O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

Anthology 2012-2017

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On the cover: A compilation of all of our covers
from the begining.
Designed by Janis Albuquerque
U.S. Army Reserve 1984-2007
Army National Guard 2008-2013
Operation Iraqi Freedom 2003-2004
Operation Enduring Freedom 2011-2012

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Publisher's Note

When I started this journal, I figured it had about a 50/50 chance of surviving the first year. Despite the best efforts of a number of friends to dissuade me, I wanted to have a journal affiliated with the Veterans Writing Project so we could provide a platform to our community to get their words out in front of an audience. And here we are five years later.

In those five years, we've published the work of more than 400 individual authors in *O-Dark-Thirty.* This includes works of fiction, memoir, poetry, short plays, and interviews with well-known veteran writers. These works have been submitted by veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Global War on Terrorism, Afghanistan, and by family members ranging from the adult children of veterans, to spouses, to grandparents.

We do this as part of the Veterans Writing Project's commitment to giving people the chance to tell their stories and putting those stories out in front of a wider audience. Stories like Jay Snyder and Grady Smith wrote. Jay came through a couple of VWP workshops. He is now writing a book about his relationship with the girl back home, the girl he actually came home to and married. Grady wrote a short story for us about a Vietnam veteran's first visit to the Wall. In 1967, Jay and Grady shipped out to Vietnam together and were replacements in the same division. They lost touch when Jay was badly wounded in a mortar attack and medevac'ed home. They found each other forty-five years later when they were both published in our literary journal.

And Joe Bruni who came through one of our workshops. Bruni left Brooklyn in 1942 with his best friend, Joe Esposito, to join the Marines. The two men survived Parris Island together, and shipped out together and came ashore on Iwo Jima together. Joe Esposito died on Iwo Jima and Joe Bruni lived. In 2015, Joe Bruni read his tribute to his pal Joe Esposito in a formal event we held in Norfolk. Esposito's nephew and kids came with a portrait of Joe and his medals for Bruni to see.

And there's Billy Brown. Billy was a Vietnam veteran who came to one of our writing workshops in North Carolina. He sat in the back row, about as far away from me as he could get. For the first day and one half he didn't say a word. He took some notes and he listened to everyone else. Just after lunch on the second day, he finally spoke up. He talked for about five minutes or so. By the time he was done, he was crying and so were about half of the others in the room, me included. He finished and said he was sorry for taking up so much time. No one spoke for a moment. The next person to speak was his wife, who was sitting beside him and had been for the entire workshop. Marsha looked at me and said, "I've been married to Billy for thirty years and I've never heard any of that." Billy attended two more of our workshops. Each time he showed up he seemed a little more at peace. During the third workshop he told me on a break that he had been writing plays and they had been staged at his church. He said he was happy and felt like he was finally home. Billy died last year of an Agent Orange–related cancer. But he got his story out and in front of an audience.

We do this with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. An annual grant based on the Veterans Writing Project's work

with NEA at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence allows us to print the paper copies of this journal and distribute copies to every participant in each one of our workshops as well as to Veterans Centers and hospitals around the country.

But most importantly we do this with the support of writers and readers. We, those of us who make up the staff of this journal, do this because we think it's important. But we're only the handlers, so to speak, of the journal. The heart and soul of this journal are the writers and readers that we connect through its pages. So please keep writing and please keep reading. Let's make this a regular thing, shall we?

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

Non-fiction Editor's Note

"Disconnecting"

There are all sorts of rich psychological material in this wonderfully engaging narrative that I won't comment on because I'm not a psychologist. But I really like stories that make concrete some abstract "thing." In this case, the sort of notion of "broken people finding comfort in other broken people" is explored.

"Things I Learned During the War"

Matthew Young has structured together soul-chilling snapshots and reflections about moments of war into this outstanding essay. This is *THE* military writer that I think everyone should know.

"Freak Accidents"

I really enjoy stories that play off stereotypes, break down conventions. In the Hollywood lore, veterans get PTSD and they become angry, shattered people. In this story, Lori Imsdahl has had her soul shaken because of the experience she's endured. And the coming to grips with how that's affected her psyche is not the Hollywood trope – it's a shockingly sad numbness.

"Heavenly Shades of Night Have Fallen"

Veteran of the First Persian Gulf War goes back to Iraq years later as a photographer and journalist. The soldiers he's with endure the confusion, boredom, and the sudden terrors of war – all condensed into one scene. What is it to wish for death? And what does Karma say about that? I teach this story to my students when I want to teach them the hallmarks of good creative writing.

"Alonzo"

This story made me cry. It's true, I'm a Marine veteran and sympathetic to Marine stories. But if I had met Kacy at a bar and I had never served this story would still stay with me forever.

Dario DiBattista

Disconnecting

By Elisabeth Sherman

Robby introduced himself to me while I was refilling my cup at a party on the top floor of my university's English literature building. When he approached me, I was standing alone, pumping the keg foolishly, trying to listen to snippets of conversation over the sound of some guy slamming away on his guitar. I narrowed my eyes at him. What could he possibly want? "I think I know you," he said. I rolled my eyes.

"We have class together," I answered. He nodded in the affirmative like he had been trying to remember something that was bothering him.

When I saw Robby for the first time at school, I didn't think too much of him. He was unshaven, wearing a tight t-shirt, his face relaxed in a way that conveyed a quiet arrogance. I was sitting at the other end of the table, in a corner seat, so that when he sat down, all I could see was his profile. He looked too young to be walking with his cane. The way he leaned all the way back in his chair during class discussion, watching everyone, but not I suspected listening to anyone, made him seem immature. That sort of apathetic careless-

ness, that self-importance with which he approached the classroom, made me want to kick the chair legs out from under him, cane or not. At the time, I was not in a charitable mood: The combination of a new university and living in New York City had made me impatient. I was consumed by anxieties over money, my social life, earning my degree—the list of problems that caused stress was constantly evolving.

For our second class, we read *Final Salute* by Jim Sheeler, which chronicled the experiences of an officer who announced the death of a service member to the dead person's family. The piece won the Pulitzer Prize but I hated it. I told the class about how I thought it was melodramatic, full of clichés, and insulting to the military and their families. A few minutes after my speech, we went around the room and introduced ourselves for the first time at the request of our professor, who had spent first class introducing himself. Robby and the man sitting next to me told us that they were both veterans. After our introductions, Robby and the other veteran, Matt, shared that they both agreed the piece in question was an enjoyable read, and if there were clichés, they didn't detract from the power of the story.

When Robby announced his status as a veteran of Afghanistan to the class, all the features of his face, all his arrogant mannerisms, changed meaning. He looked arrogant because he already knew all these stories—he hadn't read them, he had lived them. I looked at him again and noticed for the first time the broadness of his shoulders, the thickness of his arms and thighs, the sharp lines of his jaw, the fullness of his mouth. I wanted to run my hand along the back of his neck, where his black hair was shaved close to his head. His body became a vessel for his job—muscles gained at a great expense, posture born from the discipline of his profession. What I hated in him before was not, as it turned out, a contrived measure of his ego, but the result of years of labor and dedication.

After my teenage years watching soldiers on television news channels, I had formulated a list of fantasy characteristics to define soldiers that I found immensely attractive: They were loyal and disciplined, physically strong, and emotionally stoic. I had been waiting nearly ten years to speak to one as a peer in real life. I couldn't believe after our discussion in class, Robby was still curious enough about me to approach me socially.

"I was sitting over there ranting like an idiot, going on and on about how insulted *I* was, and you guys thought the story was great," I admitted to Robby at the party. "I really felt like such a piece of shit."

"It's alright. People have to remember that these things happen. It's not really all that cliché, is it, after all? Because that was really that woman's experience with her husband's death," he answered, and I nodded my head, though I still didn't agree with his point.

"I wondered if you guys were more insulted by me," I said, taking a gulp of my beer. "I wanted to tell the class that my dad has PTSD, but then I felt like maybe I would have overstepped my boundaries. I didn't want either of you to think I wanted to try to talk about something I know very little about, at least in terms of my own experience."

Awkward silence followed this declaration of my family history. To fill the void—and probably to avoid talking about either my dad or PTSD any longer—Robby told me a story about sitting in a plane ready to take off on the tarmac. One of his sergeants told him that another soldier on board had just gotten a call from his girlfriend: She was pregnant. Robby thought to himself, "Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do?" One of his soldiers was nineteen years old, and now he had a pregnant girlfriend. But they were on the plane about to take off for Afghanistan. There wasn't much that Robby could do to comfort the kid.

Robby was twenty-three at the time, and that made me wonder what his rank would have been—lieutenant, I guessed. But I didn't know

for sure, and didn't feel comfortable asking. It occurred to me that when that story took place, in 2003, I was thirteen years old, sitting on my dad's couch, watching air strikes in night vision on CNN. I began to feel the weight of our age difference, and my lack of life experience, so I downed yet another beer, suggested that Robby meet us at the bar later, and walked away to join my friends who were dancing in the corner.

A couple hours later, I found Robby at the dark, crowded bar, leaning up against the emergency exit. I grabbed a stool and sat beside him. I couldn't read him. His body was angled away from mine, his hands stuffed in his pockets. As he rambled on about his family history from India to New York, my head began to feel hazy. I had been nursing the same beer for at least a half hour, swishing the watery alcohol around, watching the foam gather around the rim.

I wasn't too interested in what he wanted to discuss; my anxiety began to creep into our interaction—that he would never allow me to get a word in. He kept trying to get me to guess his ethnicity. What I was thinking about instead was the width of his torso: Could I reach my arms all the way around his midsection and touch my fingers together on the other side?

I tried to lie to myself while he talked, tried believe he was attractive. But I had to convince myself of this. I didn't know if he hadn't been in the military if I would still find him attractive.

When he paused in a long monologue about his Indian heritage, I took the opportunity to assert myself into the conversation.

"I want to ask you so many questions about the military," I said. I wanted to know how much his gear weighed, what type of explosive gave him that limp, if he wore his glasses during combat, if he ever used his gun. There were other things, too, that I wanted to question him about—things that should be simple to explain but never could be: If the worry over the men under his command ever made him freeze up with terror at night; how much he missed kissing and

being kissed; if he ever felt so scared that he wanted to die. Most of all, I wanted to know if he still believed everything he learned in his training—all the words that made him proud but also ended up putting him in the hospital.

"But maybe here isn't the right place, or the right time," I said instead, taking a look around the room full of drunk people.

"I think you're right," Robby answered, making his own assessment of our peers. What did they call that? Re-con mission? Reconnaissance?

He went silent after that and I wondered if perhaps that time I had insulted him in a way I couldn't apologize for. Because what I wanted to know was a little sick—all the gory details of the life he couldn't escape. I couldn't wipe the excitement off my face, the wide smile at the prospect of learning more about the military life. I wondered if he knew that my excitement was not specific to him.

Instead of satisfying my curiosity, he told me that he had graduated from West Point. Not just a soldier, an officer. Robby didn't tell me his rank and I still couldn't bring myself to ask. But it didn't matter. What mattered was the pressure swelling up in my hips, pressing down on my knees, down to my toes. He kept talking but I wanted the noise to stop; I wanted to feel the weight of his palms pressed up against my stomach and shoulders, the twist of his legs around my calves and thighs, the heat of his breath on my neck or in my ear.

"Take my number," I told him, when he announced the time for his departure. Robby picked up his cane and started doing the rounds, shaking hands with his friends and classmates. I spun around on my bar stool and stared at the inside of my glass.

My cab got all the way to 96th Street before he texted me: "You want to come over?" There was already five dollars on the meter, so I told the driver to turn around and take me back to 119th Street.

The apartment door was unlocked when I got there. He was making his bed when I walked in. Robby helped me pull off my coat—I couldn't seem to get the stiff velvet to cooperate on my own, or maybe I just made it seem that way so that he'd touch me—and then we sat down on the couch.

We tried to talk but there wasn't much of a point in conversation. I turned my body to the side, so that my weight rested on my right hip, my legs tucked underneath me. Robby slid his hand over my jaw, behind my ear, wrapping his fingers around my neck. His kiss was very light; he concentrated on my top lip, his tongue hit my teeth and pulled away, not in a teasing way, but an anxious way.

I had arrived at a crossroads. We kept kissing and not kissing on the couch but while I ignored the slimy texture of his tongue trying to slide between my teeth, I fought with myself over whether or not to stop or to keep going, because more than anything, Robby was just his job to me. He was not Robby the Person, he was Robby the Soldier. That was clearly unfair, but I couldn't really avoid the longing to crawl inside the Soldier, not the Person, and I didn't try to avoid it, either. He could have been just as conflicted as me, wondering if I was using him to fulfill a fetish or just because I was bored and young, but if he felt any hesitation to continue, I couldn't sense it.

Instead, I continued to exploit his pain because I just want to kiss someone who was tortured, someone who needed to be fixed, some tough guy who kept getting called a hero but felt like a complete failure. But I wanted to do a soldier a favor, too—as though having sex with him would help him recover faster, help him take his mind off the ache of war for even just a short time.

Robby pulled away from me and took his shoes off to show me his foot injury. He had no toes on his left foot and the skin was pulled too tightly over the bone, like a piece of latex trying to cover

a blunt piece of wood. He told me that he felt as though, just to be fair, he should show me before we went any further.

I half covered my lips with my hand and giggled. Then I looked at him at smiled. My chest heated up and the warmth spread to the tips of my fingers. He thought it might've scared me, but he was wrong.

He rolled up his sleeve and showed me the skin graft on his forearm. He ran a hand over the puckered skin. He grimaced out of embarrassment and I melted into him. My arms turned to wax around his shoulders, my hips slid into his lap. It wasn't just that I wanted to fix the damage; no, it was that I wanted more damage. I wanted to feel his hurt so I couldn't feel mine. No matter how agitated I felt about school, scared that I would be broke and in debt for the rest of my life, or how lonely I had become in the city, my problems were invisible specks on a vast array of pain compared to what Robby had endured. His suffering humbled me, and even in those few hours that we spent together, the trauma I imagined he withstood as a soldier put my meager complaints and fears into clear perspective. I thought I felt sad, but I didn't know true sadness. There's no better place to score the kind of pain to remind me to be thankful than from soldiers, the ultimate burned up creatures.

Robby told me he hadn't been with a girl for a while. Five years. I guessed he meant since he got out of the military, though I didn't push the investigation into his sex life further. But when we got in bed it became clear that he wasn't as out of practice as he claimed to be. When it came to the crucial moment, though, his concentration slipped away and we couldn't have sex. We tried twice but each time he rolled off me, defeated.

I was disappointed. Robby might have been disappointed, or embarrassed, or angry, but I couldn't tell in the darkness, and I flipped onto on my side after our second failed attempt, with my back to him not even trying to comfort or make him feel better.

After some moments, laying there in the dark, I wanted to tell him that I was thinking about those photos that always came up on my Facebook news feed: In one panel there was a photo of a Marine in his dress blues and in another panel was a photo of him after his tour, all burned up or with a leg missing. The caption read, "Like if you respect him," guilting you into feeling bad for the guy. And I did feel bad for him, because he lost a limb, or because he was disfigured, but not because he was a soldier. He had made a choice to join the military. I shouldn't be required to respect someone because he decided to put his life on the line for some abstract political concept, or because he needed money to pay for college, or because if he didn't join he'd end up in prison. I'd rather give ten minutes of my time to smile at him and tell him he's still beautiful despite his injuries; I'd rather kiss him and hold him and make him feel wanted again, make him feel that there is a way out. As I listened to the pattern of Robby's heavy breathing against my shoulder blades, I wanted to explain that I had heard veterans say that they feel as though they never left the jungle, or the desert, or the trenches. That they feel trapped in uniforms and patrols and guns that jam and wet socks. Soldiers get shut inside their agony, and as we had talked at the bar, I convinced myself that if I opened a door for Robby, he could see a prettier world where soldiers can be men, too, capable of failure, awkward almost-sex, kisses that are maybe a little too wet. He didn't ask for my respect, and I didn't know him well enough to give it. I just wanted to let him rest, just let him catch up on a little lost time.

I wanted to tell him that I was thinking all this, but I just laid there, frozen in place like a statue—no heart, no brain, no blood. Just stone. He didn't need pity, but I did understand him—and that's all he needed, understanding about the skin graft and the cane and the folded up American flag on his bookshelf.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight," he whispered beside me. But I'd already closed my eyes.

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Things I Learned During the War

By Matt Young

How to Live in the Third Person

This recruit is not special. He is like all other recruits. He will wake at the same time as other recruits, he will address other recruits by "Recruit [insert last name]," he will address Drill Instructors as, "Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name]." If a Drill Instructor is not available and he needs to speak with one, he will stand at arm's length from the hatch to the Senior Drill Instructor's office, he will slap the two-inch-thick piece of raw pine nailed next to the door as hard as the nerve endings in his his palm will allow, and he will announce, in a loud, boisterous manner, "Recruit [insert rank and last name] requests permission to speak with Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name], he will then wait at the position of attention until the Drill Instructor presents himself. This recruit will eat at the same time other recruits eat, piss when they piss, shit when they shit, run when they run, sweat when they sweat, shower when they shower.

He will lay awake in his rack at night at the position of attention, as he's been trained. He will stare out the squad bay

window with the other recruits and watch the lights across the bay at the San Diego International Airport. He will see planes take off and land and think, like all the other recruits, that it might be easy to leave the squad bay late at night, and then sneak across the Recruit Depot and somehow make it to the airport where some valiant citizen will pay for a plane ticket to Canada. He thinks these thoughts until Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name] enters the squad bay and insults the recruit on duty's mother, and then tells him to shut off the lights. One hundred eyelids close in unison.

When he wakes at night, his bladder straining against his ever-receding waistline, this recruit must remember to do a set of no less than five pull-ups at the bars next to the entry of the head before entering and when leaving. This recruit's actions are to be monitored and documented by the recruit on duty that hour. This recruit can still make decisions of his own. For instance, he decides to multitask and use the shitters instead of just the urinal. The shitters do not have doors, but they have partitions, unlike most other places on the Depot. The squad bay shitters are only to be utilized at night, if this recruit or any other recruit is caught defecating in the shitters during daylight hours the punishment is the quarterdeck.

No recruits know what happens if a recruit is caught masturbating in the shitters. This recruit, nor any other recruit has been able to get a hard on since coming to the Depot. The imagined quarterdeck punishment makes these recruits ill and is enough to keep them impotent for thirteen weeks.

The quarterdeck is at once this recruit's friend and worst enemy. In the first weeks of living in the squad bay this recruit tried to avoid the quarterdeck, he refused to stare for too long at the ten by twenty square of deep ocean green linoleum, didn't even like to walk on it. The linoleum covering the floor of the rest of the squad

bay is black. This recruit believed, and to some extent still does believe, that the discoloration of the linoleum is not intentional. He believes the discoloration is caused by the countless gallons of sweat, blood, vomit, tears, snot, and bile absorbed from the bodies of past recruits. But the quarterdeck has also made this, and these, recruits strong. Time spent on the quarterdeck is referred to as "a slaying" by these recruits. Push-ups, right now; side straddle hops, right now; mountain climbers, right now; no, push-ups, right goddamned now; steam engines, right now; flutter-kicks, right now; side straddle hops, right goddamned now. These recruits have heard rumors; Drill Instructors are not to utilize the quarterdeck for more than five minutes at a time. The Drill Instructors seem immune to this mandate; either that, or time on the quarterdeck moves slower than actual time.

Later, digging a fighting hole into the side of a hill overlooking a main supply route in some desert country in one-hundred-twenty-degree heat, this recruit will come to dream of those times on the quarterdeck. He will long for them. He'll think back and he'll wish he were there as Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name] spits wintergreen flavored chewing tobacco into this recruit's face screaming, "Faster. Faster, right now. Faster, right goddamned now."

How to Survive for an Unreasonably Long Period of Time Without Sleep While Living Out of a Patrol Base in the Marshlands

Masturbation is a means of survival. I mean it. Really. Jerking off has saved countless lives throughout countless wars. Probably all the way back during the Norman invasion of England in 1066 there were peasant soldiers manning the ramparts whacking away trying to stay awake during the night watch to sound the alarm in case of raiders. Probably before that. In fact, I bet the reason the Trojan Horse worked

at all was because some asshole sergeant in Troy's army put a eunuch on the wall to keep guard. He probably fell asleep because of course he couldn't flog the dolphin and boom, Troy's burned to the ground.

Maybe not, but I like to think so.

My grandfather wasn't in World War II. So he never talked about it when he was alive. But I bet if he had been there in the shit and I could ask him now how he stayed awake in the fighting holes on Peleliu he wouldn't tell me it was because he was so scared of dying he couldn't sleep. Imagine yourself in a fighting hole, in the complete dark of a tiny coral island in the middle of the Pacific, no food or fresh water for days, dysentery pooling in your grenade sump, waiting for the Japanese to make a banzai charge. Exhaustion sets in. Sleep becomes more alluring than the fear of death.

"Maybe I'll just close my eyes for a minute, just rest them," you think. Muscles soften. You can feel lashes colliding as your lids close. Breath comes easier. And then, just like that, you're stabbed in the gut with a goddamn samurai sword. So, no, fuck that. It wasn't fear keeping those boys alive, it was that they were looking out through the darkness thinking of Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth and whoever else, while they bopped the weasel.

They may have been the greatest generation, but when they got home don't forget they did so much fucking they caused a population boom that's had unparalleled worldwide socioeconomic effects.

So things don't change that much through the generations. I mean, it's not like I'm some sex-crazed maniac jerking off to inkblots that look like my mother. You try staying awake for fifty-six hours at a time. What does that do to a person? Watch lasts for hours. No longer than eight but never less than two, and then you're out on patrol, then you're back on watch, and then you've got to find time to eat and whatnot, and then you're back on patrol. It helps if there are more new joins in the platoon, spreads out the workload. If not, well, you're pretty much fucked. The salts don't stand watch because

they've done their time, so it falls on the new joins, the boots. How do they expect me to stay awake?

So here I stand, on top of a house commandeered from a woman and her kids or whoever else, behind a shit and clay wall that comes to chest height that probably couldn't stop a shot fired from a BB gun, my right eye full darkness and my left eye full of green from a single-lens night vision goggle mounted to my helmet, staring out at the main road and fallow fields that surround us, fly undone, going to town on myself. Because I know the second I fall asleep that Trojan Horse will appear out of nowhere, and I'll be the asshole who goes down in history for letting it happen. I only have to make it until my watch is up.

How to Check for Internal Bleeding

First there is noise, but not noise like construction going on outside of my window noise. It is all-around noise. Noise that feels at once everywhere, and nowhere. Maybe I'm imagining it. It could be a dream, I think. Like one of the ones that feels like falling and then I wake up at a desk or a table or in my bed, jolting so hard the entire world notices. And it's slow because like I've learned, it's the shitty things that last longest.

There's the dust and dirt too, little particles hitting my face, so my eyes are closed, but not like they're closed in the daytime, when light shines through the thin membrane of my eyelids and gives the dark an orange-rose tint. It's pitch behind my eyelids. That's impossible, I think, or maybe it is possible and I'm actually asleep and that noise is the jolt that's going to wake me up and I'll be back at the patrol base, maybe having fallen out of bed. That doesn't seem so bad.

There's this feeling of weightlessnes too, like being inside the Gravitron I used to ride at the Fireman's Carnival during the summers when I was a kid. But it isn't a dream and the noise isn't part of

the jolt that's going to wake me up and I'm weightless not because I'm riding the Gravitron with my friends, but because our Humvee is flipping upside down. In fact, it's rolling. Sixteen thousand pounds of ammunition and engine components and equipment and up-armored steel and people, rolling and flipping down a cracked and decaying road in the southern desert outside Al Fallujah.

A blur of things, and then I wake up at the aid station, a large one-room tent, partitioned by plywood and paper curtains, I lie on a gurney under a starchy sheet while Navy doctors cut off my clothes and my boots. I try to tell them to stop, that those are my favorite pair of boots, but they cut them anyway.

There's air conditioning. I'm cold; I haven't been cold in months. It feels unnatural, like how people must've felt the first time they saw electric light. My back hurts, my right arm hurts, my head hurts, my right leg hurts. A male nurse asks me questions, and pushes different places on my belly.

"What's your name? What happened? Where are you? Do you feel nauseous? Did you throw up?"

I answer: Matt Young. I don't know. Iraq. Yes. Yes.

I tell him to turn off the AC. I'm cold. He jams an IV into my left arm—the one that didn't hurt—and walks away.

McKay, my vehicle commander, is the only other person from my truck in the room with me. He's on a similar cot to my right. A female nurse pushes on his abdomen, and asks the same questions my nurse asked me. McKay smiles at her, says something I can't hear, the nurse laughs. I watch his hand sneak behind her back and pinch the middle of her left buttock. She swats him away, laughs again, and leaves.

"Goddamn, Young," he says. "We picked the wrong job."

He tells me Owens and Keller got medevac'd elsewhere: Owens to surgical for brain scans, and Keller to Germany. "He won't be coming back," McKay says.

We lay there in silence for a few minutes, and I let those words sink in, wondering what they mean. My head's swimming, the queasy feeling I got before I passed out is coming back, my teeth start to chatter. I need to call home, I think.

"They're going to have to check us for internal bleeding," McKay says. "Hope you've washed your ass recently." He laughs a high-pitched wheezy laugh, like there's a dog toy stuck in his throat.

"What?"

"It's the easiest way for them to see if you're scrambled up inside. Soft tissue's what usually gets perforated, and since we were sitting on our asses and a fractured tailbone's hard to diagnose, it's just quicker than waiting to see if you shit blood," he says. "It ain't so bad. Hasn't your girl ever snuck one by you? Hell, I always act like I don't like it, but she knows I do."

McKay keeps talking about anal stimulation during sex. I hear him, nod and laugh at the right times, but I'm just watching the drip from the IV. I can feel the saline flowing into my vein, it's cold like the rest of the room, it's taking the heat right out of me. The queasy feeling comes in waves. Before I passed out I remember holding Keller's head between my knees trying to stabilize his cervical vertebrae. Our corpsman had taught us that before deployment. I remember most everyone made some sort of joke about their testicles being in close proximity to their partners' mouths. We'd all laughed. Keller had been thrashing on the road when we'd found him ten meters from the Humvee. He'd been thrown out the gunner's turret, smashed his face on the spades of the fifty cal. Half his forehead was hanging down over his left eye, I could see the whiteness of his skull. He kept hitting himself in the face, screaming, trying to put words together that didn't make sense. So I put my knees on either side of his head and McKay held his arms down. I tried to soak some of the blood off his face, take care of the cuts and scrapes, tried to do the first-aid I'd been trained to do. When I touched his face, it felt

crunchy, the skin dented in and stayed that way, like a Rice Krispie treat. That's when I vomited and passed out.

There are footsteps. The male and female nurses are back.

McKay starts to yell about how they better not put anything in his asshole. They look confused, they tell us we're free to go, they bring us new clothes and boots. The clothes are so clean, they don't fit quite right, there are no salt lines or bloodstains, no dust, no mud from fallow fields cakes the knees of the trousers. Like the past months have been erased somehow. I ask for my old clothes. They tell me they've already been burned. McKay asks the woman for two cigarettes, when she turns, he again pinches her butt cheek. She doesn't look back.

"Goddamn," he says. "We're in the wrong fucking job."

How to Be a Real Boy

Keep your hair long. If there's anything you've learned, it's to keep your hair long. It's the differentiating factor between the gung-ho brainwashed eighteen-year-old you were when you joined and the civilian you desperately want to be. It's the thing people notice first, the thing that doesn't fit in with certain types of clothing (mainly anything not a uniform). People peg you immediately. They look at you and say, "Jarhead." So you keep it long. You get a fingernail fade, if you'd been enlisted two years later the style would actually be in vogue, the 1920s Dust Bowl cut. You don't shave on the weekends; two-day stubble does wonders. No one seems to give you a second look by Sunday evening. You drive to Irvine or even farther north to go to bars, try to dissociate with everything you've known for the past four years.

But it's hard to fight, you're not a civilian, and years from now when you've been out and you're married and you're in grad school and you're trying to forget those times you chugged whiskey and fought and were shot at and lived in a hole and hated life and

hated everyone and hated yourself and shot at mongrel dogs and screwed anything that moved and smoked two packs a day and hazed new joins and ran until you threw up because you were still drunk from the night before and made your family cry you'll realize that you'll never be a civilian. You're destined to be some half-breed, like those mongrels you used to shoot in the desert.

And so it's hard to come home.

Sometimes you find yourself giving up and drinking at the bars outside of base. You go with your platoon mates. You go and talk about fucking and fighting and shooting and drinking. You drink and drink until it feels like you're downing in all that booze. Until it feels like your liver is pickled and you spew your guts into a urinal because you can't find the toilet in the bathroom.

Then the bouncer tries to throw you out but one of your mates blindsides him in the jaw and then the bar is a wild rumpus. There should be Benny Hill music playing on the juke. There's screaming and yelling and punching and kicking and you see the bouncer who tried to haul you out lying on the floor, groaning, trying to get back on his feet. Another of your mates runs over and field goals him right in the ribs, and you hear the bones crack, and your buddy's still kicking, slam dancing into the guy's gut and you just watch until someone else broadsides him and then they're tussling on the ground and you look around and there's an abandoned beer and your mouth is desert dry and tastes like vomit and so you drink it, and then you're wandering around drinking abandoned beers until there are sirens in the distance.

It's a long walk to base and the lot of you are laughing and trying to show swollen faces to one another in the dark. There's a pool inside the gate, maybe another half mile down the road, it's all lit bright blue and undulating shadows in the complete seaside desert darkness, just for you.

You're naked, climbing a wooden ladder to the top of a forty-foot-high platform used to simulate water entry from helicopters. The platform is covered in moldy stamped down Astroturf and squeaks and slides under the balls of your feet. The others are in the water, bobbing, floating on their backs, yelling at you through the dark.

Jump, they say. They start to drunkenly sing a running cadence, their voices echoing off the wet concrete surrounding the pool.

And you do it. You jump into nothing, eyes shut, wind whirring over tiny hairs on your body, you fall for what seems like forever, fall into nothing. Just when you think you can sense the water rushing toward you and the voices of your buddies growing louder you keep falling. You've been falling so long you don't want to open your eyes for fear you'll find yourself floating in space, in a vacuum, nowhere to go, no way to change course. So, you just fall, and you keep falling, and hope that maybe sometime you'll land and it won't be hard and your friends will be there and you'll walk home wet feet squelching in your socks, teeth chattering against the cool coastal night and drink a beer and fall asleep. And so you will time to speed up; pray yell beg threaten bargain. But time chooses when it will and won't move for you, you know that. Sometimes you're just stuck jerking off until the next mission.

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Freak Accidents

By Lori Imsdahl

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

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

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

I felt nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twenty-five-year-old Clark had a wife named Monica and four children younger than six. He came from Plant City, Florida, where he'd joined the Army a few months before September 11th to escape his job in the freezer warehouse of a Food Lion. After his death, Clark's mother, Wrenita Codrington, told the *Military Times* that Clark had told her he'd "rather get a little dirty than a lot cold all the time." Clark's dream was to go to culinary school and open a restaurant with Monica. He had last tried to contact her on August 26, 2007, but she had not been at home, and he had left a voice mail telling her that he loved her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In their sworn statements, several members of Support Platoon noted that they saw the girls standing beneath some trees. The soldiers didn't think that was unusual; many children came to observe construction, bringing along animals and infant siblings. But that day, the area was noticeably devoid of children. Besides the two girls, no one had come to watch, and the soldiers did not see the man behind them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I grabbed the notebook from my assault pack and ran back to the bridge. Staff Sergeant Jimenez was establishing a casualty collection point in an open field near the bridge. Soldiers from my convoy were transporting injured members of Support Platoon to the casualty collection point on stretchers or by fireman's carry. Some of the injured were able to walk on their own. "Sergeant Howard just died," someone informed me.

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

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

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

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

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

The soldier and First Sergeant Meyer threw on their flak vests, jumped into the nearest Humvee, and raced downhill without the commander. They wound their way through the village, sped across the barren field, roared over the dry streambed, and reached the bridge site. This makes me believe that only a few minutes elapsed between the explosion and the time the helicopter arrived. However, it still felt like hours.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We got back into our vehicles. I got on the radio and told the gunners to stay low in their turrets. We'd barely crossed the dry stream-

bed when someone I didn't recognize came on the radio. "Roughneck 3-6, Roughneck 3-6, this is Crazyhorse 18, over."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe it's genetic; even from a young age, I was less emotionally expressive than my sisters. The human narrative inherent in playing house and dolls bored me. I preferred riding my bike and climbing trees.

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

And I won't.

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

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

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

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

After detecting this strange calm at the job site, I realized I wasn't scared to die anymore, because nothing about the experience seemed terrible to me. Though I wasn't scared to die, I wanted to believe that death was not in my near future, for I felt that I still had things to accomplish: words to write, issues to be an activist about, and children to raise. But I understood that Herrera, Howard, and Clark must have felt that they still had things left to accomplish, too. For this reason, I came to believe that whether or not I lived was not my prerogative, but the prerogative of something bigger than me. My time to die would come when my purpose had been served, whether or not I knew it had been served.

Thus my conviction: there are no freak accidents.

I'm sure that most would argue that this conviction was the stress response of a young lieutenant. A young lieutenant trying to make sense of the horror she saw in Afghanistan and not wanting to comprehend that this horror could just as easily have befallen her.

I've analyzed the merits of my conviction and I understand that my reasons for believing it are based on my feelings, intuition, and personal experience rather than scientific evidence.

Scientific evidence notwithstanding, I still hold the conviction today.

Lori Imsdahl graduated from West Point and was stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. From 2006 to 2008, she deployed to Afghanistan with the 864th Engineer Battalion. Her writing can be found at loriimsdahl.com.

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Heavenly Shades of Night Have Fallen

By Nathan S. Webster

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

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

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

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

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

Some peer through observation portholes built into the green sandbags, rows stacked head-high along the roof's edge. On the ground below, a circular perimeter of fifteen foot tall, three foot wide concrete

barriers surrounds us, separates the outpost from the city of Bayji's 125,000 residents, quiet in the hours of late-night curfew.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For these three Iraqis, time begins compressing.

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

Each breath we take lasts just a second.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But *are* they?

The radio crackles again.

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

He waits for Wilson's reply.

I wait. We all wait.

I am certain the fireball will be spectacular.

Come on, I think.

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

Come on already.

Time slows down.

Slows way, way down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Be careful. Be careful what you wish for.

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

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

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

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

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

The 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade began the morning of February 24, 1991, just across the Saudi Arabian frontier, in Iraq; our first objective, the town of As Salman, about seventy miles north. I ate a peanut butter-covered cracker off my lap, in my Humvee's driver's seat. I listened to the BBC broadcast of President Bush's speech announcing the commencement of the ground war we were already participating in. I was ready to do my job as a "combat photographer" with a historical documentation unit led by a National Guard major, assigned to take pictures of the invasion for the official military record. I was active duty Army, shunted around to fill a personnel gap in this Guard unit.

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

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

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

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

When the invasion started, I sat in my Humvee on a two-lane

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I heard the news radio, I stopped rolling up the tarp we wrapped against the doorless Humvee to block the wind-driven sand when the convoy halted each night. The twenty-eight soldiers were in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, had arrived just a few days before

to a war ending before it even started. *It's not fair,* I thought in a strange non-sequitur. *How do they hit Dhahran and not us, when we're actually eighty miles into Iraq?*

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

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

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

Jackson stayed in the Humvee later that same afternoon, when we rolled up on an Iraqi troop truck on Highway 8, somewhere around Nasiriyah. Abandoned and destroyed vehicles littered the highway. This truck was destroyed but not abandoned. The passengers were strewn about, some lying in bits and pieces on the roadway, other bodies more or less complete. One leg landed not far apart from its previous owner—no shoe, but still wearing a black wool sock the owner had pulled up his calf on his last morning.

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

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

The truck's driver had never escaped the cab. He might have tried to flee through the open door, but maybe it was just the way the body twisted that direction, contorting as it burned, muscles drying

and stretching taut, pulling bone into unnatural, impossible positions. Charcoaled teeth jutted from his blackened skull. The winter air of March was dry and cool. There was no smell.

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

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

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

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

"For the flight home."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So here I am, sweating buckets in the 125-degree heat of July 2007. My first day with the paratroopers, I've slung on my body armor and strapped on my helmet and headed outside to the Humvees, ready for my first trip into Bayji city itself. A friendly lieutenant good-naturedly warns me.

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

For a month, I sweat on the rooftops, the streets, and inside the compound. Hidden behind the fifteen-foot-tall concrete walls, the

only visible sign of Bayji is a mosque tower a half mile away, its speakers announcing the daily calls to prayer in guttural Arabic. Gunfire, sweat and the incoming mortars remind everyone exactly where they are.

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

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

My superstitious nature had not faded with the years.

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

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

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

Every day brings something new and awful.

Two Iraqi cops get kidnapped, and their heads end up in a canvas sack, tossed into the broken fountain downtown. A boy, maybe eight or nine, displays his new plastic legs, attached below the mess a bomb made of his knees. An Iraqi insurgent bleeds to death after

a gun battle with Iraqi police, struggles with the US medics on the aid station table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More than "unseemly." Sticking a camera in a gut-shot Iraqi cop's face is the kind of thing I'll wish I hadn't done—the sort of action a payback comes due for, way down the line, or maybe an hour

later. Maybe in the shower when the mortars start landing. Maybe on a patrol walking by a piece of plastic that isn't plastic.

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

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

It's a war full of tough choices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I *can't*," and his voice spikes with frustration. He clenches his fists and keeps glaring through the telescope. "I don't know what

they're doing, but I can't confirm they're laying an IED. It's something, but I can't say what."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another explosion has not followed.

"How can you tell?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Is that good or bad?"

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

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

"If we think we have a shot, we'll take it," Green says. But terrorist behavior couldn't be confirmed, and that was it: a no-go for attack, at least out here, under this command; at least that night.

"Were the three of them doing anything they weren't supposed to be? Don't know. We pushed out the mounted element; didn't find anything," he says. "Once they knew they were compromised, they rolled out."

He shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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Alonzo

By Kacy Tellessen

A name is more than how a person, place, or thing is known. Names have power. Names carry the weight of the individual. All that you are is condensed into a few syllables. To some people, Carl carries the weight of abuse. To others, Carl represents pure love. Mary could be the succubus that stole your life or the saint that saved your soul. Names mean different things to different people. A name can be changed, and the person might be able to shed the weight of it. But the name always remains, and all who hear its utterance are forced to remember the good and the bad.

Of course there is always the risk of being branded with a nickname. A name on top of a name. My older brother was the master of the demeaning nickname. He replaced Kacy with Fatty McFatshit but the name was too complicated to stick so it quickly vanished into the wood paneling of our double-wide trailer. Later he came up with the name Dually. Initially, I thought it sounded pretty badass. There were worse things than being named after a big truck. Once he saw my pride in the new name he informed me that "Dually" was meant to annotate my two distinct chins. After that I hated the name, but

it was simple enough to stick. My Mom called me Kacy, everyone else called me Dually. Still it wasn't so bad. I got taller and was only mildly chubby so the dual chins aspect was quickly forgotten. I threw myself into high school athletics hoping I could create more distance from Fatty McFatshit. It worked. I made all-state as an offensive and defensive lineman, it was okay to be a little chubby in that world. Still I wanted to run away from all of my names: Fatty McFatshit, Dually, and Kacy. I found my escape route when my history teacher told me of his time in the Marine Corps. He painted a world where names were earned with accomplishment. It sounded like a place where a person could make a name.

I quickly found out that your name was immediately reduced to your last name. There were no more Carls, Erics, or Jims. Kacy was nowhere to be found. There were only Smiths, Johnsons, Kowalaskis, Changs, Torreses, and a Tellessen.

Nobody used first names, and it was wonderful. Actually when you heard someone's first name, for the first time, there was a weird ring to it. You knew whom they were talking about, but it just sounded wrong. When I met Alonzo I never bothered to ask his first name, I didn't think we needed them anymore.

Alonzo was just like the rest of us, young and invincible. Or maybe we were young and stupid enough to believe we were invincible. We had an unlikely friendship, he a senior Hispanic Marine with a deployment under his belt, and me a white ogreish boot Marine who had never been shot at before. When I first got to the squad, Alonzo eyed me with suspicion. Not only was I a boot, but a machine gunner. Riflemen, like Alonzo, have a fierce pride in their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), and though I was an infantryman myself, weapons platoon men were always looked upon with vague suspicion. This was no different. I was the outsider.

Alonzo never really talked to me until we got shot at the first time. I think he wanted to know if this "Tellessen" was the real thing,

or another coward who had slipped through the cracks. I passed his test, though emotionally immature, I was no coward. After that first firefight we were as good as brothers. Not brothers in the sense of we knew each other's every secret, but brothers in the sense that we would die a thousand times for one another. There is something that isn't quite quantifiable that happens between people in combat. There is a kind of invisible chain that connects the two souls. As much as I hated and loved my flesh and blood brothers, I hated and loved my combat brothers.

About a week into this newfound brotherhood, Alonzo got orders to go to another squad. It was the shits. All of us hated it. We were all just now starting to act like a squad together, and now we would have to get along without one of the only Marines in the squad that had any semblance of combat experience. But Alonzo, being the Marine that he was, just smiled and said "It's all good." The next day I saw him driving a Humvee outside the wire.

Alonzo refused to change squad bays, and kept sleeping in our room. It was about the only thing in the whole situation that made us feel better. The brief moments we had together were nothing but jokes and bitching about how much worse the other guy had it.

The morning of November 20, 2006, my squad was to move out to a small patrol base. Alonzo had a few hours off and watched us get ready. He made a few jokes about sleeping in and taking the day off. As I was walking out the door he asked, "Hey man, do you got smokes? I'm out."

I dug through my filthy pockets, moving my toothbrush and half-full bag of Swedish Fish to grab an unopened box of cancer sticks. They were Marlboros. I thought they made me look tougher. I threw him the pack. He smiled, but there was something behind it, some kind of apprehension, or sadness. He looked me in the eyes and slightly shook his head.

"Love you, Kacy."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know he knew my first name. I just smiled awkwardly back at him and said, "Love you too, man."

I didn't know his first name.

November 22, 2006, we were sitting around a small fire at a patrol base on the edge of the city, smoking cigarettes and eating what little junk food we could get our hands on. A porno mag was making its rounds, but I already had it memorized. The copy of *Cherry* magazine made its way to me. I flipped through the pages and picked out the girl that looked most like the guy sitting next to me. I nudged him in the shoulder and asked him, "Jesus man, I didn't know times were that tough back home. Your mom has resorted to spreading her butt cheeks in front of the camera for money."

The large Marine next to me drew back a closed fist. I braced for impact, hopefully it was going to be in the arm and not the jaw. I closed my eyes and waited. The punch never came, but far away in the distance there was an explosion. The blast was muffled due to distance and the thick walls of the patrol base. All we had to do was look up though. We could see the black column of smoke that trailed up towards the heavens like an accusatory dark finger pointed at God.

We all ran to the highest point of the patrol base. The explosion was at the far side of the city. I knew it wasn't Alonzo. He couldn't die.

I ran back down to where the radio was and listened for radio traffic, something to tell which one of us was now gone. Through the static and the panicked voices I was able to piece together that a Humvee had run over a massive improvised explosive device. It took too long for them to read off the names of the boys that had been hit. I knew the first Marine, Warner was his name. Warner was dead. The second was Davenport. I never knew Warner other than knowing his face. But I knew Davenport. He was a shy kid. A kid with a huge heart. A kid that I thought didn't belong here. Most of us fit the bill, we were

stereotypical ruffians, but not Davenport. He had a legitimate gentle soul, he shouldn't have been behind a machine gun.

The next burst of static cryptically told of a wounded Marine. Severe leg trauma, a medevac had been called. It was Alonzo. The static from the radio turned to white noise. This wasn't how this was supposed to work. We were supposed to get into a few close calls so that we would have stories to tell when we were old men. We couldn't tell stories if we were dead. This wasn't how this was supposed to work. But if he lost a leg, he would still be alive. We could still sit on a porch one day and marvel at the badasses we once were.

The radio was silent as we all looked at each other. I looked around the room at faces of rage, sadness, and terror. Some were all three. I don't know what I looked like.

More static through the radio. Alonzo was dead. The black smoke still hung heavy in the sky, indifferent and undeniable. He was gone.

Sometimes when I'm feeling selfish I think he is the lucky one. He and all the rest who are gone. They don't have to hang around here and try and make sense of it. They got to die young and leave beautiful memories. None of them lived long enough to disappoint like the rest of us did. They'll never drink whiskey until they turn to mush, screaming into the night because they wish they had died instead of us. They'll never have to face the parents at the memorial, and feel like cowards because they can't hide the tears from running down their cheeks. They'll never wonder if they've lived a life worthy of their absence, or if it's all just meaningless.

I survived sniper fire, IEDs, mortar fire, and just about everything else the enemy can throw at a combat Marine. I've picked up human body parts in the street. I've done the trigger pulling when it needed to be done. None of these things have kept me awake at night. They were all part of the job, and I accepted them wholly and completely. The only thing from those times that still whispers dark thoughts in

the back of my mind is the guilt of survival. The guilt of knowing that they stood in my place so that I could watch my babies grow.

Survivor's guilt is the reality of what many call PTSD, and for years I thought that guilt would swallow me whole. I was weak. I didn't know how people could just go about their business like none of my friends died. I was angry. I was angry with my friends for leaving me behind to deal with all of this bullshit. Angry because I knew I could never articulate what it really means to fight for the man next to you. I wanted everyone around me to hurt like I hurt. Eventually I realized that I was being a pussy, the coward that Alonzo once feared me to be. Alonzo deserved better than to have died so that his brother could degenerate into the victim. I owed it to Alonzo, and the others, to get my shit together.

Twenty-two veterans commit suicide every day. That's twenty-two names. It's hard to say just how many different people that is. I'm guessing many of them just miss their best friends. They think that if they check out, they might get to go back to the days when things made sense. I understand this, and I would be lying if I said the thought had never crossed my mind. But the reality is that we owe a debt, and to default on that debt would be a dishonor to the ones we claim to miss so much. Self-pity is weakness and against all we had to go through to earn our names. I decided to deal with it on my own, much of that was through writing. Putting the bottle down helped too. It's not easy; it's not supposed to be easy. I'm not saying that if you're hurting you shouldn't seek help, but you're stronger than you think you are. Remember that you are stronger than you think you are.

I never knew Alonzo's first name until his memorial. He'll always be Alonzo in my memories, but to his mother and sister he was Joshua C. Alonzo. I didn't know Joshua. If he was anything like me, Joshua was a far different man than Alonzo. I knew a different person than his mother and sister knew. But it's for Alonzo and Joshua that I try

to make this life mean something. That I try to put purpose into this unexpected existence that I find myself in. Hopefully I can keep adding to my name, maybe pick up a couple different ones along the way. That Tellessen that stood with Alonzo is still hanging around, but I don't see him much. I like to think he evolved into something else, but I don't think we can ever really get rid of a name.

Kacy Tellessen lives in Spangle, Washington with his wife and two children. He is currently an undergraduate at EWU, pursuing an English degree with the creative writing option. He served as a machine gunner in the United States Marine Corps from 2005-2009. To keep the lights on, he started a BBQ catering company in 2013 and has been feeding people ever since.

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Fiction.

Fiction Editor's Note

Our mission upon diving into five years' worth of *O-Dark-Thirty* fiction was to identify the best stories the journal had to offer. Talk about mission impossible! After hours spent sifting, perusing, and ultimately reacquainting ourselves with stories as if they are old friends, we decided to adjust fire. Rather than pull out the "best"—a flawed label anyway since all the stories were outstanding in their own way—we decided on choosing stories that, collectively, represented not only a five-year journey of literary accomplishment but also the metaphorical journey of military service.

For our journey's tip of the spear, we chose (appropriately enough) the story **"Walking Point."** In this piece, we join a young soldier in Vietnam navigating not only the dangers of the jungle, but the pure absurdity of war when his squad's forward progress is stymied by a band of monkeys.

"The Pointed End Goes Up" kept us pushing ever forward, this time through the eyes of a young woman experiencing her first serious crush and the unanticipated consequences that ultimately turn on what is said and unsaid.

And what's a journey without a little illumination? **"Box"** certainly shines a light on the complications of women serving in the military, offering us the funny and ironic insights of a female MP

who signs up for a boxing match. With humor and honesty, the story packs as much of a punch before the fight as it does during the match.

In **"Terminal Leave"** we find a young soldier coping with a series of changes and losses told in a voice that is at once wry, bittersweet and tough. The story moves us from the making of homemade beer to the development of a complicated and ultimately tragic friendship with a Muslim woman who lives next door.

For so many veterans, arriving home isn't the end of the journey, but rather just the beginning. **"Like Home"** delivers a powerful statement on this reality in the form of a Marine's readjustment stateside after a harrowing deployment to Afghanistan. Haunted by guilt and the ghosts of a deadly encounter with enemy snipers, he struggles to shutter the bad memories in his head but can't seem to disengage from the fear—and danger—of what he cannot see.

Finally, with the intriguing **"Playground Patriots"** we are introduced to a seasoned Iraq war veteran who has settled into the routine of a hardscrabble civilian work life, only to have this routine jarred by a young Arab-American boy whose delinquency forces the veteran to confront both his own past and his own future.

Again, it has been an absolute privilege and honor to work on these pieces and to share them once again with our readers. Moreover, we relished the journey of rediscovery of these and so many other stories that we've published the last five years. And like the many readers who have consumed the stories, we are hoping the next five years will bring even more great reads—and more impossible tasks!

Jim Mathews

Walking Point

By Jim Barrett

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I waited for several moments, but nothing happened so I rose cautiously until I could see down the trail. Nothin' there until another rock came my way. It bounced harmlessly on the trail in front of me.

I hiked my M-16 to my shoulder, clicked the safety off and sighted down the barrel, waiting to see who had the nerve to assault a fuckin' trained killer with a rock. Nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shittin' monkeys are stoppin' us?"

"Yes, sergeant. They're pretty good with the rocks." And to prove my point, several rocks smacked the ground around us, which I was secretly thankful for because one thing I've learned about the 'Nam, timing is everything.

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

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

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

"A band of rock apes, sir," Sarge replied. His eyes flickered past mine and then moved on.

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, sir?" Sarge asked.

"Uhhh, is there a way around them?"

"No, sir."

Several more minutes passed as more rocks came inbound. I could see that Sarge was starting to lose his patience. He flicked the safety on and off a couple of times, ducked when a rock nearly hit him, pulled the magazine out of his weapon and slammed it home

again. When nothing had happened, he looked at the lieutenant and said, "Whatcha wanna do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's move back."

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

"Not exactly a . . ."

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

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

Once the general heard that, the lieutenant got his butt transferred. That evening Sarge and I went to the bar and got drunk. Before we staggered to our barracks, Sarge said, "No shit, rock apes of all things. Someday this'll make a great story."

How true.

Jim Barrett is the author of four published books and several screenplays—one of which has been optioned. He served with the Army's First Aviation Brigade in Vietnam from 1968-69. After leaving the service, he spent thirty years in law enforcement.

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The Pointed End Goes Up

By Elizabeth Stetler

When I was fifteen, Mr. Johnson moved in next door. He was fortyish and tall, with a clean-shaven, angular jawline. He wore plaid shirts and boots and blue jeans every day, even to work. He drove a forest-green pickup that was rusting near the rear tire and his dog, a standard poodle, majestic and stallion-like with glistening black fur, always rode in front with him. I'd watch from our back window as Mr. Johnson threw toys or sticks and the dog grabbed them out of the air and brought them back to his master with care, his stark white teeth not all the way clamped down on the fabric or the plastic, not squeezing the life from within. I was in love with them both.

Sometimes Mom would join me at the window. She'd watch for a few minutes and then say, "Huh," and walk away.

One day, after he'd lived next door for about a month, Mom asked me why I didn't just go talk to him already. I told her that I couldn't; he would think I had a crush on him or something. But when Mom walked away I went outside.

"Well, howdy," he said.

I waved, embarrassed for both of us because he'd just said "howdy." Even though his greeting was a little awkward, I was willing to forgive it because up close he was even handsomer than he was from the window. His eyes sparkled a warm brown, like amber. And though his nose was crooked, as if it had been broken once and was never set right, it seemed rugged, manly. Even his eyebrows were strong and perfect.

"I'm Abe Johnson. This is Banjo," he said, petting the dog's head. "We moved down from Kalispell. And who might you be?"

Banjo's front paws were on the fence and he kept jumping, as if he were trying to come across but couldn't quite make it. Mr. Johnson grabbed Banjo's collar so he couldn't jump, so I reached over the fence and ran my fingers through the dog's shiny black curls.

"I'm Tara." I felt like I needed to say something else. "I always wanted a dog but my dad's allergic to dogs and cats." Mr. Johnson nodded knowingly. Then he looked past me. My mother had come outside and as she walked toward us, the sun caught her hair and spun it gold.

"I'm Claire." She held her hand out to Mr. Johnson.

He let go of Banjo's collar to shake her hand and Banjo jumped again, almost scaling the fence.

Over the next few weeks, I began to go on walks with Mr. Johnson and Banjo when I came home from school. At first Mom didn't seem too happy about it. She asked why I didn't hang out with my friends from school more. I knew that if I told her how much I'd missed out on by not ever being able to have a dog myself, she'd cave. She'd always felt bad that I couldn't have pets. So I played the guilt card and she left me alone.

I started reapplying my mascara and lip gloss right before I left school so that it would be fresh when I knocked on Mr. Johnson's door. I tried not to overdo it. I read in *Seventeen* once that the point of makeup is to enhance your natural beauty. I wasn't sure if I had all

that much natural beauty. My school friends always said how pretty my mom was, though. I hoped that beauty was one of those things you could grow into. Like, maybe she hadn't started out all that pretty either. Maybe she'd had frizzy, dirty brown hair and temperamental skin and too much hair on her arms. But then, as she got older, her hair became smooth and light and her skin took on the peachy glow that it had. I hadn't seen that many pictures of Mom as a teenager to go off of.

Sometimes my walks with Mr. Johnson were quiet. I tried to make him talk more, I asked him about his job and his favorite movie and things like that but he never really seemed that interested in talking about himself. He'd answer my questions with a word or two, sometimes not at all. When I asked him what his favorite book was, he said he'd have to get back to me on that but he never did. So I started telling him about myself, which is a thing I do when I'm nervous. I blabber. It seemed like by the end of our second week walking Banjo together, he knew my favorite band (U2), my favorite food (ice cream), my favorite book (*The Outsiders*), my favorite animal (dolphin), and my favorite actor (Leonardo DiCaprio). It felt like we were running out of things to say. But that was okay because just walking alongside of him felt electric. I'd intentionally walk a little too close, occasionally bumping into him. I'd offer to hold Banjo's leash just to touch his hands, which were calloused and strong.

Sometimes he was quiet but sometimes he talked. Sometimes he'd ask about Mom. I tried to answer his questions the best I knew how: she used to live in Wyoming and my grandparents still lived down there. We visited them every other year at Christmas. I didn't know what brought her to Montana and I didn't know how she and Dad met. I did know that she liked gardening and that her favorite movie was *Casablanca*. I knew she preferred tea over coffee. I knew that she wasn't going to let me be like her, I would go to college. I would

not be a stay-at-home mother. He told me that she seemed too smart to have not gone to college. He told me he never went to college.

I was ecstatic when Mr. Johnson knocked on our door one Saturday. Mom answered and I was right behind her, hungry to hear what strange reason would bring him over to us for once. As we stood at the door, Mr. Johnson on the other side of the screen, Mom quickly ran her fingers through her hair.

"Afternoon," Mr. Johnson said.

Mom opened the screen door and invited him in.

They sat down in the living room, across from each other on our tan sofas. I sat down next to Mr. Johnson. He smelled sweet, as if he'd put on cologne. I took a few deep breaths, until I felt dizzy.

Dad came in and looked from Mom to Mr. Johnson to me. "What's this?" he asked.

Mr. Johnson held his hand out to him. "Abe Johnson. I live next door."

Dad sat down next to Mom. "And what can we do for you?"

Mom squinted a little, as if embarrassed about something.

"I've come to ask a favor," Mr. Johnson said. He said that he would be out of town for a week in June, less than a month away. He was wondering if, while he was gone, we would be so generous as to take Banjo on his walks and make sure he was fed and had water.

"I'll do it, no problem," I said.

He turned those amber eyes on me and smiled. "Why, thank you, Tara."

"Maybe we can do it together," Mom said. "It will be fun."

Mr. Johnson smiled at her, too, but only for a second. Then he cleared his throat and looked down at his boots.

"All right. Well, that was easy," Dad said. He got up. "Nice meeting you, Dave." He clumped downstairs and shortly after, I heard the TV turn on.

Mr. Johnson got up. "I really appreciate it, Mrs. Burns."

"Please," Mom corrected him, "call me Claire."

I watched him walk home from the living room window. He had his hands in his pockets and continued to stare at the ground.

When Mom and I came in through the front door at Mr. Johnson's house, Banjo barked a low, rumbling warning at us. But then he realized who it was and gave us both generous kisses and slapped our legs with his tail. On the dining room table, Mr. Johnson had left a schedule for us to follow, written on a piece of notebook paper with shredded ring-holes. His handwriting was mostly in capitals but certain letters, like e and a, were in lowercase. I wondered how he'd chosen which letters to write in lowercase. Or maybe it wasn't a choice. Maybe his hands just found themselves doing things a particular way.

His house, in general, was spare yet dirty. There weren't any pictures on the walls, Banjo's muddy paw prints were all over the linoleum in the kitchen, dishes were stacked in the sink and on the counter, and in his living room he only had a recliner and a TV on a wooden table.

Mom and I walked Banjo together every morning, but in the evenings she had to work on dinner, so I was on my own. It always seemed kind of sad leaving him alone there at night. I began to leave the TV on for him, just so he'd have some background noise.

One day, I had turned on the TV and was about to go home but something made me stay. I walked through the house and looked into the different rooms. Most of the doors were open, anyway. In the first bedroom was nothing but stacked boxes, as if Mr. Johnson were either about to move or still unpacking. Then there was a half bathroom, which was small and dark and smelled a little like urine. The next room was his room, which was larger than my parents'. He didn't have curtains, only dusty, cream-colored blinds. Next to his unmade bed was a small table with a glass half-filled with a caramel colored liquid. It smelled sweet and doughy. I tilted the glass enough to let the liquid touch my lips. It was warm. Bitter. I swallowed a trace amount.

Then I traced the entire rim of the glass with my lips, kissing him through proxy. Banjo sniffed my mouth, his short whiskers tickling my nose.

His closet doors were open and I buried my face in the flannel shirts hanging there. None of his shirts smelled like the cologne he'd worn when he came over. A couple of his shirts smelled a little like sweat, as if his essence was too strong to be washed away that easily. On the floor, he'd amassed a pile of laundry similar in size to the one in my own room. I took a brown, button-down shirt off the top of the pile and pulled it over my shoulders. It was long enough that it could be a dress on me, so I took my jeans off and looked at myself in the mirror. He would probably think I looked cute. Brown was always a good color for me.

Still wearing his top, I climbed into the bed. My head sunk into his pillow, which was much softer than my own and smelled a little musky. I spread my arms and legs out, covering as much area as possible. I pulled the sheets over my head and closed my eyes. From under the sheets, the world was dark and warm and safe. In there, wearing his shirt, my bare legs on his sheets, I felt sexy, adult. I rolled onto my stomach and pushed my pelvis into the mattress, swaying back and forth a little. I felt electric and guilty. Banjo jumped onto the bed and stepped on me. His eyes looked knowing and somewhat suspicious.

I got up, threw his shirt back into his laundry pile, put my jeans on, and went home.

Mr. Johnson returned from his trip with gifts. Though Dad hadn't helped with Banjo, Mr. Johnson gave me a pound of coffee to give to Dad. He handed me a small box. "This one is for you," he said. Inside, in a coil of silver, was a necklace with a charm in the shape of a skyscraper. I held it up and looked closer. The tower started wide but narrowed as it got taller. Then, at the very top, was a horizontal disk which wasn't quite as wide as the base but was a great deal wider

than the shaft. “It’s beautiful,” I said. Mr. Johnson smiled at me and I wondered, when our eyes met, if he knew I had spread myself out under his sheets.

“It’s the Space Needle,” Mr. Johnson said. “It’s a tower in Seattle. If you stand in the observation deck, you can see Mount Rainier.”

“Cool,” I said.

He gave another, larger box to Mom. “For you,” he said, without looking at her. When Mom hesitated he said, “It’s nothing big. I appreciate what you guys did for me. I don’t have anyone around here who can really help out.”

Mom nodded and accepted the gift. Hers was a glass vase that looked like the spray of a fountain. Ribbons of iridescent color ran from the bottom to the top, where they looped and came back down.

“I noticed that you like to grow flowers. Thought this might look nice with some of your flowers in it,” he said. Then he shrugged. “Or something.”

Mom had an expression that I didn’t quite understand. It looked like sadness mixed with something else. That’s how I knew she loved the vase.

Back in my room, I stood next to my dresser. I had a jewelry box, a cherry wood one with glass panels on the top. I kept my favorite things in it. A ring Mom had given me for my tenth birthday, a wrinkled letter that my Grandma had written me before she passed, and a split rock that was coarse and grey on the outside, but glittering with crystals on the inside. I considered adding the necklace to my treasures. But this trinket didn’t seem to fit in with the other things. It was not nearly as beautiful as the gift he’d given Mom. The necklace seemed cheap and childish, like something from a gift shop. But Mom’s gift, the iridescent vase, was unique. It had been made with fire and beauty and love. I stood with the weight of the shrunken building in my palm for a few minutes and then I let it slide into the wastebasket next to my dresser. It hit the bottom with a thunk.

When I think of Mom, I think of hot summer days under the wide, Montana sky. I think of the chirp of crickets at night and cicadas in the day. In my best memories, I love her without jealousy. In my best memories, I love her without betrayal.

I was seven when we planted tulips bulbs next to the sidewalk. It was fall then, and I had finished my small amount of homework and stood watching her from the grass.

"Want to help?" she'd asked.

She showed me where the next hole needed to be and I pushed the spade into the ground. She put a bulb into the empty spot. "Cover it up with dirt," she told me.

After a little bit of practice digging the holes, I knew how deep to make them and how far apart they should be spaced. She said I was a natural. I hit a rock every now and then, and sometimes Mom had to throw a bulb away that had gone bad and would not grow, but other than that it went pretty smoothly until I cut the earthworm in half. I watched in horror as its pink body thrashed, half stuck to my spade, half still in the ground.

Mom picked up the writhing halves of worm and placed them in some of the loose dirt covering a planted bulb. "It will be okay," Mom said. "Did you know that worms can regrow parts of their bodies?"

I was horrified by my violence, accidental as it was. The thought of the earthworm regrowing the rest of its body disgusted me more than it comforted me. I wanted to go inside, to do something gentle and safe, like reading or drawing.

But Mom handed me a bulb. "The pointed end goes up."

I studied the thing in my hands. Underneath its papery cover, it was smooth and shiny brown. On the bottom, the blunt end had the beginnings of roots, small white tubes that would eventually sink into the earth and anchor the plant as it grew towards the sun.

It was September when Banjo was hit by the car. Mr. Johnson buried him under the ocher leaves of the aspen tree in his backyard. Mom and I had brought shovels over and helped dig the hole. We were tired and couldn't dig it as deep as we'd have liked, but the hole seemed huge and dark anyway. The three of us put Banjo, who was wrapped in his favorite blanket, down into the grave and then tenderly covered him in the loose soil.

I had cut roses from the bush in front of our house. They were mostly dead but I placed them next to the twig cross marker anyway. Then I hugged Mr. Johnson, hoping that through the warmth of my body he would feel my care and my love and adoration, but he merely placed his hand on my back and patted, as if he didn't even really register that I was there. I walked back to the house, depositing my muddy shovel next to the back steps. When I looked out from the kitchen window, Mom and Mr. Johnson were still standing at the foot of Banjo's grave. When she hugged him, he held her close to him with both of his strong arms.

The rain started a couple of weeks after Banjo's funeral. I would come home from school, heart still heavy for Mr. Johnson and Banjo and my hair heavy from the rain, and I'd just stare out the windows. Dad said he was tired of me moping around and tried to "cheer me up" by giving me chores to do around the house, so I hid out in my room and moped there instead. Mom tried to convince me to do my homework but it seemed impossible to concentrate. I would stay up late instead, talking to my school friends on the phone. We'd talk about how I'd let Kenny Lewis touch me under my bra but that I didn't love him or really even like him. They would tell me how they'd kissed/fought with/had their "first time" with Andy Pratt/Josh Fitzgerald/Warren Mark in the McDonald's parking lot/the cinema lobby/his parents' bed. These boys were not for us to keep. The experiences were interchangeable. I wanted something that meant something. When Kenny

touched me or when I touched me, I only thought of Mr. Johnson. I thought of lying in his bed, his warm body finally mine to hold.

One day, I had told Mom that I was going to the basketball game. I had planned on it. All my friends were going and though I didn't care that much, it sounded like a fun time. Now that I had the Buick, a rusty gray relic that was older than I was, she didn't have to worry about dropping me off or picking me up. But when school let out and it was still raining, I didn't want to do anything but go home. But Mom wasn't there when I got home. The house was quiet and dark. Out of the back window, Banjo's grave was no longer a raised mound but a muddy pool. The cross that Mr. Johnson had made of sticks was no longer standing. It was on its side, melting into the ground. I felt a sudden need to see Mr. Johnson, to feel his brown eyes on me, to hear his voice or his silence. He just needed to be near. We could share sadness. We could share anything.

He was home, the lights were on and his car was parked in front. But as I walked up to the door, I saw that he wasn't alone. As the raindrops ran down my bare legs and skimmed my eyelashes, I saw her through the living room blinds. My mother. She was wrapped in golden lamplight, her eyes closed, her lips parted. Mr. Johnson worshipped her, brushing his mouth along the curve of her neck. He ran his fingers up her arms. Even in betrayal, she was beautiful.

I could have screamed. I could have broken the window with my voice and flown into the room and ripped her hair out. I could have pulled the tree in his front yard out by its roots and thrown it onto them, crushing them both. But my heart felt faint and tired. And my hands were shaking.

In my room, I made a cocoon of blankets and I stayed there, tangled in anger and hate, even after I heard the front door close. Mom called my name. She had seen my car outside. She tapped on the door. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

At dinner, Mom acted like the same as she always did, chipper and sweet. She passed around the bowls of potatoes and chicken and broccoli. She smiled and talked about seeing an old friend at the grocery store. She pretended not to notice my humphs and eye rolls. When she asked Dad how his day was, I couldn't control myself anymore.

"Why don't you tell us about your day?" I asked.

Mom stared at me. "I did," she said. She seemed to be trying to send a message through her stare, but I was still too upset to try to figure out what the message was or even to care.

"No, I mean your real day. You know. Next door?"

Everyone froze, including me. Without moving her head, Mom looked from me to Dad. Dad looked at the table for a minute before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a twenty dollar bill. He set it in front of him and for a moment it just lay there, wrinkled and scarred. Then he took a deep breath and pushed the money over to me on the table with his fingertips.

"Tara, why don't you go out to the movies or something. Your mother and I need to talk for a while." When he looked at me his eyes were savage and I was terrified to disobey. I felt Mom's eyes on me as well, but I couldn't meet them. I stood up and walked, leaden, to the Buick. The lights were still on at Mr. Johnson's house but I couldn't see him. I turned the ignition and drove away, the money still in my trembling hand, damp from sweat and the still-pouring rain.

Dad wasn't a bad guy. I never thought of him that way. He was just sort of distant. He was busy. He didn't give a lot of himself to us. I got used to this after a while. I'd push my affection on him knowing that it would inevitably be too much and he'd withdraw. It wasn't really his fault. We were just different.

I remember I was ten when Mom arranged Dad's secret birthday dinner. She hadn't told me much about it because she didn't want me to accidentally say something, as I was known to do. She did tell me, however, that it was a place we hadn't gone before.

When Dad came home from work, I ran to the door to greet him. He looked tired or sad and before he had taken off his shoes or sat down, I shoved the birthday card I'd made into his hands.

"Tara, Tara," he said. "Just . . . give me a minute." He pushed me away and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

Mom followed him to the room. She emerged a few minutes later, shoes on, smile on. But her smile wasn't the one I was used to. She almost seemed nervous.

Even though he didn't know where we were going, Dad drove. He always drove.

"Where are we going, Claire?" he asked Mom.

She'd give him directions and he'd repeat them back, seeming to play along, as if solving a riddle. The closer we got to downtown, the quieter Dad became. None of the restaurants we normally went to were downtown.

"Aaaaand turn right!" Mom said.

He pulled into the parking lot on the right. We had reached the Heart of Sicily, a place I'd heard my friends talk about when they'd gone to fancy dinners with their family. White string lights wound their way up the columns in front and along the wooden trellis over the outdoor eating area. Huge painted cement planters, bursting with red hibiscus, lined the cobbled walk to the main entrance. A yellow glow radiated through the thick glass windows, which were cut through deep stucco.

I imagined that all my friends were inside, passing around plates of fettuccini and chicken parmesan and garlic bread, like people did in Italian restaurants in commercials. I imagined they were waiting for me.

I had unbuckled my seatbelt and was about to get out but Dad told me to buckle back up. "We're not eating here," he said. "We can't afford it."

My hand hovered over the door handle. I waited to move until I had heard what Mom would say.

"I am paying. It's your birthday. It will be an experience," Mom pleaded, but Dad had already put the car into reverse and was pulling out of the parking lot.

"You're paying? With what money?" Dad laughed but it wasn't a happy laugh.

Mom whispered something that I didn't hear. I didn't think Dad heard her either.

"Tara, buckle back up," he said.

We drove back home in silence and when we pulled into our driveway, Dad got out of the car and walked inside without waiting for any of us. Mom sat for a moment, not turning around, wiping her eyes in the front seat. Then she took a deep breath and turned to me in the back seat and smiled.

"So what are we going to make your daddy for dinner? Maybe some pizza?"

I was angry so I tried to think of the most disgusting thing I had ever eaten. "How about liver. And Brussel sprouts."

Mom laughed and as we walked inside, she put her arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head.

That was something I carried with me: her laughter. Even after she was gone, when she never came home and a few weeks later I started getting letters from her postmarked from Kalispell, I remembered her warmth, her laughter. When I remembered this, I forgot to hate her. Sometimes I even forgot to hate myself.

It was still raining when I pulled into the driveway. As soon as I walked in, I knew Mom wasn't there. The vase from Mr. Johnson was shattered on the kitchen floor and the crystalline shards spread like a starburst across the linoleum. Dad's hand was bleeding. He rinsed it in the kitchen sink for a while, then wrapped it in a towel.

"You did the right thing," Dad told me. He went to his room and didn't come back out for the rest of the night. I went to bed not much later. The rain pattered on my window and I listened for Mom to come back.

In the morning, I woke up with a stiff neck from sleeping while sitting up. I thought I heard a noise in the kitchen and imagined that it was Mom, closing the coffee pot lid. She'd be sitting at the kitchen table, the morning sun drenching her hair, her eyes warm and sleepy. But when I stepped out of my room, I was alone. The broken vase was still on the floor. Our dinner dishes were still on the table. The broccoli, wilted and dry, was still in its bowl. Then I realized how quiet it was. The rain had stopped.

I walked over to Mr. Johnson's house and rang the bell. In my head, I practiced what I would tell him and Mom. I would tell them that I didn't forgive them yet. In fact, I was furious with them. I would tell them that they'd betrayed me and Dad. And then, like Mom always did when she was angry with me, I would tell them that I still loved them. But no one answered the door. I walked around to the back and tried to look in the windows but everything was dark inside.

Under Mr. Johnson's aspen tree, the burial mound had been washed away. The ground was open like a wound, and I approached the site with trepidation. Mixed with the earth was Banjo's black fur. Entangled in his fur, like pieces of rice, were larvae, which squirmed and burrowed in their edible home. Banjo's hind elbow pointed upwards, as if growing towards the sun.

Though the rain had finally cleared, the ground stayed soft and pliable for almost a week after. I threw piles of heavy, wet leaves over Banjo's exposed burial site to hide his bones and fur. I bought tulip and hyacinth and daffodil bulbs and pushed them into the earth around his grave. And though my mother was gone and eventually movers came and took all of Mr. Johnson's things away, that spring

when the flowers bloomed, it seemed that I could forgive them. It seemed possible too that perhaps they weren't so very far away.

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Box

By Ryan Smithson

"Are you sure?" said Carrie Borden's recruiter, typing away at the million-page army entrance paperwork. "MPs deploy a lot."

"Why be in the army if you don't want to get deployed?"

"Fair point."

"Is Military Police a combat MOS?" she asked.

"It's not."

"What's with that rule anyway?"

"Nothing personal," he said. "It's more of a moral code society has. You don't knowingly send your female population to the front lines. Men are expendable."

"I guess you'd really only need one guy to repopulate the country."

"Technically, I suppose." He shifted in his chair.

"Luckiest man in the world, right?"

"I knew I liked you, Borden. You're funny."

He meant funny *for a girl*.

"Besides," he said. "In a heavy combat environment, a female in the ranks has a way of affecting unit cohesion. You can't take it personal."

"Like a bad breakup," she said. "It's not you, it's me."

The recruiter laughed again and straightened his back in his chair. That's how you can tell if a guy is into you: he stands tall. Women, they groom themselves. Watch for it. Notice who a woman is looking at when she tucks her hair behind her ear. It's just biology.

Even after she signed "Carrie Borden" on the dotted line and shipped off to basic, she wondered why her recruiter kept assuming she'd take the women in combat thing personal.

Then, after getting deployed and seeing action on her very first convoy, she just thinks it's funny. The whole thing.

Running so many operations out of OP Valentine makes her realize that a rule banning women from combat roles doesn't mean much in a war where the enemy hides among women and children. Which isn't funny, per se. But it's ironic. Just another part of America having to be the bigger man.

OP Valentine is located just west of the Tigris. It's triangled by Kirkuk, Samarra, and Mosul, and those are three cities you don't generally want to be stuck between.

At first, there aren't even latrines there. They go on the ground behind sandbags, and that's fine. When the engineers bring latrines, though, that's when the line becomes visible the way it is stateside. See, Borden is the only woman with her MP unit, so when it's just them and the cavalry—which is a combat MOS—she's a lone wolf. When the engineers come, though, they bring a handful of women. The commander designates one trailer with a hand-written sign that reads, simply, "FEMALE."

Every time she goes, it reminds her that she doesn't like how the army does that. That word for women: female. It sounds so . . . medical. It's just the army's way of being objective, she guesses. Dead accuracy is important. She gets that. Just kind of irks her.

The cavalry usually does the patrols—Tikrit, Mosul, Qayyarah. The MPs mostly hang back and question their survivors. Sometimes

they question them first, "lump 'em up," so to speak. If they seem like they had some real intel, like AQI knowledge, they take them over to Kirkuk West to the guys at Psyops or even Abu Ghraib to have fun with the CIA.

The handover from the MPs to the cavalry is messy at first. One of the detainees sneaks in a suicide vest once. The cav scout who misses it during the pat-down is a little guy, Gino, and he's a nice guy as far as army guys go. Borden knows he pulled a twenty-hour shift the day before, so she can't blame him. As they're doing the handover, even though he's popped his seventh stick of caffeine gum, his eyelids keep falling.

Sergeant Cruz and Sergeant Borden are the first checkpoint for the OP. At the next are about twenty soldiers, all ranks, waiting to interrogate the shit out of these AQI fuckers. Gino lets the bomber pass through, and that's when Cruz notices the trigger in the guy's hand.

Without thinking, Borden lunges at *Hajji*. She hits him in the kidneys, and the trigger goes flying. Talk about proving yourself as a woman in the army.

After that close call, they start to work the bugs out. They get used to the people and the way they move. They get used to the weather and the eerie whisper before a sandstorm hits. They get into a routine. They even get bored.

Back at their main post, Kirkuk West, this huge airfield about twenty minutes northwest of OP Valentine, there's a ton to do. There's a swimming pool, a movie theatre with a Baskin-Robbins, an MWR building with a weight room, big screen TVs, and Ping-Pong tables. There's a library and a bazaar run by Filipinos where you can get a hand-made, Egyptian cotton suit for $200 or a legit hookah and all the fruity tobacco you can smoke for $15. They hold volleyball tournaments at K-West. There's horseshoes, a basketball court. You can buy a bicycle to get around, or take the bus transit instead of walking.

It's all kind of unsettling to Borden, to be honest. After living outside the wire for so long, all that American Way of Life stuff seems . . . political. But at least it's something to do.

If there's one thing the higher ups hate worse than casualties, it's boredom. All sorts of problems start popping up when soldiers aren't occupied, especially fraternization (that's the army's objective, dead accurate word for sex). Borden is sure that when that engineering unit is at OP Valentine, there is plenty of objective, dead accurate sex going on. The rest of them, though, when they aren't interrogating *hajji* or pulling guard duty, they're bored. At least the scouts get to run around in the cities rounding up the MP To-Do list.

That engineering unit leaves a bunch of their supplies behind, so somebody thinks it's a good idea to take all that lumber, rope, and chain and build a makeshift boxing ring.

The highest-ranking officer at OP Valentine is a first lieutenant, and he also happens to be a fitness enthusiast. His platoon sergeant is almost the complete opposite. He's not fat, but he sure looks fed well. And his teeth are yellow from the unlit cigars he chews on all the time. The one thing they agree on, though, is the sheer thrill of punching other guys in the head. They decide that weekly boxing bouts will solve a couple problems. For one, it's PT. For two, it keeps the boredom at bay. Bloody noses can be great for morale, so long as the participants are willing. Boys are weird.

So every week, a sign-up sheet is posted in their chow hall—to use the term loosely; it's really just a tent with a few tables and pallets of MREs. About once per week, they spring for hot chow, but that requires a less-than-safe round trip to Kirkuk West.

There are only a couple names on the signup sheet the first time Lieutenant Gage posts it. After the ice is broken, people flock to the ring to test their manhood.

"You're light on your feet," one of the cav guys, Sergeant Thatcher, says to Borden once. "And you're strong." He means strong for a girl.

Sorry, "female."

She laughs it off at first. Then a scout she works with a lot, Charles Main, asks her.

"Show 'em what you're made of, Sarge," he says.

"You don't think saving their asses on the ECP was enough?"

"Sure it is," says Main. "They all respect you. Now make them fear you."

She laughs and tells Main she'll think about it. He's a cool guy, has this smoothness about him. She heard he was a pickpocket before he joined the army, but that seems a little far-fetched. Though, if anyone could pull it off, it would be him. He's the kind of guy who's smarter than the people in charge of him, but doesn't care enough to take their place. He'd rather sit back and chuckle at the irony.

When Main comes to Kirkuk West where you don't have to wear armor all the time, he throws on a Stetson cowboy hat and spurs—parts of the cavalry's dress uniform. Borden doesn't think he does it for any other reason than to mess with the Fobbit brass who love to ream people out for uniform misconduct.

Once, he's walking around in his desert camo and army green Stetson, and this big, nasty Sergeant Major stops him cold. The guy's got a look on his face like someone's already pissed in his morning coffee.

"Private!" he yells. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Main locks into parade rest and says, calm as hell, "What seems to be the problem, Sar'nt Major?"

"You will not walk around on my post with a cowboy hat on, Private. Where the hell is your headgear?"

"This is my headgear, Sar'nt Major. I'm a cavalry scout!"

The rest of Main's crew walk away, trying not to laugh. Borden's not sure how long the Sergeant Major runs a verbal tirade over Main, but they don't see him until two hours later at dinner chow. Guess the Sergeant Major took him back to headquarters to have a one-on-one with their commander.

When Main shows up at dinner chow, he's still wearing his Stetson. Main gets Borden really thinking about boxing. But she still refuses.

And then her partner, Sergeant Cruz, says, "You shouldn't be scared."

"I'm not, Marco, and I'm honestly a little pissed you'd suggest it."

"They all think that's why you won't do it."

"I don't care much what they think."

"Do you care what I think?"

"Of course."

"I think you should stop accepting the second-rate box the army wants to put you in. When you saved mine and Gino's life out on that ECP, did you even get a thank you from the CO?"

"I don't need thank yous."

"Their scout Boomer got a Bronze Star for jumping on that grenade in Mosul."

"That's different, and you know it," she says. How could he even compare the two? "Besides, I don't want medals."

"You don't get medals because you want them, Carrie. You get them because you deserve them."

"Is that a Batman reference?" she says, punching his shoulder.

"If you're not going to take me seriously—"

"Fine, Marco," she says. "If it'll make you happy, I'll box."

What Cruz doesn't know is that their commander did give Sergeant Borden a medal, a Bronze Star actually. She told him she didn't want to make a big thing out of it. They never held a ceremony, and that was fine with her.

Also what Cruz—and the rest of them—don't know is that Carrie Borden has taken boxing lessons since she was ten.

She's not big, even for a girl, but from watching the amateur Valentine matches every Friday, she knows she can beat even the biggest, meanest men who step into that ring.

After she agrees to box, she goes from an invisible spectator no one notices to the one people whisper about as she walks by.

"Are you really doing it?" they ask with boyish smirks.

"Sure," she says, wondering if they ask that question of everyone who signs up. To be honest, it makes her giddy with excitement. No one can tell. Besides boxing, she is also very good at poker. But inside she's beaming like a girl about to get revenge on her first boyfriend, the one who broke her heart and left her in the dirt. Then she sees the lineup.

She has to fight Gino.

On fight night, Sergeant Shields fires up the generator to power the construction spotlight hanging over the makeshift ring. When you step into the ring, that light blinds you to everything but the man in front of you. The spectators are ghosts in the shadows.

Sergeant Shields lights his cigar and steps into the spotlight while Gino and Borden bounce and stretch in their corners to warm up.

"As usual, I'd like to begin tonight with a prayer," says Shields, blue smoke billowing around his head. Everyone around the ring hangs their heads. "Dear Lord, we thank you for this wonderful space and time. We ask that you keep any and all bastard towelheads from mortaring us as we gather here for this time honored, American tradition.

"We ask that you bless the Army Corps of Engineers for leaving behind all this extra plywood, two-by-fours, and chains so we can spend our nights doing something besides sitting in the dark playing with ourselves.

"We ask that you bless Sergeant Trejo for providing this wonderful boxing equipment.

"We ask that you watch over all the brave warriors who will step into this blessed ring tonight. We pray for your grace and mercy as we root for them to beat the living snot out of each other. May you keep them bloody and ruthless but safe—and ready to report for duty promptly at 0600 hours. Amen."

Borden steps out from her corner and gets her first good look at Gino. It's like she's never seen him before. He wears this ornery scowl she doesn't recognize. He's a guitar-playing, easy-going kid. Not even when he speaks of his second-greatest passion, avenging 9/11, does he look this angry. And Borden instantly remembers the reason she doesn't want to fight—before Cruz got into her head with that deserving medals nonsense.

When you get right down to it, a girl has nothing to lose stepping toe-to-toe with a boy. But the boy, he has everything to lose. His whole rep is on the line, and in a hyper-masculine place like the army in wartime, a small man with a lot to prove is dangerous. Not in the ring; she had Gino in the ring. But after. The fallout from this could ruin a lot more than Gino's pretty, rockstar face.

"For our opening bout tonight," says Sergeant Shields. "We have, in this corner, Michael '*Hajji* Hunter' Gino."

Shields made them pick nicknames. She laughed at Gino's; kid has a good sense of humor. He narrows his eyes at her, though, and she realizes laughing is the wrong move.

"And in this corner," says Shields, giving Borden the eye. She nods for him to continue. "We have Carrie 'The Female' Borden." He pulls their gloves together. "Clean fight, soldiers. Keep it above the belt," then, to Gino, "Especially you."

They go to their corners. The bell is an empty 155 shell, and Shields rings it with his pride and joy, a battle axe his grandfather used in World War II. Gino and Borden start dancing. He seems pretty athletic. No boxer, but he's quick and light. He's tense, though, and he comes out defensive. Then Borden can see him realize that defensive is the wrong approach. You don't become the top wolf by standing back on your heels.

So he comes forward, throws a couple jabs, and she blocks them. She lets him land one on her face. He has decent weight behind

those punches, but she can feel him holding back a bit. He knows to turn his hips into the punch, but the one he lands, his hips stay square. There's that moral code society has about women. And Gino's a good man.

They dance, and when he goes for another jab, Borden ducks and hits him with a double body shot. The crowd reels. It's funny the way non-boxers react to a hard rib shot. Knocks the wind out of them, not because the punch is so terrible, but because all their focus is in their head and hands. You can tell they forgot they even had ribs.

She entertains Gino by letting him take a few more jabs. She can tell he's thinking uppercut, so she lets him, only she pulls her head back at the last second and lands a hard jab through his open left side. She catches him square in the jaw, and he stumbles back. The crowd reels again, but Gino keeps coming. He's a scrappy fighter, but he's not fired up. That's good. He's keeping his cool.

She lets him get in close so they can lock up. Before Sergeant Shields separates them, she tells Gino he owes her.

He says, "What?"

"The ECP," she whispers. "You owe me."

He grins as Shields breaks them up, shakes his head. He comes out strong, actually lands one by himself across her chin. She gets him back with another couple of body shots, and his weight goes on his heels. She lands a hard right hook, and he tumbles to the ground.

"Oh snap!" yells Trejo.

She locks eyes with Cruz, and he looks shocked and amused. She winks.

Gino pops up immediately and comes at her with a fury, which is his biggest mistake. She sidesteps and catches him in the side of the head. That humbles him, so he squares up and stays low.

She motions to him with her own gloves to keep his up. He does. Then she steps left, and he goes the opposite way. She shakes her head, steps right. He goes the right way this time. She moves forward, and

Gino inches back. She jabs, and he dodges and counters with his own jab. She steps back, and they turn with each other. Finally in sync.

"This is boxing," Borden whispers. "Right-left-left."

She throws the punches hard enough so it looks real but lands them soft so Gino knows she's not here to win. She's here to teach.

"Right-left-left. Good," she says. "Two body shots. Then upper cut with the left. Where the jaw meets the neck. Fight's over."

She steps forward to clench up again. She tells him, "I could have chosen any man."

It's a lie, but Gino doesn't know that. As Shields breaks them up, she whispers, "Do me just like I showed you."

They circle the ring. Gino comes in, pumps three times, and backs off. Borden gives him a hard look, letting him know it's him or her. He comes back: right-left-left. She leans into the last one. Gino gets low and lays a couple of body shots against her lower ribs. She opens her right arm, and his left hand comes up in a nasty upper cut.

The climax of the fight feels something like dying. But in a good way. Everything goes white for a second, and the feel of the leather is the last thing she remembers.

When she comes to, Gino stands over her. His hand is behind her head. His one eye is swollen, but she can tell from the color it's already losing its stiffness.

"You didn't have to do that," he says.

"Was it good for you?"

He laughs. "You're a good soldier, Sergeant."

"Call me Carrie."

Ryan Smithson served with the Army Corps of Engineers from 2004–2005 in Iraq, where he conducted road repair, base fortifications, and various earth-moving operations. When he came home, he enrolled in college and began writing about his war experiences. With the encouragement of a professor, he eventually published

his memoir Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI *(HarperCollins, 2009). He has had several short stories and poems published in various journals, and enjoys visiting schools to talk with young people about writing, war, and life. He holds a MA in English.*

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Terminal Leave

By Rachel A. Brune

In the large room in the small home on the outskirts of Baghdad, our host cracked a bottle of tepid beer and poured us each half a shot glass full. The electricity in this suburb of the capital city was unreliable, and the family we were meeting with didn't own a working fridge. Still, they showed us hospitality, serving us something they thought we would enjoy, so we drank the warm, flat lager and smiled through the conversation.

I would have preferred sticking to the water we carried, but our mission was to patrol through the towns surrounding our forward operating base, making nice with the locals and trying to convince them that we would inconvenience their daily lives as little as possible. It was a futile task, because every now and then the bad guys used their houses for shelter and we'd have to go in and stomp around and piss everyone off. Or else the redlegs would need to qualify with their howitzers and we'd be paying some village chief a bunch of money to let us shoot up some poor farmer's field. But it was our job as military police: escort the guys who knew how to talk nice to the locals, and make sure we didn't all get exploded or shot up in the process.

Don't get me wrong, I like beer. I've had a lot of fun, and done a few things I should probably regret, while drinking an adult beverage or four. For a long time I wanted to brew beer, but after telling people of my plans and listening to innumerable bad news stories about exploding bottles and corks launched with enough velocity to puncture walls, floors and ceilings, I had never quite gotten around to it. Especially living on Fort Bragg, with a husband who constantly worried about doing anything to the house that might end up in us paying massive cleaning fees when it came time to move out, I decided that discretion was the better part of valor, at least when it came to marriage and hobbies.

That wasn't a problem now. I had called home one morning after a long, boring night mission, the kind where nothing happened over a couple hundred miles of midnight desert road except a few loads of fuels, toothpaste, mail and vegetables got delivered to some remote base where soldiers couldn't otherwise get that stuff. It was about midnight in the states, and Jim had answered the phone groggy, voice faded and grainy with interrupted sleep. Halfway through the conversation, full of the inanities of long-term separation, I heard an unfamiliar ringtone. Jim swore, and then I heard another voice, feminine, delicate, answer a cell phone.

There had been a long silence, while I thought of all the joint parts of our life that were about to dissolve, and where he tried to think of something to say, and I hung up the receiver in the little plywood shack. My ten-minute time limit was up. I thought about what the woman might look like, if I knew her, if he was at her house when I called his cell phone—if he would get the Jeep and if I would get the dog. I ignored his e-mails for the last four months of the deployment, and when I stepped off the homecoming plane in the deep night humidity of a North Carolina summer, he was waiting there, divorce papers in hand. I signed them.

The call came at two in the morning, the time when any phone call is going to be bad news. I had turned the ringer down, but I was still a super-light sleeper, and the vibrations of the phone against the wood of the nightstand jerked me awake, heart racing, hand dropping to the bed to search for my rifle.

I picked up the phone instead. It was my friend's number, a buddy from two deployments ago, but when I answered, the voice was strange.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"My name is Sara." The woman's voice was fragile, flavored with the Deep South. "Jackie had this number in his phone."

I knew immediately what had happened. My soldier had forgotten to change his contacts after moving on to another unit, and something had happened to him, and someone was calling because they thought I was still his squad leader.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"He's dead," she said, with the brutal honesty that comes when you don't know what to say. "He shot himself."

"Have . . . " I trailed off, trying to gather my thoughts. "Have you called the police?"

"Yes, they're here," she said. "I'm trying to call his unit."

So that's how I knew Specialist Jack Trimble was gone.

We had spent an entire deployment, him in the driver's seat of the truck, me in the TC seat as the team leader. He was always going on and on about fixing cars, racing dirt bikes, and when we told him to shut up already about cars and dirt bikes, he had gone on to talk about his other favorite hobby, brewing beer. He had us groaning in pleasure and horror at the amount of beer he said was waiting in his basement, bottles and bottles of different ales and beers and stouts that would be aged to perfection when we got back. We hadn't seen or tasted a beer in months, and we alternately encouraged him and railed at him for riding us like that.

A few months after the 2:00 a.m. wakeup, I got another call. It was Sara again. I didn't want to answer the phone—I had missed the funeral, didn't send flowers, had spent most of the time crawling inside of bottles, trying to forget, while I sidestepped my way out of the Army. I hit "Ignore" but she called back right away, so I answered it. She was cleaning up his stuff and had all of his brewing equipment and didn't want to throw it away or sell it—was it something I would be interested in?

So, here I was with an empty house and nothing but time and a serious urge to develop a drinking problem. I figured it was as good a time as any to get started. I told her I would take them.

I was living off-post now, out of the Army a couple of weeks, renting a house in a quiet part of the city. I had briefly thought about moving away from Fayettenam, but was still trying to find a job and was hoping to pick up something with some Army contractor or other. I couldn't seem to summon up a sense of urgency—I had about four months of terminal leave to live off of, and hadn't even hit the midway point yet.

"Excuse me?"

The voice was quiet, feminine, with a tinge of a familiar accent. I looked up and unconsciously reached for the pistol at my hip. I forced myself to relax and unclench my fingers. This drab creature in her black hijab and swaths of skirt and long-sleeved blouse was no threat.

"Yes?" I asked, wondering where she had come from.

She hesitated at the edge of the garage. I was working with the door open, and she had walked up the short concrete driveway to where I squatted, trying to fix my old mini-fridge in which I intended to eventually store the first batch of beer I brewed.

"Can I have some rice?" she asked.

I stared at her. I couldn't think of anything to say. "Uh . . . how much?"

"Only two cups, I need," she said. "I will bring you, when I am done, dolma. You know? Dolma?"

I had a hard time understanding her. But I knew what dolma was. It was tasty, and I hadn't had any since getting back from Iraq. I had a random bag of rice in the pantry that I thought I remembered. "Hang on one second, I'll be right back."

She nodded and folded her hands in front of her. I dropped my tools next to the fridge and went inside. The house I'm renting is a pretty modern design. The garage opens into a short space with a washing machine and dryer on one side and a closet on the other. I had stashed a load of old military crap in there, along with a bunch of dry foods I had brought from the old house. Most of it was rice and beans, things that required planning and cooking to use up. These days I mostly went with microwave macaroni and cheese.

I gave her the rest of a ten-pound bag of white rice I had laying around. I wasn't going to use it. She took it with a strange relief and gratitude, which made me feel uncomfortable—too much thanks for something I was only going to throw away, after all.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Fixing a fridge," I said. "I'm planning on brewing a batch of koelsch. That's a kind of beer." I added the last to clear up the confusion I saw reflected in the twist of her mouth.

"You know how to do that?" she asked.

"Nah, but it can't be too hard," I said, with all the bravado of the neophyte. "I have a recipe."

"I mean the . . . " She trailed off. "Thank you for the rice."

And then she left and I didn't think any more of it until she came back with the dolma.

This time, she rang the doorbell and I invited her into the kitchen. I was getting ready to start boiling the first batch and I had

already washed and sterilized all of the equipment three times. The instructions that I had warned me very specifically, in no uncertain terms, not to allow any dirt or germs or bacteria onto the instruments or else the entire batch would be ruined and poisonous. The first time, I had repeated the sterilization process just to be sure. Then I accidentally touched one of the many plastic tubes that belonged to the apparatus and dropped another one, and so I repeated the whole process all over again.

My fingers were clumsy around the instruments. I couldn't shake the feeling I was robbing the dead, even though I didn't think my buddy would mind I was carrying on his passion. I would think of him every time I cracked a cold one, but it was still creepy on some level.

The front door leads into an open floor plan—family room sunk down one step on the right, open kitchen on the left, to the right a corridor that leads back to a couple of bedrooms and to the extreme left, a small dining room. The decorating was generic. I had taken my credit card to Target and bought a bunch of new cheap stuff stained and bronzed to look like old cheap stuff.

"Come on in," I said. "Have a seat."

"I only have ten minutes," she said.

"Let me make you some tea," I said.

She was wearing the same outfit she had worn previously, but the hijab did not obscure her entire face and I saw surprise in her expression when I got out the tea set I had brought back from Iraq. It was one of the few things I had taken from the old house.

"Thank you," she said.

She placed the dolma on the small kitchenette table and seated herself in one of the low chairs. I moved some paperwork and old bills off the surface and put them on the counter. Now she could see my cheap linen tablecloth with the daisy pattern I had bought thinking the bright pinks, yellows, and greens would cheer me up.

I put two small plates down as the water boiled. Her gaze took in the house, lingering over the mad scientist assortment of pipes and tubing and containers that littered the counter.

"Is that for your kass?" she asked.

"Koelsch? Yes," I said. I measured out tablespoonsful of granular brown sugar, tipping them into the tiny tea glasses. Once the water boiled, I would steep the tea—leaves I still had from deployment—and then pour it over the sugar.

She didn't say anything else.

"It's my first time trying it out," I said, to fill the silence that quickly grew awkward.

She nodded.

"My family is from central Germany," I told her. "When I was younger, my mom used to tell us we had relatives there, still, who owned a brewery. They make koelsch—Kupper Koelsch."

I told the same story to the guy at the homebrewing store up in Raleigh. He seemed mildly interested when I explained, as I did to my visitor, that all my life I had taken a sort of half-pride in the fact that my family was in the brewing business. It was only when I got older and the Internet was invented that I finally got around to searching the family lore and found out that the pride and joy of the American Kuppers was actually one of the worst-rated koelsches in all of Germany, and indeed the entire world. When I told the guy at the store that I wanted to see if I could do better to redeem the family name to myself, I was only half-joking.

"Very good," she said as I finished my story and the tea, placing a cup in front of her. I smelled the waft of mint and black tea and sat across from her. After two months, she was my first visitor.

"When it's done, you should come over and try some," I said.

"I cannot," she said, embarrassed. "It is … haram."

There was another awkward silence. I was batting a thousand today.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Safiya," she said.

"Nice to meet you, Safiya," I said. "My name is Rebecca."

She sipped her tea. "I don't want to keep you."

I shrugged. "I'm not in a hurry."

And I wasn't. I had a bunch of ingredients in my fridge I didn't understand and a pile of equipment on my counter with forbidding names like "siphon hose" and "hydrometer" and "mash paddle." I had a book and a sheet of paper printed out from the Internet.

She set the tea glass back down on the table. "I must go. My husband will be home soon."

And then I suspected that maybe she wasn't really supposed to be hanging out, sipping tea in some stranger's house.

"Well, I don't have that problem anymore," I said.

She frowned.

"No husband," I said and tried to laugh it off. She frowned again.

"I must go."

"Thanks for the dolma," I said. "I'll get your dish back to you."

She nodded without saying anything and left.

I stared at the table. The dolma sat, twelve little pieces of chicken and rice wrapped snugly in their grape leaves. They were still warm. I picked one up in the first three fingers of my right hand and brought it to my mouth, inhaling the scents of spices and meat. I bit down, gently, cupping my other hand under my chin to catch any stray bits.

The taste shuddered through me. I put the rest of the roll in my mouth and chewed slowly. I felt a curious tightening in my chest and my throat dried. It got harder to chew and it was only when I buried my face in my hands, feeling the wetness on my cheeks, that I realized I was crying. I choked it down and wiped my eyes. Breathing deeply, I stood up, went to the sink, turned on the cold water, and washed my face. I stood there with the water running over my hands for a long time.

A couple days after that, I washed all the equipment again. I still hadn't started the batch, and I was worried that dust or dirt might have gotten on it, sitting on the counter like that. This time, I refused to let myself worry or think. I told myself I wasn't the first one to try home brewing, and clearly many other people before me had attempted and succeeded with this fine kit and recipe, and so it was time to quit crying about it and just do the damn thing.

The recipe kit I bought from the store had all the ingredients pre-measured and sorted, which was convenient. As per the instructions, I boiled the water and crushed grains, using my buddy's thermometer to make sure the heat held steady right between the upper and lower temperature delimitations. I had a moment of panic when I grasped the pot handles with my bare hands and had to quickly rummage through a couple of drawers to find pot holders, and then another moment when I realized the recipe called for me to rinse the mixture with water that was already at a high temperature and I hadn't even started the heat under that pot.

Eventually I got the malt and different kinds of hops into the same pot. I hoped that I was boiling them at the perfect temperature, and that the missteps and hesitations would not permanently damage the process. I felt less as if I were cooking something than that I was playing around with a chemistry set, especially when I went to pour the wort into the fermentation vessel and then realized that I needed another couple of gallons of water—this time cold water—and some apparatus called an airlock. By now I had my laptop on the counter trying to identify which pieces of equipment were which. I was sweating and angry and cursing myself, the recipe, the guy at the homebrewing store, and my buddy for making it sound so easy.

The next part of the recipe was simple—wait for seven days. I left the fermentation vessel or, as I called it, the fucking pail, on the floor of my kitchen. The unfermented beer would remain at the right

temperature inside and I knew that if I put it outside in the garage I would forget about it and there would go the twenty bucks I spent on the kit and recipe, and the entire morning of work.

I needed to do something I knew how to do, something that would be easy for me, mindless. I decided to clean my guns.

I have three pistols and a shotgun. I keep them locked up, unloaded, when I'm drinking. Jack wasn't the only one who found it too easy to reach for one when he was mired in low places. But now they were sitting in inanimate pieces across the daisy-patterned tablecloth, and I had a half-empty bottle of Shiner Bock to keep me company as I wiped away the remnants of the morning's range practice. My hands were covered in carbon and cleaning lubricant when the doorbell rang.

I left greasy fingerprints on the shiny doorknob, opening it to find my new friend Safiya. She stepped into the house quickly, moving to hide behind me.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes, fine," she said. "I need my dish."

"Okay," I said. "Come on in."

I looked out on the street, casting a glance about to see if there was anyone following her, or any other reason for her strange entrance. Not finding anything, I closed the door and went back into the kitchen. I found her sitting at the dinette, hands in her lap, looking at the gun parts scattered across the tabletop.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked. "I still have to wash your dish."

"That's okay, I can just take it and go," she said, but her hurry was belied by the fact that she sat down.

"No, no, please, it's not a problem," I said. "Let me start some water to boil."

"Thank you," she said.

And then we once again ran out of things to say to each other, so I made the tea, gave her a cup, and pulled the empty dolma dish out of the refrigerator. I had been snacking at odd intervals, pulling one after the other out of the ceramic container with my fingers, not stopping to re-heat them or use a fork and knife. Once done, I had left the empty container in there along with some rapidly-souring milk and an empty cheese wrapper.

"What do these look like?" she asked. "When they are one piece?"

She had a curious way of speaking, like her English vocabulary was limited, so she had to think of new ways to say things.

"They're just pistols," I told her. "Like you see on TV."

"What it feels to hold one in your hands?" she asked.

She reminded me of my own curiosity the first time I had held my first gun. Unlike me, she kept her fingers to herself, wrapping them around the tea glass.

I put down the dish in the warm, soapy water, and dried my hands on a paper towel. Picking up some of the pieces, I put the spring back in the barrel of the Sig Sauer P220, racked the slide and locked it back. I handed it toward her. "You want to take a look?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. For women, that is haram."

I refrained from stating the obvious, that I was a woman, and that it obviously wasn't that forbidden, and also that I had seen other Middle Eastern women using guns, but I'm used to operating around people with radically different opinions than I about what women should and should not do. And not all of those people are from the Middle East.

"What does it feel like?" she asked. "To hold that?"

I told her that the first time is strange, and that you should never get so comfortable with them that you forget what they're capable of,

but the truth is, I've become more than comfortable with them. I told her they were easy to buy in Texas, although not so much here. She didn't say anything, but I thought I caught a look on her face. She put her hand to her cheek.

"Oh hey," I said. "I finally started the koelsch."

"It smells," she said.

"I guess it does."

She caught my frown. "I'm sorry, I meant I smell it."

"Yeah, it's kind of distinctive," I said, although I couldn't smell anything except CLP from the cleaning kit. We sat, again in silence, which was almost growing comfortable. I finished putting together the rest of the pistols, nestling them in their hard, black cases, closing them up for the next time I ventured to the range.

Someone pounded on the door. Safiya jumped, spilling tea on the tablecloth. She said something in Arabic.

"It's okay," I said. "The tablecloth's machine washable."

She shook her head. "I am sorry."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, and went to answer the bell.

When I opened the door, I didn't recognize the man standing there, but I knew it was Safiya's husband. He was about my height, five-seven, in a suit with shiny shoes.

"Come home, now," he said.

I stared at him, but then Safiya pushed her way past me, holding the dripping dish against her chest, the water staining the dark fabric of her shirt.

I watched, the uncomfortable observer to this domestic drama, as he turned and stalked off my porch, making his angry way down the wide suburban sidewalk. She followed after him, hurrying to stay at his heels. I shook my head. I had seen this sort of situation before, but hadn't expected it to drop onto my front porch or come sit in my kitchen. I wondered if I should say something, or maybe

get the number of someone for her to call next time I saw her, but then the self-centeredness I'd been wallowing in for the past couple of months reasserted itself and I simply shrugged and made a note to try to bring it up in conversation if she ever rang the doorbell again.

The directions I had said to bottle the koelsch after fourteen days, and then to wait an additional two weeks before drinking it. I decided I would keep half the bottles in the mini-fridge for those two weeks, and keep the other half stored at room temperature, to see which ones came out better. My buddy had insulated his basement and kept it at a carefully climate-controlled sixty degrees, but I wasn't about to renovate my garage when I was only renting the house and wasn't sure if I was even going to ever make another batch of beer.

I spent the time puttering around the house, rearranging my resumé, thinking about sending it out to a couple of places. The job market wasn't as bad where I was, but there still weren't a plethora of open hires. I toyed with the idea of investing in a piece of land and starting a business, but I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do badly enough to deal with the heartburn of trying to be a small business owner in this economy.

The day after I bottled my first homebrew, I decided to skip a day of job searching and head to the range. I pulled my pistol cases out from the top of my closet and brought them into the kitchen. Setting them on the table, I opened each one to make sure I had all of my magazines and cleaning equipment.

My Springfield XDS was not in its case.

I had a fun time after that, calling the police, reporting that the .45-caliber, easily concealable firearm had inexplicably vanished from my collection. They sent an officer to take my report, a young kid fresh out of the academy who clearly hadn't been assigned to many challenging cases yet because he tried hard to think of a lot of

good, probing questions to ask for his investigation. I told him that no, I hadn't taken the guns out since the last time I went to the range a month ago. Yes, I was the only one in the house in all that time. And here, I caught the whiff of a pitying look. And no, I had no idea who took the thing. And here, the look turned suspicious.

He took my paperwork, made a copy of my concealed carry permit and the receipt of purchase, noted the serial number, and told me to have a nice day. I decided to take his advice, forego the range, and spend the rest of the afternoon drinking on the back porch.

As it turned out, the bottles I had put on the shelf in the garage tasted better than the ones that had aged in the mini-fridge. I made a solemn, solitary ceremony of the first tasting, chilling the shelf-aged beer in the refrigerator, cracking the bottles with my special bottle opener with the military police crest on it, carefully pouring a small taste of each into two small glasses.

I brought the samples out to the back porch. The first one I sipped was the fridge-aged. I held it in my mouth, rolling the light amber liquid around my tongue and gums. It tasted hoppy, but tart, and stronger than normal beer. I swallowed it, then poured the rest of it on the grass. A strange bitterness lingered in the back of my throat, coating my tongue.

For you, buddy, I said to myself.

I did the same with the other glass. This one tasted . . . better. The aroma was sharper, and the taste lingered longer. When I swallowed, the aftertaste burned like satisfaction down my throat. I poured the rest of that glass out, too, an offering to some obscure household god. I got a kick out of imagining Jack's horrified reaction at the waste of a good beer.

The night was cool, summer fading fast into a reluctant autumn. I still perspired as I sat out on the back porch, a gift of the North Carolina humidity. But it wasn't unpleasant. I finished the two bottles

I had opened, thinking about my buddy, thinking a lot of what-if type thoughts about things that might have happened. It was the sort of night when you don't need anyone around, because the ghosts of those who aren't there are more present than any real person would be.

I fell asleep in my camp chair. Around midnight, I jerked awake, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. Commotion and gunshots from a neighbor's house—not the first time I'd ever been thus awoken in the middle of the night, but that was in post housing. I thought I had left that behind me when I moved off the base. I set my beer bottles upright on the back porch, went back inside and called the police. I was loading rounds back into my Sig when my doorbell echoed through the house.

I opened the door and Safiya stood on my front porch, my gun still in her hand. She was real calm, her face unmoving, betraying no emotion. She wasn't wearing her hijab. I led her into the kitchen without a word. She sat down, placing the gun carefully on the table. I left it there.

Going in the cabinet, I took down a glass. I paused.

"You want a beer?" I asked, although I thought I already knew the answer.

"No, thank you," she said. "It is haram."

I got some ice cubes and water from the tap and gave her the glass. We waited together for the police to show up.

Rachel A. Brune joined the Army Reserve after 9/11 and has been serving ever since, first as an enlisted public affairs specialist and later as a military police officer. Her work appears in a variety of media and genres, from news articles to steampunk to urban fantasy. She has published two novels, Cold Run *(Untold Press) and* Soft Target, *and is currently working on a third.*

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Like Home

By Emily Hoover

If I could look through one of the many boarded-up windows around me, I might be able to see the enemy hiding somewhere nearby—amidst the skewed about debris and dry, desert dust. They're waiting patiently for our movement with machine-gun metabolism and hard, dry eyes. I suppose it's safe to mock them now, the fucking towel heads. The dead are outside, piled on top of one another like toys, like numbers on a chalkboard.

"You know it's not your fault, what happened to Bisiada," Scotty says, the silence between us excruciating. The building we're in looks ready to collapse; my heart beats furiously. We're close to each other, close enough to shake hands, but we remain motionless, crouching low. Both of our backs are glued to the wall, and we fear standing upright. "I know it's real cruel I say this, but he served his purpose. Showed us there's still someone out here. He fought 'til the end. You can't never escape no gut shot."

I nod, experiencing a dull pain in my knees; I haven't squatted for this long since I played catcher in high school. He's right, after all, but Scotty shakes his head. "Our boys are dropping like flies,"

he says. “Gives a whole new meaning to ‘One, two, three, four, United States Marine Corps,’ don’t it?” He chuckles a little, the laugh stripped of its heartiness, and then lights a broken cigarette. He puffs in quick, sharp bursts and finally notices the smoke escaping from the Marlboro label. After ripping off the filter, he takes a better, longer drag. He removes loose tobacco from his tongue and looks up at me, pleased.

I nod again and remove the only cigarette I have from behind my ear. I don’t really want to smoke it, but I fear I won’t get a second chance. The thought of it, of Bisiada’s dusty tan boots turning red, washes over me like rain. “Yep,” I say softly. I light the cigarette and admire the glowing embers as they fall to the concrete floor, becoming ash.

The air at home is much different than the desert. Both are hot, but in Florida, you’re always damp in typically dry places and sopping wet in naturally moist places, until late in the evening, when the moonlight reflects off the ocean like hope. I tell the guys that all the time, when I get sunburned on my forearm after driving the Humvee for an hour and everybody goes crazy. *This is nothing*, I say, my resilient skin the toughest part of me. *The sun’s hardcore as fuck out here, sure, but it doesn’t measure up to heat and humidity in the swamp.* Scotty always agrees. He still owns a riverboat out in Arkansas somewhere.

The airplane approaches the gate, and the flight attendant tells us we can turn on our cell phones and other hand-held devices. My watch reads 1500.

I catch the scent of the blue-haired lady in the middle seat next to me—a mix of lavender and Werther’s butterscotch candies—and my nose reaches for home, for the tropical aroma of citrus and salt. It’s there, but faint. I look out the window—the window-seat

passenger is still snoozing—and see the sky is big and blue with wispy clouds.

The plane's passengers rise collectively as all wheels come to a halt; frequent flyers are also veterans of sorts. The blue-haired lady closes her book. I let out a yawn and grab my sea bag from the overhead compartment.

"Excuse me, young man," the blue-haired lady says, standing and leaning her body against the chair in front of her. "Could you get my suitcase? It's the leather one, the color of Merlot." I can tell she's jonesing for a glass; I'd consider joining her for a beer or two, if she'd offer.

I oblige, slinging my sea bag over my shoulder as I jimmy her bag free.

"Thank you kindly," she says.

"My pleasure." I'm jarred by the sound of my voice. I'm standing in the aisle now, taller than almost everyone around. I hear bags rustling, families chatting, sickly passengers hacking up lungs.

"Home for good or just for leave?" a man in a business suit asks, casually. He's standing behind me, holding a newspaper; it's the *Wall Street Journal*.

I was looking forward to being anonymous, if only for a plane ride. "Leave," I say. "My sister's getting married. I just got back to the States last week after a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan."

His eyes narrow. "You must be beat. Are you going back?"

"We're on call for thirty days."

"Where are you stationed now?"

"Twenty-nine Palms." I think of Bisiada; he couldn't wait to get back to The Palms.

"I know it well," the man says, smiling. "I did four years and then went to college and law school." The line begins to move. "Are you connecting?"

I shake my head. "Nope. This is home."

Scotty stands up for less than a second to adjust his bag, and his swift movements shoot through my thoughts of home like a torpedo. He puts his helmet on with a loud thump and I do the same, our backs still against the wall. I check to see if my boots are tied tight. Affirmative. Scotty's back on his knees and crawling. I follow, feeling oddly safe against the cold, sunless concrete.

"I don't think they can see us from here," I say.

"Oh, *he* can. He just can't get a shot. Stay low." Scotty coughs and looks back at me. "Don't ever underestimate them, Phillips. Remember what they told you in boot camp: expect everything." He points to a corner across the room. There's a tiny hole in the boarded-up window, and he intends to go there. Scotty's movement is quick, serpent-like; he's certainly earned the title of veteran, whether we get out of here or not. I crawl over Bisiada's corpse, which is positioned in the middle of the entryway.

My dad is quiet in the car, quieter than I expected. The tattoos on his forearms, acquired in Thailand and other various ports during his time in the Navy, are worn with a pride that reflects off the pollen-caked windshield, but the images depicted are almost unrecognizable on his tan, freckly skin. There is an eagle holding an anchor on one arm and two green tree frogs on the other. When he opens and closes a fist, you can tell the frogs are fucking.

I know a part of him is pissed about me getting out, but when I said I wanted to get a business degree with my GI bill, he was satisfied. He's proud of me for my service, but he has trouble with things like that, with speaking and sharing, ever since Mom passed away. He was on his last deployment when they called to tell him about the accident.

"Might have a job lined up for you," he says, turning over his shoulder before changing lanes.

We pass the overpass that spells out *Daytona Beach* in bright yellow cursive. As if we'd miss it otherwise. The idea of home, as a place, feels strangely soggy, like the oily sub sandwiches I remember from childhood. Maybe it's just the humidity. I've been in the desert for too long.

"Oh yeah?" I smile at him.

He looks at me momentarily and puts his eyes back on the road. "It's not anything you have to take up permanently. But I've got a buddy at the Legion who has a landscaping business. Told him you're out for good in sixty days and savvy with an edger."

"Thanks, Pop."

An enemy sniper is hiding somewhere inside of the dilapidated building ahead. He's been on a five-month killing spree and has taken out a lot of our guys, among others. It is Scotty's job to find out where the fucker is exactly and blast him to Hell. I'm supposed to be helping him, but he looks like he's got everything under control.

"So, we wait." My words reverberate and I feel hollow.

Scotty tosses me a cigarette. "We wait 'til there's movement and then . . ." He trails off, his eyes fixed on the dust outside. I nod, because I know what happens *then*. I put the cigarette behind my ear.

Bisiada's blood, drying now, covers Scotty's shoulders and back; he doesn't seem to notice. He holds his rifle with prowess, concentration—as if the part of Bisiada he can't wash off is guiding him.

Bisiada's body is yellow—bile-colored, nicotine-stained. If it weren't for the color, you'd think he was just enjoying a pleasant snooze after a tiresome day. His eyes are closed and his mouth is open slightly.

I remember it was Bisiada's plan to retreat back to the building where we had first been, where we are now. *Something just doesn't feel right,* he said, and we ignored him. *We should go back and regroup; we can just break in.*

After the shots, it was hell for us to watch him fall and try to crawl back to us, like something out of *Platoon*. He screamed like a parentless child, but he kept moving, coughing blood. When he made it about halfway, Scotty told me to shoot at the building in front of us. I obeyed, emptying my magazine. Scotty ran to him and lifted him; meanwhile, the enemy's gun was silent. Black blood spewed from Bisiada's nose and mouth. He had crimson stains on his abdomen and his right kneecap, the latter being where he was shot first.

The air was eerie, quiet, as I led us back to this building and kicked open the door. Bisiada died before Scotty removed him from his back; we both knew and said nothing. If only we had listened to him, things might be different.

Pop opens the garage door and my heart drops to my stomach. I leave the car quickly, without speaking, and approach the bike, caressing it like I would a woman's thighs.

The motorcycle, a black Honda Shadow, looks as good as it did when I first saw it almost four years ago. Before I crashed it at Bike-toberfest and traded my biker-fantasy for the more plausible and joined the Marine Corps.

"I can't believe this," I say. I'm beaming—smiling so hard it hurts. "How did you do it?"

He pops the trunk. "It's called money, son."

I laugh. "You said you sold it on Craigslist. Told me while I was in Afghanistan because you knew I wouldn't cry in front of the guys."

He chuckles. "Well, I lied. Kept her here and fixed her up myself."

"Wow," I say, seeing my own reflection in the chrome. "You're really something else."

"Motorcycle license still current?"

"It expires on my birthday." We're standing eye-level now, as equals.

"Welcome home, Robert. I missed you."

We hug briefly, but tightly.

"I'm not home yet, not for good."

He smiles weakly; I know he gets lonely sometimes. "Thirty days on call and thirty more days in The Palms," he says. "It'll be over before you know it."

The echo of a gunshot shatters my thoughts and I look up to Scotty. He is laughing; I can almost see the adrenaline running through him. "And *that's,*" he pauses for effect, "how we fuckin' do it, Phillips. Woo!"

"So you got him?"

"Hell yes, I fucking got him. I saw something move real quick and reacted. Shot him right in the fucking face."

"Good," I say and close my eyes. Scotty is gloating. I don't disturb him or endorse him; instead, I just listen to the sound of my own breath—the melodic rise and fall. He radios back to base and announces our victory, says we'll be back soon.

He lights a cigarette. "You know something, Phillips?" he asks, after some time.

"What's that?"

"This is the best cigarette I've ever fuckin' had. Did you know that?"

"That's good to hear," I say, my eyes still closed.

"Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because we completed our mission. With only one casualty, God rest his soul." He pauses for a moment, out of respect, and then I can hear the smile spreading across his cheeks. "I might be mistaken, man, but this cigarette tastes like home."

My sister Alma is smart to get married in the morning. May in Florida is no picnic. The ceremony is on the beach (as it should be) at 1100 sharp. Pop and I have to ride our bikes out of the suburbs, over the Flagler Beach Bridge, and down old A1A to get there. As I steer the bike over the bridge—Pop just ahead of me on his Harley, the horizon opening to reveal the dark blue ocean—the breeze is misty, salty, familiar. It's as if I never left, never crashed four years ago, never deployed.

Just north of Ormond Beach, before the sunscreened chaos of Daytona, a white altar with painted-on moon phases stands beside unlit tiki lamps. There are sixteen white chairs staked in the sand near the dunes. I follow as Pop takes the aisle seat in the front row, near Abe's parents.

"Robert," Abe's father says, surprised. He stands to shake my hand. "Looking good, son."

"Thank you, sir," I say. I nod and smile at his wife. She smiles back.

"Tom told us you're getting out soon."

"Yes, sir." We shake hands.

"Not a career man like your dad, then?"

"No, sir," I say, shaking my head. "Not me."

He laughs, so I laugh with him.

Pop stands and puts his hand on my shoulder, reassuringly. "Robert here is a college man," he says.

I take my seat.

The female officiator is looking over her notes. She's in her late 50s, but she has fake tits that make it look like she's in her late 30s. She's in a gold sundress with matching gold sandals. Abe and his three groomsmen stand next to her, wearing khaki shorts and collared shirts. They notice what I notice about the officiator, I'm sure; they're whispering and laughing.

Other wedding guests arrive, most of them barefooted, salty,

and ready for the beach. I don't recognize anyone other than Pop and Abe's parents.

Pop leans in. "Showtime."

"Should I go with you, see Alma, give her a kiss or something?"

He stands and shakes his head. "She said she didn't want to see you before the ceremony." He rolls his eyes, playfully. "You always stress her out."

Scotty grabs Bisiada's tags. "I think I can carry him back, Phillips."

"Let me do it."

He chuckles. "Nah, I got it. I've seen your CFT scores. You ain't one for the buddy carry." Scotty brushes his fingertips against Bisiada's forehead, gently, as if he fears waking him. He lifts Bisiada and motions for my exit.

"You go ahead," I say.

Scotty opens the door. "Now you follow low. I don't know if any others are hiding." He moves into the sun.

He adjusts the dead weight on his back and breaks into a run, making it safely to a beat-up car. Then he moves to another building a few feet ahead. I follow, trying to mimic his agile movements, carrying only my pack.

He turns to me—we're feet apart—and points to a shack to the north of us; it's in the direction of the Humvee, I realize. I nod, and he parrots me. Just as he hustles across the open street, my own feet stop; I search for breath. My knees buckle, and I fall against the brick building behind me.

Scotty falls to the ground almost as quickly as the gunshot sounds. A pool of blood grows beside his head. I look to my left, right, and left again; I see no one, no movement. Bisiada's body is on the ground, cast aside like trash. Scotty's lifeless body looks like a cross; he has both arms extended, his rifle is against his chest, and his legs are together.

The roads are unusually clear for a Saturday night. Pop stays behind me, except for stoplights. We each had a beer at the reception, and we both danced with Alma, who never looked more beautiful. The beer was enough to relax me, but not enough to keep me out of my head.

We come over the bridge and onto the mainland; the sun is setting in the western sky, leaving patchy, fiery clouds. I remember Scotty and imagine him riding too, taking in this warm, summer air.

Twilight descends, a gray fog, and I see the lights of a shopping plaza on my left and a stoplight far in the distance. Everything else is darkening slowly. The Honda's engine rattles beneath me, feeling like thunder, like home.

A white car approaches the stop sign to my right. The driver doesn't make a complete stop and pulls out, turning right. I don't have time to stop, but I slow down. Just as I consider weaving into the left lane, my bike hits the back of the car—I see it's a Ford—and I'm thrust over the car in two loud thumps. My face slides across the asphalt as I tumble; I can no longer feel my legs. When the movement stops, my brain catches up, and I realize I'm immobile in a ditch, next to a vacant lot. The streetlight above me replaces natural light.

Pop's here. My helmet's off. My head is in his lap. He's not crying, but he's rocking me, petting the hair on my head. There's a woman sobbing somewhere and a man on the phone; his voice is shaking. I can feel blood trickling down my forehead and onto my nose. Pop wipes it away.

I try to kick open the door of the shack. It's heavy. My breath is shallow. My heart beats quickly. I kick again. When I open the door, I collapse onto the floor, and dust envelops me.

When the battalion comes for me, it smells like morning. I'm on a stretcher, strapped in, and my face is golden, warm. My lips are dry, chapped, splitting. Boots are everywhere. I think of Bisiada and Scotty.

Pop is still rocking me, but I can't see the lines on his face or the color of his eyes. Color drains from everything. Breathing is difficult—sharp, like glass. There's a lump in my throat; when I cough, I taste something metallic and wet: blood. I cough again, and a bubble of red snot seeps from my nostrils. I hear sirens in the distance, but they feel oceans away. My vision blurs as I fix my eyes on the cypress trees above. I'm home.

Emily Hoover is a fiction writer and book reviewer based in Las Vegas. Her work has appeared in FIVE2ONE Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine, Wraparound South, The Los Angeles Review, Necessary Fiction, Ploughshares *blog and others.*

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Playground Patriots

By Peter Beckstrom

I function best when I'm high. My work truck helps get me there. Her name is Eunice. When you name a truck, suddenly it's more than tin and gears. Superstitious nonsense, but you can't always choose your religion. Eunice is a white Silverado, and apart from the St. Petersburg Pelican and the Parks and Rec decals, she's bone white and jacked up. She gets me high so I can look down on the world. Up here, I see what's coming.

Stopped at a red light, headed for maintenance at Borf Park, I can see for blocks. To my left in the adjacent convertible, platinum Mercedes is a bronzed trophy wife wearing a Rolex the color of her car and a diamond the size of a 7.62 round. To my right—inside Eunice—is my co-worker, Kasey. We have been sharing the cab for ten months. Kasey is in his late forties. Time has been nasty to him. Life has scraped over his face like worn brake pads over a rotor past its prime, leaving facial canals that could hide a cocktail straw. He walks around as if his boots are on backward. I don't know if he's coming or going. That's all there is to Kasey.

The light winks green and Eunice brings us to our next stop. Borf Park covers three squared acres on the corner block, stretching

to its corners flat and tight like saran-wrapped leftovers. Kasey and I go to several parks each day per our list, but this is among my favorites. It's small, quick to clean. I like to mix a few smaller parks into our daily schedule. The small ones are an easy check in the box. When the day ends, back at HQ our boss sees checks. That's good. It looks like you're working hard. Working hard is job security. I know all about security.

My watchtower is the color of antique photos left on a sunny windowsill: the same as the surrounding desert, the same as our uniforms. I knew being deployed would deprive me of life's flavor, but it never occurred that I might be deprived of its color as well. My line of sight through the tower's porthole allows me to see as far as the heat mirages allow, which isn't far on a mid-July day in Iraq. The tower reaches up over the Hesco barrier to its front for an unimpeded view of a rocky, arid sandscape, not the smooth dunes that Hollywood portrays. Although films may try, there is nothing romantic about the desert. Everything good dies under a desert sun. The tower's interior holds two five-gallon buckets. Two places to sit until one of us needs to shit. Randall, my A-duty, never shits on watch. He pisses a lot though on account of the Rip-Its he shotguns to stay awake. They don't work well for him; I toss stray 5.56 brass at him when I catch him dozing. Christ, he'd probably fall asleep tweaking on meth at a Metallica concert. The only other décor is last month's Maxim magazine, jizz crust on the floor, and a laminated poster remarking on the perils of complacency in bold military font that reminds me of the *M*A*S*H* logo. Randall has brought his iPod with small, can speakers: a minor distraction, which I allow. The Alice in Chains song "Rooster" drains from the cans.

"Listen to the lyrics," I say.

"Jesus H. Christ, Dane. We listen to the song about three times a shift. I know what the fuckin' song says and not once does it mention a Marine."

"No shit. It's poetic. Instead of saying Marine, they say 'Army greens were no safe bet'. So, if you're in Vietnam whackin' gooks from fifteen hundred meters, it's safe to assume if you're not Army—and you're definitely not in the Chair Force or the Navy because you're in the bush to begin with—you're most likely a Marine."

"I'm pickin' up what you're layin' down, but it doesn't mention sniping gooks from a click and half. Not once. Explain that?"

"Haven't you even heard of Carlos Hathcock? You must've been a PI Marine, huh?"

From my watchtower—on the northeast corner of Al Asad Airbase, Al Anbar province—I spy a cadre of *hajjis* inside the base at the adjacent DRMO lot rooting through garbage. They're a raggedy bunch with black straw beards and pleated, white *kufiyas* covering their domes. Their long, threadbare gowns slide over oily metal parts as they stoop to rummage. I have seen them cannibalize parts from DRMO before and—not so coincidentally—a day or two later IEDs are exploded in neighboring areas against convoy units.

"Get the SOG on the hooks and tell 'em to send up the MPs," I say. "*Hajjis* are rootin' through DRMO."

Randall leans over to get a better view through the porthole. One of the *hajjis* holds up a cylindrical steel tube and points to an open end as he talks to his buddy. The buddy holds his arms high and lowers them to his sides in dramatic fashion.

"Dane, c'mon man. They do this all of the time and are always cleared by highers. Can't we just let it go? I don't wanna deal with MPs today."

My tongue feels pasted to the grooves on the roof of my mouth. When I'm upset, my mouth gets dry. I guess my body needs all the fluid it can get to fight the rage fire in my mind.

"Maybe this is the time they don't get cleared and find the "what-cha-ma-fuck-it" to put into their IEDs and blow up some Marines.

Are you a blue falcon, Randall? Buddy fucker, huh? You wanna fuck your buddies? Get on the hooks."

Kasey and I exit Eunice and head to Borf's playground in the corner of the park, furthest from the street. We recon the area to check for garbage and determine what kind of tools we may need for maintenance. This park is in a decent enough area, unlike parks near the Trop that have the occasional uncapped syringe, which is why I wear hard-soled Danner boots. Kasey lives near here. He showed me his place once, but I wasn't paying attention. As we approach the playground, Kasey heads left around the swings while I get up on the equipment. The equipment has stairs leading up to a platform. Atop the platform, to the right, is a monkey bar apparatus with orange powder-coated, metal bars. To the left is a blue plastic tube with an embedded ladder that arcs to the ground. Straight ahead is the open yellow slide.

I nearly miss it, probably because I'm being complacent, on autopilot. The black paint spreads like a fresh scar atop yellow flesh. It's a halogen-illuminated road sign forecasting what's to come: gas station next exit, Holiday Inn five miles, anti-war propaganda ahead, change lanes. The graffiti has been stenciled. Some of the detail is too fine for it to be done any other way. Whoever did it probably doesn't even call it graffiti, calls it tagging, or even worse, art. The graffiti doesn't say anything, and neither do I. It's just an image of some *hajji* cutting the head off an American. Seeing this, in one of my parks, gets my mouth drier than a summer sidewalk during a drought. My mind unfolds a list of appropriate reactions to addressing this misplaced hate.

I motion for Kasey to come over, not because I care what he thinks, I just want a distraction. Kasey comes up from behind and peeks around my left side. His next inhalation sounds like sand sweeping over more sand. He asks me what I think it means. I tell

him what I think. He asks how I know the kneeling fella in the image is an American.

"Kasey, of course it's an American. Clearly, being that we are at war with jihadists, this image represents some towelhead killing an American. Lookatit."

I'm no doctor, but I dissect that image like a surgeon, cutting out every clue.

"The *hajji* standing over the kneeling blindfolded guy is wearing a *kufiya*, what we call a towel. He has a scimitar—which is a *hajji* sword—drawn halfway across the kneeling guy's neck. Clearly, this is a symbol, Kasey. It's like terrible poetry. If you want to symbolize something, you don't just say it. Does this really need further explanation?"

"We'll just clean it up, Dane. We've dealt with graffiti before."

My anger trickles down my arms to calming fingertips that trace the lines of my palm.

"This is about as disrespectful as it gets to a veteran, Kasey. It's fuckin' treason."

Kasey becomes quiet and studies the top of his boots. Kasey might be the religious type. I never heard him curse. I put an extra oomph behind that f-bomb. He seems afflicted.

"Look. I didn't come home from the sandbox to encounter this shit in my own backyard. Let's get rid of it," I say.

Kasey suggests we pick up the trash first.

"No. We clean it now."

We get rid of the graffiti. In a week, it comes back like a flaky, rubbery scab. Then again the next week, and the next and the next. It's always in the same place. Each week we clean the wound, but it keeps getting infected. I know this limb needs amputation, but Kasey doesn't have the stomach for what's next. It falls on me, as it always does.

Randall makes the call to the higher-ups, but I don't wait for the MPs. I open the tower's hatch, climb down the ladder, and make my way a hundred meters to the DRMO lot. I speed walk so I can get to them as fast as I can, while retaining the appearance of control. As I approach, the *hajjis* stop rooting around and stare at me.

"You can't be here!"

They startle at my volume and tone. The closest one to me speaks in jarringly, broken English.

"It ok sir, we be here, boss told us look for part."

"I don't care."

The DRMO manager, at the sight of a tuned-up Marine in full combat gear with a loaded M-16 A4, leaves his shack and jogs over to us. He's an American, slim bordering on malnourished, metallic-gray sideburns, wearing cargo khakis and a grey Members Only jacket. His carriage recalls floppy string cheese beyond its expiration date.

"Hiya, devil dog. These guys have permission from the brass. I—I checked their IDs."

"Bullshit."

The man stands with a lean favoring his right side. He looks down to examine the laces wound over the tongue of his boot. He looks up at the chevrons on the center of my flak.

"Corporal, if—if you wanna double-check, that's fine. You—you can use the phone in my office."

"I don't need to check anything twice. These *hajji* need to get the fuck outta here."

My eyes lock up tight around his. I let them wrestle a bit, as to make him sufficiently uncomfortable. Using my best thousand-yard voice, I tell him to go back to his hole.

The manager backs up a few steps, spins on his right heel, and scoots back to the shack. I turn to the wannabe jihadists, still facing me. I pull up my rifle from the ready position, train it on the nearest *hajji's* left eyeball, and tell them all to get on their knees. No translation

necessary, my rifle speaks any language. They get down and place their palms outward. The only sound comes from the *hajji* that first spoke. He hums a haunting tune, like a dying prayer. We stay that way until the MPs arrive: me aiming death, them praying life.

After Kasey and I wash off the treasonous slogan for the fourth time I decide to be proactive. At dusk, I begin sitting in a friendly oak with a tactical vantage of the playground. I find a comfortable resting position a dozen feet up at the crux of two massive limbs. Scarred bark tells of love affairs and visitors past. At the junction of the two limbs is a shallow depression filled with dirt, acorn hats, and a few tan cigarette butts. I bring a Nalgene bottle filled with water and my moonbeam. A nearby street light dimly illuminates the playground. Its crackling fluorescence casts a dull, flickering artificiality. My first night is fruitless. My second night is interrupted by a group of teens smoking dope while spinning on the merry-go-round. My third night bears the apple I came for: the traitor. He's a boy, probably thirteen or fourteen. He shows up at 2130. I know it is him before he pulls out the stencil and can of Krylon spray paint. Just a little bit longer—to catch him in the act—then I pluck him.

The MPs arrive in their Humvee. I'm glad; my arms are beginning to tire from bearing my rifle. Instead of the *hajjis* being placed in the MP's rifle scopes, I am. They roll me up, place me in the Humvee, and bring me to the brig. The JAG levels charges against me under Articles 92 and 97 of the UCMJ before the end of the workday. I don't fight them; I overstepped my authority as a corporal. In the end, it always comes down to a game of rock-paper-rank. Every Marine knows which one wins, although I often forget. One week later, I'm out of the brig. All charges dropped. According to the brig guard that brought me chow my last day, the three *hajji* scavengers were part of a local terrorist cell gathering IED components. They used our trash

to kill us. I wasn't paranoid. I did the right thing. Higher-ups had it hushed up, and they gave me a choice: dishonorable discharge later, or an honorable one now. My bird home came two months early, EAS shortly after.

The boy enters Borf Park from a small thicket approximately a football field's length from my position. He meanders to the swing set, and removing the stencil and spray can from the front pocket on his black hoodie, places them on the ground. The boy hops on a swing wrapped up twice around the top pole, starts swinging, and begins singing. A melody I won't forget. It was the same song that *hajji* at the DRMO facility hummed. The dying prayer.

The boy stops swinging and singing, grabs his gear, and saunters to the slide. He goes right up it, his rubber soles gripping the hard yellow plastic. Once at the top, the boy gives a turkey peek left and right, not seeming overly concerned with the possibility of being caught. He's complacent. He places the stencil in the same spot as always and lets out measured bursts of black mist from his Krylon can. I climb down from my perch, glide on my balled feet across the lawn to the stairs that lead up to the yellow slide, to that traitorous bastard, to the black paint that has stained my own backyard. As I mount the equipment, my feet slap against the rubber-coated metal. The boy turns. Our eyes can't meet in the flickering dark. He doesn't escape. He stands there, and straightening himself, puts forth his biggest voice to impress a single idea.

"I can get more paint."

I flip on my moonbeam, take two steps forward, and come chest to face with the boy. I'm tall, but this child makes me a Sequoia next to a sapling. His face turns up, nose first, to taunt me with pride. My nose turns down, face first, to beat it back. To many, my stature is imposing. My body hasn't yet been ravaged by a civilian life. Labor makes me as hard now as I ever was, but this boy won't subscribe to

that. The arrogance of youth, and the inexperience of never receiving a raw beating, has this boy entrenched in his ignorance. The boy stands erect—a barrier between myself and his work—making him taller than he has any right to be. If my stature won't intimidate him, then maybe my words will.

"I'll end you, boy. The cops are gonna arrest two people tonight if you wanna play alpha male."

His response is as unexpected as it is disarming.

"Wars are won one hill at a time."

"This ain't a hill, and you ain't a warrior, boy."

"Stop calling me that!" The boy's shoulders shift back as his chest inflates. His bony fingers tuck and form squared fists.

"What? Boy?"

"Yeah, I know what you're doing." His chest rises and falls with the cadence of his words.

"What's that?"

"My dad says its *dee-hugh-men-I-sing.*"

"Huh?" My confusion spelled out in tone.

"Soldiers do it so they don't feel bad about killin' kids."

"What do you know about soldiers?"

"My dad says they're fighting the wrong war."

"Your dad shouldn't talk so much."

"My dad says if I don't stand now, then I'll crawl the rest of my life."

I relax my body. The tension in my shoulders melts, leaving me soggy with emotions.

"Kid, give it a rest. The world ain't as bad as your dad says. Who do you think is gonna see that slide? See that image?" The boy remains quiet. "No one that matters or cares, that's for sure."

My mouth is full of saliva. I don't want to swallow though. It makes you look weak. I turn my head right, and spit a gooey gob that lands ten feet away on the lawn. The sound of throat lube being gathered into another mouth reaches my ear like a baseball hitting

a mitt. The boy lobs his gob two feet further than mine. Not to be outdone by a kid in a black hoodie and yellow, neon Nikes, I spit again, beating him by a foot. We go back and forth until we're both leaning on the rail, flinging our heads back and forth trying to get an ideal arc for distance. We stop after realizing we can no longer outdo each other. I lean back, hands gripping the orange railing. Without looking at him, I speak.

"Where do you live, kid?"

"Why?"

"If I ain't calling the cops on you, the least I'm gonna do is walk you home and talk to your dad."

The kid looks at the lawn, then at me, then back at the lawn. Options are best weighed against your immediate environment.

"C'mon. I'll show you," the kid says without looking at me.

He turns and walks down the equipment stairs. I follow him at first, and then match his stride. We walk side by side out of the park and down the sidewalk heading south. As we continue to walk, he hums to himself that same melody as before.

"What are you humming?"

"A song."

"Where did you learn it?" I ask. The boy looks down at his bright neon shoes reflecting streetlight onto his worn, blue jeans.

"My grandfather would sing it at daily prayer."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone."

The sidewalk narrows and I walk partially behind his right side. He seems in no hurry to introduce me to dad. The kid eventually stops next to a sandy path edged with cracked, red brick and peppered with broken, pearlescent shells. The path leads to a dinky, stucco house with flaking paint and rusty gutters that bend and droop like my grandfather's jowls. Four stairs composed of concrete, and missing chunks from their corners, lead up to the front door. There is warm

light coming from the edge of a curtain hanging in one of the street-facing windows.

"Is this home?"

The boy climbs the stairs to the door and draws a key ring from his pocket with only one brass key. He unlocks the deadbolt, and stops. He turns to face me, shorter now, not as tall as before.

"Do you still want to talk to my dad?"

"Yeah."

The kid nudges the door like he's cracking open a casket. He shouts for his dad. I walk up the path and stop at the base of the stairs.

Kasey answers the door holding a half-eaten granny smith apple. Kasey my co-worker. Kasey—the kid's father—stands over me, looking down.

With surprise and confusion dancing over his age-scarred face, he asks, "Dane? What is it?"

My scalp carpet stands at attention. The kid huddles next to Kasey. We see each other. He doesn't stand as strong as he stood earlier like David wielding a sling before Goliath. Now, he's an autumn leaf waiting for the gust of my words to cast him down, or keep him aloft.

"Eunice ran out of gas. Could you spare a jug?"

Peter Beckstrom was born and raised in Alborn, Minnesota; deployed twice to Iraq as a Marine with 2nd BN, 10th Marine Regiment; and recently earned his Juris Doctorate from Stetson University College of Law. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Blue Moon Literary & Art Review, The Freshwater Review, DOGZPLOT, The Corvus Review, Out of the Gutter, BlazeVOX, Line of Advance, The Deadly Writer's Patrol, *and* O-Dark Thirty, *and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Peter currently resides in Florida with his cat, wife, and two children.*

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Poetry.

Poetry Editor's Note

Poems are selected for the *Review* (our print publication) based on their strength in nine widely-accepted elements of poetry: image, figures of speech, music, rhythm, compression, precision, tone/voice, structure, and transformation. Special consideration is given for excellence in the "unteachable elements:" invention, movement, and passion.

To a lesser degree, I try and accept a variety of types of writers: e.g., families, female warriors, and warriors from different generations. This is especially the case in acceptance for the Report, our online blog.

Fred Foote

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

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Our Dreamtime Pow Wow

You ripped my jingle dress
Amongst the milky blanket of a starry night
Then tangled talons fell from Medicean moons
And wings looped a hooped heartfire until the last instant
Enveloped in the light and the darkness completely
Barely burnt within an explosion of sensational release
I awoke and poked at pink flesh on my toes
…It was a passionate dance

Sandpiper Man

Spirits, protect my favorite bird
Halt pains of tendons tensioning
Singing cadence echoing
Endless endurance—
Feathers soar high

On the wings of my love,
Do drums beat?
Feet flicker fast like flames
Sandpiper legs dash
Past ensuing waves

Belly Jazz

I'm a fetus and I ragtime waltz inside your water band
I hear a muffled ech'O'ing, but only when you're sad
I rat-a-tat upon the keys to show my Byard flow
All of a sudden, I stop because I hear arpeggio

Then from the beats and beyond your womb,
More artists in our band?
Oh, Daddy-O, our fearless one… I call him Camo Dad

He raps the mic, then he shouts, 'Tell me, how do Y'all do?'
I ball my fist, as in reply, to show I'm here with you!

Then we scat down the vocals
I sure bebop the best

Maggs Vibo (SGT Viboolsittiseri) served during OIF at Tallil Airbase in Iraq. After the war, she earned an M.A. in Liberal Studies, Graduate Certificate in Online Teaching, and lots of challenge coins for supporting her husband during his deployments to Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. When not writing, she enjoys her home near Fort Lee, VA.

These poems originally appeared in the Winter 2016 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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morning formation after fight-or-fuck night

Anna Weaver

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

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

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

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

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

Thi poem originally appeared in the Winter 2014 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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jokes with civilians

These are the things we laugh about.
It proves we belong.

This is the nomenclature we use
like handles to carry our stories,
keep from losing our grip—

That the Army doesn't have dawn.
The Army has first light and before
that, stand to. That a taste for field coffee
can be acquired. That tying a tourniquet
is a basic skill.

We argue the best way to melt shine
into boot leather. We speak almost fondly
of MREs and CS gas.

Our talk is not talk, but call and response—
one soldier drops a coin, the others follow
as if on command. We never disappoint.
We remember each other by last name first,
by rank, by squad number and stick number.
Our stories have sound effects—engine,
rotor, shockwave, unfolding canopy,
the soft exhale before firing.

Our memories have cadence and caliber,
sector and arc, drill and ceremony.
We cannot sanitize or explain.

Our jargon has no synonyms. Our alphabet
isn't made of letters. There is no signal
to tell you when it's safe to laugh.

Our jokes do not translate
into any of your languages.

hesitation before permitting a man to walk me to my car

say yes
and he walks point

say yes
and I will miss
the chance to cinch
the belt on my coat
lace keys through fingers
sharpen the brave
rhythm of heels
each step a warning
shot for stray men
who laugh and watch
from curbs and stairwells

say yes
and my brightest colors
turn dull

say no
and I alone will split
this sidewalk like a blade
danger will part and froth
in doorways
between streetlights
and I might learn
again to trust
in my best lies

that I am whole
and in control
and strong
for a woman my size

topographical survey of a man in a towel

The ridge line of his grandfather's
shoulders shadows a quadrangle
of muscle, bone, and dark Irish hair.

Just off-center within the tense plain
of waist, where the terrain draws down
between twin spurs of hipbone,
the terrycloth knot makes a gratuitous V.

My fingers trace the landforms
like water in an arroyo, down
and faster than I mean to.

He does not love me,
so the towel is not a metaphor.

It surrenders in a white valley
at the mountains of his clear, bare feet.

Raised in Oklahoma, Anna Weaver served eight years as a parachute rigger in the U.S. Army Reserve and now lives in North Carolina with her two daughters. Her poems have appeared in Literary Bohemian, Connotation Press, One, *and elsewhere. A self-described open mic tourist, she has performed in 22 states and the District of Columbia.*

These poems originally appeared in the Winter 2016 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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The Cull of Saqlawiah

Jason Arment

I Googled one of the towns
my company occupied in Iraq
with the words
“purged by ISIS”

Bodies lay piled up
chest high & ten feet across
stretching down the center
of the town's main road

I couldn't make out any faces
Men, women, & children wore
hijabs, burkas, track suits & western clothes
No one looked dressed for death

More Than Sorrow

An unwanted miscarriage
after years of trying
& months of hope & happiness
an unfathomable loss

I can't imagine how that feels
& I can't explain what it means
to watch my former life's work
turned to ash

Even though the metric of loss
has a hard time going two ways at once
maybe those things are close
maybe I could sit with the parents & talk

About what it means to really believe
only to have everything come crashing
down, the smoke stinging
tearful eyes

The Smell of Pine

All my meds are in a stout pine box
my mother gave me as a gift
my Beretta laid beside the bottles
quit or cure—no more half-measures

Jason Arment served in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a machine gunner in the USMC. He earned an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His work has appeared in Narrative Magazine, Gulf Coast, Lunch Ticket, Chautauqua, Hippocampus, The Burrow Press Review *(Push Cart nomination),* Dirty Chai, Phoebe, Pithead Chapel, The Indianola Review, Brevity, The Florida Review, Atticus Review, Zone 3, New Madrid, Veterans Writing Project,Midwestern Gothic, and War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities; *anthologized in* Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors, Volumes 2, 4, & 5; *and is forthcoming in* Duende *and* The Iowa Review. *University of Hell Press will publish his memoir,* Musalaheen *in 2017. Jason lives in Denver, where he coordinates the Denver Veterans Writing Workshop with the Colorado Humanities and Lighthouse.*

These poems originally appeared in the Fall 2016 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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Room 3A: A Night in Saigon

Richard Epstein

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

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

This poem originally appeared in the inaugural issue of O-Dark-Thirty—*Fall 2012. Reprinted with the author's permission.*

I Once Saw a Policeman . . .

I once saw a policeman shoot a black cocker spaniel
that was struck by a car. The policeman got down
on one knee, lifted the dog's ear, drew his revolver
and bang! It was over. I was seven and on my way to school.

When my brother was twelve, my dad
put his dog to rest by a quick tap to the head
with a hammer. *It had to be done,* he said.
He was blind and deaf. It's better this way.

When I was twenty-three in a foreign land,
I had a similar task at hand. The dog was sick.
I agreed to take him from a friend. After several
months of care, the dog stopped eating.

His time had come. I put him on his leash
and we walked to a police checkpoint
at the north end of town. I asked
for the policeman's assistance.
The answer was no.
I asked two soldiers at a bicycle shop.
They looked at each other and said no.
Rejected, we walked back home.

I retrieved my .45 and we set out again.
This time to a field of tall grass and bamboo
at the south end of town. I sat with him
on my lap, waiting for darkness, I guess.

With safety off, I moved my hand along
his shadowed mass until the gun rested
behind his ear. I held the barrel
where my father once tapped.

Instead of squeezing, I pulled and it was done.
I sat there a while listening to the night
then pushed my way through tall grass and bamboo
to begin the long walk home alone.

Richard Epstein, a long-time resident of the Washington, DC area, has been a featured reader at the US Navy Memorial, The Vietnam Woman's Memorial, the Orange Bear (New York City), and others. He is the editor of two veteran anthologies and his work has appeared in O-Dark-Thirty, DEROS, Incoming, A Common Bond *and* Schuykill Valley Journal. *Richard hosts an open mic venue for veterans and friends of veterans each Memorial Day and Veterans Day on the National Mall adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.*

This poem originally appeared in the Summer 2016 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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Spirit of a Solstice

Aaron Graham

At the violet hour, you found azure icicles hugging
The bathroom vanity—diving, splintering bodies
Resonating with D minor's deep blue when they struck.

You picked up their shards,
Constellated them into shapes of dying stars,
And pinned them together like an antique wedding dress.

At the violet hour, they sang unrivaled eulogies
of beauty and felicity, the tonic and the subdominant
of black and grey.

This is cactus land
At the yellow chirping of the fail-safe alarms
You awoke to a dappled snow.

Cinder-speckled drifts incompletely refract
The dim light of a put-upon heaven
You began this vigil two anemic weeks ago.

Weeks when moments of indigo still seemed
To drift between ash clouds
You awaited the shadow like a guest.

Abiit Iam Et Reverti Debet

(He has been gone for long and must, once, return)

Our love is the oak entertainment center
Built at zero-drunk-thirty
That had some upside down shelves.
The cheap, tan particleboard and black paint clash
And still face the world.
The citrus candles: cause you hated that I smoke.
Your issues of Cosmopolitan stacked on our tan and black shelves.
I loved it all. Even the TV
we stole from Jake's trailer when he left town. The picture
frame broke. Contentment and peace
spilling from the cracked glass like a severed artery,
Falling in coagulate droplets, pooling on sand and asphalt,
Carried by tire and track, splashing and coloring the continent.
Wishes and might-have-beens are dead limbs.
Best amputated before sepsis sets in.

Aaron Graham, a Marine Corps veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, is the author of the chapbook Skyping from a Combat Zone *and the collection* Blood Stripes. *His work has been published in a wide variety of literary journals. He served as the assistant editor for the* Squaw Valley Review, *and was the "Cecilia Baker Memorial Visiting Scholar" for the 2016 Seaside Writers Conference. He is currently finishing his PhD in Literature at Emory University, and serves as an Adjunct Professor of English at Kennesaw State University.*

These poems originally appeared in the Fall 2016 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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The Body Snatchers

Doug D'Elia

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elephant Grass

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doug D'Elia, poet, playwright, and visual artist, from Holyoke, Massachusetts. He enlisted in the military in 1965 and served as a medic until 1969. His poetry appears in over fifty publications, and he is the author of four books including a volume of military poems, Collateral Damage. *He is a graduate of the University of Central Florida.*

These poems originally appeared in the Winter 2014 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.
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Drama.

Drama Editor's Note

The *Review* asks three questions of plays. Is the theme artistically, socially, or politically challenging? Does the form make use of some element or elements (character, plot, language, the visual, the audience itself, etc.) in some compelling or original way to support the theme? Finally, does the play create emotion that is also well-integrated in the above?

Shock and Awe reveals a moment of tragic irony in the story of one soldier. Having failed to protect and transport an aid worker on a humanitarian mission to an all-girl's school, MSG Kelly must now break the news to the aid worker's family that she has been kidnapped.

Bryon Reiger

Shock and Awe

By Steve Scuba

ACT 1, SCENE 2

(Family Home in Clifton, NJ. Lights come up to silence for a beat or two. Suaad is sitting by herself on the couch. Master Sergeant Kelly is seated in an easy chair to her left. Rawan brings Suaad a glass of water and sits next to her. They are trying to make sense of what MSG Kelly is telling them. Both women are in an emotionally dazed state but become less so as the scene progresses.)

RAWAN

(Handing the glass of water to Suaad) Maay ummi. [Your water, Mom.]

SUAAD

Shukran. [Thank you.]

RAWAN

Afwan. [You're welcome.]

(SUAAD takes a sip and places the glass on the coffee table. Pause.)

SUAAD

How long has it been again?

MSG KELLY

Thirty-six hours, ma'am.

SUAAD

(Talking more to herself)

A day and a half.

MSG KELLY

Yes ma'am.

SUAAD

Could she just be lost? I mean . . . is there any chance of it? The neighborhoods aren't like here. The houses all look the same . . . the streets go in every direction. It would be very easy to lose your bearing and get off track.

MSG KELLY

As I said, their convoy was ambushed as they headed toward their target. It was a densely populated street. Not a lot of room to maneuver.

RAWAN

What "target" were they headed to?

MSG KELLY

An elementary school.

RAWAN

They were targeting an elementary school?!

MSG KELLY

No, I'm sorry. I'm confusing you. Their destination was an elementary school? It's just . . . that's how the mission statement would describe it.

RAWAN

As a target?

MSG KELLY

Yes.

RAWAN

Why not just call it "an elementary school"?

MSG KELLY

No, you're right. It's just the way the military does it. They were going to hand out school supplies to kids. That was their mission.

(MSG KELLY looks at RAWAN and changes the word)

…their "task." It was an all-girls school.

SUAAD and RAWAN

(Speaking at the same time)

Al-Ma'rifa.

MSG KELLY

What's that?

RAWAN

Al-Ma'rifa.—it's the school Sanaa is working with.

SUAAD

(Neutral) She's real proud of what she's been doing with those kids.

RAWAN

It's been one of the high points of her time over there.

MSG KELLY

Al-Ma'rifa.

RAWAN

It means "The Knowledge." Sanaa said it was called Taj al-Maarek, which was a famous battle during the Iraq-Iran War but after the fall of Saddam in 2003 the name was changed to inspire the female students to embrace education.

MSG KELLY

I see. *(Pause)* Well, her visit was gonna be a big deal. A non-governmental agency had donated the school supplies. Both the Army and the Iraqi Ministry of Education were going to have reps there. An ABC news crew was on the ground to cover the event.

SUAAD

Alhamdu lellah [Thank God].

RAWAN

(Timidly)

You said they tried to blow up her vehicle?

MSG KELLY

Right. It was an IED. They were in the fourth and last Humvee in the group and as they made a turn onto a narrow street, a bomb went off under the engine.

SUAAD

But my daughter and the other two weren't injured?

MSG KELLY

A number of women and children interviewed at the scene all said they saw your daughter and the driver of the Humvee exit the vehicle after the explosion. They said the gunner was thrown from the top of the vehicle onto the road and your daughter and the driver went to check on him. They were able to stand him up and he appeared all right.

SUAAD

Alhamdu lellah [Thank God]. *Allah karim* [God is generous].

RAWAN

(Timidly)

And this is where it spun out of control?

MSG KELLY

Right. Immediately after the explosion, someone in one of the other vehicles radioed it in. A couple of other soldiers from the front vehicles raced back to assist and then they started to receive enemy fire from shooters on the roof-tops above.

SUAAD

Was that the last time anyone saw her?

MSG KELLY

It gets real murky at this point. The dust literally hadn't settled from the explosion, which made it difficult to see. Locals were running in every direction possible. It was one of those crowded streets. There's a market two blocks away and apparently this street was a shortcut there. At this point, we got conflicting reports. Some of the locals say a large group of men quickly surrounded the three and overpowered

them, dragging them away. Others say the three broke free from the mob and escaped down an alleyway.

(Pause)

(Speaking without a filter. The past incidence comes to the surface. He gets increasingly animated as he says this.)

You know, when you're in something like that, it's hard to know which end is up. *(Pause)* I remember being in a similar incident in Tikrit in '04. The vehicle I was riding in took an IED and blew the engine block right off! They said it landed on this guy's goat. Can you imagine? It flew 15 feet and landed on a damn goat! I got my ass out of the vehicle and my ears were ringing like crazy. I couldn't see through the dust. We started taking small arms fire only it was impossible to tell which direction it was coming from. There's nothing worse than being in a one-sided firefight! Up was down, down was up. My mind was all wobbly. I didn't know where I was. I coulda been back in Jersey on the Garden State Parkway or tailgating with my boys at Giants stadium for all I knew. That was some shit! Some real messed up shit!

(Pause)

SUAAD

Who are you again?

MSG KELLY

Oh, let me reintroduce myself . . . I'm Master Sergeant Dwayne Kelly. I'm an Army Reserve Liaison. I was sent here by your daughter's rear detachment. That's the part of the unit that stays behind when the rest of the soldiers get deployed.

SUAAD

Oh.

MSG KELLY

I'll be working with you until your daughter is found and the situation is resolved. I'm here to support your family in any way that I can. And just so you know, right now, every unit in that battle space is looking for her and the other two missing soldiers. Reinforcements from around Baghdad have flooded that neighborhood and other suspected hotspots.

(Pause)

MSG KELLY

It happened in Al-Adhamiya. Are you familiar with that neighborhood?

SUAAD

Yes.

MSG KELLY

We're turning that place upside down even as we speak. No stone left unturned.

SUAAD

It's one of the worst places in Baghdad now. (Pause) You know, when I was a university student, I used to pass by that neighborhood all the time.

MSG KELLY

Where did you go to college?

SUAAD

Al-Mustansiriyah University. Have you ever heard of it?

MSG KELLY

No, ma'am.

SUAAD

It's one of the top schools in the country. Ten minutes from Al-Adhamiya. I studied English there. Met Sanaa's father there. Never in wildest dreams did I ever think this day would come. Or that she would go missing. And of all places, there.

###

Steve Scuba is an Army nurse and an Iraq war veteran.

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Interviews.

Interviewers' Note

Like the other sections in this issue, we took great care—and joy—in perusing the stellar list of arts and literary luminaries we have interviewed over the last five years, ultimately hoping to strike the right balance of genre and military service. We ended up choosing four interviews that represent the insightful exchanges about literature that so many of our readers crave and that so many of our contributors have displayed. Of course, each of these names—Gay Talese, Siobhan Fallon, Tobias Wolff and Kayla Williams—will be recognizable to anyone with any literary knowledge, but their personal stories and military experiences—and the inspiration and lessons drawn from those experiences—may not be as well known. That's why we reach out to them and speak to them, not only to learn about the people behind the stories, but also the stories behind the stories.

Ben Franklin was way ahead of us when he said, "Before you can write something worth reading . . . you have to live something worth writing." Each of these writers has certainly taken that quote to heart. Don't believe us? Then read on and enjoy! We certainly did!

The Editors

A Couple of Hours with Gay Talese

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

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

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

O-Dark-Thirty: So tell us about your military experience.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ten years. When I was thrity-two, I quit. So my life as a journalist for *the New York Times* was really from 1956 to 1965.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ODT: Who else did you read?

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

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

GT: Only one. I never tried it again. I promise you.

So how did Carson McCullers write this story called "The Jockey?" It's a fine story, did you read it?

ODT: Yes. It's terrific.

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

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

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

ODT: Who else did you read?

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

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

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

Then I read Hemingway, as I told you. Then I read Thomas Wolfe. These were the big people of the '50s. Then I aame to New York and I started reading *The New Yorker*, so I read John Cheever, Irwin Shaw, John O'Hara, of course McCullers. I wanted to do in non-fiction what they were doing in fiction: telling stories through people.

ODT: Did you try to write like anyone?

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

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This interview originally appeared in the inaugural issue of O-Dark-Thirty, Fall 2012.

A Conversation with Siobhan Fallon

Siobhan Fallon is a military spouse and the author of the critically-acclaimed short story collection Y*ou Know When the Men Are Gone* about the families of Fort Hood, Texas, during an Army brigade's deployment to Iraq. The collection was listed as a Best Book of 2011 by *The San Francisco Chronicle, Self Magazine*, Los Angeles Public Library and Janet Maslin of *The New York Times.* It also won a 2012 Indies Choice Honor Award, the Texas Institute of Letters Award for First Fiction, and the 2012 Pen Center USA Literary Award in Fiction.

Theatrical productions of her stories include performances by Word for Word in San Francisco and Stories on Stage in Denver. More of Siobhan's work has appeared in, among others, *Women's Day* and *Good Housekeeping*, and she writes a fiction series for *Military Spouse Magazine.* She has an MFA from The New School in New York City.

O-Dark-Thirty fiction editor Jim Mathews recently spoke with Fallon about the unique challenges of military life, the inspirations for her stories and the unforgettable characters that inhabit them.

O-Dark-Thirty: How did you get started writing fiction and when did you begin to weave the theme of military life into your work?

Siobhan Fallon: If I go way back, I was always the kid who was making up stories. But I got serious about writing during college. I took a few nonfiction writing courses in school and then I ended up getting a Masters in Fine Arts in creative writing. And then I met my husband, who was in the Army, and we moved to Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. It was at that time that I started writing about the military community for the first time.

ODT: Were you actively pursuing publication of your fiction at that time?

SF: Well, I had been sending stories off to literary magazines for probably a decade before I finished writing my current collection of stories. So for me it was all about starting small, sending things out to small magazines at different schools and getting a feel for how the real writing world worked. Which is what I would recommend to any writer just starting out—in other words, not going directly to try to find a literary agent or publisher, but to feel things out first, read all the literary magazines out there, know what's getting published, and let that affect your own writing.

ODT: So much of* You Know When the Men are Gone *revolves around life on a military base during the seemingly endless cycle of overseas deployment—I take it you've had significant experience in this area to draw from?

SF: Absolutely. We moved to Fort Hood and about a month after we arrived, my husband—who had been deployed to Afghanistan before—was deployed to Iraq for the first time. I was a Family Readiness

Group leader and when he deployed to Iraq I really became enmeshed in the Army world in a way that I hadn't been before. And that's when I started writing these particular stories. In a way, I wrote them with a desire to figure out what was going on around us. Not to document it, because it is fiction. But I just wanted to get the details down about all that was going on. It seemed that people hadn't been thinking about how military families were being impacted by events in the Middle East, and this was my way of letting people know.

ODT: So how has your experience working and living the military life factored into your approach to fiction?

SF: Well most writers have probably heard the adage "Write what you know" and I really took that to heart—especially when writing these stories. I was aware of the dialogue I'd hear everyday. A nineteen-year-old soldier would speak differently than, say, a thirty-five-year-old major's wife. So I would constantly be looking out for those details and either make a note in my head or put it down later on in a notebook. Because sometimes you lose these things if you don't capture them right away.

ODT: In the civilian world, the military experience can sometimes be stereotyped as bland, rigid, monotone. Did you find this to be the case and, if so, how did you address it?

SF: Yes, absolutely. I was a civilian before I became a mil spouse. So I came into the military community with the expectations of finding those stereotypes. In fact, I had never wanted to date a soldier. I was raised right next to the West Point military academy in New York and my sister and I said we'd never date cadets. And then, of course, I met my husband and changed my mind. But yes, I think civilian folks may view military life as everyone being similar because

they wear the same uniform and have to have the same haircuts and so forth. But that was part of the fun of writing these stories. To find a different way of illustrating a military character or a military spouse and to try to make them so specific and have different flaws and character traits that would be unexpected to the reader. And that's kind of the fun in writing anyway. When you're creating a character, you always want to surprise your reader, show them something they haven't seen before, instead of relying on what's already known. People who are reading our work are going to be looking for something they haven't read before.

ODT: Were there any particular challenges to the military character?

SF: Well, for me, my main focus isn't on the battlefield so I'm not telling that particular story. My stories focus more on the people on the home front whose lives are affected by war in a different way than the soldiers themselves. Soldiers may be facing physical injuries while the families face the stress of ordinary American life—taking the kids to soccer, celebrating holidays, changing the tires on the car—as well as constantly fearing for the safety of their deployed soldier, airman, Marine. I think that balance presents endless possibilities.

ODT: I noticed that you definitely reach for extreme human emotions and situations when creating conflict in your stories—whether it's jealousy or adultery or violence.

SF: I love tension. When I'm reading fiction, I want something that's going to grab me. I want to wonder what's going to happen next. So in my own writing, even if I'm writing about a situation that may seem simple—a family at home—I want to ratchet up the way the story is flowing toward a crisis. And because I like this approach in what I read, I try to emulate that in my own writing.

ODT: Looking at the landscape of contemporary military-themed writing, do you feel that we are touching on the same universal themes that we've seen emerge from past wars?

SF: Not necessarily. I feel like there are themes and stories that still need to be told or that can be made new by what's going on now. For someone like me who's always enjoyed fiction, I will get more from reading a short story or novel than I will from a newspaper article or seeing something on the news. So I embrace fictional storytelling and will always encourage it even if, say, Homer did it best.

ODT: Do you have a favorite story in your collection?

SF: I have favorite characters more than a favorite story. I have a soft spot for Kit Murphy, the wounded soldier who is a character in two of the stories ["The Last Stand" and "Gold Star"]. It just seemed too tragic how I left him at the end of one story, so I had to bring him back and give him a little more hope in the second story. When I do readings, I often read from his two stories. In the collection's lead story "You Know When the Men are Gone," I think I identify most with the protagonist, Meg Brady. She was sort of experiencing deployment in the way that I did—when I was a new spouse and was overwhelmed by the process and what the military world was like.

ODT: Your work has been performed theatrically—did seeing your work play out on stage alter your perceptions of your characters?

SF: I don't know if it altered the way I saw my characters but it was really interesting to see how other people interpreted them. For example, they might put a different spin on things, perhaps by delivering lines I intended to be straightforward in a sarcastic way. There was one scene where some spouses made a comment that I had imagined as sweet

but the way [the actors] read it, I thought, of course it could have had that double meaning. So the experience did illuminate certain things in the story that I hadn't paid too much attention to when I was writing.

ODT: Describe your process as a writer in approaching your work? What gets you excited? What gets you to your keyboard and keeps you there?

SF: Well, I wish I could get more done. But I equate it to working out. Nobody wants to get on the treadmill, but if you just force yourself and start doing it, you're going to get the workout done. So I somehow I trick myself and make myself sit down at my desk—whether it's re-reading some material or forcing a word count for that day. Making it a habit is usually helpful. It boils down to getting that butt in the chair and making yourself do it, again and again. And the more I stick to a real schedule, the easier it is the next day to get back in that place where I left off. I try to do five days a week—and I wish I could do the weekends. But with a six-month-old baby, I'm lucky to get what I can. And again, if I can do this as part of a schedule, then I'm also thinking about the characters even when I'm not writing. I have a lot of little notebooks in my purse to jot down thoughts about a character that helps me the next time I sit down. And just the act of writing down something funny that I've seen, I feel like it sears it into my brain in a way that's different from when, for example, you wake up and try to remember a dream.

ODT: None of the stories in* You Know When the Men are Gone *are written in first person point-of-view. Is third person your narrative approach of choice?

SF: Actually, first person is my favorite. I usually write in first person, which is what's strange about the collection. But there's something

about needing to show a wider picture of Ft. Hood, the base, the interactions, and how charaters bump into other characters. I appreciated the distance that third person gave me. I had originally written some of the stories in first person and then changed them to third. There's so much that goes into the revising of stories. It's such an important part of the process. In the end, the third person felt more evocative of a military community and life on base—instead of trying to identify with one particular character and putting everything into one voice.

ODT: So what are you reading these days and do you find it informative to your writing?

SF: Yes, I usually read what will help the work that I'm currently working on. While writing something that focuses on the military life, like my collection, I read a lot of military spouse writing. Alison Buckholtz's memoir *Standing By* is particularly good. She's a Navy spouse and she captures a lot of the details and situations that, as an Army spouse, I had no idea the Navy spouses experienced. And then there's Laura Harrington's novel *Alice Bliss*, which is about a Reserve family. It focuses on the teenage daughter growing up while her father is deployed and the dynamics that deployment has on the entire family. Another great book is *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from The Long War*. It's an outstanding anthology of fiction, written by vets of the Iraq War, edited by Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton.

ODT: What advice would you give to military veterans—and particularly spouses and dependents of service members—who are considering a career in writing?

SF: I think for me the best thing was to become a part of a writer community. Whether taking a class or creating their own writers' group. To have someone else read your work gives you a feeling that, yes, I really am writing something worth reading. And it's good to see

what other people are working on. I keep in touch with a friend from my MFA who still reads all my work. And I've made friends with other writers. So definitely reach out and connect. It's a small writing world and the military writing world is even smaller. You need to find the writers in them. And I know there are some incredible veteran writing workshops. If you're in a writer's group or workshop, you are forced to finish your work. You have to hand in that piece of writing because people are waiting to read it. And, of course, writers need to read. Read as much as you can. Especially in the area or genre that you're writing. The point is not to write something that's been done ten times but to recognize what's been done and then challenge your readers and surprise them. I have a Nook so I download a lot of samples of work—generally you can download the first chapter of a book for free to get a taste of something, which makes me think that we as writers really need to think about those first twenty pages and how good they have to be, or people aren't going to buy your book.

ODT: So what do you think about future of literature as it relates to these writers who are now emerging from the nation's most recent wars?

SF: I'm seeing so many talented veteran and military spouse writers and hearing from them—or being asked to read galleys of their books before they go to print. And I hope there are many more out there who are writing, writing, writing, and that we'll hear from them soon.

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This interview originally appeared in the Summer 2013 issue of O-Dark-Thirty.

A Conversation with Kayla Williams

Kayla Williams served in the U.S. Army for five years as an Arabic linguist, including a year in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). She is the author of two memoirs: *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army*, a book about her experiences as a soldier deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and *Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War,* a memoir of reintegration and her marriage to a former Army sergeant who suffered a traumatic brain injury. She has a B.A. in English literature from Bowling Green State University, and earned her M.A. in international affairs with a focus on the Middle East at American University. She is a project associate at the RAND Corporation, a member of the Army Education Advisory Committee, a fellow at the Truman National Security Project, and a former member of the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans. *O-Dark-Thirty* Managing Editor Jerri Bell interviewed Kayla.

ODT: You were a literature major—you got your bachelor's degree before you enlisted in the Army. What did you read, what did you like, why did you become a literature major?

KW: They were willing to give me a degree for reading books, which is what I do for pleasure. My dad has a Ph.D. in English lit, and one of my earliest memories is going to one of the classes he was teaching. They were talking about the Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," and I knew that the image of the "inward eye" meant memory when not all the college kids did. It was one of those defining moments.

Once I was in the program, I realized that the vast majority of the literature I was being exposed to was by dead straight white guys, and so I crafted my own minor in studies in gender, ethnicity and class issues. I sought out classes where I could read works by African authors and women from around the world. It was more interesting, and it gave me the space when I was writing term papers about things that hadn't already been said six hundred times. There isn't a whole lot of fresh work that you can do on Shakespeare. My thesis was on Edwidge Danticat and Gayl Jones. I thought that was exciting, interesting work.

ODT: On deployment your friend Lauren read romances, and you read Ayn Rand…what else did you read when you were deployed?

KW: For a while on the mountain [at the Sinjar Mountain forward operations post], I read a book a day. I read everything I could get my hands on: Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time,* Dan Brown novels, the whole *Lord of the Rings* series, the *Amber* series by Roger Zelazny—I like sci-fi and fantasy—I read a textbook on micro-economics, science magazines . . . if it was there, I read it. I didn't read a lot of "classic" literature while I was over there. I read what people chose to send us.

ODT: Did you go into writing* Love My Rifle More Than You *thinking that your story was different because you're a woman?

KW: That was what interested my publisher. I wrote it in partnership with a former college professor who encouraged me to tell my story. I thought that by telling my story I would get it out of me, and I could put it down and walk away from it—like writing crappy poetry in high school to deal with emotional problems. The writing process would be cathartic, and I'd be done. I didn't understand that when a book gets published, it takes on a life of its own and you have to continue to engage with it. My book tour was my version of prolonged exposure therapy—having journalists stick my book under my face on live local morning TV shows and say, *"What's it like to watch someone bleed to death?"* [And I had to talk over and over about the detainee abuse that I'd witnessed, one of the things that I'm most ashamed of in my life, one of my biggest moral failings. It was rather challenging for me.

But my publisher hoped that *Love My Rifle More Than You* would be the "female Jarhead," so I didn't read Swofford's memoir until I was done with the manuscript. I didn't want to be influenced by it.

ODT: You wrote* Love My Rifle More Than You *with a collaborator—a former professor. I sometimes thought I could read his voice in it more clearly than yours. My favorite parts were the ones where your voice comes through, with all the anger and the occasional profanity right there on the page.

KW: I had an argument with the publishers before it came out. The prologue, in particular, did not ring true to me as my voice and I wanted to rework it. The publishers put their foot down and said, "Leave it, or it's not going to get published." Then one of the reviews came out, in one of the bigger papers, and it said exactly what I'd been telling the publisher. I got an apology from my editor—and I felt vindicated.

ODT: Did they push you to spin it in any way?

KW: We had some differences in opinion. Those differences made me realize—in the Army, despite the sexual harassment, despite all the challenges, we were all on the same team when it came down to the core things. I may have actively disliked some of the people I served with, but I still trusted them to save my life in a combat zone. When I went into the process of publishing my book, I assumed that my publisher and my agent and my co-author and I were all on the same team. It was a huge shock to me to realize that they were on their own teams, and that we did things for our own reasons and didn't have entirely shared goals. That was jarring for me. Part of the problem was [writing the memoir] so soon after coming back from a combat zone, because my head was still firmly in that "We're on the same team" page, when that just wasn't true

ODT: Memoir is said to be the art of the examined life. It didn't seem like you'd been home long enough to have distance when you wrote your first book.

KW: Totally unprocessed. I just vomited everything out. In some ways I regret that, because I came across sometimes as a kind of twit. I was whiny, and angry, and that's not necessarily how I want to be remembered. On the other hand, it's a very honest account of where I was right then.

ODT: You were also going through a difficult time personally when you were writing* Love My Rifle More Than You. *I didn't realize that until I read your second memoir.

KW: Neither did my editor! [The person I was in *Love My Rifle More Than You*] is a very accurate accounting of who I was then, but that's

not who I stayed. I waited a lot longer [to write and publish my second book]. I wanted to write it about five years into my marriage, but I knew I wasn't ready. I was too full of anger. I wanted to make sure that I [had more perspective, more space], that I'd processed that experience.

ODT: What do you think would be different about* Love My Rifle More Than You *if you wrote it now?

KW: I'd have more patience and empathy for the other people I served with. Later I read Anthony Shadid's book *Night Draws Near*. He wrote about being in Baghdad with journalist Hamza Hendawi of the Associated Press waiting for the invasion to begin. Hendawi would yell at him for smoking—not for the smoke, but for the sound of his breathing while he smoked. Shadid was mature enough, had enough distance, to realize in that moment that Hendawi was afraid of dying. Reading that made me realize that I had been so unsympathetic to my squad leader. I had no empathy for how terrifying it must have been for her, how much the responsibility must have weighed on her shoulders. I developed that empathy a lot later. I don't wish I could change [what I said]; it stands as it is. But I can see things differently with more years, experience, and perspective.

And I would have had more control over the story—I'd be able to impose more of a narrative arc. It doesn't have [a strong narrative arc]. I would also be more open about some things that I wasn't ready to reveal when the book first came out. I was afraid of blowback, especially for other women in the military.

ODT: You've mentioned that you didn't want your first book to come out while you were still on active duty. What were some of your concerns? How did you think telling your story might affect other women, or the perception of women in the military?

KW: I thought publishing while I was still in could be problematic. I still had to work with people [I'd written about], and I was still in military intelligence. I wouldn't be able to talk to the media. How would I promote the book on active duty? I felt like I had to wait until I was out.

Then when the publisher sent the galleys of my first book around to get blurbs, retired General Wesley Clark wouldn't write one. He said he thought the book would set the position of women in the military back, which was upsetting to hear.

I think about what I accepted in the military, and now I'm upset with what I put up with. I wrote about the worst of it, but I just absorbed so much of the rest. Like jokes that I let people tell in front of me. And ways that I treated other women. I was harder on other women than the men were. When I saw other women fucking up, I didn't see it as an opportunity to be a mentor. I looked down on them, or I was angry at them. Other than not reporting what I knew about detainee abuse, that's the thing I regret most. I try to make up for that by actively getting engaged as a mentor now, and by speaking out about the things I did wrong. I'd like to help make things better, and move them forward.

ODT: Military women aren't telling their stories as often or as publicly as men. It was something that we noticed in the Veterans Writing Project seminars early on, and it's the reason that we created a separate women veterans-only writing seminar. Our theory was that women veterans need a safe space to feel comfortable opening up and telling their stories. Why do you think that women veterans have been more reluctant to write and publish?

KW: We're following gender norms that have been around for decades. That may have something to do with it. But we are writing. We're not

getting published as often as men, though. Both civilian novelist Cara Hoffman and *New Yorker* critic George Packer said that women veterans aren't writing, and that made me so irate. I have to clear my writing through my employer now, and they made me rewrite my response to Hoffman's op-ed four times for them before it sounded "not angry" enough to publish!

My theory is that the general public thinks of war literature as coming-of-age stories from men, stories about how boys go to war and become men. No woman joins the military to become a man, though, so [women veterans' stories] are not about that. The majority of published work by men coming out of these wars is predominantly written by young, straight, white men. There's more ethnic diversity and even job diversity in writing by women veterans—they aren't telling the typical young infantryman's stories.

ODT: I don't remember seeing the words "caregiver fatigue" anywhere in your narrative, but that's certainly a theme in* Plenty of Time When We Get Home. *I admire that you and Brian made it through that early period in his recovery.

KW: Even though Brian read each of the chapters, there were certain things that we just didn't talk about until we did a couple of joint radio interviews. The interviewers asked him questions that I had never really had the courage to ask him. Like: "What's it like to have somebody write about you? Were you okay with her writing this about you?" He said, "Look, if you don't want somebody to write about you, don't marry a writer." I came at [Brian's injury] thinking about some of the famous men like Newt Gingrich who have left their wives when their wives were fighting cancer. I just felt like they were horrible human beings for doing that. They walked away. I thought, "I can't do that. I can't be that person." Brian's more empathetic than I am. He said

in one interview, "I just want to say that if there are any spouses out there going through this, and just can't handle it, it's okay. I understand. This is a lot to go through——I would understand if somebody just couldn't handle it."

ODT: We've talked about women being hard on each other. I noticed when you discuss the Honey Badger Book Club in* Plenty of Time When We Get Home, *you and the other women veterans in the group spend some time talking about the women who enlisted in the Army or the Guard thinking that they'd never have to deploy because they were women. As you've been working with women veterans' interest groups, do you see women who deployed comparing combat experiences—"You were a fobbit, I was outside the wire—" that sort of thing? Is there a kind of one-upmanship among women veterans?

KW: No, I haven't. A couple of the women in the book club never deployed at all. I don't see them being excluded, nobody says, "Oh, I had it so much worse than you"— there's none of that. [One of the women in the book club who didn't deploy has] gone on to a civilian job trying to catch war criminals. She goes to Africa and deals with things like genocide that the rest of us don't want to sit around thinking about all the time. We're able to see that other experiences may be different than combat, but they can be just as hard.

ODT: What would you tell other women veterans who are struggling to decide if they should start writing about their military experiences—who might be hesitating to speak up?

KW: Just do it! Get involved with organizations, don't try to do it alone. I think that our stories need to be told. The act of capturing your story and telling your story can be cathartic in and of itself. Getting

it out there for other people is important for the historical record, and also for other women who feel isolated, alone, unheard—even crazy. When my first book came out and I went on book tour, women who'd been in the first Gulf War would come up to me sobbing, saying that they'd thought they were crazy for over a decade because nobody believed what they'd been through. They'd started to doubt their own memories, their perceptions of reality because they'd been so isolated. That was so meaningful to me. I'd even get letters from infantrymen who'd served in Operation Iraqi Freedom—they'd say things like, "I can't talk about the war. But I can give your book to my mom, and she can understand something about what I went through." It matters to tell our stories—not just for ourselves, but for the other people who aren't ready or able yet to tell their own stories.

ODT: What's next for you? More books?

KW: I tried my hand at fiction for the first time. I was invited to submit a piece for a collection—I don't know if they've found a publisher for it yet. That was terrifying for me. I'm almost forty, I know who I am. I have flaws. There are days when I know I'm being a bitch. So if you read my memoir, and you think, "I don't like that," I can see that as "You don't like me," and you don't have to like me. I don't need you to like me to feel good about myself. I'm comfortable in my own skin. But if I write fiction and you don't like it, you're saying that you don't like my craft. You're saying that I don't have skill. And that's much more upsetting to me.

I also have a novel in mind, but it's not getting out onto paper yet. I have two small kids, and a full-time job; I do public speaking, and I write op-eds. For my second book I had an advance that let me cut back to half-time so I could write the book. That doesn't happen so much in the fiction world, so at this moment in my life I don't see

how to make it work. You take turns making sacrifices in a marriage. Brian and I have been married for ten years, and he worked at the VA in a job he disliked so we would have financial stability while I went to grad school and worked on the second book. Now it's his turn. He's going back to college right now, so it's my turn to work full time. After he's done, maybe I'll go back to writing regularly again.

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A Conversation with Tobias Wolff

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

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

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

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

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

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

TW: Oh, sure. Latin. Which did me a lot of good later, but not then. Actually, I had also learned a little French in school, which ultimately

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

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

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

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

TW: Oh absolutely. I had wanted to be a writer ever since I was a teenager. I had been writing a long time and I even wrote when I was in Vietnam. Nothing that ended up being publishable. But it kept the flame burning. So I did my tour in Vietnam, came back and settled some affairs in the States and, by a fluke, I ended up going to England with a friend to travel around. We were going to buy motorcycles and ride all over Europe. But that didn't happen. He got married and I stayed

on in England. At the end of the summer, I started studying for the entrance examinations at Oxford University. I passed them and got in. I stayed there and got a degree in English at Oxford.

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

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

ODT: This was* Ugly Rumours*?

TW: I'm afraid so.

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

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

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

TW: Yes, I worked for a time as a reporter for *The Washington Post.* This was during the Watergate era. But my desire to be a writer was so great that even though I had a good job as a reporter, I was not getting the time I needed. If you work all day as a reporter, you don't feel like going home and writing fiction. You're exhausted and that

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

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

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

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

TW: Sure, and an old one called "Wingfield" and a more recent one called "Awaiting Orders." And there are probably two or three others. But it isn't something I go to very often. Every once in a while, though,

I will draw on those experiences. They were very important to me. And I draw on them not just for the obvious war material but for what I learned from it. For example, I've become extremely suspicious of authority and "official" statements about things. In the case of Vietnam, there was an almost comical discrepancy between the war that was being described at home by the government and what I was seeing on the ground over there. All soldiers, I think, have that experience because it's the business of the government to promote the war and theirs to fight it. And it made a—I won't say a cynic—but it made a skeptic of me about almost everything.

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

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

ODT: I actually attended a reading that you gave here in DC at Politics & Prose back in 1995 where you read from* In Pharaoh's Army, *and I recall you saying that while your letters home helped get things straight with the dates and such, they weren't otherwise very helpful.

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

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

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

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

TW: Yes, it's true about this generation of veteran writers. Many American women soldiers and Marines were exposed in a way that

previous generations weren't, so that experience and perspective will be unique.

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

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

ODT: So in your day-to-day writing activities, do you have any specific tricks of the trade, as it were? I had interviewed Robert Bausch, for example, who told me that he sometimes writes with his monitor off—just to keep himself from editing while he hammers out a first draft.

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

ODT: You know I've noticed that some of the submissions we get at* O-Dark-Thirty *and some of the folks coming into our free seminars

only want to write military-themed stories with military settings and military characters. That's fine, but we've also tried to encourage them not to limit themselves to just those types of stories. In other words, don't just be a veteran who writes, but a writer who just happens to be a veteran.

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

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

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

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

TW: Nice talking to you. I enjoyed it.

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