New Poetry from Aaron Graham

PIXELATED WOMAN, WEBCAM SHADE

Pixelated woman, even your shadow
I know as my lover.
It whispered.
Ash-white dry-erase lips
part with a foreign tongue.
A felt-tip that deletes
as it divines.
Voices like accord
rip frets, necks, and tones.

Lately, you’re singing
disjointed love ditties
to abscond almighties.

I spend my night
in ichor rivulets & “I miss you”
trying to coax it back.

III / W-E-L-C-O-M-E

ـ

احلل
on the board
at 20º incline
resting restraints
non conscious
(not unconscious)
unknowing
flesh and sinew
the body prepares
or—refuses to.
my body prepares

its tentacles to carve
a name, a meaning,
a translation for unknown—
all its forms will be
mine—inscribe—unseen—
in your being
beneath being—so
I could still give you
to your mother
and she would call
you by my name
whip you then transform
clusters of paper cardinals
into a fallout shelter
or whatever her soul
needed most.
on the board
at 20º incline
resting restraints
non conscious
(not unconscious)
an unknowing—
a drowning that
refuses to drown
you—brother prayer
to the fire prayer—
my fire prayer:
always to burn
and not burn out
on the board at 20º incline
a never-prayed-for whirlpool—
a prayer that never knew
the tempests stalking you—
my rhinoceros is your language—
ivory horns bubble from your throat.
on the board at 20º incline
the word-food will flow

I am your un-prayer—
your roiling, waking tempest—
that which drowns you
but never drowns you out.

ADJUSTMENT PERIOD

That year I was camouflaged—
with bruises of being proud—
sitting, legs crossed, peeling
OD green linoleum flooring.

A year sifting through dog tags—
dead yellow edges dangled—
like lead ghosts from bank office windows
and high school goal posts.

The enlistment was rough—
all half-sheet and nicotine stain—
the scars and wounds and tattoos

will run together in a half-century—

My body will be held up—
a battle standard
the stained Iraqi sand bleeds
every night—

I dream my daughter dances across it—
she grows tattered
like tree branch topographies
twist together with vague silhouettes.

Everywhere being is dancing.
Even the warring mausoleum
of my mind
is the one-sided scrap paper of God.

—

These poems appear in Aaron Graham's poetry collection, Blood Stripes*, and are reprinted with permission of the author.*

Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian Bonenberger and Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Hey there, Adrian.

Adrian Bonenberger: Hi, Andria.

Williams: So, I heard you recently saw "Joker" in the theater, as did I. It's gotten a lot of buzz. I've seen various reviews call it everything from "disappointing" to "an ace turn from

Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.

https://www.ibc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article

Bonenberger: Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in The Joker is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

Williams: I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

Bonenberger: That's amazing, I had no idea… how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison… in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.

Photo, TIFF. https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/

Williams: With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than once occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I

thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?

photo, Warner Bros. https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019-8

Bonenberger: If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid $18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

Williams: His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild *Vanity Fair* interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like "one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they're rinsing the tar off." And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it's bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can't go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It's fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog's teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

Bonenberger: Is Arthur Fleck's struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one's time? As someone who doesn't spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I

thought Phoenix's quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it's worth it.

Like yourself, I've always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many "jump-scare" horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

Williams: I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

Bonenberger: You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That The Joker is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about The Joker inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the

potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

Williams: I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

Bonenberger: I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*

when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

Williams: In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

Bonenberger: Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

Williams: So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

Bonenberger: If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

Williams: Who's your favorite DC villain?

Bonenberger: At this point, The Joker.

Williams: Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Bonenberger: Yeah, you're cheating there.

Williams: I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know….do they?"

Bonenberger: That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

Williams: I guess there are worse ways to go out.

Bonenberger: My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws…he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

Williams: That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of question to
end on.

Happy Birthday, Afghanistan

October 08, 2019

The war in Afghanistan is now old enough to go to war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday the war in Afghanistan, first to fall under the catchall designation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), turned 18 years old, meaning that individuals who were not yet born when it started are now old enough to deploy in it.

Growing up, 18 is one of those birthdays you look forward to so much. It means freedom, emancipation from parental oversight. It means cigarettes and lottery tickets. It means taking part in the democratic process. It means tattoos.

The war is not much different.

Freedom is certainly at the forefront of its goals. 18 years

ago it began its existence as Operation Enduring Freedom and it continues (since 2015) as Operation Freedom's Sentinel. At this point there have probably been more cigarettes smoked by US troops than rounds fired. Notably absent from this new longest war is the draft lottery, a staple of the previous longest conflict, The Vietnam War.

As for the democratic process, Afghanistan has gotten it, or a version of it, since the US removal of the Taliban in 2001, having held three parliamentary elections and just completed their fourth presidential election (though the results are still unknown, partly due to ongoing violence, low turn-out, and the usual allegations of corruption).

And tattoos? Well, tattoos are just ink filled scars, and 18 years of war have left plenty of those.

I don't much remember my 18th birthday. I'm sure it was rather unremarkable, taking place during midterms of my senior year in high school, the year we got new US history textbooks that included the September 11th attacks.

It wasn't until two months later that I got my first tattoo, and I didn't move out of my parents' house until five months later. I wouldn't enlist until two months after my 19th birthday, and with full-scale ground wars now in two countries, it was clear that I'd be deploying, especially having joined the infantry.

I received my orders to deploy to Afghanistan on October 2, 2005, just before the war turned four. By this age, much of the country's attention was turned to its younger sibling, the War in Iraq. I went to war just after my 20th birthday.

When I got home in 2006, people constantly asked me what it was like in Iraq. They still do. This was the beginning of the realization that my war would be forgotten, but I never imagined it would reach this scale.

Over the past 18 years, less than half of one percent of this country's population has served in the military. An even smaller percentage has deployed, and of that group even fewer saw combat. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, like the official operational name, has changed. But war is war and US troops are still dying.

According to DOD's most recent report (October 7, 2019), there have been 1,893 US troops killed in action in Afghanistan since the start of the conflict. 60 of those have come under the banner of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which allegedly marked the end of combat operations in the country. There have

been another 405 “non-hostile” deaths, and another 20,582 wounded in action. This is to say nothing of the US contractors or Afghan and allied forces KIA and WIA, or the veterans who have died since returning from the war, be it from complications to war injuries or from suicide.

Or the Afghan civilians whose freedom we are supposed to be sentinels of.

Questions I’m consistently faced with as a veteran of Afghanistan include: Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Should we leave? Did we win? How do we win?

The question of worth is a difficult one for me. Can we say anything is worth the number of lives that have been lost? More to the point, can we really make that judgment while we’re still in the thick of it?

Personally, yes, I would again answer my nation’s call and attempt to protect those whose position demands protection. Was it worth the injuries, physical and moral? Again, it’s hard to say in the thick of it, but when I hear that a combat outpost my team opened was closed just a few years later, or that a city we helped clear of the Taliban has fallen back under their control, it’s harder to say.

Should we leave? Absolutely. The challenge is *how* we leave. And I don’t have the answer. When the Soviets left in 1989 (after just 9 years of war), they did so under a cloud of atrocities committed. In some cases they just up and left, leaving behind equipment, mortars and tanks that I would patrol past 17 years later. They left a physical and political mess behind them. We can’t do the same. For the sake of the people of Afghanistan and the US troops who served there, we mustn’t. The feeling of futility, that our actions and sacrifices were entirely inconsequential, is one of the contributing factors to the rise of suicide among veterans.

The last question is the crux of it all. What can we call

winning? Does the fact that the OEF designation ended mean that we secured enduring freedom? Is it only enduring because we are still there as its sentinel? One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is a lack of missional clarity from 18 years ago.

The Taliban was removed from power. That was not the end of the war. Osama bin Laden was killed. The war went on. The Afghan people democratically elected a second president. Still we were there. We declared an end to combat operations. US troops are still dying in combat.

But if my 18th birthday was unremarkable, the Afghan war's is even more so. Especially when considered in the context of national discourse. There was no Facebook reminder that October 7th was OEF's birthday. There was no corresponding fundraiser.

Rather, the occasion was largely marked by attention being paid to yet another younger sibling: Syria. Headlines, television news, and online platforms were dominated by the administration's latest GWOT decision to remove troops from a younger war. And it is unsurprising.

While withdrawing troops from Afghanistan has been given lip service in debates over the past few election cycles, nothing of substance has been done. During the confirmation for Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, not a single question was asked about Afghanistan. It took two hours for the incoming Secretary of the Army to be asked a question about Afghanistan during his confirmation.

President Trump didn't even mention Afghanistan on its war's birthday. The closest he came was tweeting, "I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars…" But this was clearly in response to criticism of the Syria decision.

No mention of the war that was voted most likely to be

endless.

The Spotlight Trial

“Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

-The Gospel of John

One day you’re a teenage girl in the arms of Fidel Castro and you’re carrying the Christ child of the Christless revolution and you’re thinking this man needs a filling between his front teeth and then he will be perfect. The next you’re a lonely New Yorker taking a long walk just so you can sleep. It’s getting late. You clutch the American’s letter in your hand and stall by the summer stoop under the lightning on a night warm and wet like a mouth, the flashes revealing skyscraper spires and a proud trumpeting pig in the passing racks of silver nimbus. Most people don’t have enough imagination for reality. They find their only paints in the office and the TV and the two or three streets of their Saturday nights. You are not one of these people, though tonight you wish you were.

Photo: Handout. https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4777676/jfk-files-confirm-elaborate-cia-plots-to-kill-fidel-castro-included-exploding-sea-shell-and-contaminated-diving-suit/

The American lawyer wants you to tell your story. You hear thunder like the echo of a shot. You hear a click. You look over your shoulder at the door to your Queens apartment but it is only the old Italian with the brittle papery hands and the tomato garden where he seems to spend every hour of his summers.

You wave. You walk inside to a warm laundry smell that reminds you of candy, black and white subway tiles checkered beneath your feet except that one bare spot beneath the chandelier. This missing tile—this is you.

And the American wants to return you to your place.

Dallas.

Dallas. Dallas. Dallas. You imagine old American Indian women saying it around a fire while poking a pale doll with a needle. Dallas. Dallas. Dallas.

The American has organized his entire life around this one city and this one day and this one man named Eduardo and the American sees you as his key, his missing piece. He seems like some kind of lonely figure obsessed with a jigsaw puzzle: the body of John F. Kennedy. Who is the one woman who can fill in the holes? How many others are there like the American, lost men in small rooms staring into holes, waiting for the black jewel of your tale.

———

You stand against the window holding the American’s letter between your thumb and your forefinger, hoping for another flash of lightning. The top of the Empire State building needles into the sky as if in bequest of the same strike, the start of the storm. You could turn on the TV, what you sometimes call “the boob tube,” but you don’t care about the Olympics or the talk shows or the news. Instead you stand for a moment waiting for the rain, trying to make out the words of

your Soviet neighbor next door with his grouchy wife and sick daughter. You listen to the Russian, the music of the dying revolution, the squabbling over the heat and the TV. You read the letter out loud:

“There will be no telephone service in the room,” the American says.

You almost trust his assurance. You have always been a fool for a strong voice, all these men like Eduardo and Fidel who want to protect you and feel they know the story of the future.

_____

A small woman with chestnut hair and a turtle brooch sits silent in the corner, prepared to record your story. This is the best most women can hope for: a place in the room. Like the blacks who mop the floors and the Mexicans who clean the sheets, most women in America move silently around the white men with the booming voices. Silence is survival. You know this. To come from Germany is to know a story that dwarves the evil of all others, but it is also to know that you do not tell that tale while the beast is still alive if you wish to survive.

“Come to Miami,” the American says.

“You are lucky to have me here,” you say.

You are lucky to be alive. You have been on the edge of death your entire life. Your mother was born in America. Like you, she fell in love with a foreigner and tried to help the laborers in Bremen escape the wrath of the Fuhrer and this is how a child ends up in the camp at Bergen-Belsen. This—this American blood—is how you end up daring enough—foolish enough—to fall in love with Fidel and because of your ties of love to this one man you now have ties to the men who hate him and so here you are in this beige room across the street from

Madison Square Garden with the American. You are the daughter of a German sailor and an American actress and now here you are standing in a black dress in a hotel next to the biggest stage in New York City with one more chance to sing your song.

The American keeps pressing you about coming to Miami for the trial. He wears the black Buddy Holly glasses you used to see everywhere in New York. Like you, he is not as young as he once was. You dye your hair. He does not. He takes off his glasses for a moment and taps the temples against his forehead. This is the man Lee Harvey Oswald's mother chose to represent her son. But the Warren Commission refused to accept him as the assassin's advocate. Dick Gregory, the famous black comedian, made this white man his vice-presidential candidate in 1968 for the Freedom and Peace Party, but now this American, like you, is largely forgotten. You are his last chance at a second act. And perhaps he is yours.

"If you don't come to Miami, I'm going to have to hire an actress to read your testimony in court," he says.

"How perfect," you say.

"Could be," he says. "But it might also ring hollow and contrived. People want the real thing."

"There you are wrong," you say. "People want the performance, not the facts. Look at the president. Why am I telling you this? You know this."

"I know a courtroom," he says.

"You don't know these people," you say. "They have killed and would not hesitate to kill again."

You know these people. FBI. CIA. Army Intelligence. Whenever they get caught they change names like the corporations. The American returns his glasses to his face. He stares at you, as if seeing you for the first time—as if still trying to grasp

the strangeness of your life, the incredible fact of your survival. Who else can build the bridge from Hitler to Havana to Dallas? Can the American see what Fidel saw—the ghostly glint of the eighteen-year old girl you once were? If beauty blinds men and ruins revolutions, you also know that it opens their eyes and fuels their fires and prepares them to die for an ideal rather than merely survive in the name of retiring to some small white home on a golf course in Florida. You were once the one who lit the fire. You were the one with the entire world wrapped around her finger. You were the one the young *lider* wanted and the one the old white men needed to kill him when he grew too big. But somehow, you and Fidel are still alive, and so is your son, Andre, who has has your eyes and your mouth and Fidel's nose, and maybe you are here because you want to give him a better world and maybe you are here because some part of you will always be faithful to Fidel.

"Let's talk about Eduardo," the American says.

———

The American looks you in the eye and asks you about your present employment, but you just smile. You cannot tell him the truth. The closest you can come is telling him that you cannot tell him the truth. That is the truth. You refuse to give your home address. But when he finally asks if you have been employed by the Central Intelligence Agency, you answer, "Yes," and even the stenographer with the turtle brooch looks up, and outside a car honks its horn twice like they do every day in New York, but the sound makes you sick today because you know their ears are everywhere.

The American continues to question. You cannot believe Eduardo is foolish enough to bring this lawsuit against this tiny magazine—*The Spotlight*. It is like there is some sick part of him that wants to give the left exactly what they want. Like he, too, wants to tell the truth before he dies. Or maybe

Eduardo has become just another tired throwaway governed by the terrible truth at the black scoured bottom of America: money.

“During and prior to November 1963, did you live in Miami, Florida?” the American asks.

“Yes,” you say. “I did.”

“During and before November of 1963, did you work on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Miami area?”

“Yes.”

“Did you work with a man named Frank Sturgis, while you were working for the CIA?”

The American removes his glasses and skims the temples against his forehead. The motto of the CIA is from the Bible: “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” If by free they mean dead, sure. Fine. You imagine the actress who will perform your lines in Miami with her chest thrust out and her lipstick bright red and her eyes dark and defiant like you when you were young and the world seemed a tree full of ripe low-hanging fruit. And you were not the only one who was once young. You know the American lawyer thought he could do what will never be done. You know he thinks CIA stands for “Capitalism’s Invisible Army.” You know he thinks you have served the devil and that the devil can be killed, somehow separated from God.

The American still believes. And maybe you do, too. It feels good not to lie for once. You admit to knowing and working with “Frank Sturgis.” You go further and tell the American that you knew him as “Fiorini” and “Hamiliton” and when the American asks you if you ever witnessed anyone give money to Fiorini for the work both of you were doing on behalf of the CIA, you say:

“Yes.”

And with this one word you know you have just shot a hole into Eduardo’s story. Fiorini is the bridge. Eduardo claims *The Spotlight* ruined his life and convinced his children that he is Kennedy’s killer. He testified in the first trial that Fiorini—Frank Sturgis—never worked for the CIA and Eduardo won, but the magazine has appealed with the American as their new attorney and the only way now that they can strip Eduardo of his precious money is if they catch him in a fiction.

You imagine Eduardo played by Paul Newman but you know Paul Newman would never play a man everyone knows to be a murderer, a thief, and a swinger, so you imagine Gene Hackman instead. The Lex Luthor villain character from the Superman movie. You see Sally Field as the actress who plays the actress who plays you. You see Eduardo’s shiny bald head and those predatory eagle eyes and that Florida tan and that thin glint of a smile that was so cool and calm in November of 1963 before Capitalism’s Invisible Army killed their president, killed his killer, and then threw Eduardo into prison for the Watergate burglary like a common criminal. Today is not the first time that Eduardo’s last name—Hunt—has struck you as the perfect description for the life he has chosen.

“Who,” the American asks, “did you witness make payments to Mr. Sturgis?”

You see Sally Field bite her lip the way she does when she’s nervous. You see Anjelica Huston and Sonia Braga. You see Hackman smile next to a greasy lawyer played by the nephew of a director who is funded by the mob, the famous smile a wink to that one viewer who waits around in the theater after everyone else has left to study the maps of lies and compromise and money anyone can read in the credits, all those fake names and those lawyers and editors who make sure nobody says anything too dangerous.

You bite your lip. You glance at the stenographer whom you imagine as Sissy Spacek. When the American asks you the name of the one with the money, you say:

“A man by the name of Eduardo.”

For the first time the American smiles. And his grin is not so different from all the others. Fidel, Kennedy, Hunt—they were all hungry young men on a mission and
you were always running their errands, wearing the costumes, the shawls and sunglasses. You see those days in Miami like a black and white movie in your mind: strangers passing through a square, a man looking like a banker, a woman like a housewife on her way to pick up the laundry. Eduardo was the moneyman and Francisco handled the guns and contacts. A live drop meant Eduardo put the cash in your hand like a husband giving his wife a bit of spending money before a business trip. A dead drop meant a briefcase or a brown bag left at a bench or an envelope stuffed in a mailbox marked with chalk or soap.

“Did you go on a trip with Mr. Sturgis from Miami during November of 1963?” the American asks.

You remember it like it was yesterday. You remember the wind from the open window as you drove north, the laughter of the men at the gas station with the old bald tires sitting flaccid in the weeds. There were seven of you before you arrived in Dallas. You see the sky over the gas station again: the grasping racks of clouds over the barren land, the brown mangy hound tied by a chain to a phone booth, the way it rose up on its hind legs to try to capture a fly in its mouth. Eduardo had not yet joined the party. He was on his way from DC.

“Was there one or more cars?” the American asks.

“There was a follow-up car,” you say.

“Does that mean two cars?”

“Backup,” you say. “Yes.”

“What was in the follow-up car, if you know?”

“Weapons.”

This was what the men liked to talk about more than anything: their weapons. The new guns and the new bullets. The scopes and the range. The angles and the number of shots it would take and you kept asking yourself, “What am I doing?” as you passed normal Americans driving south with men looking at maps and children looking out the windows and billboards for Coca-Cola with women in bikinis smiling to a single hand coming out of nowhere with a Coke and the single word, “Yes,” on the sign, but you were thinking, “No.”

“Did Mr. Sturgis tell you where you would be going from Miami, Florida, during November of 1963, prior to the time that you traveled with him in the car?”

“Dallas, Texas,” you say.

There’s that name again. The needle in the neck of the pale doll.

“He told you that?” the American says.

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you the purpose of the trip to Dallas, Texas?”

“No,” you say. “He said it was confidential.”

You almost betray more, but you have been trained well. There is a fine line between the obedient housewife and the intelligent operative. You take orders and you get taken care of. You speak when spoken to. Fidel was the same way with you. Most men are. They don’t really want to know what a woman thinks or remembers, but you remember everything and anyone with half a brain remembers what everyone was talking about in Miami in 1963: Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy. They called him a pantywaist and a nigger-lover. They called him a communist and

the anti-christ and a sonofabitch and they called him a traitor for letting all of those men die on the beach—the *bahia de cochinos*—and they—Francisco and Eduardo—they were always talking about "the fall" and "the beach," and you were no idiot. You knew exactly what the talk was all about. What you weren't exactly sure of was why Eduardo wanted you involved, but the more cigarettes you smoked on the road to Dallas the more you believed Eduardo knew that you still loved Fidel because you did and if Eduardo knew what was in your heart—and Eduardo knew everything—he would use you like he did everyone else and would throw you away to get exactly what he wanted and you knew exactly what Eduardo wanted. Eduardo wanted Fidel dead. He wanted World War III. Eduardo wanted to return to the beach.

———

You want to know what the actress will look like. Sally Field is too fragile, not enough bite. You imagine some stock raven-haired refugee the American finds in a Miami theater troupe for a couple bucks, a little thing sticking out her chest as she places her right hand on the Bible and raises her left like a robot. You can hear her heaving her whispers at the obese jury. You see the scattered silhouetted heads of show-goers watching you scowl at Gene Hackman as you tell your story in a movie you know the Americans will never have the balls to make.

The American flips the page of his legal pad. For a moment, you remember that there are two Americas, two hundred and fifty million Americas, and this one has risked his life for the truth. You see him played by Gregory Peck. Atticus Finch suddenly in color, his hair going salt and pepper as he tells the obese amnesiacs in the jury the story they don't want to hear.

"After you arrived in Dallas," the American asks, "did you stay at any accommodations there?"

“Motel,” you say.

This one word tells the tale. Motel. Not a hotel where families laugh and husbands toast wives in a bright-lit lobby. No. You stayed at a motel, a small anonymous roadside hive of strangers plotting sex and death.

“While you were at that motel, did you meet anyone other than those who were in the party traveling with you from Miami to Dallas?”

“Yes.”

“Who did you meet?’

“E. Howard Hunt.”

You cough a laugh as you imagine Gene Hackman wincing and Eduardo wincing at the fact of Hackman wincing on screen. You see yourself walking into your apartment tonight as the actual Hunt, clad in a black turtleneck, waits for you behind your door and whispers “bitch” into your ear as he crushes your hyoid bone with his black gloved hands before tossing you down to the street where the lazy police and the lazy reporters from the tabloids will, of course, call your death a suicide.

“Did you see Mr. Hunt actually deliver money to anyone in the motel room which you were present in?”

“Yes,” you say.

“To whom did you see him deliver the money?”

“He gave an envelope of cash to Frank Fiorini.”

“Did anyone else enter the room other than you, Mr. Fiorini, Mr. Hunt, and others who may have been there before Mr. Hunt arrived?”

“No.”

“Where did you see the person you identified as Jack Ruby?”

This will be the moment the camera pans back to the obese amnesiacs in the American jury. Here will be the moment where the movie’s musical montage breaks and silence plays its seven-second role in the American mind. See the septuagenarian schoolteacher with the nervous sniffle and the octagonal glasses and the varicose veins. See the pale carbuncled walrus-faced machinist as the name “Jack Ruby” dawns in his pouchy eyes, the black and white television memories of his youth struggling to latch onto the colored drama of hazy middle age, the tragedy that so badly wants to remain a comedy.

If one day an actress will perform the actress who performed you, who will perform the killer who killed the killer to hide the identities of the true killers? You will never forget Jack Ruby. There he was: the mob guy who asked, “What’s the goddamn broad doing here?” Fiorini told him to be quiet, that you were part of the team, but Ruby said, “I don’t do business with broads,” and you couldn’t stand his macho bullshit. You stared at this squat, egg-shaped man with his stubby fingers and sebaceous skin and his adenoidal voice and his sick furtive smile, this man who would later bark Ozzie’s name before killing him on national television. There you were, the only “broad” in that smoky little motel room. You tell the American that Ruby arrived forty-five minutes to an hour after Eduardo left.

“When you say Eduardo, who are you referring to?”

“E. Howard Hunt,” you say.

You repeat the name with mock irritation. You know it is important that the American and his actress repeat the name E. Howard Hunt, like a chorus, as many times as possible. Hunt. Hunt. Hunt. America’s amnesia is fueled by names like Eduardo, Francisco, and Marita. Names like pills. White pills they

remember. Dark pills they forget. The “E” stands for Everette. Everette Howard Hunt, unlike most of his countrymen, could speak both Spanish and English. If you were a member of Operation 40, as you were, you spoke at least two tongues and had at least two names. You were all actors playing parts your entire lives. That was the great thrill of the CIA. It was all a performance. The name for the Dallas movie was *The Big Event*. Everyone in America, it turns out, bought a ticket to the show. Except you and the American and all the others who are now dead.

“Screw this mission,” you told the team that night.

You left that Dallas motel room the day before they murdered Kennedy in the streets and you returned to Miami where you saw it all on TV. Eduardo never imagined a Russian immigrant with a handheld camera could ruin his plan. The man with the home movie of the killing was named Abraham. Abraham Zapruder. He was a dress-maker and he captured the president’s head exploding and he captured the president’s wife in her pink dress and her pink hat crawling all over the brain-spattered back of the black convertible as it drove through Dallas. This is the movie that shows the shots. This is the movie that changed America forever.

———

On a cold February night, your handler calls you to tell you that Leslie Armstrong, the foreperson of the Miami jury, has spoken to the local cameras, claiming that the evidence in the trial clearly revealed that President Kennedy had been murdered by his own government with the assistance of the plaintiff, E. Howard Hunt. Armstrong asked for the government to take responsibility and bring the killers to justice.

“This is not going to end well,” your handler says.

You say nothing.

“If this goes national, you’re in big trouble,” you are told. “Big big trouble.”

You smile and hang up. You pour yourself a glass of wine and wait for the nightly news, a break from the daily numbing charade of Reagan and the Russians. But Tom Brokaw, Walter Cronkite’s dashing but slightly effeminate young successor, doesn’t mention the trial. He doesn’t say a word about Miami or Eduardo. Sometimes NBC needs to wait for the CIA to know what they can say. So, with the rest of America, you wait. You turn up the heat. You mute the game show, but keep the picture on the screen in case the news breaks through.

You listen to the Russians through the walls, the horns of the cabs. You rifle through your bills. You throw away a summons for jury duty. You take off your shoes and sip on your Cabernet with your feet up on the couch and you now turn on the sound and watch the new show about the black family in Brooklyn with the doctor-father played by the famous comedian, Bill Cosby.

“Heathcliff Huxtable!” says the doctor’s wife in a mock-scolding tone.

They call the black doctor Heathcliff on the show, like the orange cartoon cat. Doctor Heathcliff Huxtable. The alliterative name, coupled with Huxtable’s nostalgia for jazz and his sweaters that seem both a tribute and an insult to Jackson Pollock—they all combine to suggest—no—you don’t want to say it. You are glad the blacks have their show. After what happened to King and the Kennedys the least they can do is give them this show with a good father.

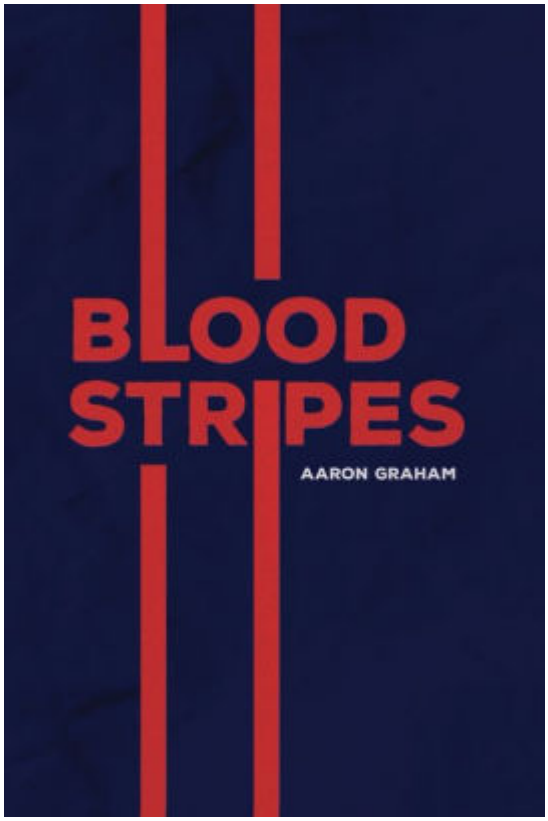
You wait for the urgent horns, the symphonic interruption, the return of Tom Brokaw. As you finish your glass of wine and the laugh track triggers a smile at a line you don’t even hear, you wonder how the American pulled it off. You see Gregory Peck thundering and this woman named Armstrong actually

listening to the argument and you see Gene Hackman wincing and you wonder: Did Eduardo get too cocky? Did he explode in front of the obese amnesiacs and shake them out of their trance with his entitled anger? Who was this Leslie Armstrong who dared to dress down the American government on camera? Years later at a party, just after Eduardo dies, you will talk with an Israeli who was also sworn to secrecy for her entire life, and the two of you, the German and the Jew, will laugh about Fidel and Eduardo and their appetites and how America has no stomach for the truth.

“The truth in America,” the woman will say, “is like constipation. You know the business has to come out. You know you will die if it does not. But it surprises you how long a body can last.”

But that is the future. For now, before the constipation and the inflammations and Hollywood coming to you for the rights to your life, you drink your Cabernet and laugh along with America at the black family in Brooklyn. The show is so good there is a small part of you that prays that the news break will wait until *Cheers*, the show about the bar in Boston tended by the retired baseball player with the saddest name in the world: Sam (M)alone. You are like this Sam Alone. And you have a little crush on Ted Danson, the actor who plays Sam. You wish him well. You don’t want Sam to end up with Diane. You want him to wait, because admit it: if he does not the show will end, and when it finally does begin and the fat jolly Norm sits down with the erudite mustachioed postal worker named Cliff and the two men begin to drink away their day, you pour another glass of wine and you join them. You fall asleep years before the news finally breaks.

Poetry Review: Aaron Graham’s BLOOD STRIPES



1.

I’m reading Aaron Graham’s war poetry. And I think *violence is a volcano.*

How pressure builds. Between layers of rock. Trapped in a chamber. Or when magma pushes. Fissures like rivers. Up through the upper mantle. Finding surface. How it erupts. Spews hot lava and ash. How bodies can blow. Apart and across a desert named Fallujah. Hurtling and pyroclastic. Or the aftermath.

Graham’s poems remind me.

How war is.

2.

This is Graham’s Iraq.

Come see the valley –

the death-cradle of civilization

(Boots On The Ground)

Iraq is where war is. Where Graham was. Deployed as a Marine. It is where I find him now. A soldier narrator. On the pages of *Blood Stripes*, his debut poetry collection. It is where his poems take me. To Iraq where. Violence erupts and

shells of men are spit out

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Skies are shrapnel

whose maw expands in the air

teeth like flame plumes

scorching gouts

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Soldiers learn

fresh-burnt flesh

smells like roast beef

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. There are

limbless boys

whose beautiful bodies

collided on football fields

in Iowa not six months before

(Boots on the Ground)

To Iraq where. Where

infantrymen are now the law

and the law is a pack of white dogs

hunting high-value targets

covering bearded brown faces

with black bags

(Since Shit Went Sideways)

To Iraq where. Children die and

There are bullets in young Sunni boys

mothers must take to a morgue

(Conjunctivitis)

Where the question. This question

did I bury a Sunni girl no larger than my arm?

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Dares to exist. This is Graham's Iraq. Where bullets pierce organs and

When a tracer round

becomes a collapsed lung

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How

breath

becomes a sparrow flapping

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham's poetry makes me think of J.G. Ballard. How he said *our civilization is like the crust of lava spewed from a volcano. It looks solid, but if you set foot on it, you feel the fire.* Graham's poems are full of fiery war. The violence of its eruptions. Graham's words forcing themselves up the throat of a volcano. Exploding like lava onto a page.

3.

Graham writes violence as a woman. How even before. War or enlistment. There is a craving

Until bent and jointed,

I hung

Between your breasts

(Midnight Runner)

Or how at war. Violence becomes anatomical. Between fingers. Coating tongue and gums. How

with each trigger pull

until death is a second skin to me,

is the film I rub

between my index and forefinger –

a charnel film I grind against

the backs of my front teeth with a raw

and bleeding tongue

(The Situation on the Ground)

And how after war. How it never goes away. Graham writes

I wear my violent acts

like a hand knit cap – reserved like a fossil fuel

a blubber slice

(Repatriation)

Graham writes of the aftermath. How after the eruption. Lava will flow. How even after. War can push into a house. Seep into a marriage. How

I tell her there are things you know only

after you've seen combat, there exists depths,

intimacies, I cannot will into existence

even when in her arms

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

Magma cools and hardens. Forms new igneous rock and PTSD. How

Your curse is the hammer about to drop –

hyper-vigilance. Doors you always lock

when you're on the wrong side

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

For Graham PTSD becomes its own violence. One that violates but also beckons. Graham writes

I give thanks to the dead

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

And. How it is

Because so many of the dead

they're always here

at the table

I've set,

like a mother's breast

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Graham's poems tell a truth about war. Its intimacy. How

there’s nothing as intimate as bleeding

with those men in the desert. A devotion

you’ll never share with a lover, child, or spouse

(The Curse of a Hammer, About to Drop)

War is not just what happens on the battlefield. War is what happens after. What keeps happening. To the soldiers who fight it. The civilians who survive it. After deployment is done. Armored trucks move out. Or a soldier goes home. Graham’s poems offer us the aftershocks of what explodes. And the truth. The truth that. For those it touches. War does not end.

4.

In Graham’s poems, the landscape haunts. Graham writes

I know my way around velvet

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How the air in Iraq is alive and cellular.

Electrons sway like the boiled wool

hides – hanging in Yezidi doorways

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

Landscape is a language. The shape of it shapes meaning. On the pages of *Blood Stripes.* The desert stretches. Almost endlessly. Across Graham’s poems. Across a war. Across all wars. Years that span a history that can feel ancient. Endless like a horizon line or how

Still the magnitude hits.

A thousand years stretch

down this street

(Mythos (Deployment))

But Graham’s landscape is not endless. This is a landscape marked by war.

The golden sands

that appear

a cold dark green

an eternal crystalline lawn

surveyed by rifle scopes

(Funeral Pyre)

Here is the desert. Where war and dunes heave. Like dying lungs.

This is Graham’s Iraq. How it seems endless. And how. It is also a place of endings. A landscape cropped by the circumference of a rifle scope. Cropped by what happens when. Bullets tear through a chest wall. And hit heart.

This is the striking duality of Graham’s landscape. Because

the cost of invasion is

how something beyond

fathom is lost

or, rather –

comes to end

(Sandscape: Mojave Viper)

This is where. The desert nurtures.

Iraq sand holds your face –

like friends and family used to

(Repatriation)

And this is where war also takes and takes. Until everything is gone or dead. How

in deep deserts

there is only

the abrupt – blast –

cracked windshields

and punctured MRAP

husks. Their rhinoceros bodies –

(Footfalls)

This is where soldiers patrol streets alive. But almost dead.

We trod the pavement on dead

patrol. Deep desert has no edge.

Our third day over the line

outside the wire

horizons merge, a cusp

of bright sky bleeds into earth

where being and not

being

touch impossibly

(Footfalls)

Graham’s poems offer us the duplicity of war. It is the craving and the curse. The eternal and the instantaneous. The invigorating and the deadly. And when soldiers are lucky to live through it. War is a landscape they leave behind. Before realizing they took it home with them.

5.

There is a tension. In Graham’s poems.

Of whether to tell his story of war. Or not to.

I pulled back from the vastness

where nothing needs

– and does not need –

to be written

(Sandscape: Dunes Overlooking Balboa Naval Hospital)

There is the question of how to write war. Because

Violence has a language all its own

(The Language of Violence)

There is a feeling. How war is

Just us bleeding in the desert

(Ode to a Wishing Well)

And that no one. No one else will understand.

Because. Americans do not know war. How they

probably learned

the words that describe

what happens to Marines

in the desert by watching

Anderson Cooper's lips –

round words

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

War for civilians is somewhere else. A running body of chyron.

About a third of the way into *Blood Stripes.* On page 32. A poem entirely in Arabic. I make a list of who I know who speaks Arabic or how. I decide not to. Decide not to try to find out what it says. What the words mean. Because the poem speaks to me in Arabic. How I can read it in Arabic. Even though. Or because I do not know. What it says.

This is a truth of war. It belongs to those who fight it. The land it is fought on. The civilians who endure its wrath. How there are parts of it. Parts of war. That are hard to translate.

Still Graham does it. In poem after poem. He writes war. He writes war in its own language. Where

a statement is a scar

(The Language of Violence)

Where

The voice of the wound

has a flickering tongue

its syllables escape

with fine bits of lung –

falling wet, into sand

(Speaking Arabic with a Redneck Accent)

And where. A Syrian amputee standing on a road speaks. Speaking in scars

the sacred scars,

which are a language

I can read to you at night

(The Language of Violence)

When Graham writes

how to sing bombs out of the air?

How deep to listen?

(Repatriation)

This is the task. The poetic task Graham takes on. Arming himself with words and war memories.

The result is *Blood Stripes.* And war. Written into being in Graham's poems.

Vivid and startling and forceful.

6.

I wake up thinking about Baudrillard.

And how *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.*

It happened obviously. But it was something else. Something other than what we thought it was. Different from what we were told.

For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was a series of atrocities. Not a war. The Gulf War was a performance of war. Not a war. The Gulf War was a media narrative constructed. Not a war. Where even the word fighting defied its own definition. As Iraqis got bombed by Americans flying in a technological sky. For Baudrillard. The Gulf War was hyperreal. A simulacrum. It was a not-war war.

And yes Iraq.

How the Iraq War was like this too.

A war. Where American soldiers went. Because of *weapons of mass destruction.* To look for *weapons of mass destruction.*

That did not exist. How the war they thought they were fighting. Was a war that did not happen.

And yet. Graham.

He writes

dry bodies

bloating and broiling

fattening in the desert

(Marine Corps Leadership Training)

How he writes

the purple lips of a wound

(Speaking Arabic With A Redneck Accent)

And I think to myself *there*. *There it is.*

Because war is not what our country tells us it is. War is what happens. To the soldiers who fight it. To the civilians. To the men and women and children and land it surrounds and engulfs and assaults. To the ripped bodies and roads. Roads of sun and bones it leaves behind. To everyone who carries it after. To everyone who carries war for days and weeks and months and years after. Long after we say *it is done.*

The Iraq War happened.

I know it did.

And not because my country told me it did.

But because it is there. Because I felt it. In the viscerally

powerful poems of Graham's *Blood Stripes.*

—

Blood Stripes is available for purchase at your local independent bookstore or wherever books are sold.