New Essay from Jerad W. Alexander: An Exchange of Fire

I don’t know your name, but we tried to kill each other once.

Do you remember it? It happened on November 5, 2005, on the second day of our big weeklong offensive in Husaybah, Iraq—a dense square of markets, mosques, and homes tucked into the corner where the Euphrates River meets the Syrian border. Nearly 2,000 U.S. Marines, me among them, had stormed into Husaybah before sunrise the previous morning. We had attacked across the trash-hewn desert west of town with our eyes coated with the green electric glow of our night vision goggles. We quickly smashed into the first row of homes and shoved our rifle barrels into the faces of the sleepy men who opened the doors and blew apart the locked doors of homes that had been abandoned. Children startled awake by our voices and our boots shrieked against their mothers in terror. I remember that.

Husaybah had been a violent place for us then. Plenty of our Marines had died there before we came, and our leaders wanted Husaybah mollified once and for all, and so we searched through your homes, sifted through your cupboards and closets, through your unmentionable things with the anger of a raw nerve. We looked for anything that tied the houses and people living inside them to Al Qaeda-in-Iraq forces, or ‘AQI’—just another letter set in the endless greasy sop of military acronyms.

On my second afternoon in Husaybah I stood on a roof and gazed out over the geometric madness of buildings that surrounded me. It was cloudy. Parts of the city crackled with rifle fire. You appeared around a corner of a wall that defined the small compound of a house the same way chain link fences surround

our yards. I liked the walled compounds for their dominance and privacy—like fortresses. Gray metal fences are just ugly and noisy. Walls can last forever. You appeared from behind it wearing a dirty gray sweat shirt and pants, like the track suits worn by fat New Jersey mobsters. You already had the launcher on your shoulder. It was made out of white PVC pipe with a cheap wooden handgrip and a battery switch bound with electrical tape. We always laughed at them whenever we captured one. Compared to our shoulder-mounted anti-tank rockets, our wire-guided missiles, and our heat seekers, your homemade bazookas were shoddy and infantile, completely weightless against our intractable technology and sophistication. But we knew they could kill, and if we had found you before you fired it, or just simply found you carrying it, building it, handing it to someone else, or even burying it in your cousin's backyard in a rage of benevolent rebellion against all war, we would have blown your body to pieces with high explosives that have been tested and refined and improved since the First World War. We would have scattered your atoms in a wide plume with a professional calculus learned and taught and relearned in the way of tradesmen, which is what the American military was and still is today: a profession of arms, trained to execute the final thousand meters of American foreign policy, which in this case was to kill you. We're good at it. American troops train for battle like athletes and our officers study war like scholars. To us you are dilettantes, a junior varsity team. Many still feel this way.

Yet given all this you pivoted around a corner in a dirty sweat suit and aimed your homemade rocket launcher at my friends and me. As I sit here now I think about the resolve it must have taken to do that, to build this cheap weapon and aim it with the hope and faith against the best weapons in the world created by some of the richest nations in history. Surely you must've felt it when you wheeled around corner. Yet it didn't seem to matter to you, did it? Was it God or money

or hatred or maybe just boredom? You are an Arab man. An Iraqi man. A Sunni man, no doubt. Faith has driven plenty to violence. But so have debt, hunger, oppression, and just blind hatred. Did you shoot at me for those things? Can I blame you? There are many Americans, more Americans than I'm comfortable with, who stock their homes with firearms and talk as if an invasion is a real possibility, be it from some outsider or from their own government. But there is little chance of invasion for us. I am from a country that will likely wither and die by its own self-destruction.

But that wasn't a luxury for you, was it? We were in your country uninvited. You turned from behind a corner to see a real invader. What did we look like to you? I imagine we looked like armored toadstools perched on your roofs with our black weapons held at our chests. I saw you. I saw your eyes. They were wide and filled with terror. Did our sight scare you? Your face was haggard, your hair and beard short and ragged. You looked like you were in your late twenties, perhaps older. It's hard to say. I only saw you for a few seconds, but looking back and remembering . . . Yes, I'm certain you were maybe twenty-eight, thirty at the latest. You were older than me. I was twenty-five then. Thoughtful, but brash. I could almost hear you chanting your battle cry—*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*—over and over and over again, begging your God for victory or maybe just to spare your life, your breaths short and fast as you quickly aimed and fired. Were your palms wet? When the circuit closed on your launcher your body was surrounded with a wispy cloud. I heard the rocket motor fire. A Marine near me yelled "RPG!"

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Surely you remember the Persian Gulf War. How could you not? I was ten years old. My stepdad was in the U.S. Air Force then. He was sent to the Emirates to fix the American fighter jets we deployed after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. I was in fifth grade then. As I turned and walked up a broad snowy path

between a set of houses on my way home from school a cold afternoon in January, I noticed my friend Chris trudging through the deep snow toward me.

“Come on, dude. Something’s going on,” he said. “I think it’s started!”

We waded through the snow and plopped cross-legged in front of the television in his living room. We watched titillated as the special news reports showed grainy night-vision video of your anti-aircraft tracers arching toward our fighter jets high above your capital city. Whenever the screen erupted with the white flash of an exploding bomb we cheered because we knew we had killed some of you. There was nothing gory about it. We didn’t see your blood or your body parts. It was clinical and precise. Even later, when we began to see the fuzzy bomb camera footage aired on the nightly news as 1,000 pound bombs crashed into bridges and factories and aircraft revetments, we saw the thermal signatures of your people—maybe your soldiers, maybe not, but all unlucky unlike us—become engulfed in the smoke and fire of our long-learned ability to destroy the human body.

Soon your whole army fell apart in front of us. When our tanks and armored vehicles crossed the border, you surrendered to us by the thousands, trudging across the desert half-dazed with your hands above your heads, flapping coalition leaflets imploring you to surrender. When you did fight us, it was almost cartoonish. Stories came back to us from the desert, or “The Sandbox” as we called it, of the shells from our main battle tanks punching through two and three of your tanks with a single shot and of bulldozers burying your troops alive right in their trenches. Just over 1,000 of our troops were killed or wounded fighting your country. To die as an American in the Persian Gulf War quickly became the unlucky punchline of a sad joke. We were so good at killing you that within four days of launching the ground offensive we annihilated an estimated 20,000 of you like we annihilate anthills in our

backyards or roaches in our cupboards.

Our whole country felt as if we had returned to the heady day's right after World War II, when America basked in the destruction of two of the ugliest regimes in the history of the planet. We used your body to eradicate the ghosts of our mindless destruction in Vietnam. We felt as if we had returned to glory, that a curse had been broken. Our money had killed the Soviet Union. Our bombs had killed your fellow Iraqis. Our army was confirmed best in the world. We were Americans, natives from the "city upon the hill," citizens of God's Country. We sang Lee Greenwood songs at school recitals. Your destruction was our absolution. We felt invincible.

Americans rarely seem to make the connection, but the two wars—the one our fathers fought in and the war where you and I finally meet—are really all part of one big war, at least in a spiritual sense. Our victory over the forces of your dictator gave us carte blanche to press our moralistic notion of empire upon your people through the use of our bolstered military confidence. Because of your indomitable dictator, coupled with a strain of American Exceptionalism, we despised you all collectively. After your generals surrendered at Safwan in March of 1991 we restricted your airspace and suffocated you with the boot heel of economic sanctions. We dangled food before your face in exchange for your precious oil. Sometimes Saddam Hussein took it. Other times he did not.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 had nothing to do with your dictator, and certainly not your country, but I can't help but think that many of your citizens saw the smoke and ash of the fallen World Trade Center, the cavity drilled into the side of the Pentagon, and the detritus of Flight 93 scattered across a field in Pennsylvania and realized with a quiet dread that your country, as proxy for your dictator, would inevitably be called to stand tall and answer for crimes real or imagined. If you didn't, the subsequent rumblings and fist poundings from our punditry would have certainly signaled

our brutal intentions. Americans wanted blood for the death of our citizens, and in many ways it was a completely justifiable desire. Our people were killed because of religious extremism, by Bronze Age clerics and zealots who failed to understand the concept of free will, and who harbored just as much sanctimonious moral superiority as the Western governments they claimed to loathe and sought to punish. You had nothing to do with it, but we came and made our demands anyway, and then we dropped more bombs.

I was a Marine by then. In late March of 2003 I watched our "Shock and Awe" air campaign smash Baghdad into rubble on CNN. I watched fire and high explosives rubble the skyscrapers of your capital with clarity of a dumb Michael Bay action flick. None of that grainy bomb camera footage that marked the opening moves in 1991. This was the modern era of the mass media spectacle. The scene felt like a cheap gratuitous facsimile of the first time, like a movie sequel that tried cover up a cheap plot with high-powered special effects.

Our leaders paraded themselves on television like conquering warlords before our troops had even crossed the border from Kuwait, counting the gold their hordes hadn't even pillaged yet. We never discussed your plight or what you may have wanted for your own futures. You were never even considered. We just shrugged it off. We told the world we were coming to rescue you from the clutches of an evil dictator and that we would be greeted as liberators. It was only by sheer luck that the results of our hubris briefly matched your exuberate expressions of freedom when your fellow Iraqis beat on the statue of Saddam in Firdos Square with fists and the dusty soles of their shoes. But that exuberance didn't last, did it? That same dumb hubris prompted a U.S. State Department toad named Paul Bremer to fire your entire defense industry, a move which put hundreds of thousands of trained Iraqi security personnel—men who wanted to rebuild your country, perhaps even you—right out of work and single-handedly created an

insurgency (up to and including ISIS) that locked us into a quagmire for the rest of the decade. A hubris that killed and wounded so many of us and exacted a still-untold cost on you. It was the same hubris that put you and me at odds with each other.

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And so here we are, back to the moment you closed the circuit on your homemade rocket launcher and tried to kill me. I might say you were brainwashed by psychopaths who arrived in the chaos of our occupation and who used the intellectual shackles of religion to make you a willing participant in my death. There is also the hard possibility these same psychopaths dangled a few hundred American dollars before your impoverished eyes, or maybe just pressed the hot blade of threats against the lives of your family in order to accomplish their bidding, which in this case was to kill Americans with a rocket propelled grenade.

Before I could seek cover behind the wall that surrounded the roof, your rocket exploded with a sharp crack against a building nearby. My veins were flooded with adrenaline and terror. My eyes had widened and my mouth drooped slightly. The sound reverberated across the madness of Husaybah for a number of seconds before it blended into the chatter of distant firefights. My joints felt stiff. I breathed slowly and began to unravel a knot of fear in my gut.

None of the others said much of anything. I suspect we were all ingesting just how lucky we had been. Had you raised the tube a few more inches your rocket might have carved a path right to the wall that surrounded the roof we commandeered, right to where we stood, and exploded with the same flash, spraying hot slivers of metal that might have pierced our bodies and punched frothy little holes into our livers and lungs. The sudden overpressure under our Kevlar helmets might have burst our eardrums and detuned our synapses. You might

have killed us. But you were nervous and afraid, so you didn't.

You appeared again a few seconds later. I saw you in a gap between two buildings as you ran. I knew immediately it was you who had fired the rocket because you looked back over your shoulder at us with wide eyes and a face that seemed to me as if grayed by terror. The emotions that arose in me in a millisecond I can only really describe as a crossbreed of disgust and atavistic rage, backed by the same glaze of self-righteousness that put us in your country to begin with. I was a member of the most skilled military on the face of the planet with the largest reach of any dominion since the British Empire. You were a terrorist from a broken nation. I raised my rifle.

Though it happened too fast to do so then, as I brought my rifle to my shoulder I could trace a trajectory of wanton caveman stupidity from your body to my barrel, through my rifle, and into my shoulder and beyond, all as a dark timeline of American foreign policy misadventures and the stone-crushing hubris of empire that created them. I could trace a hard red line back to the elected officials—thereby including many of us—who had read just enough glorified history to think America was somehow anointed with the right to interfere and manipulate the fates of other nations, as if your wishes, hopes, and aspirations for the future of your country seemed to be of little worth if they didn't match our own. I can't help but believe that to be true. We found nothing in your country. No weapons of mass destruction. No nuclear program. No terrorists but for those we ultimately brought with us, in part because of opportunistic religious thuggery, but also because of our ham-fisted American bombasticism.

For many years after 9/11, the United States, in many ways, became Captain Ahab from Moby Dick, chasing the White Whale of our national security through the "War on Terror" to all corners of the world. Like Ahab, we're a nation with a wounded

soul. A whole subset of our population refuses to allow itself to heal. Many of our people gnash their teeth with blood-thirsty indignation and rage, shaking their fists at lands they've never seen or even understand. Every anniversary of 9/11, we beat against our sores with old reels of doom and loss. Civic leaders, campaigning politicians, and even sitting statespersons routinely trumpet the call to arms with the fear of your hordes running through our streets with zealotry in your heart and a bomb strapped to your chest. They bang their gavels and shovel money and citizenry into the black maw of war to kill you, hoping that one more body—more than 200,000 civilian casualties in Iraq, so far—will pack that festering wound and finally bring peace. They do this in spite of the understanding that coming into your country was just a few short semantics away from being an outright war crime. But every time we lash out with drones, precision bombers, and surveillance measures the thin vindication that follows clouds a realization that every single bomb we drop, every bullet we fire, and every person we kill in the name of security only chips away at our overall safety. We will simply never be able to kill enough to bring about peace. But we'll certainly try.

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And so, with my rifle in my shoulder, I fired three shots.

My bullets struck out with the same thick vitriol that left my mouth when I saw you running away. I don't remember what I said, but it was undoubtedly profane. My eyes were wide and white with controlled, but crystalline rage. The brass shell casings jingled against the concrete roof and settled. I clicked the rifle safety and let it rest against my body armor. I lit a cigarette. All that bile settled inside me and my heart rate slowed. The rage and indignation was suddenly replaced by a hollow sense of futility.

What am I doing on this roof with a rifle trying to kill you? I wondered. The thought left as quickly as it came; there was

no sense in asking. But the hollowness remained and later grew, fueled with similar experiences. For many years after there was a small part of me that grew angry when I thought about you trying to kill me with a rocket propelled grenade. RPG's are serious business, and you tried to kill me and my friends with one. Over the next few years I would think about you with the same self-righteousness that carried us to your country. Slowly, though, after I put away my rifle and left the service, the self-righteousness morphed into emotionlessness, then finally retrospection.

Regardless of my feelings, I've always wondered if you are still alive, and I have to recognize the odds are not in your favor. If we did not kill you before we left Iraq in 2011, then perhaps you died in Syria. Or maybe you were forced into ISIS—the monster that filled the vacuum once we finally left—and the threadbare Iraqi military cut you down, or perhaps we finished what we started and bombed you with our own airpower in our campaigning. Maybe you were killed by Kurds, or by pro-Syrian forces, or Syrian rebels, or perhaps by Russians. Or maybe you're still out there, lost to the blinding winds of the Forever War, trapped by the flippant whimsy of our commitments.

I'll understand if you don't wish to hear any of this. Many things I write here are for you; some of them are for me. I cannot expect either of us to forgive the other for our intentions, nor can we reasonably ask for it. We intended to kill each other for reasons that were both out of our control.

Sometimes I daydream that perhaps the same futility that flooded me after I shot at you also filled your veins, and that you fled the war. I like to think you have a family, maybe a business, and you're living in peace somewhere. Sometimes I wonder if there is ever a chance when you and I might walk through Husaybah and marvel at the stupidity of our insignificant little battlefield. I wonder if one day I will be able to talk with you, to explain to you how the world I

lived in brought me to the world you lived in to destroy your life and finish ruining the lives of those who might have loved you. I want to explain to you what it looked like to see you in your town as I stood on its rooftops with the weight of an empire pressing me toward you. I want to show you the world we lived in when I came with my friends to kill you and others in the name of security for my people. We call it freedom and liberty, but what we really mean is security. I want to show you all the neuroses that fueled the tanks we sent rumbling across your streets and sent high explosives blasting into your home and the homes of thousands of others, neuroses that loaded the bombs onto our jets and dropped them from the clouds and turned to rubble the bones of so many of those you may have known. I want to show you how afraid of the world we had become and in many ways still are today. I want to show you the worth of all the tin gold trying to kill you has earned me, has earned us all. Unfortunately, that will have to wait; I'm still trying to tally its value.

But all these thoughts are nonsense and so I cashier them, yet I know they'll return at bored moments while I am driving to work on a cloudy Tuesday morning. They'll show up when I'm jogging, reading a book that I've grown bored with, or walking home from a bad date. But no matter how often I think of these things, whenever I think about those three bullets I shot at you and the fear and rage and blinding national stupidity that fueled them I'm always glad about one thing:

I'm glad I missed.

In war, it is not difficult to illuminate the darkness. Understanding is harder to come by. Photo by Jerad Alexander

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Mr. Tolkien’s War: A Review of Peter Jackson’s ‘They Shall Not Grow Old,’ by Rob Bokkon

Anyone who knows me at all well can tell you that I don’t really have a personality, per se: what I have instead is a gigantic amalgamation of obsessions. Fandoms. Things like the life and work of Prince Rogers Nelson. Hungarian cuisine. The history of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. The films of Peter Jackson. The Great War.

So, obviously, when word came through that those last two

things were colliding, in the form of a documentary commissioned by the Imperial War Museums, I was nearly beside myself. If anyone could capture the horror and the bravery of the Great War, it's the guy who gave us the Pellenor Fields and the Battle of Five Armies on the big screen. I counted the days until the release date. I jabbered about it to all three people I know who love WWI as much as I do. I was, to put it mildly, stoked.

Which remained my default state right up until I sat down in the theater to absorb what I truly hoped would be a modern masterpiece. The truth, as always, was rather more complicated.

The version we saw was bookended by both an introduction, and making-of featurette, from Mr Jackson himself. It is my current understanding that the greater theatrical release of the film will not include these, which is a pity, as the film loses much of its impact when one is unaware of the sheer labor of love involved in the restoration of the old footage. And, of course, consider yourselves warned that SPOILERS ABOUND, both for the film and for the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The theater was almost three-quarters full, which surprised us; the crowd was fairly diverse, but included a high proportion of fit middle-aged guys in outdoor-pursuits gear, who by their conversation seemed mostly to be veterans. We live in a university town, so the history dorks (us) were also well-represented. The former dean of the college of arts and letters was there. Enthusiasm was high.

And then we fucking sat there for thirty solid minutes. Not thirty minutes of previews, mind you, but some "edutainment" compiled by Fathom Features that consisted of an "interactive" quiz, six multiple-choice questions about the Great War—"Did the Great War take place in A: 1914-1918, B: 1861-1865, C: Never, D: Last Week" and "Was Baron Von Richtoven, aka the 'Red Baron', a A: toilet cleaner in Bournemouth, B: your mom,

C: a famous WWI flying ace with 80 confirmed kills or D: the inventor of owls?”—designed for people who have never heard of the Great War.

But when the film finally began, and the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed.

Because this movie is *stunning*.

It begins and ends with images of the war with which we are familiar, in shades of silver and black and white, complete with the sound effect of an antique projector. The voice-overs are the voices of old men, disconnected from their source, joined to past time and image only by association. Jackson’s decision to jettison traditional narration in favor of archival recordings from Great War veterans is meant to grant immediacy to the film by immersing the viewer in direct experience rather than received history.

The question that must be asked is, “Does this work?” And the answer is, yes and no. While my socialist soul champions the decision to represent the War exclusively from the perspective of the people who actually fought the damn thing, the narrative feels tailored nonetheless. Blame it perhaps on the source material, as the archival audio was taken from something like 600 hours of interviews done in the ‘50s and ‘60s by the Imperial War Museums, who clearly have their own version of the War they wish to promote. A version of the war where the sun still has not set on the British Empire, George V regards us all favorably from the wall of every post office, the tea is hot and everyone knows their place.

Still from Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old.'

There are moments—a few—in the voice-overs where a note of fatalism or horror or even protest will arise. Mild moments, expressed with little fervor, which seem to be included only to evoke veracity. At the end, we get a series of voices reminding us that war is useless, pointless, a waste. A series of voices that feels tacked-on, as though we as an audience of modern sensibilities expect to hear this condemnation. Overall, throughout the film we hear the stories of Tommies who were happy to be there, who'd "go over again," who missed it when they left, who saw it as "a job of work that had to be done." Is this the overarching experience of the average British soldier in the war?

My reading has told me otherwise. Robert Graves' *Good-Bye to All That* certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Siegfried Sassoon would undoubtedly curl his lovely aristocratic lip at the very notion. Is it worthwhile to hear these voices, these stories? Absolutely. Is it honest? This I cannot answer, but I have doubts.

But never mind that. You'll forget all your criticism, all

your doubt, if just for a moment, when that color footage hits the screen.

Jackson has always directed with a cinematographer's eye, and this film is no exception. The first few shots of Tommies arriving in France, clad in khaki (a very authentic shade of khaki, as it turns out; Jackson spent weeks getting the color exactly right from uniforms *in his private collection*, since Peter Jackson is the world's biggest World War I geek), baring their very British smiles for the camera: these are enough to make you forget that this footage ever existed in another form. The color used is not the bright and hyper-real shading of a modern film. The tones are very much those of a color photograph from 1914, which just serves to make the images seem more immediate and real.

The soundtrack at this point becomes a thing of pure artifice, but what artifice—Jackson's otaku devotion to detail has never been showcased to greater effect. As revealed in the making-of featurette at the end, lip-readers were employed to pore over the footage and to reconstruct all possible dialogue. Then, by identifying uniforms or cap-badges, Jackson was able to place the regiments, and based on their origins (Royal Welch, Lancashire, &c.) actually found actors from the appropriate locales and hired them to do the voice-overs. Further, every boot hitting the mud, every rustle of a rucksack, every clank of a helmet being thrown to the ground is there.

My jaw stayed on the floor for a long while. It is beautiful, there's no denying that. It is a labor of love. And in true Peter Jackson style, the camaraderie of camp life, the minor inconveniences and sanitary arrangements, or rather the lack thereof, the cheerful bitching about the cheap beer and wretched cigarettes lasts only a little while, to be replaced by the screaming terror of battle and its stomach-turning consequences. Jackson has never pulled his punches when it comes to revolting images (if you've ever seen Dead Alive or Meet the Feebles you'll know what I'm talking about) and this

film is no exception. Popcorn went untouched when the images of trench foot, bloated corpses, maggots and rats swarm across the screen.

And yet, it is here that the film reaches its greatest artistic heights. Again and again I was reminded of the works of Otto Dix. For those who don't know him, Dix was an enthusiastic volunteer for the German army in 1914, whose drawings from the front remain a poignant and disturbing testament to the aesthetic impact of conflict. His true fame came during Weimar Berlin, which earned him the enmity of the Nazis, who denounced him as a "degenerate artist."

In *They Shall Not Grow Old,* a shot of a disemboweled cavalry horse strongly recalled Dix's *Horse Cadaver,* the animal's ruined body a testament to the service of all the animals who aided in the war effort.

Otto Dix, “Horse Cadaver from the War.”

Many times Jackson shows bodies dangling, untended and ignored, from barbed wire, akin to those from the *War Triptych* or the obviously named but no less striking *Corpse on Barbed Wire*.

Otto Dix, “Near Langemarck (February 1918).”

Otto Dix, “Corpse on Barbed Wire.”

A group of Tommies, exhausted, huddled together in their trench, are positioned almost exactly like Dix’s *Resting Company,* the only difference their uniforms. The parallels were too obvious to ignore; Jackson, in his years of searching through the footage provided by the War Museums, had clearly

searched for and found footage that matched the works of Dix. Otto Dix, perhaps more than any other artist, truly captured the soul-killing dread and visceral, bleak reality of this war. Jackson, in his deep and thorough understanding of his subject, chose images echoic of Dix's in order to evoke in the viewer that same sense of despair, of resignation, of trauma. This conscious homage is my favorite takeaway from Jackson's film.

Whether conscious or not, however, Jackson's most prominent homage, and ultimately the film's downfall, lies in its obvious parallels to his most famous subject matter: the works of Tolkien.

J.R.R. Tolkien served in the Lancashire Fusilliers, as a signal-officer. He saw action at the Somme and lost two of his closest school friends to the War.

The narrative structure of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is, almost exactly, that of *Lord of the Rings*. A group of brave, innocent Englishmen/hobbits, inadvertently forced away from the comforts of hearth and home, reluctantly but bravely sally forth to do their duty in the face of certain destruction. Along the way, their innocence is lost. They confront unimaginable evil and emerge scarred, only to return home to a land unwelcoming, hostile, entirely changed from the one they left.

Of course, Jackson cannot be blamed for telling the truths of the War; this narrative, though romanticized and muddled, parallels the experience of many Englishmen during the War. It was certainly Tolkien's narrative. It is the very Englishness of the narrative that presents us with the film's biggest problem, one Andria Williams (of the Military Spouse Book Review, and a Wrath-Bearing Tree editor) also covered extensively in her review, which is that of representation.

To the casual viewer, seeing *They Shall Not Grow Old* leaves

one with the clear impression that the entire Great War was fought by the British infantry and artillery, more or less single-handed. The French of course are mentioned, and even seen in a few shots, but overall the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish troops, every face a white face. The British West Indies Reserves are never seen. The film is innocent of a single Sepoy, there are no Gurkhas, no Malays.

In the featurette at the end of the film, Jackson addresses these concerns with a literal wave of the hand and a dismissive remark about the focus of the picture and the material available to him, while the screen actually shows unused footage of black troops, giving the lie to his explanation even as he offers it. What really pissed off your humble reviewer was the sentence Jackson used to cap this segment of the featurette: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars."

Wow. OK. Certainly it's not an academic film, but to suggest that giving representation only to white British troops on-screen is in some way justifiable because the film is "by a non-scholar" rubbed me the wrong way. Mr Jackson, you're going to tell us that you, the man who owns a closetful of original WWI uniforms—the man who literally minutes before was showing off his collection of *actual Great War artillery pieces*—the man who admitted to owning every issue of *The War Illustrated* magazine—you, of all people, would offer this lame excuse?

I think the issue here is not an actual dishonesty on Jackson's part, however. I believe that his inability to see his own biases stems from a long association with the works of Tolkien, in which the War of the Ring is fought and won by the Men of the West, the people of Gondor and Rohan. (Although as noted by other viewers of this film, even Tolkien's coalition was more diverse than the one shown in *They Shall Not Grow Old*—at least the Fellowship included elves and dwarves).

The issue of Tolkien's source material, and whether or not it is actively or casually racist, is one that encompasses far too great a scope for this review. Certainly Tolkien did not think himself a racist, and was a vocal opponent of Nazi racialist theories, even going so far as to send a series of nasty letters to a German publisher who wanted to reprint *The Hobbit* in the late '30s but only after confirming if Tolkien was "arisch"—that is, Aryan. He also hated apartheid, having been born in South Africa, and was similarly vocal in his condemnation of the practice.

J.R.R. Tolkien in WWI uniform.

Yet there are Tolkien's own works, which reflect the unthinking cultural biases of a man born in the Victorian era who came of age in the Edwardian. The nations of the East (Rhun, Harad, &c.) are all populated by dark-skinned Men who are under the thrall of Sauron. Tolkien's own remarks about the appearance of Orcs (found in his letters) include a distressing description of them as like "the unlovliest of the Mongol-types," and he explicitly stated that the gold-loving Dwarves were based on the Jewish people, for whom he nurtured a public admiration his whole life, but the association is an uncomfortable one to modern thought.

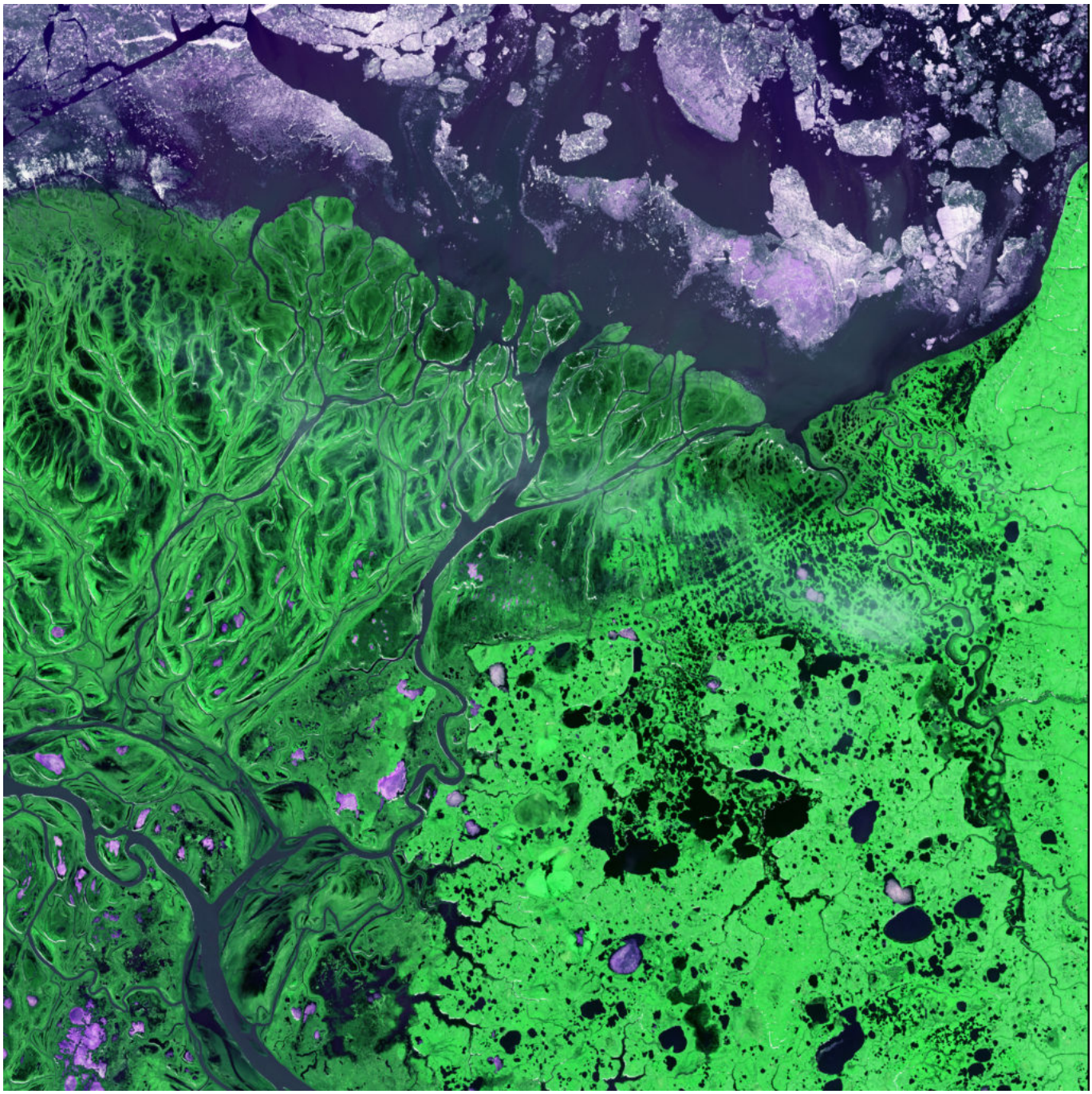
In conclusion: should you see this film? Absolutely. Should you see it with caveats and reservations? Clearly. Beautiful

but flawed, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a necessary film, but an incomplete one.

New Poetry from Shana Youngdahl

After the Maine Tin Min Company Prospectus, 1880

The earth has veins we can
open with our hammers.
Follow the cassiterite crystals
down where the iron dark
is picked by the swings
of men who name minerals
by the feel of them on damp
fingers, the bands of elvan
quartzite like the rough
footprints of mythical
man, or the smooth track
Of native silver, or gold
Ore floating in the salty
Rubbish of St. Just. Imagine
Fellow capitalists, what
Enterprise can find
Rose colored mica, purple
Fluor spar, tourmaline,
And a thin river of
Tin Ore imbedded among
calc spar crystals, follow
that river, I say, crack
the vein open.



To Find the Center of a Circle from a Part of the Circumference

Which is all I am really after, the path to the midpoint

and how to get there from this little arch

of my hand I’m told to *span the dividers any distance*

and with *one foot on the circumference*

describe the semi-circumferences: today pollen and blue sky,

book bound in navy cloth and draped with black

velvet. The ache in my wrist, throat and head dull

like the birdsong we stop hearing weeks ago.

I’m trying to find the center: the point I can cut from.

I pencil out two indefinite lines and lean

under this dome into the illuminated center.

Someone a very long time ago, told me to call *point P.*

There is comfort in such specifics, but still I feel

like all the unwound clocks that fill old buildings;

there is something I am supposed to do, but

in the fog I am unfocused, turn my head

to another arch and am led away.

—

1.

First or only?

My child is three—
wakes three times

a night
has no room

I would know. Wouldn’t I?

Piling her piss-soaked
blankets on the wood floor
I leave them to fume,

wait for the calendar or the swelling.

8.

I know
and don’t. I’m half-open
hungry, two days
from late.

I dreamt my name wrong.
I dreamt a boy laughing,
my girl pulling his

baby boots on, spelling
her own name that I
could read by water.

37.

Find
a stone to fit the palm,

our last iris, photographs of daughter’s wet curls, half-burned

and broken candles, recall when sister

believed the rainbow alive.

Collect your pebbles.

38.

I leak
dying larkspur and the strain
of mileage.

It’s a glass night,
with clean towel,
and midwives in
the basement room
where spills won’t
wet spines and this damp
brings the cool harness
of crying.

39.

We set out walking
the child grabs a stick
points at clicking marmots
shakes the trees and piñon
bleeds into her fingers
she twists it into her hair.
She is pitched
and dust rises like fire
billowing between sisters.

New Essay from Claudia Hinz: The War at Home

Michael Florez felt called to the Marines. “No greater love than dying for your brother,” the 42-year-old Oregon resident says. In 2004, Florez was deployed to Ar Ramadi, Iraq, with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. He was the point man, the first guy in to clear buildings of Al Qaeda, Taliban and foreign jihadists. These missions scared the hell out of him because he worried about who would be shot; he wanted that bullet if it meant saving his brothers. He’d been warned that the first deaths in combat would be Marines he didn’t know well, but that each successive death would hit closer. “It was always up close and personal for me,” Florez says. At the end of his first deployment, he came home and locked himself in his house. Every day he stared at the walls, his brain replaying the scenes of fellow Marines dying. His wife would come home to find him curled up on the couch crying.

Fourteen years and two more deployments later, Florez says every day feels like Groundhog Day. Small things, like hearing his children cry, can trigger a flashback, putting him right back in Iraq, lifting wounded Marines into the Humvee. Today, Florez still looks every inch an active duty Marine, clean-cut and shaven. In the past month he’s lost nearly twenty-five pounds. Eating makes him sick. There’s blood in his urine, and he’s worried about a recurrence of bladder cancer (he’s been in remission for more than a year). But it’s the depression that paralyzes him. There are weeks when he doesn’t leave the house, plagued by thoughts of what he might have done to save a fellow Marine and wracked with a physical pain so intense he’s thought about ending his life.

Veteran Volunteer Kyle Storbokken and COVR Greenhouse Manager Orion Carriger

“You come home,” Florez says, “and you’re fighting a whole other war with PTSD.” He lost fifteen comrades in combat, half of them right in front of him. Since returning from Iraq,

eight of his buddies have committed suicide, one in the past month. The numbness Florez experiences is its own kind of hurt: “I love my kids, but the numbness keeps you from the love you should be able to feel, but you can’t because the pain’s too bad.” When Florez physically lashed out a family member, his wife turned to the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch.

Central Oregon Veterans Ranch (COVR), a nineteen-acre working ranch north of the city of Bend, opened in 2015. The Ranch is home to chickens, llamas, a productive greenhouse, and the Honor Quarters, a fully accredited Adult Foster Home that provides specialized end-of-life care to veterans. It is estimated that there are around 20,000 veterans in the tri-county area of Central Oregon—as of 2018, the Ranchhas served nearly one hundred of them. Many veterans find their way to COVR through family members, including Mike Florez’s, who are desperate for help.

The Ranch is Executive Director Alison Perry’s life’s work. In 2007, Perry, a licensed professional counselor, was working at VA clinics in Bend and Portland and beginning to despair. She saw combat veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan being shuffled through a system that pushed pills and sent them home to families who felt helpless. Many of these veterans were abusing drugs and alcohol; they talked about suicide. In the meantime, Perry’s own brother, a pilot in the Army, was in Iraq, and she worried about him every day. Caring for veterans was a personal and urgent mission, and she felt like she was failing them. She remembers saying offhandedly to a colleague in Portland, “I wish we had a sheep ranch out east where we could send these guys when they got home…where they could work the land, sleep under the stars, and be in a community of other vets.”

During this time, Perry was also counseling combat veterans of Vietnam and Korea and noticing a common theme in their conversations about dying. Time and time again, older veterans spoke to her about their wish to die alone, away from family

and friends. These men were afraid of losing autonomy and becoming a burden to their families. Perry’s vision of a refuge and place of healing began to take shape. How could she provide a safe environment for veterans to commune and heal, and, ultimately, to die?

COVR Founder Alison Perry with Warm Springs Vietnam Veteran Larsen Kalama after a Sacred Fire Ritual at the Ranch
Perry, 46, is an energetic woman whose reverence respect and concern for veterans is palpable. When she refers to the veterans at the Ranch as “my guys,” she touches her heart. In developing the unique model of COVR, Perry considered two of the biggest risk factors for suicide: the lack of a sense of belonging, and feeling like a burden. If the property was going to facilitate healing and nurture a sense of self-worth, it had to be more than just a gathering place for veterans; there had to be opportunities for meaningful work and purpose, and ways for veterans to develop a new sense of identity and self-worth. Since opening the Ranch, Perry has witnessed firsthand the “regenerative energy” of caring for animals and working the land.

The Honor Quarters look out to the snow-capped peaks of the Cascade Range. In the entry way, a sign reads, “Heroes Don’t Wear Capes. They Wear Dog Tags.” The Quarters feel like an inviting family home in the modern farmhouse style. A couch and chairs are drawn in close around the fireplace, which is covered in a distressed wood rendering of the American flag. The dining table is decorated with military challenge coins displaying the seals of different units in the Armed Forces. Each bedroom bears cozy, personal touches, like quilts donated by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a throw pillow with the word “Dream.” The Ranch is still awaiting grants and additional funding before it can house full-time residents, and as Perry leads me through the empty bedrooms, she expresses both grief and frustration that there are veterans who would benefit from being here right now.

COVR grows greens, micro greens, and other seasonal produce for sale in local markets

Ed Ford, a veteran of Desert Storm and Iraq, is a familiar face at the Ranch, and one of many veterans who are indispensable to COVR, according to Perry. Ford comes out at

least twice a week to cut lettuce in the greenhouse or dig out irrigation ditches. He speaks with a strong Boston accent seldom heard in this small town in the high Oregon desert. At 53, he's still a burly guy. He wears a tee shirt from a local multi-sport racing event. A tattoo of the Grim Reaper shadows his left bicep. Like all veterans at the Ranch, he is exceedingly courteous. Ford served twenty years in the Marines—he retired in 2004 and then spent the next eight years working for a private contractor doing security detail in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011, he was the Director of Operations when the lead vehicle in a convoy returning to Kabul was destroyed by an IED. Five men were killed, among them Ford's close friend, Ness. "Looking at him there on the slab, confirming his remains, I knew it could be me next." Ford finished the job and got out.

These days, Ford tries to stay busy. He holds down two jobs but gets out to the Ranch every chance he gets. Working on the property provides"a good workout" and "burns out a day." He says it is a relief to be around "like minded individuals" who understand what he's gone through: "No one's gonna judge you." And he knows if he needs to talk, the veterans at the Ranch will be there.

Hanging out with the guys at the Ranch is one of the only things that brings Mike Florez some relief. The first time he went out to COVR, he was introduced to Vietnam vets and immediately recognized the look in their eyes: "the thousand-yard stare…they'd been suffering in silence too. It never leaves you." Florez says it struck him that the older veterans had been struggling for more than 40 years, but they were still there, getting out of the house, and coming to work on the Ranch.

"Maybe they can show me something that helps," Florez says, smiling for the first time. "And maybe I can help the younger fighters getting out. They have no idea what they're coming home to."

Contact the Ranch at info@covranch.org or COVRanch.org

HOMEBOY: New Fiction from Mark Galarrita

I went home to Jersey only once since the enlistment. I had to see my Ma. Back in the summer of 2011 I finished Basic and Advanced Individual Training for Cav Scouts and thought I'd officially become a real patriot now. The son of Filipino immigrants transformed into a proud, government-paid U.S. Soldier. A real Soldier, though, I was not. Drill sergeant said that me and the rest of my squad back at A.I.T wouldn't experience anything too bad in Iraq or Afghanistan by the time we got in it. The War was almost up. When we deployed

overseas, it would be like a vacation to Thailand, too easy. “Y’all are the lucky ones,” she said. “You’ll never see anyone die violently in your lives. You can thank Obama for that.” Joke’s on her, though. By the time I was thirteen, I’d already seen a few dead people in my life. My Pops for example. I don’t need to speak on that, though.

I showed up to Newark airport looking like a civilian, not in my ACU’s or my shiny class A’s like the Budweiser commercials have you believe we all come home looking like. Only pogues wear their uniform at the airport. Nah, I wore a grey fitted tee that felt snug and showed off my brown, ripped arms, and some boot cut jeans I picked up at the Fort Benning PX that were too baggy. It was like I was stuck in the early 2000s. Still, I had this image that Ma was going to be real proud of this new look on me. What I expected was love and admiration for the work I accomplished, the money I made, and the simple truth that I did it all on my own. Grown man now, no Pops needed, no bullshit. But when she saw me at the pickup gate with my assault pack and my Class A’s in a garment bag, she stayed in her ’93 ruby-colored Corolla as if she were a goddamn cab.

Woman who popped me out almost twenty-one years ago wouldn't even get out of her car. She unlocked the passenger door to let me in and only glanced at me once before she drove off. Ma was about five inches shorter than me, a light-skinned woman with black hair that stopped at the back of her neck. She always wore light turquoise blouses, even when it was shy of being cold as hell. In the winter she'd switch between three turquoise hoodies all the time and never anything else, even if the heat was on blast. Two cars in front of us, this college-aged Latino boy was coming out the gate with his mother, girlfriend, and whole extended family in tow like a Pharaoh had just arrived. I wondered about that dude for half of the ride until Ma spoke up.

"Have you eaten anything, Jason?" First thing she said to me.

"Pretzels—"

"What?"

"I had pretzels on the plane. They gave me that and a Sprite."

"Sugar they put in those sodas will kill you. Do you want to have your heart burst so young like your father?"

I had no answer for that. The main thing on my mind at the time was this: Big Jason Zobel was back in town, looking the part of a Cav Scout. There was a time when I did the whole college thing for a stint—even tried ROTC once—but enlisting turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did. When I completed Basic I went on Facebook and posted my graduation photo. My Facebook Likes lit up (104 to be exact) from a mix of people I never talked to before: high school people, Ma's side of the family, and even this one girl, Rebecca, who I crushed on all of my junior year but who never gave me a second glance in the hallways of Saint Barnaby High. Rebecca didn't just like my pic—she commented. She did more than just say, *Congrats!* She added: "You look so handsome, Jason." You best believe I saw that shit and sent her a message. I asked

if she wanted to chill at Flannigan's Pub the day I got back to Jersey. Rebecca messaged back, "sure, let's hang," and yo, who am I to turn her down?

"You have to eat, Jason," Ma said. "I'll cook adobo for you at home."

I tried to turn the radio on, but she told me not to touch the dial or the air con. She claimed it would kill the battery. I tried to explain that that wasn't how cars worked.

"Those crooked mechanics changed my oil, and now half of the things don't work," she said.

"This is an eighteen-year-old car, Ma. That's what happens when things get old."

Ma immigrated to the Land of The Free in the middle of the Philippine dictatorship: President Marcos, military crackdowns on dissidents, drug violence in Manila—all kinds of shit. When I was about seven, she told me about a dude who owed this other dude a bunch of pesos and was straight up shot on the street. Not to say my family's blood country is Apocalypse Right-The-Fuck-Now but I'd trade Jersey smog over getting gunned down for bad debt. I'm fifty grand in the hole since I dropped out of undergrad and I ain't paying shit because Uncle Sam said he'd wash it all away if I went off to War in some place he felt like sending me to. Some men have the option to get their slates cleaned after pushing enough paperwork; others have the option to run away from it and never look back. I chose to give myself up to a cause—if you could call it that—and if I get lucky I'll never even deploy. If I did, I'd deserve what I signed up for. Right?

When we got home, Ma ordered me to pick up groceries since there were no chicken thighs and vinegar in the apartment for the adobo she promised me. I would've said sure and gone off, but I got distracted by the horde of boxes stacked throughout the living room. They stretched from the front door all the

way to her shrine of the Virgin Mary facing the parking lot. It was a warehouse. One side near the living room couch was stacked with cardboard boxes labeled by QVC, Amazon, and a bunch of stores I've never even heard of before. Cases loaded with questionably-made jewelry cushioned by styrofoam packing peanuts; old hardcovers from libraries across the country that rotted at the spine; vinyl discs from bygone musicians I didn't even know. A brown maze of receiving and no shipping.

Before Benning, Ma had checked out a bunch of books from the library on entrepreneurship and reselling crap on Amazon to turn a profit. She got really into it, first time I'd seen her happy in years. I didn't stop her. Her 'business' had gone on for so long, I almost felt guilty whenever she told me to just wait until "the money comes in." But we're both still waiting.

"Where did you get all of this stuff?" I said.

It had been a little over six months since I drove a civilian car, so instead of going to the Wal-Mart five minutes down the road, I plotted for the Target in Lawrenceville, a good half hour away. Some alone time was in order. First, I went to the Wawa for gas, a hoagie, tall can of Monster, and a pack of Marlboro Reds; wouldn't be a trip home without the essentials. Pops used to smoke a pack of Reds a day, they turned his heart black. Course he never knew about it until it was too late to quit. Unlike some fathers who change and give it up the day their child is born. I figure if Pops could live until the end of his days with tobacco and bad diets, why shouldn't I?

All him and Ma used to talk about was me being independent and successful one day because they were hard-working immigrants, but what did that mean? When I dropped out of college and told Ma I wanted to enlist, she pretended like she didn't hear. Instead she avoided me by praying to Momma Mary's statue plus her whole holy gang. Sometimes she'd leave me for hours at a time: lost in prayer or driving to different churches throughout the county as she never stayed at one parish for

too long. I'm amazed I got through high school without asking for her help—like SAT prep, or which college I should go to, or how to interview for a job. That kind of small shit that adds up to big shit after a while. Sure, physically she was there, and she signed checks and authorized payments on bills (sometimes with my money), but on life advice or what I should be doing—she was a ghost.

As I drove, I tuned the radio until I landed on a public station. Two British women were in the middle of a discussion about troop drawdowns in Iraq and what that meant for Afghanistan. I tuned it up to a sound that was slightly short of max. They spoke in gentle voices about the history of The War on Terror. They sounded as if they were reviewing a television show, and not their topic: the wedding massacre in Mukaradeeb by coalition forces. One of them asked, *What happens to our children during a time of War?* out of nowhere. The other lady paused for a bit and that's when my fingers turned the knob left, right, and back again before I tuned it off. I struggled to pull one of the Reds out of the box, but I yanked it out and smoked it until it was a brown stub.

—

When I got back with fifteen or so bags of groceries wrapped around my fingers, Ma was still on her laptop. As I stocked the groceries, she called me out.

"What took you so long? You're putting miles on my car." She clicked away without looking up. "Took your uniform out. So dusty! I cleaned it up a bit."

My blue Army Service Uniform was unpacked, hung up on the frame of her bedroom. She wanted me to explain it all to her. Last time I'd worn it was for the AIT graduation party.

Ma stood by me and touched the uniform's lapel. I explained what every trinket stood for: the name tape, the rank, the flimsy ribbons I sort of earned just for being a living

soldier. Ma's head shook once. Twice, maybe? There was a semblance of recognition I needed—balance, I guess. Part of her eyes got really big then super small, staring at the cross and silver on my upper left chest. When I told her it was a marksmanship badge, meaning I was a good with a rifle—the badge that I'm proud of the most, being a small town Jersey boy with no history of handling a gun, let alone an assault rifle—there was no wow or pause to congratulate me. She asked: How did I pay for this (out of my government stipend) and when do I wear it (things graduation, weddings, or military funerals.) Ma wasn't too pleased with that last statement. She went straight to bed. I put the ASU back and took her car keys.

"I'm going out, Ma," I called.

"What did you say?"

"I'm going out. See what's changed around town for a bit."

"Do not destroy my car."

I arrived at Flannigan's off 295 in Ewing shortly after 1800. By the time I got there, happy hour had started, an hour before Rebecca would show up.

Flannigan's was a remnant of a New Jersey bar that once was—a replica of what could've been a local's hub straight from a television sitcom, but the idea was scrapped after years of just trying to get by. Bartender didn't even look at me when I sat in a corner section, far from the Rolling Rock lights and the empty crimson red booths cushions that sunk and tore where your ass was supposed to be. Last time I came around, I was just shy of finishing off high school at eighteen. They didn't have a guard at the front checking ID's, it was up to the bartender, but everyone in school knew that no one checked; it made 'em more money that way. Now the staff changed, the only person still around was one of the regulars: a crusty-looking bald dude with blue eyes and dry skin. Didn't recognize me

though. I ordered a High Life on draft and finished half of it before five minutes passed. The bar's floor hatch opened from below, and a white boy about my age with a short blonde crew cut emerged. He wore a fitted black tee with the pub's logo on the front and back.

"Kowalski, can you go back and bring up two more Miller kegs," the bartender said as he changed the channels from ESPN to Fox News, "they're tapped out."

The barback didn't say a word as he marched back down. I tried to listen to his voice to make sure it was him; but when he came back around to face the door, we stared one another down. Ben Kowalski was a junior when I was a freshman and he used to harass me and other kids in school for the fun of it. We were on the wrestling team together but never got along as I was the most out of shape in the group, chugging behind while he led the team in sprints, suicides, and up-downs. Outside of the sport, he'd pick me out in the cafeteria and chide me, asking if I needed any food today or he'd say something to his group in the hallways whenever I'd pass by, something that made them laugh when my back was turned. It went on for a few months until he got a DUI one semester and he couldn't act a fool anymore, he'd become one.

At the bar we scanned each other for signs of life's wear and tear. The Marine was three years older than me, but looked twenty more.

"No shit," Ben said as he leaned against the bar. "Hey *sir*, I thought you were trying to be an LT? Least that's what Facebook said."

"And I thought you were in jail for selling pills," I said.

"Murray's dad helped me out on that one. The Corps a hand in it too."

"Good for you."

The two of us slapped hands and hugged, like all that past didn't make a difference. Ben had developed into a sturdy, wood-colored deck of a man, polished with pink along the edges you can expect—the neck, the ears, and the side of arms. Once he got that DUI, he spent his senior year brawling with people over his ex-fiancé and doing pills with a couple of other oxygen thieves who were either in AA, in jail, or on house arrest now. Sometime after he signed up for the Corps and deployed a few months later.

Ben was getting off work in a few, so I told him I'd wait around. Rebecca was late anyway, I figured she was stuck in traffic or something. I thought about texting her or sending her a Snap, but I didn't. On the TV, a Fox News reporter in Manhattan said that a former Marine fractured his skull at a California Occupy Wall Street Protest and when I finished my third High Life, the bartender shut it off and called them all a bunch of communists who got what they deserved.

It was Ben's war anniversary, and also around the time he got out of the Corps, so he was thrilled to tell someone about it. After four years and two deployments on him, he got out so he could work a second shift job at Flannigan's and third shift at the Buffalo Wild Wings on Route 1, slinging boneless fried chicken and watery beer.

"What about your G.I. bill?"

"What about it? Who needs college?" Ben said.

In the Marines, his role was in signal operations between the various services. He claimed to be a master of the phonetic alphabet, and when I called bullshit, he bought three shots of whiskey and drank them in a row—waited five minutes for it to settle—and proceed to utter each letter backward and forwards, twice. It was like putting together Legos for him.

I was so impressed I offered to pay for the shots, but he kept saying no, no. "It's OK, brother," Ben said. "Too fucking

easy. It feels like tricks like that are the only thing I'm good at anymore."

I bought us a round of Miller Lights and he talked about Afghanistan, his last deployment. "We dropped so many rounds on the enemy, but I never got to see any of it up close. Pissed me off. They'd relay back to command how many targets they supposedly took out, or the LT's on the ground would radio back if they could engage a fucker, and I was pretty much the link between the green light and the action and—" Ben stopped to take out a Marlboro Red and offered me one too. "It was all indirect, never up front, you couldn't see them. I know I got 'em because I'd hear the report on the comms or watch the video a few days later. Every shot hit home. One minute a dude is running for his life in a poppy field and then out of nowhere…his remains are painted all over the flowers. Yeah. Yeah. It was fun. Hey man that's sick you went enlisted man, you'll fucking love it and then hate it a few days later. What did you sign up for in the Army?"

I told him about the cavalry.

"You went Cav? Cav? Why the fuck would you sign up to be a bullet sponge, homeboy? You should re-class and go M.I. They got the hottest chicks in the Army. Bar none."

I offered to drive Ben home but he said, "I'm Good to Fucking Go."

He got in his green Jeep and swerved out of the parking lot while I waited past twenty-three hundred for Rebecca to show up, except she didn't. She didn't text or nothing. About an hour in, ex classmates from high school came into the pub and passed me by—they looked at me, squinted, and walked away. Few people remembered me, can't blame 'em. I only had about two hundred or so friends on Facebook, perhaps eighty percent or more of them I didn't even talk to. It could've also been the beer and Ben's shots that must've given me some kind of funk

for people to keep their distance, but by midnight the buzz went away, and I started sipping on another light beer minding my own until this brunette approached me to say *hi* and she called me Eduardo, and when I said I wasn't him, she apologized, turned, and went to her friends by the pool tables. I finished another pint and drove to Ma's with the windows down. The night's chill pressed against my face and tickled my scalp. A Statey followed my ass on Route I-195 from Trenton to Robbinsville until it zoomed around me to pull over a speeding Camaro. An ambulance roared by in the other direction. Where it went, God knows.

I got home a quarter past one. Five thick red candles flickered along the apartment's window sill. The Venetian blinds swung in a lazy, steady motion, guided by the wind. I unlocked Ma's the front door and listened to the soft murmurs of prayer in a mix of Tagalog and English. She was in a nightgown, her knees pressed against the carpet, praying to the Virgin statue; tiny candles lit around Mary's ceramic feet like beggar children. Her eyes remained closed as her index fingers clutched the red rosary beads, her lips lost in the movement of The Lord's Prayer. She didn't stop or look over until I locked the door.

"You took my car without permission," she said.

"You said I could take it."

"No. I asked where you were going," she took a deep breath and turned back to the statue. "Come here. Pray with me, Jason."

My walk must've been awkward, gaited even, but I got on my knees next to her. It must've been the smell of candles that had me all fucked up still. It had been a while since I'd done this. I tried to recall how to pray and what to pray about; Hail Mary, or Our Father, or The Apostle's Creed. They all sound the same. Ma tapped my closed fist. "Pray," she said.

Prayer is an eerie and intimate feeling with another person

next to you. When Pops was still around, we went to Saint Barn’s as a whole family. We knelt in the rows at the front, not too far off from big Jesus himself looking down upon us. We recited the rosary, bead for bead. When it was done, Ma went up to the rows of candles and lit one up for her sister, another for her home in Manila, and another for Pops. Come up, Ma said to me, and I lit one up for my future, whatever that looked like. Another for Ma. Another for Pops. The light glowed in front of me as if it were a power that only I could hold; a thing that I could control.

After extinguishing the candles, I helped her to the bedroom. Her body felt grainy against my shoulders, light in weight but uneven and hard. I laid her down upon the mattress, stacking the pile of self-help magazines and business textbooks on her bed to the floor. As I tucked her in, she grabbed my wrist.

“When are you leaving me, Jason?”

“Soon. Back to Texas. Army life. Afterwards, maybe I’ll deploy. I don’t know.”

She rubbed my wrist. “You’ve always had dry skin problems,” she said, “you need to put on some lotion. My boy. God, you’re my only boy. My only boy is going away.” Her hand flowed down onto the bed in a slow, fluid, motion like a fat droplet of Georgia rain water off an up-armored Humvee’s roof. I closed her bedroom door with my body upright, my neck tight and my eyes salty with sweat from the whiskey or the candles or I don’t know. In the darkness of her warehouse, I sat on the couch and wrapped my left hand around the straps of my assault pack and tapped my fingernails against my knee with the other.