BRANDON LINGLE

My Friend Walks With Me

A conversation with Jesse Goolsby

Bagram Airfield, Parwan Province, Afghanistan—population 25,000

During the blazing summer of 2014, the drawdown from 13 years of war, I spend many hours reading early drafts of my close friend's novel, *I'd Walk With My Friends if I Could Find Them*. Around 11 p.m., alone in the office a hundred yards from the flight line, I picture Wintric, Torres, Big Dax, and the others as they move through their lives. Outside the windows, stadium lights stab the skies, and the thrum of jet engines and generators never ceases. Despite constant movement—people, equipment, jets, helicopters, bullets, rockets, bombs, bodies—Bagram feels stagnant, redundant, trapped, dirty, and this book offers momentary escape. The characters' lives unfold across the years, and I think about the lessons they offer. Outside of the two chapters set in Afghanistan, *I'd Walk* yields stunning echoes of home, and Goolsby's descriptions of place, along with his sports, music, pop culture, and literary references take me away from the sterile Afghani nights.

Dixon, California, USA—population 18,000

Late in the Fall, back from Afghanistan, I work to find my rhythm in life again. The first few weeks are beautiful, nothing but wife, kids, family, friends, hugs, high fives, smiles, good food and drink. Living and feeling everything that paused for the absent months. Life divides to before and after, and Mia's line late in the book resonates, "We're only what we've been. What you want to be means nothing." Then, the honeymoon wears off. The leave ends, life back home revs up, and small things sneak in from the side: that unpacked camo backpack leaning in the garage,

the garbage or diesel smell riding a hot breeze, an feral orange cat slinking around the corner, a ditch next to my farm-road running route, plastic water bottles, the same I-Pod songs at the gym, my kid's patch collection velcroed to the wall, the roar of a C-17 taking off, a tourniquet on the closet floor, the belt with no 9 mm Beretta. The image, smell, or noise catapults somewhere else, maybe a little deeper, darker, or perhaps funnier. And, from there another leap, forward or back, across the years and miles. Iraq merges with Afghanistan. America merges with both. Sometimes it's easy to get lost in this cycle. In those fragmented months, Goolsby spends many hours talking with me on the phone, usually during my dusty drive home as I blaze along the two-lane surrounded by alfalfa fields, a 10-story white windmill marking time in the distance. I can always count on him to answer.

Home from this last trip about 8 months now, and the echoes come and go. Just the other day, the kids from the house across the street were playing with our kids and watching me fix a flat bike tire. Their parents are from Afghanistan. The 5th grade girl tells me how her family speaks Dari, and she reminds me of Zuhal, a young Afghan girl I met at Bagram. I watched surgeon's remove a lobe of her lung. As I picture the diseased organ, the 6th grade boy, says, "The Taliban put a big bomb in my Mom's village. The Taliban are like tourists."

"Tourists or terrorists?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah, terrorists," he says.

"Sort of like tourists except with guns instead of cameras," I say and we laugh.

Then their mother sends over a plate of hot cornbread.

Overall, there's nothing really to talk about. Occasionally, it comes up in conversation, but I try not to dwell, especially around my wife and kids. I feel my time away has poisoned enough. My mind keeps hacking away, processing the deployments, and they're receding to the archives to become just another period of time. Then I read Goolsby's words about Wintric: "He now knew that the pain of the war, of the past two decades, of yesterday, would never recede all the way; the hurt simply finds new things to infect, things he has always loved—Christmas lights, interstate signs, hunting campfires, baseball games—but happiness and release also live somewhere among these things."

Read *I'd Walk With my Friends if I Could Find Them* and feel the echoes for yourself.

BL: *In an interview with* NPR*, you said, "I think veterans and active-duty service members, want to feel connection. We want to feel like our sacrifices and our service to the country [...] is appreciated, and I think to a large extent it is. [...] But I think at the core of it, we just want a conversation about what our country asks of us. And not just what our country asks of our service members, but what it asks of their families, of their friends and of their communities." I'd argue that* I'd Walk *contributes significantly to this discourse, but the conversation is largely a quiet one since the wars have faded to the background of the national dialogue. What are some of the experiences you've had since publication day to show that people are talking about our nation's still ongoing wars?*

JG: I've had very, very few experiences where people show an interest in our ongoing wars, which continues to disappoint me. Actually, it does a lot more than disappoint me. The disconnection between the fact that we're still a nation at war and the relative silence of our citizenry towards our conflicts and the ongoing jeopardy of lives is astounding. How could we ever become numb to such things? In some ways the general silence is not surprising because America's ongoing wars have largely been absent from our national dialogue for years.

I am encouraged, however, that many people are aware of the staggering and shameful shortfalls in the care of our veterans. And I think we've seen at least some pressure on our government to change that. I hope that pressure sustains, and tangible, across-the-board, improvements occur quickly. Interestingly, while there seems to be little appetite for conversation about our wars in a real, day-to-day sense, that isn't the case with war literature and art. We've seen a resurgence in the public consciousness of the consequences of conflict with the likes of *The Hurt Locker, Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, *Redeployment*, *American Sniper*, *The Yellow Birds*, *Green on Blue*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and many others. One of the things that most confounds me is the empathetic, strong, and appropriative reactions to these works of art, and yet there seems to me a general silence, or at least fatigue, to reality, which is that we still have men and women engaged in our nation's two longest wars, right now, today, this second. And somehow those conflicts, the plight of those real human beings and the reasons they are at war don't elicit even a 30-second spot on the nightly news anymore.

BL: *This is a book of consequence and contrast. The plot vibrates and bounces forward and backward across the years and miles, with an effect that mirrors memory. The book*

trusts the reader to make the connections and leaps. I'm sure some of the connections occurred naturally while you honed others. Tell us a little about the echoes?

JG: My first priority, always, is to do justice to the characters and their specific yearning. I'm very careful to be patient, to let the narrative voice inhabit me while I try to tap into some subconscious feeling or direction that will guide me through things like tenor, structure, and desire. Often, I start creative work with two entry points. The first is that there are no guaranteed moments of repose. The second is that everyone is fallible. Those two ideas in tandem create a space in which to begin thinking about realistic characters and personal stakes. When we're plugged into characters that exhibit a desire for connection or solace—and we know that they are fallible, we see it on the page—I find the echoes and threads of rewarding connections arrive by simply following the characters on their respective journeys. I can't imagine *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*'s connections and contrasts differently. For me, it felt natural to showcase moments of intensity and deep yearning, and then to leave space for the reader to bring her or his own sensibility to the reading experience and form those narrative bridges from one section to the next. I've always agreed with the notion that writers should treat readers as people smarter than themselves. I'm continually impressed with the gripping feedback from readers that have experienced the novel in surprising and fulfilling ways that I could not have imagined.

BL: *The importance of place is one of the earliest traits of the book that struck me. At* The Strategy Bridge*, Jay Moad called it, "a finely woven American tapestry—depictions of people struggling across the nation, from the East coast to the West, the small towns, landscapes and broken places within these young men, the soldiers they become, their families and the communities that helped define them." The wide swath of America affected by war in this novel helps dismantle the idea that the military is separate from society, and that's just one of the effects of the treatment of geography in the novel. How did place become so central to this book?*

JG: Our service members and veterans *are* American society. Those that serve also coach Little League and soccer, shop next to you at the local store, cheer for sports teams, vote, get speeding tickets, play their music too loud, mess up their taxes or not, make love or not, worry about mortgages, car payments. The point is that we do a disservice to our service members and veterans when we stop thinking of them, first, as human beings with specific and individual hopes, dreams, fears,

and desires. Of course, we should celebrate honorable service. We should seek out our service members and veterans that have served with distinction. But we should also acknowledge that not everyone is a hero, that some, in fact, are jerks and criminals and people that have not served honorably. When we celebrate everyone as a hero that is insincere, lazy, inaccurate praise, and does nothing to showcase a desire to know individual stories and lives. Place is important in the novel because our service members and veterans are not "from" Fort Benning or Nellis Air Force Base or Naval Base Coronado. They were raised in communities across America. And they will live after their service in places across America. If we want to tell wide-eyed, human stories about people that serve in the military, it seems to me like we must not only include the bases and conflict zones where they serve. Investigating hometowns, main streets, and back roads across our nation is critical to investigating who these people are, how they live, and what they want.

BL: *Given the reverberations, cinematic elements, and sucker-punching transitions, I think* I'd Walk *would be a filmmaker's dream. Give us some thoughts on what this book would look like on the screen?*

JG: David Fincher directs. Everything is shot on location. And the film enacts a similar narrative style to the book: sections of the film would align with the jumps in time and location. I'll admit to dreaming Aaron Paul into the role of Wintric. Gael Garcia Bernal for Armando. They are probably too old, and I'm not sure how to handle the span of 35 years the book covers. But that's why Fincher is in charge. There's something equal parts exciting and horrifying about the proposition of the book being made into a movie. I get into great arguments with my friends that prefer films to books. For me, personal imagination always wins the day—is there anything as multivalent?—so books come out triumphant. But there is something very enticing about interpretation and remediation. An example: Ang Lee is shooting *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* right now. It's supposed to come out in November of 2016. That's a wonderful book, and I'm interested on how Fountain's kinetic, descriptive language translates to the screen.

BL: *Many have noted* I'd Walk's *unique structure and finely-crafted transitions. In* Foreign Policy*, Lt. Col. Matthew Komatsu noted, "The structure of the novel is challenging, but Goolsby employs ruthless thematic control in order keep the narrative clipping along," and Peter Molin asks, "what to make of the lean-and-mean stylistic*

texture of the book?" What would you like to add to the discussion about the structure of your book?

JG: It was a joy to write in close third person, present tense. It's not a point of view readers encounter often, and it offers glorious immediacy and intensity. Because we're in close third, present tense, the patient mediation of a lived life that one typically experiences in past tense is absent. That led me to language that avoided abstraction and comparison. In real time, human beings rarely look at an object and instantaneously conjure a simile. As you live from moment to moment through your senses you absorb objects and you take them as they are: you identify them. An apple is an apple. A gun is a gun. The sun is the sun. The sun is not like an egg yolk slowly descending the ladder of day. That is abstraction and reflective mediation. It can be wildly rewarding, but also wildly distracting. In the case of my novel, the point of view hopefully demonstrates the immediacy I felt was important to capture the characters' desire for human connection as they lived from moment to moment.

BL: *Music plays a large role in your book. Each chapter references some artist or song from a wide spectrum of musicians: Deftones, Metallica, Celine Dion, Chicago, Boyz II Men, Pearl Jam, Eagles, Green Day, The Killers, Jim Croce, Radiohead, Tragically Hip, Shelby Lynne, and Diana Krall. The significance of music adds many layers of meaning very similar to the importance of place in the book. How do you see the music expanding and illuminating your words and art?*

JG: Music preference is another marker for character individuality, a way to distinguish and specify a particular life. Also, bands and songs position the reader in time, often in a particular society or community. Literature, and the novel in particular, has the page space to create in-depth lived-in worlds, and in this novel music is a key component to filling in the cultural space these characters navigate while illuminating their singular journey. For example, when I think of Wintric early in the novel aiming his gun at the Pepsi can in the forest, insults flying around him, I hear Metallica in the background playing from his lifted Bronco, and the scene somehow feels more appropriate and alive. Off the page, I admit to loving many of these artists. The Deftones's *Koi No Yokan*, The Tragically Hip's *Fully Completely,* and Shelby Lynne's *Just a Little Lovin'* are all genius and were my constant companions while writing the book.

BL: *In your* NPR *interview, you said, "One of the things I'm most interested in, not only is that specificity of a singular life and following that with the long view—I'm [also] really interested in the proximity of violence as much in the side streets and living rooms of America as in the war zone." Your book is probably the first from this era to address the long-term effects of today's wars. Where were you in the writing process when you realized these were things you wanted to explore?*

JG: At the very beginning. I don't think this novel is overtly polemical, but there's no doubt that one of the things I was most interested in creatively was this long view and crafting characters that were humans, first and always, no matter their profession, successes, or traumas. That is the origin story of *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*. The binaries our society has placed on service members and veterans are absurd, including simplistic labels such as "healthy" vs. "damaged" that do little to acknowledge each unique and complex individual. It felt appropriate to follow these characters for decades, before, during, and after conflict. It was the only way to present them as real human beings that project the incredible diversity of experience that each of us encounter during our lives. For these men and their families, war is one of those experiences, and it is traumatic, but there are also thousands of other domestic experiences that make up a life, positive and difficult. I wanted to get as far away from simple explanations and binary thinking as possible. This is one of the best things about art as a varied and powerful investigation into the human experience; not just military experience, but human experience.

BL: *Some of the chapters of* I'd Walk *originated from stand-alone short stories. How did you handle the transition from story to chapter? Did you know early on that some of these stories/chapters were speaking to one another?*

JG: I decided to try to place many of the chapters as stand alone stories first, not as an excerpt of a work in progress, but straight up stories. I found this forced me to really buckle down and fine-tune my world building and the establishment of stakes each and every time I entered a new chapter-story. Because I was aware of my desire for these stories to eventually morph into chapters I certainly kept some of the plot logistics and timelines in mind, but there were also many advantages of thinking of them, individually, as stories; most notably, the short fiction demands of immediate stakes. Additionally, I fully admit that I was in need of some positive reinforcement as I started this book. At the beginning, I had no agent, editor, or

contract. Like the vast majority of writers, it was just me, a blank Word document, and a healthy dose of consternation when the perfect words didn't come pouring out on time. Just on a personal level, I needed and greatly appreciated the validation and feedback that came with an acceptance from a literary journal, so much so—and my wife will attest to this—that I cried with nearly every acceptance.

BL: *With the publication of* I'd Walk with My Friends if I Could Find Them*, it's not a stretch to say that your writing career has transitioned and grown significantly. Tell us about the experience of being a debut novelist juggling family and a PhD program with national media interviews, a book tour, residencies, and writing?*

JG: The writing of this book was a great privilege. First, I have a wonderful job serving in the Air Force, and I accepted from the beginning that my writing could only happen during select windows of time. Pragmatically, that took a lot of pressure off, and I'm glad it did, because the book took over five years to complete. Separately, it was extremely gratifying in following my passion for writing. I had told myself for years that I might only be able to write later in life. It still feels like a dream that this collection of sentences that existed as a Word document for so many years now lives now as a tangible thing, a book, with a binding and a cover and beautiful font. I'm not sure how to put that feeling into words, except to say I feel incredible gratitude. One recent joy was attending the Sewanee Writers' Conference as a fiction fellow. Listening to, learning from, and visiting with artists like Tim O'Brien, Jill McCorkle, Allen Wier, B.H. Fairchild, Randall Kenan, and Richard Bausch was incredible and inspiring, as was befriending many other writers, poets, and playwrights. There is such a vibrant and supportive literary community out there, and Sewanee was one of my first experiences where I was able to spend some time with that close family of artists. I'm still working through the experience of writing and supporting the book as pragmatic events. Overall, all of these experiences have been very positive, but there are only so many hours in the day. Writing, in particular, is a solitary act. There is no escaping that. Most of the time I would—and do—write at night after work and after my wife and children had gone to sleep, but in those moments where I was writing on the weekend or during the day it was—and remains—very difficult because every second I was on the computer typing away was a second I was not present with my family. There is certainly a type of guilt that accompanies all of that individual solitude. The simple fact is that writing is a choice that takes a lot of time and focus. Finding the right balance, for anyone, is surely a constant endeavor.

BL: *In addition to editing fiction for* WLA*, you are also the Nonfiction Editor at* The Southeast Review. *How has your experience as an editor helped you as an author?*

JG: It certainly has helped, mainly as a reminder to be patient with my work until I am absolutely certain that the piece is ready for submission. That "absolutely certain" is still a subjective state, but it helps. Early on in my writing career I was a little too eager to get work out into the world, and I have the rejections to prove it. As an editor I see so much work that shows a compelling inciting incident, for example, but the language and deep inhabitation of the narrative voice necessary for publication is simply not present. In other words, it needs more time with the author. 90-95% of the work I see requires—I'd wager—at least three more edits before submission. A mentor of mine told me that once I thought I had a piece ready to go to submission, to first put it in a drawer for at least a week—a month preferable—then dig it out and reread. If it was still good to go after the requisite waiting period, then send it out. It's great advice, and I admit that I am closer to the waiting a week model, but I have caught so many errors, big and small, by taking a break and reading the piece fresh before submitting.

BL: *What are some journals and magazines—besides the big names—that are putting out great work these days?*

JG: As you know, there are so many, but I'll mention a few that have really impressed me lately. On the nonfiction side *The Normal School*, *Guernica*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Zone 3*, and *Consequence*. I love all of these, but be sure to check out what friend Steven Church and others are doing at *The Normal School*. On the fiction side *Ecotone*, *AGNI*, *The Literary Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *The Greensboro Review*. Thinking about these journals reminds me of how much fantastic literature is being produced in all of these places and many more. Certainly, well-known magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, and *Narrative* are bringing forth beauty into the world, but so are a myriad of other journals.

BL: *What have you been reading? Any recommendations?*

JG: I've been lucky to have recently finished some amazing books. Their collective power is still rattling around in my mind, all of them haunting in the very best ways. Here are a few to put at the top of your reading list: *The Man Who Came Out of a*

Door in the Mountain by Adrianne Harun, *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, *My Life as a Foreign Country* by Brian Turner, *The Animals* by Christian Kiefer, *Demon Camp* by Jen Percy

BL: *What's your next literary project?*

JG: I'm at work on my second novel, tentatively titled *Derrin of the North,* coming out with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2017.

JESSE GOOLSBY is an Air Force officer and the author of the novel *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). His fiction and essays have appeared widely, to include *Narrative Magazine, Epoch, The Literary Review, Salon, Alaska Quarterly Review, The Greensboro Review,* and *Redivider.* He is the recipient of the Richard Bausch Fiction Prize, the John Gardner Memorial Award in Fiction, and distinguished fellowships from Sewanee and the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences. He serves as nonfiction editor of *The Southeast Review.*

BRANDON LINGLE has served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Air Force public affairs officer. His writing appears in *The New York Times, The North American Review, Guernica, Zone 3, The Rumpus, Narrative Magazine, The Evergreen Review*, and elsewhere. His work has been noted twice in *The Best American Essays*.

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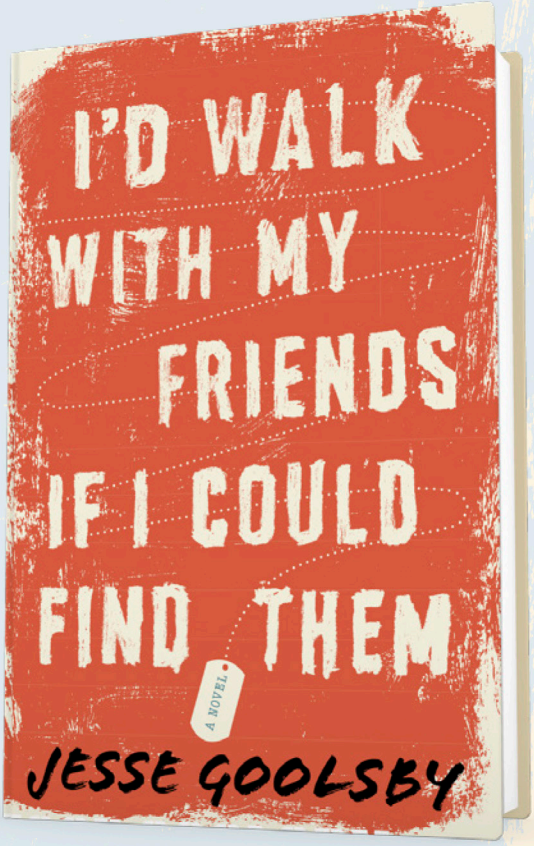
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author of *The Book of Duels*



U.S. Air Force officer Jesse Goolsby's fiction and essays have appeared in *Narrative*, the *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the Richard Bausch Short Story Prize, the John Gardner Memorial Prize in fiction, and other honors. Author photo © Ella Jane

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JESSE GOOLSBY

I'D WALK WITH MY FRIENDS IF I COULD FIND THEM

Be Polite but Have a Plan to Kill Everyone You Meet

Wintric Ellis, newly arrived, pushes his size 8 boot into the spongy ground and feels the subtle give of the earth run through the ball of his foot, up his leg, and settle in his camouflaged hip. *Green grass in Afghanistan,* he thinks, *water somewhere.* He smells damp soil and grass, unexpected but familiar — *Little League center field, Kristen in a California meadow* — and attempts to make this thick-bladed greenery stick alongside the everywhere, suck-you-dry desert he had imagined.

"Eyes open, everyone," Big Dax says.

Although Wintric knows today is a low-risk humanitarian mission, the words slide him back into his default, visceral nervousness: *Bombs, somewhere, everywhere.* Already he has been told that *roadside* means nothing in this country. Big Dax and Torres have shared stories with him — everything from far-afield livestock to massive diesel trucks igniting the barely buried hell, not to mention the bombs strapped to men, women, children, dogs. Bombs the size of tennis balls, soccer balls, tackling dummies. Under the rising sun Wintric replays the refrain repeated among his platoon for each of his eight days in country: *Don't go looking for a fair fight.*

Wintric watches the relaxed movements of the most experienced soldiers and he feels his body breathe. He pulls out his knife and crouches in the valley amid a mist of gnats. He plunges the blade into the soil and levers up a clump of grass. Silently

he rises and collects his first sample of war in a plastic bag that he fists into a cargo pocket.

Nearby a group of mangy goats bleat in a grove of white-blossomed almond trees, their shepherd talking with the interpreter. For the first time since Wintric arrived the wind doesn't howl, and he wonders if any kind of omen awaits in the warming air, but he pushes the thought from his mind when he can't think of a single positive forecast. *The size of tennis balls, soccer balls.* He breathes and rubs his eyes. The shepherd laughs and nods and moves his hand to the interpreter's shoulder, then hugs him.

"Ten minutes till the party starts," Big Dax says. "Going to be hot. Hydrate now."

Wintric observes the men start toward the small mountain of bottled water. Torres passes by and slaps his shoulder.

"Drink up."

Wintric isn't thirsty, but he keeps his mouth shut — when they say drink, he drinks. He straightens up, pats his cargo pocket, and steps and stops. He looks back at the straightening grass and watches the indentation of his boot print disappear.

Ten-thirty and the children and limbless adults are starting to arrive, and Wintric scans the group heading his way, wondering if he'll be the one ordered to pat them down before the inoculation and prosthetic limb giveaway. He pushes his index fingers into his temples, then removes his camouflage blouse and tosses it on the hood of the dusty Humvee. Big Dax and Torres have been decent enough to keep him out of trouble for his first week, but they outrank him, and each has only a few months left, so he knows he'll soon be the one palm-to-body with these incoming strangers.

Wintric studies his two superiors as they watch the arriving crowd. Big Dax towering and thick-shouldered, brick of a chin, dark, random freckles, scarred forearms, hands on his hips; Torres slim and handsome, black hair, sideburns, flat nose, outline of a mini-Bible in his pocket, hands interlocked on the top of his head.

"Ellis," Torres says, "check them. Old ones first."

Wintric nods and slowly walks over to the now settling group. The interpreter has his arms up, directing traffic, shouting at the dirty and quiet kids to stay in a single-file line along an outcropping of beige rocks. The adults are told to wait behind. On his short march over Wintric focuses on the adults, most missing a foot, a leg, or a portion of an arm. Light layers of clothing shield their bodies from the late-morning sun; various pant legs and shirtsleeves hang limp. He will have to touch all of these people.

Before Wintric begins the pat-downs, the interpreter says, "Don't touch ass, crotch. Easy with kids. No problems here. Medicine here."

"You know these people?" Wintric says.

"No."

"So you don't know shit."

Seventeen pat-downs later Wintric comes to a man who seems whole, tiny sweat streams around his eyes.

"Thank you," the man says before Wintric has touched him. Wintric glances back at the interpreter, who nods, then shakes his head.

"No problems here," he says.

"What's he doing here? He's not missing anything."

"No problems."

"Goddammit."

"Thank you," the man says.

"Yeah."

As with the others Wintric starts with the man's shoulders, pats down his arms to his wrists, up his sides, down from his clavicle, chest, to his belly, where Wintric feels something bulging, soft, ball-shaped. He pauses for a moment, and when the bomb vision arrives, he whirls around, head down, and sprints. In the slow-motion frenzy he hears the man yell something, sees his own arms reach out in front of him, and he knows he will die, right now, that the searing blast will take him from behind, open up his back and skull, liquefy his body. He is all heartbeat as he screams "Bomb!" takes two more strides, and dives to the ground.

Behind him the man has lifted his shirt up to his neck, baring his torso, pointing at a fleshy protrusion.

"Na!" the man yells. "Na!"

"No!" the interpreter says. "No. Please. Nothing. No. Only." He pauses. "Skin. How do you say it?"

Wintric lies face-down in the grass, eyes closed, body flexed. He hears *skin* and pushes himself up onto his elbows. Big Dax and Torres run toward him.

"Crazy cells," says the interpreter.

Wintric still hears his heart in his ears, and he squeezes his hands, then opens them. He cut his left hand during the dive and wipes the fine line of blood off on his pants. He stands, still dizzy, and peers back at the man, who cups the ball of flesh below his ribs. Wintric shakes his head and glances down at his palm, where fine dirt is mixed with coagulating blood.

"Goddamn," says Big Dax. "Deep breath, Ellis. Breathe."

Big Dax touches Wintric's arm and Wintric shakes him off.
From the side, children's laughter.
"Cancer," Torres says. "Could be cancer."
"Ah, yes," says the interpreter, nodding. "Cancer."

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