinson: There's no one better at demonstrating precision and economy of language.

Elizabeth Bishop: Master of narrative.

ODT: What is your personal goal with your poetry—of any topical nature? Why do you write?

CH: At the most basic, I write because I need to. It's the medium through which I strive to reach an understanding of my thoughts, experiences, and life. Topically, I'm wary of being pigeonholed as a "War Poet." It's a great tradition and line to be a part of, but as I said in the first response, veteran, writer, and veteran writer are three distinct phases of who I am. Though I still write about the war in my poetry, I find myself able to tackle other topics now and when I do write poems about war and its aftermath, I find myself doing so in a more metaphorical and philosophical way.

ODT: Scotch or bourbon? Which one inspires better poetry?

CH: Depends on the season, Dario. I'm a bourbon in summer, scotch in the winter kind of man. Then again, I do seem to write more in the winter . . . so scotch.

ODT: I think that's a good approach.

###

Colin Halloran contributed the following unpublished poem to *O-Dark-Thirty*.

Antrobus' Dream

This barren land offers no tranquility
in which to gather my thoughts.

They are lost

in geologic extremities
unfit for habitation,

populated by lost ideas
abandoned dreams
unpursued ambitions.

It is the landscape of ghosts
and dreams.

Awesome
and vast
and suffocating.

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