

A D A M G R A A F

Blackwater Bridge

The day after the celebration on the bridge,
Tahir follows the other schoolboys
to the spot where the Americans burned.

Black hollows pock the road near the entrance
and the air smells like spoiled lamb and sour chai.
They chase each other through skeletons

of desiccated vehicles and when one thinks he's found
a piece of a uniform, each boy rushes him to grab
at his tight fist or punch his arm before he runs away.

While the others push and fight over bullet casings,
Tahir tosses rocks at a bundle hanging
from a telephone wire. When he breaks the remnant free,

his cheers surprise the others, who race across the bridge
calling to Tahir. They stop to watch him rip loose red tethers
from a black chunk as long as their thighs. An older boy

dares him to fasten the charred object higher on the bridge.
Another bends to prod it with a stick, tapping bits
off its knotted end, exposing a layer of sheen.

It smells, he says, kicking it toward Tahir,
who turns it with his foot. *What is it?* another asks,
leaning in to dust it with a handful of sand.

They quiet, each waiting for the other's answer.
It's just a branch, Tahir says, grinding it with his heel.
When he lifts the limb, he's startled by the weight.

Just before throwing it, Tahir thinks
of Eid al-Adha, helping his father hold the lamb,
the slaughter, the spirit a dead thing still owns.

ADAM GRAAF served nine years in the Army Reserve, deploying once to Kuwait/Iraq in 2003-2004. He is an MFA candidate at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and is an active member of the Warrior Writers Boston chapter. In 2013, Adam won the New England Poetry Club's John Holmes Award. He resides with his wife in Brighton, Massachusetts.