O-Dark-Thirty

Fall 2015

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A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *Abe & Garcia,*
digital art by Maximilian Uriarte
United States Marine Corps
2006—2010

Max was born and raised in Oregon, and at age nineteen
enlisted into the Marine Corps as an 0351 Assaultman.
He served two tours in Iraq, 2007 and 2009,
with the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment.
His artistic talent was recognized by his battalion commander,
who assigned him as a combat artist and photographer
to document his unit's 2009 deployment to Iraq.

After discharge from the Marines as a lance corporal he
entered the California College of the Arts,
where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2013.

Max is the creator of the viral webcomic *Terminal Lance*.
"Terminal Lance," he says, "pokes fun at the Marine Corps . . .
with an emphasis on the grunt lance corporal's point of view."
In addition to his weekly *Terminal Lance* comic he has
been working for the past two years on a graphic novel,
The White Donkey.

The cover art was created digitally using
Corel Painter and Photoshop.
The image depicts the primary characters in both
Terminal Lance and *The White Donke*y, Abe and Garcia.
The White Donkey gets its title from a vision of a donkey
that plagues Garcia throughout the narrative.
www.terminallance.com

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Editor's Note

Veterans Day is upon us once again. By now, most Americans probably know that the holiday was originally known as Armistice Day and was set aside to honor the soldiers and sailors from World War I. It wasn't until a World War II veteran named Raymond Weeks led a delegation to President Dwight Eisenhower that both the name and meaning of the holiday were officially changed to include all American service members from all periods. The successful petition earned Weeks the title "Father of Veterans Day," a fact that I would wager hardly *any* Americans know.

My first experience with "petitioning" came long ago on a far tinier scale, but one that will forever be fondly nestled in my memory. When I was around eight and living on Fort Dix, I complained to my father, an Army nurse and lieutenant colonel, that the neighborhood playground was decrepit, hazardous, and (worst of all from a eight-year-old's perspective) *boring*—with only one swing in six remaining and a teeter-totter so rusted that it neither teetered nor tottered. My father, who worked nights at Walson Army Hospital and was always short on patience, was quick to reply: "So what are you telling me for? Go tell the general." He meant the then Brigadier General Julius Becton, Jr., a decorated Korean and Vietnam War veteran and the first African American to command the sprawling post at Fort Dix. If my father's intention was to be taken rhetorically, his effort was completely lost on me.

So the next day, a few friends and I gathered up our courage and marched over to the commander's giant house at the end of the street, up the looming front steps where we soon found ourselves

face to face with a man who listened to our shaky entreaties with a severe and glowering expression. I don't recall anything particular about the exchange except that, at one point, the general leaned forward and snapped "Speak up!" to one of my friends who had made the mistake of mumbling.

We left feeling like we hadn't accomplished anything. To my amazement, I awoke the next morning to the sound of Army trucks and a bulldozer or two tearing up the ground to make room for a new swing set, slide, and other brand-new playground equipment we only could have dreamed of just a few days before.

I share this story because as we enter our fourth year publishing *O-Dark-Thirty*, I'm reminded of another delegation, one that is vast and spontaneous, but also just as determined as Raymond Weeks or that rag-tag collection of Fort Dix military brats. I'm speaking of a delegation of military writers, artists and poets who are now bringing their passion, words, and voices to the American public. Some, like poet and musician Dave Shank, are just now, for the first time, finding their voice in these pages. Others, like Tobias Wolff, have been "petitioning" the literary world with the magic of their prose for decades.

As we celebrate Veterans Day and the beginning of our fourth year in print and online, we feel it's more important than ever to share these voices and to encourage even more to "Speak up!" loudly and proudly. One never knows how different the world will look in the morning.

Jim Mathews

Non-fiction.

Bread Crumbs and Hatchet Marks

By Robert F. Sommer

On one of our infrequent and brief satellite calls from Iraq in 2004, Francis asked me to take the phone where Heather wouldn't hear us. I stepped out on the deck and slid the door shut. His voice was empty and flat. He told me there'd been a friendly-fire incident, and he'd killed an Iraqi translator. He didn't know why the man was in the line of fire, but he knew instantly what he'd done as he saw him crumple to the ground through the rifle scope. He told me this and then let the sentences hang. I could hear the residue of his teenage self in his voice. He was just twenty. He spoke in monosyllables. Yes, no, I guess. But this wasn't teenage reticence; it was pain and isolation and fear. War was not supposed to be like this, to include such ambiguities, inflict such guilt. He'd seen war on TV, in the movies. They hadn't shown this.

It was one of those moments—like the night police officers came to our door and told me he was dead—in which nothing you say will change the reality of what you just heard. And whatever you do say is incidental to the fact, the reality, which is now planted before you like the monolith at the center of *2001: A Space Odyssey*—

immobile, resisting interpretation, devoid of meaning. A fact, isolated, standing free like that, has no beginning or ending, no narrative, no message or theme or imagery, and there's no way to bypass it. When the police officer told me he was gone, I didn't ask was he sure it was my son, could there be a mistake? I knew that what he told me was true, that these two men in uniforms and buckles and guns had not come to my door without knowing what they were about, that asking were they sure would only prolong recognition of what I now knew to be true. People do that: *Are you sure it's him? Could there be a mistake?* But I didn't. My knees literally went weak. I made it to the stairs to sit down, and all I could think of was the awful and tragic irony that Heather and I had imagined this moment a hundred times while he was deployed, with soldiers in Class A uniforms where the cops stood, but now, over two years after he'd come home, still, after all that, we'd lost him. It seemed so unfair, so utterly banal. I recall muttering, moaning even, "This is wrong! This is wrong!" But however it happened, at war or in a car wreck, the reality was the same. The monolith had been planted before us. He was gone.

Not knowing what to say on that call from Iraq, but that I needed to say something, I began to talk, just to talk, just so he'd hear a voice, my voice. That's what he needed most. I was as much confessor as parent. He needed expiation, forgiveness.

"Are you in trouble?"

"No."

"What happens now?"

"Nothing."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"Yeah, they've already reviewed it. I've been cleared."

Not what I meant, but I didn't press.

Nothing more would come of it. Nothing happened now. That's what I heard in his voice—the wonder of that notion. He'd killed a man, a member of his own team. The man was dead and now nothing. The translator had taken this job at great risk to himself and his family only to be killed by the people who hired him. All of this weighed on my twenty-year-old son.

I sounded like someone else on the phone, offering platitudes, saying things I didn't fully believe myself, as I danced over all that ran through my head, questions, images of the firefight, of the man dying in my son's rifle scope.

"It's not your fault."

"I know."

"You were doing what you had to do."

"Yeah."

We both bought into the momentary fiction of what we said, hollow as it sounded even as we spoke. We were talking about *his* fate, whether *he* was in trouble, whether *he* was okay, while somewhere not far from where he was calling a new widow and her fatherless children were grieving. There was the monolith—nothing we could say would alter their fate or change what he'd done.

All this in about five minutes, while I watched a few birds flutter in the walnut trees behind my fence.

We both knew—he knew—that everything wrong with that war was compressed into what had just happened and now what we said. We'd gone there wrongly, turned anger and self-pity into jingoism and nationalism; we'd fucked up on an epic scale and now weren't even talking about the war's victims.

I went inside, returned the phone to Heather for the few minutes he still had, and kept this to myself for a long time. He'd asked me to carry some of the burden, not spread it around.

When does an event become a memory?

The incident was already in the past, but he was living it still, and now, in some remote way, so were we, Heather and I. She'd been affected by this tragedy even though she didn't know what happened. Nor did the widow in Iraq know that a middle-aged man in the American Midwest felt great sorrow for her—and regret and shame, and he was angry, too.

We were all changing—being changed by events as they were woven into the fabric of our lives. A new pattern was emerging, dark, amorphous. The yarn was coarse. It would chafe. We would not remember this time as others did. We would continue to live it.

In later years, after Francis was out of the Army and home, more such incidents trickled out, briefly told, like leakage—the Taliban fighter he killed in Afghanistan at close range, indoors, and whose Qur'an sat on a shelf in his room; the children whose bodies he collected after a school bombing; carrying his friend's lifeless body up a mountainside following a helicopter crash.

He wanted us to understand his pain—why he couldn't sleep; that liquor wasn't really liquor but medicine—but he couldn't tell the stories himself, as if they'd been censored, as if a legion of demons had entrenched itself inside him, each one the avatar of an incident on his tours, and with one censor-demon in charge who redacted all of the stories until all that was left were sheets of paper with thick black stripes that he tossed into the fierce hot wind as Francis sadly looked on.

So Francis found another way. He would guide us into the dark places these demons inhabited, leave clues, bread crumbs on the forest floor, hatchet marks on the trees.

A couple of movies might help us understand. He asked us see one and rented the other just for us to view. *You should watch it,* he told me, pointing to a DVD he'd left on the coffee table. The first was *The Hurt Locker,* the second *Waltz with Bashir*.

The DVD of *Waltz with Bashir* remained in the case unviewed. There was probably a late fee when he returned it. We felt guilty, some, for silently passing on the movie, but even without seeing it we knew it was more than we could handle. Our moods then were dark and sad, and also frustrated and angry at times. We'd been infected too. This is not something you often hear about PTSD—how contagious it is, how you get it by living with someone who suffers from it. We often felt as if we were adrift in heavy seas and thick fog; we might capsize at any moment. We couldn't see the shoals, but we heard the muffled and distant echoes of his demons.

He'd been living at home for about two years while he went to school and worked. He'd lapsed into heavy drinking, in a sad way too, often alone and late at night while he watched movies like *Waltz with Bashir*. Others did not see this side of his life—when the invisible wounds became visible. He functioned well at work and school. To see him during the day going about his business, interacting with friends and coworkers, you wouldn't know how tormented he was, how guilty and just plain sad. He went many rounds with the alcoholism—rehab, AA meetings, counseling—but he was being eaten up from inside.

About a year after we lost him, I ordered *Waltz with Bashir* from Netflix. Even then it went unviewed for a month or more. We didn't watch any movies rather than return it, but there it sat, a totem of loss, an emblem of unfinished conversations and unrelieved pain. So it was with a sense of ritual that we finally did sit down to watch the movie. We were stepping back into his world, fulfilling the request he'd made more than two years earlier.

Waltz with Bashir is the autobiographical story of its director, Ari Folman, an Israeli army veteran who comes to realize he has no memory of serving during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, though he knows he was there. Folman begins a quest to recover his past, visiting

friends who served with him and a journalist who reported on the war. In a recurring dream, Folman and his friends watch from a beachfront as Beirut burns. Through their different stories we piece together a narrative of the invasion.

The film is unique in many ways, most notably that it is animated. Folman and all of the characters appear as avatars. The animation creates a bleak mood, an impression strongly reinforced by laconic dialogue and the sepia tones of visual imagery. The movie's understated rhythm glosses the immanent sense of tragedy buried in Folman's lost memories, which ultimately reveal his part in atrocities committed during the war. He'd been assigned to a detail that lit the night sky with flares over a Palestinian refugee camp as thugs from the Lebanese Christian Phalange entered the camp and ruthlessly murdered hundreds of refugees, including women and children and the elderly. The movie closes by dissolving into actual footage of the carnage, its aftermath, and the terrible grief and suffering of the Palestinians. This movie is still banned in Lebanon.

Another war, another country, another language—yet this story spoke to Francis, and he believed it spoke for him. It represented something he wanted us to know about what he'd experienced both in the Army and later. Its overarching theme is memory—Folman's odyssey into the undiscovered country of his past. For Francis, I suspect, the country was known, well mapped, and he wandered its terrain continually. His wasn't a problem of forgetting but of remembering. How do you measure the difference in magnitudes of guilt between killing one innocent or many? How many others were there besides the Iraqi translator? And too, at some point, perhaps while he was serving or perhaps later, the lines between enemy and friend, guilt and innocence blur. Why else would he keep the holy book of an enemy fighter he killed? His conviction about his own guilt was profound. We know this from snippets of nighttime conversations

with army friends overheard through thin walls and from references in his e-mails. His sense of guilt left him feeling isolated and alone, a feeling that was only reinforced by the challenges of navigating his way through a world in which these wars do not exist, even as they rage on.

Folman portrays this dizzying paradox in a sequence depicting a short leave he took during the Lebanon invasion. His avatar wanders city streets at home in Israel where people sit idly in cafés and go about their business as if there were no war. He seeks out an old girlfriend and, still dazed from the battlefield he'd left behind only the day before, finds himself in a nightclub full of young people throbbing to disco music. This contrast, this indifference, was something Francis knew well—and so did Heather and I, as we navigated the wars and deployments with him while the world around us shopped and amused itself with video games and sports, both real and fantasy, and shed maudlin tears as "God Bless America" displaced "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at seventh-inning stretches throughout the Homeland, as it was now known. TV told us about people who skipped Thanksgiving dinner to camp out at Wal-Mart and Best Buy and Target for midnight sales. Herds would gather at storefronts and stomp and shriek and trample one another as they prepared for the birth of the Christ child with bargain-priced TVs and artificial trees and strings of Christmas lights made by Chinese prisoners. It wasn't that America forgot the wars, but rather preferred them vanished in the imagery of football-field sized flags and crisp color guards and awesome flyovers.

Watching *Waltz with Bashir*, we found less that we were learning something new than recognizing what we'd already seen. He missed his cot in Afghanistan, he told us. Sleep was troubled here, in his own home, his own bed. He was afraid here. Early one morning, I had to go into his room to get his keys. My car was blocked in but I didn't want to wake him because he'd worked late the previous night, so

I slipped into his room with all the stealth and deliberation of Poe's madman-narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," soundlessly, slowly. He was sprawled across his bed as if his joints had disengaged; arms and legs seemed almost detached. Then suddenly he sprang upright, stiff and confused and intent. For a moment I thought he might attack me. His eyes were open wide and utterly blank.

"It's Dad," I said softly. "I just need your keys. I didn't want to wake you."

There was a pause while recognition set in. The fear and aggression in his eyes had not fully faded when he said, "It would not be possible for you to come in here without waking me."

He moved the car himself, and I never entered his room again without knocking and waiting for a response.

Soldiers in some ancient cultures would undergo rituals of "desanctification" on returning from war, rites of passage from the holy cause that justified the killing and bloodshed and which now restored them to the morality and codes of civilian life. War booty was sometimes shared with those at home as a way of absolving soldiers from any sense that their motives were self-serving. Such practices further gave war a communal context. In recent times, returning soldiers may suffer from the recognition that their experiences are not part of a larger narrative shared by others. Certainly this was true for the Vietnam War, and now for many soldiers it is also true of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as they are haunted by the realization that it was all for nothing. Even in battle, many are fighting simply to endure and survive until the tour ends. Francis would sometimes say, "They can't stop time," as he counted the days down. But they did mess with the physics of time through extended tours and policies like stop-loss, the back-door draft that kept soldiers in war zones beyond their active duty contracts. Such practices only contributed to the sense of betrayal many felt.

In our recent wars, platitudes like "thank-you-for-your-service" have displaced the ancient rituals, condensing them into a few words, a handshake, a knowing look. But what does the speaker think he knows, and what does his word-gesture mean?

I was with Francis at the hardware store one day when a stranger in a USA T-shirt and worn camouflage ball cap with an American flag stepped into the checkout line behind us. I could see his expression morph from curiosity to recognition to a subtle nod of approval as he looked Francis over.

"You a soldier?" he asked.

The buzz cut and stiff posture and flat belly are easy clues in our militarized culture.

When Francis nodded, the man stuck his hand out and said, "Thank you for your service." Francis shook it politely and said no problem. As we walked to the car, he told me he hated it when people did that.

"I didn't do anything for him," he said, and a moment later added, "What does he know about it?"

Francis detested the spectacle of patriotism, getups such as this man wore, gratuitous flag-waving, the subtle flavor of defiance in the man's word-gesture, in whose deep layers the tropes of Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly fermented in a quiet and desperate rage. What Francis saw and heard was a man in a mask and costume uttering a bumper-sticker cliché that—in his mind, at least—gave him a partnership stake in the wars, earned by displaying the flag on a dirty ball cap, honoring soldiers by wearing camouflage colors, and carrying a red-white-and-blue chip on his shoulder in defense of a notion of freedom that had to do with oversized trucks, abundant and cheap gasoline, and racist indifference to the victims of American bombs in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Such moments reinforced the feeling that the people who most supported these wars were also those who least understood

them. They left Francis feeling at once isolated and confused and angry. For what did he deserve thanks? he wondered. He hadn't joined the Army for this creep. He'd become a killer. He'd done things he was not proud of—and he'd enjoyed it at times. There was hardship, but there were also thrills, heavy rushes. There were badass big-boy toys; there was camaraderie. There were also bad decisions, confusing decisions, and good decisions at every level. There were incredibly courageous soldiers for whom he would have died and who would have died for him. There were also those who were cowardly and unreliable and stupid—and he probably would have died trying to save one of them, too, if that's what he'd had to do. He resented the stupidity or cowardice of soldiers who endangered others. We heard about such men—and we also heard from others who were there too about his own courage. "He led from the front," we were told. The opposite of hearing such stories isn't criticism; it's the sting of silence or its first cousin, faint praise, and we did not hear these as his friends called and sent e-mails and traveled long distances to bury him.

While *Waltz with Bashir* is autobiographical, the other movie he wanted us to see, *The Hurt Locker*, is fiction, a curious contrast since the former is animated while the latter is not. Francis told us that The Hurt Locker was the only movie he'd seen that came close to portraying what it had been like in Iraq.

Despite numerous awards and widespread praise, *The Hurt Locker* has been criticized by some Iraq veterans for various inaccuracies, most notably the idea that a loose cannon like First Sergeant Will James is representative of soldiers who fought there. Of the film's nine Oscar nominations, Paul Rieckhoff, who founded the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, remarked on Facebook that that was "nine more Oscar nominations than it deserves. I don't know why critics love this silly, inaccurate film so much."[1] But to Francis, who'd spent a year there—and to us, too—Will James is a fictional

character and his reckless and impulsive behavior less representative of soldiers in Iraq than a symptom in the larger allegory of America's addiction to war—and in particular its enthusiasm for entering this one.

James, portrayed with great intensity by Jeremy Renner, is an Army demolition specialist. He is unpredictable, impulsive, and obsessed in ways that compare with Ahab's monomania. His job is to defuse bombs and "daisy chains" of IEDs planted in urban settings where civilians are as much, if not more, at risk as American soldiers. His seemingly nerveless exploits often cross the line into recklessness, endangering his squad while winning accolades from his amped-up commander. He is, without doubt, the kind of soldier Francis did not want to be around when things got hot, nor is the amped-up platoon commander who cheered James on in much the same way amped-up cheerleaders posing as journalists led the cheers as Americans watched the Iraq invasion in an atmosphere more suited to the Superbowl than the invasion of a sovereign nation. James himself becomes an emblem of US recklessness, and we subsequently follow his inward deterioration as the war slogs on, as it did and still does for a "war-weary" public, as TV now describes us, and as his encounters with Iraqi civilians awaken him to the war's consequences.

What Francis found most akin to his experience in Iraq was the on-the-ground, in-country atmosphere created by the film—the hot, arid, crowded streets; the sudden eruptions of violence and chaos when a bomb was discovered; the confusion and terror of a civilian strapped with explosives by insurgents and released into the streets as a sacrificial goat; the tensions of not knowing whom to trust; the fears, which Francis described to us, of wondering if a boy with his hand out for candy might have a knife or gun concealed in the other.

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1 Christian Davenport, "Some Iraq, Afghanistan war veterans criticize movie 'Hurt Locker' as inaccurate," Washington Post, Feb. 28, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/25/AR2010022506161.html?sid=ST2010022603133.
It is not a small irony that the now-discredited NBC anchor Brian Williams was among those to criticize the movie for a lack of credibility, if perhaps only in order to reinforce his own battle-zone cred with soldiers.

(He told us to stop sending hard candy for the children for this very reason.) These tensions between the untrusting civilian population and the intrusive and violent military presence were only made worse as inevitable mistakes were made, innocents mistreated and killed, and individual soldiers with good intentions were resented and attacked and killed. The invasion of Iraq had all of the ingredients for a disaster and that was what it became.

The film relies on two conceits, one set out in the movie's epigraph, which is taken from a passage in Chris Hedges' 2002 book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning:* "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug." The sentence melts away on the screen as the movie begins, leaving only the words *war is a drug*. The second conceit resides in its title: a *hurt locker* is where you stash all of the pain, guilt, memories, and baggage—the soldiers' pictures of Dorian Gray, so to speak. Home to all the demons. While he's deployed, mainlining the drug of war, Will James leaves the locker shut and thinks little about its contents. But then he comes home and the drug of war fades and withdrawal sets in. Now it's just him and the hurt locker's contents, the liberated demons, and the bizarre contrast between all that surrounds him at home and the place he'd just been. He stands alone in the most ordinary of settings, a grocery store aisle, and stares in wonder at shelves filled with boxes and cans of food, all neatly lined up, not a vacant space on any shelf. The camera angle suggests a distant vanishing point and lends a sense of infinity to this abundance, while vacuous Muzak plays over the scene. Crowded places are anathema to many returning soldiers—certainly they were to Francis, who, on returning from Iraq, could not walk busy streets and stood immobile at the doorway to a mall he could not bring himself to enter. In its understatement this quiet scene in the movie isolates what is perhaps most disturbing, a question with no answer that may not even find its way into words: how can there be *this* and also *that*? How can there be war there and me alone

here on this polished linoleum floor with shelves full of food and mind-numbing music playing all around me? How can I have been *there* yesterday and *here* today? The wonder and blankness in James's eyes crystallize all there is to say.

Like Ari Folman and Will James, Francis found himself in a world where the place from which he'd just come is mostly unknown. A new arrival from another planet, a stranger in a strange land. He carried within all that remained of where he'd been, reliving the awful dramas of the past while the world that surrounded him performed its own surreal burlesques on YouTube and Facebook, in shopping malls, and in Washington, D.C. In a poignant haiku, poet David Ray asks,

But where will they take
their grief, those who return from
distant battlefields?

Returning soldiers like Francis discovered harshly that the so-called homeland does not share that grief. How can it when it has mostly not shared in the war? He and waves of others found themselves in severe withdrawal from the adrenaline and camaraderie and from a universe in which the hurt lockers remained shut. At home the lids blew open.

The drug of war is surely lethal, and even though it didn't kill Francis there, I have little doubt it killed him here.

Robert F. Sommer's late son, Sergeant Francis D. Sommer, served with the 10th Mountain Division in Iraq and Afghanistan. This essay is adapted from a work-in-progress entitled Losing Francis: One Family's Journey through a Decade of American War. *Excerpts have also appeared in* Rathalla Review, New Plains Review, *and* The Whirlybird Anthology of Kansas City Writers. *To learn more about Francis, please visit www.francisfund.org.*

Fiction.

Sergeant Hicks Guards a Bomb

By Matthew Robinson

The building was a remnant. The skeleton of an almost-skyscraper. Exposed cement and brick. Sheets of plywood scattered across the floor, covering small holes. Large holes left exposed. The biggest holes were in the top three levels, the roof and two floors, all caused by the impact of the same dropped and unexploded bomb. It was around that dull gray hulk that the platoon sat, four floors beneath the night sky.

The men wore clean, new uniforms. Their AK-47s were spotless. They were the masters of the remedial. There, on their mission, to guard the ordinance until US troops arrived to inspect it, the clump of Iraqi guardsmen fucked off.

Small rugs were unrolled for tea steam and hookah smoke. There were three well-kept fires, ringed with brick. In one corner, three men were piled up together, sleeping before their middle-of-the-night shift. A torn open box of American MREs lay gutted nearby, the plastic packaging hissing and popping in the small fires.

At ground level, the building was surrounded by a ten-foot-high wall. Along its top, shards of broken glass, jagged green and orange

and brown, ran along the straight line of masonry. At the front gate sat three folding chairs, Iraqis in two, Sergeant Hicks in the other.

Hicks was one of a handful of US soldiers charged with training the new Iraqi army, to live with them, to supervise their missions. They were always moving around, from unit to unit. It was just for a while, he was told. Back to a line unit soon, he was told. It had been three months since he was on US-occupied soil.

"Jesus I'm fucking tired," he said.

The Iraqis looked at him but didn't speak. One pointed to the entrance of the building.

"No," Hicks said. "Not yet. I'll sleep when we get relieved." He took out a long strip of jerky. Began to gnaw. He waved the stick at the Iraqis. They shook their heads no.

Hicks's radio cracked: "Romeo to Golf, over."

Hicks pushed the button. "This is Golf, over."

"We have movement in the field to the west, break, possible dismounts, over."

"Roger, possible dismounts to the west, break, continue to observe, over."

"Roger, Romeo out."

Romeo was lying on his stomach on the roof of the blown-out building, scanning. His real name was Robinson. Hicks had been assigned to him for less than a week.

"What he do?" an Iraqi said. It was a fair question; there was no need for an observation post on the roof. The building was abandoned. If it weren't for the bomb, nobody would be there. Hicks thought about why Robinson was upstairs.

"Security," he said. The Iraqis nodded.

The radio cracked: "Confirmed dismounts, break, maneuvering south around us, break, firing warning shot, over."

Bang.

Hicks looked to the roof, stood up, dropped his jerky.

"Negative, negative, cease-fire," he said into the radio. "Repeat, cease-fire."

Bang.

The Iraqis jumped up, grabbed their rifles from where they were leaning against the wall. They were talking fast, pointing to the roof. Hicks cleared the door of the building and started up the stairs.

Bang.

"Cease fire!"

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

When he came out onto the floor with the ordinance, all the Iraqis were awake, spread out around the perimeter of the floor, scanning through the empty windowpanes. Hicks kept running.

His legs burned as he approached the fifth floor and his lungs were on fire. His chest couldn't expand inside his vest, he couldn't breathe deeply enough. He went light-headed. He hadn't counted the shots fired from Robinson, and he hadn't heard any incoming fire. Hicks hoped it was an RPG team, a single-shot Hail Mary that had yet to let loose. If it was a mortar team they could be pinned down on the roof, waiting for their Iraqis who are still downstairs awaiting orders to flank or for a lucky mortar to find its way through three open floors and detonate that bomb, whichever happened first.

Overcoming the stairs to the roof, he nearly went through the bomb hole. He came to a crouch as he came up on Robinson, who was still in the prone, tracking something in his sights.

"They're moving on us," Robinson said.

Hicks stepped closer, sprawled out on his belly, and inched up to the building's edge. His elbow caught Robinson's flask, knocking it over. Bourbon smell filled his nose. He picked up the empty piece of metal, examined it in the dark.

"Shit." Robinson sat up from behind his M-4. Clicked it to safe. Laid it down in the dust and spilled booze and Hicks's stare.

"Who the fuck are you shooting at?"

"Hajjis," Robinson said. "There's a group of at least five of them and they're maneuvering on us."

"You fired half a magazine. They haven't fired a shot. And this?" Hicks slapped the flask against Robinson's chest. "What the fuck is this?"

"Well, it was Kentucky bourbon."

Hicks pushed himself up onto his knees, threw the flask over the side.

Robinson leaned way out to watch it land in the field. "Great, it went over the fucking wall."

"Sergeant Robinson, you're firing on a target you haven't identified, on a target that hasn't fired at us, you're well out of the ROE, and you're goddamn drunk."

Robinson stood. Picked up his rifle. "Don't forget, Sergeant Hicks, that I am also the ranking NCO out here. Your grievances have been heard, and will be given my full attention just as soon as I give a shit." He picked up his rucksack and slung it over his shoulder. "Besides, who the fuck are you going to tell? And don't start counting hajjis, not as people anyway." He started down the stairs.

Hicks stood looking at the wet blotch of spilled liquor. He looked to the field for signs of life. Nothing. Not even imagined ones. He started down the stairs.

When he reached the bomb, he told the men the shooting was done. They moved back to their fires and sleep piles. Hicks could hear the gurgling of the hookah resume as he continued down.

On the bottom floor, Robinson was lying on his back, head propped up on his Kevlar like a pillow. His M-4 across his chest. "Goodnight, Sergeant Hicks," he said. Hicks went back to his chair at the front gate.

He found his fallen jerky, took a bite, and chewed. *No RPG team, no mortar team, no enemy insurgents, no Mahdi Army, just people, walking through a field at night, and goddamn him for being drunk, for being here, with me, for being worse than the fucking mission, and it's only been a week, how long does he have me, can he have me, running patrols with the Iraqis, while he sits on the radio, gets drunk, waits for the shit to start, and just listens to it, just listens, I can't, I can't, I need to get back, I've been hung out too long, I won't be hung out by him too, I won't, I fucking won't.*

Knock knock knock.

It came from the outside of the rolling gate. The Iraqis pushed it open a few feet and stepped out. They came back in with two people. The man was thin, wore western clothes, jeans and a plaid collared shirt, and was clean-shaven and crying. The woman wore a blue hijab and was bleeding from her side. She was hugely pregnant. Her face was pale. She held a bloody hand out to Hicks.

Her husband began yelling. The guardsmen yelled back, gesturing for them to go back out into the night. Hicks ran to his gear and brought his medic bag to the woman. When he got close she laid that bloody hand on his shoulder. The husband pushed her hand off and shoved Hicks hard in the chest. He screamed and pointed at the wound and pointed at the roof and pointed at Hicks's rifle and screamed and screamed. The guardsmen stepped between Hicks and the husband, yelled back until the husband started pushing them too. Two rifles leveled at the husband. The woman bled silently, reaching her hand towards Hicks, a wisp of blood trailing from her finger.

"Stop!" Hicks said, forcing himself in front of the barrels. "No shoot, no shoot." The husband grabbed the back of Hicks's flack vest but didn't push or pull. Just held him. "Tell him," Hicks said to the soldiers, "I need to look at his wife's wound. I have bandages in my bag." The men spoke to the husband, not yelling but not quiet.

They still gestured for them to leave. "Tell them I can help." The husband squeezed his grip on Hicks's vest, pulled him sideways, slamming him against the wall. Hicks fell onto his back. His medic bag crunched beneath him.

The rifles went back up, the woman's hand dropped. The husband screamed at the soldiers and braced himself.

BANGBANGBANG.

Hicks jumped at the sound, scrambled to get up but only made it as far as his knees. The soldiers looked to their AKs, then to each other, then to the husband, who was still standing in front of them, now quiet.

"Shut the fuck up!" Robinson said from the door of the building, his M-4 pointed at the sky. Everyone turned. Except the woman. Who just stood, bleeding.

Robinson came over, three stacks of American money in his hand.

Hicks stood. "They need to let me help her."

"That ship fucking sailed. Look at him, he's not letting anyone help her. I shot the bitch, I'll fix it." He held out the money to the husband. The husband spit at Robinson's boots. Slowly, without moving his money hand, Robinson raised his M-4 to the man's heart. He wagged the money in the air.

When the husband reached for it Robinson pulled it back, just out of reach. He extended his index finger from the same hand and pointed out the gate. "You take," he said, "and you fucking go." A guardsman spoke quietly over Robinson's shoulder. The husband nodded. Robinson lowered his rifle and handed over the bundled money.

"Take her to a hospital," Hicks said. To the guardsman, "Tell him she has to see a doctor." The guardsman spoke. He took his wife by the arm and led her out the gate. The guardsmen rolled it closed.

They went back to their chairs. Robinson went back into the building.

Hicks stared at his crushed medic bag for a long time.

At the end of their shift Robinson came out with their relief. "I forgot to tell you, this is your last night with us. You're getting rotated out."

"What?" Hicks said. "When did you get word?"

"I've known for a week. Said they're taking you back when they come for the bomb, you'll catch a ride with EOD. You're going back to your line unit." To the guardsmen he said, "Open the gate. You two come with me. I'm adding a few more minutes to your shift."

"Where the fuck are you going?" Hicks said.

"We're going to go find my flask."

Matthew Robinson's writing has appeared online at Word Riot, Nailed Magazine, Gobshite Quarterly, *and in the short story anthology* The Night, and The Rain, and The River *published by Forest Avenue Press. He received his MFA in creative writing from Portland State University and lives and writes in Portland, Oregon.*

we stood in squares

By Christopher Muravez

every morning was another rally, another affirmation of our duty, where we were counted among those who believe in the will of our own versions of freedom. a post-modern nuremberg where all were present and accounted save for one newcomer, yet to be met in any real sense. he had come to us from texas and iraq, and little was known about him. his habits. his quirks. nothing. we were almost oblivious to him except for the name, which i shall not utter here.

we had to stand in squares, or rectangles, (i don't think axioms in form are necessary) four to five people deep, and six to ten people wide. we were counted this way because it left us anonymous. we weren't known this way, simply a part of the grid. our number. my coordinates were headquarters platoon, motor pool, second squad, bravo team, mechanic number three (or sometimes two if drake—the squad fuck-up—was too drunk to make it that morning then i'd be promoted by default and left in charge of one other person).

i had had one other duty aside from greasing bearings, changing tires, fixing wiring, and the occasional oil change. they found out i could count, and gave me the grave responsibility of counting the keys to the rooms in our barracks. i was an underglorified hotel clerk, swank places had better uniforms. so when missile platoon, fourth squad, bravo team, technician number four was missing they sent me to grab his room key from the grey metallic box hanging in the supply office and to which only i had access that day.

like a good soldier i ran from the square on order. found the box. found number 213. took key 213. ran to room 213 where i was greeted by a tall and unhealthily skinny man who had killed more people than i can count without taking my boots off. he gave the order to open the door and search the room for missile platoon, fourth squad, bravo team, tech number four.

i followed this order.

the room was tidy save for the bed sheets askew and an open copy of *The Sun Also Rises* sitting on the desk across from the bed. i had concluded he wasn't here and was telling tall'n'skinny just as much until i noticed a pair of feet propped up in the bathtub. i opened the door to the bathroom completely. there was tech number four hanging, awkwardly, from the shower head by way of a silk red rope whose texture was that of smooth and ecstatic constriction. he was wearing a sun skirt, the type that flows in windswept shores during the months before and after torrential rains and sun blisters. of course i was taken aback by the deceased's wardrobe selection, but this was overshadowed by the rigor mortis of his uncircumcised cock he dutifully held.

auto-erotic asphyxiation.

investigators later assumed that the man was not man at all and were in the process of opening a murder investigation and (non)man hunt for the masturbatorial dead man. it was i who had to point my shaking index finger to the purpleacious member in order to let the idiot investigator find out for himself that he assumed the wrong sex. apparently women hanging from shower heads with morning facial hair shadows were standard issue enough to just assume.

tech number four was never a formal suspect in the murder investigation of his own death. who knows, had it not been for the subsidence of nausea to a proper level where a crude and base form of communication was possible, two yopper speaking minnesota residents might have grieved a little differently for a brief period of what would seem like never and always.

sometimes we leave this world doing what we want when
every
thing
else
tries
to tell us
no.

Chris Muravez finished his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Sierra Nevada College, and is currently pursuing his MFA in Creative Writing at The University of Notre Dame. He is a ten year veteran of the U.S. Army and the Army National Guard. His poetry focuses on exploring the damaging effects of war on both the society and the individual. His poems have been featured in The Mochila Review, Santa Clara Review, *and* South 85 Journal. *He has also worked on the* Sierra Nevada Review *(Sierra Nevada College's literary journal) as an editor. Apart from reading and writing, Chris also enjoys cheeseburgers and heavy metal.*

Airborne

By Jens Hughes

Be a paratrooper and face your fears, my recruiter told me, and it sounded like the only thing I could do to become a man. Now I've faced heights over twenty times and I don't feel any manlier. The only thing that I know for certain is that, someday, I'm going to punch my recruiter in the face.

We sit on twenty or so hundred-foot long benches at Green Ramp waiting to "put our knees in the breeze." We've already donned our chutes, reserve chutes, weapons and rucksacks. It's the waiting game now. We're jumping so some VIPs can look at all the pretty paratroopers floating to the ground, and dog-and-pony shows never happen on time.

I lean my head back on the bench, the perfect height to rest the back of my helmet on, and close my eyes. This is the time that I always ask God to see me through in exchange for me not using his name in vain. Sometimes I promise to start attending church. Promises that I never follow through with but they still make me feel safer.

"Chalk Two, let's go!"

Our bench starts the linear waddle to the ramp at the back of a C-130. The idling engines of twelve birds roar on the tarmac.

This portion of a jump is a medley of head nods and fist bumps. Fist bumps with our left hands because our right is always covering the reserve deployment handle. I didn't take that practice seriously until a sergeant was decapitated when his reserve deployed, snaked to the door, and pulled him out at a couple of hundred miles an hour.

At the ramp, we wait again. The Air Force personnel pack us in tight so it takes eight people a while to sit down. Waters, the largest person in my unit, stumbles into his seat and nearly sits on my lap. He's always busting balls and smiling. I love the guy, but right now, he's taking up my elbow room.

The ramp closes and the Air Force guys walk across our laps to get to the front of the cargo hold. The engine noise amplifies and the thrust causes me to lean on top of Waters. We're in the air, shaking with occasional turbulence, before he has the opportunity to tell a homophobic joke at my expense. The C-130 can get off the ground faster than any bird its size.

Looking around, I smile and try to appear relaxed but really, I'm seeing if any of my comrades are as scared as I am. Reassuring young soldiers takes my mind off the fear of having a chute malfunction or getting hung up in the door but around me, everyone looks fine.

"Luke, you wanna go to Raleigh tomorrow?" Waters yells to broadcast over the engines.

"If my chute opens, yeah!" I yell back.

"Man, I shouldn't have eaten that MRE," he jokes in reference to the time he puked on the back of my uniform right before a jump.

"Ten minutes!" The jumpmaster yells and we unhook our safety belts.

"Outboard personnel, stand up!" He signals by holding his arms out like the Vitruvian Man.

I reach my arm out and help the person in front of me stand.

"Inboard personnel, stand up!" He points his arms straight in front of his crotch as if to say *I caught a fish this big*. I'm helped to my feet.

The side doors at the front of the cargo hold are opened and the wind blows in. Seeing the pitch dark of the outside comforts me. Not being able to see the ground helps me overlook how high we are.

"Sound off for equipment check!" the jumpmaster says while putting his hands to his ears.

The men at the rear of the bird slaps the butt of the man in front of him and yells "Okay." This is reciprocated to the front of the cargo hold. Waters stings me with his massive hand and yells okay.

"Hook up!"

We snap our static lines to the metal wire above our heads and hold it with our inboard hands, right hand in this case, and switch to covering our reserves with our left. My stomach churns and I stare at the red light above the door even though I know it won't turn green for seven more minutes. The jumpmaster hooks himself to the safety harness, places his arms on both sides of the door and leans his body out to look for landmarks. He holds his hand up to signify five minutes.

"Five minutes!" we echo to the back so that people who can't see can prepare themselves.

"Let's get some, Haggerty!" Waters yells in my ear and slaps the back of the helmet. I nod and return to making empty promises to God. The jumpmaster leans back in and holds up his index finger.

"One minute!" we yell. I stare at the red light like it just told a foul-mouthed joke about my mom.

The light turns green and the jumpmaster yells, "Go!"

The line of soldiers runs towards the door. In a couple of seconds, I go from twenty soldiers away from the door to handing my static line to the jumpmaster. I turn to my left and launch myself

out. The hot air from the jet wash hits me and I begin my count. *One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four . . .*

My chute snaps open and jerks me from terminal velocity to a slow fall. *It opened. Thank you, God.* I begin to look for a blinking red light on the ground where my unit is assembling. If I can see it from this height I can slip towards it and make my jog substantially less but before I can make it out, an inflated chute begins to cross underneath me.

"Slip away!" I yell, pulling down on my front left riser but it's too late for either of us to move. He's stealing my wind and I'm in serious trouble when my feet hit his apex. Churning my legs, I make almost no progress towards the edge of his chute. I feel my risers losing tension and try frantically to get out of the trap. My risers drop below my shoulder level and my chute is just above my eye level. I still have a few feet to go.

Diving face first, I escape. Free fall begins again but just for a moment. My chute inflates but is half inverted. It's giving only part of the lift it should and I have no control of my fall. I'm too low to deploy my reserve now. Wind whistles in my ears as I drift backwards. I get into my landing position and try to relax my body. I close my eyes; impact is close.

My back hits flush on a mound of dirt. I see white, my chin strap shreds, and my helmet flies to who knows where. Semi-conscious, I'm getting dragged across the earth by my chute. *Now you work.* I undo the quick snap on my shoulder that releases the riser, and the chute deflates. My movement stops and I stay on my back as I do a mental evaluation of my health. I move my legs and arms and, other than some wooziness, I'm fine. I gather my gear, get the lay of the land, and run to my assembly area.

"What's up with the chin strap, John Wayne?" Waters asks me.

"One of those jumps. So, what do ya wanna do in Raleigh?"

Jens Hughes served for nine years in the regular Army and the Arizona National Guard as an artilleryman and a mortarman. While he has always enjoyed a good story, it wasn't until his enlistment ended that he began to create stories of his own. He has written a few short stories and a science-fiction novel, Beyond Technologies.

Poetry.

Heroin By Any Other Name

By Dwight Jenkins

There is really nothing
like unleashed anger
to clarify the mind
and its brutal
intentions.

It is pure enough
to languor,
bubble and revel
in its myriad
sad inventions.

A Returning

Dwight Jenkins

With the passing of the storm and the setting of the sun
Comes the advent of the night and the breeze
But the heat stays true to form and disappears into its gun
Where the chamber slides the bullet home with ease

Dwight Jenkins served in the Marine Corps from August 1979 to December 1991. Trained as a rifleman, he was selected to guard the Corps' top generals at the Marine Barracks in D.C. before guarding Presidents Carter and Reagan at Camp David. He reenlisted in 1984 as an F-18 Radar Technician, serving with VMFA-531 in El Toro, CA, before accepting an enlisted commissioning program and becoming a disbursing officer. He was deployed with the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August of 1990. Desert Storm found his larger parent units, the 4th and 5th MEB's, practicing to invade Kuwait. Then they sailed home, safe and sound.

Vietnam raW War

Raymond Keen

We are watching the war.
It looks fuzzy.
It's too loud!

You're the closest,

So you
Turn down
The volume.

Raymond Keen's first volume of poetry, Love Poems for Cannibals, *was published in February 2014. His drama* The Private and Public Life of King Able *will be published in 2015. Since 2010, Raymond's poems have been accepted for publication by twenty-four literary journals. Raymond spent three years as a Navy clinical psychologist with a year in Vietnam (July 1967—July 1968). He worked as a school psychologist in the USA and overseas until his retirement in 2006. He lives with his wife Kemme in Sahuarita, AZ. They have two grown children.*

Soap and Oil

TJ Reynolds

O, holy women of Damascus sing me
down
like rain
—
—
—
I was twenty years old when a Sunni crone cursed me somewhere along the Syrian border of northern Iraq—maybe commonplace for some
but my first so something I'll not forget—her finger arcing up like an antler
and her eyes deep with the work of hatred—I was surprised to see it settle
on me —the curse—as light as a fedora and as keen as a mindful noose. If not for her older sister who I met months on the outskirts of Mosul I would have died in the callous sands of Babylon—she sat atop a spine that found its strength by curling upward on itself—wind carved stairs—a trunk of wisdom so heavy she pulled the shade's words from me. With bent hands and eyes softened with cataracts she cured me and spoke words
mulled in the balming oil of lay psalms in arabic like:

ah, a boy, how tall he's grown

and

yes, I'll pray for you and your friends.

In a Handful of Gluts

TJ Reynolds

As I hold the smallest between my neck and shoulder, a soft and babbling violin up from teething again at 3:30 AM, I find more to live by than at Halabja, more to say than Abu Ghraib.

So I hum a single hamdalah, and I hold this tiny woman.

—

Still no light outside, but the birds are already singing hallelujah.

TJ Reynolds is an MA student at California State University Fullerton. He served in 1/24th Infantry and deployed to Mosul, Iraq in 2004, which has inspired much of his creative drive. TJ resigns himself to the foolish and necessary hope that poetry and art can save the world.

clean sweep

David Shank

in soft wet sand
an homage intaglioed.
colossus bent.
a swagger dispatched
with Olympian indifference.

solarized, shaken.
planted arse, upright fetal.
frothy flows bathed his ovals.
ebbs fizzy reminder:
receding in all directions.

Being?
unnoticed at best.
a heartbeat, a blink,
a tear, a rattle,
then dawn.

Tides relentless breathing,
every repetition a rebirth.
asking and answering,
sacrificing all that is peripheral,
all that is me.

Dave Shank has worked as a professional musician for over forty years. He served in the United States Air Force, 6910th Radio Group Mobile, in Wiesbaden, Germany. Inspired by Tim McLafferty, Forge Journal *editor, Dave recently began writing seriously and instantly found a new passion.*

Interview.

A Conversation with Tobias Wolff

Tobias Wolff is the award-winning author of the novels *The Barracks Thief* and *Old School*, and the short story collections *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs, Back in the World, The Night in Question* and *Our Story Begins.* He is also the author of two acclaimed memoirs *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*, the latter of which focuses on his experiences while serving as an advisor in a Vietnamese infantry division in the Mekong Delta from 1967–1968. His work in both fiction and memoir has garnered many honors, including the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award—both for excellence in the short story—the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. His work appears regularly in *The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper's,* and other magazines and literary journals. *O-Dark-Thirty* Senior Editor, Jim Mathews, recently spoke with Wolff about his experiences in the military and how they helped shape his work.

O-Dark-Thirty: To kick us off, I thought we'd start with just the basics, so to speak. I know that you were in the Army and served in Vietnam in the late 1960s.

Tobias Wolff: That's right. I enlisted in the spring of '64 and got out in the spring of '68. My year in Vietnam was 1967 to '68. I got out of the service as soon as I got back to the States.

ODT: So you also straddled both the enlisted and officer tiers during your time in. What was that like?

TW: It was a strange transition. I was in the 3rd Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg as an enlisted man, and went from there to Officer Candidate School. I had once lost a scholarship to boarding school for failing mathematics—repeatedly. So, of course, the Army in its infinite wisdom sent me to Fort Sill to train as an artillery officer, which involved a lot of trigonometry and calculus. And then what does the Army do? It sends me back to Special Forces—which has no artillery. Typical Army logic. I went back to the Special Forces at Fort Bragg, where many officers and especially NCOs had known me as an enlisted man. I wasn't a bad soldier or I wouldn't have lasted or been sent to OCS, but I was a bit of a screw-up. Some of them were flabbergasted, to say the least, that I had come back wearing second lieutenant's bars. Meanwhile, in artillery school I had been losing out on the constant small-unit training that would have helped me become a more efficient team leader. But I tried my best to catch up, while anticipating getting orders for Vietnam, as this was spring and summer of '66. Well, I did get shipped out, but where I got shipped out to was Washington, DC, because the Army decided they needed me to speak Vietnamese. So I was sent to DC on civilian status to go to the Defense Language Institute to learn Vietnamese.

ODT: Now had you had any language training prior to this?

TW: Oh, sure. Latin. Which did me a lot of good later, but not then.

Actually, I had also learned a little French in school, which ultimately did turn out to be helpful. The language training was for ten months. So I go to DC, which is really throwing Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. I had a lot of friends there. That was where I'd been living when I enlisted. So I rented a house with an old friend of mine who was in college at the time. I went to language classes all day with other soldiers and sailors and Marines and foreign service officers, and afterwards I just went home in my civvies like a college kid. I had a girlfriend at the time living with me, so I was leading a civilian life. No military training at all for ten months.

ODT: Oh, so you didn't wear your uniform during the day?

TW: Right, when I say 'civilian,' I mean it. We weren't supposed to wear our uniforms to class. I went out to Fort Belvoir to do jumps every three months to stay qualified and get my jump pay. But other than that, nothing. Then they sent me back to my unit and I went over. And by that time, not only had I been in the artillery school for six months, but then I'd been on civilian status for ten more months. And then I was thrown into the war. So I was really out of training, really unprepared. The Army did not think this out very well.

ODT: Did your passion and desire to be a writer precede your experience with the Army?

TW: Oh absolutely. I had wanted to be a writer ever since I was a teenager. I had been writing a long time and I even wrote when I was in Vietnam. Nothing that ended up being publishable. But it kept the flame burning. So I did my tour in Vietnam, came back and settled some affairs in the States and, by a fluke, I ended up going to England with a friend to travel around. We were going to buy

motorcycles and ride all over Europe. But that didn't happen. He got married and I stayed on in England. At the end of the summer, I started studying for the entrance examinations at Oxford University. I passed them and got in. I stayed there and got a degree in English at Oxford.

ODT: And is that where you began to study the craft of fiction more intensely?

TW: Well, I wrote every day. I finished a novel during the time I was a student there. I was an older student, to be sure—I was twenty-seven when I graduated, some years older than most of my classmates. But I wrote a novel and it was published. I don't list it among my publications because I don't like it and it's not very good. But I thought it was good at the time or I wouldn't have published it.

ODT: This was* Ugly Rumours*?

TW: I'm afraid so.

ODT: That's the one book of yours I haven't read.

TW: Yeah, well, I hope you never do. It's hard to get hold of, anyway. If you look at booksellers' catalogs and you see a copy for sale, it will not cost less than $750. Not because it's good but because it's rare.

ODT: So after Oxford, you returned to the States?

TW: Yes, I worked for a time as a reporter for the *Washington Post.* This was during the Watergate era. But my desire to be a writer was so great that even though I had a good job as a reporter, I was not

getting the time I needed. If you work all day as a reporter, you don't feel like going home and writing fiction. You're exhausted and that part of your mind is used up. And I knew I'd never end up writing if I stayed, because the newsroom was filled with people who'd started out wanting to be writers, and I didn't want to become one of them. So I quit, moved out to San Francisco, a city I had fallen in love with when I was preparing to ship out to Vietnam and then again coming back. I worked odd jobs there after leaving the Post. I was a night watchman for a time and also a waiter. Then I got a job teaching high school at a Catholic boys' school. I did that for a couple of years and kept writing. The writing I did then won me a fellowship at Stanford. And that really made the rest of my life possible because I got much better as a writer during that time, and was offered a job teaching at Stanford for a few years, and then got another job at Syracuse University, where I stayed for seventeen years. I wrote several of my books there. And ultimately came back here to Stanford in 1997. This is my last year of teaching because I just want to write from now on.

ODT: Your experience in the military has certainly played a major part in your fiction, certainly in* The Barracks Thief *but also several other stories. How much did you draw on those experiences and do you still do that?

TW: Yes, to some extent. I also wrote a memoir [*In Pharaoh's Army*] about my time in Vietnam. So those are a couple of obvious examples. And here and there, you'll see the military come up in my short stories.

ODT: Right, I think your story "Soldier's Joy" has a military setting and military characters.

TW: Sure, and an old one called "Wingfield" and a more recent one called "Awaiting Orders." And there are probably two or three others. But it isn't something I go to very often. Every once in a while, though, I will draw on those experiences. They were very important to me. And I draw on them not just for the obvious war material but for what I learned from it. For example, I've become extremely suspicious of authority and "official" statements about things. In the case of Vietnam, there was an almost comical discrepancy between the war that was being described at home by the government and what I was seeing on the ground over there. All soldiers, I think, have that experience because it's the business of the government to promote the war and theirs to fight it. And it made a—I won't say a cynic—but it made a skeptic of me about almost everything.

ODT: You ended up writing your memoir about your Vietnam experiences,* In Pharaoh's Army, *some twenty-five years after you returned. Was it something you had wanted to do over those years and it simply took that long to make it happen?

TW: That was when I had enough distance to be able to write about it. I took a crack at it when I first got back, but I was too close to the material. So yes, it took me a little time to step back. I did have a pretty good resource for refreshing my memory of what happened. Although I didn't keep a journal, I did send a lot of letters home to my mother and my brother. They were kind enough to give me those letters when I finally decided to write this book, which helped me reconstitute some of the basic facts. But I also have a pretty good memory, in fact, a pretty vivid memory of what went on that year.

***ODT: I actually attended a reading that you gave here in DC at Politics & Prose back in 1995 where you read from* In Pharaoh's**

Army, ***and I recall you saying that while your letters home helped get things straight with the dates and such, they weren't otherwise very helpful.***

TW: Yes, the factual stuff was helpful, but the pretense of how upbeat I was about the whole thing, and here and there a bit of swagger—that was false. I knew that had all been for the consumption of the folks at home and a bit of a pose. And I think all soldiers writing home tend to exaggerate a bit, without really meaning to, or being guilty of bad intentions.

ODT: You were one of the first workshop leaders for the National Endowment of the Arts Operation Homecoming. What was that like?

TW: It was great. I worked with Marines down at Camp Pendleton and one of the things I really liked about the experience was that there were a lot of women Marines. The workshops also included the wives and husbands of Marines who had been deployed, and so we were able to capture what that experience was like for them, having to hold everything together back at home. It provided these young writers with an opportunity to express the cost of war deployment, but also the exhilaration of their experiences. You know you just can't get away from that. But I remember one woman Marine in particular, who talked about getting a teddy bear from her daughter. She described how she could smell her daughter on the bear and how she would hold it to her face every night before she went to sleep. And that really touched me. I didn't have kids when I was in Vietnam, thank God, but I have three now and the idea of being separated when they were young, that's really hard to think about.

ODT: So are you excited about the prospect of the literary perspective of women serving in combat roles—an aspect that may have been lacking in other wars?

TW: Yes, it's true about this generation of veteran writers. Many American women soldiers and Marines were exposed in a way that previous generations weren't, so that experience and perspective will be unique.

ODT: Do you have any advice for young writers who are veterans and who are now pursuing fiction and nonfiction?

TW: Sure, and the first big tip is you've got to do it. You don't know how to write when you start. The best teacher of writing is the process of writing. What you are working on will teach you how to write it. But you have to do it. You have to sit down and be uncomfortable and wish the hell you were doing something else, anything else. Stay away from your e-mail. Stay away from the Internet. Do the hard thing, stay with it. Try to tell that story you have to tell. And be patient with yourself. Writing is an art as much as learning an instrument is. We all know that when we sit down for the first time at a piano, we're not going to produce pretty music. But we also know that if we sit down every day and practice, we will produce it. Writing is like that. You have to be patient the way someone learning an instrument is patient and you have to be willing to hit a lot of sour notes before you start hitting them right. Do it and be patient with yourself as you do it.

ODT: So in your day-to-day writing activities, do you have any specific tricks of the trade, as it were? I had interviewed Robert Bausch, for example, who told me that he sometimes writes with

his monitor off—just to keep himself from editing while he hammers out a first draft.

TW: No I can't do anything like that. I just can't stop self-editing. I understand the desire to escape that trap because I fall into it again and again, but I guess I'm destined for it.

ODT: You know, I've noticed that many of the submissions we get at* O-Dark-Thirty, *and stories we hear at our free seminars, are military-themed stories with military settings and military characters. That's fine, but we've also tried to encourage them not to limit themselves to just those types of stories. In other words, don't just be a veteran who writes, but a writer who just happens to be a veteran.

TW: I think that's excellent advice. One way to do that is for them to imagine the lives of their friends and their family members. Imagine themselves on the other side of that divide and what a day in their life might be like. But that's an excellent distinction to make—not a veteran writer, but a writer who happens to be a veteran.

ODT: So as a parting shot, I think you said you'd be teaching less and writing more?

TW: That's right. I've got a book in progress that I hope to finish in the next year or so. It's a novel.

ODT: Well, best of luck with that, and I very much appreciate your time today.

TW: Nice talking to you. I enjoyed it.

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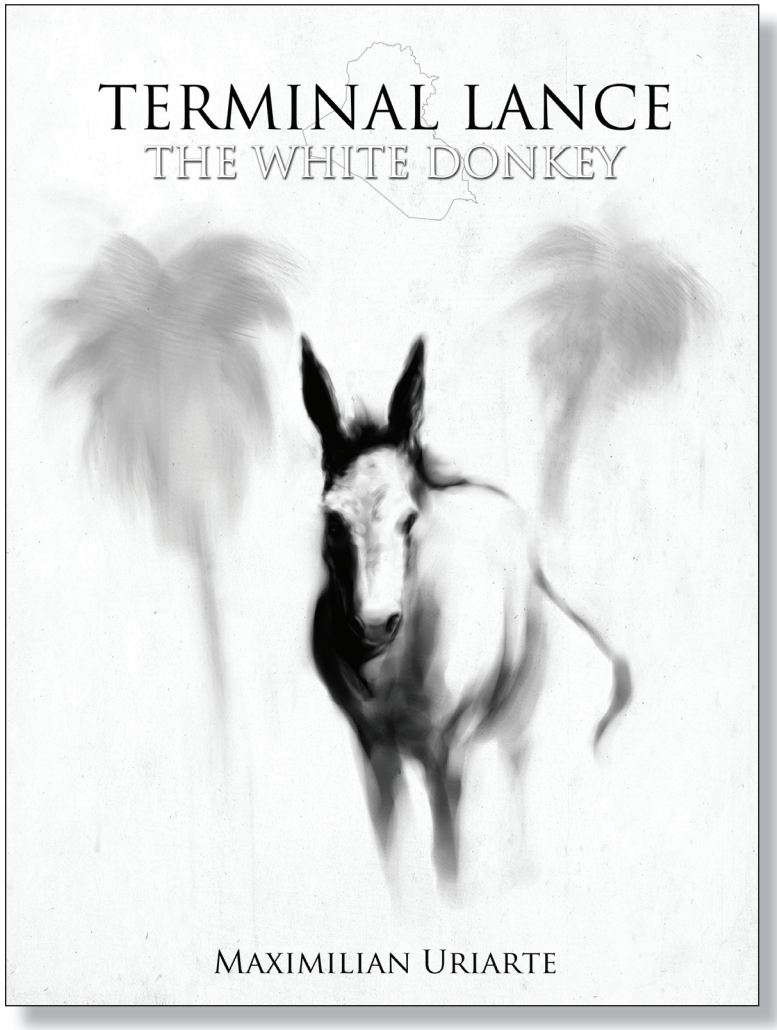

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