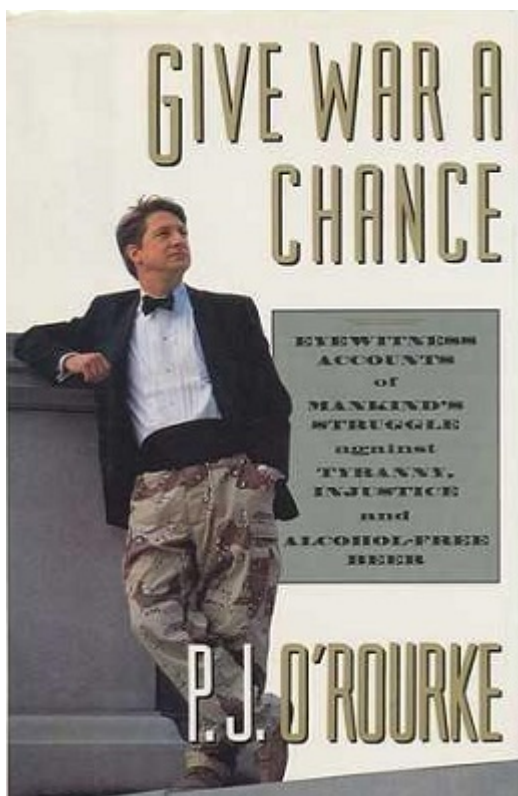


New Poetry by Kat Raido: “Blood Goggles”

New poem by Kat Raido: “Blood Goggles”

New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “The Last of the Gonzo Boys: P.J. O’Rourke, War, and the Evolution of a Political Mind”



“We hear the Iraqi army is systematically blowing up buildings

in downtown Kuwait City. If the architecture in Kuwait resembles the architecture in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi army will have done one good deed, anyway. As soon as the Iraqis have all surrendered, let's send them to New York and let them take a whack at Trump Tower."—P. J. O'Rourke, February 25, 1991

On February 15, 2022, Patrick Jake O'Rourke shuffled off this mortal coil owing to lung cancer. If P.J.'s general demeanor was any indication, this probably left him pissed off and in need of a drink. It certainly did me.

Who was P.J. O'Rourke?

P.J. O'Rourke was a dick.

"Gadfly" isn't really evocative enough. He fulfilled that function, but it wasn't his only schtick. "Curmudgeon" isn't right either, even though he tried a little too hard to be one, especially as he got older. But curmudgeons don't like anybody or anything, and P.J. had more than his share of joie de vivre. "Dick" pretty much sums it up—that one guy with an attitude problem and a drinking problem and possibly a coke problem, who says outrageous shit after his second bourbon that pisses off the whole room, and after the third one has everybody roaring with laughter.

He was a dick. But he was *our* dick, goddamnit.

And he was one hell of a writer.

At the risk of showing my age:

Back in the Grand Old Days of Print Media—in the misty, forgotten, sepia-toned era that is the late '80s and early '90s—everybody, and I mean everybody, read *Rolling Stone*. If you had the least pretension to musical hipness, you read *RS*. Your ex-hippie parents read *RS*. Your Atari-generation older

siblings grew up on it, so there were always copies lying around the house. If your high school library was hip enough, they had it; college libraries *always* did, and so did record stores. We read it, we talked about what we read, we argued over the music reviews, we cut pics out to hang on our dorm room walls. It piled up under the coffee table, it stacked on the backs of toilets. It was everywhere.

Rolling Stone was fucking cool back then, too. They reviewed shit you'd never, ever have heard of otherwise, especially if like me you grew up in a rural coal-mining area of the Upland South. My friends and I pestered the poor long-suffering employees at Disc Jockey in the one tiny mall in Owensboro with increasingly strange requests for shit we'd heard of but couldn't find in the bins, we kept lists of shit we wanted to hear in our pockets to offset the dread phenomenon known as Record Store Amnesia. Buying music was a big deal back then and we spent enormous amounts of the disposable income that we used to have so much more of on it. It was a feedback loop; read *Rolling Stone*, go to record store for shit you'd read about in *Rolling Stone*, buy the new *Rolling Stone* while you're there, repeat. And it wasn't just the music. They had great pieces on the entertainment industry, politics, global affairs.

But the really, really good times came when there was a P.J. O'Rourke article gracing the issue.

I've lost count of how many people have stared me down and said "YOU like P.J. O'Rourke? You, Rob BOKKON, Marxist and identity politics asshole and general leftist menace, actively buy his books?" Yeah, I do like P.J. O'Rourke. He's a great writer, he's funny as fuck, and he's also wrong about almost everything and often heinously offensive. Do yourself a favor and don't look up anything he ever wrote for *National Lampoon*. In fact, most of what was in *National Lampoon* is virtually unreadable to modern audiences and that's probably a good thing—they were never as funny as they thought they were, and

that whole “shock comedy” thing is mad lame anyway. That’s not to denigrate their impact culturally or whatever, but a bunch of white boys yelling the n-word because they can is not revolutionary and it wasn’t then either. I dislike all of PJ’s views on Marxism, not least because they’re facile and, well, silly; I dislike his views on American imperialism; I especially dislike his defenses of capitalism, which are based on a grade-school understanding of economics and amount to not much more than the “get rich while you can” ethos of Gordon Gekko or Patrick Bateman. There’s also the casual racism and sexism, which is to be expected from a Boomer white male straight Republican.

With that all said: I have rarely laughed harder than when reading P.J. go off on one of his tangents, especially when the target is his own party (which is frequent) or matters of foreign policy, with which he was well acquainted as an on-the-ground reporter, for ABC Radio, *RS*, and the egregious *American Spectator*. And his writing is valuable as historical documentation, of a particular political attitude that has vanished from the American intellectual landscape. Much, I would argue, to the detriment of that landscape.

I’m no big fan of “the discourse.” I don’t really regard engagement with today’s right-wingers as a useful or healthy activity. We have nothing in common other than citizenship, and I know that no amount of pleading on my part can convince anyone to stop being a terrible person. That falls firmly under the category of “personal development”, and people who think the government shouldn’t provide us with clean water but should have the authority to arrest LGBT+ people for existing are not, generally speaking, capable of much in the way of soul-searching. (You’re free to disagree with any of these statements as long as you know that you’re wrong.) I could give less of a shit what some KKK member in Indiana thinks of the economy or Black Lives Matter or socialism, because A: I

already know what he thinks and B: what he thinks is shitty, so having a “dialogue” is going to benefit no one at all.

P.J. O'Rourke, of all the Republicans in the world, really just wasn't like that. Sure, he was a plutocrat-fellating asshole and a warmonger and an apologist for the worst economic system the world ever created, but he would flat-out tell you that he was all those things and then smoke a joint with you. Hunter Thompson didn't suffer fools gladly. Hunter Thompson liked P.J. So did Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* for many decades, who's hardly what you'd call a right-wing ideologue. And so did a lot of (in those days) liberal kids like me who found reading P.J. a delicious sort of crime, the thrill of the forbidden making the humor even more sharp.

We saw ourselves in P.J., even if we didn't like what he had to say. He was a pure Boomer, but his attitude was so much more like that of Gen X: question everything, have an attitude about it, say what's on your mind. Be bold. Be very wrong, if you have to be, and then take the time to examine what you were wrong about. But above all, *say something*. If something annoys you, bring it up. Be the squeaky wheel. Be the gadfly. Stir some shit up.

And stir shit he did. Liberals hated him (probably because he turned that laser gaze onto the silliest aspects of American pseudo-leftism and proclaimed them to be exactly what they were); conservatives hated him too. He thought Reagan was a dunce and Bush Sr. an affable goofball who stumbled into all his political successes (both of these facts are categorically correct); he hated, but *hated*, the Drug War and called it out for its waste of public dollars and its human consequence, to say nothing of its impact on our civil liberties. As P.J. saw it, no strict constructionist could defend the unlawful search and seizure that was drug testing, nor the Fifth Amendment violation of self-incrimination it virtually guarantees. “Jail will screw up your life worse than a whole Glad bag full of

daffy dust," he wrote, acknowledging something we're just now starting to talk about, the failure of the punitive system to address *anything* meaningful about drug use in America.

Imagine a Republican saying THAT now. Imagine a Republican questioning the importance of the prison-industrial complex. Fuck, imagine a Republican questioning anything his own party did.

And that is why P.J. was the last Republican on this planet with whom I would have, willingly, shared a whiskey. Because he didn't think the government needed to fuck with your private life. He didn't think there was anything particularly noble in politics or politicians in general, and regarded the cultish worship of people in the public sphere of government as both perverse and un-American; he didn't think people in a democracy were obliged to bow to anybody in particular, regardless of whether that somebody was JFK or Reagan. Plus, he is, to date, the only person to describe a landscape using the words "blood and diarrhea" in an article on American foreign policy, and that takes a certain amount of style. Audacity, anyway.

And nothing in this world succeeds like audacity. As P.J. himself might say, just look at Congress; right there you've got 535 people who work six months out of the year (maybe) for six-figure salaries, and the chief qualification for their job is saying things very loudly. Not only when they're right, but *especially* when they're wrong. Even the reasonably good ones have a huge dash of chutzpah, or they wouldn't be in politics. P.J. famously called Congress a "Parliament of whores" in the early '90s. I would argue that this situation, post-*Citizens United*, has only gotten worse.

The current debate on members of Congress and their ability to trade stocks is also extremely germane to his basic point: public servants enriching themselves at the public trough at public expense are not good for the Republic. He was right

about that. He was often right. He was more often wrong. But somewhere in all this, there's a grain of something gone; that center we all hear about, the "core values" we're all supposed to share, the general idea that maybe, just maybe, we could in fact all get along again if we just sat down and talked. But that was before QAnon, and anti-vaxx nonsense, and people who think the Earth is flat actually being elected to Congress (something P.J. used to joke about a lot). It may sound like I'm spreading the blame around equally here, and to some degree I am; the Democrats are largely useless. But they're not the ones who got us to this point, and the liberal silliness P.J. so often derides ain't got a patch on the festering pile of batshit crazy that is the modern Republican Party. P.J. thought book burnings were bad and wanted you to be able to snort all the coke you want. Marjorie Taylor Greene he wasn't.

"She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters."—P.J. on why he voted for Hillary over Trump



Original artwork for this essay by artist Tom Law at moreorlesanimation@gmail.com

Speaking of coke: If you like Dr Hunter S. Thompson, you'll like P.J. It's the same basic thing; gonzo journalism, the writing of a serious piece as though it's a work of fiction, Truman Capote's nonfiction novel concept writ large (writ small?), the whole world filtered through *style*. A rejection of bland reportage in favor of commentary, a flat exposure of the lie of objectivity, an embrace of the good things about

writing in English. Just because it's news doesn't mean it can't be fun. There would never have been a Jon Stewart without gonzo journalism, nor a Colbert, nor a Jon Oliver, nor an Anthony Bourdain. There's something very true about it. Something honest. No bullshit other than the author's bullshit, which is a given when you write anything; when the reader *knows*, intimately, that what they're reading is opinion, they're much more likely to pay some attention to the content of what you say.

This is why smart people like shit like *The Daily Show* and stupid people watch Fox News. If you *know* you're consuming biased content, and act accordingly, at least you're thinking. If you consume biased content, and either don't know it's biased or, worse, defend it as unbiased, then you're doing the opposite of thinking. P.J. hated stupidity. He hated Trump. He held his nose and voted for Hillary Clinton because, as he said, "She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters." This would have made sense to Dr Thompson. It was, for a Republican, a very gonzo thing to do. It was...well, it was honest. And it added to the rich narrative thread that was P.J.'s life. At this point, he was a darling of NPR, a regular on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*, every Democrat's favorite Republican, the snide funny dude on your radio while you made lunch on Saturdays, if that's your sort of thing. His previous persona must have been shocked, but his capitalist soul liked the checks, so I guess it worked out, even if his bread and butter came from publicly-funded liberal media.

Imagine Lauren Boebert being on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*. Imagine Lauren Boebert on any quiz show at all. Fuck, imagine Lauren Boebert in high school academic team. Actually, don't do that, because that exact scenario is coming soon to a dank conference room near you, now that the GOP has discovered books exist and are doing their level best to do something about that.

P.J. at War



"Wherever there's injustice, oppression, and suffering, America will show up six months late and bomb the country next to where it's happening."

P.J. was no stranger to world conflict. He'd been in Lebanon in 1984, in Seoul for the 1987 election of Roh Tae Woo that ended decades of authoritarianism. In '89 and '90, P.J. was assigned to cover the (often premature) collapse of various Communist regimes in Central America and Europe for both *Rolling Stone* and *American Spectator*, along with a few other global hot spots that were in turmoil outside of the realm of Marxism. There's a lot to like here, a lot to laugh at, and a lot of head-shaking. He advances the cause of the modern conservative narrative "liberals = socialists = supporters of totalitarianism", which is both silly and contains one small element of truth: the liberal-to-socialist pipeline is a thing, as anybody who started out as a James Carville Democrat and wound up a red-flag-waving socialist can tell you. (Author waves enthusiastically at the audience.)

Regardless of his silliness and eventually incorrect predictions about the “death of Communism”, the articles were good. They took us to places that, as P.J. said, “the United States only cared about if we got our dope from them.” The crowing over the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 is amusing in hindsight, given how long Danny Ortega has now been President of Nicaragua and also given the continuing Pink Tide in South and Central America. But the piece on Paraguay was particularly good, acknowledging as it did that U.S. allies in the Dirty War were also super-comfortable with Nazi expatriates and connections with apartheid South Africa, and flatly stating that our Cold War ally had tortured its own citizens. P.J. said that was a bad thing. He acknowledged U.S. complicity in bullshit, which wasn’t even the focus of the article. He just said it and moved on. At the time of publication, it was barely noteworthy. Now it’s revolutionary. P.J. wasn’t always right, but he was consistent. He hated what he hated and he liked what he liked, and he didn’t approve of torture. He didn’t like it when Stroessner did it in Paraguay and he didn’t like it when Saddam did it in Kuwait and he didn’t like it when we did it in black sites. Conservatism once had limits.

Imagine, if you will, those days. Imagine conservatism with self-examination. Imagine conservatism being, well, conservatism.

The way I see it, it’s a pretty philosophy on paper, but it never works in the real world.

“H00000-AH!!!”, as the Gulf troops say.”

In 1990, Saddam Hussein, perpetual ally/enemy/focus of American Middle East foreign policy, invaded Kuwait, and very shortly the United States wound up in its first proper shooting war since Vietnam, since everyone knows Grenada and

Panama don't officially count. Whatever, this was big, and more importantly it was on TV, and a bunch of people I know and you know were fucked up by it. It led directly to our continuing policy of interventionism in a region that was better left alone or influenced by diplomacy. It led to Bush Jr. and Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and twenty fucking years in Afghanistan and more dead civilians than anyone knows how to count properly, and a bunch of American kids with lifelong PTSD and wounds that won't heal. It led to Bill Clinton bombing Iraq, on average, every two weeks of the eight years he was in the White House. It led to the attitude that perpetual war was the norm, not the exception.

Maybe it is. Maybe we can't function without it now. But in 1990, it was a fun new conceit and it didn't involve the Soviet Union, so we were fairly convinced it was an adventure that wouldn't precipitate The Big One. I guess it depends on what your definition of The Big One is. Regardless, ABC Radio (of all people) sent P.J. to the Middle East as a war correspondent on the strength of his global reporting of the last couple of years, and *Rolling Stone* decided to get in on the action too with print columns, and thus we got a *Rolling Stone* view of American foreign policy in the Bush years. Which is a weird sentence, no matter how you parse it.

P.J. was on the ground for most of the war, and his writings on the subject are still poignant, still relevant as a document of a time when the USA was in its ascendancy and the Soviet Union descending into chaos. We were flexing our global muscle against someone who'd been an ally as recently as two years ago; we were enforcing the Carter Doctrine; we were giving the finger to the planet, and weirdest of all—*almost no one objected*.

As P.J. said, "There don't seem to be a lot of celebrities protesting against this war. New Kid On the Block Donnie Wahlberg did wear a 'War Sucks' T-shirt at the Grammy awards, but that's about it. In fact, I've heard that Jane Fonda has

decided to maintain public silence on the subject of Desert Storm. Getting Jane Fonda to be quiet—this alone makes fighting Iraq worthwhile. ” It’s a cheap shot for P.J., an easy, misogynistic swing at a conservative target of ire so predictable that it should be beneath his notice, but it’s worth mentioning for a reason. The complete defeat of anti-war ideology in the US in those days was a very real thing, replaced by what P.J. called “kick-ass patriotism” and a general belief that what we were doing was just. P.J. certainly believed in the cause, but he also thought the whole thing was absurd and was happy to point out exactly how:

“You may wonder what the job of a Gulf War journalist is like. Well, we spend all day broadcasting on the radio and TV telling people back home what’s happening over here. And we learn what’s happening over here by spending all day monitoring the radio and TV broadcasts from back home. You may also wonder how any actual information ever gets into this loop. If you find out, please call.”

P.J. traveled through Jordan, Syria, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and wound up in Kuwait City just before US and coalition forces arrived, but after the Iraqis had trashed the place and headed for home. He embedded with troops (another first for that war) and got shot at, nearly arrested more than once, had Scuds lobbed at him and very nearly blew himself up when he, lit cigar firmly screwed in the side of his mouth, opened up an Iraqi demolition booby trap consisting of a pile of RPGs and a grenade with the pin out. Although he later said the most dangerous thing he did throughout the whole war was cook spaghetti sauce on a camp stove on the Hilton roof with his flak jacket off, because the Kuwaitis took that opportunity to celebrate the US victory by firing “every available weapon in the air, including the .50 caliber dual-mount machine guns on the Saudi and Qatari APCs...Finally, a Brit and a veteran of the Special Air Services could stand it no more and leaned over the roof parapet and bellowed at the trigger-crazed Kuwaiti

merrymakers 'STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! PUT THOSE FUCKING GUNS AWAY AND GO GET A MOP AND A BROOM AND CLEAN THIS COUNTRY UP!'"

"Peacenik types say there would be no war if people truly understood how horrible war is. They're wrong. People don't mind a little horror...but everybody hates to be bored and uncomfortable. If people truly understood how much sleeping on rocks, how much eating things rejected by high school cafeterias, how much washing small parts of the body in cold water and how much sheer sitting around in the dirt war entails, we might have world peace after all."



Kuwait City after the Iraqi withdrawal. "It looked like all the worst rock bands in the world had stayed there at the same time."

Here's the thing about P.J.

P.J. opened your mind to the possibility that ideologies could

be fluid. That you could believe a thing and maybe later change your mind. That you could evolve. He had.

A self-confessed “peace weenie” and “liberal goofball” in the ‘60s, P.J., like so many others of his generation, made the rightward swing in the late ‘70s and landed, not so much in the Reagan camp, but at some outpost of his own building, an ideological stronghold somewhere between classical liberalism and drug-legalization libertarianism, with a hearty dash of that countercultural anti-authoritarianism (and of course the dope) still firmly in the mix. He wasn’t tidy, in fact he could be absolutely all over the place and even self-contradictory. Good thinkers often are. Great writers usually are, because they say what they’re thinking when they’re thinking it and often live to regret it later.

Here’s why that’s important, at least to me: P.J., in his rejection of his former principles, gave me the courage to take the step away from moderate centrism and to embrace the leftist principles that truly evoke my core beliefs. I stopped caring about where people wanted me to be and reached out for the things I thought were right. It’s messy here sometimes, and it pisses people off. (Lord knows P.J. would think I was a weenie or worse. He would also be pleased that I don’t care.) But it’s mine. I thought it through, I stood up, I said something.

As I write this, Russia has invaded Ukraine. The world situation is dire in a way it hasn’t been in decades. Putin is rattling the nuclear saber, Zelenskyy is making himself into a world media icon, Ukrainian grandmas are becoming social media darlings by cussing out 18-year-old conscripts on video, there may or may not be thermobaric bombs dropping on civilians and nobody knows if the Ghost of Kyiv is real or not, but damn, it’s a story of kick-ass patriotism. And all over the world, people are standing up, people are saying something, people are trying to make a difference.

I just wish P.J. were here to give us his take. I wish Anthony Bourdain was here too. The world needs cynicism and humor, but also basic decency and compassion, when the shit gets too real. Oh, they'd probably hate each other, but I'd pay real money to see the two of them shout at each other over whiskey and cigars on CNN. Wherever you are, Gonzo Boys, we could use a dose of your realness right about now.

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Lauren Johnson Interviews Amy Waldman, Author of 'A Door in the Earth'

Amy Waldman's novel, A Door in the Earth, follows Parveen, a young Afghan-American woman who returns to her war-torn homeland after discovering a memoir by humanitarian Gideon Crane. Parveen is not the only American influenced by the book; Mother Afghanistan has become a bible for American counterinsurgency operations in the country. If part of that

story rings familiar, it is: The book-within-a-book was inspired by Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson's 2006 memoir of building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was later revealed to be largely fabricated.

I was one of the legions of soldiers who read and fell head over steel-toed boots for Mortenson's story. Like Waldman's protagonist, I ultimately found myself in a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2009. As a military information operations officer, I was charged with "winning hearts and minds"—an instrument of the "kind power" advocated by Gideon Crane. I didn't share Parveen's Afghan heritage, but I see my younger self in her idealism and naivety. I feel the crushing blow when expectations and reality clash.

I relate these parallels to Waldman before our interview, and she begins by asking me questions about my experience—curiosity cultivated through a career in journalism, but also desire to learn, to investigate, to understand. Waldman's first novel, The Submission, explores the aftereffects of 9/11 on American soil, imagining what might happen if a Muslim-American wins a blind competition to design a Ground Zero Memorial. A Door in the Earth is her second novel.

Lauren Johnson: You worked as a reporter for a number of years with the *New York Times* and covered both ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the war overseas for a few years. I'd love to hear you talk a little about what led you to pursue journalism to begin with and how your experiences reporting after 9/11 shaped your perspective as a writer.

Amy Waldman: I finished college and didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I was interested in writing, film, but it was all fairly vague. And then I ended up moving to South Africa a year after graduation. First, I was volunteering there in a university—teaching and helping in other ways, and then I began doing some freelance reporting. It was 1992, 1993, so

apartheid was ending. It was a very exciting time in the country's history, and so partly I felt like being a reporter gave me a way to go witness all of this, gave me a reason to be going to rallies and protests. I have a strong interest in social justice, so it was a way to write about things I cared about. I sort of felt like I backed into journalism a little bit. But then felt like, *Okay, this is what I want to do.*

I came back from South Africa, worked at the magazine *Washington Monthly*, then went to the *New York Times* and spent five years writing about New York City. And then 9/11. I was in New York for about six weeks afterward covering the aftermath and then was sent overseas . . . I ended up in Afghanistan in November 2001, then went back repeatedly over the next few years. It was, obviously, a much more peaceful time there. There was a lot more freedom of movement. I went to Helmand and places that within a few years it was much more dangerous to go to. So I had, I think, a very personal, visceral sense of what was happening with the war because I had seen this window of optimism and openness, and then watched it closing.

I was actually briefly sent to Iraq after the invasion. And I think that was really informative for me, too—in registering all the ways that diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, but also the sense of an occupation was much more palpable there. I think Afghanistan did have this identity much more as the 'good war,' and our reasons for being there were clearer. And yet, it helped me see certain parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan and our presence in both places. Also just watching things start to sour. In Iraq I felt them start to sour very quickly. I was there maybe two months at the most, and within that time I saw the change. Afghanistan, it was much slower — the disillusionment that built, among Afghans, but also my sense is even within the military, and for reporters as well. Even once I left the region I followed really closely what was happening with the war and our

presence there and just felt very confused by it. I guess it's the simplest way to put it. You know, more and more this sense that there was—and frankly is—no good solution to this, and that we hadn't thought through where this was going.

I think that's a very long way of saying that all of my post-9/11 experience fed into the first novel I wrote. *The Submission* is much more about America and how 9/11 changed us at home. I'm interested in, even in fiction, moral questions and the choices we have to make both as a society and individuals about how to answer these moral questions. The first novel came out of reporting in America and reporting abroad and the ideas of: What did we want to be as a country in the wake of 9/11? What were our values? What should change? What should stay the same? And then for individuals, how did your personal, political, psychological history weigh into how you answer these questions?

I really loved Afghanistan as a country. I always loved going there. I loved the people that I met and people that I worked with. I was good friends with a lot of our interpreters there. I felt anguish about what I saw happening. [*A Door in the Earth*] is, in a way, another chapter of what I had started with the first novel: who we are at home. Afghanistan was where I wanted to try to understand who and what we are abroad.

I also felt like 9/11 created this whole new set of tropes and ideas and conditions about who we imagined ourselves to be. *Three Cups of Tea* I think was so popular because it fit into that idea of who we think we are. I was interested in idealism, even going back to when I went to South Africa as a young person. I kind of love that impulse in Americans, to want to go and help abroad. But I also think as I've gotten older I question it more and see it as much more complicated, and I don't have as clear a sense of how to think about it. Fiction for me is a good place to work out things that I don't know the answers to, or don't exactly know how to think about.

So that all fed into this novel. That was a very long answer.

Lauren Johnson: I appreciate long answers because these are challenging things to think about, and I don't think there is an easy answer a lot of times. I heard that for *The Submission* the idea kind of lodged itself in your brain, and you had initially shelved it while you were working as a journalist. Then it wouldn't stop gnawing at you so you decided to listen to it, and you stopped working for the *Times* and wrote the novel. Was the seed for *A Door in the Earth* similar to that? Was it an obsession, for lack of better words?

Amy Waldman: Yeah, it actually was. I had not read *Three Cups of Tea*, and then Jon Krakauer published *Three Cups of Deceit* and 60 Minutes did its report, and I became completely obsessed with the entire thing. So I read *Three Cups of Tea* at that point. I wasn't even that interested in [Greg Mortenson] as a person or what his motivations were, I was more interested in why did so many people buy into this myth? What did that say about us? I felt like it got at something pretty deep, both in who we are as Americans, but also in the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan. I couldn't easily articulate what that was, but I felt like it really went to the heart of something there. And then I also was really interested in what would it feel like to believe in this cause or this person and then find out that in all kinds of ways, it wasn't what you thought it had been.

I spent a lot of time online reading reactions from people after *Three Cups of Tea* was exposed. I was interested in the people who were really angry at Krakauer for exposing him—this idea that we need heroes, and it's wrong to tear them down, even if they're false heroes. But then I would find, say, a 14 year old girl who would be like, '*I'm crushed, because I really believed in this and raised money for this.*' What would that feel like to be that young and having this experience? I was trying to make sense of why was it so popular, why did the military latch on to it, and then what would it feel like to

find out that basically you've hitched your idealism—which is a genuine feeling—to something that's false. I kept meeting people who said, '*Oh, I went into education because of that book,*' or '*My brother went to help in Pakistan because of that book.*' So, if something's not true but it's motivating people to help, that's really interesting as well. So anyway, it just seemed very messy and interesting. I usually feel like when I become obsessed with something, that's fertile territory for a novel.

Lauren Johnson: And why did you choose 2009 as a time frame in particular?

Amy Waldman: Initially, I think I didn't have the novel set in any particular year. When I'm writing fiction I'm always torn, especially the kind of fiction I do—at least everything I've done so far—which is so obviously spun off reality in some way. I'm always torn about how specific do I want to get? In *The Submission*, I don't say it's 9/11. I left it vague in terms of what the attack in question was. I never use the term 9/11 or September 11 anywhere in the book, because I felt like it just takes you out of a fictional world into one that immediately you're thinking about all your associations and experiences with 9/11.

In this case, the more I thought about it and started looking at different points in the war, I just felt like it actually does matter to be specific. That year was so interesting to me, for all the reasons I weave into the novel: everything from Obama becoming president and rethinking the whole Afghanistan strategy, to the number of casualties of American soldiers rising, to growing public disenchantment at home. . . It really just felt like that was a pivotal year in the war. And so it seems a good pivot point to set the story when all of this is going on.

Lauren Johnson: And it's definitely rooted in reality. You mentioned a lot of things that took place that year, including

the airstrike in Farah that led to massive civilian casualties, and the attack in Kunduz in November where the British reporter was kidnapped. I appreciated all those little reminders. And I think someone who maybe didn't have an obsession with that region in 2009-2010 would still pick up on those elements, that it feels very grounded.

Amy Waldman: Yes, but I think, equally though, someone who didn't know anything—in a way it wouldn't matter. It's almost like I'm speaking to you as a reader in one way and another reader in another way. I'm putting all those things in; to me, it's exciting that you would get them and register them and their significance. But equally, I know there's a lot of readers who will not have paid any attention to any of those things. I kind of like tucking in reality into fiction. I like that people who get it will get it. But I also feel like, if you don't, that's fine, too. It doesn't matter if you never read the news about Afghanistan, I want it to affect you emotionally. Maybe there's a way putting it in fiction will do that, even if you turn off the news.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. It grounds it but also has those emotional reverberations, and I think particularly the way that you approach it from a new perspective. That's one of the things that I really appreciate about the book as a whole is all the different perspectives. You're not looking at this from the traditional whitewashed American lens that most people are used to viewing war through. You weave in all these different points of view against the backdrop of war that captures a fuller spectrum. There's Parveen—and I would love to hear more about your choice to make her your protagonist—and then all the colorful characters she interacts with along the way.

Amy Waldman: Originally there was going to be, I think, five different sections, and each would have a different central character. Aziz, the [military] interpreter, and Trotter [the American military commander] were going to have one section,

and [Parveen] was going to have another section. But when I started working on it, it just didn't work. And so I ended up kind of folding everything into her story. And it really to me became about her story, but braided together with all these other people. I wanted someone young, because I feel like that is a point when you are more open to influences, and partly it's a novel about her wrestling with all these adult figures and mentors and influences, and kind of coming to terms with them.

The idea of a young American going abroad is a very familiar story and has been done in fiction. I decided to make her Afghan-American, partly because I wanted her to have some understanding of the culture and speak the language. I feel like every American in some way has a place that they are connected to—it can be very immediate, it can be very distant—and they're sort of these ghost places for us where you imagine a strong connection. And then what happens when that's tested and you have to come face to face with real people? Also, I'm always very interested in people who are kind of caught in between. With her and Aziz, I felt like they were both in that situation. The question of allegiances: even if that's clear in your own mind, how do other people perceive you?

Lauren Johnson: You cover a really impressive spectrum. With Parveen herself, with the family she's staying with, Waheed's family, who are mostly just trying to exist and live their lives in this remote Afghan village, and then Colonel Trotter and these American soldiers who are also inspired by Gideon Crane's book and the "kind power" notion. And I'm glad you mentioned Aziz, I think he was my favorite character.

Amy Waldman: Oh, that makes me happy!

Lauren Johnson: I think interpreters don't get a lot of attention for the precarious position that they're in, straddling these different worlds and competing agendas. I

really appreciated that perspective. But again, it's how you weave everyone all together. Parveen observes at one point that her "sympathies kept tilting back and forth, never finding a perfect place to rest." I have to say, that's how I felt throughout the book, not really comfortable aligning myself 100% with any character. And I think that's in large part because of all these different perspectives that you invite us to consider. Would you say that one of your messages is that there *is* no comfortable place to rest in war?

Amy Waldman: Yes. Although I'd maybe say there's no comfortable place to rest in life!

Lauren Johnson: That's a fair edit!

Amy Waldman: But yes, I think that's true. When I was younger I was very certain about a lot of things, and I think I've become less and less so, which is often frustrating. There are things—and I could go on at great length—where I have a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong, including in war. I mean, there's a lot happening right now in Afghanistan that I think is egregiously wrong. But that feeling you have is exactly what I wanted. That certainly in that situation there's nobody's saintly or perfect, whether that's because they're trying to survive or that's human nature. There shouldn't be a comfortable place to rest. Certainly in war.

Lauren Johnson: I grew up in the era of chick flicks where in 90 minutes someone falls in love and lives happily ever after; it's just this clean-cut story line. As I've gotten older I realized that's not the case, basically ever. And that's part of coming of age. To me, a lot of Parveen's experience read like a coming of age story also.

Amy Waldman: Yes.

Lauren Johnson: She's confronted with the fact that life isn't black and white, that there are shades of gray everywhere, and it's uncomfortable. Your decisions have ripple effects, and

even if you're making them with good intentions, you can't count on them having positive outcomes.

Amy Waldman: The more I worked on this novel, that idea became something I thought about more and more. Just what do our actions do? In the name of whatever cause you believe in, how do you affect other people? That's the beauty of being alive—how interconnected we all are—but also it's very hard to live without having repercussions in the lives of others, whether you want to or not. And the gap between our ideas of ourselves in the world and our realities in the world interests me too. How do you ever stand far enough outside yourself to even see how you affect others?

Lauren Johnson: Having not been back to the country in so long, you render the landscape so strikingly. And you also invite readers into this very intimate setting of an Afghan home, which is mostly closed off to us here in the West. I would love to hear more about how you were able to capture the spaces and characters authentically.

Amy Waldman: The landscape there made such an impression on me. Some of that just stayed with me, and then I certainly drew on the reporting I had done when I was there. There's little lines and things people said to me when I was a reporter that I probably wove into the book or gave me the seed for an idea. So I had that base for having spent time there, but it was very difficult not being able to—or, I should say, deciding not to—go back and research. Instagram I love for the visual reminders it provides, and there's so many photographers doing great work there. I read a lot of books, including *Afghan Post* [by Wrath-Bearing Tree co-editor Adrian Bonenberger]. There are quite a few documentaries that I watched, and I also did a lot of research on maternal mortality. I read [military blogs] for more logistical detail. Anthropology—there's not so much that's super recent just because of conditions, but there's enough to be really helpful. There's a lot out there. But it's not the same as

going back.

Lauren Johnson: I'm glad you mentioned maternal mortality. Could you talk about why you chose to focus on that as one of the central issues? [Crane, the humanitarian, witnesses an Afghan woman's death in childbirth, and in response decides to build a clinic for women in her village]

Amy Waldman: Yes. So once I came up with the idea that, in a way, it's a book about a book—the influence of this memoir—I was trying to think, who is this person who wrote it? What was he doing in this village? I don't remember exactly what the spark was for that, but as soon as I thought about it, it totally made sense. I mean, maternal mortality is a huge issue in Afghanistan, and it also was a way to get at one of the complicated things about this war, which is the whole issue of women. Are we there to save them or protect them? Is that a true reason or a pretext? And also the contradictions embedded in that—for example the way we've mostly allowed women to be left out of the peace process.

And so I wanted to see how those contradictions in America's relationship to women in Afghanistan would play out in the story I'd invented. What is PR and what is a legitimate desire to help? What is our obligation? I felt like it was a way for [Parveen] to connect with women in the village as well. And then all the complexities around—and again this came out of my reporting, some of it at least—who can treat women, medically, and how does that work? So, it just seemed like the issue to build the novel around.

Lauren Johnson: And one of the other ways that Parveen ends up connecting with the women in the village is in reading them Crane's book, which is such an interesting layer. She quickly realizes that events and descriptions in the book don't line up with the reality of the people who were living it. Aside from that, the moments in those scenes where we get to see the women interacting away from the men and their daily routines

was a really powerful image. They take their burqas off and they're teasing each other, and harping on their husbands, talking about sex; just women being women. I think that's an important element, too, that gets lost in the politicized discussions of war: just people being people and the connective power of that.

Amy Waldman: I definitely wanted to have that. I would say the war was the thing that propelled the novel into existence, and yet I didn't want it only to be about that. And I did feel strongly that all the reasons I really loved Afghanistan, I wanted to try to get some of that across. And, you know, people everywhere are just funny and saucy and smart. Someone once said to me that it's much easier to focus on the differences with people in other cultures than it is the similarities. That was probably in the context of being a reporter, but I think it's true in fiction too, that it's very easy to exoticize everything that's different or extreme in another culture. But the truer portrait is capturing at least some of ways that people are quite similar anywhere: their friendships, their relationships, their desires—all of that.

Lauren Johnson: Were any of the moments that occur in the book echoes of experiences you had in Afghanistan?

Amy Waldman: Good question. Funny, at this point it's so hard to even sort everything out. There are things that were not experiences, but were taken from the news. [One incident, removed to avoid spoilers] is based on this tiny, one paragraph news item that I found years ago . . . that's always really haunted me. Frankly, the Konduz incident—the translator who died was someone I was really close to and had worked with, so that never went away for me. I had very strong feelings about it and wanted it not forgotten. And then there would just be little things. Like when Waheed says to Parveen, "You know, I wish my wives could do what you do." When I was in a Pashtun area reporting, this man said that to me: "I wish my wife could do what you do." I just never expected to hear

that there.

There are little things that in one way or another either are my experience or things I read. [I read a paper] about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, the psychology of an occupation, and that fed into my thinking: this idea of, is an old man just an old man or is he dangerous? What does it mean to be an occupying power? As the fear increases, how do you start to interact with the population? I feel like that's a central tension of our presence there: Supposedly trying to help and win hearts and minds, and yet we're also terrified and have no idea who to trust. How do those things coexist with each other?

Lauren Johnson: I actually wrote down a line where Parveen wonders: "What did it mean to offer help to people you don't trust?"

Amy Waldman: Exactly.

Lauren Johnson: That was certainly something on my mind when I was there, and I'm sure many of my compatriots as well. That really complicated mixture of the inherent power that comes with being an American military member, but also the vulnerability that comes with it, and just the pervasive lack of knowledge and understanding, and then the rules that are being dictated by people who aren't actually on the ground—and you captured that web in really kind of an appropriately discombobulating way.

Amy Waldman: That's interesting, that idea that you are not making the rules. And also that, in this novel, and it seemed to me there, like the rules were always changing.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely.

Amy Waldman: I think for most Americans and Afghans that's incredibly confusing. Because there's no consistent relationship. And even as a soldier, you're still a human

being, and you're told one day to perceive the people in this place a certain way, and the next day you're told to perceive them in a different way. How are you supposed to reconcile that internally as well as externally in your actions and your reactions?

Lauren Johnson: Right. And how are you supposed to inspire trust in an interaction when you're going in with body armor and two weapons and ballistic sunglasses and fourteen ton vehicles? So many paradoxes inherent in war.

Amy Waldman: Yes, paradox is the word.

Lauren Johnson: The fact that this war has now been going on for 18 years, I think it's fitting that this is not a book that wraps up neatly at the end. Parveen has this great line that it is "a war shaggy with loose ends." Which does not satisfy my idealistic American desire for happy ending, but it's also very appropriate. Was that a conscious decision?

Amy Waldman: Yes. It was hard for me to imagine a happy ending, to be honest. I think this is a very slow moving, epic tragedy and it's gotten so much worse—for Afghans, in particular, in the past few years. I just felt like the most honest ending was one that was unresolved . . . It's more just, we have to think about these things. We can't just be congratulating ourselves all the time on being the saviors of the world. Not that we really are any more. In some ways I feel like I'm writing about history more than the present.

[I also want to] touch on the role anger, for lack of a better word, played in the writing of *A Door in the Earth*. So many things about the war that were treated as normal—the lies or withholding of information; the false rhetoric about success or victory in the war; the sending of soldiers on missions or to outposts that made no sense or seemed destined to fail; the loss of life on both sides, of both soldiers and civilians, and the lack of questioning whether those deaths, or lifelong

injuries, were a cost worth paying—seemed wrong to me, and the novel was a way to work through that. I think one problem with the civilian-military divide is that civilians don't think they have the right to ask these kinds of questions, because we're not serving, when for me that's the reason we're obligated to ask them.

Lauren Johnson: These two novels, it seems, very organically fed into each other. Do you think you'll stay in that zone, about the aftereffects of 9/11? Or is that still to be determined?

Amy Waldman: I think it's to be determined. I mean, sometimes I think there must be a trilogy. It seems like these things always come in threes, but I don't know what the third one would be. And I definitely don't want to force it. Both these books really just came out of, as we talked about, kind of obsessions. And so, I feel like if I don't have another obsession, I will not write another novel along those lines. I might write another novel, but it would be totally different. And yet, I clearly am consumed by post-9/11 America and the War on Terror. And since it never seems to end, I guess eventually there may be another novel. But I would rather it all ended and then I could write about something else.

Lauren Johnson: Do you ever see yourself going back to journalism?

Amy Waldman: I don't think I would go back to the kind of journalism I was doing. I could see doing more essay writing. I keep thinking about how to write about what's going on now . . . The Afghan deaths, both soldiers and civilians, and the numbers—how extreme that has become. And also the number of airstrikes the US is now carrying out there, and how little information there is about that—I think that's what's really disturbing, that it almost becoming this secret war where we just have very little sense of what's going on and who's doing what. But I don't want to write a novel about that. It would

be more an essay or op-ed. So that's a long way of saying I don't know.

Lauren Johnson: Well you can be sure that I will be reading everything you ever write from now on.

New Fiction: Excerpt from Hilary Plum's Strawberry Fields

An excerpt from the novel [*Strawberry Fields*](#). Alice, a reporter, and the detective Modigliani are both working on the case of five murdered veterans of the Iraq War (including Kareem, named below). The investigation has extended in many directions, including toward the private military contractor Xenith, with whom the victims were involved.



Alice

Modigliani came over, a bottle brown-bagged in his hand. I'd hoped for wine but it was gin. He poured for us both and produced a jar of olives from his jacket, with his fingers dropped three into each glass. Thank you, I'm sure, I said, eyeing the greasy floating pimentos. Your table sucks, he said, rocking it back and forth with his hand.

The death of Farzad Ahmad Muhammad, I said.

OK, Modigliani said.

You remember it, I insisted. He was murdered in US custody. A

British journalist got interested, and so there was an actual military follow-up. A few guys were held responsible, or kind of—I pushed photos toward him, tapped each face in turn—this one spent two months in jail, this one was demoted, this one not even discharged. These photos, I added, were Kareem's. He was working on some kind of amateur investigation.

OK, Modigliani said.

Modigliani bent down and slid the lid of the olive jar under the short leg of the table. Now we have to finish these, he said. How did he die?

I said: He was hanging from the ceiling by his hands, which is common practice, but he was left there for days, and they beat his legs to interrogate him, the backs of his knees. *Pulpified*, is how the autopsy describes his legs—if he hadn't died, they'd have had to amputate. They said the beatings were normal, but none of them realized how many teams were going at him, how many altogether, and blood pooled around the injuries until his heart stopped, with him just hanging there. They found him on the morning of the fifth day.

Modigliani nodded. And where does Kareem come in?

He knew one of the guys who was later held responsible, the guy who went to jail. They were based out of the same compound for a while, they met socially, if that's the right word. I'm trying to see if maybe Kareem is the one who tipped off the journalist in the first place. Like, he gathered this evidence to give it to her.

And this works out to a motive for killing Kareem, what, seven or eight years later?

Fuck, I said, fuck.

Modigliani stacked the photos and pushed them back toward me, maneuvering around drinks and olives. He said: If the guy who

killed the prisoner was Kareem's friend, Kareem could have been looking to get him off, not get him punished. But you know that. Not to mention, he added, that we have four other victims.

I know, I said. The photo on top was of the bruised legs, and I covered it with both hands.

Alice-Modigliani said, looking in the direction of the air conditioner-your thinking is the opposite of conspiratorial. It's the web without the spider.

He said: I think I've always liked that about you.

Later I understood this was the one thing he ever said that I truly believed.

If I were a conspiracy theorist, he went on, I'd think you were trying to distract this investigation from its real target.

Bill LeRoy, I said obediently, Xenith.

Right now he's angling to replace the military in Afghanistan, Modigliani said. All private contractors, private air force. British East India Company model.

I said: At the same time he's selling his forces to countries hoping to keep migrants in or migrants out. Or rather, Muslims out. Turn back the boats at gunpoint.

Modigliani shifted and I thought he was going to lay his hands over the photo, over my own.

What happens, I wondered, when a spider mistakes itself for a fly?

Modigliani finished his drink and rose. The table rocked again.

Have you ever noticed, he said, how rarely I ask a question?

After Modigliani left I went on: I'd called the guy who'd served time, the guy Kareem knew. He was punished most severely because he'd visited the prisoner the most and was supposed to be the one signing off, keeping track of the others.

I was only halfway through Kareem's name when the woman who had answered the phone interrupted: He doesn't know anything. Don't call here again. She was gone and with her the background sound of a child's off-key singing. I called again. I thought of going out there, to the Midwestern farmland where they lived, not far from where I used to visit a long-dead uncle of my mother's. Amish in buggies or on bicycles on the road's shoulder, cornfields, trampolines in yards that back then I'd coveted. He was a farm boy, this man, and at first I thought this should damn him. Shouldn't a boy like that have known, have understood the body and what it won't endure? Only once did they unhook Muhammad from the ceiling and by then he could no longer bend his knees. But tonight, the refrigerator assuming the role of crickets, the floor athrum with someone's bass, I understood why this made no difference.

Strawberry Fields was published in April, 2018 and is available from [Fence Books](#) or your local bookseller.

New Essay: Axe by M.C. Armstrong

I met a woman on my way to Iraq. Just before I stepped onto the midnight plane to Baghdad, she asked me what should have been a simple question:

“Who do you work for?”

Her name was Moni Basu. She was a journalist. She had thick dark hair, an intense demeanor, and she wore a helmet that said “Evil Media Chick.” We were drinking coffee at a picnic table behind a beverage kiosk at the back of Ali Al Salem base in Kuwait. Her traveling companion, a photographer named Curtis Compton, had caught shrapnel from an IED during a previous embed. A moment before, Moni had given me, a rookie journalist, an important Arabic term: *mutar saif*. It meant lies, bullshit, summer rain, a thing that just didn’t happen in the desert.

I told her I worked for a magazine called “CQ.”

“GQ?”

“No. CQ.”

“You write for Congressional Quarterly?”

The questions never stopped with Moni. She could smell the bullshit.

“Convergence Quarterly,” I said. “It’s a new magazine. This will be our first issue. We’re sponsored by North Carolina A&T.”

“You work at North Carolina A&T?”

I nodded nervously. I’m white. A&T is a historically black

college in Greensboro, North Carolina. Many people argue that the student protest movement of the 60s began at A&T when four courageous young men conducted a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter on February 1st, 1960. This was the part of our history that we advertised to the world.

"Do you know who graduated from there?" Moni asked.

"Uh, Jesse Jackson?"

"Khalid Sheikh Mohammed?"

She said it like that, like a question, like she couldn't believe that I was here with her and didn't know this crucial fact. It was early March, 2008, the fifth anniversary of the Iraq invasion. I'd been working at A&T as a lecturer in interdisciplinary writing for the past three years, but didn't know a thing about Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

"This is the guy who masterminded the attacks on 9/11," Moni said. "You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

Moni glanced at Curtis who was applying a cloth to a lens with calm circular strokes. It was just beginning to dawn on me that I might be in way over my head, like maybe I was the man my father was afraid I was, a rube destined to die a ridiculous death in the coming days, my charred body hung from a bridge in some war-torn hamlet, men in loose-fitting garments cheering as my ashy corpse twisted in the wind. Or they'd put me in one of those orange jumpsuits and cut off my head, whoever "they" were.

I took a long sip of my coffee. Surely, whatever crush I had on Moni would not be reciprocated given my astounding ignorance about the war on terror. There I was, about to embed with Navy SEALs in Haditha, one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq, and I had no idea about the man who had started the very war I was trying to cover for a magazine that hadn't even released its first issue. Yes, I was the guy who

had traveled seven thousand miles to learn that the mastermind of 9/11 had been educated in my own backyard.

"Excuse me," I said.

Rather than behave like a good journalist and question Moni relentlessly about KSM, I retreated to the bathroom to attend to suddenly struggling bowels. I stared at the graffiti from the troops:

Chuck Norris doesn't consider it sex unless the woman dies.

Chuck Norris's tears cure cancer. Too bad he never cries.

Here I sit, cheeks a'flexin, ready to unleash another Texan.

Here I sit, upon the crapper, ready to produce another rapper.

Can't wait to go home.

Have a nice war.

They called my bus. I put on my army surplus helmet and bulletproof vest, jotted down a few notes about the jokes in the toilet. I sat close to Moni as the bus filled up. I didn't want to lose her. I felt like I needed her, and I wasn't used to that feeling, that fear. Basically, I didn't want to be left alone in Iraq. On the drive to the plane, I made small talk about the record-breaking drought back home.

"It's so bad in Atlanta," she said, "that I keep a bucket in my shower just so I can save enough water for my garden."

We walked across the tarmac and up the ramp into the loud bloated hull of a C-130 Hercules. It was me, Moni, Curtis, four soldiers, and two contractors. The C-130 is an exposed experience, a cabin stripped of padding and panel, the seats nothing more than net and pole, the lights a dim red, white, and blue, the floor studded with traction pads. After the plane took off, Moni fell asleep and so did one of the

soldiers. Another sat with his headphones blasting so loud it sounded like spit was coming out of his ears. I smelled grape Kool-Aid powder. I looked around at the seemingly calm faces occasionally jostled by the turbulence. There was no turning back. For the past six months, I'd been obsessed with seeing the war for myself and escaping the media-saturated mindfuck of left versus right, peace versus war, WMDS, beheadings and 9/11 conspiracy theories. I wanted to see the thing for myself and now that I was here I couldn't stop thinking about how blind I'd been to the very place I was escaping: America: my own backyard.

Other than KSM, what else had I missed? Was I about to get kidnapped and beheaded, my father dropping to his knees in our front yard with photographers clipping pictures all around him, just like the dad of Nick Berg, the famous decapitated contractor? And were contractors—these men snoozing all around me—were they the bad guys like everybody said? Was America evil? And why were our troops so infatuated with Chuck Norris?

All the lights went out in the Hercules, the cabin a dark tunnel of jiggling multi-national bodies as this massive airship began its spiral descent to Baghdad, the famous lights-out, corkscrew roller-coaster free-fall approach the military's way of evading RPGs and demonstrating to rookie journalists just how simultaneously colossal and agile America can be if she truly wants to keep herself a secret.

Baghdad seemed calm before dawn, more a dense constellation of sapphire lights than a bombed out wasteland. I pressed my cheek against the glass of the Blackhawk. Here was one of the oldest cities in the world, Babylon herself on a Sunday

morning. As a thirteen-year old boy I'd seen SCUDS and Patriot missiles doing their duty on the news, my country at war for the first time in this city down below, but Iraq meant nothing to me back then. In high school, I owned a bong named the Enola Gay. History was just a game, a trivial pursuit, a place to get names for marijuana paraphernalia. Now I was here, in the center of the mediated world, seated next to Moni and Curtis and two soldiers manning swiveling guns as we strafed over the dark crawl of the Tigris River.

We touched down on a slab of cement behind a barricaded building known as LZ (Landing Zone) Washington. Apparently most of the soldiers at this chopper terminal for Green Zone activity were employees of a contractor firm known as Triple Canopy Security Solutions. Moni, Curtis, and I walked into the office with two soldiers who were in town for a court-martial.

The first thing I noticed inside LZ Washington was a photo on the wall, an autographed black and white shot of Chuck Norris next to the sign-in desk.

"What is the deal with all the Chuck Norris worship?" I asked Moni.



Chuck Norris doesn't read, he stares at the words until they change into the meaning he believes they should communicate. If he blinks the whole process starts over again.

She shook her head and smiled, like I was paying attention to the wrong things. As we waited for a our ride to CPIC, the Combined Press Information Center, I stepped closer to the Norris board, the little flapping scraps of pink and green post-its framing the autographed photo, the post-its scrawled with doggerel travelers had dedicated to this classic example of the Whitmanian American, that man who contains multitudes. Norris' life was actually quite remarkable, I realized at that moment. Not only was he an actor, but he was also a former contractor, a highly decorated martial artist who formed an entire school of Karate, and, on top of it all, he was a devout Christian political wonk who'd recently taken over William F. Buckley's conservative column in hundreds of newspapers, railing against premarital sex, gay marriage, and other such signs of the apocalypse. The picture of Norris I saw posted in LZ Washington had him seated atop a motorcycle that might as well have been a white horse. Beneath were bits of wit like:

Chuck Norris doesn't read. He stares at the book until it gives him information.

Chuck Norris wears cowboy boots. They're made of real cowboys.

Chuck Norris doesn't mow his grass. He dares it to grow.

I wrote down as many of these jokes as I could, determined to keep alive the lighter side of Iraq, but as we drove through the sunrise streets of Baghdad, I couldn't stop thinking about what Moni had told me just before we'd gotten on the C-130.

"You don't know who Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is?"

How bad is America's amnesia, its will to blindness? And to what extent is that blindness connected to our sense of humor, our addiction to nervous, absurdist jokes? Was I the only one who didn't know the names of our enemies? How little did we know about "them"? From the back of a Humvee, I looked for

faces. We passed by monolithic cement barricades, flashes of street vendors with exhausted leers pushing bales of blankets, a statue for the soldiers who'd fought against Iran in the grisly chemical weapons fueled war of the 1980s. God, how did I not know that the man who started this whole "war on terror" was a graduate of the school where I taught? Was the gap a function of too many rips off the Enola Gay as a teenager? Was I the only American who was this clueless about the Global War on Terror? Sometimes I felt extremely uncomfortable about just how much I had in common with the fool we'd elected President: George W. Bush.

My father gave me some advice before I left for Iraq. He said that Operation Iraqi Freedom was just as much our civil war as it was theirs. He said all anybody talked about in the press was whether we were the good guys or the bad guys.

"But what about them?" he said. "Who's their good guy? Who's their George Washington? That's the story you want to find. Talk to *them*."

That was my goal. I knew I had bigger fish to fry than the graffiti dedicated to Chuck Norris, but talking to actual Iraqis without intrusive oversight was easier said than done. After being in Iraq for more than a week, I still hadn't met a single Iraqi. On the eighth day of my tour, along with my military escort, a large mustachioed Mormon named Reynolds, I landed at Al Asad, a sprawling base that reminded me of summer camp, soldiers jogging and playing volleyball, fobbits zooming around in golf carts, a commissary store loaded with candy and chewing tobacco and cellophane wrapped soft core magazines displaying pin-up girls. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, under a shelter at the back of the base, as I was

paging through a men's magazine, I heard a familiar voice.

"Eat Boy!"

I looked up from my picnic table and ran down to the barricaded cul-de-sac where my SEAL platoon had parked their humvees. I hugged my old friend, now the Lieutenant for this platoon that was actually a Joint Special Operations Force (mostly SEALs mixed with contractors, CIA, and Rangers). Diet was a man I'd known since I was five years old. He looked different, his thick bristly mustache designed to create an air of gravity and power—what the Iraqis called *wasta*—but to me, it was pure comedy, a nod to the porn stars of the seventies or perhaps the viceroys of nineteenth century colonial England, Panama Jack.

"Nice stache," I said.

Diet commented on the disproportion between the hair on my face and the hair on my head. Whereas he was growing a mustache, I was growing a beard, having learned from him that while mustaches suggest power to Iraqis, the beard suggests holy man.

"You're in the back," Diet said, as we stepped towards a humvee with the name "Leonidas" spray-painted on the back. Leonidas was an ancient Spartan king, and also a fictional character from a recent movie, "The 300," which followed one Spartan unit's heroic exploits during the battle of Thermopylae. According to historical legend and the movie, the Spartans died valiantly fighting against King Xeres and his Persian horde, the Spartan story told only because Leonidas was wise enough to send a man named Dilios away from the platoon on the night before the decisive battle so he—Dilios—might tell the story of the soldiers' bravery to the masses.

"We're driving?" I said.

Diet nodded and smiled. I was surprised and pleased, and scared shitless. I'd enjoyed the aerial views of Iraq, the absence of Iraqis, but was growing a bit suspicious of the embedding strategy, the careful hopscotch from base to base, the way we avoided all the spaces between, the people.

"You scared?" Diet said.

"Should I be?" I said.

"No," he said. "That's part of the story here."

I put on my helmet and ceramic plated vest. *Complacency Kills*, said a spray-painted sign on the edge of Al Asad. A soldier named B. Dubbs was driving as we passed beyond the wire, the concertina and the cement barriers. Diet passed back a tin of Copenhagen. I threw in a pinch, feeling like high school, about to go rallying through the woods on a winter day, except we weren't entering a state forest or the rutted lanes of an apple orchard. This was a war zone.



The Haditha burn pit. Part of the desert scenery.

Diet had described Haditha to me as the West Virginia of Iraq, a triad of tribal villages a hundred and fifty miles northwest of Baghdad. Unemployment was seventy percent. There was desert everywhere, many of the people making a living the way they had for thousands of years: fishing and farming, ghostly figures shepherding goats on the smoke-plumed horizon. There

were men in robes selling what looked like lemonade from cheap collapsible roadside tables.

“That’s gas,” Diet said.

I nodded my head. Children ran along the shoulder with their hands outstretched. We threw them candy, jolly ranchers. I felt good. I loved the way the desert sky was skinning my eyes, the taste of my fresh chaw and its fiberglass shards tearing through my gums, the feeling of sharing a buzz with Diet in this surreal landscape that seemed to go back and forth between war-torn and exotic, novel and vivid on the one hand, tragic and impoverished on the other. I listened to the gobble of radio communications, smelled the sweat of the men, saw fruit stands pass by along the road, date palms and eucalyptus, a graveyard of jets, a black burned out hulk of a sedan on the shoulder a reminder that I was not in the Disney version of Iraq anymore and that, at any moment, one of these swaddled and stoic-faced roadside strangers might decide to press a button on a cell-phone he’d converted into a remote control and thereby remind me that not everybody shared the enthusiasm of the children for the foreigners with their tanks and their sunglasses and their gargantuan guns and their swollen lower lips.

I tried to keep my head in the moment as we approached Haditha, my vision of the world at that moment an opaque dust-smear profile of Diet riding shotgun, his face a single sunglass eye and the edge of that thick mustache, a wire coming out of his ear, his lips mutely mouthing orders into a mic as we passed through a gate, and then we could suddenly see a lake to our left and the Euphrates valley to our right down below, this ancient river of grade school lore now a roaring spout from the cement jaws of a massive dam, the slabby Soviet architecture and the sulfurous smell of the Haditha Dam not enough to mute the feeling of ancient resonance, the awe of seeing distant cities of mud huts clustered behind palms on the east and west banks, a vast

desert stretching out forever on the southern horizon, no billboards anywhere.

“Can we go for a swim?” I asked.

“You do not want to swim in there,” Diet said.

I wondered what that meant. Was the river polluted or was he wisely discouraging the appearance of recreation, a spring break scene of buddies privileged white men splashing around in sacred waters while dark people downstream were cutting each other’s heads off? I’ve always been a sucker for symbolic baths, half-hearted ablutions. When I see a new body of water, I want to swim. I kept telling myself to shut the fuck up, to remember the wisdom of Mark Twain: “It is better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

We parked the humvees and stepped out, were greeted by a pack of sand-colored mongrel dogs that threaded their way through our dispersing ranks. I gave one a tentative pat, stretched my legs and spit out my dip, then looked around the base at black missile-shaped tubes of inflatable boats leaned up against the cement barriers that fortified the borders, red and green storage containers forming a wall against the southern end of the camp, an empty plywood watchtower like the first leg of a Trojan horse.

“Who’s on the other side?” I asked Diet, as we stood on the bank of the river looking across at the camp on the eastern shore. He told me that was where the contractors slept. Sure enough, I saw the letters “KBR” sprayed in red on a cement wall, a few extremely thick men milling around. Kellogg Brown Root was a subsidiary of Dick Cheney’s old company, Halliburton.

“What do they do?” I asked.

“They more or less take care of the trash,” Diet said.

The great secret of my time in Iraq, I thought for awhile, was that trash, the burn pits KBR ran and the rash of scary symptoms discovered in soldiers and in Iraqis, or maybe, I came to think, it was a chemical weapons discovery at the Haditha Dam, a story one of those KBR contractors told me in a tent one night back in Kuwait. According to him, we never told the media about these "WMDs" because the serial numbers indicated American origins. This was a big story, I thought, as big as they come, but after I put it out in *The Mantle* the very week C.J. Chivers of *The New York Times* released a similar story about such weapons being discovered all over Iraq, I realized people didn't care, that our complicity in Iraq's development of the very WMDs we'd used to justify the war meant nothing to most Americans.[\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) No, I now believe that the big secret of Iraq is still that thing my father told me to explore: the people.

Diet showed me the trailer where I could take a shower, then ushered me into a maze of corrugated storage containers. I followed him across a wooden plank past a dark empty plywood room. Behind this was another row of these metal containers, the "ConEx" boxes that served as the sleeping quarters for his men, each door sprayed with their nicknames, monikers like "Lurch" and "Tree." Diet's door was marked by two big black letters: "LT."

"Damn. Not bad," I said, as I walked inside and beheld strands of Christmas lights forming vines above a red bed and a wall decorated with an ornate tribal tapestry, the pattern a pointillist spread of teal and brown leaves. I saw trunks of care package goodies everywhere, a Macbook on a desk under a reading lamp. Behind Diet's computer sat a black and white photo of his father from his time in the Marines during Vietnam. Above the photo were Diet's books, including a tattered copy of William Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*.

As Diet took off his gear, I sat down in his black swivel desk chair and read through his Faulkner. I came across a line on

a page that had been dog-eared, a passage I wrote down for some reason: "When a feller has to start killin' folks, he most always has to keep killin' em. And when he does, he's already dead hisself."

"You hungry?" Diet asked.

"What do you think?" I said.

"I know. Stupid question."

He laughed. Eat Boy's always hungry. Diet offered me one of his care-package nutrition bars, something with flax and honey and other progressive ingredients. It felt good to eat, to take off my shoes, to savor for a second the sense—the illusion—of finally having arrived.

"Fucking Eat Boy," he said.

"Bet you never thought this was going to happen," I said.

"No," he said. "To be honest. I didn't."

I looked at the cutouts of women from *Maxim* magazine he'd taped to the walls. He had a white dry board on the back of his door.

"Let's come up with a list of five stories," he said.

I didn't like the sound of that. I told Diet I could find my stories on my own. Diet, for good reason, looked at me skeptically, or perhaps paternally is the better word, or maybe it was close to the same look Moni gave me when I asked about Chuck Norris and told her I'd never heard of KSM. All three of them—Diet, my dad, and Moni—knew I knew nothing, and thought this was to my detriment, but sometimes I wondered if there wasn't a certain advantage to my naïvite.

"Just out of curiosity," I said. "Why does there have to be five?"

"It's a good number, Eat Boy. One story a day for a full work-week."

Three months earlier, after our local newspaper had backed out on sponsoring me because my father had threatened their editor (his patient) with a lawsuit if anything happened to me while I was in Iraq, Diet had called from me Haditha and challenged me to "be a man," to make the trip happen in spite of my father's resistance. So, like my president, I faked my way into Iraq, came up with a magazine of my own. I was proud of this, my American ingenuity, but as Diet stood there telling me what stories to write, I felt like he was meddling.

"I wanna meet some Iraqis," I said.

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna meet Captain Allah?"

"Yes, I wanna meet Allah."

That's how the name first sounded to me—Captain Allah—Captain God. Like, sure, let's go straight to the top. I had no idea who he was, but he sounded important and he definitely sounded Iraqi. Diet and I walked back through the maze of trailers that finally spilled out into the open air of the Iraqi night, some of the brightest stars I'd ever seen, the lighting of the base kept deliberately low, the vast miles of desert all around us offering no diffusing glow to the constellations, Orion stippled with a dress of chain mail armor, stars below his belt I'd never seen before. I spun around in the cool night air like I was stoned, saw a tall black SEAL walk out of the shower hut with a towel around his neck, saw the mongrel dogs play-fighting down at the southern end of the base by the red punching bag hanging beneath the watchtower.

We walked into the room of one of the platoon's translators, a

thick-bearded Jordanian named Rami who had a large American flag posted over his bed in the same fashion that Diet had a tribal tapestry tacked over his. Cutout pictures of women in skin-tight apparel modeling machine guns dotted Rami's walls.

Diet was briefing Rami on what was about to happen and I was admiring a photo of a blonde woman in a black dress wielding a black rifle when a tall man with a feathered mullet and a gold tie walked through the door, his entrance worthy of a sitcom scene. I half expected a studio audience to explode into a roar of applause. He was gangly, a silver pen clipped to his left breast pocket, his white dress shirt and olive suit freshly ironed, his eyes moving left to right in a furtive display of awareness and anxiety that evoked Kramer's character from *Seinfeld*. But this was unhinged, unrehearsed. Here was a man like me, who did not know his role, and no feature of his appearance suggested this more than the feathered mullet.

"Matt, this is Captain Al'A Khalaf Hrat. He's the leader of the thirty man Iraqi Swat Team we've been training over the past few months."

"Assalamu Alaikum," I said, rather proud of myself for remembering this rote greeting.

I shook the man's hand, felt a strong calloused grip. He responded with a deep voice and an abridgement of the conventional crib sheet Arabic greeting:

"Salaam."

He took off his jacket, revealing a shoulder holster, two pistols tucked beneath his arms. He took that off as well, spoke at length, looking back and forth between Diet and me, never once looking at Rami, which I thought was "interesting," as they say.

"He wants to know where you're from," Rami said.

Either Arabic is the most inefficient language in the world or Captain Al'A wanted to know more than just where I was from. Rami wore a tan jumpsuit with an American flag above his left breast. I was anxious, aware that a lot was going to be lost in translation. I had my journal in my hands with all of the questions I wanted to ask, but felt tempted, as I almost always do, to improvise, to throw my notes aside, and go with the feeling of the moment.

For the first time in my life I was not only in Iraq, but I was finally sitting with an Iraqi, the leader of a SEAL trained SWAT team, perhaps the Iraqi equivalent of Vic Mackey, Michael Chikliss's character from my favorite cop show, *The Shield*. Was it possible that Captain Al'A's mullet meant to Iraqis what Mackey's shaved head meant to Americans? Was I dealing with the alpha dog, the badass, a rogue cop, the sort of man who made his own rules? I kept getting this comic vibe from Captain Al'A, the ghost of the American mullet and its connotations of "I don't give a fuck, throw me another beer" mentality.

After telling Al'A that I was from a town close to Washington, D.C. I decided to forget my questions about statistics and George W. Bush and the fifth anniversary of the invasion and "the Al Anbar Awakening," and I elected, instead, to ask him about his hair. I told him I liked his mullet. I told him that I understood that different hairstyles meant different things to different people, that the mustache was supposed to mean power and the beard holiness, "but what does the mullet mean?"

I exchanged a quick look with Diet who shook his head in crestfallen disbelief. Captain Al'A crinkled his eyes and also looked toward his boss, perhaps not expecting the interrogation with the American journalist to broach such serious subjects as the symbolic significance of a mullet. I felt like such an amateur. I wondered what Moni would do. Over a hundred thousand Iraqis had already been killed in the

war and I was asking questions about hair care. I looked down at Al'A's feet, determined to get serious with the next question, scolding myself for my improvisational approach, my belief in naïvete perhaps nothing more than the sophist's justification for laziness, a tragicomic foreshadowing of the America to come. In the seconds between my question and Al'A's answer, I noticed the Captain wore ankle length socks. There were subtle pin stripes in his pants, a sharp pleated crease. He removed a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and offered me one.

I took it. We both lit up. And then he began to talk, his deep voice drawn into higher registers by the frenzy of his thoughts, glottals and hisses clashing, Rami listening from his desk, the Captain seated on the translator's bed, Diet standing over us. When Al'A finished speaking, he took a deep inhalation and blew a clean two-pronged stream of smoke out of his considerable nostrils, his face—his wide eyes and large nose a bit reminiscent of the Muppet character, Gonzo.

"He says that his men are not afraid of death," Rami said. "He says that in some cities his haircut is not allowed, that it means a man is gay, and if you are gay you can get killed. But he is not gay. He just does what he wants. He is not afraid of death. He has lost eight family members, three brothers kidnapped and killed. His uncle, who was the police chief—he and his three children were murdered. It has been a terrible time for Hadithans. Hundreds of people leaving the city for Syria and elsewhere. Refugees. There was a man, an insurgent, who spoke to an American in public so everyone could see. Fifteen minutes this man and the American talk so everyone can see. Then the insurgent goes and kills an old innocent man, a barber. What do you think people thought? Do you understand the game they play? You cannot be afraid of death."

Lately, I've given a lot of thought to this moment, the story that emerged out of that question about hair. Many of the men

we armed in Al Anbar, men like Al'A, joined up with the Islamic State. Many of those who did not continued to flood Syria, contributing to the destabilization of that country and its civil war that goes on to this day. So I've thought about Al'A's words a lot, his story, the flood of death in his family. I've thought about these words specifically: "You cannot be afraid of death." This value, what some used to call bravery, has not aged well in the twenty-first century, or at least the American version. Sometimes we now call people who embrace death "cowards." The absence of fear in the face of death runs totally counter to the American way of life and the way it's so structured around careerism and self-interest, retirement and insurance and health care, keeping people alive into their nineties, banking their bodies in the faceless retirement communities we find near our beaches and deserts, Florida and Arizona.

That night I looked into the spaniel calm of the Captain's eyes as another divided slide of smoke issued from his nose. A million thoughts were rushing through my head. I thought of Native Americans, the ones who got the haircuts and joined us, the ones who didn't, the Shawnee who occasionally came to dance at my elementary school when I was a child. Was I engaged in a timeless rite in that moment, sharing tobacco with a Brave? How ironic was it that the white man, or at least the white man's corporation, was now the one to provide the tobacco? And who, truly, was the savage in this "game" of drones and beheadings, snipers, IEDs and WMDs? What would you think if you were in the Captain's shoes, an Iraqi man working with Americans in the heart of a war that might well be illegal and might possibly (and simultaneously) produce positive unintended consequences, your every move fraught with the implications of poverty versus complicity? A simple conversation could cost you your life.

I felt a tremendous surge of affection and pity for Captain Al'A. We continued the interview. I learned that he belonged

to the tribe known as the Jughayfi. He was born the son of a worker at a local oil refinery. He witnessed the Iran-Iraq war and thereafter the first war with America. For a long time, like most Iraqis, his hatreds were pure, thoroughly controlled by an oppressive regime and its lockstep media, a government that kept tight control over the textbooks in the schools.

"You were not allowed to think," Al'A told me. "Everything was military."

God, I wanted to drink a beer with this guy and tell him about what it had been like the last five years in America, generals galore on TV, generals on the radio, CIA on NBC, assassins on Fox, anchorwomen cheerleading the war, military budgets exploding, everybody in the country shaving their head like yours truly, everybody with their support our troops bumper stickers and tree ribbons, every chicken hawk politician suddenly with polished flag pins posted on their lapels, country musicians turned to jingoistic sycophants for the war machine, everybody every day constantly reminded by the streaming ticker on the TV that we were living in code orange and it was all the fault of people like Captain Al'A.

"How have things changed?" I asked him.

"Come downtown with me," he said. "Come see the souk. It used to be so small you could fit it into the back of a truck. Now it's like, it's like—it's like Europe. It's like Paris."

Rami laughed, said to me, "Matt, it's not that nice. Definitely not Paris."

"You should come to the market," Al'A said.

I looked to Diet like a teenage son begging permission from his father to go to a party with the older guys, that archetypal convertible revving in the driveway. Diet looked

back at me like I wasn't quite ready to take that ride, a long pointed blink.

"Don't worry, Eat Boy," he said. "We're going downtown tomorrow."

I was terrified-thrilled, intoxicated by war, confident in the seal of my spectatorial membrane, my security detail. I'd never been "downtown" in a place where barbers were murdered in the streets, a city where there were "attacks" every day. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I was finally getting around to my father's advice. I was talking to an Iraqi. But there was still a veil over the scene, a translator and a lieutenant, cement barriers everywhere outside. To go "downtown"—that might actually qualify as reality, an authentic "beyond the wire" glimpse of Iraq. Hot dog! Come on, Daddy-o! Can't I see beyond the walls?

Diet told me to wrap it up. I suggested a photograph with the Captain before calling it a night. Then, in a moment I'll never forget, Captain Al'A stood up and brandished a small bottle of "Axe" cologne. This baffled me. We'd been sitting incredibly close the whole evening and not once had he broken out the cologne. Smell, of course, is not conveyed in a photograph, so why the hell would a man spray himself with cologne prior to a photo? To comb one's mullet or tighten one's tie—this I understood. But as I flew back to America, I couldn't stop thinking about this final gesture. Why had this man with a mullet sprayed himself down so profusely with cologne before locking arms with me? Was this a custom my crib sheets had neglected to apprise me of? And why, of all colognes, was he wearing Axe? And why do I focus on trivial things like haircuts and colognes when there are body counts and ideologies and elections and secret prisons everywhere?

Perhaps the answer is simple. I don't know. I'm a coward. I'm an American idiot. But maybe that's too easy, modesty to the point of dishonesty and disavowal. So let me try to step it

back. Most Americans know Axe as the Walmart of colognes. Axe is the most aggressively advertised cologne slash body spray on the marketplace, a cheap and strong smell for young men looking to score. Axe is what we advertise to the young after advertising Viagra and Cialis to the old and Coke to all. As I sought Iraq, perhaps Iraq sought me as well, reaching out with the one smell that could not possibly be misinterpreted. Maybe Iraq, too, was befuddled by the multitudes Chuck Norris contained, the strange mixed messages of our muse and our media.

Ultimately, whether Iraq and Captain Al'A were as confused about us as we were about ourselves, I think it's safe to say that I'll never forget either. Captain Al'A, the way his mullet brushed my bare scalp as we wrapped arms for the photo, his locks dusting me with a musk laced with body odor and American tobacco, his ribs for a moment in contact with mine, their texture uncovered by his absent holster, the awareness of those bones sharpened by that most pungent of musks; begging for my approval, hungry for my adoring stare.

[\[1\]](#)

<http://www.mantlethought.org/world-literature/spring-break-iraq>

[\[2\]](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/14/world/middleeast/us-casualties-of-iraq-chemical-weapons.html>

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