New Poetry by Emily Hyland: “Rehab Day 1,” “Rehab Day 4,” “Rehab Day 9,” “Rehab Day 11,” and “Rehab Day 19”

THAT PARTICULAR REGION / *image by Amalie Flynn*

REHAB DAY 1

He hadn’t told me, hadn’t stopped drinking
drank beer in the hallway near recycling

where people bring garbage and broken-down boxes
he guzzled, and I was here on the other side of the door

thinking him sober,

reversing redness and the inflammation
from an otherwise young and healthy liver

and *I* was sober—

how would it help for me to sip a glass of wine
while he drank water with our chicken piccata?

My first thought after drop-off was rebellion

to pull the cork from a long glass throat
and pour full garnet into stemware

I wanted that right again. In my home
the right again

to not finish a bottle and know
it will still be there in the morning

Then I felt a kind of shame

I checked him into a rehab facility
and all I could think of was wine

to unleash my desire for want

drove hours home like a Christmas-morning kid
thrashing through ribbons and crinkled paper

so soon as it was in sight
enrapt and hungry for vice.

REHAB DAY 4

He’s been in rehab four days now, four days without hands on my body

how indulgent that every day I’ve had hands plying my nerves

into delight

delight like the tickle and lick of sharing a bed with the same person

and when I finally call my dad, my dad who I'd been avoiding telling

I tell him how lonely it was to arrive back home after leaving him there

with nurses in their face shields, yellow gowns, and their masks

and the globe eyes of his counselor, who stood just back on the sidewalk

and my dad says with unintended harshness that he takes back

as soon as the truth hits the mouth of his phone: *You don't have to tell me that*

at least he's coming back and I imagine him there alone, barefoot

in shorts with a solid color shirt, some sort of mauve, doodling spirals

and checker-box patterns at the kitchen table on a yellow legal pad

in felt-tipped pen while he talks to me, and I remember how in the month

between funeral and stay-at-home, he was well-booked—every day

somebody stopped by with a crumb cake. Baked goods multiplied

on his countertop: cookies mutated into blondies into muffins into baskets

filled mostly with crinkle paper with pears and crackers atop

and underneath

the suffocation of plastic tied with ribbons. We worked in shifts

so he would not be alone, alone where he watched her for months and months

and months and months, he danced with her bald in her walker. Oh, how

she resisted that walker until she fell over! How there was a friend each day

on the calendar for lunch, how we took turns staying the night

frying two eggs with toast in the morning—he always ate breakfast—

the plate hearkening back to the diner in Waldwick. How he does not have a return.

My call—a child seeking solace from a parent who only understands

in the way the child will only know as real in some future

hard to materialize in the livingness of abundance and relative youth

how he too was young once with a wife who had long hair she permed

curly and he would tug on her locks under their blankets. When I say *future*

I see Jim again, clear-eyed with warm hands playing my rib cage,

The National on in the car as we drive up 95 to some version of our life

twenty-four days from right now.

REHAB DAY 9

of course the doctor finds a cyst

on my left breast uphill from sternum

rolling around like a glass marble

of course this is the first day he calls

of course I cannot tell him this news

washed from normal humdrum stress

he swims in progress

and my secret would not serve him

any more than it serves my own

malicious asshole cells

dense like perennials since puberty

of that particular region

of course I cannot even examine

the terrain of my own human lumps

with one arm raised like a branch

fingers ambling around suspicion

every time I’ve been terrified

I’ll find what mom found

and it all feels like oatmeal anyhow

and he’s helpless from there anyhow

to distract from my cycle of peering

into imagined crystal balls and storylines

seeing only the worst, seeing coffins—

if he does not know he cannot worry

and I cannot put that upon him now

make him worry for me

while he does so well in there

REHAB DAY 11

It’s time to take the IUD out.
This is what I think about today, my body
doesn’t want this preventer centered anymore.

I remember the day it went in:
man-doctor’s hand inserting copper
I winced. He said *I know, I know*

generic bedside assuaging
irked my nerves I sharpened back
No, no, you actually don’t.

And mom came along for support
all frail in her bird limbs, climbed broken
into a chair next to me at the outpatient place

and pain got to the point I needed her hand
to squeeze like citrus pulp out of my grip
as something external opened me up—

I want to be opened from the inside instead
dragged ragged in the riptide of giving birth—

I realized I’d break her frame of softening digits

and knuckles of chemo bones if I juiced
so I unfelt her skin and took hold of my gown
wrung into wrinkles and sweated holes

it’s only a sheen of thin paper anyway…
When he comes back, he will come back
to some levels of absence—and so in turn

open space comes back in, to come in
like syrup into my hungry self.

REHAB DAY 19

His absence heightens hers
so this is how I communicate with mom

I feel each breast one by one smushed
between a plastic pane and its baseboard
goosebumps prickle against machine sounds

in a room alone with the rumbling
inherited path toward lobular cancer

where will my tissue light up a mammogram
like a late-summer campfire sparkler?
Today the ultrasound is a shock

The technician skates a roller over my mound
and I see with clarity a round black orb

She talks to me lump to lump
on the same table she undid her robe years ago
except her skin puckered like a citrus punch

breast vines weighted
by clusters of rotting berries, overripe

mine are bright on the doctor’s screen
netted fibers the rind of a cantaloupe’s dry skin
I see roadways toward lactation

and roadways toward demise
and this marble eye from god

like an omen is benign
has come out as a reminder
of how to spend my days.

* *Variation on second line borrowed from Barthes’s* Mourning Diary
**Last line borrowed from Anne Dillard quote, “How we spend our days is how we spend our lives”*

New Nonfiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “Was His Name Mohammed Hassan?”

I don’t want to keep going back there. I’m damn near forty years old; too broke and tubby to deploy anymore. It’s my kid’s birthday next week. I should be thinking about balloons, wrapping paper, last-minute toys to order off Amazon. I don’t want to keep going back there, to the dust up my nose from another bomb buried in the road, to the holes left in me, those feelings, the loss, but I do.

*

It’s eight months into my second deployment. August 2009. I’m standing in a guard tower sandwiched between two hesco bastions, looking out over a lush green carpet of terraced

farms and qalats, all of it laid out before me with titanic, purple-brown, barren peaks rising up either side. Wheat grows down in the strip of green, apple and apricot orchards. Your night vision snags in their branches during patrols. I'm standing in my uniform, wearing a patrol cap, my radio tucked in my back pocket with the antennae whapping me in the shoulder. There are two other guys with me in the tower, wearing their mitch helmets, vests, ammo, however-many pounds of gear. I'm the Sergeant of the Guard, on light duty inside the walls of COP Blackhawk. My left hand looks like someone's blown one of those purple latex gloves into a balloon, but the swelling's been going down over the last couple of days. Within a week or so, I'll be on patrol again.

One of the guys is talking about this new JSS—a Joint Security Something or other, I can't remember my acronyms anymore. It's a base. We're going to build another base out at the far western nexus of that green carpet. Near a village named Omarkhel.

"Somebody's gonna fuckin' die," he says.

I can't disagree with him.

"You believe this shit, sergeant? We're practically combat fuckin' inoperable what with all the casualties we've taken and they want us to go out *there* and man another fuckin' base?"

"Bullshit," says the other guard.

"What's gonna happen when this JSS gets hit, huh? I mean, we can't even use the road without Counter-IED clearin' the way. How's anyone supposed to get out there to help us?"

"Hell, even Counter-IED got hit with an IED."

This is all stuff way over any of our pay grades.

"What do you think, sergeant?"

I don’t say it but I think he’s probably right. Whoever came up with the grand idea of plopping another base even deeper into Nerkh Valley is going to get a rude awakening when they hear about yet another truckful of soldiers getting blown sky-high either on their way out to or back from it. It’s the road. There’s only one squiggly-ass dirt road in or out of that valley; a natural bottleneck. We’ve already lost so many because of that road. Hall. Ogden. Wilson. Obakrairur. Farris. I’m twenty-four years old and I’m tired of people dying. People I knew, ate with, slept next to, traded jokes and slaphappy bro-handshakes with.

Maybe my name is next.

But if the higher-ups want a base out in Indian Country then they get a base in Indian Country. That’s where the bad guys are at, hooah.

The guard flicks his cigarette. “Shit’s pointless.” His cherry somersaults through the razor wire, and down, out of sight. “We’re just shoving a stick in a hornet’s nest. These people aren’t ever gonna change.”

And it hits me that if a couple of grunts with probably nothing more than high school diplomas (and a Good Enough Degree, in my case) can see the fruitlessness of our endeavors in Afghanistan, then why can’t the generals, politicians and think-tank analysts up there in the Big Beltway in the Sky? How many more grunts have to die until they do?

“What do you think, sergeant?”

“I think both of ya need to mind your sectors.” Or, in other words, quit your bitching about shit none of us have any control over. “I’m headed to the other tower, call me if you need anything.”

Within a month the JSS would be built, then abandoned. It happened on their way back. It happened on the road. Pellerin.

That was his name.

*

Wait, no. What actually happened was that I was in the recovery tent on FOB Shank. It wasn't even twenty-four hours since I'd been wounded when a whole truckful of Blackhawk guys choppers in. Another IED. I beeline it into the triage tent and stand next to them, let them see a face they recognize, crack a joke or two. Some are still out of it. Specks of dirt in the creases of their faces. A couple in neck braces. One with a broken leg. Everyone's been thrown around the inside of an armored truck and, yes, the steel is just as hard on the inside as it is on the outside. Necks, backs, heads, spines—all discombobulated. I count five, total, in the triage tent. They're missing one. The driver.

It isn't until after nightfall that we send Pellerin home. No lights but the ghostly green out of a Blackhawk. The wind of its rotors. The medics, doctors and others create a cordon leading up to the bird. I'm unexpectedly grateful it's my left hand that's wounded and not my right since I have to salute with my right.

We salute Pellerin.

He floats between rows of saluting soldiers. A body shape inside a black body bag. Four carry him on a stretcher but I don't see them, I just see Pellerin sliding onto a waiting helicopter and the doors close and the engine rises in pitch as its wheels cease to touch ground and he's gone. The IED had blown him mitch-first through three inches of ballistic windshield. I pray it was quick.

In another day or two, after catching a rare hot shower—careful not to get too much water in the hole in my shoulder, or the one in my thigh, or those in my hand—I'm on my own Blackhawk to FOB Airborne in Maiden Shar, then on a convoy back out to Nerkh, where I belong. That's the order of

events. A conversation with a guard in a tower about somebody dying actually happened *before* I was wounded. But it's all so twelve, thirteen years ago, it's like something out of a dream anymore. A gush of emotive images, smells, meanings. Takes a while for everything to settle into place.

Nettlesome memories, getting in the way of the story I want to tell and how I want to tell it, memories half-imagined anymore, memorized imaginings, best just forget about all of them, I got a kid's birthday to prep for—tap, ctrl + A, delete.

*

I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. This is what I write on my laptop in a not-so-diary word doc. It's mid to late August 2009 and I type this, and save it, because it captures everyone's frustration, my own particularly. A thousand lives equated to one. I write it because it feels so right, visceral, and I write it because it feels so wrong, vile.

At the beginning of the deployment, I spent months not in an infantry line company, where I felt I belonged, but behind a desk in the Maiden Shar District Center trading scraps of intel with Afghan police and national army about what was happening where, which outposts were attacked when, IED reports, and so on. I learned to speak some Dari, shared meals and chai with one Afghan officer after the next, traded jokes, was guarded by them while I took my turn grabbing a few hours of shuteye in a connex no more than a few steps outside the door of our little intel-swap office. I came to admire a number of Afghans, their patriotism, their ingenuity, their faith, and to sympathize with them, with the obstinacy of Afghanistan's many hydra-headed problems, from corruption, to extremism, to poverty, to incompetence.

But now I'm back in an infantry line unit and things are a

little different. I’m so tired of people dying. Everyone is. You deploy raring to kick some ass only to discover your entire deployment is turning into a line of losses, one after the next, like holes left in the road out in that bottleneck. You try to fill in the hole with something, anything, but it never fills.

Sure, we conduct a handful of night ops in retaliation, kick in some doors, find some IED-wire, but, soon enough, that hole’s empty all over again.

We’re rough with the people. Headed back to base, we’re dismounted, when my team leader spots a guy on a cellphone. He zeroes in on the guy, smacks the cellphone out of his hand, shoves him up against a mud wall, pats him down, stomps his cellphone into pieces. Another soldier smashes their buttstock through someone’s windows while we’re searching their qalat. Oops. When another IED hits, more than a few of us squeeze our triggers off at anyone. Goat-herder running away from the explosion? Pop-pop-pop. Van getting too close, not responding to shouts and waves to stop? Put half a belt of 7.62 through their windshield. Guy digging in the middle of the road for no discernible reason? One shot, one kill.

Yes, there were good things we did, promises kept. Communication barriers overcome. But throwing bags of candy at little kids and drinking chai with elders and showing general good will at best papers over the bad stuff. When the Big Army comes down and an investigation ensues about why this farmer was killed, it’s found that escalation of force procedures were followed. It’s an unfortunate accident. Here’s some money for the family.

But the people's grievances keep piling up. Whatever trust we build, it's erased with the single squeeze of a trigger. Try to paper over things but all that does is add fuel to the fire. It also doesn't help that the Afghan army is often more indiscriminate with their bullets than we are.

The people are convinced, the Taliban encourages them to think this way, that you can never trust a non-Muslim, a foreigner, an American, or the puppet government they're propping up. Trust is the hot commodity. You trust your brothers-in-arms over any Afghan stranger, but do you trust an American soldier's narrative over an Afghan's? Should you?

On another mission, a couple of guys wander into our perimeter, smiling, waving, out for a morning stroll—Oh look, Americans sprouted in our front yard overnight. We detain both of them, zip-cuff their wrists, put them in a row with all of the other military-age males we're rounding up. Because we don't know. We can't tell the difference between who's Taliban and who isn't. We don't speak the language, don't understand the culture, we don't really want to.

First day in country and they're telling you about counterinsurgency doctrine, winning hearts and minds, even the President of the United States can spout off buzz words like COIN and the people are the key terrain, but it doesn't make a dent in us. Not down in the thick of the ranks. From newbie privates already indoctrinated to mid-career professionals to flag officers, the majority of us resist counterinsurgency. These people, the rank and file, the army with its sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels and kickass (kiss-ass?) corporate culture, they're never going to change.

I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. We put the people in our sights because, often enough, they were the only target we could find. The people, stuck in a no man's land between pissing off the Taliban, who will kill them for talking to Americans, and us, who kick in their doors in the middle of the night and make their children scream when we zip-cuff their fathers. Still hear myself screaming at ten-year-olds. Sit down and shut the fuck up! Is that me? Is this who I am? Where's my compassion?

I'm too tired of people dying, of worrying about one of my guys dying, or myself, tired of civilians catching the flak from soldiers frustrated with their role in a mean little war. It's only another week until my scheduled R&R and it can't come fast enough.

*

I'm on my way back from R&R. September 2009. I'm sitting in coach and reading the latest Stars and Stripes when there's an itch on the top of my left hand, on the meaty part between my thumb and forefinger. I scratch at it. It feels like the tip of a screw just starting to poke out the wrong side. What the hell? And I realize: it's my shrapnel. It's working its way out.

Don't pick at it.

Eventually, I leave it alone and return to reading my Stars and Stripes. The engines decelerate; we begin our descent. I finish my article and turn the—stop. *Remembering the Fallen*. Two full pages of photographs, ranks, names, places and dates of death, so many soldiers and marines, so many faces, names, but I'm zeroed in on just two of them.

That's them—isn't it? That's their faces, ranks, names, dates, place of—that's fucking them. Cox. Allen. They're fucking dead.

"Shit!"

Heads swivel. I'm on a civilian flight. I'm not wearing my uniform but one look at my high-and-tight and anybody can probably tell. I fold up my Stars and Stripes, open it back up, recheck their names, their faces. I stare and keep staring until I'm certain I'm not seeing things.

"Shit."

I say it much closer to myself this time. I fold up my Stars and Stripes—don't, don't open it again—and drop my head back and close my eyes and try not to think anything, to hear anything, but it comes on, under the clunk of landing gear and the roar of decelerating aircraft, a whisper in my head, an incantation, repeating names, all of their names.

*

I'm standing in a shower connex with a pair of tweezers in my right hand. I've been in Kuwait a few days, waiting for a C-17 to shuttle me back to Afghanistan. My shrapnel's made a little recess for itself in the top of my left hand, though initially, boom, it entered through my palm. My tweezers don't even have to pull, it just snaps through the last threadbare bit of skin and rimming of puss and I'm holding it, looking at it, my shrapnel, under the phosphorescent glare of the light over the mirror. It's like a tiny meteor, silverish, clean.

The hole in my hand isn’t bleeding or anything. My body made a perfect little recess to spit out the contaminant. New skin’s even starting to grow down inside. Without waiting to think twice, I release my tweezers and watch as my shrapnel drops into the sink, clink, down the drain, gone. I don’t need any token reminders. Their names are etched in my memory.

*

I also own a black bracelet with all of their names etched onto it. After we got back, roundabout January 2010, everyone in the company received a black bracelet with our fallen writ across it. Many Blackhawk guys were already wearing one; now even more wore one. I did not wear one, I still don’t. My black bracelet is hidden in a box in the basement, along with all of my other army stuff. To meet me, to walk in my house, you’d never know I was even in the military. No awards or folded flags hanging from my living room wall. My scars and the beaten pathways of my thoughts remind me enough, thanks very much.

*

It’s October and I’m back where I belong on COP Blackhawk talking to a couple of my fellow non-comms.

They’re tolerating me, sort of.

“Remember back in February, back before we even started building the cop,”—COP, or combat outpost. “And there was this intel report about the AP3 checkpoint out in Omarkhel getting attacked?”—AP3, Afghan Public Protection Program, call them whatever just don’t call them a US-equipped militia of half-Taliban good ol’ boys.

“Sorta,” says one of my fellow non-comms.

“What about it?” says the other.

“You remember the checkpoints falling? In February it was the

checkpoint in Omarkhel. In March, the one in Karimdad. Then Mir-Hazari in April. By May, it was Dehayat's turn." I remember this because I used to work in that intel-swap office. A big map on the wall demarcated every AP3 checkpoint; I remember erasing them. "One after the next, west to east, all through the bottleneck, those checkpoints fell like fucking dominoes, remember?"

They're not sure, it's October and this is all so four months ago. (I'm not even sure, umpteen years later.)

"But you see what I'm saying? Special Forces set up the local militias, equipped them, then set up the checkpoints to safeguard the road. But the SF are all over the place, they can't back up the militias day and night. Those checkpoints didn't have any support. Not even from us though we can literally *see* Dehayat from here."

"Mac, what's your point?"

"June was when we started taking major fucking casualties, right?"

"Yeah—and?"

"It's the road, see? The Taliban wanted unfettered fucking access to the road. That's why the checkpoints were attacked. That's why building a JSS all the way out to Omarkhel was never going to work, cuz the bottleneck was already IED-fucking-alley by the end of summer. The Taliban *knew* the road was key, they knew it all along."

"Taliban don't know shit. Don't go giving those goat-fuckers any more credit than they deserve."

"Yeah Mac, sounds like you're scrapin' the bottom of the barrel on that one. Every road's got IEDs in 'em."

And they leave me standing there in the dirt. Now I'm the one talking about stuff way above my pay grade. They didn't quite

say that, but they didn't have to. And it takes me a cold minute to realize: they're right. Stay in your lane, buck sergeant. Stop talking about shit you don't know the first thing about. No one wants to listen to you, you make too many mistakes.

I look down at my left hand.

Sure, I do some things right. I've maneuvered my squad under fire, engaged the enemy, prevented my own soldier from firing on someone they weren't supposed to only to spin around at the shot from another finishing the job. Still, I'm nowhere near the level of competence I expect myself to be. I mean, no one is, but I've got one field-grade and two company-grades under my belt in my seven years in this man's army, and—

Only a divot of a scar left in the top of my hand, a pale slice in my palm.

They told us before the mission not to go near the road. There was intel about (yet another) IED. Don't go near the fucking road, they said. And what does Sergeant Mac do?

Thing is, it wasn't just me who was wounded that day. Our lieutenant caught one or more pieces of shrapnel, too. But because his were located near a major artery—which I believe he made a full recovery from, last I talked to him—the docs shipped him back stateside, just to be safe. Be glad it wasn't worse. That's what I tell myself.

And it hits me: I'm not cut out for this operational shit. It's October and we're not even pulling patrols out west of Dehayat anymore. We're doing odd jobs around COP Blackhawk, pulling guard, visiting "safe" villages like Kanie Ezzat and Dae Afghanan. Busy work. Minimal risk. Command doesn't want any more casualties, not this late in the game. It's October and all we're doing is winding down the clock, waiting for the next regular infantry company, the 173rd out of Vincenza, to

begin rotating in. It’s October and I’m less than a year out from the end of my enlistment, and I’m done. Done with Afghanistan, with the army, with all of it. If I make it back to Fort Drum in the next couple of months, I’m out.

*

It’s the day before my kid’s birthday and we don’t have any cream cheese. How’re we supposed to make frosting for his birthday cake? Who’s running to the grocery store? You? Me?

Please let it be me.

Going into it you think it’ll be easy, being a stay-at-home dad. You won’t turn into a frazzled wreck of your former self. You won’t end up desperate for a mere thirty-minute jaunt to Walmart, a slice of time, a guilty convalescence from the rabid lunacies of your toddler, a chance to feel, I don’t know, normal again, but you do. Transitioning to solids. A dab of toothpaste the size of a pea. Fucking potty training. Your spouse gets to go and do adult things like commute to work, talk to other adults at work, stress out about work, while you get to stay at home and watch Blippi the clown for the umpteenth time and fight to survive another day of it. Because when you’re a stay-at-home parent every day can feel like a losing battle. He’s teething (again). Only daddy can rock him to sleep anymore. Take that out of your mouth. Spit it out—now!

I’m standing in the dairy section at Walmart and I’m spacing out. I’m not thinking about the all-natural organic cream cheese in my left hand, a buck-fifty more expensive than the low-fat generic cream cheese in my right. The coolness of their cubes in my palms. No, I’m trying to remember the names of mountains.

*

It’s December and my last night in COP Blackhawk. The

remaining days of twenty-o-nine, and our deployment, can be counted on one hand. We're hours away from lining up in our chalks and hitching a ride up to Bagram. Midnight flights.

Darkness the infantryman's friend. The 173rd have already come in and taken over, pulling guard, running missions, sleeping in what were until very recently our tents. I'm standing down at the smoke pit and the stars are above me, brilliant spangled sonsabitches like nothing you see back stateside. And there are the mountains, black crags tearing into the spectacle.

I recall a few missions where we scaled the mountains and when we scaled them, we named them. Names like Mount Outlaw, Chocolate Chip, Drag-Ass One, Drag-Ass Two-point-O, Blackhawk Point. Who knew, or cared, what names the Afghans had given them.

*

At least, those are the names I can remember. I doubt my memory and I absolutely doubt my own versions of events, biased and incomplete as they are bound to be. I don't really mention any heroics, mine or anyone else's. My mind doesn't dwell on standard heroics like it does the unpleasant realities, the blind spots in our collective rearview, the things that should not have happened but always do.

I'm damn near forty years old, staring into space, until I remember the cubes of cream cheese in my hands. Organic or generic? Price and packaging. What's the difference, really? Is there any difference between the mythic me, the combat story me, and the now me, the real me standing in the dairy section of Walmart in flip-flops and pajama pants with two leftover bits of twelve-year-old shrapnel still in him? God knows they may never work themselves out.

*

My cherry crackles in the midnight December chill. There's only a handful of us down at the smoke pit. None of us speak. We're all looking out at the stars and mountains. Each of us in our own way saying goodbye, good riddance and good fucking luck. It's only a few hours and we're walking across the landing zone of COP Blackhawk under the gusts of propellers. I count my guys aboard the Chinook. Then I embark and catch a seat with a view out the back ramp. The only light is a green bulb in the fuselage. It details each of our faces. The only sound is the thrum of the double rotors. I give a thumbs-up to the crewman, then, in the next moment, we're leaving. Never get tired of that elevator-drop in the pit of my stomach when the chopper's wheels cease to touch ground.

I'm looking out the back of the Chinook, at the dark outline of COP Blackhawk as it circles below. The overall square of hesco bastions. The moonlit carpet of gravel from one end of base to the next. Armored trucks parked in rows. Light discipline observed. In a few beats of the chopper's blades, COP Blackhawk is out of sight and I lean back in my seat, and my gear, my carbine muzzle-down between my legs, and I'm looking back at when we first arrived in Nerkh.

COP Blackhawk did not exist back in January or February or whenever it was. We visited the Nerkh District Center, a stone's throw down the hill from where COP Blackhawk would be. The District Center wasn't much to look at. A handful of Afghan soldiers, a sprinkling of police. What caught our attention were the bullet holes riddling the walls around the outside of the compound. One sergeant looked at me, grinned and said, "It's like the Alamo." I grinned back at him. Hell yeah, the Alamo. That's what every infantryman really wants deep in their bones.

*

From January to December 2009, Blackhawk Company lost a total of eight killed in action. All of them to IEDs. Not to mention

the dozens upon dozens of others who did not die but continue to suffer from paralysis, imbedded shrapnel, leg, neck and back injuries, PTSD, suicide. Their names are forever etched in my memory.

After we left, COP Blackhawk was renamed to COP Nerkh. Did the 173rd rename the mountains, too? Or the company after them? Or the company after them? The names that stay with you, the names that wash away.

*

When I ask the Afghan army commander who had taken over COP Nerkh after the Green Berets' exit if there was any way that someone could bury a body 50 yards outside his perimeter without him being aware of it, he laughs. "There is no possibility," he says, pointing out that his guard towers have clear lines of sight in all directions over the flat ground. No one could start digging outside the base without attracting immediate attention. "The Americans must have known they were there."

—*The A-Team Killings*, Rolling Stone, November 13, 2013

It puts my hairs on end. I've walked over that ground. We, Blackhawk Company, built COP Nerkh. My ten toes tingling inside of my boots. Ten bodies buried under the ground. When a place you've known becomes a site of torture and mass burial, it's unthinkable, tragic, and then, all too familiar.

Many regular infantry bases, built up during the surge in '09, were turned over to Special Forces roundabout 2012. The surge was drawing down, the decade-long withdrawal from Afghanistan just beginning. Special Forces were sent in to assure Afghan allies we weren't completely abandoning them while appeasing taxpayers back home by supplanting thousands of regular troops with "pods" of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams.

ODA Team 3124 took over COP Nerkh.

In November 2012, Aziz Rehman was found under a bridge in a wadi, beaten, near death. He'd reportedly been stopped by Special Forces, on the road, earlier that day. He died right before reaching a hospital in Kabul.

Mohammed Hassan, in December 2012, was waiting with his family for the bus to Kabul. The bearded soldiers told him to come with them. Mohammed said to his family not to worry, that he'd meet them in Kabul. They never saw him alive again.

Nasratullah, a veterinary student, home on break in Ibrahimkhel, was abducted in a Special Forces night raid in February 2013.

I've read there was a box, on COP Nerkh. A plywood cube. The bearded soldiers put the men they arrested in the box. Agha, a fifty-year-old man and employee in Maiden Shar, described how Special Forces broke into his house without knocking and took him to their base. When he was electrocuted, buried up to his neck and left to freeze overnight, or dunked headfirst into a barrel of water, Agha said it was the Americans telling the Afghan soldiers to do it.

The SF went to Karimdad, to Omarkhel, to Dae Afghanan, to all of these villages I still see before me, the road twisting through them, golden mulberries drying in a wooden bowl, the apple orchards with the oldest trees and the deepest shade. There was a man I met in Dae Afghanan, in twenty-o-nine. We knocked on his door and he allowed us to search his home. It was a cursory search; peek inside. Clear. I remember I stood outside, just below the man, in his courtyard, my eyes feasting on his garden. A bee rummaging across the fiery head of a zinnia. Red-lipstick geraniums. The cool blue of cornflowers, or something like them. Salamalekum. You have a beautiful garden. I said this to him through our interpreter. He put his palm to his chest. Salam. Thank you. Was his name

Mohammed Hassan? I don’t know; I can’t remember even asking the man his name.

In 2013, a military investigation was opened, shut, with “no evidence connecting US troops to allegations of abuse, torture, harassment and murder of innocent Afghans.” Protests erupted in Wardak Province. Hamid Karzai demanded the Special Forces leave Nerkh and, by April 2013, they did. Within a month, with permission from Afghan security forces, relatives began uncovering bodies scattered in shallow graves around the walls of COP Nerkh. Relatives who had searched, questioned and quested in vain to find out what had happened to their brother, father, son, as no record existed of their relation being detained in any official database, now knew.

Neamatullah wept when, with pickaxes, his three brothers, Hekmatullah, Sediqullah, and Esmatullah, were raised up out of the brown broken earth. He knew them only by their clothes—a telltale scarf, a shirt, a watch. All else was bones and barely decayed flesh.

Information is scant, but from what I can discern an investigation was reopened, per new evidence presented by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and it’s still pending, or has gone stale, unresolved, or is closed again. Who knows? It’s all so five, six, seven years ago. Many fingers point towards the Special Forces’ interpreter, Zikria Kandahari, but, as a 2013 Human Rights Watch article points out: “Even if Afghan personnel are found to have carried out the killings and mistreatment, US personnel can bear criminal responsibility for war crimes and other violations of international law if they aided and abetted, ordered, or knew or should have known about crimes committed by their subordinates and took no action.”

Things buried, whether in flesh or earth, have ways of wriggling themselves out into the light. Ten bodies buried under the ground. Another eight found dead or left for dead in

wadis, under bridges, or what have you, in Nerkh Valley, Afghanistan. Come home, kiss your wife, go to your kid's birthday party. And what of the people you left behind who don't have their son, father, husband anymore? What memorial will come to stand on that ground? What plaque speak their names?

Mohammad Qasim. Nawab. Sayed Mohammad. Noorullah. Mohammad Hassan. Esmatullah. Sediqullah. Atiqullah. Mansoor. Mehrab Khan.

Maybe the tragedy itself needs a name for people to remember it by. Maybe we call it the Nerkh Massacre, or the Nerkh Killings, so it can join the long sad list of other massacres, named and unnamed, committed by US military forces, from Wounded Knee to No Gun Ri, from Bud Dajo to Bad Axe, from Haditha to My Lai. That village, or valley, or river, that ground forever in collective memory stained in blood. Or will their names, too, one day, wash away?

*

My kid's birthday goes off without a hitch. He's running circles around the yard with cream cheese frosting still stuck to his cheeks—organic, only the best for my baby. I'm sitting in a lawn chair, watching him, and imagining a future-me and a future-teenaged-him sitting at the table in the kitchen. I'm talking away about something or other, but then, out it slips, and he asks, "Wait, dad, you were in the army?" and I say, "Yeah, for… a little while."

"Why have I never heard about this?"

"Well, it wasn't anything to write home about—say, what're you doing with your friends this afternoon?"

That's how it goes. Divert and distract. Change subjects. It never works out that way. But I don't want my kid following in my footsteps. Chasing war, combat, strife, then growing into a

forty-year-old man who spends his days trekking the fields of his memory, gleaning shoots of violence, reciting the names of others gone before him to prevent their dying a second death. No, not for my kid. If I could swaddle him in a bubble of innocence forever, I would.

Though, chances are, it'll all go to shit.

He'll grow up wanting to join the army, the infantry of all things, he'll go off to fight in some mean little war just like daddy-o. Because I can't stop going back there. Because the United States can't help itself from starting mean little wars it can't finish every couple of decades or so. Because part of me is in love with the making of a myth of myself.

In May 2021, with only a thousand or so American troops remaining in Afghanistan, the Nerkh District Center is overrun. A Taliban spokesman claimed Afghan security forces were killed or captured in the taking.

I don't know how to make it stop, or what remedy would suffice. I can't bear to count the dead anymore. All any of it makes me wonder is: whose names are next?

<<<<<<<>>>>>>>

References:

– Gaskell, Stephanie. "Frustration Mounts in Afghanistan for Soldiers from Fort Drum-Based 10th Mountain Division." New York Daily News, September 23, 2009. https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/frustration-mounts-afghanistan-soldiers-fort-drum-based-10th-mountain-division-article-1.403466

– Left in the Dark: Failures of Accountability for Civilian

Casualties Caused by International Military Operations in Afghanistan. Amnesty International Ltd, 2014. https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/left_in_the_dark_afghanistan.pdf

– Aikins, Matthieu. “Afghanistan: U.S. Special Forces Guilty of War Crimes?” Rolling Stone, November 6, 2013. https://www.rollingstone.com/interactive/feature-a-team-killings-afghanistan-special-forces/

– Wendle, John. “Did U.S. Special Forces Commit Atrocities in a Key Afghan Province?” Time, February 28, 2013. https://world.time.com/2013/02/28/did-u-s-special-forces-commit-atrocities-in-a-key-afghan-province/

– Aikins, Matthieu. “Mapping Allegations of an American War Crime.” The Nation, June 21, 2016. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wardak-investigation/

– “US: Investigate Killings in Afghanistan.” Human Rights Watch, November 6, 2013. https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/06/us-investigate-killings-afghanistan#

– “Taliban Capture Key District near Afghan Capital.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, May 11, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-conflict-idUSKBN2CS2DV

New Fiction from Amar

Benchikha: “Flight”

CONTENT WARNING: A hate crime against an Arab-American is committed in the story. Being an Arab-American myself, the hate crime is loosely based on something that occurred to me back in 2004 when I worked as a raft guide in a southern state.

It’s past two in the morning, and it is warm on this early summer night despite a slight drizzle falling through the trees. I’ve just bedded down in my tent, which is my home for the summer and fall seasons here in Copperhill, Tennessee, where I work as a raft guide on the Ocoee River. But as I lie there, my eyes getting heavier by the second, I have a strange feeling that something’s not quite right.

I had spent three hours hanging with Brady at his campsite, feeding the fire dry wood, smoking pot, telling stories, jokes, and, as the threads of conversation dwindled, watching the dance of the flames in silence. Then, with the workday looming just a few hours later, I called it a night, patted Brady’s shoulder in friendly affection, then shined my headlight along the path leading to my tent some thirty yards away. As I approached, I made out a red pinpoint light to my left in the dark, in the distance. Then the light vanished. Odd, I thought, but gave it no further thought as my feet carried me inside the tent. After I undressed, I lay down, eager to fall asleep.

“So you’re the Arab riding around with a peace sign,” a man’s voice says.

I hear this through the fabric of my tent. I must have dozed off, but now my eyes snap open. I am in danger. I reach for my knife, but outside I hear the sound of a gun cocking. Shit.

Then, that same voice coming to me from the darkness: “Come on out, why don’t you.”

I’m considering my options when a blade slashes open the back of my tent. I clutch my knife, ready to defend myself as two dark human shapes stand outside, two red pinpoint lights emitting out of them. I look down at my chest and see both dots upon it.

“You might want to drop that knife, Arab.” He says the first “A” of “Arab” like the letter A. “If you want to live, that is.”

I drop it.

“Now, grab your wallet and car keys and come on out—slow-like.”

I do as I’m told, step out of the tent and wait for further instructions.

“Alright. Listen well, now. We want you to get in your car and leave Tennessee. Tonight, you hear?”

He hits me in the stomach with the butt of his rifle, and I fall to my knees. Then he strikes me again, this time in the face. I hear the crack of my nose breaking before I fall over, warm blood now flowing out of my nose. I taste it in my mouth, noticing for the first time in my life its flavor—salty, metallic.

“You hear?” he repeats.

“Yes, sir,” I manage to say through the pain.

“Oooh, he called me sir. I like that. I like me a courteous Arab. What do you think?”

His friend speaks for the first time. “Courteous or not, the only good Arab is a dead Arab, if you ask me.”

“You hear that, Arab? I think you better go. Now git!”

Holding my nose in one hand and my keys and wallet in the other, I struggle to my feet and start to make my way around the tent to the dirt path that leads to where my car’s parked.

“And don’t come back. Ever. You hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I say as I reach the path and hurry down it, making my way half out of memory and half by the light of the lamp over at the parking area of the campsite.

When I get to my car, I fumble with my keys and get the door

open. I turn the engine, back out, and drive off in my boxers and blood-soaked shirt, leaving my tent, clothes, cell phone, life vest, helmet, rescue bag, friends—leaving it all behind. Except for my life, I think to myself—except for my life. I think of going to the police station, but am afraid that here, in the south, not even three years after 9/11, I might not get the protection and justice I seek. I fear that I might get mistreated there as well. So I just drive. It's a long way to Seattle, where my parents live. I'm twenty-nine, a full-grown man, so I don't know why I think of them as my destination. Perhaps it's natural after traumatic moments to revert back to childhood instincts. I don't know, but the sooner I get there, the better. I drive. First west so I can get to a well-traveled highway where I start heading north, blissfully north. I'm going to Cincinnati, Ohio, I've decided. There I can take stock of the situation, find a hotel, clothes, wash up. There will be no rafting for me today.

I think back to the previous day, at how everything had been so perfect. My life, my job, spending my days on the rivers I loved so much. I recall what led me to Tennessee in the first place—the roundabout way I got to Copperhill from Seattle.

I'd had my first taste of rafting back in Washington when I was still a teenager, and I didn't know that I would carry that experience with me to the east coast. I had wanted to move as far away from my parents' influence as possible. My mother, in particular, was insistent that I join the family business—a small marketing firm—while I wanted to stand on my own two feet and know I could still make it.

I lived in New York City where everything was exciting at first. The city, the people who inhabit it, the multiculturalism, the job itself even. I'd gotten a job in advertising and it was sexy to work on products millions of Americans used; I felt important. And then 9/11 occurred and everything changed. I couldn't get excited about my job anymore, the tragedy having wiped out any semblance of

relevance to what I was doing. Still, though, I did it, woke up, washed up, dressed up, and went through the daily rigmarole. I began to think about things—about why some people hated the U.S., about whether a war with Afghanistan was the smartest way of defending ourselves against terrorism. But in my work life, I had become an automaton. A buddy who worked in IT at a different firm was feeling that same lack of purpose and floated the idea of escaping down to Tennessee to become raft guides. It didn't take much to convince me to drop everything and in May of '02 we had moved and were both training on the river. My friend couldn't cut it as a guide and returned to New York, but I'd had a natural ability for the job and fell in love with the river, its currents, the lifestyle of the raft guide. Save for winters—when I worked as a chair lift operator at a ski area a couple of hours northeast—I'd been there ever since.

As I drive I realize I'm shaking; fear, panic coursing through my body. I grab the steering wheel harder to make myself stop, but still I shake. How I could use some of Brady's weed, I think, to mellow out a bit. I switch on the radio—country music, the last thing I need right now. I turn the dial until I find a rock station, but I can't focus on the music, can't shake the feeling that I'm still in danger, that I've got a target on my back. After all, I do have that stinking peace symbol on the back of my car. Anyone could see it and follow me. I must stay on the highway, must make it to civilization, must make it to Cincinnati.

After a while, my shaking disappears. I don't know what I was thinking choosing to work in the south. And now, now of all times, with the war in Iraq raging… What was I *thinking*? With a name like Farouq Benhajjar and flouting my peace sign like an idiot. Then, a niggling thought comes through to me. Why the heck did they allow me to take my wallet with me? It seems like such a considerate act that it baffles me for a minute, before I realize they wanted to be sure I made it out of the

state. What if I ran out of gas? What then? they must have thought. I might have called the police, then.

I check the gauge. Should have enough to make it to Kentucky—then, I'll refill. I've been on the road about two hours. The radio is still playing its dumb, vapid songs. I'm thinking it could've been worse. They could have shot me. Heck, they might have shot me if I'd done something stupid like refuse to drop the knife, or try to fight, or be defiant, rather than submissive. Yes, sir. I can't believe I said that—twice.

Who did this? I wonder. I've no idea, didn't recognize the voices, couldn't see their faces in the dark. I haven't been careful about who I've had political conversations with. I've had them with other guides—locals and non-locals—as well as with customers. In addition, I've been writing anti-war editorials to local and state newspapers, signing off with "Farouq Benhajjar (Copperhill, TN)." Stupid, I've been stupid! I realize now more than ever that which blacks and whites, heck, what *everyone* knew back in the sixties, that activism in the south is serious and dangerous business.

Of course, in a post 9/11 world, I wasn't so naïve as to think that I wouldn't be victim of some sort of prejudice in the south. There's sometimes a misconception here in the U.S. that Arabs are dark-skinned, but we're not. We're Mediterranean for the most part, look more like Italians or Spanish than like natives of India or Pakistan. So I did think that I would be less conspicuous in the south than, say, a Black person. Thought it would spare me some grief, which I'm sure it did. But still, there were isolated incidents, always unexpected, always hurtful.

Two seasons ago, I was in a store buying firecrackers for July 4th with a friend who said, "Check this out, Farouq," pointing to what were the biggest firework rockets I'd ever seen. And before I could answer, one of three young punks who were

browsing, said, “*Farouq*? Isn’t that a terrorist’s name?” The other two smirked. “Shit,” he continued, “we ought to drag your ass to Polk County Sheriff Department and have you locked up for trying to buy explosives.”

“Forget it, man,” my friend said, getting between me and the three guys. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, beat it, towelhead.”

“Go fuck a camel, *Farouq*,” another one chimed in, to which the three of them busted out laughing.

I shake my head at the ignorance witnessed two years ago, and again today. At the thought of tonight’s events, I feel my heartbeat pick up again. But then, yes, there, I see the sign, “WELCOME TO KENTUCKY,” and feel my breathing come a bit easier. I’m still in the south, but out of Tennessee. I check the gauge again and stop at the next gas station. I step out of the car, fill up the tank, then walk barefoot into the station.

“What the fuck?” says the guy behind the counter, his gaze penetrating, his hand reaching for something out of sight. “Are you okay, sir?”

I look down at myself. My white t-shirt is blood-stained—it looks like I’ve been shot in the chest—and I can feel the blood on my face, sticking to the skin like dry mud on a hog. “I—I—” I stutter. “I was attacked a couple of hours ago,” I say. “But I’m fine now.”

His hand comes up now from behind the counter, and in it is a phone—just a phone.

“Do you want me to call the police?” he asks.

I think of all the explaining I would have to do, when all I want is to escape, be on my way, find a hotel and sleep, hug my parents in Seattle. I don’t have it in me to spend an hour

with police officers going over what happened, let alone here, in the south, where anything could still happen to me—even at a police station, I tell myself.

“No, thank you. I don’t think I could handle the police right now. Could I use your bathroom to clean up a bit, though?”

“Sure, sure. Go right ahead.”

I walk to the back and enter the restroom. As soon as I see myself in the mirror, the darkened blood on me and the anxious, fearful look stamped on my face, I break down. I lean forward and press on the sides of the sink and let the tears stream down, drops of diluted red hitting the porcelain below me. I sob for a minute or two and then, to make myself stop, I throw water on my face, soap, more water. I take off my shirt, wash it too, and dry it under the hand drier. When I don it again, there’s a visible stain, but nothing that would alert anyone of any violence having occurred. I use the toilet, wash my hands, and step out.

The clerk is waiting by the counter with a plastic bag. He walks over when he sees me, and hands it to me.

“After my shift here,” he says, “I go to the pool for a few laps. They’re not pants or anything, just a pair of swimming trunks, but at least you won’t be walking around in your underwear. There’s also a pair of sandals in there.”

I feel the emotion well up in me again, take the bag, and say thank you, holding back tears. I return to the restroom, change into the sky-blue swimming trunks and look almost like an ordinary person, except for the cut on the bridge of my nose. The sandals fit—they’re a little big, but they fit. Now that I’ve got footwear, I take the opportunity to wash my feet from the dirt and when I step out, I wouldn’t say that I feel almost normal, but I feel a little better equipped to face the next few days.

After I pay for the gasoline and some food I've picked up off the shelves, I thank the man again and walk out.

On the road to Cincinnati, I think of the kindness of the clerk compared to the two men in Tennessee just three hours ago. Those men. They must be laughing their asses off right now—having scared the poor Arab shitless—laughing all night, I'd say if I were a betting man. It's mind-boggling and I'm shaking my head at the absurdity of it all. I'm barely even Arab, I tell myself. I'm not Muslim, don't speak Arabic, haven't been to Algeria in nearly two decades. I'd be just another American if it weren't for my name, my father and a few cultural items he's imparted to me and my sister. But I'm obviously not. My broken nose and the ache in my abdomen remind me just how much a name can mean to some.

I turn on the radio, not wanting to get myself all upset again, and focus on the road, think of rafting instead, of yesterday, my last day on the Ocoee, I now realize. The day had been epic—my lines down the rapids clean as could be. If it was to be my last day on the river, I could be proud of it. Eric, however, had flipped his boat and there had been a furious scramble for me and the other guides to rescue the swimmers. After the trip, we had all chuckled about it over a beer at the company bar, watching and rewatching the flip on video, the customers laughing along with the guides, because now they had a story to tell.

Would I ever again have days like that?

*

In Cincinnati, I locate a Target, and decide to rest a bit. I recline my seat and try to sleep. But the night's events replay in my mind, over and over again, and I wonder if there was anything I could have done differently. Nothing comes to mind, other than maybe being less openly progressive, less of an activist. But as I consider this and remember how many

innocent Iraqi deaths could have been prevented, I realize how impossible it would have been for me to be silent. No, I conclude, there was nothing I could have done to avoid being singled out. There's nothing to regret here. Just plain bad luck.

And now I'm angry. Angry at these two racist men. Enraged all over again at the ignorance pervasive in America, at how Arabs are dying in Iraq because of the same type of racism I've just been victim of. At that damn president who, in the face of adversity, sees only war as the solution, and death—though I doubt he considers the latter, else he wouldn't put our troops in harm's way, or engage in such violent action toward a people that hasn't done anything to us.

I need to calm down, I tell myself. Nothing good will come out of my anger right now. So I give up on rest and walk into the store where I buy myself a whole new wardrobe, as well as toiletries, a duffel bag and a backpack. Right away I change into jeans and a t-shirt, and, after a full meal at a diner, I feel it in me to drive another couple of hours. Soon I'm nearing Indianapolis and decide to pull over at a Country Inn. I check in, take a nice long shower to wash off the scuzz of the day, brush my teeth and get to bed even though it's still only afternoon. I've been awake over thirty hours and, knowing that no one but the hotel receptionist knows I'm here, that the door is locked and bolted, that there are walls surrounding me to protect me, that I'm abundantly *safe*, I fall asleep at once.

I wake up to use the bathroom around ten thirty—nighttime—then go back to sleep where I find myself back in the forests of Tennessee, in Copperhill, running in the dark with the sounds of men calling out from behind me and dogs barking. I'm running as fast as I can but I can hear them gaining ground, can hear them yell, "We told you not to come back! Ever, you hear? Ever!" That's when I trip on a root, a rock, a branch, on something that sends me flying through the air and landing

on the ground hard. Vicious, wicked snarls surround me and dogs bite at my limbs, holding on and shaking as though trying to rip them away from me. I look up into the night as I struggle to get them off, and see a red pinpoint light there, and I know I don't have much longer to live. Then a voice says, "Did you really think you could escape?" followed by a loud BANG.

I open my eyes and find my shirt moist with sweat. I turn to look at the clock. It's a little past four in the morning and I know I won't be able to get anymore sleep, not after that. I wash up, check out, and hit the road.

About three months into my tenure at Muddy Waters Rafting, I had a group of rambunctious customers who just may have been a little drunk. Once they heard my name, one of them said, "Arabs are flying planes into our buildings and, in the meantime, we give them jobs. Go figure." That was about a month after the fireworks shop incident, and the two coming so close one to the other had me fuming. So I flipped 'em. Flipped 'em good. I'm not proud of it, but I put 'em in the drink and watched them flail. Afterward, I put the blame on them, told them they hadn't paddled hard enough. It felt good to get a little revenge.

I make it to Chicago where I stop for breakfast. As I eat, I realize that nobody back at Muddy Waters Rafting knows where I am. I was supposed to work yesterday and people would be sure to ask about me. I finish off my French toast and eggs, then use the pay phone to call the river manager at Muddy Waters. Sammy's relieved when he hears it's me calling. I give him the lowdown on the assault, on where I am, where I'm heading. He asks for my parents' address so that he can send over my things.

"Thanks for everything, Sammy," I say. "For having given me a job and a home for nearly three seasons."

“No sweat. You take care, you hear?”

And I flinch at that “you hear?” Even though it’s said in a different tone, in a different voice, the phrase reminds me of that man, of the violence, the blood, the fright.

“Farouq?” Sammy says, and it pulls me away from that night and back to my current reality.

“Will do, Sammy. Tell everyone there I wish I’d been able to say goodbye.”

I hang up and then it’s back on the road. Hours of driving, followed by lunch, followed by more driving. It’s dinnertime when I get to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I’m tired, and I need to stop for the night. The next morning, it’s back at it again, foot to the pedal and trying not to speed on the highway, when I see something strange. A black pickup truck in my rearview mirror is edging ever closer to me, until I feel the truck bump the rear of my car. My eyes find those of the driver and there’s a guy with a big old smile on his face giving me a small wave. Next to him is another man, this one with a rifle in hand. I can’t tell if they’re the same guys that attacked me back in Tennessee, but I step on the accelerator and soon I’m putting distance between me and them. Until my car starts to slow down. I pump the gas pedal, but nothing happens. The truck gains on me, reaches me and passes me on the left. I swivel my head and there’s the passenger aiming his rifle at me through his open window. He motions for me to open mine, and I do. Then he shouts, “Hey, Arab. Remember us?”

I wake up with a gasp. That’s nightmares two nights in a row. It’s like a haunting, and I wonder how long they’ll be chasing me, can’t wait to be in Seattle where I can just…decompress. But the nightmare has got me spooked, and I decide to remove the peace sign from my car. It’s better that way—safer. No reason advertising to whomever that I’m against the war. Then

I put some food in my stomach, and head off. Every so often, I see a car with that “Support Our Troops” yellow ribbon on its rear and, when I do, I have to keep my calm, because it’s such people who support the president and his actions overseas. And I wonder if by removing the peace symbol I’m betraying dead Iraqis, fallen American soldiers, my own nature, for that matter. This assault business has really thrown my head for a spin. I try not to dwell on any of this, insert a CD and drive on, let the music void my mind until it’s become numb. And I realize it isn’t just because of the dullness of the drive; it’s a numbness that has been creeping up on me since the beginning of my flight, a numbness at having had to leave everything behind, back in Tennessee. My life vest which was like a second skin to me; the helmet I had purchased at the beginning of the season; the gorgeous guide paddle that helped preserve my back and shoulders from the strains of the job; my home which, yes, was just a tent, but still, one that I had saved up for and spent a couple of hundred dollars on; the high-quality air mattress I slept on; the camping chairs and half a dozen other camping essentials. I frown. That’s not it. I’m going to get all of that stuff back—Sammy said I would. As for my friends, I know that our paths will cross again—I’m not worried about them. No, it’s more profound than that. It’s the sadness of having to leave behind the rivers. I’m going to miss the rivers. That’s it—that’s what it is.

Moving water has always inspired, and the pristine nature that surrounds it—the lush forests, cacti-sprouting hills, or majestic snow-capped peaks—is an inseparable frame to an awe-inspiring moving picture. But I find the beauty of the river runs deeper—much deeper.

It’s a subtler one, accessible only to boaters—kayakers, river guides, canoeists. The eddies, currents, hydraulics, waves, rocks, boulders are all features of the river that one could examine, but to take such a deconstructionist approach at describing the river doesn’t cut it. Not one bit. The skill we

boaters possess to access a river's hidden beauty is that of reading water; in other words, of deeply understanding the dynamics of water in motion. That's what we do—we read and react to what the water tells us. Put in this way, it can sound somewhat pedestrian, but in reality it is a magical and spiritual feeling, as we're in effect dialoguing with the river. One of the most dynamic creations of nature understood and I harmonized with it, easing my boat from one current to the next, playing with the river, smiling and laughing with it. And, some would say, playing, smiling, and laughing with Him.

I take a large breath and expel it. Yes, I'm going to miss them. But I feel that my relationship towards them has changed. Those men have done more than violence toward my physical and mental self. I can feel it—they've altered my viewpoint. I no longer consider the river with peace and love in my heart and mind, but with dread. Those bastards have made me fear nature, or, maybe not nature itself, but the vulnerability one exposes himself to in these wild and wonderful places. And now—what the hell am I going to do now?

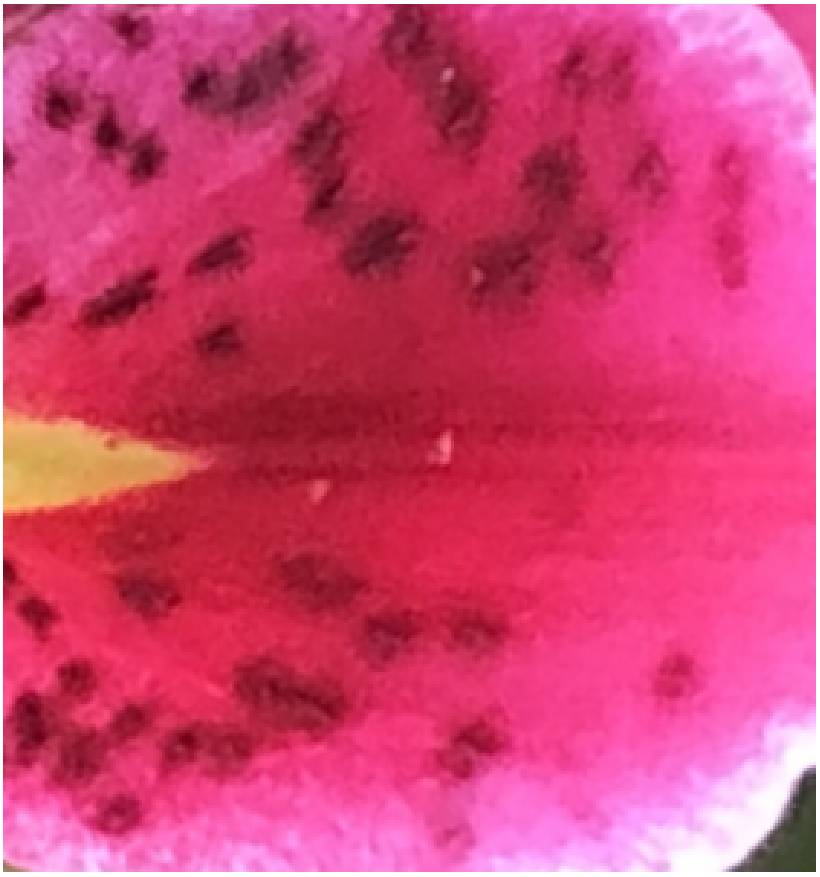
For the moment I set the matter aside and just drive. Drive till I feel the weariness in my body, in my brain, and I wonder how truckers manage to do this every working day of their lives. The tedium is insufferable. I stop in Bozeman, Montana. Tomorrow, last stretch to Seattle.

I would like to make it home for dinner, so I leave early and make it to Spokane by lunchtime. I'm now in Washington, just four hours from Seattle—I've made it. I want to cry out victory, and I do—I whoop as Credence plays on the radio. I can't wait to eat my mother's cooking, to hug her and my pop both. I'll hug them so hard their eyes will pop out of their heads.

But rather than drive west toward Seattle, I find myself compelled by…I don't know by what…by the best of me, the

strongest of me, to turn the steering wheel and head southwest. I know of a couple of rivers a few hours down that way. It’s still early in the season—they might have work for me. And I hear there’s some gnarly rafting on the White Salmon River. I don’t have a life vest, or my helmet, or a splash jacket, or a throw bag or river sandals, or a flip line or a dry bag even—I’ve got none of those. Plus, I’ve got that nascent dread of nature to deal with. But still, I tell myself, it’s worth a shot, no? On the way there I can find a place that sells stickers, something to fill the gashing hole on the back of my car, something colorful and hopeful, something that really has meaning—like another peace symbol.

New Poetry by Maggie Harrison: “Clutch and Bless”



MY RASPBERRY HEART / *image by Amalie Flynn*

CLUTCH AND BLESS

my heart is a raspberry
     juicy yet taut
     fragile
     temporal
     eat it now
          before it degrades   and
     leaves a tasteless
     piece
     of itself

smeared on the basket.
my raspberry heart lives in the moment
but not my gut
my gut dreams
unpredictable
digesting whatever latest bout
I’ve consumed
pandemic fear
fear of white supremacists
indignation
incarceration
playacting colonization with real guns on the range
a night in jail to protest police violence
hope for change
the audacity to hold it
all of this roils
my gut
terribly
tangled in the past
it’s what I ate yesterday and am now
transforming
to expel in the future
my raspberry, my beating heart
crush it, suck it through your teeth, and savor