O-Dark-Thirty

Spring 2016

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A Literary Journal

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On the cover:
Patrol on top of the 6,000 feature, Kabul, Afghansitan,
watercolour inks on paper
by Matthew Cook

Since graduating with a First-class Honours degree with Distinction from Saint Martins and Kingston School of Art, in 1986, Matthew has travelled the world as an artist, working in Papua New Guinea, North Korea, Brazil, Peru, New Zealand and the United States, among other countries. His many and varied commissions in the UK have included illustrating stamps for the Royal Mail, several portfolios of work for *The Times*—not least the coverage of four parliamentary elections—and a role as the All England Lawn Tennis Clubs' first Championship Artist. His work is held in several public collections, including the Ministry of Defence Art Collection, The National Army Museum in Chelsea and The Times Archive. *The Times* newspaper sent him as a war artist, to draw the Invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Ministry of Defence sent him to draw in Afghanistan on seven occasions, between 2006 and 2013.

Matthew has also served in the British armed forces. In 1991, he joined the 10th Battalion of the Parachute Regiment and then The Rifles of the Army Reserves. He served in Iraq on Operation Telic 3 in 2004, eventually leaving the reservists in 2015.

Matthew's work as a war artist can be seen in the new book
War Artists in Afghanistan: Beyond the Wire
(Also featured is the work of *O-Dark-Thirty* Art Editor, Michael Fay)

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Editor's Note

Welcome to our annual Memorial Day issue of *O-Dark-Thirty*. Like the rest of the nation, we veterans consider Memorial Day to be a solemn day of remembrance. Unlike the vast majority of Americans, we more often bring to that consideration intensely personal thoughts and prayers for those with whom we served and who are no longer with us.

One service member who always finds his way into my thoughts and prayers was someone I never actually met face-to-face. While finishing up my second tour in Iraq in 2006, I was asked by a stateside colleague to reach out to his good friend, a fighter pilot, who had just been deployed to my location. The pilot was Major Troy "Trojan" Gilbert. I immediately sent an e-mail to the major and suggested that we grab a cup of coffee at the base chow hall. He responded with enthusiasm about our shared acquaintance and the chance to pick my brain about the lay of the land. Unfortunately, our shift schedules never aligned, and we ultimately missed the opportunity to meet in person. In a final e-mail before I redeployed, I let him know that perhaps we could try to meet again when he was "back in the world," this time over an ice cold beer.

Several weeks after redeploying stateside, the colleague who had contacted me about Major Gilbert sent me another e-mail with the alarming subject line: "Terrible news." Major Gilbert had just been killed in action after his F-16 crashed. His sacrifice came while

courageously supporting ground troops fighting north of Baghdad. He left behind a wife, five children, and a nation forever indebted to his service and bravery.

It's difficult even now for me to write about that fleeting exchange of e-mails with Major Gilbert. But it's something I will never forget nor will I ever stop saying a prayer for him and his family every year on this solemn day.

In many ways, what drives us to write is also deeply rooted in personal memories or events. Almost all writers can trace their first spark of literary passion to a single profound encounter with the written word. For me, it was my first reading of Flannery O'Connor's classic short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." For award-winning novelist, Jesse Goolsby—whose interview appears in this issue—it was a professor who insisted he read *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway.

As editors of this journal, one goal we share is a firm desire to provide service members and veterans and their family members the opportunity to give voice to their own literary passion which has undoubtedly been built on their own literary memories. One day, perhaps many years from now, our readers and future writers may trace their own literary spark to a story or poem first presented within these very pages.

James Mathews
Senior Editor

Non-fiction.

If You Had It to Do All Over Again

By Mara Lubans-Othic

Dear MaraMouse,

When you join the Army—right after you swear to defend the constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and to obey the orders of the officers appointed over you, but before you learn to say no, like you mean it, to those same officers—douche-bag, fuck-tard, and ass-hat will become words that you say. These words will become part of your patois. You will no longer use words like patois.

These words will become acceptable and your liberal use of them will speed your inclusion into the boys' club that the 501st MP Company is, that the 293rd MP Company is, that the Army is. Words like "happy" and "sad" will not help you and you should refrain from using them, unless used in a context like: "I'm happy that you found the fucking radio, now dummy-cord it to yourself" or "I'm sad that Hampton's wife is leaving him for a woman, but let's admit we all saw it coming." You'll be surprised at how quickly you adopt these words and say them with more frequency than you ever said words like "I love you" or "I'm sorry" to your mother and father and brother. Years later, when you have rejoined polite society, you will make

many mental notes that you need to clean up your language. You will make New Year's resolutions centered on your embarrassment of how often you use the word "fuck." You still let "fuck" slip far too often, in all its permutations. Some people will think this is endearing; most won't. You probably won't really give a fuck.

Whatever you do, though, you shouldn't cry. If you must, if you find yourself horrified by the things that Staff Sergeant Fillmore says to you when no one else can hear, if you feel at odds with your core beliefs as you watch your own soldier drag a shackled man across the floor, if the indirect fire lands so close to your tent that you lose control of your bladder and your composure for just a second, do it when you're somewhere you can be alone for a while. Though the men you work with may not know what to do if you do happen to shed a few tears, they certainly have a knack for recognizing the raw eyes and red nose. They've seen it with their wives and girlfriends and sisters and mothers. And you will, sometimes, be all of these things to them. When Branson asks you if you're OK after that one time with the boy with the peanut allergy, you'll want to cry more. This should be avoided. I don't want you to think that these men are heartless—they aren't—but they are uncomfortable around you. It's not shyness, it's just that they don't know what to expect from you.

To help them through these times of confusion, the best you can do is to keep up with them on runs. Pass them on a ruck march. Do as many push-ups as they do. Do more sit-ups than they do. This will help them know how to respond to you because they will respect your physicality. You'll never do as many push-ups and you'll never keep up with them on a run, but you'll routinely do more sit-ups. And you'll lead them by a half mile on the ruck march. Your platoon sergeant will say "Way to set the example, Sergeant Anspaugh." Anyway, some of them will become like a brother to you. You will share a bond with them. It may be fleeting—here only for the time you are stationed at their base and in the same platoon—but it is worthwhile.

You will be encouraged to show little weakness. Maybe only a tenderness to certain fragile things. Handle dead children like you might handle a small animal. Like a lamb. Cradle him or her in your arms and do not think about the children you might have one day. This is a tough one, though; fair warning to you. Mentally prepare yourself for these days—there will be more than one—by thinking of how you want to be stoic and tearless. The gratitude you sense in the press of the family's hands and the liquid gaze of the mother's eyes will not be enough to smother the guilt and shame you'll carry with you after you break down and sob because you don't know how to fix their child. The shame you feel will make it hard to think of how to end this sentence.

Anyway, you should try to be photogenic, too. The public loves pictures of soldiers, male or female, tenderly handling children. Or giving children chocolate to distract their eyes from seeing their fathers and uncles trussed and hooded like pigs on the ground. When you are given chocolate by the photographer who has accompanied the infantry platoon you are attached to into this remote valley where they are doing "knock and talks," politely hand it back to him and tell him to give it to the little boy himself. But you won't, and you'll wish you had, especially when you see the picture misappropriated and misattributed and mistitled: "Iraq: Reconciliation." Make sure your hair is always tightly bound. When you look at the "gifting chocolate" picture of yourself later, you don't want to fixate on strands of hair coming loose from the bun under your helmet. It looks messy and unprofessional. It distracts you from the fact that, at that moment, in that photograph, you are feeling a tense, roiling mixture of power and benevolence, fear and marvel.

Speaking of photogenic, you should never *admit* to wearing makeup, but you should strive to be at least a "seven," because that makes you an Army "ten." And, well, who wouldn't want to be a "ten" at least once in their life?

Despite your best attempts, you will never be able to pee into a Gatorade bottle or a Pringles can while sitting in the team leader position of the up-armored HMMWV. You will wish you had brought Depends. You will develop a deep, lingering envy of men and their penises. The plates in your vest will make it nearly impossible to reach the buttons of your pants, let alone scoot them off as you are jostled over the roughly paved Afghan road. This is one of many things that are unfair. But when the pressure in your bladder threatens to become an emergency, and after you make the radio call and ask the commander of the forty-plus vehicle convoy to *please stop* so you can pee, you should squat right next to your HMMWV and let it go. Because unwittingly wandering off into a mine field is not worth what shred of modesty you have left.

In spite of the face-searing embarrassment, you will have the perverse pleasure of knowing that day you formed a unique bond with your female platoon leader over your mutual need to take a piss. This memory will prompt you to want to message her on Facebook and ask her about the time you squatted on the Pakistan border behind a poncho, and which one of you it was that needed to take a shit, and which one of you it was that needed to change a tampon. You'll remind her of how she slept alone in the big office in the crumble-down air traffic control center in Jalalabad and how she awoke to see Afghan men stacked three-deep at the small window in the door, all breathless, hot and bothered to capture a glimpse of the blond American woman. You will hope she laughs. But then you'll get to her Facebook page and open a new message to her and read the one that you sent her last time to which she didn't respond. And you'll write "Hi, Emily, exclamation point, smiley face emoji" and then reconsider the bond you thought you had. You'll think about the time she asked if you had ever "dated or fucked Staff Sergeant Vargas," because she couldn't think of a more creative reason for why he badmouths you, why he goes out of his way to undermine and

humiliate you. Because it must have been something you did. And you'll close Facebook and keep writing your own story. Maybe her memories will matter later, but they don't right now.

You should stay focused on the good, the positive. Keep a journal and write in it every night. Write the amazing, and write the crippling truth of what it means to have a say in when another person sleeps, eats, shits, reads, walks, wakes. Write the power that running with a pistol strapped to your leg gives you, how it makes you feel a little bit like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, even when it's chafed the shit out of your thigh and you're only halfway around the airfield. Write the lushness of Jalalabad. Write the airplane graveyard. Write the interpreter named Nash who has blue eyes and says he loves you.

Interpreters may give you gifts—you should accept them graciously but ignore any rumors of impending marriage to the aforementioned interpreter. Likewise, even if an interpreter has given you a fake, blue sapphire ring, you should not let him put it on your finger himself. You'll never be sure if he was kidding when he said that you were now his fiancé. I would also advise against letting him use your electric toothbrush when he asks to. Just be careful with the words you choose to deny him that particular pleasure. You may deeply offend him.

Be especially wary of warlords. When you meet one and shake hands with him and feel the scrape of his fingernail against the white flesh of your palm—a proposition of sex with him—do not recoil in disgust. You don't want to see the knowing grin on his face because he knows that you know. Rather, you should return his leer with a face of cold marble, the sternest, most impassable countenance you can muster. Scowl at him. Leer back. Square your goddamn shoulders and yawn in his face, showing all the teeth you have that he doesn't. And when a warlord offers your squad leader a large number of goats as payment for you, it's OK to feel something akin to pride at this. But even though goats are all right, camels would be better.

Set free the camel spiders and the scorpions trapped in the plastic bottles and sold to you for a dollar. They don't want to fight any more than you do.

At the market in Kabul, spend more time speaking to the little girls that approach you. They have a hard road ahead. Stand at the front of the commander's vehicle and smile at them. Kneel down, point the muzzle of your rifle to the ground behind you, and engage with them. Forget your pride here. There will soon be a crowd of 200 or more people who want to see who—or what—you are. Use the interpreter there to speak to them. Speak to them more. Do not answer timidly that you "don't have a husband" and listen as all the men suck their teeth. Tell them instead you don't need a husband, you provide for yourself, as many women do where you come from. It doesn't have to be about the United States. It doesn't have to be about the pity they feel for you, or the pity you feel for yourself that you don't have a good man. You will, later. When the 'terp says they want to know where your children are, maybe you should just throw your head back and laugh a maniacal laugh, as though you ate them. Or maybe you should just answer truthfully, that you don't have any. Don't worry about it. Because right then, there, that is the time to be all glimmering smiles and shiny blondishness and standing tall in your uniform with your M4/203. Wave a Miss "I'll say fuck if I want to" North Carolina wave at them. Smile your best smile at the women gathered before you. Shake the hand of the little boy. Believe that, in that instant, you opened his eyes to the big world. Kneel to say hello to the shy girl that stands in front of her father, clutching his robes. Keep the image of her smile with you and don't let it go.

You'll need it for those other days when the air around Bagram seems heavier, harder to breathe, laden with exhaust and beaten thick by helicopters returning with soldiers now or soon destined for Arlington.

When your parents write and ask you to contribute to the *Durham Herald-Sun*, jump at the chance. You should write more than two articles. You should become the darling of Durham, North Carolina. You should tell all the people back home what it's really like. Write your story from the crowded MWR room on the second floor of the detainment facility. Use words like *happy* and *sad, confused* and *heartbreak*. Tell them the pineapple you eat there is the best you've ever had. Casually mention that it's not OK all media attention has been directed away from Afghanistan and toward Iraq. Gently suggest if we don't tie up loose ends now, we'll be back sooner than we'd like. They won't want to know, but should. Write about crying over the broken bodies of children. Write about how hard it is to find a place to pee in a mine field. Write about your unrealistic commitment to *leave no trace*, and of needing to rid your cargo pocket of a soiled tampon on the Pakistan border. Write about how lonely you are in a tent of five other women, each desperate and callous in her effort to survive. Tell them how the rhythmic highs and lows of helicopters spinning up lull you to sleep. How it's hard to suppress the gut-twisting anxiety when you see the Africans work their mine detecting dogs on thirty-foot leashes, and how you flinch when you hear a dog blow up. How there's an Afghan man who passes through your gate most days; your team always has a cup of water waiting for him. He pops his glass eye out, drops it in with a plunk and a swish, grins at you, fishes it out and walks away. Write how you think that smile means you're doing the right thing. Tell them how you wonder if you're doing the right thing, if all these mistakes you make will ever become undone. If you'll ever see yourself in the same way. If you'll ever have use for these words again. Anyway, once you have written all these things for all those people, you should start again and write them for yourself.

All the love in the world, and then some,
Sergeant Princess Mara

Mara Lubans-Othic is a nonfiction writer and MFA candidate at Oregon State University. She served in the Army from 1998 to 2013. She and her husband (also a veteran) live in the Willamette Valley, where they raise chickens and trouble.

How the Marine Corps Saved My Life

By Rory Holderness

Well, that's a bit dramatic. But "How the Marine Corps Reeeeeeeally Helped Me Become Better at Stuff" is just too long, and it lacks a bit of panache. I have never been one for a panacheless title, so here we are.

I went down to Marine Corps boot camp in January of 2003. To say that it was transformative would be an understatement. I realized a hell of a lot about myself in those few months. I learned that I could absolutely be disciplined if need be, that I could shoot really well and that I was pretty good at the whole military thing. This would shock you if you knew me in 2003 (probably today, too). I excelled, earning a meritorious promotion and getting by without reenacting *Full Metal Jacket* too much.

Once I got to my unit, I realized that boot camp and infantry school were not in fact the hardest things I'll ever have to do. They are merely training you for the actual hard stuff. I deployed to Afghanistan with my unit shortly after joining it and worked my way up from A-gunner to squad leader. I should mention that my job in the infantry was shooting rockets. It has no real relevance, but blowing stuff up is really awesome. Shout out to ten-years-ago me!

We did some interesting stuff (including scaring the president of Afghanistan so badly that Bush had to come and personally apologize) but those stories are for a different piece. We spent most of our time in Afghanistan out at a forward operating base (clever term for shitty temporary base instead of a real permanent one) near the Pakistani border. Like, I could see it. We would do patrols for a few days at a time, sometimes focused on raiding houses the villagers had told us contained terrorists or weapons caches. It was rough and harrowing (got in my first firefight on one of those) but also extremely satisfying. I don't pretend to speak for all of the military nor all of the civilians of Afghanistan, but all I know is that 95 percent of the people we encountered loved us and were extremely glad that we were pushing the Taliban out of their village. So it was the first thing I'd ever done in my life that felt like I was directly affecting other people's quality of life in a positive way. I had also not really seen many impoverished areas before. When you see that there are people whose only concern is where they will find a miniscule amount of water and rice to take care of their family, it really puts your life in perspective. I know we all know this philosophically. But actually seeing it with my own eyes really made me understand what that meant. I was deployed to the Middle East a second time in 2005. We basically floated into the Persian Gulf and were on call where needed. We did a variety of things, ranging from feeding hungry civilians in Ethiopia, patrolling the Gaza strip, to getting a freaking rocket shot at our gigantic thousand-foot LHD amphibious warship. Don't worry, the dude was a horrible marksman and missed so the *USS Kearsarge* was pretty enough for Fleet Week the next year. Let me reiterate, he missed a thousand-foot ship from close range. I hope that guy is never on my *Call of Duty* team online.

But long before my amphibious heroics (since this is the written word you can't see my tongue but it is planted firmly in

cheek), I was a relatively shitty teenager. Or a really shitty teenager, it depends on whether you ask me, my brother or my parents. I was self-centered and entitled (like many of my demographic still are). I was doing a lot of bad, dumb stuff at the time. Not just enough to get my lifetime SeaWorld membership revoked, but enough to get kicked out of college, too. A really expensive one to which I had an academic scholarship, just to be more of an idiot. I partied and messed around, and was generally a slightly-more-than-usual self-absorbed teenager. But the school I was going to happened to be in Washington, D.C., I happened to live a block and a half from the White House, and it happened to be September, 2001. When 9/11 happened, I was profoundly disturbed. At the end of the school year, I had failed out with no plan. I also felt a sense of duty to my country. I enlisted in the Marine Corps, as a reservist Humvee driver. Unfortunately, I failed the drug test and had to wait. During the wait, I realized that I should do more. I changed my MOS (military occupational specialty—fancy way of saying "job") to the infantry and my enlistment to full-time. I was dumb enough to do everything else I've described but smart enough to know that I was an immature schmuck. I figured if anything could give me some discipline and direction, it would be the Marines. I was right.

When I got out, I realized that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. Weird for a twenty-three-year-old, right? I had served my country and fought in the infantry, perhaps the noblest of duties. But in the real world the ability to shoot well and blow things up is extremely worthless in the workplace. So I was back where I had started after failing out of school, really. I went back to school for nursing because I wanted to make money to support my child at that point. Doing something for money is usually a pretty bad idea. The classes were fine but I wasn't passionate about it. Then I took a basic chemistry class and everything changed. It was taught by a physicist

due to a lack of staff and I am so glad it was. He would go off on these tangents about crazy topics like time dilation and gravity as a bending of the space-time continuum. I soon realized that I found these tangents six hundred percent more interesting than the rest of the class.

So I switched my major and got a degree in physics. For those keeping score at home, the kid who failed out of freshman classes ended up graduating with honors from one of the best physics programs in the country. Now, I don't bring that up to brag (okay, not JUST to brag) but more to demonstrate what a different person I was. I know every twenty-six-year-old should be wiser and more mature than the nineteen-year-old version but this was more than that. I had learned how to be a grown-up without realizing it. It's not as simple as "the Corps gave me discipline so I succeeded in school." It's more complicated than that.

I think the single best thing I learned was situational management. That made civilian life so much easier. I've worked quite a few stressful jobs and had some really busy times. But at no point in my job life was someone's life on the line if I screwed up. That just makes everything not very stressful at all. You just do what you need to do and that's really it. There's no point sweating the rest, and if you do something wrong nobody's getting shot. It's very liberating. While I was in school, I worked in bars and restaurants and on the busiest days people would often ask me why I'm so calm. I moved like my ass was on fire, but there was a calmness and relaxation to it. I would always tell people that nobody was going to die if we failed to bring a patron some honey mustard sauce, so it's not the end of the world. At school, people would freak out about tests. I mean, freak out. College science majors are some stressed individuals. I would study and then just take the test. I generally did well, because not stressing yourself out actually makes it far easier to retain information.

Once I got out of school, I entered the telecommunications industry. I work in project management, where we live and die by one number: how many LTE sites we put on the air. Same situation all over again, people generally amp up their stress levels at the end of the month (and definitely the end of the year). I don't mean to make it sound like in all these situations I'm Sam Jackson-level cool surrounded by chickens with their heads cut off. He is far more handsome than I am. I just mean that in every situation I have been noticeably not stressed out and I think that has led to my success in these various fields.

Let me state for the record that I am not a robot. I do feel feelings, the normal range of human emotions. I just don't really get past seven on the stress meter anymore. Why bother? For me, I do not get better at decision-making when I am hyperstressed. It's an inverse relationship, actually. I have learned to maintain my head and do what I'm supposed to do regardless of insanity happening around me. That may not sound like it translates to civilian work life but it absolutely does. In pretty much any job I've ever had there have been two categories of things. Things that I can control and things that I cannot. What my training taught me was to focus on the former and do them right. The latter are absolutely useless except as stressors. It's not that different than logging off at five, saying "I did my piece in the correct format, now it is up to [insert other group] to do their bit." Going home and worrying about it not only accomplishes nothing, but it affects the home life. I go home to my wife and children each day satisfied that I've done my job to the best of my ability. That attitude leads to a relatively stress-free life. It also leads to doing good work, which people note. As an added bonus, most people in offices get uncomfortable when you say that nobody will get their heads sniped off if a spreadsheet is formatted incorrectly. It is fun to put people on edge, and bringing up the Grim Reaper is a good way to do that.

As long as I can remember, I have heard people say that the military brainwashes people. That's silly and I wouldn't trust someone who can't apply critical thinking to such nonsense. However, the sentiment has been around for ages. I think people often confuse obedience to orders with being brainwashed. As a Marine, my job was to do what I was told. If they had told me to shoot an unarmed civilian, I would have told whoever gave the order to fuck off. Nothing like that ever happened. But if I was told to get over to that building and start laying down cover fire, I would immediately do it. I wouldn't have a philosophical debate with my commanding officer on the tactical strategy he was attempting. That wasn't my job. It sounds simplistic but worrying about the things you have to in order to accomplish your task is the only thing that matters. All the rest is just noise. You can debate tactics later. If your suppressing fire doesn't get laid down immediately, somebody might die. Also, don't worry about whether or not the helicopter is showing up to get you the hell out of there; that's somebody else's job.

Rory Holderness is a Marine Corps combat veteran from Maryland who served two tours of the Middle East with the infantry. He wrote for the National Lampoon site during the four-month period it was kind of impressive to do so. He is currently working in the telecommunications field but will probably tell you jokes if you ask nicely.

Life is Like a Box of Beanies

By Lauren Halloran

In Afghanistan, there are storage conexes everywhere—steel freight containers, scattered and stacked around deployed military bases, outfitted with toilets and showers or bunk beds and two dressers. And in Gardez Valley, about sixty miles south of the capital city of Kabul, one holds Beanie Babies.

They're a striking contrast to the stark landscape: metallic unicorns and tie-dyed rabbits against the dusty brown ground, brown rolling hills, brown buildings, brown military vehicles; fluorescent pink flamingos and neon-speckled fish against harsh gravel walkways; fuzzy, floppy-eared basset hounds to the straggly mutts that sometimes wander past the conex. Inside, the Beanies are stored with other items designated for humanitarian assistance: bags of rice, winter coats, shoes, notebooks and pencils. That conex is where we housed our hopes, our wishes that everything was simple enough to be solved with a charitable gesture.

Many of the Beanie Babies arrived in boxes addressed to me, first Lieutenant Johnson, Forward Operating Base Gardez. I spent nine months there as the public affairs officer on a team working to build infrastructure and governance capacity in the region. It was

my first deployment, and though I didn't really know what to expect, many of the things I envisioned came to be true. There were long, thankless hours hunched behind a desk, punctuated by the occasional adrenaline burst of a trip "outside the wire." There were meals of dry meat, mashed potatoes, soggy vegetables, scalloped potatoes, overripe fruit, fried potatoes, baked potatoes, grilled potatoes. There were meager bathroom facilities—128 steps from my sleeping quarters to the nearest single toilet, sink and shower that I shared with eight other women.

When I deployed, on some level I must have expected the sounds of war, the echoes of distant and not-so-distant gunfire, and the whoosh of helicopter rotor blades stirring up dust and settling it back in a thick film over our buildings, our boots, our exposed skin, between our teeth. I had heard about the feel of war, the hug of body armor and the creep of paranoia that even a sixty-pound bulletproof vest can't keep away.

To a degree, I expected all of these things. I did not expect Beanie Babies.

The first few packages were addressed to my predecessor. He had informed the contact that I was taking over the program, but it took the mail system a while to catch up (approximately 2-4 weeks: Afghanistan time). The return address on the boxes was for Indiana, the headquarters of "Beanies for Baghdad," an organization that collects the stuffed animals to send to deployed military members for distribution to local children to help foster cross-cultural relationships. A noble idea, based on the premise that there is a surplus of Beanies in many US households from a fleeting time when they were thought to be a valuable collector's item. It seemed fitting that like so many other things that have outgrown their American usefulness—old magazines, computers, white Toyota sedans—the Beanie Babies would end up in Afghanistan.

I was no stranger to the toys. On a bookshelf in my childhood bedroom I still have one of the rare nine original Beanies, Flash the Dolphin. I bought him at a swim meet in my pre-teen years, handed over a soggy wad of allowance money in exchange for Flash and a muffin. I picked him because he was cute and my team mascot was a dolphin; it made perfect sense. It makes less sense why I still have him. Without the original tag he's not worth much. Maybe, as with the young adult novels scattered around him on my shelves, I'm just too lazy to get rid of him. Or perhaps I kept him because he's a reminder of simpler times, times when my biggest worry was winning a heat of the fifty-yard breaststroke. Not winning hearts and minds.

In Afghanistan, we sometimes took the Beanies with us on missions to local villages. While we met with government officials or tribal leaders, oversaw training programs or construction work, throngs of skinny tanned children played hide-and-seek between our vehicles. The boys were pushy, jockeying for the best view and practicing their English: "Madam, may I have a pen?" (We quickly learned to remove ours from the pen clips on our uniform sleeves, or they would disappear. Pocketfuls of crayons—and Beanies—were more economical.) The little girls were a product of their culture, timid and reserved. I watched them peek around the corners of the mud-brick *qalats* where they lived, their expressive eyes not yet hidden under *burqas*.

I never understood why the children were so fascinated by the American military. I like to think they saw us as their rescuers, riding in on our heavily armored steeds to pluck them from the grasps of insurgent control. But it's probably more accurate to call us aliens. Our big trucks were fascinating, so were our weapons and body armor, the brazenness with which we strode down their streets and burst into their homes. I was fascinating: a woman, wearing the same uniform as the men, doing the same work. And our stuff was endlessly,

insatiably fascinating.The children were excited not so much that they were getting cute, fuzzy bean-stuffed toys, but something—anything!—from the Americans. Except once.

Once, at the rear of a dingy building in the background of a meeting, I watched two girls lovingly prance their new Beanie Babies across the aisle between them. It was gentleness so rare in Afghanistan that I was unprepared to bear witness. My breath caught in my throat, and I felt my face crack and stretch into an unpracticed smile. Then I reached quietly into my bag and removed my camera. I needed this: evidence that gentleness still existed.

Typically, it was chaos. The men were shouting inside and the boys were shouting outside. Whether they were arguing about the number of locally hired security personnel needed to guard the newest paved stretch of the Khowst-Gardez road, or grabbing for crayons or an empty water bottle or a single flip-flop sandal, it was a frenzy of screeching voices, knobby elbows and dirty fingernails.

Back on base, we experienced our own frenzy at mail time. In a place so cut off from the rest of the world, our twice-weekly, weather-dependent airdrops were a somewhat predictable source of comfort, a scheduled reminder that life existed outside Afghanistan. By the end of the deployment we were all ordering and shipping items to ourselves just to hear our names at mail call (in 2-4 weeks). While we waited, our items made their way from vendors to the cargo space of a commercial airliner; to Germany or Spain for redistribution and refueling; likely to Kuwait or Kyrgyzstan for further sorting; then on military aircraft to the Regional Mail Distribution Center at Bagram Air Base, the military's main base in Afghanistan; then on a smaller aircraft to eastern region hubs in Khowst or Paktika provinces; then finally by helicopter to Gardez, which has no fixed-wing runway, where our unit's mail was separated and loaded onto the back of a rickety cart driven by our personnel officer down the

gravel walkway until, amid eager radio chatter ("Mail call! Mail call in front of the B-Huts!") he and his load came to a stop next to the storage conex.

A tangle of camouflaged sleeves.

Sweet, my iPod came in!

Hogan, one for Hogan! Two for Granger!

Expectant faces. Excitement. And disappointment.

We could always count on the Beanies. At first, I opened the boxes alone in my office, rummaging through layers of bright plush, pulling out any pigs (insulting in Muslim culture), the American flag-emblazoned bears (just a bit too overt), and any snacks or knickknacks that were buried underneath to be tossed in the "morale pile" for mass consumption. But then something happened that neither I nor the founder of Beanies for Baghdad could have predicted. Maybe it was the regularity of the packages in a place where nothing seemed regular. Maybe it was nostalgia in a place where comforts were few and far between. Maybe it was the diversion from the brown landscape and harsh gravel. Whatever the reason, I suddenly became very popular on mail days.

It was mostly the women, but even some of the male soldiers loitered around while I sliced the packing tape on the familiarly addressed boxes. Over the clickity-clack of busy keyboards and the wind rattling the flimsy outer door, my office rang with cries of, "Oh this one's so cute! I'm going to put it on my desk!" It quickly became clear that many of the Beanies would never make it on a mission.

One of my colleagues started a collection of sea creatures; by the time we left, she could probably have acted out every scene from *The Little Mermaid.* We could barely see our head medic behind the community of bears that inhabited her desk. I kept two cats perched next to a picture of my real cats. We came across a dinosaur that bore uncanny resemblance to the sword-wielding figure on one

of the unit's patches, and the unit adopted him, using a Sharpie to make color corrections and gluing a plastic knife between his paws. At Christmas, a parade of festively adorned Beanie Babies marched across the conference room table.

Even the hardheaded, no-nonsense engineer who worked next door took a liking to a lemur with large, goofy eyes. One day I threw the Beanie over the wall that separated our offices (it had become habit for my colleagues and his to launch all sorts of care package goodies back and forth—entertainment in a war zone). On this particular morning, though, all that came flying back was a comment about "this one" being "especially ugly." "Big Eyes" spent the rest of the deployment displayed prominently on the engineer's desk.

A few Beanies even made it back to the States. Birthday bears were a popular item to send to loved ones at home, but occasionally another critter grabbed someone's attention. I remember one afternoon a Security Forces soldier plucked a Beanie from its box and held it out in his burly arm. The soldier's rifle, slung across his chest, rattled as he bounced excitedly, smiling through a cheek full of tobacco.

"Hey L-T, mind if I take this one? I want to send it to my daughter. She loves pandas."

I didn't think about it then, the irony of these well-traveled Beanies, making their way from their original homes to Indiana, and through the odyssey to Gardez (2-4 weeks) only to be boxed up and sent back in reverse.

It is, I suppose, just one of the many ironies of war.

A former Air Force public affairs officer, Lauren Kay Halloran served in Mali, Africa and deployed to Afghanistan as part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team working to build governance and development in southeastern Paktia Province. After her honorable discharge, Lauren earned her MFA in creative writing from Emerson College in Boston, though the military remains a main theme in her

writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Glamour, Pleiades, Cobalt Review, Mason's Road, Spry Literary Journal, *and* 20 Something Magazine; *and in the short story collection* The Road Ahead *(Pegasus Books), and anthologies* Retire the Colors: Veterans & Civilians on Iraq & Afghanistan *(Hudson Whitman/Excelsior College Press) and* Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors *(Southeast Missouri State University Press). Her writing and interviews have been used in the creation of dance and theater productions, and her in-progress memoir chronicles her coming-of-age against the backdrop of war—beginning with her mother's Army career and deployment in support of Operation Desert Storm when Lauren was seven years old, and later with her own service in Afghanistan. Lauren lives in Boston with her husband, fellow veteran-writer Colin D. Halloran, two cats, and hundreds of books.*

Fiction.

Leaving the Body

By Emily Hoover

I was on base, five months into my seven-month deployment, when Gunnery Sergeant Hayes interrupted a meeting with one of my men. Gunny just cleared his throat and put a hand on my shoulder. The gesture was gentle enough, I guess, but coming from Gunny it felt like an eagle swooping down to snatch a snake.

"Staff Sergeant Paul, I need to have a word with you," he said.

That sonofabitch had a hard-on for me since I made E6 last fall, so I knew, immediately, something was wrong. "Yes, Gunny." I looked at the map and then nodded at Scotty. "Dismissed. We'll finish this up later." My thoughts quickly went to Maggie but I didn't want to say anything out loud for fear I'd jinx us; she said the twins were fine after the last sonogram.

I stared at him, waiting for him to speak, and we exchanged awkward silence. He turned about-face. I followed him out of the tent and into the dust. We walked quietly, side by side, our sand-colored boots meeting the dirt road, desert heat surrounding us. Gunny held the door for me, and I made my way to the XO's office.

"Have a seat, Staff Sergeant," Major Ashbury said.

I took off my cap and joined him at his desk. "Yes, sir."

Gunny stood behind us with his talons behind his back.

Major Ashbury took off his glasses and let out a sigh. "I don't want to have to be the one to tell you this, son, but it's the hand I've been dealt."

I nodded, wiping beads of sweat from my bald head. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir."

"Your father was found dead this morning," he said slowly. "I've been told he died peacefully in his sleep. My condolences."

Gunny coughed.

My vision blurred. I cradled my head in my hands, trying to concentrate on my breath, which felt stuck in my chest. Gunny stepped forward and touched my back. Dad, without even being present, knocked the wind out of me, like in one of the holiday football games from my childhood. I needed to see about a 21-gun salute. "Thank you, sir," I whispered after what felt like an eternity of thick silence.

"You'll be on a plane back to the States at 1700 hours. Staff Sergeant Martin will cover your platoon while you're gone."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"If you go to AMVETS," Gunny said quietly, "they can get you a flag for the ceremony. What branch was he in?"

"Army," I said. "He was a Green Beret early in the Vietnam police action."

Gunny nodded, tried to smile. "That's right," he said. "A hero."

"Is there anything else we can get you, son?" Major Ashbury asked.

"I need to call my wife."

The grass was green, I'd just mowed it, and the ground was muddy, so much so that my sneakers were covered, my socks and toes moist on the inside. The rain hit my face in cool bursts. Water and steam fogged everything in my backyard except my father, who

stood fifty yards in front of me, arms folded together, dressed for PT. It was my thirteenth birthday and I wished I were anywhere else.

I kneeled, finding my runner's stance, both hands grounded, right knee bent forward toward elbows, left foot extended. The task was simple: the 50-yard dash. I had to sprint to Dad as fast as I could, but no matter how quickly I ran—twenty seconds, fifteen seconds, thirteen seconds—nothing was fast enough for him. The path was laid out for me by my own muddy tracks of defeat. I'd fallen more times than I could remember and the green and brown stains on my knees confirmed it. I was sure Dad was keeping score.

"Go!" he yelled.

I darted forward, breath even, eyes glued to the word *Army* on his t-shirt. He became bigger and bigger as I moved closer and closer. My shoes made squeaking sounds and I tripped, but I remained stable and lunged ahead. My form was messy, but I knew I would make it.

"Eleven seconds," he said and clicked the stopwatch. "Getting closer. You'll need to move quicker and smarter if you don't want your ass handed to you in Basic."

My hands found my knees. "Can we take a break?" I asked, winded.

"For what?"

"I just need to catch my breath."

"Catch it, son. It ain't going any farther than you let it." He handed me the canteen of water. "Nurse it, now. Don't take too much."

I stood and drank. When I handed it back, I offered a smile.

"Don't go and get all soft on me, David. Do you want to be a quitter like your mama?"

"No, sir."

"Find your position."

I spotted Maggie sitting by the luggage dollies, massaging her swollen belly with both hands. Eric was reading the Hardy Boys

from the collection we bought at the NEX for five dollars last winter. I smiled at both of them and Maggie nudged Eric, pointing at me.

I dropped my sea bag to the floor and waved.

"Dad!" Eric sped along the airport-gray carpet and right into my arms. I made the swooshing airplane noise as I scooped him up and it dawned on me that, at seven, he might be too old for it. Definitely too heavy. Still, I hugged him tightly, tighter than I remember hugging anyone, even Maggie. I could tell when he'd had enough, but the lump in my throat made me keep on hugging.

"Dad," he whispered, muffled, his feet dangling, his Vans sneakers conducting reflex tests at my shins. "Dad, you're crushing me."

I let out a short laugh and let go. Eric slid to the floor. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Missed you," he said, casually, as if he'd been practicing.

"Me too, bud." I ran my fingers through his curly blond hair. The top of his head was at my ribcage. I wondered if he was this tall before I left or if he'd had another growth spurt. "It's good to see you reading without the book so close to your eyes. The glasses have been helping, then? No more headaches?"

"Yeah." He shoved a piece of bubble tape in his mouth.

I touched Eric's shoulder with my palm and we walked to Maggie.

She pushed her arms into the armrests and rose to her feet, squatting slightly. She grabbed her purse from the seat next to her and stood up straight, smiling through her obvious irritability and discomfort.

I kneeled and kissed her belly, prompting toothy grins from nearly all the women around. Then, I pushed her brown hair aside and kissed her lips.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. I watched Eric pick up my sea bag, huff at its heaviness, and sling it over his shoulder. Usually, I'd

intervene and take the load myself, but I decided it was good for him. I'd been gangly too at his age.

"Tired. Fat." She tugged at her sundress.

I shook my head. "How are the twins?" My hand found the warmth of her stomach, the two hearts beating inside.

"They're good," she said, her hand moving mine in soft circles across her belly. "Healthy. No complications. You'd think they're Olympians with the way they swim around. It's exhausting."

"Just like their old man." I grinned. I couldn't wait to be inside her, feel something other than dead weight on my chest.

She smiled too. "How was your flight?"

"Not bad for squids."

She rolled her eyes and smiled cordially at a nearby sailor in his whites. "Did you sleep?"

"Not this time."

Eric was sitting again, waiting patiently, the sea bag across his lap.

She squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"It is what it is."

I hadn't been to my dad's house in two years. Neither had Maggie. Eric had never been there. Dad always insisted we meet him in Orlando rather than driving the extra forty-five minutes to Lakeland even though we'd already been in the car for three hours. He liked taking Eric to Pirate's Cove mini golf course by Disney and said Jacksonville, where I was stationed, was the armpit of the earth. We never objected. We always ate at TGI Fridays afterward, and Dad always had the Jack Daniels steak with mashed potatoes.

The inside of his house was immaculate—swept, mopped, blankets folded, my boot camp pictures joining his on the western wall—except I noticed there were still dishes in the sink. He used to beat me with a belt when I didn't wash the dishes, when the melted

cheese from my fried egg sandwiches stuck to the plate or I left peanut butter on the edge of a butter knife. The neighbors told us the heart attack happened in the kitchen, not peacefully in his sleep like Major Ashbury told me. Dad was probably about to wash the fucking dishes when he collapsed.

"Well," Maggie said, "where should we begin?"

We divvied up the work as best as we could. I would take care of Dad's room and my old bedroom, Maggie would pack away the kitchen dishes, and Eric would be on paperwork patrol. Every time we found something important, we'd call for Eric, and he'd set whatever it was—bank statements, bills—on the kitchen table next to Maggie's purse.

Dad's room smelled like him—aftershave and chewing tobacco. I moved his bedroom slippers aside, resisting the urge to put my own feet into them, and squatted next to the bed. As I pulled out three suitcases—each fully packed with pants, t-shirts, socks, and underwear in case he had to travel fast—I found the paranoid old bastard's footlocker from the Army. I slid it out and blew away dust. When I opened it, I picked up the ring cases before I saw anything else. The first ring was gold with a black stone in the center. Two eagle crests lined the side of the band, and the words "U.S. Veteran" wrapped around the stone. I put it on my right ring finger because it was mine now, or it would be when I retired. I opened the other box and saw an almost identical ring. This one said "Army Special Forces." He must have gotten it after his time in 'Nam. I told Eric to put the ring in Maggie's purse for safekeeping.

"Wow." He pointed at the ring on my finger. "Is that yours now?"

"Yep. Might be yours too, if you stick to the family business." I sat on the bed.

He opened the case, looked carefully at the ring inside, and snapped the box shut. "I want to be a veterinarian when I grow up."

"Why?" I motioned for him to join me on Dad's bed. "Don't you want to be a hero like your grandpa?"

"I don't like running. I'm not good at it. I want to help animals stay healthy, not shoot bad guys. That's being a hero, too, Dad."

My face felt hot in the air-conditioned room. I wanted to tell Eric that as a veterinarian he'd have to kill sweet little dogs and cats when they're too old or sick or overpopulated, that death is a part of life, but I couldn't. "Do your four years and then you can get the schooling you need," I said instead. It came out as a command.

He looked down. "I don't want to."

Eric had never said no to me before. "It's just four years, bud, no big deal. You'd only have to stay if you want to."

Silence sat between us.

"You could even be a vet in the Navy," I said, nudging him. "Work with animals like seals and dolphins, teach them how to do cool stuff like blow up ships. Wouldn't that be fun?"

He sighed. "I guess."

I pushed my fingers through his blond mop and smiled, pulling him into a close hug. He resisted me a little, which made me hug tighter. "Why don't you go check on Mom, make sure she's okay?"

He nodded and moved out of the room, quickly and without hesitation.

My dad always told me joining the Army was the best thing he ever did. We'd sit outside on the concrete porch in the afternoon humidity, batting away mosquitoes and sugar ants, drinking Dr. Pepper and eating boiled peanuts. We'd sit there for hours, through the thunderstorms, until the sun disappeared beneath the live oaks, and talk about the war. Standing in his room, listening to the air conditioner buzz, I looked forward to flipping through photos and showing Eric his grandfather's awards. I was excited to retell Dad's memories as if they were mine.

But I found one picture of my dad in uniform in the whole box. He's smoking a filterless cigarette and holding a rifle, half-smiling in some fucked impression of John Wayne. The photo was captioned "Fort Dix, '65." He'd always told me he deployed to Vietnam in 1964, held his best friend's intestines in his hands when they were ambushed by Vietcong in the fall of that year. Why would he be at Fort Dix a year after he deployed? I studied the photo again. Had I misheard him? My heart beat a little faster. He told that story the same way, almost verbatim, all my life—so much that it was etched in my brain like my computer passwords or Social Security number.

Our mission was to train the men of South Vietnam, Dad would say. *They were young and they were scared, but goddamn it, we would make them ready.*

I never interrupted him or cut him short during our talks, even when I gave up GI Joe action figures for pussy, because that would be like putting your elbows on the dinner table in normal people's houses. Dad's eyes would swell and the spells of silence that rested between one memory and the next would become longer, more thoughtful, like he was savoring good Scotch. And I'd listen. I fingered the photo, the softness of the film and the slightly bending corners. My dad's dark, ashy eyes reflected my own.

War is hell, son, and don't you forget it. I killed a lot of people, some of them younger than you. I ain't proud of it, but the jungle takes no prisoners.

I flipped it over again. This was definitely Dad's handwriting, and his expression in the photo was definitely one of a kid who's had his balls handed to him in Basic. I set the photo aside. *Pain is weakness leaving the body, David.*

I found Dad's green beret next. It was flattened inside its plastic sheet container, tucked inside the case for his BS in History from Florida Southern College. I knew it would be; they were what

he saw as his two greatest accomplishments. I took the beret out and admired it, brought it to my nose so I could smell the wool. Dad must have had it dry-cleaned—no odor, no stains, like it had been sitting in a glass case in a museum. I turned it over in my hands, relishing its lightness, and ran my thumb across the eagle on the side that had been face down. My father was many things, but a full-bird colonel was not one of them. Sweat seeped from my pores. I felt myself becoming light-headed, disoriented, like I was about to fall.

Don't let your daddy get to you, Mom used to whisper. She'd say it a lot, until she wasn't around anymore to make corn bread and chili, tell me to brush my teeth, or kiss me good night. *Just be a good boy. Hear me? Always tell the truth.*

I quickly pushed myself into a seated position and took out the manila envelope. I found a letter from the Army to my grandmother, who died before I was born. The Army spoke of my dad's progress in Basic, how he and the other recruits were enjoying their time in New Jersey. The letter thanked my grandmother for her support and my dad for his service and gave an address for sending letters while he was away. It was dated January 1964.

I flipped to the next piece of paper, which included Dad's discharge information. I called for Eric and skimmed the boxes on the form. My dad's job was listed as clerk, there were no awards printed, and the number of deployments was written as zero. Confused, I fixed my eyes on the number zero for a minute, the curved lines making a hole in my gut. My eyes continued down the page. The form said the discharge was honorable after four years of service in the Army Reserves.

"What's up, Dad?" Eric asked.

Before I knew it, I was on my knees. Then, on my feet. With big steps, I passed my son and my old room. I went into the kitchen, still clutching the paper in my hand.

Eric followed. "Is that for the paperwork pile, Dad?"

"Go play outside." It felt like *his* voice, Dad's voice, not mine.

Eric stood next to me, frozen.

Maggie looked up from the box of dishes. "What's wrong?"

I held the paper in front of me, trembling slightly. "He lied."

Maggie squinted. "You heard your father," she said. "Go play outside."

I spent the better part of the evening in a drunken stupor. I started drinking on the concrete porch but came inside at twilight, when the memories and mosquitoes became too much. Maggie said she didn't want Eric to see me *this way,* what I perceived as a state of weakness, so she took him out for pizza. She said she'd bring me a calzone, but I said I wasn't hungry.

I found Dad's movie collection as I walked around wallowing—the Steve McQueen box set I bought him one year for Christmas, digitally remastered versions of *Stagecoach* and other John Ford Westerns, a VHS recording of *Smokey and the Bandit.* But I decided to watch *The Green Berets,* starring John Wayne as Colonel Kirby, because my mom never let me watch it as a kid and Dad's copy *somehow* disappeared during my teenage years. By the time I reached adulthood, I was more of an Eastwood fan than a Duke fan.

I knew, within minutes of watching the film, why the story felt so familiar—the Duke also trained South Vietnamese soldiers for combat. I also knew immediately why Dad never took advantage of VA healthcare, why he urged me to join the Marines instead of the Army. Everything clicked into place like an automatic rifle.

The next morning, I woke on the couch wrapped in my dad's wool Army blanket. It felt like there was a truck parked on my head. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I smelled bacon. Maggie

drank tea at the kitchen table and organized paperwork. I joined her. I told her we wouldn't need a 21-gun salute, that I'd go to the post office and get a flag rather than show my face at AMVETS, that the VA wouldn't cover the burial, that we didn't need the Army after all. I held in the tears and concentrated on straightening my spine, pushing out my chest like Dad taught me at his own father's funeral. I wasn't much older than Eric.

"We don't need to worry about that right now," she said, touching my cheek. I needed a shave. "You're grieving now. Why don't you just let it be?"

"I have no grief for a lying asshole that'd rather die than face the truth," I said and leaned back. I brushed both hands across my eyes, inhaled deeply, and took Dad's ring off my finger. I noticed the beginnings of a green line in its place. He probably bought it from a late-night infomercial to go with his surplus-store beret. I considered throwing it across the room but set it on the table for Maggie.

"I found something in the garage this morning." She walked to the counter. "I thought you might want it."

I didn't want to, but I looked at her. She held two baseball gloves in her hands, one from my childhood and the other I recognized as the one Dad used to use. We'd do baseball drills every Saturday, rain or shine.

"I looked at the DD214 and I'm sorry," Maggie said. "But there's nothing we can do except plan the funeral. He's been cremated."

I didn't speak.

"Feel however you want to feel about this," she said. "I get it. It's a terrible lie and you deserve better, especially after all you've sacrificed. But this isn't how Eric should remember his grandfather. This isn't how I want him to remember you when you're away."

I rose from the chair and walked to her. She came into my arms. We stood there for a few moments, hugging and listening to

each other breathe. She rubbed her fingers up and down my spine, pulling me closer, and I felt the twins kick.

"Eric is in the bedroom reading," she said finally. "He's been watching you sleep for the last hour. Why don't you ask him if he wants to play catch?"

"But he's not very good."

She put both gloves in my hands and sighed. "Who cares? Ask him anyway."

Eric and I found a spot in the backyard next to the fence. It was already hot out, stagnant, and my cotton t-shirt clung to my body. I only sweat under my arms and cap in the desert. I forgot Florida was a full-body experience, especially in late summer. I took off my shirt, wiped my brow, and threw the shirt on the fence to dry.

"All right. Let's start off close and then when we get good, in sync, we can move farther apart." I put the ball in Eric's glove, triggering my own childhood memories. "Ready?"

He nodded, smiling.

We tossed the ball back and forth for a half hour or so, but it spent more time on the ground. The space between us didn't increase except for a few times when I had to respond to a wild throw. Eric fumbled over his glove, tripped over his shoes, and ate shit a couple of times reaching for the ball. I wasn't sure if it was poor coordination or depth perception. It was painful to watch, and I resisted the urge to correct him, teach him, force him to be more like me. I didn't laugh either. That would have been cruel.

"Maybe we should stop," he said, retrieving the ball from the other side of the yard, his knees stained green, shoes squeaking in morning dew. "I suck."

"Only if you want to stop."

"Really?" He moved the ball around in his glove.

"Yeah, bud, it's your call. And for the record, you don't suck. That's why they call it practice."

"You don't hate playing with me?"

"I enjoy every minute of it." I bent my knees, anticipating his throw.

"Even when I fall? Tell the truth."

His words stung a little, an open wound submerged in seawater. "I am telling the truth," I said. "Falling's the best part."

Emily Hoover earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Northern Arizona University. Her recent poetry publications include Potluck Magazine *and* FIVE2ONE Magazine; *her fiction has appeared in* tNY. Press, Narrow Chimney Anthology, Flash Fiction Magazine, Wraparound South *and others, and her book reviews have been featured in* Southern Literary Review, Fiction Writers Review, Flag Live, *and the* Ploughshares *blog. She lives in Las Vegas and is currently working on a short story collection about her home state of Florida.*

Incoming

By Steven Kiernan

I slept through the only combat of our deployment, a mortar attack. We had been out on patrol all morning, six hours of humping up and down the mountain we dubbed "the ankle-breaker." I was dead tired. I didn't even bother peeling off my sweaty, crusted cammies, just took off my armor and fell face down. Ten minutes later everyone was screaming "Incoming! Incoming!" and running to the bunker in a sickening surge of adrenaline. I lay there peacefully, ignorant of the chaos. Back home they bragged about their encounter with death, laughing away their fear. I don't remember anything.

Steven Kiernan was a Marine infantry sergeant and Iraq War veteran. He is currently in the creative writing program at the University of Virginia.

CLR-27

By John Milas

It's another one of those Camp Lejeune mornings where the smell of shit hangs thick in the French Creek air. Sergeant Santiago walks into your room without knocking. "Leave the hatch open and get in formation in green on green," he says before you're even out of bed.

Then the company's in green on green PT gear in formation and the first sergeant calls everyone into a school circle after morning accountability and explains they're conducting another regiment-wide piss test, the second one in as many months. "No one's going back in their rooms 'til everyone's pissed," his voice rasps, hoarse from his stint as a Drill Instructor in the 90s. "This is coming from MLG. Because of the drawdown." And you thought you'd be safe after the first roundup a month ago, so you toked up a little with Tobit in the mall parking lot Friday night, hunkered down in his Silverado with the dome lights off.

And Tobit's not lined up on the catwalk at FC412 like everyone else in LS Company, so you ask Corporal Christ, "Hey Corporal, where's Tobit?" You're both in LS1. He should be here too.

"That's how we talk to NCOs now?" Christ says. You mimic a recruit in boot camp and rephrase the question.

"Good morning, Corporal. Lance Corporal Schmuckatelli requests permission to speak to Corporal Christ."

"Shut the fuck up, Fletcher," Christ says. He asks Sergeant Santiago where Tobit's at by leaning against the railing and calling down into the FC412 courtyard. "Hey Sergeant, where's Tobit?" Then Sergeant Santiago chews Christ out for not knowing where his own Marines are, but for his own accountability purposes he explains after checking a handwritten list of appointments scribbled in his olive drab notebook that Tobit's at a dental appointment.

And there's the shit smell again, coming from the shit plant down the road across from the chow hall. You taste Lejeune in the humidity. The smell of free college spiraling down a toilet. The smell of having to call your parents and tell them you're coming home sooner than expected. Almost a year and a half sooner. And they'll wonder why you threw it away to get high. Why spend those years training and training to serve honorably in Afghanistan just to come back and get kicked out? But it's hard to explain how you only escape the company formations, the broken down CH-53s, the nonstop cleaning and garbage detail by destroying your body with booze every weekend and disappearing from this place. If it wasn't a joint on Friday, it would've been a case of beer or a fifth.

You're all lined up in your green shorts and green shirts, the ones you've worn since boot camp, a couple hundred of you. Only four pecker checkers for the males in the company, escorting each Marine one by one, making sure they're not cheating. The females in the company have four observers as well, but only twenty-eight total women get through their line in less than an hour. And you're left with everyone else, inching around the catwalk facing inward at the smoke pit and pull-up bars on the ground below as the sun creeps toward the center of the sky. Cadence calls from other companies of PTing Marines echo into the courtyard from the street outside the barracks.

Sergeant Santiago paces back and forth in the courtyard with his arms crossed, the sun glinting off the sweat on his bald head. Other NCOs patrol the outside of the barracks. Some marines waiting in line have to piss but it's not their turn to get checked. NCOs escort them to their own rooms and back into the line when they're done pissing, where they proceed to chug water in preparation for the urinalysis.

Boxes laid out with the piss test bottles sit on tables in the second deck common room. When it's your turn you grab the empty piss bottle from the box on the table with your name on the corresponding roster sheet and hold it over your shoulder so the staff sergeant can see it at all times and you think about the future. Maybe a second year at community college won't be so bad in the long run. Living at home will be cheap. Some of your friends will still be in town.

You lead the staff sergeant from the common room to room Delta 205 where they've converted someone's bathroom into a public pissing stall. You fill the plastic bottle and then finish in the toilet while the staff sergeant watches from the doorway, and then walk back outside displaying the bottle over your shoulder so he can see it at all times. The sky is blue, the birds fly in a V, the smoke pit is one big mud puddle. Sergeant Santiago glances up at you. He has a clear view of the plastic bottle of piss. He'll know soon.

Would it make a difference to confess now? Probably not. Zero tolerance policy. Should you call your parents before the hammer falls? And what about Sergeant Santiago? He spoke on your behalf when you nearly got ninja-punched for getting too drunk at the Mojave Viper warrior banquet, the same NCO who called you one of his ten best Marines in Afghanistan. You won't get off this time though. Maybe there's a way to tell him you're sorry for getting high with Tobit in the parking lot. Maybe he'll understand, maybe he won't. He could say you blew it and what a waste. He could call you a shitbag,

or an integrity violator. His first name's Seymour, but you're only allowed to call him Sergeant. Years from now you could track him down, knock on his door, catch him on a Sunday afternoon. He's heavier now, hasn't fit in his dress blues for years. And you would say I'm sorry Seymour, please forgive me for fucking up, but your Drill Instructors taught you never to apologize.

John Milas studied writing at the University of Illinois after serving in the Marine Corps from 2008-2012. His writing can be found in Chicago Quarterly Review, Hypertext Magazine, Red Savina Review, *and elsewhere.*

Poetry.

Mr. Scratch

Maggs Vibo

The beast lies still within weeds to prowl
With a piercing gaze and high-pitched howls
Snarl away
Snarl Away

Nostrils hunt the earth as digging hands
While he fluffs pillows of gritty sands
Scratch away
Scratch away

Jury members cast—his chances slim
Defense explains—Jabez can't win
Fire away
Fire away

Feathers choke his throat and suffocate
At o-dark-thirty he ends the date
Sleep away
Sleep away

Maggs Vibo served in the Army from 2000-2004 as a brigade supply sergeant. She considers providing toilet paper to buddies, burning waste, and pulling security her most important missions at Tallil Air Base in Iraq. In 2011, she earned a Graduate Certificate in Online Teaching and MA in Liberal Studies. Maggs Vibo has first person images featured at the philosophy website for Douglas Harding @Headlessway.org. Her other pieces on Harding's method of self-inquiry are collaborations with French writer, José Le Roy. As the granddaughter of a Native American, Vibo believes storytelling through art continues the oral traditions of her Sac and Fox Nation ancestors. She currently teaches science and cultural history as a docent at Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawaii.

The Night Before Deployment

Lisa Stice

I say, I need you to come back
but you are asleep.
I think of the flak vest and helmet,
jump and dive gear,
weighted rucksacks
stacked in the living room.

I should have faith
in the Corpsman's vigilance,
in sound training,
in your drown proofing,
in your combat drills,

but where was my training?
I think of the tasks unfinished,
a toy box held together with clamps,
sockets without safety plugs,
cabinets and drawers free to open—
our daughter will crawl and walk

in the months you are gone,
and I need to protect her.

A native of Colorado, Lisa Stice received a BA in English literature from Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University) and completed her thesis year of an MFA in creative writing and literary arts from the University of Alaska Anchorage. She taught high school for ten years and is now a military wife who lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter and dog. Some of her poems are forthcoming or in Emerge Literary Journal, Inklette, 300 Days of Sun, *and* On the Rusk.

Tentative Love

Kimberly Simms

Like the fern unrolling its spring tendrils
millimeter by millimeter.
Like a wren, approaching its nest…
Like a child, opening a new book
to crisply turn the pages . . .
we opened our hearts.
Too old for the wild abandon
of high school blushing;
armed with the wisdom
of stodgy common sense;
a clock the only thing whirling,
we held each other like a last chance;
or rather, a final beginning.
We held each other like a destiny
yet to be realized.

Like a fire in the Craftsman wood stove,
at first slow to consume news
and recycled pasts,
reliant on the the breath of a kiss
to feed the conflagration from cheap
heart necklaces into full rings of Citrine,
our love became a heat radiating into each cold
corner, till our winter home is warm as spring.

While dedicating her time between her family and her work as a teaching artist, Kimberly Simms is an award winning, published poet. She is the daughter of a veteran of the Vietnam War and a granddaughter of a veteran of World War II. She is inspired to write about history and her love for men of courage.

From the "Lumes" Series

Nichole Riggs

0130

The new moon exhumes a boneyard giant cracks the hulk of a C-5 with its dusky shovel
  tiny gas masks stacked inside smiling up like locusts a feast of MREs lurk past their expiration and the moon pours its black milk
into the frame into the diorama and the giant wakes it from its heat-dreams its teeth snagging yellow gleams from remote street-lights limbs groaning in the milk-warm night aching to enact death

0330

My brother and I tear through cactus groves
to our fox-hole thunderstorm floats
facedown and so heavy above our heads
The chollas loll at us wait for our vibrations
to explode into ankles
needle the tender triangle
just behind the bone

1800

My mother and I expose our throats let the Arizona sun crack our chiminea faces
like crème brûlée trace the bodies of my dad and brother across the skyline their frames
steal light at the sharp edges sword wings slicing through saffron cumulus innards the sunset's gorgeous gutrot anointing us
we weep sacrificial shoulder the tears of the men we love

Nichole Riggs is an Air Force brat from Tucson, AZ, where she grew up in the shadow of Davis Monthan Air Force Base. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Notre Dame where she studies poetry and teaches creative writing. She holds an editorial position with Action Books, and periodically works with Spork Press. Her poetry has been published most recently in Quaint Magazine*, on* entropymag.com*, and in #thebestiary issue of* White Stag.

Taliban Hotel

Matthew Mobley

I would not book a room at the Taliban Hotel
If I were you

There is no pool or fitness center and the continental breakfast
Is not so continental

The valet reeks of goat shit
And zealotry

The front desk lost my reservation, on purpose,
(which is my suspicion)

The room service waiter simply paced back and forth in the hall
All night

And the kitchen staff was overheard to be making IED's
In their spare time

I just would not book a room at the Taliban Hotel
If I were you

Matthew Mobley is a career U.S. Army Infantry Soldier/Officer, Ranger-qualified paratrooper, and former drill instructor with multiple combat tours. He currently teaches military science at the University of Tampa, though he considers the military more art than science. His previous work has appeared in McSweeney's.

Second Year

Katie Gleason

When you
left,
I bought some groceries while we waited
for the war to end
and lovers to come back to their hands

I remember that feeling
of crushed petals,
a flailing beetle
waking darkly out of night
the hushed ear of earth listening
saying
I know

Katie Gleason is a social worker and lives in Arizona with her husband, who served in the Army for eight years. Katie writes poetry and non-fiction and is a student of The Writers Studio.

Interview.

A Conversation with Jesse Goolsby

Jesse Goolsby is an Air Force officer and the author of the novel *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), winner of the Florida Book Award for Fiction and long-listed for the Flaherty-Duncan First Novel Prize. His fiction and essays have appeared widely, including *The Literary Review, Epoch, The Kenyon Review, Narrative Magazine, Salon,* and *Pleiades*. He is the recipient of the Richard Bausch Short Story Prize, the John Gardner Memorial Award in Fiction, and fellowships from the Sewanee Writers' Conference and the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences. His work has been listed as notable in both *Best American Essays* and *Best American Short Stories,* and selected for *Best American Mystery Stories*. He serves as Fiction Editor for the literary journal *War, Literature & the Arts*. Goolsby holds an English degree from the United States Air Force Academy, a Master's degree in English from the University of Tennessee, and a PhD in English and Creative Writing from Florida State University.

O-Dark-Thirty Senior Editor, Jim Mathews, recently spoke

with Goolsby about the military and how his experiences have helped shape his work and literary approach.

O-Dark-Thirty: Let's start off with how you came to be a writer and where that intersected with your military experience.

Jesse Goolsby: I was always interested in the arts, even in high school, but it was at the Air Force Academy, and just after, as I joined the operational force, where my service and my love of writing came together. I graduated from the academy three and a half months before 9/11, so I entered the military as a brand new second lieutenant with expectations of serving in a time of relative peace. Of course, 9/11 changed everything. After a few months of training in Texas, I first served as an aircraft maintenance officer in England. It was an incredibly charged and emotional time, and the intersection between my writing and my service surprisingly intensified as I drove to base, worked around the clock, and launched aircraft to support the two wars. When I returned to my rented apartment, I found myself rereading and finding a peculiar energy in work like *Catch-22, The Things They Carried, Slaughterhouse-Five,* and *Dispatches.* For me, there was a compelling dichotomy between real-world events and the literature that I had grown to love and appreciate throughout my university days. The literature drove me deep into myself and resurfaced questions I had been asking since my first day in the Air Force: What is worth fighting for? Dying for? Can I claim an effort for peace while I'm culpable in violence? In response, my outlet for trying to piece together who I was and what I wanted arrived in the form of writing. So while I had attempted to write stories and personal essays at the Air Force Academy, the real work of learning the craft of writing and finding my voice began in England, at the beginning of the wars. I still recall that singular feeling

of writing in my journal, a safe space of both liberation and confusion as I tried to give voice to my perceptions of a chaotic world.

ODT: Were you able to write a lot during this period?

JG: Not much at all, but every line I jotted down felt wondrous. That may sound overblown, but it was true. Even the simple fact that I felt my voice mattered, that my experience and sensibility was worth my own time, was something new to me. Listen, I don't think my experience was all that much different than what so many others experience as they mature and question and find outlets to investigate the "Who am I?" question. So, early on, and perhaps pragmatically, I was writing for myself. Again, I think it was this effort at self-exploration. It was private, and purposely so. I was interested in writing as well as I could, but I never thought of anyone else reading my work. I wrote sporadically due to the demands of my Air Force job, and almost everything went into my journal. I sure as hell wasn't submitting anything for publication. My focus was waking up every day and fixing and launching aircraft on time. So the tenor of writing I was doing, namely private journaling, went on for about eight years, during assignments in England and in New Mexico. At the time, I saw my creativity as a type of hobby. Sure, it was a vital hobby that I cared deeply about, but I could have never dreamt that it would turn into anything else. The writing provided a space of repose and imagination without the fear of rejection, and I'm incredibly grateful for the period of writing I kept to myself.

ODT: Now had that been your experience before you were commissioned?

JG: Not really. Like many eighteen- to nineteen-year-olds, I was most concerned with status and ego, and I thought that playing basketball,

which I did initially in college, and being a rocket scientist, of all things, would bring me some kind of glory, so I started out as an astrophysics major at the Air Force Academy although I had almost no interest in astrophysics. And that decision didn't bring me glory. It brought me poor grades and put me at the edge of leaving the Academy, partly because of my academic performance and partly because I was simply unhappy. Again, like many young people in college I was living far away from my family for the first time, and tragically, my mother had died just two weeks before I arrived at the academy. So there were a lot of complex emotions I was dealing with, as anyone would in a similar situation. But I was saved, literally, by the humanities. I had an English professor at the Air Force Academy who pulled me aside and encouraged me to follow my passion, whatever subject it was, and handed me *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway. He told me to read it and then we'd talk about what I wanted to do. Honestly, that was the first time that I'd read Hemingway and after that he guided me to Alice Munro, Tobias Wolff, and Cormac McCarthy. That's when I really caught the bug for literature, but I had yet to feel aware enough or confident enough to start writing on my own. Really, it was during those initial two years after 9/11 where that creative impulse really struck me. As I think about it now, maybe it was because I was forced to deal with the world as an adult, to face moral questions that only I could answer.

ODT: I think my first experience with the bug was Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." A creative writing teacher gave it to me and I recall kicking and screaming about it, but reading the story turned out to be a truly transformative experience. An on-ramp and an off-ramp at the same time. I really saw then what could be done with the written word.

JG: My experience was quite similar in that for years I was much more interested in focused genre work like the early books of Stephen King. And with good reason—they are wonderful. But again, in my encounters with Hemingway and Munro, I found a certain human yearning that spoke to me. How to put it? I guess I found a fantastic vulnerability in their characters. And that's one of the centerpieces, regardless of genre, of successful literature. Being able to tap into different sensibilities of deep human yearning to answer the ultimate question, "Who am I?" You found that in your own way through O'Connor, and what a knockout story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is, and for me, it was not only Hemingway and his characters of World War I, but also Alice Munro's creative sensibilities and her women of western Ontario, or McCarthy's marauders in *Blood Meridian*, or Wolff's Anders in the incredible "Bullet in the Brain." These were characters with whom I would normally have little in common with or frankly, little interest in, but the quality and uniqueness of the work opened up those doors for me and made every life captivating, especially imagined ones.

ODT: So you're back in the service and you're journaling in more of a private way, at what point did you decide to go public, for lack of a better word?

JG: With a phone call. So I was sitting in New Mexico, working as an aircraft maintenance officer, and the same professor who handed me Hemingway and Munro about eight, nine years earlier let me know there might be chance I could come back to the Air Force Academy as an instructor of English. And basically, the collision of my private literary life and the traditional service really happened in the aftermath of that phone call. The first thing I thought was, "Hell yes. This sounds great." But then the doubt crept in immediately. "How can I do this? How was this opportunity even possible

while I served? What's the drawback?" And I soon found myself with different, very real pressures. Namely, the traditional military structure told me, "Sure, Goolsby, you can go teach English, but you can kiss your career goodbye." Listen, I don't blame anyone for that advice. They were just looking out for me. I appreciate the fact that the military's primary mission isn't growing professors or writers. I realize that. But the opportunity to teach a subject I was so passionate about at a place so dear to me was very attractive, and I was looking for a change, so I went for it.

ODT: Which would not be that different from many who are looking to do more on the writing side while still in the service, right?

JG: Exactly, I had this deep passion to follow my creative yearnings, but also a sense of duty and obligation. And it's not like I hated being an aircraft maintenance officer. The job was incredibly rewarding, and I wouldn't trade that time for anything. But I was ready for a new challenge and I took a risk when the opportunity came up to do something unusual. So I went off to get my master's in English at the University of Tennessee. And it was after my master's degree while teaching at the Air Force Academy I ran into the first people in my military career who encouraged me to write and publish. They wanted me to understand the arts could be one of the most important manifestations of military service that we have—investigating and writing about the consequences of war and what our nation asks of our service members and their families. There are so many different ways to serve, a fact that wasn't apparent to me early on in my military career. It's also critical to know that just because someone is on active duty doesn't mean they have to keep their creative efforts private. To be clear, folks should know the rules behind publishing, but in large part, the doors are wide open for individual expression. How great would it be to have more active

duty personnel as members of the writing community and finding new pathways to talking about their experiences not only as service members, but also as human beings with an incredible range of interests, hopes, dreams, and fears? It would be wonderful, and thankfully we're seeing more and more work from active duty and veteran artists. So, for me, that's really where the turn happened—when mentors and friends, in and out of the service, supported my work and encouraged me to begin submitting to literary journals. I was very lucky to have work selected not long after I began submitting.

ODT: And it's interesting to think of all those men and women who share the same dreams but don't get that little spark or push.

JG: Right! I can't overstate how important it was for me to have the support of people I trusted. At every turn, but especially early in my military career, I needed someone to reinforce the idea that the humanities were not just a "worthwhile" field, but an essential field of study and contemplation, one that all members of the military should investigate vigorously. Alongside that advice, and much more personally, I needed positive reinforcement when I decided to really test my creative work. It wasn't always easy. It still isn't. Rejection never is, and rejection is part of the business of writing. My first official writing workshop during my master's degree was an absolute disaster. I had not yet learned that craft, earned tension, and manifested stakes in art were much, much different than simply relaying my personal experiences through a first draft. I needed that hard lesson and to be told, face-to-face, I had to improve, but I was extremely fortunate I had mentors and friends that stuck by me while I found my voice, waded through the rejection messages from literary journals, and kept at it. Donald Anderson, Brandon Lingle, Jay Moad, Kristen Loyd, Kerry Linfoot—these are some of the friends that would read and reread my work and

offer suggestions and encouragement, and of course, I'd return the favor. Without them I can't fathom a single work of mine ever being published. And so this is what I would say to those who may read this that are at the beginning stages of writing with an eye toward publishing: when you are ready, seek out a support network. Don't be shy. There are many organizations out there, just like the Veterans Writing Project, that can help link you up with a community of writers who will help further your work. Writing is, initially, a solitary act, but nearly every writer leans on others to reach her of his full potential. I certainly do.

ODT: And you know, when you think about it, it's such fertile field, the military. I think from the outside looking in, it's easy to believe that there's not much beneath the polished facade of uniformity. And yet there's such a diversity of cultures and even cultures within cultures. Between the sister services, for example, or between officer and enlisted corps. So much depth that it's almost the ideal breeding ground, if you will, for literature.

JG: I couldn't agree more. And think of it logically—the uniform is designed to make the individual disappear into the group, or into her or his surroundings. The form and function of it is to hide. That's why we go through basic training and we march in groups and gut through similar trials all to create uniformity. What better way to maintain a sense of self than to project to the outside world that each and every military member, spouse, and child is a world unto her or himself. Yes, we devote our professional lives to getting the operational mission done–and importantly so–but we never stop being individuals with very specific hopes, dreams and fears. There's tension embedded in all of those experiences, the necessity of the group versus the needs-morality-actions of the individual. It doesn't matter where you're at or your proximity to violence, sooner or later

each one of us will have to come to terms with our service. And what a wide range of experiences! So many of them positive. But anyone attempting to combine all military service into one, "lived" experience, or attempting to paint service members, veterans, or their families into a single group that all thinks the same surely doesn't understand the people in military or the power of specific, individual experience.

ODT: I think you do that so effectively in your novel,* I'd Walk With My Friends If I Could Find Them, *specifically where you intertwine the civilian and military experiences of your characters. And I wonder if you could talk a little about the development of the three main characters in the book and how you worked to weave those two environmental and cultural realities together.

JG: Sure. The motivation for the three protagonists in the book was an investigation of that central question of, "Who Am I?" And when we start looking at those questions of identity, all of those moments of introspection are a necessary act of living, especially for these three young men. And they each have a different path of figuring that out. They come from different places. They joined the military for different reasons. They have different combat experiences, and they have different lives and pressures when they return home. Wintric, for example, joins the military after 9/11 and finds himself very quickly in an Afghanistan he couldn't have mentally prepared for. His first mission is a humanitarian mission, which immediately puts him off-balance. And skipping ahead a bit, he is sexually assaulted in country, a horrific act that further complicates the question of who he is and how will he live the rest of his life. Dax and Armando, again, have completely separate challenges and successes as they struggle to remember who they were and who they want to be. This is true of these characters, but also of ourselves—one of the ways we

know who we are is to remember who we've been. That collective history of memories helps guide us, provides us some foundation to act each moment moving forward. And when you go through trauma, or success, or other big life events such as joining the military, it's a fundamental, natural question to ask, "Who am I now?" and, "How has this event changed me?" And I think we ask those questions not only if we're being shot at or if we're shooting at someone in combat. But we're asking those questions after we're away for a year-long deployment and our children don't seem to recognize us the same way. We're asking those same questions with events not related to military service—if a parent dies or if we navigate a divorce or if we win the lottery. Those pressures are tangible. For Wintric, Dax, and Armando, I hope they represent and showcase the truth that they are human beings, first and always. Yes, they serve in the military, but that is not even close to the only defining thing in their respective lives. Like us they also live lives filled with music, sports, sex, anxiety, redemption, pain, taxes, car payments, injury, and success.

ODT: And it's also the interactions with civilian counterparts when you get back. I mean even the language and the meaning of words can become distorted and out of place where it once fit right in.

JG: When you're in the military or you're a veteran remembering your experiences, I think the context, the moment, the training, provides us with entry points and introspection about what we've signed up for and what has been asked of us. That provides us pathways for a kind of bizarre combination of empathy and destruction. We want to foster a type of reluctant killer. When you stop to think of our expectations of our military members, that's exactly what we're asking. We're asking them to be deeply empathetic, moral, benevolent, fit, and trustworthy. And simultaneously, we want those same people to kill and destroy things. It's an incredible dichotomy.

How do we provide spaces for our service members and veterans to find the language to even begin to talk about their culpability in violence? Even the most healthy, well-adjusted folks—however you define that—come back trying to navigate that very difficult charge. How do you find the language, not just for one's brothers and sisters in arms who may have had similar experiences, but for a spouse and communities that want to help, but don't necessarily know how? How do I appropriately voice support and love to my buddy who flies the A-10 when he called me up at 2:00 a.m. to say he'd killed about 120 insurgents and saved dozens of Americans on the ground and he felt like celebrating, high-fiving everyone and locking himself in a room for a week because it was all too much?

ODT: And I think the real power of* I'd Walk With My Friends if I Could Find Them *is that you actually capture both of those things, the naked honesty of war—the feeling of wanting to high-five someone—and, at the same time, the humanity and reflection that you experience upon returning home.

JG: I've found that courage exists in so many expected and unexpected places. In general, we do a great job of celebrating battlefield heroism, because we know what to look for. But equally as important is the courage exhibited by so many people who get up each and every day and try their best, oftentimes under a terrible emotional burden. That type of courage often goes unnoticed and uncommented upon. I hope my novel sheds some light on this special bravery in the aftermath of trauma. Also, I've fielded a lot of questions about this duality many of our warriors confront—celebration and regret—and how it relates to the novel's structure, and I would just build off what we've been talking about–first, one of the great things about writing is there really isn't a prescribed theme or structure for any subject.

Not every war or military-themed book is or should be relayed in realism, or tight combat perspective or fragments or snapshots. It's much more about imagination and artistic sensibility. With my novel, I felt there was something inherent in the snapshot structure, in following the divided selves of Wintric, Dax, and Armando, as well as their spouses and children. To get all of those sides of the story, to focus not just on Afghanistan, but equally, if not more, on the side streets and backyards of America, this structure allowed quite a bit of movement into those varying perspectives.

ODT: Tell me a little bit about how you worked with the third person dramatic point of view, that is, you rarely put the reader inside the characters' minds but rather infer motive, emotion, etc. primarily through dialogue and action.

JG: I can say this dramatic point of view is not traditionally found in my fiction, but I investigated it once the book settled into present tense. Present tense has this great immediacy, but present tense can often lack mediation. So the perspective of the "camera" POV being just off the shoulder, seeing what the characters see, but purposefully avoiding metaphor, simile, or any other type of remediation seemed to me critical to pair with the present tense. That lovely immediacy fostered tension, both dramatic and subtle. And not just with the combat scenes or scenes of mortal danger, but also scenes where the reader might expect tranquility: driving through a redwood tree or walking down a street in Colorado. And that was key to me, keeping the tension ever-present. So there's an Afghan girl walking with a soccer ball and the characters have to make a split second decision to shoot or not, and that's hopefully going to be as intense a scene as a person sitting on the footsteps of a trailer late at night in Elko, Nevada trying to decide what to do with the rest of his life.

ODT: And that's really the mark of great fiction. It's often that subtle tension that keeps the reader turning pages.

JG: Exactly! Because you can only amp up the dramatic, climactic tension so often or the reader will completely check out. Finding power and uniqueness in more traditionally "quiet" moments, in the quotidian, is often where we witness rewarding revelations.

ODT: So are you working on your next book now?

JG: Yes, I am, and I admit, slowly. My second book is a novel tentatively titled "Derrin of the North," due for publication in the summer of 2017. It's about friendship, sports, sex, health, and disease. There are some military aspects to it, but it's much more along the lines of Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* or Barry Hannah's "Testimony of Pilot." It's been a great joy to stretch my literary legs a little bit and try new things, but at the same time my sensibilities and curiosities are so close to conflict and service in the military that I can't fathom writing something that didn't touch on those subjects.

ODT: So many of our* O-Dark-Thirty *readers are writers and poets just starting out and hope to one day be right where you are now. Any words of encouragement for them?

JG: Be excited about your own work and write in your own voice. Enthrall yourself. You need to be your biggest fan, and if you're not enthralled by your work, no one else will be. Find your pathway to that confidence and bring along a deep desire for honest, direct feedback. There's no magic answer to when your work is ready, and your first draft most likely isn't destined for greatness, but find that confidence, believe in your voice, and keep writing.

###

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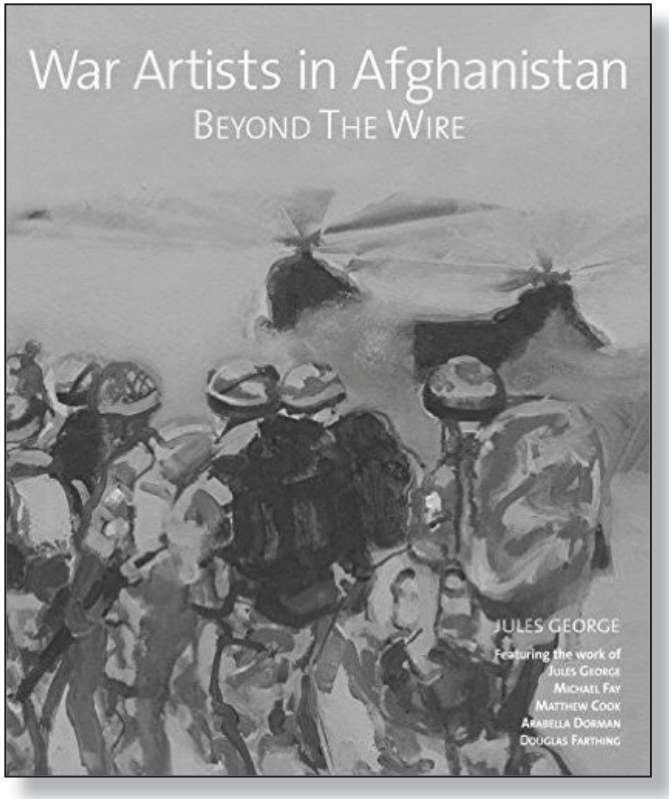
All works submitted to *O-Dark-Thirty* will be considered for publication in *The Review*. Works accepted will undergo a rigorous review process by our editorial board and may require some back and forth between the editors and the author. We seek work of the highest literary quality.

We accept submissions year round, of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction (including memoir and profiles). If you want to write for us, you should be a veteran, a service member (active or reserve), or a service member or veteran's family member. Your submissions should be previously unpublished (see below for our definition of exactly what "published" means) and should conform to these standards:

We accept fiction of up to 5,000 words (2500+/- words are more likely to be published); Non-fiction—should be true and under 5000 words (again, shorter works are more likely to be published); Poetry—three poems per submission. Please only send one submission at a time: one piece of fiction or non-fiction, or one batch of three poems.

We cannot provide payment for publishing your work. If your work is selected for *The Review,* you'll receive a free copy of that issue and you may purchase additional copies at a reduced rate. It is also our goal to print an anthology of our best works. If your work is selected, you will receive a copy of that as well.

We use *Submittable* as our submissions manager. Please go to our website at **o-dark-thirty.org/submit/** for more information about submitting work to *O-Dark-Thirty* and a link to the *Submittable* site.



From the perspective of five artists, both civilian and military, War Artists in Afghanistan: Beyond the Wire *conveys the vivid experience of being on the ground during the recent conflict in Afghanistan. It highlights, through painting and drawing, the many facets of a contemporary war zone with powerful imagery, enhanced with personal narrative and text. A rich diversity of themes and subjects are covered, whether soldiering, local culture, religion or landscape, reflecting the very complex nature of this environment as a 'theatre of war'. In an era where we are surrounded by photography, drawing and painting has a unique power and essence to bring something to life.*

Sale of this book goes to aid Combat Stress: The Veterans' Mental Health Charity in the United Kindom. *combatstress.org.uk*