

Four Poems

Eric Janken

Anniversary

*A sandbag was put over their heads
while it was soaked in hot sauce. Okay, that's bad
but these guys have info, we are trying to get them to talk,
that's all, we don't do this to all prisoners,
just the few we have which is about 30-40 not many—*

Letter from Abu Ghraib

At five am, on the tenth anniversary
of Abu Ghraib, I pretend not to hear
Dad hack phlegm into toilet paper,
too ashamed to leave evidence in the sink.
Deep gags ricochet up the stairs.
He'll cough 'til his gut cramps,
collapse on his La-Z-Boy, and wait

for the *News & Observer*,
which will not mention Private Lynndie
England's naked Iraqi tower, bare asses
blurred in leaked photos. American decency
standards intact. For an entire spring,

her official portrait blared on the TV.

Sullen cheeks, child-like lips.

My friends marveled how a churlish

Kentucky waif could muster the balls

to force a man to jerk off.

We agreed she had to be a lesbian.

I still remember those pictures.

Some trickled through my father's

ensorship. Ali Shallal al-Qaisi hooded

and barefoot. Specialist Sabrina Harman

grinning over a body-bagged corpse.

Too cute to be thrown in a San Diego brig.

Others were whispered about like confiscated

Playboys. "Light fixtures shoved up their asses.

Freaks." Congress said German Shepherds

mauled Baathists, while I wondered

in a middle school classroom why Saddam's

boys obsessed over showers.

Lunch at the Confederate Memorial

*The present generation scarcely takes note
of what the Confederate soldier meant
to the welfare of the Anglo Saxon race
during the four years immediately succeeding
the war.*

—Julian Shakespeare Carr, dedication speech, 1913

Near poplars, Charlie and I unlaced
our steel-toed boots, and slid fried
bologna out of greased wax paper,
guarded by the bronzed boy-soldier
in butternut. Rifle aimed north, quietly
turning green. From steps bruised by shade,
we'd watch girls in fluttering sundresses.

Our crew primed walls, emptying
the supply of aerosol cans.
For a year, freshmen fought caulk
and cinderblock, names carved
in the dressers. Bossman forgot masks,
so we lurched out the dorms breathless,
cursing OSHA. *Never want that damn
eggshell white again. I'd take piss yellow*

or mud brown, I said, reclined on the marble's
blunted edges.

You know he ain't gonna fire til a virgin

walks by, Charlie mumbled, as three

AKA sisters coordinated in salmon

hurried towards the English building.

He peeled half-dried paint off his arms.

Rolled between the thumb and index finger,

it felt like lotioned skin.

Before the Air Raid

London

Because Henri thought Django Reinhardt's
swing vulgar, I insisted on a Segovia
minuet to guide candle-lit baking
after we unfurled the black curtains.

I loved the unsalted dough sheathing
my fingers. Stiffened wheat and water
felt like new muscle. Henri could not see
the flour-streak across my neck or the spilled
patis on the floor. *Dance, Simone?*

He scraped starter off my palms with a knife-
spine, whittling around our wedding band.

You'll smell like yeast and our socks will dirty,

I said. Trying not to kick the cat, we twirled
around the table, and tripped over a chair.

You idiot. I dusted his forehead with cornmeal
before kneading again. Henri swept the floor.

We sat by the covered bay windows, an unopened
card deck between us. Spanish guitar silenced
after the first rising. Unwilling to glance
at the wool fabric, lest it provoke sirens.

Unsent Letter from Andersonville

June 18, 1864

humid and thundering

Dear Father,

From my straw pallet, the bell-tongue
cajoles, *Come, come, come*,
when Captain Wirz yanks the hemp rope.
Yet I will not let Christ the bridegroom,
ever patient, to lift my body,
(porous teeth, with a heron's hollowed
bones) up to the marriage bed.
He will not anoint me with fetid mud
from Stockade Creek.

I pray the Raiders won't snarl
at my festered limbs curled
around corn-mush. I have no jewelry
left to steal. Mother's pendant
was traded for chicken bones.
If the traitors find me face down,
unable to smell their wet tobacco,
let their clubs crush me.

Let the sweet sap tattoo my skin,
so it may regain color.

Do not let them roll me, veiled
in burlap, into a pit where sand
will file my teeth. Let me burn.

I will somersault in the summer sun,
not where cholera slithers,
but near cicadas purring
in drowned summer cabbage.

Your son, Thomas

Eric Janken's work has been featured in *Shenandoah*, *Southern Cultures*, *Regarding Arts & Letters*, *Aethlon: Journal of Sport Literature*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. Janken is a graduate of Appalachian State University, where he was the 2014 recipient of the Truman Capote Literary Trust Award in Creative Writing.