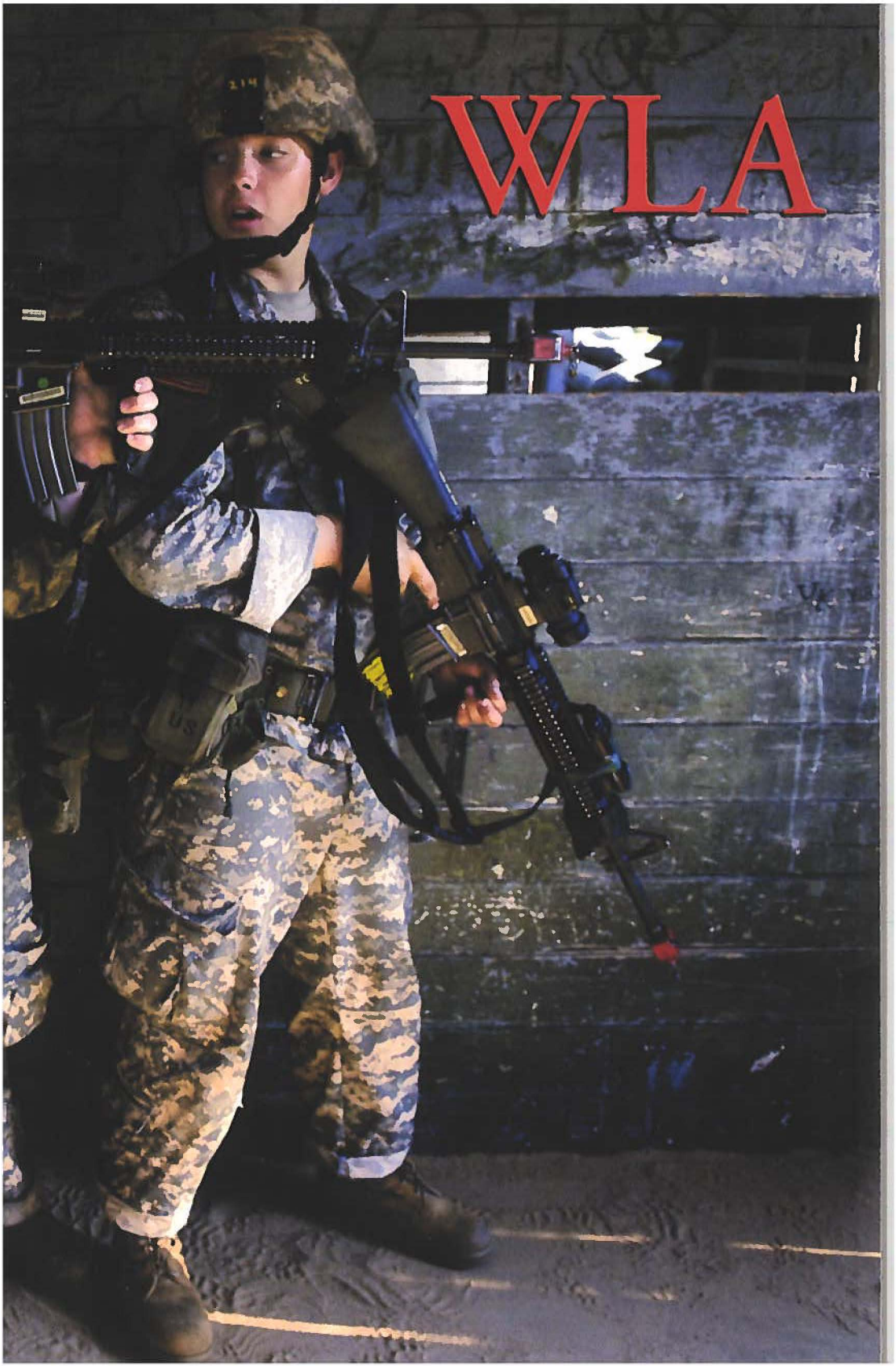
WLA




# *War, Literature & the Arts:*
## An International Journal of the Humanities

Volume 22, 2010

Department of
English & Fine Arts
United States Air Force Academy
Colorado Springs, Colorado




# *War, Literature & the Arts:*
## An International Journal of the Humanities

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THOMAS E. BARDEN

# Urban Legends in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

In assessing Tim O'Brien's writings, reviewers and critics have repeatedly questioned what they are by genre and what they should be called. *The New York Times Book Review* said of *Going After Cacciato*, "maybe we are dealing here with that form of writing the new South American novelists would call 'magic realism'."[1] The New Statesman's review of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* said, "A strange aura surrounds it; it is casual and impressionistic. It unfolds like looking through a series of snapshots."[2] And Robert Harris, also writing for the *New York Times*, said of *The Things They Carried*, "The publisher calls the book a work of fiction, but in no real sense can it be considered a novel."[3] Many critics have noted that O'Brien's works have no plots in the conventional sense of the word, no developed characters, and little formal structure. My purposes in this essay are to examine O'Brien's Vietnam War novel *The Things They Carried* and to suggest a connection between the issue of genre and his particular success among the increasing number of writers who have taken the Vietnam War as their subject. The conceptual tool I will use is folklore.

In an essay in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1957 titled "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," Richard Dorson urged literary scholars to establish biographical evidence for authors' uses of folklore by demonstrating their firsthand knowledge of the lore they depicted in their works. He called for the citation of sources outside the literary works to substantiate that the folklore in them is "actually traditional material."[4] While critical thinking about folklore's complex relation to literature has evolved substantially since Dorson's day, his point

remains reasonable. So, I will begin by testifying that O'Brien's works accurately render the folklore of the U. S. combat ground troops in the Vietnam War during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which I can do as a former member of the group that maintained and transmitted that lore.

The germ of the ideas I will explore here and my realization of the importance of folklore to O'Brien's work occurred when I experienced that shock of recognition so often associated with the contemporary legend—the flash realization that a story one has accepted as fact is actually a traditional migratory narrative. It came for me at the following passage of his 1990 novel, *The Things They Carried*:

> "God's truth," Mitchell Sanders said. "A six-man patrol goes up into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation. The idea's to spend a week up there, just lie low and listen for enemy movement. They've got a radio along, so if they hear anything suspicious—anything—they're supposed to call in artillery or gunships, whatever it takes. Otherwise they keep strict field discipline. Absolute silence. They just listen. We're talking regulation, by the book LP, they don't say boo for a solid week. . . . So what happens is, these guys get themselves deep in the bush, all camouflaged up, and they lie down and wait and that's all they do. And man, I'll tell you—it's spooky. It's jungle, sort of, except it's way up in the clouds and there's always this fog—like rain only it's not raining—everything all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with. Like you don't even have a body . . . so after a couple of days the guys start hearing this real soft, kind of wacked-out music. Weird echoes and stuff. Like a radio or something, but it's not a radio, it's this strange gook music coming right out of the rocks. They try to ignore it, right, but it's a listening post, so they listen. And every night they keep hearing this crazyass gook concert, like the mountains are tuned in to Radio fucking Hanoi. Naturally they get nervous."[3]

The story ends with the sounds getting stranger and stranger—cocktail party talk, chamber music, Buddhist chanting, etc.—until the patrol "loses it." They break radio silence and call in artillery, gunships, air strikes, everything at their disposal. I will continue to quote, both to close the narrative and to showcase the folk speech and jargon O'Brien renders so effectively:

"And I'll tell you, they fuckin' crash that cocktail party. All night long, they just smoke those mountains. They make jungle juice. They blow away trees and glee clubs and whatever else there is to blow away. Scorch time. They walk napalm up and down the ridges. They bring in Cobras and F-4s, they use Willie Peter [white phosphorus] and HE [high explosive] and incendiaries. It's all fire. They make those mountains dance. So around dawn things finally get quiet, like you never even heard quiet before. One of those real thick, real misty days—just clouds and fog, and the mountains are absolutely dead-flat silent, like every sound is sucked up inside the fog—except they still hear it! So they pack up and start humping, down the mountain, back to base camp, and when they get there they don't say diddly. Not a word. It's like they're deaf and dumb. Later on this fat bird colonel comes up and asks what the hell happened out there. Why all the ordnance? . . . . They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say. It says, man, you don't even want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away." (83)

I first heard this story in July, 1970, at a fire support base named St. Barbara in Tay Ninh Province, Republic of South Vietnam. This base, about ninety kilometers west of Saigon, was positioned with heavy artillery [the 2nd of the 32nd Regiment] to fire targets along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia. It was in the Third Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), hundreds of kilometers south of O'Brien's area in the North Central Highlands around My Lai. I was told the story because radio-silent listening posts were common in my unit's area of operations, 'The Parrot's Beak.' It was one of a set of narratives I heard as a "newbie" on the base and in country. My variant, unlike O'Brien's, included interpretations of the "gook music phenomenon." My narrator, Staff Sergeant Jay Somerfield, thought it was Viet Cong psychological warfare. Another participant in the session thought it was "all in the heads" of the soldiers who experienced the sounds as a result of sensory deprivation.

After recognizing this Vietnam folk legend from personal experience, I read "with a folklorist's eye" four of O'Brien's Vietnam War books, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* to locate and annotate the folklore in them. I concluded that an awareness of folklore and its place in group dynamics is an overriding feature of his work. Folk speech, folk syntax, slang and jargon, graffiti, folk sayings, proverbs, folk rhymes, superstitions, and particularly war stories, rumors, anecdotes, and legends permeate his books. Furthermore, O'Brien as narrator typically points out, glosses, and comments on the folklore he presents. I found *The Things They Carried* to be

O'Brien's most folkloric work. This is not to say that his other works are not rich in folklore, or that the ideas I discuss here would not apply to them as well. But, for the present essay, I will confine my focus to that work, which is increasingly seen as his best literary effort.

There are thirty-two specific passages depicting folklore in *The Things They Carried*. Some are short items such as the folk rhyme O'Brien's unit developed on patrol as they followed an old papa-san—"Step out of line, hit a mine; follow the dink, you're in the pink" (37). Some are simply glosses by O'Brien, as the book's narrator, pointing out folk speech and naming—"They were called legs or grunts," or "To carry something was to hump it" (5). And some are detailed explanations and commentary on customs and practices, such as the ritual behavior of Private Henry Dobbins in wrapping his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck before going on patrol—"Like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins felt the pull of superstition. Whenever we saddled up for a late night ambush Dobbins would make a ritual out of arranging the nylons, carefully tying a knot, draping the two leg sections over his left shoulder. There were some jokes of course, but we came to appreciate the mystery of it all" (130). He closes the passage with this observation about folk beliefs—"Dobbins was invulnerable; never wounded, never a scratch. In August he tripped a Bouncing Betty, which failed to detonate. It turned us into a platoon of believers. You don't dispute facts" (131).

In addition to these short items, there are numerous passages like the "gook music" one quoted previously, which are complete texts of folk narratives plus comments on their situational and performance contexts. These passages are especially interesting since they reveal O'Brien's thorough understanding of contemporary folkloristics (either learned or intuited). In a chapter titled "The Ghost Soldiers," for example, he goes to great pains to detail the set-up, the pacing, the group response, and the atmospherics of what is clearly an oral narrative performance event—"We partied until chow time. Afterwards, we kept on partying. It was one of the rituals. Even if you weren't in the mood, you did it on principle. By midnight it was story time. 'Morty Phillips used up his luck,' Bowker said. I smiled and waited. There was a tempo to how stories got told. Bowker peeled open a finger blister and sucked on it. 'Go on,' Azar said. 'Well, that's about it. He wasted his luck. Pissed it away.' Norman Bowker nodded, started to speak, but then stopped and got up and moved to the cooler and shoved his hands deep in the ice. In that pause I felt close to them all, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in-it-togetherness" (221).

In the chapter "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," O'Brien goes beyond offering his own personal author/narrator insights into a legend's performance to render the meta-folkloric comments of the troops themselves as the session unfolds:

> "Whenever he told a story Rat Kiley had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion. It was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can't clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. What you have to do, Sanders said, is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself. But Rat couldn't help it. He wanted to bracket the full range of meaning. 'I know it sounds far out,' he'd say, 'but it's not like impossible or anything. I was right there. I saw it. She was a girl, that's all. I mean if it was a guy, everybody'd say, hey no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women, how peaceful they are, all that crap; you got to get rid of that sexist attitude.' Rat would go on like that until Mitchell Sanders couldn't tolerate it any longer. It offended his inner ear. 'The story,' Sanders would say, 'The whole tone, man, you're wrecking it.' 'Tone?,' he'd say, 'Tone? I didn't know it was that complicated. The girl joined the zoo—one more animal—end of story.' 'Yeah, fine,' but tell it right!" (116-117)

There is no passage in the book that better demonstrates how important the performance of oral narrative is to Tim O'Brien. Although no critics have specified this term in discussing how he conveys such a visceral sense of the reality of Vietnam, almost all have noted how well he accomplishes the effect. I submit that it is O'Brien's extensive and sophisticated use of the folklore of the troops in the war in its performance setting that accounts for it.

Yet, what does this really say beyond placing O'Brien in the realist, "local color" school of writers since Mark Twain and Bret Hart who also used dialect, folk speech, and verbal lore this way. So his books are full of folklore and that explains their effective realism. Isn't there more going on between O'Brien and folklore than that? As early as the 1957 *Journal of American Folklore* special issue on folklore and literature, scholars such as Daniel Hoffman and Carvel Collins were asking for more than Dorson's rudimentary process of folklore identification called for.[6] And by 1965, folklorist Alan Dundes had outlined a comprehensive approach to

studying folklore within literature.[7] Three years later, invoking Dundes' article, Hennig Cohen put the matter this way, "Folklore in American literature has been put to work in a number of ways—among them, to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, and to defend, explain, and raise questions about the nature of society."[8] The critics who have asked what kind of books O'Brien has written, can find their answer in the last portion of Cohen's list, his novels are designed to defend, explain, and raise questions about the social group he participated in during his year in the war. He turned to folklore, particularly oral narratives in their performed settings, to do so. By genre, then, his books are ethnographies of speaking and enacting folklore. Exploring the nature of the face-to-face group known as the platoon is his most basic aim, and depicting the storytelling event and the community it creates is his basic method. As he says addressing the reader near the end of *The Things They Carried*—"I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (203).

So, if the stories in *The Things They Carried* are renderings of actual folk narrative performances O'Brien witnessed and remembered more or less accurately, they can be subjected to basic analyses as folklore. With the "gook music" story, for example, we might start with the functionalist's prime questions, answering with William Bascom's four functions of folklore: education, validation, compensation, and integration.[9] There are some obvious points; the story, both in O'Brien's text and as I experienced it, teaches about the job of forward observing at a listening post. In my case, it clarified my situation and status as a new member of the unit and strengthened that unit's solidarity as "in the know." But it is necessary to move beyond Bascom's abstractions to specifics: To what exactly do O'Brien's oral narratives educate his characters? What exactly do the narratives validate for them? For what do they compensate? How do they work to integrate the soldiers into their group? And, finally, what do the stories do in Kenneth Burke's sense that all language art is symbolic action, or "equipment for living?"[10]

First, stories such as the "gook music" narrative are accounts of the collapse of consensus reality. The story doesn't try to explain the surreal event it depicts, but only to show that the inexplicable was the norm in Vietnam. Like all folklore, the narrative constitutes cultural information. Its message is that the usual rules of daily reality have ceased to apply, even though the higher executives of the war don't realize it. It places the field grade officer from the rear in opposition to the soldiers and displays their inevitable failure to communicate. It proceeds precisely the way a supernatural legend does, by shaking our assumptions about the world and revealing how little we truly know about reality. In discussing ghost tales

the folktale scholar Max Luthi said: "In the [supernatural] legend one senses the anxiety of man, who, though apparently a part of the community of his fellow men, finds himself ultimately confronted with an uncanny world which he finds hard to comprehend and which threatens him with death."[11]

The absence of anything solid and real to cling to is a recurring theme in the stories O'Brien's characters tell. Their sessions are consistently shown as serving, if not to ease group anxieties, at least to share and claim ownership of them. This interpretation supports the view that legends are texts that reveal the psychological state of the group that maintains them. Like the work of such folklorists as Luthi, Dundes, and Brunvand[12], this interpretation reads narrative performances as a kind of folk therapy in which a group explores, in an imaginative and therefore safe manner, issues that are stressful and frightening.

My linking of O'Brien's group's narratives to ghost tales is not as large a stretch as we might imagine. In fact, he invites it. The word "ghost" occurs frequently as slang, one chapter is titled "The Ghost Soldiers," and in one passage O'Brien directly connects this slang term for the Vietcong with the pervasive feeling of unreality the soldiers shared. Notice the extensive use of the pronoun "we" in the passage:

> We called the enemy ghosts. 'Bad night,' we'd say, 'the ghosts are out.' To get spooked meant not only to get scared but also to get killed. The countryside itself seemed spooky—shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth century science. Late at night on guard it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogie men in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country and Charlie Cong was the main ghost—the way he came out at night, the way you never really saw him, almost magical. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn't believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you became a believer. (229)

"If reality becomes surrealistic," asks a critic of post-modern fiction, "what must fiction do to be realistic?"[13] O'Brien's characteristic answer is that fiction can tell ghost stories.

But fear of surrealistic ghost guerrillas is not the only anxiety the men in O'Brien's platoon experienced. To his literary credit O'Brien had the insight to depict their smaller-scale concerns too, and to realize that these were important. He relates their tales on such subjects as embarrassment and fear of "losing face," on "going native" (losing touch with civil behavior), and on the psychic weight of thoughts about their loved ones "back in the world," which he suggests was the heaviest of all the "things they carried." While most of the time the soldiers' speech groupings are deliberate and ritualized "bull sessions," other times they are casual, momentary—and all the more striking because of it. For example: "Norman Bowker lying on his back one night, watching the stars, whispered to us, 'I'll tell you something, if I could have one wish, anything, I'd wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it's okay if I don't win any medals. That's all my old man talks about, nothing else. How he can't wait to see my goddamn medals" (39).

Here is the heart of this book, a voice speaking in the dark to his buddies about his deepest anxieties. As Jean-Francois Lyotard says in *The Postmodern Condition*, "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations. A person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be."[14] This is the nature of the social bond from a postmodern perspective, and it is precisely the nature of the social bond in Vietnam. Groups did not come to the war together as the platoons, brigades, and regiments of previous American wars did. They did not project a future in which they would leave together in victory or die together in defeat. They trickled in alone and joined an already formed group. Each "self" realized he would "DEROS" (a verb made from the anagram Date of Estimated Return from OverseaS) alone when his 365-day countdown was up, or die when his number was up. It is O'Brien's genius that he has located the only stable core in the isolated and absurd social universe called the Vietnam war—the verbal society formed daily and nightly by the telling of stories.

The "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" narrative mentioned earlier is the most extended storytelling event in *The Things They Carried*. It provides an example of how O'Brien's "story truth" operates to explore the soldiers' most deep-seated anxieties. Further, it reveals that other dimension that scholars of the legend have noted as important, namely the moral one. As folklorist Polly Stewart has pointed out, "All folklore reflects the moral order of a society or of a group within the society; it simultaneously upholds that order and instructs the society's members in it. Folklore persuades, courts, and controls a group's members. Though on the surface legends may be told without any open claim to instructiveness, most are

informed by a powerful moral message couched in ironic terms: seekers of hidden gold mines, intruding in forbidden places, meet with unknown terror, with inexplicable death, or—at the very least—with frustration. Greedy people get their just desserts. Whether the events in the stories can be rationally accounted for or not, they illustrate the dangers inherent in behavior that is inimical to collective order and to personal well-being."[5]

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is just the kind of negative exemplum Stewart is describing. It plays out the consequences of violating the boundary of the most potent structural opposition in the group mind of the soldiers in Vietnam—the boundary between THE NAM, the garden of evil, and THE WORLD, the civilized, pre-war universe of "round-eyed" women, family, school, job, flush toilets, and (a word O'Brien uses often) decency. The "Sweetheart" legend is a base-camp belief tale about a soldier who brought his high school girlfriend to Vietnam. Her name was Mary Ann Bell and she was from Cleveland Heights, Ohio:

> "'It can't happen, Sanders said. 'Nobody ships his honey over to Nam. It don't ring true. I mean, you just can't import your own personal poontang.' Rat shook his head. 'I saw it, man. I was right there. This guy did it.' 'His girlfriend?' 'Straight on. It's a fact. Flies her over. This cute blonde—just a kid, just barely out of high school—she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater. There she is.' I remember Mitchell Sanders folding his arms. He looked over at me for a second, not quite grinning, not saying a word, but I could read the amusement in his eyes. Rat saw it too. 'No lie, he said, 'Culottes.'" (102)

As O'Brien has Rat Kiley tell it, it wasn't hard to get her in country. "'Cleveland to LA, LA to Bangkok, Bangkok to Saigon. She hopped a C-130 up to Chu Lai and stayed overnight at a USO—a cinch,' said her boyfriend Mark Fossie. 'Thing is you got to want it enough'" (103).

Once Mary Ann gets to the base she and her boyfriend set up house in a bunker near the Special Forces hooch and take up the relationship of high school sweethearts that they had lived before the war. At first, things go smoothly. The men genuinely like her. "Out on the volleyball court she wore cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated, and in the evening she liked to dance to music from Rat's portable tape deck. There was a novelty to it; she

was good for morale. At times she gave off a kind of come-get-me energy, coy and flirtatious, but apparently it never bothered Mark Fossie" (103).

But soon she becomes curious about things, wanting to know what a trip flare is, talking to the ARVNs out on the perimeter, picking up little phrases of Vietnamese, and learning how to cook rice over a Sterno can. "The guys liked to kid her about it—our own little native, they'd say—but Mary Ann would just smile and stick out her tongue. 'I'm here,' she'd say, 'I might as well learn something.'" She gets more and more involved in things and starts to get a feel for the way the Vietnamese people live. She appears oblivious to the danger around her, swimming in the Song Tra Bong while her boyfriend tries to explain to her about snipers, ambushes, and the stopping power of an AK-47. The men agree she's tough—"'A real tiger,' said Eddie Diamond. 'D-cup guts, trainer bra brains.' 'She'll learn,' somebody said. Eddie Diamond gave a solemn nod. 'That's the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn.'"

O'Brien runs subtle observations on performance style, texture, and context throughout the story's thirty pages. In the following passage, for instance, notice how he directs attention to Kiley's delivery:

> "In parts, at least, it was a funny story, and yet to hear Rat Kiley tell it you'd almost think it was intended as straight tragedy. He never smiled. Not even at the crazy stuff. There was always a dark, far-off look in his eyes, a kind of sadness, as if he were troubled by something sliding beneath the story's surface. Whenever we'd laugh, I remember, he'd sigh and wait it out, but the one thing he could not tolerate was disbelief. He'd get edgy if someone questioned one of the details. 'She wasn't dumb,' he'd snap. 'I never said that. Young, that's all I said. Like you and me. A girl, that's the only difference, and I'll tell you something: it didn't amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Ann.' Rat would peer down at his hands, silent and thoughtful. 'You don't believe it, fine,' he'd say, 'just means you don't know human nature. You don't know Nam'" (109).

Eventually Mary Ann leaves Fosse and takes up with the "Greenies," the Special Forces long range patrol, who have their own hooch at the edge of the base camp. She cuts her hair and wraps it in a dark green bandanna; she stops wearing jewelry and cosmetics; she learns to disassemble, clean, and fire an M16; and finally she

starts to go out on night ambush with the Greenies. Rat Kiley explains that it isn't sexual, "She wasn't sleeping with any of them. At least not exactly; I mean, in a way she was sleeping with all of them, except it wasn't sex or anything. They was just lying together, her and these six weirded-out Green Berets" (112). She slips further and further into the mind-set of the bush until Fosse, in desperation, braves the Greenies hooch to retrieve her. Inside, he finds the severed head of a large black leopard, a pile of bones under a sign that reads ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK! FREE SAMPLE KIT!, and Mary Ann, now wearing a necklace of human tongues. "'You are in a place,' Mary Ann said softly, 'where you don't belong.' She moved her hand in a gesture that encompassed not just the hooch but everything around it, the entire war. 'You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what it's all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to have it inside me. It's like this appetite. You know When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin, my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm almost on fire, burning away to nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am.'" When Fosse turns to Rat Kiley, who has come with him to the hooch, and says, "Do something, I just can't let her go like that!," Kiley answers "Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone" (121).

The story ends, like all local legends, with a projection of past events into the present and future. One day she walks off by herself into the bush. No body is ever found, no clothing, no equipment. There is an inquiry, Mark Fosse is busted to PFC, and Mary Ann is listed as MIA. But according to the Greenies, she is still out there, in the dark. Rat Kiley finishes the tale:

> "Odd movements, odd shapes, late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, they said the whole rain forest seemed to stare at them, and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and her necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill." (125)

The moral lesson of the taboo violation intermixes in this narrative with the bitter truth that even a "sweetheart" is susceptible to Vietnam's power to corrupt. It is the story equivalent of the fact that the U. S. soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre were a cross-section of average American young men. This "heart of

darkness" legend is about many things simultaneously. It is about going native, one of the grand ideas of American literature and cultural history—from the Boston Tea Party, The Deerslayer, Indian captivity narratives, and Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, to Apocalypse Now and Dances With Wolves. It is also about the "Dear John" letter tradition and the lore of Jodi, the figure in cadence calls who is back home in your car with your girl while you are at war; it warns against letting those fears make you violate the taboo of bringing the peace world into the war world. And it is a rendering of the deep structure of the group's world view as the following set of polarities: Nam/World, male/female, experience/innocence, chaos/order, death/life, and finally (the most numinous) evil/good.

But what it means is also a function of how it feels. The story rings true to me as a Vietnam veteran. It feels like the whole war in a grain of sand. And "ringing true" is, in the final analysis, what O'Brien is trying to do. He begins *The Things They Carried* with an epigram from John Ransom's *Andersonville Diary*, an account of the infamous Confederate Civil War prison. The diarist writes, "Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all others it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest." I think O'Brien chose this epigram for its key word "experienced." He wants to write books that put us through an experience. It was Jimi Hendrix, widely acknowledged as the poet laureate of the Vietnam War, who asked the question ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Reality itself was destabilized in Vietnam. Events in and of themselves had no solidity; a favorite phrase in response to an overwhelming event was "It never happened." This particular war—like "magic realism," like folk legends, like psychoactive drugs (which were very common, even in non-garrison situations)—warped and reordered reality and brought consensus actuality into question. O'Brien is clear about this. He says "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (89). He shows us that nothing had meaning until the soldiers' group agreed that it did. The only stability was that of the community of discourse the soldiers maintained, and nothing was real except by the group's consensus. Tim O'Brien knows that if you can experience this "story truth," the group's narrations of reality, then you have experienced Vietnam. This is both how and why this Vietnam novel works.

## Notes

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2. Chris Waters, *New Statesman*, Jan. 4, 1974: 24.

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4, Richard Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," *Folklore and Literature, A Symposium, Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957): 1-8.

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**THOMAS E. BARDEN** was drafted in June, 1968. After Basic and Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, he attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. As a Lieutenant, he served with the 2nd Battalion of the 32nd Artillery Regiment, The Proud Americans, in Tay Ninh Province of the Republic of South Vietnam from June 1970 to July 1971. The 2/32nd is a heavy artillery regiment (8 inch and 175 mm) that fired for the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the 1st ARVN Infantry Division. He received the Bronze Star in February, 1971. After military service, he attended graduate school at the University of Virginia where he received the Ph.D. in English in 1975. He joined the faculty of the University of Toledo in 1977. He was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Wales in Swansea, United Kingdom, in 1993. He currently directs the University of Toledo's Honors Program.

DAVID LAWRENCE

# Heroic Act of Witness: Dexter Filkins' *Forever War*

*The New York Times'* relationship with the US military is a fraught one. On the one hand there are the conservative pundits who suggest that much of what "The Gray Lady" offers up as front page news is tantamount to a fifth column in American foreign policy. Those assertions are often devoured with Pavlovian zest in many military circles. And then.... And then there's Judith Miller, the former *Times* columnist whose front-page articles in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 were as hawkish as they proved to be, in the end, dubious. Miller is no longer with the *New York Times*, but her *cause célèbre*, of course, remains. Informed geo-pol-mil analysts disagree as to the future prospects for Iraq, but as the violence-marred Iraqi elections of March 7, 2010 indicate, one thing is for certain, and that's continued instability for the foreseeable future.

These factors make for the rather textured backdrop of the award-winning book *The Forever War* by *New York Times* columnist Dexter Filkins. Indeed it is a backdrop which makes the book's accomplishments all the more astonishing. In a sense, Filkins serves as something of a synthesis between Ernie Pyle, the popular war correspondent covering the "good" war in the European and Pacific theaters in the 1940s, and David Halberstam, the considerably more controversial journalist covering a much more polarizing event in southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s. Filkins' beat takes him to the front lines of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (insofar as front lines exist in those places), wars which we increasingly love to hate. For his subjects Filkins' has the soldiers and marines whose sacrifices we admire and appreciate (insofar as we're reminded or even aware of them), but whose sacrifices also exact an inestimable toll. *LA Times* journalist Tim Rutten calls Filkins' efforts

in *The Forever War* a "heroic act of witness." I'll confess I don't know exactly what Rutten means by the term, and I'd guess, after having read the book along with a number of Filkins' subsequent dispatches from Afghanistan, that Filkins himself would be somewhat uncomfortable with the description. Nonetheless, in *The Forever War* Filkins gives us a "warts-and-all" look at the complexity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the consequences of these conflicts on the people called upon to prosecute them. The image that emerges is at once beautiful and deeply, profoundly troubling.

The book resonates not only by virtue of Filkins' extraordinary powers of observation. It also works because few westerners are as well-acquainted with the people, customs, and issues of these regions as Filkins is. Filkins began observing the Taliban in the late 90s, when he was the New Delhi bureau chief for the *LA Times*. In the first, brief part of the book, Filkins recalls some of his observations from those "innocent" days prior to September 11 while on assignment in Kabul, Afghanistan. Hindsight is always clear-eyed, but Filkins nonetheless artfully captures the competing tensions that will animate much of what follows when his journeys take him to Iraq. There is the terror of the Taliban in their white Toyota Hi-Luxes, those fearsome symbols of power and authority that speak volumes in a land where modern technology is largely foreign. "They were the baddest asses in town," Filkins says of the Taliban, "and they knew it, too.... Their strength," he adds, "was their ignorance." He doesn't admire them, at least not in the traditional sense, but he understands their rise to power. "Anarchy had taken over," he observes, "and the Taliban were the only guys mean enough and dark enough to wrestle it back to dusty earth."[1]

But it is the anarchy and mean, tough men of Iraq that Filkins treats at much greater length in the book, however. In March of 2003 Filkins embedded with a company of US Marines—themselves mean, tough men whose job it is to restore order and defeat a mean, tough enemy. "They were trained killers, after all," Filkins says of the men he accompanies into battle. "They could hit a guy at five hundred yards or cut his throat from ear-to-ear. And they didn't ask a lot of questions. They had faith, they did what they were told and they killed people.... Out there in Falluja, in the streets," Filkins concludes, "I was happy they were in front of me."[2]

This seemingly melodramatic observation presages the book's defining moment, however. Filkins and his photographer Ashley Gilbertson "needed a corpse for the newspaper," we're told, so the two proceed, along with a dozen Marines, to a minaret from which the Marines had been taking a barrage of fire and which they

had eventually nearly destroyed. "We'll go first," two Marines nonchalantly tell Filkins and his photographer. "The stairs squeaked as we went up," Filkins recalls.

> It was a narrow staircase, winding, just wide enough for your body. A nautilus, maybe a hundred feed high. Not very stable. Dark, too, but for the holes shot by the tank. I could see beams of light above. I slowed my step. The shot was loud inside the staircase, and I couldn't see much, because the second marine was falling backwards, falling onto Ashley, who fell onto me. Warm liquid spattered on my face. Three of us tumbled backwards out of the doorway.[3]

Another gun battle erupts as Filkins and Gilbertson stumble out of the minaret. As the fighting continues, two other marines carry out William Miller, the 22-year-old lance corporal from Pearland, Texas who had led the way up the winding staircase. Filkins continues:

> His face was opened in a large V, split like meat, fish maybe, with the two sides jiggling.
>
> "Please tell me he's not dead," Ash said. "Please tell me."
>
> "He's dead," I said.[4]

It is the crucial utterance of the book. Even the platoon commander's blunt accusation to Filkins and Gilbertson following the event—"Yeah, it was your fault," the lieutenant tells the two—pales in comparison. Miller's death invariably colors all of what follows in the book, and in many ways reshapes the reader's understanding of what has come before. Filkins is, understandably, haunted by the event. One can't help but wonder if in some way the very sympathetic treatment he gives what are, at the end of the day, blood-thirsty marines in the pages of this book isn't atonement for the feeling that his actions—a photo-op, no less—cost a young man his life. The death of one marine lance corporal, then, in the bombed-out staircase of a minaret in Falluja, Iraq becomes the impetus for Filkins' meticulous rendering of a difficult and controversial conflict, a conflict initiated under exceedingly questionable circumstances, and which gobbles up resources and blood treasure. Yet in the midst of this conflict, selfless marines emerge resolved, dignified, noble—put on display and ready for consumption in the pages of *The New York Times* and, later, in a best-selling book, forcing Americans once again to rethink this war and, particularly, those who help wage it. In this respect I am

"What's that?" Miller shouted. He touched the nosecone with both hands and stopped chewing his gum. "What the hell's that?"

Far below, amid the inferno the 71st Bomb Group had just created, there were puddles of fireless calm, like a stillness had decided to pock the burning ground. The buildings looked undamaged, destruction raged and cracked around them but inside the little circles of our bomb blasts there was nothing but peace. There's no other way to describe it: It looked like our B-17 had blasted the harbor with life, not with death.

As we turned back towards England we said nothing to each other. Miller stared out the nosecone and didn't move. When we landed, he just sat there, thinking.

He came to the conclusion that it was some kind of super weapon. After all, new technology came out of warfare all the time, and didn't the last World War create submarines and tanks and flame-throwers and mustard gas? Maybe these bombs were some kind of new military hocus-pocus?

Major Gillespie ordered us into his office and closed the door. He talked in hushed tones. Reports were written, Rocinante was studied and Second Lieutenant Miller was interviewed by scads of brass. And then my co-pilot and I were taken for a long drive with Major Gillespie. He motored through villages called Plumpton, Broomer's Corner, and Wisborough Green. Thatch roofs and leafy trees flicked by the windows. The sun was a dull white circle and the air was hazy, full of pollen. We talked about home and then, after zigzagging down gritty roads that pinged rocks off the undercarriage of the car, Major Gillespie pulled into a field, he turned off the engine and took out a pipe. He wanted to hear the whole story again, off the record, so Deering and I told him once again what we knew.

Gillespie nodded and tweaked his nose. He mentioned that spies in Kiel had managed to visit the bombsite. Their reports were full of these unbelievable accounts of buildings that had been reassembled from rubble, trees were made whole again from splinters, anything scorched by fire was unburned.

"It's an impossible story of course," Gillespie said relighting his pipe. "They're saying that everything inside the blast radius of your bombs has been brought back to life. Some kind of Kraut propaganda, no doubt."

"I don't follow, sir," Deering said.

Gillespie stared out the window and cleared his throat. He went on to say that—according to the report, which he hardly believed—people had been brought back to life. Anyone that was dead was now alive. It made Gillespie chuckle. "These are being called 'Lazarus Bombs' by the Germans. But look, I need both of you

to ignore these fantastic reports and stay on target. We're at war so don't believe everything you hear...just get your job done, okay?"

Over Hamburg and Cologne our bombs did exactly the same thing. Instead of fire there was a flash of white. Everything looked peaceful, untouched, fresh, like the Garden of Eden had bloomed to life again, and it didn't matter what bombs we used or what the weather was like or what city we were attacking. Rubble jumped up and reshaped itself into buildings, bridges knitted themselves together, fires crouched down into little sparks and puffed into nothingness. When we were flying back from Cologne, Miller asked about people being brought back to life. "You think that's true?" he asked chewing his gum. "Think my bombs are doing that?"

"Don't be stupid," I said over the intercom. "Can't be true."

But privately I wasn't so sure.

Miller moved his bunk into the bomb hangar and started doing really crazy things like blessing 1000-pounders. He sprinkled water on their tailfins and made the sign of the cross over huge stacks of explosives. He slept with firing mechanisms like they were teddy bears and I had to remind the guy to brush his teeth, and finish the mutton on his plate, and shave. I began to feel like his mother.

A team of scientists was brought in from a place called Bletchley Park and they studied Miller for a week, they gave him all these psychological tests, then we were told to bomb some insignificant podunk village on the coast of Germany. We didn't know it at the time but this place had been flamed off the map two days earlier because they wanted to see what would happen when we arrived with our payload. Rocinante was the only B-17 that went on the mission and we were under heavy fighter escort. Two scientists (we weren't told their names) joined the crew and filmed Miller at work. They watched him chew his gum, line up the scope, and drop a single bomb onto the charred houses. They heard him say "Boom", although with less enthusiasm then he usually did. When they saw the little globe of white their mouths opened in shock. It's true after all, one of the shouted.

We were immediately grounded.

What use were we to the war if our bombs healed Germany? We were quarantined in a corner of the base and forbidden to go anywhere, not to the Postal Exchange, not to the Doughnut Dugout, and especially not into the village of Falmer for a pint of beer. Our hut began to smell like leather and stale farts, MPs were stationed outside our door and, as the days leaked by, Miller got quieter and quieter. They

gave us a radio and plenty of good chow but I hated watching the rest of the 71st lift into the morning haze without us, especially when so many of these guys never came home. On a single run over Frankfurt, eight B-17s fell into the earth. It was late in the afternoon when they began to return and we counted everyone back except for eight planes. *Red Box* and *Glenda's Men* and *Pirate Ship* were gone. So were *Your Mississippi Pop* and *Eight Ball* and *Thumper. Omaha Joe* and *Yankee Clipper.*

And where were we? Stuck in a goddamn hut. In one day, eighty men disappeared—abracadabra, gone—that's eighty men that will never come home and have kids or go to the ballpark or brush their teeth or open birthday presents or grow old. Their lives were snipped, cut short, and I couldn't help but wonder how things might be different if we were up there with them. Maybe we couldn't save them but the flak would have burst differently and the fighter planes would have banked around Rocinante if she were up there in that mess. As I thought about all of this in the cruel calm of our hut, I stopped babying Second Lieutenant Miller. I began to hate the guy. I prickled with resentment. We should be up there.

After two weeks of music and darning socks there was a knock on the door. A man in an expensive suit came in with a case of beer and a stack of chocolate. He introduced himself as Dr Pearse and he made polite noise about the damp weather. He knew our names and asked specific questions about our families, he listed off our hometowns like he knew them personally, then he took a deep breath and smiled.

"Gentlemen, we'd like you to bomb London."

Everyone in the room snorted with laughter, we rocked back and forth on our cots and held our stomachs, we took out our handkerchiefs and wiped our eyes.

"Bomb London?" I said. "You can't be serious."

"Gentlemen! Almost 40,000 people have died in air raids since this war began," the man barked. He closed his eyes and composed himself. "Whole areas of the city, especially those around the East End, have been totally destroyed. Lives have been lost...good people are dead."

He went on to mention how awful the Blitz was. While fires raged, water boiled inside fire hydrants, lead from old windowpanes trickled down from buildings, bricks glowed yellow and burst. The sky was so full of flame and smoke that people didn't notice when morning came. There was no sunrise at all, like it never happened, and this went on night after night after night.

"We'd like you to bomb London. Do you think it will work?"

Everyone looked at Miller, who stared at his unlaced boots. He took in a sharp breath like he was going to speak but he said nothing. Outside, a truck drove past and we listened to it gear away. It seemed like the war itself was leaving us behind.

After a long moment, Miller shrugged a shoulder.

"Good," Dr Pearse smiled. "We'll let you know more about our plans tonight."

We were told the big man himself, Winston Churchill, would be watching us. He, his cigar, and a platoon of military others would be stationed on a rooftop across the river at Greenwich. Anti-aircraft guns and spotlights were told to stand down and we were ordered to make our run at 0300. Not even the pigeons would be awake at that time in the morning. So we flew over Big Ben and lined up our sites on the coal-stained dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral. It was damp and we had a full moon to guide us over the blind streets. Flares had been rigged up over the shattered docks of West India Quay, which was our primary target, and the Prime Minister was somewhere down there with thousands of others who could hear our heavy plane push through the night.

When Miller flicked his thumb and let go of our bomb, we banked up high into the moon. At first there was total silence but then there was this low crack like thunder beneath ice. An explosion of color bulged into the night, it turned into a globe of burning daylight that shimmered with heat and, after several seconds, it flared into brilliant white like phosphorous. It was so bright it illuminated our cockpit and cast weird shadows across the instrument panel. It flickered, then vanished.

It lasted almost twelve seconds. I know because I counted. One-mississippi, two-mississippi, three-mississippi four-mississippi, five-mississippi, six-mississippi, seven-mississippi, eight-mississippi, nine-mississippi, ten-mississippi, eleven-mississippi, twelve—

It was a glorious sight, far more beautiful than during the day because it was a giant pearl of wispy light that didn't hurt the eyes. It swelled up, did its thing, and went away. Even now when I close my eyes I can see that ball of glistening energy over London. It was like a scoop of light had been dropped onto the streets.

Rocinante filled with cheers when it disappeared. We hooted and thumped the side of our plane. Deering shook my hand and we flew back to base. Champagne waited for us and Dr Pearse patted everyone on the back by saying "good job, good job". Our tail-gunner yipped like a coyote but amid it all Miller just stood outside in his flight suit and smoked a cigarette. He stared into the distance and didn't talk, he didn't move, he didn't do a goddamn thing.

I put my arm around him and gave him a shake.

"I don't get it," he said. "For twelve missions I drop straight-up explosives on people then this happens to me?"

I shrugged and turned him towards the party. "Stop thinking about it. Let's have a beer."

The next day Gillespie and Pearse gathered us in a large office. We sat on desks and drank fresh coffee, we spooned in sugar and dribbled real cream into our mugs. Thick slabs of wheaten bread and pots of jam were on a sideboard. Rationing may have been taking place elsewhere in Great Britain but it wasn't happening in that office. We even had oranges and bananas.

Men in trenchcoats had gone into West India Quay shortly after we dropped our bomb. They walked around with flashlights and found 219 people walking dazed through the streets, their bodies whole and undamaged. When they asked these people what day of the week it was, one elderly lady crossed her arms and refused to believe it was 1943. "Impossible," she said. "Any fool knows it's November 9, 1941."

Hearing all this gave me the creeps. I touched my rosary and wondered where all these souls had been and what it meant that we brought them back from wherever that was. The trenchcoats also reported that bricks had reassembled themselves into buildings and that smashed streets looked as if they had been newly cobbled. Birds nested in regrown trees, clothes were as good as new, and antiques that were hundreds of years old looked as if they were bought yesterday. Books written in the 1800s were crisp, their leather covers fresh and perfect. Most amazing of all, no one was sick. Confused families and dock workers and firefighters and maids and journalists and bus drivers and children, they were all perfectly healthy. Even familiar problems like arthritis and polio and childhood scars were erased. One middle-aged man who was badly wounded in the Great War of 1914-1918, ran down the street and wept. For the first time in three decades he was able to walk without pain. He danced and went looking for his children.

"West India Quay has been quarantined," Dr Pearse said with crossed arms. "All of this gives us great hope for this so-called Lazarus Bomb."

"Hope for what?" Miller asked. There was a sharp tone in his eyes.

Gillespie and Pearse looked at each other and walked over to a map of North Africa. Pearse pointed at the coast and talked about battles that were being waged, then he talked about Rocinante bombing American troops and then, with a straight face, he said he wanted us to fly over battlefields and drop 2000-pounders on the freshly dead.

"Our boys will be healed and we can put guns back into the hands." Pearse cocked his head to one side and squinted at the map. "Of course, any Krauts that are brought back would need to be eliminated. We could place machine guns here, here, and here."

Miller stood up so quickly he knocked his coffee to the ground. The cup shattered. "This can't be used as a weapon."

Pearse took a deep breath. "Son, you love your country, don't you? You want this war over, right?"

Miller gazed out the window and I watched blood drain from his cheeks. He looked pale and clammy, like a jellyfish.

"You'd be saving thousands of American lives. Think of those boys going home to their mothers and wives and girlfriends. Would they have a problem with what I'm suggesting? I don't think so." Then Pearse pointed at the door and his voice softened. "Let me show you something."

We walked across the base to a hangar and Pearse opened his arms like he was about to conduct an orchestra. Hundreds of explosives glinted behind him. It looked like a galaxy of brass. "Everything in here can be used to bring back the dead...all of it. Tell me how that's wrong. Tell me why we shouldn't raise the dead."

Miller didn't say anything but after a few minutes he went to a stack of 500-pounders. He put both hands on the bombs and closed his eyes like he was deep in thought. If the war hadn't interrupted his life he might have been a philosopher or artist but certain paths were chosen and certain possibilities had been eliminated. All of us were denied access to selves that we might have become. A future me was killed in those war years and sometimes I feel like I'm still searching for the corpse of that young man I might have become, that young man who had no clue what hot steel did to human bodies. No bomb in the world can bring him back to life. My young self died in 1943 and he's never coming home. Never.

Maybe Miller was thinking about this or maybe he was thinking about giving rifles to the dead over and over again and what that would mean. Maybe he was thinking about that beautiful bomb—the one that transformed chunks of wet tissue back into breathing loving human beings—maybe he was thinking about that bomb becoming no different than any other weapon used in war. I don't know what he was thinking, but I know he stood there for a long time. A really long time.

When he finally spoke it was in a whisper. "This can't be used as a weapon. It wouldn't be right."

Pearse looked at the floor and then clapped his hands together with a false smile. "Boys...how about we grill us some salmon tonight, eh? Sound like a plan? Have some beer too?"

We went back to our hut and played blackjack but Miller stared out the window and smoked cigarette after cigarette. As the sun went down, he squinted at the horizon. He was smiling about something.

He was missing the next morning. His pistol was on his cot, it was dismantled, and all the bullets were gone. The man just—*poof*—he vanished. Now you see him, now you don't. Abracadabra. We heard rumors that he was hidden by the government, or that he sneaked off in civvies, someone said he went to neutral Ireland. Another person swore that Miller was living in the same area of London we bombed back to life.

I can't vouch for these stories. I only know what happened next.

A few days after he disappeared I stood on the edge of a wheat field near our airbase. This grainy ocean rolled in wind and I noticed footprints running through the thin stalks. I couldn't say why, but I just knew it was Miller. I thought about all that grain throbbing with life while men and women died in their thousands all around me. Starlings began to dip and rise overhead, they were a waltzing cloud of flight, and the whole sky was on fire. The sun looked like a bullet wound and there I stood, a single man caught in so much destruction. I closed my eyes and felt air move in and out of my lungs and I was just so happy to be alive. What, I wondered, would the world be like if life could be brought back so easily?

Around me the wheat flowed on the wind. Birds danced. The clouds darkened. It was all so...so beautiful, so delicate.

The bombs that Miller touched were placed under lockdown. A week went by, then two weeks, and then this seventeen-year-old kid shows up in our hut. He knew zip about war but he was from Nebraska like Miller and he was fresh out of Bombardier School. They gave him a copy of Don Quixote and told him to chew bubblegum. Miller's bombs were hoisted into the belly of Rocinante and we were sent back to Kiel where it all started. No one told the kid a thing. I wore my rosary. The other guys had their rabbits' feet and horseshoes and locks of hair. Deering had his lucky bullet. The kid chewed bubblegum and put it on the crossbeam just like he was ordered to. He looked through his bombsite and used his thumb to release thousands of pounds of explosives.

"Boom!" he yelled. "Boom!"

Flak burst around us, steel and brass stabbed the air, and I looked at the angry ground below. I hoped to see a blast of color and that familiar glowing pearl but our explosions were only full of fire and destruction and death. The kid began to cheer. He began to pound the side of our plane and yell for joy because all of his bombs landed right on target. He couldn't figure out why the rest of us were so disappointed, so empty, so silent.

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JESSE GOOLSBY

# Stepfather

The first time I met you, stepson, I fought your father in the driveway. He fisted a tire iron, so I grabbed a loose piece of flagstone at the base of the porch and we went at each other. That's really where my scar comes from. The afternoon had been nice, your mother made kabobs: venison, tomato, onion, squash, green pepper; the peppers you wouldn't touch, and you wouldn't speak to me, so your mom brought the soccer ball out and we kicked at it in the small backyard and I pretended to know something about Pele, and she made you hug me before I left out the front door, running into your dad who had spied our embrace.

In the photo you're ten, you stand in front of our autumn oak, your white-casted right arm straight as an arrow, Nazi-like, but at your side, saluting the rocky ground that shattered your elbow on your fall from the old tree. I warned you about the dead branches, and still I ran to you when I heard your animal groan, your dangling lower arm, inverted, twisting, and I made you wait for the hospital and belted you first because you never listened to me, a stepfather, and it felt good to whip that leather at your lower back, to hear sharpness in the air, and see your body quiet and stiffen as if lost for the first time.

You tried me three times, and two of the times your mother fell on her own accord, but I still let you get the first jab in, just so you thought you had a chance. I remember the living room: the worn grey carpet, little bay window, my weight on your weight, choosing where to land the next blow, your mother pulling, yelping, pleading as I took your arms above your head and locked them with one of my

hands, feeling your helpless slither, knowing none of it mattered because you weren't mine.

Sometimes you'd crawl into our bed and curl into your mother. You looked just like her, and I'd imagine you seeping back into her womb, breathing her liquid, splitting into cells, into her egg, his sperm, but when I'd slip into half sleep I'd feel your fingers on my anchor and knife tattoos, tracing them, transposing them to your arms, and then you lifted your sleeve, unveiling your mother's name on your bicep after your first tour in Iraq.

When you called before Fallujah, you asked for your mother, and she sobbed and shoved the phone at me, so I took it, and you told me you loved me for the first time. You thanked me for the fishing trips, for sitting in the stands at miserable band performances, for toughening you up for the Marines. And after the battle you told me you'd lied, that you didn't love me, that my belt and fist still filled your closest dreams, and fearing death makes you say things you think God wants to hear.

Your mother and I pulled weeds in the front yard when the chaplain's clean blue sedan edged up to the curb. He asked us to step inside, but your mother wouldn't budge, took the news on the sidewalk with a fist full of crab grass. I drove through a lightning storm to the green bridge we used to fish below. It's where I taught you to smack salmon heads against the large black rocks before slicing the guts out. Once, we tried to catch them with our hands. I told you I'd caught hundreds of salmon this way, and that my scar was from wrestling a twenty pounder on the rocks. For all I could tell you believed me.

Your mother fell apart. She locked herself in our dark bedroom, taking small meals there. She didn't talk to anyone, but on the third day she came to me: *Tell his father*, she said. I waited a couple hours, and after cursing and circling town, I drove to his place by the lumber mill. My hand gripped the car door handle, but I couldn't pull the damn thing, and I sat there for an hour, his dog barking the whole time. Finally, your father emerged and slowly approached my rusting Ford. He carried a baseball bat in his strong hand. I didn't fancy up the news. *Adam's dead*, I said, and drove away. I drove until I ran out of gas on a dirt road out by where we shot clay pigeons and walked the ten miles back to town.

When I arrived home, your father's truck rested in our driveway. I wasn't angry. As I passed the truck I looked inside on the chance that he had just arrived, but it was empty. I walked up the steps you helped me build and stood at the threshold with an overwhelming sensation to knock at my own door.

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**CAPTAIN JESSE GOOLSBY**'s work has appeared in numerous literary journals to include *Harpur Palate*, *Our Stories*, *Oak Bend Review*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, *Storyglossia*, *Vestal Review*, *Paradigm*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Breakwater Review*, and various anthologies. He is the recipient of the 2010 Richard Bausch Short Fiction Prize and the 2009 John Gardner Memorial Fiction Award. He teaches War Literature and Far Eastern Literature at the United States Air Force Academy.

JAMES GLEASON BISHOP

# Sitting on the Veterans' Memorial at the Corner of Main Street and Route 22, July 3, 1972, Not Thinking About Walter Cronkite

Someone was lying.
On TV, shells burst in jungles,
body counts distorted nightly.
Police clashed with students
clashed with professors clashed
with blacks clashed with whites.
Drugs drugs drugs. I saw it all
on TV

But not on Main Street in Essex,
not in the softwood aisles
of Harold Tart's Grocery Store
amid pyramids of dusty cans.
Not on the granite memorial—
gray, unpolished headstone,
mass grave for three wars' worth—
which I sat on 'til a dark-eyed
man from the fire department
marched across Route 22.

*How would you like it*
*if someone sat on your memorial?*
*I don't think I'd care, if I were dead,*
I said. He growled, *Get down.*

So I watched the black and white screen,
heard the black and white screams.
Then Phil Tate came home from Nam
smiling beneath his leather
hippie hat with dangly strands.
The Tater didn't look scarred.
Someone was lying,
and I suspected Phillip.

# Goodman Blodgett

Hot summer morning. I shot
baskets at the playground, beside
the Blodgett's house, where, trying
to rescue ourselves from ourselves,

we'd fling fistfuls of gravel onto his roof,
listen to it rattle like rain, then run
as the old man burst out to swear at us.
Blodgett walked with a limp, had a scar

we never saw on his thigh. He'd rescued
a buddy at Anzio. The man was drowning
in an inch of ocean. Old man Blodgett—but
he must've been young man Blodgett then—

dragged his buddy from the sea. On the beach,
got shot through the thigh. Blood slicked
his leg with each step. His buddy bled out
before Blodgett could find the medic.

I don't think he had buddies after the war.
Not Mrs. Blodgett. We'd hear their words
burst out of the house, rattle on the roof, then
die out early, like their cigarettes, their lights.

Blodgett shot himself the year I graduated.
Cleaning his gun, said the paper, said his wife.
Could've been true, for all we knew. Such a sour
life, no one questioned why he'd want it to end.

And no one gave a glance of a thought to our
shot, how we turned that lush village
ugly for him with a fistful of gravel.
We need so many rescues.

# While Guppies Bay at the Moon

Crouched in a gray doorway, the sold-
ier smells his sour sweat, feels it drip
down his stomach, gather in his groin.
You know this story: he left Cleveland,
trained hard at Fort Dix. Waiting for
the presumed terrorist. He won't miss.
You know, have taken sides already?
Tired hero or oppressed villager. Either
way the dark man emerges, shivers,
collapses. Blood dyes his white thawb.
Eventually, the bent bullet falls free, flees
the fight and finds you, sipping carrot soup
in your living room, where you chip a tooth
on this mass of metal, say *mother-fricker*
and throw the bullet away, becoming aware
as you dial your dentist's emergency number,
that blood has begun to spread across your belly,
and your guppy—suspended between green sword-
plants, trying to blink—is baying at the moon.

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**LIEUTENANT COLONEL JAMES GLEASON BISHOP'S** work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Connecticut Review, North American Review, Smithsonian, Yankee, The Boston Globe,* and *Christianity and Literature.* His poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is an assistant professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy.

WILL BADGER

# Afghani Chai

> "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time...an honored guest. The third time...you become family."
>
> —from *Three Cups of Tea*, by G. Mortensen and D. Oliver

Three cups of tea
they taught us (waving the book about)
a new way to win the war

With the first cup
fathers elbowed children into razor wire
to grab the Pokemon backpacks passed out like party favors,
the chai sweet and steeped
with sugar that looked like quartz

During the second cup
cricket teams from as far as Parachinar
came for the Chamkani Games
but some chai slopped over the chipped lip of my cup
soaking my shirt when
riots broke out before
conversation
did

As the spinach-like dregs of the last cup
tickled my lips
a grandfather—actually my host—stole a radio
it was hard to watch them beat him
how he bleated

The cups come from a Balti proverb, anyway.
Maybe their mountains are nice
this time of year.

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**WILL BADGER** recently served as a medic in Afghanistan with the 19th Special Forces Group. He is currently pursuing the MFA in Creative Writing at North Carolina State University.

MICHAIL W. MULVEY

# Short

"Get your shit together, you're going back," said Sergeant Craig, our squad leader.

"Back where?" I asked.

"Back to base camp. You're going home in two weeks and the Army wants you to wash your ass and clean up your fuckin' language before you DEROS."

DEROS: Date of Expected Return from Overseas. Your DEROS date was your link with home from day one. From your first day in-country you started counting backwards from 365. Everybody here knew their DEROS date. It was imprinted on your military mind like your Army Serial Number and your weapon's serial number. Next to your ETS, the day the Army allowed you to return to civilian life, your DEROS date was always on your mind.

A cherry once asked me what DEROS meant. 'Dumb fuck,' I thought as I looked at this poor, pink-faced kid. When he told me he had been in country only three weeks I changed my mind. 'Poor fucker' was more like it. "It's when you get to go home," I said as I turned and walked away.

In fourteen days I would wake up, put on a much-traveled pair of jungle boots for the last time and retrace my route back to "The world." Back to "The land of round-eyed women and the big PX." Home.

"Catch the re-supply Chinook at 1700 hours. Good luck." Although Sergeant Craig wished me luck, there was something between resentment and jealousy in his voice, but I didn't give a shit. He had only been in country a little over two months and wasn't even close to being short.

Sin Loi, motherfucker! I'm going home!

"Thanks," I replied. After 351 days, I was about to leave this place behind.

That I was going home in two weeks wasn't news to me, I knew I was short, but I thought the Army would keep me out here until the very last day. I quickly said my goodbyes. I ignored my platoon sergeant, Harvey the hard-on. Our LT was long gone. After eleven and a half months, there weren't too many old faces left in the platoon. Terry had DEROS'd in November; Tom had gotten a housecat job at battalion, Bob and Jerry were gone, medevaced after a mine blew them to Japan then all the way home.

At 1700 hours I heard the familiar, deep 'whopping' sound of the incoming twin-rotored Chinook. After dropping its slingload of supplies, the pilot slid the aircraft sideways and landed in our FSB. It dropped its ramp and shit out a load of cherries, discernable by their dark green jungle fatigues, their pink arms and faces, and their look of fear and uncertainty.

"Good," I wanted to tell them. "Always be afraid. Don't be ashamed of fear. It will keep you alive."

Along with several other heavily tanned and filthy passengers, I walked up the rear ramp of the big cargo chopper for the noisy but final ride back to my home away from home, base camp. Through the round porthole of a window I took one last look at our FSB. In the center sat the sandbagged TOC. Nearby was a rectangular mess tent surrounded by an earthen berm that had been hit by enemy recoilless rifle rounds the day after Thanksgiving.

You missed, motherfuckers! Check your calendars, you were a day off.

As I sat there holding my M-16 between my legs, staring at the floor, taking in the cool and cleansing air that blew through the aircraft, the sound and vibration brought back memories of another flight when AK-47 rounds came through the floor of the Chinook, right where I was staring. When I pointed out the small jagged holes to the crew chief, he yelled to the pilot over the intercom that we were taking ground fire. The pilot dropped the big chopper down to below tree top level and flew all the way back to the airfield at a height that had to be less than ten feet. The pilot was running trucks and water buffalo carts off the road. "Doan mean nuthin," mumbled one weary passenger. I couldn't hear him over the roar of the engines, but I could read his lips. I knew the phrase well. It meant don't bother complaining. Nobody's listening. Nobody gives a shit 'cause there's nothing you can do about it. Fuck it, doan mean nuthin'.

Back at the airfield the Chinook disgorged its passengers and taxied away. As I stood waiting for a ride back to the company area, I looked around at all the aircraft.

The gooks would love to get hold of this place and fuck it up real good. Chinooks, Cobras, UH1-B gunships, slicks; all the aircraft that bring smoke and hardtimes on their asses.

An empty slick lifted, nosed forward and raced down the runway, picking up speed as it rose and passed over me. I looked up into the face of one of the door gunners as it passed and thought I saw the crew chief who ordered me off his Huey one day back in June. The pilot had said the aircraft was overloaded. The chow, water cans, ammo and other supplies had priority, so one of the three passengers had to unass the aircraft. The crew chief pointed to me and motioned with his thumb to get off and wait for the next resupply chopper going out. Awash in the rotor blast, I watched the aircraft lift, tilt forward, and begin to fly off. About 75 yards from liftoff the nose of the Huey dropped and the aircraft fell, hitting and tumbling across a rain-soaked and muddy bunker line, throwing ammo crates, water cans, and men out into the water.

"Holy shit," I mumbled as I watched one helmet-less man stumble away from the broken aircraft holding what appeared to be his broken arm. The Huey didn't burn, though; it crumbled and collapsed into a twisted pile of smoking, whirring metal. No longer having any blades to turn, the gas-turbine engine whined until someone in the cockpit hit the master switch. An E-5 from supply who witnessed the crash turned, kicked a rock and looked away. The Huey that passed over me at the airfield didn't crash though. It flew off, climbing until it disappeared into the distant gray-blue rain clouds.

I caught a ride back to my company area in a deuce and a half from headquarters supply. Once past division headquarters, the driver took a right, past the spot where a Sp/5 from Headquarters Company accidentally drove his 3/4 ton truck into one of those deep, water-filled drainage ditches that bordered the main roads inside base camp. When his truck rolled over, the guy was pinned underneath and drowned.

"Fuckin' shame," said one PFC whose tone was just short of sad.

Back in the company area I walked into our empty squad hooch, glad to be alone. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I stood and looked around: eleven empty Army cots, footlockers, a small black-and-white TV in the corner, *Playboy* centerfolds taped to the walls and corrugated metal ceiling, shelves made from empty ammo crates that held brown boxes of M-16 ammo, cans of fruit, pictures of loved ones, radios, wrinkled and ripped paperbacks, clothing and green towels hanging on commo wire, and other damp and musty-smelling gear lying in heaps on the floor and the four corners. Two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling, but I left them off. For a

long while I sat alone on my bunk and took in the relative quiet of the cool, dark hooch. I could still hear the occasional muffled boom of artillery fire, but it was off in the distance, and outgoing. The distant sound of Hueys bringing men and supplies out to the field or bringing the dead and wounded back in to the 12th Evac Hospital was a reminder that, although the war was almost over for me, many still had a long way to go till their DEROS. Another two cots, Bob and Jerry's, would remain empty when the battalion came in for stand down. Three other cots waited for replacements, three green and pink-faced cherries who, over time, would turn brown, dirty, and quiet.

Tonight I would sleep in a bed, only a crude folding canvas Army cot really. No sheets, just a wool blanket, but it was dry and up off the ground and I had a real pillow, sort of. The hooch was screened in. I didn't have to share my bunk with mosquitoes, snakes, scorpions, centipedes, red fire ants, or anything else that crawled into my clothes or flew around and around my head until I wanted to fucking scream. During one firefight I thought I had been shot. The pain in my chest took my legs out from under me. I rolled around on the ground in agony, feeling for the entrance wound and blood. Instead, my hand found a large scorpion crawling away off my chest.

No flush toilets, but there was the relative privacy of a five-hole, screened-in shitter with an unlimited amount of toilet paper. And I wouldn't have to take my M-16 with me, just a copy of last month's *Playboy*.

This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for shooting, this is for fun.

Although my weapon was clean, the rest of me was worn and filthy. I wanted to rid myself of clothes that still reeked of that all-too-familiar damp, musty stench that mingled with diesel fuel and LSA, smells that emanated from men who had been marinating in their own sweat for days on end. I hadn't really washed in days or changed my clothes for over a week, but back here I could take a hot shower every day for the next fourteen days if I wanted. Except for the seven baths I took on R&R, I could count the number of showers I had taken in the last 351 days on one hand. When Nancy, my R&R girlfriend, first saw me with my shirt off, she smiled and said I had a nice tan, but after an hour-long soak in the tub, I dropped two, maybe three shades of brown. I had to change the scummy-gray water twice.

And I was thirsty for anything other than piss-warm, heavily chlorinated water or the unsweetened Kool-Aid that we added to take the bite out of the water, and hungry for anything besides the monotonous C-Rats. I could get real food and cold milk in the mess hall. Even mess hall food would be a welcome change.

After I had taken off my helmet and flak-jacket, dropped my web gear in the corner, hung my M-16 from the nails in the overhead rafter, I looked around again and blinked several times, trying to comprehend that it was over for me, and that I would be going home in fourteen days. My eyes burned from lack of sleep. Too many nights on guard or ambush patrol, or sitting out on LP followed by long, endless days searching for an enemy who would not allow themselves to be found. There was a good chance that tonight I would be allowed to get at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. I could probably sleep though a mortar attack. There were times in the past when I had.

As I began to unlace my boots, a faint stain on the toe of the left one reminded me of the blood splatters I washed off late last March—it was Easter Day I think—near a town named Suoi Da in the shadow of Nui Ba Den. A man standing next to me had been shot in the neck. When he went down, the blood spurted like a pulsating fountain onto the ground next to him and onto my boot. Just a foot or two to the right and it would have been me. I saw him medevaced out, Plasma bottle hanging over his litter, but I never found out if he survived. He was a local Vietnamese, a one-legged vet who owned a bar—which side he fought for was a mystery. I didn't know his name and I didn't ask. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to put a name with the face. I wanted to throw these boots onto the tarmac at Bien Hoa for those replacements getting off my plane to see. They could have them for all I cared. They were well broken in, but they carried memories I wanted to leave behind. Maybe I would have the Vietnamese man who burned our shit every morning burn my boots too.

These were the same size twelve boots I wished were about ten sizes smaller when we discovered we were in the middle of a mine field one warm morning. When a track from second squad ran over a mine while moving up to the front of the platoon column, we realized we were probably in the middle of, or at least on the edge of a mine field. Everyone slowly retraced their steps and climbed back up on their respective tracks. If they could talk, these boots had stories to tell, but not to me, I would be leaving the boots and the stories behind in fourteen days.

It was safe back here. Relatively safe. When you were out in the field, safe was when you were deep in a hole with overhead cover during a mortar attack. Or behind a berm when green tracers are looking for you. When you're back at base camp, safe meant you're out of the deep shit. There was always the threat of a mortar attack, even back here, but an occasional mortar attack was nothing.

Piece of fuckin' cake.

Surely the enemy could find bigger targets than one 20 year-old, 135 pound, raggedy-assed, used-up white boy like me. There were ten, maybe even twelve or fifteen-thousand other, more important people here, people who could do them some harm. Surely they would aim for the high priority targets like the airfield, ammo dumps, or division HQ. I was spent, useless, ready to check out of the net. Right about now I didn't give a rat's ass who won. As far as I was concerned, I was out of the game, standing on the sidelines, watching the game clock wind down.

Looking down the long empty hooch past the empty bunks, I could see through the screen door at the other end and across an open area to the mess hall. It was chow time and the housecats stood in line with the short-timers. One particular face reminded me of the kid from Recon Platoon—Rodriquez I think his name was—or was it? Why can't I remember his name? I remember his face and big smile.

"Short!" he yelled as he got into line.

"How short are you, Rodriquez?" asked one Sp/4.

"I'm so fuckin' short I can walk under the mess hall door," he laughed.

And so it went. Back and forth. Laughing, grateful, exhausted men who were going home soon.

Later that day Rodriquez took a shell fragment in the head from an outgoing 105mm short round from one of our own artillery batteries inside base camp answering a call for fire—killed just one day after coming in from the field for the last time. He was sitting on his bunk, they said. Just sitting there sorting through his footlocker, trying to decide what to give away, what to toss out, and what to take home.

'Friendly fire,' it was called.

"Ain't nothing friendly about a shell fragment the size of your hand taking off the top of your fuckin' head," said another short-timer standing nervously in line at the chow hall next day. "Nothing friendly at all."

"Fuckin'-A," replied another, looking over his shoulder in the general direction of the offending unit, still firing from somewhere on the north-west side of the base perimeter out into enemy territory in support of a unit that had stepped in the shit.

But as safe and comfortable as it was compared to the field, base camp wasn't home or even close. It was one step closer to home and the real world. One step away from the darkness and one step closer to the light of reality and what we all knew to be the truth about life. It was a place to blink and try to figure out what had happened the last eleven and a half months. It was a way station; for the line companies in on stand down just a temporary respite from the field. For guys like me, the short-timers, a kind of purgatory, not quite heaven but definitely not hell.

A place between the hell of the bush and the heaven we called home. To the Army it was a place for short-timers to decompress before they went home and back to civilization. A place to reacquire some sanity, maybe even remember simple table manners. I always wondered what would happen if the Army just snatched a man out of the field and dropped him off back in his old neighborhood, all in the space of, let's say, about twelve hours. The Army knew what would happen and that's why they tried to give a man at least two weeks to try to wind down. Let the spring uncoil a bit.

Here we could begin to rid our vocabulary of words like 'fuck,' 'motherfucker,' 'cocksucker,' 'asshole,' 'shithead,' 'dickhead,' 'dipshit,' 'numbnuts,' and try to replace them with mild expletives you could use in front of your grandmother. We even joked about it; "Hey Mom, pass the fucking salt."

Home would be a place where we would never again hear the word 'incoming' or 'medevac.' A place where you would call for a pizza instead of a fire mission. Base camp was a place to begin to readjust to civilian sounds and smells. Back in the world there would be none of the constant ear-shattering fire from weapons, large and small, ours and theirs, or the ever-present stench of foul bodies, week or more old clothes, decaying vegetation, warm piss, burning human excrement, and diesel exhaust.

There were times when I wondered if I would ever again see the projects back home. A lot of close shaves, many bumps and bruises, and one big-ass mine that left me lying semi-conscious in the middle of a dirt road a few klicks east of Phuc My. Our track hit a mine and bucked like a bronco. We all flew in different directions; I landed on my head and shoulder.

After a good night's sleep—must have been ten hours at least, I don't remember falling off—I reported to the First Sergeant the next morning. I was told that I would spend the next two weeks pulling either nightly guard duty on the perimeter bunker line or nightly CQ runner in the company orderly room.

"No sweat," I said to nobody in particular. I could do the next two weeks standing on my head. I'd of even filled sandbags and burned shit if I had to. I was out of the real shit. No more search-and-destroy missions, ambush patrols or LP's. No fire fights, mines, mortar attacks, snipers, or RPGs. No more monsoon rains that kept you and everything you owned wet, cold and moldy for days on end, or relentless heat and humidity that could make your eyes roll back in your head and drop you in your tracks. No more sights, sounds or smells of death or dying.

Sitting alone in the empty and silent hooch, I had time to think about other things besides that night's patrol or tomorrow's sweep. I had time to think back on

the last eleven and a half months. That's what happens when you finally get enough sleep; the fog clears, and your mind begins to function again.

When I reported for duty on my first night as CQ runner, I met the new company clerk, a guy named John who had been in-country only two months or so. He briefed me on my duties; what I had to do from 6 pm till 6 am—1800 hours till 0600 hours Army time—answer the phone, run errands for the Duty NCO, stay out of the CO's desk, stay awake, stay sober.

Piece of fuckin' cake.

I had electric lights, a radio, small black and white TV, a big fan, cold soda, snacks. Almost like being back at Fort Benning, only nobody was trying to kill you there; it was against Army regulations.

John was a Yale-educated Southerner with a BA in English. He was a slim, wiry-looking guy who proudly sported a non-regulation moustache, his way of saying "Fuck you" to the Army.

"I used to talk like a hillbilly but Yale taught me the King's English," he told me one day, smiling. Although Yale had taken him out of Kentucky, it hadn't taken the Kentucky drawl out of his voice. He asked what I was going to do with my life when I got out of the Army besides burn my uniforms, take long hot showers, drink beer and get laid. I told him that I had just been accepted by a small New England college near where my father and his second wife lived. I was hoping college would be my way out of the city housing projects.

Someone in the admissions office must have had a sense of humor or maybe they'd been in the Army. On the application my mother had sent me, where it said "Present position," I wrote, "Sitting in a hole." Not looking past that day, and not thinking any college would accept me, especially with my poor high school grades, I really didn't take the application seriously. I pulled out a pen and filled out the papers right then and there, sitting in a hole out in the Bo Loi Woods, M-16 leaning against my leg, two grenades and a Claymore clacker sitting on a sandbag to my left. I had just finished digging in for the night and sweat dripped on the application, mingling with my grimy fingerprints. I had a good hoot, as John would say, filling out that application. I think I might have even dropped a pinch of dirt into the envelope.

Sometimes John lingered in the office after duty hours and told me about all the great literature he had read as an undergrad. When I told him I might major in English, he gave me his copy of W.W. Norton's The American Tradition in Literature, which he said he probably wouldn't have time to read now anyway.

"Don't understand why I even brought it," he said, sitting behind his gray Army desk with a slightly puzzled look, feet up, hands behind his head. Maybe he thought it would be one of his ties to home, one of those ties you're afraid or reluctant to let go of.

"New Haven seems a million miles away right about now. Funny though, the Army thought that because I had a degree in English, I'd make a good company clerk. There's no connection whatsoever, except when I have to write up citations for the officers. Then my love of fiction kicks in. I can make a dumb-as-dogshit-officer look like John fuckin' Wayne."

We both laughed. One day our battalion commander landed his C&C chopper in a clearing, got out and poked his head in an enemy bunker complex that had been uncovered by Alpha Company. The battalion S-3—the operations officer—put the colonel—his boss—in for a Silver Star.

"The clerk in S-1 who wrote up that recommendation should have been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in fiction," said John, shaking his head and smiling. "But that's the way it works. The officers have to get their tickets punched before they move on to their next assignment or go home."

Before I'd allowed the Army to take over my life and thoughts, I loved to read. I was a lousy student but a voracious reader, as one teacher told my mother. I could always be found in the library. Although I resisted at first, I eventually came to appreciate Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Emily Dickenson, and especially Damon Runyon, who always wrote in the present tense. But here, in this place, I found it hard to focus on a book or anything other than how to make it to the future tense.

In English class I refused to diagram sentences and couldn't tell the difference between a direct or indirect object, but when Miss Mirante made us read and act out Macbeth, I begged to play the lead. I memorized Macbeth's famous soliloquy in act five and acted my heart out:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Mrs. Mirante's mouth dropped when I acted out my lines. For the last 351 days, though, I hadn't read Shakespeare, Damon Runyon or much of anything. I found it hard to focus on any reading matter of any substance.

"Get your head out your ass!" the lifers would yell at anyone who wasn't 100% focused on the task at hand, the mission, the moment. Here, if you lost your focus, you could lose your life. Attention to detail. Besides, nothing I had read in high school seemed to have any relevance here. Nothing I learned in high school had prepared me for this place. Some guys, the rednecks and the brain-dead lifers, read the latest *Playboy* or Marvel comic books; they gawked at and joked about Miss April with her big tits and perky nipples who hoped to "Sing Rigoletto or Rigatoni, or whatever at Carnegie fuckin' Hall some day," or get a Ph.D. in astro-fuckin'-physics.

One night—I was down to ten and a wakeup—I was told by the First Sergeant to drive the battalion S-3, Major Johnson, out to Ann Margaret, a collection of bunkers that guarded the bridge over the Suoi Ben Muong, a stream just outside our division perimeter. This defensive position was named Ann Margaret after the actress who visited the men manning the bunkers on one of her morale-raising tours. One PFC said that two of the bunkers reminded him of Annie's enormous tits—"She can raise my morale any day"—so for this reason and for her kind and risky gesture of support, the position was called Ann Margaret. That night a guy from another company—a short timer I heard—had accidentally blown himself up with the Claymore he was setting up as part of the routine defense measures taken to guard the bridge. As he was leaning over the Claymore, it detonated, sending him up in the air and separating his head, arms, and legs from his torso. As I carefully drove down to the bunker, I could see what appeared to be a large piece of smoking red meat in the faint blackout lights of my Jeep. The medics gathered the body parts and collected them in a body bag, but they never found one of his legs. This was the second time I had to deal with some fuckup who had blown himself away with a claymore. With ten days left, I really didn't want to deal with this shit again.

This shit isn't supposed to happen back here, man.

Back in my empty hooch I turned on the light over my bunk and opened my American Tradition in Literature. I needed to focus on something other than the dead short-timer. I lost myself in the heavy book filled with stories of other times

and places. One poem by Archibald McLeish stood out and reminded me of this place:

> Death is here:
> Death is another place, not among strangers.
> Death is under the moon here and the rain.
> I promise you old signs and a recognition
> Of sun in the seething grass and the wind's rising.
> Do you ask more?
> Do you ask to travel for ever?

I wasn't sure if I understood what this poem meant, but something clicked in my head. I was a tourist here in this country. Just visiting, seeing the sights, killing people. Do I want to travel forever? Fuck no. When I get home I'm never leaving again.

I reached up and grabbed the light that was slowly swinging back and forth from a long black electrical wire, making small arcs, like a pendulum. The light reminded me of that illum round that passed over our NDP one night, slowly swinging in the night breeze, casting long deadly shadows as a sniper popped away in the distance.

I looked over to Terry's old bunk and thought back to the time not that long ago when a mortar round landed where I would have been walking if I had gotten up when he told me to. Instead, I lay there on top of a sand-bagged bunker trying to snatch just a few more minutes of sleep. That morning our CO had some hot chow flown in thinking we deserved it after the previous evening's entertainment—A body count of one KIA, three WIA; ours not theirs. The enemy saw the chopper, the chow line, much of the company lined up for eggs and pancakes and figured it would be a great time for an encore. Only I was just too tired to even get up, even for pancakes. I spent half the night dropping M-79 rounds outside the perimeter. The other half I lay half awake expecting a ground attack or at least some RPG's.

"See, sometimes it pays to be a lazy-ass motherfucker," I laughed, nervously. If Terry hadn't stopped to try to get my tired ass up, he too would have been in line.

Now that I was short, I could turn in most of my equipment. When I picked up my flak jacket from where it sat in the corner, a jagged piece of shrapnel fell out of the pocket, a souvenir from an enemy recoilless rifle round that hit not far from our bunker one night. I heard the explosion, far enough away I thought that there was no need to find cover—or maybe I was too tired to move—then a whizzing sound rapidly heading in my general direction. I should have known better, my ear was

attuned to all the sounds of this place. The shrapnel hit with a thud, landing in the sandbag next to me. When I pried it out, it was too hot to hold. When it cooled off I kept it as a souvenir of another near miss. Something to show the folks back home. A souvenir for my uncles to prove that I too had seen war. I was part of the club. The initiation was a mother fucker but I was one of them now.

As I stood in line at the PX, the eyes of the Vietnamese cashier reminded me of a wounded enemy soldier who had been hiding in a spider hole in a trench. The wounded man stared at me for just a moment until his face contorted in pain at his wound. I stood there and stared back. The guy behind roughly pushed me aside and blew his shit away. The dead man was dragged out of his hole and dropped on the ground for all to see. The dead always seemed to lie in unnatural positions, their tired, empty eyes staring out at nothing. Some men stood over the body and joked.

"He had to be the dumbest mother fucker in the NVA," said one SP/4 staring into the dead man's face. "He emptied a whole magazine at us and didn't hit a God damned thing." I stared at the body.

You missed, motherfucker.

There were too many near misses. Too many memories. I wanted them out of my head. Alcohol or weed were the usual ways to dull the brain, wash away the memories, push back the faces, close the eyes, but instead I used John's book. It was my anchor, my link with sanity, with another place, another time, the future. I wanted a clear head, just in case. Didn't want to lose count. No accidents, nothing to keep me from getting home. I didn't want to drive into a ditch, rollover and drown, or get blown away by my own Claymore.

"What's that you got there?" asked my bunker companion eyeing the big, black anthology the first night I pulled bunker guard.

"It's just a book of short stories. Something to do out here. Besides, I've already read this month's *Playboy*," I lied.

"What kind of stories?" he asked. By his clean and dark green jungle fatigues and unstained web gear I could see he was new in country. He carried an M-16 in one hand and a *Playboy* magazine in the other.

Just don't get any on me, I thought to myself.

"Just short stories. I'll take the first shift, you take the next. We'll rotate, OK?"

"Sure." He said, taking off his web gear, leaning his M-16 against the wall, and climbing into the lower bunk with his *Playboy*, flashlight, and wool blanket for a pillow.

Out on the bunker line I could bring my book, sit on top of the bunker and read until the light faded, then inside, by flashlight under my poncho. Bret Hart's "The

Outcasts of Poker Flat" reminded me that I too was now something of an outcast, no longer a part of my old squad, what was left of it. I was an outcast here—the locals were trying to chase me out of their country. When I got home would I be an outcast because of what I had seen and done? Would I fit in? Hart's people were cast out and died in the wilderness. Would I survive all this just to die crossing some street back home because I lost my focus and didn't see the truck coming my way, or would I die alone in an apartment on Pacific Street, surrounded by empty beer bottles, slowly rotting away?

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," wrote poet Robert Frost in "The Death of the Handyman." Would my family take me in? Of course they would. Except for what they saw in the news, they had no idea what really went on here, no fucking clue. My father had been a medic in an Army hospital in England during the Second World War. The only shit he saw was in a bedpan. My step-father served in a sub out in the Pacific and since there are no windows on subs, at least for the enlisted men, he didn't see shit either. Outwardly I had changed very little. Coming home in January they would notice my tan. I was thin. I had deeper, more thoughtful eyes. But would they see behind my eyes? Would they see into my mind? My foul language might be a clue, but I was determined to clean that up. If someone asked, "Did you kill anyone?" What would I say? Would I lie? Or would I tell the truth and say "Yes," so they would leave me alone?

A platoon of passing tanks running up the road to the safety of base camp before nightfall took me back to the night when a platoon of tanks passing by our ambush position fired up their big-ass Xenon searchlights, illuminating our position. I waited for the flechettes from the 90mm bee hive rounds to come hissing our way, but the tankers must have recognized us. They turned off their lights and moved on, down the road, leaving several of us with shit-filled pants and thumping hearts under our shirts. Another near miss.

With seven days left, the Duty NCO let me visit my R&R buddy in the 3/13th Artillery, about a half mile down the perimeter road. It was 1930 hours and the sun was long gone, replaced by cool and damp night air. Bob and I had shared a bathroom at the hotel in Kuala Lumpur; two rooms, one bath. We had a sink with both hot and cold running water, a flush toilet, unlimited toilet paper, and a bathtub, which we took turns soaking in, trying to cleanse away months of accumulated filth.

I didn't know Bob before we met at the hotel, but we became friends, sort of. We had shared some good times in Malaysia so I wanted to say goodbye before I left the division. When I got to Bob's battery, however, neither of us had much to say. Bob still had three months left in country and I was going home in seven days. After a few beers and some meaningless conversation, we shook hands, I wished him good luck and left, heading back down the dirt road to my company area.

As I slowly walked back down the road, a full moon was just coming up over the horizon. I could clearly see its craters and wondered, half in jest, if someone had called in an air-strike. I wondered if my friends and family were all looking up at the same moon. Was it tomorrow or yesterday back home? What were they thinking and doing right now? I stopped to listen to voices off to my right. On the other side of a large drainage ditch several men played pool in their EM club. Outside, others sat on long benches, watching a movie at an outdoor theater. Through a side door of the club I could see a soldier leaning over a pool table, pool cue in hand, intently lining up his shot. Others stood around watching, some leaning on their cues with both hands, others sipping cans of beer.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught the bright flash of heavy weapons fired at night. It came from outside our division perimeter, and was immediately followed by the thumping sounds they made in the distance. Light travels faster than sound I remembered from high school science. From the flashes and sounds, it looked like four; probably mortars or recoilless rifles.

I instinctively yelled "Incoming," even though I stood alone in the road. Before I could move, the soft whoosh of rounds passed closely overhead was immediately followed by a clang and a thud. One of the four rounds had gone through the corrugated sheet metal roof of the EM club and buried itself in the pool table where that soldier still leaned over his shot. The round was a dud. One second he and his friends were there and then they weren't; I blinked and they were gone. Two more rounds, neither of them duds, landed to the left of the club. The fourth landed farther away.

When another round landed between the club and me, sending dirt but no shrapnel my way, I jumped into the ditch and squatted in the water. The cool, slimy and stagnant water filled my boots. A second round, landing on the edge of the ditch, sent me prone. I buried my head deep in the water. I held it under as long as I could without drowning. When another round landed in the ditch, a few meters down from me, sending up a fountain of dirty water, I scrambled out and threw myself on the ground near the EM club.

Were they after me, I wondered? Having lost my hat in the water, I covered my head with both hands, as if that would do any good against flying metal screaming to take off the top of my skull.

Wham! A round hit between the club and the theater.

Wham! Another landed to the right of the club, sending clumps of hard clay up in the air and back down onto my arms and legs.

Fuck! I'm too short for this shit!

A sharp clang was immediately followed by another explosion. A second round went through the roof of the EM club, but this one was not a dud. It blew off part of the roof and one wall, but everyone who had been playing pool had already smartly unassed this target, crawling for the nearest bunker.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Three in rapid succession. They had the range now and were dropping rounds in the middle of the theater where they knew Americans were watching the movie.

Wham! This one to my front and so close I could feel the concussion and the heat from the blast on my bare arms.

Wham! Clumps of dirt fell on my arms and back.

They're gonna drop one right on my ass and blow my balls off!

I didn't think I was going to die right then and there, just go home minus my nuts and other precious parts I would need when and if I ever got back to the land of the big PX and round-eyed women. No more fogging up the windows of my '55 Chevy Bel-Aire at the Stamford Drive-In on cold winter nights.

I was lying there, out in the open with my ass hanging out. No cover, no hole to hide in. But I wasn't about to get up and run.

"You run, you die," one old NCO told a class of cherries in ambush school. "If the rounds are close, just get down. It has to hit you right in the ass to kill you, so just get as flat as you can." And that was my worry, taking one in the ass.

Another explosion, but back in the theater where I could hear voices, some loud, some soft, some shouting orders, some screaming, others softly begging.

"Medic!" They yelled. "Medic!" they cried.

A distant Carrump! They were dropping rounds on another target, shifting fire, not too far away but far enough for me to didi the fuck outta here, I thought.

I jumped back down into the ditch and ran towards the battalion area, splashing through the cool water, falling, getting up, running, falling again, tripping on some unknown object. Up and out, across the road, leaving muddy wet footprints in the dirt, over the chest-high barbed-wire fence and into our company area. I could still hear the distant sounds of rounds impacting the airfield and other priority targets.

I stopped and stood there, breathing heavily, looking across the road and back down along the ditch. To the right, outside our perimeter, I could still see the flashes of the enemy mortar and recoilless rifles. To my left I could hear the distant sound and see the soft flash and sparks as these rounds hit over by division HQ and the airfield. They were looking for Hueys, especially the gunships who could fuck up their evening if they ever got off the ground.

I was watching the show now, no longer part of it. I was a spectator, no longer a participant—better yet, no longer a target. Another near miss.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doin'? Get in a bunker, asshole," someone yelled from within one of those large buried bunkers that could be found between the hooches. But I knew I was safe now. They were no longer after me.

Another Carrump! off in the distance.

"You missed, motherfuckers!" I yelled to the rounds landing off in the distance. "I fuckin' win!"

"Hey! What's your fuckin' problem? Get in a bunker!"

"I don't have a fuckin' problem. I'm short," I yelled, laughing, still breathing hard, but not as hard as before. Still breathing was what mattered.

"You're one crazy motherfucker!"

"Yeah, I'm one dinky-dau G.I."

I wanted to yell at the men hiding in the bunker; "Come on out you bunch of pussies! Come out and enjoy the show!" but I didn't want to piss off anybody who could keep me here any longer than the seven days I had left. No last minute "Who you think you're fuckin' with?" paperwork glitches.

Yeah, I was crazy, all right, but they missed. I was alive. Soaked through but still breathing. Not looking up from inside a body bag. As I slowly came down off my adrenaline high, I decided it might be better to get down into the bunker after all. Maybe they heard me and would come back. I quietly sat down in a corner. I was soaked through and covered with slime and mud, but I didn't care. They missed. "They fuckin' missed," I said to myself, but nobody was paying attention. They were listening to the rounds landing on the other side of the division perimeter, hoping they wouldn't come back. Just across the road was the battalion ammo dump. I passed it as I splashed down the ditch.

I sat there, alone in a corner; I don't remember how long. My breathing was regular now. I thought back to one of my nightly talks with John about one of the stories I'd read in the literature anthology he had given me, a short story called "The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane. I'm not sure why I chose that time to remember that story, maybe it was the water in the ditch that made me think of it.

"If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?"

I told John I wasn't sure what it meant, but I asked if maybe it had something to do with living in an uncaring universe that didn't make any sense. And what's this shit about some sacred cheese of life? And why does the oiler die in the surf instead of the captain with his injured arm?

We both agreed that a lot of what happened here didn't always make sense. You could dig the deepest hole and lay down three layers of sandbags for overhead cover and a mortar round could drop right down through your entrance and blow your shit away. Or you could be standing right out in the open and a round might land five meters away, like tonight, but you lived to laugh about it.

Doan mean nothin'.

Why did Rodriquez have to die on the very day he came in from the field, before he had a chance to nibble the sacred cheese of life? Why did that truck driver have to drown in a ditch? "If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"

I could still hear the distant Carrump of rounds hitting the base, only farther off in the distance, on the other side of the airfield. They were after the Chinooks now.

"That you? Where you been?" asked a familiar voice coming from the dark, from another corner of the bunker. It was John. I wanted to tell him that I almost had the sacred cheese of life snatched away tonight, but all I could say was, "Yeah, it's me. I was down the road visiting a friend." But that's all I said. For some reason I didn't want to admit that I almost died in a water-filled ditch seven days short of going home.

"Yeah, stupid fucker died seven days short of his DEROS." I could hear them say over my bodybag. "Hit right in the ass by a mortar round. Blew his shit away, among other things."

But I was not dead. Not yet. Like the captain in Crane's life boat, it wasn't my time.

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# Outside the Reign of Logic, Outside the Reach of God:

## *Hester Panim* in the Surreal Art of Paul Celan and Samuel Bak

A rudimentary but often used definition of the "surreal" refers to true events that appear fantastic and dreamlike. History books are on the other side of the spectrum, as they purport to detail only the facts, facts which are real simply because they are published as history. Occasionally, however, the real is so incredible that even factual accounts of it cannot help but lapse into depictions of the *sur*real. The events of the Holocaust mark an historical event so terrible that descriptions of it, even in factual accounts, become surreal because they read like tales of horror. For example, a seemingly technical historical statistic—six million Jews were victims of genocide during WWII—is so shocking that history becomes a landscape of nightmare. This landscape is replete with unanswered and likely unanswerable philosophical and theological dilemmas, the most common being: Where was God during the Holocaust?

Post-Holocaust artists have attempted to depict this nightmare landscape and address this question through various media. Two artists in particular, poet Paul Celan and visual artist Samuel Bak, both Holocaust survivors, have used aspects of Surrealism to represent the nightmares of WWII. Louis Aragon, a founder of the surrealist movement, asserted, "'Reality [...] is the apparent absence of contradiction. The marvelous is the eruption of contradiction within the real.'"[1] In *Adam and Eve* from Bak's *In a Different Light* series and Celan's poem "Tenebrae,"[2]

classical elements of this surrealist sense of contradiction are used to depict the Jewish concept of *Hester Panim* as an answer to questions about God and the Holocaust. As defined by the Shoah Resource Center, *Hester Panim* refers to "God's hiddenness. Some believe that God 'hides' Himself in order to tolerate sin in the world, and along the way people are hurt by that sin. Others assert that there is no explanation for God's hiding."[3] This type of absence theology can take many forms, as there "are a variety of notions about the hiddenness of God, the absence of God, the silence of God, and the eclipse of God."[4] *Hester Panim* has a long history that is evidenced in the Old Testament books of Job and Esther, and the questions of God's absence that arise in those books are evident in the vistas that Bak and Celan create. Both depict an absent God and/or a fading God who has chosen to hide from the intolerable acts of Adolph Hitler's "Final Solution." Indeed, the very act of attempting to depict a God who is not there is steeped in incongruity. Thus, the works explored below speak to and for one another; the images and ideas that Celan metaphorically paints in "Tenebrae," Bak literally paints in *Adam and Eve*. The images and words contained therein offer avenues of emotional release for those burdened by the unanswerable queries that inevitably follow the tragedy of war.

Surrealism is a complex and esoteric artistic, literary and philosophical movement founded in France as a reaction to WWI carnage. The surrealists constituted the front lines of a subversive cultural shift that attempted to root out the principles that led to the 37,466,904 casualties of the so-called "War to End All Wars."[5] The surrealistic elements of Bak's and Celan's work analyzed below are *purposely* less complex, focusing primarily on the contradictory images and psychological "gardening"—as in rooting through the darkest reaches of the psyche—that naturally arise when one tries to represent living horrors. And this is a representation that has given up on the logic and ration that grounds Western philosophical traditions. There is no place more ruled by chaos and the irrational than the dreamscapes of the human mind. Thus, prompted by Sigmund Freud's work on the subconscious, André Breton stated the following in his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*:

> We are still living under the reign of logic [...] But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest [...] Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly

> be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.[6]

However, the surrealists did not allow their philosophy, their interest in "fancy" and the "forbidden," to slip into instances of mere nihilistic buffoonery. In contrast, they asserted that the real was to be found within these peripheral worlds: "Surrealism is not flight into the unreal or into dream, but an attempt to penetrate what has more reality than the logical and objective universe."[7] Are Bak's and Celan's images fantastic, dreamlike, and unreal? Yes, but that does not make the worlds they create any less authentic—perhaps it makes them more so. James E. Young quotes Holocaust scholar Robert Scholes as asserting that "'it is because reality [itself] cannot be recorded that realism is dead [...] We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it."[8] Bak and Celan are students of this perspective, and they use "fancy" and the "forbidden" to depict the completely illogical events of WWII. They have created art that expresses the search for God in the worlds they have constructed. Their art is *not* reality per se, but it is their constructions of the truths they came to know, truths so terrible that depictions of it fall outside "the reign of logic" and far from the embrace of God.

**Celan and Bak: Holocaust Survivors**

Both Paul Celan (1920-1970) and Samuel Bak (b. 1933) survived the atrocities of the Holocaust. However, their physical survivals belie the continued emotional imprisonment that is evident in their complexly stunning artistic creations. As Lawrence Langer eloquently states, "[T]he artist has few illusions about the ease of renewal. The task of escaping the weight of memory imposes a nearly insuperable burden on the imagination seeking to create profuse options for the future."[9] The violent acts that Celan and Bak witnessed were never fully purged from their minds, and memories of these horrors serve as the impetus for much of their artistic output. Surrealism, which attempts to plumb and purify the psyche, provides a logical avenue through which to attempt such psychological catharsis. At 22, Celan, a Romanian Jew, was moved from a ghetto to a labor camp where his parents would die. While "freed" from the Holocaust in 1944, Celan's attempts to grapple with his past ended in 1970, when he killed himself by drowning in the Seine River. Bak's family was moved to the Vilna, Poland ghetto in 1940. His father was shot just before Vilna's 1944 liberation. He and his mother were two of the few from Vilna who had survived by war's end.

Bak's 2001 autobiography *Painted in Words: A Memoir* clearly demonstrates the ways in which events of ghetto and camp life mirror the use of the extraordinary and paradoxical images that dominate surrealist art. Bak writes of an "Exhibition of Art" that took place in the ghetto: "A waiting room for the horrors of the death camps seems an unlikely setting for something meant to liberate the spirit and bring joy. Yet it is not an unusual conjunction, as we know from many books about the Holocaust."[10] As shown in the following excerpt, Bak's autobiography abounds with further surreal images "painted in words," just as the title of his memoir promises. On a train from Lodz to Berlin after the war, the artist reports the following:

> The first impression is of total blackness, and then gradually contours start to emerge. Strange animal-like sounds and bizarre smells filter into our small space. We are in a sort of anteroom that gives access to the rest of the car. Two or three Red Army men in heavy coats, reeking of vomit and alcohol, are spread on the floor and snore. I hear distant voices and see some light filtering through the side of a closed door.[11]

These examples, rife with multi-sensory images that slowly arise from the train's moving darkness, maintain a dreamlike/nightmare quality, showing the ways in which the Holocaust essentially served as fertile ground from which surreal gardens of remembrance could grow.

Celan and Bak have long been seen as *surrealistic*, though not necessarily as surrealists proper.[12] In her 1993 study of Celan, Clarise Samuels asserts that the poet's surrealist style in depicting Holocaust themes "has already been noted and analyzed by a number of scholars. As early as 1954, Hans Egon Holthusen commented on the French surrealists' influence on Celan's lyrics."[13] Similarly, while Bak was influenced by Cubism during his early career, his interest in the surreal was honed during the late 1960s/ early 1970s. Pam Chadick notes this shift by stating that in "the 1960s he discarded abstraction for a style that required more realistic rendering, but incorporated images that verged on the surreal [...] Bak does interesting things with his motifs and symbols [...] by forcing surprising relationships between the symbol and the world that he creates in these paintings."[14] Although Celan and Bak are not completely aligned with the historical Surrealist movement, both artists certainly used the surrealist tropes of contradiction and spectacular imagery to question both the horrors of war and God's responsibility for them and/or absence from them. This is an act very much in keeping with the

spirit of Surrealism, a movement that eschewed both the concept of a higher power and the primacy of logic within Western discourse.

**Celan and the Absence of God in "Tenebrae"**

Paradoxically, but true to form, the surrealists declared that traditional modes of artistic production, both in writing and art, were defunct. This contradiction, some would say hypocrisy—of a writer *writing* that writing is dead—was not lost on the surrealists' contemporary critics. But however much the surrealists believed that art no longer existed, the fact is that they *did* continue to write, and most would agree that they did so with quite a degree of finesse. In reality, such declarations were more a way of ensuring that art would become fused with the happenings of everyday life. Georges Hugnet asserted that poetry had slipped from the page to "'to the center of life. It is no longer an art, a spiritual state, but life, spirit.'"[15] Paul Celan's "Tenebrae" relies on surreal contradiction to make meaning and to create spirit both in the communal sense and with the faint expectation of renewal. In "Tenebrae," Celan, a Jewish poet,[16] appears to be addressing a Christian "Lord." David Wolpe notes that "metaphorical language [poetry] is intrinsically suspect when it comes to theology" because it signifies an attempt to depict something beyond the capability of humans to comprehend, something that "transcends" language.[17] However, he concludes that although metaphor is inadequate, it is the primary communicative option that we have as human beings, explaining that "as we cannot speak without recourse to metaphor, we cannot theologize without it [...] the metaphor of eclipse is part of the congeries of images about God's silence, hiddenness and inactivity which run through Jewish tradition and have become exquisitely apposite in the wake of the Holocaust."[18] Celan, consequently, appropriates Christian metaphorical language in addressing the concept of *Hester Panim* and in bringing this language to the "'center of life.'" Since the God of the covenant has abandoned His people, the speaker's only recourse is to address another God. In essence, Celan "mobilizes the trope of humanity's separation from the messiah" through the language of poetry.[19] Conversely, there is also the conflicting sense that the God of the covenant still exists somewhere, as demonstrated by the fury directed at that entity. Therefore, a simple Deistic theological perspective will not work here. Rather, the speaker, and speakers, of this poem find affinity with their brother Jesus Christ, another Jewish man who was tortured, sacrificed, and seemingly abandoned by his Father.

The very title of this poem refers to the Christian Tenebrae service that takes place during the Holy Week before Easter. Tenebrae—which in Latin means "shadows"—attempts to reconstruct the emotive elements of the passion and crucifixion of

Jesus Christ. In Celan's Tenebrae service, the death of Christ is compared to the deaths of Jews as they send out an alert to God: "We are near, Lord,/ near and at hand" (lines 1-2).[20] To be near to God is to be close to death or deceased already. The second stanza of the poem juxtaposes the events of the Holocaust to Christ's passion, while also alluding to the murder of Jews in gas chambers:

> Handled already, Lord,
> clawed and clawing as though
> the body of each of us were
> your body, Lord. (lines 3-6)

Although the reference is subtle, the Lord here is quite possibly a Christian God, as it was his son Jesus Christ who was made into flesh/ "body" and brutally "handled" by the Romans. In *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, John Felstiner notes that Celan adapted the fourth line of this poem from "Gerald Reitlinger's ground-breaking study *The Final Solution*" in which, "at the end of an already horrifying paragraph, a cluster of Jews pressing against the gas chamber door, suffocating, is described as 'even in death clawed into each other.'"[21] The speaker[22] expresses rage that is evident in his warning to God that the suffering are "clawing" their way to He who allowed them to be so brutally "handled" by the Nazis.

The third stanza of "Tenebrae" completely circumvents the traditional landscape of religious worship, thereby exemplifying how Celan uses contradiction to direct fury toward as well as deny God. He revisions pious souls at prayer as angry souls demanding that their negated deity pray to them: "Pray, Lord,/ *pray to us*,/ we are near" (lines 7-9, emphasis added). This stanza was controversial from the start, causing Celan's Catholic friend Otto Pöggeler to advise that he remove the "'sacrilegious'" line quoted above.[23] In fact, Celan did initially take Pöggeler's advice, but eventually decided to restore it before final publication. The implication, again, is that the Jews are "clawing" their way to the God who has abandoned them. God, therefore, is advised to pray to them, perhaps for forgiveness. In "Washing of the Word, Washing of the World," Beth Hawkins aptly notes that what "emerges in the space of destruction [the Holocaust] is a conditional covenant that paradoxically renders the previous conditions—i.e. that the keeping of the Torah necessitates protection—null and void."[24] For a Jew during and after the Holocaust, God's negation of the Biblical covenant would seem a likely supposition. In return, God is negated.

The next two stanzas refer back to stanza two, in which elements of daily life in the camps are depicted amidst a hectic landscape:

> Wind awry we went there,
> went there to bend
> over hollow and ditch.
> To be watered we went there, Lord. (lines 10-13)

The image here evokes the harsh conditions under which one was expected to work in the labor camps. In fact, the Romanian camp in which Celan worked was eventually closed due to extremely bad weather conditions. The exact details of the poet's time in the forced-labor camps are sketchy. Felstiner notes the following: "'Shoveling!' is what [Celan] would say when asked [...] what work he did [in the camp]."[15] In the stanzas above, the shoveling has already been done. Jews were forced to shovel to create a final (un)resting place for the bodies of their murdered brethren. The speaker and his companions, the "we," look down into the depths of the earth waiting to be "watered" like flowers—a reference to being drenched with their own blood in front of a Nazi firing squad. As Samuels writes, Celan often used the flower trope as part of his surrealist repertoire:

> The flower motif reminiscent of spring and life is combined with [...] images of destruction, death, and the Holocaust. This contradiction is a reminder of the fact that the German death camps of the Holocaust often possessed bizarre contrasts with nature and civilization that included garden paths and music within the camps, as well as the camps' surrounding countryside. This bizarre incongruity, which defied words, existed as an aura, palpably present yet always intangible.[16]

This seemingly inherent contradictory aspect of life in Nazi camps, as ably noted by Samuels, is confirmed by Bak's memories of WWII (see passages quoted above from his memoir), again confirming that the reality of the Holocaust is most suitably reconstructed through a surreal filter due to the seemingly incompatible elements of life during the war.

Celan's surreal vista is further darkened, or reddened, as the speakers, the "we" of the poem, are watered with blood: "It was blood, it was/ what you shed, Lord" (lines 14-15). Jews, persecuted because of religious beliefs, are found bathing in the blood of a Christian God who made His son flesh with the knowledge that he would then

be tortured and sacrificed. Although the image itself seems illogical, this is a logical comparison made by a speaker, or speakers, attempting to comprehend his people's own incomprehensible torture and sacrifice. He continues with a description of the blood that "gleamed":

> It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
> Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord.
> We have drunk, Lord.
> The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord. (lines 17-20)

In this stanza, "Tenebrae" becomes a prayer to an absent Judaic God through its repeated call to a Christian Lord who shed his own blood for the salvation of humankind, an event reenacted in countless Christian ceremonial masses. In fact, Celan asserts that the Jews *are* Jesus Christ (a somewhat logical comparison since Christ was himself Jewish). There is no differentiation between the ultimate iconic image of self-sacrifice, Jesus Christ, and the victims of the Holocaust. Christ resides in the lifeless eyes of the massacred Jews; they swallow him, drink him, both his literal blood, via the sacrament of communion, and the image of him crucified. This use of dogmatic contradiction is not unique to Celan. For example, in 1938, Jewish artist Marc Chagall painted *The White Crucifixion*, depicting Christ amidst "a pogrom" in which "some cottages have been turned over, their possessions scattered and owners killed ... [and] Christ, [depicted on the cross, wears] a Jewish prayer-shawl."[27] The historical use of Christian iconography by Jewish artists is noted by Felstiner and expounded upon in relation to the New Testament when Christ asks during his final hours: "'*Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani*' that is, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"[28] This question, of course, is met with the sourness of a sponge soaked with vinegar. Like Christ, the Jews cry out to a seemingly disinterested God; in response, they are only fed more bitterness.

This poem, offered to readers as a bizarre Tenebrae service, ends as it began, with a collective "we" addressing God in an unexpected manner: "Pray, Lord./ We are near" (lines 21-22). The speaker makes a final demand of the Lord who has abandoned the Jews in the horrid landscape that unfolds in the second, fourth, and eighth stanzas. In between these stanzas God is beseeched to notice their suffering, but they, like their Jewish brother Christ, are left forsaken. Whether or not God is hidden, eclipsed, or disinterested, his people are approaching him. They have been "handled" and "clawed," and they know they will die. Some are already dead. When alive, they were always already near death.

**Bak and the Absence of God in *Adam and Eve***

Although one must be careful when attempting to understand the artist through his/her art, Samuel Bak's reference to himself as a "'God-fearing atheist'" is pertinent here.[29] The phrase epitomizes one of the main components of this study: *Hester Panim* via the contradictory depiction of an absent supreme deity. Scott Ruescher's review of Bak's show, *In a Different Light: Genesis in the Art of Samuel Bak*, summarizes the series as a whole, while capturing the artist's use of Surrealism:

> [I]n painting after painting, [Bak uses] appropriated depictions of Adam himself, in the unmistakable guise of a hunted-down European Jew [...] In Bak's bizarre paintings, [he] strip[s] down Michelangelo's sensual settings of the *Genesis* stories and dress[es] them back up in ghastlier garb [...] Adam, a pallid, stubble-faced, burr-headed, gaunt, and hopelessly impassive figure, no longer relishes a languid nonchalance, and no longer counts on an imminent touch from the warm hand of God [...] Bak makes liberal use of surrealist symbolism to drive home his never-exactly-subtle visionary point about the Holocaust as proof of humanity's estrangement from the divine.[30]

In *Adam and Eve*,[31] part of this series, Bak, like Celan before him, works with religious iconography to depict the effects of the Holocaust on both the human psyche and the Jewish relationship with God. Indeed, an "estrangement" bordering on complete abandonment dominates the austere landscape that Bak creates. Ferdinand Alquié, philosopher of the surreal, affirms that in "Surrealism [...] the imaginary comes ceaselessly to break the framework of the given, to surpass it," but that the end results are always, inevitably, compared to the real.[32] Bak breaks the frames of reality ("the given") by depicting conditions of a brutal reality amidst a conflux of extraordinary and unsettling images. Thus, his *Adam and Eve* serves as a striking counterpart to Celan's "Tenebrae."

While the creation of Adam is an aspect of both Judaic and Christian dogma, Bak, like Celan with the Tenebrae service, borrows from Christian/Western iconography; in this case, he utilizes Michelangelo Buonarroti's *The Creation of Adam*, from the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. In *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, Langer explains that Michelangelo's painting "is charged with tension between human expectation and divine wish. The focal point is the narrow space dividing God's resolute finger from Adam's languid hand, awaiting the spark of vitality that will give life."[33] Eve, meanwhile, is securely wrapped in God's arm amidst a chorus

of fleshy cherubim. *Adam and Eve* is indicative of Bak's distinctive iconography which "draws on strong and well-known European pictorial traditions" in which "we find the real refigured as the surreal [...] suffused with the unmistakable nightmarish smoldering of the historical moment after Auschwitz."[34] Bak's use of easily recognizable icons is quite brilliant on two levels. First, it draws the viewer in because most are already familiar with Michelangelo's classic Renaissance image. Next, it reworks the image to expose the lie of protection promised by the covenant, thereby exposing the viewer to the (sur)reality of iniquity let loose on earth.

The very act of appropriating a Christian image of God announces Bak's fracturing of traditional Judaic practice. Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not offer an abundant catalogue of divine images. The absence of imagery in Judaic tradition is partly due to interpretations of the Second Commandment, which warns against idolatry. In "'Make yourself no graven image': The Second Commandment and Judaism," Carl S. Ehrlich expounds upon the Jewish prohibition against creating images of God—although he does note ruptures within this "aniconic" tradition.[35] He states, "[Historically, in Christian Europe] the Jewish community interpreted the Second Commandment in reaction to the iconography of the Church, which in Jewish eyes contained more than a trace of idolatry."[36] In contrast, Bak paradoxically uses these very Christian idols to depict an abandoned Jewish people. In appropriate surreal (paradoxical) fashion, however, Bak depicts God without actually depicting him at all.

Michelangelo's Christian/Renaissance representation of God as dynamic being, giver of life, and all-powerful entity is nothing less than inert in Bak's version. A juxtaposition of these two paintings is remarkable. The robust and lively Adam and Eve from *Creation* are replaced with pale, emaciated, sorrowful figures who are no longer protected by God (again, strikingly similar to the speakers in Celan's poem). Bak's Adam appears near death as he points and looks at something beyond the images on the canvas. Eve is presented above, lethargically pointing at Adam through a break in the wall. Langer makes the astute observation "that those familiar with Bak's earlier work will instantly recognize [...] the wall from a chamber of death."[37] In the distance, crematoria are actively puffing out smoke—from the remains of murdered Jews—that combines effortlessly with the threatening sky. Indeed, death permeates this entire nightmare landscape. The vivid, rich, and varied hues of *Creation* are replaced with the shades of red that drench Bak's *Adam and Eve*. Just as Celan's Jews are watered with blood in "Tenebrae," so are Bak's.

Again, we return to the query that confounds historians, theologians, philosophers, and survivors: Where was God during the Holocaust? In *Adam and*

*Eve*, he is as good as gone, reduced to a mere outline, to a fading memory on the death chamber wall. The finger of vitality that first ignited humankind points not at man but, again, at something beyond the canvas. The two "divine" hands represented—the top one connected to the outline of God, the bottom one to a makeshift arm made out of wood—are wearing gloves. With His hands gloved/bound, God is not available to transfer the spark of life that galvanizes Michelangelo's *Creation*. Indeed, the bottom hand is completely ineffective because it has been securely nailed to the death chamber wall—an image that Langer correlate's with Christ's crucifixion, thereby showing this painting's further affinity with "Tenebrae" and Chagall's *White Crucifixion*. The grand incongruity, and one that secures Bak's use of contradiction, is the implication that a supposedly all-powerful God is not ***able*** to revitalize his people.

As observed in Celan's poem, the use of unexpected and complex imagery results in a barrage of rational quandaries that form the basis of *Hester Panim*: Is God absent? Eclipsed? Disinterested? Did he ever exist? The positioning of hands in *Adam and Eve* attempts to address these questions. The "narrow space" between God and man in Michelangelo's *Creation* has become a seemingly insurmountable chasm in Bak's revision. Adam and Eve scarcely have the strength to lift their hands. To point at Adam, Eve must rest her small frame against the wall. In return, the Adam she points at barely has the strength to gesture at something that remains unseen. In contrast, God's hands are infused with the strength to point rigidly, but he points away from Adam and Eve, and the outline of his head shows that he also looks away from them. The implication may be that God, indeed, does have the strength to attend to his people. However, he chooses not to. If this is the case, then perhaps the reds in this painting are not blood so much as representations of anger directed at a disinterested deity. With God absent, nonexistent, or disinterested, Adam and Eve are the only remaining "real" figures in Bak's painting. However, they find no solace in each other. Eve's coquettish look in Michelangelo's *Creation* is replaced with a downcast stare in *Adam and Eve*. Adam, meanwhile, appears too weak to lift his eyes up to his female counterpart. Abandoned by God, they remain distant from each other. There is no divinity, and there is no humanity. Their hands, those appendages that should connect human beings to each other through the power of touch, are flaccid and unseen by their respective and prospective partners. Meanwhile, the "hand of God has lost its way."[8] Adam and Eve are ultimately alone in this landscape, separated from God, possibly *by* God, and distant from each other.

The verdant sash which trail's from God's entourage in *Creation* is transformed into a white flag that leans against the death chamber wall, though its positioning is such that it appears to be in Adam's hand. Does the flag symbolize that Adam has given up? Is he waving the proverbial white flag of surrender? Are he and Eve subtly whispering, "We cannot take any more! Cease fire, Lord!"? If, indeed, those cries whisper through this conflux of bizarre icons and post-Holocaust images, God has not heard them. He is looking and pointing elsewhere. Indeed, He appears as if He will fly off and away from a deserted people who remain mired in a chaotic land. Christ's words in Matthew 27 again resound: "'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'"

**Conclusion: Depicting Absence**

Despite ongoing debates over whether or not it is appropriate to write of and depict the Holocaust, those re-imaginings continue to occur in writing and the visual arts (especially in film). Our continued fascination with the Holocaust shows a desire to understand both how and why such a tragedy occurred. There is an apparent human impulse to believe that with enough study, with enough rational investigation and knowledge, we can understand anything. The surrealists did not believe this, yet despite protests to the contrary, they did not give up on using textual and visual artistry to grapple with tragedy and the unknown. The questions remain: How could the Germans let this happen? How could the world let this happen? How could *God* let this happen? Does God really exist? Is the Holocaust proof that He doesn't? The poetry of Celan and the art of Bak serve as ideal examples of how the unspeakable and unseeable can powerfully become spoken and seen. To understand Celan's poem is to understand Bak's painting, and vice versa. In both cases, success of the artist lies in the dynamic representation of *Hester Panim* and the questioning of God. In these cases, the answers are not joyful; rather, they are woeful, violent, angry, and bathed in blood—exactly like the Holocaust itself. In "Tenebrae" and *Adam and Eve*, readers and viewers meet the undead. In the former they are "clawing" their way to God demanding answers, while in the latter they are adrift in a chaotic morass from which God is either fleeing or hopelessly absent. Aspects of Surrealism—the subconscious, contradiction, and the irrational—combined with an appropriation of Christian imagery, have provided a sieve through which these artists can purge their unconscious minds to depict unconscionable acts and unexplained absences.

Ideally, it is hope, forgiveness, and triumph of the human spirit that will be the ultimate outcomes of history's past, present, and future atrocities. That is not

the case here, not in Paul Celan's "Tenebrae" nor in Samuel Bak's *Adam and Eve*. The implication that God, or lack thereof, is implicated in history's genocides is unabashedly depicted by the artists. They have not fully answered the question, "Where was God during the Holocaust?" No one can answer that with any certainty. Yet their attempts to do so can be utilized as avenues for contemplating the irrationality of war, a concept that contemporary audiences are painfully familiar with, as warfare and genocide were certainly not buried in the rubble of post-WWII Europe. In the end, Celan and Bak have partially answered the question by alluding to where God was not and to what He was not doing during WWII. God was not protecting Jews from Nazi carnage in Auschwitz-Berkinau, Ravensbruck, Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor, Dachau, Theresienstadt, etc. Consequently, the reds of anger and blood are suitable hues through which to paint—in words and images—the surreal landscape that the Holocaust wrought, and they are suitable hues through which to contemplate the absence of God.

## Notes

1. Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 1944, trans. Richard Howard, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1989), 22. Also note that here and throughout the essay, instances of bracketed ellipses ([...]) indicate that material has been omitted from the original source.

2. "Tenebrae" was originally written in German; the translation in this essay is by Michael Hamburger. See note 16 below for full citation.

3. Shoah Resource Center and Yad Vashem, *Jewish Philosophical and Theological Responses to the Holocaust*, http://yad-vashem.org.il/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206385.pdf, (4 June 2009), 1.

4. David J. Wolpe, "*Hester Panim* in Modern Jewish Thought." *Modern Judaism* 17.1 (1997): 26.

5. U.S. Department of Justice, *WWI Casualty and Death Table*, http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html, (4 June 2009).

6. André, Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 9-10.

7. Ferdinand Alquié, *The Philosophy of Surrealism*, trans. Bernard Waldrop, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 84.

8. James Edward Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 17.

9. Lawrence L. Langer, *New Perceptions of Old Appearances in the Art of Samuel Bak*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 18.

10. Samuel Bak, *Painted in Words: A Memoir*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 29.

11. Ibid., 408.

12. According to Nadeau, Surrealism began in 1885 and lasted until 1939, finding its defining moment in the post-WWI 1920s. Others propose that Surrealism ended with Breton's death in 1966, while still others assert that the surrealist project never ended. Regardless of Surrealism's proposed "death," Celan and Bak were never official members of the movement.

13. Clarise Samuels, "Surrealism and the Holocaust: An Inquiry into the Epistemological and Ideological Structure of Paul Celan's Language" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1990), 2.

14. Pam Chadick, "In Pulverem Reverteris: An Encounter with the Paintings of Samuel Bak," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 14 (2002): 143.

15. Alquié, 16.

16. There is some controversy over the categorization of Celan as a Jewish poet. In *Holocaust Visions* (see full citation below), Samuels notes critic Arthur Hoelzel's belief—analyzed in a 1987 essay "Paul Celan: An Authentic Jewish Voice?"—that since Celan was neither religious nor acquiescent to his family's heritage, he should not be seen as a Jewish poet. Hoelzel ultimately concludes that Celan's Jewishness is relevant within the Judaic "history of sorrow" and the events of the Holocaust.

17. Wolpe, 25.

18. Ibid.

19. Derek Hillard, "The Rhetoric of Originality: Paul Celan and the Disentanglement of Illness and Creativity," *The German Quarterly* 75.4 (2002): 403.

20. All line citations from Celan's poem are taken from the following source: Paul Celan, "Tenebrae," trans. Michael Hamburger, *Art From the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 606.

21. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 103.

22. For the sake of simplicity, the speaker will, with a few exceptions, be indicated with singular masculine pronouns. Of course, one can assume that the speaker is Celan himself, either professing for and/or with a group of other Holocaust victims.

23. Felstiner, 103.

24. Beth Hawkins, "The Washing of the Word, the Washing of the World: Paul Celan and the Language of Sanctification," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 20.4 (2002): 50.

25. Felstiner, 16.

26. Clarise Samuels, *Holocaust Visions: Surrealism and Existentialism in the Poetry of Paul Celan*, (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), 153.

27. Isaac Kloomok, *Marc Chagall: His Life and Work*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 87.

28. Matt. 27:46 (New International Version).

29. Fran Bartkowski, "A Visit with Samuel Bak," *Tikkun* 18.3 (2003): 89.

30. Scott Ruescher, "Twists of the Wrist: Bak's Recent Paintings Reviewed," *ArtsEditor*. (Dec. 2000), http://www.artseditor.com/html/december00/dec00_bak.shtml, (4 June 2009).

31. The Museum of Art at the University of New Hampshire currently holds Bak's *Adam and Eve*, and an image of the crayon and oil painting can accessed through the main page of their Web site: http://www.unh.edu/moa/collectionnew.html.

32. Alquié, 124.

33. Lawrence Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 145.

34. Bartkowski, 89.

35. It should be noted that the ultimate goal of Ehrlich's article is to refute scholar/philosopher Martin Buber's claim that ancient Jews were more "ear" than "eye" people. Therefore, the quote from Ehrlich refers to relatively recent Judaic traditions, especially those from Europe, as it is from this Christian/Western tradition that Bak borrows his images.

36. Carl S. Ehrlich, "'Make yourself no graven image': The Second Commandment and Judaism," *Textures and Meanings: Thirty Years of Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst*, http://www.umass.edu/judaic/anniversaryvolume/articles/18-D1-CEhrlich.pdf>, 9.

37. Langer, *Using*, 145.

38. Ibid., 146.

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# Keeping Watch

Keeping watch. It always sounded so interesting in old stories. Like swords, like valor and armor. Not just sitting out in the cab of the old pickup truck on a dark March night so cold that Katie could scarce believe anything would be fool enough to venture out. Even if it was lambing season, though she knew that the smell of blood on newborn lambs would be almost a signed and sealed invitation to anything with a mouthful of teeth and a belly empty of food.

So. She and Daddy kept watch with no armor, with no swords. With only night noise and thoughts for company, because of course, as Daddy always said, "If your mouth is hangin' open, your eyes and ears're closed."

Daddy was in the driver's seat with his gun sitting across his knees, the metal thermos of hot tea between them. Katie had a little rifle poking through the open passenger side window. Though she could not see the black of the barrel, she could feel the smooth oiled wood of its stock, she could feel the carving in the handle, RH. She traced the initials. Robert Hirte.

"Drink up some of this here tea, Katie. It'll keep you awake." Daddy's voice was heavy. It had been a long night already, and was not but halfway done. The brisk spring air chilled her awake. Anything to keep from thinking of warm beds going empty.

"Yessir." She unscrewed the lid, careful not to spill it. The truck's seats were old, but Daddy took care of what he had, no matter how old it was, no matter if it were the rifles he had carefully cleaned and oiled or his truck's threadbare seats.

Katie poured the tea into the plastic cup that attached to the lid. The tea was strong, grainy with sugar, and still warm, but only just. She had burnt her tongue earlier in the night when the tea was just-brewed and still scalding, and the pain of the burn was still fresh. More even than that tea, that raw edge of the burn helped to keep her awake. She poured a cup for Daddy and held it out to him. He took it from her carefully, only turning his eyes to the cup when she again raised her eyes to the herd.

Forty sheep bunched in a small defensive clump in the corner of the low pasture, back where the fence met up with the McDermitt place. Daddy had the lights off, but Katie's eyes had adjusted as the light of day had gone from the sky, leaving only a slice of moon against the stars. It wasn't snowing, and that was blessing enough. It had been too much to hope that them fool ewes would finish up birthing before dark. Now that the winter was mostly over, and the snows were fading, they needed to pasture the animals, not to feed them more hay, which cost nearly twice what it did before the dry spell last winter.

It was Katie's first watch at the spring lambing. Sure, she had been target shooting enough with Daddy, and her brother Robert too, before he had gone. She knew how to handle Robert's little .22 well enough, all a kid should be given just yet, Daddy had said. Momma hadn't quite pitched a fit about Katie going this year, though something in her voice had told Katie to get her extra coat and her hat, and, *yes, young lady, you do have to bring gloves*; something flinty and cautionary visible in her blue eyes as she had handed them the tea. The words—she's only twelve—seemed behind every move, every reminder.

But of course, Robert wouldn't be here to watch this year, and Daddy needed all the help he could get.

There wasn't much work now. Hadn't been for quite some time. The ranch didn't make enough to cover costs most years—even she, the baby of the family, had known that. Momma and Daddy both worked most of the time for other people, and worked the ranch every other spare minute. Most people outside of town worked like that—the McDermitts, the Clancys, everybody up and down the road all the ten miles to the town limits of Meeker. Of course they didn't raise livestock in town. But out here, well, it was what everybody did. Looking tired like Daddy did now—and Katie knew there were purple smudges under his eyes even though she couldn't see them—well, that was a matter of course.

Now Katie was big enough to shoulder some more of the load. Oh sure, she had done chores since she could walk—weeding, watering, cleaning, that sort of thing. But watch was something that you did when you were nearly grown. Robert

had started when he was twelve, too. It was something you did when you could be trusted not to shoot a sheep, instead of hitting whatever had crept out of the forest at the river's edge to see what pickings could be got off the ranchers. It was something you did when you could be trusted not to fall asleep when you were the only eyes, to take a fair turn at watch. It was spring break now, but if the lambing lasted long enough, Katie knew that Daddy would ask an agricultural leave for her from school next week, like any other of the country kids.

He needed her now. Momma needed her now—it wasn't like she could sit up watch with a day job waiting tables and nights minding...well, minding her brother through his bad times.

And, well, the sheep needed her.

Daddy had just shut his eyes, like his eyelids were too heavy to keep open even a minute more. Katie knew he'd needed to, even if it was his turn to stay awake. It was Sunday night, and he worked his factory job during the week, but he had been helping at the Clancy place in exchange for the Clancys keeping an eye on the flock during the weekdays. She could see the tiredness running him ragged, from the purple blossoms under his eyes, from the stiff set of his shoulders beneath the chambray work shirt. She'd known he would be tired like this, even while she had been at church with Momma that very morning.

She should have been listening to the sermon, of course she knew that. Somewhere in the background she had heard the tall severe man behind the tall severe pulpit speaking carefully into the microphone. Words of comfort and all that. What had always been, just like it would always be. Forever and ever, amen. Though coming from his mouth they sounded more...well, more *ominous* perhaps was the word for it. She had doodled a star in pencil on her order of services, typed up in letters all business and without so much as a single picture. The thick paper was always good for drawing though, so long as she didn't draw anything sufficiently unchurchy as to raise the ire of Momma sitting all straight-backed and soapy-clean in the wooden pew beside her. Katie traced the star again. It wasn't one of her best, the legs on the bottom were a little askew, but that gave it character, like Father Desmond at school was always talking about. Character was always more important than perfect figures. Perfect figures were like gingerbread men, like the pickets on a fence. Healthy enough, but boring if that's all a body has to look at.

Katie had used a finger to trace the carved pattern in the armrest of the pew, the long scrolling curves in the varnished honey-colored wood, deepest in the middle, rolling up to nearly nothing at the ends. They were just, just...*elegant* was the right

word a person should use. *Elegant*. Yes. It fit how the woodcarving felt under her fingers, long and right and somehow proper for the pew. But just the same, the word fit Father Desmond, her reading teacher at school, and he hadn't a thing to do with the pew. He was tall and thin with kind eyes and the hands of someone who didn't work with much but papers and chalk, the kind of a messy sort of man who could never keep his books in order. Not like her daddy, or her brother, or any man or boy she ever knew from town. But when he talked, there was something pure in his voice. Something about his talking about characters in the stories he set for them to learn, something that got so fired up and yet so calm at the same time, something that made her understand that there wasn't any other word for him either. Just *elegant*.

The girls at school would just say that she had a thing for him, blasphemy though that was to think it of a *priest*. Momma might even tease if she knew, and say she was sweet on him (in that old-talking, all-too-country way that townies would make fun of), but that wasn't exactly right. Father Desmond was handsome enough, but he was a grown man, and it was just foolishness for a girl to be setting her eyes on any *priest*, for heaven's sake, much less a grown man. No, that wasn't it. Maybe there was something about things and people that were *elegant* that just felt right, something about them that didn't only just line up smooth and plumb at the edges—like their soul and their mind and their body all matched up exact—but somehow did more than that. She didn't know, but it seemed something to set on for a time and ponder.

Though Father Desmond didn't know a thing about ranching, neither. Right before break, they had started in on something called "pastoral poetry," properly religious and properly agricultural, he seemed to think, for the girls of the Holy Trinity Catholic School. Sure, it was pretty how they said stuff about the meadows and all, but the shepherds were just about the stupidest thing that Katie had ever heard. She didn't like to say so, and wouldn't have for anything—Father Desmond being such an educated man and all. The poetry was supposed to be about *ancient* times, he'd said, when shepherds lived out on the hillside with their sheep all night, rather than having a proper sheep ranch like the folks around Meeker. But the shepherds (who all seemed to be boys) just sat around and wrote poems about pretty girls and nice flowers and sitting in the grass all day.

Katie had known shepherds. Lots of them. She had stood shepherd herself over summer breaks. Shepherds might have enough time to walk around a bit, and she had often spent time with the wind and sun on her face and the hot sweet smell of drying grass all around. But those cursed sheep were always getting themselves

in some fix or another, especially when the weather was fine and their fleeces were shorn and they were feeling good—crawling into places they couldn't get out of, wandering away from the herd and then panicking. The sheep in them pastoral poems always seemed to be somewhere else, like the shepherds had them on a leash or could stick them in a pocket or something and didn't have to spend their days fretting about where the thick-skulled things had gotten off to now. If she hadn't thought so highly of Father Desmond, Katie would have said so. Though that probably would have meant something else for confession, disrespecting an elder and all. Just thinking it was bad enough.

Just then, the organ had started up, and Momma had got to her feet. Katie had to help hold the hymnal today—on most any other Sunday, Daddy could have been here and done it, and Katie could have held her own hymnal and just mouthed the words. She didn't much like singing.

Daddy knew of course that the Lord frowned on work on Sundays, but He frowned harder on them that don't help themselves, as any starving soul could tell. As it was, Daddy had been up laying in a new root cellar for the Clancy family, who sat in the next pew but one, so the floor might settle by the time the canning was done, and not fall to bits like the old cellar had, which caved and nearly killed Mrs. Clancy, but didn't. It did bury her preserves, though, and that was a pity. Everybody said so.

Robert used to hold the hymnal too. He was tall enough that it was easier, nearly as tall as Daddy, standing proud enough in his dress uniform.

But it wasn't any good thinking about it now.

So Katie had to sing out, standing so close to Momma. For fear of the look. Katie was sure what adjective to call Momma's look—she had tried on *terrible* and *accusatory*, but neither word really seemed to cut it. There was something in Momma's look that knew what you were trying to get away with, and knew about how long you'd been doing it, and knew just about how many chores you'd need to do to get out of your head that doing it ever had been a good idea. There was a trick to it—she was certain.

Of course, Katie knew that all mommas had such a look, but Katie's Momma somehow knew how to make the look something more than just fearful. It was almost certain if you could watch a body long enough, particularly a body really good at a thing, you might figure out the trick of it. Just like Katie had learned how to walk a sheep fence by watching Jimmy McDaniel, who was the best fence walker in the county. If she could figure such a look out, Katie was pretty sure that she could understand anything.

Until she learned it however, Momma was the reigning champion of the look. And so, Katie had held that hymnal and sung out.

In the pickup cab, Katie's eyes had long ago adjusted to the dark, not really blackness, but more a smudgy gray in the half-moon's light. Dark enough that a flashlight would make her all but blind now. She could just make out, on Daddy's wristwatch that it was nearly midnight. He was still dozing a bit, and that was fine. The Clancy cellar had taken him most of today, and would probably take him some of tomorrow as well, after his shift at the factory had let up. She could wake him up in a bit, and do her own dozing when the tiredness came upon her. It wasn't quite as good as sleep, but it was something like rest.

Besides, the sheep weren't milling about at all, they seemed to be dozing themselves. Sheep mostly seemed to know when something wrong was near, both the sheep and the sheep dogs, now asleep back at the house. Katie would have liked to have them with her, their warm furry bodies would have been a comfort on a night like this. Of course, if something did come, the dogs would go after it, try to bring it down. They would try to defend against it, even if there wasn't a prayer of surviving it, trying to save the sheep, trying to keep their owners from harm. Even though a shot or two from the truck cab—even missed shots—would probably be enough to drive off most anything out there.

This sort of thing was more about making noise than actually doing anything harm. Coyotes, known as the most *notorious* lamb-thieves in the county, would be frightened off by noise. *Notorious* was a good word for them. It was like criminals carrying guns and heisting banks, like movies that Momma and Daddy didn't want her to see just yet. Of course on a lambing night, those *notorious* creatures would make trouble.

Momma and Daddy could not afford to replace such good herding dogs. So they had to be left back at the house until morning.

They had been Robert's dogs. Not a gift or anything, but those three shepherds had all just—well—taken to him. They knew they were his from the moment they had landed at the farm—a trade in puppies from the McDermitts for help with their hay—and they had slept in his room. They fit with Robert. Had always come to him when he called, even before he called. Wrestle around with him and pile on him in a big heap of tails and extra limbs, all dog-grin and boy-grin. They just all fit together perfect, as much as a gangly heap of creatures could.

Or they *had*. Before Robert came back. Now the dogs only laid in front of the door to his room when they weren't out herding, laid like they were at watch.

Robert had long since gone off to fight. Lots of the kids from town had gone off to do it, had gone on to the war overseas. In Daddy's time, it had been Vietnam. In Grandaddy's time, it had been Korea. Now it was Iraq or Iran or Kuwait. An army-job made money, and little enough money was to be had in a town this size. Most kids from their school didn't have a prayer of a scholarship.

Robert hadn't send many letters back, but Meeker was the kind of place you spent your days trying to get away from, and being thankful when you got out. It wasn't the kind of place that kept its kids, and not just because there wasn't a thing to do on a Saturday night. Maybe it was because the mill had closed and turned away workers who had been there all their lives. Maybe it was because the bleak weather and flat scenery never attracted skiers in the winter or tourists in the summer like the places further up in the mountains. Katie knew that the town was the kind of place that you left, the kind of place that you maybe sent cards to once a year, where the home folks were and stayed and you visited them only sometimes, even home folks that were pretty good to you. But you had to have a place to go when you left, something waiting for you, a job to go to. If you just left without a place to go to, you had to come back. The kids who left without a place always came back. Just like Sam Clancy, the Clancy's oldest son, who sat on the couch and smoked more bummed cigarettes every year, and complained about how the big city had taken every good thing he might have had. No, you didn't leave without a plan, without a place.

For lots of kids, it was the army. It had been for Robert, too. He had gone to basic training, had gotten his private's rank, and quietly and steadily done them all proud stateside at the base out east on the Front Range. Before he was deployed, he had thought he might be groomed for a sergeant's stripes in a few years. He had once told Katie, when he was home on leave, "I'm gonna retire from the army, go work for the post office, have a cushy retirement. I'll send for you when I get out. Couldn't leave my kid-sister to rot out in the sticks," he had assured her. Katie could count, though, and she was fairly sure that she would be more than 20 years old before her brother could retire from the military. She hadn't said anything, though. She had only smiled a little at Robert, his eyes bright and staring off into a future she couldn't see.

Better then than now. Better him looking at a dream she couldn't see but wanted to, than seeing and living in a nightmare he couldn't outrun.

She jumped in her seat when Daddy nudged her. "Katie, you rest a spell now."
"Yes, sir."

She closed her eyes, but didn't sleep.

Robert had been deployed with his troop, gone a whole month, and then was captured. Momma had gotten the letter when he was listed as a prisoner-of-war. When the letter came, her lips had thinned to such a sharp little line, and her eyes looked like they were drowning. She pulled herself together enough to read the official words aloud. Katie remembered a few of the words—*regret to inform...in the line of duty...missing in action*—words that sounded like a speech, like they weren't talking about a person she knew.

Daddy hadn't really spoken for a week, just threw himself into his work, day after long day.

When Daddy finally did say something, his voice creaked and grated, as though it had become rusty from disuse. He had said, "Used to be, back in my day, the girls would be all a-flutter over a uniform. Silly as sheep even then, but now... Now their daughters're just waiting to get their very own. 'Less you get a scholarship, 'less you find a way out of here by your own sails, Katie, there ain't nothin' for it." Daddy had turned his eyes to look past her, those eyes usually such a placid gray, suddenly cold and hard like an iron fence on a February morning. Her backbone had come up rigid, and she had felt like she should have cleaned off the sheep-doo on her boots, have combed her hair out of its usual tangled and ragged mess, paid more attention somehow. And a little voice—a mean little voice—wondered why he would never talk right, even with all those big thoughts of his. Why he always had to talk like he was fresh off the Okie wagon, as the girls at school would say. And she would be ashamed of that cruel voice, even as she could not silence it, even as she could not stop listening to it. Daddy had gone on, "Girls are tough enough, help 'em, to bring babies into it and all. It ain't that. But Lord knows, if I could have stopped your brother, Katie... But, ain't nothin' for it. Nothin' at all."

Daddy had looked away—he always looked away then. Always started fiddling with whatever was in his hands, baling wire, pliers, a hammer. And his eyes had released her at last, had moved to whatever his hands had found to occupy themselves. "Well. Go on, then. Go get after them chores." And the speech would be over. And Katie could get on.

The speech came more often these days. Often enough before Robert had left for the war, but more often in the six months or so since Robert, or what was left of him, had come back, it seemed.

Katie didn't go into her brother's room these days, didn't knee aside the dogs in their vigil at his door, didn't try to see where Robert lay day after day on the faded

coverlet of the bed he had slept on since he was a child. Didn't try to see into his endless stare, off into some other place she couldn't see. Didn't want to see.

Nothing for it, of course.

It wasn't quite right to say that Robert was as good as dead. But nothing would bring her brother back from that dream he had gone to, nothing would make him a whole person again.

She was sure of it.

She had tried, of course. He was her brother, had been her brother, after all.

It had been a dark summer day, heavy with clouds and a scorching heat that seemed to come up from the ground itself, when they had brought him home—those army men in their dark-painted ambulance, a camouflage blotch from another world. Robert's face was all slack jaw and wandering eye. When she and Momma and Daddy had come to greet him, it was as though a stand of trees had just crossed his view, instead of his family. Momma had tried to touch his arm, to welcome him home, but he flinched away from her with a whimper so quiet it was nearly under his breath. He would not speak at all. They had gotten him inside the house, inside his bed where he curled up, and the dogs had crawled to his door like his own personal guards.

The army men didn't have much to say about what had happened. Ongoing treatment was being researched—the best possible care had been given. Recovery within a few weeks was possible, but the patient had not responded as hoped. No reason to believe that he might not respond more functionally within the home-environment. All apology and duty and medals and the like. No word of which was enough to make up for what had been lost, no matter how shiny or dutiful they sounded.

None of them spoke at dinner.

It seemed to Katie that he had run away in his own mind. She had thought that maybe she could still talk to him, thought about it instead of sleeping, thought about as she stared at the clock hands edging sleepily and so slowly toward 5:00, thought how it might be to hear him say, well, anything at all. He was still her brother, still her Robert, still the boy who was going to retire and take her away from this, just like the captain of the guard or a prince in a fairy story.

Daddy had gone to bed after all all-night swing shift, Momma was still sleeping on the sofa, close to Robert's door, so she could hear if he called out in the night, if he needed anything at all. Momma had been gently snoring as Katie stepped over the dogs. They made no noise as she passed, pricking their ears as she turned the handle on the door and stepped through. The air in the room was still, smelling too

clean from the furniture polish and glass cleaner they all had used only last week when his homecoming letter came, instead of the smells of shoe-leather and saddle soap like it had before.

She had whispered to him through the half-light seeping gray through heavy blankets that passed for curtains, "Robert?" She had wondered if his army buddies had called him something else. Maybe he wouldn't recognize it anymore. She had moved toward the shape on the bed, still curled up. "Robert?"

The shape had stirred, had made a noise on the bed, a whispery shivery sound without voice behind it, only the breath stirring. She had thought maybe he was sleeping, stirring in a dream perhaps. But the light had come from the window, had glinted off open eyes, and the white of the bandages at his arm, his throat. The pupils had been dilated in the darkness, turning gray eyes into black pools against the flashing whites. The glance whipped frantically across the ceiling, scanning over the textures and contours of it, seeking out...something.

"Robert?"

A dull, dead voice drifted up through the darkness of his bed, so low and strange that it startled her, rose the gooseflesh on her arms. "It's no good, you know. They'll hear you, and then, they'll come to get you too." Cold. So cold, that voice had sounded. The eyes darted again and again across the ceiling. She hadn't been sure they even blinked. But the voice was so sure.

"Robert?" she had whispered.

"Don't be stupid. They don't care. That's what they're here for."

For a minute, she hadn't been sure. She had held her breath, listening, watching the terrified eyes that weren't any part of the Robert she had ever known.

"Shut up, shut up!" the voice barked. Without another word, without the eyes so much as glancing at her, the voice rose in a siren howl longer and longer, without seeming to stop for breath.

Katie had heard feet—the feet of her parents coming—running, and she had slid down against the wall. Momma and Daddy hadn't yelled. She had wanted them to, wanted some sort of noise, something at all besides that voiceless gray light and the sound of running feet.

Daddy had just scooped her up and put her in the hall with the whining, uneasy dogs.

She had heard him just before the door shut behind her, before he went silent, and it had been Robert, and he had said just her name. Just once. Just, "Katie."

Katie hadn't tried to go into the room again. That had been at the beginning. She didn't want to be alone with those eyes or that voice. She never saw him come

out of the room. Momma went in, brought him his medicine and such. Katie saw Momma's face, Momma's eyes when she came out of that room and knew that there had been no change, that those words *responding in a home-environment* were just as hollow as the terror in her changed brother's eyes.

It did no good to think about Robert or what had taken him away. Her brother and his silly lopsided grin, the loping way he had of running through the high pasture. How she had sometimes seen him and his friends wrestling like puppies tumbling through a great loose pile of sweet dusty hay, playing until Daddy would yell at them—though he had a laugh in his voice—to knock it off, and start getting the hay piled already. Robert snapping off a perfect salute in his dress blues, home on leave, getting into his dirty clothes and boots to help. Robert's commendations. Robert's medals.

Robert laid up in bed with no more sense than...than those sheep out there, he was as good as dead, no matter what her folks said, and that was all there was to it. You went to war, you came back wounded. That was what happened. You took your check like the next person—the next grunt, as Robert himself once might have said—and you said thank you. No matter what it cost.

And then, Daddy was shaking her shoulder, and she was blowing her nose to hide her wet cheeks, and it was her turn again.

The light of false dawn ghosted the sky, turning the deep indigo into something more cloudlike. Katie stretched her legs against the dusty floor of the pickup's cab, pushing the soles of her hip waders into the truck's mats. She yawned. The lambs didn't seem inclined to actually come tonight—it seemed like the ewes might just give up, and wait for another day.

Daddy's great shaggy head leaned against the door. He sighed quietly in his sleep, the lines between his eyebrows smoothing a bit. She smiled a little, and reached over to pull his coat a little more around him. She sat up a little straighter. If he could really sleep now, it was nearly...what was the word? *Idyllic*.

The dogs would be up in a couple of hours, and the Clancy boys would come over, and then she could sleep truly. It wouldn't be much for them to...

Katie saw the sheep had moved off in the corner of the field, now lying by the fence post, but restive and shifting. One of the ewes had gone off by herself, bleating in that strangled sounding way that the ewes always did. Daddy still slept, and Katie let him, wiping at the sleep in her eyes. It might be time.

Katie blew warmth on her stiff fingers and squinted into the early light. There was something moving a little way off, slow, but not in the stiff-limbed way of sheep shaking off sleep. Not quite in the jerky frightened way the ewes had.

In a moment, the herd suddenly quivered to its feet, and the bleat of the solitary ewe rippled and echoed through the herd. A momentary silence. Katie strained to see, a shivering in the pit of her stomach.

The herd jerked into motion, scattering all at once.

A dark streak, two, darted after them, so fast that Katie could not identify the attackers.

Katie's breath rushed out, "Daddy?" She shook his arm. "Daddy!"

"Uhm. Katie..." he muttered.

"Somethin'. Out there."

He swiped at his eyes, and was instantly awake. "Which way?"

She pointed in the direction most of the herd had gone. He yanked at the window crank, opening it a little further, its gears protesting after hours of cold inactivity. He sighted along his scope for a second, grunted in frustration and reach for the door handle.

"Katie, you stay here."

"But, Daddy..."

He wrenched the squeaking door open, staggered onto his feet, and called over his shoulder. "Stay, Katie. Your momma would shoot me herself if somethin' happened. Stay and watch if they come back this way."

The bleats echoed up from the high pasture, the direction of the calls becoming less clear, less singular.

"But...," she started. He was too far away. What would possibly happen? And how would it be better if it just happened to Daddy?

She should do what he said. She *should* obey him.

There had been at least two things out there. The numbers weren't fair, and the sheep would be more in the way than any kind of help.

The dogs. She could get the dogs, and they could buy him some time. The house was maybe a ten-minute run away.

She wrestled the truck door open, the loud groan of it startling her. Her legs were numb, but she started to move them anyway, through the sticky white-gray mud of the pasture that pulled at her boots, that clung to her. Her limbs felt heavy, half-numb with sleep. It was just question of pulling her feet out hard enough without throwing herself off balance. Within a few paces and a very near fall, her blood had begun to pump faster, to wake up her heavy legs, her heavy arms.

She got the motion down, the regular sliding forward in the muddy ground, finding a few clumps of new grass to support herself without skidding.

Left, right. One in front of the other.

She was there faster than she expected, as though the pasture had shrunk into snatched breaths of cold March air and careful steps and anxious moments. How many moments had there been? Where had they all gone? Where was Daddy?

She skidded up the back steps, into the door, hearing the claws of the dogs scrabbling furtively, their voices yipping high and anxious. She opened the door, and the dogs streaked past her, around her, through her legs, bowling her over. She sat down with a whoosh of breath.

And they were gone. She pulled herself to her feet, turning to see where they had all gone. They had been too fast.

She was suddenly tired, more tired than she had ever been, just sitting in the truck.

Katie listened for the dogs' barking, for the sound of a gun. The faintest echo came from the high pasture, a growling, maybe a shout...

She began to run against the mud as it again grabbed at her boots. The high pasture. She could see from there, even if they had moved on. She could see where they had all gone. Her breath came harder now as she ran up the small rise.

She had not quite crested the rise of the high pasture when she heard the scream. It was unmistakably a scream, though afterward, she could never be certain how she had known so definitely. Her feet hesitated. She had never heard anything like it before, so wavering, so terrified. The primal sound of it trailed off. It could not be her father. It was not a human sound.

She ran toward it, toward the winter barn, where they stabled the sheep in bad weather. She burst through the doors, eyes scanning the wood of the corrals, the scattered hay. Then she saw it.

A sheep had crawled beneath the feed chute, the little slot that funneled hay from the top loft. It was empty of hay now, but she could see the sheep trying to push a little further into the chute, trying to expose a little less flesh, trying to hide from the darting and nipping teeth that worried it. The blur of the attacker was all shaggy fur, dirty and matted. It was all white teeth and snapping jaws.

It was a dog.

A dog darted in, nipping at the sheep, growling. Not one of their dogs, but a stranger, part German shepherd she was pretty sure. She could see its snarled muzzle smattered with blood, flat brown eyes on the sheep's torn flank.

The sheep shrieked that high, panicked sound again, and Katie was cold and heavy with fear...dogs sometimes went wild, she knew, sometimes got hungry enough, abandoned on country roads, left the world of people...they would form a pack, they had no fear of humans, became ruled by their instincts, their fear. A wild dog wouldn't herd again, would see anything smaller and weaker as food, never again something to be protected.

And she had left the gun in the truck.

Before she knew what she was doing, Katie had yelled at it, "Hey!" She felt her cheeks flush with anger, with shame. Like it was a dog getting into the trash or something. How could she be so stupid?

The dog cowered for a moment, and stopped growling. It turned to look at her, tail dropped. She clenched her jaw, so it wouldn't fall open. The dog wagged its tail a bit, changing in an instant from a feral creature, into something recognizable.

Except for the blood across its muzzle.

The sheep whistled a soft scream behind it.

The dog was confused—Katie could see it. It couldn't make up its mind, decisions flickering in its eyes. It shifted its weight back and forth on its legs—her or the sheep, now bleeding onto the scattered hay on the floor.

"Hey now," she said, trying to be stern, but her voice shaking. "Get out of there. You don't want to do that."

The dog whined.

She couldn't move. It was a dog, just like any of the other dogs on the place. Except for its frantic eyes, darting between the sheep and Katie, paralyzed between instinct and familiarity.

The shot came from the door of the barn, and took the dog cleanly in the throat. It fell heavily over. Her father jogged through the door.

Katie nearly fell over with shock, with terror, with relief.

"There were three of them," her father said, clearing the shell from the chamber. "You know, once they go wild like that...there's nothing else really for them." He walked to Katie, and put his arm on her shoulder. "It's over, honey."

Katie looked at the bleeding sheep under the chute, saw the glazing eyes of the dog as it drew its final hard breaths, saw it reflected in both their eyes. The flickering glance, the look of hollow terror. It was never over.

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THOMAS VARGISH

# Conrad's "The Secret Sharer": A Private Ethics of Leadership

How can anyone's welfare depend on such as I am?
—Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

Structural authority resides in the nexus between the social institution or system—the State, the corporation, the ship, the family—and the constituents of the system, the individuals who comprise it. Those who exercise power in any system, who possess authority, act as the synapses or negotiators between the overall system and its parts. In a corporate system, managers serve as the interface between the general structure and the individuals who work in it. In a legal system the police and officers of the court negotiate between the law and the citizens bound by it. These points of contact are the location of authority within any system. They are always points of tension and often points of conflict. This is so general that in certain systems, like the law which develops through precedent and like healthy corporate and military institutions capable of responding to adversarial challenge, the conflict is often exploited as a device to advance the system itself, to accommodate it to changes in the larger culture.

But what about the people occupying these points of tension and conflict? What happens to the leaders themselves? How do they transcend the static structural authority of their positions to advance their institutions and their individual subordinates. How do they develop from mere rank to charisma? The exercise of charisma depends largely on the leader's ability to embody the values that sustain

authority in the cultural context where it is exercised. These embodiments are often, perhaps always, expressed as personal characteristics. To put it differently, a leader's ability to recognize the authoritative characteristics in his or her own makeup and to translate these into a public identity permits the values to become shared–so that the experience of charisma for both leaders and followers is one of sharing.[1] This is the most important social function of leadership and it can be used primarily for purposes of charity and social justice or for purposes of national and personal aggrandizement. For better or worse, charisma is a social phenomenon, an experience of sharing. Having acknowledged this broad function of leadership, I now want to leave the larger social sphere and move inward, into the inner dynamic of those who exercise practical authority.

Everyone in a position of responsibility knows from experience that the exercise of practical authority involves tradeoffs and conflicts between the professional (public) and the personal (private) life. From a psychological standpoint the question quickly resolves itself into one of inner conflict, the tension or stress caused by the starvation of the personal self in the interest of social responsibility, whether that responsibility is characterized as religious, or social, or political, or military, or commercial, or corporate, or even familial. The representation of this conflict is a central concern of our greatest literature. Antigone in her long final speech recalls her thwarted desire to become a wife and mother; Brutus acknowledges his inner war between "genius" and "mortal instrument"; Milton's Adam learns what it means to fail to govern where one adores; Dr. Frankenstein withdraws in the face of professional disillusionment; Captain Vere feels paternal love for the person his conception of duty requires him to kill. And in the end these characters do not do well as leaders precisely because they have not resolved the conflict between their public and private identities, their professional functions and their personal needs. We might admire them (Antigone); we might pity them (Vere); we might identify with them (Adam)–but they do not serve us as models of sustainable leadership. For that we need to go to those who, however ethically imperfect, have achieved this inner resolution, like Shakespeare's Henry V, like Stendhal's Napoleon, like Winston Churchill, like Martin Luther King. And more important than a list of successful leaders (over which we might well disagree) will be an understanding of the process of resolution itself, its costs and its returns.

**Achieving the Resolution: "The Secret Sharer"**

In order to discuss this complex matter clearly and efficiently we need a narrative that deals with the internal conflict between personal and professional authority

and that gives an account of its *successful* resolution as the key to creative leadership. Joseph Conrad's astonishing parable of command and its requirements in "The Secret Sharer" (1910) places the process of inner resolution before us with an immediacy and power unequaled elsewhere in our literature.

By the time he published this story, Conrad had extensive experience of the world of affairs, especially the world of the sea, culminating in a captaincy in the British merchant marine at the age of thirty. Two years later, in 1889, he turned to fiction and in 1994 his career as a seaman ended as the result of a tropical illness suffered in the Belgian Congo. During the sixteen years before "The Secret Sharer" appeared he wrote a number of complex and influential narratives dealing with the ethical and psychological problems of authority and with failures of leadership. Most famous of these include *Heart of Darkness* (1898), *Lord Jim* (1900), and *Nostromo* (1904). In much of this work his attention centers on the mind of the person who appears to be the leader, who wants to think of himself as leader, who sees himself as a failed leader, who has been tested and who has failed due to some dark inner weakness in himself and who dies or who wanders seeking redemption. "The Secret Sharer," however, tells of the successful integration of personal and professional authority, the creative synergy of private and professional aspiration, and this makes it very rare among serious, complex studies of leadership.

The narrator is a young officer who has just been given his first command, to captain a merchant sailing ship back to Britain from the Gulf of Siam. He does not tell us exactly how he received the appointment but the implication is that he possesses connections and a background that would favor him and that place him at a social distance above his officers and the ordinary seamen. Suddenly he finds himself master of an unfamiliar ship in command of officers and a crew who are strange to him. He is absolutely responsible and absolutely isolated, conditions which he feels acutely. As he wanders the ship alone at night, having taken the watch himself–an extraordinary step which he immediately sees as reflecting badly on his leadership–he discovers a naked man clinging to a rope side ladder. He permits the man to climb aboard and listens to his story. The stranger, named Leggatt, becomes the "secret sharer" of the tale. He has a background that brings him into social and psychological alignment with the narrator: his father is a parson in Norfolk and therefore a gentleman; he enjoyed the same prestigeous merchant marine schooling as the narrator; and he has served as a ship's officer. The narrator-captain immediately associates Leggatt with himself. But Leggatt is an outlaw, having killed an insubordinate seaman for refusing a crucial order when a storm threatened their ship. The narrator, without making a conscious decision, hides,

feeds, and protects the secret sharer in his cabin until–amid a splendid virtuoso display of high-risk seamanship–he secures his escape.

Conrad's story is exciting as a tale of the sea and profound in its exploration of the psychology of leadership. The narration never explicitly explains this psychology, though the narrator gives pointers in the form of hints couched in abbreviated, oblique "masculine" formulations. But as readers we have constantly before us an intriguing psychological opacity as we try to understand not the sharer (who is plain enough) but the narrator himself. Conrad forces the reader to come to terms with the inner drama by means of this opacity, as if the parable must be understood only by the happy few who have the eyes and ears for it. The technique of veiled meaning forces us to make a positive effort to identify the values of the narrator. Why does he harbor Leggatt? Why does he risk his entire career, his whole future life, to protect someone for whom he has no formal responsibility? Why does he jeopardize his first command? His crew? His ship? To find the answers to these questions as they become more and more pressing the reader must attend urgently to the narrative, must become a kind of co-conspirator, must discover in the process both the pressures and the terrors of leadership. Only in this way will the reader comprehend their ultimate resolution in a triumphant creative performance that guarantees professional because it secures personal success. "The Secret Sharer" enables us to move to the heart of the conflict of public and private demands with a speed and precision unmatched in more abstract (objective, historical, scientific) presentations. Here again literature can show us the actual life which gives birth to whatever authentic authority we will ever know.

The narrator-captain is never named. Nor is his ship. The obvious putative reason for this is of course the security of his reputation, even though he tells the story from a distance of years. The effect of the namelessness, however, is to enlarge the specific history into a kind of parable, a parable of youth and of the acquisition of authority, which the narrator possesses in its preliminary manifestations as the story opens. He has power: he is captain. And he has knowledge: he understands completely the passage from the Gulf of Siam to Britain. He pictures to himself "the coming passage through the Malay Archipelago, down the Indian Ocean, and up the Atlantic. All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas–everything! . . . except the novel responsibility of command." He has everything, that is, except the ultimate requirements of his authority:

> It must be said, too, that I knew very little of my officers. . . . Neither did I know much of the hands forward. All these people had been together for eighteen months or so, and my position was that of the only stranger on board. . . . But what I felt most was my being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself.[2]

We could say that he has technical knowledge, but not that knowledge of others or of himself that will enable him to achieve a creative authority, one that can reach beyond the regulations, one containing the ability to resolve the public with the private life.

From the opening of the story Conrad has directed our attention to what the narrator knows and what he does not know. The first sentence gives us a hint of what we are in for: "On my right hand there were lines of fishing stakes resembling a mysterious system of half-submerged bamboo fences, incomprehensible in its division of the domain of tropical fishes, and crazy of aspect as if abandoned for ever by some nomad tribe of fishermen now gone to the other end of the ocean; for there was no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could reach" (7). The paragraph goes on to give reinforcing images of the isolation and above all of the opacity hinted at in the introductory sentence. The order of the fishing stakes is "mysterious" and "incomprehensible," "crazy of aspect"—unless one understands the movement of the fish beneath the surface. But those who do understand that movement are not present to explain it so that if we did wish to understand the surface pattern, its origin and its order, we would have to go beneath the surface and observe a world that contains different values and different forces from those above the water line. This of course is the reader's assignment, to go beneath the surface of the explicit events to their springs and sources in the narrator's mind.

We have seen that at the beginning of his journey the narrator feels a stranger on board the ship–a stranger to his crew, to the ship, to himself. He feels acutely the isolation of his situation and asks himself if he will prove worthy of his first command. He anxiously imagines the sea and sky as "spectators" and "judges"; he senses uncomfortably that the stars are a "multitude of celestial bodies staring down at one"; he wonders "how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly" (8, 9). As he paces the deck alone in the dark he quiets these anxieties by concocting a comforting story of the way things are, a soothing script for his world:

> I took heart from the reasonable thought that the ship was like other ships, the men like other men, and that the sea was not likely to keep any special surprises expressly for my discomfiture.
>
> Arrived at that comforting conclusion, I bethought myself of a cigar and went below to get it. . . . And suddenly I rejoiced in the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land, in my choice of that untempted life presenting no disquieting problems, invested with an elementary moral beauty by the absolute straightforwardness of its appeal and by the singleness of its purpose. (11)

Every assumption in this little fantasy falls before the events that follow: the particular character of the ship becomes crucial to her management; the individual characters of his subordinates must be taken into account; the sea has in store a very special surprise for him. Into this false complacency Leggatt intrudes, and his arrival contradicts everything the narrator has been thinking. Suddenly the life of the sea proves to be one of continual unrest, temptation, disquiet–and above all multiple in its nature, devious in its appeal, duplicitous in its purpose.

When Leggatt, as the sea's special surprise for the narrator, climbs on board the parable goes into overdrive. His name suggests an envoy or ambassador, as in a legation. He comes from the *Sephora*, "self-bearer" or that which gives birth to the self. Images of doubleness begin to proliferate: the "sleeping suit" that the narrator lends Leggatt fits perfectly; the narrator calls him "my double" and his own "gray ghost"; their physical similarities are pointed to: "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a somber and immense mirror," that as they spoke they would have treated an intruder to "the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self" (14-18). But in what sense is Leggatt a messenger who will aid in the birth of the narrator's selfhood? And to what degree and in what way is he his "double?"

Having stressed the doubleness of the encounter and thus for the attentive reader the potential depth of the association, the narrator admits that in actual personal appearance "He was not a bit like me, really" (17). But it is not the function of a double to provide a simple mirror image of the protagonist, either physically or psychologically. Doubles abound in modernist literature from Dostoevsky through Faulkner and they function chiefly to stress certain propensities of the protagonist, where he might be weak or in what moral or mental direction he might be pointed. In *Crime and Punishment*, which also deals with transgression and its spiritual consequences, Dostoevsky makes brilliant use of his character

Svidrigaylov whose spiritual damnation appears as a vivid warning for the protagonist Raskolnikov, even though the two characters are widely separated in appearance and circumstances. Raskolnikov sees the warning in his double and turns in revulsion from such a future. But what does Leggatt teach the narrator of "The Secret Sharer"? How will he help him find himself?

Leggatt is a failed leader. He has been arrested by his own captain for killing the insubordinate seaman. It may be that few officers would behave as courageously in a crisis (his initiative in setting a reefed foresail saved the *Sephora* from the storm); it may be that knocking down the insubordinate seaman was a necessary step; it may be that Leggatt strangled him in a state of unconsciousness when a huge wave washed over the ship. None of these extenuations changes the fact that he has killed a subordinate and that with the decision of his captain to hold him responsible his career as an officer is over. But, remarkably, Leggatt does not collapse in the face of this adversity. He does not see himself as guilty. Above all he does not hold himself answerable to the law for his action: "'My father's a parson in Norfolk. Do you see me before a judge and jury on that charge? For myself I can't see the necessity'" (14). He sees his act in its circumstances as beyond the understanding of his legal peers and thus as beyond their reach:

> "You don't suppose I am afraid of what can be done to me? Prison or gallows or whatever they may please. But you don't see me coming back to explain such things to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen, do you? What can they know whether I am guilty or not–or of *what* I am guilty, either? That's my affair. What does the Bible say? 'Driven off the face of the earth.' Very well. I am off the face of the earth now. As I came at night so I shall go." (37)

Leggatt by an act of will exempts himself from the judgment of his society. When he leaves the narrator's ship he becomes radically isolated, like Cain, wandering on the face of the earth, exiled but in possession of *himself*. The narrator watches and learns.

What strikes the narrator as most remarkable is Leggatt's firmness. He admires his calm, his self-possession, "that something unyielding in his character which was carrying him through so finely," "the unalterable purpose of his action" (37). This quality may be natural to Leggatt but it was developed during his imprisonment on the *Sephora* after its captain relieved him of his command. He had time then to think through the nature of his action and his degree of responsibility. He came to

the conclusion that he cannot be judged by the "twelve respectable tradesmen" who as an English jury represent the law and the interests of society. Leggatt actually denies that the system can judge him, and this impresses the narrator who had judgment by others so much on his mind before the secret sharer came aboard. And Leggatt's chosen alienation is a remarkable, modernist, extreme existential gesture: to declare oneself free of social context. Billy Budd couldn't do it and Captain Vere did not help him. Unlike Billy, Leggatt does not bless his captain. In effect he becomes a unique system unto himself, wandering the face of the earth, and in the process he embodies a critique of the home system, the traditional system of legal precedent and of hierarchical command.

The home system is represented in its blind inertia by Captain Archbold of the *Sephora*. He comes on board the narrator's vessel seeking the escaped Leggatt. He serves as the representative of established law and order, the conventional system of justice that Leggatt has rejected. Captain Archbold's chief characteristic is a "spiritless tenacity," suitable for the embodiment of unimaginative process and procedure, of the *single* point of view. The narrator determines that Archbold has made up his mind not to credit Leggatt for setting the reefed foresail. He claims to have given the order himself and then dutifully passes the credit on to Providence. "God's own hand in it," he asserts. The narrator asks:

> "You were very anxious to give up your mate to the shore people, I believe?"
>
> He was. To the law. His obscure tenacity on that point had in it something incomprehensible and a little awful: something, as it were, mystical, quite apart from his anxiety that he should not be suspected of "countenancing any doings of that sort." Seven-and-thirty virtuous years at sea, of which over twenty of immaculate command, and the last fifteen in the *Sephora*, seemed to have laid him under some pitiless obligation. (27)

In his absolute devotion to the prescribed law and in his inability to perceive ethical alternatives, his lack of a metasystem, Archbold represents a kind of degenerate Captain Vere, stripped of the intelligence, passion, and elegance of Melville's leader. But Leggatt, as we have seen, is no Billy Budd.

It is this Archbold version of justice, mechanical and spiritless, that Leggatt rejects and that he leads the narrator to circumvent. This is no easy matter, involving as it does a kind of existential departure–a departure not just from conventional legal structure but from the cosmic or religious validation that backs it:

> Later in the afternoon we had a cautious try at whispering. The Sunday quietness of the ship was against us; the stillness of air and water around her was against us; the elements, the men were against us–everything was against us in our secret partnership; time itself–for this could not go on forever. The very trust in Providence was, I suppose, denied to his guilt. Shall I confess that this thought cast me down very much? And as to the chapter of accidents which counts for so much in the book of success, I could only hope that it was closed. For what favorable accident could be expected? (31)

With the loss of Providence as guide and ally no fortunate accidents can be expected. For Leggatt (a parson's son) and for the narrator and for most sailors in the nineteenth century when the story is set, favorable accidents indicate the care of Providence. Archbold attributes to Providence the successful setting of the reefed foresail by which Leggatt saved his ship. To abandon trust in Providence is to cut oneself loose from a structure of hope and consolation, to feel a cosmic bereavement that can be imagined only distantly by most of us now. In such an isolation, what remains to guide us? What is left? And Leggatt's answer, the answer from the ship *Sephora*, is the inner leadership of the self.

This process of self-creation lies at the heart of the story, and Conrad presents it as an experience of doubling, of finding an alternative nature, of achieving an inner metasystem, an ethic of independence from the conventional socially acknowledged ethos. It isn't easy: "all the time the dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity. I was constantly watching myself, my secret self, as dependent on my actions as my own personality, sleeping in that bed, behind that door which faced me as I sat at the head of the table. It was very much like being mad, only it was worse because one was aware of it" (24). But through this duplicity (doubleness) the narrator-captain learns to be firm in his relation with his men. His need to protect Leggatt, the other self that is becoming his metasystem, forces him to show no weakness, no quarter, to his subordinates. He acquires the firmness, the *self-possession* he so much admired in the other. His unremitting preservation of this other self is, to use Leggatt's phrase, his own affair. It teaches him to lead without faltering because faltering would be fatal for his secret sharer.

Learning this lesson interferes with the pleasure of being in command of his ship: "I was not wholly alone with my command; for there was that stranger in my cabin. Or rather, I was not completely and wholly with her. Part of me was absent. That mental feeling of being in two places at once affected me physically as if the

mood of secrecy had penetrated my very soul" (32-33). The comforting script with which he started his narrative is gone, and with it the weaknesses of self-doubt. The narrator is creating a metasystem, represented for a time by Leggatt–his firmness, resolution, and self-trust–but ultimately to be converted by the narrator's own courage into a tested foundation of leadership.

This resolution is fixed by the narrator's desire to see his secret sharer safely off the ship. In order to let Leggatt swim to shore he approaches an island called Koh-ring and sails under the face of its massive cliff. "It was now a matter of conscience to shave the land as close as possible–for now he must go overboard whenever the ship was put in stays." But the narrator-captain takes his ship in much closer than is necessary, especially given Leggatt's prize-winning swimming power of which much is made when he first comes on board. The closeness to the land is a gift that Leggatt does not need. The narrator also presses on his double some money and a floppy white hat to protect his head from the tropical sun. The reader knows that these gifts are not so much to Leggatt the exile as they are necessary to the narrator as he parts with his double, a kind of acknowledgment of the legacy of leadership that Leggatt will leave behind. In sailing in so close, putatively looking for a land wind, the narrator captain risks his own life, the lives of his men, above all the ship itself. He risks them all for no practical purpose, for no publicly defensible reason. No jury would acquit him of his rashness. As the ship moves in close the chief mate cracks under the strain and the narrator subdues him, subdues him without harming him. He thinks of Leggatt, "perhaps he was able to understand why, on my conscience, it had to be thus close–no less" (42,44). What does he mean, "on my conscience?" To whom does he owe the indefensible risk he chooses to take? The reader must provide an answer to this question and the only answer that remains is that he owes the gesture to himself.

What is strangest in all this may not be the narrator's self-referential choice, but the fact that readers rejoice in it. We rejoice in the thrilling gesture at the end. Why? Because we intuit that something more important than responsible, efficient management is going on. And something more important even than British justice, than trial by jury. We the readers are the privileged "witnesses" and "judges" who haunted the narrator at the beginning of his command. We see in the impractical and dangerous virtuosity something even more important than the safety of the ship: the achievement of a truly creative authority.

At the crucial last moment the narrator tries to determine the direction of the unfamiliar ship in the calm sea. He looks desperately for a sign, for a marker that will give him the knowledge that will save them all. Suddenly he spots his own white

floppy hat on the black water, the hat that had washed off Leggatt's head as he swam away. He sees it drifting forward and knows that the ship has begun to gather stern way. Just in time he gives the order to shift the helm and the ship comes round. The image of system and metasystem could not be more vivid. In order to determine the direction of the home system, the ship, the leader requires reference to a metasystem, the sea as marked by the white hat. And the fact that the hat has been left behind by Leggatt, who has unknowingly served as the narrator's psychological and ethical guide, enables the narrator to succeed as a leader, to incorporate Leggatt's independence and firmness into his single public identity as captain. Having achieved this integration he can say goodbye to his external second self:

> Walking to the taffrail . . . I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment; a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny. (45-46)

And we know as we read this that the narrator himself, having overcome his doubts and fears, will also strike out, will succeed as a leader because he has become whole as a person, as the kind of person who can command. He has incorporated Leggatt's powers with his own in the kind of authoritative integrity that only those who can summon up a private and alternative ethics ever achieve.

**A Private Ethics of Leadership?**

We grant the narrator-captain our applause because he has earned it, and because we intuit or know from experience the immense discipline and the immense loneliness of leadership. For this reason we more than tolerate the risk he takes with the ship and the crew. But the story does leave behind certain unresolved and perhaps unresolvable ethical questions. Does the narrator have the right to risk all for the sake of his commitment to Leggatt and what Leggatt stands for? Would we applaud his action if we were on board? Does a prospective leader have the right–with all the lifetime of good service before him that might justify, might *pay* for the risk–to endanger without consultation human lives perhaps as worthy as his own? The story leaves these questions behind without addressing them directly, but the implied answer is affirmative. "The Secret Sharer" suggests that there are certain moments in our lives when extravagant, irresponsible gestures become necessary if we are to continue to grow. And beyond this it suggests that true leaders are

expensive in just this way: that they risk the rest of us. Their development necessitates departures from the established ethos, the ethos of Captain Archbold and the conventional ethical coordinates that map out prescribed actions.

The message is elitist and may be dangerously so: that leaders, even prospective leaders, must take for themselves a margin of independence that the rest of us cannot share. This is Raskolnikov's theory at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* and Dostoevsky puts him through hell for acting on it. But Conrad takes a different view. He seems to be telling us that in the immense play of authority and in its immense ambiguities leaders will find the conventional ethos, the Archbold view of justice, inadequate. It will not be sufficiently flexible, precise, and extreme to cover the radical situations in which leaders function. Leaders must possess an alternative ethos, an ethical metasystem by which to measure the efficacy and perhaps even the justice of the law, of the established home system. There will be moments when the received definition of duty will prescribe the wrong action–Captain Archbold's action, or Captain Vere's–or when it will have nothing to say. But leaders cannot afford to have nothing to say, nowhere to turn. Leaders must act in a single lucid gesture and give an unequivocal command. Leaders can make this single gesture, utter this single command, only if a private self sustains them secretly from within, beyond the order of those conventional systems of prudence and duty that regulate most of our perceived choices.

## Notes

1. For a related discussion of charisma see Raphael Falco, *Charismatic Authority in Early Modern English Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Up, 2000).

2. Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Sharer," *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Michael Gorra (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), 10, 9.

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CARI GRINDEM-CORBETT

# Constellations

I can't tell you his name.
I shouldn't tell you who he is
because of who he was, and when.
But he showed me Cassiopeia,
Orion, the Big and Little Dippers,
made me watch Haley's Comet
—I swear you couldn't see it move—
wanted me to remember all the names.

I knew all those Greek gods,
why couldn't I remember
where they are forever in the stars?
I was told when I was little
he didn't exist "on paper"
but when I was nineteen or twenty
I found a list of Silver Stars
on the internet.

And his name, full and real,
Year: '66, PFC, Private First Class,
on a website soaked in middle school enthusiasm
for death, colored backgrounds, blinking links,
only this time, it was Vietnam.

Through the link, faces,
specters laughing with guns,
smoking short cigars,
leaning, one foot on a tire on a green jeep,
or looking at the tan dirt,
or even smirking for the camera
bare-chested. Among these ghosts

I found his face,
a young stranger's,
unreal, like the Polaroid of his first wife
I found in his medicine bag, and never saw again.
His only real wife is my mother.
That other woman was just a black hole
that stole his big house and drank
while pregnant with my brother.

I remember being told how
some of the people in the pictures died,
but I'm not supposed to say;
it would hurt him too much to read this
and recall,
even names without faces
and so many faces without names.

When I showed him the list, links and pictures
he went out to sit under our porchlight,
saying he needed to have a good talk with god.
I imagine, though, after words faded
and the reel of images stopped,
it was the pin-prick lights in the violet sky
that really kept him out all night.

Does he remember, I wonder, the names
of those immortal men whom the gods let live
forever in the stars? Does remembering names
even matter at all? Remembering facts? Faces?

The web of stars, the honors, medals, lives.
A constellation with no name, forever
with no time, no face.

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THOMAS H. PATE

## Every Spray of Blood a Blessing

> "Nowhere else in history has there ever been a flag that stands for the right to burn itself. This is the fractal of our flag. It stands for the right to destroy itself."
>
> —Ken Kesey

A downpour of metal and shrapnel. Bullets whip and whiz, but you don't hear them.
They do not exist. The only thing that exists is the presence of death as tangible as the hand
Digging deep in his neck. Sticky blood makes the ordeal almost impossible and every time his
Heart beats a geyser of blood shoots a foot high and you do your best to avoid it.
Not because you can't or won't reconcile the blood, but because the carotid artery is there,
Somewhere. Every spray of blood a blessing. He lives. Maybe, if you succeed
He will continue to live. The fact you are not covered, open, a nameless, faceless target,
A hated American comes later. Now you fight the viscera of his neck, blood as thick as
Oil fights you. The real enemy, time, is slipping and so is he. The spraying blood abates,
But you find the artery. Where his neck ends and your hand begins is indistinguishable.
Finally, the explosions and gun shots become real. You take his nine-millimeter from his chest
And begin firing with your left hand. Your right holding his life. Time is useless as you wait.
And fire. And wait. The anarchy subsides. Fellows aid you. A medic clamps his artery
With hemostats. Your hand aches from squeezing so long, and you realize it's over.
He lived. You lived. You walk away covered in blood. You smell it, stingy as fresh cut grass.
You vomit. Then you collapse. No one can see and you begin to cry until it becomes thick, deep
Sobs. You have no idea why the tears are as heavy as the blood stained armor across your chest.

Later they give you a medal for valor and call you a hero. A nameless General shakes your
Hand. You hate him. You never tell this story to anyone until now and only now because it is
Honest and disgusting and you are disturbed at an America that you realize was only a myth.
In combat there was a purity, a rawness that haunted your sleep. You woke, freezing in sweat,
And it was screams, your screams that pulled you from a restless slumber. Again, you sob
But this time you know why. Your America, your flag burning America has been a lie and
You are ashamed.

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HENRY HUGHES

## Vicki's Grandfather

The Sonderkommandos
gulped and guzzled their hearts,
leading prisoners off the trains
and into the showers, saying everything's okay.
Wheelbarrows, smoke. It was do this or die
sooner.

On Friday afternoon I ride the C train
to Brooklyn, enjoying the steel sway, the pneumatic doors
opening at every stop, until I get off and walk
the leafy streets
up to Vicki's brownstone.

Sitting around, reading the papers,
I just ask, *Vicki, does it bother you that I'm not Jewish?*
*Not anymore*, she says. *Let's eat.*

Into the flames
her grandfather slid all his daughters, save one
who walked on ashes back to Long Island,
holy sand spit of peaches and roast duck. *It's my mother*, she says.
*It's hard for her. But she likes you.*

We eat clams
at a bar between Oceanbeach and Rockaway,
watching old, graffitied subway cars barged
and dumped for a reef. Startled fish circle their new barracks.

Vicki's grandfather is buried in Poland.
No one visits his grave.

# Why Is He Frightened?

*—Winter 2005*

Why is he frightened? Your son,
three-years-old and shrieking from my hug.
Maybe it's the beard, my vagrant voice, diesel
under the collar—bus station bright
as a shepherd's cave. *He's tired*, you say,
wrapping him in blue fleece.

The paper reports a heavy cache
of rockets and rifles found in a Baghdad baker's oven.
Rubbing your boy's little back,
and glancing at two shaky girls
boarding with bagels for Chicago,
I wonder if we can bury fear with a little sleep.
Or bite it with good tires when the highway freezes
and the speed of America is irreducible?
Maybe just roll it over. An off white
brightening our kitchen coffee
when there's only rain
and more news.

Wake to gunfire, to glass and hard crusts
swept into a corner. There's a flour-aproned man
sitting silently by the door. His crying daughter
cradles him chai in a pretty cup.
In an hour he'll be arrested for trafficking weapons.
Next month she'll explode
in a decent restaurant
where a lieutenant, your husband and my old friend,
has just ordered the lamb.

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REBECCA KANNER

# Safety

When my brother has massed into a flesh-colored Incredible Hulk, it's time to starve. He doesn't eat carbohydrates and he restricts his water. I know how it works because this will be his second competition—he won the lightweight division at his first. He wants to win this next one as a middleweight.

His myspace status reads: "Aaron plans to respectfully destroy all of his fellow competitors."

I'm not alarmed when I see him at Lifetime Fitness, where he works as a personal trainer, and he says it's nice to see me—all three of me that are shimmering in front of him. I'm not sure if he's hallucinating or he just doesn't have the energy to focus his gaze. He looks strong, invincible, but he can no longer do the planche push-ups he's put into his routine, and his backflip has been giving him trouble.

He's 5' 6" and 180 pounds, which makes him, technically, obese. He has to be under 176 to compete as a middleweight, and he'll have no trouble making it—he's not starving to make weight. He's starving so the veins bulge from his skin like little green rivers. He's starving so his muscles look like they might explode.

Later, when he comes home, he's so exhausted that he has to turn his routine song up as loud as it will go not only because he left a good deal of his hearing in Iraq, but to motivate himself to practice.

> Let the bodies hit the floor
> Let the bodies hit the floor
> Beaten, why for

Can't take much more
*Here we go here we go here we go, now...*[1]

It's the song that PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) blasted over Fallujah when my brother's unit invaded on November 7, 2004, in what the American military named: *Operation Phantom Fury*. The song was used not just to terrorize the insurgents who hadn't heeded the flyers dropped from the sky warning them to leave if they were to avoid a battle, but also to drown out the Marines' fear.

The insurgency had its own anesthetic. My brother said of the men he fought, "They were hopped up on something. They had no fear and they didn't die right away when you shot them."

This battle turned out to be the bloodiest in the Iraq war to date. A third of the men in my brother's unit were injured or killed, officially making his unit "Combat Ineffective." Nine of the 160 men in my brother's company lost their lives.

He finished his four years of active duty in October of 2006. When he first returned to the home in St. Paul where he, my father and I live, he warmly greeted all the people we'd invited to welcome him home—a mix of my father's friends, my friends, and my brother's friends—about twenty people. My father had the American and Marine flags flying outside, and the red, white and blue streamers we'd decorated the living room with for his first visit home from the Marines three and a half years earlier were still hanging limply in the living room.

He ate the pies people had brought for him, and politely answered questions about how hot Iraq is (very, though it's cold at night in the winter), where he'd been on his 3 tours (Diwaniyah, Fallujah, Ramadi), what he missed most while he was gone: *("Sleep!")*

As the guests left my brother graciously thanked each of them for coming. Then he went down to the basement, turned the television on, and watched it, alone in the dark, for six weeks.

Not wanting to descend into our dank, dust-filled basement, and not yet realizing my brother couldn't hear well anymore, I'd yell down to him to ask how he was doing. When he didn't answer I assumed he wanted to be left alone, but sometimes that didn't stop me. I crept down the stairs without turning on a light—I didn't want to annoy him and the television projected enough light to see by. Also, I didn't want to be reminded of the old bubbling floor tile and cobwebs full of dry, half-disappeared insects. I came to stand beside where he was lying on the couch and gently asked him what he was watching. Occasionally I'd pull up

a folding chair and watch with him. We breathed the dust in together, watching colors flicker across the screen. I imagine the scene—with him lying down and me sitting beside him—looked like a hospital visitation, except that I was turned away, towards the television. We didn't talk about the war, or really, much of anything.

Then one day, as I stood at the top of the stairs deciding if I should go down or not, I heard the clanking of metal. A weight machine had been sitting in the basement since before my brother left for the Marines, and I realized he was using it. For a few moments I stood happily listening to the rhythmic squeaking and clanging of metal blocks being lifted and then falling gently down upon each other. I thought: *Maybe everything will be okay.*

My brother started to work out everyday, and soon after he decided to get a membership at Lifetime.

He began to get bigger, and—seemingly in direct proportion—happier.

Though the money he lost in unemployment would be many times greater than what he made, I was relieved when he got a part-time job cleaning the fitness equipment at Lifetime, wandering around the gym dressed all in black, smelling of disinfectant and looking much more alive than he had in our basement. Half a year later he began studying to become a personal trainer. He stopped watching so much television and made friends with the people at the gym who shared his obsession with weight-lifting.

I don't know if winning his upcoming middleweight competition will help him finally feel fearless and strong. But I'm hopeful—being hopeful is the least I can do for him.

When he was a baby, I tried to make my brother safe the way my father had taught me.

As a body-builder he eats chicken, salmon and protein shakes, but as a peaceful, runty baby he liked to eat plants. His fuzzy baby-gaze sharpened when he spotted a big shiny leaf poking out of one of the potted plants in our living room, and he rushed across the carpet in his walker, ecstatically waving his arms because he couldn't *believe* his luck!

I knew what I had to do when his tiny hand reached for the leaf.

My hands were twice as big as his. I was—am—five years older. I easily grabbed his little hand in one of my own, and hit it. If he'd been old enough to understand I'd have told him: *You shouldn't reach for things, you shouldn't tug, you shouldn't pull things apart, you shouldn't put strange things in your mouth.* Above all he shouldn't have messed with my father's plants.

How my father loved—and still loves—his plants! He also loves birds, trees, little bugs which we looked at and sometimes kept in jars. He and I once studied a broken egg under the microscope. We marveled at a tiny foot that seemed to be the only part of the chick that had had a chance to form before the egg fell from the nest. My father handled the egg like it still might come to life. He was careful not to damage it.

But us—my brother and I—he grabbed and twisted like he didn't remember being young and already having feeling in his arms and legs. I thought he knew everything and possessed the best solution to any problem. When I cut or bruised myself I felt I had no choice but to hold the problem out to him—my hand, my elbow, my ankle. He grabbed the limb, twisted it so he could examine it, and then painted it red with Mercurochrome.[2] The Mercurochrome drew attention to the wound and therefore also to my klutziness. I wanted to wash it off but I was afraid of what might happen if I did, and how it might hurt. I knew I was wrong to hurt, and I would have been all the more wrong to show it.

My brother quickly came to feel this way too, and he does not seem to know—not anymore—when he's hurt.

At the end of 2002 my father and I went to Camp Pendleton, California to see my brother graduate from Marine Boot Camp. It was a clear hot day—the temperature difference between St. Paul and San Diego was about 70 degrees, and I felt very pale amongst the other onlookers, at least a third of whom were Latino.

My brother had told us that he'd had some trouble with his left knee, but that everything was fine. He wasn't hard to spot. Hundreds of guys in uniform were in formation on the field, but he was the only one in uniform on the bleachers, his crutches leaning at a steep angle beside him. He'd confessed to me that he wouldn't mind not being in formation—that in fact he couldn't *stand* formation (ha ha!), and many others literally couldn't either: "Sometimes guys get dehydrated, or their knees lock, and they pass the fuck out." Still, he didn't look happy sitting on the sidelines all by himself. He'd been on crutches a couple of times before (due to rollerblading and gymnastics accidents) and afterwards he hadn't wanted his crutches anywhere that he could see them.

After the formation ceremony and speeches, the graduates and their families were provided lunch, which we ate in a shelter on base. We mingled a little. Usually in mingling situations I will either babble at great length to avoid the risk of an awkward pause (while carefully scanning the people around me to make sure they aren't exchanging glances or rolling their eyes), or simply nod and smile. By this

time I was a graduate student and anything free was of special interest to me, so I just chewed and smiled and thanked the many people who told me how tough and loyal my brother was.

When my brother went to get more food, one of his Staff Sergeants recounted for me how he'd tried to keep his injury hidden, even loaded down with a 50 pound pack during a 9.7 mile hike that ended with a climb up The Reaper, a 700 foot tall mountain. "It wasn't like him to be the last one. It finally became apparent that he was limping. His knee was swollen to the size of a cantaloupe," the Staff Sergeant laughed. "He almost lost it."

I tried not to look like I might regurgitate my free lunch. Later my brother would tell me that this same Staff Sergeant saw him heading back to his "rack" after breakfast one day, and my brother didn't say "Good morning," loud enough, so the Staff Sergeant made him do IT (Individual Training). My brother did mountain-climbers for 2 minutes. He tells me this in the same tone as the Staff Sergeant told me about his knee—like it's hilarious, and I try not to show any emotion, though I'm thinking *Why the hell didn't you remind him your knee was about to explode?* With my brother it's best not to act like anything is a big deal.

But when the Staff Sergeant told me my brother almost lost his knee I refused to pretend it was nothing. "How is your knee?" I asked Aaron after lunch. I'd asked him earlier that day, when I first saw him, but this time I asked him without any pretense of casualness.

"It feels okay," he said dismissively. "I'm taking stuff and it's helping."

Later he showed me the knee—swollen unevenly, like our bubbling basement tile. Pink and red and white and angry. And also sad—something about its unevenness reminding me of a heart, and clearly, from the look of it, a bruised-until-broken heart, which has traveled down the length of the body, or has maybe even been dropped, and due to neglect is pressing outwards, trying to escape. Unable to escape, it was rubbing hard against my brother's bones, as if to say, "I will bring myself to your attention. I will make a place for myself where you can't ignore me. I hurt and now you will hurt too."

I began to worry in earnest about his upcoming tour to Iraq. What if he got hurt—would he tell anybody? Would he even know that he was hurt? What had happened to his ability to cry out when he was in pain?

At one year of age, when I grabbed his hand, he knew that it hurt. I spanked his smooth new skin like I could slap the urge to grab from it, and he did something he lost the ability to do in the Marines: he cried.

I'd felt sad that he was crying, and angry that he'd made me hit him, and more than anything, angry that he'd been on the verge of eating the plant. *He had to learn the rules of the world so he wouldn't be hurt.* I wasn't always going to be there to protect him.

My father was, unofficially, a behaviorist. He had to take care of me the year after I was born, when my mother was hospitalized for psychiatric problems and chemical dependency. If he heard me crying in my crib he knew that he must not come to me, or I would learn that crying is a behavior that is rewarded. My mother told me that when she came home he wouldn't let her come to me either, and recently my father acknowledged it was true. His face looked heavy as he admitted this, as if he were remembering a terrible time. Now I think of the heaviness of his face whenever I feel too ready to blame him for everything.

By the time Aaron was born I'd become a behaviorist too. The slaps I gave him weren't always to his hands, and they weren't always physical. I used words like *stupid,* phrases like *how could you.* I wanted to make sure that he would *never again* do whatever it was that he'd done wrong. If he never did anything wrong, nothing bad would happen to him. My father had taught me, and his teaching method had made it true: one false move and the world will come down on you.

My father wasn't one to be argued with. And yet he and I yelled at each other across tables, through all the rooms of our house, inside the car, out on the lawn, until we were hoarse. I learned to stomp my foot, pound my fist on the table, yell so loudly I couldn't hear him yelling back. He told me to shut up, that he would slap me. Though I was scared—in fact because I was scared and knew I should hide it—I kept yelling.

Aaron rarely argued aloud with anyone.

Yet I suspect he was always striving to best my father—to be as strong, as fearless, as fearsome—and he finally did by joining the Marines. He told me, "I want to show the world that I can do anything."

By "world," did he mean "father?"

My father and brother have wrestled since my brother could walk. Even now they wrestle—one attacks the other and they bang into counters & chairs in their mock battle. Though it's not supposed to be a real fight, can't each feel the strength in the other's body, feel how easy or hard it is to lead the battle in the direction of his opponent—to make him step back, or to be unable to do anything but step back himself? Now, unlike in their wrestling matches before Aaron went into the Marines, my father is very careful not to lose control and escalate the mock battles.

He wraps his arms protectively around himself, and calls jestfully for me to come help him: "Help! Bec, help! He's beating me up!"

My father is such a loyal person that it's hard to find out anything that doesn't shine a good light on his mother and father, Jewish immigrants who came from Poland and Austria in 1919 and 1929 respectively. They lived in New York—first in Brownsville, and then in a little apartment on Coney Island from which you can see the ocean (and just as importantly to me years later when my father took me to visit my grandparents, the Sliding Ferris Wheel) and hear the screams of the kids on the Cyclone. My grandfather worked at a ladies' handbag factory and my grandmother worked at an umbrella factory and then as a subway token seller.

"They were liberal people" my father tells me, "until the ends of their lives." They'd worked hard in order to feed and clothe my father and his two sisters, and they resented people who expected the government to take care of them. By the time I came along they'd started listening to conservative radio programs and yelling at the guests on talk shows. Or at least I remember my grandma doing that. I also remember her doing everything for my grandfather. He didn't even pour the milk on his own cereal. My grandparents were like my father, and I suppose like me—a combination of very loving and very angry. My grandmother more loving than my grandfather, certainly, and not quite as angry.

I know my grandfather hit my father. My father doesn't want to talk about it, but when I see him getting frustrated with himself, a depth of sudden fear and anger triggered by something as small or smaller than spilled milk, I know there's an invisible person standing over him, yelling things only he can hear, "How could you pour too much milk? Look at all that's wasted!"

Except that I hear these things too.

My father has passed his ghosts onto my brother and I, and I have doubled Aaron's share. He doesn't blame me. Deep down he must think that my father and I slapped his hands and were critical of him because he deserved it.

During his second and third tours, when it had been too long since his last staticy 4 am call and I'd started to imagine the worst, I asked myself: *Did my slaps send him to Iraq?*

The strain of the 14-week diet leading up to the competition is making my brother very intense—more intense than before the last competition. One of his trainers has noticed, and he's assured him that it's natural for the stress of training to bring him back to the last time he was under intense stress, which was when he was on his third tour in Iraq.

The stress has finally got my brother talking.

He tells me, one night when raccoons run back and forth across the roof and we think we hear them in the fireplace, of the huge mutant dogs at Camp Habbaniyah. They had strange bumps on their backs, and there was a rumor they'd killed a guy. Everyone had to carry their weapon with them at all times.

And then he confesses to me—as if he's confessing a horrible crime—that as a machine gunner in Iraq sometimes he'd been afraid. "Sometimes I felt like a scared dog running around with its tail between its legs."

"Of course you were scared, lots of men in your unit died. You had good reason to be scared."

"No, I wasn't scared then, during Operation Phantom Fury. Then—at the time—I was numb, and I didn't hardly even feel anything when those guys died. I wasn't scared until my third tour, when we convoyed back and forth through the Anbar Province on 'I.E.D. Alley.' We were told to go slow, that that would be the best way to avoid the I.E.D.s. But we figured if we were going slow the insurgents watching with their fingers on the button could time the explosions better, so we drove erratically—sometimes fast, sometimes slow. The main thing was just to keep moving.

"Bullets hit my turret, and a few times we came within inches of a pressure plate (bomb), but nobody died. For awhile nothing that bad happened, and *that's* when I was most afraid—I was sure something bad *had* to happen. I thought that at any second—sometimes at every second for days in a row—the road would explode. But then, the few times when I was actually sure I was about to die, I was completely calm."

He's sitting in his spot on the floor in my room, looking down at the weight-lifting calluses on his hands. He's been sitting there so often that there's a grey imprint of his back on the white wall. "That's what I'm always like now—numb. I'm not afraid anymore. I can't feel anything unless I'm angry."

He tells me, one night when he's sitting on my floor late at night, not wanting to go to bed, "I dream Iraqis have invaded our country."

I wonder if that is the dream he is having when I wake up later in the night and stumble across the hall, woozy from sleeping pills, into the bathroom. I hear him tossing with all his might from one side to the other, and back. He is still tossing when I stumble back across the hall, into my bedroom, and close the door.

For a moment I think I should wake him—I want to rescue him.

Nineteen years ago, after we moved into the house we live in now, he developed a fear of the dark. He was seven, and absolutely sure that there were monsters in his

closet and under the bed. "Don't worry," I told him, "I have just the thing." I knew he would believe in whatever magic I came up with. And as I walked a bowl of "Angel Water" into his room, holding it carefully out in front of me in both hands, I believed in my magic powers too. I placed the bowl of water on his dresser, then said a blessing in Hebrew which was identical to the one observant Jews say before eating, but with some gibberish tacked onto the end. Though perhaps "gibberish" isn't the right word for the sounds that left my mouth, which felt as if they were from the very core of my being, and were laced with a desire to keep him safe that was so incredibly strong and full of energy that surely it would protect him from whatever might come his way.

He left the bowl on his dresser, and whenever he got scared that it was losing its power I would bring him some new Angel Water.

But now, as he smashes around in the dark dreaming of an Iraqi invasion, he's not the only one who's afraid. I am afraid too. What can I say to rescue him? And if I touch him, how long will it take for him to realize it's only me?

My father and I are increasingly careful around him. We no longer suggest he go to the VA for an assessment and counseling; we don't talk about foods that aren't allowed on his body-building diet; and we're vigilant about not mentioning the controversy surrounding the treatment of detainees ("What about *us!?!?*" my brother will ask. "We didn't get to sleep for days at a time, we didn't have the right armor until our 3rd tour, five of our guys were killed because the army just up and left a secured area 5 hours before we arrived ...").

The more he tells me, the more I understand why he usually only wants to talk about body-building. He's quick to remind me and anyone else who cares to listen that it could be worse: "Some people come back from Iraq and drink too much or beat their wives. I lift weights."

Then, displaying the hyper-confidence Arnold Schwarzenegger made famous in the movie "Pumping Iron" when he told a competitor before the show that he'd *already* called his mother to tell her he won, my brother adds, "And win titles!"

I help him prepare. I paint him dark, I clap when he poses in front of the bathroom mirror, I tell him he looks like he could uproot trees and toss them halfway down the block. I'm understanding when he gets Pro-Tan on the bathroom towels and toilet seat, and I don't say anything when he makes a mess cooking massive amounts of chicken and doesn't clean it up. He had to eat even more for this competition—he'll be 20 pounds heavier at this show than his first. I pretend

not to notice that it smells like a barn full of chickens has bled, shit, and burned to death in our kitchen.

And then finally—June 7, 2008—he is on stage. He's been home for over a year and a half, and finally he's going to feel good. Finally he's going to be proud. I start screaming.

You're Perfect!

Beautiful!

It's yours—Go get it! All yours!

Bring it home!

Get Some!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

No matter how loud I yell I can't get all the emotion out. I'm yelling at the top of my lungs not only because he doesn't hear well but because I feel like I might explode. Beneath what I'm screaming aloud is what I'm actually screaming: *You're damaged and brave and bleeding from the wounds we gave you which you've made beautiful, and everyone is cheering because they are large, and in perfect proportion to each other, and flexed so that they are shining through your skin like something Godly.*

His planche push-ups are perfect. His flip is perfect. His muscles pop and he can't help smiling when he hears me and his friends from Lifetime cheering for him. There are ten other middleweights but they don't stand a chance against all he has to prove.

"I want to be bigger next time," he tells me afterwards.

He eats and eats. He has gained 25 pounds in the week since the competition. When we get home from The Grand Buffet he runs upstairs to weigh himself. He waits until my father and I gather around to step on the scale: 202 pounds.

"Do you need to get much bigger?" my father asks.

"Yes," my brother says.

## Notes

1. Drowning Pool, "Bodies" *Sinner*, 2001.

2. Mercurochrome is a topical antiseptic. It's distribution in the US was halted in 1998 because of The Food and Drug Administration's concerns about potential mercury poisoning

**REBECCA KANNER** is working on a book about her brother's obsession with body-building since his return from serving in Iraq. She is the winner of a 2003 Associated Writing Programs Award and the recipient of a Carrie S. Galt Prize. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *The Kenyon Review, The Cincinnati Review, The Bellingham Review,* and *Third Coast.*

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**AARON KANNER** won the 2009 Minnesota Gopher State Body-building Championship on June 6, qualifying him to compete at a national level. He placed 14th in the middleweight division at nationals on June 20, 2009. He plans to spend the year adding muscle so he can compete next year at nationals as a light-heavy.

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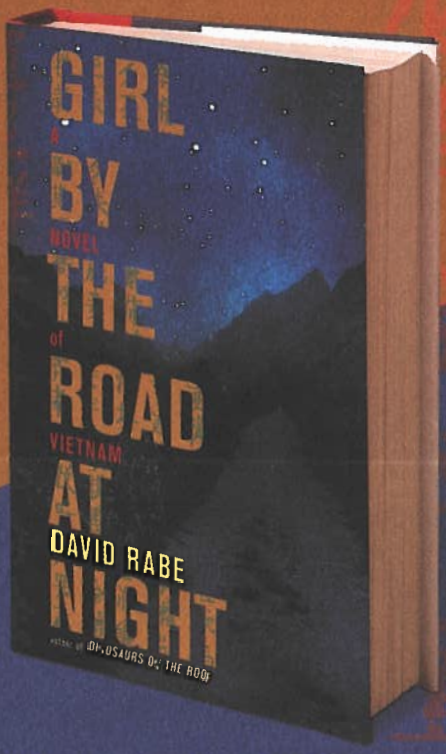


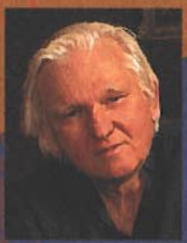

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DAVID RABE

# Walking Guard

## —from *Girl by the Road at Night*

There was a guy in Whitaker's high school like Bonefezi. Because Whitaker trekked in from the country to high school in nearby Platteville, he knew a variety of kids, both farm kids and Platteville kids. Walking toward the area he is assigned to guard, he thinks about going to school in his father's truck, and then he thinks about his father lying motionless under all those covers in that big bed in Wisconsin at this very instant. It doesn't make any sense, so damn hot here and still winter there. His father had big callused hands and was maybe too quick to fly off the handle, but if he said he'd be there, he showed up. Whitaker traveled to grade school by bus, but his father drove him and Roger three miles to the pickup spot each day. Later on when Roger was in high school and had a car of his own, he drove Whitaker to the bus stop. Then Whitaker started high school, and Roger drove them both all the way to school and back. But Roger graduated when Whitaker was about to become a sophomore, so the job fell to his father. In good weather, the trip took maybe forty minutes, which meant his dad had to waste the same amount of time getting back to the farm. Whenever he could, Whitaker bummed a ride home. But often the best he could arrange was to get dropped off at the house of a friend who lived along the way. And then one winter morning, with the both of them finishing up pancakes and gulping coffee before rushing out to the truck, Whitaker realized he was in a brand-new, special kind of companionship

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with his father. He hadn't ever really thought of such a thing. They were alone a lot, Roger having gone off to work at a car dealership owned by a friend's older brother. Whitaker started trying to think of things he might say to his father, or maybe even some questions he might ask. He wondered what he wanted to know. Then winter came and he watched his father face down blinding sleet and long, ice-disguised stretches of pavement. When the old F100 Dually struggled and fishtailed, his dad cursed, demanding that the tires with their goddamn overpriced chains catch. If the windshield froze up so it looked like they were trying to see through paraffin, he poked his head out the open side window. Occasionally, they spun to a halt. Even though Whitaker was sixteen and strong, he was told to get behind the wheel while his father went out and manhandled the truck, shouting and shoving until the damn thing got back where it belonged and acted like it was supposed to.

It was in the late spring that one Saturday his father pulled the Nash into the yard with Roger following in the truck. His dad had made the purchase at the lot where Roger worked. Two mornings later, as Whitaker drove off on his own for the first time, he had such a sense of negligence, he was sure he'd forgotten something. He braked and looked in the rearview mirror, and he saw his father by the front door laughing, and he laughed, too. They were both free now, and then he looked again. The old man was turning away, walking into the house. The door closed and the empty front porch looked abandoned and forlorn and forgotten when that wasn't the case at all.

Whitaker, following, as best he can, the lieutenant's stupid map, goes along the road. It's annoying to have these stupid directions; he's pulled guard before without them, but he feels like he better try to do as they say. It looks like he should turn at the ditch and go toward the area behind the bunker. The ground is a dusty pale brown under the moon. It's pocked with holes and strewn with stones that seesaw under his boots. The coiled concertina wire has a leaden color as he arrives beside it, though the many barbs to his left and right, hit with moonlight, seem silverish. He strolls for a time along the wire before halting to look down toward the Vung Tau highway and the ammo dump. Nothing moves and there is no sound but a barking dog far off and then another dog closer picking up the cry. He loosens the sling on his rifle and switches it to his left shoulder, then checks the map and walks toward the bunker. My first general order, he thinks, is to take charge of this post and all government property in view. My second general order is to walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing. Fuck me, he thinks. I guess that means I can't whack off.

The barking has ceased; he's back on the road. The road vanishes to his left at a hill. The guy like Bonefezi in Whitaker's high school was a Platteville kid named Silvestri. Silvestri and Whitaker and all of them hated school, and Mr. Prendergast, the chemistry teacher, was weak, a regular milquetoast, and they all knew it the minute they saw him, so he was their goat. Once they hung fifty Trojan prophylactics all over the classroom; they hung them from the lights and from the radiators, they taped them to the blackboard. Mr. Prendergast, arriving as the bell rang, tried to pretend he hadn't noticed by proceeding directly into his lecture, until Silvestri raised his hand. Ignored for several minutes, Silvestri climbed up onto his desk and after several more minutes, began stomping his feet until Mr. Prendergast looked at him and he cried out, Sir, what's the point? There are dirty goddamn prophylactic rubbers hanging all over our classroom, Mr. Prendergast. Dirty goddamn prophylactic sexual rubbers! What's the point?

Whitaker is back at the wire and again the cries of the dogs have begun. That was a good thing ole Silvestri and me did, he thinks, seeing himself somehow at the center of the story. Then the sudden, hollow whoom-whoom of two mortar rounds firing startles him, and he flinches but hears no trace of their trajectory until there is a faint and distant double thudding where they hit. He wonders, should he perhaps insert a magazine, knowing, of course, he shouldn't, but still, maybe he might prepare himself a little. He will lock the receiver open; he will unfasten the catch of one ammo pack. But then he worries that walking around with the receiver open could get dirt in it. Should some of the enemy actually come, how would he behave? Kill the fuckers, he thinks. Bang, bang. He is at the road, peering over lengths of desolate terrain featureless in the dark except for patches of gravel catching light from somewhere, and empty except for the hulking machinery, stacks of tools, the mound of dirt near the ragged outlines of the half-built bunker. Silence has returned. They did a lot of funny stuff to Mr. Prendergast. He is walking again, taking long steps controlled by a slow, methodical inner rhythm. In this manner he negotiates the whole area, thinking only of his walking until he finds that tiny, quick steps seem more interesting. Though he intends to walk the entire route in this new, entertaining style, he suddenly quits. He's at the very edge of the compound. He's at the perimeter. There has been no firing for a while now. Deciding he will sit for a little on a stack of empty sandbags, he puts the rifle to his shoulder to aim into the dark. Bang, bang, dead gook; bang, bang. And one time Silvestri took the anatomy skeleton out of its jarlike case, and after hiding it, he climbed into the jar himself, so he was standing there looking out grinning when Mr. Prendergast entered the room. Get out of there, Silvestri,

yelled Mr. Prendergast. Get out of there right this minute. Where's the skeleton? Silvestri only smiled. Whitaker is grinning. Mr. Prendergast tried to force open the door of the jar, which worked like a coffin lid, but Silvestri held it shut from the inside. Mr. Prendergast screamed, You get out of there right this minute, Silvestri! I mean it now—where is the skeleton? That skeleton is worth a lot of money. Money! screamed Silvestri and burst out of the case to run around the room opening cabinets, slamming doors and drawers. Everyone, all of them joined in. It's not here, Mr. Prendergast! Not here! Slam! Bang! Not in your desk, Mr. Prendergast. Bang! Slam! Not here! Not here! Where did you last see it!

A flare appears, so distant it seems a star. He stops at the sight of it hanging miles out among the ghostly hills. There is fighting in the jungle there, a skirmish. Another flare, a spark creasing the total black, leaps up and then another comes. Three match flames in the enormity of that black sky. He grows tense, listening, tilted toward those trembling, airborne specks to hear the gunfire. He waits, straining, but no sound comes and then the grinding rumble of a truck reaches him, faintly, gearing down for power, and he sees it moving with its headlights off way down below where the evac hospital has a few lights on. And then something else happens: a shout. A light comes on much closer, the beam darting crazily. It's a flashlight. Someone is running on the paths among the tents where Whitaker lives and they're waving a flashlight all over the place and they're yelling, but Whitaker can't make any sense of what they're saying. Other lights pop on in scattered tents and then more and more lights, and people are coming out from some of the tents. Whitaker jams a magazine into his rifle. He locks and loads a round; he pushes the safety on. Something is wrong. He sets off at a trot. Guys are zigzagging around. Most of them wear T-shirts and underwear. They run and yell and some start beating on metal, their canteen cups or something. "Snake! Snake! Big fucking snake!"

"Where? Where?" Whitaker calls; he's the only one armed.

"Griffin went down to take a shit, and there was this big fucking snake. Twenty feet long at least. Thirty. Forty." It's Doland standing there in his fatigue cap, Bermuda shorts, and flip-flops.

The floodlights at the basketball court go on, and Whitaker thinks he sees a flash on the gravel, a bolt of whipping dull gray that seems to have no end and then it's gone. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"It was right there, Doland. Do you think I should shoot it?"

"What? Where?"

Down near the latrine there's an excited cry. It's a bunch of people yelling all at once in a kind of swelling cheer, like at a football game. Several guys run past Whitaker into the tents, and other guys run in the opposite direction. One of them is carrying an armload of beer, and he goes backward for a few steps so he can announce, "Randall says the stupid thing went into the shit trench. It's in the shit trench. They saw it. Fucking thing's a monster."

Now Whitaker is positive he saw it; that's what it was on the basketball court, he's sure of it. Still, he wants a better look.

"Whitaker! What the hell are you doing? Stop where you are."

It's the lieutenant coming straight at him, and he's got his pants on, his boots, too, his baseball cap with its bar and a T-shirt. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I saw all the hullabaloo, sir, and there's a big snake, so—"

"What's your fifth general order?"

"What?"

"Tell me your fifth general order, Whitaker! I want you to tell me your fifth general order."

"I saw all the noise and everybody and I—"

"What did I just ask you?"

"My fifth, sir?"

"To quit my post only when properly relieved," the lieutenant barks at him. "That's your fifth general order! Do you want to end up in the stockade?"

"What?"

"What's your fifth general order? You spit it out!"

"To quit my post only when properly relieved! Sir!"

"Is this your post?"

"What?"

"Have you been properly relieved?"

"No, sir."

"And is this your post? Right here?"

"No, sir."

"So where is it? Where is your post?"

Whitaker takes off toward the bunker, striding briskly and then breaking into a trot. The gigantic slapping sound, the whoosh and the yellow wall of light that balloons over him and throws his shadow down onto the dirt ahead, like a ghost squirming in the gravel, turns him around. Fire is reaching from the latrine area where he knows the latrine box can be moved off the shit trench so the shit can be burned. The way everybody's hooting and carrying on, they must have moved the

box, poured in gasoline and diesel, and then ignited the trench with the snake still in it. They're burning the shit with the snake in it. The flames rocket and rattle. The stink of burning fuel, the stench of the shit, and the heat roll over him. The whole campsite is vivid and weird, like it's going to blink out and be gone. Then shouting starts up again. It had been silenced or covered by the fire. But he doesn't dare look any longer, because even though the lieutenant has been caught up by the spectacle, Whitaker knows the prick will wheel around and glare at him any second now.

He hurries on to the bunker, and once he's there, he ducks behind it. He sits down in the dirt with his rifle resting on his lap. What a crazy thing. That snake was dinky dow. Why would it just do that, just crawl into their camp? The way it was running, it was scared of people. He feels like he saw its eyes, even though he couldn't have. He hates snakes. He's killed them all his life. Every time he saw one all over Wisconsin. So why does he feel sort of bad? Did he really see its eyes? Even though he couldn't have. Maybe it was trying to get the garbage. Maybe it was hungry. Or maybe it used to live here. In the jungle that used to be here. He stands quickly and looks around warily. Did he have to worry about that now? Because if it lived here, others might have lived here, too. The snake might have brothers and sisters. It might have come looking for them. They might be looking for him. They might all come back.

The fire has died down and the campsite is quiet. A couple of men stand talking. They look like officers, but he can't really tell. He turns once more toward the hills that seem empty now, silent and dark. In the daylight a village is often discernible in that area, tin roofs and a church steeple shimmering in the sun like scattered toy blocks. But there's just the darkness. Full of secrets. Two flares climb from the black, and then tracer rounds float up from one point and sink in another. The first of the flares sputters and goes out, while the other, with a slight lateral drift, descends. But up leaps a new one to make a pair, then a third and a fourth climb to form a cone of leaden whiteness. A nearer noise whirls him around, beginning to aim the rifle. A figure is crossing the field toward him. Reese. It's midnight— past midnight, actually. Reese is late. Whitaker's shift is over.

And the way he feels, it's like someone out there beneath those failing flares is dying now. He has heard nothing, seen nothing, but someone is dead, having put up light to find the enemy all around him. Alert to the silence in which there is only the scrape and grind of Reese approaching, his mind has eyes to see into that blackness and then even further, into another day when someone on one of those hills will look over the miles from there to here—to this place where Whitaker will be standing, having desperately sent up flares in a call for help as the enemy closes

in on him. Poor fucking Mr. Prendergast, he thinks. He can hear the steps of Reese behind him getting nearer. One afternoon as Mr. Prendergast entered, the entire class bellowed in unison, Good morning, Mr. Hoosier! He glanced at them, only the briefest alarm in his eyes as he sat down behind his desk. They called, How are you this morning, Mr. Hoosier? I'm not Mr. Hoosier, he said. Yes, you are. I'm Mr. Prendergast. No, Mr. Hoosier, don't you know your name? I'm Mr. Prendergast! No! We're tired of calling you Prendergast. Prendergast is stupid.

Reese arrives and Whitaker hands over the forty rounds of ammunition that they are not to put into their rifles unless they mean to kill somebody. Reese says he would like to get a shot at a VC as long he was old and coming in backwards.

"Did you see the snake?"

"No. I was tryin' to sleep, man. You can guess how screwed up that was. The place was a loony bin. Did you see it?"

Whitaker shakes his head, and hands over the lieutenant's map and Reese stares at it. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's the route we're supposed to walk."

"Who says?"

"The lieutenant drew it up."

"You're puttin' me on."

"No."

"You gotta be kiddin' me."

"No." The flares have vanished. The sky and landscape look peaceful. The heart attack that felled Whitaker's father landed with the force of a truck. He yelped and shoved out with his fist, as if to fend off a thing he could see, all the while going down like a man bowing, only he didn't stop. Whitaker had been about to walk from the kitchen and he turned back at the yell, and before he knew to kneel down, before he knew to telephone for help, he stood there, frozen.

Reese points at the diagram and says, "What's this?"

Whitaker looks. "The bunker."

"No kidding."

He leaves Reese muttering and turning the map upside down and around, every which way. "This is fucked up, man," he says. Whitaker staggers a little, actually stepping sideways to catch his balance. Soon he will sleep. A little further along in the night, he will be awakened to walk some more. At six am, he will go to work. And like a filament in his mind, without which he could not see anything at all, there begin to hover and glow the tiny dark-haired bodies of the girls in the countryside and villages who everyone says are riddled with sickness beneath their

loveliness. But he doesn't care. What can he care? In the afternoon he will go and move within and against them. Find a part no one has taken time to find. Make her breathe. See the changes in her eyes. Hear her.

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**DAVID RABE** has been hailed as one of America's greatest living playwrights since his early plays on the Vietnam war, a quartet written after he returned from Vietnam in 1967. Four of his plays have been nominated for the Tony Award, including one win for best play. Rabe is the author of the novels, *Dinosaurs on the Roof*, and *Recital of the Dog*, and a collection of stories, *A Primitive Heart*. Born in Dubuque, Iowa, he lives in Northwest Connecticut.

CRAIG F. WALKER

## —from "Ian Fisher: American Soldier" the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography

In the spring of 2007, *The Denver Post* invested heavily in a story despite having no idea where it would lead. Photojournalist Craig F. Walker followed a young man, 18-year-old Ian Fisher, as he finished high school and joined the Army at the height of insurgent violence in Iraq. The intent was to tag along wherever his deployment led and chronicle his journey—for better or worse.

What emerged was a detailed sketch of a young man's struggle with himself and the Army that would redefine him. With virtually unfettered access to Fisher at home and in uniform, Walker documented the civilian life that wouldn't loosen its grip and the political realities of a war that, upon Fisher's arrival, bore no resemblance to the violent conflict he both feared and craved.

The photographs captured the story of countless young men who find themselves moved to the military by some combination of patriotism and personal inertia. On an intensely personal landscape, it told of a boy struggling to become a man. The primary conflict that flared over the course of two years took place not on the streets of Baghdad or Fallujah, but within Ian Fisher.

Along the way, the series illustrates the Army's recruitment struggles during an unpopular war. It looked at shifting strategies for training young soldiers for the "new Army" and the battle against boredom when combat readiness runs up against a mission that demands as much boots-on-the-ground political savvy as tactical competence.

But at the heart of Walker's photography lay a coming-of-age story delivered with the kind of detail that comes only from close access over an extended period.

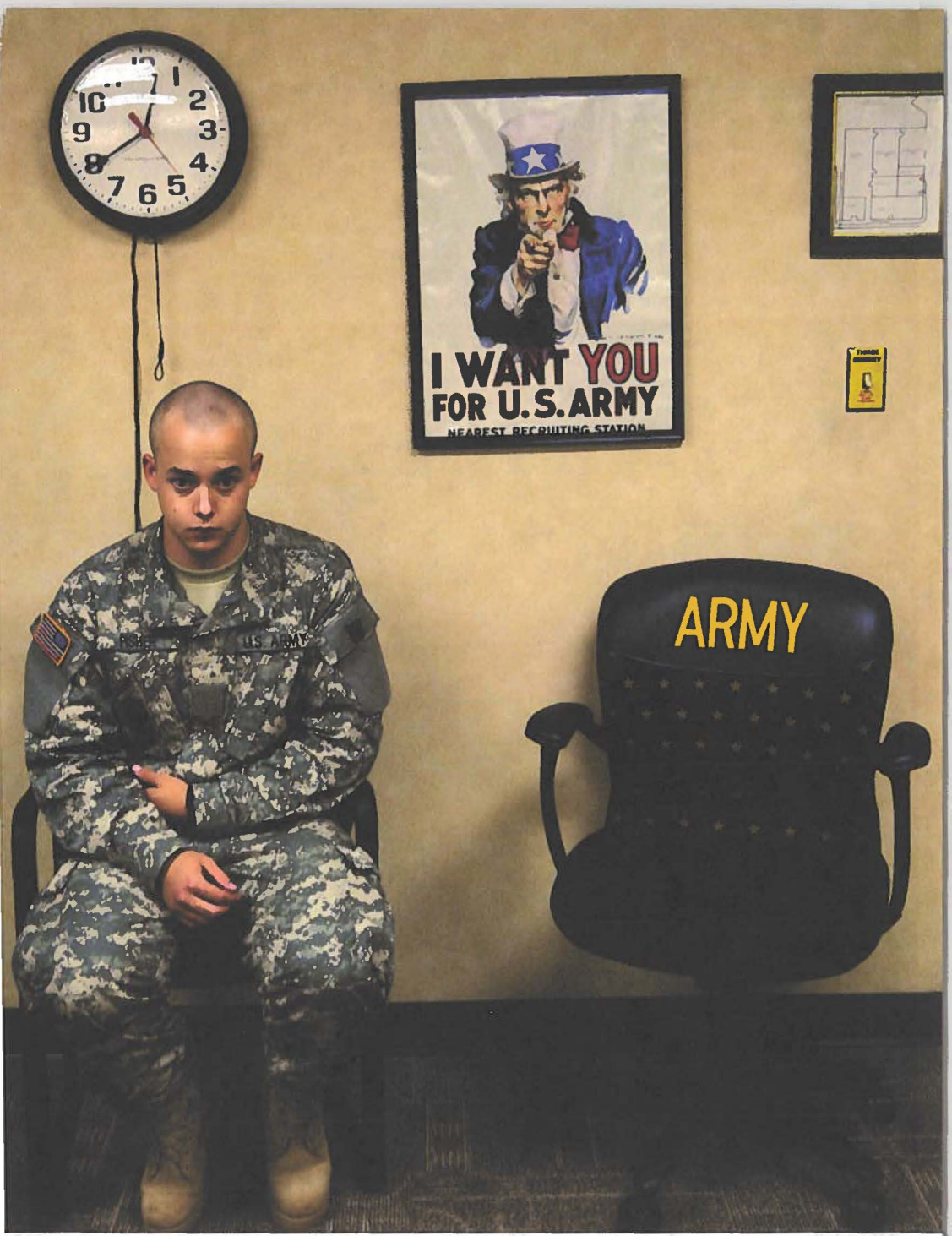
Whether sitting at the family's kitchen table or hunkered in a Humvee, Walker blended into the background so seamlessly that Fisher, as well as his family, friends and fellow soldiers, acted and reacted with unselfconscious authenticity.

When Fisher spoke comfortingly with his father just before heading to boot camp, Walker was there. When he tried to wriggle out of his commitment just 48 hours into basic training, Walker captured his battle of wills with Army brass. Family conflicts over his drug abuse, contentious break-ups with girlfriends both at home and via Internet from a war zone, impulsive decisions to go AWOL—all of it was fair game, and all of it found its way into print.

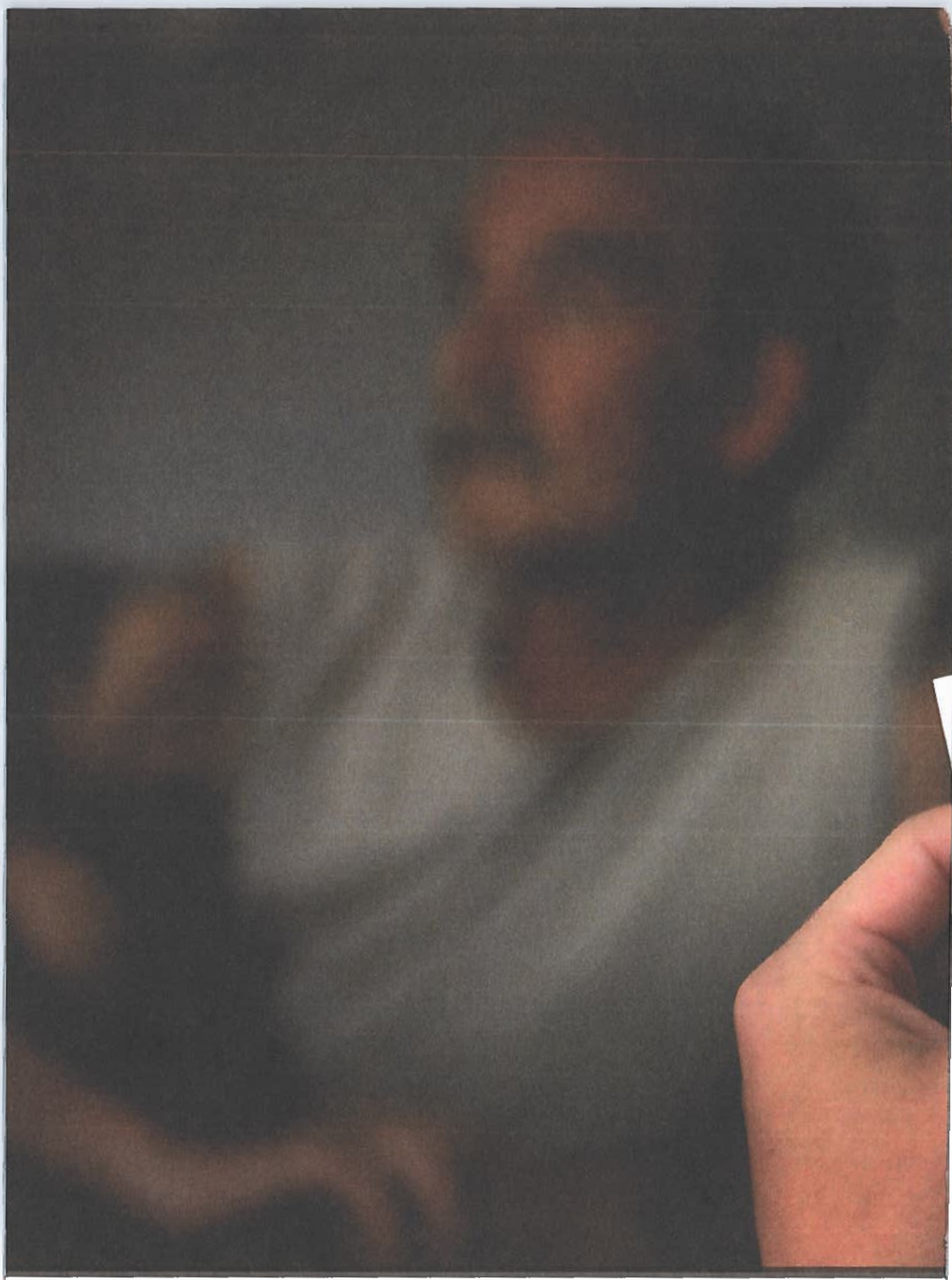
The result was the powerful and transparent tale of one young man's precarious struggle to transform his life. Yet it also surely reflects the difficulties thousands experience as they commit themselves, in a time of war, to a job and a lifestyle so far removed from anything they've experienced.

"American Soldier" is an intense photojournalism project that examines one soldier's journey through a most introspective lens.

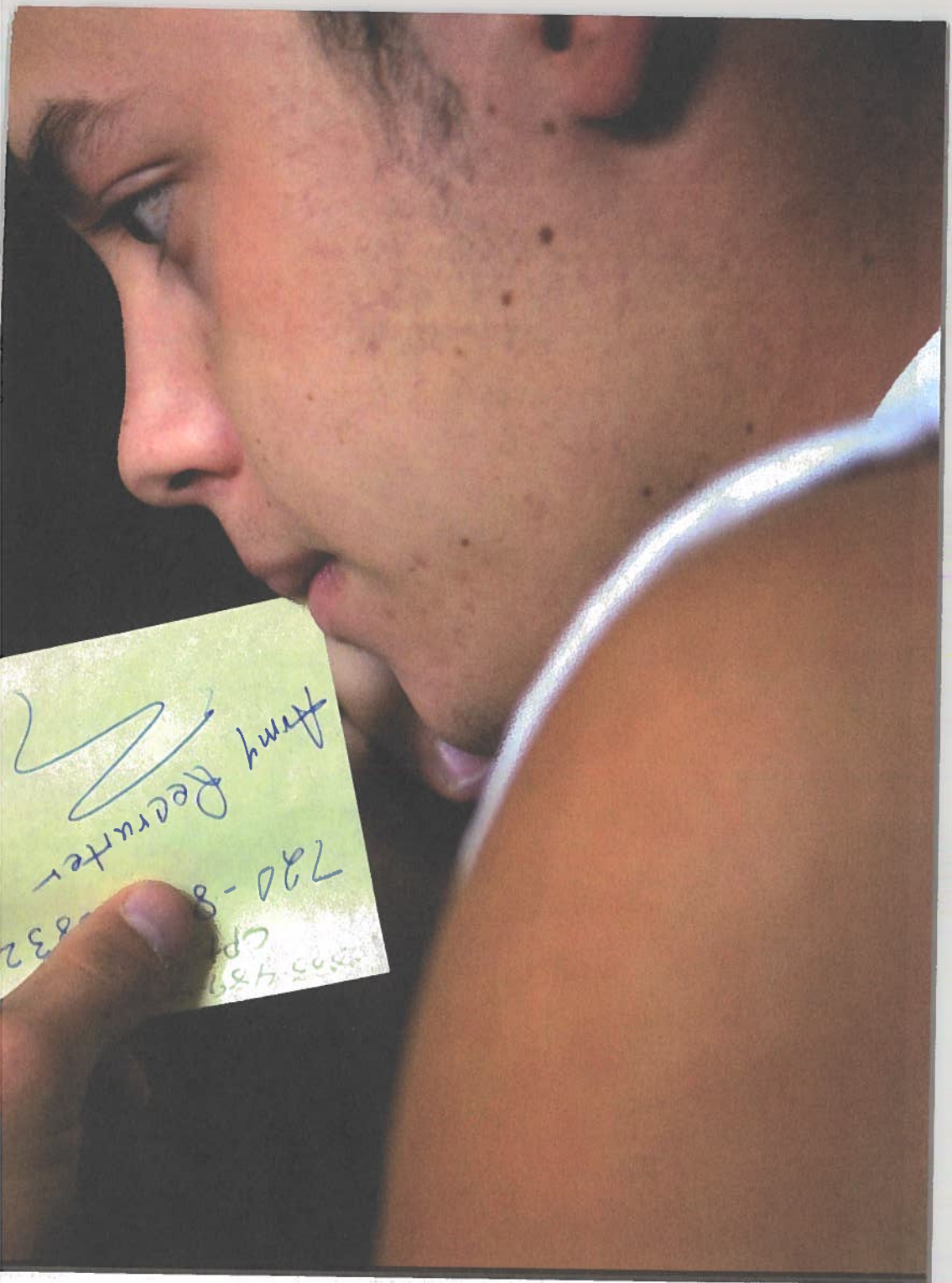
Since the Sept. 11, 2001, *Denver Post* staff photojournalist Craig F. Walker has covered some of the most important threads of the terror attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., fixing a compassionate lens on the men, women and children tangled then, and now, in the continuing story of geopolitical conflict. He chronicled the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York, the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002, including the inauguration of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and the deployment of American troops in Kuwait in 2003, and in Iraq in 2005 and 2009. Walker's photo essay "Ian Fisher: American Soldier" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography in 2010. It also earned the American Society of News Editors community photojournalism award, the Sidney Hillman Foundation prize for photojournalism, a Gold Medal from the Society of Newspaper Design and the grand prize in Editor & Publisher's Photos of the Year competition. His portfolio received third place in POYi's Newspaper Photographer of the Year category. In previous years, Walker has received awards from National Press Photographers Association's Best of Photojournalism, National Headliner and UNICEF Photo of the Year. Walker came to the *Post* in 1998 from the *Berkshire Eagle* in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he chronicled the final seven months in the life of a single mother with AIDS. He graduated from Rhode Island School of Photography and began his career in Massachusetts, at the *Marlborough Enterprise*. Walker grew up in York, Pennsylvania.



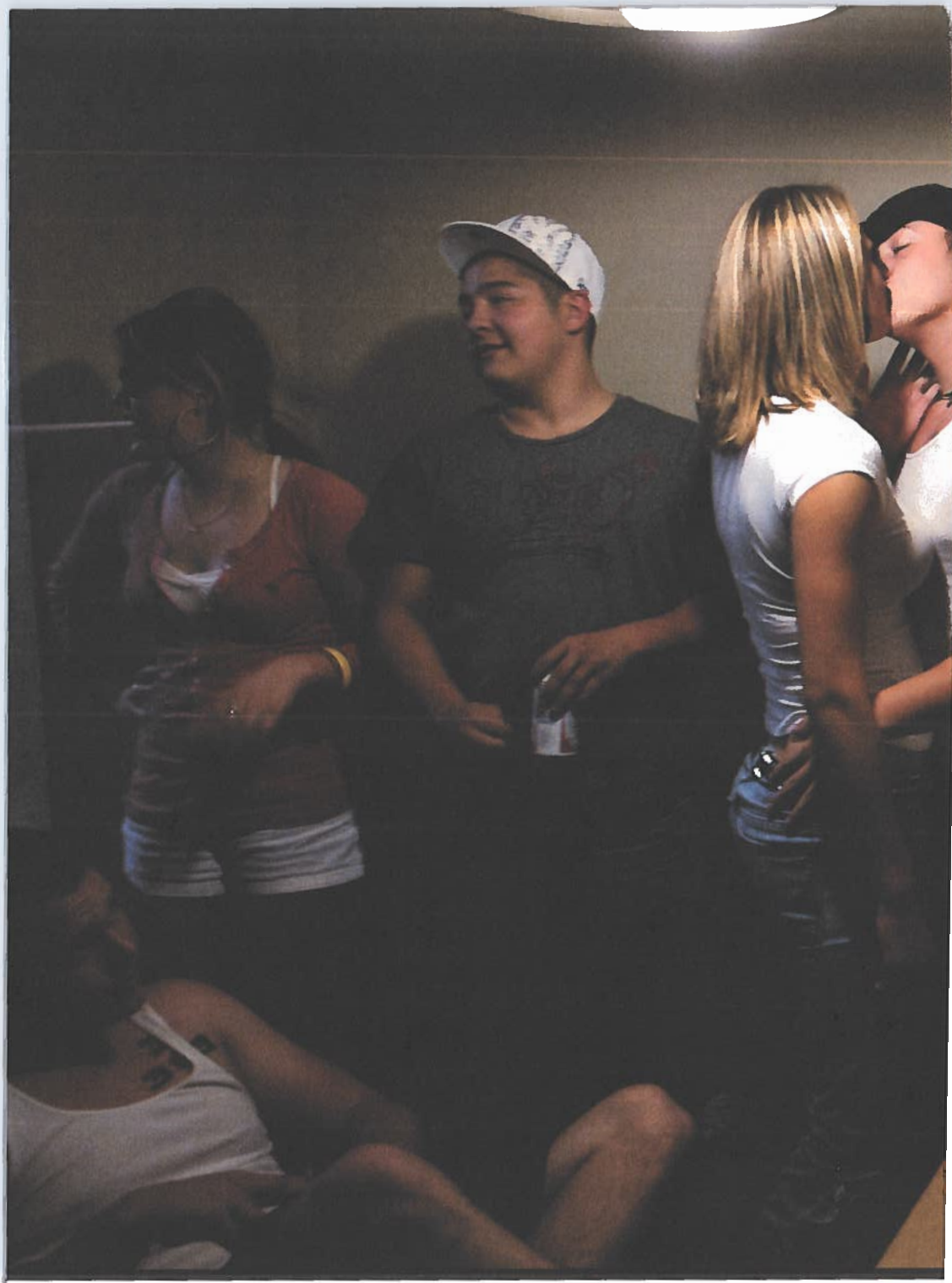

Ian Fisher cradles his injured elbow during his processing into the Army in Fort Benning, Georgia, on June 20, 2007. Though he later had a change of heart after speaking with a commander, he saw a possibility to escape his enlistment only two days in. From his first day in fatigues through his days driving a Humvee in Iraq, military life often didn't mesh with his expectations. Sometimes the structure of the Army and the demands of training for war clashed with the freedom he shared with his outside friends.



Ian returns a phone call to Sgt. 1st Class Gavino Barron, the commander at Ian's Army recruiting office, on June 1, 2007. Barron was making sure Ian was on track for enlistment. When he was 17, Ian had joined the Army's Future Solider Program, which prepares recruits for enlistment. Barron recalled his initial impressions of Ian: "He wasn't in it for the money.



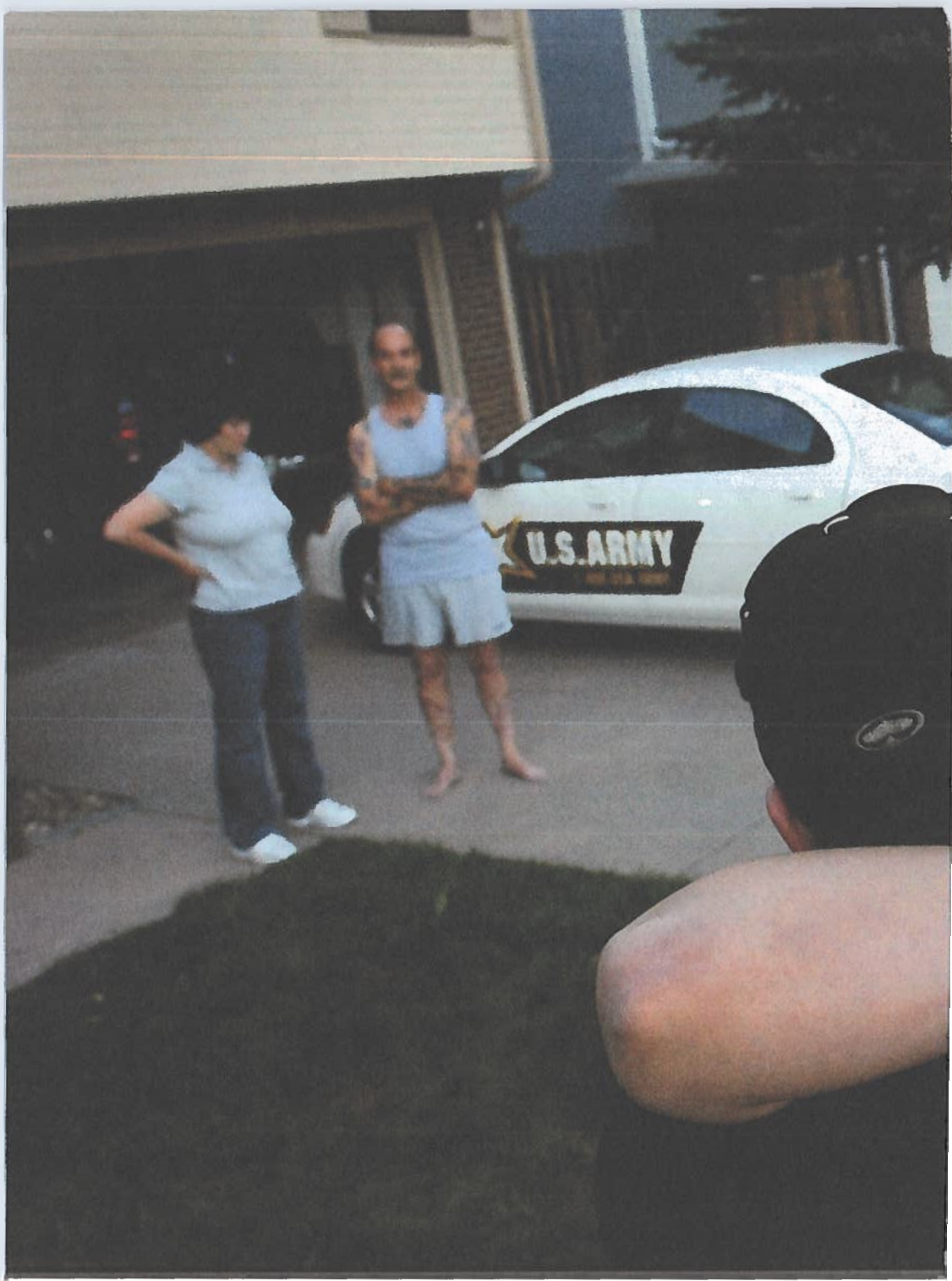
He was only in it for God and country. That's the reason most infantrymen join." Ian's father, Eric Fisher, listens to the conversation. Eric returned from the Vietnam War with the Combat Infantryman Badge and emotional scars. Eric's father had been awarded the Bronze Star for combat in World War II.



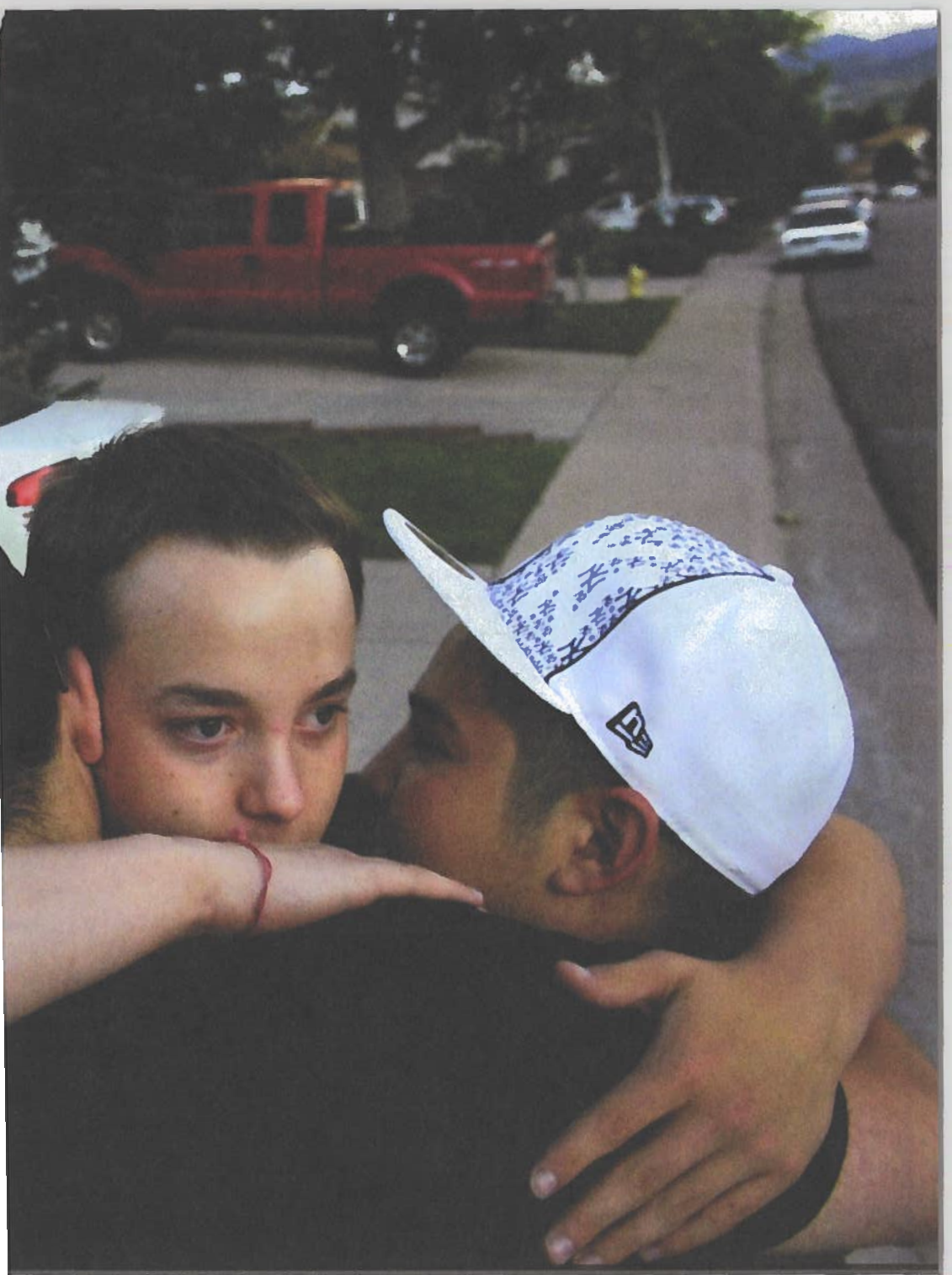
Hours after Ian's family threw a goodbye bash for him with cake and ice cream on June 16, 2007, his friends gave him a party of a different type, with beer pong and affection from his



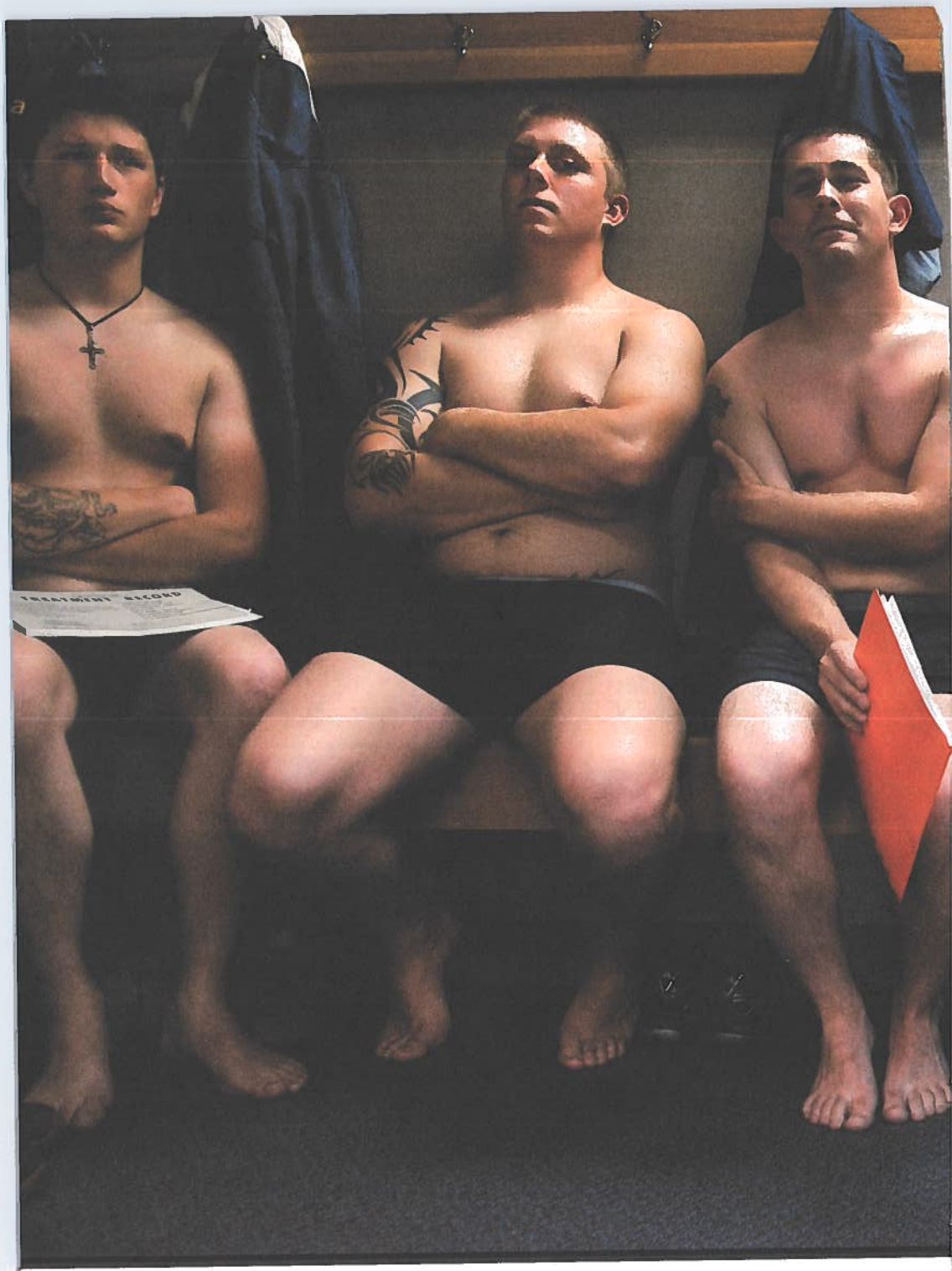

girlfriend Ashley Hibbs. It was a time of emotional goodbyes among friends as Ian prepared to refine his high school image of the rough-and-tumble teen fumbling for a grip on his future.



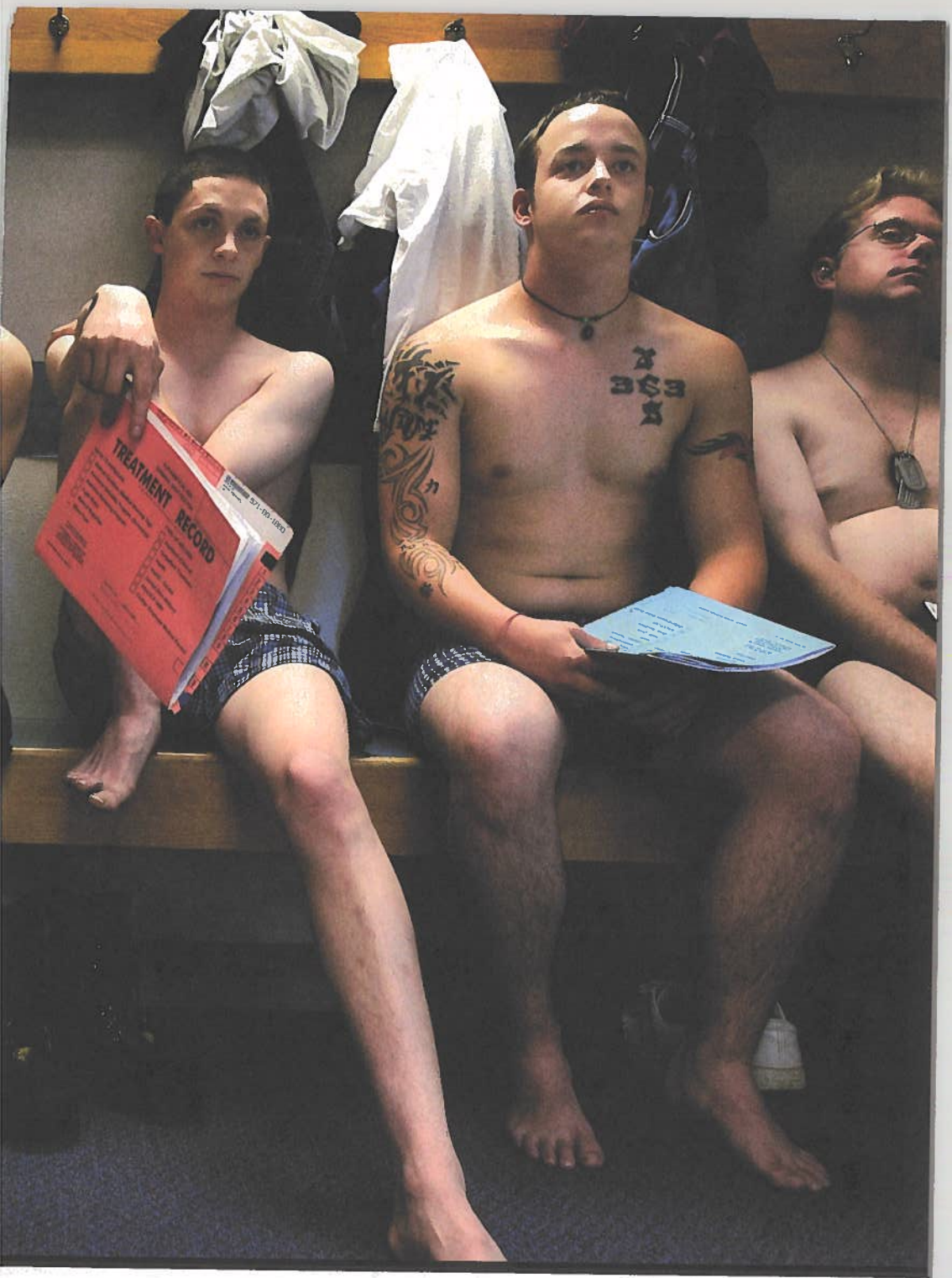

As Ian's father, Eric, waits in the driveway with the recruiter who's about to take Ian away to 14 weeks of basic training, Ian embraces friends Nick 'Buddha' Nelson, left, and Shane 'Pineapple' Doiel on June 17, 2007. Between hugs, Ian's eyes welled with tears. Ian approached his father.



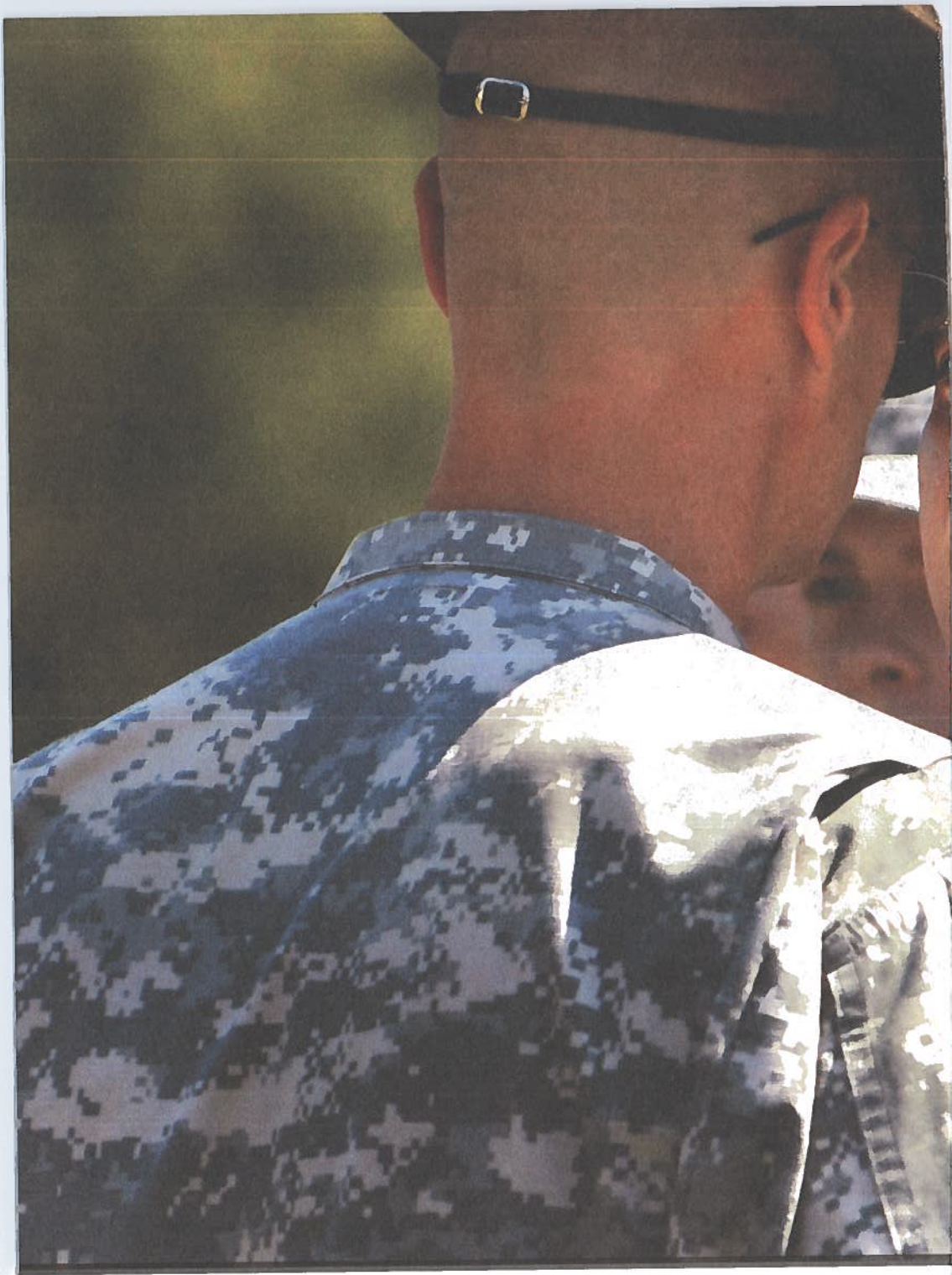
You got everything? Eric whispered. Yeah, Ian replied. The car pulled out, and Ian was gone. As soon as we saw him driving off, that's when we realized how real it was, 'Buddha' said.




Fisher, second from right, waits for a medical exam with other recruits at the Denver Military Entrance Processing Station on June 18, 2007. They took the oath of enlistment and, later that day, Fisher would travel to Fort Benning, where his new life in the Army began. Over the next




three days, he filled out forms. He stood in formation. And he joined in the constant repetition of the Soldier's Creed: "...I will always place the mission first; I will never accept defeat; I will never quit; I will never leave a fallen comrade..."



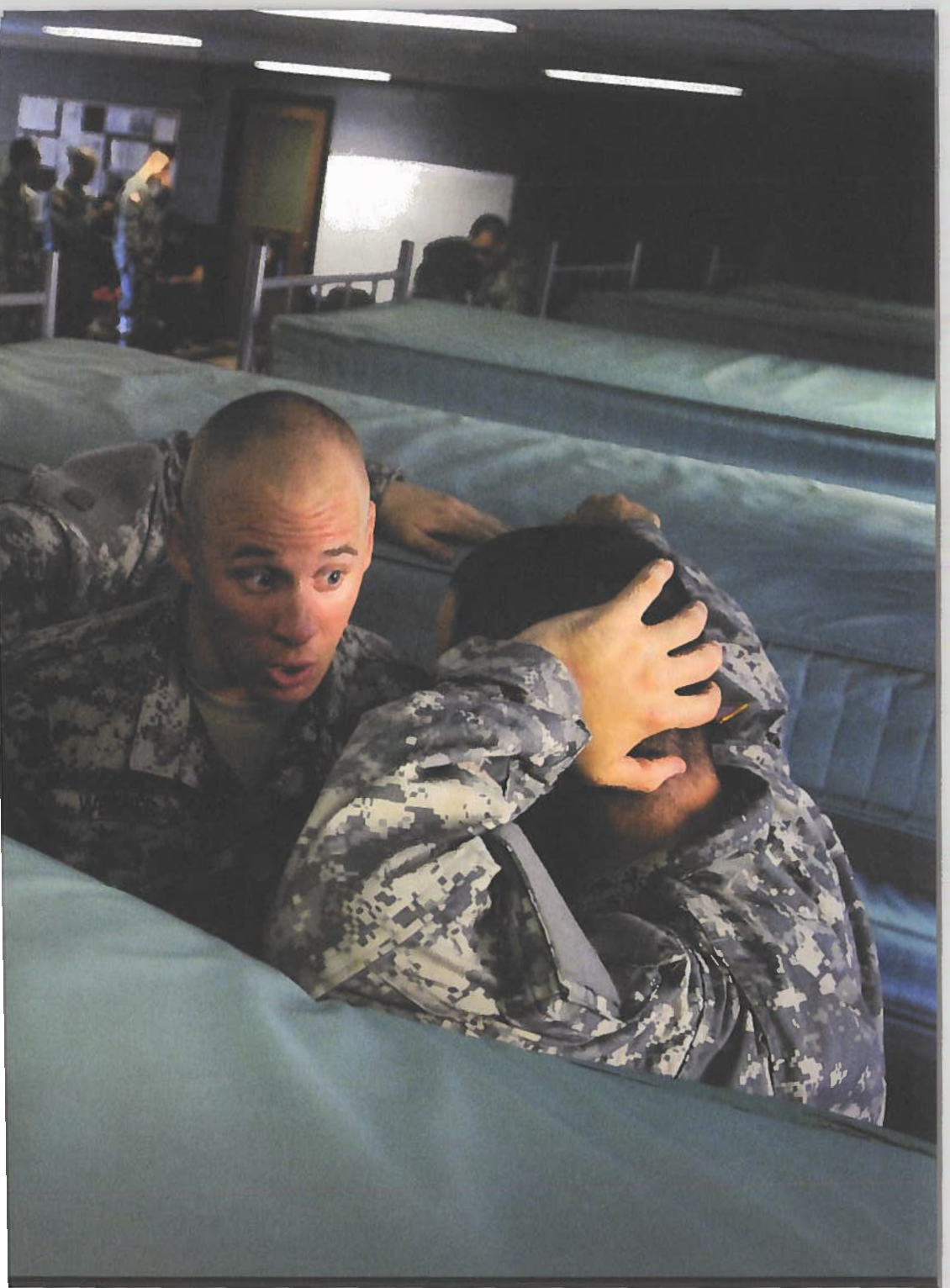
After three days of endless lines, little rest and second thoughts at processing, Fisher arrives June 22, 2007, at basic training and is introduced to his place in the military by drill sergeant David Vance. "We see who's going to quit in that first hour," says drill sergeant John Eldridge.




"This scared me more than anything ever has," Fisher said of the jolting arrival at Fort Benning. He'd joined the Army to make a different life. Now that life was upon him. "I just keep telling myself to be happy," Fisher said. "I'm already feeling like a different person."



From left, recruits Rob-drick Robinson, Fisher and Christopher Wegner talk with Fisher's bunkmate about his behavior June 23, 2007. He had been consistently causing problems, and the rest of the platoon was paying the price. Because of the culture of basic training, where all suffer for the faults of one, recruits often police their own ranks. Fisher said he worried that the pep



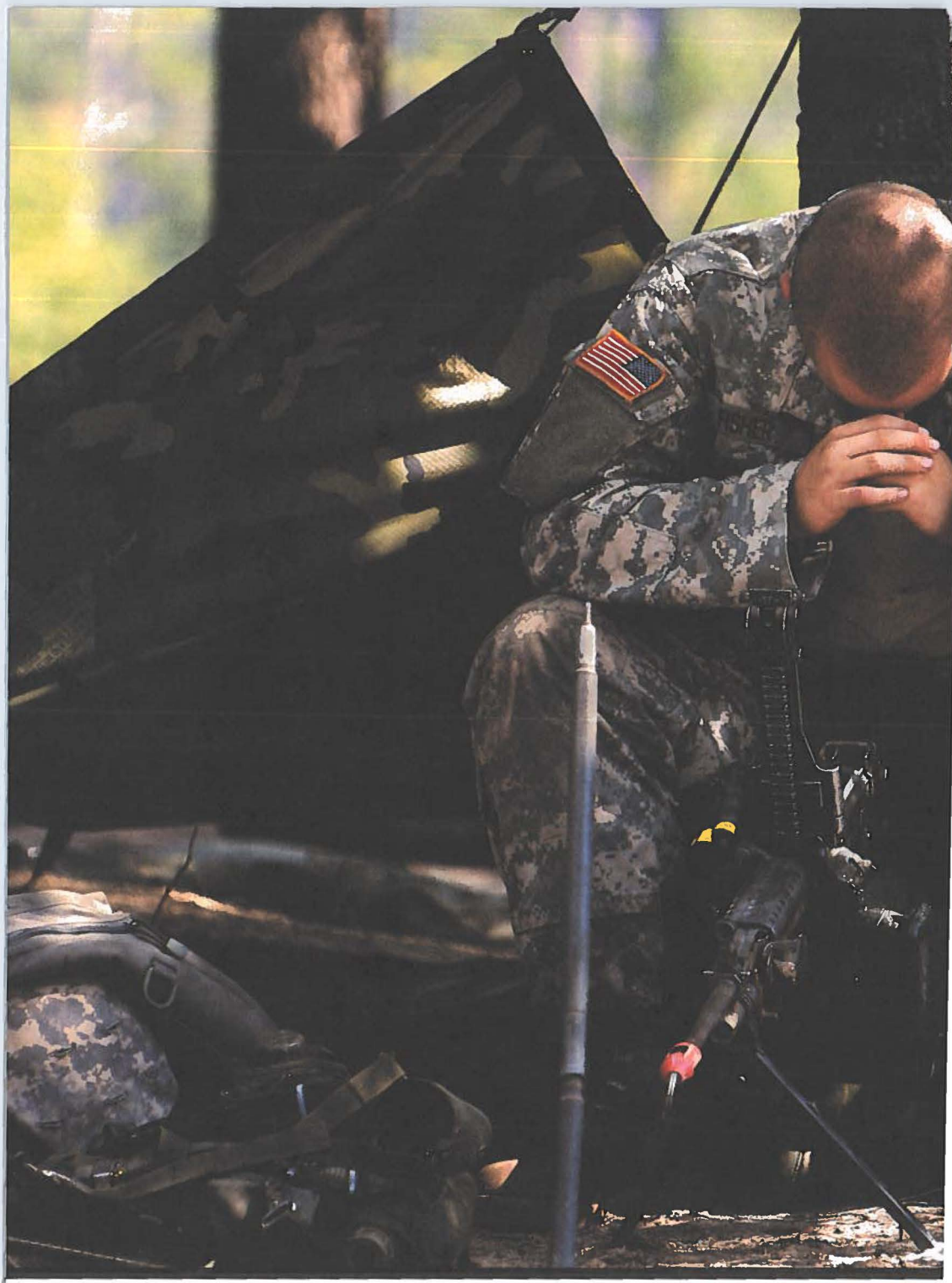
talks for his bunkmate might not be enough but he wouldn't be part of any physical confrontation. "I told him I'd be there for him," Fisher said. "But he just doesn't seem to care." The bunkmate, an 18-year old who had been in and out of jail in his hometown of Syracuse, N.Y. and joined the Army as a last resort, would be gone within eight weeks like one-fifth of Fisher's 40-man platoon.



As his team prepares to clear and secure a room during a training drill, Fisher is the first man in a four-man stack. It's Aug. 15, 2007, and Echo Company is deep into its Mission Oriented Urban Tactics exercises—three days focused on urban combat at Fort Benning. Drill sergeant Tommy



Beauchamp has a lot of first-hand experience to share with the troops about urban combat: He served a tour of duty in Afghanistan and two tours in Iraq, where the battlefield loomed more complex than in previous wars.



Following a long day - on top of a long week - and suffering from heat rash on his upper body, Fisher finds himself at his tent in Fort Benning, bowing his head in prayer Sept. 15, 2007. He explains later: "I've been praying that God takes this stuff off my back." Basic training had given



him a cold, hard appraisal of his limitations. His ambitions had dissolved amid repeated and futile efforts to pass his physical-training test. Injuries had hindered his performance. Fisher did a reality check: Instead of excellence, he would settle for survival.




Fisher braces for his crossed-rifles pin, signifying his completion of training. Drill sergeant John Eldridge holds the pin in place and prepares to secure it with a fist. "I hit him square on the chest," Eldridge said. "He had two holes, and blood dripping down from each - 'blood rifles.'"



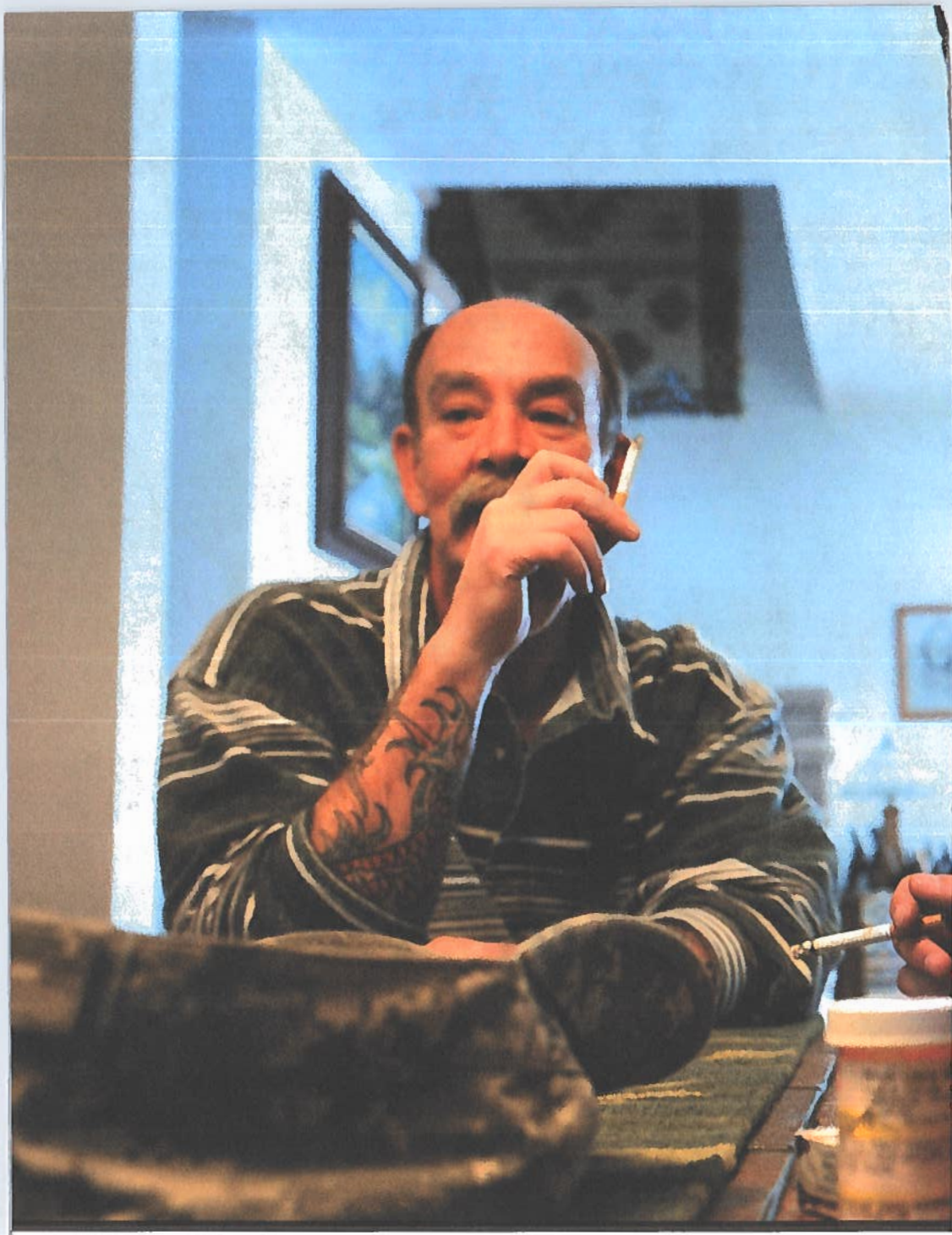

Thirteen weeks of basic training had led Fisher to this—a 10-mile march through a series of high-stress combat tests that ended at a place called Honor Hill. A sergeant closed the ceremony Sept. 17, 2007: "You are now the guardian of freedom and the American way of life! A warrior!"



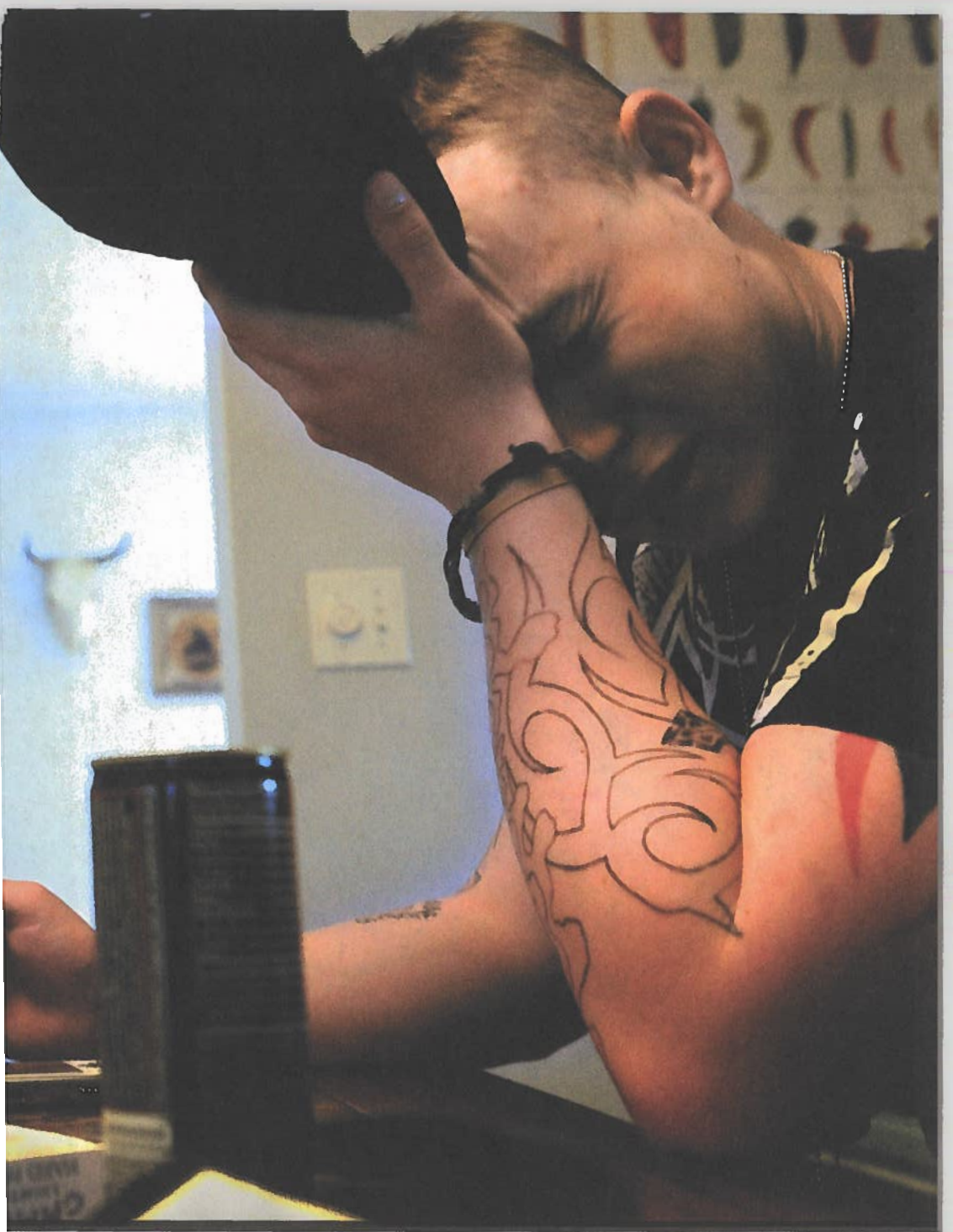

During a weekend home from his first assignment at Fort Carson, Colorado, Ian walked through a Denver-area mall with his new girlfriend, Kayla Spitzlberger, on Dec. 15, 2007, and asked whether she wanted to go ring shopping. She was excited, but working out the financing made him nervous. They picked out the engagement ring in about five minutes, but Ian wouldn't




officially propose until Christmas Day in front of her family. The couple had met in freshman math class but never really dated until now. She wrote to him during basic training and decided to give Ian a chance. The engagement would end before Valentine's Day.



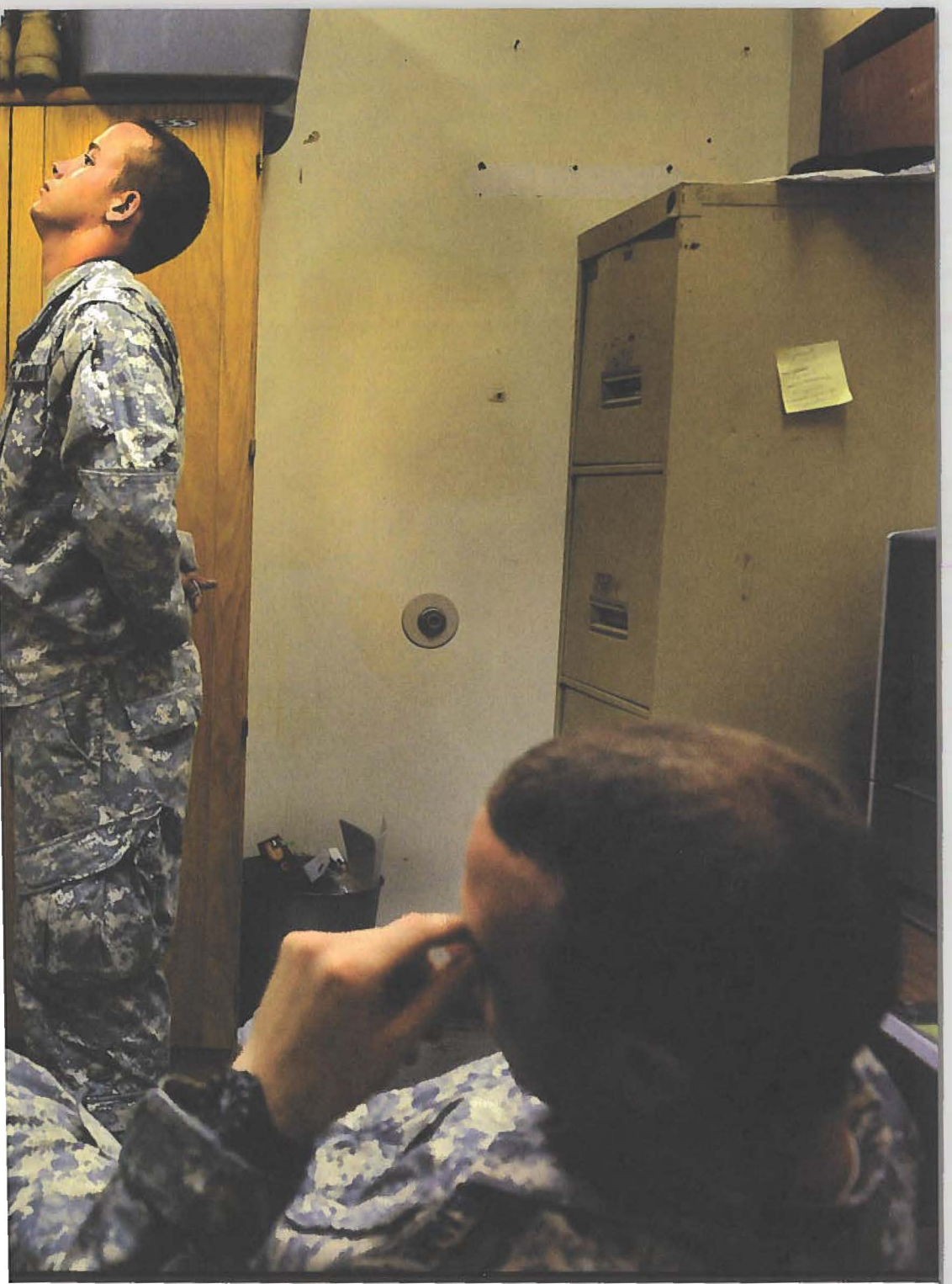
Ian survived basic training, but he faced a steep learning curve when it came to everyday Army life. Assigned to Fort Carson, just over an hour's drive from his teenage stomping grounds in Colorado, he found himself pulled in two directions. The Army sought to prepare him for the rigors of deployment in Iraq. But on the home front, his weekend visits with friends reminded him of the carefree life he'd left behind. Again home for the weekend March 8, 2008, Ian sits at the table with his essentials: cellphone, energy drink, cigarettes and a bottle of Vicodin. After a



series of training injuries, Ian is taking pain medications and muscle relaxants. His father, Eric, expressed concern about the drugs. "I think you're abusing them," he said. "You keep taking those as recreational and you're going to end up immune to them." Ian dismissed it: "At least it's not coke, Ecstasy, weed.... I've got like six, seven different medications now. They give it to you for a reason. I'm not going to just let them sit there."



Fisher shows his frustration during a counseling session at Fort Carson with Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Weisensel on July 24, 2008. For a second time, Fisher had returned late from a weekend home. Now he had turned himself in for having a drug problem. In the days to follow, Fisher's continued failure to cooperate put him in danger of getting kicked out of the Army. Instead, the



commander gave him another chance, assigning him to a new platoon. Punishment included extra duty, loss of pay and a reduction in rank from a private first class to private 1. But it was a fresh start.



The Rev. John H. Bell Jr. lays a hand on Ian during a baptism at Wellshire Presbyterian Church in Denver on July 13, 2008, Ian's mother's birthday. Teri Mercill said the greatest gift she could ask for was to see her son baptized before he deploys to Iraq. "It has given me a lot stronger



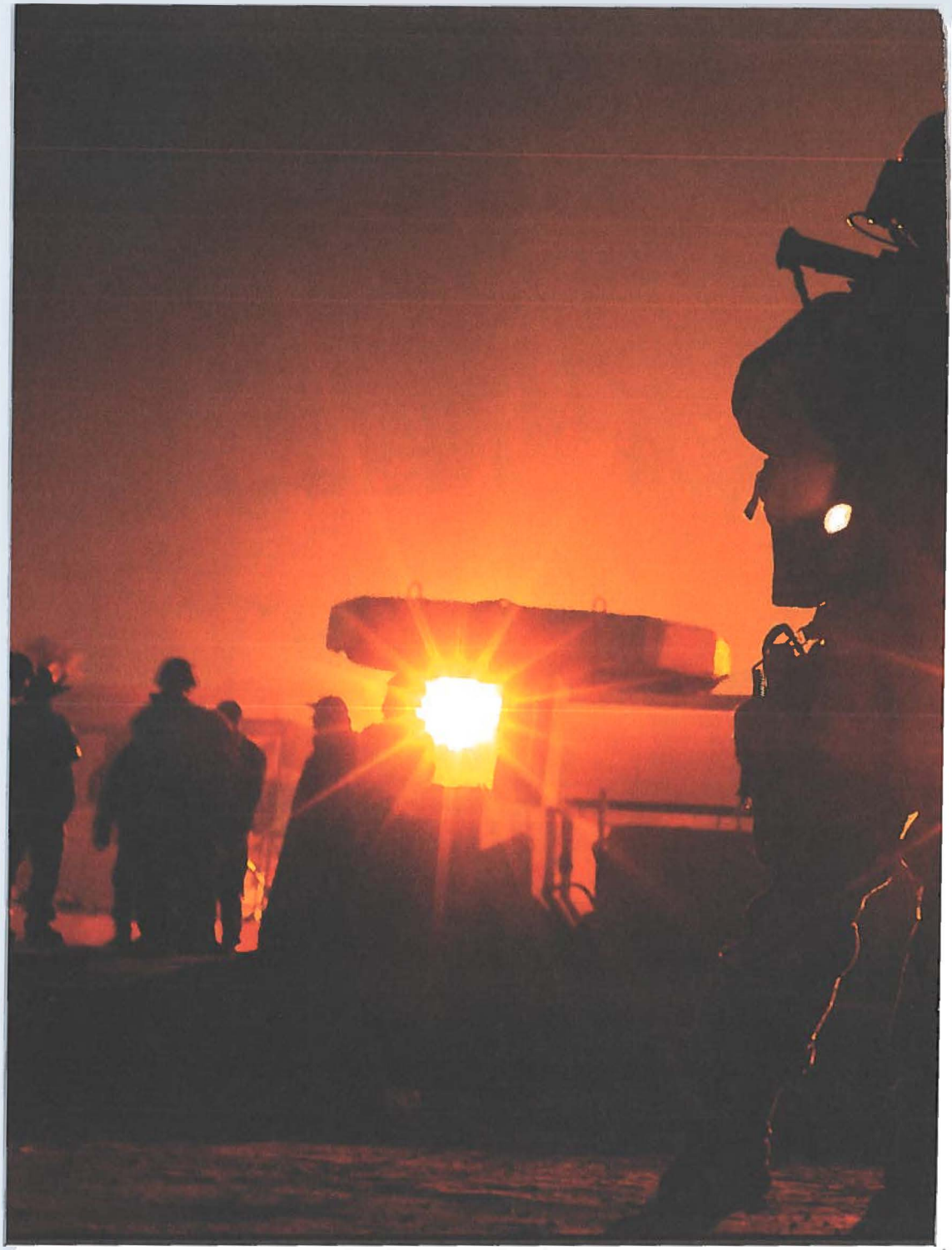
sense of peace letting him go on deployment," she said. "I just feel like he has that little extra in his pocket to watch over him... He might have started out doing it for me, but I think he ended doing it for himself."



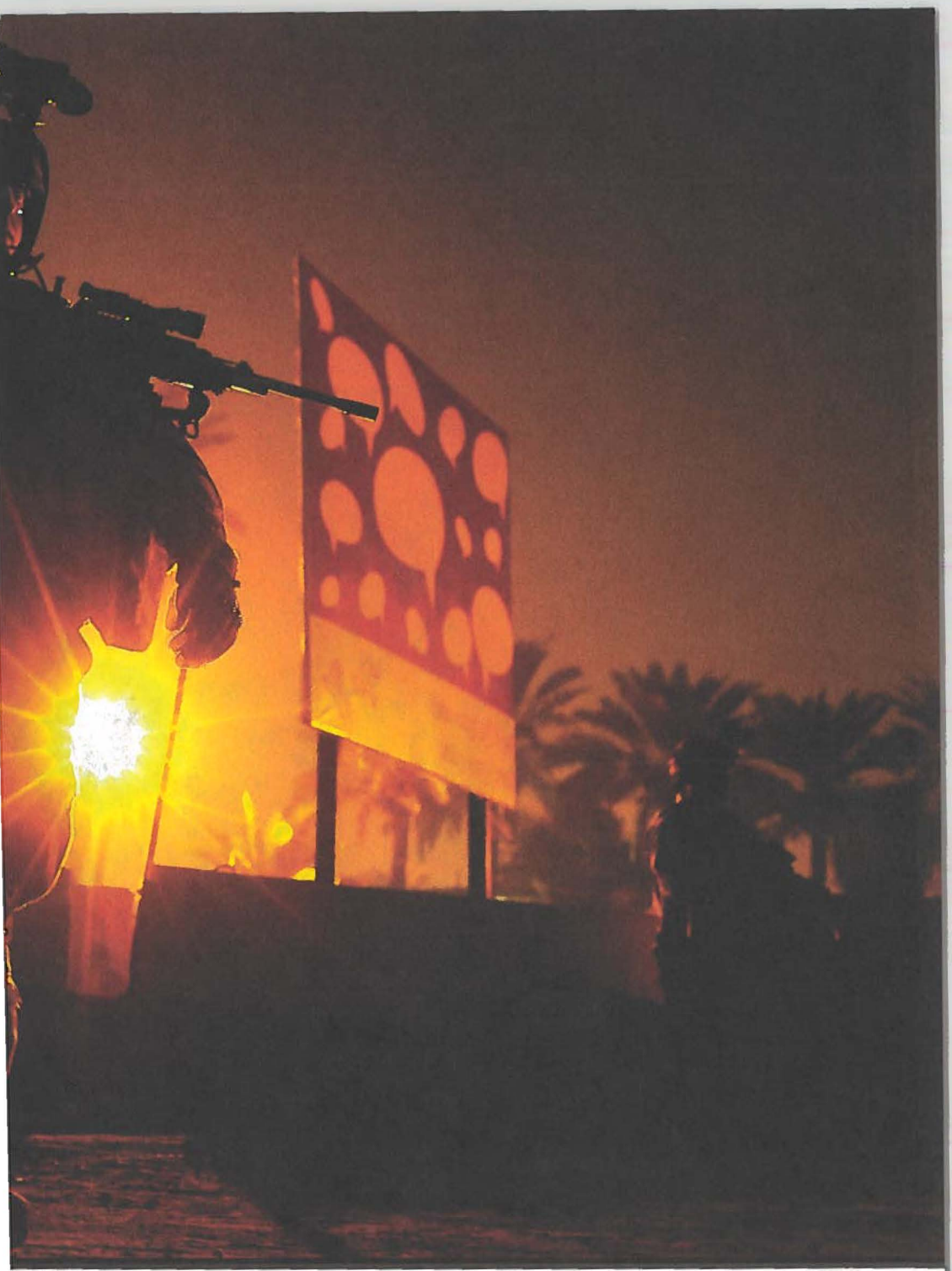

Ian and his dad share some time at the PX at Fort Carson on Sept. 1, 2008, when his family dropped him off for deployment to Iraq. Eric, a Vietnam veteran, offers him advice only a soldier could give: "Basically I said two things to him. No. 1, I said, 'I want you to be careful all the



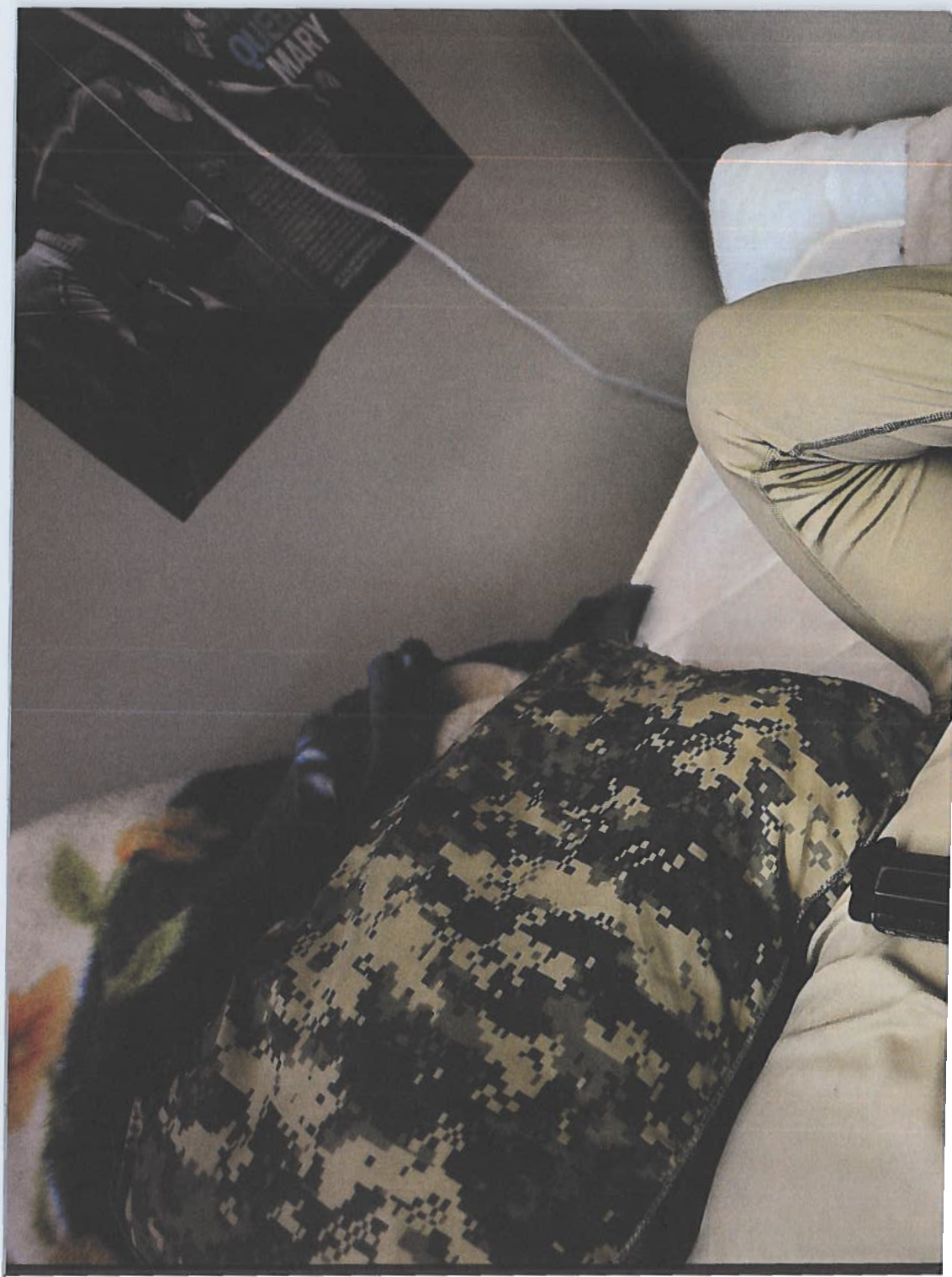

time and trust your instincts.' No. 2, I said, 'If you're going down, give 'em hell. Fire 'till your last breath.' At that point he squeezed me, like, 'I understand,' you know? And we didn't say anything else."



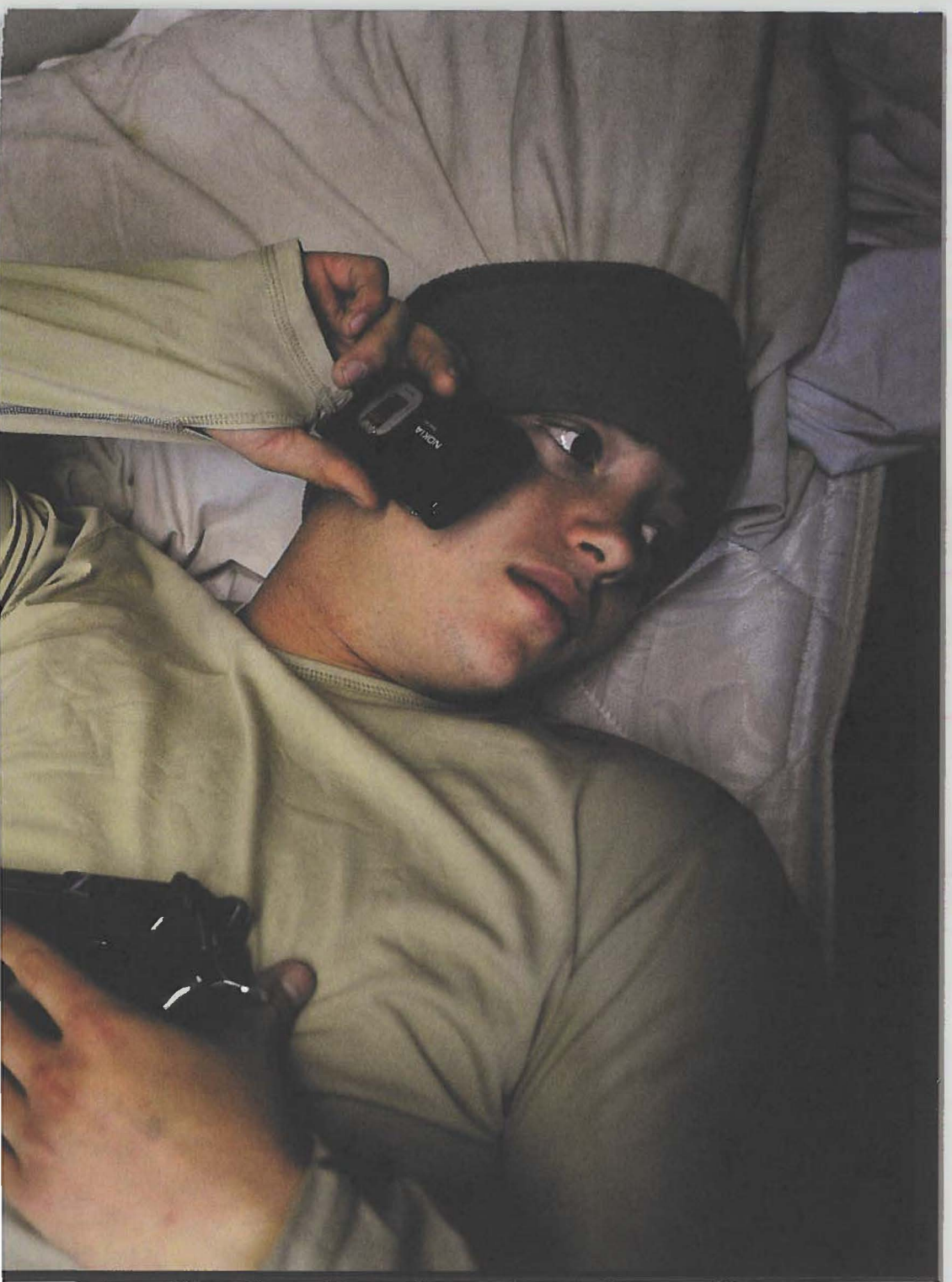
Fisher pulls security detail Dec. 10, 2008, for a meeting between intelligence troops and local residents near the site of a recent rocket attack in Diwaniyah, Iraq. He's excited to get selected for the task, and for the chance to finally wield his Squad Automatic Weapon in Iraq, three months into his deployment. Trained for combat and primed to fight, Fisher arrived in Iraq in September 2008 along with about 3,800 troops of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team. He had expectations for Iraq, and new ones for his life. Given a second chance after missteps at Fort Carson, field



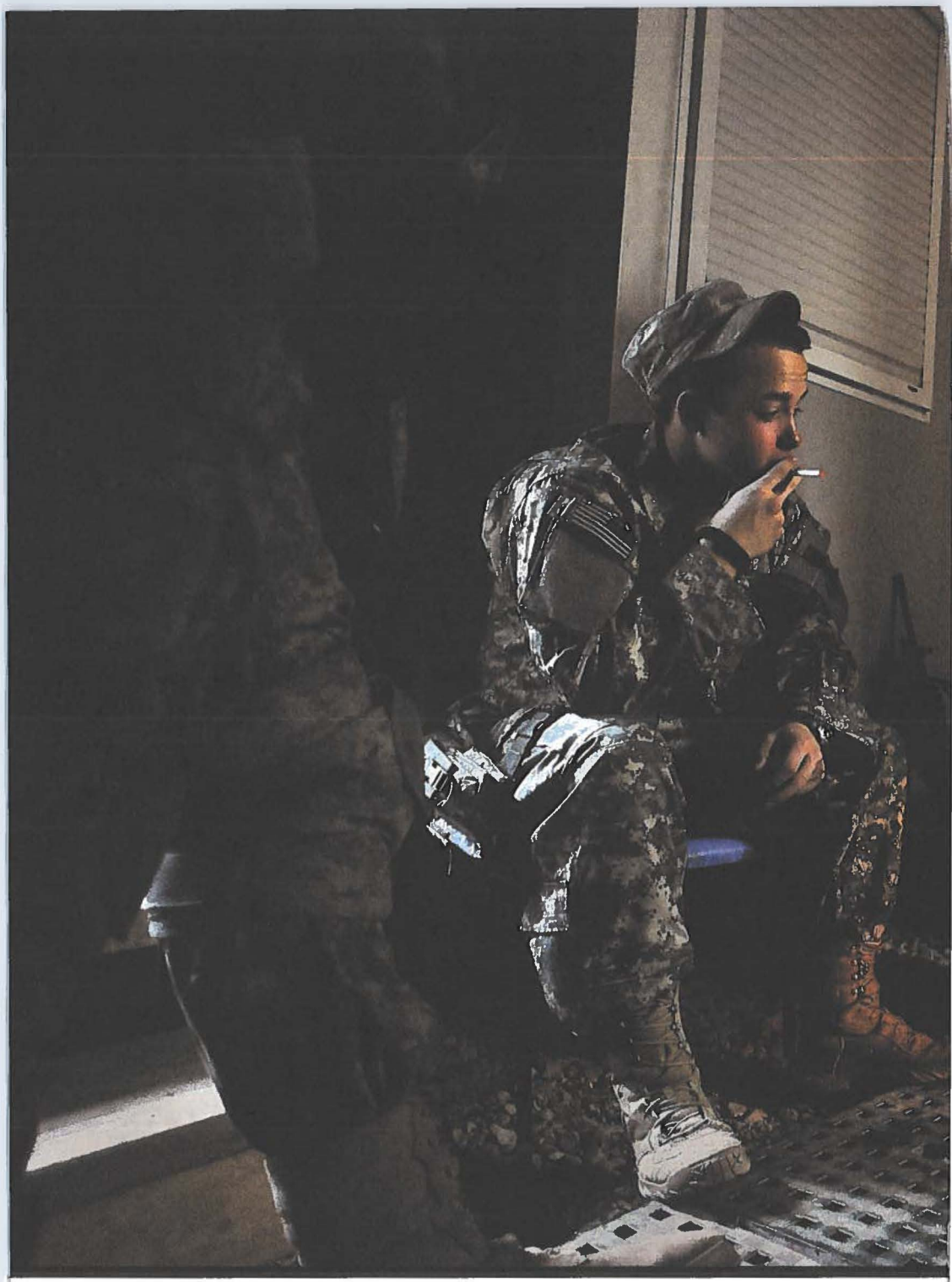
commanders saw his potential as a soldier. But they remained wary of issues that had surfaced before he'd shipped out, when substance abuse and lapses of judgment got him demoted—and nearly got him booted from the military. Fisher plunged into his unit's deployment with new resolve. But while he'd gone looking for a fight, he arrived at a time when the U.S. military role had been scaled back. Fisher adjusted to his role with the help of seasoned veterans.




Fisher rests on his bed with his 9mm while calling a girlfriend back home Dec. 7, 2008. A couple of weeks earlier, while communicating with friends on MySpace, he came to the realization that his on-again, off-again relationship with Kirsten Oliver was really over. "It's one of those things,



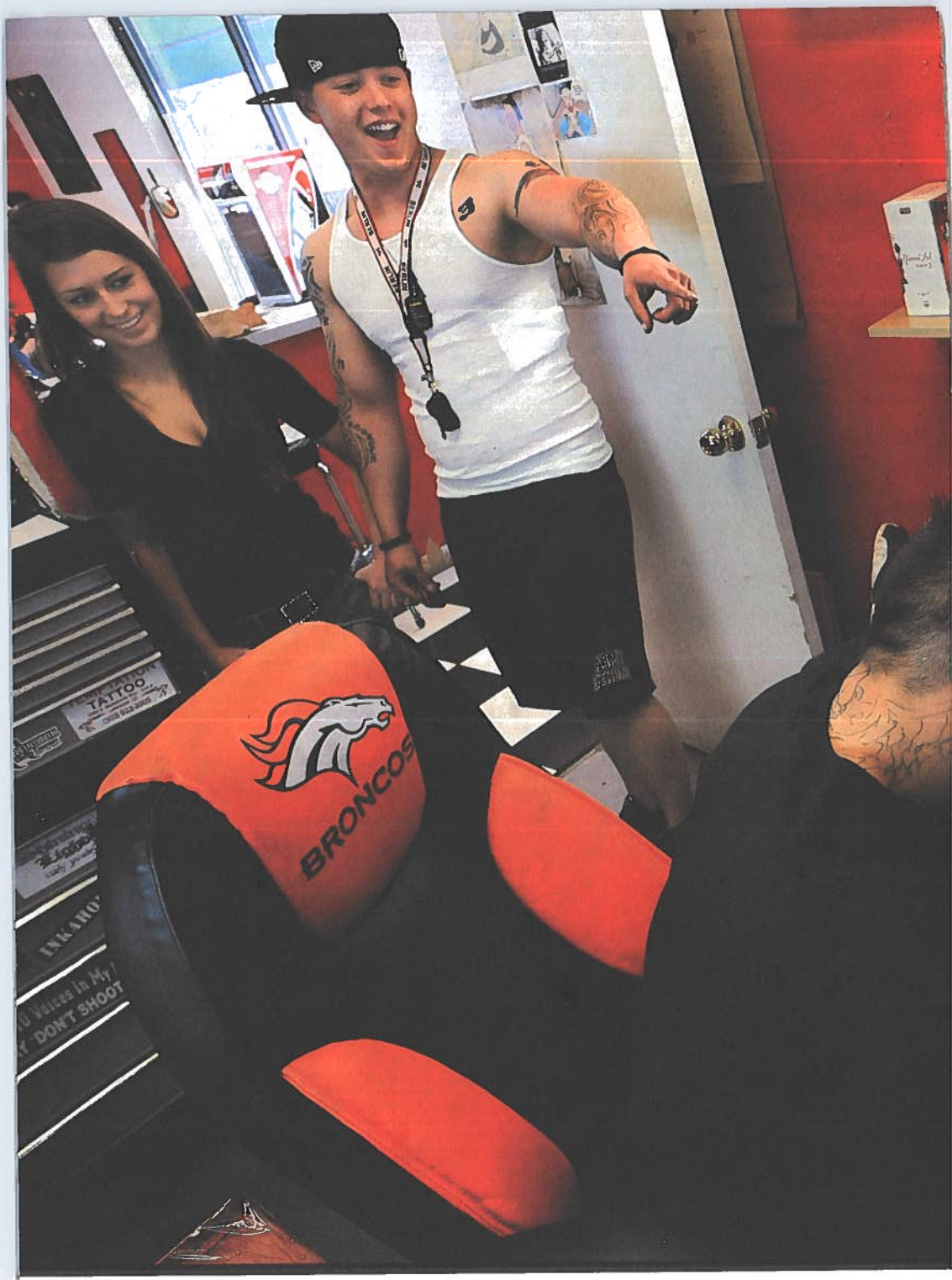

man," he said. "You can't really let it hit you. Just continue with the mission... What the hell am I supposed to do?" Soon after, he began calling a former girlfriend. They talked about getting together when he returned stateside.



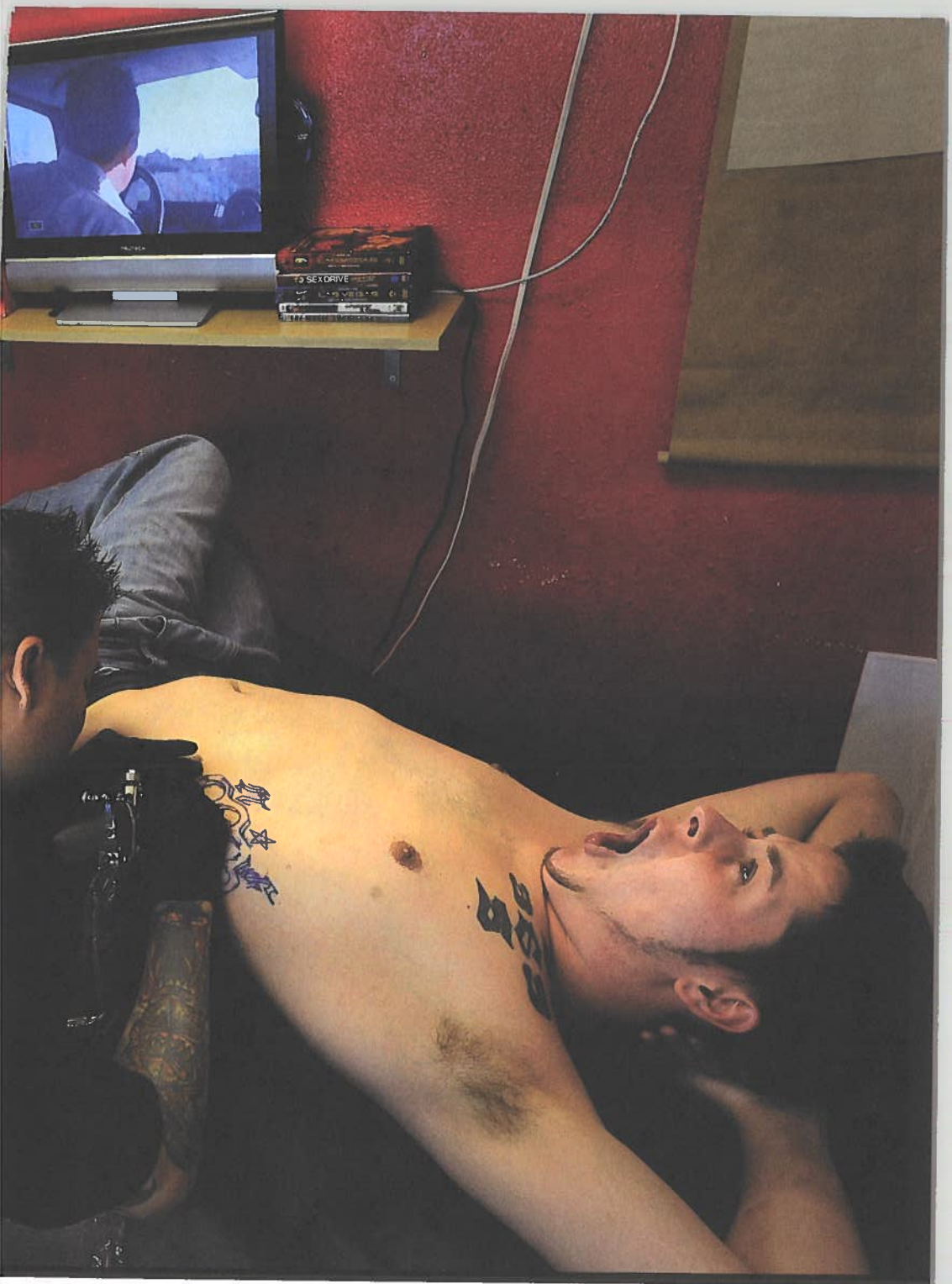
As Sgt. Lonnie Buthmann and Pvt. Rob-drick Robinson roughhouse, Fisher grabs a smoke Nov. 28, 2008. The Iraq of late 2008 is nothing like the Iraq that Ian envisioned upon enlisting. With violence down and U.S. troops giving more control to local forces, Fisher questioned his purpose. Instead of facing off with the enemy, U.S. troops were being asked to provide



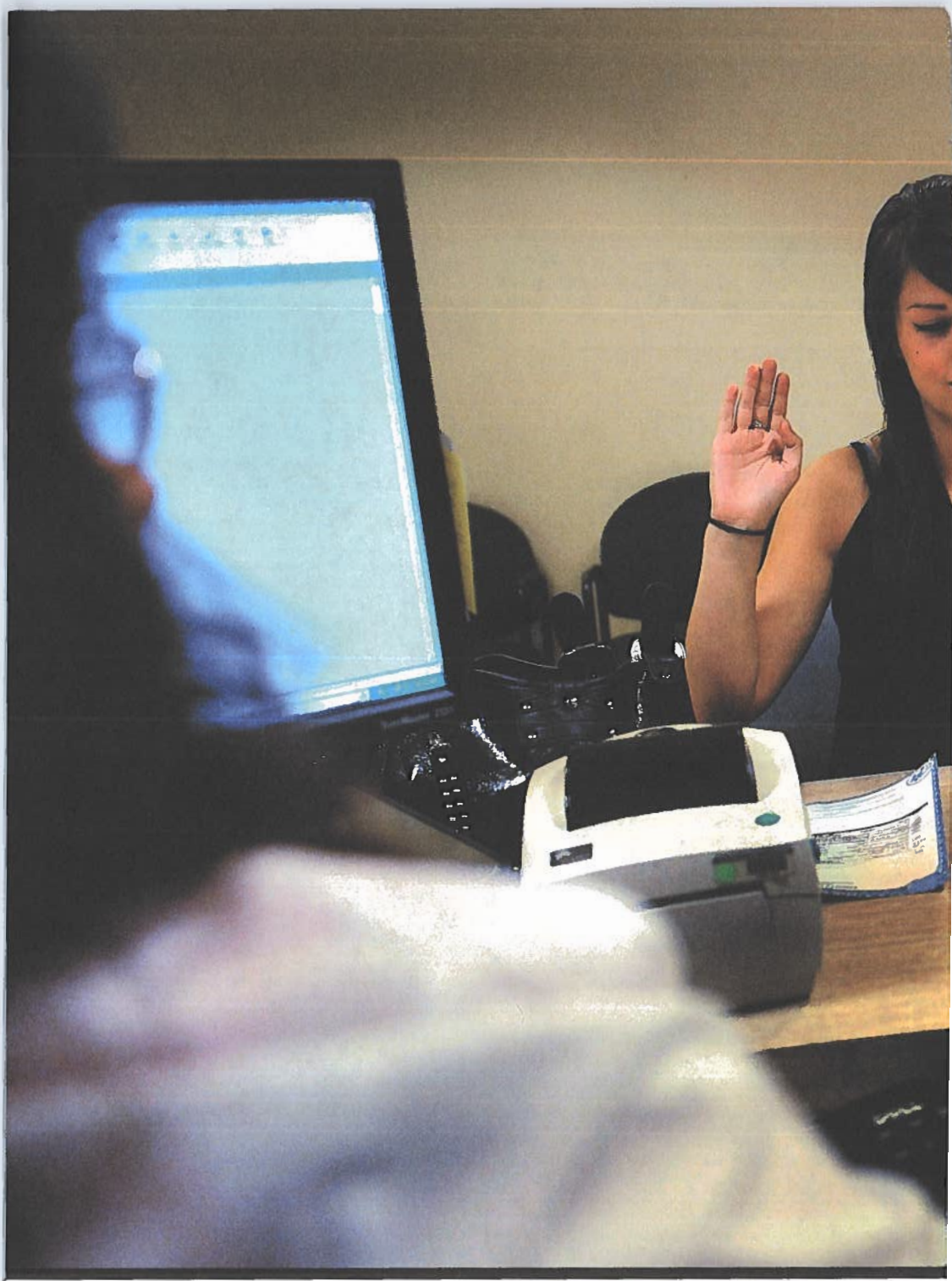
transportation, react to events long after the fact and undertake mundane chores. But as the time passed, Fisher began to make sense of it: "Maybe it's about learning to soldier up and do your job in life. Maybe that's what a real soldier is."



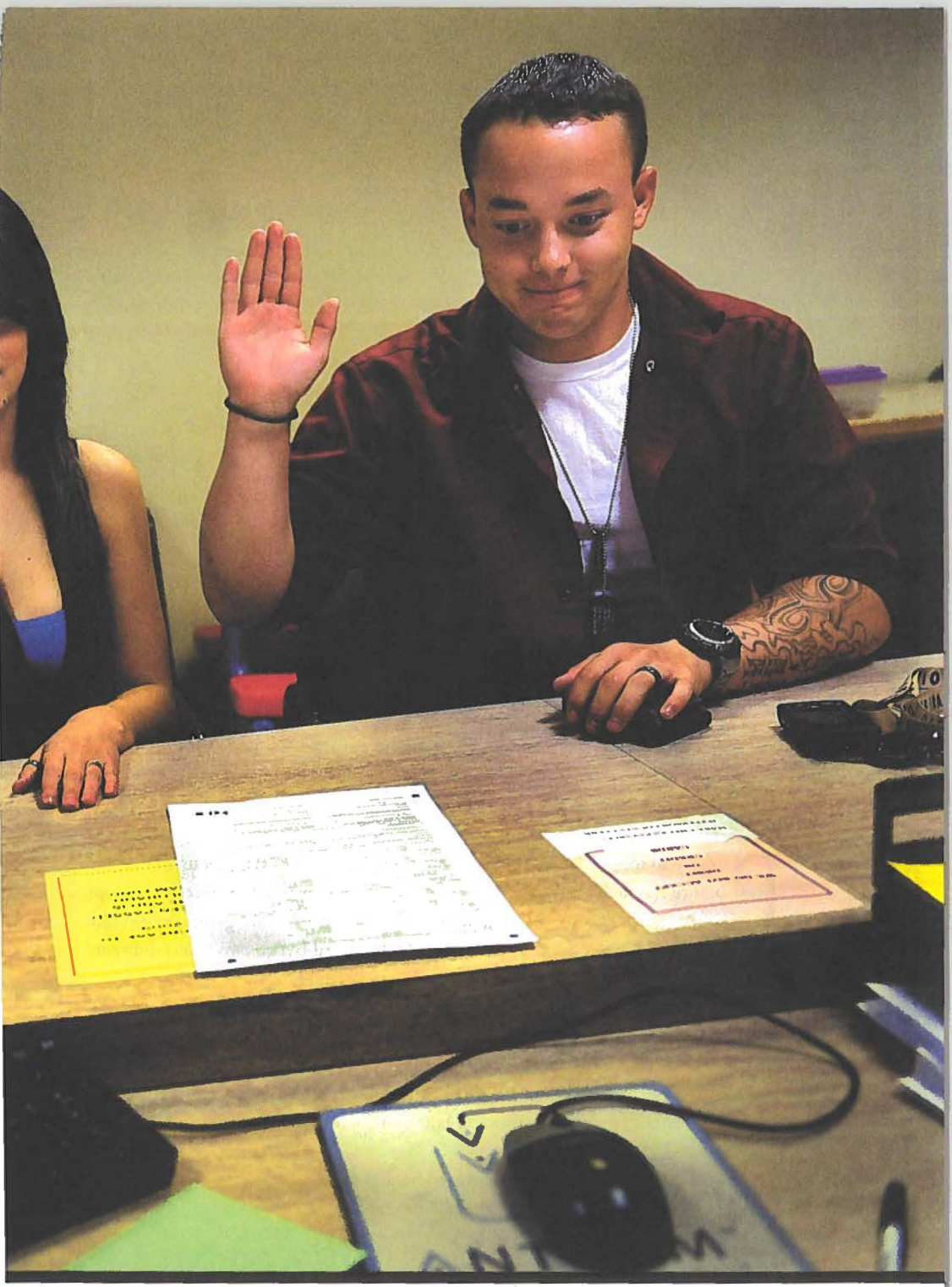

Ian and his new girlfriend, Devin Ervin, enjoy watching Nick 'Buddha' Nelson get a brass-knuckles tattoo March 14, 2009, in Lakewood, Colorado, Ian got a matching one earlier that day. The design includes an 'N' and an 'F,' for their last names. "He's my best friend," Ian says. The tattoo "represents all the trouble we have gotten into together." The trio were inseparable




during Ian's leave from his tour in Iraq. "We're boyfriend and girlfriend," Devin said later. "I don't remember how that happened, but I think we just figured it out together, not really saying anything to each other. But it happened."



On Aug. 24, 2009, three days after Ian's return from Iraq, he and Devin applied for a marriage license at the Jefferson County, Colo., clerk's office. The couple were married an hour later in a quiet courtroom. They were eager to get married immediately. Driving away, Ian turned down



the music. "Ya know, everyone gets counseled in Iraq that life is not going to be like your fantasy when you get back home," he said. "...Well, I'm checking this off my fantasy list."

THE DAVID L. JANNETTA
DISTINGUISHED LECTURESHIP
IN WAR, LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY, OCTOBER 13, 2009

JOHN BALABAN

# The Invisible Powers

"The proper subjects of poetry are love, virtue, and war."
--Dante Alighieri, De Vulgari Eloquentia c.1303.

Perhaps as long as there has been war, there has been poetry about war. Long before Homer composed his epic about the launching of the Greek warships to Asia, there was an oral poetry already alive among his pre-literate ancestors recording the valor and miseries of what Lord Byron two thousand years later would call the "brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art."

The great war epics of the ancient world, even while praising the bravery of sword-wielding warriors, were mindful of the pain left by warfare's destruction, both on the soldiers and civilians, victors and vanquished. At the close of the 10th century Anglo-Saxon poem called "The Battle of Brunanburh" celebrating the liberation of the English tribes from the Scots and Danes, we hear this:

> Behind them they left corpses to be shared
> by the dark-coated one - the black raven

with curving beak - and the grey-coated one,
the eagle with white tail, the carrion to be enjoyed

by the greedy hawk of war and the grey beast,
the wolf in the wood. A greater slaughter was never
before on this island slain by an army
with sword blades....

Lord Byron, attuned to modern wars of national liberation brewing in Europe, continued:

War's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art,
Unless her cause by right be sanctified.[1]

And in doing so, he presents some complicated questions not just for men and women in uniform, but for any citizen, but particularly a citizen of a democracy like ours, in times like ours, with a technology like ours. How is a war "by right sanctified"? What is a "just war", or a *jus ad bellum*, "the right to go to war"? And how do we determine what is *jus in bello*, the "right use of force"? Who makes these discriminations?

In its imagery and affecting music, poetry has considered such issues through the centuries, and not just in Western poetry but in nonwestern traditions as well. Later in my talk I will try to persuade you that a mind trained in reading poetry—not necessarily poetry about war but poetry about anything that affects our human condition—is a mind crafted to make crucial moral distinctions.

But for now, here is an 8th century poem by the Chinese master Li Po[2], written around 750 when Chinese imperial armies had sent out hundreds of thousands of their troops as far west as the Caspian Sea in modern day Iran, northwest into Xinjiang and the domain of the Uighurs, and south in India and Vietnam:

Last year we were fighting at the source of the Sang-kan;
This year we are fighting on the Onion River road.
We have washed our swords in the surf of Parthian Seas;
We have pastured our horses among the snows of the T'ien Shan.

[1] *Don Juan*, Canto 9, V.4

[2] Arthur Waley, trans.& editor, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po* (Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 34-35.

The King's armies have grown grey and old
Fighting ten thousand leagues away from home.
The Huns have no trade but battle and carnage;
They have no fields or ploughlands,
But only wastes where white bones lie among yellow sands.
Where the House of Ch'in built the Great Wall that was to keep away the Tartars,
There, in its turn, the House of Han lit beacons of war.
The beacons are always alight, fighting and marching never stop.
Men die in the field, slashing sword to sword;
The horses of the conquered neigh piteously to Heaven.
Crows and hawks peck for human guts,
Carry them in their beaks and hang them on the branches of withered trees.
Captains and soldiers are smeared on the bushes and grass;
The general schemed in vain.
Know therefore that the sword is a cursed thing
Which the wise man uses only if he must.

What were they doing washing off their swords in Parthia, or present day Iran? Li Po's poem maintains that the sword is "cursed thing" that a wise man uses only when he must.[3] This is idea comes right out of the ancient *Tao Te Ching.* Otherwise, the viewpoint is fairly similar to the Anglo-Saxon poem I just read, even in its disturbing imagery. In ancient China, generals returning home with their armies re-entered the capital through a so-called Gate of Mourning. This was true whether the campaign had been a success or a defeat, because war is a pollution and ceremonies are required to protect the living from the inevitable spiritual consequences.

The key word in these old poems is "sword." For us, it has been a long, long time since it was the usual expectation of warfare that soldiers would be driving sharp instruments into enemy soldiers, face to face. We are a long ways from the very personal battlefields where one warrior using a sword or ax went after another warrior whose name and family lineage he might have even known.

Over the centuries, as this audience knows well, the technology of warfare has changed drastically, complicating moral issues almost beyond comprehension both

[3] Chapter 31 of the *Tao Tĕ Ching,* James Legge, trans. "Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. ...and not the instruments of the superior man—he uses them only on the compulsion of necessity. ...Calm and repose are what [the sage] prizes; victory (by force of arms) is to him undesirable... and he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom.

for the ordinary citizen and for soldiers skilled in war's *techné*—to use the ancient Greek word for craft or skills. As Air Force cadets you are well aware that your extraordinary technical skills make possible the killing of people you will never see, perhaps from 35,000 feet or so from where you cannot even see the ground much less the people on it. Sitting at a computer screen and keyboard in Las Vegas, Nevada, you can launch missiles from a drone circling a landscape on the other side of a world.

Such is the current techné of warfare, the technology of modern warfare. In his book *Air War Vietnam*, the aviation historian Frank Harvey called this technology "hurling impersonal thunderbolts from the heights in supersonic jets."

The plural of *techné* is *technai*, curiously the word from which we derive the term "liberal arts" as the plural came to mean more than utilitarian skills but was extended to refer to what we call the arts—the use of skills for a higher purpose of the human moral imagination—including the art I wish to talk about: poetry.

But before I talk about the power of poetry, here is some background:

During the Vietnam War, I volunteered as a civilian conscientious objector and worked as the field representative for a private agency that treated the most severely wounded children. The children that we brought to major U.S. teaching hospitals were riddled by bullets, slashed by cluster bomb flechettes, blinded and deafened by tossed grenades, had their lips and jaws shot away, their spines severed. Others had their limbs blown off, including one 12-year old boy left with only an arm after a road mine blast. Another boy had his chin glued to his chest by napalm. One girl had her eyelids burned off by a white phosphorus artillery shell. One gun-shot toddler survived the massacre of her family in a ditch because she was protected by their bodies. I could go on. And, indeed, the memory of such suffering would have been my sole, unadulterated sense of Vietnam hadn't my job often taken me into the countryside to explain to parents what we could possibly do for their children at hospitals in the United States. Oddly, that work afforded me a glimpse of another, more enduring Vietnam. Improbable as it might seem, this glimpse came on snatches of poetry and song that led me into a realm of beauty and wisdom beyond the mayhem of the war.

At first, I had no clue on what I was hearing. I would be standing on a river bank way out in the war zone as a little skiff motored by and I would hear a bit of song float past me, sometimes without ever even seeing the singer's face under the conical leaf hat from where the song drifted up to disappear in the stutter of the boat's two-cycle engine and in the wave wash on the muddy bank at my feet. Once, I found myself waiting in an orchard behind a family's house as they came to a

decision about sending their injured, 10-year old son to America in our care. You can imagine the strange intensity of this moment: "we" had injured their child, yet our huge American war technology made it also seem to Vietnamese farmers that we could do anything...maybe even grow back a arm? Back at the regional hospital, it was explained that this could not be done, not even in America, but that it might be possible to make a bone graft to join the severed bones. The arm would always be weak. The graft might fail.

That day, off a dirt road near the Mekong, at their bamboo-thatched house under palm trees, I had come for their decision. While they conferred, I went out back to sit on a bench in their fruit orchard. Somewhere in the stands of bananas and papaya, a woman's voice started up in song. I was in my twenties and in what you might call a heightened state because of what was happening inside and because being out by myself in the countryside was a risk. The singing was lovely, just a lone voice drifting through the leaves. I couldn't see the woman, but pictured her picking bananas or snagging papaya into one of those little wire baskets at the end of a long pole. Inside the simple house, a momentous decision was being made about the boy whose right, upper arm had been severed by shrapnel but held together by a plaster-of-Paris cast and fed by an underarm sliver of flesh that carried the arteries and nerves. He could still move his fingers, so there was hope. At the hospital weeks earlier, the family had refused the surgeon's advice to have their son's arm removed. Now the splintered bone tips were starting to decay.

After what seemed like forever, they came out with some tea and a plate of sliced mango. It was late in the afternoon and everyone knew I had to get out of there before too long. Yes, they would send their son for surgery in America. They made me promise to bring him back when it was over. All during our talk, drifting in the background of this charged moment, oblivious and yet calling from some other realm, was the woman's song.

My fascination with that sung poetry led me to a lifelong study of Vietnamese literary culture. What I was hearing out in the country was a *ca dao*, an oral poetry in a singing tradition over 2000 years old. After my discharge, I returned to Vietnam on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities intending to record this poetry before it disappeared, I thought, like the passenger pigeon, along with the society that knew it. So, while the war still nattered on, I walked about the countryside of South Vietnam with my green Harvard bookbag that held my notebook, a tape-recorder, a bottle of water, and a .38 revolver. The book that resulted, *Ca Dao Vietnam*, was the first such book translated to a Western

language. Most of the poems had never been written down before *in Vietnamese*. Here is one of the poems I recorded, sung by a former 38-year Viet Cong soldier:

Sông Sàigòn chảy dài Chợ Cũ,
Nước mênh mông nước đỏ phù sa.
Ngọt ngào ngọn lúa bát ngát hương (thơm)
Hương lúa của quê nhà (hò hò);
Hướng về quê mẹ đậm đà tình thương.

The Saigon River slides past the Old Market,
its broad waters thick with silt. There
the rice shoots gather a fragrance,
the fragrance of my country home,
recalling my mother home, stirring deep love.[4]

From the folk poetry I went on translate some of the literary poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương, the "Queen of Nôm Poetry," in a tri-scriptural book called *Spring Essence*. Her world of imagery and literary allusion—tied to the oral folk poetry but coming at the end of a complex *literary* tradition spread across East Asia—was a far more complex challenge. Even with the help of Vietnamese and French scholars, it took me ten years to translate and annotate the fifty poems in the book. Moreover, *Spring Essence* was the first time that the Vietnamese ancient writing script called Nôm had been printed in the modern sense.

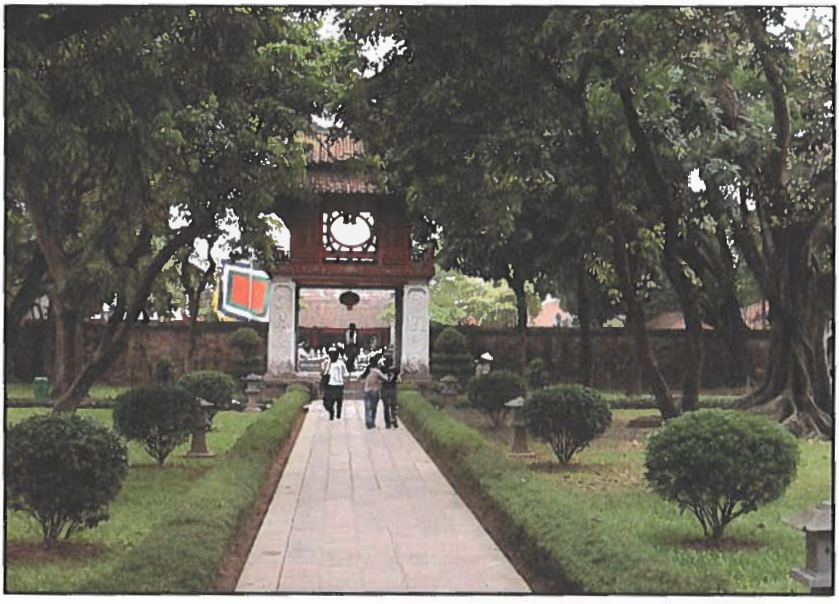
Following the remarkable success of *Spring Essence*, in 1999 I began the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation with Vietnamese colleagues (http://nomfoundation.org) to rescue the 1000-year cultural heritage written in Nôm. What other treasures, we wondered, might be hidden in Nôm collections and known only to a few scholars or to no one at all? We have continued that work for ten years now.

Last December I was in Hanoi, where our Foundation has been working at the National Library to digitize and make a digital library of its 4000 ancient texts, all of which are rotting away and being eaten by insects. I took a day off from my work to visit the old Temple of Literature, founded as Vietnam's first university in 1076, after the Vietnamese had finally driven out their Chinese overlords. Until 1919

[4] to hear this poem and others as originally taped in 1970-71 go to:
http://www.johnbalaban.com/ca-dao.html#the_saigon_river )

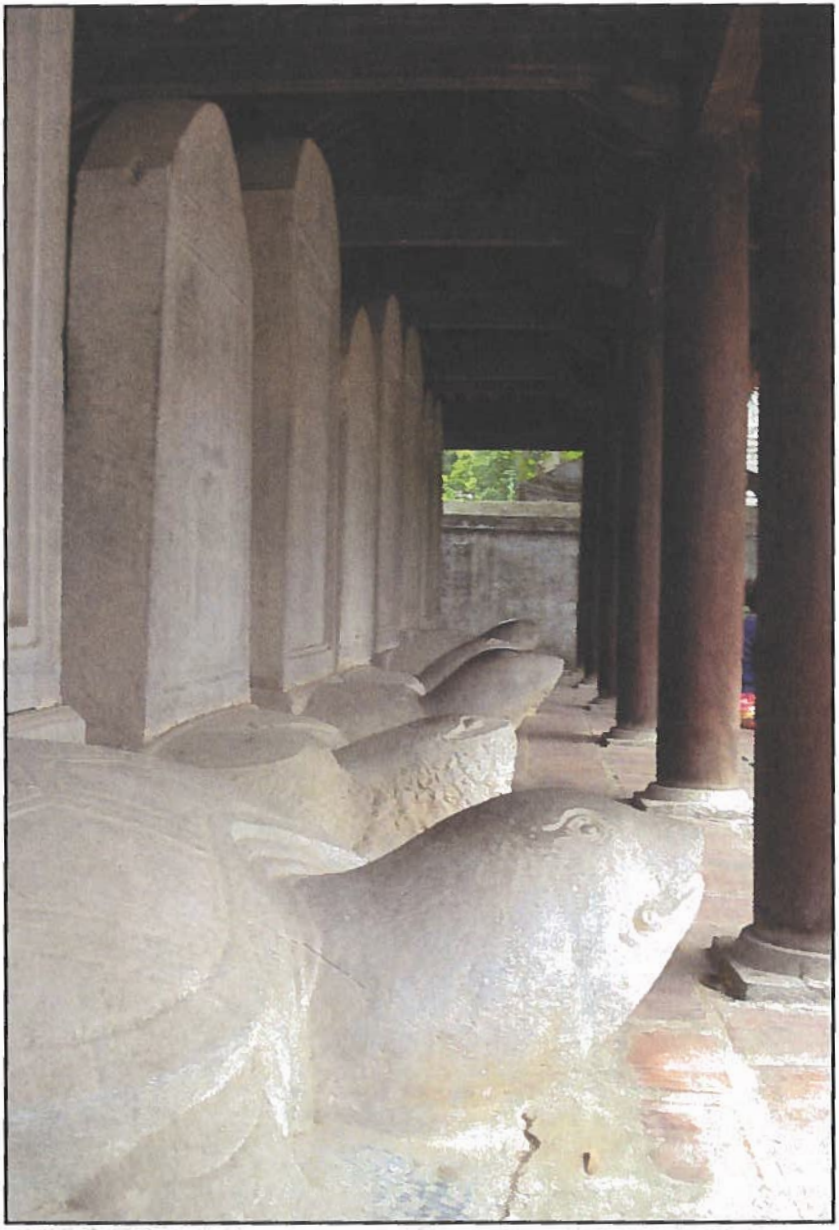
when it was closed, this is the academy where Vietnam trained its elite in poetry, history, and philosophy, selecting its students from any social class, and believing that a mind trained and tested in such things is a quick, sharp, and careful mind. And that such minds are important resources to the nation.

You enter the Temple grounds through a large stone gate topped with recoiling dragons and then proceed past gardens and ponds through another large gateway under a sheltered balcony where graduates declaimed their poetry.



Walkway into the main Temple. Photo: John Balaban

Perhaps the most striking thing one then sees are rows of 6-foot stone blocks standing on the backs of huge stone turtles. On the blocks are carved the names of those who, over the hundreds of years, graduated from the Temple and entered Vietnam's ancient civil service. Even today, hundreds of years after their serving the nation, one can see their descendants lighting incense sticks and placing them before those stone blocks in veneration.



Scholars' Stone. Photo:Tally Balaban

Further on, in a room inside the Temple itself, there is a large square stone carved in Chinese characters and next to it a translation of its text in modern Vietnamese and in English.



The Temple and,below, the 1442 inscription. Photos: John Balaban



This is what it says:

> Virtuous and talented men are state sustaining elements. The strength and prosperity of a state depend on it[s] stable vitality and it becomes weaker as such vitality fails. That is why all the saint emperors and clear-sighted kings didn't fail in seeing to the formation of men of talent and the employment of literati to develop this vitality.
>
> --Examination Stele, Đai Bảo Dynasty, Third Year (1442).

Literati? Literary people as "state sustaining elements"?

How on earth, we Americans might ask, can citizens trained in literary skills be "state-sustaining elements"? Why would the Vietnamese royal court set up a university for its best and brightest, regardless of class or wealth, and train them largely in poetry, history, and philosophy?

If that seems a little far-fetched, consider this: Confucius, the Chinese philosopher to whom the Vietnamese Temple of Literature is dedicated (after the Chinese were driven out of Vietnam) was once asked the perennial philosophic question of 4th century China—as it was the perennial question for Socrates in Plato's *The Republic*—"what would you first do if allowed to rule a kingdom?" Confucius' reply, as recorded in his *Analects*, was "to correct language." Because, he continued, if language is not precise, "then what is meant cannot be effected. If what is meant cannot be effected, society falls apart."

The application of the Confucian reply to our affairs today must be obvious.

Here is the substance of the exchange in Book XIII from around 400 BC.

> Tzu-lu said, "If the prince of Wei were waiting for you to come and administer his country for him, what would be your first measure?"
>
> The Master said, "It would certainly be to correct language."
>
> Tzu-Lu said, "Did I hear you right? Surely what you say has nothing to do with the matter. Why should language be corrected?"
>
> The Master said, "Lu! How simple you are! A gentleman, when things he does not understand are mentioned, should maintain an attitude of reserve. If language is incorrect, then what is said does not concord with what was meant; and if what is said does not concord with what

was meant, what is to be done cannot be effected. If what is to be done cannot be effected, then society falls apart."

Such precision in the use of words is of course a lifelong pleasure in-and-of itself, but it has immense practical value as well. Without such precision in the way we communicate with ourselves, with ourselves as a society, and with the world beyond the U.S., our private and public affairs falter.

Precision in the use of words is the talent which lends all other professions and skills their usefulness. It is a skill which goes beyond utilitarian technology. Such precision in speech, writing, and the reading of complex works of the human imagination brings to its practitioners and their societies a more enriched sense of self and an inevitable moral expansion. This skill, most notably found in poetry, is indeed "a state-sustaining endeavor." It is no mere curiosity that from Vietnam's earliest nationhood its rulers and foreign emissaries were always known poets. The 18th century ambassador to China, Nguyen Du, decorated as a "pillar of the nation" is also Vietnam's most famous poet. In modern times, Ho Chi Minh wrote quite good poetry in Vietnamese and in Chinese. The North Vietnamese ambassador to the Paris Peace Talks was Xuan Thuy, known first as a poet.

Traditionally, the chief poetic vehicle for study and composition, was the "regulated" poem made classic by the Chinese master Tu Fu in the 8th century. It is always eight lines, seven syllables to a line, rhyming usually on the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines, and requiring syntactic parallel structure in the middle four. For several East Asian societies it became the main lyric vehicle for centuries, serving them in the way the sonnet served the West. Through this form—whether written in Vietnamese and in Chinese—streamed history, culture, and cohorts of individuals possessing "bright mind."

As if creating and commenting on such compressed poetic structures were not enough for honing one's mind, Vietnamese carried it further, sometimes completing palindromes of the regulated verse form. Indeed, sometimes they created palindromes that when read backwards *changed language* from Vietnamese to Chinese, still about the same place, but with a different point-of-view.

And, in one instance that will bedazzle the mathematicians in the audience, in 1848 the Emperor Thieu-Tri composed "for his intellectual recreation" a cyclical palindrome in which twelve perfectly constructed 8-line poems were interlocked in a sun-shape (suggesting "heavenly mandate") which could be read by starting from any of its rays and, going about in a circle (clockwise or counterclockwise, from the outside-in or the inside-out) would create a perfect poem. Twelve different poems.

His poem still resides in Huế, carved in jade, and it should come as no surprise that it was a mathematician who managed to analyze and plumb its intricacies[5]



As the stone tablet suggests, the strength and prosperity of a state depend on its stable vitality created by men and women who are trained to inquire, sharpen their minds, and expand their souls by an active engagement with "the best words in the best order," with poetry.

This is as true in 21st century America as it was in 15th century Vietnam, even though we probably all have heard the hangdog modern view about the "use" of poetry. *Humboldt's Gift*, Saul Bellows' powerful novel based on his brilliant and crazed friend Delmore Schwartz, says hard things about the importance of poets in modern society: "Orpheus moved stones and trees. But a poet can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system." That is, their artistry of words means very little compared to the real skills, the *visible*, *demonstrable* powers of technology. "Poor loonies" he calls poets.

Even poets would seem to agree. W.H. Auden says that "poetry makes nothing happen" but a little later in his famous elegy for W. B. Yeats, he qualifies this "making-nothing-happen" view. Auden adds that poetry "survives/A way of happening, a mouth."

[5] Pierre Daudin, Pòemes anacycliques de l'Empereur Thieu-Tri," *Bulletin de la Societé des Études Indochinoises* 47, no. 1(1972):2-24, 49, no.2 (1974): 226-51.

That changes things. With the qualification, poetry becomes as essential for us now as it ever was, for if poetry gives us a "mouth," a voice to express our most private and public concerns, poetry makes *everything* happen.

Some years ago Mona Van Duyn, then the Poet Laureate of the United States, was interviewed by Ted Koppel on his television show Nightline. Mr. Koppel must have ticked off Ms. Van Duyn because here is her comment:[6]

> "Mr. Koppel, I have watched you over the years as you challenge, manipulate, contradict, humiliate the world's leaders, the world's visible powers. Those powers are very great: they can change the world. Now you are in a new world, the world of invisible powers, the world of literature, of poem and story. These do not force their powers upon their subjects, who freely choose to submit to them. You cannot contradict, challenge, manipulate or humiliate them. They work invisibly—they widen and deepen the human imagination, they increase empathy (without which no being is truly human), they train the emotions to employ themselves with more appropriateness and precision, they change or modify the very language in which human thought is formed. Like love, but stronger, since love's power is limited by mortality, they are holders and keepers of what Time would otherwise take away from us—the world, both natural (its creatures, colors, shapes, textures, sounds, smells, tastes) and the social (the others we love or hate or have never known, their voices, appearances, assumptions, the inner and outer contexts of their lives). These powers, too, are very great: they can change the self."

[6] Mona Van Duyn, "Matters of Poetry" (Library of Congress, 1993).

**JOHN BALABAN** Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, has been nominated twice for the National Book Award in Poetry, and is a winner of the William Carlos Williams award from the Poetry Society of America. He served in Vietnam as a conscientious objector and is known for his translations of Vietnamese poetry and his work to preserve Vietnamese writing in the ancient script called Nom: <http://nomfoundation.org>.

BEVERLY A. TIFT

## In Memory Of All Things Past

Tonight, I visit the 'Moving Wall', the half-size replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that has toured the country for more than twenty years. Each time the wall comes to Connecticut, I go at twilight—for I cannot bear my reflection.

laundry day—
clenched between my teeth
clothespins

—originally appeared in *Haibun Today*, 2007

## Stop-Time, Convoy Rest Stop, Tapline Road, Saudi Arabia, January 1991

Cindy—in one perfect moment with the sun on her wind-shuffled hair—is laughing. From where I stand, I frame her bright face with my hands and call, "Click, Click, I got you."

distant thunder
all night the radio
tuned to static

# Arabian Nights

Under the dark of the moon, the *An-Nafūd* desert is shrouded in brilliant light. These are not muted city stars, but a radiant tide that pours from black-velvet sky to engulf the world that I once knew.

sentry duty
the letter from home
in my pocket

—originally appeared in *Moonset Literary Newspaper*, 2009

# A Holiday Called July

Two months after returning from Desert Storm, I'm sitting on the porch listening to an album by Bette Midler. When neighborhood teenagers set off fireworks, I startle back to those memories that keep time with the echoing booms.

Again, the beginning notes, *From a Distance*, weave through my thoughts . . . leading me home. I turn the volume higher, close my eyes to the brilliant sky and wonder: Is God still watching us?

fireflies . . .
"red rover, red rover"
fades into night

## Somewhere North of the Neutral Zone

On days like this, neither here nor there, I see your silhouette against a ruddy horizon, which is marred by dark clouds that imperceptibly engulf the light. When the sky fractures and falls apart, desert sand slips between my fingers and there is nothing left but the wind . . . on days like this.

shifting shadows
under the clothesline
greener grass

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J. SCOTT SMITH

# March 25th

Franklyn was a big guy from Florida who got stop-lossed while at the University of Florida. We all thought that was funny, but no one would ever tell him to his face because we'd always call him, "Frank the Tank!" Franklyn could be pretty scary sometimes. Franklyn was also manning the gun in his hummer—what we call "trucks"—when we got ambushed on March 25th. When we got ambushed that morning the truck behind me thought we were dead because they saw an RPG go in, and only smoke come out. And I thought Franklyn was as good as dead when his truck drove into the berm where the ambush was coming from. That's where the RPG, mortar, and AK fire was coming from, too. Franklyn didn't die but the men shooting at him either missed or froze, and instead of killing him, they got killed by him. Franklyn had SLAP rounds in his .50 cal and shot a guy point blank all over the body. That's like being hit by hundreds of piano keys at supersonic speed. Corty stepped out of the truck and started rounding up prisoners when Franklyn yelled, "What the fuck are ya doing! Get the hell outta the way!"

But Corty didn't and so the prisoners lived, even though we thought they should've died. Corty looked pretty shaken up after the whole thing, and I couldn't tell how Franklyn looked because, after shooting the .50, everything shakes. It puts cracks in the ground and tears off flesh if a round comes within close enough range. When their truck drove through that opening in the berm, Lt. Tosh and Cybert dismounted, while Mac stepped out with his 9mm pistol.

I was still screaming when they charged the trenches because I could still feel the shrapnel singeing my skin, crawling down my back, finding a new home. Pucket told me to be quiet.

"Shut the fuck up Smith! Calm down!"

So I did and grabbed Quintero's cargo pocket and patted him on the leg thinking that my touch would soothe his damaged innards, hoping that he'd stop rolling around and moaning like some mental patient. In between all that I'd start to moan and whine too, but how a little kid would after scraping his knee, all worried and scared, even though I hadn't been shot or wounded, only burnt and shaken up.

The Abrams tanks were firing into the berm and little red balls would bounce and skip across my windshield. The earth hiccupped in shallow deep breaths as fiery angry wasps zipped through the air, zinging and snapping in straight lines, cracking like a whip the closer they got. Before the RPG came a-knocking, I held my 9mm up and looked from left to right for any movement. When the RPG left I picked up my M16 and swung it wildly until it hit my temple and cracked the skin.

"Whoa, Smith, dude! That's going to be a cool looking scar!"

But I couldn't manage to tell them that while our corpsman tumbled lifeless to the dirt, all I did was drive in a straight line and pet the leg of my dazed and wounded gunner. All I did was drive in a straight line.

Enemy fire hit the tanks on their turrets like flies hitting a windshield. The crack and pop of AK fire was interrupted by the even bursts of .50 and 240 fire, there's a distinctive difference. I didn't shit or piss myself, but I whined and nervously looked from left to right. I went from yelling to myself, to yelling into the handset,

"They're all over the place...like fuckin' ants...we need support!" then Keeney responded,

"Roger that, Smitty," and hearing his voice and the fatherly assurance he carried with it made me feel better, even though he was an asshole. But Johnson was already dead, his whole body charred and molded like red and black clay left out in the sun to bake and peel.

Tosh, Mac and Cybert ran along the trenches and past all the warm plates of rice and hot tea still steeping, plates upturned and black puddles growing in size like rich oil seeping from the ground. Lt.'s rifle jammed so he gave it to Cybert.

"Fix this!" and Cybert did what they taught him in boot camp.

"Tap, Rack, Bang," he later told me.

Lt.'s rifle got fixed but Cybert hung onto it anyway.

"You should've seen it, Smith. They were all huddled together against the berm, with their hands up in the air, so I just kept shootin' and they just kept gettin' smaller and smaller."

I don't know what Tosh or Mac did because they didn't tell me, and I didn't ask. There was a rumor that Tosh picked up an RPG and shot a bunker full of Iraqis, killing them all and saving the day. That did not happen. He shot an RPG for the hell of it and watched it fly off into the distance. It hit the ground with a small thud. Soon after there was already talk that Lt.'s truck was getting silver and bronze stars. Johnson was dead, and they were getting silver and bronze stars.

A lot of people died that day, and because a lot of people died, Tosh was awarded the Navy Cross, the second highest award you can be given in the Marines. Cybert and Mac were both awarded the Bronze Star, a pretty prestigious award as well. Quintero got the Purple Heart for taking an RPG across the stomach. Johnson got the Purple Heart for being killed by an RPG when it hit him in the head. Franklyn and every other Marine and Corpsmen that day got the Combat Action Ribbon. Corty got made fun of for protecting the prisoners, and later that night, Major Navé was run over and killed by one of our own Tracks in his sleep. He was awarded nothing.

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THOMAS MCGUIRE

# Heirloom Photograph

If you are interested in scars I can show you some very interesting
ones but I would rather tell you about grasshoppers.

—Nick Adams in "A Way You'll Never Be"

I.

In a reprint of a photo posted on my laptop screen
struts my grandpa, a raw recruit just sixteen.
Note how he stands smart and stract
in a uniform stylish yet oversized
and by the ladies prized
(despite its common medium-brown drabness).

See how he smiles shouldering the gravid rucksack
that he'll bear across the Western Front
from Belleau Wood to St. Mihiel.

It's the jaw, though, that always numbs
my nuts—see how it juts
as if to say to the demon Hun,
"Bring it on Gerry boy, I dare your sorry ass."

2.

Later in the labyrinth
of the trenches he'll
shed the rucksack
from his back
as he runs & pronks
about the redoubt
dodging minatory
five-nines & corpses
bloating in the sun,
hopping like
a hunted hopper
who somehow
always scores
some shade.

Oh lucky hopper
slips his ass
just beyond the reach
of Mower's lethal blade,
a sickle mowing
so much hay.

3.

But the photo doesn't show his fright—
that's the face of battle that almost always gets forgotten,
the oh-shit face that says he's crapped his knickers
as he carts dead-end dispatches day & night
from colonel to captain, then back again.

In the photo he just smiles smiles smiles.
Should fresh recruits look otherwise?
What good's a greenhorn grunt who foresees his own demise?

4.

Absent from the photo too is grandpa's brother,
age fifteen, a courier who wears the same
drab uniform, the usual medium-brown affair.
But for the dogtag stats stamped upon the rim
of a few paltry medals awarded postmortem
(760599 PTE E.T. Taggart)
I know next to nothing of this phantom kin.

I want grandpa's and his brother's rest
to be more than silence though
so I'll sing their song of suffering:

One day as gramps trailed
his brother he blinked not once but twice
as a five-nine fragment sliced
clean through parapets & gunny sacks.

Until gramps died from the disease called slow suicide,
the curse of working men & gutted soldiers,
a pyrotechnic trauma show of haywire synapses fired
near every night in the minefield of his neuralpaths.

* * *

Here's the nightly horror show he saw
till his liver finally caved
like a fish rotting in the head:

first a flame-red flash
quickens the retina
as a smooth shrapnel

axe scythes all
within its path;

then a white-hot
fragment crops
the shaved carrot top
of little brother's
patriotic head—
and of a sudden
little Edmund
sweet, sweet Edmund
is oh so dead.

And in that vision smooth and clean
as a mower glides through long grass green—
a nightly déjà vu of a shrapnel blade that felled for good
sweet Edmund in the mud of Belleau Wood—
Grandpa's photogenic jutted jaw unhinged forever.

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KEVIN PATRICK

# The Forgotten Few: The Portrayal of Aerial Combat in Australian Fiction

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there appeared a comparatively new genre of Australian war novel which sought to give readers some insight about the unique dangers of aerial combat and the intense pressures faced by Australian aircrews that fought in World War II and the Korean War. Yet few, if any, of these novels have ever been admitted into the canon of great Australian war literature.[1]

A key reason for such exclusion, it will be argued, was that the mechanised nature of air warfare, coupled with the class-conscious hierarchy of the air force itself, placed these novels in direct opposition to the enduring appeal of the ANZAC 'legend', which was underpinned by the image of the egalitarian Australian soldier—the archetypal 'digger'.

Another equally telling reason for their diminished artistic status is that many of these novels emanated from the ranks of 'popular' paperbacks, which were routinely shunned by contemporary critics and remain almost continually overlooked by present-day scholars.

However, as this article will demonstrate, such critical disdain fails to acknowledge how systemic changes to Australia's post-war publishing landscape made it possible for a new generation of Australian war novelist, such as William R. Bennett, to reach a truly mass audience, for whom tales of aerial combat were not so much a celebration of an outmoded martial ideal of the Australian soldier, but an exciting harbinger of the technological age in which they lived.

Central to any study of Australian war literature is the notion of the ANZAC 'legend', as both a political and historical construct and as a thematic ideal which has underscored many Australian war novels published since the end of World War I.[2]

The earliest and most influential articulation of the ANZAC legend can be found in *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914—1918*. C.E.W. Bean's six-volume account[3] of the 1st AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and its military actions at Gallipoli and along the Western Front was considered remarkable not only for its breadth of coverage, but its often intimate level of detail. A contemporary newspaper review remarked that its "comprehensiveness of narrative" made it unique, while noting how "the adventures of little parties of private soldiers are told if they throw light on the campaigns".[4]

This was typical of Bean's willingness to push the ordinary Australian soldier to the forefront of historical events. More significantly, however, Bean argued that the "strongest bond" amongst Australian servicemen was "between a man and his mate", a quality that "became recognisable as parts of the national character".[5] Not only did the act of war throw the traits of a uniquely Australian character into sharp relief, but it would be on the shores of Gallipoli, on 25 April 1915, where, according to Bean, "the consciousness of Australian nationhood was born".[6] By entwining the notion of mateship with a national pride forged by war, Bean laid down the basic tenets of the ANZAC legend that would colour a great deal of Australian war literature to come.

Butler expands on Bean's observations about the Australian character by tracing the historical lineage of the word 'digger', the nickname given to Australian soldiers during World War I, to the pastoral pioneers of 19th century Australia. More significantly, Butler mounts an explicitly political argument endorsing the ANZAC legend by nominating 'Diggerism' as a new form of "social order", one free of "political rancour", which could guide Australia through the uncertainties of the post-war world.[7] The rejection of "party politics" was evident in the rhetoric of veterans groups like the RSSILA,[8] which sought to "recreate the wartime spirit of fellowship" in peacetime Australia.[9] However, as political and economic crises wracked Australian society during the 1920s and 1930s, these aspirations frequently degenerated into extremism of the sort typified by paramilitary groups like the New Guard.[10]

If, as Bean argues, the ordeal of war was essential to the formation of Australia's national identity, then it is not surprising that the Australian experience of war should serve as the inspiration for Australian authors and their work. World War

II proved to be an unusually fertile field for Australian literature, spawning over 400 works of fiction.[11] David Walker stresses that not only were many of these written by veterans keen "to record at first hand the deeds of those who had done the fighting", but that some of them, such as Lawson Glassop's *We Were the Rats* (1944) and Eric Lambert's *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (1952), became bestsellers and outsold the official Australian histories of both world wars.[12] Many of these novels evoked the popular image of the anti-authoritarian Australian fighting man, by evoking "real or fancied links...with the diggers of the First World War and the distant rigours of pioneering life".[13]

Beneath this superficial bravado, however, lay a shared sense of alienation amongst Australian servicemen, as depicted in Lambert's *The Veterans* (1954), who were disgusted by the hedonistic and corrupt atmosphere of wartime Australian society. Yet as Robin Gerster points out, the acerbic and disillusioned tone of these novels was partly attributable to authors' catering to the "more 'sophisticated' tastes and tolerances" of post-war Australian audiences.[14]

Rick Hosking argues that the creative possibilities of the documentary-styled war novel, written by ex-servicemen attempting "to create fiction out of their memories", had been exhausted by the late 1950s.[15] Instead, Hosking nominates George Turner's *Young Man of Talent* (1959) as one of the few Australian war novels to extend the creative parameters of the genre by suggesting that, far from being a positive, transformative experience, war hastens the "emotional and ... physical collapse of those who fought them".[16]

If the critical literature devoted to Australian war novels seems inordinately concerned with the experience of the Australian soldier, it is only because the same is overwhelmingly true of the novels themselves. Despite the substantial contribution made by the RAAF to Australia's war effort during 1939-45, few post-war novels reflected the experience of Australian airmen. Unlike the British, for whom the experience of aerial combat was "an everyday reality", Gerster argues that, aside from the Japanese bombing raids to the country's remote northern coastline, "Australians had less occasion to be impressed, either positively or adversely, by air warfare".[17]

The national observance of ANZAC Day since 25 April 1916 meant that a generation of Australians had been raised to respect, if not worship, the image of the ANZAC 'digger'. This meant that, for the men who enlisted with the 2nd AIF mobilised in 1939, there was "no need to invent a new group persona for the Australian foot solder ... it was ready and waiting, full-blown".[18]

The RAAF, by contrast, struggled to invoke a stirring wartime narrative that resonated with Australians. Although its forerunner, the Australian Flying Corps, served with distinction during 1914-18, its exploits were never extolled in the same manner as the soldiers who fought at Lone Pine, Fromelles or Amiens. Contemporary RAAF propaganda inadvertently drew attention to the rawness of its history by referring to its recruits as "a new and amazing breed of men," only to concede in the same sentence that "most of them are little more than boys".[19]

This didn't dissuade some Australian writers from attempting to recast the RAAF pilot in the image of the physically imposing digger:

> The Australian Flight Lieutenant ... magnetized every pilot's attention. A brushed shock of corn-coloured hair topped six feet of athletically-proportioned sinew and muscle. His broad shoulders tapered down to slim hips. The width of his chest, too, was impressive and deep-built, like the chest of an underwater swimmer.[20]

Even if they weren't cast from the same mould as an Olympic athlete, Australians always stood out, even amongst the anonymous ranks of RAF Bomber Command: 'Sometimes they wore khaki felt hats. No aircrew components of any other nations had these ... Their uniform was a purplish blue; all others wore a blue-grey ... the fact that they wore a different uniform seemed to underline an Australian independence. They were not the most disciplined of men, but they were efficient'.[21]

Yet there would be little place for the 'rugged individualism' of the Australian soldier in the modern air force, where aircrews were "more than just [individuals] flying in an aeroplane. They were a crew fighting in it as a corporate unit".[22]

Those who did openly rebel against air force bureaucracy were swiftly punished. The hedonistic hero of Geoffrey Dutton's absurdist war novel, *Andy*,[23] having spent the first third of the book in "the boob" for stealing aviation fuel for his clapped-out motor car, is subsequently transferred to a remote Advanced Flying School in Tasmania, thousands of miles away from where he wants to be, at the frontline in New Guinea.

The hierarchical structure of the RAAF, and the demographic composition of its personnel, sometimes stood in stark contrast to the supposedly egalitarian traditions of the 1st AIF. Sir John Monash, the Australian Commander-in-Chief, noted that "there was ... no officer caste, no social distinction in the whole force ... In not a few instances, men of humble origin ... rose, during the war, from privates to commanders of battalions".[24] Although Serle argues that all armies are

"anything but a democratic institution," he points to Monash's "unusual" custom of involving large conferences of officers in planning attacks as a sign that the 1st AIF "was far more democratic than most".[25]

Such egalitarianism was not so readily apparent in fictional treatments of air force life. Squadron Leader Lou McKinnon, the arrogant commanding officer in *Island Victory*, is likened to "those upper-class Englishmen who do not boast about the virtues of their race and class, assuming what lesser men would assert," whose "contempt for the RAAF's indispensable 'wingless wonders' was notorious ... [even though] he was hardly conscious of his prejudice".[26] The Australian officers' ranks are frequently shown to be drawn from the upper–middle classes. Squadron Leader Gordon McCulloch is described as "a former Sydney stockbroker", while Flight Lieutenant Philip Masters lectured in modern English literature at university.[27]

The same was written of Australians serving in the RAF, characterised as young men "who had known the benefits of a well-equipped home, a comprehensive education and an ordered social existence," while stringent health and medical standards "weeded out the majority of applicants who had been deprived of these advantages".[28] The observance of class distinction might partly explain why such Australian authors as Geoff Taylor, Olaf Ruhen and Ray Hollis, all of whom flew with RAF Bomber Command, found favour with British publishers. Not only did their novels depict events experienced by the British public, thereby ensuring their commercial appeal, but their evocation of air force hierarchy, in its own way, positively reaffirmed Britain's own sense of social order.

If the Australian airman depicted in war novels was markedly different from the popular image of the 'digger', so were his weapons of war. The combat prowess of fighter pilots was defined by their aircraft. Therefore, considerable attention was given to the aircraft themselves:

> In the Tempest's specially designed high-speed wings, completely enclosed and out of sight, four 20-mm. Hispano Mk.V cannons lay at rest. Specially designed, too, those guns ... His right thumb found the firing button and gouged the Tempest's four slumbering Hispano cannons into back-lashing wakefulness ... 20-mm shells were gulped, spewed from flame-lashed muzzles.[29]

While such technically detailed passages were no doubt meant to bolster the claims of realism made on behalf of these books by their publishers, they also reflected the almost fetishistic appeal such technology held for the pilots

themselves: 'Vincent was admiring his Gee-Set. The grey metal box ... looked more like a toy than a weapon of war ... But still the flyers, hardly more than boys and all just boys at heart, fingered and admired their latest toys with gay anticipation'.[30] The thrill of flight is central to many of these novels. As much as he might hate the air force, Andy's love of flying is plainly evident when he expounds upon the beauty of his CAC Wirraway trainer to his priggish colleague, Ian Almond:

> Look at those kites with their serious noses sniffing the evening air, more patient than any horse, stronger than any lion, gayer than any kitten. The aeroplane is entirely yours, what personality you have, it will express ... If you are feeling rorty and passionate, mad to fornicate with the clouds and brush the belly of the earth, then you can loop it and roll it and fly it so low that the prop cuts the grass.[31]

Yet it is the very mechanical quality of aerial combat, where men are made subservient to machines which, Gerster argues, places it at odds with the ANZAC legend that "still believed that 'real' combat was conducted with the feet squarely planted on terra firma, man facing man".[32] But as one RAAF officer observes of his colleague in *Island Victory*, "[this] was a machine war in a machine age ... Poor Childers with his rifle-and-bayonet war was an anachronism".[33]

Critics such as Gerster, however, fail to acknowledge the intrinsic glamour that combat aircraft held for both author and reader alike. Almost without exception, humans were noticeably absent from the covers which adorned these air warfare novels, supplanted instead by dramatic images of aircraft in action, particularly on paperback novels like William R. Bennett's *Target Turin*[34] and *Spitfire Attack!*[35] As Toni Johnson-Woods observes, pulp fiction covers such as these "conformed to the 'ten-foot' rule; they had to be visible from ten feet away and thus relied on garish colours and high-octane moments."[36] Appearing as they did during the late 1950s and early 1960s, these air combat 'pulps', with their focus on high-speed dogfights and aeronautical technology, both anticipated and reflected the emerging technological vocabulary of the dawning 'space race' between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The punishing physical and psychological effects of combat were a recurring theme in these novels. The Australian crew of an RAF flying boat, exhausted to the point of collapse, are sent on a dangerous mission with disastrous results in *Mediterranean Black*.[37] In *The Hollow Square*, Sergeant-pilot Truett faces court martial on the charge of 'lacking moral fibre', after refusing to fly any further

missions.[38] Brandt Mitford, the chief protagonist in *The Squadron Leader*, is on the verge of 'cracking up' after amassing 150 combat missions in Korea.[39]

Death, too, was ever present in these novels, striking in random, almost absurd, circumstances. An observer, perched on the wing of a P-40 Kittyhawk, is killed during a collision with an incoming P-38 Lightning on a crowded island landing strip.[40] A wireless operator dumping ammunition from the escape hatch of a bomber is dragged to his death when an ammunition belt gets snagged on his inflatable vest.[41]

If World War II inspired a new generation of Australian authors, then the Korean War proved to be comparatively arid ground for Australian literature. Yet the fact that Bryan Haven's Korean War novel, *Jet Fury*, was published in Great Britain by the 'pulp paperback' imprint, Digit House,[42] as distinct from a 'reputable' book publisher, may partly explain why it has been overlooked by literary critics until now. Nonetheless, it can be legitimately discussed as an example of Australian air warfare literature, not only for its subject matter, but for the fact that its author served with the RAAF during World War II, and allegedly saw action in the Korean War, as well.[43]

*Jet Fury* is a curious amalgam of Cold War spy thriller and Korean air war adventure. The first half of the novel focuses on John 'Slash' Sewell, an RAAF veteran hired by aerospace engineer Arthur Lewin as the test pilot for his new prototype aircraft, the Lancer jet fighter. While thwarting the efforts of Soviet spies to sabotage the project, Sewell falls in love with Lewin's daughter, Dorothy. Recalled to active duty for the Korean War, Sewell leads a Lancer-equipped RAAF squadron into action against enemy MiG-15 fighters. Upon learning that Dorothy is leaving him for one of her father's junior employees, Sewell seeks "release from his problems via the bottle"[44] and recklessly throws himself into combat, with fatal consequences.

*Jet Fury* is an unabashedly jingoistic and xenophobic work, where Sewell and his Australian pilots not only have the measure of their opponents, but are also shown to be stoic and mature, in contrast with their USAF comrades. Sewell slaps a drunken American pilot who is openly grieving for his "buddy", shot down over the Yalu River. An American officer takes Sewell to task, saying that Sewell reminds him of the English pilots he'd flown with during World War II, who'd "just ask for a cup of tea or a pint of beer and carry on" after losing one of their friends. "Slash tried to explain about Anglo-Saxon restraint", writes Haven, "but gave it up in the end".[45] Far removed from the brawling, rugged and uncouth Australian soldier that dominate the works of Glassop and Lambert, Haven instead portrays Sewell as an

Antipodean version of an emotionally reserved British air force officer—in many respects, the very antithesis of the Australian fighting man.

Despite its Australian author and British publisher, *Jet Fury* nonetheless epitomised what Norman Bartlett acerbically referred to as "the glossies"—American-styled "paper-bound books with varnished art-board covers in primary colours".[46] (Bartlett no doubt sought to distinguish 'the glossies' from his own air warfare novel, *Island Victory*, which was published a reputable company, Angus & Robertson, and issued in hardback, with a dust wrapper, thereby confirming its status as a 'real' book.) *Jet Fury*, and other paperback novels of similar ilk, according to Bartlett, did little more than serve up "the same sort of thrills that more pretentious readers find in *The Naked and the Dead* [and] *From Here to Eternity*."[47]

Bartlett's disdain for paperback books extends to their readers, whom he casually dismisses as "lowbrows".[48] This low opinion was shared by one Australian pulp writer, who said readers "bought paperbacks like they were at the butchers, weighing up their pound of sausages, it didn't matter what they bought, as long as they had a pound".[49] Yet the democratic paperback publishing model, which put affordable reading into the hands of "millions of normally unliterary Australians"[50], throws up an intriguing question about the audience reception of 'pulp' novels. If the elitist, class-conscious air force pilots of such novels as *Jet Fury* stood in stark opposition to the stridently egalitarian image of the Australian soldier, what appeal could they possibly hold for their working-class readership? The reason may well be that, nearly twenty years after the end of World War II, the mythic appeal of the tough Australian soldier had lost some of its lustre. Whereas the 'digger', clutching his obsolete Lee-Enfield rifle and sporting a World War I-era tin helmet, seemed hopelessly out of date, the fighter pilot seemed poised on the cusp of tomorrow—a prototype astronaut whose aircraft would eventually pave the way for sound barrier-breaking jets, satellites and space capsules. If the 'digger; was emblematic of Australia's working-class past, then the airman was the symbol of an aspirational, technological future.

Rick Hosking reinforces the historical schism between Australian 'literature' and 'popular fiction' by drawing distinctions between *novelists* like T.A.G. Hungerford and *writers* (to use Hosking's own terms) like J.E. Macdonnell, whose voluminous output of sea warfare paperbacks embodied what Hosking claims was both the "reading public's and publishers' [commercial] notion of the war novel."[51] While these qualitative distinctions between literary and popular fiction have typified most academic treatments of Australian 'pulp fiction', Johnson-Woods observes

that the post-war paperback industry represented "the richest period in Australian literary history, [as] thousands of titles were produced, millions of copies were sold and dozens of authors found gainful employment".[52]

In his critical survey of Australian war literature, J.T. Laird singles out A.H. Martin's *The Tall Man* (1958) as the "only significant work to emerge from the Korean War", but dismisses William Bennett's *MiG Meat* on the grounds that Bennett "wrote about the war at the 'popular fiction' level".[53] Laird's curt assessment not only typifies academia's reluctance to critically assess 'popular' Australian fiction, but overlooks one of the few Australian authors who wrote extensively about the Australian experience of aerial combat in World War II and the Korean War.

William Robert Bennett was nothing if not qualified to write about his subject. He enlisted with the RAAF in August 1941 and flew Spitfires with 453 Squadron RAAF (Dern, Scotland). Shot down over The Hague in 1944 and captured as a prisoner of war, Bennett was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in 1945. Posted to 77 Squadron RAAF in Korea as Deputy Commanding Officer, Bennett flew over 200 combat missions and was awarded the DFC and Bar, along with the United States Air Medal and DFC. Bennett wrote a novel based on his air force experiences and submitted it to Horwitz Publications, whose editors, sensing promise in Bennett's "rough and unprofessional" manuscript, brought it up to publishable standard. Coached by Horwitz's editors on the "fine points of the writer's trade", Bennett eventually retired from the RAAF and devoted himself to full-time writing.[54]

Bennett's Korean War novels frequently depicted the RAAF's British-built Meteor jets being overwhelmed by the enemy's numerically and technologically superior MiG-15 jets. This lopsided aerial contest was confirmed by Squadron Leader Ron Guthrie who, rather tellingly, likened 77 Squadron's difficulties to those faced by Australian soldiers at Gallipoli: "We were ill equipped to do the job that needed to be done ... we coped as best we could with what we had, [but we were] always ... on the defensive from the word go".[55]

Bennett's novels, like all 'genre' fiction, are essentially formulaic. Some revolved around the struggle of an 'outsider' trying to fit in with a tightly-knit combat unit, such as *Edge of Hell*, where Max Blair, an older instructor posted to Korea, tries to impose his will on the younger, more capable pilot, Jack Colter.[56] Others, like *MiG Meat*, dealt with the rivalry between two officers, Steve Dane and Tony Randall, competing for the love of the same woman.[57] Typically, these conflicts were resolved after the protagonists had either undergone a shared ordeal or, in

some instances, when one of them was 'sacrificed' in combat. Regardless of their individual variations of plot or setting, Bennett's novels, like most 'pulp' war stories of that era, according to Arne Axelsson, adhered to a "traditionally realistic framework", which eschewed the need for "technical experimentation and artistic sophistication."[58]

Yet for all their overripe prose and clichéd situations, Bennett's Korean War novels "took the reader convincingly into the pilot's seat", conveying the frenetic confusion of air-to-air jet combat.[59] Occasionally, Bennett would stray from generic conventions, as with *The Red Parallel*, where he made the struggle of a North Korean air force officer defecting to South Korea aboard his MiG-15 a focal point of the book.[60] Such sympathetic portrayals of Asian combatants are rarities in Australian war literature.

From 1961 onwards, Bennett exclusively wrote World War II stories, which suggests that his Korean War stories failed to attract sufficient sales to justify their continuation. Yet the commercial 'failure' of these novels arguably has as much to do with Australians' disinterest in the Korean War itself, as it does with any creative shortcomings on Bennett's part. Gavan McCormack argues that the 'Cold War' which spawned the Korean conflict was "experienced in a more diffuse and generalised way" within Australian society which, in turn, regarded the Korean War "almost as a sideshow".[61] Even the official military history of Australia's involvement in the Korean War concedes that the "comparatively small [Australian] units" were taking part in a war that "Australians everywhere freely acknowledge was an American show".[62]

Bennett's fortunes as a writer were tied to the dramatic changes sweeping Australia's publishing industry. In 1960, the Australian government lifted its 20-year ban on imported printed matter from the United States (originally imposed as a wartime austerity measure), resulting in a surge of imported paperback books that drove many indigenous publishers out of business. Horwitz Publications, however, abandoned its cheap 'booklet' format and employed new letterpress printing technologies to produce a range of paperback books, sporting full-colour covers which compared favourably with their glossy American rivals. Horwitz implemented an editorial policy of establishing new categories of "sensational fiction", written by a team of "versatile authors", which allowed the company to respond swiftly to changing public tastes.[63]

Horwitz's revitalised publishing programme coincided with a surge of public interest in war novels, the distance of time since the end of World War II now making it "an acceptable topic for writers and readers".[64] Horwitz Publications

scored considerable success in this market with J.E. Macdonnell, a former journalist and ex-Royal Australian Navy gunnery officer, whose book, *Stand by to Ram*, was the first of nearly 200 paperbacks he would pen for the company during 1957-1989. Horwitz built up Macdonnell as a 'brand name' author, whose book covers proclaimed him to be "Australia's leading novelist of the Navy"[65] and, by 1961, boasting "over 1,890,000 copies sold".[66]

Horwitz Publications no doubt hoped to duplicate this success by commissioning Ivan Southall, whom they approached on the strength of his biography of the famed RAAF flier, Keith 'Bluey' Truscott,[67] to write air combat novels during 1959-60. Southall, who'd served with RAF Coastal Command in World War II, would draw upon his wartime experiences in this new series of books featuring a flying boat pilot, Walter Pym. However, Southall was informed by his editor that the series hadn't sold well and that war stories were declining in popularity.[68] This explanation, however, doesn't tally with Horwitz Publications' successful launch of their new *Commando/War* paperback series in 1960, which spanned nearly 50 titles over ten years.[69]

No doubt Horwitz Publications hoped they would have better luck in establishing Bennett as their 'air force' novelist. The decision to launch Bennett with four Korean War novels may have been a deliberate ploy to differentiate their new author in a marketplace already crowded with World War II novels. Given that Bennett's subsequent books were all set during World War II, it was clear the company's promotional strategy was unsuccessful.[70]

When Compton Mackenzie compared the "glorious young men" of the 1st AIF at Gallipoli to such heroes of Greek legend as "Ajax ... Hector or Achilles",[71] he invoked an ancient image of manhood that lay beneath the khaki-clad exterior of the ANZAC legend. It was a folkloric figure well-suited to the Australia of 1915, which could still recall the national struggle to 'tame' a harsh, unyielding continent. The ANZAC legend was still powerful enough to galvanise the nation during World War II, but the mechanised conflict of 1939-45 nearly made the rugged Aussie digger obsolete. Nor would the 'limited' wars that followed it (beginning with the Korean 'police action' of 1950-53) ever allow the ANZAC legend to be invoked so easily. The Australian combat pilot was, however, more attuned to the tempo of the modern world. Encased in a deadly flying machine, high above the Earth, he was the perfect warrior for the industrial age, a fusion of flesh and steel, poised to travel faster than the speed of sound. Tempting as it might be to cast him as a modern-day Icarus, the fighter pilot was not the stuff of ancient legend, but the 'fact' of futuristic fantasy. William Bennett understood this, even on a

subconscious level, when he described the jet fighter as "something right from the pages of a science fiction magazine".[71] If the Australian experience of aerial combat has not been celebrated in the same manner as the infantry 'legend' of ANZAC, this does not mean that it somehow fell short when measured against it. Rather, air warfare needed a new vocabulary, a new means of expression, one which could not be found in the 'nation-building' prose of the 19th century that revered the pioneer bushman, nor in the 'literary' novel that elevated the everyman soldier, but in the crude vibrancy of pulp fiction. These stories spoke to a new, mass audience, who briefly spurned the egalitarian ANZAC in favour of the airman, whose exploits were better suited to the visceral, disposable fantasies of flight written by Australian pilots themselves—the forgotten few.

## Notes

1. For instance, when Penguin Books Australia published the 'Australian War Classics' series during 1991-1993, only one of the twelve titles issued – Don Charlwood's bomber command memoir, No Moon Tonight – dealt with aerial combat.

2. Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC): Acronym given to Australian and New Zealand contingents stationed in Cairo in 1915. Attributed to Lt. A.T. White, a superintending clerk with the English Army Service Corps, 'ANZAC' was an administrative term coined for the convenience of supply clerks for use in official correspondence and telegrams. See: C.E.W. Bean, The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918. Volume 1: The Story of Anzac (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921), pp.124-125.

3. The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914 – 1918 was, in fact, a twelve-volume series. C.E.W Bean wrote the first six volumes which dealt with the Australian campaigns in Gallipoli and France, while the subsequent six volumes were written by other authors who dealt with specific subjects, such as the Australian Flying Corps (Vol.8) and the Royal Australian Navy (Vol.9).

4. David Winter, Making the Legend: The War Writings of C.E.W. Bean (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992), p.16.

5. Bean,7.

6. Quoted in: K.S. Inglis, 'The ANZAC Tradition', Meanjin Quarterly, 24:1 (1965), pp.25-44 (p.29).

7. A.G. Butler, The Digger: A Study in Democracy (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1945), pp.50-51.

8. Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) was formed on 6 June 1916 and subsequently renamed the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL).

9. Inglis, 41.

10. Geoffrey Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', Meanjin Quarterly, 24:2 (1965), pp.149-158 (p.157).

11. Rick Hosking, 'The Usable Past: Australian War Fiction of the 1950s', Australian Literary Studies, 12.2 (1985), pp.234 – 247 (p.234).

12. David Walker, 'The Getting of Manhood'. Australian Popular Culture. Eds. Peter Spearitt and David Walker (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp.121-144 (p.121,123).

13. Ibid, 124.

14. Robin Gerster, Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987), p.180.

15. Hosking, 234.

16. Ibid, 246.

17. Gerster, 206.

18. Graham Seal, Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004), p.147.

19. RAAF Directorate of Public Relations, These Eagles: Story of the RAAF at War (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1942), 'Foreword'.

20. W.R. Bennett, Fighter Pilot (Sydney: Horwitz International, 1964), p.41.

21. Olaf Ruhen, The Broken Wing (Dee Why West: Tempo Books, 1973), p.46.

22. Geoff Taylor, The Hollow Square (London: Peter Davies, 1958), p.6.

23. Geoffrey Dutton, Andy (London: Collins, 1968).

24. Quoted in Inglis, 33.

25. Serle, 153-154.

26. Norman Bartlett , Island Victory (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955), p.12.

27. Ibid, 3, 46-47.

28. Ruhen, 106.

29. W.R. Bennett, Skybolt (Sydney: Horwitz International, 1966), pp.19-20.

30. Ray Ollis , 101 Nights (London: Cassell & Company, 1957), p.64.

31. Dutton, 47.

32. Gerster, 206.

33. Bartlett, 84.

34. W.R. Bennett, Spitfire Attack! (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1963).

35. W.R. Bennett, Target Turin (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1962).

36. Toni Johnson-Woods, ' "Pulp" Fiction Industry in Australia 1949-1959', Antipodes, 20:1 (2006), pp.63-67 (p.66).

37. Ivan Southall, Mediterranean Black, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1963).

38. Taylor, ibid.

39. William R. Bennett, Squadron Leader (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1960).

40. Bartlett, 102.

41. Bennett, 1962, 39-40.

42. Steve Holland, The Mushroom Jungle: A History of Postwar Paperback Publishing (Wiltshire: Zeon Books), pp.175-176.

43. Steve Holland, 'Bryan Haven (1922-1994)', Paperbacks, Pulps and Comics, Vol.3 (1995), pp.101-105.

44. Bryan Haven, Jet Fury (London: Digit Books, 1959), p.149.

45. Ibid, 109.

46. Norman Bartlett, 'Culture and Comics', Meanjin, 13:1 (Autumn 1954), pp.5-18 (p.8).

47. Ibid, 6.

48. Ibid, 5.

49. C.J. McKenzie, cited in Johnson-Woods, 67.

50. John Hetherington, 'This is the House that Paperbacks Built', The Age (13 April 1963), p.22.

51. Hosking, 244.

52. Johnson-Woods, 63.

53. J.T. Laird, 'War Literature', The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature, 2nd ed. Eds. W.H. Wilde, J. Hooton and B. Andrews. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp.785-796 (p.794).

54. Hetherington, 22.

55. Mike Hayes, Angry Skies: Recollections of Australian Combat Fliers (Sydney: ABC Books, 2003), p.169.

56. William R. Bennett, Edge of Hell (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1960).

57. William R. Bennett, MiG-Meat (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1960).

58. Arne Axelsson, Restrained Response: American Novels of the Cold War and Korea, 1945-1962 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp. xvii, xviii.

59. Doug Hurst, The Forgotten Few: 77 RAAF Squadron in Korea (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008), p.199.

60. W. R. Bennett, The Red Parallel (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1960).

61. Gavan McCormack, Cold War, Hot War: An Australian Perspective on the Korean War (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983), p.164.

62. Norman Bartlett, With the Australians in Korea,3rd Ed. (Canberra: Australian War Memorial. 1960), 'Editorial Note'.

63. Anthony May, 'Case-Study: Horwitz', Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946 -2000, Eds. C. Munro and R. Sheahan-Bright. (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006). pp.50 – 52 (p.52).

64. Toni Johnson-Woods, Pulp: A Collector's Book of Australian Pulp Fiction Covers (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006), p.61.

65. J.E. Macdonnell, The First Lieutenant (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1962).

66. J.E. Macdonnell, The Rocky (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1961).

67. Ivan Southall, Bluey Truscott (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958).

68. Stephany Evans Steggall, The Loved and the Lost: The Life of Ivan Southall (South Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2006), p.143.

69. Graeme Flanagan, The Australian Vintage Paperback Guide (Brooklyn: Gryphon Books, 1994), p.39.

70. Horwitz Publications did re-release three of Bennett's Korean War novels (Edge of Hell, The Squadron Leader and The Red Parallel) in 1963. These were followed by European editions of MiG Meat, (France, 1960), Red Parallel (Sweden, 1966) and Edge of Hell (Denmark, 1969), which suggests these works continued to find new readers at home and abroad after their initial publication in 1960.

71. Serle, 152.

72. W.R. Bennett, Flak Alley (North Sydney: Scripts, 1967), p.9.

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JACOB M. APPEL

# The Tear Sower

Carthage had been aflame for six nights when my mother's nitwit kinsman, Scipio Aemilianus, dispatched us into the *ager publicus* with the wheelbarrows. Consul Scipio—for so we were now expected to address my illustrious cousin—was one of those ambitious, calculating officers who had mastered the craft of disguising punishment as honor. With his generals gathered around the rubble of the Temple of Eshmun, where the defeated king had so recently had his thumbs and great toes lopped off, Scipio hailed me as "Brave Oppius," and to a bystander, his words might have rung sincere. "Take noble Decimus Felix and two *contubernia* of legionnaires," he ordered, "and salt the Carthaginian's soil, that not so much as a tare or vetch may sprout forth in the days of living men." Good heavens! What kind of affected ass says "vetch" and "tare" like a Phoenician scribe? But Scipio had personally stormed the enemy's gates, and claimed fifty thousand hostages to his name, so I had no choice but to lead the salt-sowers past our dormant catapults and into the lush, fertile country that separated the dusty inland plateaus from the turquoise waves of Mare Nostrum.

A Roman must do his duty, but he does not have to enjoy it. Marching alongside my men in the mid-morning heat—for I refused to become one of those pampered, pudding-like officers who ride while their soldiers sweat—I watched the white sun glistening off the white salt, as blinding as a blacksmith's flames, and the extravagance of our enterprise made the blood pound up my neck and into the tips of my ears. We were not salting *all* the arable land in Carthage, of course, merely several thousand hectares of the defeated King Hasdrubal's choicest fields, but even this symbolic effort defied both sense and decency. Who benefitted from

squandering an emperor's ransom upon a gesture? The salt alone must have been worth two million *denarii*. One also had to consider the peasants who farmed this land—and the many free Italian citizens who would gladly have crossed the Sicilian Chanel for such a patch to till. The truth was that this salting business made us no better than the Carthaginians. Possibly worse. I longed for a companion with whom to share these subversive thoughts, for sedition—even in its most idle form—covets the reassurance of companionship. Alas, Decimus Felix was a terminally earnest lad of nineteen years who would have sown pearls into the earth without questioning.

We pitched our camp under a stand of cork oaks. Our pack-bearers chased several drowsy jackals from the shade; the hammering of the tent posts sent a phalanx of golden hares scurrying through the esparto grass. To the south, in the shelter of a craggy ridge, stood an abandoned peasant settlement. It was a small village of twenty or so clay dwellings, but many of the walls were richly decorated with mosaics of lions and wild boar. Quite honestly, the tile-work was as skilled as anything to be found in the palaces of Herculaneum. On the outskirts of this village, a makeshift necropolis housed dozens of tiny burial urns. Whether these children has died naturally, or had been sacrificed to martial gods—as is claimed to be the Carthaginian practice—only an historian might discern, but I suddenly felt the expanse between myself and my own son, Agrippa, a cavalryman assigned to the Iberian legion. My boy was barely twenty, but already *optio centuriae*—second-in-command of one hundred troops. I was thinking of Agrippa as I hiked to the top of a nearby dune—to scout the lie of the territory, while the others broke for lunch—and I will confess that I fought back a sob as I gazed beyond those African sea-cliffs toward where clouds and surf melted into the horizon. Meanwhile, to the northwest, dying Carthage coughed out her final gasps of unforgiving black smoke.

Decimus came searching for me when the sun had reached its zenith. He paused at the top of the embankment and took a swig from his canteen. "The men are ready to salt," he said. "Shall I send them into the fields?"

I felt another twinge of loneliness, as I willed Agrippa from my mind, and the sea air loosened my tongue. "May I ask you something?"

My companion's blank eyes peered from his equally blank face. His oversized fingers toyed with the fringe of his braided belt.

"Has it ever crossed your mind," I asked, already realizing the futility of my question, "that we might be wrong and the Carthaginians might be right?"

"About what?" asked Decimus.

I pressed my inquiry. "Do you think the barbarians think of *themselves* as barbarians?"

The lad shrugged. "I don't imagine the barbarians think much at all. That's why they're barbarians," he replied. "Now are you ready to commence with the salting?"

"Yes, certainly," I agreed. "The salting."

I followed Decimus back down the path to the camp, and I offered the men a brief sermon on the primacy of honor and duty. I'll confess that I've always had something of a reputation for oratory—and, in a matter of minutes, I had the men stirred up to the point where they'd have salted the Nile to its very source. These high spirits proved necessary, as it turned out, because Decimus had been unable to procure any oxen for the sowing—it was reported that the enemy had driven their animals into the desert to starve, although I never encountered an actual witness to such deeds—so the men had to draw the harrows over their own shoulders. They worked in pairs, taking turns between kneading the soil and strewing the salt. While they labored, they sang a bawdy ballad about "The Punic Eunuch." I would have joined them in the fields, both for the sake of solidarity and to distract myself from my doubts, but a senior officer must not traverse certain barriers. Instead, I dictated an account of our efforts for the benefit of my celebrated cousin. When the final rays of sun sank between the western hills, we had salted approximately two hundred *iugera*, or fifty hectares. At that rate, the completion of our mission would have required the entire autumn—all but ensuring that we'd miss the last of the victory banquets. This was my payback, I understood, for voting against Scipio in the consular balloting, and for denying him my reluctant Livia's hand in marriage, but it was a cruel sentence to impose upon the men.

"Gaius Sempronius!" I ordered the cook on impulse. "A double ration for all."

Decimus eyed me warily, as though I was more specter than flesh.

Around the fire, the men grew subdued. Young Lucius plucked a mournful dirge on the kithara and soon Drusus broke out his *aulos*. A sharp breeze blew in off the water; wide-eyed opossums rustled in the dwarf palms. To our collective amazement, when valiant Perseus had nearly completed his pursuit of Andromeda across the northern sky, a scimitar-horned oryx sauntered into our bivouac and settled indifferently beside the latrine. What an unlikley creature! Evidence that the mysteries of the universe are without bounds. Yet no exotic beast could divert our eyes too long from the sight of walled Carthage blazing like a torch in the distance. A man has not suffered the true shiver of living death until he has witnessed firsthand the mute horror of fire consuming a great metropolis.

The moon set. I assigned Drusus and a red-haired lad, Ephebus, to stand guard over the wheelbarrows, fearful that the oryx might overturn them in his late-night meanderings, and then I retired to my tent. I slept poorly, alas, consumed with thoughts of my distant son and daughter. When I awoke, the gulls and swallows were just welcoming the dawn. The oryx had departed. A fine dew coated the savannah. Decimus Felix was already waking the men, tapping the soles of their feet firmly with the end of his pike—his every act precisely in accord with regulations, on the path toward his own consulship, no doubt. I filled a gourd at the drinking trough and doused my face with cold water.

That was the final moment of peace before the calamity. Then the aged cook stood before me, his expression as perplexed as a blind man's.

"My apologies, sir," said Gaius Sempronius. "We appear to be out of salt."

A specific provision of the Legionnaire's Code governs the theft of military supplies: The perpetrator is to be tied inside a sack of serpents and thrown into a still body of water. In the absence of snakes, the accused may be cudgeled to death. However—and I quote here directly from a praetorian edict—*clubbing ought to be substituted for drowning sparingly, so as not to raise expectations of leniency among would-be thieves.* Of course, my first thought was that the salt had merely been misplaced or—and this has been known to happen—the men had united in hatching a rather distasteful prank at my expense. The obvious terror of red-haired Ephebus assured me that I was mistaken. This tremulous lad stood behind the row of empty barrows, head bowed, arms locked at his waist, awaiting his punishment. He readily confessed to having fallen asleep while on duty, the sanctioned penalty for which was stoning. Drusus, who had joined him in his slumber, had run off into the steppe to avoid such a fate.

I summoned both *contubernia*. "As you can see," I declared, keeping my voice steady as I gestured toward the scene of the disaster, "fortune has not smiled upon us. The fault is mine and I will answer for it. But all in due order. First, you will fan out across the hills and bring Sleepy Drusus back to camp." Then I looked pointedly at Ephebus. "And you may assure the young man that nobody will raise a hand against him over this episode."

At my words of mercy, the men's breath eased from their throats, and the very acacia branches seemed to sigh with relief. Ephebus fell silently to his bare knees, his body slumped, moisture staining his pock-marked cheeks. Within seconds, the search parties had vanished into the upcountry, abandoning the empty wheelbarrows to the scurrying of jerboas.

"With all respect, Oppius," said Decimus Felix, "sentry duty is no light matter. What if the thieves had come for blood instead of salt?"

"I don't recall having assigned a sentry," I said—even though we both understood well that I was lying. "My final report shall reflect this oversight."

I approached Ephebus and rested my staff on his shoulder. He looked up. His face was still lacquered with apprehension, as though he feared I might withdraw my reprieve.

"You will take a message to Scipio Aemilianus at Carthage," I ordered him. "Inform the Consul that his kinsman, noble Oppius, requires more salt."

The youth was the ideal herald for the task, after all. He had every reason not to explain *why* we required more salt so soon. If my cousin wanted any additional explanation, he would have to ask me for it directly. Not that I had much insight to offer. What sort of thieves would inconvenience themselves by carrying off the salt and leaving the barrows behind? This was more likely the handiwork of saboteurs than bandits—it would not have surprised me had we discovered the plunder discarded in the nearby scrub—but the tidal breeze had swept away both footprints and wheel ruts.

"We may find that salt yet," I said aloud—but as much to myself as to Ephebus. "Neither treasure nor treason can be concealed forever."

The lad remained on his knees, awaiting further orders. I think the poor youth may actually have been in shock.

"That is all," I said.

I strode away quickly, as gratitude always leaves me uneasy, and I returned to the shade of the cork oaks to enjoy my breakfast. Decimus ate alongside me, and several times he leaned forward as though to speak, but his lips did not open. What could he say? He had only garnered his officer's rank, after all, because of his uncle's connections in the Senate, while I had given an eye and three fingers during the Macedonian Campaign. After the meal, I composed a fine letter to my daughter, sharing my observations on the flora of the African lowlands.

The sun was already high in the morning sky when the first *contubernium* returned with the hangdog Drusus in tow. The detachment had followed my orders and informed the terrified boy that he would not be stoned, but they had done so in such a jocular manner that he did not genuinely believe them, and the absence of his fellow offender, Ephebus, did little to allay his suspicions. I squandered the better part of an hour convincing the youth that no harm would befall him. Shortly afterward, the second *contubernium* emerged from the undergrowth with a prisoner. A girl of fourteen or fifteen. Pretty too, for a Carthaginian. Her nose

was as straight as a Celtiberian's sword and her skin no darker than a pistachio seed. She wore the sleeveless frock of the local tribeswomen, a hooded *palla*, and a pair of open-toed *carbatina* sandals. I was instantly struck by her expression: a firm and impenetrable chill.

"She is the culprit, sir," said the venerable Valerius Curio, a soldier of my own age, pushing the captive girl forward. "We found her sleeping on a bed of sandarac needles. You will find that salt remains matted in the folds of her garment."

I reached forward and tugged at the girl's cloak. Sure enough, the stolen crystals had formed a fine confection along the cloth furrows.

"Explain yourself," I demanded. "What have you done with our salt?"

The prisoner glared at me fiercely and spluttered a mouthful of indecipherable syllables.

I looked from the girl to the men. "I don't suppose any of you speak Punic?"

This question was rhetorical, of course. Roman soldiers do not study barbarian tongues.

I pointed to the empty wheelbarrows and then flashed my palms skyward—hoping to convey my question to the girl without words. I did not actually expect an answer. But I was not going to order the cudgeling of a young woman, even a Carthaginian saboteur, without attempting to ferret out an understanding of the crime. Secretly, I also hoped that the salt might be recovered. If no permanent harm had been rendered against the Republic, I felt that I might have some latitude in meting out the girl's sentence—although I could not imagine how I might convey this possibility to her through hand-gestures.

To my amazement, the captive girl grinned at my silent efforts. She cupped her own small hands together and brought them to her mouth like a squirrel stashing chestnuts. At first, I was genuinely befuddled. What did ground rodents have to do with salt? Only when she rubbed her hands across her belly did I realize that this girl was mocking my interrogation.

"You did not *eat* twenty barrows of salt." I shook my head and slammed the foot of my staff into the dust. "Dammit, girl. Listen up," I snapped, grabbing her face by the jaw with one hand and forcing my gaze upon her onyx eyes. "I don't know whether you speak our language, but for your own sake, you'd better hope that you understand me. Now if you don't tell me what you've done with that salt, I will have no choice but to have you beaten."

The girl hissed at me through her broken teeth, like a feral cat, and for a moment, I expected her to spit in my face. Instead, she kicked me hard in the shin. It was

only a glancing blow, but I reflexively released her jaw and drew my knee to my chest. Several of the men instantly restrained the prisoner.

"I'm trying to spare your life, dammit," I shouted. "If that salt is not recovered, you are going to die."

"Meaning no offense," interjected Decimus Felix, "But the girl will have to die in any case....I can send to Carthage for a sack of snakes, if you would like."

"That won't be necessary," I shot back.

But Decimus was correct, I recognized. Sabotage was a far more serious offense than falling asleep on watch. Moreover, rules that might bend slightly for free and loyal Roman soldiers could not be shattered haphazardly for hostile peasants. Justice comes from the stability of laws, after all, not the caprice of men. That is why every tenth soldier must perish for his legion's cowardice, even if he has personally displayed great courage in battle, and why an officer's insubordination must be atoned for with his life.

In this girl's case, the only real decision to be made was whether to carry out her punishment myself, or to send her to Carthage in irons. Scipio Aemilianus possessed the authority to grant the wretch a consular pardon and to sell her into bondage—although the chances of such a reprieve were remote. At the same time, in Carthage the girl might fall prey to the baser urges of the garrison. Needless to say, this was not a judgment to be rendered in haste, so I ordered the captive secured to a solitary fig tree, under the guard of a revitalized Drusus, and I trekked out to the abandoned peasant settlement to reflect on the matter. Since we had not received a fresh supply of salt, the *contubernia* were left to their leisure. When I returned for the evening meal hours later—the call of the cook's ram-horn trumpet had echoed like a battle cry through the clay walls of the deserted village—the men were pitching quoits for quincunx coins.

Our second supper in the encampment proved far less festive than the first. The want of labor had left the men restless, and the prospect of an execution, even if merited, reminds men of their own inevitable mortality. Young Lucius, sensing the collective mood, sang a wistful ballad about a princess whose lover is lost at sea. At the conclusion of the melody, Decimus Felix—who could be surprisingly considerate, in his limited way—reminded me that Drusus had to be relieved from guard duty. While thinking of the captive, I had entirely forgotten about the bondage of her jailor.

"Will I be feeding the prisoner tonight?" asked Gaius Sempronius.

"Fill a pewter dish," I answered, "and I will serve her myself."

The men must have thought this peculiar—it's not very often that a senior *praefectus* plays maidservant to a condemned thief—but I suppose they'd already grown accustomed to my queer ways, because their expressions betrayed no surprise. I followed Gaius Sempronius to the cooking pit, retrieved the girl's meal, and approached the fig tree from behind. Drusus, clearly chastised, stood watch as rigid as a cedar plank. The captive sat at the base of the tree, elbows and torso roped to the trunk, glowering. When I approached, holding up my hand in a sign of peace, she balled both of her helpless fists.

I dismissed the guard and set the plate in the girl's lap. She had just enough freedom to maneuver her fingers to her mouth. The poor creature was clearly famished—not only from her afternoon of captivity, but from days, maybe weeks, roaming the wilderness. I squatted opposite her on the caked earth, and after she'd gnawed every last shred of gristle from the bone, I held my canteen to her lips and allowed her to drink the vessel dry. She was only a few years younger than my darling Livia, whom I missed most dreadfully, likely around the very age at which my daughter had resisted Scipio's unwelcome courtship. I hoped that if Rome were ever sacked—a horror so unspeakable that a man must have his tongue severed for mentioning the possibility—that a generous barbarian officer might take a warm meal to my precious child.

I smiled at the captive, but she did not smile back. Why should she smile upon the men who had driven her people from their land?

"Do *you* think you're a barbarian?" I asked.

She answered with a violent burst of Punic jabber. Later, when I turned over the sentry post to Valerius Curio, I reached my hand forward to brush the coarse bangs from her eyes—and she dug her teeth into my wrist. I could not help thinking that, with an armed century of girls as fierce as her, I could bring all of the tribes of Germania to their knees.

A squall blustered across the camp during the overnight, and we greeted the morning under a sky of chalcedony clouds. During the storm, a flock of partridges had taken refuge in the shelter of the cork oaks; the fowl scampered and fluttered into the shadows as I approached, their swollen gorgets puffed with pride. Rainwater had overrun the sides of the drinking trough and wind gusts had uprooted several of the acacias. A wondrous aroma of honeysuckle drifted down from the hills. At the horizon, so recently scarred by smoldering Carthage, nature had snuffed the city's flames with the ease of extinguishing a lantern.

Although we still possessed no salt, Decimus Felix roused the men at daybreak. That seemed a fruitless exercise to me, but while I could in principle have overruled my fellow officer, the badge of a wise *praefectus* is knowing which battles to fight. My opportunity arrived soon enough when, following breakfast, the lad raised the future of the prisoner. I had dwelt on the girls' fate into the wee hours of the morning, but had reached no definitive conclusion.

Decimus had left the *contubernia* to their quoits and followed me out to the solitary ficus.

"She must be punished," he said. "If you do not act soon, the men will think us weak."

"I know," I agreed.

"I'm not so sure that you do know, Oppius," answered my companion. "You have a son in Iberia, don't you?"

"So?" I demanded.

"So, she'd *kill* him. Without a second thought." Decimus snapped an invisible stick between his hands to emphasize his point. "It's us against them, Oppius. Don't forget that."

He was speaking the truth. I had assured myself that I could return the girl to Carthage with the *contubernium* that was to bring us the salt, but now I recognized that the matter had to be handled quickly. Infantrymen will tolerate many shortcomings in a senior officer, but they grow restless when they perceive a dereliction of responsibility. Common decency also told me that it was cruel to keep the captive fettered as she was, once her destiny had been sealed, although I also knew that my judgment ought not be swayed by her welfare.

"Look, Oppius," said Decimus. "I do not mean to question you. I know you know your duty as well as any Roman. But whatever your motives, friend, surely you must realize that this dithering is to no purpose."

The boy placed his clammy hand on my elbow like a tutor—as though he had seen twice my years and not half as many. His words might have been patronizing, but they were clearly heartfelt. And his reasoning was sound: dithering *did* serve no purpose. I shook free of his grasp and walked off toward the latrine.

"Gather the men," I ordered without turning around. "Tell them to fashion bludgeons from the fallen branches and to convene for the punishment of the captive."

I had butchered scores of men in combat, but no battlefield carnage prepares a man to supervise an execution. While the praetorian edicts may warn against the

substitution of cudgeling for the snake-sack, on the grounds of leniency, I suspect the real concern is for the resolve of those charged with exacting the penalty. With the snake-sack, the victim's face is concealed at the outset. In contrast, a fatal beating requires the presiding authority to watch first-hand the consequences of his orders—to meet the eyes of the condemned. Ten thousand years could not erase the horror I felt as Marcus and Valerius Curio dragged that shrieking wretch across the encampment to the ditch where she was to be slaughtered. As is the custom in the African legions, she was buried up to her waist in earth—both to prevent her escape during the beating, and to facilitate her subsequent interment. Once she recognized the inevitability of her fate, the girl stopped hollering and adopted the icy rigor of a Stoic. Her hostile gaze followed me relentlessly, until I planted myself on a boulder beyond the arc of her neck.

I waited for Marcus and Valerius Curio to return to the ranks, and then I did my duty and addressed the men. "A Roman birthright is not free," I said. "With its glorious privileges come heavy burdens. Today, we carry such a burden." Then I launched into a discourse on the responsibilities of citizenship and the special obligations of the republican legionnaire. Whatever doubts I had, I made sure that the men did not sense them. A good leader, after all, is much like a talented surgeon: Sometimes right—but always certain. "So we must act with fortitude," I concluded. "But we do so for the good of Rome, not the pleasure of revenge. Let no man among us believe otherwise."

The veteran warriors nodded in agreement. Young Lucius, his delicate features pale as a death mask, appeared as though he might vomit. The partridges twittered and clucked around the condemned woman, oblivious to the impending bloodshed.

I lifted my sword—knowing that as soon as I lowered the blade, the massacre would commence. That's when a spear of sunlight broke through the cloudscape, sparking a glimmer across the distant cavalcade of salt. Gaius Sempronius, perched atop a nearby ridge, cried out that a convoy was indeed approaching, and we all watched, transfixed, as a formation of wheelbarrows advanced across the open grassland toward our oasis. Soon the phalanx separated into individual rows—*hundreds* of rows—an entire army of salt-bearers. The lead barrows paused at the edge of the clearing, paying no heed to the girl buried waist-deep in the freshly-dug soil. The *decurion* at the head of the column dismounted and presented himself.

"From Consul Scipio Aemilianus," he said. "With complements to his noble kinsman."

He handed me a parchment under wax seal. The message read: *Brave Oppius! All of the salt in the Republic is at your disposal. Enjoy your labors. Sc. Aem.* Although

I was now seething with rage—once again my cousin had packaged his venom in the cloak of generosity—I thanked the cavalryman and quickly dismissed his unit. Soon the visiting legion, having deposited the wheelbarrows in the shade of the cork oaks, was retreating across the plain. The afternoon had turned tranquil: A hawk soared high above the sea cliffs. In the center of the clearing, the condemned girl remained steeled to her doom.

I sensed Decimus Felix at my elbow. "You should finish her off now," he whispered, "before the men lose their resolve."

"I can't do that." I turned to the men. "Dig her up," I ordered.

Decimus placed his hand on my shoulder. "Think of your son."

"I *am* thinking of my son," I answered—which was true. But I was also thinking of the barbarian girl's father, maybe somewhere out in those dusty hills, awaiting her return. "You, Valerius Curio. And you, Drusus. Free the captive immediately. And you, Gaius Sempronius: Make sure she has a full meal before she leaves the camp."

The men jumped into action. A Roman legionnaire does not question his instructions, no matter how irrational or erratic they may seem. Within seconds, the girl was free of her terrestrial prison and being dragged, kicking and wailing, toward the roasting pit. I suppose she expected to be assaulted—rather than fed—but that could not be helped.

"I will have to lodge a formal objection," said Decimus Felix.

"You do that," I said. "Absolutely. A formal objection."

I was still standing in the clearing, digesting my own deeds, when Gaius Sempronius approached with his aged head bowed.

"I don't mean to interrupt, sir," he said. "But what would you have us do with the salt?"

"Excuse me?"

"If we leave it out in the open like this, sir," he explained, "there is no telling what the elements may do to it. Would you like me to search for a cave in which to stow it?"

I took a deep breath. "What I'd like," I replied, "is to pour the damned salt into the depths of the sea."

The ancient cook nodded—assuming I was speaking to myself.

"That's an order, Gaius Sempronius," I barked. "Take the men and pour the salt over the cliffs. Every last goddam grain of it!"

Decimus Felix gasped. "If you're not feeling well—"

"Don't question me," I snapped at him. "I'm the senior *praefectus* in this legion, and my command is that the salt be discarded into the sea. If I find a single grain of salt in this camp at nightfall, every tenth soldier will perish."

So the men did as they were ordered and poured the trove of salt over the cliffs, barrow by barrow, watching the precious crystals return from whence they came. They did not question my authority even once. They knew their duty. I watched from the shade of the abandoned peasant village, recording this history and hoping that my children would be proud of me—knowing that, when the last of the precious salt had melted into the sea, I too would do my duty to the Republic by climbing over those same cliffs and returning from whence I had come.

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W. D. EHRHART

# Redipuglia

—for Adi, who brought me here

What once had been a ramshackle
cemetery dotted with the detritus
of battle—barbed wire, battered helmets,
trenching tools, broken rifle butts—
Mussolini in his fascist grandiosity
recreated as a pristine staircase
of the dead: twenty-two giant steps,
each one-hundred-forty meters wide,
twenty feet deep, and nine feet high,
rising to the crest of Mount Sei Busi,
three giant crosses crowning all.

* * *

Twenty-one steps are faced with small
brass plates, 1900 plates per step,
each plate the name of someone dead:
  Fabio Bernardi, Terza compagnia,
    Ventunesimo battaglione del Bersaglieri,
    3rd Company, 21st Battalion of Bersaglieri;
  Mario Bottino, Sessantottesimo batteria,
    Artiglieria del mulo,
    68th Battery, Mule Artillery;
  Paolo Barbieri, Primo Reparti d'assalto;
  Ottavio Cavallo, Sardo granatieri, Gruppa Pistoia.

Behind each plate, the dead man's bones:
  Marco Esposito, Ottantatresimo compagnia
    di assistenti tecnici,
    83rd Company of Engineers;
  Allesandro Forni, Nono reggimento
    di fanteria chiara di Bersaglieri,
    9th Bersaglieri Light Infantry Regiment;
  Carlo Selvaggio, Quinto reggimento del Alpini;
  Pietro Allegreti, Arma dei Carabinieri.

Many plates are incomplete, containing
only what could be recovered of the man:
  Luigi -----, Fusiliers;
  ----- Trovato, 28th Infantry, Pavia Brigade.

The bones and names of 40,000 dead.

The twenty-second step contains
the bones of 60,000 more
whose names were taken with their lives.

The hill contains, in all, 100,187 dead.

* * *

Across the top of every step in huge
block granite print a dozen times
and more: a single word. PRESENTE
Silent roll call of the dead:
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Emilio Morelli, 6th Company,
142nd Infantry, Catanzaro Brigade;
Roberto Pappalardo, 132nd Infantry Regiment,
Lazio Brigade, 29th Division;
Vittore Maggio, 3rd Battalion,
58th Infantry, Abruzzi Brigade:
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:
Stefano Tenaglia, 14th Regiment,
4th Bersaglieri Brigade;
Giani Caltibiano, 75th Alpino Division;
Umberto Testa, 22nd Arditi:
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:
Cristiano Martelli, 19th Infantry, Brescia Brigade;
Battista Grassello, 48th Regiment, Ferrara Brigade;
Claudio Conti, 28th Infantry, Pavia Brigade:
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

Young men:
Raffaello, Firenze Brigade;
Leonardo, Novara Lancers;
Gino, 52nd Alpine Infantry Division:
PRESENTE Present. We are here.

* * *

If you stand at the base of the steps
looking up, the steps are so arranged
that all you see is the single word PRESENTE
rising out of the stone
over again, and over and over again,
marching up to the heavens,
mocking the *Duce*'s own design,
mocking the millions who come to worship here,
mocking the empty promise of salvation,
whispering, murmuring, muttering:

PRESENTE Present. We are here.

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JAMES A. MOAD II

# Our Ghost

"Sometimes they go with ya," my friend Bennie said when I told him we'd be movin' on soon. I didn't want to believe him, ya know, and that scared me more than anything, cuz I was hopin' we'd leave it behind.

Bennie's got two older sisters, but ain't neither of us got a brother, so we're about as close as close can be. He knows all about ghosts. Even read a book about it once, and he and his sister watch a T.V. show about 'em. They asked me over once to watch, but I got no interest in seeing them on T.V. since I got one of my own. Bennie says that ghosts ain't got no sense of time, that they didn't make it over to the other side, and they just keep moving from one place in time to another. They're restless, he says, and sometimes they go back to when they died and watch it over and over again.

That must be why they're so angry and sad, I think, but I put that notion away and don't linger on it too long. Last week the ghost did some awful screaming in the middle of the night. I heard my mama talking it down, telling it how it needed to stop. She asked God to step in and give her a hand, and I think that done the trick for awhile.

"Do ya think we can kill ghosts with these here guns?" I ask Bennie. He's almost nine, a full eight months and a day older than me, and he just might know. His daddy give him two air guns for Christmas and we use 'em to play war in the trees between their lot and ours. They only got half an acre, but there's a whole patch of trees on it for hidin' behind. I asked my mama for one of them air guns for Christmas, but she said we ain't got no use for guns anymore. She took both of papa's rifles out of the house before he came back. I thought he might put up a

fight about it, but he don't say or do much about anything anymore. When it's nice out, mama sets him out in an old Adirondack chair facing toward us boys. I always straighten out his baseball cap before I go on and play. No matter how awful tired he is, it makes me feel all warm inside to know he's watchin' over me.

"Can't see as any gun would kill a ghost," Bennie says. "They already dead."

"They sound like they're alive to me."

"You ever actual seen one?"

"Nope, and I hope I never do."

And that's about as far as I take the talk before we get back to killing each other and anything else we see fit to shoot at. Bennie's a better shot than me, but I wanna be sniper some day, so I'm trying to practice and get a good eye like him. I know it's in me, cuz my papa was a sniper. Ain't sure exactly what it means, but I know he was good at shootin'. Sometimes I wish he could just kill that ghost and get it gone for good. A real gun might do the trick, but he's got the slowness now, and it might be hard for him. I ain't scared or nothin', but it'd sure be nice to have things back to normal.

"My grandpa thought he could kill it," I tell Bennie, but he just looks across the road toward a coal train and the river out beyond.

"Them kids don't know nothin'," he says.

After my papa got back, the kids at school started talkin' about how my grandpa tried to kill the ghost. Everybody knows about how it got on him so bad one night that he took a shot at it, but missed. The bullet went right through grampa's brain and killed him dead. Mama don't say nothin' about it, since it was her daddy and all, but I know it's true.

"I guess my grandpa wasn't as good a shot as my papa."

"Ain't nobody as good a shot as your daddy," Bennie says.

And that makes me happy, and I forget about everything else.

My Mama says there's been a ghost on the land as long as she can recall. It comes and goes, and I knows she's right cuz she told me about the screams back when she was a girl. Sometimes at night, it puts off a horrible howlin' when it gets in a real bad place, and I hide under the blanket with Pesky. Pesky's my German shepherd—not a real one, cuz they cost too much money to feed and all. He's stuffed—black and white all over, but he's as real as real can be, I got no doubt about that. One time he woke me when papa left a cigarette burnin' and it caught the corner of the porch on fire. If it wadn't for Pesky, I bet this place mighta burned up like a torch. I seen a trailer down the road where that happened and I felt bad for those folks. We

been meaning to get that porch fixed for some time, but we gotta wait for things to get better, mama says.

"Skeeters startin' to bite," Bennie says as he slaps his arm and leans against the tree. "My daddy says the River's running high this spring, and there's gonna be a whole mess of them this summer."

"I hate skeeters worse than just about anything," I say as I look out toward our burned up porch. I can see mama in the kitchen. Papa's inside somewhere and she's on the phone again, talkin' and waitin' to talk with people. "I bet if you stayed out here all night they'd suck the blood right out of you until there wadn't nothin' left."

"My daddy went up to Alaska once, and he said the skeeters up there are so big they can kill just about anything. If you leave a horse out in the wild, a whole swarm of 'em will suck its life right out."

Just thinking about a big old horse being sucked down to the bone makes me tingly all over, and I start to feel a bite or two even though I know they ain't real. Back behind us, I hear Bennie's mom open up the screen door and yell for him to come home for dinner.

"I'll see ya in the mornin'," he says as the sun drops down below his house. I know it's time to head home, but I ain't ready just yet. There ain't no hurry, and besides, I like to hear the crickets start their evenin' talk. I watch as Bennie's mama takes his hand at the back door, and by the time he gets inside, I feel some of that cool air workin' its way up from the Ohio.

We're on the other side of the river from Paducah, the winning side, just a little ways from Mound City. Sometimes when Bennie and me play in these here woods, I think about how my family used to own all this land. I told him about it once, but he said my head was full of rocks, and I didn't know nothin'. But I know what my Mama says, and she ain't never ever lied to me. She said her great, great, great granddaddy got it after the Civil War. Lt Joseph James was his name, and the government gave him a hundred acres for fightin' in the War. He had a wooden leg, but he got on a horse and come out here all the way from Pennsylvania. Can't imagine what it's like to ride a horse all that way with a wooden leg, but I guess that's what heroes do. He's buried down the road in the big Civil War cemetery.

She says we's all that's left of him now. There used to be a picture of him in a frame wearing his uniform, but it got lost years back during the big flood. Sometimes I think about what it must've been like to be some Civil War hero and then have your picture get taken away by the river. It don't seem right somehow. I sure wish we had it up on the wall still. We got lots of other pictures of war heroes in the family. Grandpa's got one, my uncle Jake on papa's side is up there, too, and then there's the

one of my papa right next to a big old flag. He's one of them National Guard heroes that goes off when they come callin'. He got into the fight twice. I don't remember the first time he went cuz I was just a kid, but this last time I seen him off and welcomed him back. I missed him so hard that at first I didn't care what he was like when he come home. He's got the slowness now, but mama says the government's givin' him all the time he needs to rest and get better. It'd be nice if they could give us some more land like they gave Lt James, but I guess they done give it all away.

"You ever think that old ghost might be Lt James?" Bennie says.

"Can't say for sure who it is."

"Don't look at it when you leave."

"I ain't ever seen it."

"I mean don't look back at the house. If a ghost sees you lookin' at it, then it might follow you."

"Why would it do that?"

"Maybe he's angry that folks sold off his land after he won it fair and square?"

"Can't see how he'd be angry at us. We ain't the ones who sold it." I wanna say more, but I'm not gonna, cuz Bennie's my one good friend and there ain't no use in making a bother over things I ain't sure about. Mama says her family kept splittin' the land in two over the years when times got hard. They kept selling it off in pieces until they was down to an acre and a half. Her daddy did that, sayin' it wadn't worth having less than an acre, and I think he's right. I don't mention that to Bennie, cuz I don't want him to get all jealous or think I'm special cuz they only got a half acre. But I know what I know and he ain't got no Civil War heroes to speak of, anyways.

When mama tells me the news, the first thing I do is go over and find Bennie in the trees. They got a real dog—a mutt named Georgie—and they's out playin' fetch. Georgie's a good ol' dog, and they got him trained to do all sorts of tricks.

"Yep, were goin' for sure," I tell Bennie, and he kicks the dirt in front of me. Georgie comes runnin' up and drops the ball at his feet. "Where ya headin'?"

"Up to Mary Ann. They got a special hospital up there—just for snipers and other heroes to get all better."

"I been up to Marion once," Bennie says. "Went camping on Crab Orchard Lake. They got good fishin' there." Georgie looks up at us, waitin' for one of us to pick up the ball, but ain't either of us in the mood for playin'.

"My papa always liked to go fishin'. Maybe you can come up when he gets better, and we can all go together."

"Maybe," he says, reachin' down to pick up the ball. "Somebody buyin' your place?"

"Nope. I think folks are scared of comin' round. The bank's gonna take it back."

I can tell Bennie don't know what to say as he looks over toward the house where papa's sittin'. I bet he's hopin' there'll be another boy who moves in, another boy to go shootin' with, and it makes me sorta sad thinking how I might be replaced.

"Think you'll ever be comin' back?"

"Can't say as I know one way or another, but once papa gets all better, I can't see why not."

"I like the sound of that," he says and then he lets the ball loose on a long toss, and old Georgie tears off at high speed to get it.

It's time now. We got papa strapped in good and tight in the back seat. He ain't been drivin' since he come home cuz his arms don't work so well. They say snipers are the most important men in the whole army. I guess being that important and all, he was used to gettin' driven around by folks. Mama's up front, and me and Pesky's in the back to keep a watch over him.

I take a quick look over toward Bennie's house, and I can see him out on the front stoop sitting there with Georgie. We done said our goodbyes, and it don't look like he's watching us, but I bet he is. We's best friends and all, so my going's gotta mean something. I suck back a tear I feel building up on the inside, and I roll down my window to yell goodbye. Before I can get that window down, though, his mama joins him, so I just raise my arm a bit instead. They ain't waving or nothin', though, they're just sittin' there.

I wonder if he's watching to see if the ghost will follow us. I been trying not to, but that's all I been thinkin' about lately. I wanna ask mama about it, but I can tell she's kinda sad. She's always on the phone talking to someone about papa, and I bet she's done talked out. It's like she got tired real fast when he came back, helping him out and all, and then with the ghost, too, it musta been all she could handle.

I got Pesky's sittin' on my lap, and I reach out and take papa's hand. It feels a little cold, but I don't mind. "We'll leave that old ghost behind, mama," I say, but deep down I ain't so sure. Maybe Bennie's right, I think. Maybe the old ghost is Lt. James, after all, and he's out there looking for us right now, angry that we lost it all. There ain't nobody else left to blame, but us. Maybe he's gonna follow us right up to Mary Ann and won't leave us alone until we make things right.

Mama starts the car, and I squeeze papa's hand wantin' him to squeeze back, but there ain't nothin' there. She turns out of the driveway, leading our U-Haul trailer onto the road. I can see her in the mirror, looking for papa's eyes, and then they settle on me. "Don't look back, honey," she says, and I nod and turn to papa. He's gotta little smile on his face, and he leans into the window looking hard as if he can see something we can't.

Up front, mama's all about the road ahead. She ain't cryin' like I thought she would. I guess maybe she's too scared to cry.

"I ain't gonna look back, mama," I say. "I ain't gonna."

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LAREN MCCLUNG

## Counting the Dead

Sometimes we breathe on windows
and name those faces
that wake us in the night
walking there in sleep. They live
where only the half-awake can see.
For those we can't remember
we draw a line. As a girl
I stood staring at the blank wall
left to think about whatever
I'd done wrong. With my finger,
I'd list names of boys
I'd marry, our children.
On a Sunday evening in July
the wall houses shadows.
We stand where the dead wander
nameless and I watch him
as he sees a face in the flare-light:
Timothy Dye, Christmas '48
to Easter '69. At sundown,
he unlearns to lock up
a story and shifts a shoulder
as if to shake a demon loose.
In the wall, I trace the year

where my father would be
and leave my own name there.

# Thanksgiving

He stands at the sink, the turkey
in his hands. He turns it

under the water, removes the innards,
pulls back the loose skin from the hollow

of the neck and tenderly washes
the bird's open cavity.

He's laughing when he calls it *hero*—
and *Doesn't it sound better that way?*

Then, as he cuts the fat, ties the limbs,
he tells me: *Out there, there was no rest.*

*Some of those guys were farm boys, too.*
*We snuck through the highlands*

*where we heard they were camped.*
*In the freezone, we had orders to kill anyone,*

*NVA, SVA, you know. The Cong*
*were gone, but they left chickens there*

*and those farm boys in my platoon,*
*they knew what to do, to grab*

*a chicken by its head like this:*
he slipped his hand over my fist to show

how the palm would fit over a head,
the neck between two fingers.

*They'd slap the chicken into the air*—his arm
shot up then down like a whip.

He said, *the legs kicked and kicked.*
That night, they butchered the birds, plucked

feathers with their fingers, the guts from under
the ribs, the gizzard, the heart, the liver, the lungs.

He said, *We huddled in the grass to eat the legs*
*and wings slow enough to keep the night at bay.*

*That was the first time I ever killed anything.*

# Carpentry

I've seen him work the backsaw into heartwood
for perfect dovetails, held slabs of wood in place,
my fingers turned white at the tips, worrying
I'd slip as he'd move the blade across a pencil mark.

When I ask where he learned, he tells me
his father drew blueprints for a living,
carried a compass and protractor
everywhere, it was part of his thinking.

He said he knew interiors, maneuvered
in tight spaces where the old man couldn't fit.
He'd inch through the crawlspace on his back
to the rats down there, they had red eyes. He was scared,

wasn't scared. He tells me it was like the first time
in a foxhole near *Phan Thiết,* that sometimes
he'd close his eyes and hold his breath
because mud in the jungle smells like sick
and you never know what you're sleeping with.

What you do there at night maybe isn't sleep.
I read sometimes the inner animal
is activated by a brief awakening. This is true
for the rat, the hedgehog, and the rhesus monkey.
On waking, they scan the environment for signs

of predators. Maybe in war this is how a soldier sleeps,
part in dream, partly conscious. I also know
in sleep the brain re-orders memory. When I ask
the name of his sergeant he forgets.

But he has this photograph where they're digging
foxholes. My father is laughing as he works.
He swings a pickaxe over his head, his arms at a right angle.
He's shirtless, and hanging just to his solar plexus
his mother's miraculous medal on a silver chain.

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ABBY E. MURRAY

# Corners of the Ceiling

I married a man who sleeps with a gun under the mattress.
He's made his living at war, in an army-issued freight container
near Musayyib where soldiers drew straws to get out of waking him,
the way they had to slam the rusted door and shout his name
then drop like spies before he fired a customary good morning shot.

I found him praying in a chapel ten years ago and took him home with me.
He emptied his pockets after dinner. Condom, lip balm, quarter, compass.
I thought he would be a grizzly bear in bed and he was,
handling me easily even when I tossed over him like a fish.
Afterward he slurped water straight from the tap.

When we married he told me we'd carry our rings in our pockets, just to be safe.
We moved from ghetto to ghetto, covered our windows with bedsheets
and stashed ammunition so he could sleep.
We lay in bed and listened for neighborhood gunfire; he pointed
to the different corners of our ceiling as if he were explaining the constellations
and told me which way the bullets had gone.

# Lieutenant Charles in the Jungle

When Jim Flancey stepped on
the first landmine since Sunday
his body shot straight up
into the melaleuca tree
like a bouquet of red bottle rockets
and Lieutenant Charles knew
there weren't any flat rocks or stones
lying around to knock
the limbs down so he had his men
take off their boots and throw
those at the branches instead.
Everybody's feet were rotten by then
anyway and those who could
feel the mud bubbling up
between their toes said it felt good.
They all smiled and cried
and threw their boots in the air
to knock Jim Flancey from the branches
while one sergeant waddled
back and forth holding a black bag open
like the mouth of a floating fish head.
Everyone agreed that the platoon
really came together that night
and it was a shame Jim Flancey
wasn't there to see it.
Lieutenant Charles clapped his sergeant
on the back and told him
he held that bag like a real pro,
like he was back home at a baseball game
catching his first foul ball.

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ANTHONY BUKOSKI

# The Six Purposes of Drill

Do not call Marine Corps drill instructors "You." A ewe is a female sheep. Do not refer to yourself as "I" in boot camp. Without a personality, there is no "I." Yell at the top of your lungs, "Sir, Private Bronkowski requests permission to leave the parade ground, Sir." When you make the request, don't look your DIs in the eye or they will say, "Are you queer for our gear? Why are you eyeballing us, Private?" As you formulate your next thought, find a place midway between the back of their campaign hats and the historic buildings of the arcade surrounding the drill field where you march this June morning, 1964. Focused on the in-between place in air, say in a voice that doesn't quaver, "Sir, Private Bronkowski has shit his pants."

"Get away from us!" they'll yell.

"Aye, aye, Sir."

Jog, M-14 in hand, to the head, the latrine, across the wide, paved parade ground, the Grinder, where in the distance platoons practice close order drill, DIs calling cadence. Where will you go next? you wonder in your misery.

Seeing you run past the reviewing stand, a lieutenant asks, "What's the matter, Recruit?"

"Sir, the private had an accident."

"Get cleaned up," he says. With his tan summer service uniform, he wears a garrison cap, a piss cutter. Near the front of the piss cutter shine the single silver bars of his rank.

The gunnery sergeant you come up to next—when you walk behind him, you slow your pace. "By your leave, Sir." He waves you on.

See now, Private Bronkowski, through frosted glass windows tilted open, how the sun throws patterns across the clean floor of the latrine. For the first time since leaving Superior, Wisconsin, by Greyhound bus for Minneapolis, then by Western Airlines for San Diego, you have a moment to relax; during your eighteenth year on earth, a moment alone in the first weeks of boot camp. A Marlboro would taste good, you think, while on the Grinder, Platoon 146 drills under the gaze of Corporal George, Sergeant Gribben, and Staff Sergeant Welch, the man who sent you here.

Senior Drill Instructor Welch, bitter-eyed, red-faced, nose filled with broken blood vessels, is especially no friend of yours. To look salty, he wears his campaign hat a little back on his head. If he wanted, he could carry a swagger stick. Despite his cigar smoking and slight paunch, on long runs through the canyons he'll stay with any nineteen-year-old.

"Where are the utility trousers you befouled?" he asks when the platoon returns from the Grinder to the quonset huts, Platoon 146 territory.

"Sir, Private Bronkowski threw them and his skivvies in the dumpster on the way to the shower."

"Diapers are not part of the basic clothing issue. You'll have to buy them. At the next pay call, Corporal George will accompany you to the Recruit Exchange to shop. Get out of my sight, Dippy."

Staff Sergeant Welch has no use for you or other recruits. In Korea he watched men have similar accidents as yours. They had endured combat, extreme heat and cold, sparse rations, water tasting like iodine purification tablets. Who could blame a marine for things that occurred in combat? Then you come along all the way from "Wesconsin"—blond-haired, shiny-faced, soft in the stomach. Disgusted by the sight of you, Staff Sergeant Welch barks something to Sergeant Gribben, the junior drill instructor, about getting the platoon prepared for chow.

Anderson, Clark, Joubert, Jimenez, other privates in your squad bay put away their M-14s.

"Fall in!" Sergeant Gribben yells.

"Sir, Yes, Sir."

Private Dillon grabs the guidon, a staff resting in a holder by the hatch. Its red pennant with yellow numbers identifies the platoon. To win streamers for the guidon, streamers for marksmanship, physical readiness, academics, and drill, Platoon 146 will compete against other platoons in the training series. The drill streamer is yellow, physical readiness streamer white, marksmanship streamer blue.

"Dress right," Sergeant Gribben says, then the rest of the command, "Dress!"

In short sidesteps, you move till Private Muntean's fingertips touch your shoulders and your fingertips touch Private Keiser's when he moves right. At the command "Front!", turning heads and eyes forward, you drop your arms, resuming the position of attention. Page 102, *Guidebook for Marines*, lists six purposes of drill: 1. "To teach discipline by instilling habits of precision and automatic response to orders," 2. "To move a unit from one place to another in a standard, orderly manner. . ."

"Right face," Gribben says. Dissatisfied with the response, he cancels the command.

"Don't worry about bagging your nylons. Let's get it right, Ladies."

This time you turn smartly. Page 103, *Guidebook for Marines*, defines "Snap" in drill as "immediate and smart execution of movement." You will want the smoking lamp lit after chow.

DIs on two sides of you, Dillon raising the guidon, you step out to Sergeant Gribben's cadence call, "Owr, owr, owr, urel, owr, urel, owr." Private Boyd Page runs in front of you. At 1130 hours he is your foghorn. Six feet, five inches tall, soft-spoken, he looks foolish running back and forth ahead of the platoon. By forcing him to imitate a foghorn, the DIs believe Page will sound off louder in ranks.

"Let that horn come from the diaphragm, Page. Make it sound low and nasty. Platoon 146 does not want to collide with some pussy platoon," Sergeant Gribben is saying. "*We* are not pussies. *We* are squared away." "Ah-hoo, ah-hoo," calls Page. "That's right. Back and forth. Back and forth, Private Page. Private Keiser, you're slouching. Don't slouch. Private Clark, you're ditty-bopping. Why must you ditty-bop? Huber, Huber, what am I to do with a fuck up like you?"

The boot heels of sixty-one recruits and two DIs hit the deck together. A third purpose of drill is "To improve morale by developing team spirit." "Owr, owr, owr, hedalep, hedalep." You are aligned, squared away. If it could stay this way, if the problem with the ice plant hadn't come up to annoy Staff Sergeant Welch, then boot camp could have been a little easier today, but someone is disturbing the ice plant. Huber? Ramage? Page? Secrist?

Given the destruction of the ice plant and your misfortune on the Grinder, you wonder whether the smoking lamp will ever be lit for Platoon 146. All through the march to chow, you think about a cigarette. After you eat, when you've marched back and stand in formation, will the DIs say, "At ease, Privates. The smoking lamp is lit for everyone but Bronkowski."?

Your girlfriend taught you to smoke. If she sends gum, cigarettes, or other pogey bait when she writes you from Superior, Wisconsin, the DIs will pummel you in

the duty hut. They'll order you to swallow the gum wrappers. If you can't, they'll make you chew the gum before the platoon. Private Markwood has had to do this. He is the suck-up housemouse who is in and out of the duty hut whenever the DIs want little things done. By having "Housemouse" chew gum before the platoon, by having him roll his eyes to show how happy he is that none of you have gum to chew, the DIs have taught everyone a lesson.

"You'll never crave pogey bait, will you?" they yelled back on the nineteenth day of boot training. "No, Sir." "*Will* you, Privates?" "No, Sir," you roared, convinced you'd never have a milkshake, cheeseburger, or Milky Way candy bar again. Pogey bait is for civilians.

Let ass-kissing housemouses and civilians eat pogey bait. Now on the twenty-ninth day of recruit training, someone could offer you a grilled cheese sandwich and you'd refuse. You don't want any of it. You'll be a lean, mean fighting machine when you leave Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, in September. You'll have learned hand-to-hand combat, the nomenclature of the M-14 rifle, how to parry and thrust with the fixed bayonet, even the six purposes of drill, though the last three are aimed more toward NCOs than recruits.

At 1200 hours, Corporal George at the lunch tables in the mess hall says, "No playing grab ass. No talking. You have twelve minutes to eat. At the command 'Sit!', I want sixty-one hairy assholes hitting the benches in unison."

On the menu are chicken, potatoes, and corn, but, given the condition of your stomach, you eat light. You want to slip Private Huber a slice of bread. This won't do. He must lose weight.

In twelve minutes, you're outside reforming around the guidon for the march back. On a sunny afternoon, Page is the foghorn.

While the platoon was eating, sleepy-eyed Sergeant Campos has come aboard to relieve Sergeant Gribben. Ordinarily, his eyes stay half shut through the training day. The ice plant problem has troubled Sergeant Campos and gotten under Staff Sergeant Welch's skin. Today, because of the ice plant, Sergeant Campos's eyes are wide open. Below the shaped crown of his felt campaign hat is a black eagle, globe, and anchor insignia. His shirt front buttons align with the left edge of his cartridge belt buckle. The buckle aligns with his trouser fly. Everything freshly starched and pressed runs straight up and down above spit-shined boots.

"Screw with me, I'll screw with you," he says. "In ten minutes, I want 100 dead flies in your grubby hands. Gnats and fleas do not count, Dippies. Private Markwood, bring the DI's chair from the duty hut. There will be no lollygagging. You've disappointed your drill instructors, Girls. Page, sound the foghorn. Quickly.

Get it done. Fly patrol. When I say 'Time,' the rest of you maggots line up, each presenting his captured flies."

The platoon and you, Private Bronkowski, search the pavement, search everywhere inside and outside the squad bays. Private Quinn bumps into Private Hedstrom. Private Barker curses Private Smith. Next to the hatchway, Floyd Settles sees a fly on the hand pump. "Where?" asks LaRoche. "There. No, it's flown," Settles says. Ulom has one, Velarde two. On the bulkhead inside the quonset hut, Elroy Williams zeroes in on a fly. When Lavern Cooper steps into Garcia's and Duncan's cupped hands and they lift him, he reaches halfway up the bulkhead for two flies, maybe three. Velarde, a regular Venus Flytrap claims he has three. Walmsley strikes it rich. "Ahoo ahoo!" Page yells, minutes ticking past.

Standing beside Sergeant Campos, the hateful Housemouse reads from a pocket dictionary kept in the duty hut. "Ice plant is 'An Old World annual herb of the carpetweed family with fleshy foliage covered with glistening papillate dots or vesicles.'" No one understands him. All you know is that ice plant is four inches tall, dark green, and grows around quonset huts and duty huts.

As the platoon rushes about, Private Custard gives you the finger.

"It wasn't me that did anything to the ice plant, Custard."

"Yes it was. You came back here once you crapped your pants."

"So what?" you say. "Somebody would've seen me if I was sitting out here."

Tonight they'll treat you to a blanket party. The darkness and blanket hiding them from sight, the recipient doesn't know who's hitting him.

"Page, cease with the alarm," Sergeant Campos says. He relaxes in his chair. "Platoon 146, present your findings."

"Aye, aye, Sir," the platoon says, scrambling into line.

It's all silly. When Sergeant Gribben makes Private Lee, whose rifle is found with rust on it, bury the M-14 outside the quonset hut, placing an R.I.P. sign over it, it's silly. When Private Draper, assigned submarine patrol, scans the quonset huts for enemy subs, it's silly. Looking like a fool, he stands for thirty minutes on a dumpster peering through empty Coca Cola bottles before reporting, "Sir, no submarine activity sighted here on land, Sir." When the DIs say things like "Up your giggy with a wawa brush," it's silly. The words make no sense. Fly patrol is silly.

"How many captured?" Sergeant Campos asks.

"Sir, two, Sir," Wangler says.

"How many from you, Brickman?"

"Four, Sir."

"Do not give your flies to other recruits, Privates. We will extend the flies a proper burial. How many, Chief?" he asks Sammaripa, an Indian the DIs call "Blanket Ass." They call blacks "Splivs," Catholics "Mackerel Snappers."

When he has examined thirty-six flies, Sergeant Campos stands up. Eyes focused on Private Ramage's palm, he says, "Ramage, I've seen this one. What are you pulling? This fly was the second one through the line."

"No, Sir, it's newly killed, Sir."

"It's not. I saw it five minutes ago. I recognize its eyes. Flies, like civilians, are unsanitary. You must discourage them from your presence. Get down. All of you, get down. Hit the deck. I want one hundred squat thrusts. Ready, exercise. One, two—" Sergeant Campos loses count at fifty six. "Start over, Girls," he says as Staff Sergeant Welch returns to the duty deck while Corporal George hovers about.

A Catholic like you, Sergeant Campos has received Communion at Mass. When you could not climb the straight rope on the obstacle course, he's looked the other way. "Try the knotted rope, Broo-owski," he's said at other times. Gribben and George, not being Catholic, are neutral toward you.

Coming from the Land of Sky Blue Waters, you're pretty good at swimming and running forest paths. You hate squat thrusts. You begin them standing up. Elbows touching the insides of the knees, you place your palms on the burning asphalt. Arms stiff, you thrust legs and trunk backward, keeping toes straight, heels up. Returning to the squat position, elbows touching knees again, you go back to the stand position, repeating the process for as long as the DI wants you to.

When you look over, Private Huber is picking up flies. No one sees this. He looks pleased that he's pulled one on the DIs. He looks around for more flies to put in his mouth. The starving Huber isn't one of the platoon's better recruits; Private Ramage isn't; you, Alphonse Bronkowski, aren't. Custard and the guidon carrier are. Even with a boot camp haircut, Keith Custard has striking features. The DIs call him "Hollywood." He went to high school with The Beachboys. Given his good looks, you'd think he'd be happy anticipating his opportunities for beautiful women and good jobs, but it's like he wants boot camp to go on forever.

If Private Huber doesn't lose weight, he'll be sent back to start recruit training over. Motivation Platoon is for the lazy, the out of shape. When Huber takes a slice of bread in the chow line, the DIs remove it from his tray. When Huber takes a pat of butter, they shitcan it. "None of it's for you. None, Huber." Though he's not as heavy as before, he messes things up.

The Fatboy, the Fly Thief, you with your "problem" are upsetting the DIs. As far as Keith Custard is concerned, you should be discharged, leaving Platoon 146 better off. If Huber eats flies, Sergeant Campos has a fly up his ass.

"Someone's breaking the ice plant. Who's the moonlight squatter? No diddledicking, Privates. Who did it? Who's the leaf lover?" he asks.

You, Private Bronkowski, know the guilty man. After "Taps," the private above you hasn't been able to sleep with Settles snoring, Bertilson and Ramage whispering to themselves, and Huber crying. Maybe a lot of things motivate Private Secrist to descend from his bunk, returning later smelling of earth and ice plant.

Hollywood Custard is pinning the destruction on Huber. For all the things Huber's messed up, he's not disturbed the landscaping at three a.m. Because Hollywood dislikes him, they're out to get him. Maybe Hollywood's trumped-up suspicions about the ice plant have been relayed to the DIs by the Housemouse. Huber has been off all through training. He couldn't execute the vertical climb on the obstacle course. He couldn't execute the "By the right flank, March" command on the drill field.

Corporal George asks, "Are you in love with plant life, Huber? Are you a horticulturist?"

Sergeant Campos asks, "Is this your secret garden? What other secrets do you keep from your drill instructors?"

Staff Sergeant Welch, brim of his brown felt campaign hat touching the front of Huber's utility cover, asks, "Are you rebelling against us, Huber? Are you the deranged fuck up we think you are?"

Unsure whom to answer, the still-fat private whose utility uniform hangs from his frame begins to shake. We knew the end was near when he couldn't recall the sixth General Order, the muzzle velocity of the M-14, or the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

"The private doesn't know what a hordacultist is, Sir."

"Your DI doesn't speak English? Is that what's wrong that you can't understand him? We've had trouble with you all along, Private?"

"Sir, the private understands the drill instructor."

"Then you are a horticulturist?"

"Sir, Yes, Sir. I guess the private is a hordacultist."

"No shit. Bring me roses," Staff Sergeant Welch says, as though one way or another he's getting to the truth about Private Joey Paul Huber. "You like gardening. I want roses. You don't grow roses? You said you're a horticulturist."

"Sir, it wasn't Huber," Secrist says. "It wasn't him. I sat in the ice plant. It calms me at night."

"Stand still, Huber," Welch is saying. "Do you have the St. Vitus' Dance that you're shaking and moving about? You'll shake all right when you get to Motivation Platoon. I can do nothing for you. Your drill instructor, who froze hands, feet, and dick at Inchon, Korea, leaving the latter permanently erect, does not fail, but he has done so this day. You'll be sent back in training."

"It wasn't him," Secrist says. "Look at him. He's helpless, Sir."

"Out of my way," Corporal George yells when he's heard enough. Pushing aside recruits, he's on Secrist. Face an inch away, he hollers, "You better stand at attention, Maggot."

"Yes, Sir. I'll be sent back," Huber says to Staff Sergeant Welch on the other side of the platoon. Crying, he wiggles around in some kind of dance. Hoping Sergeant Welch will change his mind and not shitcan him, Huber looks like he's performing the Twist as he burps up his snack. Done with squat thrusts, Platoon 146 starts more push-ups as punishment for all of this.

"One for the Corps, two for the Corps—"the platoon says.

"Sound off! Louder!"

"I did it. *I* did, Sir," Private Secrist says.

"Louder!" Corporal George says. "Louder, Louder!" drowning him out. "One for the Corps, two for the Corps."

A flight is leaving San Diego. A platoon is heading on a long run. A girl is preparing to write you. You've told her no pogey bait, but she's angry about what you said the night before you left when you told her you loved the Corps more than her. Who knows what she'll put in the envelope for the DIs to find. The smoking lamp is out, probably forever. The ocean breeze has stopped. They've paired Private Norman with Private Page. Page...Norman. Now double foghorns run about at 1400 hours on a clear day yelling "Ah-hoo, ah-hoo." Ramage is doing extra push-ups for lying when he didn't lie. Housemouse is reading from the dictionary. Secrist is doing squat thrusts for telling the truth. Starved, Huber looks for flies, gnats, ants even, as you, Bronkowski, are saying to Staff Sergeant Welch, "Sir, the private requests permission to make a head call."

"You went four hours ago."

"Yes, sir, the private knows this, Sir."

"Up your giggy with a wawa brush. Get back in line. Finish your squat thrusts, Bronkowski."

"Twenty-nine for the Corps, thirty for the Corps," the recruits are saying.

Don't look Sergeant Welch in the eye. To him you're not human. When you formulate a thought as Page and Norman warn of fog and Huber dances the fly dance, find a place midway between the back of Staff Sergeant Welch's campaign hat and the quonset huts this June afternoon, 1964. Focused on the in-between place, say in a voice that doesn't quaver, "Sir, Private Bronkowski's had an accident again, Sir."

When he yells, "Get away from me. Get away from here," do not move, Bronkowski. Say, "Sir, the private from Wisconsin has shit himself. Do you hear the private? The private's going to have another accident and another, Sir," until finally one of them listens about Huber the fly eater, about Page the moving foghorn, about Ramage the liar, about all of you, and how, after the first four weeks of Marine Corps boot camp, the fog is descending on an otherwise clear afternoon.

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COMMENTARY BY ROSS GRESHAM

# The Memory Hole is Us

## *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*
## By Jon Krakauer
## Doubleday, 2009

This book takes off halfway through, Chapter 22, when Pvt. Jessica Lynch's army convoy blunders into the Iraqi town of Nasiriyah. Eight days later, one of the thousand soldiers put on alert to participate in Pvt. Lynch's rescue is Pvt. Pat Tillman.

Jessica Lynch. Pat Tillman. To those of us who watch our wars on the news, these may be the only enlisted soldiers we know by name—which is a central subject here, what we know and what we don't.

In *Where Men Win Glory*, Jon Krakauer, accomplished writer of *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, recounts Tillman's life and death, the bare facts of which are so stirring that most of the college freshman I teach can still recite them. Inspired by 9/11, Tillman gave up his career as a professional football player—a job most American boys fantasize about—to enlist in the US Army. Two years later, in Afghanistan, he was shot to death by another Ranger when half his divided platoon stumbled upon the other half.

Of course, this is all most of us know. Krakauer fills in the details, and doing so takes the tale from tragic to sickening. When he's finished, the nobility of Tillman's choice is still there, burnished by what we learn of Tillman's thoughtful character.

But it also becomes more and more clear that Tillman was wrong, even silly. He left the NFL because wanted to give to something greater than himself, but in the end nothing was: not the Army, and certainly not his country—neither the people running it nor us, the American public, who care little for what actually happens in our name but who go stern and teary over fairy tales of heroism. No one and nothing in the book lives up to the nobility of Tillman's act; no one comes close.

*Where Men Win Glory* falls into sections, and the weakest section is first. After a gripping prologue, the first 18 chapters follow Pat Tillman's young life while providing, in parallel, the happenings in Afghanistan. Tillman is excelling in sports, the Taliban are rising to power.

Tillman is an interesting young man, a free thinker and the sort of athlete who surprises coaches at every level by achieving more than his natural gifts suggest that he might. He makes varsity as a skinny sophomore. No one thinks he can play high-level college football, but he stars in the Rose Bowl. No one thinks he can make the pros, but by the time he quits to join the Army, some sportswriters have him down as the best strong safety in the NFL.

Grit and determination trumping stop-watch speed—it's inspiring stuff. But it's also a fairly common trope of sports writing (the white guy who tries hard) and Krakauer finds more in Tillman than he manages to convince me of. He begins the section with a passage from Susan Neiman's *Moral Clarity*, about "the life force or spark thought close to divine," and generally he implies that with Tillman's death we lose one of the best minds of our generation. Why load such weight on Tillman's shoulders? We see Tillman make kid mistakes. He hurts a harmless boy in a parking-lot scuffle. His journals of drinking and louting his way around Paris are no more edifying than one would expect. One semester at Arizona State, we learn, Tillman gets his grades up from 3.5 to a 4.0. Yes?

It's a small enough problem, perhaps exaggerated by this parallel history of Afghanistan, with the implied sense of a convergence of the twain, two great forces destined for collision, instead of one poor idealist tripping toward the feed chute of implacable machines: geopolitics, the US Army, and the Taliban's medieval horror show. Set against these, the admirable drive that's fueled Tillman's sports career will prove to be less than nothing, a sick joke.

The Afghanistan material is difficult to read for its own reasons. It's ugly from start to finish. President Carter waxes sanctimonious about the Soviets invading Afghanistan. But it turns out that he's faking. He has baited them in, sending aid to the mujahideen in hopes the Soviets will respond and become bogged down as

America had been in Vietnam. The plan works, a great success, but in the process the United States sows the seeds of all that's to come. Afghanistan has burgeoning pockets of culture that we would recognize and admire—rights for women, arts, civil society, etc. The United States throws its weight behind the forces who would stamp these out, dragging the country back to warlords and their medieval tribes. According to Krakauer, George Bush the elder has a chance to stop this, but doesn't—why would he? The United States has its eye on the Soviets. Chaos in Afghanistan is what we're after.

By comparison, the Taliban's rise reads like a hero movie. They come together to stop banditry, and one of their first triumphs is to punish two warlords who are quarreling over which of them gets to rape a child. The Taliban's rigid sense of order is understandably appealing amidst the chaos we and the Soviets caused with our proxy war. Yet soon the Taliban are able to indulge in their own primitive brutality (with which we are more familiar) and history of the place rolls on, unremittingly bleak. Al Qaeda arrives, nursed into being by a combination of US fumbles. They set their sights on us. We ignore their threats and initial strikes until finally President Clinton impotently fires cruise missiles at a training camp, harming few. Some of the missiles fail to detonate, and Osama Bin Laden reportedly sells them to China for some badly-needed cash.

It's almost unreadably painful, and the pain gets worse the second half of the book. The short-sighted self-interest and mendacity roll on when the new President Bush engages that terrible, reeling country—country?—that chaos of people terrorized by bandit lords and zealots. The only difference will be the magnitude.

As a sort of interlude, chapters 18-21 cover Tillman's early days in the army. Not surprisingly, Tillman is disappointed by what he finds. There's silly bullying, and a system that favors time-served over ability. Instead of idealists, most of his fellow recruits are immature kids who joined because they couldn't get jobs elsewhere. With prescience Tillman writes in his journal, "One thing I find myself despising is the sight of all these guns in the hands of children. Of course we all understand the necessity of defense.... It doesn't dismiss the fact that a young man I would not trust with my canteen is walking about armed...."

Not that one should ever get the impression that Tillman is a whiner. He's just genuinely surprised. At the same time he's constantly hopeful that he'll find more professional class of soldier, and he admires them when he does.

At chapter 22 the book begins to move with more expertise. Krakauer explains just how the rescue of Jessica Lynch was a piece of choreographed propaganda. The real war in Iraq was ugly—maybe necessarily ugly, with ubiquitous miscommunication and soldiers simultaneously tired and wired. There were battles where nearly all the American casualties were caused by our own warplanes, strafing pass after pass. Ample numbers of Iraqis were already demonstrating that, far from greeting us "with sweets and flowers," they would be pleased to see Americans dead. To distract from this disturbing reality, the Bush team invents the tale of Jessica Lynch, who goes down fighting but is captured and tortured, then plucked from the jaws of death by our brave commandos.

Lynch is seriously hurt when her vehicle crashes, but she doesn't fight and she isn't tortured. The staff of the Iraqi hospital to which she is taken gives her two pints of their own blood, and her doctor attempts to return her to the Americans, who fire on the approaching ambulance. No doubt the soldiers who retrieve her from the hospital are brave, but the situation doesn't require it. They meet no real resistance. During these days of the war, there are other American POWs held by the enemy, and no special effort is made to rescue them. The Bush team seems to choose Lynch because she is young and pretty, with the same logic that causes television networks to report the abduction of blonde children as national news.

Some evidence suggests that Lynch's rescue is delayed 24 hours so that a camera crew can be rushed to the site. As Tillman waits to participate in the operation, he and his mates are puzzled by the massive assembly of resources. He writes in his journal: "...I do believe this to be a big Public Relations stunt."

In *Where Men Win Glory*, all politicians live in a world of perception rather than truth, and the military officers who help compose these pictures are inevitably soiled by the contact. At some point following orders becomes indistinguishable from collusion. Probably, and most charitably, these politicians and military officials truly believe that their war should be fought, and they view the civilian public as unable to process bad news maturely. Instead we (the public) would just be disturbed by what we saw and heard, vaguely and uncomprehendingly.

This argument goes that the military has to show the public a good war or they won't support it, and then worse things will happen. They might have to shut the whole thing down. If the public is manipulated with fictions, a larger, greater truth will stand.

And at some level, *Where Men Win Glory* supports at least the first part of this case: the American public can't understand anything.

In one course this semester I teach about forty young men and women. These are Air Force Academy cadets, fairly well-versed in war news. About ten of them knew of Jessica Lynch. Who was she? A soldier taken prisoner in the war, rescued by special operations forces. Only one of my students ventured a few of the more cynical facts: an Iraqi lawyer told us about her, would walk three miles to our checkpoint to tell us....

What most knew was the old story, primarily—the first story, the fake one. Yet Krakauer isn't the first to expose this colossal hoax. What lasts, what sticks in our heads, disturbingly, is the *better* story. "Jessica Lynch, The Truth," is not as appealing as "Jessica Lynch, The Lie." Let's face it, "Jessica Lynch, The Truth" is a non-story. It happens all the time and we don't hear about it.

Next time you're in front of twenty people, ask them what they know about Lynch. Then ask about Pat Tillman.

Throughout *Where Men Win Glory* I'm reminded of George Orwell, another gifted young man who, inspired by a higher cause, volunteered for infantry combat. Toward the end of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* he loses his famous cool a few times. While he and his unit have been serving in the front lines, a political shift back in Barcelona has caused his militia organization to be pronounced politically unsound. Orwell and his fellows, who have given up promising lives in other countries, and who have served bravely in combat, are quietly rounded up by the authorities. In one pathetic scene, Orwell has to beg a police underling for a document which he hopes will free his commander. He has no voice left, having been shot through the throat by a Fascist sniper.

In "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War," Orwell writes,

> ...Early in life I have noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as heroes of imaginary victories; and I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in

> terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines.'

Later, he goes on:

> This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history.

If you haven't picked up *Homage to Catalonia* in a while, it's easy to forget that sections of it are almost unreadably dense. Orwell worries that the facts of the political turmoil in Barcelona will go forever misreported, so he sets down his own eye-witness account in great detail. These late chapters slog on and on, with the various factions carefully distinguished, who shot first, who ordered what.... More than any other writer I know, Orwell doesn't want to lie. He carefully distinguishes between what he sees, what he surmises, what he heard and how likely he thinks this is to be true. As a result we have no over-arching narrative on which to hang all of this information. Our eyes begin to glaze. 'Are the good guys winning? Wait, I thought they were the villains....'

Krakauer's book is similarly loaded with information. There's the history of Afghanistan. The vote count in the 2000 election. Bits from political speeches. There is a map (sensible) of the ambush terrain and a map (why?) of California. Krakauer gives an opening "Dramatis Personae" of 48 names from Tillman's platoon and their Afghan allies, along with their position in various vehicles ("Private First Class Kyle Jones, left waist seat"). In a blocked-off section he names the fourteen members of Tillman's chain of command, right up to President Bush, and their assistants.

Krakauer isn't Orwell, and some of this information feels simultaneously too fast and too slow. Instead of a neutral history of Afghanistan, we're given the bits that support a particular narrative. Krakauer is disgusted by what he's found. His jog through the history will stop at the low points. It's convincingly done, useful to an amateur like me, but I can't trust it as the final word, and I doubt it would impress a historian.

At other times, though, as with these exhaustive lists, or with the exhaustive who-saw-what of Tillman's death, there is an echo of Orwell's concern. These things have been misrepresented so many times that finally we need to go through it point

by point, slowly. 'I know,' he seems to be saying, 'I know the army admits that they buried their damning first report on the Tillman incident. But this fact needs to be set down once more, clearly and unambiguously, using everyone's full name.'

And if you and I get bored of the nuts and bolts, and relax instead on platitudes about Tillman's bravery, or the bravery of soldiers in general, or about honoring sacrifice...if the real story is available and we hold onto the fake one because it's simpler and nicer, then can we really blame Tillman's senior commanders or the Office of Strategic Influence?

The protagonist in Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith, works for the Ministry of Truth, rewriting history so that it doesn't undermine the claims of the government, and then destroying the old, problematic documents by sticking them down the "memory hole." At one point he's trying to erase a newly-declared traitor from the newspapers and must fill the vacant space, so he invents a hero soldier, one Comrade Ogilvy. Ogilvy lives a pure life, at age eleven denouncing his uncle to the Thought Police, and at nineteen designing a new hand grenade. He dies at twenty-three, deliberately sinking himself in the Indian Ocean in order to prevent secret dispatches from falling into enemy hands.

"Winston debated with himself whether to award Comrade Ogilvy the Order of Conspicuous Merit; in the end he decided against it because of the unnecessary cross-references that it would entail."

After Tillman's death, the army fast-tracks him for a Silver Star, though everyone involved knows that he's simply been the victim of a friendly-fire accident. This is as Tillman himself predicted. After joining the army he had refused all requests for interviews. He didn't want special celebration of himself and his choice, and he didn't want to become Comrade Ogilvy. One of his pals in Iraq tells us, "He was afraid that if something were to happen to him, Bush's people would, like, make a big deal out of his death and parade him through the streets. And those were his exact words: 'I don't want them to parade me through the streets.'"

He didn't want it, but once he was dead there was nothing he could do.

Until Tillman was killed I knew his story in the peripheral-vision way I "know" many things—internet flashes that appear beside my email, or headlines as I walk past the newspaper box. After he died I learned more. I read a long, moving article about him in *Sports Illustrated*, "Code of Honor."

The other day I looked it up to re-read. At the end I cried again, it's so poignant. The first scene is Tillman in Afghanistan, amongst mountains that "crawled with

al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters traveling in packs of four or five dozen." (Crawling in packs?) Tillman and his platoon are hot on the trail of some "big dogs": Mohammed Omar, al-Zawahiri, "or the biggest one of all, Osama bin Laden." "Dusk fell. The shadows twitched with treachery."

> A tribesman rode with them, a Taliban sympathizer. He was a plant who had offered to take the Rangers to a hidden enemy arms dump. Instead he was leading them into a trap. That's what Taliban sources would report later, after the air ripped just outside of Spera at half past seven and everything went to hell.
>
> The Rangers scrambled out of their vehicles as they came under ambush and charged the militants on foot. Suddenly Pat was down, Pat was dying. Two other U.S. soldiers were wounded, and a coalition Afghani fighter was killed in a firefight that lasted 15 or 20 minutes before the jihadists melted away. That's what the American military says.

If only one thing here were true. Instead, Tillman died the way most soldiers die. His platoon was following orders that now, when we have the luxury to consider them coolly, seem arbitrary and silly. No hunt for Osama. No treachery. No fight. Some Afghans shot at Rangers earlier, but they ran away long before any killing happened. All the casualties were from Americans shooting at each other. A few of the men who were involved in this earlier ambush were captured later. They weren't "jihadists" but local boys hired for the occasion, and if the evening had turned out differently and the Americans had slaughtered them to the man, it's hard to see how the US cause would have been advanced.

What did happen was that an underslept, dim-witted American soldier, jittery from all the shooting, saw Tillman waving his empty arms, shouting "I'm Pat Fucking Tillman!" and put three bullets in his head.

Which account will stick, if I ask my students in twenty years? I suppose that's clear. Another *Sports Illustrated* writer, Peter King, returned for a USO tour of Afghanistan and mentioned, disturbingly, that the troops were tired of questions about Tillman. It's another trouble with real information. It trickles in. It's all bad. We get worn out. 'What? Why the niggling questions? We got it basically right. Tillman's still dead, isn't he? Honor his sacrifice. Can't you honor his sacrifice? [Manly tears]. Besides, what makes him so special? How about we spend a minute on a real hero, Private Ogilvy....'

Probably the real question should be, who is to blame for our misconceptions? The political administration and the army, for encouraging this initial fable? The *SI* boys for laying it on thick, then of course not printing a retraction of similar length and drama, perhaps this time identifying these treacherous shadows more accurately?

Or is it our fault? We love stories so much. Not all those boring facts but the stories that help us negotiate them. We want things to have a point. We want one thing to lead to another, to imagine Pat Tillman charged the enemy with special ability because of those football legs of his. Osama shouldn't have strayed into the secondary, we think, rubbing our hands, because old Pat's going to give him a taste of headhunter tackling.

We really don't know anything. We live in a fairy land of movies, sports writing, and country music ballads.

*Where Men Win Glory*. Why that title? There's no glory here, nor anything close. I'd like to ask Krakauer that question and others. I miss Krakauer in this book. Unlike in his early work, he shows up only briefly, in the third person. I had to read a newspaper piece to learn this interesting bit: Pat Tillman was a Krakauer fan. He'd read all but one of Krakauer's books, and he had that in his pack when he was killed. Tillman's widow, Marie, approached Krakauer with the idea for the project.

I'll take this as a posthumous endorsement. Tillman would have read this book. Though the truth is that it's a grim slog. Reading it is a chore. Parts aren't that great, and the rest is terribly disturbing. You finish it and can't sleep. You feel unclean and wonder if the United States can survive as a country, afloat on the fizzy pop of ignorance.

But if we still think that what Tillman did was noble (rather than naive), then we may owe him a few unpleasant hours. On balance for what he gave up. I'd start at chapter 22. Jessica Lynch's sleepy commander misreads a map and takes his supply convoy into the middle of a hostile Iraqi city. The baffled Iraqis rub their eyes and begin to kill them.

It won't be as much fun as a movie, but we can go back, sluice away the scummy misdirection and half-lies, and learn the truth of who Pat Tillman was and how he gave his life for us.

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COMMENTARY BY ALEX VERNON

## Your War is My War Too

We lunch at two long tables, a roof over our heads, a slab concrete floor beneath our feet, and no walls, where we have gathered, my college students and me, our hosts, and a number of local officials and villagers, to celebrate the end of our two-week visit. There is much toasting with rice wine: "*Một, hai, ba, YO!*" The kitchen stands nearby, a dirt-floor hooch of fronds and leaves woven onto melaleuca supports with an open fire outside. For the last three days, we had split into teams to join four local families in their sustaining labors, which is to say in their lives. Among other tasks my team caught mollusks to feed the fish penned in the river, steps from the doorless front door; built up the earthworks between rice paddies; helped cook; replenished the firewood stores; resurrected a cow stall; started a compost site; and created a vegetable garden from scratch, fence and all.

"*Một, hai, ba, YO!*" The local communist party chief, a round and ruddy man, has taken a place at the far end of the table. Across from me sits the head of the local veterans' association. He and I talk through a Vietnamese student. He finds me handsome, his openness in kind with nearly all Vietnamese I've met. I tell him he looks quite young for a veteran.

"He says he's fifty."

This can't be right. I am forty, a veteran of the first U.S. war in the Persian Gulf. I have plenty of friends on either side of fifty, peers who belong to my generation. But the Vietnam War doesn't. It belongs to the generation or two preceding ours. It belongs to us only by heritage. I spent over seven years in the U.S. Army beginning in the mid nineteen-eighties, those initial years imaginatively rent between the

apocalyptically feared war against the Soviet bloc communists on one side and the traumatically lost guerilla war against the Vietnamese communists on the other. And I've dedicated the past ten to becoming a scholar of American war literature, a field preoccupied by the war in Vietnam—the war of my old colonels, generals, and senior non-commissioned officers, men now in their seventies and eighties.

The man across from me entered the army at fourteen in 1971 and served four years. It's January 2008. The math works.

There is much toasting with rice win. In a few days I am back home, in Little Rock, but the shock of that moment—*He says he's fifty*—prickles me for months. I tell everyone. Now I'm telling you.

I have rarely if ever felt more useless in my adult life than at the end of those work days, when the farmer, a man roughly my age but looking considerably older, solicited my advice for improving the management of his household economy. A different mix of agriculture, livestock, fishing, and his own outsourced labor? Improved methods for any of his industries?

What could Nguyễn Văn Phúc do to make his family's life better?

Beside his house—a three-room version of that other kitchen—how had they gotten that bed and dresser way out here, well in the middle of the Mekong Delta, across the many waterways?—my students and I were sitting or standing, and the Vietnamese squatting or standing, as we shared fruit and tea. The farmer's two young sons were there, seven and eleven, neither of them appreciably larger than my five-year-old daughter a few hours from dawn half the world away. The boys hadn't stopped smiling for three days.

I had no answers. Raised in a suburb, trained first as a company grade armor officer and eventually as an English professor, I had nothing for them. Useless: utterly, uttermore. And angry at whatever led him to expect an answer from me. I couldn't even offer tangible guidance on how he might see his sons one day headed for college in America.

We had come to Vietnam to gain perspective on the country's education system. Those three days with the families provided crucial understanding about the conditions in which education struggles to function. Like all impoverished rural Vietnamese children, Phúc's sons faced the near-impossibility of completing high school, much less achieving a spot at the regional university in Cân Thơ. Only one in a hundred make it. The free primary-school public education levies a local fee equal to a full quarter of the family's annual income. The community's children lack not only books, paper, and classroom materials, but that most indispensible

of resources: educated (literate) elders. As they progress to the upper schools, they and a parent must walk greater and greater distances—ten kilometers one way is not uncommon—and such a family can ill-afford lost labor time even as the children need school in order to someday move away. The area simply can't support them and their future families.

My students and I had nothing for them, nothing except the joy of this rare encounter. When we weren't working in the sun or the kitchen, breaking for lunch, resting in the shade, or playing with the boys, we helped them with their English. Those precious minutes were barely a gesture. Yet as the gesture passed into the boys' memories, that memory mutated into possibility. Into the thrill of being able, someday, to talk with others like ourselves. The alchemy happened in plain sight.

The next day, on parting after the grand lunch, the younger brother gave me a tiny blue and purple castle made of miniature Lego-like plastic blocks. Today that castle overlooks my writing desk from its perch on the highest bookshelf, the token of tokens from the boys who called me "Teacher."

The trip had been two years in the making. Everyone I consulted steered us away from the war as the topic of our student trip. Over half the population of Vietnam was born after the war, and many of them were raised after the *Đổi mới* reforms and during the heady years of normalized relations with the United Sates. The war was ancient history to them. The country lives for the future. The people are determined to pull themselves, individual by individual, into a better life. They don't look back.

We went to study the education system's response to this seismic shifting, arriving around the one-year anniversary of Vietnam's admission into the World Trade Organization. But we went because of the war. Of course we did. In the United States, Vietnam piques us because the war draws us.

Travelers to Vietnam, whatever their purpose, can't escape the war. Despite itself the nation still tosses in the spewing part of the war's wake. One would perhaps need some study to know how much Vietnamese society has been organized and reorganized (and reorganized) following the war. No visitor, however, can miss the Soviet-style war monuments standing tall, broad-shouldered, and square-jawed, in parks and at intersections in cities and a few hundred meters off the major roads into the countryside. No visitor waiting for a ferry can miss the amputees and the otherwise mangled reduced to begging, or those propelling themselves on makeshift skateboards down the walkways of Ho Chi Minh City. Nobody can miss the tourist sites and souvenir stands carrying wares like the wooden Abrams

tanks, Stealth bombers, and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers carved to a sheen and too large for a coffee table, the generic tanks and planes crafted of flattened Coca-Cola cans, and the ersatz lost-and-found G.I. lighters likely fashioned a blocks away only days earlier sporting unit insignias and engravings like this peach: "KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR VIRGINITY." I've heard that elsewhere in former Indochina one can find tourist industry entrepreneurs who offer water buffalos as targets for AKs and RPGs.

They know why we are here.

I've twice now seen the photographs of Vietnamese victims of napalm and other American cruelties that form the chief exhibit of the War Remnants Museum, a space that presents what one of my Vietnamese student guides called "the Truth about the war" even as she later, in a café, declined to discuss the war at all. Three times I've hunch-scuttled through the famously widened-for-western-tourists Cu Chi tunnels, though I declined paying to shoot an AK-47. And I've heard stories. One man, now a prominent environmental scientist, bused tables as a boy during the war. G.I.'s terrified him, with all that deadly gear hanging off their immense frames, until one night when he stumbled upon an American soldier in a back room, gear off, curled up, and sobbing. Men in their twenties and thirties have told me about the years—the *years*—their fathers spent in postwar reeducation camps. One of my southern Vietnamese friends and his family could not emigrate because his grandfather, a military officer, had destroyed the family papers to protect his beloveds from the North Vietnamese victors. Because the communist government does not bestow veteran benefits on its former enemy combatants, the lives of widows of ARVN soldiers and veterans are often bleak. With no money from the state and zero chance of remarriage, these women have no prospects for their provision.

The Vietnamese do in fact look back, even if the youth, especially the young women, are reticent. I wonder what they are taught or told about the war. I don't wonder about the causes for their reluctance, as they are hardly equipped otherwise. Not when a historian asked to lecture on Vietnamese history delivers an avuncular homage to the Vietnamese soul, and refuses to answer mildly controversial questions about political dissent or the dispute with China over ownership of several islands; not when learning is still so rote that in casual conversation among new international friends Vietnamese youth sometimes cannot answer a question without resorting to a classroom script, squinching their eyes or touching fingers to temple to activate their recall; and not when teachers themselves obey a script,

and often leave the room during an exam so students can ensure they collectively succeed.

We found the generations that lived through the war, however, not at all shy. They spoke at ease. It perhaps helped in loosening their tongues that we did not come to study the war and make objects of them and their memories, but that we came in the spirit of friendly curiosity, letting conversations go where they would.

In the spring of 2001, many of the officers from my Persian Gulf War battalion assembled outside our old coastal Georgia army post to recognize the tenth anniversary of our war. A few weeks later I defended my dissertation on American war literature, ending with several chapters on the work of one of the Vietnam War's chief American veteran-writers. Five months after that, the Twin Towers fell.

My first student trip landed in Ho Chi Minh City on New Year's Eve, 2008, five years into the second U.S. war with Iraq. At first the new war's mad armored dash north through the desert looked a lot like my war felt, a similarity re-experienced when published and filmed narrative treatments began to appear. Indeed had the United States pressed on to Baghdad in 1991, my division, the closest mechanized division to Iraq's capital, would have spearheaded the assault, and in 2003, my old division (albeit renumbered) actually spearheaded the assault. Sadly, it did not take long for the new war to change course and for the Vietnam conflict to replace the Gulf war as the seeming historical correlative.

All wars are alike; no two wars are alike. Your war is my war too.

A friend and fellow writer has suggested that I write a war novel about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There has yet to be such a book with real possibility for readers of later generations. I love the practice and craft of making books, and I have some experience at it, if none writing fiction. This would be my chance. I could bridge the insider's knowledge with the outsider's perspective and narrative desires. Embedded and disembedded all at once. I know the terrain and the weather, and the impression of the people one gets while speeding by on a tank. I know the army—the dialogue, the dynamics across and among the ranks, and much of the equipment. I'm in the unique position, so my friend contended, of combining deep familiarity with decided unfamiliarity such that I would not suffer from an inability to detach, from an inability to relinquish niggling self-witnessing to bring creativity to bear. It's the extremely rare veteran who can write

a great, creative war novel without the benefit of several years of emotional distance on the experience.

Not only have I not written or started writing that book, but other potential projects compel me instead. A friend's father commanded a cavalry unit in Vietnam, and has already collected rich material from both sides of one particular battle. I would love to write that story. I would love to walk the battlefield, old maps and a notebook in my hands, camera dangling on my hip, participants at my side. The war in Vietnam grips me as the current wars of Operation Enduring Freedom do not—not yet, at least.

This reaction I don't fully comprehend. Over the last eight years I have, after all, ranted and cried aplenty. Yet for all that turmoil, these wars have resisted my professional engagement. Perhaps it's a case of emotional distancing, if the current wars do indeed live too close to home. Studying war literature has proven a wonderfully salutary tool for indirect immersion in my own war experiences. Perhaps I'm not ready for these wars' more direct revisiting, and like today's newest veterans, I need a few years. In truth I chose in the peaceable late 1990s to write a dissertation on American war literature because I saw the generation of scholars raised on Vietnam preparing to retire, because I saw an opportunity; with a career predicated on the backward gaze, I have not readily shifted focus to an emergent literature.

Or is it that real engagement would demand the sort of political action I haven't been prepared to do?—as if one could do, could have done, anything to make a difference. Maybe these wars bore me as they bore a lot of us: Nearly a decade now (!), old news, and everyone's an expert. Maybe I am already overwhelmed with the literary material of the past wars. A scholar can only absorb so much. It's also the case that the very reality and presence of today's wars render them abstractions, whereas the abstract historicity of Vietnam, Korea, the world wars, the Spanish Civil War, and so on, render them real. They have body and texture for being relegated to documents. They live by nature of being dead; they can be contained and processed by head and heart. I deployed to the Persian Gulf War only fifteen years after the fall of Saigon—barely a wink's length of time—and the *twentieth* anniversary of that deployment is scant months away. My war belongs, with Vietnam, to history.

While I also sometimes suspect that I have avoided the current wars because they remind me of the paltry nature of my own, counterexamples come to my relief. I lived on an Abrams tank—I mean I slept on the behemoth, ate dehydrated food on it, read and wrote letters on it, and bathed beside it, all with three other men, and in a tank company with sixty other men, in the middle of desert nowhere, for eight

months. Then, for four furious days, I maneuvered and fought on it. Here's how one memoir describes the author's combat-free Iraq war service fifteen years later:

> I put away the food in the OR break room cupboards; they're filled with supplies sent to us from dozens of soldier support groups across the U.S. I eat better in Iraq than I do at home. These people are sending us everything they have and most of us don't deserve. They aren't sending provisions to the heroes we think we are. It is going to [those of us doing the job] and others who can be criminals; people doing drugs, committing crimes, molesters, adulterers, people doing anything they can to only help themselves.

Granting the extremity and singularity of this soldier's perspective, the remoteness it suggests from my experiences remains rather vast.

For all that, as the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, as the memoirs move from the Current Events shelf to other bookstore shelves and the movies and novels begin to feel like historic fictions, they grow more comfortable. The current war has and has not always been my war, and it appears to be becoming my war anew.

And in a very profound way Vietnam is my war. On the day I was born, eighty-five U.S. military personnel, and god knows how many Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, lost their lives. Within a year the Tet offensive and My Lai would come to pass. From Vietnam developed the army that forged my military consciousness. Though I didn't know it, I grew up—I came to be—in a nation still tossing in the spewing part of the war's wake.

On my second student trip, eighteen months later, we spent our brief time constructing small homes for two families in a hamlet outside Rach Gia in Vietnam's southwest corner. Unlike the first trip, this one did not provide these mostly liberal youth a glimpse of the oppressive communist state which the United States fought for a decade to prevent (even if the fight itself drove the state toward a more entrenched ideology and thus a temperament capable of so many condemnable behaviors). Instead I brought home scenes to rival received ones. Rather than U.S. Marines pushing a flagpole overhead on a conquered wasteland of an island, Vietnamese and Americans pushing a beam overhead for a new home. Rather than automatic weapons and explosives tearing water buffalos to pieces, boys riding and swimming alongside water buffalos upriver during a wet season

downpour. Rather than a naked young girl and crying and fleeing down the road, a naked little girl laughing and running up a path chasing squeaking yellow chicks.

I've begun planning the next trip. On this one, I hope to create discussion space for American and Vietnamese students and educators with literature from both countries available in translation. In this way the English professor might actually prove useful. The army trained its junior officers to strive to create opportunities, shape the battle, and fight the fight on the scale one is assigned, and that's exactly what I hope to do now. A platoon, a company commander once told me, can win a battle, and a battle can turn a war. In twenty or thirty years other college or university cohorts, from the next generation, will make their way from the States to Iraq or Afghanistan, and I salute them: Your war is my war, too.

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COMMENTARY BY JEFF COLLINS

# Ways of War: Reading Frank Harvey's Vietnam Experiences for Emotional Truth in a Digital Age

As an undergrad at Purdue in the late 80s, one of my political science profs assigned part of Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam,* a book my roommate, a naval ROTC midshipman, and I agreed was assigned by someone who was clearly either a communist himself or at least sympathetic to Soviet totalitarianism and, worse, anti-Reagan. Shining in my memory of that book is the dissonance I experienced between its Vietnam story and the ones I'd been learning in my first years of Air Force ROTC classes.

I will never forget a quotation from those ROTC histories describing the Air Force's role in the Inchon invasion of the Korean conflict (we weren't calling it and Vietnam "wars" yet). As I remember it, the textbook worked hard to show the Air Force as integral to the war effort well beyond providing air superiority; among other ground-related acts, airmen "bravely strafed" the enemy retreat across the Yalu river. That phrase tickled me and my Generation X cohorts—we'd joke about "bravely ordering" pizza from Garcia's and "bravely drinking" beer to wash down the terrible but free hot wings at Purdue Pete's bar.

I also remember my internalization of the lessons from Krepinevich's book caused some discomfort during a discussion I had with our ROTC detachment commander, a decorated Vietnam vet. The discomfort stemmed from this: the reasons I thought we lost Vietnam were different than his. Even the word "lost" caused wriggling nonverbal cues of disagreement and nearly-expressed tidbits of anger from the officer—wriggles and tidbits I was eager to get past because he was the colonel and because I planned to date his daughter ASAP, a different tale.

I didn't learn until this year, while reading David Cloud and Greg Jaffe's book *The Fourth Star* about the rise of Petraeus and other four star leaders of the Army, that the author of the Vietnam history book I'd read so long ago was a military teacher at West Point; he was a major who made lieutenant colonel and absolutely nothing beyond. While a few of the West Point thinkers, such as young Captain Petraeus, read and internalized the disruptive lessons of Major Krepinevich's history, the Army and its Reagan-era leaders chose to learn lessons that led to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine: avoid avoid avoid any engagement in which overwhelming force cannot be applied to an enemy and which the American public will not fully support.

I suppose the parallels between the Army leadership's 1980s thinking about Vietnam and what I was experiencing in Air Force thinking about that war weren't much dissimilar. Like the conventional Army, the Air Force heaped most blame for the outcome in Vietnam on journalists' portrayals and politicians' interferences. In this view, proscribed tactics, graduated responses and off limits enemy sanctuaries cemented America's need to bargain for peace rather than achieve decisive victory. Our Air Force's occasionally revised mission statement—To Fly, Fight and Win—brooked no ground for indecisive engagement. Such views were then reinforced by the hapless Saddam Hussein of 1990: conveniently setting up his defenses, tactics and Soviet-made weaponry to provide a perfect arena for our overwhelming high tech arsenal and for getting America singing (or at least humming) Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" and finally putting Vietnam behind us.

Eight years later I was a young captain when I invited my commander from my first duty assignment to talk to my English classes at the Air Force Academy. He was also a Vietnam Vet and was a fighter-pilot good guy—the kind of commander who would tell my visiting mother how impressed he was that I ate vegetables every day and implied I single-handedly kept the Air Force flying: "You musta' done a fine job raising this L-T," he'd tell her.

The day he visited my senior war lit class my students had read *Dien Cai Dau,* Phil Caputo's *In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant,* and some Tim O'Brien, among others. He strode to the front of the room and told my students he was glad I'd invited him to talk about the real, military side of Vietnam. "When I was a cadet, I remember hearing from pilots who'd fought World War II. I hope I don't look as old to you as they did to me. I was studying here about 25 years after their war. And you're here about 25 years after the end of mine." He looked around the class of 15 cadets, his eyes beaming above his handle-bar mustache. "Jeff, turn on the slide projector." I flipped the switch on the 35mm projector, precariously balanced

atop the digital one we usually used. The machine's fan whirred as the carousel clacked a slide into view. The bright projection coated the colonel in jungle green as he moved to flip the light switch, "Wrong slide." I pressed the back-up button. Click-clackety-clack.

"That's me, three years after I'd graduated from here. I was the world's greatest fighter pilot." On the screen is a young lieutenant, mugging for the camera; dressed in a clean flight suit with his helmet under his arm, flight cap tilted to the right with a rakish air—like the swaggering pilots in the black and white World War II films. In the background, a few enlisted men in solid green fatigues recline on toolboxes just inside a shadowy concrete arch.

He told us about a particular early morning mission in which they were supposed to midair refuel from a tanker on their way to take out a heavily defended bridge. One of my cadets, steeped in post-Gulf War air war theory, asked him why they didn't use bombers to take out a strategic target like a bridge. "Didn't you risk a lot more fighters to get the same payload to the target?"

"Yes. It probably wasted gas and airplanes and people. Not just the fighters, but also tankers had to be up and recon birds... It's a good question, why we did it like that." He went on to remind us John Warden hadn't yet written books about "concentric circles of military power" and they hadn't "re-discovered" Sun Tsu's ancient wisdom about the application of force. Besides, he said, the politicians wouldn't have tolerated additional commitments of strategic bombers and North Vietnam's heavy defenses made fighters a better choice. He clackety-clacked through stories, going on to talk about "kill zones" and how he'd have to decide whether someone was running because he was a scared civilian or a Viet Cong to be strafed. "We fighters were just one more way of delivering munitions and attritting the enemy forces." The cadets nodded their understanding. They knew of Secretary McNamara and his body-counting Pentagon.

The colonel looked at the faces of my students, pausing long enough for the whir of the fan to become noticeable. "You know, I think I remember why I thought those World War II pilots were old coots, talking about 'feathering their props' and fire bombing whole cities to 'break the enemy's spirit.' We were preparing to go to Vietnam. We were going to fly our jets and fight our war the modern way. We looked at those guys kind of like you're looking at me..." He smiled and continued with his war story, talking of the decisions he made and the missions he flew and the love affair that developed between himself and his war machinery. My attention drifted as I pondered what my students were thinking, what they were making of

these stories. "Jeff?" I quickly press the projector button, realizing he'd asked twice. Some students were looking at me, smiling.

Fast forward to the post-Kosovo, post-9/11, post-Abu Ghraib world—nearly two decades after our nation "got past" Vietnam via the Gulf War. Militarily- and politically-costly stalls in southwest Asia helped the Army discover a pressing need for a surge of new ideas about how to win counterinsurgencies (COIN). The type of thinking about the lessons of Vietnam the readers of Krepinevich had clung to were suddenly in ascendance and integrated into a new Army COIN manual, authored by General Petraeus (published in 2006). I was at Petraeus's speech at the Al Faw palace in Baghdad when he took over from General Casey: the COINdinistas wrested command of the operation that day and even the band at the ceremony—wearing cavalry hats like you'd see in 1960s westerns and like Robert Duvall wore when he praised the smell of napalm in the morning—played brighter and trumpeted louder after Petraeus's speech that day.

I didn't detect the same shift in the Air Force at the time. The general officers who bought the "shock and awe" weaponry and concerned themselves with making TV commercials about the Air Force's executive agency of the cyber domain seemed busy re-fighting 1947 battles of Key West to ensure it would be airmen who would control key decisions about unmanned aerial vehicles and their employment.

But new leadership reframes thinking. Today some of my students are trained, while in college, to fly remotely piloted vehicles (see Branum). These young men and women, like my commander flying over kill zones in Vietnam, will wrap themselves in high technology to face quick decisions of life-and-death consequence after commissioning. In a few years they'll be like Captains "Mike" and "Dan," remote vehicle pilots shown in a PBS *Frontline* episode titled "Digital Nation." In the film we learn about such pilots following a suspected terrorist in Asia on mile-high cameras, watching while the fellow plays soccer with kids and attends a meeting of bad guys that, presumably, the captain sitting near Las Vegas breaks up with a hellfire missile. It's hard to define the feelings you'd suffer after killing someone you've watched for hours or maybe days prior playing with his kids, drinking coffee and doing the usual stuff people do. This goes beyond the snap decision of a fighter pilot, deciding whether or not to strafe a fleeing male in a kill zone. Captain "Dan" assures the camera (and himself) of his confidence in the intelligence apparatus beyond his own eyes. Armed service members (other than snipers and special forces) have not routinely known similar stresses since perhaps the American civil war when neighbors in border-state regions had to choose sides and would find themselves sometimes fighting one another. But my sense is that

even then the weaponry of the day, although requiring closer range, allowed more depersonalized trigger-pulls. Aiming at a firing line of blue or gray uniforms that might contain a former neighbor and that is, probably, preparing to fire back at you seems different in fundamental ways than putting a thermobaric weapon into the midst of a meeting at which a soccer-playing alleged terrorist (and known father) sits. It's also tough to know how commuting home at the end of that day to your loving family for a chicken dinner would feel.

In this context, my struggle with how to best prepare my cadets for their future led me to ask John Balaban what he thought about it. Balaban is well known to readers of *WLA* as a Vietnam conscientious objector who served as a university teacher in Vietnam before being wounded and as a celebrated author and decorated translator of Vietnamese poetry. He visited with our English department faculty over a meal prior to an evening lecture for cadets. I asked him what books he thought worthwhile in terms of helping people understand the moral consequences of trigger pulls happening miles from the heat of battle. He thought only for a moment before recommending the slim collection of reporting by Frank Harvey called *Air War: Vietnam*. He went on to develop its context a bit for us, especially referring to an exchange between Harvey and a reviewer named Robert Crichton. It seems Harvey the reporter had been displeased with how Crichton had read Harvey the narrator of the book.

My search for the book in our library was at first confused. The Air Force, it turns out, published a book with an identical title 11 years after Harvey's book came out. My weakening eyesight and some fading call numbers led me to pick up the wrong book. Although I can't be sure of the service's intent in publishing a book of the same title, the introduction seemed to be an argument against what I expected to find in Harvey's book. The introduction by Drew Middleton claims the Air Force book will shed light on "some of the achievements and innovations of American fighting men in Vietnam" and will describe new weapons that were then "in the process of revolutionizing the structures and tactics of armies and air forces" (vii). This, it seemed, would be an argument about the benefits of better integration of technology with people. What my students and I needed was an understanding of some of the emotional truth involved in technologically-mediated killing.

After finding and digesting Harvey's book, I can certainly understand both why Balaban recommended it and why the 1970s Air Force—trying to draw lessons from the war about new doctrines and weapons procurement directions—might not have made it a centerpiece of military education. The chief character in Harvey's book is Harvey. As the book's journalistic narrator, this dynamic character's initial

enthusiasms for the technology of the air war and aviators' actions in war wane as a result of his close exposure to combat and the things he sees men do there.

Crichton, the reviewer I mentioned earlier, contrasts the more gung-ho early Harvey—a reporter so admired and supported by the military he was invited to participate in almost every type of aviation mission during his 55-days of reporting in Vietnam—to the less-enthused Harvey who, later in his reporting, ponders whether some actions should be taken at all, and questions their justification in the name of military expediency. Although in a response letter to the review, Harvey reaffirms his "steadfast loyalty to the guys in military uniforms who are fighting in Vietnam..." (para. 2) he dedicates his book to Major George Weiss whom he describes as, "a top pro, a valued friend, and a man who will no doubt take violent exception to some of the things in this book" (dedication). As you read Harvey's lively accounting for the military's public "credibility gap" (38–40) and read his reflective asides on the morality and efficacy of military tactics, you can see why Weiss, the Air Force public affairs handler assigned to mind Harvey, would object to the reports.

Harvey travels from unit to unit across the theater of war; during his journey we see both narrator and the characters he accompanies on flying missions facing personal danger and uncertain moral consequences coolly. A stoic, professionalized acceptance of violence and technical prowess is echoed by several characters Harvey portrays. For example, we meet Lieutenant Commander Fitch in Harvey's chapter 7 titled "The Death Bringers" (66–76) who assures the reporter, "One or two napalm attacks can change the fighting spirit of a whole [Viet Cong] company" (69). And we meet Colonel Goldsburry, a gum-chewing forward air controller who flies an O-1 Bird Dog observation aircraft and calmly radios artillery gunners to walk high explosive shells into a reported Viet Cong's house (74) before working with a flight of F-100s fighter pilots to put their napalm and 20mm cannons right on a whole line of village huts (75).

As we read along, Harvey's narrator becomes less sanguine about the technologies and action than his characters. He reports "feeling queasy" after the napalm/strafing attack and asks Colonel Goldsburry to take him back to the base (75). Harvey then provides a contrasting character to the stoicism seen so far, an unnamed forward air controller who is close to finishing his tour of duty. The controller had been ordered to level a village with artillery fire, but when flying over the village he saw only a bunch of women and children, no Viet Cong; he radioed back to headquarters to get confirmation of his orders. Harvey the reporter remarks to the controller, "You must have seen a lot of people killed." The controller's response ends the chapter as

he replies, "No people got killed. Nobody was in the [rice] paddy where I directed the artillery fire" (76).

Such potentially-fruitful fodder for class discussions notwithstanding, as I write this I've decided not to assign Harvey's book to my next class of students. Although there's no doubt it's a good, interesting, important read for those of us who are students of war literature—and for those of us struggling to understand the human implications of modern technological warfare—its literary qualities don't approach an O'Brien, Balaban or Caputo or even other excellent journalistic efforts at capturing wartime truths such as those by Mark Bowden, David Finkel or Dexter Filkins. Instead of assigning Harvey's book to my students, I am taking it as I took my experience bringing my commander in to class to talk about his war stories: the book has strengthened my ability to help my students prepare for their wars, but once is enough for me. If you have an afternoon, read the whole book; if you don't, do make time to read chapters 1, 7, 8 and 11. Those chapters remind us that while methods of war change, ways of war change less certainly.

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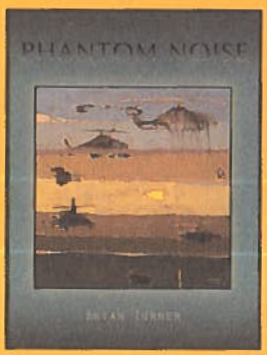
## Brian Turner

## Phantom Noise



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EDITOR'S CHOICE BY JAMES GLEASON BISHOP

# "We Should Know These People We Bury in the Earth": Brian Turner's Radical Message

*Phantom Noise*
by Brian Turner
Alice James Books, 2010

When I start my computer this evening, 117 hyperlinks vie for my attention. Republicans are "talking tough" about pending Wall Street reform. Sandra Bullock is trending. On a secondary news page, seventeen items down, I learn that today, April 23, 2010, was the bloodiest day so far this year in Iraq. The news seems old: In Baghdad, Sunni-led insurgents set off car- and roadside-bombs in multiple Shiite centers—including three mosques—killing at least 69. I wish it hadn't happened. But if I weren't writing this article, I probably wouldn't have opened the story. In "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," Seamus Heaney writes, in one of his most overtly political poems, of turbulent Northern Ireland in 1971: "I'm back in winter / Quarters where bad news is no longer news...." After nine years of war, car-bombs in Iraq aren't trending.

Brian Turner's second collection of poetry, *Phantom Noise,* is not news. But this book will endure. From the opening gut-thump of "VA Confessional" to the bull's-eye of ".22-Caliber," to so many wrenching lines ("Gilgamesh ... knows that each life is the world / dying anew"), this book shows a mature, versatile poet, as much

a witness at Lowe's Home Improvement Center as at a Mutanabbi street bombing. William Carlos Williams' lines from "Asphodel" echo throughout *Phantom Noise*: "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."

Turner's debut, *Here, Bullet*, won the won the Beatrice Hawley Award in 2005 and the 2007 Poet's Prize. It made Turner, in poetry circles, a rock star. He appeared on the Newshour with Jim Lehrer, National Public Radio, the BBC, Weekend America, and others. *Publishers Weekly* called *Here, Bullet* "likely the most discussed debut of the decade." *The New York Times Book Review* wrote an eloquently favorable review. To date, *Here, Bullet* has sold more than 25,000 copies and is in its fifth print run: an astonishing number not only by poetry standards, but for any first book. According to the publisher, "These sales led to one of the highest first print runs in Alice James Books' history for *Phantom Noise*, half of which sold before the book was even printed." A typical poetry book printing runs about 1,200 copies. *Here, Bullet* was brutally, wonderfully, relentlessly about the Iraq war. Each poem thudded home, on target. And the target was invariably Iraq. In *Here, Bullet,* Turner chiseled a few great poems onto the wall of American letters, notably, "2,000 lbs.," "Sadiq," "Eulogy," "What Every Soldier Should Know," and the title poem. After awhile, however, the bullets slapping flesh and sand started to sound—God help us — alike. In his second collection, war follows the poet home. *Phantom Noise* showcases Turner's ability to squeeze magic and despair from the motions of ordinary life. A dozen poems—though not the title poem—stand out as ones which will show up on blogs, be handed to returning veterans, and which will rightly become part of the next great anthology of war poetry.

With the success of *Here, Bullet*, Turner joined the ranks of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in World War I, Randall Jarrell in World War II, and Yusef Komunyakaa in Vietnam. With the publication of *Phantom Noise,* Turner solidifies his title as America's war poet. The sobriquet is, in one sense, unfortunate. These poems show such vision, voice and range, that he could integrate or transcend the war and become America's poet. Midway through *Phantom Noise* appears the poem titled, "A Lullaby for Bullets," which could serve as an answer to "Here, Bullet." Rather than taunting the bullet to come and get him, here the speaker asks the bullet to miss, to "graze / the man's temple," close enough to learn the man's name. *We should know these people.*

In a dream sequence from "Illumination Rounds," the poet is shoveling graves for the dead in his backyard, explaining to his lover, "We need to help them, if only

with a coffin..." The mate in this nonsexual fantasy stops the speaker's digging to say

> We should invite them into our home.
> We should learn their names, their history.
> We should know these people
> we bury in the earth.

But she doesn't say that in waking-life, so it becomes the poet's task to learn the history of those killed by America's longest war. In a 14 May email interview, Turner elaborated on the relevance of the notion that "we should know these people" we're fighting: "It's something I would often say to people once I returned from Iraq. Eventually, the phrase worked its way into this poem. So many have died. So many have lost those they love. So many wounded, with trauma to be lived with for the decades to come. The very, very least we can do is to recognize the wide distribution of pain to which we are connected."

Turner looks at the distribution of pain on both sides of the war. The wealth of epigraphs and brief histories seem not to take sides. We hear from Iraqi poet Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati ("Embrace the frightful and the beautiful"). We also hear from Katie Couric ("One in three female soldiers will experience sexual assault while serving in the military") in an angry and wrenching poem, "Insignia," about a sexual assault victim sleeping under a deuce 'n half cargo truck to hide from her attacker. "It's you she's dreaming of, Sergeant—she'll dream of you / for years to come." This is a book concerned with the lingering violence in the years to come. Each poem in this collection serves as its own illumination round.

*Here, Bullet* gave more or less equal treatment to American soldiers, Iraqi soldiers, and Iraqi civilians. The poems in *Phantom Noise* also stare hard at the frightful and, less often, the beautiful, on both sides of the Atlantic. Sometimes the war is explicitly nearby, as in the provocative lead poem, "VA Hospital Confessional."

> Each night is different. Each night the same.
> Sometimes I pull the trigger. Sometimes I don't.
>
> When I pull the trigger, he often just stands there,
> gesturing, as if saying, *Aren't you ashamed?*

Other times, the war hovers, ghost-like, shimmering in and out of the lines. In ".22-Caliber," the speaker's father helps him make a zip gun with a barrel and "finishing nail." The gun made, he takes aim and fires at the target, again and again: "an exercise in muscle memory. / I am learning how to connect / with the small dark silence / carried within the center of all things."

Bull's-eye.

Throughout *Phantom Noise,* Turner connects with the small dark center. Returning from a year in Iraq, he attends a rave—an all-night party—on his first weekend stateside. A man dressed in an Energizer bunny suit roller-skates around the party. The speaker is taking inventory of what's left after he returns from his deployment: "Rifle oil, *check.* Smoke grenades, *check.*" Then, "The boredom. The minutes. The hours. Days. Weeks. Months. The moments / unbound by time's dominion. The years after." He looks around the party and declares with terse irony, "These people. My people." The soldier has returned home, and Sandra Bullock is trending.

War informs each poem, though some remain once- or twice-removed from battle—and these become the most powerful in this collection. The simple and simply powerful "The Whale" never mentions war, yet war is the phantom noise whispering throughout the poem.

I expect things to blow up in Ramadi and Fallujah, but not in Florence, Oregon. "It is 1970," the poem begins, "and the summer of love is over." An eight-ton sperm whale has died, and those in charge "carve"—apt verb — an entrance into the whale's side and place 500 pounds of explosives "to rend open the interior / so scavengers can pick the carcass clean." But this is just a whale, a boy watching while "engineers argue / ...equations to undo the intricate puzzle / of muscle and bone."

The year the poem takes place is significant. Although Woodstock, My Lai, Martin Luther King's assassination, and Robert Kennedy's assassination are all past, plenty of things are blowing up in 1970. By mid-year, a third of a million U.S. troops are still in Vietnam. In August, heavy B-52 bombing occurs along the Demilitarized Zone. In 1970, things were also blowing up at home. On April 30, President Nixon announced that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces will enter Cambodia. In his address to the nation, Nixon said the invasion is "not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we desire." Four days later, Kent State: Four dead. Eight wounded. Three days before the shootings, Nixon called anti-war protestors "bums blowing up campuses."

But Turner's poem is just about a whale, a boy watching

...the blast
from the sawgrass dunes,
the sudden
jolt of nerves as the body absorbs
the shockwave, beach-sand shot upward
in jets of tissue and meat,
the local news reporter dropping to his knees
to cover his head with a clipboard
[...]
and I remember everyone smiling
afterward, laughing, each of us amazed
the day a god was blown to pieces on a beach
and we all walked away from it, unscathed.

Turner's jagged lines suggest broken flesh. His trademark internal rhyme (*blast, sawgrass*) mingles beauty and ugliness. Alone, these lines could describe any beachhead, any war. The whale stank, and little pieces of it fell on the observers. This is no allegory, but there was a large, smelly carcass stateside in 1970. Perhaps, Turner suggests without suggesting, another whale has washed ashore.

"Cut these words and they would bleed," Ralph Waldo Emerson famously observed. There's no need to cut Turner's words. They already bleed. The lines surrounding Emerson's quote from his 1850 review of Montaigne's essays, "Montaigne, or The Skeptic," could apply to *Phantom Noise.*

"The sincerity and marrow of the man reaches to his sentences. I know not anywhere the book that seems less written. It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive. One has the same pleasure in it that he feels in listening to the necessary speech of men about their work, when any unusual circumstance gives momentary importance to the dialogue. For blacksmiths and teamsters do not trip in their speech; it is a shower of bullets. It is Cambridge men who correct themselves and begin again at every half sentence, and, moreover, will pun, and refine too much, and swerve from the matter to the expression."

Turner served seven years in the enlisted corps, eventually earning the rank of buck sergeant (E-5). He joined the Army at age 29, with his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Oregon in hand. Turner knew he could have been commissioned, but opted to be a "grunt." He said he joined in part to continue a

family tradition of service in wars. His grandfather served as a Marine in World War II, and his father was a Russian linguist at the height of the Cold War. Turner deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999-2000 with the 10th Mountain Division. Then, in November, 2003, he went to Iraq with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. For nearly one year, he was an infantry team leader—the modern military equivalent of Emerson's teamster and blacksmith. When he got out of the Army in 2005, he split his time between teaching and working as a low-voltage electrician in Fresno. He kept his hands dirty. Turner wrote in our e-mail interview that he was glad not to be promoted above buck sergeant: "I hated the meetings and didn't want anything to do with them." Turner has the voice of a man about his work; consequently, his words become a shower of bullets.

Almost none of the works in *Phantom Noise* is explicitly a protest poem. An exception is "Sleeping in Dick Cheney's Bed," about speaking to a group of 1,600 cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy, then returning that evening to the Distinguished Visitor's Suite in on-base lodging, the "very bed" where Dick Cheney once slept. "It's unnerving how comfortable this is," the poem begins, already nudging toward metaphor, Energizer bunnies dancing during a back-page war. The accusation turns inward, grows larger only by implication—the war crime, in this case, becomes simple act of falling asleep.

> ... [W]hat does it say about me
> that I can return to Cheney's room after midnight
> strip my clothes off to curl in the bed
> where he too has slept...the night a perfection of sleep.

This is the new chivalry. Not Achilles dragging Hector's body around the walls of Troy. Not doomed Roland defending Roncesvalles, not even Emerson's farmers firing "the shot heard round the world," nor the scholars and bridegrooms roused by Walt Whitman's drums and bugles. This is the new chivalry: not protest, but clear-eyed compassion for those who suffer on both sides of a war. *We should invite them into our home.*

Turner commented in his e-mail interview on the widening circle of responsibility in "Sleeping in Dick Cheney's Bed"—about the fact that bad news about Iraq is not news. "The word 'obscene' comes to mind. It reminds me of a recurring question I have for us—What does it say about a nation that can wage war and yet know very little about [the enemy]? This particular poem avoids the rant, but the rant is

woven into it." Turner wrote that he hoped the explicit complicity in the speaker—himself—might uncover an unspoken complicity "within us all. I'm talking about torture. I'm talking about a country that must be responsible for what it has done. I'm talking about the country I love. America."

The easiest thing for a returning soldier to write would be a book of protest poems. Next easiest would be inner-vision poems: look at my raw nerves. Either posture, in academic circles, is trending. As a seven-year veteran of the Army, Turner would also have been justified in writing some artistic version of support-our-troops poems. But this is the harsh reality of *Phantom Noise*: Turner follows soldiers on both sides of the war back home, and he becomes a clear-eyed witness to the phantom violence that occurs years after the violence of war. *Here, Bullet* was a poignant book about war; *Phantom Noise* is a poignant book about war and healing. Significantly, his latest book begins in a VA hospital and ends in silence, deep in Olympic National Park: "it is a type of medicine by landscape." The trajectory is from confession to beauty—or if not beauty, at least the hope of beauty, of finding, as he does in "Eucalyptus," "the small bright lanterns of sunlight / breaking through the leaves above." The penultimate poem in the collection takes place in the Guggenheim Museum. *Phantom Noise* points toward the power of art to reveal, then heal.

One of my favorite poems, "The Mutanabbi Street Bombing," mingles a bombing in Iraq with a quiet street in California. After the car-bomb explodes and an old man, ears bleeding, "staggers in the cloud of dust and debris," the Renaissance Bookstore catches on fire. Iraqi poets burn next to Homer and Whitman. The California couple lies asleep in a room that smells of "apple-roasted tobacco." Recalling the lines from "Sleeping in Dick Cheney's Bed,"—"the night a perfection of sleep"—the couple wake to find themselves "dusted in ash, the poems of Sulma / and Sayyab in their hair, Sa'di on their eyebrows, / Hafiz and Rumi on their lips." This transcends a surrealist dream of two warring cultures connecting. "This is the world," Dylan Thomas wrote. "Have faith." Like it or not, the poem suggests, America and Iraq are already connected by the war, and by the phantom noise which will echo after the war.

Former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia, in his searing polemic, *Can Poetry Matter?*, laments the insular, private, and specialist-speaking-to-specialist nature of contemporary poetry. Written in 1992, his points ring true today. Gioia alleges that "poetry has lost the confidence that it speaks to and for the general culture" and that the genre as a whole has "difficulty in discussing most public concerns." A decade later, responding to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Gioia wrote

in *Disappearing Ink*, "Poetry is a vast and flexible art that should be able to express all human experience—public and private. The horrors of September 11 remind us that the art should be able to articulate our common sorrows as well as our private ones...It is a false sophistication to believe that contemporary poetry is above such mundane concerns."

*Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise* may constitute the best attempts so far to answer Gioia's charges. Here are collections that go to war, return home, and stare hard at what matters. These books will endure until, and after, the next war breaks out, even though Brian Turner, thank the thankless Muse, is not trending.

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**LIEUTENANT COLONEL JAMES BISHOP'S** work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Connecticut Review, North American Review, Smithsonian, Yankee, The Boston Globe,* and *Christianity and Literature.* His poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is an assistant professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy.

REVIEW BY JAMES FAIRHALL,
DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

# *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*

Heonik Kwon

Cambridge University Press, 2009, $32.00, cloth, 232 pp.

Not all wars produce large numbers of persistently undead, culturally meaningful ghosts. Legions of ghosts did not emerge from Europe's Napoleonic Wars or America's Revolutionary War. They were generated, however, by our Civil War and, in Britain but not here, by World War I.[1] Although the Vietnam War produced in the United States an unprecedented preoccupation with MIAs and the recuperation of their bodies, and though it shook America's sense of its identity, no surge of spiritualism occurred. But in Vietnam the American War gave life, in its long aftermath, to a subculture of war ghosts whose interactions with society proved to be quite different in form and meaning from those of ordinary ancestors and traditional gods.

The Korean-British social anthropologist Heonik Kwon's remarkable book, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, is a rigorous yet innovative and interweaving of anthropology, history and creative nonfiction. His accounts and interpretations of medium-facilitated contacts with ghosts, spirits and gods are intriguing and sometimes chilling, yet they always circle back to his primary themes. Overall he is interested in the cultural significance in Vietnamese society of a particular kind of ghost, which he distinguishes from ancestors to whom most Vietnamese pay reverence at their home altars. , he is interested in subversive spirits and especially

[1] See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

in wandering souls tied to the "wrong side" (as defined by the Communist government) of the American War. The invocation of these ghosts, often MIAs, provides many Vietnamese citizens with a way not just of reconciling themselves to tragic losses whose mourning is not sanctioned by the state, but of reinterpreting recent history and thus staking claims on a revised understanding of their socio-economic status in the present. Recognition of the claims on the living of wandering souls extends to American ghosts and foreign ghosts from earlier wars. Kwon's earlier book, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*,[2] grew out of his interviews with villagers in My Lai and a nearby site of mass killing by American and South Korean soldiers. A crucial element of the ripping of the social fabric of these areas by large-scale violent death was the disruption of family ties to ancestors. Traditionally, acceptable death took place in or close to the home (*chet nha*). The newly deceased family member entered into a stable, mutually reinforcing network of the living and the dead in which both sides needed and helped each other. Violent death and death away from home—literally death in the street (*chet duong*)—disrupted this network. Lacking the bodies of their loved ones, Vietnamese families could not conduct proper funeral ceremonies. They experienced their missing relatives as souls unhappily wandering outside of the kinship network.

Reinforcing this disruption was the binary attitude of Communist officials toward the war dead. The only legitimate, officially honored deaths were those of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers and their allies. In a move common to states that seek to strengthen and often mythicize their foundation in common sacrifice, the government built monumental (and invariably ugly) military cemeteries for those fighters who had fallen in the struggle to drive out foreign invaders—a theme in Vietnamese history that the authorities sought to appropriate. So-called "puppet" or "quisling" soldiers were seen as having died in the support of foreigners (seeing the American War as in part a civil war was and is not permitted). The ongoing discovery of bodies or body parts of some of Vietnam's huge number of MIAs posed a problem for the government. Many of these recovered dead belonged to the wrong side and thus were non-persons in death. They could not be buried in Communist state cemeteries or the dwindling number of off-limits dilapidated ARVN cemeteries. Nor could they receive public religious funerals. Grief for such politically incorrect dead, whether they were

[2] Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

recuperated remains or (much more likely) wandering souls, was private, hidden and socially risky.

Following the immediate postwar period of Marxist-Leninist ideological purity, the economic loosening fostered by the *doi moi* decree (1986) led to unforeseen consequences. In the 1990s in the central part of Vietnam where Kwon did his investigations, a small entrepreneurial coffin-making industry sprang up as new construction unearthed human remains from both sides of the war. The practice of burning replica money at altars and shrines, no longer forbidden by the regime, grew popular, the American dollar in various incarnations becoming the favorite currency. (Kwon's chapter on ritual money and the "Bank of Hell" is worth the price of his book alone.) Disposable income earned by families whose members or ancestors were connected with the wrong side in the war contributed to the growth of these phenomena. Such families gradually became more assertive, though never publicly, about the legitimacy of both their own citizenship and that of their ancestors. They sought out mediums to contact their ancestors' wandering souls and find their bodies. Sometimes, unexpectedly, family members became the vehicles for wandering souls or new, non-traditional gods to make their presence known.

Thus Vietnam's gradual joining of the global economy loosened official control of the culture of commemoration and resulted in a continuing socioeconomic realignment of power that has subverted the government's binary division of the population, living and dead, into genuine citizens and reluctantly acknowledged semi-citizens. The grassroots revival of spiritual, religious and family mourning rituals (as opposed to patriotic state rituals) eroded distinctions between different kinds of ghosts. Not only did it equalize Vietnamese ghosts from opposing sides of the war, but it eroded differences between ancestors and strangers and—most surprisingly—between Vietnamese and foreign ghosts. In the area near Danang and Hoi An which Kwon researched, he found a special category of shrines devoted not to ancestors (*ong ba*) who have died at home but to strangers (*co bac*). These shrines were intended to make contact with and propitiate wandering souls who might well be American or even French or French colonial soldiers. According to wandering souls speaking through mediums, the dead do not remember which side they were on. They are reduced to equality in death much as bodies are mixed together, at sites of major battles, without regard for earthly affiliations. Moreover, those families whose ancestors include wandering souls heed the principle of reciprocity, hoping that their hospitality to the souls of strangers might be accorded to their own wandering kin.

Ghosts are of course not just (and not always) catalysts of sociopolitical transformation. They are disturbing and frightening. They are uncanny yet embody what Freud called the mutual relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar (*heimlich* and *unheimlich*) in his famous post-World War I essay. In the aftermath of the American War, Vietnamese ghosts cross the borders between life and death, family and stranger, ally and enemy, native and foreigner. They also are real and unreal, somewhat like what the British child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott called "transitional" objects and phenomena (e.g., the dolls, Teddy bears and invisible companions of young children). Although Kwon is a rigorous, theorizing social scientist, his accounts of encounters through mediums with wandering souls, spirits, and gods occasionally rise to the level of literature in the face of which the reader (like Kwon himself) must temporarily suspend disbelief.

If *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* were a collection of stories, the masterpiece would be Kwon's dramatic case-study/tale of a ten-tear-old girl drowned during the war. After her accidental resting place was disturbed in 1991, Lotus Flower entered the body of a sixteen-year-old village girl, Bien, to complain about the foul odor of onions that Bien's family had planted near her remains. By the chronological end of the story in 1997, this shocking collision with the alien—shocking for both the living and the dead—has become part of a narrative of acceptance and growth. Kwon begins at the end: "The day of full moon in the last lunar month of 1997 was a special day for Lien Hoa (Lotus Flower) and the people of Cam Re who knew about [her]." Lotus Flower has morphed from invasive stranger to Bien's adopted, honored sister. She is confident enough, after six years of association with Bien's family, to undertake a long journey to a place in the other world where she will be educated to become a higher ranking, more powerful spirit—no longer a plaintive war orphan. As for Bien, Kwon recounts:

> Ever since their first encounter, [she] had periodically spoken in voices other than her own, including the strong Hue dialect of Lotus Flower. In places she went to in Cam Re and beyond, different ghosts of war borrowed her body to express their personal grievances and histories. More than a dozen families in Cam Re and its environs discovered their invisible neighbors through Bien... Bien eventually became a kind of cognitive archaeologist who could excavate stories out of the sites of hidden death..., and her body-finding activity [enriched] the oral history of the village... She would simply go about her daily...movements, hit the

site of an unknown burial, start representing the dead in a trance, and forget everything she said on awakening.

More than any other example, Lotus Flower's (and Bien's) history illustrates the interchangeability and complexity of relationships between the dead and living in postwar Vietnam. I do wonder to what extent *Ghosts of War* pertains to all of Vietnamese society from Hanoi to the Mekong Delta. Kwon's years of field work in the central part of the country were heroic, and it would have taken him several lives to cover all of Vietnam. I can only say what I have seen myself. Recently, in a fifth-floor apartment in Ho Chi Minh City, my wife's Catholic family stepped effortlessly across a border on her father's death day as they chanted to his photo at the center of an altar lined with his favorite foods. Later that day, at the party to commemorate him, a hip middle-aged man, a hair stylist with blond-streaked hair, talked with him (or his photo, if you will) for five minutes. My late father-in-law spent three years in a "re-education camp" for having served as what the local government in his village near Hue termed (in my wife's family background document) a "quisling soldier." Supporting Kwon's research, his now honored ghost from the wrong side in the American War is playing a part in his family's long-delayed, partial socioeconomic resurgence and its claim to nearly full membership in the community of Vietnamese citizens.

To American readers, perhaps the most striking case history comes from Kwon's interview with a retired Vietnamese army officer. Angered when the men of his postwar unit made incense offerings to a foreign ghost and requested the help of a ritual specialist, he urinated on the site of the spirit's last manifestation. The ghost disappeared. Soon, however, the officer began to suffer from headaches so debilitating that a stay in a psychiatric ward was recommended. Instead, he followed the advice of a spiritual expert who alerted him that the ghost had been outraged by his insult. The ghost's body was located, determined to belong to an American officer shot through the head, and returned to the United States. The Vietnamese officer recovered, quit the army, and opened a motorcycle repair shop whose immediate success was attributed to help from the American's no longer wandering soul. In telling his history to Kwon, he observed in binary terms: "[The] American officer nearly defeated me, an officer in the Vietnamese Army, long after the war's end." An uncle, an elderly war veteran, reprimanded him: "Nephew, one does not fight with the dead. American or Vietnamese, the dead should be respected." In other words, the officer seemed to miss the point of his story, which was the need for reconciliation and respect between former enemies.

It would be trite to cite the uncle's comment as the moral of Kwon's rich, complex book. *Ghosts of War* is the work of a subtle mind in full, open engagement with years of field experience in postwar Vietnam. Sometimes the brilliance of Kwon's arguments is obscured by his overreliance on academic jargon; and surely Cambridge University Press could have afforded to hire a proofreader to help with Kwon's not completely fluent written English. Having said that, I must admit that his book fascinated me so much that I read it three times. You don't have to be a sociologist to appreciate his gemlike accounts of the social meaning of changes in ritual money, the hidden history of a missing leg and the Tiger Temple, the intertwined growth of Lotus Flower and Bien, the war between the ancient god Sharpshooter and the upstart Red Monster, and the flexibility of ordinary, uneducated Vietnamese people in acknowledging their kinship with all war ghosts regardless of affiliation. The American government, which spends millions every year to locate its MIAs, has indirectly participated in the flowering ghost culture of postwar Vietnam when its joint mission with Hanoi has used mediums to search for the bodies of our own wandering souls. A lesson that some segments of American society have yet to learn is that of respect and hospitality to all war dead, who after all do not care which side they fought on.

REVIEW BY RANDY FERTEL

# *Wandering Souls: Journeys with the Dead and the Living*

Wayne Karlin

Nation Books, 2009, $25.95, cloth, 376 pp.

In March 1969, First Lieutenant Homer Steedly Jr. experienced an event so rare in the Vietnam War, there is a name for it: "a meeting engagement." Turning a bend in a trail in Pleiku Provence, he came face-to-face with a North Vietnamese soldier, his weapon shoulder-slung. Steedly's weapon was ready at his side. By the time Hoang Ngoc Dam, a twenty-four-year-old medic from the village of Thai Giang in Thai Binh Province, had lowered his weapon, Steedly fired.

That Steedly came to know Dam's name and birthplace is another rarity in a war where, as novelist Tim O'Brien writes, a largely faceless enemy left many of our soldiers with feelings of "faceless responsibility" and "faceless grief." Like many soldiers, Steedly searched Dam for papers, and like many soldiers he turned the notebook he found into S-2, intelligence. But uniquely perhaps, Steedly that same night contacted a friend at S-2 and asked for the papers back. He sent them home to his mother in North Carolina writing that perhaps one day he would return them to the family of the man he'd killed.

In *Wandering Souls: Journeys with the Dead and the Living,* Wayne Karlin tells the story of Steedly's doing so 40 years later. Writing at the height of his powers, novelist and memoirist Karlin brings 40 years of study and reflection about the war to bear on a story of a man with a "need to dig up the past in order to rebury it properly, with wisdom and compassion and proper commemoration."

Why dig up the past? is a question many American families are perhaps asking of their returning Iraq and Afghan war veterans, or which they are hearing in reply when they ask of their sons' and daughters' service. Why dwell on trauma? homespun wisdom asks. Better to get on with our lives. But Steedly's narrative of release and redemption confirms the lessons of trauma psychologists. "The ordinary response to atrocities," writes Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman in her extraordinary book *Trauma and Recovery,* "is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable.* Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally

as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." [Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*]

Atrocity? Surely Steedly's kill—a man in uniform with a weapon drawing down on him—was a good kill, in a war zone with few civilians and unambiguous. No doubt. But "atrocity"—a word that stems from dual roots meaning both *dark* and *fierce*—is also defined as the intrusion of an extraordinary event that breaks the life narrative, the story we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives. Steedly, a South Carolina farm boy who had come to Viet Nam to save the world from Communism came to doubt that meta-narrative. When he did, the lives lost under his command and at his side, and the lives he took began to make less sense. "The first casualty in war," Karlin writes, "is not truth but the murder of one's own heart."

If so, the second casualty is one's place in society. "Homer had returned to his native soil" we learn in a passage we need to attend to today for the sake of recent veterans,

> but he was in a shifted universe in which everything had a different meaning to him than to the people around him. He had seen and done things that he knew the people around him did not want to know about, and because of that he knew he could never rejoin them. There were certain images burned into his brain, certain smells seared into his nostrils, certain tastes still on his tongue, and he felt they formed a wall between him and those who had not seen, felt, smelled, or heard what he had. He was afraid that difference made him monstrous.

After thirty years of life marked by "emotions . . . frozen into a defensive crouch," Steedly retrieved from his mother the letters he'd written and the notebook he'd sent home to begin to make sense of and to tell his story on his website, <swampfox.info.> Dam's notebook—filled with elegant line drawings—teaches him the counter-intuitive truth about war, that demeaning the enemy also traumatizes. This is a truth modern industrialized, ideological wars and their propaganda machines have denied. But demonizing the enemy dehumanizes us. With Karlin's help Steedly finds Dam's family and repatriates his notebook and then travels with

them to help locate, disinter and bring home Dam's remains, to literally bury the war. In humanizing the enemy, Steedly is rehumanized.

No one is better placed to have helped Steedly and to have told his story than Karlin, who for 20 years has led the effort to listen to the voice of the enemy and to normalize relations. In *The Other Side of Heaven: Postwar Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers*, Karlin, himself a Vietnam veteran, brought together writing by all the war's participants. Co-edited with former North Vietnamese cadre Le Minh Khue and South Vietnamese émigré Truong Vu, the anthology was listed as a Critics' Choice for 1995-1996. He is American editor for Curbstone Press's Voices from Vietnam series. Karlin's contacts in Hanoi were instrumental in finding Dam's family. Knowing the culture as he does, Karlin knows the crucial importance to the Vietnamese of burying the dead, or at least their effects. To go unburied and uncommemorated is to be forever a ghostly "wandering soul." By returning the notebook, Steedly lays his victim's soul, and his family's, to rest.

But most important of all, Karlin gave to Steedly what he and what many veterans most need. He convinced Steedly he could tell his story and he listened. *Wandering Souls* is a kind of window into the future when 30 years post Gulf Wars, we can glimpse the suffering that will have ensued if we don't learn to listen to those who serve in our name. Only by doing so can we re-knit the fabric of our own nation torn by wars that tear asunder other nations.

REVIEW BY KEVIN MCCLURE,
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

# *Armenian Golgotha*

Grigoris Balakian

Translated by Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag
Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. $35.00, cloth, 560 pp.

*Armenian Golgotha* represents for author Grigoris Balakian the fulfillment of a promise. From mid-February to April of 1916, Balakian, a priest in the Armenian Apostolic Church, vowed to dying compatriots that he would survive and record the atrocities he experienced as a victim of the Young Turks' (Committee on Union and Progress, or CUP) efforts to exterminate the Armenian population of Ottoman Turkey. One elderly friend instructed: "...write the story of our suffering; let future generations know what a steep price was paid for the salvation and freedom of their nation."

Throughout this two month span of time, Balakian and a group of approximately one hundred Armenian men were deported from their homes and forced to march on foot in the direction of Der Zor. This desert city in modern-day Syria was one of several sites of mass murder during the Armenian Genocide (1914-1918), which took the lives of over one million people. As a survivor account, both tragedy and inspiration are prominent features in the text. Translated for the first time into English from Armenian, it will prove to be an accessible source of insight for students of the Armenian Genocide and contribute to debate regarding the place of memoirs in historical research.

The text flows chronologically from July of 1914 to September of 1918. Organized into two volumes within one book, each volume subdivided into three parts, Balakian maps the political environment of pre-World War I Berlin—where he studied as a student—and wartime Ottoman Turkey. In Volume I, Balakian describes the general situation of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Despite anti-Armenian discrimination from sultans like Abdul Hamid II, Balakian stresses the vital role Armenians played in Ottoman society and suggests their prosperity was a cause of envy. It is in Volume I that we see Balakian arrested, along with other notable Armenian males, and deported to a prison in central Anatolia. Hundreds of male Armenian elites are similarly arrested and deported in the following days,

and many of them are later executed in accordance with the Young Turks' genocidal aim of rendering Armenian communities leaderless. This is but one step of the Young Turks' plan, which Balakian outlines and analyzes, calling the Temporary Law of Deportation the "epitaph of the Armenian nation."

In between context and analysis, Balakian traces his own journey of deportation, which starts from prison and ends with his harrowing escape to work on the construction of the Berlin to Baghdad railroad. Each stop along the way receives Balakian's full attention. Leaving nothing to the imagination, readers relive victories, if they can be so termed, such as bribing of police officers to be able to purchase bread from Turkish merchants at unfair prices. More difficult to stomach are the persistent defeats, such as observing mass graves on the horizon and bribing police officers for protection from weapon-wielding squads of freed Turkish criminals.

Volume II offers incisive political commentary, particularly in the text's final part. In chapter 34, Balakian denounces newspaper articles in which Turks blame wayward "adventurers" for the slayings. However, Balakian dedicates a great deal of Volume II to his time working on, and escaping from, the German railroad project. German soldiers are depicted as unsympathetic and "inhumane" accomplices to the Turks' extermination plan, as they did not protect from deportation the Armenian laborers who had been using the project as a pretext to avoid death. He quotes two soldiers who in conversation call Armenians "Christian Jews" who deserve punishment for their lack of loyalty.

Balakian's account exemplifies the ever-growing genre of witness literature, documenting in gruesome detail what for Armenians amounts to the first case of genocide in history and for Turks constitutes, at minimum, a blood-tinted blemish on their controversial road to republic. In this way, beyond doubt, the text is about death; not death hidden and simplified by words like "massacre" or "annihilation," but rather death described in vivid, personal detail. He repeatedly paints the heart wrenching scenes of his daily reality, such as observing a man who, robbed of his possessions, labors on a railroad that will transport arms and munitions to war fronts (producing yet more death). However, this is also a text about compassion, generosity, and justice. After the armistice, Balakian hopes Armenians will finally be granted nationhood and the CUP leaders responsible for plotting and executing the mass murders will be punished.

*Armenian Golgotha* contributes significantly to our understanding of the history of the Armenian genocide. Although the text does not present altogether new information, it provides rich testimonial evidence that verifies many pre-existing

interpretations. Importantly, Balakian demonstrates that the extermination plan was premeditated at the highest levels of government and systematically executed by thousands of individuals, many of whom materially benefited from the killings. German complicity in the genocide is painfully obvious in the text. Striking are the feelings of vulnerability and resentment toward European powers that Balakian establishes as driving forces in the Young Turks' decision-making. The fact that the text is in English is significant because many documents on the genocide remain in Ottoman Turkish.

The text is called by its translators a memoir, but it could easily defy such categorization. While Balakian relies primarily upon his own memories, he also took time as a prisoner to write. After his escape from the German railroad project, Balakian immediately felt his duty was to give voice to his fallen comrades. But he finds the trauma too fresh. He assures readers (and skeptics), nevertheless, that it was a constant thought: "... I stored ... all the principal events of my exile and all of the relevant details. I continually ruminated and mentally recorded everything." The result is testimony that is remarkable in its depth and breadth. As a church leader and multi-lingual scholar, Balakian provides a window into the belief systems of a wide spectrum of actors. On several occasions, he capitalizes on his captors' faith in impunity and extracts guarded information, giving the testimony confessional attributes.

Even if we question the veracity of memory-filtered testimony, Balakian's craft is instructive. Students will find numerous examples of effectively balancing contextual narrative and oral evidence, and it will surely facilitate lively discussions on methodology, or lack thereof. A thorough history of the conditions, structure, and aftermath of the genocide, *Armenian Golgotha* is part memoir, part oral history, and part promise fulfilled.

REVIEW BY JOHN DONOVAN,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

## *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*

Edited by Andrew Schopp and Matthew Hill

Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009, $59.50, cloth, 300 pp.

Almost five years after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, London's *Daily Mirror* newspaper published an exclusive report that revealed the identity of a man who had either fallen or jumped to his death from the top of the north World Trade Center tower. The photo of the man, which had been released by the Associated Press and used in newspaper articles around the United States the day after the horrible events of 9/11, showed a man plunging head first to the ground below and became famous as the "Falling Man" photo. At the time, no one came forward to positively identify the "Falling Man." Estimates are that seven to eight percent of the people killed when the Twin Towers collapsed died as a result of either jumping or falling from the burning buildings. Many people complained about the images taken of people dropping to their deaths, often referring to them as "jumpers," and within days of the tragedy, the media downplayed the images and declined to use them, focusing instead on the heroic actions of rescue workers who put their lives in jeopardy to save others. In recalling the human suffering associated with the tragedy, people did not want to see or remember the images of falling people, so the photos have not been widely used in 9/11 memorial services or remembrance ceremonies. When the identity of the "Falling Man" was revealed by the *Daily Mirror* to have been Jonathan Briley, a 43-year-old restaurant worker, his daughter was quoted in the article as stating that "it's not about trying to find out who he is, but what his death says about all of us." The helplessness felt by those who witnessed the jumping, the refusal of the media to acknowledge or use the "Falling Man" photo—or similar images in recalling the events of 9/11—and the public's rejection of associating the images of death in favor of the heroic actions of others that day, are just one aspect of the cultural reactions to the horrible events of that September day are analyzed in a series of fascinating articles on 9/11 and its aftermath in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture* from Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Edited by two Assistant Professors of English, Andrew Schopp from Nassau Community College in New York, and Matthew Hill from Coppin State University in Maryland, *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture* is a collection of essays that examines the "pre- and post-September 11 worldview" that has shaped popular culture, and how Americans have incorporated the impact of 9/11 into their perceptions and reactions to the violence witnessed that day. Divided into three sections, the book addresses the cultural role of images of the "Falling Man" and the towers collapsing, the idea of good and evil in identifying who is a "friend" or "enemy" of the United States, how technology has shaped the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, the political impact of policies and responses enacted by the U.S. government in the war on terror on a national and international level, as well as the "fear culture" evident in movies, television programs and music released since 9/11.

In the first section of the book, "Interrogating the "'Passion for the Real,'" author Todd Schack describes a "wartime epistemology" that has promoted a "for us or against us" mentality in dealing with other nations. In a fascinating essay entitled "Perpetual Media Wars: The Cultural Front in the Wars on Terror and Drugs," Schack contends there is a "government/military/entertainment media nexus" that keeps Americans in a constant state of fear. He believes the War on Terror needs to focus on the deeper ideological or political reasons that could lead someone to commit terrorist acts such as 9/11 instead of depicting terrorist actions as only the work of evil people. This "ideological straitjacket" is also addressed by essayist Meghan Gibbons in "Representing the Real on *The Road to Guantanamo*" in which she discusses the political and ethical considerations surrounding the detention of Arab Muslim men at Guantanamo Bay. Americans confronting the dilemma of seeking those responsible for terrorist acts must also discern the reality of their crime. The essays in the second section of the book, "'Back to Basics:' Reaffirming National Myths," address questions such as: Are Arab Muslim men detained because they are actual terrorists, or because they resemble the profile of what we expect a terrorist to look like? Is the truth as obvious as Americans see on television shows and in the movies?

Television shows such as *24* make it very clear that terrorists are out to kill and maim Americans, and that we need heroes like the lead character, Jack Bauer, to protect us. In "Tom Clancy, *24*, and the Language of Autocracy," author and editor Matthew Hill makes the case that just like the hero of Tom Clancy's novels from the 1980s, Jack Ryan, who fought communists and drug dealers, the hero of *24* represents America's war on terror. Taken to an even greater psychological

level, Hill contends that the actions of Jack Bauer are "violent retribution" for the "emasculating effects of victimization or failure" to stop the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center buildings. Hill also analyzes the use of military weapons and innovation in Clancy novels and *24* as a replication of the "technowar" used by U.S. military forces in the war on terror. Americans look to heroes who can take action and protect us from evil in the world. This desire for a hero is discussed in an essay by Justine Toh in "'People have had enough tragedy:' The Spectacle of Global Heroism in *Superman Returns*." Toh makes the case that a mythic character such as Superman is a symbol of "American heroism" who can perform heroic acts on a global scale. While Superman may not have been able to prevent 9/11, we can still see the embodiment of hope that he engenders in his ability to act and overcome evil in the world. As Loh points out, the public revulsion associated with the "Falling Man" image resulted in the media focusing instead on the uplifting images of police and firefighters that day (our real heroes). This focus became a symbolic way to compensate for the helplessness felt by millions of Americans on 9/11. It is this perception of helplessness, and how we deal with the fear that it could happen again, that is the focus of the book's third section, "Embracing the Complexity: Deconstructing the War on Terror."

Essayist Paul Williams analyzes the criticism of the Bush administration's response to 9/11 in "'I Could Smell the Dawn of Armageddon When this Dick Was Elected:' Hip-Hop's Oppositional Voices in the War on Terror." Williams cites the lyrics of Hip-Hop artist Mr. Lif to demonstrate that the War on Terror targets "non-whites," that the Patriot Act suppresses freedom, that the actions of the Bush Administration were based on racist American history, and that the Department of Defense is using minority soldiers to fight and die in Afghanistan and Iraq to support profits for corporate interests. This chapter is one of the most controversial in the book, as it seeks to remind the reader that some Americans see the national and global actions taken by the United States over the past nine years not as targeted against those who perpetrated and supported the attacks that took place on 9/11, but, as Williams puts it, as "discarding non-white lives as it executes the War on Terror." This questioning of means and motives is at the heart of editor and author Andrew Schopp's contribution which closes out the book, "Interrogating the Manipulation of Fear: *V for Vendetta, Batman Begins, Good Night, and Good Luck*, and America's "'War on Terror.'"

Schopp has the final word in this excellent anthology when he postulates that movies such as *Batman Begins* make us examine whether we can "challenge the control and power of fear" generated by 9/11 and the War on Terror. The reader is

urged to question whether the criminal actions of the Joker in *Batman Begins* (just like those of the terrorists in the real world) are the actions of an evil individual, or is it the actions themselves that are evil? Just like the other thought-stimulating essays in this book, Schopp urges us to confront some fundamental questions in our response to 9/11 and the War on Terror: "Who is the enemy?" "What makes one a criminal?" "What vision of justice should we embrace?" These questions and others are addressed in this outstanding book of well-researched scholarship and insight that is essential reading for all those interested in understanding the lasting impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror.

REVIEW BY STEVEN TROUT,
FORT HAYES STATE UNIVERSITY

# *The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the Fiction of Mobilization*

Keith Gandal

Oxford University Press, 2008. $24.95 paper, 288 pp

Keith Gandal's *The Gun and the Pen* argues forcefully that classic works of American Modernism from the 1920s have less to say about the horrors of the First World War—horrors long thought to have shaped the so-called Lost Generation—than about the social and cultural upheaval introduced by wartime mobilization. Few who finish this study will find themselves in disagreement with Gandal's provocative thesis. Indeed, this is a book likely to change our conception of American World War I literature—or, more specifically, the relationship between the Great War and American Modernism—for good.

As Gandal reminds us, the three central Modernists of the interwar period (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner) were all losers where World War I mobilization was concerned. For all his martial bluster, Hemingway entered the Great War via a non-combatant organization, the American Red Cross. The US Army rejected him because of his nearsightedness. Fitzgerald, on the other hand, successfully pursued a commission as a Second Lieutenant; however, his superiors judged him largely incompetent, and the war ended before he could reach the Western Front. As for Faulkner, his mobilization story is the most pitiful of all. Too short to serve in the American military, the Mississippian lied his way into an RAF training camp in Canada, allegedly by perfecting a phony British accent. Faulkner joined too late to see action in France (or even to experience actual flight training), but this inconvenient fact did not prevent him from dressing up as a fighter pilot and describing ferocious dogfights to gullible audiences in Oxford, Mississippi.

The anomalous nature of these writers' war experiences has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Never before, however, has a critic made "mobilization wounds"—Gandal's term for the emasculating trauma experienced by Anglo males who missed

out on the fighting—the focus of a sustained rereading of canonical Modernist fiction. As explored here, even familiar works such as *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Great Gatsby* suddenly become quite different from the Lost-Generation chestnuts that we thought we knew. Setting aside the notion that these novels explicitly express postwar disillusionment, Gandal instead unpacks the bundle of mobilization-related anxieties (and resulting plot similarities) that they share. In particular, he demonstrates that each text pits a character of impeccable WASP credentials (a traditional recipient, that is, of the prestige attached to frontline service) against a hyphenated "upstart" who has benefited in some way from Progressive wartime policies. Thus, in *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan, the quintessential old-moneyed New Englander, collides with Gatsby, a German-American who successfully uses America's entry into the war as a springboard for his ambitions. And thus, in *The Sun Also Rises*, impotent Jake Barnes tussles with Robert Cohn, a Jewish-American who, while not a war veteran per se, utters the same chivalric language of chastity and righteousness absorbed by Gatsby in the AEF. For Gandal, such novels not only compensate in various ways for their creators' embarrassing war records, they also lash out at ethnic veterans, implicitly condemning mobilization policies that led members of minority groups to achieve a level of recognition once reserved exclusively for Anglo warriors.

For many readers, this part of Gandal's thesis may seem a stretch. After all, World War I historiography has long emphasized the War Department's hostility toward ethnic and racial minorities. Bogus intelligence tests, we have been told, prevented non-Anglos from rising in the ranks. And then there is the AEF's notoriously discriminatory treatment of African-American troops, most of whom served as laborers in uniform. Fortunately, however, Gandal's rethinking of 1920s American Modernism coincides with an ongoing historical reevaluation of the US Army in World War I. Indeed, *The Gun and the Pen* is an excellent example of intellectual fertilization across disciplinary lines. Drawing upon the recent work of social historians such as Nancy Gentile Ford and Jennifer Keene, Gandal demonstrates that despite their built-in bias, World War I era intelligence tests actually gave many troops—particularly second-generation immigrants—unprecedented access to positions of authority. Of course, African-American soldiers benefited little from this progressive side of wartime mobilization; skin color trumped ethnicity where intolerance was concerned. Nevertheless, Gandal's radical new construction of American Modernism dovetails persuasively with an equally revolutionary vision of The Great Adventure of 1917-1918 as The Great Opportunity for many hyphenated Americans.

Since the central argument in *The Gun and the Pen* rests so heavily upon social-historical evidence, Gandal understandably spends much of the book backing up his claim that American participation in World War I was, more than anything else, a *mobilization* event. He even goes so far as to suggest that War-Department policies pertaining to draft eligibility, progressive standards of soldierly conduct, and merit-based promotion ultimately mattered more, in terms of Twentieth-Century American history, than the (relatively brief) experience of the AEF in battle. However, the most exciting moments in this study come when familiar texts suddenly change before our eyes. Unlike lesser New Historicists, Gandal does not eschew close reading. On the contrary, he proves himself a master at bringing text and context into dialogue. Consider, for example, his detailed analysis of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. As Gandal observes, "a common misreading" of Fitzgerald's text "is to perceive Daisy as a traditional woman and a foil to Jordan Baker's new woman" (108). Why a misreading? As it turns out, the object of Gatsby's obsession is no less shaped than he is by the social and sexual turmoil of mobilization. However, while Gatsby embraces and absurdly exaggerates the AEF's official standards of clean-living and selfless devotion to an idealized girl at home (a moral posture that he maintains even during his subsequent career as a bootlegger), Daisy discovers that mobilization brings sexual empowerment and variety. It is she, in fact, who makes Jordan aware of the erotic possibilities opened up in a society knocked sidewise by total war. After marshalling evidence from passages in the novel that are rarely, if ever, discussed in detail, Gandal asserts that Daisy is "a romanticized version of the charity girl" (111); in other words, she bears a strong resemblance to the kind of woman (one overly susceptible to the charms of a man in uniform and thus likely to engage in promiscuity) specifically targeted as a threat by the US Army. Indeed, we learn that military authorities in 1917 and 1918 rounded up more than 30,000 such "charity girls" in a bizarre program of "misogynistic law enforcement" (112). Read in this way, Gatsby's romance with Daisy is itself a mobilization event; the rapidly shifting social conditions of wartime bring the two characters together, but not, ultimately, in a way that will allow their relationship to flourish beyond the Armistice.

One can quibble with parts of *The Gun and the Pen*. Although always absorbing, Gandal's close reading sometimes seem overly determined to draw everything back to the theme of mobilization, and his excessive defense of his methodology, an entire chapter in length, seems to have been, well, mobilized unnecessarily. But these are minor matters. By any standard, *The Gun and the Pen* is the most

important book on American Modernism and World War I to appear in decades. And no one who claims to know the works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner can afford to ignore it.

REVIEW BY JASON ZIMMERMANN,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World*

Holger H. Herwig

Random House, 2009. $20.00, cloth, 416 pp.

Those familiar with the Great War will certainly have heard of the "Miracle of the Marne" of September 1914, the legendary battle that witnessed Parisian taxi drivers gallantly ferrying troops to the front lines to exploit a gap in the advancing German armies. In a new account of this battle, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World,* Holger H. Herwig disrupts the conventional emphasis on Allied audacity and German surprise with a critical examination of German commanders' correspondence and personal accounts from August to September 1914. Herwig asserts that far from being pushed back by Allied arms, the Germans unwisely made a tactical decision to withdraw to a more defensible position from the Marne to the Aisne River on 9 September. This decision yielded strategically disastrous results for the Germans, for it prolonged the war by making a quick victory on the Western Front impossible.

The book is more than what its title suggests, for it covers far more than just the series of battles that came to be called "the Marne". Herwig details the diplomatic backdrop to the major powers' military planning prior to World War One, as well as the July crisis that brought about the war in 1914. Herwig's fresh look at events is welcome in that he dispels a lingering misperception surrounding the German war plan. Strategically, the Germans sought to destroy France in a swift campaign which would leave Germany's rear secure during the subsequent attack on Russia. It was the Schlieffen Plan of 1905, subsequently modified by the German Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke, which was to accomplish this aim. For all the later speculation about whether the unmodified Schlieffen Plan would have succeeded in capturing Paris is really beside the point, which Herwig convincingly argues: the German Army had actually *abandoned* the Schlieffen Plan by the end of August 1914. The reason was simple overconfidence, which Herwig demonstrates with examples too numerous to be coincidental, and which led Moltke and his

army commanders to conclude that the defeat of the French army was imminent, that all that need be done was roll them up from the west. It was this belief which led to the German First Army's infamous turn to the southeast, thereby leaving Paris (and the French Sixth Army) on its western flank.

The author also stresses how this overconfidence contributed to communications breakdowns and lackadaisical control by Moltke from his headquarters in Luxembourg, who expected his army commanders to act in accordance with his general "ideas" for the campaign. Admiral Horatio Nelson famously informed his captains of his "ideas and intentions" so that in the smoke of battle there would be less confusion. This was an admirable measure where communication was expected to be difficult or even impossible, but in 1914 the German army had no such excuse. Days would go by when the critical First and Second Armies would not communicate with each other, nor they with Moltke, an oversight unimaginable in a modern army. Major German attacks or movements were often begun without even informing neighboring formations. Only the complacence borne of assured victory can account for such actions. By contrast, Marshal Joffre was constantly on the move close behind the front lines directing the entire French effort. Even so, Herwig shows just how close the Germans came to winning this battle in 1914.

Valuable as this new look at the Marne is, Herwig's assertion that this was the most significant land battle of the twentieth century, and the most decisive land battle since Waterloo must, however, be contradicted. Even had the Schlieffen Plan worked in 1914, and enabled the German army to capture Paris, the question must then follow: would France have surrendered? The experience of 1871, when Parisians fought on after the defeat of the French army, suggests otherwise. And even if France had fallen in defeat, would England then have sued for peace? The experience of 1940, when England chose to continue the fight against Germany even without Russia, indicates that the British would likely have fought on. For all the European military planners' expectations of a short war decided by decisive battles, the Great War proved to be something altogether different. Perhaps it is indelicate to point out that while stalemate at the Marne meant that the Great War would continue, what Herwig fails to note in his otherwise admirable account is that German victory at the Marne would likely have meant the same thing.

REVIEW BY BENJAMIN F. JONES,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *Valley of Death: The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu That Led America into the Vietnam War*

Ted Morgan

Random House, 2010. $35, cloth. 752 pp.

Anything that Ted Morgan writes about the French Army should be read, and read closely. His own experiences as a French officer in the Battle of Algiers shaped his views on war, and how the French waged their 20th Century wars. While born French, Morgan became an American and took an anagram version of his French name Sanche de Gramont, dropped any pretense of French nobility, and has been writing great works of literature, history, and biography ever since. A winner of two Pulitzer Prizes for Journalism and Biography, Morgan's writing moves quickly and succeeds at bringing the reader along with all the complicated characters involved in French Indochina from 1940 to 1954. And it was a complicated place as the nations involved were Vichy and Gaullist France and its international colonial army, the Japanese, the Americans, the British, the Nationalist and Communist Chinese, the Soviets, and of course the Vietnamese. Morgan's writing succeeds at bringing the personalities of those involved directly into the story, marking in the reader's mind the breadth of complexity and the depth of human suffering in this war. *Valley of Death* demonstrates that people and the interactions of all their foibles, weaknesses, strengths, and passions drive events. Misunderstandings pervade and Morgan argues that they are the main human weakness at fault for France's loss and America's tragedy in Vietnam.

Organized with an operatic flare, Morgan divides the book into *Acts* and comprises the *Acts* into small narrative scenes culminating in Dien Bien Phu's aftermath at the peace talks. The first Act describes the French, Japanese, American, and Vietnamese vying to achieve their aims as Germany defeated France in 1940 and then how the parties fared as the war came to an end. President Roosevelt's zeal to keep the British and French from reacquiring their pre-war colonial empires fizzled, first due to his own inability to juggle that war aim while winning the war and secondly due to his premature death. President Truman did no better in

guiding the region through to a successful independence, but instead wound up reversing Roosevelt's wishes in order to strengthen France's standing for the Cold War's pressing realities. The first three Acts relate the quickly paced events of Vichy's surrender, Japan's formal occupation followed quickly by their own surrender, the peace time occupation by Nationalist China and Britain, and France's fragile return. France successfully pursued its goal of control and then found itself amidst a brutal guerrilla fight in northern Vietnam with Ho Chi Minh's forces. While Bernard Fall's *Hell in a Very Small Place* describes the operational motivations and thinking of French commanders, Morgan fills in the gaps with his discussion of French domestic politics and the Cold War politics that are immediately relevant to the Indochinese jungles. Morgan deftly steers the narrative through the careening international politics of the French Communist Party power plays, to the American State Department's inability to keep up with events, to Ho Chi Minh's deft handling of his Chinese neighbors, to the French generals and their different operational philosophies. He includes the reasons for Vietnamese hatred of the French as their occupation and how the war starved thousands to death. The forth Act describes the battle itself where one wonders where the guerrilla war went as Ho's army is now fully equipped and adequately trained with Chinese support. But ironically, the French government had decided to leave Indochina even before the fateful battle was joined. French commander General Navarre's goal was to sustain his position to gain the Geneva negotiators better leverage with Ho Chi Minh as well as with the rest of the world's great powers. The final Act describes the various governments' facing their different options now that they are going to deal with a new world in the wake of France's defeat. Additionally, we see the horrendous plight of the French Army prisoners and their victorious captors.

Morgan's powerful prose describes the human interaction of it all so completely it is hard to see how one nation, much less any one individual, could possibly get their way. Nevertheless, they keep trying as if they could, enfeebled in the fog of one misunderstanding after another. Morgan's underlying theme is the inexorable American tragedy that followed in the same place, and with the same enemy. However, that tragedy needs a different five act drama to explain it, for the fact that General Giap's forces defeated France does not mean that the United States was bound to suffer the same consequences. If there is a fault with the book, it is the sub-title. The United States is meaningfully involved and deeply concerned about Indochina from the book's first pages, but Morgan does not advance an argument that leads from Dien Bien Phu to the 1975 fall of Saigon. What he does, however, better than anyone else, is offer a concise discussion of Roosevelt's disgust with the

French government and the far-reaching implications of those sentiments. He also succeeds marvelously with his prose describing the soldiers and diplomats seeking to get what they want. So while *Valley of Death* describes the high level politics, it also brings out the combatants' experiences in compelling and tragic ways. Anyone interested in Vietnam's history, the early Cold War, and certainly the human aspects of warfare would do well to savor the rich work Ted Morgan provides here.

REVIEW BY MIRANDA S. BALDWIN,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour*

Lynne Olson

Random House, 2010. $20.00, cloth, 496 pp.

Olson's third novel, *Citizens of London,* gives readers insight into the professional and personal lives of three American men— John Gilbert Winant, Edward R. Murrow, and Averell Harriman—who served as behind-the-scenes players forging the alliance between America and Britain at the onset of World War II. She accomplishes her goal of weaving their stories against the backdrop of war-ravaged London through incorporating personal memoirs, diary entries, interviews, biographies, and newspaper articles into her own narrative. Olson charges the reader to move beyond a factual understanding of the three Americans' struggle to maintain American allegiance while building relationships with their British audience and relate on a sympathetic level to the challenges that the two nations faced in building that alliance.

Olson opens with chapters dedicated to the respective backgrounds of John Gilbert Winant, the U.S. Ambassador to Britain; Edward R. Murrow, the head of CBS News in Europe; and Averell Harriman, the U.S. representative of Roosevelt's Lend-Lease program in London. In these chapters Olson weaves humorous anecdotes with the sobering reality of London these men faced as they began their assignments. The next chapters discuss the different relationships between Winston Churchill and the three Americans, focusing on both their professional and personal interactions. In fact, Olson blurs the distinction between personal and professional, claiming "rarely—before or since—has diplomacy been so personal." This personal diplomacy extended to joint Christmas celebrations between the Roosevelts and the Churchills; an open-door policy from Churchill to Winant, Murrow, and Harriman; and personal relationships formed between members of the Churchill family and the three Americans. Building on this foundation, Olson extends her narrative to those Americans living in Europe who acted on their passion for their adopted homeland by joining as members of the Home

Guard, as well as those who broke American laws and served as members of the RAF, the British Army, and as part of the Canadian forces in Britain. She extends her moniker "Citizen of London" to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force because of his insistence on American and British military forces working together against an imposing enemy. Olson's narrative concludes with V-E day activities and the legacies of Roosevelt, Churchill, Winant, Murrow and Harriman still evident today.

*Citizens of London* details the complexity of the alliance between the United States and England, offering a different perspective of the war effort by the two countries than traditional narratives. Olson challenges a spirit of prevailing American nationalism to show the humanity of war and its implications for the soldiers and citizens bearing the brunt of the conflict. She does not disagree with holding fiercely to a spirit of nationalism, but she does show the repercussions resulting from maintaining this type of isolationist outlook. She uses examples of the U.S.'s unwillingness to enter the war in its early stages when London faced nightly blitz bombings; the disagreements spurred by non-understandings between American GIs and Britons; and the conflict inherent in allied relationships to show that education and understanding between nations are paramount to fostering alliances.

After reading *Citizens of London*, one cannot help but think how paramount understanding this message is as the United States with our British colleagues have again embarked on wars not held on our soil. Olson paints a vivid backdrop of war-torn London in World War II for her audience, and this reviewer's reaction is to think of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to envision those backdrops for its citizens and soldiers. When I served in Iraq, I watched the farmers and their sheep outside the wire of my base, but I'm not sure that I ever empathized with their situations. Olson's narrative gives readers that perspective and opportunity. Lastly, *Citizens of London* opens a space to discuss post-traumatic stress syndrome as it relates to those not directly involved in combat operations. As she concludes her text by discussing the aftermath of the war for Roosevelt, Churchill, Winant, Murrow and Harriman, Olson allows an understanding that war exacts physical, mental, and emotional tolls on soldiers and citizens alike. Some men, like Murrow and Harriman, flourished in the post-war world. Others, like Roosevelt, Churchill, and Winant, suffered insurmountable physical and emotional distresses. War is an ugly thing, as the 19th century Englishman John Stuart Mill claims, and Lynne Olson deftly captures the effects of World War II on Britons and Americans alike.

REVIEW BY JOHN J. ABBATIELLO,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *No Less Than Victory*

Jeff Shaara

Ballantine Books, 2009. $28.00, cloth, 449 pp.

Few authors write historical fiction better than Jeff Shaara, and his latest novel meets this expectation. The third book in his World War II trilogy, *No Less Than Victory* continues the masterful retelling of the war in Europe from the Battle of the Bulge to Germany's unconditional surrender. As his father did in *The Killer Angels*, Shaara creates a story that is both fiction and non-fiction at the same time. He reconstructs conversations about which no records exist, yet his extensive documentary research allows him to portray them accurately. In one chapter, the reader might experience General Dwight D. Eisenhower speaking with his senior commanders and staffers about strategic options relating to the campaign in Europe. In another chapter, the reader will see the war from the tactical level through the perspective of one of Shaara's fictional characters—perhaps in a B-17 cockpit or in a snow-covered foxhole in the Ardennes Forest. In this way, Shaara effectively weaves a narrative—employing both real and fictional personalities—that provides a top to bottom understanding of the final six months of the war.

What was it like to experience the intense cold of the December 1944 Battle of the Bulge or to bail out of a burning B-17 cockpit? In general terms, Jeff Shaara's visceral descriptions give the reader a historically accurate portrayal of combat conditions in World War II. This reviewer discovered a few minor historical inaccuracies in the story but they did not detract from the overall quality of the novel. For those readers seeking an entertaining and engaging book that describes good history, Shaara's *No Less than Victory* will not disappoint.

REVIEW BY JAMES A. MOAD,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *Warrior Writers: Re-Making Sense*

Edited by Lovella Calica. Barre, Vermont

Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008. $14.99, paper, 208 pp.

Memorial day, 2010, and I'm rereading *Warrior Writers: Re-Making Sense*, a collection of artwork—essays, poetry, photographs, and letters from veterans of the War in Iraq. The book consists mostly of projects from five creative workshops that took place across the country in 2007. It is written by and about those who fought, many of whom are struggling to find meaning, direction, and peace in the aftermath of their experiences in Iraq. They speak for themselves, for those they fought beside, and for those who died alongside them. It is both a powerful and important book of war literature.

As a part of the Warrior Writers Project, the various writing workshops help veterans find expression through creative acts to help them reflect on their wartime experiences. Similar to *Operation Homecoming*, which emerged from the National Endowment of the Arts writing workshops with service members in 2004, *Warrior Writers* builds on the need for veterans to explore the trauma of war through artistic expression. It delves deeper, though, reflecting the resonance of war and its aftermath in the years that would follow the Invasion of Iraq. It picks up where *Operation Homecoming* left off, depicting the internal struggles that veterans of all wars confront at one time or another. They ask hard questions for both the writer and reader, pushing aside old assumptions of what it means to be a veteran of war.

These are not professional writers, and yet their words reflect an honesty and integrity that makes a mockery of mottos such as *Service before self* or *Be all you can be.* Whether it's a Marine reflecting on the systematic means in which he was taught to dehumanize Arabs, or a Soldier recounting how he was trained from his first day in the military to think of all Iraqis as Hajis, Ragheads or Sand Niggers, these young warrior writers' ability to examine the truth deserves both attention and admiration.

The book is comprehensive in its depiction of the transformation wrought by war on the individuals who fight. Cathartic in its nature, the various workshops

helped the soldiers reflect on their experiences by writing about a single word, an image, the enemy they fought, and the demons that haunt them still. They express their hurt, pain, and reflections on lost idealism, write letters to their future selves, confront the need to apologize, to vent, to confess, and to accept and understand that they will never be the same. As Vince Emanuele, a former Marine, wrote, "Missing is a piece of me that I will never get back."

We are given a snapshot of those who serve in our nation's military, the poor, the hopeful, the uneducated, the destitute, and the patriotic (many of whom join as young men and women, and sign contracts, despite confusion about what the military expects from them). Nathan Lewis wonders, "Why did I know the difference between an M-16 and an AK-47 before I could compare a Hindu to a Muslim or a sonnet to a Haiku?" Neither do the writers shy away from condemning the war or the government that holds its servicemen hostage once they sign up to defend the nation. As Luke Austin, a public affairs photojournalist wrote, "With more laws to keep them in the military than to help them when they're out, these patriotic citizens are given no choice but to stay."

The directors of the Warrior Writers Project have succeeded on many levels. The book itself is a reminder of the need for art to transcend and shed light on the destructive nature of war, whether at the individual or global level. Among the many successes of this book, it clearly expresses a truth that is often overlooked: every soldier who ever goes to war dies a different kind of death, whether they come back home or not. The person they once were—the young man or woman who went off to war is no more. Afterward, the creative process must take over—needs to take over—in order for the pain and suffering of war to be endured.

On this Memorial Day, I'm reminded that it is a day to reflect on all those who have fallen in America's wars. It is meant to honor the dead, but I can't help but think about all those who've suffered in our wars as well—the ones who returned alive—the ones who've never been able to express their own pain and suffering. A 2008 Rand study stated that 20% of those who served in Iraq will have a form of PTSD, numbers that the American Military recognizes as a realistic estimate. While the statistics speak their own kind of truth, a short poem by Matt Howard, who served two combat tours in Iraq speaks another truth:

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

How is this a *disorder?*

What part of being emotionally and physically affected by gross violence is *disorder?*

How about a *going to war and coming home with a clear conscience* disorder?

I think that would be far more appropriate.

As Jan Barry writes in his introduction to the book, the works comprised in this anthology do much more than shed light on the realities of war, they also challenge "the mythology of military veterans as stoic saviors of civil society's virtues and values." This book is powerful not only for what it says, but what it achieves in the process of opening up the minds and souls of those who have served our nation. For those who hope to understand the sacrifices of war veterans and the individual costs of war, *Warrior Writers* is an invaluable resource.

REVIEW BY SONJA K. PASQUANTONIO,
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

# *Clamor*

Elyse Fenton

Cleveland State University Press, 2010. $15.95, paper, 77pp.

Amidst the litany of books received by our various *War, Literature and the Arts* editors, I did a little clamoring of my own to unearth this poetic jewel. As I pawed through the stockpile of books, what initially sold me was the title: *Clamor.*

As Elyse Fenton explains, clamor is a "noisy shouting," a random mixture of visual and verbal stimulation that suggests an almost chaotic, frenzied fusion of two worlds. It can also stand for the "SILENCE" between worlds, places both alien and recognizable. They consist of the one going to war and the one left in Boston. It's a deeply moving, impossibly tender, love-filled book of poetry that I have no business infringing upon, but continue reading because I can't bear to put it down.

> ...And I love you more for holding the last good flesh
>
> of that soldier's cock in your hands, for startling his warm blood
> back to life. Listen. I know the way the struck chord begins
>
> to shudder, fierce heat rising into the skin of my own
> sensate palms. That moment just before we think ...

Loosely broken into four sections, Fenton's journey takes us from "The Beginning," in which every sliver of civilization is an aching reminder of her lover/husband's deployment to Iraq, to the narrative, conversational style of his return, in which their yearlong struggle, which amounts to "too much harm," becomes a testament to the healing process. In the third section, Fenton struggles with her own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, turning to nature to identify her husband and grapple with her new status as "War Bride." In the final section, which Fenton purposefully refuses to label, the poem "Roll Call," a dream sequence of "Twenty-

one triggers / and twelve-hundred bit-down tongues" where she gulps a "Last unmuzzled throatful of air." "Roll Call" is the beginning . . . of the end.

Fenton's writing is unique and universal in that we've all been imprinted by war. We equally relate and respond to the narrative, conversational style of the reintegration section and frenetic, pagan, spastic representation of their separation. As a war veteran, I understand how one of Fenton's narrators "survived the war though the war would never be won."

With mortality strewn like bullet holes through the pages, words are equally connected by an unbridled sexuality between Fenton and her absent partner. In "After the Blast," Fenton visualizes her lover in the shower as he discusses an explosion in which a body hangs on concertina wire. She tries to mouth, "I love you," but can only think about concertina wire and the image of a "body caught in the agony of climax." Even in death, Fenton ekes forth a fervent sexuality to the words and worlds. Every word is edged in a longing for the corporeal presence her lover provides—a facet that left me, at times, uncomfortable. I vacillated between guilt and voyeurism for listening eagerly into what should clearly be a private dialogue. But isn't that part of the pleasure of poetry? Ezra Pound believed it was the "human inside talking to the human inside." It's a glimpse at what lies beneath the machine, and it is not, as Fenton suggests, "SILENCE."

In "Word from the Front," Fenton, proud because she understands the "corkscrew landing," a method used by pilots to avoid incoming rounds by sending the plane into a downward spiral, finds herself incapable of attending to the conversation. Instead, she synapses on her partner's voice inflections, and what he intends to conceal.

> ...so I don't yet register the casual solemnity
> of newscaster banter
>
> falling like spent shells
> from both our mouths, nor am I
> startled by the feigned evenness
> in my lover's tone, the way
>
> he wrests the brief quaver
> from his voice like a pilot...

And this is the elemental bond of Fenton's poetry. As her partner strains to depict the carnage, but mask his emotions, Fenton both desires and fears the truth. While her lover battles against the rigors of war, Fenton grapples with the chimera of maintaining control, best outlined in "Veteran's Day" where we trip across a "poppy-strafed" field, reviewing the "basketry of limbs" while watching the sun and clouds through a "bone-sawing" gap in the leaves. In every breath she delivers a dichotomy of life versus death, the barrenness of nature and nurture, and the ache of gut-wrenching loss.

Fenton, a graduate of the University of Oregon, married her now-husband, an Army medic who served in Iraq. She received the 2008 Pablo Neruda Award from *Nimrod International Literary Journal*, and has published poetry and nonfiction in *The New York Times*, *Best New Poets*, *The Iowa Review*, *Bat City Review*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. *Clamor* won Cleveland State University's Poetry Center First Book Prize.

With Fenton as the lens, readers see the raw, oozing scars of embattled Iraq, are witness to the mental and physical carnage each soldier carries, and are privy to the love that endures. The message is distinct, precise, and at times, volatile. I dithered between re-reading lines while shuddering with revulsion or running my fingers over a word, like the varied meanings of "*wound*" in "Commerce," where "each meaning...haunted...the next."

Despite the fidelity with which Fenton shapes her craft, there are a few sections where her poems lack the internal electricity I'd come to associate with her artistry, places where she squanders passion and temporarily displaces the reader. Even Fenton begs forgiveness for her small gaffe writing, "Some didn't make it through / our rough caging, some will never / bear fruit."

Ultimately, this is a work of love, both fiercely private and touchingly open. After nine years, approximately one million people have been to war, affecting perhaps ten times that number by association; yet Fenton illustrates how "the war is everywhere" and continues to affect two people living in a state of suspended animation. Her poetry is unexpected, ferocious, poignant, and lyrical and I, as one of the "Hopeless Returned" discovered "there are smaller prices for having survived."




# War, Literature & the Arts

An International Journal of the Humanities


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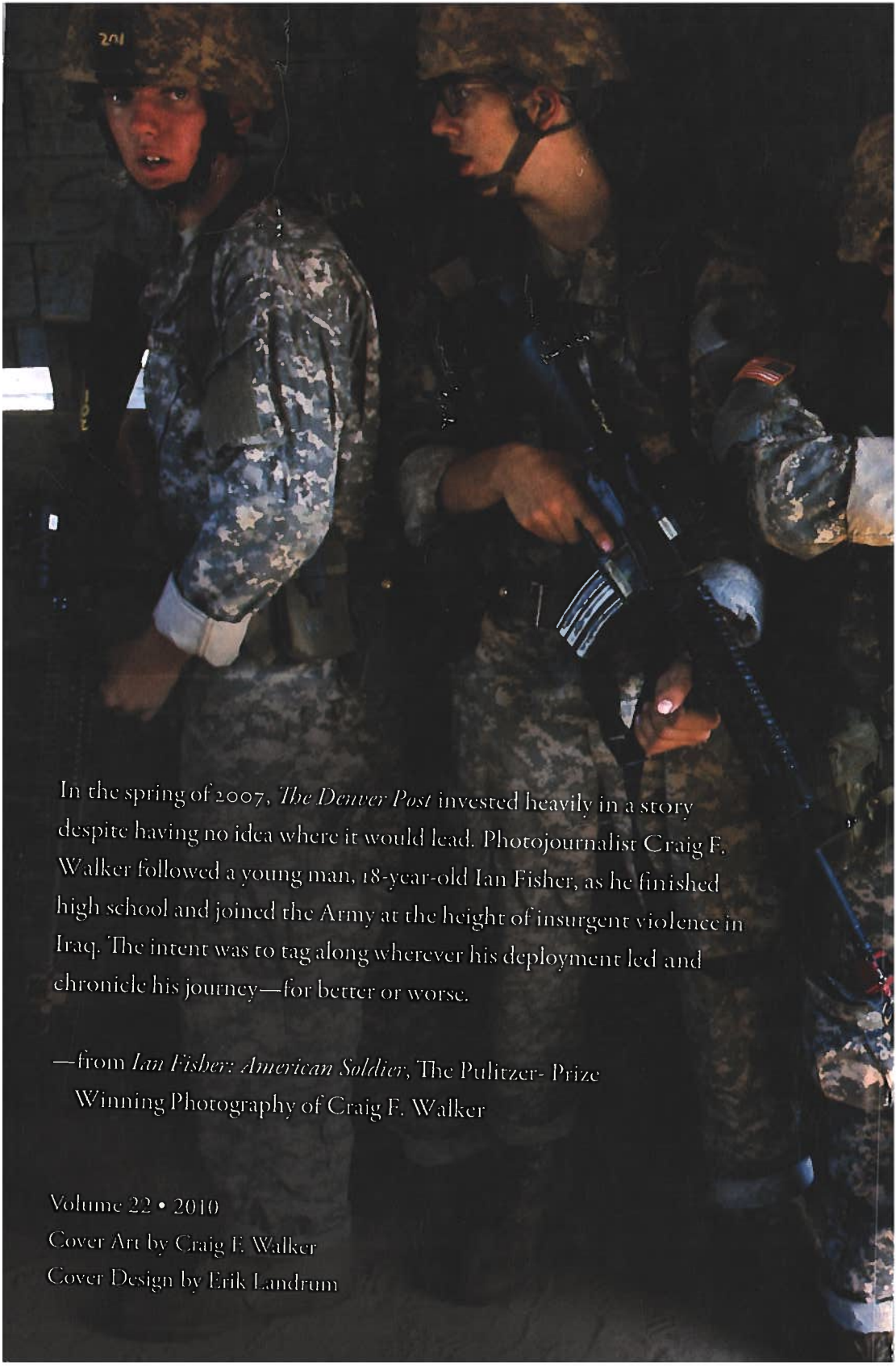

In the spring of 2007, *The Denver Post* invested heavily in a story despite having no idea where it would lead. Photojournalist Craig F. Walker followed a young man, 18-year-old Ian Fisher, as he finished high school and joined the Army at the height of insurgent violence in Iraq. The intent was to tag along wherever his deployment led and chronicle his journey—for better or worse.

—from *Ian Fisher: American Soldier*, The Pulitzer- Prize Winning Photography of Craig F. Walker

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