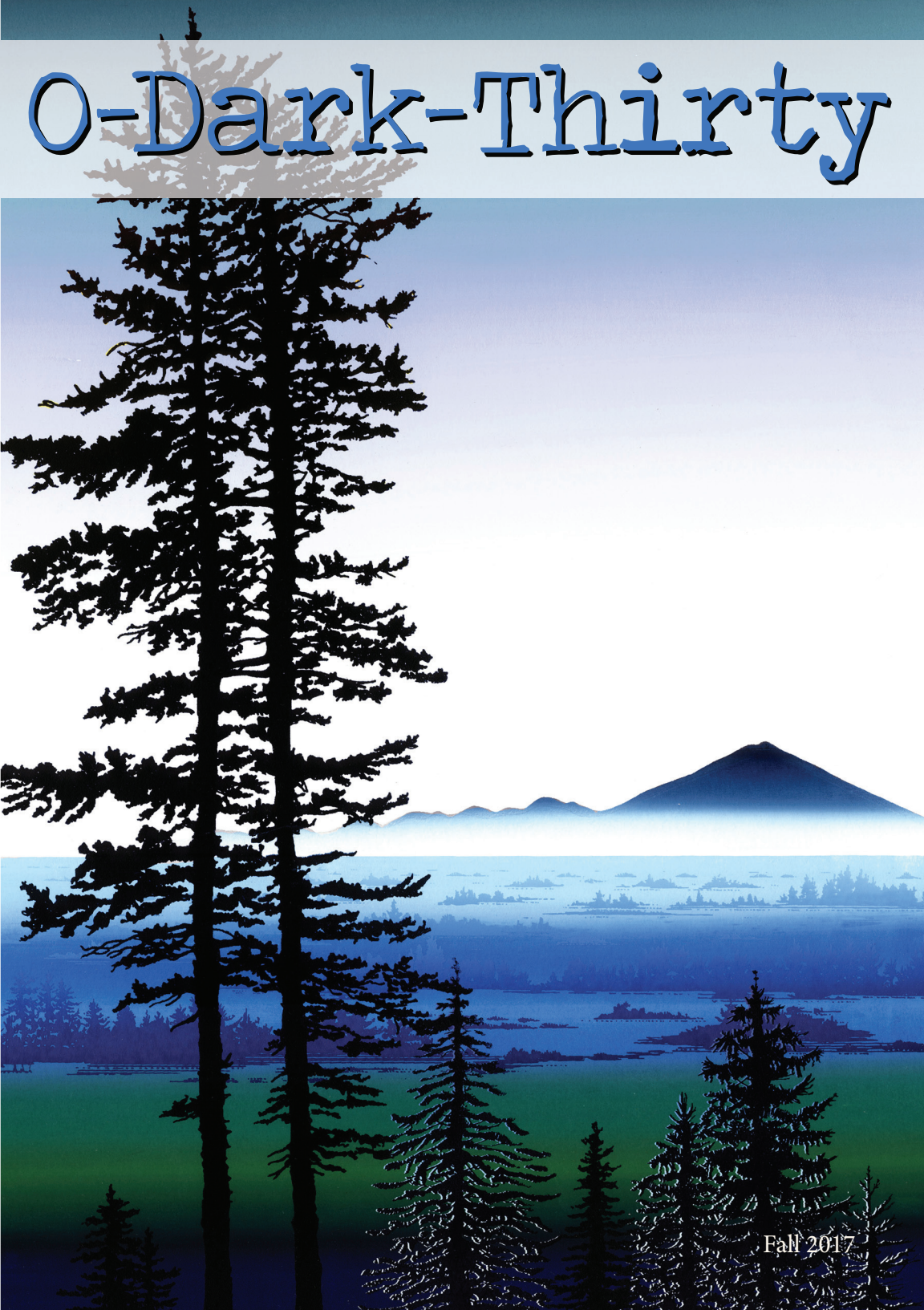
O-Dark-Thirty



Fall 2017

O-Dark-Thirty

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On the cover: *After Ever*
Serigraph (silkscreen), 16"x24"
by Rip Bodman
United States Army, 1968-1970

Rip Bodman grew up in Northern New Jersey near the Great Swamp, where he spent most of his time exploring as a child. He graduated from Bernardsville High School and Parsons College in Iowa, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Shortly after graduation he was drafted into the Army to go fight in Vietnam.
He arrived in Vietnam on January 18, 1969.
He served in the Twenty Fifth Infantry Division's "Triple Deuce," 2/22 Mechanized Infantry Regiment, III Corps, Tay Ninn, where he was a forward observer on night ambush patrol from February to November 1969.
He then became a training aids instructor at 25ID's Tropic Lightning Academy (TLA), from November 1969 to March 1970, and left the war March 29, 1970, Easter Sunday.

He has been working as an artist selling his silkscreen prints—serigraphs—ever since he returned home. You can see him at art fairs and craft shows throughout the Northeast.

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Editor's Note

It's hard to believe that *O-Dark-Thirty* is entering its sixth year of publication. It feels like our team has been together forever, in the way that a tight platoon, a good wardroom, or a close-knit group of military families sometimes does. We're lucky to be able to keep something of the best part of our military experience alive in our work with each other, and in our interactions with our remarkable contributors.

We continue to be amazed, surprised, and delighted by the submissions we receive. This quarter, we were especially thrilled to receive a series of vignettes from a combat veteran of the Korean War, which ended almost 65 years ago. The Korean War has often been called the "Forgotten War" because so many of those who served there came home, reintegrated into society, and never said much about their wartime experiences. We're honored to be able to preserve some memories from that time in the pages of this issue, and to introduce the work of some other new contributors whose military and family experiences span the intervening six decades.

We're also grateful for the generosity of the established veteran and military family writers who contribute their time and share their insights in our interviews. This quarter, senior editor Jim Mathews spoke with Pulitzer Prize-winning author and Vietnam veteran Robert Olen Butler about writing and the military experience. Butler says: "Veteran writers have a fucking 'intense white-hot center', one way or another." We hope you enjoy the journey into that intense, white-hot center through the fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in this issue.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

Witness

By Patricia Poteat

There is another that beareth witness of me;
and I know that the witness, which he witnesseth
of me, is true.

—The Gospel of John, 5:32

The big golden dog and I walk from the parking lot toward a nondescript two-story building adjacent to the hospital.

The sign outside says Patriots' Home.[1]

The signs inside say: Army-Navy-Air Force-Marines, wash hands/in and out, oxygen in use, staff only, provisions, come in, keep out; I miss my dog, I'm afraid of dogs, does your dog bite?; tell me a story, I have a story to tell, I can't speak but my eyes say all; I'm going to live with my brother, I'm going to live in Maine, I'm dying.

The dog and I visit every week.

Mid-afternoon, those who can gather in the dayroom. The space is opposite the nurses' station and harshly lit by overhead

[1] A Veterans Administration regional medical center, long-term care and hospice units. All names changed.

fluorescent strips. Furnishings are basic: a couple of card tables at which no one plays cards, a few chairs and a sofa covered in industrial-strength material, a corner table with iced tea and cookies on offer, and a few plants as brave and challenged as the residents.

Some of the men are *compos mentis*. Some are not. Most lean this way or that in a wheelchair.

All are oriented, after a fashion, toward a large, flat-screen TV in the corner of the room. It's time for *Bonanza*. They're all there: Pa, canny and upstanding, unlucky in wives, lucky in sons. Adam, dressed in black and harboring, surely, some secret sorrow. Hoss of the big grin and bigger girth, marked for an early heart attack. Curly-haired, doe-eyed Little Joe, object of intense but feckless female attention, on screen and off.

The Cartwrights are just as the men and I remember them: earnest, intentional, holding the high ground in every sense of the word. Good soldiers, all. Thanks to the latest HDTV technology, they are more ruddy-cheeked and, Adam excepted, colorfully dressed than 1960s black and white television let on. Who knew? This does not matter. The men watch avidly or not, as capacity allows. The dog waits patiently.

Some of the men are apart.

Mr. Compton (Army) does not watch *Bonanza*. Instead, he stays in bed and shouts at the television in his room. Neither I nor the dog nor his sitter understands what he says but, whatever it is, he says it with great conviction. Every so often when the dog nuzzles his hand, the soldier returns from wherever he has been, smiles and is gone again.

When Mrs. Compton visits on Valentine's Day, she brings flowers, balloons, and a determined cheerfulness. All are contrived to camouflage loss and grief. They do not.

Mr. Lawrence (Navy) drifts, washing up on this beach or that. A benign version of *The Ancient Mariner*, he fixes an unblinking gaze

upon whoever else has landed there. His eyes are the same startling pale blue as were Paul Newman's, without the glint of bad boy risibility. They are also eloquent. In their depths, many things float free and clear and bright: great pleasure at seeing the dog; genial indifference to the lady who brings him; puzzlement about the foreign port in which he resides for reasons he has forgotten. His is a gentle spirit.

All the while, as the sailor's eyes convey this and more, his tongue darts back and forth between his lips, a live thing, trying to shape a word, any word. It does not succeed. It does not stop trying.

Mr. Pickering (Army) positions himself in his wheelchair midway between *Bonanza* and his room and on a beeline from the main entrance into the building. He is always the first person the dog and I meet. One afternoon, he greets us with a sweet, shy smile and announces that he is going home that day. His daughter is coming to get him. He is happy. Wonderful! Good luck! Take care of yourself! We'll miss you!

On our next visit, Mr. Pickering is in his usual place. It would be unkind to ask why he is still there. That afternoon, he fingers his plastic hospital ID bracelet and explains to me and the dog that he is going to a jewelry store downtown and have it taken off. A week later, he tells us that he and his brother plan to move into their old home together. It's just around the corner, he says. It's much cheaper than this place, he says. He has put some clothes in a plastic bag.

In the weeks following, there is no further mention of daughter, brother, or anyone else. The clothes are put away. Mr. Pickering is alone with memory and longing, fractured, and lasting.

Mr. Meeks' (Marines) sister visits often. She is terrified of the dog. When we come in, the only thing that keeps her from fleeing is the hospital bed, which stands, big and solid, between her and the beast.

Even in his prime, her brother must have been a slight man, not the physical type we associate with the Corps. Now, he is swaddled in

white blankets, head to toe, and so wasted that his sister could lift him if she had to. But Mr. Meeks' mind is lively. He gently teases his sister about her fear of the easygoing dog who only wants to be her new best friend. He musters enough strength, just, to stroke the dog and talk with him and his chaperone. He is always glad to see us, even when he is feeling poorly.

But the Marine is disappearing. Each week, he is smaller, thinner, diminished. Each week, he is more likely to be sleeping when we stop by. One day soon, perhaps already, only the white blankets and Mr. Meeks' sister will remain. The dog will no longer visit. She will have nothing to fear.

In his late twenties, Mr. Broughton (Marines) is much younger than most. On his second tour in Afghanistan, he suffered a traumatic brain injury when his humvee hit an IED. Blind with limited ability to speak and confined to a wheelchair, he caresses and caresses and caresses the dog's ears. As he does so, the Marine bows his head over the dog's, their foreheads almost touching. The dog sits at attention. The young man's mother, who visits frequently, turns away.

Three years ago, Mr. Lorenzo (Navy) declined treatment for a highly treatable form of cancer. He did so on religious grounds, assuring his wife and two young daughters that if they all kept faith and prayed hard, God would heal him.

They did. God did not.

One gray winter afternoon, sitting on the floor in the hall outside her father's room with her arms around the dog's neck, the older of the two girls, now twelve, confides that she no longer believes in God. She prayed and prayed but he did not make her daddy well. Her sister, age eight, bites her lip, looks at the floor, and nods as if to say, "Me too." One day later, the girls are fatherless in this world and, by their lights it would seem, in the next.

Mr. Stiller's (Air Force) room is filled with photographs of family, dogs, and furniture he built once-upon-a-time. The family

is large, the dogs diverse, and the furniture handsome. He is happy when we arrive and sad when we leave.

The family is absent. According to the airman, everyone, including his wife, is scattered coast to coast. Why they are wherever they are and why he is alone in this city is not clear. The dogs are either long dead (his) or belong to someone else and visit from time to time (mine and one other). His woodworking skills are presently devoted to building housings for small clocks: a log cabin, a birdhouse, a grandfather clock. All in miniature. He sands, glues, and stains. Clocks tick. Time marches.

Mr. Stiller has an incision in his belly. The bandage is visible when he wears a tee shirt that is too short, which is often. It has a date written on it that changes every few days. Without being asked, he tells me he has water in his abdomen that must be drained away three times a week. He mentions his liver.

In almost the same breath, Mr. Stiller declares that, one day, he will just up and leave "this place." Where will you go? Where will you stay? To California, with a sister; to Maine, with "Mama," his wife, and a stepdaughter. If the latter, he will build furniture again for Mama. She will like that. He shows me the materials catalogue.

One day, the airman will make good on his intention. He will just up and leave. But his journey will not take him to California or Maine; rather, to a different state in a far country hidden from our sight.

There are others: the soldier the Army trained first as a cook and later as a veterinarian's assistant, a *non sequitur* we both find bemusing; the Vietnam vet with whom I trade stories about visiting the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and locating, in the midst of loud, self-absorbed middle-schoolers on a class trip, the names of friends who died in Vietnam (mine, a few; his, many); the gay airman consumed with anxiety about what will happen to his partner when he dies;

the survivor of the 1983 bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut who can neither stand nor use his right hand due to injuries suffered then; the Navy veteran who never leaves his bed, never has visitors, and has a white cloth "tent" placed over his face at all times; the new, soft-spoken resident whose room is very neat and has not yet acquired the singular aroma of this, his last posting.

Every soldier has a story. Every soldier is a mother's son or daughter. Every soldier has a family, here or there, whole or broken. All served, all did their duty, soldiers and families alike. We know this.

The sign outside says, Patriots' Home. Had my father (Army) lived long enough, he might have been among those whose story ends here, whose family gathers here. For each of us who comes and goes, as a professional or as a volunteer, our duty is to see, to listen, and to bear witness. This is part of our story. We know this too.

The big golden dog and I say goodbye until next week. We walk past the sign, cross the parking lot, and get into the car. I drive home in the slanted light of a late fall afternoon. The dog is tired but has accomplished his mission, good soldier that he is.

Patricia Poteat is the daughter of a veteran. She reads, writes, and does pro bono work in Asheville, NC. In addition to providing pet therapy at the VA, she serves as a court-appointed advocate (Guardian ad Litem) *for abused and neglected children. She also cooks.*

Recollections of a Korean War Rifleman

By Ray Richmond

The Listening Post

The hot charcoals cast a red glow across our faces as we huddled around the bucket of heat. We were nine smelly, grimy, bearded grunts too cold to bathe or shave. The bucket of coals, called a *habotchi,* was the only light in the bunker which was blacked out for security reasons. Outside temperatures were thirty-eight below zero with an extreme wind-chill factor. We'd been on "Heartbreak Ridge" in Northern Korea for months, a place that gained a lot of notoriety after becoming the subject of a film by Clint Eastwood. It had gained his attention because of the huge loss of life during the fierce battle taking it from the North Korean Communists entrenched there early in the war.

I was a twenty-one-year-old infantry squad leader. My squad was responsible for a fifty-foot long trench formerly dug and occupied by the enemy. Our number one concern in the winter of 1952 was freezing to death. That night around the *habotchi* was like a lot of

others, taking our turns sharing stories about girls, bitching about ending up here, and speculating about when, if ever, we'd get the hell out of there.

The enemy held higher ground to our front, with about a five-hundred-foot valley separating us. The mountains were somewhat like the Sierra Nevada back home in California. What made it different was the valley between us called "Desolation Valley." It had been bombed and strafed by airstrikes, which left the trees bare and the ground burned. It would fill up with fog, and it reminded us of a graveyard scene from a horror movie.

About a hundred yards down in the valley was a listening post. It was really just a hole in the ground large enough for three riflemen equipped with a sound-powered telephone to warn the main line of resistance of any troop movement coming our way. Because we all knew those manning it would be expendable, it was a much-hated duty.

It was common to see the relief troopers passing our section of the trench on their way to the listening post. They had to pass through the makeshift gate in the barbed wire fence in the middle of our trench leading down to the post. I recognized the voice of a friend of mine, Corporal Delgado, as he slipped on the icy trail and cursed.

Suddenly, we were attacked by mortars raining down on us. The bombardment was nothing like we were used to. It was so intense ,with so many well-placed rounds, that the dirt from the sandbags on our roof was coming down through the timbers, filling the air. We feared getting buried alive. It was a struggle to crawl out of there before being suffocated.

I heard a North Korean leader shouting orders from below, and one of their soldiers came charging up the hill toward our trench. Our machine gun almost cut him in two a few feet in front of us. It was then that I began to realize that the mortar shelling was a tactical

distraction while they ambushed our listening post for prisoners of war. Corporal Delgado and his guys were gone, captured.

In the aftermath, there was one dead soldier frozen in front of us where we stood guard. The shocked expression on his face when he'd died, staring up, was unforgettable. He was in a crouched position with his entrails in his lap. Eventually, we risked having one of our own guys go down and push him into some bushes so we could stand guard without the face glaring at us, especially in the moonlit night.

Nearly two years later, I was blessed to be back home and watching the TV news. They were covering the prisoner exchange agreement between the US and North Korea. The camera panned onto a close-up of some of our guys coming home. There was Corporal Delgado, smiling and waving to the camera. I was so excited to see him that I jumped out of my chair, cheering. I was grateful to know Delgado came home to his family and loved ones.

Everybody Loved Big Boy

It seems all military units have a big boy. We had ours. He was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed guy named Homer Vanderpool, and he was very special. It wasn't because of his impressive size—6'4", three hundred pounds—but because of his country boy charm, a smile that was contagious, and refreshing good manners. He had a kind of honest simplicity about him. I believe he adjusted to Army life easily because he was taught to fish and hunt as a young boy. Besides being such an amiable guy, he was an excellent marksman, so any of us squad leaders would've loved to have him with us. He was in my friend's squad.

One day we were ordered to launch a platoon-sized patrol, about forty riflemen, with a mission to advance into enemy territory until we were fired upon, then radio back their location to our artillery support or naval aircraft. We'd established a main line of resistance,

so patrolling like this was routine for us. The enemy had figured it out, too. Usually, the enemy knew we were simply hunting for targets during these patrols and would hold their fire until we passed them by, or they'd wait until we were close enough that we couldn't call in the bigger ordnance. We conducted these patrols sometimes just to test out new weapons systems or collect data for the Army. Some were more eventful than others.

This time we'd made a serious tactical blunder. We were patrolling rice paddies, which meant we were trudging through knee-deep, rancid mud that was frigid. It had a thin layer of ice over the top. It slowed us down considerably, and we were out in the open. There were berms all around the paddies. That day we ended up walking into a North Korean ambush.

We were surrounded, pinned down in a crossfire of machine guns. There was no cover, and we were low-crawling through the muck with the rounds cracking overhead. Things turned into absolute chaos. There were screams for medics all around us. It was then that I saw that Big Boy was hit. It was in his abdomen, and the bleeding would be fatal. We crawled through the mire to him and tried to make a stretcher out of two rifles and our shirts, but it was hopeless. He was too heavy and big to be carried, so they could only drag his body out of that slime. I had to organize my squad for our retreat, and so lost contact with their rescue efforts.

We managed to get out and call for artillery fire on the enemy machine guns. The platoon suffered a few men wounded, but Big Boy's loss hurt us all. We were down for a while after that; dejected, sad, and angry.

After all these years, the image of what happened in that rice paddy will forever be etched in my memory; the screams, the outhouse-like smell of the place, the tragic loss of life of that young man . . . Everybody loved Big Boy.

Fix Bayonets

With a lot of grunting, heavy breathing, muscle pain, and the pungent smell of sweat from a twenty-mile forced march, and oh, yeah, the usual bitching and grumbling about finding ourselves in this awful place, we managed to stumble up the hill and set up for our first assignment. I was a squad leader in the US Army, with the 14th Regimental Combat Team. Our mission was to launch battle patrols into enemy territory for the purpose of providing targets for our artillery support as well as naval airstrikes. Our orders were to advance until the enemy fired at us, then radio back the locations. The hill we dug into overlooked a huge valley called Kumwha in the central part of the country.

Incredibly, a short time after we settled in, sometime around midnight, our platoon runner came by and informed us that our intelligence reported seeing enemy troops gathered at the base of our area, most likely for an attack. There were a lot of nervous bellies getting trigger-happy after hearing that. We were all aware of how many lives were lost when our soldiers were overrun by hordes of communist troops in the early parts of the war.

One of the most dreadful orders for a rifleman is the order to "fix bayonets," which of course conjures up images of hand-to-hand combat. Well, we fixed bayonets to our rifles. We also prepared by pulling the pins on our hand grenades and assumed a stance to throw them at a moment's notice. I must confess this was my most frightening experience in all the time I spent in Korea.

After being in primed for a fight for hours, obsessed about this oncoming attack, something strange happened. I noticed dawn was breaking, and in the distance, I saw a beautiful sunrise above a mountain range. Then a flock of birds flew out of some bushes, which I could have sworn only moments ago were enemy soldiers. It was a peaceful scene, nothing like what I'd envisioned that morning to be.

The truth was beginning to set in that the intelligence was probably faulty and that there was no immediate threat. We were relieved, but now we had to find a way to dispose of our hand grenades. There was a fifty-foot cliff in front of us that'd allow us to throw them down. They'd explode in the air on the way down.

There's nothing like the order to fix bayonets to cause some self-inflicted psychological warfare.

River Rats

It was bitter cold that night. The Korean winter of 1952 was bringing us sub-zero temperatures. The slightest breeze sent shivers down my spine. Fortunately, we were issued camouflaged white overcoats with hoods that cinched up tightly around our faces to prevent frostbite. I wrapped up a scarf over my nose and mouth, too. We kept our rifles under the coats to prevent their freezing up.

We were dug in in the Kumwha Valley. The enemy communist forces were about seven hundred yards to our front. I was alone, standing guard for a four-hour shift. My thoughts would inevitably drift back to more pleasant things like home, my family, and, of course, my girlfriend and her warm, sweet smile.

But after a while my thoughts changed, and a sense of sadness crept over me. I detected a faint smell of death in the air. I knew immediately it came from some fallen comrade who'd been killed in a fierce firefight coming back from a patrol. Circumstances had prevented our recovery of the body. To make matters worse, someone had seen the much hated and feared river rats converging on the body.

Up until that night I'd never seen the rodents. For months, I'd heard stories about how aggressive they'd become. For instance, one night a soldier let out a bloodcurdling scream after one had bit his foot as he slipped into his sleeping bag. We fought back against them,

though. One soldier emptied his BAR into a rat that surprised him. Sometimes, the guys threw hand grenades at them.

But as I stared into the darkness that night, I saw the notorious rats from the corner of my eye. They were silhouetted against the moonlight on the riverbank. It was spooky, weird. The hair on my neck bristled. I swear they looked as big as cats. Then I could see the moonlight flashing in their eyes as they scampered toward me, maneuvering around rocks and bushes.

Looking back, I was involved in a lot of combat patrols. I had several close calls that could have ended my life, and, sadly, I saw a lot of young men die in battle. Yet after all these years, the images of the river rats preying on our fallen comrades still evoke strong feelings of loathing and disgust. The evil, demonic creatures gained a reputation of almost mystical proportions that still haunts me.

Ray Richmond served in the US Merchant Marine during WWII and the US Army infantry during the Korean War and is a retired construction contractor. He is an avid church-goer, husband, father, and grandfather.

Always Makes Me Dance

By William Sanchez

The young boy danced alone in a counter-clockwise circle. On the sofa, I sat. Chai tea in my right hand, I sipped. Nuts in my left hand, I munched.

I did not know his name, but I knew his Afghan label: Chai Boy or *bacha bazi*.

The boy wore a black traditional outfit, *chafan.* The outfit was dull and lifeless. The neutral clothing lacked gender-identifying curves or markings. A matching knee-length shirt, *perahon*, covered his baggy trousers, *tunban.* Bright white [tennis shoes] escaped the cotton clothing like early morning light punching daybreak. Eerily white in a country where nothing is new, his feet swam in those shoes, which were three sizes too large. No thread of hair escaped from a scarf, *dismaal,* which was tied around his head. The fabric bore the national colors of Afghanistan in a trio of red, black, and green not traditionally worn in this area. Tribal and family colors were the norm.

His dainty arms, like angel hair pasta, gave way to thinner and limper wrists. He swayed to the music and wavered in and out of orbits above a woven red carpet stretched from one faux dark wood

laminate wall to the other. Everything about him was effeminate. In between circles, his right leg kicked up high enough to place his knees near his chest. Too flexible to be male. But he was.

Those delicate hands flailed about in an effort to grab something. Every change in his body position had a purpose, a story to tell, but his childish face became the focal point.

His smoky jade eyes were empty and no longer shone, the luster far gone. I followed his petrified search for a point other than another pair of eyes. Around the room, they darted, well above the eye level of his audience. Mine stayed focused on his. I read in them a message of pain from witnessing a life of war, or fear of knowing what was to come.

I was watching a child sex slave/entertainer. The Afghan men behind me imagined a playful boy flirting with them, engaged in a display of teasing flesh. In this part of the world, I knew that women are for babies and boys are for pleasure.

My home on Forward Operating Base Orgun-E was a ten-minute drive from the open space of Commander Aziz's high-vaulted rectangular main room. Roughly fifty guests attended. With me were four other US employees. Together we shared two plaid and floral print sectionals pushed together to form an L-shaped VIP section. I sat on the shorter of the two with my host, thirty-three-year-old Commander Aziz. In the front row, we faced the boy and the band. Between Aziz and me sat a British contractor, and one Afghan-turned-CIA informant, who was too outspoken, too cocky in this room filled with real killers because he had power. Not physical power. Power of a stronger kind. CIA-backed political power. The longer couch hugged the wall closest to the room's sole exit and there sat an Army soldier, and a Green Beret, the only one of us armed that night. The rest of the audience sat behind us in rows of white plastic lawn chairs.

We watched.

This was my first time at a Commander Aziz party. No one refused Aziz's parties. Aziz and his men were the reason I was alive. During the day, his men trusted me to work on their weapons. At night, to decline their invitation meant I could lose their trust and protection. Tonight was an offer I could not refuse.

Posted around Aziz's heavily fortified compound were armed men in four wooden and sandbagged guard towers overlooking his camp of one-story structures and a hundred yards towards one of the only three paved roads in Paktika Province. Until 1970, Orgun was the Provincial Capital of Paktika's fifteen districts. Even though Orgun is still the largest town with 90,000 residents, the authority was given to the 55,000 of Sharana because it sits on a main highway connecting it to Kabul. Regardless of logistical posture, Aziz's Special Squad of the 175 Afghan Local Police, ALP, controlled this region. Not the 500 Americans on Orgun-E, 2,000 Coalition troops in Sharana, or the unknown number of Afghan forces. This part of Afghanistan was stashed away for those inside Aziz's circle of trust. His land. His rules.

Commander Aziz personally invited everyone in attendance. The other men were from the Orgun-E area: local leaders, businessmen, and village elders. Outwardly, they came for free food, entertainment, and the possibility of future protection. On the inside, they feared Commander Aziz and did not dare insult their host. He had the firepower and backing of the Americans. Paid by US dollars, Aziz recruited at gunpoint.

A Tajik, Commander Aziz was the sole reason Taliban bodies dropped. No one questioned the man responsible for pushing the Taliban death counts into the thousands. My host was doing more in Paktika Province than the collective group of American forces in the area. To Brits and Americans, he was the Chuck Norris of Afghanistan. So notorious *Fox News, Time Magazine,* and *The New York Times* wrote articles on his involvement in alleged crimes against Pashtuns. *"Alleged,"* they said.

Before we were seated in the main dancing room, four of us were escorted outside to another building tucked away and folded inside Aziz's compound. Special Squad members shepherded us past concrete, mud, wood, and brick walls. Each turn put us face-to-face with another pair of Aziz's men. They were guarding something. Deeper we wove into a circle within an inner circle, the black hole of Aziz's complex, which turned out to be Aziz's personal bar.

For a dry country, the bar was drenched with alcohol. Familiar faces of Jack, Johnny, and Bombay greeted me. Aziz had good taste and through an opening in the wood bar, his tiger-striped woodland camouflage trousers and snugly fit plain black t-shirt strained as he poured us Dewar's White Label into marred Collins glasses. No idea how he was able to stock his bar, but I was not going to question my first taste of liquid freedom since I arrived.

The plywood walls were decorated with war trophies dating back to the 1800s. British and Soviet weapons; one day, American firearms would join the collection. Not because we would present them to our Afghan hosts, but because history repeats itself. You can invade Afghanistan, but you cannot control it. We would retreat like the rest.

Above the weapons sagged strings of mini white Christmas lights and a few other colors. This was not my first time in close proximity to Aziz, but from behind the dimly lit bar, he reminded me of the darker, quieter version of TV salesman Billy Mays. Instead of peddling OxiClean, he quenched my thirst with a slanted smile and a cozy stomach.

I brought my host a selection of Cubans, because I heard Aziz was a cigar smoker. Luckily, my friend in Switzerland had sent me a care package earlier that week. Through a translator, he thanked me. In return, I smacked my left breast with an open right palm with enough force; a beat of flesh was heard. A sign of respect. He nodded

in return while placing the cherry-stained humidor on the bar top. A gold wedding band on his left hand had known Aziz in his thinner days as his sausages hovered above the open humidor. He picked one of the medium-sized sticks, but the most expensive, a Partagas Series D No. 4 Reserve L. E. 2005. The man knew his Cuban leaves. As he turned the open cedar box around to the rest of the guests to pick a cigar, a Special Squad member cut Aziz's cigar and handed it back to him with a lighter at the ready. During this time, Aziz did not speak. After Aziz stoked his cigar, I went in and grabbed a torpedo-shaped Montecristo Vitolas No. 2. A rich and earthy choice because I wanted strong smoke to complement the whiskey.

Everyone else grabbed a cigar and lit up.

I admired Aziz from across the bar. He was the archetype for a badass. The man did not have muscles; his eyes did all of the heavy lifting. Beneath a half-crescent-shaped, billed baseball cap, I hunted his eyes for pupils, but they were one color. They lacked depth. For a man who was a few months older than me, he looked well into his late forties.

Aziz barely moved his mouth, always close-lipped; his hands did a majority of the communication. A slice through the air and Special Squad knew exactly what he wanted. A gestured judo chop followed by a point appeared to signal everything from bring me tea to change my sidearm for the Sig-Sauer and Kydex waist holster. If he did speak, his bulky black Cheech-like mustache bounced above a groomed beard of salt and teak.

We drank and smoked. Except I didn't see Aziz take a drink.

Thirty minutes passed and Commander Aziz's son escorted the chai boy around the bar like a VIP. At a rare Afghan six-foot-something, Aziz's son towered behind the boy, whose head barely came to the middle of his stilt torso. The boy was puppeted around by his undeveloped neck and right shoulder by way of Aziz's son's colossal right hand. The

boy was never left alone; a hand controlled the frightened performer's strings.

Aziz personally poured the boy a stiff four fingers of whiskey. He passed the drink to his son to give to the boy. Aziz's son watched the boy to make sure he drank it all. Through a grimaced face, the boy kept it down. Color raced to his young cheeks. Did I see embarrassment or fear? The second he finished, Aziz's son escorted the boy out and back through the maze, past the armed guards to the main hall to where the regular party was held.

With his right pointer finger, Commander Aziz wrapped up the boozefest as he motioned towards the closed door that lead out of his bar. Before my glass was taken away, I tipped the glass skyward and sucked the Dewar's down so no fingerprints remained on the end of those fingers of whiskey.

We traversed back through the many corners to the main room where everyone waited. Sounds of my boots crunching gravel and concrete mixed with sounds coming from the band. Inside the well-lit and largest room of Aziz's compound, a four-person male band played on a raised stage with speakers. An Afghanistan flag hung from a floor stand and nearly touched the carpet in front of the left portion of the stage. Scattered around the stage were plastic-wrapped cases of bottled water, the same found at water stations on US bases.

Behind the band hung large laminated posters and framed photos of Commander Aziz. In the biggest two, Aziz did not look into the camera, but off to his left, deep in thought. The posters took much of the wall. Centered yellow Arabic writing arched above and below his head. In the left two frames, a superimposed Aziz visited a tropical island and a gold-domed mosque. Both pictures bore the same pose as the posters. The two framed photos on the right had Commander Aziz chumming up Yasser Arafat and Kim Jong-Il; in those he looked at the camera.

The band sat cross-legged behind their instruments on a red felt carpet. Each member wore cotton white-collared robes and had facial hair of varying length and thickness. In the center was the most distinguishable member of the band, the singer. He had the sole microphone, and on top of his head, he wore a black wool hat, *pakol.* The round-topped lid resembled a thick-banded unrolled condom, minus the thinner tip. Both are used in the same manner: roll down the sides until the thick band rests above the hairline.

The band didn't look happy playing music. The only animation came from the singer, because his mouth moved. Most musicians have a stage presence and smiles across their faces. Throughout the night, the men played and every couple of seconds they stared at Aziz.

In came Aziz wearing a new outfit; the mixed shades of muted greens, light beige, and dark brown colors of the Army Combat Uniform trousers in the MultiCam camouflage. He tucked a fresh MultiCam TDU Rapid Assault Shirt into the trousers, allowing his gut to lap over his belt. Not sure what warranted a wardrobe change, but this uniform pattern had not been issued to the regular army yet, just to deployed units. A coyote tan baseball cap completed his wardrobe.

Aziz's husky frame sunk into the left corner of the couch in a casual slouch, the first time he looked comfortable and willing to let himself let loose.

Behind us, eight rows of plastic chairs were filled with Afghans. A pair of Commander Aziz's men blocked the door and faced the outside while his remaining men stood and lined the inner walls.

Aziz motioned for his property, the chai boy. The party continued as all eyes converged on the boy. He was the main attraction.

I leaned forward and rested my elbows into the meaty portion of my thighs, and propped my head on my fists. To my left I noticed what could be a winning lottery ticket: an upturned Aziz lip, a suggestion of a smile, a half Mona Lisa. This boy made Aziz happy, a rare sight like getting one of the Queen's Guard to laugh while on duty.

Around the room, dark Afghan eyes fixed on us, the foreigners with Aziz. These Afghan men, hardened from equal parts fear and survival, had to grow up fast in their harsh environment. The innocence of their childhood passes too quickly when they are forced take up arms.

After the conclusion of a song, Aziz passed paper money from a wad kept inside his left pocket to one of his Special Squad members. The $20 found its way into the singer's thick hatband. His wad was made up of American money, not Afghan bank notes.

The youngest and shortest of my group, soldier Brandon Love, stopped clapping to lean over to me. "Oh man, I think my favorite part is coming up. It's so badass, Aziz has his own song. If it is, I'll let you know because we stand." Love attended other Aziz parties during his yearlong deployment and filled me in on the spectacle when he wasn't frozen in delight. That was not often, so I had a lot of questions. Special Squad members filed in to a cadence of beaten bass.

Love broadcasted, "Yes! It's time." He stood and I followed, positioning my body towards the singer. One by one, heavily trod small steps marked by high left knees raised parallel to the floor came crashing down to the carpet. Boots stomped out imaginary life. Stoic faces on the men performing for Aziz. Only his satisfaction mattered. I was unable to see if the guests behind me also took to their feet in respect. If they valued a life that led into tomorrow, I guarantee they did. The stutter steps matched the rich drum bass and the singer's voice sunk deeper and less lyrical. I can see why Love loved this song; I too was getting pumped up by the band's call to arms. Special Squad members pounded their chests and marched on into a circle formation.

Cheers and whistles erupted after the last note of the song. Aziz's men returned outside and the singer had to move the paper money to the back of his head to allow him to see. His face was completely covered in Andrew Jacksons. Aziz, the only one with American dollars, sent money forward to the musicians.

I looked over at Love, and the baby-faced blond member of my group smiled brighter. He always smiled, which I had previously noticed, but his face was intense with delight.

The chai boy danced a few more songs, and then Aziz pointed at Love, who didn't notice because he was watching the chai boy. I got Love's attention, and he saw Aziz pointing to the dance floor. He stood up, and he was a little taller than the chai boy.

Love turned to me and over the music he said, "Aziz always makes me dance."

William ("Billy") Sanchez grew up in Northridge, California and enlisted in the Marine Corps from 1998 – 2012. He deployed to Iraq, and later to Afghanistan as a contractor. He graduated magna cum laude *from Sacred Heart University with a BA in English and is currently a candidate for an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Tampa. When he is not writing non-fiction, Billy scours the US for tacos and craft beer. He currently lives in Naples, Florida with his supermodel/law student girlfriend Megan and their two fur babies, Semper and Bear.*

Zero Week

By Lucas Shepherd

Buzz Lightyear volunteers to be dorm leader on the second day, which is strange, or at least I think so, because my recruiter told me whatever you do in basic training, don't volunteer for anything. Dorm leader puts you in the spotlight, front and center, and I've got just enough machismo to be comfortable four or five trainees deep in formation but not nearly enough to accept the role of lapdog to our instructor, Staff Sergeant Reed.

Anxious to please, ready to accept his role as surrogate leader, Buzz steps forward. He certainly looks the part—lantern jaw, blue eyes, Boy Scout demeanor. Mister America. The kind of guy that doesn't realize his nickname was chosen to mock him.

Sergeant Reed looks him up and down. "Think you got what it takes?"

Buzz Lightyear hesitates. Probably too late to back out now. He nods.

Sergeant Reed shakes his head. "The Air Force has changed since I joined," he says as we enter the day room one morning. "You'll never know what it's like to be afraid."

He tells us that he loved the fear—searched for it the way an alcoholic finds drops of beer on the bar, gulped it down like Popeye's can of spinach. He has an enlarged diaphragm from a lifetime of yelling, two V-shaped scars under his chin, and the shiniest boots I've ever seen.

All forty-three trainees making up our flight sit like prisoners: knees in chest, arms wrapped around shins, fingers interlaced. Sergeant Reed teaches us to be airmen, which he says is more than just rolling t-shirts and folding underwear in six-inch squares. He sits at his desk and licks his lips and tells us a story about war.

"This was a long time ago," he says, arms crossed. "Some of you were in junior high, getting picked last for dodgeball."

This elicits big laughs from everyone.

"Lock it up," says Sergeant Reed.

The room falls silent.

He was riding in a convoy to the outskirts of Fallujah or somewhere, back when manpower was low in Iraq and they tasked airmen to patrol with soldiers and grunts. His best friend stood up top by the fifty-cal because no one else wanted to. The ride was bumpy, he tells us, and the driver argued with the front seat passenger about college football, about who played who in what bowl game. Sergeant Reed—he was just a senior airman back then—felt the grit in his mouth, bitter and crunchy, sand finding every crack in the vehicle and wriggling in to torment him. Suddenly his best friend's body went slack and slipped down, his chest open and warm, arms twitching with electricity. The two men up front started yelling curses. Sergeant Reed grabbed the fifty cal and aimed to the desert. Diamonds glinted in the sand all around him but nothing else was in sight—no al-Qaeda, no Ba'ath party loyalists, no smoke traces, not even a camel spider. Just the other convoy vehicles. So he held the trigger back and fired at the empty desert, tendons in his fingers pulled tight as violin strings, shells

pouring out beside him, hot brass piling in small, hateful bunches. But he saw nothing.

We are quieter than Sunday school while he recounts this story of war, something we will never have to—or get to?—experience. Sergeant Reed has seen the abyss and it stared back hard into his soul, but we will never even reach the chasm. His aura grows larger and larger, a big and burly mystique that chokes its way down our throats and festers in our souls.

He arrives early in the morning and makes us march, his hot breath smelling like bourbon, steps sloppy, cadence uneven, gunpowder-gray eyes lost in yesterday. He yells when we fail to achieve Air Force standards. He punishes us with pushups and squats and leg lifts, but we forgive him. We listen for encouragement.

He sings while we march, his voice hovering over the sound of marching boots. His melody is a faintly audible roar.

"All God's children," he sings, "all God's children go to war."

He sings and we march, not daring to react when jackrabbits emerge from behind fiddlewood stalks, fearful of asking permission to adjust when sweat tickles our most private of places. We choke silently on the dust stirred awake while our boots keep rhythm to his words. Sergeant Reed continues to roar.

In the dayroom he tells us how to wash blood out of our DCUs, smiling while he speaks because he knows we are to be crew chiefs and mechanics and cooks and loadmasters, because we will never answer the call of battle and watch our brothers go limp and slide down the gun turret, torso a bloody mess, eyes falling back into brains.

"This is the new Air Force. You're lucky to have missed the fighting," he says, but his pensive headshake tells a different story.

If ever in our lives we see patriotic holiday banners with such established sayings as "Some gave all, all gave some," we'll know which category we fall under. We are not the heroes of our youth.

Having grown up on a diet of tough-talking war movies, I'm surprised to learn that the instructors aren't allowed to swear at us. Instead they employ a litany of Air Force-approved euphemisms. Obscenities are downgraded to such humorous phrases as "Holy Jack Russell Terrier" and "What the fish" and "Cheese and rice." Sometimes it's hard not to laugh, but God save you if you do crack up.

"I might accidentally cuss sometimes. Is that going to offend anyone?" asks Sergeant Reed.

Orr speaks up in his mousy voice. "I only get offended when you say GD."

I hold my breath and turn from Orr to Sergeant Reed. I assume that any question Sergeant Reed asks is rhetorical.

"Fair enough," he finally says. "No taking the Lord's name in vain. Anything else?"

Sergeant Reed's curse words slip out when he yells at us for doing stupid things like not knowing how to do a to-the-rear-march (me) or bobbing your head up and down in formation (my bunkmate Kennedy) or forgetting to put your cover back on when exiting the dining facility (everyone). Otherwise, he sticks to the approved list of substitute swears.

By far the preferred euphemism used around here is "nut." The instructors say, "Look straight ahead, nut," or "Come on, nut, get moving."

There is a reasonable, non-genitalia explanation for this. Sergeant Reed says we are all like little acorns now but after graduation we will burst from our shells and take in water and spread our roots out and become mighty oaks in the Air Force forest. It sounds like a rehearsed speech, but it wins us over regardless.

"It doesn't mean testicle," he explains. "It's what we call trainees."

Trainees become something like those Etch-A-Sketch toys. Shaken up, old lines and designs forgotten, a new, blank slate to write on.

It happens to everyone; there's no use trying to argue about the way things are here. We start at Zero Week instead of Week One because you cannot have one with zero. Does that sound crazy? It makes sense to us. We nod our heads. We say, Yes sir.

No trainee wants to be called into Sergeant Reed's office, located in between the two bays. It's a place of one-sided catharsis—he yells at us and then feels better. He beckons me to his office on the third day, when I'm exiting the showers with only a towel to hide my shame. My shower shoes yelp with freshness as I cross the threshold.

"You have tattoos," he says from behind the desk.

"Yes sir."

"The zigzag on your upper arm," he says, mimicking the design with a finger in the air. "That gang related?"

"No sir." I have a death grip on my towel. Somewhere I hear a clock ticking. "It's supposed to be a lightning bolt."

Sergeant Reed considers this response. "Then you're not in violation. You have some nice tattoos." He continues his paperwork.

My face burns with pride as I march to my wall locker and gather my uniform.

"I was going to get a tattoo once," says Buzz Lightyear. His bunk is five beds away, and he's wearing a shirt but no pants.

An exhaustive list of all the tattoos Buzz Lightyear might choose: his last name in Old English font, an American flag attached to an M-16, some memorable quote from *Toy Story.* I say, "So what happened?"

"Oh, you know." He rolls his eyes. "I sobered up. Can you guess what those are going to look like when you're eighty?"

Images of blurred ink enter my mind.

In the afternoon we get letters from back home, which Sergeant Reed flings at us from his desk, perhaps because he's having a bad day.

Or maybe he's upset that no one writes him letters with pink cursive and X's and O's on the back, stinking of perfume and freshness and everything that isn't basic training. We grasp at the swooping envelopes, anxious to escape the desperate confusion of basic training for even a while. We read the words feverishly and stuff them into our pillowcases.

At night, after Sergeant Reed has left us, the bays light up, a soupy glow beneath wool blankets. Flashlights click on and everyone begins to write back to their family. This is what I see every night—trainees staying awake after the Taps bugle, hiding under tent blankets and insisting on what little privacy is afforded them.

Pencil and pen marks precede erasing sounds, a hard rubber scrubbing or furious ink scribbling, respectively, to cleanse the paper of mistakes. Sometimes writing sounds disappear from under the lightning bug blankets, and the crispness of that day's mail folding and unfolding begins.

Letters are read over and over, memorized. Never again in our lives will receiving mail feel this way. In a month our awful memories will render the words ineffective and worthless and we'll forget exactly what the letters said but we'll remember how alive they made us feel in that particular moment, and that is as grand as anything I've ever known.

Moments like that grab me by the throat. The letters we get in basic training are so pure and necessary they make me sick, and when I get caught up in these moments I just want them to go away because inside I feel helpless and alone, like my lungs are two hot air balloons sailing away from everything familiar. But truthfully I live for those moments; they define me. I reside where the pencil leaves the paper. I build my home where life makes so much sense it hurts.

Buzz Lightyear wakes us up by pounding an aluminum garbage can. After flicking the lights on and off, he walks the rows of

perfectly aligned bunk beds and yells, rapping the garbage can with his knobby knuckles. He's an easy target, still wearing the shirt and no pants combo. Waterman throws a pillow at him.

"Drop and give me twenty-five," says an incensed Buzz.

"Are you joking?"

Buzz starts to freak out on Waterman, yelling and cussing and spitting. Waterman rolls out of his bunk, gives Buzz a sour look, and performs one set of unenthusiastic pushups. At the risk of being labeled sexist, they are akin to Girl Scout pushups. Still, Buzz is satisfied. He waltzes over to my double bunk where Kennedy, cocooned in blankets above me, still has his eyes shut.

"Up and at 'em," grunts Buzz, poking the cocoon.

Kennedy tells him where to go.

"I'm in charge, trainee," he says. "Listen to your dorm leader or I'll tell Sergeant Reed. You have five seconds to get out of bed."

Kennedy complies, muttering curses. He could sleep longer than the rest of us because he doesn't need to shave his face yet. He could be twelve years old for all I know. He could be just hitting puberty. He could be wishing his face grew whiskers as he stood beside us in front of the latrine sinks each morning. He could be on patrol in Afghanistan.

Being born before the advent of Xbox and Playstation, I have memories of playing with an Etch-A-Sketch. It was once a desired toy, and maybe you could even argue its position as precursor to modern handheld video games.

Anyway, I could draw a squiggly square under a wobbly triangle, which was supposed to be a house. My dream house, in fact; the place I would live when I had to leave Mom and Dad's. My older sister, upset with the amount of time my blueprints took, waited for me to take a break and leave the Etch-A-Sketch alone. She was still holding

the toy over her head and giving it all she had when I returned from the bathroom. I cried for hours at the empty screen. Finally my sister said, "Just start over."

That day we practice marching. I suck at marching. I never could dance, never had any rhythm. We march all day and when we get back to the dorms, our uniforms are ringed with salt crystals.

In the morning we are late getting dressed. Everyone is sluggish, as the first grueling week of basic training catches up with us. But there is hope: if we make it through the day, it will complete one week. Five more to go.

Buzz Lightyear, dressed in his usual pants-but-no-shirt ensemble and holding a razor, walks over to us. He has a shaving cream beard on that glorious chin of his, white foaminess coated around his lips and cheeks too. "What's taking so long?"

Sergeant Reed barges in and balks at our laziness. He yells, but no one is really listening. So he pushes over a bunk bed. For some reason, this act of half-cocked violence—I mean, we know he's killed people before—feels out of character for Sergeant Reed. It would almost make more sense if he threw a trainee out the window.

As the frame is tipping over sideways, dumping pillows and 50-threadcount sheets and wool blankets, everyone expects the perfectly aligned bunk beds to fall like a stack of dominoes. We hold our breath. Even Sergeant Reed looks anxious. But the bed bumps ineffectually against its neighbor and hangs crooked, two legs suspended in the air.

"Huh," says Sergeant Reed. "How about that." He looks at Buzz. "What is taking this flight so long to get out the door?"

Buzz is scared.

"What's wrong with you? Why can't you get these trainees out on time?"

Buzz doesn't say anything. I feel embarrassed for him. Slightly. A crowd has gathered around the scene, watching with sideways glances.

"You're fired," says Sergeant Reed. "Waterman, you're the new dorm leader. Get dressed and get down to morning chow." He gives Buzz one final glare and says, "Couldn't even make it through Zero Week. Are you sure you're gonna last in my Air Force?"

Buzz Lightyear nods his head vigorously, like you do with an Etch-A-Sketch when you're ready to start over. Sergeant Reed exits with a slam of the door. Buzz goes into the latrine and shaves off his white foam beard, puts his pants on, double-knots his bootlaces, and then joins the rest of us for morning chow.

Lucas Shepherd teaches technical writing, creative writing, and a class on war narrative at the University of New Mexico. A two-time Pushcart Prize-nominee, his creative and scholarly work has appeared in The Atlantic, Aldous Huxley Annual, The Writing Disorder, *and elsewhere. He served in the United States Air Force from 2006-2010.*

Fiction.

Triple-X

By M. L. Doyle

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to rein it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lie there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple cots down from me mumbles, turning over and slamming a pillow over her heard.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to

the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.

"Turn that shit down. NOW!"

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip-flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder, and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sex, slip back together across the camp.

They are scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I'm not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud-covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built-in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those who aren't standing already stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears if not a bit forced.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Keep it down now."

"Yes, Sergeant."

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled *thank yous* from my tentmates that drift through the anonymous dark don't lessen the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three-twenty. Behind my heavy lids I still see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they've left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won't allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don't know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.

M. L. Doyle is the co-author of two memoirs: I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home, *which chronicles the story of Shoshana Johnson, a member of the 507th Maintenance Company who was captured during an ambush and held prisoner in the early days of the Iraq War; and* A Promise Fulfilled; My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer, *that recounts Julia Cleckley's struggles to care for her children and advance her career despite terrible loss and unspeakable tragedy. Unafraid of genre jumping, Mary has also authored a three-book mystery series and a four-novella erotic romance series.*

Too Far East

By Anthony R. Garner

"I can't wait to get out of this hellhole," she said.

"Where in God's name are we supposed to go?" I asked.

Danita was not content with our home, so this quarrel occurred as frequently as the sun would set. It was meant to be temporary, a starter house, but she had outgrown it while I was deployed in Iraq. Fresh paint lingered in my memory, yet I returned to used appliances and loose hinges. All the neighbors and their wives were strangers. Whether I was ready or not, Danita wanted to move on with the life she envisioned before I enlisted.

"I should have waited to move out of Mama's," she said.

"We have our own space," I said.

"I'm trapped here all day, Randall. Four years, just me and Colton. What happened to us? You don't want anyone over. You don't take me out. Who do you think you are?" she said.

Colton begged for a snack as I suggested that she get out and take him for a walk.

"You get out," she said under her breath.

I tried to listen closer as she ripped open a package of animal-shaped fruit snacks. Mistakenly, I asked her to repeat that.

"You take him!" she said.

Colton watched my eyes as he nibbled a red elephant and returned to his pile of Legos.

"Our own front yard isn't safe with them pit bulls running around," she said.

I shrugged my shoulders as if that was the first time I'd heard about them. She stabbed her finger toward the front window like they were stalking us, watching us gossip about them.

I had seen them before, though, on a rare day of being dismissed early from the air base. Trash was overflowing in the kitchen, so I took it outside with an excuse to sip a beer and smoke. They strolled around the corner as I shut the garbage bin. One was a muscular male, mostly black with a brown hindquarter. The other was lean from nursing, and was pure white from paws to snout. I lit up right before they leapt into a sprint, like the coil of my lighter was a starting pistol. The male ransacked the patio of a home catty-corner to ours. There he claimed his prize of an old, scroungy cat. He yanked it onto the lawn and shared it with his mate. He was proud, but in a rage. She was hungry and perhaps grateful. The whole scene lasted one cigarette. I lost sight of them a quarter mile down the block. After I chugged the first bottle, I then contemplated with the other five longnecks on the couch by the front window.

When Danita arrived, she asked me to bring in the groceries while she put Colton down for a nap. She didn't ask me where those beers went, or why I was so quiet. I'm not sure that she ever knew those neighbors had a cat. I've tried to forget that too.

"If only we had a gun," she would say sometimes.

"The solution to every problem…" I would say.

". . . isn't a bullet." She would then storm off and start Colton's bath, or take one herself.

I just wasn't comfortable with a firearm in our house. Colton had his daddy back home and that blessing combated the darker thoughts from taking aim. The last name I wanted on my kill list was my own.

Our house hunting focused on listings in Andover, a quarter hour due east from Wichita right off Highway 54. It had been a "top ten fastest growing" community for the last decade. They also had the most land for parks, the most equipped YMCA, and the most families with one or more children. All of that was also cited in spring home guides that Danita collected from the supermarket. "Come and ye shall find refuge," should have been chiseled on their town gateway. I quietly knew, though, that the true appeal was she'd be closer to her mama and our church was just up the road on the edge of the town.

The first house we toured was miraculously ours that same day. The realtor was just around the corner at Slim Pick'n's when I called his number on the yard sign.

"Yeah, let me just finish my sandwich and I'll be right over," he said.

"Okay. See you then," I said. "No worries."

Danita scoffed, because she hated that phrase. I wouldn't justify it to her though. Why it gave me courage was confidential. She didn't need to know that those were Sergeant Eckhart's final words before our convoy was ambushed, or that they still echoed every time that scene hauntingly repeated in my mind. The less worries, the better, and no worries was serenity.

I was scoping out the backyard with Colton at my side when I heard a diesel engine throttle up, veer closer, and sputter gravel as it stopped. Danita shouted for us to come up front. For an inner-limits property it was intriguingly large, and so was the super-cab, long-bed, raised-up truck that was now in the driveway—and so was the man who drove it.

Champ Smith introduced himself as the "QB of Realty." He was tall, broad, and around our age, mid-twenties. I flashed my nice-to-meet-you smile and shook his hand. "We ought to work on that grip, son," he said. He leaned to high-five Colton, but my son was also uncertain.

"We're the Bloodworths," said my wife with an extended hand. She then introduced each of us and couldn't have been more proud to do so. "It's so nice to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine, darling," he said as he kissed her knuckles. She would've signed buyer's papers right then, right there, on the hood of his Chevy.

"You look military," he said to me.

"Yes, I'm over at McConnell."

"You guys from around here, then?" he asked as he opened the key safety box.

I stood in silence, a protest of sorts. I disliked Champ and his Walmart cowboy boots.

"Born and raised," Danita chimed in. She locked arms with me, but kept talking to him. She jabbered about senior year, being pregnant, and our courthouse elopement. He listened to her every word, so she carried on about stay-at-home motherhood, my deployment, and how she wouldn't have made it through a day of it without the love and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I remained silent when Champ agreed with her that God was good. He then set aside the lock, huddled us beneath his arms, and pointed to the house to the east.

"You meet them neighbors yet?" he asked.

Danita shook her head, nuzzling deeper into his pits.

"They're Muslims," he said.

That's it. He said, "They're Muslims," and welcomed us into the house.

Danita bee-lined it to the kitchen, dragging Colton along. Meanwhile, I stood at the front door stealing glances at these neighbors' house. Whoever lived there had not mowed in a couple of weeks. Their house resembled the other designs on the block, but had chipped siding paint and a loose gutter drain. The backyard gate sagged something awful. I wanted to know more about them, or maybe less. I supposed that I needed to meet them first.

"Hey, Champ," I said as Danita waltzed back into the living room. "Why is this house still on the market?"

"It wasn't until yesterday," he said, "Isn't that fate? I set up this place for a little old lady at my church. All she had to do was sign a few hand-it-over type of papers, but her fricking son threw a hissy fit about taxes and insurance. Consider it a belated Christmas gift from her to you."

"How sweet of you," said my wife, "stepping in at a time of need."

"Well, if you're just giving it away," I said, "we'll take it off your hands."

"It's perfect, truly," she said. "Isn't it, babe?"

"Heaven on Earth," I said.

Danita bargained with Champ for a dozen, more or less, minor repairs before we'd close. He said it'd all take a month or so, and she was invited to oversee the projects one by one. I was too, but said, "I trust you, both of you." I secretly hoped a better offer would nullify ours.

Life then carried on as we knew it. Seven out of ten of my battle buddies returned from the Middle East. At some point, all of them were decorated. Danita thought she was pregnant again, but it was a blighted ovum. I had to Google it. I also enrolled in a couple of online courses and attended a few AA meetings, here and there. Danita prepared to homeschool Colton, even though we were in a top-ten rated school district. We adopted a golden retriever too, Daisy. I had been stalking the Humane Society website for pit bull listings when

Colton pointed her out as a birthday present for his mom. In between all that, we packed our little starter life into little brown boxes and invited potential tenants to see what our old house would have to offer.

The man we chose was Gregory Newell.

Greg cleaned up that day like no other time I'd see him again. His fingernails were clean of grease and his t-shirt was stainless. He needed a place to share custody of his six-year-old son with his "bitch of an ex-girlfriend." Danita offered that our sons could be friends. I nodded too. He just needed a week or so to get the deposit together. Danita waived it. He'd been happy to prorate a check for April, but was just on his way to pick up payment for replacing a radiator. Danita rolled it into May. Of all the applicants, he was the pick of the litter.

"I'll give you a call, Greg. Let me just draft up some papers first," I said.

After I locked the door behind me, we all grinned, shook hands, and waved goodbye.

A biblical marriage study at our church started up later that night. Danita begged me to take her. We drove through the heart of Andover to get there.

"Look, Colton! Our new house is just up here," said Danita.

"It'll be there for the rest of our lives," I said.

"You don't know that," she said.

In a divine way, I stubbornly felt like I did.

She signaled down our road-to-be and said, "Those must be them Muslim neighbors."

I piled on the brakes and nearly wrecked my family in a single-car collision. Danita's leather-bound Bible protected her breasts from the dashboard. Colton cried because his Skittles spilled. I blamed it on some goddamn mutt, even pointed at the imaginary thing out my window. The squeal of my tires also got attention from down the block. A man and a woman, and their young child, stood there staring

at us. Our families were so similar, yet so distant. He then hurried them into their sedan. There wasn't a dog, just them—my finger pointing right at them. All three of us were dead silent for what little remained of the drive.

When our Bible study let out, our pastor was practicing his sermon in the chapel. Danita moseyed right up to the pulpit and appealed that he pray with us . . . for us. We bowed our heads and held hands there: "Guide us, Lord. Bless us with your light. May we never fall astray. Shine for us a path with glory and grace, to an eternal house on that salvation's day. Amen."

Danita believed in that moment with all her heart that Gregory Newell should be our tenant. We were ready to move on. He was ready to move on. With faith, it'd all be alright.

I called him right then and there, in the middle of that chapel, before the eyes of God.

"I won't let you down, mister. This means so much to me, you don't even know," he said, and then hung up. I missed my cue about the first month's rent check.

"I am not going to live with you anymore," she said.

"Where in the hell are you going to live then?" I asked.

Danita was not content with our marriage. She couldn't withhold that from me any longer than she already had. We sat across from each other in a red and white-checkered booth. She'd sent Colton up to the buffet. It was the end of Mother's Day rush and the pizza was getting stale.

"I want a divorce," she said.

She graciously agreed that I could keep the second house. E-7 pay covered the mortgage. Greg still occupied our first, and I often covered his too. She took most of the little brown boxes and Daisy. After a month or so, a judge agreed in my favor for better custody. I took Monday through Wednesday and every other weekend. By Father's

Day, I was out at the curb helping him out of a super-cab, long-bed, raised-up truck. My grip was getting aggressively stronger.

"Meet them neighbors yet?" asked Champ.

"Not formally," I said.

"Bake them a cake and go say hello," he said.

"Fuck your cake, Champ," I said with cupped hands over Colton's ears.

Champ dodged Colton's backpack as I swung it a millimeter from his face onto my shoulder, and then I hoisted my son up on to the other.

"Don't drop him, Randall," said Danita. "It's not safe up there." I looked past her for a second, and then directly into her eyes to ask, "Danita, where is safe for you? Not here, not there. Where? Not with me. With him? Where?"

A moment of silence fell in the center of us. It was all momentary.

The neighbor's garage door then punched open, like the heavens had erupted and the rapture was at hand. Their gray, gently used Cadillac slowly rolled backward. The window tint was too strong to identify any passengers, or the driver. We just stood there with our lips parted, baring our teeth. Colton pointed as the right rear window rolled down. A little girl's hand sprung from the black square and waved.

I watched their garage door close. I watched the window roll up, too. I even watched a seemingly flawless stop with a right turn onto the main road.

Danita was right, it was time for me to get to know other people.

Colton and I liked working together on his kindergarten homework. On my days, he unfailingly brought packets of coloring, numbers, and letter pronunciation. I would assist with portions of it as I paced from chore to chore, or the fridge to the microwave, or between texts from single mommies who found out I was a single daddy. Our favorite

activity was cutting and pasting shopper-ad collages. He snipped out brand food mascots, and I saved the coupons.

"Dad?" he asked as he sheared off the thumb of Tony the Tiger.

"Yeah, buddy," I said.

"Is Champ going to be my other daddy?"

I bit my tongue, and then the doorbell rang.

It was the young girl from next door. She had such sparkly green eyes, much like the gems I found in Panjshir Valley. Her smile was utterly guiltless.

"I'm Aisha," she said. "Can he play?"

I looked up toward her house to the east. I presumed that the woman standing there waving was Aisha's mother. I waved back.

Aisha ran through so fast that she nearly swept my legs out from under me. They were playing in Colton's bedroom in the blink of an eye. I heard her say, "My daddy is on a plane," as they dumped Legos onto the floor. "I'll be right back," I said with an anxious lump in my throat. Neither of them heard me. My palm was sweaty against the glass pane of the screen door. I was not ready, yet the time had come to introduce myself.

I inventoried her appearance as I crossed over their property line. I didn't expect a burqa, but she was so unveiled. Her hair was in a frizzy ponytail with bands of brunette overlapping strands of gray. Her practiced, youthful smile proudly exhibited motherhood. Tissues feathered from one of her cardigan pockets, and a headless Barbie doll stowed away in the other. If she was older than forty, then she had me fooled. And, she was white—like all my other neighbors.

"Hi, I'm Randall," I said.

"I know, yes. We have your mail sometimes," she said. "My name is Farrah."

Until I met her, I had long forgotten that I once shared a bottle of mulberry vodka with an Armenian fighter pilot who trained and refueled at our flight line. Farrah shared his accent.

"Do you still have any of that mail?" I asked.

She apologized and broke eye contact. I smothered an overgrown weed with my sneaker. We folded our arms in unison and looked back up.

"No worries. It was probably junk anyhow," I said.

"Martin is quite selective, is all," she said.

I made sure Martin was her husband's name, that he was on business, and that it was not a problem that we were chatting. The first two were definite, but the third got jumbled between other small talk. Martin wasn't flying back until Thanksgiving, so I had a couple of months to make sure. I then welcomed Aisha to play with Colton anytime. Farrah reciprocated my offer.

After work and weekends were a life well lived. Aisha and Colton were in and out, in and out. I likened them to the coyote and roadrunner chasing each other across Arizona. Farrah didn't know the reference. From then on, the kids played while I taught her American pop culture from my smart phone. That was our deal. We smashed weeds in her yard and I introduced her to child movie stars and dead celebrities. I also agreed to mow her yard when I mowed mine. I looked forward to it, and to our playdates. They knocked on our door first most evenings. Her only two rules were no pork for dinner and they could never play behind closed doors. I crossed my heart and swore on it. Chilled September moons were in full force by the time we all called it a night.

Of course, Danita didn't condone their friendship. She didn't like Colton playing with that girl next door. I asked if her outburst was more about me and Farrah. She said she didn't know there was a "me and Farrah." There essentially wasn't, but I couldn't be honest with her.

The playdates eased the pain of the divorce. It wasn't sudden, but it was all so shameful. My therapist at base framed it all as a concussion to my reality and a whiplash to my emotions. Double whammy! I had

more absences those first few months than I had clocked hours; more debt and overdraft fees than I had income; and more whiskey in my cups than I had cola. I had procrastinated on essays and failed exams. I failed at being a husband, a father, and a man. But, that was then and this was now. I had survived! My lovely neighbor ladies were a spark in the ashes. I felt like the proverbial phoenix, defying the laws of physics, society, and God himself. Permission was granted. I could finally erase myself from the list of damnation that I had chiseled in my psyche. The only remaining question was how to get Gregory Newell and Martin off that list too.

My last day with Colton that week was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. He woke up excited to play with Aisha. He didn't want to eat breakfast or watch the parade. He sprinted out the door with a handful of Cheerios. I watched through the screen as my son set off into the world, free as a meadowlark. He was safe and loved. Meanwhile, I did some chores: washed dishes, texted Greg, vacuumed, called Greg, and then I changed out a roll of toilet paper. I was productive. Greg needed to pay November rent, but I eventually stopped trying and dozed off.

Colton was nose to nose with me when I woke up on the couch.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

"Aisha's daddy came back."

"Did he send you home?"

His eyes welled up and he ran to his bedroom. I looked out a window to see their garage door closing. The protective feeling a father has for his son weighs at peculiar times.

That evening I baked while Colton watched a Charlie Brown special. I had four pies in the oven: two pumpkin and two pecan. I only wanted one of each for my house. The others were an impulsive welcome home gift for Martin. I was adamant that the time had come to meet

the man of that house. The pies were still hot when I carried them across our property line.

Martin answered the door after a couple of knocks and a ring of their doorbell. His frame consumed the doorway. His staunch gaze and stoic jaw bore into my masculinity. I was just a Boy Scout kneeling at this warrior's doorstep. All I had to offer was pie. It was too late to place them back in the oven, or gift them to Danita to reconcile, or smash them in his face and run.

"Hi, I'm Randall," I said, "your neighbor."

"I know who you are, neighbor," he said.

I wished him a happy Thanksgiving and then held up the pumpkin and pecan shields.

He beckoned Farrah. She sprung over from rinsing dishes and retrieved the pies. I'm not sure that she knew it was me. She only looked at him, and him at me, and me at him. Nothing could have interrupted us worse than the annoying ringtone I expressly set for Greg.

"Yeah, what is it?" I barked into my phone with a shoulder slanted from Martin.

"I've got your rent money," said Greg.

"On the night before fucking Thanksgiving?" I yelled.

Martin started to shut the door, but I held out my hand as an impulsive door stop.

"I'll just come get it. Where are you?" I asked, although I knew damn well where.

Martin grinned at watching me fluster, missing the end call button five times over.

"Could Colton stay here while I run an errand? He's friends with your daughter," I said.

"The sun is down," he said.

"It's alright, love. Unpack and I'll watch the kids," said Farrah as she covered the pies.

The drive could take half an hour, and then back again, so I sprinted back over to get Colton ready. Danita and Champ were picking him up around then to go meet a fake Santa at Towne East Mall. It was a tight schedule, but so was my budget. No worries, despite the clocks.

Greg was already drunk when I burst into Jerry's Grill and Pub. All the regulars were too. They all shouted, "Randall," and hollered, "Happy Thanksgiving!"

A part of me wanted to join them, but I planted myself behind my cheery tenant's barstool instead. He slapped down a twenty on the bar and ordered two spiced rums. That was my drink too. He swiveled to face me with both in hand. I declined mine with a whisk of my fingers.

"Consider this your eviction notice," I said.

He pulled out a pocketful of cash and aligned the bills. I nodded my head along with his count, most of them twenties. He stacked them like bullets in a clip, and then loaded one in his left and aimed for another round. I made my first ever sober decision in a bar: I swiped his stool out from under him, grabbed him by the cash hand, and graciously suspended him to the floor.

"This," I said, "is for November and December. However much it is, wherever you got it, I don't care. Stay through New Year's Eve, but you're out on the first."

He let go of the whole stack of cash. The fear in his eyes reminded me of the children in compounds we had raided. Their lives were not at stake as much as the very little they possessed. We wanted neither, but they occasionally sacrificed the former for the latter.

When I pulled up, Champ stood on my porch and Danita set Daisy free on a long leash. I'd warned her about shitting on my lawn. The mess always got tracked into my house.

"Where's my son?" she demanded to know.

I hotfooted it across the grass. She tried to meet my stride before I was too far east.

"With those people, Randall? Why didn't you call me to come get him?"

"Providence," I said as I knocked on their door.

Farrah opened it. I wrapped my arms around her, thanked her, and hugged her tight.

I entered to find Martin cleaning his pistol on the coffee table in the front room. Yellow haze filled the space from old fluorescents and dusty drapes. I had seen their framed painting of Athena battling Ares at Goodwill, but I didn't have the balls to put it in my cart. It seemed that Martin had unpacked fairly quickly for such a long trip. My heart was racing from outrunning Danita, who now stood in their front doorway ranting at Farrah about "me and Farrah."

Martin watched me as he assembled his firearm. I had an acute sense of his training.

"Are the kids downstairs?" I asked him, or her, or anyone who would answer.

Nobody did. I stood dead center in a triangle of chaos. Who was cuckolding who here? Danita wouldn't shut up; Farrah wouldn't look at me; Champ couldn't stay off porches; and Martin wouldn't take that hateful grin off his face. Only then did I want that spiced rum.

"I did not fuck your wife, Martin! Okay? It never went that far. We're just friends!"

It was a defensive thought. It just rolled out of my mouth and onto the floor. The tick-tock of a wall clock was the only sound in the room. The crescendo of my heartbeat began to drown it out. I didn't dare breathe, as it could have incited a war between our nations.

Martin cocked the slider and peered down a hopefully empty chamber. He flipped the safety, I think, and wrapped his grip intently

around the handle. Goliath then advanced on David. Or was it the other way around? My position was purely compromised. The tips of our shoes collided like tectonic plates. We lost oxygen in the close quarters of shared breath.

"Whatever arrangements you had with my wife are finished," he said.

"You're finished," I said as I flared my thumb from the hip. I extended my index finger and pressed it right into his temple. I won the quick draw! He dropped his weapon, but the fight wasn't over. Whichever one of us threw the first punch meant it sincerely. It mattered. We both wanted this duel. Our heads collided with the end table. Farrah screamed, as I'm sure Danita did too. Our feet flung photo frames across their space. Champ unobjectively rooted, as long as there was blood. Decades, if not centuries, of misjudged persona fumed the room like a tear gas projectile. Colton and Aisha paused at the top step, frightened of the twisted form sprawling on the floor. We rolled over the gun and then away from it—neither of us could get a grip. I locked my bite through his cashmere shirt and into his left breastplate. He slugged my liver, and I vomited on the shag carpet. Our women couldn't find a hold enough to pull us back to them. My clinch on his balls kept me in the fight. For Martin, he had his rage.

Click! Startlingly, everyone let go.

"No, baby, put it down," she said with the most motherly of caution.

A round fired from the chamber, like a sunburst from the cosmos. The chrome orb consumed all light and sound as it spiraled through their living room. I gazed past it for a trillionth of a moment for a final look at my son, the center of my universe. The loving concern in his eyes affirmed that he too could carry grief with honor. Then, the shrill quintet stifled. Dense metal flavors mixed with blood and bile congealed on my tongue. Bombardments of enmity dimmed into

nihility. Strobes of canary, dandelion, and sandstorm pulsed to a faint inner beat. A familiar, yet permanent, nightfall enshrouded my mind, as it had in Iraq.

Anthony Garner has been enlisted with the Kansas Air National Guard since December 2005, and is currently an Active Guard Reservist, serving full-time at the rank of Master Sergeant. He studies English and creative writing at Wichita State University.

Poetry.

Jungle Breakfast

Bruce Colbert

We sat on the veranda of that Tikal motel and it rained in monsoon sheets for hours on end, this grey sky and the heat of the Guatemala jungle, and we drank, mostly one scotch after another and talked in a pidgin Spanish, the ranting of too much liquor, twisting the words like children almost, the language, two men sweating, the stone rectangles of the vanished Mayans looking back at us above the tree line, people who had a civilization that lasted a thousand years and one day disappeared into the rain forest, forever, and we

Turned this language into something nonsensical, asking for the name of a llama that sounded like asking a man's name, and it went on, mostly me,

For hours, right after we'd eaten what amounted to a road kill dinner of some unfortunate creature, tasty though he might be, and the chef was delighted, or maybe he didn't care
because we were the only guests
at this two story erector set-looking building, save one other with
the UN, serious-looking with wire rim glasses,

And we all looked out into the bush over our drink glasses, and at night heard animals calling to one another, unfamiliar sounds, jaguar growls and monkey calls, and at
breakfast, without much real

Appetite I asked this single other guest, a doctor, at our table,

What was the biggest problem here? and between bites of his fried eggs, he said, "The war, the one that they say we don't have which will finish us, and after that there's dysentery. Kills a fifth of the Indian children. But who cares?"

"You can get murdered by both sides, it's kind of funny in a way, being completely innocent of it all, almost democratic."

Bruce Colbert is a stage and TV actor, filmmaker and author of six books of poetry and fiction. His most recently-published poetry collection is A Place That Once Was.

The Story

Joshua Hines

The empty night crackles with sudden snaps and shallow echoes— silence shattering in spurts of enemy fire. The correspondent sits on a green cloth-covered cot inside a ten-man tent dim and dark besides a low-lit laptop screen. A story scrolls across the monitor to the sound of rhythmic keyboard clicks and gunfire. The story has nothing to with the evening's events. Not one word describing the enemy's attack or the patrol circling around the forward operating base to surprise the unfortunate Afghans firing on the FOB. The story is about something else entirely. It might mean something. It might not. The correspondent stops typing, closes the laptop, lies down, and then falls asleep to the sound of bullets crying in the darkness—knowing there will be more bodies in the morning.

The Photographer

Joshua Hines

Three dead men lie in a row under the scorching desert sun. Red stains highlight the numerous holes in their clothes. All of them dark skin, dark hair, with empty eyes staring straight up from the dirt. Marines walk by, no second glances, the base is business as usual. A flash flares in the daylight. The civilian photojournalist takes photo after photo, moving position to position— has to find the perfect frame for death. The correspondent's lens cap stays on his camera and he stares, watching a man smile at dead men from behind a Nikon.

The Bereaved

Joshua Hines

The correspondent sits alone at a foldable table in the center of an unused, oversized tent armed with, pen, paper, and a voice recorder. His questions are loaded on the page lying in front of him and the recorder's batteries are fully charged. Ready to begin his interviews, the correspondent calls in the Marines one by one. He begins slow and simple, asking the basics, like name, rank, unit—relationship to the deceased. Then things get difficult. He asks each of them how long they knew them, what kind of people they were, and what they meant to their units. The difficulties appear in the shape of tears accompanying each answer. Every drop from their eyes filled with devastation and mourning, infectious and painful. The correspondent grinds his teeth, struggling against empathetic sorrow and choking on the questions as they catch in his throat. The Marines answer their questions, the interviews end, the correspondent thanks each of them for their time, apologizing and giving them his condolences, and then they exit the tent, leaving the correspondent to sit alone grieving for men he will never have a chance to meet.

Joshua 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, Sequestrum, *and will soon be featured in* The Deadly Writers Patrol.

The Marathon of Luck of Getting a Good PTSD Counselor at the V.A.

Ron Riekki

When you figure out how to inoculate intrusions,
the gift is sleep.
It takes one extra call, but there is such a thing as
a Mozart of psychology,
the way lives can not only be saved, but comet-like

strengthened,
the ability to not only breathe, but to clear out
the smoke
of panic. Death leaves footprints on the mind,
the crime scene

of war, how blood never washes out of memory,
but there are those
who help to build new moments, a family,
the gifts of birth
and rebirth.

Watching the Search-and-Rescue Boats from the Shore During Desert Storm

Ron Riekki

Horizon shifts meaning boats scattered the sun drowned.

The Bus to MEPS

Ron Riekki

Those heading to college
will never know
the sacrifice
of even just
this bus ride,
the way that we
dedicate our lives
forever to this road
that will take us through
our lives—always a vet.

Ron Riekki wrote U.P.: a novel *(Great Michigan Read nominated) and edited T*he Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works *(2014 Michigan Notable Book from the Library of Michigan);* Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula *(2016 Independent Publisher Book Award); and* And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017 *(Michigan State University Press, 2017). He has three books upcoming with Michigan State University Press and McFarland. Riekki was both active duty U.S. Navy (where he worked closely with the Marines) and U.S. Air Force reserves (where he worked closely with the Army).*

Cocktails in Guantanamo

Jonathan Tennis

Walk down the halls of the detention centers
And you'll hear the troops talking
About cocktails.
Nice,
You think.
After work the GIs like to gather
And blow off steam having mixed drinks.

Mixed drinks on the beach
Doesn't sound that bad,
But cocktails here
Are not what you think.

The people in the cages
Lash out at their captors
With a mixture of
the smells of what's available,
Coppery blood,
Pungent-sticky semen,
Acrid urine,
Earthy feces.
Stirred in a cup,
Or in their hand,
Thrown at the person
On the other side of their cage.

No umbrellas in those drinks.

Escape from Guantanamo

Jonathan Tennis

I sit inside the new camp
They call it Five
Before I was in Delta
And before that X-Ray.

Those camps were outdoors
I could feel the rolling waves of
The ocean crash
A few feet away
The breeze carrying the salty mist across the rocky beaches
I could hear the cacophony of birds
Laying claim to whatever the ocean had deposited before them
I could see the sun rising and setting
Keeping count of the days
Because I had lost it.
I could smell past the scent of whatever we were being fed
To the fast food restaurants just over the hill.

My new camp is different;
I moved in at night
I can scream as loud as I want,
Only I would hear it.

Gone is the ocean
Gone are the birds
Gone is the sun
Gone is the moon
Gone are the Big Macs and root beer floats.

I beat against the walls with my voice
Until I can no longer speak.
In the silence of my steel and concrete home
The blinking of my eyes echoes across my single room
I've lost track of time
I've had enough
So I push the button on the wall
Give the guard my name,
My badge number
And he releases me.
He releases me because I'm not a detainee
I am the detainer.

But GTMO doesn't discriminate
And will never let me go.

Jonathan Tennis served an enlistment in the United States Army, with a deployment to Iraq in support of OIF. He is a graduate of Eckerd College (BA) and Norwich University (MSIA). He currently resides in Tampa, Florida, where he enjoys writing, reading, year-round sunshine, traveling, and biking. He is currently applying to creative writing programs to pursue a MFA.

Interview.

A Conversation with Robert Olen Butler

Robert Olen Butler is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of sixteen novels and six volumes of short stories, including *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, A Small Hotel, Hell,* and the Christopher Marlowe Cobb series. He is also the author of a book on the creative process, *From Where You Dream*. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he has twice won the National Magazine Award in Fiction and received the 2015 F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Achievement in American Literature. He teaches creative writing at Florida State University. His most recent and highly acclaimed novel is *Perfume River,* which explores the Vietnam War and its effect on one veteran and his family. That book was recently a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize.

An Army veteran himself, Butler served in Vietnam as a counter-intelligence special agent and Vietnamese linguist. *O-Dark-Thirty* Senior Editor, Jim Mathews, recently spoke with Butler about his time in the military and how that and other experiences helped shape his work and approach to teaching.

O-Dark-Thirty: So what were the circumstances of your military service? How did that come about?

Robert Olen Butler: I was heading into my last year in the master's program in playwriting at the University of Iowa. This was in the fall of 1968, that infamous year of 1968. My hometown of Granite City, Illinois, was a steel mill town and they had used up all the young bodies at the draft board and they informed me that as soon as I got my degree in February of '69, I would be drafted. So I had choices to make. I had questions about the war. I didn't agree with the simple glorification of it. On the other side, I knew enough about the human condition that there's not a nation in the world whose hands are clean. I wasn't ready to exile myself. So I went to my Army recruiter to see what my options were. I could have gone into officer training with a Master's degree, but you didn't get to choose what sort of officer you would be. Of course, to be drafted also meant not choosing. I felt I needed to choose my fate. What job would I do in my country's army, whose war I questioned but whose existence as an institution I did not? What I landed on was counterintelligence special agent.

ODT: And that was because of your advanced degree that you were able to land that specialty?

ROB: Right. Well, that and the aptitude test. I then simply had to enlist for a third year instead of being drafted for two, and with that third-year commitment, they guaranteed me a place in an Army school to be trained as a counterintelligence special agent. So after I got my M.A. in February 1969 I went into basic at Fort Lewis, Washington, and then they sent me to Fort Holabird in Baltimore, Maryland, where I sat and painted rocks for six months. That was because Army recruiters all over the country were dangling counterintelligence special agent at

college graduates. Finally I got my spot in the class, and when I graduated from the Fort Holabird intelligence school, I had already been in the Army for a year. None of us knew what we'd be doing next since the prospect of counterintelligence work was vague enough. Some of us were surprised when we ended up at Vietnamese language school. I was sent to Crystal City, Virginia, to a high-rise office building, where I was put in a classroom with nine other Army guys and one Vietnamese native and taught the language full time for a year.

ODT: How did you take to learning a completely new language?

ROB: Vietnamese is a tricky language. The tonality is difficult. But I have a musical background of sorts and I applied myself and I picked it up. That took a year. So at this point I'd been in the Army for two years, and right at the beginning of 1971, they sent me to Vietnam. My first day in country, I was already speaking fluent Vietnamese. My second day in country, I began to fall deeply, madly in love with Vietnam. With the land, the people, the culture, the history. After processing through Long Binh I was assigned about a thousand yards up Highway 1, at a camp called Plantation, where I was put in the 219th Military Intelligence Detachment. I worked in intelligence for about five months, often out in the countryside. I had close contacts with Vietnamese farmers, woodcutters, fishermen, provincial police chiefs. I worked for a while with Australian intelligence down in Phuoc Thuy province. But this was 1971 and Nixon was starting to pull some units home. The 219th M.I. Detachment was one of those units. But I still owed the Army seven months in Vietnam. Fortunately, along the way, on a liaison trip to Saigon, I'd somehow impressed an American diplomat by the name of Hatcher James. He was the civilian advisor to the mayor of Saigon. And he asked the Army to have me assigned to him. Which they did. So I worked the rest of my Vietnam tour as an administrative assistant and sometimes translator at Saigon

City Hall. I lived in an old French hotel. For seven months, virtually every night after midnight, I would leave my .38 in the bottom drawer of a dresser and, armed only with the Vietnamese language, I would wander alone through the steamy back alleys of Saigon. Nobody ever seemed to sleep back there and I would crouch in the doorways with the people and talk with them deep into the night.

ODT: I'm guessing this probably wasn't officially advised?

ROB: No, not advised. In fact, disadvised. But at that point, I was Vietnamizing myself and ardently so. I was an only child. In my second month in-country, I got a "Dear John" letter from my wife. I was alone in the world and the Vietnamese adopted me. They are a warm, generous-spirited people. Invariably they invited me into their homes, into their culture, into their lives. And we talked about everything but the war. There was a kind of separate peace going on there.

ODT: Was there a sense at all among the Vietnamese that things were only a few years away from changing forever?

ROB: No, there was no sense of that. As I said, the war itself was almost never a topic of conversation. The experience was a kind of fevered, hot-weather dream, all these people and faces that passed in front of me, and I'm sure I was a kind of hot-weather dream for them as well. This American drops into their midst, speaking their language, clearly respecting them, even loving them, and the fate of the country for that time was just set aside.

ODT: When you returned from Vietnam, did you consider a military career?

ROB: No, that was never a consideration.

ODT: So you weren't a "lifer"?

ROB: I was not. Nor was it an expectation in my family, who were always supportive of whatever I wanted to do. While I was in Vietnam, I was always conscious of my ambition to be a writer. Though I was still a long, long way from actually writing well. I was coming off my master's degree in playwriting, not yet realizing what a benighted aspiring playwright I was. I should have known better because my most impassioned playwriting was going into the stage directions. Now that's a very bad sign for a playwright. That is a closeted fiction writer. So I came home from Vietnam, went to New York, and got into business journalism for many years. And I continued writing, mostly as an autodidact. Before I could write my first really good novel—the Vietnam-based *The Alleys of Eden,* published in 1981—I would have to write a dozen awful full-length plays, four dozen terrible short stories, and five dreadful novels. All unpublished, thank goodness. And through all of that failure I was sustained, perhaps most of all, by self-deception.

ODT: But it was also in your New York days that you eventually began to write good fiction?

ROB: Yes, ultimately I wrote my first four published novels on my lap on legal pads on the Long Island Railroad while I commuted to and from Manhattan.

ODT: So did the experiences you had in the military and in Vietnam influence your writing going forward?

ROB: Yes, and I'm going to take your question in the broadest sense because it's important to understand something about what I did and

came to understand. In those back alleys of Saigon and out in the countryside in Bien Hoa province and Bien Hoa City, what I deeply learned about the people was not just Vietnamese culture and their lives and the way they see the world. It wasn't just that. Of my twenty-three or so works of fiction, only seven are quote-unquote Vietnam books that use Vietnam as a kind of central experience. But in all the other books, there's almost never even a whisper of Vietnam.

What I try to deal with as a literary artist are the deepest truths of the human condition, the things that are eternally and universally true about how all of us exist on this planet. And much of what I know about the universal human condition I also learned from the Vietnamese people. From their humanity, from engaging intensely and deeply with them. So they affected everything I've written, even if it has nothing whatsoever to do with that country and the war. But so has the summer I worked on the labor gang of the blast furnace at Granite City Steel and also when I drove a cab in the greater St. Louis area. And when I worked in business journalism. And when I went through four marriages and have now finally done it right. It's all there. All of my life experience. All of that resides in what Graham Greene called the "compost of the imagination."

ODT: Does that relate to the narrative principle of yearning that I've heard you speak about in other interviews?

ROB: Absolutely, because fiction is the art form of human yearning. Fiction is, of course, about human beings and their feelings, but it's also a temporal art form. It exists in time. Narrative moves forward in time. Even if it deals with the interaction of the past and the present, it is still a thing that moves forward in time. You turn the page and you are inevitably, as they used to say, "upon a time." And any Buddhist will tell you—it's one of the basic truths of their religion—that you

can't be a human being with feelings on this planet—those other two things fiction is always about—without desiring something. I use the word "yearning" with my writing students because they come to me to become literary artists and yearning suggests the deepest level of our desires, our goals, our objectives, which is where the literary art strives to go. Indeed, I think I've come to understand—to borrow Einstein's phrase—a "Unified Field Theory" of yearning in literary fiction. If you dig deep enough in serious storytelling, below the surface goals and objectives and strivings and flashpoints for a character, you're going to find that at the heart of the central character is one fundamental yearning. And that is: I yearn for self; I yearn for an identity; I yearn for a place in the universe. That's what all great fiction is about.

War is an extraordinary experience that brings a nascent writer to an intuitive understanding of identity. And, not incidentally, this is a deep principle in literary fiction because it is a deep principle in life. It's a Unified Field Theory, in my mind, of everything human. Because every morning, everyone on this planet wakes up and whether it's a real mirror or a metaphorical one, whether they are conscious of doing it or unconsciously doing it, we all wake up every day and look at the image in the mirror and say: Who the fuck are you? It's the great "Who the fuck am I?" which motivates everything. In this era, in this world, in these perilous times of the early 21st Century, consider all the flashpoints of our culture and of our lives: gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, politics, sexual preference. You name it. Everything. If you take half a step back, what are those things? They are all structured, external, come-be-part-of-this answers to that central question. Who the fuck am I? I am a man. I am a woman. I'm black. I'm white. I'm a Republican. I'm a Democrat. I'm a Jew, I'm a Christian, I'm an atheist. I am a military veteran of the Vietnam war. I am a veteran of the anti-war protest. Those attributes we pursue and embrace and battle over are all simply ways to try to

answer the question of self, of identity. Where do you draw the line around yourself? Inside that circle are those who are your own. Outside it are the others.

The sad thing about human beings is we think we can solidify our own identity, aggrandize it, by claiming a superiority to those others outside our circle. And if we actually demonize those others, we feel stronger and more righteous still.

ODT: Did the intense relationships you built in Vietnam also include intense relationships with your fellow soldiers and veterans? I say that because your experience in Vietnam was somewhat unique in that you spent a great deal of time with native Vietnamese. Also because we tend to carry forward those relationships and dependencies through the years—similar to how the character, William, the World War II veteran in* Perfume River, *did with his fellow vets?

ROB: I have to this day a special and warm feeling whenever I meet a fellow Vietnam veteran. But on a one-to-one, latter-day basis. I had American Army friends in Vietnam, but I was never part of a cohesive company or platoon or team. Given the jobs I had, some of my closest friends were as much the Vietnamese as the Americans. They were all the same. And given the march of the decades and the natural movements of my life, I keep up in an ongoing way with very few people. Those who remain active friends are Americans. The late and wonderful Vietnam novelist and newspaperman, Jack Fuller, was a dear friend to the end. Larry Heinemann is a good friend of mine. Mark Leepson as well. Just as examples. But these were all friends I made after returning home. I've lost track of the individuals I knew in Vietnam, both American and Vietnamese.

ODT: So significant literary success came with* A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, *which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. Did you

need that distance of time from Vietnam, some twenty years earlier, to arrive at that book?

ROB: Graham Greene, who I mentioned before, with his "compost of the imagination," also said that all good novelists have bad memories. He said that what you remember comes out as journalism; what you forget goes into that compost heap. And that takes time. It took eighteen years from those Saigon back alleys to the time when I finally had access to the characters who appear in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. They were finally creatures not of literal memory and journalism but of the depths of my imagination and my deepest personal subconscious.

ODT: And your journey through the years displayed an incredible range of work, from the literary genre to page-turning mystery. Describe that shifting over time until you arrived at your most recent work.

ROB: The mysteries you're talking about were three books in a row I wrote over three years for Otto Penzler, whose Mysterious Press imprint is published by my longtime publisher, Grove/Atlantic. By the way, the fourth book in the series is called *Paris in the Dark* and will be coming out in the fall of 2018. These four books are as literary as any of my books but they're also historical espionage thrillers set during World War I. Their literary quality derives from how I arrive at those external features of so-called "genre" fiction. Those genre elements do not have a function independent of my own deep sense of the human condition. The books were not written with a preconceived effect that they wished to have on the reader. Indeed, the fundamental issues that are being dealt in their plots include immigration and terrorism and national identity and world alliances and the modern technology of killing. All of these were issues of the early 20th century in much same way that they are issues of our own early 21st century. It's my

artistic engagement with our present zeitgeist that has drawn me to that era and those espionage or thriller or suspense conventions. MSNBC and CNN are full of those conventions every day of the week.

ODT: Can you speak a bit about the process of writing and how it factors into the way you teach fiction?

ROB: I personally have serious problems with the much of the prevailing pedagogy of creative writing. It's a pedagogy that's appropriate for those who are just starting out, for those who need to learn craft and technique. That has to be done initially in a willful, conscious and analytical way. For literary writers, however, the problem with the pedagogy is that the mode of teaching never truly gets past a single-minded analytical engagement with craft and technique. It does not adequately teach the deeper creative process. The fundamental thing about art is not only ignored, you get an implicit paradigm for the artistic process which is the antithesis of the way art is actually created. The reality is that art does not come from the mind, from the rational, analytical faculties. Art comes from the place where you dream. It comes from your unconscious, from your white-hot center. Veteran writers have a fucking intense white-hot center, one way or another. That's where art comes from. But the prevailing pedagogy tends to cut them off from that.

ODT: I understand that you don't allow peer criticism in your workshops?

ROB: No, they get plenty of that elsewhere. The prevailing format of the classic workshop is essentially the blind leading the potentially sighted. As a student you are often forced to speak. It's required. It's always, at least implicitly, a way you're evaluated by your established-writer teacher, the way you're admired by your mentor. Even if you

simply feel you must give helpful criticism, you begin to read each other's work in exactly the wrong way. You read from your head. You're asking from the get-go, what am I going to say? You do not read from the waking-dream of the shared artistic experience, which is what we are trying to create and what true readers are seeking. The paradigm of most creative writing workshops is that whatever you do spontaneously is fine but then we go into the process of self evaluation, peer evaluation, and we examine the perceived problems in the texts and then we thoughtfully analyze what to do about them and we have an assortment of craft and technique devices that we willfully apply. Which is the antithesis of the creative process. But peer criticism is built on that.

ODT: Now your latest book,* Perfume River, *is quite an achievement. The characters have all been affected not only by the Vietnam War, but also World Wars I and II and even the current War on Terror. Can you speak to this generational overlap of the nation's conflicts? Will we be seeing the same dynamics twenty years from now with perhaps the Iraq and Afghanistan wars at the center with more distant reflections on earlier conflicts like Vietnam?

ROB: That's absolutely right. Wars have forever done the same things to people. Future wars, like the past wars, will create secrets in the men and women who serve, secrets that they feel they must forever hold back from the people they return to. That will forever be true. And war also illuminates another enduring truth of the human condition, which is that the past is always with us. The past is always in dialogue with the present. And there's one other important effect, especially where there are no front lines. In a war zone a soldier's senses, a soldier's entire sensual being, is intensely heightened. So a pair of dry socks or a hot shower or a cup of coffee or the touch of a woman or friendship and male bonding, all of those things are intensely heightened. Look,

fewer than twenty percent of the soldiers who go to any war actually see classic combat. Over eighty percent do not. But this phenomenon of heightened sensual experience is true of everyone. Especially for every war forever more. Frontlines are gone for good. And with the pervasive fear of death in war also comes a cosmic consciousness. You not only are in uniquely intense contact with your body, you are in mortally intense communion with the deepest questions of your very existence.

What I'm working around to is PTSD. Now, our dear brothers of the twenty percent or so who were in battle have a special burden in their post-traumatic stress and they have rightly come to almost exclusively represent that syndrome. But all of the others, the eighty percenters, also carried home a post-traumatic stress. And a significant one. One that lasts forever. For the great majority, the trauma isn't about the horrors of the past. It's about the blandness of the present. The blandness of their only foreseeable future. Indeed, that's a part of the combat soldier's PTSD as well, I suspect. That whole reality is explored in *Perfume River*. How do you tell your family or your friends that something is terribly missing in your daily existence? The intensity is gone. The connectedness—to the people around you and to the very cosmos—is gone. Most veterans can't express this to anyone. Would never dare express this. But in so many veterans, this is what's going on.

ODT: It really speaks to the experience that many veterans have in common, whereby all you think about when you're over there is being home. And all you think about when you're finally home, is being back over there.

ROB: It can seem for so many veterans that there is no earthly pleasure back home that wasn't intensely more pleasurable during the war. And by God, that's a terrible thing.

ODT: So I always like to close out interviews with a request on behalf of young vets coming home who are thinking about or have actually taken up the mantle of the literary arts. What advice can you give them?

ROB: Ultimately, don't write from your ideas about what happened. Don't write from theory. Don't write by consciously focusing on the techniques that you learn. Graham Greene was definitely speaking of life experiences when he said you must forget. But the same thing is true of all the craft and technique you will learn. You have to let it dissolve itself down into that compost of your imagination, along with the content of your lived life, so that you can command your imagination without having to retreat to your head. The war you went to is always in your unconscious.

As a writer you must have as much courage on the battlefield of your own creative unconscious as you did in that distant land of war. The great Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa, said, "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes." The courage you found inside yourself to go war, you're going to have to find that same courage to go into battle in your own unconscious and never flinch. There will be heightened joys in there as well. In Vietnam, the landscape was beautiful. But in your writing process there is always someone in the tree line firing an AK-47 at you. Literary writing takes supreme courage. You cannot avert your eyes, even when there is heavy fire.

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