New Interview from Larry Abbott: “The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen”

Art After War: The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen

As the memory of U.S. participation in the Afghanistan War fades in the minds of most Americans (the report on the exit fiasco notwithstanding), there was probably even less awareness that the military did not “go it alone” but had NATO allies, including Denmark (which entered the war 2001), one of the twelve founding nations in 1949. In Afghanistan the Danish military suffered 43 deaths from combat injuries, with 214 wounded in action. The raw number is low compared to the U.S. but was the highest number of deaths any country suffered if considered per capita, and so had an outsized impact.

That the Danish participation in the war still looms large in the country is reflected in an installation at The Danish War Museum in Copenhagen, which developed *A Distant War – A Danish Soldier in Afghanistan* over 10 years ago. It reflects an on-going presence of the war and its aftermath, a memory embodied in a physical space.

Mai Stenbjerg Jensen, the curator, told me that “the exhibition was made in collaboration with the Danish Armed Forces, more precisely with soldiers from ISAF team 10. Objects in the exhibition have all been brought home directly from Afghanistan. The exhibition shows the Danish soldier’s journey during a deployment to Afghanistan. The story is told from the soldiers’ perspective” (personal communication, July 4, 2023). The exhibit follows a ternary pattern of a soldier

going to war, in country, and back home.

The return home to civilian life can be problematic, as soldiers of any country's forces can be affected by PTSD. In the same way that the war for the American public is largely forgotten, the effects of war on the individual are likewise ignored or misunderstood by the broader civilian population. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and alienation. For many vets, the arts can offer a pathway to understanding their feelings of estrangement upon return by creating a visual or verbal representation of those feelings. Another intention of veterans' artistic creation is to share their work with both the general public and with other vets. The artwork can provide the non-vet with a window into the veterans' war and post-war experiences, helping to bridge the vet/non-vet divide, while sharing their work with other vets can both inspire and create a sense of community, thus reducing that sense of isolation and estrangement.

Henrik Andersen, now 40, served in the Danish army for 15 years and was deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan from February to August 2017. He had the rank of Specialist. When he returned home he was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. He decided that he would use artwork as a way of dealing with the various levels of how the diagnosis affected his daily life. Starting on January 1, 2022 and until December of that year he created a new watercolor each day. He notes in an artist's statement: "Follow my painted diary for better or for worse with my daily companion PTSD. A new picture every day in 2022 that both describes my world in and around me."

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen told me that “the diary concept was one my wife came up with, and for me a way to express myself daily through both good and bad days with a troubled PTSD mind, the thoughts, the emotions and sense of things which made an impact that particular day. I usually made the picture at the end of the day to make sure I got the most important impact of the day down on paper. It’s sometimes really hard to go to a mentally neutral place when you’re filled with anger, depression and loneliness. To empty your mind of judgmental thoughts and emotions and find that one thing that mattered just that day, that in itself can become therapeutic.”

He continued: “It would be really nice for me to be able to reach as many veterans as possible with my art. I hope that it will make a difference and maybe even inspire others and others like me, who are battling with the aftermath of their

deployment, to inspire others to find new ways to express their daily struggle. Even though I have my Instagram account, I've still not reached out to as many as I would like to. I do think it is an important message to get out to veterans and their families, that there are other ways to express yourself than you might think. My artwork is very personal to me, and it was a big deal for me to go public with it. It is meant as a daily diary in pictures and every day a new picture in 2022. My wife convinced me to make it public through Instagram, so I would post a new picture, describing my day emotionally or physically."

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen is not a formally-trained artist. He was adept at drawing and painting from childhood and was influenced by an eclectic mix of comics, the figures in *Warhammer*, movies, and

the classical sculptures and paintings in museums. Regardless of the medium or the genre he was always interested in how a thought, a question, or an emotion could be expressed. To him, the work begins with an idea and then the manner of expression evolves from the initial idea. The finished product, he says "comes from trial and error, both so rewarding and frustrating."

He does not plan any of his daily images but rather allows spontaneous moments to guide his work. The images are diverse, ranging from the relatively realistic to surrealistic to expressionistic. Even though they are created to reflect what Petersen is experiencing on any particular day they are not merely solipsistic and self-referential; they become a visual correlative that take on a broader meaning. The titles to the works help in this regard.

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

The early pictures set the tone for much of the rest of the year. “Angsten og Vreden del. 1/The Anxiety and the Anger part. 1” is dated January 2, 2022, and depicts a fragment of a face in profile, just a nose and a wide-open mouth in a scream, with a ball of reddish-colored smoke emanating from the mouth.

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness”

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness” (January 3)

depicts an empty chair in a barren room; a day later, “Fjernsynet viser ingenting/TV is Showing Nothing,” a TV set in a bare gray room has a blank green screen, connoting that there is nothing worthwhile being presented. Each depicts a sense of emptiness and the inability of some vets to re-integrate into the broader civilian society. “Mareridt i rodt, derefter sort/ Nightmare in Red, Then Black,” completed a few days later, shows a bleak, war-torn landscape with a few burned trees in red, mirroring a burned-out psychological landscape.

“Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot”

The January 5 work “Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot” refers to the physical impact of PTSD, and suggests that PTSD affects the vet not just psychologically but also physically.

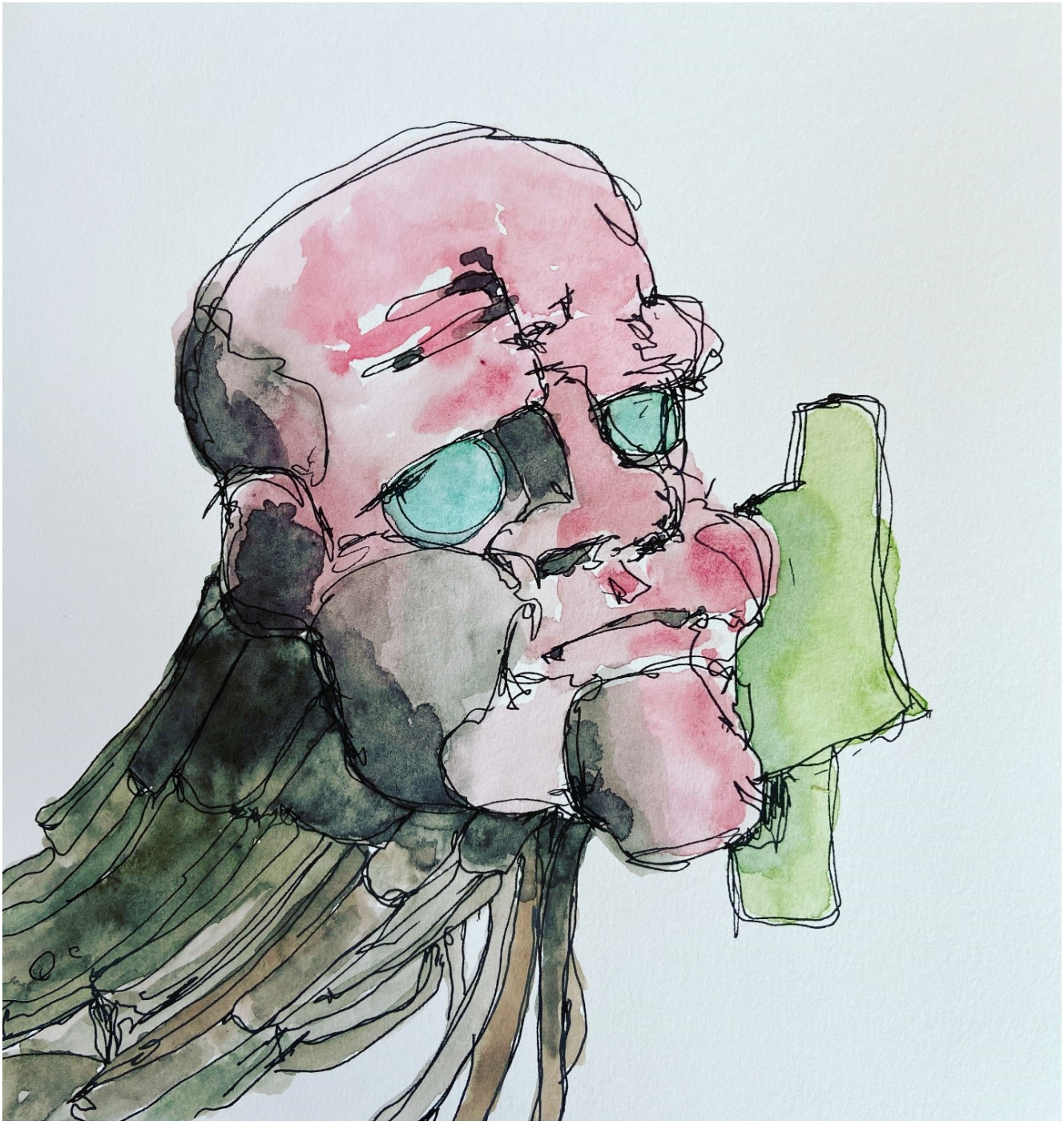
As the year progresses the imagery takes on different dimensions. A few works show recognizable scenes, like the river and bridge of “Ude for at se verden/ Out To See The World” (February 21), a floodlight on a lone power pole (“Sidst i rækken/Last in line,” March 6), steps going down a tunnel (“Sidst i rækken/ What happens if you look inside,” April 15), a dilapidated house with collapsed roof (“Ja der er brug for genopbygning/ Yes rebuilding is needed,” October 11), and an isolated cabin (“Hyggeligt uhyggeligt/Cozy Cozy,” October 14). Interestingly, none of these scenes include people, and even in “Cozy Cozy” there is a sense of isolation and remoteness, while in “What happens if you look inside” there is an intimation of foreboding as the steps lead to emptiness.

Faces, especially the eyes, and stylized bodies figure in a number of works, a few of which are self-portraits. “Sidder her bare del. 1, 2, 3/Just sitting here sharing 1, 2, 3” (August 26, 28, 29), is a triptych of sorts. The first two panels depict a skeletal figure sitting on a rock leaning its skull on its right “hand.” In 1, the background is a washed-out gray. The same figure is in panel 2, but some color has been added. In the third panel the figure is in the same posture but is now fleshed out in green. There are three human figures in the October 21 “Bare en fornemmelse/Just a Feeling.” The figures, in foreground, midground, and background, are dressed in brown and wear neckties, but are faceless. The two closest figures have flames around their feet, while the figure in the background is engulfed in flames. The figures appear impassive, accepting pain and death. “Sådan føler jeg mig/This is how i feel” (October 30)

is a self-portrait. The figure is fleshed, not skeletal, yet the posture is reminiscent of the skeletons in “Just sitting here sharing 1 and 2.” The eyes are wide and the face anguished, suggesting the pain caused by PTSD. Although the title “Trivialiteten er skræmmende/Triviality is scary” (February 8) might be considered a bit strange, it points toward the inability to fully reintegrate into the daily minutiae of civilian life. In this self-portrait, the predominant feature in the multicolored, somewhat blurred face are the eyes. Similar to other works, the eyes are wide, staring, fearful. In the July 23 “Selvportræt/Self-portrait” the face is disembodied, outlined in gray and framed by red, and seems to be floating in the clouds over mountains, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation from the world.

“Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection”

There is also a self-portrait entitled “Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection” from October 11. There is a disembodied head attached to tendrils with a green object next to the cheek. Both of these works connote a sense of loss, even a dissociation from one’s own body.



“Drukner på land/Drowning on land”

Much of the work has an abstract quality. “Drukner på land/Drowning on land” (November 10) depicts shapes of blue and brown, yet the title reveals a sense of struggle and suffocation. The November 2 “Tankespin/Mind spin” is a burst of reds, and represents both the explosions of war on the battlefield and in the mind. “Hvor brænder det ?//Where does it burn?” (August 20-22) is another series in three parts. In

each piece, stylized and intermixed dark and lighter blue smoke rises from what could be hills. Looking closely at the first panel one sees what could be disembodied eyes in the smoke. In part 2 the eyes become a bit more pronounced. In part 3 an outline of a face in dark red, with what appears to be bared fang-like teeth, is revealed in the smoke. There is an agonized expression on the face. Again, the burning can refer to the destruction of war and also to a mind on fire.

Not all the watercolors represent negative emotions. The March 8, “Et sælsomt lille væsen er mødt op/A happy little creature has appeared” shows a rabbit in a field. In “Foråret kommer nu/Spring is coming” from March 9 a sprig of green grows out of a finger on a green hand, showing the regenerative power of Nature. There is the playful “Guleroden er der, jeg kan se den nu/ The carrot is there, I can see it now” (April 4); a teddy bear is the subject of the October 18 “Ren kærlighed/Pure love”; likewise, a bird is the subject of “Maskot/Mascot” (November 10). These more “gentle” works indicate that even with the traumatic aftereffects of war there is the possibility for beauty and clarity.

As he looks back on his visual diary he told me “this picture [the April 1 “Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”] and others like it, of a withered, sick hand, gives a new meaning after I tried to take my own life in February 2023, and the attempt left me with exactly that, and really makes me think about the dual meaning in a lot of my pictures. I’ll admit that I didn’t succeed every day, but it was just as important to some days paint through a veil of tears or immense anger. I haven’t continued in 2023 with the diary but I am still painting, it is my little safe zone through the day and it has a calming effect to put paint on paper, the colors and the brush don’t expect anything from me, and as long as I don’t try to force something on to the paper it’s very fulfilling and stressless. My pictures surprise me

in ways I would never have imagined.”

“Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”]

The range of Andersen's images offers a broad insight into the post-war experience, including the effects of PTSD. His images reveal the uncertainty and tenuousness of what any particular day will bring. At the same time, the very act of creation becomes a shield or bulwark against this uncertainty and provides a sense of order, not only in the finished product but also in the process itself, which provides a structure that my otherwise be lacking.

All statements by Mr. Andersen were from correspondence with him on October 7, 10 and 11, 2023.

All artwork images courtesy of Henrik Andersen.

All photographs of Andersen courtesy of Mads Ullerup.

Images available on Instagram: **henrikerladetmedptsd**

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Mads Ullerup, "With Paintbrush and PTSD," October 22, 2022, https://www.veterancentret.dk/da/nyheder/2022/med-pensel-og-ptsd/

The Oscar-nominated Danish film *Krigen* (*A War*; 2015, directed by Tobias Lindholm), with echoes of *"Breaker Morant,"* examines the moral quandaries that war occasions and reveals that these dilemmas occur regardless of the size of a nation's forces. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/movies/tobias-lindholm-narrates-a-scene-from-a-war.html

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Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Interment at Arlington

The vet read that the hero’s burial ceremony in Arlington Cemetery was taking place the following Tuesday. As it happened, the vet was going to be in Arlington, the county in Virginia, that day and he had known the hero. They had taught together at West Point, and thought the vet was senior to the hero and they didn’t socialize outside of department functions, a couple of episodes had offered closer looks at him. Among other things, the hero was on the softball team coached by the vet in their last summer together.

The hero played left field, an important position in softball. The leftfielder has to catch the long drives hit by the opposing team’s best right-handed hitters. That summer, the hero chased down those towering shots, or circled under them, until he reared them in. It never seemed like a sure thing, honestly, but the hero almost always got them. The hero was fast, too, so he batted lead-off or second in the line-up. He was not a home-run hitter, but could easily turn a single into

a double if the opposing team did not field the ball cleanly or hesitated for a moment.

But the hero was not a hero for his softball ability. Early in the post-9/11 wars he had protested the interrogation tactics used by members of his platoon when they questioned detainees in Afghanistan. Brutality, let's just say torture, was forbidden by policy and regulation, but now appeared to be a tolerated standard practice. The hero sought clarification first from his chain-of-command and then from the highest governmental levels in Washington. He then took his concerns to a human-rights watchdog group in New York. The hero had been celebrated for doing so by many and was even been named a "Man of the Year" by Time magazine. Others, however, considered him a troublemaker. Couldn't he have addressed the problem other than by writing politicians and advocacy groups? The vet wondered how he might have handled the same situation.

At West Point, the vet had seen the hero lead a philosophy workshop. He was laser focused, deeply logical, and profoundly aware of competing factors and viewpoints, which he would unpack in detail in front of the workshop attendees. As he spoke, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The furious physical expenditure of mental energy was endearing. The vet had read comments by the hero's former students and it was clear the hero's students had been in awe of him. In the workshop, watching him give birth to the intricacies of an argument, it was easy to see why. The vet also understood why a woman, a colleague, loved the hero and eventually married him.

At the end of his tour at West Point, the hero left the Army after 15 years on active duty. He said he had enough of the military and now wanted to study philosophy as a civilian.

But the years after the Army did not go well. First gradually, then quickly, the hero's life disintegrated. In the beginning, he excelled in graduate school, but then his work grew erratic

and unsubtle. He picked fights with other scholars and his marriage fell apart. Eventually the hero lost his apartment and was several times detained by the police for public outbursts of craziness. He was hospitalized more than once, but because he had left the Army before retiring, and it was not clear that his present maladies were service-related, the VA was slow to assume care for him. Subject to the vagrancies of state-provided mental care, he was in-and-out of institutions.

Friends from the military tried to help. So did childhood friends and distinguished professors who had been impressed by the hero's early work and potential. The decline continued, however, and as so often happens, the hero resisted efforts by others to help him. Toward the end, his grip on what Poe once called "the precincts of reality" was tenuous. In 2021, he was found dead in his room at a mental hospital. The exact cause of his death remains unclear. Was it too much or the wrong kind of medication? Was it suicide? Did his mind and body just give out?

Now the vet sat in his car alongside other cars lined up outside the burial office at Arlington Cemetery. He knew how these interments happened, because the previous summer he had been in attendance for the interment of a childhood friend's mother alongside her husband, a Korean War-era vet, who had died years earlier. The vet had known his friend's father well and knew how much his Army service meant to him, along with the prospect of burial at Arlington. He also knew the interment process to be an orderly and dignified one that respected the deceased and his or her family members. Still, that interment had been a markedly casual event, with little ceremony or eulogizing of the departed. The vet had enjoyed the company of his friend and his two children, who were now adults and whom he had not seen in decades. The cemetery official was a retired Army paratrooper, and the vet, who had also been a paratrooper, bandied with the official about their

airborne days. Only when the cemetery official opened the columbarium “niche,” as the square burial vaults are called, where the ashes of his friend’s father lay waiting for his wife to join him, did the vet feel the momentousness of the event.

On cue, the procession of cars began to snake through the cemetery to the burial location. The hero was also to be interred in a columbarium niche, but there would be a service before the interment. A tent was set up among the gravestones to provide shade for the hero’s immediate family, along with chairs for them to sit in. Others in attendance, about fifty, stood in the sun, though for a summer day in Virginia it was neither hot nor humid. Off in the distance, the vet could see the Pentagon, which seemed ironically appropriate. An Army chaplain, a woman, stood waiting, along with a small detail of uniformed soldiers poised to fold the flag covering the hero’s burial urn. About 100 yards away stood a platoon-sized honor guard and a military band. Also present was a firing squad and bugler. The vet recognized a couple of teachers from West Point with whom he and the hero had taught, but not anyone else he knew. The attendees seemed composed equally of family and friends who looked like they might have either served with the hero or been his students. Only a couple of attendees were in uniform—none especially high-ranking.

The chaplain called the service to order. She said kind words about the hero without shying away from the controversies that marked his service and his sad final days. She read from Romans 8:28: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” When she finished, the detail folded the flag and presented it to the hero’s father. The bugler played Taps and the firing squad fired a three-round salute. Then the chaplain asked for a volunteer to carry the urn containing hero’s ashes to the columbarium. At first no one volunteered, and the vet wondered if it was appropriate if he stepped forward. Then the hero’s father said that he would carry his son’s remains.

The vet had read that the hero's father was a former Marine Corps machine-gunner and a Vietnam veteran. He had also read that the father hated the military and had been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was the only male at the ceremony not formally dressed or in military attire. Confined to a wheelchair, wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, the hero's father exuded determination that his son's life was worthy of military honor.

As the procession walked to the columbarium, the band played a song that sounded like the Elvis Presley classic "Love Me Tender." It's a sweet song, but the vet wondered at the selection. Only later did he learn that the melody belonged first to a song called "Army Blue" that predated "Love Me Tender" and was long associated with West Point.

The columbarium at Arlington Cemetery has its own kind of dignity, but it's narrow for the purposes of a ceremonial gathering. The previous summer, at the vet's friend's mother's interment, there was only the cemetery official, the friend, and the friend's son and daughter. Now the attendees squeezed into the row between the walls of burial niches or looked on from the ends of the rows. More words were said, but from the vet's position it was hard to hear them. After final remarks were completed, attendees filed past the niche and paid their last respects.

The vet had so far viewed the day's events abstractly, almost without emotion or consolidated articulation of his thoughts about the hero. But when his turn came to stand before the urn in its dark square final resting place, tears welled up and the vet suddenly found himself both short of breath and short of words. Conscious that others were waiting in line behind him, he stammered under his breath, "Good job man, good job" and moved on.

Following the ceremony, the vet spoke with his friends from West Point and a couple of others present. Someone pointed out

former students of the hero's. Another pointed out the childhood friend who had gone to the most length to organize help for the hero in his troubled final days. No ready opportunity to speak with the hero's family presented itself, and the vet was hesitant to force the issue. A reception was announced, but the vet didn't get the location and had already decided he would not attend.

An official announced it was time to for the procession to depart and the attendees in their cars drove slowly toward the cemetery gates.

On the way out of the cemetery, the vet saw signs directing traffic to the Marine Corps War Memorial. It had been a long time since he had visited the memorial, so he followed the signs to the parking lot. He walked around the grounds, read the signage, and contemplated the magnificent statue of the six soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The crowd was sparse: a few casually-attired tourists and some vet old-timers wearing ball-caps adorned with patches and pins representing military units. Unexpectedly, a wedding party, dressed in their finest, strolled by from a site farther off from the statue where they had gathered for pictures.

After taking it all in for a while, the vet walked back to his car.

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Biographical details about the life of Ian Fishback not recounted from memory were obtained from C.J. Chivers, "Ian Fishback's American Nightmare." *New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

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Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival, has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in*

the Sand "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* blogpost titled "Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?" I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie's resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn't state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments" is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between "Biodegradables" and "Seven." In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn't) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments," Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests

some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida's thinking and writing:

Jacques Derrida's description of a biodegradable object (from "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments," *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989):

On the one hand, this thing is not a thing, not-as one ordinarily believes things to be-a natural thing:

in fact "biodegradable," on the contrary, is generally said of an artificial product, most often an industrial product, whenever it lets itself be de-

composed by microorganisms. On the other hand, the "biodegradable" is hardly a thing since it remains a thing that does not remain, an essentially

decomposable thing, destined to pass away, to lose its identity as a thing

and to become again a non-thing.

The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just this week I read an article about the danger of "micro-plastic" particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. His fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the "shelf-live" of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives,

which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida's musing might be, the larger context of "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida's inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany's attitude and actions to oppress Europe's Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which de Man's journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida implies, is an abrogation of a "natural" process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That's a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as "cultural biodegradability" that structures the dissolution of a publication's ideas and import into culture over time. He asks, "Can one transpose onto 'culture' the vocabulary of 'natural waste treatment'—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the 'environment' in our societies?" In Derrida's formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency

only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls “the great organic body of culture.”

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases, fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida’s) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuring decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but many knew of it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm, Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific “paradigm” in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the “male gaze” in a 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books, movies, and art about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis’ article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were

overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the "good man with a gun" sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether "biodegradability" or "cultural biodegradability" best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I'm describing, I'm not sure, but I don't know what the better words are. Derrida doesn't clearly explain whether an important work (a "classic") resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there's also plenty of evidence that a book's reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked

greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in “Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments” are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida’s formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today’s cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man’s expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can’t have one without the other. As Derrida writes, “the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but ‘the Deconstruction’ of 1989.”

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn’t jibe with the values held by

the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to All the War Vet Novelists? They've Moved On and So Have We." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 2023.

https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-12/what-happened-to-all-the-war-vet-novelists-theyve-moved-on-and-so-have-we

Jacques Derrida, “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments.” *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989. Peggy Kamuf, a frequent translator of Derrida, is here named as co-author.

Peter Molin, “Whatever Happened to American Sniper?” *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature*. July 2018.

https://acolytesofwar.com/2018/07/01/does-anyone-remember-american-sniper/

Peter Molin, “Before *Time Now*: *Military Review Book Reviews*, 2001-2009.” *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature.* January 2023.

https://acolytesofwar.com/2023/01/14/before-time-now-military-review-book-reviews/

Peter Molin, *15-Month Adventure: US Army Advisor Service, Khost and Paktya Provinces*. 2008-2012.

https://petermolin.wordpress.com/

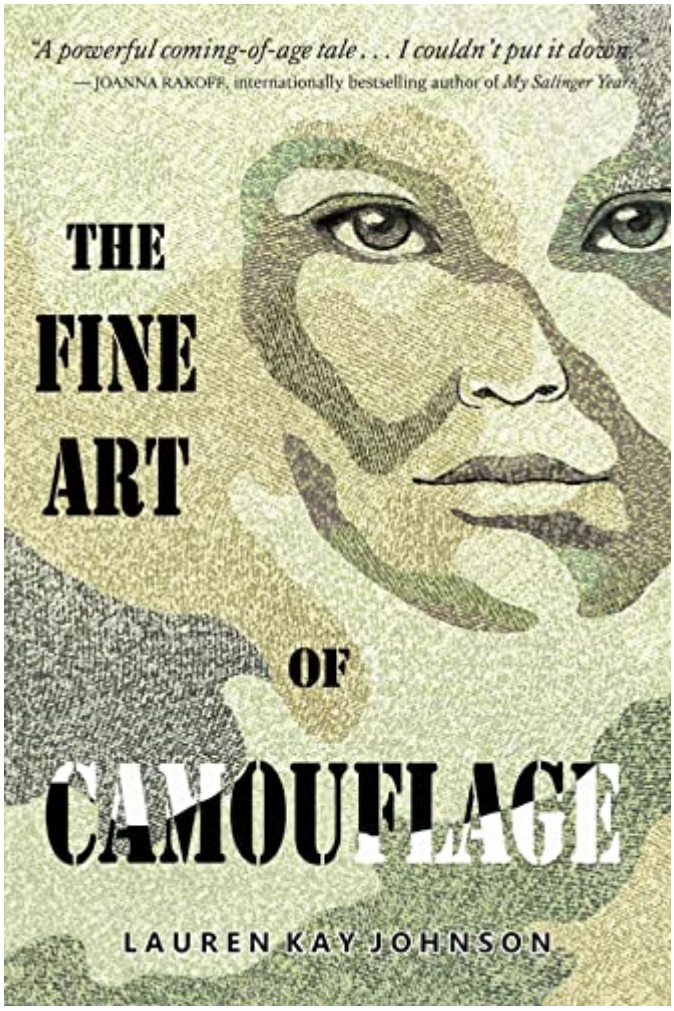
Fiction by David Abrams: “Thank You”

Thank you Thank you for your service Thank you for going Thank you for coming back Thank you for not dying Thank you for taking the bullet, the mortar round, the shrapnel that is making its way to your heart by micromillimeters every year Thank you for eating that god-awful food gritted with sand so we don’t have to Thank you for eating Thanksgiving dinner on a paper plate Thank you for living in a metal shipping container for the first three months until they got their shit together and built proper housing for you and your men Thank you for driving a Humvee without armor while ambassadors and visiting senators and country music stars were going around in bulletproof SUVs Thank you for carrying a gun for slinging it across your body for wearing it like a heavy necklace that, after the first week, you hardly noticed was there Thank you for the magazine of bullets you polished every night Thank you for dripping with sweat Thank you for leaving your wife for eighteen months Thank you for telling your children you’d be back before they knew it Thank you for punching the walls of your shipping container Thank you for your bruised knuckles Thank you for screaming Thank you for crying quietly in the porta-potty when you thought no one was listening Thank you for enduring the stink and heat and filth of that entire year-and-a-half Thank you for writing back to that fifth-grade class when all you really wanted to do was sleep after a hard day of walking Thank you for looking through the tear-blurred sights of your rifle Thank you for crying over the dead Thank you for the sucking chest wound Thank you for the partial loss of your leg Thank you for your blood caught in a sterile metal tray shaped like a curled cheese puff Thank you for hating and killing Muslims Thank you for the hard clench of your jaw Thank you for thinking of us back here in the United States of Amnesia going about our war-free lives Thank you for our amber waves of grain purple mountains majesty bombs bursting in mid-air Thank you for Fox News and the pretty girl who reads the headlines Thank you for the freedom to fill my lungs so I can howl across the bandwidth of Twitter Thank you for this Big Mac and this Whopper and this Domino’s pizza Thank you for

almost dying in order that I might live to gain another twenty pounds and then Keto myself back to normalcy two years later Thank you for the chance to marry Kevin S., to fuck him, to bear his two children, and to file for divorce when I was through with all of that Thank you for giving me the freedom to move from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon Thank you for my Golden Retriever Thank you for my God-given right to enjoy the rain Thank you for my new breasts and the blue pill which cures my erectile dysfunction Thank you for infomercials and the operators who are standing by Thank you for this cigarette and this beer and this fried pork rind Thank you for the chance to uncork this ’41 Cabernet and eat this Bernaise-smothered filet Thank you for the three Starbucks in my neighborhood Thank you for *American Idol* Thank you for my amazing Amazon Kindle Thank you for the Mall of America Victoria’s Secret Dippin Dots The Gap Best Buy and the weight of shopping bags that turn my fingers white Thank you for my Prius and the $3.34 per gallon which fills it Thank you for giving your blood for my oil Thank you for leaving and returning Thank you for limping through the airport on your half leg Thank you for that little American flag sticking from a side pocket of your rucksack (long may she wave) Thank you for your smile on a stiff upper lip and the way you tried to conceal your limp by swinging both legs in equal cadence like you were in a Sousa march Thank you for catching my eye Thank you for allowing me to stop you on the concourse Thank you for taking this stranger’s hand Thank you for saying You’re welcome No problem Glad to do it.

The original version of “Thank You” was published in F(r)iction Magazine in 2015.

New Review from Larry Abbott: Lauren Kay Johnson's "The Fine Art of Camouflage"



Camouflage can exist on a number of levels. There is the basic military definition of disguising personnel, equipment, and installations to make them "invisible" to the enemy. There is the idea of blending into one's surroundings to be unobserved, hiding in plain sight. There is the connotation of pretending, concealing, falsifying. One could add that there is also self-camouflage, where one pretends or conceals or falsifies to others and even the self. These latter connotations are more relevant to Lauren Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*.

Indeed, her epigraph is a quote from Bryce Courtenay's *The Power of One*: "'*I had become an expert at camouflage. My precocity allowed me, chameleonlike, to be to each what they required me to be*.'" The book follows the familiar three-part pattern of going to war, being in country, and coming back home. The twenty-five chapters in five major sections, utilizing copious flashbacks, interweave all three phases of her military experience, along with the gradual peeling away of self-camouflage leading to a more truthful vision of self and others.

Lauren Johnson comes from a line of familial military service. Her grandfather, his two brothers, her mother's father-in-law, and her mother, all served. When Johnson was seven, her mother deployed to Riyadh in December of 1990 as a reservist Army nurse in the first Gulf War. These months were a time of uncertainty and stress for the young Lauren. She feels emotionally disconnected and, of course, worried about her mother's safety. However, when her mother returns in March of 1991 "the world was whole again." It seems as if everything has returned to normal: "Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there." Her mother would give Veterans' Day talks at local schools, and Johnson felt immense pride about her heroic mom. However, what Johnson did not recognize at the time was her mother's struggle to re-integrate into "normal life," the camouflage her mother wore psychologically upon her return: "She didn't discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn't know she carried trauma with her every day, . . . I didn't understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough." Later in the book, her realization of her mother's war experiences comes again to the fore: "I saw the infallible hero that I wanted to see. I saw what I was allowed to see; because we needed

her, and because she knew no other good option, Mom spent twenty years swallowing her trauma."

Eleven years after her mother's return, during Johnson's senior year in high school, that pact is nullified by 9/11. Upon hearing news reports that day she writes that "Something inside me awakened" and she feels "a latent patriotism, the subconscious pull to serve, like my grandfathers had before me, and to emulate my hero, my mom." She takes and passes a ROTC exam and eventually signs a contract to be become a cadet during her four years in college. After graduating as an Air Force 2nd lieutenant she has a month-long post to Mali. Finally, in 2009, after three months of training, she deploys for a nine- month tour to Afghanistan. She is optimistic about the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) objectives, working with locals and actually helping people. At the same time, she is torn, because going to Afghanistan "felt like a betrayal . . . because part of me . . . wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter." The theme of split emotions is one of the major motifs in the book and reflects the idea of camouflage, putting a positive spin on a less than ideal situation. In one email to her family she raved about her living conditions at FOB Gardez in Paktia Province, but she also admits to herself that "Other details, like the knot corkscrewed around my stomach and the choke hold of fear on my mind, I left unsaid." Similarly, she also fears that, despite outward appearances and newly-minted rank, she would not measure up: "I was afraid I wouldn't be good at taking or giving orders, that I would fail, somehow, as a military officer, and in doing so I would betray my family history."

The book actually begins in May of 2009 while Johnson is undergoing three months of training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana to prepare for deployment to Gardez. She is an Air Force public affairs officer, a self-described "desk job chick," now armed with an M9 and M4. As a member of a PRT headed for Paktia she is not expecting combat, but the team

has to be prepared for any eventuality. In this particular exercise she has to clear a village. The exercise ends on a mixed note: as she charges into a plywood room a "bomb" of pink paint explodes and covers her, leading to her new nickname, Combat Barbie. Even though there is laughter and a hint of humiliation in this result, at the same time the incident was a catalyst, giving her a sense of accomplishment: "When I charged into the room, I looked professional and confident, like I belonged. And for once since arriving in Indiana, I didn't feel out of place. I didn't feel like a displaced Air Force desk officer, or a city girl, or even a woman. I felt like a soldier." Her feelings of achievement and optimism in pre-deployment training will gradually give way to doubts about her role and what exactly the mission in Afghanistan is all about.

For example, she writes an op-ed and a commentary about the August 2009 Afghanistan elections ("I commended the success of the Afghan security forces and the bravery of the voters"). In the back of her mind she seems to recognize that there was a discrepancy between the successful appearance of the elections as presented in her articles and the reality of what actually occurred: fraud, violence, desertion by the Afghan security forces. Her generally rosy view was countered by Thomas Ruttig, an observer for the independent Afghan Analysts Network. In his response he calls her articles '"plain propaganda.'" She writes that in September of 2009 she disagreed with his assessment but, she adds, "In April 2010, I agreed." This is the start of her questions about her role in the mission to "win hearts and minds."

Another incident illustrating the dissonance between "good news" and reality involves an elderly detainee who is being compassionately released and sent home. She looks forward to interviewing the man, with coalition forces radio DJs, because he could be "an ally in our information war." He could speak to local citizens about the merciful Americans and tell how

thankful he was for his release. However, the man is not the terrorist she expected but an old man who did not know why he was originally detained. She admits: "And all I felt was pity." The interview turns into a disaster and the public affairs team has to edit out awkward details from the interview. Johnson later writes a blog post which puts a positive spin on the incident by writing that the "detainee spoke kindly of his treatment," adding "that his eyes 'were also thankful,'" but admits that "I don't know if it was a conscious lie. . . . Mostly, though, I simply wanted that line to be true. . . . More importantly, I needed the line to be true for myself."

In October 2009, around the time of her 26th birthday, she helps prepare for a visit by the American ambassador (who never shows) by diverting resources and personnel to give the appearance of safety and progress ("For the ambassador, we flipped the notion on its head: our security mission was to *create* an illusion"). In addition, there was a communications failure in attempting to develop a media training session for government officials. She takes the brunt of the attacks on this failure. Gradually, as the negative incidents, blaming, and finger-pointing cascade she concludes that her duties were becoming more and more meaningless at best, counterproductive at worst, "the claims [the PR team were making] were starting to feel exaggerated, the efforts sleazy." The title of chapter 14 succinctly represents her outlook on "the mission": "F*#K."

Part Four/chapter 16 opens in spring 2013 after she is well out of Afghanistan. But as she watches *Zero Dark Thirty* with a friend she flashes back to December 2009, the deaths of CIA agents at Camp Chapman, which puts a chill of paranoia, loss of trust toward Afghans, and anger on Gardez. In January, 2010 threats escalated, including a possible suicide bomber at Gardez and mounting civilian casualties. She tells, in an extended sequence in chapter 18, "The Fog of War," of a joint

U.S. and Afghan raid to capture a suspected insurgent. Unfortunately, three civilian women, one pregnant, were killed, and initial reports blame the Taliban for the deaths. However, as the story unfolds, certainty turns into ambiguity. As the possibility arises that American troops were culpable, she has to produce euphemistic reports: “I hated the way the words tasted coming out of my mouth, and how easily they came, even when I fought against them. I hated that there was nothing I could do but tap dance, stall, and repeat hollow command messages.” She is in a continual psychological battle between telling the truth and loyalty to the mission (“Even when my emotions ran counter to the tasks of my job, duty always won out”). She continues: “A new kind of fear stalked me too. Maybe I was not only not changing the world for the better; maybe I was actually making it worse. What if my IO messages, radio broadcasts, and media talking points—all promoting support for the war, the American military, and the Afghan government— what if those messages sent ripples. And what if, on either side, people got caught in those ripples. And what if people died. My job isn’t life or death, I’d always told myself. But what if it was?” As the chapter ends, though, she cannot bring herself to tell the truth, writing “I still wanted to be a good officer.”

On March 2, 2010, replacements arrive at Gardez, she departs a week or so later, and after nine months in country arrives in Tampa, and 18 years from her mother’s deployment reunion she re-unites with her family. Hovering in the background, though, is a sense of alienation. She writes that the first two weeks back, before returning to PA at Hurlburt, were “a period of numbness . . . driving aimlessly around town . . . my brain lingered in Afghanistan.” She is caught between two worlds and unable to reconcile either. She is hit hard by the deaths of friends, two by car accident in Scotland and two by a plane crash in Afghanistan. While earlier she was able to emotionally distance herself from death, she is now haunted by the faces of the dead: “Now, faces swam like holograms across

my vision. Ben, Amanda, the seven CIA agents, the pregnant Afghan woman, the seventeen Fallen Comrades of Paktia Province."

She takes a short trip to Seattle as a "lifeline" but receives orders to South Korea. She faces a dilemma: report, or decline the orders and finish her military career. She chooses the latter, and "would be a civilian by Christmas." She also learns that U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths in the Gardez raid. This information, among other factors, begins her downward spiral into depression, excessive drinking, and PTSD. When she returns to Florida she decides to get help. The counseling seems pro forma and she does not immediately return for a second session, although the counselor does recommend that Johnson talk with her parents about her experience. Her "confessions" are the first step in regaining control of her life and stripping off the camouflage: "Talking to my parents was a catalyst for a conversation that would go on for years to come: an open discussion with my mom and often my dad, sometimes my siblings and grandparents, about our wars: how they'd affected us, all the ways they were different, and all the surprising ways they were the same." She also realizes that "War, I was starting to understand, was part of my inheritance too." Another step she takes is to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in Boston. Her writing has appeared in a number of newspapers, magazines, and journals, and in the anthologies *Retire the Colors*, *The Road Ahead*, and *It's My Country Too*.

In her Epilogue dated August, 2021, she writes of the traces that PTSD left on her: "In many ways, my brain has spent the eleven years since my deployment withdrawing from Afghanistan." She adds: "Still, the military always bubbled under the surface." This included a dysfunction marriage to an Army veteran. It takes her five years to get her "bearings."

As the book ends the "bearings" seem to have held: she is remarried and has two-month old twin daughters. But images of

Afghanistan still cast a shadow. The year she became a mother was the year of the withdrawal. Reflecting on her daughters she recalls photos of Afghan children being handed over from their families for evacuation. She writes, “I try to wrap my head around the kind of desperation that would lead a parent to surrender a baby.” She wonders if her life took a different turn would she be standing on the tarmac of the Kabul airport; perhaps she would be interviewing heroic Marines and writing uplifting press releases. She wonders if she could, or should, dissuade her daughters from following in her military bootsteps, and she wonders further about the young Afghan girl she met eleven years ago, and her musings speak to the unreconciled questions raised by “the mission”: “She must be a young woman now, likely with children of her own. I hope she experienced a glimpse of the brighter future we promised. I worry she is among those seeking refuge, and that she may not find it.” Have the promises, and the hopes, been fulfilled? There is no way to tell. But there is a lasting truism: wars are never over.

In 1939 Vera Brittain, in her notes to “Introduction to War Diaries,” ponders her World War 1 experiences as a nurse and how those experiences affected her post-war sense of self. She writes: “For myself to-day I feel sorrow no more; my grief is for those I have known & loved who were cut off before their time by the crass errors of human stupidity. I can only give thanks to whatever power directs the seemingly unjust and haphazard course of human existence that I have survived the sad little ghost of 1917 sufficiently long to know that the blackest night – though it never ceases to cast its shadows – may still change, for long intervals of time, to the full sunlight of the golden day” (16). Over eighty years later Lauren Johnson echoes this sentiment in “War and Peace of Mind,” one of the final chapters in *The Fine Art Of Camouflage*: “In the eerie quiet, I thought about the ripples I sent in my IO job, imagining them joining with other ripples sent by other naïve soldiers and aid workers, feeding a

tsunami that swept across the country, swallowing people like Ben and the seven CIA agents and the pregnant Afghan woman. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing their faces, or conjuring other nameless faces yet to be swept away." Yet she also speaks, if not of Brittain's "full sunlight of the golden day," of a dawn that can dispel the darkness of Afghanistan, depression, and PTSD.

The Fine Art of Camouflage by Lauren Kay Johnson, Liberty, NC: Milspeak Foundation, 2023.

Website: https://laurenkayjohnson.com/

Brittain, Vera. *Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary 1913-1917*. Ed. by Alan Bishop and Terry Smart. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982.

New Poetry from Amalie Flynn: "Married"

MARRIED TO A MORNING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

For twenty years I have been married
to a morning. Of blue sky that stretches
and pulls across me like water filling up
a suburban swimming pool. The pit that
formed a hole. The bodies falling down
as if bloodless dolls instead of kneecaps
and muscle shins and thighs hot fingers
letting go of metal or chests and ribs an
artery that runs down the length of a leg
like a hose cheeks that hold in teeth and

tongues jaw and soft palates or a brain
inside of a skull. How the sky was full of
bodies so many falling thoughts fell down
or how the word *land* crashes and breaks
breaks and breaks apart on impact. How
the day still drowns me.
Today my husband is crouched in our
garden calves flexed. Today I reach out
and I run my fingers across broad fields
of skin between the shoulders. Shoulders
of my two sons. And I know.
How I know beneath.
We are bones.

HOMEBOY: New Fiction from Mark Galarrita

I went home to Jersey only once since the enlistment. I had to see my Ma. Back in the summer of 2011 I finished Basic and Advanced Individual Training for Cav Scouts and thought I'd officially become a real patriot now. The son of Filipino immigrants transformed into a proud, government-paid U.S. Soldier. A real Soldier, though, I was not. Drill sergeant said that me and the rest of my squad back at A.I.T wouldn't experience anything too bad in Iraq or Afghanistan by the time we got in it. The War was almost up. When we deployed overseas, it would be like a vacation to Thailand, too easy. "Y'all are the lucky ones," she said. "You'll never see anyone die violently in your lives. You can thank Obama for that." Joke's on her, though. By the time I was thirteen, I'd already seen a few dead people in my life. My Pops for example. I don't need to speak on that, though.

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

Woman who popped me out almost twenty-one years ago wouldn't even get out of her car. She unlocked the passenger door to let me in and only glanced at me once before she drove off. Ma was about five inches shorter than me, a light-skinned woman with black hair that stopped at the back of her neck. She always wore light turquoise blouses, even when it was shy of being cold as hell. In the winter she'd switch between three

turquoise hoodies all the time and never anything else, even if the heat was on blast. Two cars in front of us, this college-aged Latino boy was coming out the gate with his mother, girlfriend, and whole extended family in tow like a Pharaoh had just arrived. I wondered about that dude for half of the ride until Ma spoke up.

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

“Pretzels—”

“What?”

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

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

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

“You have to eat, Jason,” Ma said. “I’ll cook adobo for you at home.”

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

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

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

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

When we got home, Ma ordered me to pick up groceries since there were no chicken thighs and vinegar in the apartment for the adobo she promised me. I would've said sure and gone off, but I got distracted by the horde of boxes stacked throughout the living room. They stretched from the front door all the way to her shrine of the Virgin Mary facing the parking lot. It was a warehouse. One side near the living room couch was stacked with cardboard boxes labeled by QVC, Amazon, and a bunch of stores I've never even heard of before. Cases loaded with questionably-made jewelry cushioned by styrofoam packing peanuts; old hardcovers from libraries across the country that

rotted at the spine; vinyl discs from bygone musicians I didn't even know. A brown maze of receiving and no shipping.

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

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

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

All him and Ma used to talk about was me being independent and successful one day because they were hard-working immigrants, but what did that mean? When I dropped out of college and told Ma I wanted to enlist, she pretended like she didn't hear. Instead she avoided me by praying to Momma Mary's statue plus her whole holy gang. Sometimes she'd leave me for hours at a time: lost in prayer or driving to different churches throughout the county as she never stayed at one parish for too long. I'm amazed I got through high school without asking for her help—like SAT prep, or which college I should go to, or how to interview for a job. That kind of small shit that adds up to big shit after a while. Sure, physically she was there, and she signed checks and authorized payments on bills (sometimes with my money), but on life advice or what I should

be doing—she was a ghost.

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

—

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

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

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

Ma stood by me and touched the uniform's lapel. I explained what every trinket stood for: the name tape, the rank, the flimsy ribbons I sort of earned just for being a living soldier. Ma's head shook once. Twice, maybe? There was a semblance of recognition I needed—balance, I guess. Part of her eyes got really big then super small, staring at the cross and silver on my upper left chest. When I told her it was a marksmanship badge, meaning I was a good with a rifle—the badge that I'm proud of the most, being a small town Jersey

boy with no history of handling a gun, let alone an assault rifle—there was no wow or pause to congratulate me. She asked: How did I pay for this (out of my government stipend) and when do I wear it (things graduation, weddings, or military funerals.) Ma wasn't too pleased with that last statement. She went straight to bed. I put the ASU back and took her car keys.

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

"What did you say?"

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

"Do not destroy my car."

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

Flannigan's was a remnant of a New Jersey bar that once was—a replica of what could've been a local's hub straight from a television sitcom, but the idea was scrapped after years of just trying to get by. Bartender didn't even look at me when I sat in a corner section, far from the Rolling Rock lights and the empty crimson red booths cushions that sunk and tore where your ass was supposed to be. Last time I came around, I was just shy of finishing off high school at eighteen. They didn't have a guard at the front checking ID's, it was up to the bartender, but everyone in school knew that no one checked; it made 'em more money that way. Now the staff changed, the only person still around was one of the regulars: a crusty-looking bald dude with blue eyes and dry skin. Didn't recognize me though. I ordered a High Life on draft and finished half of it before five minutes passed. The bar's floor hatch opened from below, and a white boy about my age with a short blonde crew cut emerged. He wore a fitted black tee with the pub's logo on the front and back.

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

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

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

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

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

“Murray’s dad helped me out on that one. The Corps a hand in it too.”

“Good for you.”

The two of us slapped hands and hugged, like all that past didn’t make a difference. Ben had developed into a sturdy, wood-colored deck of a man, polished with pink along the edges you can expect—the neck, the ears, and the side of arms. Once he got that DUI, he spent his senior year brawling with people

over his ex-fiancé and doing pills with a couple of other oxygen thieves who were either in AA, in jail, or on house arrest now. Sometime after he signed up for the Corps and deployed a few months later.

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

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

"What about your G.I. bill?"

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

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

I was so impressed I offered to pay for the shots, but he kept saying no, no. "It's OK, brother," Ben said. "Too fucking easy. It feels like tricks like that are the only thing I'm good at anymore."

I bought us a round of Miller Lights and he talked about Afghanistan, his last deployment. "We dropped so many rounds

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

I told him about the cavalry.

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

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

He got in his green Jeep and swerved out of the parking lot while I waited past twenty-three hundred for Rebecca to show up, except she didn't. She didn't text or nothing. About an hour in, ex classmates from high school came into the pub and passed me by—they looked at me, squinted, and walked away. Few people remembered me, can't blame 'em. I only had about two hundred or so friends on Facebook, perhaps eighty percent or more of them I didn't even talk to. It could've also been the beer and Ben's shots that must've given me some kind of funk for people to keep their distance, but by midnight the buzz went away, and I started sipping on another light beer minding my own until this brunette approached me to say *hi* and she called me Eduardo, and when I said I wasn't him, she apologized, turned, and went to her friends by the pool

tables. I finished another pint and drove to Ma's with the windows down. The night's chill pressed against my face and tickled my scalp. A Statey followed my ass on Route I-195 from Trenton to Robbinsville until it zoomed around me to pull over a speeding Camaro. An ambulance roared by in the other direction. Where it went, God knows.

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

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

"You said I could take it."

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

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

Prayer is an eerie and intimate feeling with another person next to you. When Pops was still around, we went to Saint Barn's as a whole family. We knelt in the rows at the front, not too far off from big Jesus himself looking down upon us. We recited the rosary, bead for bead. When it was done, Ma went up to the rows of candles and lit one up for her sister,

another for her home in Manila, and another for Pops. Come up, Ma said to me, and I lit one up for my future, whatever that looked like. Another for Ma. Another for Pops. The light glowed in front of me as if it were a power that only I could hold; a thing that I could control.

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

“When are you leaving me, Jason?”

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

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

New Poetry from Frank Blake

Poet Frank Blake during his Army service.

We came home

And had nothing to do and nowhere to go and too much freedom and money and space and women and cars and booze.

No more mission

Like a marathon runner collapsed at the end of a race and across the finish line and not really sure how to stop running or what to do next.

We missed each other

These other humans didn’t get it and had never been in that place where it was not fun but we had fun anyway because we had the love of combat brothers

We were bored

Because no matter what, nothing we would do in a week back home was even close to being the team with unlimited government funding using state of the art weapon technology

And none of us yearn for combat

But we do wish we could go back to a time where our actions mattered and our friends were nearby and we all had a great goddamn adventure ahead of us.

And now we know

That “in our youth our hearts were touched with fire” and that everything that comes next will probably suck in comparison

because life needs us to be paying cable bills and walking dogs

And it’s hard

To find meaning in things of little consequence when we learned so early on that the world is big and scary and violent and can be filled with acts of valor and sacrifice and hate and love.

So our only option

Is to live such a great and full life of found meaning in meaningless tasks as to make the sacrifices of those who didn’t come home and don’t get to walk the dog all worth it.

So we try

To draw as much life out of life and to execute a new mission of a great and purposeful existence

Because not all of us can

Because some didn’t make it back.

Tracer

There is one round among many
Painted with that iridescent color of night time illumination
Designed to mark the path
Of bullets flight in jet black fear fueled midnight battles

Zips towards the enemy
A laser of lead and anger

Ricochet path betrayed by a bright glow

The rule is

That for every one you see

There are many more you don’t

Just like the veterans suffering back home years later
We can see one every so often
Glowing in pain

Tracing the path of alcohol fueled rage and family splits and no jobs and hard times fitting in

But we all know
For the one we see
There are lots more

Descent

On the escalator at the airport

I saw a young man headed down as I was moving up

He wore that same familiar ripstop nylon rucksack that I knew all too well

It had patches from his units and friends and adventures

It had the same contents as mine

He carried in it lots of sadness for the friends he had lost

And guilt that he had made it back

And fear for what to do next

And memories of things he should not have done

And dreams of little girls dying

And lessons about leadership

And instincts to make his bed

And tears from current day family strife

And resumes to find new jobs

And drinks for when times get hard

And pills from the doctors

But it wasn’t his rucksack that made me know he was a combat veteran

It was the knowing dead look in his eyes that gazed right past me and through me at the same time in that one brief moment where our missions intersected.

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn for the WWI Centennial

Zone Rouge

(for the centennial)

photo by Amalie Flynn

1.
When the land was.

2.
Full of bodies dead. And twisted.

3.
When the fighting was.

4.
Sustained.

5.
With bodies. Dead. Twisted on a riverbank.

6.
Wrist bent. Hand hovers. Over water.

7.
Dead bodies with fingers. Like feathers.

8.
Stretched feathers or the calamus.

9.
Attaching to bird skin.

10.
These are bodies. Bodies of war.

11.
Dead with. Feathered fingers.

12.
Wing of a bird.

13.
300 days of shelling.

14.
The shells were 240 mm. Full of shrapnel.

15.
Mustard gas.

16.
Hitting men and hitting ground.

17.
Making holes. Upon impact.

18.
Shrapnel bursting.

19.
Bloom and rip.

20.
Ripping through dirt and faces.

21.
Ripped skin. Ripping off tissue.

22.
A nose.

23.
Hole in the center of an ear.

24.
Exposing canal and bone.

25.
Missing teeth. One lower jaw is.

26.
Gone. A set of lips.

27.
The chunk of a chin.

28.
And the shells. Shells from Verdun.

29.
Are still there.

30.
Unexploded ordnance. Sunk.

31.
Into dirt pockets. Like seeds.

32.
This blooming. Metal war.

33.
Shrapnel that looks like rocks or.

34.
Smooth egg of a bird.

35.
Soil made of mud and men and metal.

36.
How. Metal leaches and clings.

37.
This soil of war.

38.
Chlorine and lead and mercury and arsenic.

39.
Where every tree and every plant and every animal.

40.
Each blade of grass.

41.
Where 99% of everything died.

42.
Ground stripped raw.

43.
Stripped earth tissue or how this is.

44.
What war also.

45.
Also does.

46.
Damage to properties: 100%

47.
Damage to agriculture: 100%

48.
Impossible to clean.

49.
Human life impossible.

50.
The government declared it *uninhabitable.*

51.
A *no-go zone*.

52.
Broken skeletons of villages.

53.
And the craters that bombs make.

54.
Deep and round holes.

55.
How the bomb craters filled with water.

56.
Making. War ponds.

57.
This is a place.

58.
Where almost everything died.

59.
But the land.

60.
The land was still alive.

61.
Grass stretching again and.

62.
Grafting itself over the bone.

63.
Bone of what happened.

64.
Stretching over trenches and scars.

65.
Like new skin.

66.
And plants and trees and vines.

67.
Rodents and snails and voles and mice.

68.
Deer. Wildcats with metal stomachs.

69.
Still living I say. To my husband.

70.
Who went to war.

71.
War that he did not want.

72.
Afghanistan.

73.
How he came home with hands and feet.

74.
Covered in blisters. *Lesions* the doctor said.

75.
Skin burning. Waking up to him crouched.

76.
On the floor and scratching. Saying *I don’t know.*

77.
And I know.

78.
That this is how war is.

79.
Or later. I will lay in the darkness.

80.
And think about burn pits in Iraq.

81.
Black smoke and jet fuel and fumes.

82.
About Vietnam sprayed. The bare mudflats after.

83.
Defoliation of trees. And birds. Missing mangroves.

84.
How dioxin poisons wind. Sleeps. In a river or sediment.

85.
The fatty tissue of a fish. Atomic blasts in Hiroshima and.

86.
Nagasaki. The incineration of bodies and land.

87.
Tearing skin off people. Tearing trees out of ground.

88.
Tearing everything.

89.
Away.

90.
How black rain fell. Radioactive bomb debris.

91.
Into mouths. Of people and rivers.

92.
How radiation lives. In grass and soil. The intestine of a cow.

93.
About the GWOT. Blood soaked years and streets and.

94.
How many miles of land. Where we left bombs.

95.
Unexploded or forever.

96.
I will think about Zone Rouge.

97.
Trenches like scars.

98.
My husband gardening. The tendons in his arms.

99.
Moving like trees.

100.

Or how war never goes away.

Amalie Flynn

October 2018

New Movie Review: In “The Interpreters,” Home Is No Place At All

“The Interpreters,” a new documentary film by directors Sofian Khan and Andres Caballero, is a raw, emotionally vigorous, and, only too often, devastating look into the lives of Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and their efforts to flee home for the United States.

When it comes to narratives of the Forever Wars, interpreters consistently rate as some of the most important people working on the ground, frequently appearing in the novels and nonfiction works coming out of these conflicts, darting the intricately woven fabric of U.S.-focused narratives as charismatic, generous, and occasionally suspect men of two worlds. Very rarely, if ever, do they get to speak for themselves. This film gives them that opportunity.

“The American forces…call us interpreters, not translators,” a resonant voice narrates over opening frames of desert sand, Americans on patrol, soldiers and villagers deep in conversation. “The translator, he will just translate the word, exactly. We are *interpreters*. We interpret what they say

to our soldiers, and what the soldiers say to our people."

According to the documentary, over 50,000 local nationals have served with U.S. military and coalition forces since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But these so-called invaluable assets have found themselves flung forcibly from one fire into another, having been labeled traitors by their home countries for aiding outside forces, only to find themselves unable to acquire the necessary visa to enter and resettle in the United States.

Khan and Caballero make three such men the narrative focus of "The Interpreters," which debuted at Telluride Mountainfilm Festival during Memorial Day weekend, 2018. "Philip Morris," a quick-witted chain-smoker from Iraq; "Mujtaba," a protective and desperate father of three from Afghanistan; and "Malik," an Afghan interpreter still serving with the U.S. Air Force, whose striking features are half-concealed by a keffiyeh throughout the film. They are men who, were it not for the efforts of the filmmakers who sought them out, would otherwise be names on bureaucratic paper, anonymous victims of the machinations of the U.S. government.

Phillip Morris, Mujtaba, and Malik are three representatives of a significantly larger whole, men who were promised Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) by the U.S. government in exchange for their work as interpreters. They did this work at risk to their lives and the lives of their families. "When I started working with the U.S. Army, I was trying to help them to help us," says Phillip Morris. "We spent our lives suffering because of Saddam's regime." With the outside support and aid of his best friend, Minnesota National Guard veteran Lt. Paul Braun, Morris's SIV application moves through the doldrums of Washington bureaucracy and—after some tense back-and-forth traveling between the U.S. and Iraq—eventually sees Morris and his family safely relocated to Minnesota. According to the documentary, by law, the application and approval process should take no more than nine months. Morris's takes four

years.

Were it in Hollywood’s Midas hands, “The Interpreters” would be made as a kind of filmic victory lap with Morris as the only subject, a golden testimonial to the U.S. military’s presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and the generosity extended to interpreters by our government. Of the three subjects in the film, Phillip Morris is the resounding success story, and certainly carries the bulk of the narrative. But what Khan and Caballero have done—smartly, and well—is avoid the gilded trap almost entirely. They choose not to rest on the laurels of Phillip Morris’s story alone, and instead show a range of experiences that are far more indicative of what it means to be an interpreter marked for death while waiting, interminably, for a promise made by a foreign government to be upheld.

In Mujtaba’s case, the waiting becomes impossible, and he flees the country with his wife and children. After arriving in Turkey, Mujtaba seeks out a smuggler who can take him and his family to Greece. In their desperate attempt to cross the Aegean Sea, the small smugglers’ boat capsizes, and Mujtaba’s wife and two of their three young children drown.

Following their rescue at sea, Mujtaba and his son are returned to Turkey. Now refugees, they are forced to try and negotiate the SIV application process while simultaneously avoiding deportation. Mujtaba is adamant in his belief that his wife and two children are still alive, and enlists the help of a volunteer from a refugee organization to look for them. It’s a painful thing to watch, knowing what Mujtaba is risking by living in denial and extending his time in Turkey because of it. The longer he stays behind to look for his family, the less tenable his refugee status becomes, and if his SIV is not approved, Mujtaba and his young son will be forced to return to Afghanistan.

It is a life lived between impossible choices, every one of which is likely to end in some degree of tragedy. Mujtaba eventually receives approval from the State Department to continue with the SIV application process. The approval, unfortunately, comes two months after his wife and two children drowned in the Aegean. He continues to refuse to go anywhere without them.

Throughout the film, American voices—both military and civilian—maintain what is (or should be) abundantly clear to anyone watching the film: Iraqi and Afghan interpreters are service members of U.S. and coalition forces, and they are being abandoned. It is an ongoing injustice, an ugly stain not only on the U.S. military, but the government that sent those Americans into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

Journalist George Packer, who appears in the film, authored one of the most significant contributions to the conversation surrounding interpreters, SIVs, and America's responsibility toward the people it enlisted to help fight its endless wars in 2007. Packer's *New Yorker* piece, *Betrayed*, drew back the curtain on what was already a messy issue at the time. Reading it eleven years later, one can easily imagine seeing Malik, Mujtaba, and Phillip Morris's names in place of those like Othman, Laith, and Ali, given how similar their stories are, the events and struggles of earlier years repeating themselves *ad infinitum* with each generation of interpreters looking for a way out. It could just as easily be Malik on camera in Afghanistan telling us what Laith told Packer in Iraq so many years ago: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."[1]

In the film, Packer—who reinforces the importance of interpreters in these ongoing conflicts—attempts to draw a line between past and present by referencing the unofficial evacuations from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War and the interpreters being left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan today: "For some Americans, their finest hour in Vietnam was at the very end, and I wondered if something like that was happening in Iraq—were people organizing some kind of exodus for their Iraqi contacts? It wasn't as clear-cut a situation. But if you're an Iraqi who's gotten a death threat, it doesn't matter."

When the Americans began their own gradual exodus in 2011, Morris knew he faced an uncertain future. "I told [Lt. Paul]

Braun, I told him, ‘When you leave, what’s going to happen to me?’”

In the case of Malik, another Afghan interpreter and the third subject of the film, that abandonment is a very real life-or-death issue. A marked man (his sixteen-year-old brother was beaten for information regarding Malik’s whereabouts), Malik is forced to move his family from house to house and never shows his face out of doors. The film follows him as he continues to serve as an interpreter while he waits on a response to his SIV application.

Malik holds to his belief in America’s mission in Afghanistan despite knowing that he cannot stay to help rebuild his country when and if we leave. He works diligently under the pall that is the outstanding threat on his life: “As I go to my work location,” he says, “I won’t take the same taxi, the same bus, and I won’t take the same gate every day. Daesh, Talibs, Al Qaeda…if they find out that I’m still presently working with the U.S. Air Force in Kabul, they may get me, and

they'll kill me."

The SIV program for Iraqi interpreters was enacted in 2008, but stopped accepting new applications in September 2014, leaving tens of thousands of people—interpreters and their families—in the lurch and forcing them to go through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for resettlement, to little to no success.[2] The same SIV program was extended to Afghan interpreters in 2009 (the Afghan Allies Protection Act) and is still active, but the number of applicants accepted dwindles with every passing year. According to Human Rights First: "As of July 2017, over 11,000 Afghan principal applicants and 13,000 of their family members are still waiting at some point in the application phase."[3]

In the end, too many people are being forced to fight over too few visas—for those principle applicants and their families, for example, a grand total of 3,500 SIVs have been allocated for fiscal year 2018.

"The Interpreters" is a visually striking and narratively incisive investigation into a human rights issue that is as long and convoluted as the Global War on Terror itself. Interspersed with cell phone camera footage throughout, it is very much a documentary of the moment, immediate and jarring, and the stakes are all too real. Any faults are few and far between, a roughness in the editing that does little to take away from the effectiveness of the whole.

In a film full of emotionally resonant scenes, the one that arguably strikes the strongest chord is also the most subdued, the most well-earned: late in the film, having just watched Phillip Morris reunite with his family only to hear Trump extoll the virtues of the Muslim Ban seconds later, one feels braced for the worst. It's impossible to forget, after all, that while throngs of protesters outside John F. Kennedy Airport chant "No hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here," that Mujtaba's wife and children remain lost to the sea.

But then we see Malik, in 2017. A long white line at the bottom of the screen illustrates the amount of time it took the U.S. government to grant him his SIV. It is a freedom moment, a cause for joy, as much as it is a long pause that carries the weight of six long years of mortal uncertainty. We see Malik, and his quiet reveal reminds those of us on the outside looking in that a face is just a face, except when it is a target.

Malik and his family arrive in America in early 2017, just under the wire of Trump's initial ban. His success is nothing short of a statistical miracle: between January and April 2018, only thirty-six Iraqi interpreters and their families were admitted into the United States.[4]

Khan and Caballero have made a landmark documentary, a film that is by turns devastating, uplifting, enraging, and only too timely: as of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States has voted to uphold Trump's Muslim ban, sparking renewed outrage among American citizens and recalling the most inhumane of Supreme Court decisions past. Having watched "The Interpreters," I can only wonder what thoughts are on Phillip Morris's mind. Is Malik at risk of being deported? How is Mujtaba—still a refugee in Turkey at risk of being deported back to Afghanistan—contending with this latest in a long series of setbacks?

Because of the Supreme Court's decision, it stands to reason that by this time next year, thirty-six Special Immigrant Visas will seem like a lofty goal.

Early in the film, Malik says, "I hope that they won't forget what I do for them." Facing away from the camera, he looks out across the American base in Kabul, his body silhouetted between an aircraft hangar and a broad swath of dusty blue sky, tracking a single C-130 as it flies up and over the sun-bleached mountains in the distance. In that moment, Malik could be any one of the thousands of interpreters left behind

in Iraq and Afghanistan—men still biding their borrowed time behind threadbare keffiyehs in the hot sun, waiting for a piece of paper to decide their fate.

[1] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/26/betrayed-2

[2] https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194

[3] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/afghan-special-immigrant-visa-program

[4] https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194

Acronyms and 21st Century Conflict

Some useful acronyms by which to understand 21st century conflict:

COIN: Counter Insurgency. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2003-2010. Broadly speaking, the strategy wherein a friendly force competes with an enemy force for the allegiance and support of a largely-neutral population. Unattractive to militaries because of the numerous paradoxes involved in successfully pursuing the strategy. Very attractive to democracies and advocates of human rights as, ideally, COIN involves pitting humanism and liberal, western ideas against some competing philosophy, and we'd rather believe that, properly marketed, our system will defeat any competing system.

CT: Counter Terror. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2010-present. Employed around the world by America. Championed most vocally by Vice President Joe Biden. The strategy wherein intelligence (gathered directly by humans or by technological means) identifies actual or potential terrorist threats to the U.S.A. or any of its allies (or strategic interests, including Russia and China), and that terrorist threat is neutralized. With a bomb or a gun. "Taken off the board." AKA "whack-a-mole" for its apparent ineffectiveness.

DEVGRU: Seal Team Six.

GWOT: Global War on Terror. The Bush Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that included OEF (the war in Afghanistan) and OIF (the war in Iraq). Intentionally imprecise.

GCO: Global Contingency Operations. The Obama Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that includes OEF (the war in Afghanistan), and the unnamed operations in Africa, Pakistan, throughout South America and Europe and Southeast Asia. Terrifyingly, even broader and somehow more vague than GWOT.

ISAF: International Security Assistance Force. The group of mostly-NATO countries helping Afghanistan transition from tribal society into modern democracy. Also jokingly known as "I Saw Americans Fighting" among Scandinavian ISAF members.

OEF: Operation Enduring Freedom. The war in Afghanistan.

OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war in Iraq.

SOCOM: Special Operations Command (the command, now basically obsolete, responsible for organizing Delta, Rangers, Seals, and Special Forces).

TF -: Task Force [blank] – depending on the context, either a Battalion or Brigade-size effort, or a much smaller higher-

echelon group of former SOCOM-affiliate soldiers performing deniable missions for which there are no names.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote an essay about the way politics was impacting the ways in which people used language. The basic idea was that unscrupulous people who had things to hide were manipulating how we communicated in order to deceive us into supporting people or policies that we would not otherwise want to support. That politicians lie was not a new idea in 1946, and is not surprising today. In a world with enough thermonuclear energy to destroy most life above cockroaches, though, the stakes are a great deal higher.

Orwell refined the ideas he expressed in 1946, and published them in a more broad fashion in *1984*, when he described the language of "Newspeak." The language (a revision of English undertaken by a totalitarian state apparatus) would shift the way people thought by channeling their ability to express certain thoughts in public, the way they exchanged information. Reading "Politics and the English Language" and 1984, it's not difficult to see how Orwell's ideas about thinking and language had evolved. Orwell believed strongly in the potential of democracy and humanism to create morally responsible, ethical, civic-minded individuals, and put his life on the line to that end in the Spanish Civil War, receiving a throat wound that kept him off the front lines of the Second World War.

One of the most important and relevant intellectual legacies that George Orwell bequeathed us was this idea that, either with or without malice, institutions routinely and *deliberately* attempt to shape public thought through language. Nowhere is that more apparent today than in the successive American Presidential Administrations responsible for beginning what we call the "Global War on Terror" (the Bush Administration) and expanding the definition and bureaucratic entrenchment of that war (the Obama Administration). Both Administrations make heavy, almost exclusive use of acronyms

to describe every aspect of the conflict, from the weapons used, to the agencies involved, to the nature and scope of the military actions. Orwell would recognize the current “Global Contingency Operations” (GCO) as the apogee of post-modern “Newspeak” in action – a war that is made up of “contingency operations,” less police action than police-intention, less of an effort and more of an idea. Something slippery, hopelessly slick, around which no counter-argument can be mustered.

The acronyms are constantly changing. When I got to Afghanistan, the Taliban were called “ACM,” or “Anti-Coalition Militia.” Eight months later, they became “AAF,” or “Anti-Afghan Forces.” A single fighter was a “MAM” or “Military-Aged Male,” though many of the soldiers called them “FAGs,” or “Fighting Aged Guys.” As earlier pointed out, GWOT morphed into GCO sometime mid-2010. The CIA, with too much baggage, has lost much of its actual importance to various TFs, the NSA, DEA, DIA, and DHS, which in their turn will likely change acronyms over the coming years.

The enemy carried AKs and PKMs and RPGs, while we carried M4s, AT4s, M240Bs, SAWs and M4-mounted 203s, which were later swapped out for 320s. HIMARS is good, but getting a GOMAR is bad, although one of the finest, most scrupulous officers I ever served with went on record saying that if you got out of combat without a CIB and a GOMAR, you hadn’t done your job properly, a commentary on the higher-level leadership in the Army’s unreliability and essential disconnect from events on the ground. One cannot understand the military without speaking its acronyms fluently—and each military branch has a separate set of acronyms, some so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

In short – to wage war on the side of justice and good (America, the west, humanism), one must first master a shifting language of words and acronyms which themselves change every few years or so. I can testify from personal experience that the effort involved in mastering that language

is great, especially when one is actually in combat (and therefore not incentivized to do anything with one's energy save decipher the enemy's intentions). Mastering military-speak is the first step in confronting the realities of the war – one cannot effectively protest or criticize without understanding what it is one is protesting or criticizing. If one lacks the proper words by which to challenge a given political institution – especially when it is in the institution's interests to keep the nature of its goals and efforts obscure – one will simply rail away in a vacuum, doomed to appear to be protesting the last war, or some archaic problem that is irrelevant.

This is why the long-haired Vietnam-era protester seems so sad, so overmatched – he's saying "no war," to which statement the Obama Administration can correctly say "we never declared war, but Iraq, which was begun on false premises by the Bush Administration, has been closed down," and ignore the ongoing engagement in Afghanistan, and the ubiquitous worldwide "Counter-Terror" operations targeting, among others, American citizens. College students and idealists who feel – correctly! – that we should be more careful about how much information we allow our government to collect have to sift through layers of obfuscation before they uncover an acronym – NSA? Not CIA, or DHS? – that gives them an entity, literally an *agency* against which to argue, with which to dispute.

And why, why does any of this matter? Because every political administration understands that if they were to place a new agency inside the Pentagon and advertise it by its true name – in the case of the NSA, for example, the "Office of Monitoring Everything Anyone Does Online to Profile and Preempt Terrorist Attacks," there would presumably be a great deal of blowback. While some polls seem to indicate that a majority of Americans support sacrificing a certain amount of privacy to security, it's not clear to me whether Americans would support such a program or agency – supposing that the majority of the

population agrees that one should trump the other, we could have (given knowledge of the NSA's programs) collectively agreed to discuss our way ahead as a nation. Even the CIA – the "Central Intelligence Agency," which I will use as an umbrella acronym for those acronyms I should not divulge to the public in the interests of national security, could at this point more accurately be called the "CIA / DDSAT," or Central Intelligence Agency / Department of Drone Strikes Against Terrorists." Again, if the public had understood – understood, that we had kill teams in many third world countries, and were targeting individual human beings for assassination, oftentimes based on patterns of behavior, there probably would have been a spirited debate on the subject. These actions were *not kept secret*, but were buried beneath an avalanche of acronyms and double-speak. Newspeak, in fact.

One should not have to offer one's credentials or explain one's love of country when making such a statement, but it still feels obligatory. In an intellectual atmosphere where substance is more important than words, I have to point out that I believe, like Orwell, so strongly in the potential for good in the west and our cultural tradition that I went to war, twice, for it – OEF VIII and OEF X (it may have been XI, I never got a clear answer on that). I believe that my country, a part of the cultural legacy of Kant and Plato, is an especially permissive and forgiving country in which to be a journalist and thinker, and despite the vitriol with which intellectuals are attacked from both the left and the right (the Williamsburg Hipsters on the one hand who see no wrong in President Obama, and the Fox News / Rush Limbaugh apologists on the right who see no wrong with anything the Neocons say or do), you can still live freer here than in any other large country of which I'm aware in the world. We can do better, though, as citizens – we should expect better from our government. Obfuscation and deceit are rife within our political community, and should be done away with. We must begin calling things by their true names again, and if we

don’t like how they look on paper – we need to be more responsible about how we exercise our global citizenship. On this, Orwell would agree.

Adrian B