

PATRICK MONDACA

Allawi

ALLAWI, ALLAWI, ALLAWI... I HEAR IT STILL, cutting across the din of the market. It is a place of employment maybe. Or worship. Or school. I wonder what or where Allawi is. Or who. Allawi is lost perhaps. Or missing. I say a quick prayer for Allawi, whatever it may be. In Baghdad, Allawi might be anything. I have no idea. Allawi might be my sanity.

It doesn't take much for me to be back there. Even now, fourteen years later. Every crowd or traffic jam, every shopping mall or bus stop, every queue at any place at any time, I am reminded of it, the market. When people talk about war, when I hear veterans talking about their wars, and I think about my war, I think about that market. I think about Allawi. It is the place I dream of. The place of nightmares.

The street through the market is so hot it scorches the soles of our cheap Army issued boots. So hot, the discarded innards from the sheep carcasses steam off the pavement and the stench of it hangs in the air, putrid and alkaline, clinging to our nostrils long into the night. The old men and boys tasked with the slaughtering draw their knives across the throats of doomed, wide-eyed beasts, glimpses of silver from flimsy blades glinting in the sun; slick red blood dripping raw from their hands and between their fingers, clotting and bubbling around their plastic Chinese sandals and fake Adidas trainers. The dull black of our machine guns and rifles and shotguns and pistols is a thin wall around us, its mortar our bristling ammunition belts and columns of green and orange tipped rounds pressed into grey magazines and olive-drab pods, shells of Remington buckshot rattle loose in our pockets like handfuls of small stones. We pull the stocks tight into our shoulders, clinging to them like lovers; hard butts of rubber and plastic, grafted with dark steel and smelling of gun oil and cordite. Forged in America, and Germany, and Italy, comforting and horrifying, nylon slings wrapped around clenched fists like prayer beads, nerves and trigger springs together coiled tight, eyes unflinching for fear of blinking.

In the market outside Baghdad International Airport, I stared dully through the cracked, mud-streaked windshield of a banged-up Humvee. Weary but still alert, my eyes absorbed the empty, trash-strewn street. I was tired of it. Every goddamned day, patrolling this godforsaken market, sunup to

sundown. Keep the convoys moving through. Push the crowds back. Back. Further back. Keep the roadway clear, at least two lanes worth of real estate. An endless and futile effort, like sweeping sand off a beach. I thought of the beaches back home. Low tide, high tide; but here the beach was just a dusty street and here the waves were human. Waves of people spilling and tumbling over each other; a demented desperate sea of people, the worst kind, the kind that would surely try to drown you in their wake given the chance, pulling you under, clawing at your straps and body armor and rigging. *Mister, mister, give me dollar.* Pushing and begging. *Chai, mister? You need chai?* Fighting and trampling and grasping over each other. I sipped tepid black coffee from an aluminum canteen cup.

I did not dislike this time of day. I had time enough to ponder but, not too much time, not enough to get all nostalgic. Early mornings were almost peaceful. Before the thud of the Blackhawks and Apaches would return overhead and the groans of the Bradley fighting vehicles and Abrams tanks would reverberate through the streets, the market slept. Before the sun would rise over the remnants of the date palm groves along the airport road, when the first rays of light would begin flickering through the charred leviathans, the sparse survivors with trunks scarred and blackened, all was quiet. While the dew still lingered on the aluminum skins of the parked Toyota mini buses, the multi-colored taxis, and ancient Mercedes-Benz lorries, the market was at peace.

It never lasted long. The wailings of the muezzins' prayers would soon echo through the labyrinth of empty stalls, waking man and beast now asleep under flimsy metal card tables and wooden carts soon to be weighed down with the precarious livelihoods of so many. A robbery or a murder, a light till or an errant bomb, entire families could be ruined in an instant. How anyone could sleep in this city was beyond me. Though some could not and were already awake. A doctor, now compelled to sell parts stripped from a prized BMW. A widow, once whole, now compelled to sell parts of herself. They stood like statues of ancient lives long past, silent, hoping, and ashamed of what they had mustered up the courage to do. Between desperation and survival, there is a distinct absence of dignity. And I was ashamed to bear witness to this.

In moments like these I hated the market and wanted to not be there at all. I hated it with the same force that I loved the sheer defiance of me being there. I *had* to be there. So, I would be there. Because the Army said I would be, mostly. It's too hot to care really. The mind wanders.

Allawi, Allawi, Allawi... I dream Allawi is in the turret, hunched over the stock of a short-barreled machine gun, eyes scanning the roofs of the sand colored buildings on our periphery. Sporadic shots fired at the patrol ahead of ours and the longer sustained bursts of return fire from the tanker scout ahead of us interrupt the relative afternoon calm.

Allawi kicks the back of the driver's seat and shouts down for the driver to step on the gas. *Move, move, move! Get this fucker moving! Don't get stuck in the kill zone!* And the driver floors it, the truck lurching forward towards the gunfire through the traffic. Smoke billows from a vehicle that has been hit by an explosive device and disabled in the intersection ahead, flames belching from its blackened underbelly as its fuel ignites and the thin fiberglass and canvass skin begins to melt and peel. Covering fire, the only rounds we ever fired in Iraq were covering fire. Allawi fired them really. Allawi is my guardian angel maybe. Allawi is the angel of death.

Allawi says that the next morning you will wake as if that is the first day you have been on the earth – to savor the crisp cool morning air, the warmth of the sun on your face, the smell of the charcoal and meat from the kebab stands, the grit of dust in your teeth, the sounds of the bus drivers calling their fares, the voices and feet of little school children contrasting with the rumble of tanks and the vibration of helicopters above them, the taste of cordite and hot gun oil left on your lips after the firing of a machine gun– there is no greater feeling than the realization that one is still alive. Allawi sees this he says. Allawi says I'm seeing things.

Mostly I see the market from the rear right seat of our unarmored fiberglass-skinned truck. As the day wore on, I would blink the sleep out of my eyes and light another knockoff Marlboro, inhaling its dry, chemical smoke. When I exhaled, I'd aim the blue tinged cloud up at the turret hatch, partly out of boredom, mostly to annoy my gunner, partly to see if the kid was awake. He throws an empty Pepsi can back down at me in response, no words needed. And we would listen for the sounds of the market stirring. The yelps of a startled dog, a restless donkey's bray, a rooster crowing, a small child crying on a distant rooftop, these were the earliest sounds, small reminders of humanity around us. We would listen for the sound of the radio, for the lieutenant to give the order, breathe in the smell of burning garbage, its acrid wafts drifting lazily upwards in the early morning humidity, and of unwashed bodies and sweat-soaked gear, of days on end worn uniforms, stale cigarettes, and half-eaten rations languishing in tattered plastic olive-drab packets.

Soon the smell of charcoal would be in the air from the small fires lit by the tea sellers to boil water in copper pots. The smell of lamb kebabs and chickens roasting on spits would hit the air only to be overwhelmed by the smells of mechanized transport, of petrol and diesel, of burning radiator coolant and hot engine oil and overheated rotors and brake pads. The smell of fear, too, would be in the air. And too soon, after another hot, restless night, it would be time for me to go back into the market, again to this strange waltz in the sun. Soon Baghdad would awake completely, its merchants

and residents intermingling amongst the stalls and tables, amongst the decrepit plastic chairs and dusty piles of bricks, the rickety horse carts, shells of bombed out cars, and bent frames of rusted bicycles and battered motorcycles. One step forward, two steps back; the market would expand like a tempest, intent on surging forward, on swallowing the roadway running through its center, swelling the sea onto a shallow beach, drowning, consuming, devouring, and killing us, erasing our very existence.

“Are you awake, Sergeant?” the private asks from above. We are waiting by the roundabout for the crackle of the radio, for the cursed transmission that sends us back in. We are in a nightmare, the one where the room grows smaller and smaller until it we are crushed to death. We are at the bottom of a newly dug grave and wait for the earth to rain down on our faces. The market wants to swallow us alive; every cell and organism within it rebels against our presence there. The market wants only to consume and expel us. We are in its center, foreign, intrusive. We are a cancer, a gaping raw wound the market wants only to close. And beneath the noise of commerce, the market buzzes its hatred of us like a nest of provoked and angry wasps.

I check the lanyard on my pistol one last time, flick the safety off, black to red. I rack a slug into my shotgun. Then I step out of the truck and into the market. Toward the cries of *Allawi, Allawi, Allawi...* Always, always *Allawi*.

Patrick Mondaca served in Baghdad, Iraq with the U.S. Army in 2003. He holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Fairleigh Dickinson University, and his work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *USA Today*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. He lives in Montclair, New Jersey.