

SETH BRADY TUCKER

Keep Them Busy Keep Them Dumb

You have starched your uniform, spit-glassed your jump boots until they reflect your face, buzzed your hair up the sides until there are tiny lines of blood where the razor bit; you are standing at attention outside the office of the Company Commander, a default position for you, heels locked and back straight, the sound of your platoon Sergeant's voice streaming clear to you from under the closed door. You hear him asking for a moment of the Captain's time, then, he asks if the Captain could sign this form to allow Corporal Tucker to attend night school at Fayetteville Community College? It is all arranged, he explains to the Captain. It will not impact the Corporal's work, and yes, he knows that if there are any recalls he will have to drop the class and deploy just like everyone else.

You are twenty-years-old and not a virgin but you might as well be.

You want to meet girls and you want to read books and you hope a classroom will provide you that rare experience of genuine downtime, that relief from strapped weapons and ammunition and Kevlar, relief from what had happened to Sergeant Major Commacho during a midnight airborne mission, relief from the sound of a man as he breaks with the earth. You hear the Captain raise his voice to tell your platoon

sergeant that this sort of bullshit is the way to lose his soldier's respect, that if he expected to have anyone follow his orders, he needed to keep them dumb and to keep them busy. You don't hear your Sergeant reply to this, but the Captain continues, says, "These men are putty, Sergeant, and you mold them any way you see fit, but the more hands you allow on the clay, the less control you will have of them when the bullets fly. And this ain't the busy I'm talking about!"

You stop listening because you are shamed by it, this obviously true thing, this deeply true and tragic law of soldiering, as true as a cancer in your throat, so it is a surprise when your Sergeant comes out and hands you the signed form anyway, says, "Better get an 'A,' Corporal, or this will be your last class."

Your Sergeant went to college for a time, and is a good man. You decide that you will prove him right and the Captain wrong. You do not know this will indeed be the last class you take.

You buy the books and read the course description and it feels like it is written in a different language because it is true that you are ignorant: the product of poor Wyoming schools and your own laziness in high school and the fact that no one ever told you education might be important. Work was important. Labor. But you buy new jeans and a shirt with what remains of your small monthly paychecks, and you attend the first classes no matter how exhausted you are from long days of field exercises and combat jumps from airplanes, and it is everything you hoped it would be, and you have a knack for it, and you take a girl from class to Olive Garden and you have just enough time to turn in your first wrong-headed essay devoted to Chekhov before you are deployed to Iraq to kill Saddam Hussein.

In Iraq you do what you are told, even when you are ordered to defend burning oil fields, even as the enemy retreats and your lungs splutter with oil and all the promises are broken. You are twenty and have seen more dead bodies at this point in your life than you have seen naked women.

You do what you are told as the men around you take keepsakes from the littered dead, and because you are ignorant you do it too and you take an ID from the wallet of a dead civilian, his handsome face expectant and naïve, unaware that it would be the concussive force of a bomb that would shatter his insides, but leave him all in one piece, as if he had just fallen asleep next to the highway. You do it quick, ashamed. It takes you years before you can begin to accept your part in all of it, and when you do, it becomes clear to you that it is not just you who should feel the shame of murder, but every American should also bear the same responsibility for every trigger pulled, for every night op, for every round launched downrange, for every child starving in the street, for every woman burned alive in the cab of a Toyota.

When you return to the states, you get out as quickly as you can and enroll at a college in San Francisco, a dream, and you use that ID as a bookmark for years until it is lost on a bus-ride down 19th Avenue between your work and school. At some point, your grade on the paper comes in the mail, addressed first to the deployment APO in Saudi Arabia, then to your unit mailroom, then finally to your parents' home in Wyoming. They read you the kind message from the professor written in the margins, and they are proud of the perfect score you received, and you think just how much could have changed for you if you had been allowed to stay in that classroom forever. If only you could have known any better, if only you had been shown the other side of this life.

SETH BRADY TUCKER is the founder and executive director of the Longleaf Writers' Conference and the senior prose editor for *Tupelo Quarterly Review*. He is originally from Wyoming, and once served as an 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper in the US Army. Tucker's second poetry collection, *We Deserve the Gods We Ask For*, won the 2015 Eric Hoffer Book Award and his first book, *Mormon Boy*, was a Finalist for the 2013 Colorado Book Award. His

essays, poetry, and fiction have been published widely, including *December*, *Iowa Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Verse Daily*, *Blackbird*, and *Driftwood*.