

MATTHEW BOULAY

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## Mud in the Desert

**M**ud in the desert, says the soldier boy from tennessee, why the *fuck* is there mud in the desert? the emphasis is on fuck and it's a good question; the tormented figures huddle close to one another until someone yells spread the fuck out and so they spread out and the soldier boy from tennessee grabs his shovel and digs and digs and the wheels on the humvee spin and spin until bang, a sudden blast, the smoke, the scream, the smell of blistered flesh and just like that the neighbor boy is dead, *faceless, nameless, do not think of the neighbor boy*, we don't know him and we don't know his mother or his father or his two little sisters who went to school this morning—first grade, Mrs. Anderson's class—with bows in their hair and matching pink dresses and cute smiles with dimples and not a care in the world, not a single thought about the twenty-two year old egyptian boy who left cairo last week without saying goodbye to his parents, flew to baghdad, met his handler, drove to mosul and then in the backroom of a dimly lit restaurant that still, even today, serves lamb and eggplant stew made with two teaspoons of baharat and a half cup of yellow split peas, he tried on the vest that he would soon explode like a furnace blast, melting the skin and pan-searing the guts of the faceless, nameless soldier boy from tennessee.

## The Blank Stare

**H**is buddies said it was suicide to charge up that hill and from the look of his eyes in the old photograph he knew, he already knew; the blank stare, the thousand yard stare, the stare of the spooked kid who goes up the hill, murders a yellow-skinned boy at the top of the hill and then goes home and works the day shift, sometimes doubles up on the night shift, starts a family, sometimes drinks himself to sleep, sometimes pretends its no big deal, sometimes cries himself to sleep, but never talks about it, never lets anyone in, never lets anyone know because jesus fucking christ, he screams, Arlington is already full of heroes. What does that mean, I say, I don't know what that means and he looks at me and says no, how would you know, you don't know nothing and walks out. But that was then, a long time ago, a time when we were family; it's different now—now I need a copy of the certificate to prove he's dead because mom wants a copy of it and these days it's just easier to do what she wants and so here is the sullen clerk with the cheap tie and bad breath telling me how old, you forgot to put how old and he points to the empty box on the form and smiles, smugly, because he's right and I'm wrong and so I write fifty-two and the next box says death, cause of death, and so I write rope, one end secured around ceiling beam, one end secured around neck and the clerk reads it and the clerk stops and stares and says nothing until finally he whispers me too, my dad too, and I don't know what to say so I look down and nod and smile a stupid smile because what else can we do when our hero dads hang themselves.

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**MATTHEW BOULAY** joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 1997 and served in Iraq in 2003. He now lives and works in Salem, Oregon.