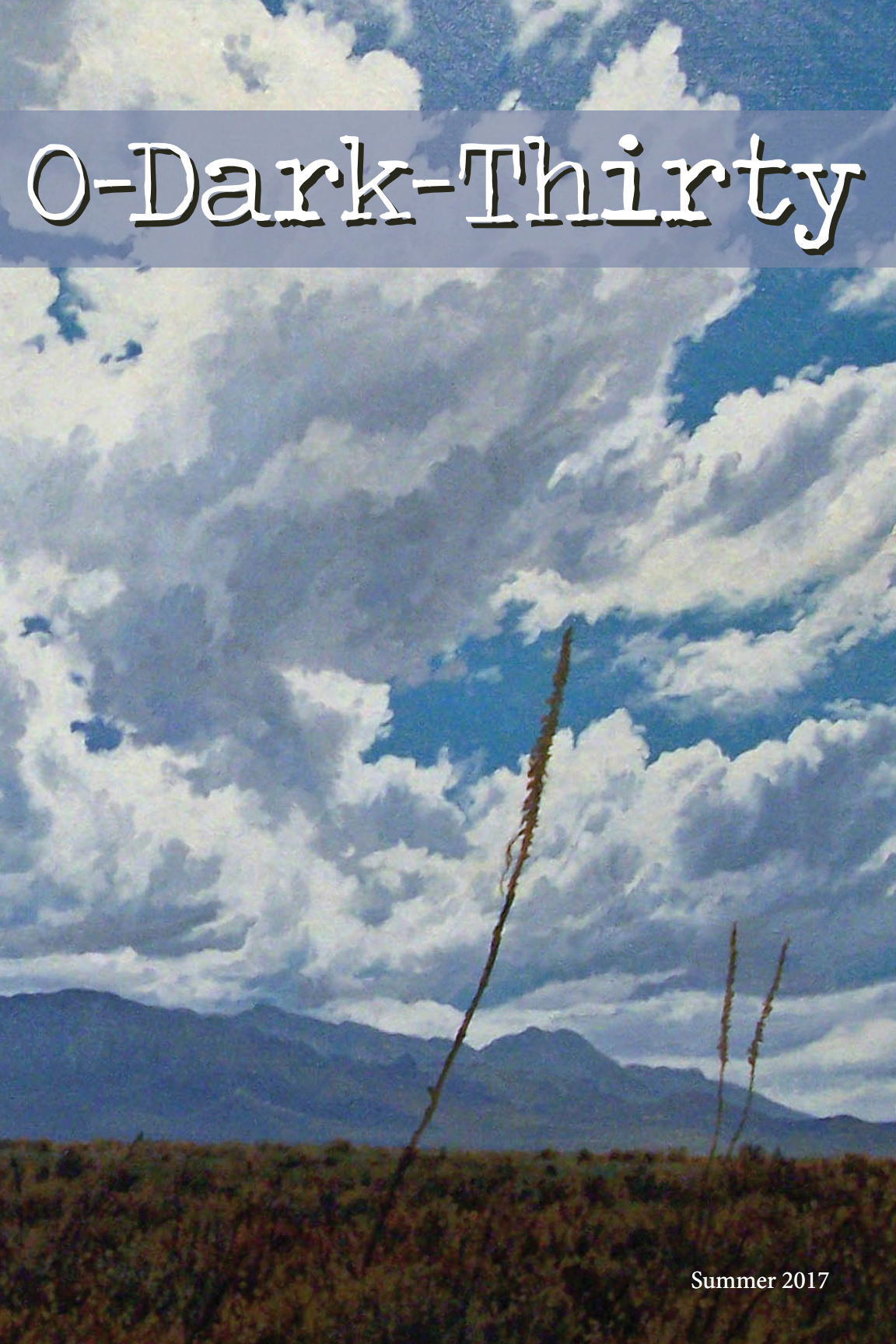
O-Dark-Thirty



Summer 2017

O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *Standing Tall,*
12"x36", oil on canvass
by Dennis Blagg

Dennis served in the US Army from 1970 to1972.
After completing basic training at Fort Ord, California,
he was assigned to Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio
as an (81E20) army illustrator and then served
in Seoul, South Korea. His first art show at the USO sold out.
He was honorably discharged in May of 1972 with the rank of
E-5 (sergeant), and his reserve duty service ended in 1976.

After his time in the Army, Blagg returned home and resumed
his artistic career in painting. His work is focused on the
arid landscape of the Big Bend country of west Texas.
For some thirty-five years he has traveled there for both renewal
and inspiration. He seeks solace in the rocks and cactus,
and in the harsh desperation that only the desert can offer.

You can find more of Dennis' art at
www.artspace111.com/dennis-blagg/

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Editor's Note

Welcome to *O-Dark-Thirty's* special issue exploring the theme of "Identity." If you're a service member or veteran, you know exactly what identity is. It's the thing you had erased during basic military training. Not erased for long, mind you, because the service quickly issued you a new one, one that was identical to everyone else's. That was the intent anyway. And it's not a bad one when you consider the core purpose of any effective fighting force: to kill the enemy and break things.

Of course, as many of us found out, the human yearning for individual identity is as difficult to suppress as that first incongruent tug of a smile upon hearing drill instructors shout obscenities at the tops of their lungs. It was a smile that vanished almost as quickly as it appeared, into the grip of fear and discipline, swallowed up by the question no recruit can refrain from asking themselves on that first day: "*What the hell have I gotten myself into?*"

For those of us who have practiced the literary arts either before, during, and after the service (or all of the above), the military experience almost certainly helped hone our sense of tension—for what greater tension than having one's own irresistible desire for a personal identity suppressed? The experience almost certainly helped us to recognize the inherent tension in all human interactions and then use such tension in our work, regardless of the subject or the characters or the setting in which it all comes together.

That's exactly why we chose "Identity" for this year's themed issue. We wanted to see what creative possibilities could emerge from considering how we ourselves have changed—for good or bad—as we move beyond the military world and into the world of everything else. That's also why we purposely called for work that did not have to do specifically with the military or military characters. The writers and poets within these pages and in our online offerings certainly responded with a treasure of materials in all the literary genres.

The great short story writer and Vietnam War veteran Tobias Wolff once said of humankind: "We are made to persist. That's how we find out who we are." It's hard to name another pursuit that doesn't reward persistence like the literary arts. In fact, we feel this issue's cover beautifully captures that persistence in revealing ourselves and our place in the world. The natural environment, like one's own identity, is often shaped by the harshest of elements. But through those travails emerges who we really are. And no amount of suppression or reshaping—or even shouting—will deny that eventual revelation.

We, the editors of this literary journal, hope you are similarly rewarded by the persistent quest for identity that you read in this issue. We certainly were in creating it.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

Worlds Apart

By Bryan Crosson

I sat in the yard on a thin textile carpet with my back up against a heavy mud wall, my legs uncomfortably crossed underneath me as I rubbed infinitesimally fine dust between my index finger and thumb. My body armor sat next to me, propped up against the wall. Freed of it, my damp green and brown uniform stuck to my skin, held in place by the tension of my own sweat. The sun was suspended low in the clear, windless sky, casting long shadows across the fertile valley spread in front of me. Thick brown compound walls with ageless rusted metal gates rose above the cornfields. Tall thin poplar and mulberry trees lined the hard-packed dirt paths that followed muddy irrigation canals and zigzagged through tiny villages. The first evidence of autumn was beginning to show on their frail branches.

The changing seasons meant soon it would be time to harvest the massive cornfields, which only three years prior had been almost exclusively poppy. There was still a poppy season, and opium and heroin still moved along trade routes running to Iran and Pakistan

that had existed for a millennium, but now images of vast cornfields gave those State Department and USAID clowns a big dog and pony show that they could hand to the smattering of reporters who still gave a damn about Afghanistan. Cutting the corn down would be a good thing. The fields of tall, tightly packed cornstalks served as hiding places for the Taliban and although it might still be easy to see them from the numerous surveillance drones and blimps that floated silently above us, it certainly made our jobs on the ground more difficult.

The first action we had seen involved Taliban fighters spraying a PK machine gun at us from a hiding place on the other side of a cornfield. I had jumped into a ditch and covered for one of my Marines while he pumped grenades from his grenade launcher at their firing position. In the midst of this I was stunned to see a man from a nearby village walking through the gunfire along the path I had just leapt from, pulling an unperturbed cow along by his leather lead with one hand and leading his crying young son with the other hand. The irony of the fact that this child was born well after events that occurred on September 11, 2001, half a world away in a place he could not even fathom, was not lost on me.

With the ground sloping away from my perch, I could easily see over the opposite wall of the compound. Far off in the distance, bordering the lush farmland, the Helmand River, steady and sure in its movement, flowed southeast toward Iran. The far bank of the river, devoid of any of the near side's cultivation or greenery, instead was characterized by rocky, barren desert. Foothills climbed into the distance, their steep fingers and draws now swallowed by shadows. Goat paths, almost imperceptible to everyone but the locals, drew subtle dusty veins into the hillside.

A young man with a scraggly black beard came by with steaming glasses of chai in small tumblers atop a silver tray. The tarnish on

the tray made foul rainbows that swirled beneath the dirty glasses. An equally dirty lump of rock sugar sat in the middle of the glasses. I accepted a glass and placed it on the ground between my legs. I sipped the scalding, golden liquid and fished out a soggy tea leaf stem that had made its way from my cup into my mouth. Not a word was spoken as Marine and Afghan alike absorbed the present moment that we were sharing.

We had to return to the police station, miles away in the city, before dark but I felt compelled by the serene scene I was currently a part of to linger a little. The quietude was only juxtaposed by the tense feeling of danger that enveloped us at all times in what was once considered to be the most dangerous district in the most dangerous province of a country that existed in a perpetual state of war. Back in Quantico, Virginia, where they trained officers, there was a running trail that bore the namesake "Sangin" in commemoration of the bloody fighting that had occurred here.

Living with a constant, palpable closeness to violence induced a state of oneness that took some people a lifetime of meditation to actualize. Past and future did not matter; what mattered was the singular moment in which you existed and the next step you took. You didn't worry about who would win the Super Bowl, what your family and friends were doing back in the other world, or when your next meal would be. You were only concerned with the thought that your next step might compress two imperceptibly small wires glued between wooden boards and ignite thirty pounds of ammonium nitrate and aluminum powder. So you lived in the present moment because it was the only one upon which your life depended.

An older Afghan sat in silence on the ground across from me wearing an expression like an oak tree. Cracks and creases across his bearded face showed a man who had aged far too quickly—results

of a lifetime working as a farmer in the Helmand River valley. His ink-black eyes were haggard windows into a timeless state of lassitude and a despondent worldview that had been largely unchanged since Alexander the Great and the Seleucid Empire. He had been surrounded by war for more than half of his existence. I held another sip of the now-cooling chai in my mouth for a moment while I considered this thought.

Finally, I swallowed the tea and, with it, my desire to continue to watch the sun fall. I stood and hefted my armor over my head, draping it over my chest and wrapping the sides around me. It swaddled me with its familiar welcoming discomfort. Most of us had developed rashes from where the heavy ceramic side plates rubbed against our hips, a feeling still preferable to that of a bullet passing through your chest cavity. The Afghan rose with me, still bearing all the expressionless stoicism of a statue. I shook his rough, calloused hand as we both mumbled stiff pleasantries in Pashto. The Marines began to file out of the wide metal gateway—single file to lower the chances of stepping on an errant booby trap. I picked up my carbine and looked out over the verdant landscape one last time.

"You OK?"

When I blinked, I was standing alone at a bar, looking down at a neat glass of whiskey. It was New Years in downtown Manhattan and the ball had just dropped. Ostentatious revelers, dressed in sleek suits and svelte dresses poured out into the brightly lit streets, laughing and loving. I shot a bewildered look at the woman standing next to me, unsure of how long she had been standing there.

"You look a little sad," she offered up as I struggled to rectify in my mind the time and place that I had just been teleported from. Here in the present, my sweat-stained armor had been traded for a tailored wool suit, which I wore with an equal discomfort. Somewhere, in the

same city but now a lifetime away, I had an ex-wife: a woman who decided she could no longer stand being the supporting actress whose life and accomplishments went unsung while her absentee husband took on the world. I couldn't blame her—in this moment she undoubtedly was wearing the same blissful expression of the people standing outside of the bar. Happy that yesterday was the thirty-first and today was the first.

"No," I shook my head and strained a smile, "no, just zoned out for a second."

She smiled and placed her empty glass on the bar before turning and leaving, rejoining her friends. I wistfully looked back down at my glass and wished I could rejoin mine, back in our distant valley. There at least it felt like we had a purpose, even if that purpose was merely to keep each other alive until it was time to go home. There I never felt so damn alone.

Transitioning from the life of a warfighter to that of just another McGuffin wandering aimlessly around FiDi did not bother me; if I never spoke of my time in the military again I would be a happier man for it. But here I found myself standing at a bar with a half-empty glass and a heavy heart, knowing I would one day fit in but unsure of where or how. I wanted everything I had forsaken by trading my youth for a uniform. If the universe was constantly expanding in every direction simultaneously I was paralyzed by its vastness, wanting to experience all of it at once. In theory, walking away from the military at the ripe age of twenty-seven with a broken marriage and nothing but promise ahead of me, the world was my oyster. In reality, I was more heartbroken than I would ever admit, and too conditioned against asking for help to reach out to anyone.

It was almost impossible to spot, but I was concealing a deep spiritual wound. I had compartmentalized myself well enough to keep

the wound from bleeding freely, but I knew that to heal it eventually might require some actual professional attention. On the other hand, I had spent so long ignoring injuries to accomplish the mission that I would be damned if I didn't try to fix myself before conceding that I needed help. I was mentally as sharp as ever and in the best physical condition of my life yet I was dying a slow death while my heart and soul slowly drained.

Slowly shifting my gaze around the now empty bar, I rolled another sip of whiskey over my tongue and savored it for a moment before swallowing: medicine, *or some trope along those lines.* How else was I supposed to sleep tonight? I knew the longer this wound remained open the greater the likelihood that it would fester. In fact, it already was. The pain would occasionally exceed my threshold for self-treatment through liquor consumption and I would be doubled over- a chaotic mess of inconsolable suffering and overmedication. In the cataclysmic wake of separating from my wife, the rot had driven away more than a few frightened dates, no doubt perplexed that I would even have approached them with such an injury.

The bartender and I made eye contact. Without a word, I gently tapped my now empty glass with my index finger and he obliged me.

"Happy New Year's."

"Happy New Year's." I replied. I took a sip. My brain floated in a limbo somewhere between New York and Afghanistan.

Some invisible force that I could not quantify had driven me to this point in my life. It had forged me into an infantry officer. It had guided me as I patrolled far-off foreign lands. It had led me into the secretive life of America's elite special operations forces. But now what? My path forward was uncertain, and as I looked around I found myself exhausted, standing alone at a bar in New York City. What had it all been for?

Me. A sudden gust of clarity and honest introspection blew a cloud of guilt over me. It had all been for me. It had never been about God and country so much as fulfilling some sort of personal manifest destiny. I had been selfishly chasing the cool, the rush, the thrill, never once stopping to examine the rest of my life passing by. It had all been about scratching my own itch. And now the cool was in the past, yet here I remained.

Well, here you find yourself with huge parts of your life gone forever—merely distant memories. You didn't consider what this life of adventure would cost you when your younger, hardheaded self wrote a blank check. Wish as you might, you're never going to get those parts of your life back—stop moping and fucking deal with it.

When you're in situations where the stakes are life and death, your only option when faced with an obstacle is to overcome it; success and failure become about as binary as they can get. To win wars, personal or otherwise, you have to condition yourself to encounter obstacles, take hard hits, and then get back up. Getting back up is the hardest part. You can't wallow in grief about your situation. You quickly take stock of what resources you have left, fix your gaze back on the horizon, and start moving forward. The only catch is that to learn how to get back up requires first taking a fall. I took another sip and swished the smooth whiskey around in my mouth while I pondered this simple yet profound thought.

Finally, I swallowed the whisky and with it my desire to watch the world leave me behind. This didn't feel like a war that I was currently winning. Thusly, this could not be the end of my path. Where is my path's terminus? Unimportant—all that matters is that it's not here. I banished any uncertainty from my mind that I would stand back up and bring new purpose into my life. Most importantly, I reassured myself that it would be worth the price of the tolls I had paid along the way.

I left a few bills on the bar, took stock of myself, and made for the door. It was New Year's Day, and as I stepped out into the cold I fixed my gaze back on the horizon and started walking.

Bryan Crosson grew up in Frederick, Maryland and was commissioned as a Marine Corps officer after graduating from The Citadel in 2010. He served as an advisor to the Afghan National Security Forces in Sangin District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Bryan writes as a pastime and is currently planning to pursue a Masters of Business Administration degree beginning in the fall of 2018.

Care Now

By Joshua Hines

I stood there useless and watched the man in the mirror lose control—body trembling, white-knuckling the sink, breath quick and short, tears leaking from puffy red eyes—hidden behind the unisex restroom's locked door in the heart of the Medical Center's emergency room in McKinney, while his mom laid in a bed at the end of the hall, alone and afraid, clutching her stomach in pain.

Mom broke down when the doctor explained that she had to stay another night in the hospital, that her life could be in danger, that she needed *another* procedure—she cried, and wanted Dad there, wanted him to make things a little easier on her, but Dad couldn't make it. Standing there, I held her close as she cried, rubbed her hair, and told her everything was going to be alright, said she was okay, explained that at least she knew now. Knew what the problem was and how to handle it. All the while holding back my own tears, hiding my clenched teeth and tight fist, hoping she didn't see my fear as I tried to be strong the way Dad always was—but I left her when she

stopped crying, when she calmed down and seemed strong enough to be alone for a moment, and went to hide behind the locked door where I stared into the mirror and broke.

I've always hated hospitals. Though I don't think anyone actually likes hospitals, except maybe people with Munchausen syndrome. Like so much of my life, I can't recall how old I was when my hatred of hospitals started, but I know it grew out of a needle prick as a kid, when my Mom took me to the doctor and they stabbed my fingertips for some blood test I don't know why I needed. Mom held me tight trying to calm and reassure me that everything was fine, while I kicked and flailed trying to squirm out of her arms, screaming and crying until my lungs felt empty in my chest and my eyes ran dry. It's not the pain of the needle piercing my fingers that sticks with me, but the sight of the deep red bubbling from the tips, the inside swelling to the outside, the sense of something precious being stolen, as the doctor squeezed my fingers to get the drops of blood for her test.

I stood beside Mom as the doctor spoke, watched his face for signs that might give context to the steady stream of jargon he was rambling on about, stared as the words fell meaningless from his mouth—

seroma,

infection,

buildup,

radiologist,

drain,

cultures,

abscess.

When the last word jettisoned from his lips, silence stretched out in our small, little alcove, and I saw Mom's face contort with confusion and something nearing the precipice of what I guessed was panic. She looked back and forth between the doctor and me; her

brows furrowed and jaw slack waiting for something. Moments later, trapped in the silence, I realized what it was. In all of his freefalling terminology, the doctor had failed to tell Mom the one thing she needed to hear, but was too afraid to ask—after the numerous trips to doctors to figure out what was wrong with her, after the countless times she'd been told they'd fixed the problem, after procedure, after procedure, after procedure, still not knowing what was wrong, she just wanted to know if she going to spend another fucking night in the hospital—so I asked for her.

The day started off so simple. I was visiting the family in McKinney for a few days, sleeping on a spare mattress laid out on the living room floor, enjoying doing nothing for a little while. Mom was having some pain in her stomach again and woke me up, asking if I'd take her to Care Now, because she was hurting too much to drive. I'm ashamed now to think back on how reluctantly I agreed, but I told her I would and we left once I was dressed. I had to help her to the car, because she was unsteady on her feet, which I didn't know how to respond to. It'd been years since I had seen Mom in such bad shape, and distance makes it easy to forget the troubles of others. We made it to Care Now just after they opened, but it still took a couple of hours for her to be seen, which baffles me to this day considering the cruel irony of the place's full name, Care Now Urgent Care. Once Mom was finally seen at Care Now they quickly sent us to the closest ER, after we paid for our visit of course, because they didn't have the capabilities to either determine the problem or do anything for it.

I didn't see Mom on the day I shipped out for boot camp—didn't hug her good-bye, didn't see the tears in her eyes, didn't hear the fear in her voice, and didn't get to tell her not to worry or that I loved her, because she was lying down in the passenger seat of Dad's truck, parked outside of the Military Entrance Processing Station in Dallas, her

hands pressed against her stomach, crippled by pain despite the heavy dosage of pain medication the doctors gave her to help manage the symptoms of the internal problem they'd "fixed." Inside the MEPS, I played pool with Dad and Jacob, my younger brother, while we waited for the bus to arrive and take me to the airport. I hugged them both good-bye when it arrived, heard the pride in their voices, and told them not to worry, I loved them, and to tell Mom the same.

Sitting on the bus I looked out toward the parking lot, hoping I could see the truck with all of its stickers declaring Dad a "Proud Parent Of A Marine," hoping I could see Mom waving from the passenger seat sending her love via hand signals. It was a useless hope, though months later, on leave, I found out they had already driven off by the time I was on the bus—Mom was just in too much pain and because of it I missed her.

I have a lot of memories of visiting hospitals over the years and for the most part they all run together in a strange game of magical hospital bed in my mind, where the hospital room stays the same, but the person in the bed keeps switching places with the people visiting, until eventually the music stops and suddenly everything's sad and real.

Most of the time, Mom's the one in the bed, which either makes her the winner or loser depending on how you play the game, I guess. Every time she's in the hospital, though, Dad's right next to her playing his own game of emotional roulette, going from stoic to goofy to sympathetic with any given spin of the wheel, hoping he's lucky enough to pick the right emotion to help make Mom's time in the hospital a little easier. Sometimes he landed a win, but it's the losses that stay with me.

I'd love to say I'm proud of *everything* I did in the military—that I was an outstanding Marine and my career was made of success

after success after success, but that wouldn't be the truth of it. My four years of service were chock full of struggles, disappointments, failures, and more often than not, pain. Pain that first began when I hurt my left ankle climbing over a barricade, while running a training exercise on Camp Pendleton, during phase two of boot camp, which forced my Drill Instructor, Staff Sgt. G-., to take me to the Camp Pendleton Naval Hospital. I sat in the waiting room for hours, dirt-caked and filthy, one hand on each knee sitting upright in my chair (like a good recruit) trying to impress my DI, to show him how Marine-like I was, while he flirted with passing nurses, pointing toward me at one point and explaining how "this jackass hurt himself and I have to babysit." When a petite, brunette nurse in dark blue scrubs finally called me back to see the doctor my whole body was stiff. I hobbled along behind her, trying to keep the weight off my left foot with its unlaced combat boot, while she led me through a door near the nurses' station to a small examination room where she deposited me and left. I don't know how long I sat alone in that tiny room, but each moment was agony waiting for someone to tell me how bad my situation was, how much danger I was in, what was wrong with me. Time, pain, and the unknown mingled into a hellish cocktail of fear inside my chest as I sat there, isolated, my feet dangling off the edge of the paper-sheet-covered examination table. Of course, it didn't help that my senior DI's words after the Corpsman's initial triage of my foot kept booming inside my head

I hope

it's fucking

snapped!

I was a wreck by the time the doctor, a tall, portly man with receding white hair and a cheerful voice, came in. It was all I could do to hold back tears when he said he needed to take my boot off. I still hadn't seen my foot yet. He must have seen my fear, the teary

eyes, the heavy breathing, because he patted my arm and told me not to worry. He took care removing my boot and regulation brown sock, then gave a soft whistle when my foot was revealed in all of its grotesque gore—the entire foot and ankle, fat and swollen, so large it couldn't fit back into the boot—deep purple blossoms of blood beneath the skin, outlined by sickly yellow edges—bloody dye seeping into the fleshy water balloon of my foot.

The Doc couldn't tell if it was broken, so he sent me hobbling off on a set of crutches to get X-rays taken, after which I was returned to the tiny room to sit and wait, with nothing to do except imagine the worst—that my foot was broken, shattered even, that I would be dropped from my platoon, from boot camp, or worse—forced into the Medical Rehabilitation Platoon, stuck in limbo, not a civilian, not a Marine, just an unending existence as a broken recruit waiting to heal or drop.

My nerve-wracking contemplations on my possible future prospects were interrupted when the Doc came into the room, closed the door behind him, and looked through the tiny window to see if anyone was watching. Apparently satisfied in our privacy he turned to me, explained that the X-rays wouldn't be back for a while, and then offered me his cell phone with an outstretched hand and told me to call someone—his offer was so unexpected and bewildering to me at the time that my mind reeled, trying to make sense of the words as though he'd suddenly spoke in a language I'd never heard before—and then I broke.

I realize this may not make sense, so let me explain. Recruit training for the Marine Corps is thirteen weeks of physical, but mostly mental, training and reconditioning, during which time the only contact we have with the outside world is through letters. When I hurt my ankle I was in the middle of phase two of training, which was in the sixth week of boot camp—the sixth week of not talking to

my family, the sixth week of being mentally and physically drained in ways I'd never known I could be, the sixth week of being 1,425 miles away from my family and the sixth week of not living with them for the first time in my life. All of this compounded with the prospect of being sent home due to landing the wrong way after climbing over a fucking four-foot tall wall and not knowing how the next hour would change my life—all of this and then the Doc's unsolicited and unexpected kindness burst whatever dam had kept my emotions in check. I broke—tears and snot ran free, shoulders racking with erratic breaths between sobs, face burning in my hands attempting to hide, embarrassed and flushed with fire under the skin trying to regain some semblance of control.

Once my breakdown was over the Doc offered his phone to me again and played lookout for my DI.

I called Mom.

I wish I could remember exactly what I talked to her about that day. I wish the phone call had been something extraordinary and deep, but in truth the phone call itself felt underwhelming and mundane compared to the unexpected idea of it, the profound prospect of hearing Mom's voice. All I remember for certain is that I missed her and in that desperate moment of my life, from 1,425 miles away, she was there.

Mom raised up in her bed as the doctor explained in simpler terms that they found a grapefruit sized seroma—a swollen area containing an accumulation of pus, which sometimes develops after surgical procedures. It was in her abdomen pressing on her bladder, which was causing the pain that had taken us to Care Now. They wouldneed to take blood cultures to determine if the seroma had turned into an abscess—an infectious version of a seroma that can't be cured with antibiotics alone, and would have to be drained by

a radiologist. Mom would need to have blood cultures taken before the doctor could decide what course of action to take.

When Mom checked into the ER, they inserted an IV in her arm, which is a long, flexible tube used to make giving and extracting fluids easier. This was the tube I watched, both horrified and captivated, as the blood was drawn for the culture tests to check Mom's seroma for bacteria, yeast, or other microorganisms, which would indicate she had an abscess.

I watched the nurse's blue latex wrapped hands as she attached the clear culture bottle to the IV attached to Mom's arm, watched as her fingers maneuvered the lever on the IV, and watched as a steady stream of blood shot out of Mom's arm, swirled through the central line like red Kool-Aid through a crazy straw, then squirted into the culture container with the force of a gruesome faucet filling the clear bottle with ten milliliters of Moms blood. Blood cultures are done in pairs and the doctor ordered two blood cultures for Mom—he wanted to be sure. With each of the four bottles, I watched the gory blood-letting repeat itself, unable to look away as something precious was stolen from my mother.

On the fourth culture, the nurse realized she didn't have the labels she needed for the cultures and abandoned the bloody bottles on the table beside Mom's bed, and left to get the labels. She returned sometime later with four more bottles and the right number of labels for the cultures. As she began the horror show of draining the life from Mom in ten-milliliter increments once again, she explained absent-mindedly that she had to start over, because she was supposed to have labeled the cultures immediately after filling them.

The average human body holds an approximate 5.5 liters or 5,500 milliliters of blood. Standing at Mom's side watching that nurse carelessly drain 80 milliliters of the vital dark, red substance from my mom's arm I couldn't help but feel that 5,420 milliliters of blood just wasn't enough to sustain the body of someone so important to

me—something had been stolen from inside of her and she was 80 milliliters closer to being taken from me and in that moment I hated that nurse, that doctor, and that hospital.

Inside the unisex restroom I collected myself, wiped away snot and tears, and did my best to piece my broken persona of strength back together. I left the restroom and found Mom alone in her little alcove, hidden behind the thin, blue curtain that made up her door. I stood next to her and placed my hand on her shoulder and told her how useless I felt, how sorry I was that dad wasn't there.

She looked up at me, placed her hand on mine, and with a weak smile said, "Thank you for being here. I honestly don't know what I'd have done without you."

As she said them, her words carried a heaviness that I couldn't recognize, let alone handle yet. She meant what she said, but I was too busy feeling like I should have done more, so her words just sounded like she was trying to comfort me the way she did when I was a kid. The truth of it though, was this: at that desperate time in her life—when I was the only person capable of helping her right when she needed it the most, when she was isolated and afraid, in bodily pain, emotional distress, trapped beneath a curtain of the unknown—I was there.

Joshua Hines attends Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He began attending Stephen F. Austin after spending four years as a military journalist in the U.S. Marine Corps. His work can be found in Blue Route *and* Sequestrum, *and will soon be featured in* The Deadly Writers Patrol.

The Lone Ranger and the Sisters of the Holy Child

By Bob McCarthy

Nobody else saw the oranges coming out of the radio. Or the locomotive. The doctor gave me penicillin for my fever and told my parents that I was too excitable. The prescription was a limit of two radio shows a week and more structure in life. So at home it was *The Lone Ranger* and *The Shadow,* and at school it was the Sisters of the Holy Child. No more public school. At five years old, I was about to get my first taste of Catholic education.

My mom shouldn't have been surprised about the Catholic education part, since she had already agreed in principle. A Canadian citizen, she had met my dad in New York City in 1940, while she was working in an office that promoted the British war effort. As an Anglican, my mom had to sign my soul over to Rome, before the Catholic Church would permit her marriage to my dad. Now it was time to pay up.

The four-block walk down Saint Nicholas Avenue to P.S. 189 school was exciting because of the stores, and I looked forward to seeing them each morning. At Bill and Ethel's, bus drivers joked and

ate at the lunch counter before heading back downtown in small caravans. Outside the stationery stores big stacks of newspapers fluttered under flat metal weights. New York had four morning papers in those days, so that was lots of news trying to take flight. Next to the paper stand were the candy machines. The big colored gumballs looked even bigger inside the glass globes. For a penny a gumball plopped out, or a handful of red pistachios spilled into your hand. For a nickel you got a little plastic container with a toy and some gum. Kenny used the empty plastic tops to melt flies onto his light bulbs. Even as kids, we knew that was weird.

To reach St. Elizabeth's School I had to walk down Wadsworth Avenue, which had no stores, but it had lots of parked cars, and I learned all the hood ornaments – the Pontiac Indian, the Plymouth sailing ship, the Oldsmobile rocket, and the neat portholes on the Buick. All the cars had their special shapes too. I guessed the car make from the front, then looked at the name on the rear as I passed by, checking my work just the way the nuns told us to. After a while I could even tell the difference between a Hudson and a Packard, even though they both bulged out the same way in front, like they were just squeezed out of a big toothpaste tube. Knowing all the names made me feel more at home.

St. Elizabeth's was brand new, since the old school had burned down a year earlier. In fact for half of second grade, we were bussed to another school, while the new school was being built. All I remember is the bus ride, the wide wooden staircase, and the nun telling the whole class that "one child" didn't know how to make the sign of the cross properly. She was looking straight at me, and I noticed my hand was on my right shoulder while all the other kids were touching their left. Not knowing the sign of the cross made me feel left out, like not knowing the secret handshake or something. I wondered if I'd have to cross myself perfectly to get into heaven.

That cross mistake was my Canadian side giving me away again. When my father went into the U.S. Army after Pearl Harbor, my mom moved back to Canada to be with family during her pregnancy, and so I was born in Canada. When we came back to New York after the war, the neighborhood kids learned my story and christened me "Canada," which I hated. I had hoped the new school would be a fresh start, but I had failed the most basic test and stood out again.

Life was brighter at the new St. Elizabeth's School. It was made of yellow brick and was the cleanest looking building in Washington Heights. They built it like a capital L, because it had to wrap around an apartment building on the corner. That was good because it saved the candy store. We walked down three steps and were surrounded by candy. There was the normal stuff like Lifesavers and Mounds bars, but they also had other things. We bought what looked like aspirins glued to adding machine tape. They were chalky and we ate them by scraping them off the paper with our teeth. Or we popped Good and Plenty candies that looked like little pills and washed them down by biting the tops off miniature wax Coke bottles and sucking out the syrup. Then there were the Red Hots, tiny and spicy. After them you needed a real Coke. To look cool, we bought candy cigarettes in packages labeled Camels, Lucky Strike, or Winston, and dangled them from the corners or our mouths. We could tell the nuns didn't like the candy store, but they never told us we couldn't go there. No candy in the school though, and chewing gum was up around the mortal-sin level.

At P.S. 189, when you got to school, you just walked inside like a normal person, and when the school day was over, you walked out the door and went home. Not at St. Elizabeth's. In the morning we played outside until Mother Celsus, the principal, rang the big brass bell. Then the nuns formed us up by class and took us inside in groups, no talking allowed. Same thing after lunch, and when school ended, we marched to the corner and waited. When the light turned green,

it was like a prison break. It was hard to be orderly all day. You just had to knock somebody's books into the street or whack somebody with a ruler when you got free. That's when the Lone Ranger rode again.

Bobby McKiernan and I got into trouble a lot for doing stuff like that and for laughing, so I brought a tiny bottle of soy sauce to school. I hated soy sauce and took a sip whenever I felt like laughing. Unfortunately I developed a taste for it, and that really made us laugh.

All through grammar school, McKiernan and I had good-natured battles with Thomas Omelia, who had a physique that would later make him the Catholic high school's shot-put champion, and Richard Martin, another burly kid who walked fast and leaned forward, as though he'd fall flat on his face if he stopped moving. They were dangerous at close quarters, but we could always outrun them. However, we could never let our guard down.

For example, at our annual Christmas pageant, Omelia was a stagehand, and I was the Angel Gabriel, which meant I had to stand on a little white platform and tell Mary she was pregnant. Omelia's job was to get the platform ready. When I went up the steps in my stocking feet, the spotlight made it hard to see. Fortunately at the last minute I spotted the upside down thumbtacks. Omelia was disappointed, but Catholic teaching told us to "offer up" our disappointments, so maybe he got some sanctifying grace out of his thumbtacks.

Against all odds, the sisters tried to improve our spiritual lives. They gave making our first confession a huge buildup and I was really looking forward to it. When we came out of the confessional that first time, it would be like walking on air, they said, because all our sins would be washed away. It turned out that I was the first one in line, when confession time came. The little window in the confessional slid open and I confessed my sins. Considering that I had a whole lifetime of sins, the penance was pretty reasonable—just a few Hail Marys and an Our Father. The window slid shut again, and I waited in the dark for that special feeling, but nothing happened.

The other kids were watching me as I started for the altar, and I didn't want to disappoint them or let on that my sins didn't wash off right. So I put on a dreamy expression, like the saints have on their holy cards, and tried to make believe I was walking on soft clouds. Maybe the special effects only came after you paid the price, I thought, and made sure I said the exact number of prayers the priest had given me. But still nothing special happened.

Later we all learned to take confession more in stride. Father Griffin was always my first choice. He looked like a fat country friar, but he was blazingly fast, so you could do a quick in-and-out on a Saturday afternoon. He didn't listen closely either, so you could confess a mortal sin without getting the third degree. "With yourself or with others?" was about as far as his questioning went. Unfortunately he sometimes fell asleep. The confessional was like two phone booths with a priest sitting between them. After hearing a confession, the priest closed the window to one booth and opened the window to the other, but Father Griffin used to doze off with both windows shut. You just had to kneel in the dark and cough and bump the wall until he woke up. When you came out of the confessional twenty minutes later, everyone looked at you like you were an ax murderer.

Father Wilde was the best second choice. He spoke slowly with too many ums and ahs, and he always added, "Say a Hail Mary for me" at the end of the penance. I always said the extra prayer just in case, but it was like paying protection money to make sure your soul didn't burn down.

After that first confession, the nuns started getting us ready for First Communion, so I guess we all had good confessions. Maybe it was like laundry. Sometimes the towels were fresher than other times, but they were always cleaner than before. First Communion was better than First Confession, because it touched us more directly, even though it was hard to keep from chewing the wafer, which would have been

a sin. And I wore a white bow on my arm, which made me feel special. But Confirmation was the best, because it was foolproof. Confirmation automatically left "an indelible mark on the soul" without any pain. The mark was indelible, so it must have been deep—deeper than a tattoo, say—but you didn't feel a thing. In Catholicism, things like that are called mysteries, a good name for them, when you think about it.

The sisters gave us religion in many ways. It was always "Eyes down!" when we marched past the girls' restroom, and there was a compulsory children's mass every Sunday at 9:00 a.m. The nuns kept attendance and patrolled the aisles. The best thing about finally getting to attend the adult mass was that I could kneel with my rear parked on the pew and not get hit with a ruler. The sisters were always urging us to become either choirboys or altar boys, and one nun asked the boys who were neither to raise their hands in class. A few hands went up, including mine, and the nun pressed us to choose one or the other on the spot. I didn't know what to say, so I said I'd have to ask my parents first. With that I blundered into salvation. Even though my mother was Protestant, I was attending a Catholic school. That was already quite a success for the Church. I never heard another word about altar boys or choirboys, and I think the nuns may have decided to leave well enough alone. A soul is a soul, after all. There was no telling how a cornered Protestant might react.

The school also organized concerts and assemblies, and we made religious cards and doilies. One time we had a big classroom exhibit of art projects in honor of the Virgin Mary. Students voted for the best one at the end. There were some really good exhibits. I didn't want to spend a lot of time, so I glued a picture of Mary to a piece of blue cardboard and pushed a flashlight bulb through the cardboard above Mary's head. I connected the bulb to a battery in back, and you could turn the bulb on and off with a switch. The cardboard was propped up like a sagging billboard. It looked awful, but everybody liked turning

the light on and off. The nun told us we should vote for the most spiritual exhibit and not be attracted to gimmicks, but my project won anyway. I knew Mary wouldn't have picked it, if she had been the judge.

The doctor was right about Catholic structure. The school structured the day through its orderly classrooms, and the church structured the year through its elaborate liturgical calendar. The symbolism was fantastic: ashes on the forehead, Lenten purple, palm fronds, the crèche, wise men. They were the religious counterpoint to those vivid impressions from my first walks to school when I was five.

The quieter moments of religious practice could be calming, almost meditative. During Lent the nuns encouraged us to attend Mass before school, and I grew to like it. The church was still and the Latin clear enough that I followed along easily in my *Saint Joseph's Missal,* a thick black book in English and Latin with colored ribbons to mark sections of the Mass that changed from day to day. Following the Latin and English texts, with the priest's murmuring at the altar, was mildly hypnotic, and I left church feeling relaxed and centered.

I felt I belonged. I was still Canadian and American, but the Canadian half was not being shoved in my face. In fact, I felt so secure—or so tightly cocooned in all that structure perhaps—that I felt free to be myself more. My highway billboard to Mary reflected that confidence.

I was a believer, but those rich experiences in church and school, in addition to fortifying my faith, also prepared me to be more skeptical about received wisdom. I learned that institutions—even ones you respect—have a hilarious side, not bad preparation for the military, years later.

After I graduated from St. Elizabeth's, I only went to Mass on Sundays and frequently left my missal at home. Finally it became easier not to take it at all. Decades passed, and in the interim I had struggled with questions of faith and had ultimately broken with the

Church. But I missed the Church's rich traditions. By then English had replaced Latin in the Mass, but Saint Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C. had reportedly preserved large sections of the service in Latin. I wanted to see how I would react to the ritual that I had found so comforting years ago.

I hadn't been to church in years, but I dug out my *Saint Joseph's Missal* and turned to its extensive table of years and feasts to select the appropriate texts and orient myself for the Mass that day. That lengthy table, which had seemed inexhaustible in my youth, no longer provided guidance. It had run out of years.

I was on my own.

Bob McCarthy was commissioned through ROTC in 1964. He served in US Army Intelligence from 1966-1968, including assignments at the Fort Benning Platoon Leaders Course, counterintelligence training at Fort Holabird, and the 513th MI Group in Oberursel, Germany.

Fiction.

Loons

By Hildie Block

I didn't try to be difficult. But my mother is still in the hospital and my father's deployed which is exactly how I ended up living with Uncle Dan and Aunt Jessica, who don't have kids because they didn't want them, and don't ask about that.

It was only temporary, so I figured, okay.

It wasn't okay.

When I first decided to blow off school because I couldn't handle failing another algebra test, I planned to be home by dinner.

I didn't think anyone would miss me, really. With the school-issued laptops open in every class on every desk, I didn't even think the teachers could recognize us from the tops of our bent heads. I could be wrong, but it was a risk I was willing to take.

I mean, Uncle Dan tries. Runs an online business from home, but still he comes out to talk to me sometimes and makes dinner usually. There was the one time he took me fishing, we even heard an eerie loon. I'd never heard one before.

It's Aunt Jessica who is a real piece of work. Likes everything just so and works a million hours. She's like the only lawyer in this tiny town. Mostly deals with big clients like Mr. Stratham who owns

the factory here where a lot of people work. He's been missing for awhile and everyone's trying to figure if he's dead or what and if he is, what happens. It keeps her very busy. If she talks to me, it's to ask why. "Jason, why are the towels like that in the bathroom?" "Why is your backpack by the door?" And then something "really important" comes in on her phone and she's gone again.

Today, I just mentally hung out a sign that said "Gone Fishin'."

I took Uncle Dan's tackle box, some snacks, and walked out a couple miles to the fishing hole he'd showed me before. That's how I knew where to put in. It takes a while, sitting there with the dragonflies, the bullfrogs and the cattails, but I start pulling out fish. And I think, this tackle box has everything—I can clean the fish, and cook them—why am I going home for dinner?

So there I am just pulling out fish after fish, when Uncle Dan walks up, looks at his tackle box, nods and says, "You catch enough for two?"

"I hope you like stripers."

"Better than the chicken I was going to make," Dan says with a smile.

I laugh. "Aunt Jess working late?"

"We won't be missed."

At dusk, we heard the loon.

"There's that ghoul again," he said.

"Loon, Uncle Dan."

"Zombie."

I shook my head. Part of me wondered what it was—I thought loons call in the morning, but whatever. It was the loon.

"Nothing for a zombie out here."

He laughed. "I'm gonna run to the car and come back."

Plunking down a four-man tent and two sleeping bags, he says, "I have no idea why I still had these in the car."

"You a Boy Scout?"

"Cub Scout, maybe."

"Then I don't know either."

"I'm going to just text your aunt and let her know—"

"No signal out here."

"Oh, right. The tent then."

When the loon woke us up the next morning, Uncle Dan was still there.

"Breakfast of champions."

"Granola bars? If you say so."

"Hey, I saw blueberries up that path. Go, take this bandana and get some."

Fresh blueberries. School, Schmool.

When I came back, there was coffee in a camp pot over the fire and Uncle Dan was sitting on a log talking to my guidance counselor.

"Hi, Jason," she said casually. "Nice setup you have here."

"Thanks, Ms. Connelly."

"Planning on school tomorrow?"

"Not sure."

She pulled out her phone and tapped on it.

"No signal," said Uncle Dan.

"Nice," muttered Ms. Connelly.

Ms. Connelly left, but two hours later she was back with an overnight bag, sleeping bag and a bag of marshmallows.

"You guys have it good here."

"We think so."

"Room for one more?"

"Depends, can you fish?"

"I can even clean fish."

"You're hired."

As Ms. Connelly was cleaning the fish, she started singing a song and we joined in. The loon called and Uncle Dan and I just looked at each other.

After dinner, a branch cracked and I jumped.

"Ghost," said Uncle Dan, but an older man emerged from the bushes playing an uncanny tune on a blade of grass.

"Mr. Stratham?"

"Depends who's asking."

"A lot of people in town trying to figure out where you went."

"People? Nah," Mr. Stratham stabbed a marshmallow onto a stick, jammed it straight into the fire. "Just phone totin' zombies." The marshmallow burst into flame. "Safer out here. No signal."

"But, Mr. Stratham—" Ms. Connelly started.

And that's how we all started living here at the fishing hole. Uncle Dan and Ms. Connelly left to get clothes and stuff, but Mr. Stratham and I just stayed.

A week went by before Aunt Jess came marching up the path towards us.

She was tapping away at her phone, when she saw Mr. Stratham and shrieked.

"You're . . . ALIVE?"

"Was this morning."

"This changes everything."

"Not for me." And Mr. Stratham took Aunt Jess and walked her clear around to the other side of the pond. I could hear his voice nonstop.

Afterward, we all sat down to our fish dinner. About halfway through the meal, Mr. Stratham grabbed his throat and made a choking noise and fell behind the log.

Uncle Dan rushed over and made some attempt to perform the Heimlich maneuver. But it was too late.

Uncle Dan walked Aunt Jess up the path. I talked to Ms. Connelly for a bit. When we looked over, Mr. Stratham was gone.

About two minutes after Uncle Dan came back, we heard the loon. We looked at each other and said, "Ghost."

Hildie S. Block is a writer based in Arlington, VA. She has published over 50 short stories (and many essays, too) and was the co-editor of the 2007 anthology Not What I Expected. *Her work has appeared in a variety of literary journals like* Gargoyle, San Franscisco Review, Cortland Review, Literary Mama, Mother-Verse *and others. Her story "People" was a* Delmarva Review *prize winner and was published as a Kindle Single. "Just Talk" was a Pushcart nominee, and "Spectre" (an essay) received a 2004* Best of the Fray.

A Dime

By Philip Julian

A dime.

Shiny.

Reflection against the afternoon sun caught my reclined attention with its clad of major copper and minor nickel. A final content that doesn't reflect the actual value of its intention.

Nickel for a dime, I chime.

It's not a crime, I reason. Since when?

Well, since the institution of our constitution, dummy.

I pick it up. Must be time, my dear dime. I've been staring at it for a good few minutes.

What good will it do me? Ten cents . . . one-tenth of a dollar. What can it buy?

Check out U.S. Mint markings. Lay the creation date faceup on the scarred palm of my hand.

1991.

Get ready, men. We're going in. Black Hawk on the tarmac and we'll be airborne in 2100 hours. HALO combat at 35 kilo with

bat suit as scheduled. Friendly Gulfstream will take us up to the edge. You'll exit from the aft baggage container door under engine nacelle. Load light as we have discussed. You'll light up the targets for the night birds at designated Zulu and do mop-ups where and when needed—legs for brass confirms. Rendezvous with local camels and our shepherd to retrieve your customized gears and rucks.

Go ahead and strip down naked. Put on your best caravan fashion wear, nomads.

Headgear, too. Your green berets will be waiting for you upon your return—alive.

Hand over all your dog tags right now. You're on your own out there.

Major Thomas made clear to us what we heard for quite some time now. The gulf between the Persian Gulf and us was as distant as our aspirations.

We were ready.

Flip the dime. Heads or tails? Heads, I head forward with this reminisce, tails, I tuck my vet tail in and mosey on to the beach, monkey around and check out the haps.

Midflight, twirling dime reminds me of HALO free-fall. A record at that time: 35,000 feet, skimming at the edge of the troposphere. Custom bat suits made us look like alien spaceships invading Earth—except we were invading enemy territory. Bleak desertscape inhospitable to normal living. We left it all behind, as volunteers for the black bat mission. Descending at 130-150 mph, maxed our distance travelled. Over twenty miles inland from the border of Saudi Arabia, thanks to the incredible desert updraft that night. A black ops record that went down and still stands, unofficially.

Heads. Fucking piece of shit! It's me, myself and I… no judge, no goddamn jury present. Sigh.

A dime . . . ten fucking pennies' worth to represent ten Special Forces volunteers who batted a thousand to get into this dark batty mission to paint the way for surgical air strikes and bunker-busting, laser-guided, deep-throat ordnance. The GBU-28 . . . The *Saddamizer,* and whatever else they had. And they had a lot.

China and the United States inexorably embroiled in each other's path to world order. Sun Tzu, Stormin' Norman. *The Art of War.*

Our Picasso moment.

Dealing with moralities and strategies of battle—humanity's poetic justification in killing and profit. Soldiers as artists . . . create and annihilate. Artistic differences empirically inconsequential. Understanding and application of logical mathematics. Modern warfare… beware.

Delving into war history, theory and stupidity makes me hungry for Chinese. I head toward the nearest restaurant I knew.

In transit, I recollect our desert food fares. Lamb mostly, camel, goat, dates, et cetera. Six months before our mission, we delved into infiltration immersion mode. We ate, dressed, groomed and did everything to become like one of the locals in-country.

We also had a language expert from Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California embed with our group to make us efficient in local lingo. Our family, close friends and mates had difficulty making us out in normal outings.

Mop-up orders were a given. The birds' leaders needed eyes on the ground to verify effectiveness, so we had to deliver evidence ASAP. We all had sat phones with cameras, but *we* had to take the close-ups. Had to fend for ourselves.

Carte blanche . . . whatever we needed, DOD will provide.

First on our customized list: FAGs—Fuel-Air Grenade rounds (a thermobaric derivative), with 50-feet-plus diameter/height for fuel

dispersion/ignition; M-209 customized FAG launcher, an M-203 hybrid, with slightly longer barrel; the M-9, customized M-4 rifle with interchangeable .50 caliber sniper gun barrel, the M-9.50 (design later used for the M-82/107), with articulating bi-pod and special carry bag; .50 caliber rounds made from depleted uranium—DU, for heavy tank armor penetration, fragmenting after penetrating metal sheathing and burning through armor to exterminate internal tank personnel and stored tank rounds, exploding them encase, with 10-round semi-automatic clip, safe ammo storage container; sniper scope.

All these, and more, prioritized and finished in six months. Needed to be self-sustained. Vital to survive and complete our mission. Ethics of contemporary unconventional warfare about to be blurred into fucking oblivion. Fuck the man!

I want to wear my green beret again.

DOD was no DUD.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Shit. Vibration mode shook me. Answered my sat phone. Yes, sir. We landed safely and buried our HALO outfits. Made contact with caravan. Company shepherds took care of their flocks. Painting paraphernalia within reach. We're chillin' and set. Out.

Our laser pointers, small and light. Rigged old school telescoping radio antennas as our unipods with duct tape to secure in place atop local high-rises.

Sat call came in—light 'em up! Raised radio antenna, turned on laser pointer taped to it, secured target. Repeated process four more times, times a dime, that's fifty designated targets lit up for our night birds. We exited and retreated to our holes. What seemed like a few minutes later, earth shook thunderously all around.

A tremendous force unleashed.

We retrieved our lasers.

Daylight. Shepherds delivered food for their flocks' mop-up mission. Capital's downtown buzzing with frenzy, a normal one. Buildings all around intact, except for targets. Our sat phones gave new meaning to the word implosion. We took photos where we could and paid for those we couldn't. Did what we came to do.

Goodbye. Good riddance.

Cavalry was coming in from the south and we had to escape the opposite way. Friendlies wouldn't recognize us as theirs. Open season . . . locals' nerves wacked. We were stuck between two opposing forces. Nothing special. We would get whacked.

Let's go!

Ring. Ring. Ring. Snap out of it! Pick up my cell phone, long-time shrink wants to know why I missed the appointment. It's afternoon. Tell her I spaced. Apologize. She has a 2:00 p.m. opening. I'll be there. Shit. Better eat quick.

Pita bread. Lamb chops. Hummus. Dates. What the fuck are these things doing here in a freaking Chinese restaurant buffet? I survey the labels—Mediterranean cuisine. Since when . . . shit, never mind.

Ate a slab of lamb roasting over the fire pit in the northern desert village. Village elder passing around basket of sweet dates. Sky clear, air cold and sedate. Nerves extremely tense. Our shepherd knew these nomads, guerillas, but we didn't. They knew we were here, they had families, friends, needs . . . Found out there were bounties on our heads. How much?

A dime for your crime? Against a despot? We were in enemy territory—still.

We spread out as was our custom and didn't trust anyone. Let our shepherd do his thing. Huddled just north of Samarra, we were

near Tikrit, HQ for ruling sympathizers. Their ruler idol born nearby. Of all places, shepherd. The company The Company keeps…

Shit. Skirting the edge of a fucking time bomb. Fuse already lit.

Keep all your senses on life or death. Very bad feeling about this so-called village alliance. As I surveyed the festive scene in front of me, the tasty lamb we ate looked more and more like a fucking historical event to me. Abraham and his ancient religious practice alive and kicking right here in front of us. Dead and fed, to us—sacrificial lambs.

Wolf in sheep's clothing . . . Who's the wolf? Who's the sheep? Beware . . .

Lock and load—hot!

Hot plate loaded with spicy Mongolian beef, Asian vegetables. I choose the ingredients and the cook grills the mix for me, hot and spicy, just the way I like it. Natural gas fuel seals in all that good juice, spice, and for a little extra flair and flavor, cook adds top fuel to light up his creation… woof.

Ra-ta-ta-ta-tat! Our shepherd's head exploded into pieces right in front of us as the village chief's commander held his AK-47 in front of his flowing dishdasha, empty casings flying off his side like a fountain of heavy metal. As shepherd collapsed, commander zero spun sideways and pointed his weapon at John, his motion continuing onwards as a burst of M-9 rounds obliterated his intention.

Tank round exploded the wall of village elder's semi-enclosed courtyard setting. Our readiness set into motion our special response. I ran to nearby well scoped out earlier, while another tank round exploded another wall. Removed M-9 bolt, two seconds, attached M-9.50 bolt/scope, five seconds, unzip and load DU 10-round clip, three seconds . . . ten seconds total—a dime, for time. Searched tank

with night vision sniper scope. Another tank round fired. Gotcha! Cross hairs centered on gap between body and turret, tank gun rotating toward my position . . . I fire my dirty round.

I visualized the DU bullet tip penetrating the armor gap, intense composition heat easing its path, molecular structure disintegrating into a dozen-plus pieces, dispersing as it contacted open air, hitting occupants and ammo. Tank exploded into a ball of fire, spreading shrapnel to adjacent troops.

I acquired another tank, same sweet spot, squeezed trigger… boom, another great explosion.

I rolled over to my opposite side, up and ran to another rocky location.

Well exploded with three tank rounds.

I heard three tremendous explosions—three tanks blown up. Those are Brad, John and Tim. We are the only demolition experts who carry the customized M-9s and the M-9.50s, with the M-209s.

Five tanks down.

Rounds of RPGs and AK-47s rain down on the village. Return fire given by village guerillas. Gave us vicinity to unload our FAGs. The night sky lit up with four immense fireballs. We reloaded and unleashed fucking hell below the invading forces—whooom! I made up that description: initial whoosh, sound of air being sucked up from the ground by the fuel vapor vacuum; then boom, sound of fire thunder raining down on maximum ignited blast circumference; then concussion from the blast force and air pressure, disabling everything within a few hundred feet in its path or around . . . destroying eardrums, hearing loss, vertigo—well, a no-go.

We four each carried fifteen FAGs, five frags, one flare, three 10-round clips for our M-9.50s. Used up ten each—forty FAGs total against over a thousand government loyalists, slew of frags; spent two clips each, eighty dirty rounds total, destroyed twenty tanks and

twenty-five pickup trucks with recoilless and anti-aircraft mounts. We lost two of our best, best left respectfully undisclosed. Villagers lost a lot of their warriors. They relished mop-up.

Major Thomas, sir, we were attacked. We lost three—our Bravo 5 and Tango 2. We will leave them behind with friendlies for your extract. We will continue onwards with our exit. The shepherd can no longer tend to his flock. We'll find greener pasture to graze and visit Noah's Ark. Dove will be let out when we see land.

Over.

Out.

More tea, sir? Or water? Can I get you anything else . . . ?
She seems in a hurry. I can understand. Buffet patrons. Faster you close the deal, the sooner you get your tip. With experience, it becomes an art form.

No, thank you, just the check please.

Thank you. Have a good day.

You, too.

I finish my ice cream, a requirement for me. Check my check out and leave appropriate tip behind for my attentive waitress. She's cute, too. The food is always good. Can't wait to come back. Been coming back for years. A good place.

Open my fortune cookie, read:

You will find a thing;
It may be important.
Your reality check about to bounce;
You will soon have an out of money experience.

Who makes these up, anyway? The cookie, Chinese, the words, American? Smile. I may not live long, but I'm alive for now. I thank a few for that.

I make way to cashier, pay cash and keep change. Know the manager by now, after all this time. Let's see what he says.

I'm curious, I say. What's the cost of a fortune cookie?

We no profit from it, you know. Part of life, man. You really wanna know, for sure?

Yes, I do.

Chinese manager sizes me up, like 2,500-year-old-art, tugs on gray goatee.

Dime.

Philip Julian is a former member of the 19th Special Forces Group, B Company, sited in Pueblo, Colorado, serving six years. He is a member of the foundational UCLA Wordcommandos Creative Writing Class for PTSD, and other veteran issues, created last year in April (located in the Welcome Center for Homeless Veterans in building 257 on the West Los Angeles VA Campus). He has been a resident of the WLAVA's Domiciliary program for homeless/disabled veterans for about a year now and is getting ready to move on. In January 2017, his first short story was accepted for publication by Military Experience & The Arts in their Memorial Day 2017 issue.

Two Fingers Down

By Travis KLempan

"Nothin profound in sayin what everybody's already thinkin."

I wished it hard yet he wouldn't shut up.

"But there's more people make millions off just that line of work every day."

More of his bits. Nothing like wisdom, just bits of things stuck between teeth of other . . . things.

Was I this tired, again?

Funny how, once you know a thing, you start going back before that thing and thinking of what might have led to it, seeking and seeing signs where maybe there weren't any, hunting for others to confirm. Invent patterns, look for clues and precursors.

Hindsight more than 20/20.

I'm not going so far as to cast omens and find secrets, but just looking for the underlying this-ness of a thing, the *that* which matters more than the *that* which is.

A missed red light becoming a signal unto itself, a case of happenstance and irony taking on heavy weight, the stumble before the stroke something we missed.

"I mean," he continues, meaning nothing. "Take this bus. I mean, we're takin the bus, obviously." He waves his left hand in my direction, sticking three fingers and a meaty palm across the aisle at me. "Some guy got the idea that folks need rides, buys himself some busses, and years followin here we are. Talkin over any number of thins."

He's right. Been a long Utah desert and a Nevada range of lowly rolling hills since Salt Lake and Elko and there were mountains—real mountains; snow-capped—left to come before Reno, Tahoe, Truckee, and eventually Oakland, where the constant jabberer says he's headed.

I hope he gets off before.

The obsession for pattern-making called apophenia, read it in a book, because that's not the word you invent, instead you stumble upon it fresh. Kind of the same reason we see two slits and a hole and, maybe it's an electrical outlet, but we think face. Luckily for the funny of it the face is a shocked face, raised eyebrows and everything, but it's our own minds filling all the non-existent in.

The only reason I know what it's called is because I have it. Apophenia.

Had it.

Everyone's got it, different degrees, but I had it bad. Saw signs everywhere. Think I got it beat to rights by now. But this guy's making me question it all over again. I've memorized his hand, this thing he waves at me to make points or refute arguments or just indicate the scenery, and he won't obey the unwritten rule of long-distance travel, the one of keeping to yourself and shutting up, especially if the other party (me) isn't interested in talking (I'm not).

The one who'd occupied his seat before, though—I'd tried to talk to her much as I could. Ridden from Denver to Salt Lake across from a woman, this woman, not exactly stunning, but beautiful in the

tough prairie way, lonely and "fuck you" without saying it, told me she was headed west, too, talked plenty, though she kept her times for dozing to herself.

Sydney, she'd said, and I joked that her parents must've loved Australia. We laughed in the shared joke, though she'd probably need a better stage name if she were headed to Vegas (as she claimed). The shirt she wore—revealed once she took off the denim jacket, itself a nod towards other kinds of sensibilities—rode high, revelatory around her sides and hips, and I could see words inked across her rib cage and that part of a woman that curves upward from the iliac crest.

Another phrase picked up, not a normal lexical word, but I did crosswords.

Do. Sometimes.

The word writ in that script makes it hard to decipher without staring, but I wanted to anyway, on account of the aforementioned curve.

She didn't mind either, caught me glancing and let me try my eyes at decoding it. "'Indulgence,'" she explained a few mileposts later. "'Discipline' on the other side."

I'd've stared at her hours longer to see into her belly and through to that other side, but since she put on her denim jacket again before departing I never could confirm the far side of her body's world. Not the hardest thing to take a stripper's word for what it was worth—she had to lie about so much else why would she fudge this truth? If the story were different I could pay or not pay and see that word or library and verify.

My experience with women who disrobed for money was minimal but enough to guess at her kind of future and I wished her luck, then thought better of it once the words departed.

But this fellow without fingers drives me faster than the bus.

The driver seems to delight in pushing the schedule, granting the barest of breaks at each rest stop, and we very nearly leave a man

at some unnamed and unnamable hole in the ground near a crack in the Earth a sign called Grant's Gulch. (What was it called before, down through the centuries, before someone learned or thought to count years?) Someone has to live out here, I figure as the man runs down the bus, waving arms and hollering—the streetlight casts some sort of illumination, and who's left to string the power?

Who would you call for help?

This guy, though. He waves that stump again, talking now about the power of prayer and its unsettled scientific nature, and I think on how odd it must be to lose the index and ring fingers but preserve the thumb, middle, and pinky fingers. (The refrain of an old stupid argument passed through my head—there are some who do not count the thumb a finger at all, and these people I neither trust nor understand. Mordecai Brown pitched fastballs with only three fingers, and surely he knew his thumb was what it was and not what others called it.)

Stumpy said it was Desert Shield, not Desert Storm, wherein he'd lost the missing digits, and we'd spoken briefly of how middle and ring fingers made sense for names—for the middle finger only makes sense when counting to five, not four—for even though a man might not have a ring to wear he knew where he could put it—but index? Pinky?

And a thumb? Some Saxon hangover of a word?

The man behind my seat had leant forward and decreed it the pointer finger, demonstrating its utility by jabbing it nearly in my eye, then demanded we shut the good fuck up about it, least until the next piss stop.

We had, but now the sun is up and sleep is no one's right. Try if you want, I think with other uncharitable notions directed towards the rearward interloper, but daytime is for talking.

The stripper told me shortly before departing that she'd dreamt on it and her decision to move westward knew no end. She'd heard there was money in Vegas, and money to be had in Hollywood, and if she had to go to Waikiki or Guam beyond then she would, that Japanese tourists paid in dollars just the same.

Could be, I'd joked, she'd keep going until she resulted in the same origin as her destination. I wet my lips and said she'd end up where she started.

When she turned to leave—our break in Salt Lake long enough to allow me a cigarette and a better appraisal of her entirety—and picked up her duffel, I asked how much work a woman in her line might find in a city like this; she laughed and said men were men. When I suggested she be careful she replied without turning her head, long blonde curls and strands and a single purple streak standing out in the early morning city glow.

"It's a living."

He coughs. "How's a man lose these finners and not the others?" He coughs words at me.

I look at him and he's read my mind, least a part of it. "I've no earthly idea," I reply slow. "You're the one what lost 'em, right? I wasn't there."

He laughs and crooks his neck back, Adam's apple pointy and indicating west. "Seems so," he says and closes his eyes.

I know he won't sleep, he says he won't sleep until he gets to Oakland. He's traveling there on account of a doctor he read about, one who promised to perform elective surgery on the remaining fingers, grind his hand down to a uniform nub.

I want to call bullshit but he showed me the article.

Some loophole in California medical law allows for such procedures and I blame Beverly Hills for this, the logical end result of

so many years spent carving our bodies, and hope that the stripper doesn't end up there, at least not yet.

This man doesn't seem lost, just like he doesn't want to be anywhere particular at the moment and is hoping he can suddenly apparate in Oakland.

"I've been workin on a certain kind of relationship to the Army," he says, eyes still shut. "I hate it, hate it for takin my finners, for sendin me places I wouldn't've gone otherwise, for bein big and full of dumb." He opens them finally, turns to look at me. "But I don't stomach much when others start talkin down on it."

His dropping of the gees seems just him ignoring that they should appear at all.

Real, not affected, so by now I barely notice.

Unless now I notice that I notice.

"I wonder, even after I get the doc to chop off my thumb and the rest, I wonder I'm ever gonna find that kind of livin, that kind of friction."

I saw the Grand Canyon once, one of the few things to ever live up to the hype.

Not having been to war I don't know what might compare for the man.

"Do you think it's possible for two people to love each other?" I ask. "I mean, in this world."

He grins at me and nods. "That's a hard question. Hard questions hard to answer."

"I just figure we could talk about something else for awhile," I reveal.

"No, that's a good question. Good can be hard." He wets his lips and rubs his chin. None of us have anything like a clean shave anymore, not after a night and a morning on a desert bus. "Can two people love each other." He sits up sudden. "That's not really a condition, is it? Not in the real sense, right? Like, it's more of a way of seein things?"

I'm unsure what his response means but nod just the same. "What is it you figure you're here to do? I mean, not just getting to Oakland, but in the big scheme of things."

"Oh, that's an easy question. I'm here to help save the human race." He seems satisfied.

"That seems . . . achievable."

"I know that sounds crazy. Me gettin my finners chopped off on purpose sounds crazy, I'm sure. I could just be the crazy lonely vet, this year's Vietnam hobo, a poster child for keepin kids in school and all that shit, but I'm for-real serious about that last bit—I want to be part of savin humanity."

My curiosity keeps me silent.

"I know I can't invent nothin, especially not somethin like a rocket or interstellar travel, let alone a new kind of anythin easy. I was always more into art class and poetry. Naw, man, I figure we've got to have people teachin the kids, if we—I mean, even if I can't teach 'em math or engineerin or rocket science, I can teach them that there's stuff worth savin down here. One day, tomorrow or years from now, asteroid could hit us, pow, wipe us out like dinosaurs. Even that don't happen, especially the Sun's gonna blow and eat up the Earth. We gotta get outta here before that happens. So, my small part is to show them what it is about us that's worth tryin out on another planet, under some other star. That make sense?" He laughed. "Shit, way you talked about that woman here before, gotta be lots worth savin."

"Well, sure," I say. "Kind of, in the big scheme of things. But won't it be like, five billion years or something before the Sun blows up?"

"Just means we've got plenty of time, is all, so better not waste it." He looks out the window. "Otherwise the future'd have every right to be disappointed in us."

The general disorderliness of the Oakland bus terminal—some stretching legs, some boarding anew, others finding bags and

leaving, very few greetings leveled either way—means I almost miss him in the crowd.

I want to say goodbye.

"Got a taxi waitin," he says without extending a hand. "Thanks for conversation."

I know he's heading towards craziness and a surgery he can't undo, though he's already forty percent towards his goal. I want to ask him other questions, see if he has wisdom under the layers, but can't think of anything.

Again, reading my mind, he drops his bag.

"I'm not entirely convinced people years ago or years from now aren't just as full of shit as we are. We like to think, maybe because of black and white photos or scratchy old records, that our shit today is better. Maybe, I dunno." He picks up the bag and slings it over his shoulder, grabbing the strap with a thumb and middle finger, his pinky waving idly. "They say loneliness falls on everyone, man, even them that have the umbrellas."

I look up but the sky is clear.

Travis Klempan joined the Navy right out of high school, saw the world, and came home to Colorado. He earned a BS in English and an MFA in creative writing along the way. His work has appeared in Ash & Bones, Windmill, *and* Proximity Magazine.

Tadpole the Quitter

By Ray McPadden

In the beginning the mission was a neatly drawn plan on a topographic map. There were arrows and icons and phase lines, even sexy call signs for each unit like Viper 23 and Reaper 6. Training, planning and machines gave them control over nature and the night. No sweat, it was only four inches on the map.

And then they went, forty-four foot soldiers into the dark, marching at a clip through the Hindu Kush Range. None of it was how they thought it would be. The mission was men lost in the rills and folds and slants of a river valley. It was clawing up a gully blowing sweat beads off the tip of your nose. It was soldiers tripping in the talus on a tar-black night before the moon reared up in the east. It was sliding on your ass down a granite slab and marching on with your butt cheeks scraped and visible through torn cammies. It was lost men calling for each other between terraces where cornstalks grew head high.

"Where's Tadpole?"

"Lying on his ruck."

"He quit?"

“Yep.”

“Fuck him.”

“You gonna handle it?”

“I’ll handle it.”

The mission was cussing the mountain and the Afghans and that quitter, Tadpole, who had to be rib-kicked for a long minute before he rose. It was getting turned around in the dark and swearing to Christ that the trail on the left was the one and being wrong. It was command on the radio reminding sweaty men with stiff knees that they were "not where they were supposed to be" and "what's the hold up" and "stop dicking around.” It was rock climbing with machine guns and post-holing through waist-deep snow and licking your cracked lips on a windy ridge. And for fuck’s sake, where is Tadpole?

“Behind again.”

“Jesus.”

“Says his feet hurt.”

“Feet hurt?”

“Feet hurt.”

“Goddamn oxygen thief.”

“Should we shoot him?”

The mission was moonlight captured in the window of a stone hut. It was firing wildly at a granite prow up ahead and mortars landing far from the mark, hitting only pines and sleeping natives in a faraway village. It was finally mule-kicking the door and wrecking a dank room where a woodstove crackled in the corner. It was some guy's shiny blood pooled and drying in the dirt and tossing more rooms and then slipping in that guy’s blood and wiping it from your palms to your pant legs.

Afterward, the mission was dropping on hands and knees to drink from a stream. It was bashing through gooseberry hedges outside the village and the sting of sweat in the slashes on your neck

from the gooseberry. It was the machine gun teams dragging behind, panting and squirming under their heavy loads with their ammo belts jangling.

"Where's Tadpole?"

"Behind again."

"Let's leave him. No one will know."

"They'll make us come back."

"For real, we should shoot him."

"We'd need the right caliber."

"And we'd have to carry out the body."

It was once again rib-kicking that quitting little bitch, Tadpole. But it all looked quite perfect on the battle map—arrows and icons and time hacks and cool call signs. And strong men with thermal optics and rifle-mounted lasers standing round the map proclaiming how it would all unfold.

Ray McPadden served in the infantry with 10th Mountain Division and Second Ranger Battalion, deploying multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan. He received multiple decorations, but is most proud of his Taliban Marksmanship Badge (Purple Heart). Ray's writing has appeared in Society *and* Natural Resources, As You Were, *and* Line of Advance. *He now lives in Colorado with his wife and daughter.*

Poetry.

Chai, Coffee, Cigarettes, and Conversation

Alfred Abbondanza

Chai [tea]—yes.
Coffee [coffee]—yes.
Cigarettes— yes, somewhat.
Conversation— yes.
Language—different.
Culture—different.
History—different.
Religion—way different, maybe.
We are all different.
Yet, we are all the same.
Just in different ways.

I saw the Iraqis drink chai—no cream, only sugar. After meals and always during conversations. I liked chai, a lot.

The Polish and Ukrainians drank tea- black, no cream, sugar. Always during conversations.

The Iraqis drank coffee—thick, Turkish style, no sugar. It was good, even with no sugar.

The Polish drank coffee—thick, with sugar.

The Ukrainians not so much with the coffee,
they preferred tea.

The Iraqis smoke—like a forest fire and always
offered me a smoke, despite saying 'no' every
time. Hospitality is a must.

The Polish and Ukrainians did not smoke as much.

When I drank chai with the Iraqis, they loved conversations and talked
forever about everything.

The Polish loved conversations and talked
about everything.

The Ukrainians loved conversation and talked
about everything.

We are all different.

Yet, we are all the same.

Just in different ways.

Al Abbondanza is a retired army veteran of 30 years (active and reserve). He deployed to Iraq three times ('04; '05-'06; '07-'08) and Afghanistan once ('09, as a tribute to Kipling). Al has been married for thirty-five yearsand is the father of two adult children. He used his Post 9-11 GI Bill, and earned his MBA and CAGS-BA in 2014-5.

This is Your Life

Sylvia Bowersox

I faded into consciousness horizontal
in a hospital bed, dreaming of clambering
poison vines, excruciating explosions,
& tearful black-cloth encased arms
gouging my legs, pulling me into the chasm
of *I meant to do better.*

My war-refugee, battle-buddy turned not-so-loving lover,
understood nightmares, too many beers,
& nameless, faceless fear.

He too didn't know what to do with his hands
now he was home from the war & the Beretta, combat knife,
boom-boom life was no longer in vogue.
So, he pried open my heart, exchanging his polluted soul for mine.

He couldn't fathom I'd buckle, sloppily try to die,
by swallowing 90 VA issued pills,
downing them with our heated arguments & cold coffee.

"She's not breathing," said the ER nurse.

"Let's get a breathing tube in." said the doctor.

I was supposed to be the strong one & endure.
He needed me to exist, to catch his heart as he
cried it out in code.

I woke to my not-so-loving lover playing sentry at my door, dripping
dry rot & ghosts, still scared of losing me.
His obligatory loving concern looked painful, relieved,
eager.

I wasn't impressed.

We're infected by the same sand creatures,

he & I,—same soundtrack of Blackhawk blades, small arms fire in the distance,
sirens, calls to prayer, many televisions blaring the same news
at the same time, & cries of desperate natives begging for protection.

We owned the same shame,
the nothing we could do to fix
what we broke—shame—forever stained,
tormented by "thank you for your service" at the airport

& whenever the topic came up
—nobody knew what else to say.

I made my escape, collapsing on the floor,
while he was in the toilet.

He drug my lifeless body
to the hospital for the professionals
to play Jesus,
bringing me Lazarus-like
back into the world.

Snapping to attention, my lover auto-smiled
into my cracked, *tired of this shit* eyes.
"Try not to move," he said

Handcuffs,
no
— psych-ward restraints.

Hold me.

Plastic tubes breath for me,
purple bruises under soaked,
old-blood-bandages cling.
IV needles connecting tubes secrete
fluids; bladder, bowels, spleen.

"We thought we'd lost you," he said

Who's we, I thought

"I'll get the doctor."

I'm still here?

Two weeks later they let me out after
I promised always to be a good girl & never do anything
so silly-Billy ever again.

Scars on my hands, wrists, a husky rattling
voice, & new weariness
keep me powerless-angry & blank.

My close-call, could-have-been-worse death,
had been dramatic
but in the end, nothing but a boundary testing rehearsal,
that thing you do when back from war
& you trip over the road-side bomb realization
—this is your life.

Sylvia Bowersox served her first tour in Iraq in 2003-2004 as a U.S. army broadcast journalist attached to the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul. Her assignments took her around the country, but much of her time was spent in Baghdad, at Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters, which serves as the background for much of her work. She returned to Iraq for two more tours as a "3161" press officer assigned to the U.S Embassy Baghdad public affairs office, and later to the Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR). She lives with PTSD, and writes about her experiences in both wars. She has been honored by multiple Pushcart nominations for her work. Her first book Triggers, *a chapbook of war journalism flavored poetry and prose, was published by JerkPoet Press. Her work has appeared in the journal* O-Dark-Thirty, The Synthesis, Tethered by Letters, Solstice Literary Magazine, Epic Times, Bramble Literary Magazine, *and* The Washington Post. *Sylvia received her Masters degree in English from California State University, Chico. She lives in Wisconsin with her veteran husband, and her Black Labrador service dog, Timothy.*

Airman, Second Grade

Randy Brown

Airman, Second Grade

This is where
you ask me where I'm from.

And this is where
I tell you that my family and I
are in the Air Force.

Focused as a death-ray lens
on the playground ants below, you suddenly blaze
that my pants are on fire.

I do not understand why.
I know some hard things, just as the sky is blue:
My family is in the Air Force.

I have already moved four times
that I can remember. Each address
has been a new bicycle, and learning to pedal

through conversations like this one.
Kids can't be in the Air Force, you laugh.

I burn, my face hot. My eyes sting.

But I get it now:
I am not from around here
and you are not

one of us.

Randy Brown embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. He authored the poetry collection Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire *(Middle West Press, 2015). His work has appeared widely in literary print and on-line publications. As "Charlie Sherpa," he blogs about military culture at:* www.redbullrising.com.

Part of the Job

Donald Chance

Part of the Job—never, never, ever volunteer, stupid.

naval traditional warning—well me lad,
its fer sure, don't ye speake up,
they be wantin' vol'nteers!
—Anon.

Do what?
Grab the rope, we will winch you down,
can't land on the deck, too dangerous.

Well, great, fuck you too, asshole! Sorryassedmotherfuckers,
flyin' this piece of shit!
Where did you get yer trainin', fucking Sears catalog?
Suppose I fall?
Don't let go of the rope.

No kiddin', fucking Sherlock, but suppose I fall?
Well, then we'll give you a refund.
Yeah, Ha ha, real funny! That means I gotta
come back the same way, huh?

More' n likely, this time tomorrow, ok?
Fuck me, just be sure to be here,
I don't want to keep my ass on this tub
any longer than I have to, there ya go, fuckin 'nam.
Have a nice day sailor.
Nice day, I'll give you a nice day you puke
like to stick my boot up your pussy ass
telling me you can't land on an LST
look its perfectly calm out, not even a breeze
making me go down a fuckin rope what do I look like,
fuckin Tarzan, why do I volunteer for these things
I always get shafted stupid war stupid fuckin 'nam.

ok, lower away.

-they be wantin' vol'nteers!

Donald Chance is a retired/disabled Vietnam veteran who served seven years in the US Navy and eighteen months' duty in Vietnam (1969-70). An Electronics Technician, he traveled from Nha Trang to Song On Doc in the Mekong Delta repairing communications. He travels full-time now in a RV with his pooch and writes poetry for therapy.

Dear Blue Eyes

Lynn Marie Houston

Dear Blue Eyes,

You earned a new nickname in Iraq.
The men in your unit call you Frank, after Sinatra,
because your eyes are so blue they astound
the Iraqi soldiers you're training to assist
coalition forces. Two of them joked around,
asked if you were the American secret
weapon, able to pierce heavy armor just by looking at it.
You stopped removing your sunglasses.
But those two men befriended you, brought you
to a local house to eat, where they placed
hot pieces of grilled meat on your plate
with their fingers. You learned the names
of their children, took off your glasses
and gave them to one of the young boys.
Frank, they laughed, rolling the R, patting you
on the back, Frank, lots of wives for you here.
A few weeks later, in a sudden burst
of unexpected fire, your friends were gone.
An insurgent had infiltrated their training.

At night now, you replay a childhood memory:
the summer you found a litter of stray kittens
under the porch. You spent hours in the darkness
of the crawl space, watching them, the cool sand
on your tanned skin. Your mother saved the juice
from tuna cans and you fed it to them from your fingers.
When a fox entered the yard at dusk, you were there,
keeping watch with your BB gun, to scare him away.

Lynn Marie Houston has published her poetry in over thirty literary journals, including the Ocean State Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, Gravel, *and others, as well as in her collections:* The Clever Dream of Man *(Aldrich Press),* Chatterbox *(Word Poetry Books),* The Mauled Keeper *(Main Street Rag), and* Unguarded *(Heartland Review Press), a chapbook comprised of love letters to a deployed soldier. The editor-in-chief of* Five Oaks Press*, she holds a Ph.D. from Arizona State University and an MFA from Southern Connecticut State University. "Dear Blue Eyes" is from a manuscript-in-progress called Bravo Zulu, which is a collection of poem-portraits honoring the service of OIF and OEF veterans.*

Everyone Has Better Things Than Us

Mathew Mobley

We were never given
Lucky Charms
Froot Loops
Cap'n Crunch

Our mother gave us
Fortunate Talismans
Fruity Round Ups
Lieutenant Crispy

In a giant cellophane bag
That ripped wide open
As we searched
For a toy we might never find

I am sure everyone else got a surprise
In their perfect box of Honey Nut Cheerios
While we go nothing
In our Golden Touched Tasteeos

But oh, how they tasted so sweet
As we ate them off the floor
Having spilled the contents

Of our giant sack.

Things to Do

Matthew Mobley

Build a canoe with my own hands,
Rough-hewn, stripped bare,

Not necessarily sea-worthy
But lake, pond, capable of navigating a stream,

A children's boat made of balsa, or paper
In a fast moving, flooded ditch.

Or a tiny twig watched with careful eyes
Moving steadily, slowly

Searching and picking a way
Through the yard rivulet after a hard rain.

The Year of the Rat

Matthew Mobley

I told my students about the dragon on my back. How he once looked like a dancing float in a Chinatown parade, held aloft by six sets of laundered hands. There were plans to add koi, Samurai, and lotus—

Or loti.

But I was too lazy to care about the details. Details necessary to prevent the dragon from turning into a non-descript blob of green ink.

Matthew J. Mobley is a writer, teacher, and US Army Infantry Officer and Ranger qualified paratrooper. He currently teaches Military Science at the University of Tampa, though he considers the military much more art than science. His work has previously appeared in O-Dark-Thirty, Bridge Eight, *and* The Sandhill Review.

You Can Seek Redemption on Route 66

Matthew Oudbier

Sometimes when you kill a man
you have to pick up the pieces.
This is no metaphor.
Sometimes when you kill a man,
you actually have to get down on your hands and knees,
scour through the sand, and pick up every single bloody piece:
arms, legs, fingers, tiny bits of charred flesh, and all that stuff
we normally keep inside of us. You have to scoop it up with a shovel
and lay it out on a black tarp to atone for your sins.
I'd like to think there's redemption after throwing a GBU-38
down range—put the pieces back together like parts on a motorcycle
—but,
I know you can't get to heaven on a '94 Sportster.
There's no redemption in replacing a snapped torsion spring in the shifter assembly
somewhere between Chicago and St. Louis,
and redemption isn't found by removing a sheared transmission pulley
on a stretch of highway in the Texas panhandle and waiting three days for the replacement part.
Putting the pieces back together may get you another hundred miles down the road,
but it doesn't get you into heaven.

Redemption isn't replacing a cracked oil filter
under the glaring New Mexican sun just outside of Santa Fe.
It certainly isn't bending a rear view mirror back into place
because you dropped the bike on a slick patch of asphalt in Flagstaff.
No redemption to running out of gas in the home stretch
between Needles and Barstow where the Joshua Trees wave you in.
And there's not a damn bit of redemption in the engine seizing up
as you pull up to the Santa Monica Pier, because you've been leaking
oil for the last 20 miles.

Heaven isn't at the end of any pier.

Sometimes when you kill a man
the only thing you can do is jump on your piece of shit '94 Sportster,
ride to LA,
and pick up the pieces along the way.
There may not be redemption in putting your motorcycle back together,
but there's redemption in taking everything apart on the side of the road
so you can see that even a tiny spring can cause grief.
Because redemption is getting your hands covered in grease,
sitting on the side of the road, putting your head between your
knees, and praying to God.

Redemption is what happens while you're putting the pieces back together.

Redemption is the long walk to get a replacement filter and 3 quarts of oil;
You walk, and think about the man you killed.
Redemption is making sense of the mangled wreck,
but first you have to pick up every single bloody piece.
There may not be redemption in realizing that you're out of gas, but
there is redemption
when you also realize that you're uncertain whether you're at the
gates of heaven or the gates of hell.

You wave back at the Joshua Trees to acknowledge their demarcation.
Redemption is standing at the end of the Santa Monica Pier and seeing heaven so far away;
the tow truck is taking your bike away, but you can't get to heaven on a '94 Sportster.

Sometimes when you kill a man
you have to pick up the pieces.
You have to pick up the arms, the legs, the fingers, the tiny bits of charred flesh,
and all the stuff we normally keep inside;
and you have to keep picking up the pieces long after the war is over.
You have to get on your '94 Sportster and pray from Chicago to the city of angles,
and every couple hundred miles you have to pull over and break down;
and you have to break down in tears and grease and blood and sand.
Sometimes when you kill a man you need redemption.

You can seek redemption on Route 66.

After graduating high school in 2004, Matthew Oudbier enlisted in the Marine Corps. He served eight years as a radio operator and deployed to Iraq twice, Afghanistan once, and a number of other countries for training and humanitarian relief efforts. When he finally took off the uniform in 2012, he moved back to Grand Rapids, MI, and started attending school at Grand Valley State University where he is earning a degree in philosophy. He has stayed close to the veterans community since he separated from military service. He is the president of Grand Valley State University's Student Veterans Organization, where he works with veterans transitioning out of service.

Soul Survivor

Ron G. Self

His war was over, that's what they said,
But not for the soul survivor of the living dead.

He came back to the world, like he was never gone.
He pretended to be normal, but there was something wrong.

His war was still raging deep down inside,
The horrors and killing, the dark human side.

There were no outward signs, no one had a clue
That he was hurting so bad, and what he would do.

He went to his cell and locked the door.
He put the rope around his neck, his pain was no more.

His war was over, that's what they said.
Only now is there peace for the walking dead . . .

Navy and Marine Corps Medal holder Ron G. Self founded "Veterans Healing Veterans From The Inside Out" in 2012 at San Quentin Prison, where he is currently incarcerated.

Dissonance

Kayla Williams

My breasts are full,
The right more so than the left,
Swollen and hot, aching as I unclip.

You attack your objective,
Greedily at first, then settling in
To contented suckling.

Oxytocin floods my brain
As milk fills your mouth;
We relax into one another.

Are these the same breasts
Men once eyed with different hunger,
Beneath camouflaged uniform?

Is the finger your tiny hand now grasps
The same that once rested comfortably
Along rifle trigger guard?

Past and present jostle one another,
Uneasily coexisting
Within my jagged self.

Kayla M. Williams is a former sergeant and Arabic linguist in a Military Intelligence company of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). She is the author of Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army, *a memoir about her deployment to Iraq, and* Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War, *about her family's journey from war trauma to healing. She graduated cum laude with a BA in English Literature from Bowling Green State University, and earned an MA in International Affairs with a focus on the Middle East from American University. Kayla currently lives near Washington, DC, with her husband, a combat-wounded veteran, and their two children.*

Interview.

A Conversation with Benjamin Busch

Benjamin Busch is an award-winning writer, actor, photographer, film director, former United States Marine Corps officer who served two tours of combat duty in Iraq, and the author of *Dust to Dust: A Memoir* (Ecco, 2013). He played Officer Anthony Colicchio on the HBO series *The Wire*, his writing has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in Harper's, and he has been a guest commentator on NPR's *All Things Considered.* A native of New York, he now lives on a farm in Michigan with his wife and two daughters. Nonfiction Editor Dario DiBattista, also a former Marine, spoke with Busch for *O-Dark-Thirty.*

O-Dark-Thirty: I know this is painfully vague, but what does "identity" mean to you? How does it relate directly to writing and acting?

Benjamin Busch: There are both internal senses and external applications of identity. The latter is how we relate to other people, a tribal identity, and we are either born into it, adopt it, feel we've earned membership in it, or had it forced on us. We add our professions and religions, our nations and race, our sex and sexuality. I can always tell

when an identity hasn't been given much thought, lives on the surface, can't defend itself. Writers and actors make decisions about who their characters are and how much their identity is influential. They have to find ways inside, past civilization's dense fabric of labels, to what a character can't deny under scrutiny.

ODT: What must an actor consider about "identity" in approaching their craft? What about a "writer," in this same regard? Are approaches similar, to your thinking? What's different?

BB: An actor is trapped with what is written while the writer creates the trap. Actors inhabit characters in order to "act" like them. Writers are charged with the same intellectual and emotional task, but with fewer limitations. Both are dealing with invention, but the actor is given lines, directed, much of their art imposed upon. The common labor is research and understanding. Any character the actor or writer doesn't believe in will eventually fail their audience.

ODT: In military artistry—specifically, acting or writing—it's interesting to me how your identity gets assigned to you, and there are so many identities with clear or generally understood delineations—Marine, sniper, POG, grunt, Seabee, Airborne, etc. How might knowledge of this impact or influence the process a writer or actor exploring military themes would use?

BB: This goes back to research. Writers who choose to employ service members or veterans as characters have to know the tribes, have to sit by their fires and learn their vernaculars, rituals, and myths. I don't believe in artistic territorialism with respect to ownership and authority over identities, that's damning the immensity of imagination, but I expect deep research in the absence of direct experience. I despise

the creation of a character built on stereotype and used as a decorative tool. A character has to have true narrative urge, a necessity born in the writer worthy of giving them space in a story. To find the right words, there must be sensory depth in the lives being written. In order for an actor to emote loss or fear or ferocity, they also have to understand it. An artist sifts from all they've seen, felt and been taught. The best wade deep to learn more about humanity.

ODT: In the MFA "rule book" of writing, it's generally agreed that to have a good story, you need a protagonist who's undergone some transformation of character from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. Obviously, understanding how your characters see the world and themselves in it can help with that. What are other ways intentional focus on "identity" can help with the craft and construction of creative writing?

BB: I don't believe transformation is necessary in a protagonist. Plenty of characters, like people, don't change despite consequences, new knowledge, or experience. They'll drag more baggage in their lives, but they don't always learn. Gamblers, addicts, fools. You know them. They're real. A protagonist can move for an entire book and never get anywhere. We just have to be interested in them. I would say that most stories involve a problem, our protagonists drawn into some kind of trouble and forced to make a decision. It's difficult to list stories where everyone in them is perfectly satisfied. Identity is often used in juxtaposition to the identities of others, friction heating between ideas, histories, environments and desires. Playing on a character's awareness of identities can create that tension. I think it's helpful to know where a character is from and how they got to where they are. Place and circumstance often intensifies these feelings of identity. When I played Officer Colicchio on *The Wire,* I went on a drug raid

with narcotics officers in Baltimore. I researched. Then I invented an identity as a frustrated police [officer]. I harvested some of my own feelings from the failures of our occupation in Iraq. I understood Colicchio.

ODT: You're a veteran with an impressive collection of artistic endeavors (writer, poet, actor, educator), beyond your equally impressive collection of military experiences. How has your "identity" changed throughout your own personal journey?

BB: I have the legal public identities everyone else in America has a version of: father; husband; citizen; taxpayer; homeowner; American. But we don't claim all our identities. I didn't identify as a student in high school or college. I didn't identify as a football player off the field. I don't identify as a graduate. I teach in an MFA program, but I don't claim to be an educator. I haven't yet fully identified as a veteran. It still feels like exceptionalizing any past experience I've ever had, like saying I'm a teen because I spent seven years as a teenager. I don't like much of what is added and assumed by the title "veteran." I collect no benefits as such, except, of course, a particular comprehension of military service and warfare. But I fiercely identified as a Marine for sixteen years. In all company, in disparate gatherings, I was a Marine. I was the Marine at dinner parties, at gallery openings, in every introduction. Marine. I find that fascinating, because I've always most deeply been an artist. I've been an artist since I was seven years old, and it has remained the strongest of all categories I've lived in. But, for a time, I would answer "Marine" first if you'd asked. The arts are all braided within me now, acting, writing, photography, illustration, filmmaking. "Marine" still lingers though I don't say it. It's been eleven years since I wore my uniform. I think we choose, at some point, to commit to certain flags, raise them over us and keep

them up despite the wind. I want to be able to tell you who I am, rather than to be told. I've been an artist without anyone telling me so.

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