O-Dark-Thirty

Winter 2018

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On the cover: *Swimmer on a Hook (Helicopter 1),*
24" x 36" acrylic in canvas.
by Adam S. Taylor
United States Navy, 1988-1997
United States Army, 1997-2012

Adam S. Taylor is a full-time single father of two teenage sons. He enlisted in the Navy at the age of seventeen, crewed the Navy's SH-60B Seahawk as an aviation warfare systems operator and rescue swimmer from 1988 to 1997, and completed three deployments to the Middle East and Asia. In the fall of '97 he separated from the Navy to attend the US Army Warrant Officer Flight Training Program, where he trained and qualified in the AH-64A/D Apache attack helicopter. He served in various units of the 82nd Airborne, 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions; completed four deployments with the Army in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq; and retired as a chief warrant officer 4 after 24 years of active duty.

His work is currently on display at the San Antonio Artists Collective, *https://gallerysa.com/the-artists*

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Editor's Note

It's cold and gloomy in metro Washington, DC, but the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) will be held in Tampa, Florida next month. We're looking forward to some balmy temperatures and sunshine! To fit the mood and venue, this quarter's issue features an interview with Tampa resident, Navy veteran, and former *O-Dark-Thirty* contributor Jeffery Hess—and an excerpt from his newest novel, the thriller *Tushhog*.

As always, it was a pleasure to review this quarter's submissions and curate more excellent fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for this issue. We remain ever grateful to all the veterans and family members who send us their work, to the established writers who contribute their time to our interview series, and to the visual artists who continue to inspire and awe us with the images they permit us to share on our covers. Keep it coming, and write on!

The Editors

Non-fiction.

Life Among the Reasonable

By James Gleason Bishop

Sta da khaira may tobah da, kho das pie de rana kurray ka.
Don't give me your alms, just save me from your dogs.
-Pashto Proverb

A sheen of sweat broke out on my upper lip as I opened the door. It was July 1, 2014.

"May I help you?" asked the private first class. Probably twenty years old. Smoker. Ink on her left forearm. Pretty. Behind me, the young Turk I saw nearly every time I went to the showers sat in a dusty chair, his big toe bandaged from an operation to remove his hangnail.

Embarrassed to confess my problem to someone so young, I stumbled over the words. "I'd, I'd like to speak to—you know, the combat counselors?"

She looked up from her computer. "They're not in this week because of the July fourth stuff going on." She paused. "I'm sorry." Then she wrote the number to the counseling hotline on a yellow sticky note. Kindness heaped upon kindness. People at International

Security Assistance Forces, NATO Headquarters, Camp Kabul were, above all, busy, and eager to remind you. Second, they were surly, and equally glad to display their well-earned surliness.

Too depressed to face the MOC—the media operations center where I worked—I prayed, *God I need your help right now to survive.*

In the absence of a lightning bolt of joy from heaven, I decided to do one of my favorite tasks at ISAF. I walked to the pallet holding massive amounts of half-liter Kinley water bottles baking in the Afghan sun, slung three shrink-wrapped six-packs into my arms, and lugged them 100 feet into the building and up one flight of stairs to stash at the landing. Before I'd made three trips, my T-shirt was slick with sweat. People were genuinely pleased to see you haul water inside. This was one time I could be sure my cat-lady boss, Colonel Jane Kaufman[1], wouldn't materialize to tell me what a lousy job I was doing. Colonel Kaufman ran the MOC floor. She was a razor-tongue, sharp-witted Army colonel. She would've been tall, but her shoulders stooped from hunching over a computer fourteen hours a day for the last eleven months.

Back home, my family and friends were doing fine without me, which shouldn't have surprised me but did. So I hauled bottled water up the dusty stairs and didn't allow myself to count the days left in Afghanistan. I never returned to the clinic.

My best therapy was writing. For several months, I'd been devoting ninety minutes out of my twelve-hour day to write. (What are they going to do, send me to Afghanistan?) By then, I'd abandoned all hope of impressing Colonel Kaufman, given her public outbursts about how unhappy she was with my leadership. I knit together a story about what it's like to work at ISAF. My friend Brandon wrote an article for the *New York Times* "At War" blog and suggested I send a piece to Jim Dao, the editor.

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[1] All names have been changed except for that of General Joe Dunford.

Before I sent a story to the *Times,* however, Colonel Kaufman had to review the article to ensure I didn't reveal classified info, endanger the mission, or embarrass NATO. I went on high alert to find a break in her festering miasma of bitterness. I thought I found a window of opportunity one day and shipped off my article to her.

That evening, she called me in. I sat down while she finished an email. (Army leaders ignore underlings when they enter a room, while you wait for them to toss you a scrap of their attention.) She had added another half-dozen cat posters to her wall. One featured a blue-eyed Siamese with the heading, *Beware of the dog. And the cat is no one to fuck with either.*

Finally, she glanced at me. Her skin looked gray, except for blue-black semicircles under her eyes.

"You say the Czech CHOD is visiting ISAF. Have you prepared a press release?" (Dignitaries—in this case the Chief of Defense of Czechoslovakia—visited regularly.)

I felt the familiar panic she could induce at will. "I didn't know that was a requirement, Ma'am. I can do one."

She let loose an award-winning sigh, a solo in a jazz piece entitled *Lonely Afternoon with Fools.* "That's what we've done in the past. Don't you think it would be a good idea to let the press know when foreign dignitaries visit ISAF?" she said with singsong snark.

Not really. "I'll draft a release, Ma'am. Do you have an example?"

Shorter sigh. "All our press releases are on the website."

"Ok . . . Uh, have you had a chance to review my article?"

She motioned to a stack of papers. "It's on my list, right after a hundred other things."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, unable to conceal my disappointment.

She didn't read my story the next day, or the next week. I finally asked if her deputy could read it. He corrected one fact, gave a summary to Colonel Kaufman, who shrugged her approval. I emailed it to the *New York Times* and waited.

In the meantime, Colonel Kaufman came in one day wearing Army PT shorts. She was rushing to finish her out-processing checklists. For the past two months, she'd been trying to bring back three indigenous cats, which required a mountain of paperwork and permissions. The clearance had finally come through. The next day, she looked around the MOC one last time, sighed at the sheer mass of incompetence, and gave her benediction.

"Well, I did my best. Try not to fuck things up."

Two days later, General Butler introduced Colonel Kaufman's replacement. "This is Colonel Eric Grossman. He'll be taking over as my PAO." Colonel Grossman had the shape and mass of a bear. His OCP blouse could've doubled as a tent. A second after he left, my friend Mike said in the quietest yell he could muster, "God! I didn't think you could deploy when you're that overweight." A senior civilian, GS-15, at thirty-one years old, Mike would have outranked everyone in the building in his civilian status. You knew when he was in the room. Mike laughed loud, swore loud, and even typed loud.

"Give him a chance," I said. "He seems like a nice guy."

"Anything's an improvement over Colonel Kaufman," he thundered.

A few days later, my lightning bolt of joy struck. Jim Dao emailed to say he wanted to run my article! I happily began working on a series of articles about life at ISAF. For the next few hours, I thought, *This place isn't so bad*.

On the evening of July 28, my article ran in the *New York Times* "At War" blog. The next morning, it was included in the daily "Situation Awareness Report," distributed to General Joe Dunford and all the generals and colonels from all branches of service and dozens of countries that made up NATO military leadership in Afghanistan. All day, I heard congratulations. A general I knew wrote from the US:

Your essay is excellent. It did bring back memories . . . I think the hardest thing about a deployment like yours is holding on to the hope that you are helping to make Afghanistan a better place.

Around 9:45 p.m., I was in the barracks bathroom snorting salt-water spray to clean the Kabul dust from my nostrils, thinking, *I'm glad no one is watching,* when my loud friend Mike walked in. He worked noon to midnight.

"Oh, I'm glad I found you, sir. The general wants to see you."

"Tonight?"

"Right away." He made air quotes.

Late-night meetings are rarely about congratulating someone on, for example, his insightful article.

"What's he want to see me about?"

"Didn't say."

I rushed over in my PT gear. After waiting thirty minutes (always remind minions how busy you are), I was face-to-face with the general in charge of NATO Communications in Afghanistan. Colonel "Bear" Grossman sat with us, wheezing. Around the general's office hung large, fading photos of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The décor must have come from a decade ago, when the war was fresh.

Brigadier General Johnny Butler was handsome, slender, and painfully serious. He drove himself and his staff from 8:30 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. After ignoring us for another minute, he sat down at the long conference table with us. He looked tired.

"Jim, I wanted to let you know how disappointed I am in your *New York Times* article. I believe you have revealed things that might get ISAF members killed or put them in danger." His words sounded rehearsed. Each word seemed to drain more blood from my head. I was dumbstruck, literally too surprised to speak.

"This is not the kind of article we need at a time when things are so sensitive here."

He was right. Both Asraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah were claiming victory in the presidential election. Some Abdullah supporters were threatening civil war if their candidate wasn't declared president

immediately. Worse, two days earlier, the *New York Times* ran a controversial story entitled "Taliban Making Military Gains in Afghanistan." The article alleged that the surprising Taliban gains that summer cast doubt on the Afghan forces' ability to take over security when the coalition leaves. This caused General Dunford to claim, "We're losing the Afghan narrative." General B, as head of ISAF Communications, had the impossible task of winning the Afghan narrative.

I stared at the general's polished conference table. "How did I put ISAF members' lives at risk?" It would've surprised me less if he'd said, "Just kidding," pulled out a pointy red hat, and lit a candle.

"Well, for example, you let the enemy know that we take Friday and Sunday mornings off," he said. Lines crinkled on his young face. He was younger than me. I was fifty-three.

I didn't say the guards took the morning off. The conversation became more surreal. He mentioned the fact that I specifically let it slip that the Macedonians guarded the gate.

"Someone could read that and they could apply political pressure," he said.

"That's public information." All the troop-contributing nations and numbers were listed on the ISAF website. He was grasping at reasons to dislike this article. I wondered why.

"At the end you say we're motivated by a desire to look good."

"But at the end I also say there are a lot of people working hard to build a democracy. Didn't you see that part?"

"No." He'd skimmed for the bad parts.

"I'm really surprised at your reaction. From the title, 'The "Battle Rhythm" of Helping to Build a Democracy,' to the ending, where I say I see people working hard and braving dangers to help create a fledgling democracy, I think it's a positive piece."

At this point Colonel Bear chimed in. "Well, no one reads all the way to the end anyway."

Ignoring him, the general said, "Jim, it's a sensitive time for the country, and you can see why we can't have articles like this."

"Not really."

Then he dug into the real issue. "General Dunford was pissed. I know you included the disclaimer about the article being your opinion, but you also identified yourself as an ISAF public affairs officer. So in his mind, you're still acting as the general's spokesman." That explained a lot. King Lear redux—my boss had been embarrassed at court.

"My thinking was that putting in the honest stuff made the positive part more credible," I argued. "There are people who won't see the ending, about building a democracy, anywhere else. The *Times* accepted it because it was honest."

"Of course the *Times* accepted it. The article made us look bad."

"No one reads the ending," Colonel Grossman repeated.

General B. leaned forward. "Did anyone review this before you sent it to the *Times*?" The threat was clear: if I didn't send it up the chain for review as required, I was in legal trouble.

"Colonel Kaufman reviewed it." Sort of.

"Well, I never saw it," the general said.

"Was I supposed to show it to you afterwards? I thought once she approved it I was good to go. No one said differently." I'd been so shocked I'd neglected to say "sir" during the entire discussion, an omission both bosses must have noted.

"I don't want you publishing any more personal pieces while you're here."

"Yes, sir."

For the remainder of my time at ISAF, I was under a gag order. I was continually surprised at how insecure Army leadership acted, even at the general officer level. That night, walking back to my barracks around 10:30 p.m., I thought about the consequences of a Marine Corps four-star general being "pissed." Could General Dunford simply

wonder aloud how much better ISAF would be without Air Force reservists running around giving away secrets, causing one of his toadies to have an "accidental discharge" of his M9 in my direction? It was a surreal thought, but the meeting had been surreal, like I'd opened the door to the bathroom and found a whorehouse. I hurried off the streets, skipped a shower, and locked my door.

The next day, my friend Fitz asked me to leave a secret meeting. The meeting always dragged on, so I left, grateful. Later, Fitz told me, half-jokingly, that I should be wearing a scarlet A and announce my presence before I enter a room so they can put away any classified. Fitz had a blazing smile, round belly, and boyish good looks, which is amazing considering that he'd been a civilian contractor at DCOS COMM for more than two years. Other long-timers looked pale gray, like the dust.

Later that morning, Colonel Grossman sat at his desk, munching on crackers. Brown crumbs littered the paperwork spread out in front of him. I needed to redeem myself.

"Sir, General Butler was wrong to accuse me of putting ISAF lives in danger. I had that article vetted . . . "

"Jim, drop it. They've moved on to other stuff. The general took a lot of crap at the staff meeting. J2 was even looking into it." J2 is the head of ISAF intelligence. He told me they considered starting an investigation to determine if I'd released any classified information.

I re-read the article to see if we were talking about the same words. Fitz later explained, "You said you heard about explosions over classified networks."

"Then in tweets."

He shrugged. "That's probably why they didn't go after you."

When I told Jim Dao about the gag order, he was surprised.

"I've met Dunford. He struck me as smart and level-headed," he wrote, then asked what the offensive part was.

"He didn't like that I said part of the officer's motivation is to look good."

Jim's emails are quick bites of only the necessary information, since he was also the *Times*' Deputy Editor on the National Desk. He replied, "That's common knowledge."

So I languished, gagged, in the land of the reasonable. General Dunford held the reasonable assumption that his public affairs officers generate good news. The Taliban held the reasonable assumption that each bomb they detonated saved Afghanistan from Western pornography. And I didn't sparkle either, sitting in General B's reasonable office, folding my hands atop his shiny conference table, nodding my tacit support for their war.

James Gleason Bishop's work appeared previously in Smithsonian, Yankee, The Boston Globe, North American Review *and others. His work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, he lives in Western Massachusetts. "Life Among the Reasonable" is excerpted from his memoir* The Long War: From Kabul to PTSD to Peace.

Perfect Storm of Indecency

By John Melton

I pull the rickety, rusty Suburban into the McDonald's parking lot. A brooding western sky acts as a spur in my side. We'll have to work quickly in order for me to call it a week and collect my paycheck, which I plan on blowing at my wife's birthday dinner tonight. If my co-worker, Rhett, is on time and squared away, we should be able to get into the city, knock out some survey work for our boss, Bogdan, and be heading for the burbs before the deluge hits. Working through a storm will definitely make it all take longer. But it will get done. Our employer lumps surveyors right in there with postal workers and the infantry.

I look at the time, look for signs of Rhett, already four minutes late. This irks me. Maybe a coffee for the road will reboot the feel-good Friday I awoke with. Inside the restaurant many homeless people mill about because of the shelter six blocks down the street. Rhett counts himself among the residents. He's also a heroin addict. I have to pick him up here each time we go to the field. Bogdan won't let me go all the way to the shelter because he says it's too far off the highway. So he makes Rhett huff it six blocks each day to prove he's willing to

work. And work for peanuts he does, because Bogdan is cheap. It's why we drive a jalopy truck and use surveyors' instruments from the 1990s.

Bogdan is old world too, a first-generation immigrant from Bulgaria. He is one hell of a surveyor. I'll give him that. Knows pretty much everything about it. Problem is, he thinks he can play by old world rules as an employer and get by in this country. Like not paying us on time, or telling me to put air in the truck tire with the slow leak before I head off into the city. Since I've only known him for a couple of months I haven't worked up the nerve to say it doesn't work that way here. Legitimate businesses fix the tire so their workers have a safe vehicle. It's just the decent thing to do. But Bogdan is aloof. He probably thinks OSHA is one of the whales at Sea World.

When it comes to Rhett, his low wages match his unreliability. He averages a no-show a week. Even though he's technically the senior surveyor on the job, I make more than him to basically drive the truck around and be his assistant. He can do the job when he's straight though. Bogdan says he was a solid surveyor before the problems. It's the one skill he still possesses that he hasn't totally wasted on his other skill, procuring heroin. That's our three-person company: Bogdan, the stingy, old-world taskmaster; Rhett, the junkie, homeless surveyor; and myself, a master's degree recipient between real jobs who thought it would be fun to work in the field for the summer.

After I get my coffee and notice Rhett outside smooching some sweaty homeless girl with tattoos on her neck, we meet up, load up, and head off in the Suburban. Two minutes later we're on the expressway heading into the big urban sprawl like all the other lemmings. I look in the mirror again. The storm is closer, bigger. I think of all the work to be done and push down on the accelerator a little more.

"So who was the girl?" I ask Rhett, already reclining in the passenger seat, pulling his greasy hair back under his dirty ball cap.

"Allison, man. That's the chick I've been tellin' you about."

Allison is another addict who is in and out of the shelter. He sometimes stays with her when he's on the outs with the staff there, as is the case often. For the next half hour I glance over a few times to check on his level of lucidity. He seems straight. Even when he begs me to pull over so he can piss along the side of the busy freeway, which he does a lot. The first time I was like, really, Rhett, it's the middle of rush hour on the Eisenhower. How about a little common decency for the good people of Chicago? I know I should make him bring a bottle or just wait—sometimes I do—but he starts squirming and groaning and I cave more often than not, like today.

Once at the job site, Rhett rushes off to use the bathroom again. When he comes back he's suddenly all jovial and pumped up. He grabs the survey instrument and tripod and takes off running down the street singing a cadence I remember from my days in the Army:

I wanna be an Airborne Ranger!

I wanna live a life of danger!

Great, I think. My partner is on something. I'm not sure it's heroin because I thought it was supposed to make you mellow. But it definitely affects his performance. We take longer to do our survey work. The storm holds off and we just finish before the first rumbles can be heard overhead. But Rhett must have dropped one of our devices in the bushes, and it takes us a whole hour to find it, in the rain of course.

The rain is coming down hard now as we head back to the expressway, enough that my wipers can hardly keep up, and I need my lights at four in the afternoon. I'm really watching Rhett too, still irritated about him losing the instrument. Whatever, it looks like I'll make that dinner. The thought is comforting, but then everything changes.

The pressure on my brake pedal disappears. I'm going forty on a four-lane street and I have just enough brakes to keep from hitting

the car in front of me. I pull into the first service station I see and learn the brake lines have crimped and dumped all the fluid. I call Bogdan.

"I have bad news. The brakes are out on the truck."

"Did you get the work done?"

That one makes me cringe. I tell him the mechanic said we shouldn't drive the vehicle, but Bogdan wants me to tape up the brake line myself and make a run for it with a bunch of cans of brake fluid. I ask why he can't just come get us and leave the truck to be worked on. He spews some bullshit about how he's supposed to pick someone up at the airport and is late already. Plus, he says, city mechanics will rip you off every time. I realize he's hanging me out to dry. I also realize there is no way I'll make that dinner now unless I try what he says. We get one more verbal warning from the mechanic, absolution on his part. Even Rhett, a devil-may-care individual with very little to lose in any situation, seems reluctant to forge ahead. After the tape job we both use the toilet at the station and head back out into the storm with ten cans of brake fluid.

I test the pedal just enough to know I have some braking power, while knowing each time I press it, I'm releasing a stream of oily fluid on the road. The route I choose is nearly a straight shot on surface roads, because the freeways are out of the question. With the hazards on, I make sure I never get above thirty miles per hour, so everyone is passing us. By the time I gain a semblance of comfort it's time to add more brake fluid. I pull over and drench myself while under the hood, but we're underway again momentarily.

I make a joke about the situation, and truthfully, I'm pleased it's working out. Rhett doesn't respond so I look over at him and he seems really out of it suddenly. Sure enough, when prodded, he starts groping at the air in front of him with his eyes closed, mumbling incoherent phrases. Awesome, so this is the face of heroin. He must have used when he was in the bathroom right before we left the service station.

The next two hours are hell. The sky is the shade of night, the deluge is just that. I have to stop and pop the hood every two miles to put in more fluid myself, because Rhett is jacked up on the heavy stuff. There's no way I'll make the dinner. When I pull into the service station near the office looking like a drowned rat, Bogdan is waiting and tries to act like the afternoon was no big deal. He gets the cold shoulder from me, and then a cold stare when he asks if I can take Rhett back to the McDonald's. To top it all off, he says he will make sure and pay me on Monday.

John Melton is an Army veteran (1992-1996) who enjoys reading and writing creative prose. Inspiration for this piece came after the worst work day of his adult life. Names have been changed.

MASCAL

By Forest Ray

"MASCAL, MASCAL, MASCAL."

We've trained for this a hundred times. We all know the drill. But now the safety of the training field is gone, replaced by Iraq's red sands, and an electrical current transforms a voice into ice that freezes my veins and stops my heart.

How many hours of training for this moment and I feel sick to my stomach. I'm not ready. I'll never be ready. Just push that feeling, and all feelings, down. Far down. Let training overwrite feeling.

Out of the cot. Boots laced. Soldiers run across the starlit sand.

"Stage the triage categories here!" shouts an officer. Field medical tags stack up at each station, awaiting their grim purpose.

Voices in the dark, disembodied.

"How many?"

"Unknown! Vehicle accident, one rollover!"

In unison, we unfold cots, set up IV stands, open our medical supply kits and lay the pieces out on rolling shelves, everything in

arm's reach. The deep gurgling of heavy engines in the dark breaks the stillness of time and announces the arrival of our fallen. We stand ready. Or, if not ready, we look the part.

Hurried hands lay a soldier on my cot. Dark brown skin wrapped in a light brown uniform. Eyes flutter weakly for one moment and go still. Breath follows and then pulse. CPR begins, each of us playing our part. Breath flows from the fully living into the nearly dead. Hands compress the chest as the nurse practitioner readies an IV. My uniform hangs on me, damp with sweat despite the nighttime chill. I never sweat while doing CPR in training. Now my skin leaks after only the first cycle.

Needle punctures vein and medicine displaces sluggish blood to strike the heart.

Life returns screaming. Gone the dying flutter in the soldier's eyes. Eyes now bulge outwards, wide fields of bright white surrounding flailing pupils. Muscles contract and spasm, arms and legs thrash.

"Hold him down!"

We throw ourselves atop him, one soldier on each limb. Still, he threatens to overcome us. The leg I lay atop lifts me from the ground and I fight it back down. Atop the other leg, Owens and I lock gazes, separated by unbridgeable inches.

Lungs unleash their full power in a desperate scream. Our captain fights to administer a sedative. The soldier screams, fights us, eyes seeking escape or perhaps just something familiar to grab hold of. For one moment, those terrified eyes meet mine, but he does not see me.

What did you see over there, brother, that sent you back to us afraid?

Stillness.

Cold and pale stars watch over us. Hot embers of cigarette ends burn among us. The dull thud of helicopter rotors recedes into the failing night, ferrying a young soldier to the next point on his path to recovery.

"Do you think he'll be alright?"
"No."

Forest Ray was a medic in the 82nd Airborne and served in Iraq from 2003-2004.

Fiction.

Waiting Room

By D. A. Gray

We keep our appointment at lunchtime. Minutes ago Specialist Reid knocked on my door, a sign to tuck what paperwork I had to do into my drawer (I can't even remember what the paperwork was) and take him across post. Everyone else in uniform performs the normal tasks of returning: unloading equipment, cleaning personal gear, turning in body armor, cleaning weapons, cleaning offices abandoned for a year. These are the jobs soldiers can do in their sleep without our help. When you've seen what Reid saw, the world will have to go on without you for a few hours a week.

We arrive at the Fort Hood R&R Center (which now stands for the Resilience and Restoration center). This clinic was created as the first soldiers returned from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to meet a growing number of needs. Returning soldiers who self-medicated, who swung their arms wildly in their dreams, who exiled themselves to the sofa, afraid that wild swinging would hurt someone, and those who never made it to the sofa in time. It takes a few minutes of circling the parking lot to find an open space. Finally a car, another first sergeant leaving, a soldier in his passenger seat.

This yellow brick building on the corner was once the office building for a signal company, full of storage rooms and communications equipment. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan progressed, each building within walking distance of Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center began to be repurposed. Drywall, cheap metal studs and drop ceilings perform the miraculous transformation. Suddenly, office space becomes a bigger place to make prosthetic limbs; sleeping quarters become a place to transition warriors to civilian life; warehouse becomes psychiatric care. Everything is malleable.

We have been back in country for two months. Much of the post seems locked in a mundane cycle of busywork. Three soldiers sit on a picnic table beside the sidewalk. They're smoking, with Army Combat Uniform (ACU) tops folded on the ground; a mower and weed-eaters sit beside the table. It is March in Texas, 78 degrees and the yellow grass looks like it hasn't grown since November. No matter, they're following orders.

I look toward Reid, who looks down at something miles away. He hasn't talked much more than the minimum since returning but at least he agreed to see a counselor without being made to go. His silence stands in awkward contrast to the Reid I used to catch clowning at the barracks before deployment, once bringing me in at midnight because his errant water balloon knocked the beret off a Military Police (MP) officer's head. Luckily the cop had a sense of humor. I remember pulling into the barracks parking lot to see three patrol cars all with their lights flashing. The first person I saw was Sergeant Scott, an MP with a still-wet beret who had a slight grin on his face. He caught up to me while I scanned the parking lot for Reid, and said, "Top, it's not that bad. But your guys need to know not to do crazy shit while cops are running around with guns drawn. This time it was training. Next time it might not be."

I tried to drum up the outrage from within, to explain the consequences of not knowing where he was and what could happen with an itchy-fingered cop. Reid was sitting on the sidewalk in his PT shorts, no shirt, no shoes.

"Reid, get over here!"

He jogged to me, stood with head down, hands crossed behind his back.

"Do you know what could have happened? What if that cop didn't recognize it as a water balloon and just turned and fired at the person who threw it? Then I'd be calling your parents and setting up a memorial service . . . over a fucking water balloon."

"It won't happen again." He never looked up, kind of like today.

It was hard to keep a straight face, after years of responding to alcohol-fueled fights, or worse, spouse abuse. My first time to disrupt a water balloon fight.

Not much is funny now.

Last time he went to a clinic like this is the reason we're here today. Eight months ago Reid made an appointment with a combat stress clinic in Baghdad, on Victory Base. The clinic was two blocks from the warehouse where he worked procuring supplies for the base camp. Most of the former buildings once belonged to the old Iraqi army and this was no exception. A cinder block building on a poured slab, now with sandbags lining the outside like most buildings in theater, altered slightly to fit their new role.

Six months into our tour, Reid suffered from a minor case of depression. Though we were busy, soldiers often experienced a sense of futility triggered by missions that changed rapidly with little explanation. If work was going fine, there was the absence of familiar faces from home, or the barrage of issues on the home front we could do little about. Reid began to experience trouble sleeping and looking distant while on duty. His problems, on the surface, seemed to be the

problems all of us were having. A pair of sympathetic ears, maybe a prescription for the Ambien clinics handed out like candy, and he'd be on his way.

Check that. A month before we'd lost a soldier. Not the prescribed narrative of the six o-clock news. Specialist Donaldson, on an early mid-tour leave, decided to drive his pickup truck a hundred ten miles an hour on the outskirts of his hometown of Abilene, Texas. He had alcohol in his system, though we didn't ask how much. We got the news from our rear detachment not long after it happened, then checked the news stories. We didn't know why. We did know the truck flipped six times. That weighed over everyone. Leaders wondered what more they could have said in the counseling. His buddies wondered what they didn't pick up on.

The day Reid went to the combat stress clinic was the day a soldier—a sergeant—left the clinic after his own appointment, stole a gun from his escort, returned, and opened fire on his fellow soldiers in the waiting area. The soldier killed five American soldiers before being subdued. A soldier who had access inside the crime scene later said he couldn't get the sight of five red splatters out of his mind, or the way they turned brown as they collected dust and dried.

No one ever expects a fellow soldier to open fire on his own, especially in a psychiatric clinic. Even the soldiers who go outside the wire let their guard down. The emotional toll of a violent act grows when it happens in a place you thought was safe, like when your mind equates danger with outside the wire, safety with inside the wire and you've walked in 112-degree heat to an air conditioned oasis, placed your weapon in the rack, dropped body armor to the floor and begun to let muscles unwind in a cushioned chair.

Back in the present. A tinted glass door greets visitors to the R&R Center, giving the appearance that the clinic is closed even in

the middle of the day. Inside the door, a reception desk sits strategically between entrance and waiting room. It is impossible to slip in to check on a soldier, or to slip out and skip an appointment, without being seen. Ms. Honeycutt occupies the seat behind the desk. Her head barely rises above the wooden barrier erected, I suspect, to keep prying eyes from reading the patient information that sits before her.

The walls around her have been painted an innocuous pale blue, perhaps to soothe those who enter the clinic. I'm never sure whether color has the desire effect on its target. What I do know is the room is dark, with every fluorescent light turned on, and I'm getting agitated.

"Have you been here before?" It takes me a minute. The second time I realize Ms. Honeycutt is speaking to us.

I look at Reid, who says, "No, Ma'am."

"Then you'll need to fill these out." She hands him a clipboard with about eight sheets of paper. Mostly Privacy Act statements and questionnaires about previous medical conditions, from what I can make out over his shoulder.

Within two minutes he hands the paperwork back, signed.

"You all can go into the waiting room. And Top, he'll have to go back to his appointment by himself. If the doctor wants you, he will call you."

"Roger that." And we stop at the doorway when we realize there are no empty seats.

There are four rows of eight chairs each, a wall-mounted television and a magazine rack with a combination of *Army Times* and *Sports Illustrated,* maybe a couple of other titles.

This might be the point where one expects a description of sullen, quiet bodies. The truth is, there was some of that. There are just as many texting, playing on their PSPs, reading, whispering dirty jokes. No one exactly fits the cookie cutter mold intended to give identity to a redeploying soldier.

Opposite the television is a long hallway where a medic wearing whites and sergeant stripes walks up and down, appearing every few minutes to call the next patient. Since we have an appointment, Reid's is the next name called. Then another name, and a seat opens up. I find myself sitting on the front row, in front of the television. The staff has turned the channel to the cartoon network where Coyote and Roadrunner are renewing their sixty-year struggle.

The desert scene vaguely reminds me of Tikrit, or Tallil, one of the dustier bases where our soldiers were scattered. Replace the gray bluffs with buildings and it becomes a cityscape. And now Coyote is burying a trap in the desert floor. I wonder if anyone pays attention to what is showing but, fortunately, no one seems to be fazed.

Beside me sits a soldier who's staring at the screen, or through the screen. Roughly the same age as Reid, the same look. He seems to be alone, no first sergeant, no buddy present. I want to turn and ask him how he's doing but I let the moment pass. Though everyone shares a common geography and a familiarity with trauma, each grief is individual. Even the soldiers behind us, who seem to know us, who snicker between whispers at the story of last night's drunken escapade, camouflage the personal. The one beside me has his arms crossed covering his name tag. He's intently watching Coyote bait a trap, even cracking a smile.

Reid's been in the office five minutes.

The last time he didn't make it past the waiting room. Members of the shooter's unit would later describe him as a lone wolf, someone who kept to himself while others talked openly. The lone wolf let the tension build from within. That's one of the reasons I kept looking for signs of changes in our troops as I grew into this new responsibility.

I was not the first sergeant when the shooting happened. The old first sergeant was removed four months later and I was the next

highest ranking enlisted soldier, having to both learn the ropes and establish a new relationship with each soldier in the middle of a war zone. From the calls I would later get, I can imagine how news of the shooting came down. "Guidons, guidons, guidons, report your status" would have sounded over the radio. Guidons, officially a flag with the unit colors, was the term for the first sergeant of each company—the person who reported back with the following information: number of soldiers assigned, number out of country, in the hospital, and present.

Our unit would have to call eight base camps from our office in Balad, about one hour north of Baghdad—we were scattered across the country—to give a complete report. I am sure that higher headquarters asked if we had any soldiers at the combat stress tent and I hope that when the news came down, someone from our company caught a standby flight to Baghdad just to listen to how our own people were coping with the trauma. It's a simple rule that a little give-a-damn goes a long way.

When I did take over, Reid and I held an uneasy peace. I made the trip to Baghdad a first priority. With the fragmentation of people and events, combined with the fact we had lost a soldier in this conflict, trust would be difficult. Where I had traveled before as a junior leader and sat with them on stolen lawn chairs and talked about anything while watching camel spiders crawl sideways beneath the trailers where they slept, now we communicated in gestures, body language, short choppy sentences where the answer to everything was "okay." We're okay. The mission's okay. Okay, I'll do it. Just don't make me really say it, okay?

The definition of okay takes on whatever definition the speaker gives it. It may mean "thumbs up" on the surface and "leave me alone" a few levels down.

I would find myself talking to fill the silence, seeing head nods as signs of progress, wondering what variables we could control. I realize

now, after some time has passed, the worst part of losing a soldier is forgetting temporarily that there are 119 still waiting for direction. That comes through in the silence—"What are you going to do now, Sergeant?"

But this is Reid's story, not mine.

That damn cartoon. It has only been ten minutes. No one has called for me and I hope Reid is opening up. I don't have much faith, having seen the tendency to annotate and medicate, but it's the overwhelmed system we have of full waiting rooms and appointments booked weeks in advance.

The medic returns and calls a name. And our drama on the screen begins to unfold. The bird dances on the trap, pecks at the bowl of seed, and zips down the road. Coyote follows in disbelief. The medic returns and calls a name. The trap snaps shut. A few of us, knowing the ending, jump anyway. The medic calls a name. The third time I hear the medic say "Hall" a little louder. I look left and ask, "Is that you?" and as if waking he says, "Yes it is." Private Hall rises and disappears down the corridor. Another soldier takes his place.

In ten more minutes Reid will appear carrying an appointment slip. In two months he will be clowning around, without water balloons, I hope. The sight of five red-turned-brown Rorschach blots on the wall may never disappear and may always serve as his own self-assessment of whether he is living in the present or some repurposed memory. In a year he'll be out and going back to school and in another year I'll follow.

When the door at the end of the corridor opens up I'll look for some clue, whether he's looking up or down. I'll take his follow up date and post it on the Big Board. Maybe we'll grab a burger, maybe we'll talk about anything but the Army, maybe the future, or cars.

Or maybe we'll eat in silence. And after that—maybe tomorrow—if the schedule's clear—I'll make my own appointment. I'm sure there will be time tomorrow.

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Excerpt from *Tushhog*

By Jeffery Hess

Fort Myers, Florida, May 14, 1981

The inside of Gator Doug's lip felt raw from chewing on it as he drove his El Camino down San Carlos Boulevard. The sun was hours from rising and without street lights, the dark was broken up by patches of light from windows of houses here or there along the side of the road. Of the couple of cars in motion at that hour, he assumed they were bakers on their way to making donuts or route drivers on their way to one plant or another to pick up their delivery trucks. He felt bad for guys who had to work so early every day. Almost nothing got him out of bed at that hour. Today, he had no choice. He'd received a phone call five minutes earlier saying his son, Dougie, was at the Waterway Marina. The caller had spoken with a Cuban accent, but he hadn't stayed on the line long enough to get his name. Gator Doug had pulled on his pants and his boots as fast as he could.

His mouth ran dry and his head pounded with the percussive beats of nerve endings throbbing optimism and pessimism. Every bit of hope in him rose to the surface of his skin. He licked his tongue over the chewed part of his lip.

He pushed the V-8 with a steady rumble and wished he could speed up time, too. His eyes focused on the road so intently, he had to remind himself to blink.

As much hope as there was in Gator Doug's mind, he couldn't ignore a little fear that the mysterious phone call was a trap. Either way, he didn't have a choice. His son might need his help. If he'd had Scotland Ross's phone number, he would've called and asked him to come along.

Once he hit US 41, he tried to calm himself for the ride that would take him only twenty minutes at that time of day. He leaned forward with his finger on the radio buttons searching for something decent to listen to. He had a case full of 8-tracks on his passenger seat he couldn't play because his tape deck had eaten his Bozz Scaggs and Kool and the Gang tapes and he wasn't willing to risk anything else in his collection. The FM channels were filled with commercials and the AM channels were mostly static and wayward feeds from Cuba in the 500-kilohertz range to almost halfway up the dial, where he found weather reports. Another beautiful spring day in the sunshine state was planned as if they didn't know his son's life was in danger. Gator Doug's breath came shallow and he couldn't help yawning despite being eager and anxious. He didn't know if he was feeling his age or if his brain was so tense that it starved for oxygen. He'd breathe easier if Scotland was with him.

Gator Doug had always dreamed of Dougie going to law school and making partner in a credible firm somewhere, but since there was no way in hell that would happen, he hoped his son was safe and happy. He'd settle for safe.

As he drove, his shoulders rounded forward—curling toward the steering wheel. His hands shook. He felt like he had a dripping faucet in the back of his throat and had no idea where all that saliva came from. He chewed his lip some more until his jaw ached.

Farther up US 41, another new strip plaza had cropped up on the side of the road where a few acres of pines, palms, and palmettos had once grown wild. A used car lot had taken over a burger place at the light not far from the church. Both were new since the last time he'd made this drive.

It would've been quicker to have taken a boat ride. Be that as it may, he was in his car, crossing the Caloosahatchee Bridge and then turning left on Pondella Road. He'd looked up where to turn on the map he kept folded in his glove box. The name sounded like the headliners at a second-rate hotel lounge in Coral Gables. He turned left again on Orange Grove Boulevard—the business end of which held shopping centers and gas stations on each corner. After that was an elementary school and a high school boasting of the Red Knights. The rest of the road was single-family homes of cinderblock and stucco construction, asphalt shingle roofs, and one-car garages. It was a nice, normal place for nice, normal people to raise nice, normal families. In another world, maybe Gator Doug would have a nice, normal job where that kind of house and family were possible, but it wasn't likely, based not on his luck, but on his low tolerance for nice and normal anything. He continued along Orange Grove, past the sign for Waterway Estates, which held more cinderblock and stucco homes of the nice and normal variety. He leaned forward, wringing the steering wheel like a dishrag.

A half-mile later, the Waterway Marina sign indicated where to turn, but with his windows down, he would've known simply by the rotten-fish smell of low tide.

The marina was a harbor cut into a swath of mangroves off the north shore of the Caloosahatchee River and consisted of dormant boats tied to docks stretching fifty-deep. He parked and walked along the docks near the end of the row closest to the channel. Ripples of diesel-slick water lapped at the pylons and the hulls of boats. The

marina was quiet and dark except for the pole lights on every dock. Two dogs somewhere across the water barked back and forth and he wondered if they'd ever stop. That was the only sound worse than a baby crying. Both were loud and non-stop, but babies have to cry, except for Dougie. He hadn't been much of a crier at all. That was one of his rare gifts. That boy was never going to be the next attorney general, but at least he hadn't kept his father up at night.

Gator Doug walked toward the docks with cautious steps, like walking barefoot on a cold road. If this was some sort of ambush, those Cuban bastards would get him soon enough.

Sweat dampened his neck though the May air was pleasant and humidity wasn't scheduled for another month. As he walked, the smell of low tide was replaced by the charred smell of wood and meat. It was the wrong weather for a fireplace and the wrong time of day for a barbeque. The smell got stronger the closer he got to the Golden Noble, which was red, except for the transom that was scorched black halfway to the waterline. If anybody lived aboard their boat in the marina, they would've seen or heard the fire. Smelled the smoke. Maybe anyone who'd been there already ran for the hills or to the cops. Gator Doug had no way of knowing how much time he'd have before the cops showed.

He chewed his lip again and eased up only once he'd tasted blood. He spit a stream onto the dock leading to the boat. As he got closer, he caught sight of the outline of someone sitting motionless near the stern. His throat kinked and he couldn't catch a breath. He walked closer, leaned over the gunnel.

A stream of bile rose from Gator Doug's gut fast enough to make his knees weak. Despite the suddenness of it, he managed to lean over the dock a split second before he puked. His vomit mixed with the harbor water just as any acid mixes into a base and he wished everything was that simple. He was in shock and his knees

were locked. He felt like his feet were nailed to the dock with railroad spikes, yet despite the horror of seeing his dead son, he couldn't look away.

No matter how much time might've gone between visits or how much horror had been inflicted, Gator Doug would always be able to recognize his son, even if not for the jagged tooth—the one his mother had convinced him gave him character. Gator Doug felt bad for the first time that he never got his boy braces.

He shook his head. "No!" he called into the night. He squeezed his eyes shut as if he could open them to a different scene. This was accompanied by a heaviness in the pit of his stomach. It was then he'd realized he'd held his breath for a few rapid heartbeats.

Once air filled his lungs again, he kept looking up as he forced his eyes to retain water building there. Tears and sweat mixed in the crease of his cheeks. He wiped it away with the tail of his T-shirt.

His eyes remained unfocused as he recalled the day he taught Dougie to ride a bike. And then closed as the memory became clearer to reveal the kid was only three or four, and too small for the bike. So much so that Gator Doug had lowered the seat as far as it would go, duct-taped blocks to the pedals, and angled the handlebars so the kid had a chance at sitting upright. The boy's mother had hollered from the front stoop for them to be careful. Gator Doug had laughed because they were men and it wasn't possible to learn to ride a bike and be careful at the same time. Falling was half the lesson. The little guy never fell off that bike. He pedaled into a palm tree, but held on through the impact. Gator Doug had gotten to him before he and the bike toppled over.

A catfish splashed ahead of Gator Doug—silent on the way out, with impact that displaced water loud enough to jar him from his memory.

"Ah, fuck," he said as he pulled a Kool from the pack in his chest

pocket and lit it with an S&H Green Stamps matchbook. He wasn't sure what to do. "Motherfuckers!" he yelled as he kicked the hull of the partially burned boat hard enough that it floated out the slack in the mooring lines fast enough to snap back against the old tires used as dock bumpers.

Every voice Gator Doug had ever heard spoke to him at once. They all told him to get in the car and get the hell away from there. Killing and barbecuing his son meant they could do the same to him. His cigarette burned down to his knuckles. He tossed it into the water.

The boat and the body had been burned deliberately and hotly, but extinguished before the mooring lines ever felt the heat. Whoever did this didn't want to destroy evidence. A hose reel affixed to the dock sat ten feet away. Gator Doug assumed fingerprints could be taken from the nozzle if he found a phone and called the cops right away. He didn't.

As he spat into the water, he saw a nineteen-foot Bayliner with a torn Bimini top. He walked over and tugged on the ripped canvas. With the help of his pocket knife, he cut off a sheet large enough to satisfy his needs. He laid it on the dock and climbed aboard the burned boat.

Water sloshed on the charred deck and felt spongy beneath his footfalls. He walked up to his son. Dougie's charred remains were drenched in salt water. A wallet was unburned and tucked into a crevice of charred meat between two of his ribs. Gator Doug cried a little as he tugged it out, opened it to see the Florida drivers license picture of his son staring back at him, flipper tooth and all.

He scooped up his son with one arm under the bend in his knees and the other just below his shoulders. Salt water soaked his clothes and the smell of burnt flesh threatened to make Gator Doug vomit again. He shook it off and wrestled his son's burnt corpse onto the dock, where one leg dangled over the edge as the boat drifted wide on its moorings. Gator Doug gripped the weatherbeaten wood

planks to snug the boat against the dock, which crimped the burnt leg in the process. Gator Doug pushed off just enough to grab his son's bare foot and heave the leg onto the dock. His heart pounded from the effort and a foreign compulsion to cry overtook him. He ignored both as best he could and climbed out of the burned boat and dragged Dougie into position on the scrap of Bimini top.

No boats motored out of or into the marina and the boats docked there seemed unoccupied. He wiped the wallet on his son's wet and burned shirt and tucked it into his own back pocket. He bent down again and rolled Dougie like the world's biggest joint. He wished he had one now to make this bearable.

Gator Doug bent as deep as a sumo wrestler and heaved the wrapped corpse over his shoulder. The last time he'd carried his son was probably twenty years ago. And though Dougie wasn't very big, he was heavy the way churches are heavy. "We're almost gone, boy. Hang in there," Gator Doug said out loud as he shifted the load. By the time he made it to the seawall, he felt like his back was going to give out. A wise man would've dropped the load and rested a moment, but Gator Doug pushed on, figuring it was easier to keep going than to go through the exertion of setting him down and picking him back up.

The burden on his shoulder felt like the trunk of a tree as he grasped to keep hold. Forward momentum carried them into the parking lot, where Gator Doug laid his son into the bed of his El Camino.

Gator Doug pushed through the backdoor of the tavern bearing his name. He walked through the kitchen and right out to the bar, where he grabbed a bottle of Wild Turkey. Before he poured himself a drink, he looked up, saw Scotland Ross, and said, "I'll be damned!"

Scotland's neck visibly tightened. He rolled his head, stretched, and rubbed the back of his neck. Fidgeted—couldn't stay still, avoided eye contact. Cleared his throat.

Gator Doug took a moment to let the man collect himself.

"You look like shit," Scotland said. "You out all night chasing that redhead from the beauty parlor?"

Gator Doug took the bottle and walked through the dining room.

Scotland followed him out to the deck along the far wall of the restaurant overlooking San Carlos Bay.

It was early enough that no other employees were there and pelicans soared close enough to the water Gator Doug thought they'd crash. The sun barely above the horizon made the water shine like glass. He and Scotland had not just the deck, but the whole outdoors to themselves—more private than his private office by the bathrooms.

Scotland held a revolver, but gripped the barrel and reached the handle toward Gator Doug. "I wanted to stop by first thing, because I can't keep this," he said.

Gator Doug denied the return and pushed Scotland's hand away. "We'll get to that," he said.

"You been good to me," Scotland offered the handle of the .38 toward Gator Doug again. "But I can't get into any more trouble."

Gator Doug ignored him and leaned his elbows on the deck railing. "I got an anonymous call last night that Dougie was at a marina on the north side. Fucking suburbs, you know?"

"Is he okay?"

Gator Doug's mouth curled. He swallowed hard and then shook his head. His hand pressed on his stomach simultaneously tamping down vomit and rage.

Scotland looked nauseous himself as his own skin wrapped around his bones. "Oh, fuck!" Scotland said, his voice as low as Gator Doug felt. There was genuine anguish in his face.

Gator Doug unscrewed the whiskey cap and spit over the railing, into water lapping against the pylons beneath them. "Poor son of a bitch got my looks and his mother's shit-for-brains." He chugged from the

bottle. He righted the bottle and added, "His whole life would've been exactly different if those attributes could've been reversed. But that's life. You know?" Gator Doug sniffed then and looked out toward the wide part of the bay. Without turning, he said, "Boy, I'm telling you, he wasn't perfect, but he was mine. You know?"

Scotland's chin puckered and water seemed to build behind his eyes. He cleared his throat and looked up at the sky. "Yep."

Gator Doug nodded as his mind clicked back to Scotland's sad story of losing a son.

Scotland raised the revolver and tucked it back into his waistband. "We got to get them before they take something else."

Gator Doug hid his surprise by taking another swig from the whiskey bottle. He'd never seen such a 180 without hearing the screech of tires and smelling smoke rising off of pavement. He wanted the kid to keep the gun for their protection. "We ain't going to do anything," Gator Doug said as he carried the bottle back toward the bar, "especially right now."

"They're coming for you next," Scotland said before he walked inside. "We've got to get to them first."

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Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba

By Michael Lund

The odd man leaned closer and said, "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba." Or at least that's what Ben, working the seat at the far end of sign-up table, heard.

"Charlotte," he asked, getting up and coming over to her side. "Is there a problem?"

"This gentleman." He could tell she did not think he was a gentleman. "He seems to think he's on file with us."

"Let me see."

The bloodmobile from Maryville carried records of past and prospective donors on their visits to small towns like this. Some, not yet entered into the electronic database, were in plastic crates. Ben opened the file of donors again. "What did you say your name was?"

The man said again, "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba."

Ben, thinking he'd heard an echo from thirty years ago, raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

The man had spoken with a kind of lilt, a rhythm; and Ben shifted his attention to take in whoever this was more carefully. He saw someone middle-aged with a super-sized soft drink cup in one hand. His appearance might have been charitably described as "casual."

When the man repeated what he'd said, grinning widely, Ben realized why he hadn't heard him distinctly: the man had no teeth. His lips and gums were smacking. But this time Ben could distinguish actual words, though it didn't help that much: "Do you smell the cotton candy?" And again the would-be donor almost sang it: "Do you smell the cotton candy." But what did that mean?

Ben wondered if he could have possibly heard, *"em bé, em bé, em bé, em bé,"* a Vietnamese phrase that haunted him from his one-year tour in 1970. That language is tonal, and the phrasing is, even to Western ears, sometimes musical.

They were in the old train station (converted into an event center), but Ben, taking this man's words literally, sniffed the air to see if, in fact, there might be a smell of cotton candy drifting from some far-off place. Sitting, as it does, right on the edge of the prairie, Tarkio's wind sometimes seems to bring voices, sounds, and odors all the way across Kansas from Colorado and beyond. As he sniffed, Ben also noticed that that soft drink cup the man was holding did not have liquid in it.

Still, he felt an odd sense of kinship with the smiling stranger. Once Tarkio College's account manager, Ben had been officially unemployed for twenty-three months, a time in which he felt lost, disconnected, off the grid. Red Cross had finally hired him, but at a substantial cut in pay.

His wife, a nurse, worked at the hospital in Fairfax, thirty minutes away, and they had concluded that moving from their home of thirty years would be a last resort. They claimed life was clean and simple in this community of 1,500 laid out on the flat land in a rectangular grid.

So Ben said to the man he would later refer to as "Smiley", "No. No, I don't smell it," referring to the cotton candy. He now noted scruffy clothes, several days' beard, maybe a bit of a musty smell. And that cup he was holding? There were probably several hundred

cigarette butts in there. He must have been combing the streets before he showed up here.

This could be one of those homeless men who donate every two months, Ben thought—money to fund a drinking binge. He experienced one of those waves of gratitude he'd first had when he returned safely from Vietnam and which still came to him from time to time. His file could have been closed several times over there.

The man leaned closer, smiling even more, and, looking him intently in the face, said, "When you do. When you do smell the cotton candy, you'll know it's time."

Ah, thought Ben. This is a would-be prophet, warning me about the end of the world. "Repent ye, repent ye." No wonder Charlotte had been made uncomfortable.

So, he sat down with Smiley and helped him fill out the necessary forms. It seemed unlikely, but George I. Joseph did have a donor's card.

When he related the experience to Rachel later that night, Ben admitted that the guy had the right form. "It's the old soothsayer's formula: the warning, the omen, the foreshadowing—the smell of cotton candy."

"Yes," she said. "But a bit creepy. And the content—'you'll know it's time'—doesn't add up, to me at least. I actually like 'Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba' better."

But then she paused, her mouth open, and he realized she was thinking about the Army veteran, back from a difficult tour in Kosovo, and his wife, who had come into her emergency room several months ago.

He moved on quickly to other people he'd chatted with at the recruiting event: the young bank teller wanting to donate for her first time, the retired Navy pilot who came home to run his family's 250-acre cattle farm, the mayor, jovial as ever. Ben thought he'd gotten past that difficult moment. But he and Rachel would both hear "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba" one more time.

It would bring back Rachel's traumatic encounter with a grieving mother, but it also resurrected Ben's confrontation with what was probably a child's grandmother. She had been holding a bundle out to him on the outskirts of Saigon, as if, because he was an American in uniform, he could save a baby dying of malnutrition.

At the blood drive the following week, the lilting echo floated past Ben as he chatted with a man reclined on a gurney squeezing a rubber ball. Since they had the gurneys back to back, Ben guessed "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba" came from the person behind him or someone at the table where people are required to sit for fifteen minutes after donating and where they can enjoy snacks and more drinks.

Later, he walked his donor to the waiting area and found smiling George Joseph, the man he'd seen at the train station a week earlier, speaking to the volunteer handling refreshments. Rachel was supervising the nurses and keeping records on one side of the hall. Looking over at her, he knew they both were hearing it: "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba."

Ben concentrated and heard Smiley ask a volunteer, not "Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba"; he said/sang, "Do *you* have some Nutter Butters?"

Rachel had told him about the young couple and their infant son in the emergency room. The mother's words now mixed in Ben's head with those of the toothless prophet.

The military wife had gone to work, leaving the husband, just come from duty at the Army Corps of Engineers in Kansas City, to watch their six-month-old child. The couple had grown up in Fairfax, and, at the end of his current enlistment, they were going to take over her family's tractor supply business. When the dad woke from a nap, the baby beside him wasn't breathing.

Rachel had met the father and child coming on the ambulance. The mother arrived minutes later. It appeared to be Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but that's a difficult diagnosis to confirm. Understandably, neither parent could accept what had happened.

In such situations the police have to come; and an investigation is required. The baby—the body—has to be taken away. Rachel promised to go with the child, not to let her out of her sight. But even as she rode in the squad car, the dead infant in her arms, all she could hear in her head was the mother back at the hospital keening uncontrollably.

After Smiley left the blood drive, another of the volunteers said to Ben, “Did you know that guy who just walked out sang back-up for a rock-n-roll band I’ve never heard of back in the sixties? Or at least that's what he told me. Made all sorts of money from a couple of key hits, then just dropped out of sight. Apparently he didn't like to live like everybody else, so he followed the open road wherever he had a mind to be." She paused. "If he really had a mind. There were a lot of drugs in the sixties."

Ben knew there were other reasons people dropped out in the sixties. He asked the volunteer, “‘Bubba, bubba, bubba, bubba’ was background music for some hit?"

"For several hits. Something like 'boob-a-boob-a, blue moon,' something like that."

Rachel, standing close to Ben, gripped his elbow and whispered that she would hear “baby, baby, baby, baby" in her dreams forever.

Ben also heard, *"em bé, em bé, em bé, em bé,"* the Vietnamese word for baby.

Michael Lund, a native of Rolla, Missouri, lives and writes in Virginia. The author of At Home and Away, *a Route 66 novel series that chronicles an American family during times of peace and war from 1915 to 2015, he has also produced two collections of short stories:* How Not to Tell a War Story *(2012) and* Eating With Veterans *(2015).*

Poetry.

The Wall

Mitchell Burch

On a dilapidated highway
I happened upon a wall

That once held a secret
Intended for destruction.

A secret now missing,
With a ragged hole in its wake.

It carried with it a message
Clear in intent.

“I am going to kill you.”

But a new message
Was scrawled about the pit.

Holding no secrets
Amidst a forceful taunt.

"You missed!"

Mitchell Burch is a former sergeant in the United States Army. He served four years in the Indiana Army National Guard in Alpha Troop 1-152 Cavalry, where he deployed to Iraq in h2008, and five years on active duty with Alpha Company 2/8 Infantry, where he deployed to Afghanistan in 2011-2012, and Kuwait in 2013-2014. Mitchell lives in a quiet town in southern Indiana where he enjoys playing the banjo, writing, and spending time with his beautiful wife Amber, two children, and dogs.

Malingerers

Milton Ehrlich

At the Port of Embarcation,
they came in droves,
weeping and bleeding
to our psychiatric clinic
escorted by Military Police.

We administered
sodium-pentothal interviews
to find out if their suicidal gestures
were authentic or fake.

The phonies were court martialed,
and sentenced to hard labor in the stockade,
before being dishonorably discharged
as cowardly malingerers.

The genuinely suicidal were hospitalized
and medically discharged under Section 8:
"Mentally unfit for military duty."

Our psychiatrist, Captain Greene
confessed that after reading
The Red Badge of Courage,
he always wondered which way
he would run when under fire.

He was reassured by his reaction
to a robbery in progress one night
while eating a burger at the White Castle.

He leapt into action by turning lights
on and off until police arrived.

Doesn't every man want to know
how brave he would be when tested?

Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D is an 85-year-old psychologist. A Korean War veteran, he has published numerous poems in periodicals such as Descant, Wisconsin Review, Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow, Toronto Quarterly Review, Christian Science Monitor, Huffington Post, *and the* New York Times.

It

Dwight Jenkins

I didn't want to.
I never did.
I was a child.
But I grew disillusioned
Under the banners of what we hid,
Adorning the red blades of our what . . . love
(Is that really what we made—love?)
with wilting wild flowers we could never save.
Was it ever able to live without dark morning's
purpled shadows, or deep evening's rippled pain?

I doubt it.

Oh how we lied to each other, every time,
how we purified the drinks we laced
with lies until they ran clear as moonshine,
crystal meth on love, yours and mine,
all signs of life erased.

Dwight Jenkins served in the United States Marine Corps for ten years, deploying with the 13th MEU for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He has been married for thirty-two years to the love of his life, Jennifer. They have five wonderful and intriguing children.

Dying at Work

Jacob Paul Patchen

We're all dying in our work clothes.

Lying gray and lifeless on the floor
halfway into the break room; buttoned-
up dress shirt, threaded and stitched
together, holding in the stench of waste
and decay.

Zipped and buckled to be proper, I.D.
badge and nametag that reads JACOB,
so that they will know who once made
this suit move; who would walk back
and forth to the copier in these stiff penny
loafers, clicking this ballpoint pen, half
inkless from signature after signature,
signing away valued time in a place of
emptiness, of worthlessness.

To shed this shirt and run, to wrap this
red tie around my head like an office
Rambo, ducking in and out of cubicles
for cover,

a stapler as my weapon, fending off the
hours, the minutes, the angry moments
gone from you, from them, from us.

I will shimmy from these slacks and leave
them wadded up in my rolling cushioned
swivel chair, where they will feel at home.

I give these calf high socks to the filing
cabinet; these scuffless brown shoes to the
bathroom trashcan, where I would throw
away time alone.

And out into that fine, free air I will strut,
victorious, in my bright blue boxer briefs
and flashing red tie, free. Free. Freedom.

Jacob Paul Patchen was born and raised outside of Byesville, Ohio where he spent his youth tormenting babysitters and hiding in trees. Patchen earns his inspiration through experience, where he writes abundantly about love, life, war and family. Jacob is a poet, a blogger, an author, and combat veteran. He debuted with his book Life Lessons from Grandpa and His Chicken Coop. *He is also a published poet. His work can be found in several journals, including* New Millennium Writings, O-Dark-Thirty, The Deadly Writers Patrol, *and* Lost Lake Folk Opera *magazine.*

Redeployment Is Predeployment

Charity Winters

The Bard War Writing Today: Notes from the Plays

It is the mission.
It is ambition
that creeps across the
stage in dreadful marches
to delightful measures
contrived by those whose
plots have laid inductions
dangerous. Return
and turn around to
endure this going
hence for we shall meet
again—us banded
merry few. There are
deployments yet to
come with battles fought
and wars not won.
Don't ever unpack.
We're always going back.

Charity Winters is a 2003 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy and a freelance writer. During her six years on active duty as an Air Force Security Forces Officer, she deployed three times to Iraq to conduct security operations. Her writing has appeared in various publications including the Naval Institute's Proceedings, Leatherneck, Scintilla, The Red Mud Review, Lutheran Digest, Round Table, O-Dark Thirty, *and* Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors *Vols. 2, 4, and 5.*

Interview.

A Conversation with Jeffery Hess

This quarter, *O-Dark-Thirty* interviewed Tampa resident and former sailor Jeffery Hess. Hess is the author of the novels *Tushhog* and *Beachhead* and the story collection Cold War Canoe Club. He is also the editor of the award-winning anthologies *Home of the Brave: Stories in Uniform* and *Home of the Brave: Somewhere in the Sand*. He served six years aboard the Navy's oldest and newest ships, and has held writing positions at a daily newspaper, a Fortune 500 company, and a university-based research center. He holds an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte, and his writing has appeared widely in print and online. He leads the DD-214 Writers' Workshop for military veterans. Hess spoke with *O-Dark-Thirty* managing editor Jerri Bell.

O-Dark-Thirty: Tell us a little bit about your desire to write, and how your military service either impeded or enhanced your writing ambitions.

Jeffery Hess: My desire to write began when I was four years old. My family moved to Florida, and all I wanted to do was write letters to

my grandparents back in New York. That letter writing habit continued during my enlistment—which predated the internet, when snail mail was all we had. (Oddly, my penmanship didn't improve much between those earliest letters and the most recent.) But my path to becoming a novelist began in high school with a class where our only responsibilities were to read any books we wanted and then write reports about them. I remember two books I chose for that class. One was Steven King's *Christine*. The other was John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. I don't recall which I read first, but I was a wrestler for a couple years in high school. *Garp* featured collegiate wrestling, and *Christine* was about high school kids. I related so fully that I was hooked as a reader, but I also wanted to do what King and Irving were doing. Someday.

In the Navy, I continued to read voraciously—took a fair amount of ribbing for reading my dogeared copy of Webster's Dictionary. My aunt sent me subscriptions to *Reader's Digest,* and the first thing I did with every issue was flip to the Word Power section and take the vocabulary test.

The first ship I got orders to was a submarine tender homeported on Guam. I wasn't aboard long before I vowed to make my first book a scathing novel titled "Shattered Expectations." I never got farther than that awful title, but the desire to write burned inside me. Little did I know then that I was building experiences that would be invaluable years later, though it was almost two decades into my writing career before I began writing about my Navy days.

It was after the Navy, in my first or second year of college, that I met Randy Wayne White. He had a table outside the campus bookstore where he sold copies of his first Doc Ford novels. I told him I wanted to be a writer too, and he told me to study writing in college. I didn't even know that was possible. The next semester, I took a creative writing class and haven't stopped writing since.

ODT: The Navy plays a central role in the stories you included in* Cold War Canoe Club, *but a more peripheral one—a significant but unexplored element in the protagonist's backstory—in your novels* Beachhead *and* Tushhog. *Military service seems to be a key determining factor in your fictional protagonists' characters. Why do you think this is the case?

JH: Life between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four (often known as the stupid years) is transformational in general, but particularly for anyone in the military, perhaps especially aboard ship.

Even if deployments are militarily uneventful, there are hundreds, sometimes thousands of souls aboard who experience various degrees of personal calamities at sea or upon their return to homeport.

Also, I was so impressed with the range of activity and emotions while in the Navy. The two ships I was stationed aboard could not have been more different, but we still worked two or three days straight or lost sleep because of various ports of call, and combined it with the sheer luck of not being involved in anything more life threatening than a typhoon that had more than half the crew laid up in their racks, trying, unsuccessfully, not to puke.

The times when I worked for days in a row were nothing compared to the turret explosion aboard USS *Iowa* or the Exocet missile that hit the USS *Stark*. At the time I was disappointed my ships escaped calamity. Being young and dumb, I wanted my training to be tested. After almost two decades of perspective, I was able to write about those kinds of events and in some small way honor them.

ODT: What compels you to write so much about Florida, and why do you set so many stories in the 1980s?

JH: That decade encapsulated four years of high school and my six-year Navy enlistment. Though it was only one-fifth of my life so far, it was

tremendously formative. And Florida has always been home. I grew up in southwest Florida and I've lived half my life only two hours from where I grew up. I'm fortunate enough to maintain friendships with many people I've known since grade school, many of whom still live there.

Together, that period and that state have more material than I could ever touch upon. Times were simpler and the rules were more lax; with only half as many people, there was much more room to move around and hide the bodies. But even with the crime and the violence, the era and the state not only provide identities for the characters, they also shape their lives in the heat and on the beaches and in the woods and swamps as they pursue love and suffer loss and win or lose, all the while yearning for something else. Something about that time and place seems to facilitate that on the page.

ODT: What did you find to be the biggest differences between writing short stories for* Cold War Canoe Club *and working with the longer form of your novels? What are the unique pleasures and challenges of each form?

JH: I got hooked on short stories in college as a twenty-four-year old freshman. (I'd spent the previous six years in the Navy reading only novels.) The stories of Poe, Hemingway, Carver, O'Connor, O'Brien, and others made me want to write something brief yet powerful, too.

I wrote short stories all through college and began my first novel right after graduation.

I wrote three (unpublished) novels and dozens of stories before I began the first of the stories included in *Cold War Canoe Club.* I hadn't written about my Navy experience at all in those intervening thirteen years.

Writing a novel is like having a relationship. The short story form on the other hand, is a fling. Sometimes only one weekend-long, other times it continues for months, but the brevity is only part of the

appeal. I like to write short stories for the same reason I like to read them. To use a Navy analogy, a story is like a day cruise while a novel is like a long deployment. It's fun to get underway knowing you can go full speed ahead, do crashbacks, whatever, and still get back to port and hit the beach that night. Novels as deployments mean months (years, most often while writing a novel) without doing or seeing much else. Both are fun for me. Half the stories in *Cold War Canoe Club* are in first person point of view. That's especially fun. My novels have all been written in the third person, so it's fun to write from within the protagonists that way.

I've written stories inspired by actual events, both related to the Navy or ships or just one particular sailor—a submarine in peril in the 1940s, an aircraft carrier in a race riot in the seventies, and a pregnant Navy wife during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the sixties. I rely on that kind connection with the characters in search of their emotional truth. With that comes some pretty unsavory stuff, too. These are sailors we're talking about. Sometimes alcohol is involved, because no good sea story ever began with a salad. Some of this material presents itself to me as stories, some as segments for novels.

ODT: Your novels are thrillers, which by definition are more plot-driven than character-driven. Something has to—many somethings have to—*happen *in a thriller. And yet, in good thrillers, character matters. It drives the action. The plots of* Beachhead *and* Tushhog *would be different, I think, if the protagonist was someone other than the character you created for Scotland Ross. So it's not all about the plot. Yet there's a perception that writers of thrillers, mysteries, and romance are "plotters"—that you write from a predetermined plot—while writers of "literary" fiction are "pantsers" who develop their stories as they go, with no clear understanding of where their stories are headed until the end. Do you think of yourself as a "plotter," or a "pantser," or a little of both?

JH: This literary vs. commercial debate has always been interesting to me. The books I'm most drawn to are the ones that combine elements of both. The highest action won't hold me if I don't care about the character(s). The deepest character won't interest me if he or she doesn't do much.

As a reader and a writer, I look for characters with scars from the past, fears of the future, and not just the wants of the present, but the intensity of those wants.

With *Beachhead,* I began to discover what has turned out to be advantageous. I'd guess I have about an 80/20 pantser to plotter ratio. I tend to be scene oriented, and I generally write one scene at a time. E. L. Doctorow's quip that "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way" applies to writing scenes, too.

I don't know what scene or catastrophe to place on an outline unless I know what drove that character to that point. If I pick a killing or a robbery arbitrarily, the methods and motivations might not come across authentically. But if I get inside those characters perspective—in the moment, their moment—everything they do will be believable as it occurs naturally in story time. This is my interpretation of what Robert McKee called writing from the inside out rather than from the outside in. And I watched every hour of Robert Olen Butler's series on YouTube, which was a video demonstration of inside out writing. I read your interview with him in an earlier issue and he hinted at this method when he discussed the yearning within the protagonist.

Because just as I mentioned above, I can't arbitrarily assign a death to occur in the fifth chapter, second scene. But if I write from inside the characters *in* action and employ cause and effect as realistically as I'm able, then perhaps it will come across in a way that seems not only real but inevitable. That's the goal, anyway.

With that said, I obviously don't make an outline in the traditional sense, but I do sort of end up with one because I construct mine as

I go. I try to have some idea of what comes just beyond the scene I'm working on—the length of the headlights to return to the analogy mentioned earlier. Over the course of writing the book (or story) I have compiled a list that resembles an outline, but it's more like a scene list. It's sort of like making a blueprint as you build a house. One room at a time and only drawing in the next load-bearing wall after adding another room and more square footage. It may not be the most efficient way, but it gets me where I want to be.

ODT: Much fiction, regardless of genre, deals with death, fear of death, coping with the death of a close friend or family member. In the thriller genre, the violent deaths of victims and the prospect of the protagonist's violent death are central elements and drive some of the tension. I picture you with a character list on a whiteboard, figuring out in a George R. R. Martin/*Game of Thrones *sort of way who to off next in your book. I was devastated when you killed off important secondary characters I'd come to know and like in both your novels (no spoilers for readers here!) How* do *you decide which character has to die—which of your darlings to kill on the page, and not just in a metaphorical sense? How does it feel?

JH: I'm always sad to see my favorites have to go and though I've never read or seen any of the *Game of Thrones* material, I imagine those deaths serve the story in essential ways.

Death is never planned, it just happens, organically—stemming from the desires of the other characters. It is kind of exciting when a reader reacts so strongly. I frequently hear, "How could you kill him or her?" I usually respond that I didn't kill them—the other character did.

ODT: Shifting gears, tell me about the DD-214 writing workshop and your anthologies. How did these come about, and what do you think you've accomplished with them?

JH: The workshop and the *Home of the Brave* anthologies are intrinsically linked. I began the workshop in 2007. At AWP in '08, my Queens MFA classmate, Sheryl Monks, who had cofounded Press 53, asked me if I'd be interested in publishing an anthology of my students' stories. The workshop was too new at the time, so she and co-publisher Kevin Watson asked if I'd consider doing an anthology of military stories in general.

I'm infinitely proud of the anthologies and honored to have received awards for both from the Military Writers Society of America. Proceeds from the first benefit USA Cares and the second helps support the workshop.

With both entities, I try to highlight the military experience in some way. Even if my students don't write about their military experiences, they are veterans who have a sense of community and connection with like-minded individuals and I'm continually gratified by their writing and dedication.

ODT: Will there be more Scotland Ross novels? What are you working on next?

JH: Absolutely. *Beachhead* began as a short story that couldn't contain all Scotland Ross had going on in his life. Halfway through writing *Beachhead* as a novel, I realized one novel wasn't enough either. The characters (those who don't die early, anyway) proved to have stories that demanded to be told beyond the scope of that book. I knew there'd have to be a sequel. A publisher I'd spoken to at a conference suggested I consider a trilogy. That seemed like a perfect fit for those people I'd conjured. As a result, I'm currently working on the third book. It's slated for release in early 2020.

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