

DREW PHAM

Because of George H.W. Bush, I Thought Smart Bombs Were a Good Thing

like the American Dream
and McDonald's Happy Meals
and democracy
and a big house
and the mortgage that comes with it
and grocery stores with enough rice to feed a village
and meat—not just on Tết, like Mom during the war—but every day
and G.I. Joes from the cartoons
of which the white boy next door had boxes full
and took for granted
but Dad thought were too expensive
so I got sack loads of green and tan army men
that came with flags
for each side like Old Glory for the good guys
and Germany's
and once after the Gulf War, Iraq's
but most often Việt Nam's
yet this was peace
and we had all the things my parents never had during the war
so Dad voted Republican because it was Nixon that ended it after all—

though
 Saigon
 fell
 under
 Ford
 and
 I
 barely
 remember
Operation Desert Shield
 but don't you think it's the bad kind of mixed metaphor
 when a shield becomes a storm?
 I do remember NBC or ABC covering it
 and General Schwarzkopf saying
 I'm now going to show you a picture of the luckiest man in Iraq
 and Mom cringed
 and didn't want to look
 and turned away just like she did during Bosnia
 but Dad bought me the *Gulf War 4 Pack VHS Set*
 no shit that was the title
and I was only four
but when I turned five it's all I ever watched because Barney never did
bring on a Vietnamese kid like me
so I was obsessed
with machines like the M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank
and the F4 Phantom II in its Wild Weasel configuration
and the B-52 Stratofortress
both of which Mom recognized from her war
which is why it was all so hard to watch
but Dad said they had stealth jets with smart bombs
so It wouldn't be like it was
in Việt Nam—this was back when he still told himself he loved her
 before he went back home after Clinton opened the country
 before he took another lover over there and brought her back here
 before my mom broke a dustpan over his head when he called her a whore
 before my aunt spotted him with that woman in an Atlantic City casino
 before he left for good.

When you believe that there's such a thing as a smart bomb you can believe in such a thing as a good soldier even though your mother never believed the words *good* and *soldier* should ever be conjoined because what is good about a soldier drafting a seventeen-year-old to go and fight in Cambodia when the war should've been over years ago? She left with her whole family and they came here where the grocery stores dazzled her and there was so much promise and she had her degree and her parents were math teachers but they still cleaned fast food joints after hours because all they were in the end were just another source of cheap labor and her brother died anyway but in a lovers spat and she worked and worked and by some sick cosmic joke she married a man from the other side (it was a civil war) and got a job in the defense industry and gave birth to two boys and a girl and both boys joined the Army and she went to Kuwait after the invasion (the second go-around) and she had to do all that just so she could qualify for a mortgage on a house she'd end up selling anyway just so she could have a little of all that food that would get thrown out if she didn't buy it before the sell by date just so she could worry about another pair of boys about to go to off to fight.

The day George H. W. Bush dies they fly the flag at half mast at
Brooklyn College as if the Drug War never happened
my Twitter friends—they're well meaning people—say:
now that was a president
look at his poise
his civility
his fucking socks
but they've never fired an M120's M395 Precision Guided Mortar Munition
at a target
only to miss by a full kilometer
—the Colonel really freaked at that one
and how surgical is a smart bomb if the kill radius is seventy meters?
and how many schools
and roads
and toilets
and hospitals
could you build for one Tomahawk Cruise Missile?

I tell my friends that I want to write a poem
titled, “Because of George H.W. Bush, I thought Smart Bombs Were a Good Thing”
with the lines,

*In hell, I hope the GBU-Paveway IIs are precise
enough to pass
through your asshole
for an eternity with
surgical precision*

but the kill
radius of a stanza like that would be smaller than
the real thing
so I say let’s remember the dead
presidents and the future
dead presidents for all the things we thought were good
like money
for college and
a guarantee not to be vaporized on your way to school
and
that white picket fence Dad lost in the bankruptcy
and how those things made Mom
forget that
no matter
how hard
she tried to save my uncle
she still had to clean out his bedroom when he died
she feels it today
like shrapnel, from a bomb dropped decades ago,
lodged in her side
and mine.

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deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 with the 10th Mountain Division.