

# New Fiction from Colin Raunig: “What Happened in Vegas”

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had woken up too early and couldn't go back to sleep—he couldn't sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank's body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank's body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah'd* his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from

deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

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Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave, literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a

Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

"I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we're going to Vegas," Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. "You're coming with me. And don't you die before we make it back. Or I'll kill ya."

"Okay," Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn't die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before, trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or

the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

"What the fuck?" Cameron said.

"What?" Frank replied.

"Where are the fountains?" Cameron asked. "There are supposed to be fountains."

"Where?" Frank asked.

"Where? Right fucking there. In the lake."

"All the time?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," Cameron said, upset. "I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don't fucking see any."

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

"Hey," Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. "What?" Frank replied.

"The *fountains*," Cameron said, incredulous.

"Must have just missed them," Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. "The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it," Cameron said.

"We're only twenty-two," Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. "Whatever," Cameron said. "People pee in there, you know."

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron's luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

"Oh, look at the beautiful toes!"

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful of frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

"They're wonderful! They are such little treats!"

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin, the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

"Is everything ok?" the shorter man whispered into Richard Simmons' ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. "Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys," Richard said.

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The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from

the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat to Richard's left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn't really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

"So, what'll it be?" Richard asked the table. "It's on me! It's the least I can do, for what you did."

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn't know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:

*Honor*

*Loyalty*

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

*Semper Fidelis*—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn't know what he would do. He wasn't sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever. Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be it. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. "Jack and Coke for me," Frank said to the waitress.

"Make it two," said Cameron.

"Make it four," said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us," Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron's politeness.

"Mr. Simmons!" Richard said, delighted, "Mr. Simmons is my dad's name, and *he* didn't like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir."

"Really?" asked Cameron.

"Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things."

"Oh yeah?" said Cameron.

"You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I'm fit," he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn't have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. "60 years old and I don't feel a day over 30. I have my gym still. In LA. I can't move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it's fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that's the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym."

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in



the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. "Frank's the real fitness freak."

Richard looked at Frank. "The strong, silent type, I can tell," said Richard. "Frank, what's your routine?"

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard's eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard's gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

"Oh, thank you!" Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard's assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard's assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. "To the troops!" Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

"Bench," said Frank, in response to Richard's previous question. "Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that."

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard's question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drunk way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

"Wow, and all the military training you do, too," Richard said.

Frank nodded. "70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I'm kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago."

"Two weeks," Richard said. "So you really just got home, didn't you?"

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank's youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank's—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard's gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn't remember anyone ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard

asked for Frank's and Cameron's number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank's gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that's not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn't look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

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"Do you think he's gay?" Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt's Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

"Who cares?" Frank replied to Cameron's question. "Why does it matter?"

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

"It doesn't," Cameron said. "I'm just asking, damn."

"Well, if it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter."

"He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight."

"He was just being nice," Frank said.

"Whatever," Cameron grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

"Nothing," Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn't been to very many strip clubs. He didn't like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren't so impressed or scared or jealous. The saying was "every Marine a rifleman," the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn't why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn't quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He'd give it a try, at

least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron's suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank's elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

"Vanessa," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

"Do you want a dance?"

"Okay."

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa's coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn't help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and

admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn't able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

"You're body's so hot," she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks, smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls

from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

"Hey," she said. She stood right next to Frank.

"Hey," he replied.

"Sandra," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. "My phone is dead," she said. "Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you." Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them

out to Frank. "That should cover it," she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. "I just failed my audition," she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. "They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won't get surgery. I didn't have to do any of this shit in Portland."

"I'm sorry," Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

"It's different here, in Vegas," she said. "The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you're not."

"I think you're beautiful," Frank said to her. He meant it.

"Thanks," Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't let them change you," he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. "Thank you," she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. "What are you in Vegas for?"

"Just got back from Iraq," Frank said. "Here for some R & R with my buddy."

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and



looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. "Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks," Frank said.

Frank's phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra's ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

"Thank you for helping me," she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. "You're so sweet."

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn't want it to end.

"Can I come with you?" Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. "Not tonight," she said.

"Okay," Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn't come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when he didn't, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard's face again, the one where he had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard's eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

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Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes.

At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours. His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

"I know it's early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping."

"I'm up early, too," Frank said. "I'm sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation."

"What are you up to?" Richard asked.

"I'm out walking the strip."

"Oh, you are?" Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. "Where?"

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. "I don't know. By some hotels."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Come to the Bellagio. They'll send you to my room. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn't know where Richard's room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat and white gloves.

"Are you here for Richard Simmons?" the man asked.

"Yes," Frank said.

"Right this way," the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard's room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the

window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.



“Frank. Come in.”

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn't touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

“I got a little of everything,” Richard said.

“I can see that,” Frank replied.

“Shall we?” Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact,

was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn't seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn't finish before Richard did.

"How was it?" Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. "Really good," Frank said. "Thank you."

"Of course," Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. "Did you have a nice night?"

"We went to a strip club, actually," Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank's embarrassment and waved away his concern. "It's Vegas. I'd be worried if you *didn't* go to a strip club."

"I was worried to tell you, actually," Frank said.

"There's nothing you've seen that I haven't. And I've seen *everything*. Did you have a good time?"

Frank thought about it.

"I don't know," Frank said. "Maybe not."

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

"What about you?" Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. "Oh, I found the party, but the party didn't find me, if that makes sense."

It didn't, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was

deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

"Do you ever get tired of it all?" Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank's question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. "Of this?" Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. "No, sorry," Frank said.

"Oh, I can get tired of this," Richard said. "It's marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with."

"And are you tired of it now?" Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I take a break, and then I'm good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years."

"I think I'm getting to that point," Frank said. "Of being done."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Ha!" Richard's laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank

couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard's laugh trickled down into a snuffle.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said.

"I wasn't laughing at you," Richard said. "I just —"

"It's okay."

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair that was to Frank's immediate left. He looked in Frank's eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. "And so have you," Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank's comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed "Richard Simmons" into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, "Sweatin' to the Oldies." Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard's David Letterman's appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman

smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.



"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

"I've never seen them," Frank said. "In person, I mean. I've seen them on YouTube or whatever."

Richard whirled around on his heels. "You've never seen them?!"

"No."

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. "Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please."

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard Richard's muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. "I've got good news!" Richard said. He started walking.

"They're going to turn on the fountains?" Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. "Bingo," Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

"How'd you do that?" Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks*. "One of the perks."

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that

they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

“Any second now,” Richard said.

“Okay,” Frank said.

“What about your friend?” Richard asked. “Should we stop the parade and invite him?”

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his response.

“Cameron doesn’t like fountains,” Frank replied finally.

“Oh,” Richard replied. “Oh, okay.”

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard’s.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn’t look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. “Don’t be scared,” he said.

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# **New Fiction from David P. Ervin: “Currents”**

Grant crouched on the sandstone and leaned on his fishing pole. The sun warmed his shoulders as he stared through the clear, green water of the Sand Fork River. Shadows of particles on the water’s surface glided across the submerged, algae-covered rocks. A dragonfly buzzed over the water. There were no fish in the pool. His boots gritted against the rock as he stood. He took a deep breath.

He looked down the narrow valley as the hot breeze buffeted him. The green walls of the gorge hemmed the river into a space barely a hundred yards wide. Hemlock and sycamore branches shaded the whitish-tan rocks that formed its jagged banks. The water meandered around the boulders for two hundred yards before it dropped below the horizon into a rapid he could only hear.

He liked the river best when he was alone. There was only what he brought with him – no bustle, no people and their motives. No one trying to show off. No one trying to scare anyone. There was just the river and its own cacophony.

He listened to all the layers of sound. The river’s whoosh echoed off the sides of the gorge. The water lapped in a steady rhythm against the rock on which he was standing. It gurgled and tinkled around an exposed log a few feet away. Further down it poured between two rocks in a sloshing sound heavier than the gurgle. Then there was a steady thundering down at the rapids that reminded him that the river could change.

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“This next one’s a bit crazier than the last one, man, but you’re doing good so far. Just keep it up,” said Brandon.

Grant looked behind him. Brandon’s tall frame was perched on the back edge of the three-man raft, eyes intent on the rapids ahead. His freckles were conspicuous on his fair skin. The swollen, muddy river stretched along the valley behind him. Spring had so far brought only rain. The valley was dead except for the evergreens and the beginnings of red and green buds on the other trees. They glided down a calm stretch between two rapids.



“Yeah. Right,” said Grant. He wedged his left foot tighter between the floor of the raft and its side. The roar almost a

hundred yards ahead of them grew as they drifted toward it. "Man, are you sure we shouldn't just walk the raft around this one? There's nobody else out here if we tip over."

"Nah, man. We'll be totally fine. This one's intense but it's fuckin' epic. Trust me," said Brandon. He sat down and jammed his foot under the side. He nodded at Grant with a faint smile, then locked his eyes downriver. Grant said nothing and turned around. He gritted his teeth and shivered, wishing the clouds would break. He cinched the chinstrap on his plastic helmet.

He wondered how the hell he'd gotten here.

He'd run into Brandon on the campus of the state university. They'd graduated high school together, and he was a familiar face even though they'd run in different circles then. It was the second day of classes, the second day as a new college student just a few days removed from four years in the Army infantry and a tour in Iraq. The second day of bewilderment in a sea change. They got together on weekends through the spring semester, and Brandon took him the most laid-back bars, showed him the best grocery stores and hiking spots. They talked and bonded.

When Grant spoke of Iraq and a little of combat, Brandon spoke of being a whitewater rafting guide. It was a lot like war, Brandon had said once. He'd read a lot about it, World War II mainly. You had to keep it together to survive. That took balls. This would, too. The river was like that. He'd invited him to take him rafting before the season opened, just them and the river. It'd be epic, Brandon had said.

It sounded like it could be fun. Brandon had showed him a lot so far that was. Maybe it would be like the cool parts of the Army, the air assaults and live-fire exercises. The adrenaline.

"You sure you've gone down this one when it was this high?"

said Grant. The booming rapid had grown louder. "You're not bullshitting me, are you?"

"We'll be fine, man," said Brandon. "If you get thrown out, just curl up in a ball. You won't get stuck under a rock that way. The current will just push you downriver."

The image flashed through Grant's mind of being pinned against a rock by the force of the river and his mouth went dry. Brandon stood in the raft behind him. The rubber squeaked and the raft rocked. Grant turned around. Brandon was mumbling to himself and scanning the rapid ahead, eyes wide.

"Yeah," said Grant and faced front again. He pushed out a breath. The look on Brandon's face had tensed him up. It was always worse when the guy in charge was scared. His limbs felt warm despite the chilled water that hadn't yet dried from the last rapid.

Brandon dropped to his seat and the water sloshed underneath. "Okay, man. Comin' up! You ready?! We're hitting it from the left."

Grant rolled his shoulders and gripped the tee handle of the paddle. He jammed his foot further into the crevice until it pinched his toes.

"Got it," he said, adding force to the words. He couldn't see the course of the rapids, only a drop twenty-five yards ahead and a scattering of worn boulders. The whoosh had grown into a thundering. He crouched low. "Yeah I'm ready."

His heart thumped in his chest. He heard Brandon behind him taking deep, deliberate breaths.

"You fuckin' nervous, man?" said Grant. "Shit."

"Huh-uh, nah. Remember, dig with that paddle. Push hard," said Brandon. "Okay, let's go two left!"

Grant put his paddle in the water on the left side, ensuring the entire paddle head was submerged, and pulled. They veered to the right, pointing at a narrow passage between two boulders. He dipped the paddle in the water and pulled once more.

“Okay, rest...Let’s do it, man!” shouted Brandon over the intensified roar in front of them Grant stared straight ahead. He heard Brandon’s paddle hit the water, then the current sucked them into the rapid.

“Left! Dig!” Brandon screamed over the din of the crashing water. “Now right!” Grant switched hands on the paddle and hunkered low as he dug the paddle into the water on the right of the raft.

They shot through the crevice. The front of the boat dropped and Grant felt weightless for an instant before it smacked the surface of the water. He stopped breathing when water came in the boat, dousing him, and then a gasp filled his lungs with air that smelled of mud. Boulders jutted out of the water and swirled all around them.

“Left, left!” said Brandon.

A wall of water to his left rose several feet above his head. His paddle was horizontal.

“Right! Right!” He flipped his hands around and leaned over the right side of the boat to get the paddle in the water. His left foot came loose. A wave underneath the boat bounced him out of the rubber seat. He scrambled to shove his foot back into the side and righted himself as the boat shot down the rapid. A wave threw the raft to the left and into a rock, stopping it and tilting them at an obscene angle.

This was it, thought Grant, and his heart fluttered.

“Back left, back left! Oh fuck back left!” said Brandon. Grant

plunged the paddle in the water and pushed backward and his arms burned. The bottom of the boat hit rock then broke loose and bounced against another boulder. It sent them hurtling down the river to the left.

“Two right and two left!”

Grant caught a glimpse of calmer water further ahead as he paddled. A wave crashed against the left side of the boat and drenched him. He blinked the cold water out of his eyes.

“Two right, two left again,” said Brandon with a voice that had evened. He took a breath and paddled. The raft bobbed in the waves, and Grant heard the sucking sound underneath as it passed over them.

The raft slid down the remaining rapids, mere bumps, and reached the calm. Brandon whooped behind him.

“Holy shit, man!” he said. “We made it! Was that not awesome?!” Grant turned around in the boat. Brandon was taking off his helmet. Water streamed from his face and through his short, red hair.

Grant looked at the rapid behind him, growing quieter as they drifted, and traced the path they’d taken with his eyes. His stomach churned at the sight of the water pounding the sides of the boulder against which they’d bumped and the tremble began.

“Okay dude, you see that rock over to the right? Let’s take a little break there,” said Brandon, pointing to a long, flat rock that jutted into the water. Grant nodded and paddled.

The raft scraped against the rock as they approached it, then made an abrupt stop. Grant still felt the motion of the waves rocking him. He propped the paddle against the wall of the raft and unsnapped the chin strap. He lifted the light helmet off and ran a hand through his wet hair. Brandon got out



splashed past Grant. He tossed his lifejacket onto the rock and put his hands on his hips, regarding the rapid behind them. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

When Grant climbed out of the boat his legs were wobbly. He sat back down on the edge of the raft and fished his water bottle out of the dry bag.

“That, my friend, is some fucking whitewater rafting,” said Brandon with a satisfied smile. “You okay man? Looking a little pale over there.”

“I’m fine,” said Grant. He tensed his jaw. He took the life vest off and his sodden shoes squished as he stood. “Man, fuck. Is that it?” He took short, shallow breaths.

“Yeah that’s the last big one. The rest of them are babies, nothing like that. Just an hour’s worth or so until the takeout.”

Grant nodded. “I almost came out of the goddamn raft,” he said.

The old fear had returned in earnest, the gut-churning sense of doom like passing a pile of trash on an Iraqi road and wondering if it would explode and kill you or nail your best friend’s Humvee behind you.

“Ha! Yeah. Glad you didn’t,” said Brandon. “We’d have been screwed.”

“Yeah, especially with no fucking medevac,” said Grant. He wanted to scream at him for subjecting him to some kind of cruel, pointless trick, a measuring contest he’d never entered into. “At least in the Army we were smart about shit.”

He stared at Brandon, whose smile ebbed.

“Well, I didn’t know it’d be this high, but still, rocks doesn’t it? Figured you could handle it.”

Grant shook his head, feeling the blood rushing to his face and his back stiffening. "I sure fucking can. What are you trying to prove, man?"

"What?" said Brandon. His eyebrows shot up. "Nothing, dude. This is just fun. We beat the river, you know?"

Grant glared at him. Brandon shook his head, and then walked over to the raft and dug in his bag for a Power Bar that he ate in silence.

Just fun, thought Grant. Exactly. The war wasn't just fun. It had a point. He'd gone because people had flown planes into towers his senior year, and someone had to step up and do hard things. It wasn't about fun at all. All that fear – on the roads of Iraq, the raids, the incoming – it was about serving something other than ego.

"You hear that?" said Brandon with his mouth full. He nodded towards the rapid they'd just come through. "Listen close. That real low rumbling."

Grant cocked his ear toward the rapid. He homed in on the deep booming of the water. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the sound.

"I hear it."

"Know what that is?"

"No," mumbled Grant. It was unmistakable now, a low, rolling knock beneath the higher pitched sounds of the rapid.

"Those are rocks moving along the bottom. That's how powerful that current is. I forget the numbers on the volume of water the Sand Fork pushes, but yeah, it's that powerful."

"Rocks? Really?"

"Yeah man. This river's no joke," said Brandon.

Grant listened to the deep booms under the surface.

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That was almost the last time he'd seen Brandon. He'd taken up his invitation for a celebratory drunk at McNally's pub the night after the trip. Grant thought it could smooth things over. Maybe he'd overreacted, misread things when his blood was up.

The Sam Adams had gone down nicely. Easy conversation flowed. And they'd noticed a couple of attractive, seemingly single girls. This could be epic, too, Brandon had said. They sidled up to them at the long wooden bar and offered them shots. They accepted, but that was all. At the first sign of their disinterest, Brandon had regaled them with tales of the river, at how they'd nearly been killed if not for his expertise and calm. Should have seen how scared Grant was, he'd said. They weren't impressed. And neither was Grant.

He'd avoided him since. He needed no measuring contests. He needed peace.

Grant picked up his fishing pole. He listened for the rumbling of the rocks along the river bottom but did not hear them now. He unhooked the lure from the pole and flipped it into the water. The ripples dissipated as they were carried downstream.

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## **Praying at America's Altar: A Review of Phil Klay's**

# MISSIONARIES, by Adrian Bonenberger

One of the first books I read was given to me by my father, who got it from his father—a children’s version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Opening the tome in the garret that was our home, I’d be transported to the vastness of Homer’s Aegean. A giant tome that has fit awkwardly on my bookshelf since, the book’s pages demanded effort and dexterity from my young arms, each revealing some new story or chapter in the war between Greece and Troy, and, later, Odysseus’ long and tortured return to Ithaca.

Beautifully illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, the book has a distinctive look that was clearly intended to evoke black-figure and red-figure paintings found on pottery from Greece’s Classical period and earlier. Illustrations often take up more than one page, with action swirling from left to right, and back again, a chorus between the characters, achieving an effect on the viewer not unlike that produced when walking around the urns and amphorae that unfurl stories of Achilles, Hector, and clever Odysseus in museums today.



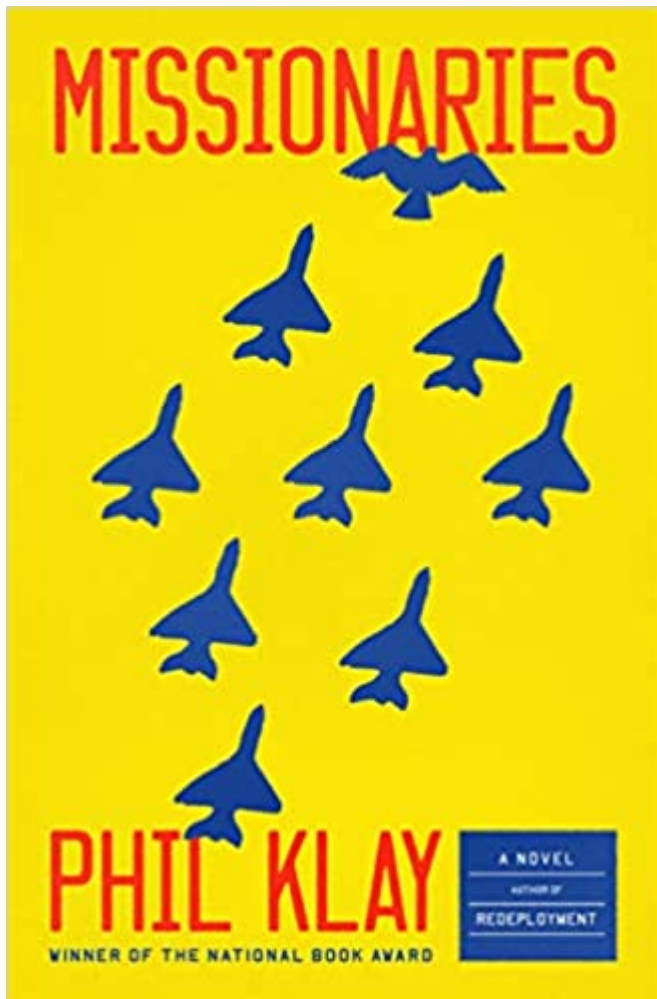


A two-page spread early on in the book introduces the characters together, more or less in context. The pro-Greek gods are arrayed on the left, above the Greek ships, while Greek heroes form a single-file line walking rightward across the page and onto the next, where they encounter the Trojan heroes and other significant Trojan characters in a stylized building. Above that building float the gods who support Troy.

It is a childish device, to introduce all of the characters immediately, and in their context, but this is a children's book. On those two pages, which almost serve as a glossary, I spent much time—either flipping back to cross-reference my understanding of a particular event, or simply to understand who fit in where with which story. With all of the love and care that went into building this book *for children*, it is not surprising that a war or wars that occurred nearly three thousand years ago remain entrenched within cultural memory. Indeed, they have come to form a great part of the literary basis of western civilization, and helped shape my own development.

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Phil Klay's [\*Missionaries\*](#) does not introduce its characters all at once, in part because Mr. Klay assumes that his readers are not children who lack object permanence and are capable of holding thoughts in their heads for longer than a minute. Instead, *Missionaries* offers a sophisticated narrative template, the shape of which organizes further chapters, and accomplishes the goal of stitching disparate storylines and characters together. The point of this device is to bind the journey of its characters together thematically—to create a plot driven by ethical choices rather than linear, temporal accident.



In this sense, *Missionaries* occupies a place in western literature most sensible to readers 100 years ago. It is a modernist book: things happen for reasons, and rewards are organized around a central ethical framework. It is a moral book: the bad come to bad ends or are thwarted from achieving their plans, and the good are afforded some measure of satisfaction through their choices.

The first character readers meet is a Colombian child growing up in the rural south. He's devastated by war, a kind of avatar of victimization, losing his parents and home before being rescued from the streets by a Christian missionary. The story moves back and forth between this child's evolution into a criminal during the 1980s and 1990s and the life of a female conflict journalist covering Afghanistan in 2015.

Klay focuses on these two characters' arcs in the book's first section. Later, the story expands to include others—most



significantly a special operations soldier who goes into the intelligence sphere, a former U.S. soldier who becomes a mercenary, a paramilitary leader turned drug lord, and a well-bred Colombian officer from a military family and his wife and daughter.

The final section of *Missionaries*, its denouement, is satisfying in a way that many modernist books are not. Klay avoids the impulse to “get cute” with the story—each of the characters is treated with dignity and respect, even the characters who make bad and selfish choices with their lives, and each one of their endings feels earned. When the journalist is presented with an opportunity to sleep with the mercenary—the two had been in some sort of romantic relationship in the past—what happens between them is both natural and surprising. The Colombian child turned criminal discovers an opportunity to atone for his choices, and how he takes advantage of it is perfectly in keeping with his trajectory.

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*Missionaries* carefully avoids endorsing a particular perspective or world-view, which is refreshing given the contemporary moment—characters are rarely driven by politics, nationalism, or philosophy. Perhaps it can be said that *Missionaries* is not anti-religion. The moments when many characters are at their most empathetic—moments that cannot be discarded later when characters behave selfishly or with cruelty toward others—often involve grace. The hidden hand of God is often seen deflecting or guiding bullets, presenting paths toward redemption, and, ultimately, offering mercy. Not every character takes the redemptive path, not every character accepts the mercy that’s offered. That is part of life, and Klay has represented that sad, tender part of the human experience well. Any adult, looking back over the scope of their lives, will easily find some regretted words or choices, a chance at grace missed. Klay’s characters, too, are beholden

to but not quite fully owned by previous choices to a greater or lesser degree that's magnified as successive generations within a family make choices that accumulate as the years pass.

This is most conspicuously true of the Colombian officer's family. The officer, an ambitious, cultured lieutenant colonel, has himself been affected by the political and military choices of his father, a disgraced general accused of war crimes carried out by soldiers under his command. This is explained as part of the country's fight against the FARC, a far-left communist insurgency group aligned with and inspired partly by Che Guevara. The effects of this longtime war are already known to readers, having been described in the book's first chapter, when the Colombian boy loses his family and village to fighting between the left and right, and the confusing criminal violence that arises in between. By the time the Colombian officer has a daughter of his own, Che has become a popular figure in the capital, a counter-cultural icon, a symbol of South American independence. His daughter has become enamored of a worldview in which the Colombian military is at best a handmaiden of American imperialism, and the FARC a kind of quixotic rebellion against that foreign (to Colombia) influence.

The hard work of the lieutenant colonel's father to do what seems right at the time—to battle the FARC—has become politically embarrassing, a liability during a time when political leaders are attempting to negotiate peace. The lieutenant colonel's own work training special operations to American standards in the war on drugs similarly comes to no spiritually uplifting end. But it is impossible to see what either man could have done differently in their lives.

Klay weaves his characters' arcs together slowly and imperceptibly, or reveals that they have been interwoven all along until all that is left are imperatives to act one way or another, selected out of expediency or faith. Those selected

out of the former tend to elevate characters professionally, while further ensnaring them in some greater, obscure plan—one operated or funded by the United States. Those selected out of the latter receive some sort of completion or absolution, and depart from the story.

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Here is the essence of Klay's project. Using fiction, he has sketched out an investigative piece no less important than the Pulitzer-Prize winning "Panama Papers." The contours of the book outline a series of behaviors and practices that, collectively, both define and circumscribe human action—what might, in previous centuries, have been understood as "fate." The characters inhabit those patterns, unconsciously, living out their lives and loves as best they can. Religion factors into this equation, as does class, ethnicity, sex, nationality, and gender. But the patterns run deeper, and are not accessible to the characters. Envisioned, felt, like some transcendent explanation to which none have access, the truth is exposed only to readers, like a divine boon. The name of that truth is "The United States of America."

Eventually, everything in *Missionaries* returns to the U.S. In mysterious ways, everyone gets drawn into America's orbit of wars and machinations—the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the various named and unnamed contingency operations sprawling from sea to shining sea. A story that begins in Colombia ends, improbably enough, in an air-conditioned tactical operations center in Yemen. The role of some is to cover the wars, to write about them. Others create the wars, participating in their function as soldiers or officers on one side or another. Others yet fund them, or support them from afar. In this sense every American is a "missionary," and everyone who ends up taking a side, participating in the great global competition for influence, whether by birth or by choice, is a convert. America is its own God, its own religion, at least when it comes to the everyday, the mundane. America is the context in

which violence occurs, America is the bad end of the deal that gets offered to you at gunpoint in some destitute village; America is a romantic liaison in a hotel room with a trusted confidante; America is the family waiting patiently in Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C. America can get you into trouble, but it will get you out of trouble, too, if you suit America's obscure purposes. America is not grace—America is the novel itself, the entire complicated project. This is not political, it's not “anti-American” as some might say; it is, as Klay has presented it, a simple and unarguable fact at the center of everything happening in the world today as we know it.

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My grandfather was a diffident socialist. Largely apolitical, anti-war, having served in WWII, his socialism was the quiet, humanistic sort that started with certain fundamental assumptions and extrapolated from them ways of behaving toward and around others. The only time I recall him being worked up about a particular issue in a political way was to oppose my applying to West Point, threatening to disown me if I attended (who's to say I would have gotten in? I didn't apply).

Reading *Missionaries*, I realized that attending Yale was no different from attending West Point, on a certain level—or Dartmouth, where Klay went, or USC, from which my grandfather graduated thanks to the GI Bill. These places are, essentially, the same, in the way that Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen, Venezuela, China, and America are the same, aspects of a megalithic overarching schema. Socialist, capitalist, communist, religious, atheist, opportunist, everyone inhabits some niche that feeds back into the center. You make choices—attending Yale or West Point or neither—and you live by them. You end up in a war zone, writing about it or fighting in it. Or you pay taxes, run numbers, open a small business, and your tax dollars are spent chasing the traumatized products of war from farmhouse to untenanted

farmhouse. *Missionaries* is about the wars, yes, but because the wars have come to define so much of what is and what we are, whether we like to talk about that or not, *Missionaries* is *us*, it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century Middlemarch, a 21<sup>st</sup> century *Iliad*.

Having spoken with my grandfather at great length while I was in university, and talked with him about his military experiences once I joined the Army, I feel confident that he would have loved this book, and seen in it as much value as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that he gave to my father. I enthusiastically recommend this to my grandfather, although he passed away thirteen years ago—his aesthetics led him to prefer nonfiction, but he would occasionally make exceptions—and I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who has seen value in culture and civilization, who wants to better understand the world we live in today, and who values human life regardless of the choices that human makes. For although the structure of our world is not pleasant to many, and most of its poorest inhabitants, if there is any hope, it is that people from different backgrounds and cultural contexts can be kind to one another—that the logic of cynicism is not, after all, the only determinative mode of behavior possible on America's earth.

Klay, Phil. *Missionaries* (Penguin, 2020).

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## **New Fiction from Matthew Cricchio: “War All the Time”**

The Staff Sergeant shifted in his tight, class-A uniform and frowned. Phones rang and keyboards, the primary weapon of administrative Marines, clicked in the busy Personnel Support

Detachment office. I said *please* a lot even though, if I hadn't lost my eye, I'd never beg a guy like that for a thing.

"Please, Staff Sar'nt. Who else can I talk to?"

"For what, Sergeant Bing?"

"So I can stay in the Marines. I want to do my job." I leaned in close so no one could hear me insisting, and pulled on the ragged border of my destroyed eye, the pink skin bubbling where the upper eye lid should've been. "I can still be a grunt."

"Yeah?" he said, holding his black government pen on my blind side. "Catch this." The falling pen disappeared into the darkness of my non-vision and he groaned as he bent over to pick it up from the floor. "The Med Board makes these decisions. Not me. But it's obvious you can't see out of that eye." He took one last look at my paperwork before putting it into a folder and handing it to me. "You barely have an eye."

"But they let wounded guys come back a lot. Last year in the Marine Corps Times they wrote about that Recon Gunny who went to Iraq with a fake leg." A line of Marines looking to sort out pay issues, Basic Housing Allowance disbursements, life insurance policies, built up behind me and the Staff Sergeant became anxious to move me along.

"Marine Corps says you gotta have two eyes for combat shooting."

I'd been to Iraq, two times, and Afghanistan. I had my Combat Action Ribbon. Even had a gold star device on the damn thing. This guy, whose uniform was too tight, whose hands were too soft when we shook, knew fuck all about shooting, let alone combat.

"All due respect, Staff Sergeant, your rifle range isn't the same as my deployments."

"I understand, Sergeant Bing. What I guess I'm saying is," he leaned down to his cluttered desk, grabbed the hefty wad of my medical record and pushed that into my chest too. "People come here every day wanting out. Faking injuries, getting arrested just so they can get kicked out. They want out bad. We process them quick so they can go back to whatever fucked up place they came from. But *you*," he came around his desk, put his arm over my shoulder and walked me out because I wasn't getting the point. "You'll be medically retired. Have free health-insurance until you die. Get a pension. The whole nine. This is your new life. You gotta embrace it." At the front door, he turned away and called the next person in line.

It only took walking those 20 feet and I wasn't a marine anymore.

\*

I was in the Holding Company for another week before they finalized my medical retirement pay. Legally restricted from driving, I had to ask my parents to pick me up from the base. We rolled through the gate, past the marines in formation, in pairs, in dress blues, class- A's, and cammies and I felt like the kid who was embarrassed to have his friends see his mom pick him up after school. They were in. I was out.

We drove from Camp Lejeune to Virginia Beach in record time if they give records for being as slow as possible. My dad was against me living alone, so during the entire trip he was stalling at rest stops, barbeque restaurants, and those giant road signs marking long destroyed historical sites.

"I've always wanted to read these things. Haven't you?" he yelled over the scream of passing cars on the highway as he read the tiny, raised print. My mom was quiet and probably just very happy I wasn't in the Marine Corps anymore. What none of us ever talked about was the fragments, from the bullet that hit me, lodged in my brain. My parents were honest, even

blunt people, but these fragments, which could migrate and possibly kill me, were something they were never honest about. Instead, they just talked about all the reasons me living on my own was a terrible idea.

Every time my dad slowed the trip down, I told him, making sure to thrust the badge of my eye forward, that I was still an adult. We'd lived in Virginia Beach when I was a kid. I knew the area and might even run into a few old friends. All I needed to do was dry out for a minute, get settled, and then start regular school. Through the internet I'd already rented a small, terrible apartment. Seriously, I'd been in much worse. When we got there they helped move my three cardboard boxes inside, took me out to eat, and lingered for a half-an-hour wanting to ask me, or tell me, to come home before they finally left without mentioning a thing.

\*

I took a job interview at a grocery store because I could walk there from my apartment.

The assistant night shift manager, an older lady who seemed afraid of me but masked it with a sample tray of rainbow cookies from the bakery she put as a barrier between us, asked me the standard questions.

"What's your work experience?" "I'm a Marine."

"Is that," the assistant night shift manager touched her eye socket unconsciously, "what happened?"

"Afghanistan."

"Oh, okay." She marked something on her piece of paper. I had the job if I was willing to work first shift, ready to help open the store at 0600. That was easy. What was hard was the slow pace, old people in the morning, unemployed people before lunch, working people shopping with no time to be shopping



when work let out. Every instruction was broken down Barney-style until even my dumbest co-workers could get tasks done with little supervision.

Other than being on time, I had no responsibilities. It didn't matter that I led a fire team in Ramadi or Musah Qaleh. No one cared that my platoon had captured six High Value Targets in Iraq. Or that we fought our way out of multiple ambushes in Afghanistan, including when I was wounded. I "didn't yet have the grocery experience to be a morning lead cashier." Sitting back wasn't the way I had been raised to work so when I saw problems I addressed them at the lowest possible level. That went wrong too when they wrote me up for approaching a chronically late coworker:

"Listen, Robbie. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you have to be on time." The kid rolled his eyes at me. I moved forward, touched apron to apron. His eyes were brown and dumber than a blood hound's. "Don't fucking roll your eyes at me."

"Listen man, you ain't the boss." He smoothed his short moustache, licked his lips and stared at me meanly.

I clenched his apron. I was strong. He was not. Lifting him off his feet was an inevitable result of the laws of physics. "It's everyone's job to do their part. Don't be a Blue Falcon. Don't be a Buddy Fucker." He was embarrassed, which was good—embarrassment is the truest motivation—so I put him down.

"This ain't the damn military," he said without looking me in the eye. He walked away before turning to add, "bitch." I'd confronted him in the small break room in the back of the store, to avoid attention, but they'd heard the scuffle and the room filled with the fat ladies that worked in the dairy cooler. It took four of them, wrapping their soft arms around me, to hold me back from finishing him. I was suspended from work for a week.

Once a month, my father took me to my appointments at the VA Hospital. It worked out, because when the doctor asked if I was maintaining a "social support network" I could fake it and point to my dad who sat there, never betraying my independence, rubbing his face. I had the same doctor every time, which was good, but it was always the same speech. My scar would become less prominent. There'd be less fluid leaking. The unspeakable fragments in my brain couldn't be removed and our only option was to keep watching for migration. When the appointments were done, my dad would take me out to eat, argue cheerfully with me about sports, and as he dropped me off ask me to move to northern Virginia so I was closer to my parents. I refused, every time, and he'd nod sadly before driving away.

At night, in my apartment, I'd pace. I would pace for hours and be unable to control the energy of my legs, feet, and hands. I had no idea what I should be doing other than pacing.

\*

When I first used the Adult Services page on Craigslist it was because I wanted to do something dangerous again. Something with a pay-off.

I only looked at the ads with pictures. They didn't offer sex, explicitly, but an hour of companionship. It was something they had to write in order to keep it legal. I called a few of the listed numbers to see what would happen:

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I saw your ad on Craigslist and was interested."

"Okay sweetie, what time did you wanna come see me?"

"Hold on a minute. What're your rates?" Money wasn't really an issue for me. My apartment was cheap, I sat on lawn furniture, slept on a twin mattress on the floor. I had no bills. I just

wanted to keep her on the phone.

“Everything,” she covered the phone and violently coughed. “Oh, ‘scuse me. Everything is on my ad, sweetie. I don’t discuss anything over the phone.”

“Will you give me a blowjob?”

The silence bulked between us. “I don’t discuss anything over the phone,” she said again, then hung up.



I kept searching and found a girl who called herself Octavia in her ad. 95 roses. Roses was code for dollars. I called, this time skipping the part where I asked for a blowjob, and she told me her motel. I walked there and called her again from the parking lot for her room number. Short and thick in a red velour jump suit, she was not as pretty as her picture. She had a tattoo of the Columbian flag on her neck.

“Columbiana?” I said.

“Ya,” she motioned for me to sit on one of the unmade beds in the dim room. “How’d you know?”

“Took a guess.” I didn’t know what to do next. I took out the

95 dollars and put it on the bed. She didn't look at my face, my eye. She looked at the money. Then she looked at my cock.

When it was over, I walked home slowly in the delicious quiet. I'd tempted risk and won. It was good, felt like the old days. That night, in my rat-fucked apartment, I paced the beaten brown carpet. I felt like myself again. If I'd turned out the lights I would've sparked through the darkness.

The next escort I saw was a brunette. She had a tattoo like the other girl, except on her tit, but I couldn't even tell what it was because it looked like she'd done it herself. It was gray and, in the dim motel breezeway, looked like scratches over her stretch marks. When I knocked she swung the door open all the way and stared at me with her hands on her hips.

"Hi."

"You da boy dat just call me?"

"Yeah." She didn't move out of the doorway and I couldn't see inside the room except for the reflection of street lights on a mirror.

"What happen' to ya face?" She crossed her arms over her chest and the tattoo swelled out of her low-cut shirt.

"I kinda got shot." My skin prickled. I looked over her and nervously scanned the dark shapes in the room.

"Oh f'real? Damn. You got ma money?" I nodded and she suddenly dropped her arms to her sides and jumped out of the door way, jamming tightly against the frame.

A huge man ran out from inside the dark motel room and punched me in my destroyed eye. I heard his boots squeaking then there was a flash of white light, searing pain and heat. I fell down and couldn't move. He stomped on my legs and ribs.

The girl was screaming, "take his shit! Take all his shit!" He lifted me up by my belt, almost ripping my pants off, taking my wallet and phone. He looked for car keys and, not finding any, kicked me harder. When he found the keys to my apartment he threw them down into the parking lot.

"Not even a fucking car!" The girl screamed.

The man dragged me to the stairwell at the end of the breezeway. He punched me again in the eye before he threw me down the steps. I never saw his face and I can't tell you what he was wearing. But I can still smell his dusty breath and feel the drip of his sweat on my face as he worked me over. No one came out to investigate the screaming at that cheap motel, though there were lights on in some of the rooms when I walked up. No one cared about me.

I was bleeding heavily from my face. Even my ears bled. I didn't try to find my keys. I limped as fast as I could through some woods to my apartment and kicked in the locked front door. I'd tell the complex manager to fix it in the morning.

The last time I'd been hurt this bad was when I'd gotten shot in Afghanistan. After I was hit, PFC Meno dragged me down a wadi for cover, treated me for shock and held my hand until the medevac helo arrived.

Inside my apartment I wet some towels in hot water and mopped the new wounds. That Admin Staff Sar'nt who processed me out was right: this was my life now. I had to embrace it. I was alone and nobody was coming to save me. I had to adapt or be killed. I'd continue doing this dangerous thing, because that's who I was, but I decided that something like this would never happen to me again.

\*

I developed selection methods to help pick the escorts I would

meet. I bought multiple Trac phones and called the girls from those. I'd never use a personal phone again. I set up a Tactical Operations Center in my living room. Multiple dry-erase boards hung from the walls listing phone numbers, girls they belonged to, and the copy from their Craigslist ads. I searched ads by phone numbers in other cities and states to develop a pattern of life analysis on which girls shared phones, worked with each other, or how often they left town, where they went, and when they came back. I had huge maps of Virginia Beach with acetate overlays so I could mark in wax pencil their motels. There was a kill board too, if something happened again while I visited a girl and my parents came looking for me they would know where I was last.

I called multiple girls to ask for the rates and chose to engage only the politest. This was no indication of safety but it was a method and better than my previous efforts. I'd send them to the wrong address in my apartment complex and watch from my window what they did when they got here, who was in the car with them, who followed them in another car. If a girl came to my fake address with a man in the car I never called her again. If a man followed in a separate car I never called her again.

Another thing I did was sit counter-surveillance in restaurants near their motels.

Sometimes late at night I'd hide behind a dumpster in the motel's parking lot and blow an air horn to see who came out of their rooms. If, after I blew the air horn, she came out with another man I'd never call her again. I mitigated risk at all cost.

I was visiting one escort a week but stopped having sex with them. It wasn't about that anymore. We'd talk for an hour and I'd pay them for that and leave. I really was paying for the company.

My focus returned at the grocery store and around the same time I got an award from management. We even had a ceremony like the ones in the marines. I was the most productive worker for January. Everyone forgot about the time I'd been written up.

Besides the first one, the only other escort I had sex with was blond and slightly taller than me. She called herself Starr. Her thighs were thick and she had a small belly. Her face was beautiful and her hair wasn't brittle like the others. It was long and full and it looked strong, bouncing in the pony tail high on her head. She'd been drinking wine and watching television when I knocked on the door. She hugged me after I said hello, told me to sit on the bed.

"You're in the military," she said. "Why do you say that?"

"They hurt you."

"That was a long time ago." The room was dim and the fine smell of cigarettes came up when we shifted on the bed. It was warm. "Believe it or not it used to look worse."

"Either way it's no good." She reached up and touched my cheek. "My cousin is a Marine."

"Really? No way. I'm a Marine," I said.

"Oh, *you* must be the hot guy in his unit he was always telling me I should call." We laughed. "Come on." She kissed me, which no other girl ever did. "Let's have some fun."

When we were done I paid her for the hour even though I didn't stay. She insisted I keep half of the money. "Really, it's no big deal," she told me.

I usually showered immediately after I came back from a motel but I could smell the wine, cigarettes, and the lived-in feeling of her room. I went to sleep with all my clothes on.

\*

The Motel 8 was on Virginia Beach Boulevard. It was L-shaped with rooms that faced a large parking lot. Every room had two windows, four feet by two feet, on either side of the door. All the windows had red curtains except rooms 108 and 222's were blue. The doors had hinges that opened to the inside. The six-digit grid for the Motel 8 was: 18SVF657453. I wanted 10 digits, which would be accurate within 10 meters, but my civilian GPS couldn't do it.

The maids began cleaning the rooms without Do Not Disturb signs around 0730 and usually finished at 1000. There was one maintenance man, black, 45 to 55 years of age, 5'8 to 5'10, 165-175 pounds, athletic build, short salt and pepper hair, goatee, glasses, thin gold chain around his neck and left wrist, usually in a gray button up shirt and black pants. The name "Sam" was stitched in red thread over his left breast pocket. Noticing these types of details kept me safe and tactically proficient.

The escort I was meeting in that Motel 8 posted a Craigslist ad titled JuSt wHaT YoU nEeD J . She offered half hour incall sessions for 100 roses and hour outcalls for 175 roses. An incall was me coming to the Motel 8, outcall was her getting into a 2002 sea green Honda Accord, license plate WSJ-1463, and driving to my apartment.

I was watching the motel from the Denny's across the street, shifting uncomfortably in the booth from the taser in my waistband digging into my hip. I almost left it at my apartment because when I got beat up the guy didn't use weapons but I'd just bought it and it was cool. I grabbed it, figuring it was like the intelligence I gathered; just another way to diminish the danger.

I finished the runny eggs from my Grand Slam and called the escort on my cellphone, scanning the motel windows for



movement. It rang four times as I slid down the sticky green vinyl booth to avoid the constant hover of the waitress refilling my coffee cup.

"Hullah?" She answered softly in a lilting southern accent.

"Hey, I called you earlier about meeting up." The blue curtain, room 222, second floor, north side, moved. That's where I had guessed she was staying. "Yep. I'm pulling up to the parking lot, just like you told me." She scanned the parking lot from her window. "What room should I come to?"

"222. The door's open, just come in."

"Be up in a minute," I said. I waited for her to close the curtain, took a last bite of a burnt sausage link, threw down twenty dollars and left the Denny's to go to her room.

Climbing the stairs to room 222, I unzipped my jacket. I wore the taser on the right side of my body, streamlined, low profile, and accessible. It was barely noticeable and I needed the extra seconds it would've taken to unzip a jacket in case something happened.

When I knocked she cracked the door and stared at me.

"Are you Krystal?"

"Maybe, are you James?"

"Yessum," I said. "My name is James Webb."

"Come on in, James." She smiled, opened the door and motioned me inside. Petite, her brown hair was teased into an obnoxious wave and held in a pink, ruffled hair tie. She looked *exactly* like her picture, which'd never happened before. The beds were made like they hadn't been slept in. There were no suitcases in the room. I immediately didn't like the situation.

"Well, shit ya don't mind if ah smoke, d'ya?" I said, faking

an accent. The room smelled like it had been scoured with chemicals.

“Honey, this isn’t a smoking room.” I knew something was wrong. I hadn’t met an escort yet that didn’t smoke. She went over to the bed and patted the cheap, magenta comforter. “Come over here, James. Right next to me. You got the money?”

The hair on my neck went stiff. My balls tightened into a knot. “Money for what?” I scanned the room. The bathroom door was closed. There was a door in the wall beside the two twin beds that led to the adjacent motel room. The chain lock was unlatched.

“We need money if we’re going to fuck.” She rubbed her face nervously. “Come on, take off your jacket.”

“No. You take off your shirt, Krystal.” I took a step back toward the front door.

“No, no, no, James. Not without money. You did come to this motel room to pay me to fuck, right?”

I started to breathe heavy. My hands clenched and unclenched. I threw my jacket open a little and it caught on the taser under my shirt. “Take your shirt off, Krystal.”

“What’s under that jacket, James?”

“My cellphone. See ya later.” I reached for the door knob.

She quickly stood up from the bed, walking backwards to the door that joined the two rooms. “*Brisket.*”

“What the fuck.” I drew my jacket completely open.

“*Brisket,*” she said again and the connecting door exploded inward as a tall, fat, bald guy pushed it until it was completely open. Another man was behind him. He had a blonde handle bar moustache and a jean shirt. They both pointed

pistols at me.

When you're in an ambush, particularly a near ambush, the only way to survive is to rush that ambush. I crouched and combat-glided toward her pimps, reaching for the taser.

When I was an E-2 or E-3 and deploying to Iraq for the first time, a psychologist gave us a lecture on something called Cooper's Scale. It's a color-coded scale of mental states in stressful situations. It started with white, which was being completely in la-la land and progressed to yellow which was having your head on a swivel. Next was red, when you focused in on one thing to the slight detriment of other events around you. You usually went red when you were engaging the enemy in combat but it was best to be there for just a moment and quickly peel back to yellow. The spectrum ended with black. Black was pure dumb instinct. If you went black you had no recollection of what you did. Go white or black in a fire fight and you will die. Yellow and red are fucking fun. When that connecting door opened and I saw those guys with guns I went pure yellow, like the color of melted butter.

"He's going for something!" The big, bald guy screamed. He was in Weaver stance with his gun on me at center mass. That's when I knew they weren't pimps. Pimps aren't tactical.

The two cops cleared the corners and moved down the wall just like they were supposed to. The girl was gone. I dropped the taser and raised my hands. I'd seen enough movies to know what to do next.

"I hate to break it to you fellas," I lifted my shirt above my chest to show them I didn't have anything else. "But this isn't the first time people've put guns in my face." That wasn't the truth. I hardly ever saw the people who'd shot at me. It just sounded badass.

Do you see how war works? You train to fight an enemy by transforming yourself through pain into whatever it is you

need to be to win against that particular foe. But, when you have worthy adversaries, there's always something else waiting to surprise you. I assumed I'd get beat up and robbed again. Getting arrested never even crossed my mind.

I was cuffed after they punched me a couple of times for scaring the shit out of them.

\*

Later, the big, bald cop interrogated me in a barren room at the police station. "Your name's Rod Bing, right?"

"Yep."

"Not James Webb."

"No, but it was clever wasn't it?"

The bald cop snorted like a bull. "Do you regularly see prostitutes?"

"Maybe."

"Do you pay them?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you see a lot of prostitutes in this area?" "Possibly."

He slapped the table forcefully. "I can't help you if you don't help me, Rod." "Help with what?"

"You seem like a smart guy. In shape, good looking."

"Damn straight."

"Why would you do something like this? Don't you have friends? Girlfriends?" "I was trying to figure out my next move before I got around to that."

"Tell me what's going on. So I can help you."

"Sure," I said. "But you're not going to get a narrative response out of me by asking leading questions. That's amateur shit. Didn't they teach you how to interrogate?" I threw up my cuffed hands and smirked.

"Okay, maybe you don't want me to help you." He looked around like he was searching for something that had just been in his hand. The room was as tight as a broom closet and the cinderblock walls were sweating with condensation. "You smoke cigarettes, Rod?"

"No."

"You want a soda?"

"Never."

"What the fuck do you do other than meet prostitutes?" He slammed his hand again but not to scare me. He was genuinely frustrated.

"There you go! An interrogative! *What* do I do? Look at me, I'm a beast."

"So you like to work out? Okay. What're your favorite supplements?"

"Fuck that," I said. "If it had a face, soul, and a mother I eat it. If it grows out of the ground or you can pick it from a tree I eat it." I smirked again. "All that other shit'll kill you."

"You like music?"

"Sure."

"What type?"

"I'll be that asshole and just say I listen to everything. That's what everyone else says, right?"

"You look like a rock guy."

"Uh." I shrugged. "Okay."

"Who you like?"

"I don't know, man. Okay? I like fucking music."

"You were in the Marine Corps, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm in the Army Reserves. I've been to Afghanistan twice. You deploy anywhere?"

"Iraq twice, Afghanistan once. Marine Corps Infantry, man. You see? *That's* what I'm really supposed to be doing. Not this prostitute shit." I leaned across the narrow table. "You know what a Pashtun is?"

"They're the people in southern Afghanistan, right?" "You got it. What about the Popalzai?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what those are."

"The Popalzai are a Pashtun tribe. See, that's what I do. I try to be the best at my job. So I studied Afghanistan harder than my officers because knowing everything would keep my marines alive. I was good at my job because I put in the work. That's who I am." I placed my cuffed hands on the table, pushing them toward his scribbled note pad. "The Pashtun tribal structure is tight because it's really what they all have in the end. Without your tribe you don't exist. If you're a Pashtun that gets kicked out of your tribe, you might as well be dead. It's like being shit out." I licked my dry lips. "Do you know what it feels like to be *shit out*?"

"No," he said.

Of course he didn't. But I did.

\*

“Turn here,” I told my dad. He hadn’t said a word since he picked me up from the police station. “You want to get something to eat?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I was only in jail for 36 hours with no food.” I stretched in my seat. “But then again I’d rather be a skinny dog in the streets than a fat dog on a leash.” He was mad so he was giving me the dramatic silent treatment. Typical for my dad. “It’s just a misdemeanor.”

He accelerated to a red light and stuck the brakes hard. “How are you going to keep your job?”

“The grocery store? Fuck that job.” Turning into the parking lot of my apartment complex, he found a spot and threw the gear violently into park. “Look, I know it took you awhile to get over me being hurt,” I said. “You were mad I even joined the Marines. But being in the Marine Corps was good for me. Really good.”

“Shut up, Rod.” He sat back and exhaled loud. It was all fucking drama. “You’re being a stress monster, dad.”

“Yeah, really? What’d I tell you would happen if you lived on your own? Look at this place.” He motioned through the windshield at my rundown apartment complex. “You can’t live here. You need to come back with me.”

“Fine, whatever.” I pulled the handle on the car door. “Not much left for me here anyway.”

“Rod,” he whispered. Still all theater. “You’re not well.”

I opened the door and swung my feet out, back turned. “You need to understand that I’m only coming to live with you because I don’t want to live here anymore. Not because you’re

asking me to.”

“Rod, you’re in a lot of trouble.”

“And you’re more drama than Shakespeare.” I got out of his car. “Come inside and help me with my stuff.”

My dad lost his mind when I opened the door to my apartment.

“Holy shit, Rod. This is bad.” He spun in place, taking in the entire living room, the maps, the kill board, the six digit geocords of motels on white boards, the picture printouts.

“This is bad bad bad.” He walked over to the comms gear on the sagging card table. “How many phones is this? You got a dozen cell phones?” He picked two up, raising them over his head, and turned toward me.

“Trac phones,” I said. “Throw-aways. The primary communication method of drug dealers, insurgents and terrorists at large. And this guy.” I smiled at him, his shock, but also at the order and symmetry of my work. He dropped the phones, their backs blowing open and lithium batteries spilling on the carpet. I stooped to the ground. “Come on, these are fragile.”

“—Is this a HAM radio? Is it? What is this for?” His mouth hung open in surprise. I put the reassembled trac phones on the card table and took hold of his wrists before he broke something else. He let me move him, like a tired child, toward the single nylon lawn chair in the middle of the room. Seated, I placed the HAM radio on his lap.

“I bought it on E-Bay for like 20 bucks. It’s fucking useless. Just looks badass.” I sat at his feet, cross-legged on the brown and dirty carpet, looking up at his face for something more than terrified shock.

“Rod, son.” He placed the radio at his feet and looked away from what he must of thought was a terrible sight. “Not good. None of this.”



I laughed when he said that to convince him that this wasn't a problem. It was cool. This stuff, this way of life, was cool. "Look." I swept my hand across the space. "You're getting a glimpse into what I did for 6 years. Welcome to my TOC."

He stood from the lawn chair, stared at me. His eyes were lined with tears and he tilted his head back to keep them from spilling out. "Come here. Stand up," he said. I grabbed his hand and he took my shoulders for a moment before pulling me against his body. "This is not the only thing you have to be." He pushed me away to see my face and held my head on the wounded side. My dad rubbed my scar softly. "You can be something else."

I slapped his hand away impulsively then grabbed it again, pushing it into the thick bands of my scar. The tear ducts in my wounded eye were gone but I cried from the other. "But I didn't want to be anything else, Dad. This is what I wanted to be."

"Come home with me. We'll figure it out."

Just like mom, my dad had never wanted me to become a Marine. He didn't get it, never had any desire to do it himself, hadn't ever even known anyone in the military except for my grandfather who was in World War II but never talked about it—like *everyone else's* fucking grandpa—and had spent his life wearing a collared shirt and some khaki pants hanging out in an office and drinking coffee with co-workers he called friends but never came over to our house for birthdays or holidays or even a summer party, let alone hide him in a wadi and keep him alive as bullets screamed over their heads. And he was convinced I would get PTSD, probably because he'd watched too many sad Vietnam movies. I couldn't explain to him that machine guns had made me excited the same way footballs and baseball bats or SAT prep had for other kids. And sometimes I wish I hadn't been their only kid, had an older brother or sister that joined just so I could blame it

on them and make it easy.

But when I graduated boot camp, and *especially* when I started to deploy, my dad became prouder than anyone I knew. He bought a Marine Dad hat at Parris Island and a t-shirt too, put my goofy looking boot camp photo on his desk at work. My mom once told me that he faced it toward the opening of his cubicle just so people could see it when they walked by and would ask him about me.

Later, when I was wounded, my dad barely came into my hospital room in Germany, and when he did, he'd spend five minutes there, never sitting, looking out the window before leaving again. I thought he was an asshole. Really, he just couldn't stand seeing me hurt.

Standing together in the living room, my dad asked me what I wanted to pack, but I was crying so hard I could barely talk. He took my clothes and we left as soon as he was done stuffing them in my sea bag. I never went back to that apartment in Virginia Beach. We went to my parent's house in Fredericksburg and they set me up in the newly finished room over the garage.

That first night I slept well and in the morning I could hear him downstairs talking to my mom before they went to work. It was the first morning in eight months I hadn't woken up alone.

Both him and my mom eventually went back to Virginia Beach and cleaned out my apartment, throwing out all of the TOC gear and bringing what was left home. There were boxes full of uniforms. The three boxes labeled *Afghanistan* had frayed, dirty cammies I'd worn for five months straight.

When my parents were at work I put one of the cammie blouses on, pulled a pair of the trousers up to my waist. In front of the bathroom mirror I almost looked like myself. There was my wounded face and the muscle I'd lost but I was almost myself. It was the uniform that was wrong. On the chest there was the left name tape with my last name, BING, and another on the

right that read US MARINES. I found my pig sticker knife in the same Afghanistan box and used it to cut off the US MARINES. I pulled the rest of the uniforms from the box and cut US MARINES off them too. I went back to the bathroom mirror. With just my last name the uniform looked much better.

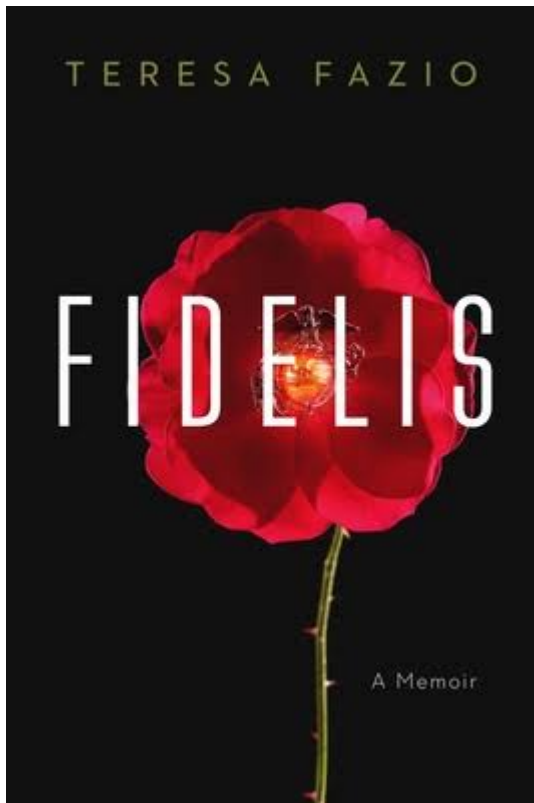
I looked like who I was. I was good to go.

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## **Loyal to the Corps: A Review of Teresa Fazio's 'Fidelis'**

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, or USMC, is "Semper Fidelis." Commonly translated to "always faithful," the motto—adopted in 1883 upon the urging of Colonel Charles McCawley, 8<sup>th</sup> commandant of the Marine Corps—replaced earlier mottos, including "with courage" and "by sea, by land."

The definition of the motto and what it "means" to be a Marine is different for different people, and almost never exactly what one probably thinks from the outside looking in. Now commonly shortened to "Semper Fi" by Marines, the motto and its history bear testament to the essentially arbitrary way in which rules are enforced not only in and by the USMC, but by and in American society, as well. After all, "Semper Fi" means "always fi," in Latin—fi means nothing, it's a nonsensical term. Taken at face value, the reduction of a motto to shorthand underlines the motto's essential mutability. Faithful... to what? Each other, the constitution, the president? Always... since 1883?



Meaning, as every adult understands, is highly contextual. This essential truth underlines most modernist and all post-modernist art and literature. When one takes the changeable truth of life and runs it through a harsh and dogmatic set of ideals, the resulting psychological energy is sufficiently powerful to drive some people to superhuman acts of discipline, in the name of honor and self-respect, and this is very useful when fighting a dedicated enemy. It drives almost everyone else mad, according to the extent to which they failed to live up to those ideals. Some rationalize their misbehavior, building up elaborate personal philosophies to justify their actions. Others descend into pessimism and become jaded.

Teresa Fazio is a proud former Marine, and her war memoir—*Fidelis*—grapples with that mutability at the heart of everyday life, and her own efforts to live up to ideals. It is a top rate book about war, and how serving in the Marines requires great reservoirs of emotional energy under normal circumstances, but especially on deployment to Iraq. It will resonate with anyone who has served in the military. *Fidelis*

may even give military leaders something to think about when it comes to setting and enforcing rules.

The story begins with Fazio's difficult family background—a household broken by infidelity, and an abusive stepfather, the type of situation that breaks many people down and ruins their potential before they have a chance to properly begin their lives. The setting did not break Fazio. Instead, she discovered great reservoirs of personal forbearance that complemented an aptitude for science. She put herself through MIT on a Marine Corps ROTC scholarship. She also learned early to rely on herself to succeed and overcome obstacles in an effort to achieve independence in two worlds dominated by men, first, that of science, then, that of the military.

One of the threads that Fazio follows from her childhood through the military and then afterwards is her complicated relationship with femininity. Growing up, she seems to see in her mother's adultery a kind of moral hazard specific to women, and this feeling is reinforced by the masculine circles in which she moves. It takes time and great effort for Fazio to overcome this inherent bias against her own identity as a woman, both in her own estimation and from others. The parts of her memoir that deal with this question are unsparingly honest.

Once in the military, Fazio proves herself a competent leader whose attention to detail makes her ideally suited to ensuring that communications for a Battalion-sized fort ran smoothly. The war intrudes in the form of dead bodies from outside the wire, and also mortar attacks, one of which nearly ends her life. Nevertheless, Fazio's greatest challenge arrives in the form of a man—a much older, and (not incidentally) married man, who seduces her in Iraq, and with whom she sleeps after the deployment. Far more troubling to Fazio than the embarrassment of having fallen for a manipulative adulterer is her violation of two codes: her personal code, which depended on a lifelong repudiation of using femininity to gain any

advantage (in this case, the attention of a man), and her violation of her expectations of herself as an officer and a Marine.

Above all, *Fidelis* is a memoir of endurance; a story about how a person can bear up under the weight of external and internal expectations. The prose is spare and straightforward, assembled carefully, attentively, and in a way that drives the reader forward sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter all the way to the end. Capable of being experienced in a weekend, or even over the course of a single day, at 215 pages, *Fidelis* is, like Fazio's deployment, intense.

The story is also filled with moments of understated wit, such as when she describes the midnight runs necessitated by a shift schedule that required her to stay awake at night:

*Before midnight, I ran on the rough gravel roads, carrying a flashlight so trucks could spot me. Even with its bouncing beam, I could hardly see five feet ahead, and I tripped over concrete chunks, bruising my knees through OCS-issued sweats. I got up and kept running. Headlights higher than my head screamed toward me, and I scrambled off-road to avoid them. Trucks roared past, carrying water or sewage to or away from this place; I couldn't tell. I turned around and jogged back for a freezing shower.*

Of a rebound relationship, "if I squinted, it looked like love." Of the internet and cell phones, technology made it easier to talk, but not to connect."

According to Fazio, and the strict rules of the Corps, in helping a married man cheat, Fazio failed to live up to its standards of behavior. But she was surrounded by people who were skirting the system—drinking on deployment, cutting corners, focused on their own happiness and well-being first, before that of the corps. Not, in other words, being *Semper*

*Fidelis.*

This is one of Fazio's greatest accomplishments: she remains essentially optimistic, loyal to the Corps and to her memory of the military. In spite of the failure of various Marines to live up to the ideals of the Corps, in spite of her own inability to reach perfection, Fazio carries out her assigned duties faithfully. Making an error, even one that consumes a substantial portion of one's energy and attention, does not define an individual, and although Fazio's error was apparent to her at the time and since, this aspect of her life does not capture her essence any more than it captures the essence of any human. The experience could easily have ruined her as an officer and a human, embittering her and turning her toward cynicism – but she must have been a competent and caring officer, and earning a PhD at Columbia after leaving the military establishes her bona fides as an intelligent and steadfast worker.

In writing *Fidelis*, Fazio more than makes up for her in retrospect understandable transgressions, by offering aspiring young men and women a realistic and expertly-written account of what it's like to go to war. Her unprepossessing prose, dry humor, and faithful rendition of the trials and temptations faced by deploying women should be read by anyone curious about what it was like to be a woman in the Marine Corps.

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## **The Gift of Trey**

A nuclear reactor is nothing more than a glorified water heater. Sailors as young as nineteen, kids, bombard uranium atoms with neutrons until the binding energy of the atom is no longer able to hold it together. When it finally rips at the

seams, it throws energy: heat, kinetically agitated neutrons, which strike more atoms and keep the reaction going.

Inside the core, we've planted the enriched fuel in such a way that we can control the reaction, but new elements are created in the process, venomous isotopes which will outlive us for hundreds upon hundreds of generations. When time has wrought language obsolete, when it has split the cities from their foundations, the Frankenstein elements will still hurl packets of energy into the dark, so that they can rest once again. We entomb them someplace where no one can reach them, where time may work its healing. Monoliths, literal pillars of stone, adorned with skulls and lightning bolts are designed in a gracious effort to keep our future selves at bay. All this simply to heat water. We're kids with matches and an endless supply of gasoline.

\*

My watch team at the nuclear plant has been operating in rotating shifts for nearly seven months now, simulating what life beneath the sea shoved into a tin can submarine will be like. A place where the hours of the day have no bearing, where sunlight has no relevance, a place where sleep will be a luxury and stress a constant companion. I work noon to midnight one week, then daybreak to sundown the next, and then graveyard to noon the next in an ever-revolving, never-failing pattern of lost memory and fuzzy intentions. I stand watch in the engine room of a submarine, quite literally, on blocks located in the center of a forest in the middle of nowhere upstate in New York, far from everything and everyone I've ever known. It took me a year and a half to finish the theoretical, classroom portion of my training in the swamps of South Carolina, and now I'm here to receive my working knowledge of the plant itself: the boiling, unsympathetic heart of the submarine where atoms slam together endlessly releasing their heat for us to capture.



I've been floating for weeks now. That's what it feels like—floating, like I'm inside a bubble where all my senses are subdued, where light and sound and taste and touch and smell all pass through some kind of foggy membrane. When I wake for the next shift, my room is very dark. The windows are covered over by aluminum foil and heavy blankets to seal out daylight. The steady drone of white noise from the television blocks all outside sounds.

There's a numbness which invades my every cell. This world I find myself in, a system of autonomic duty, lays waste to individual freedom of all kinds. My thoughts are not my thoughts. My deeds are not my own. My duty is another's.

When I finally pull myself from the bed, the alarm having screamed at me for twenty minutes, I make my way through the unadorned hallway and into the small bathroom I share with a couple other sailors. I stare at the young man in the mirror without turning on the light, the day streaming in through the window enough to cause me to wince. I look him over—large ears, dark brows nearly joined at the nose's bridge, sharpness of the cheek bones. I hardly recognize him.

\*

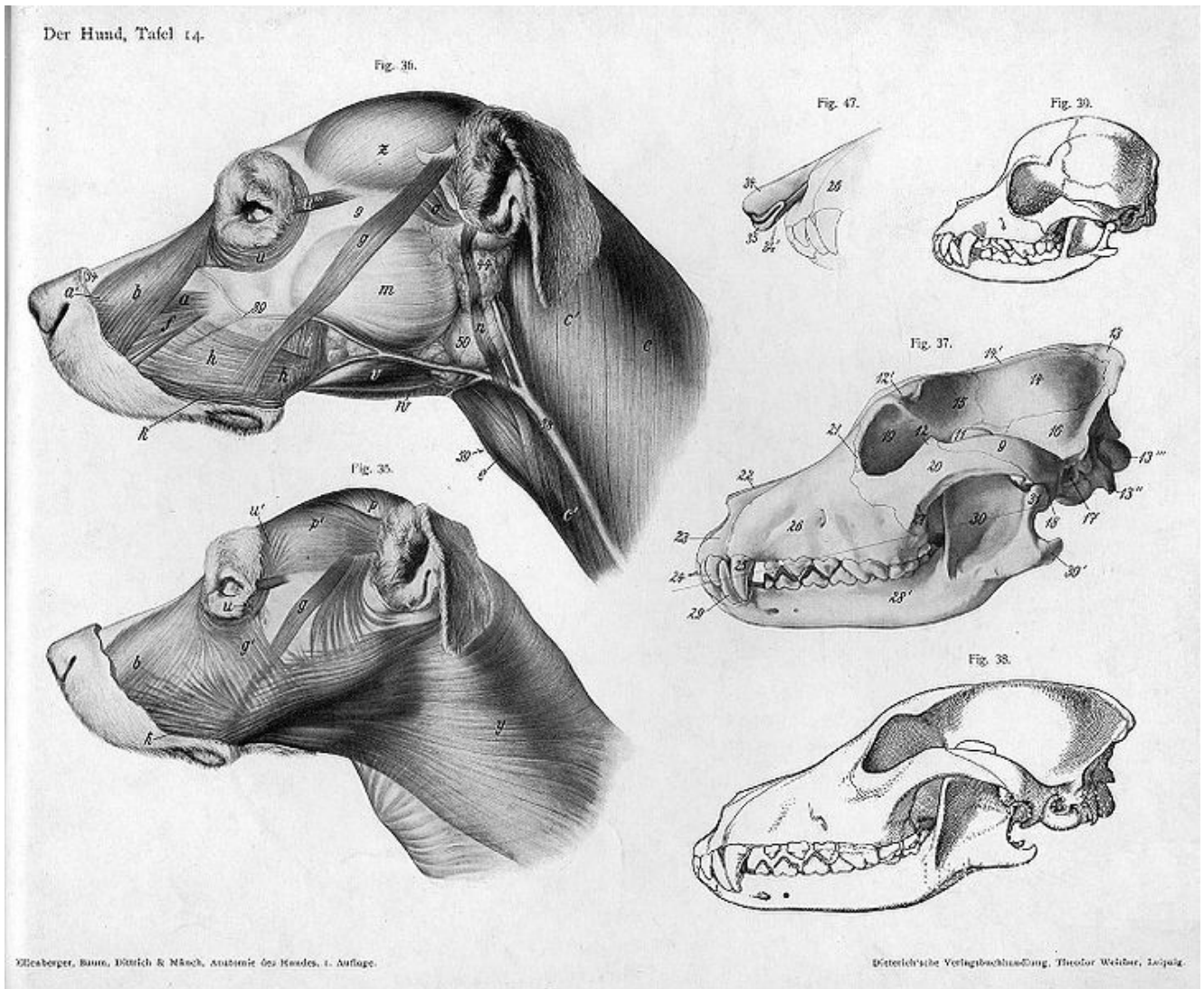
Between schools, I was granted leave. I went home to Mississippi for the first time since I joined up. My father hosted a barbeque, inviting his enormous Catholic family. My uncles were there, a few of my aunts, and a dozen or so cousins including Trey, a close friend as well as cousin, born on the same day I was, making us the same age. Trey had recently been discharged from the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, The Rakkasans. He'd been embedded with the first surge of troops into Afghanistan, then later Iraq for the ousting of Saddam. I hadn't seen him for a couple years and only heard faint hearsay of what he'd been doing with his new-found freedom.

Trey and I sat together on the porch swing at the back of the

house overlooking forest running the opposite direction. His normally healthy face was drawn taut, dark rings around his eyes. He'd lost weight since I'd last seen him.

"How's things, Trey?"

"Ah man, you know, never been better," he said, smiling sarcastically, exhaling blue cigarette smoke between gritted teeth. He told me of his new place out in the country in Holly Springs, Mississippi. He bought a trailer on a few acres of land all to himself and his wife. Horses and chickens ran the place. He raised fighting cocks for money and for his own entertainment. He raised pit bulls as well. "I had to shoot one of my studs the other day," he told me. "He was growling and acting crazy with a neighbor boy, so I cut his head off and hung it in a tree on the property as a warning to the others." He fought the cocks on an Indian reservation near his home where the laws of Mississippi don't apply. Most of his sales of the cocks go to illegal Mexicans who carry over the tradition from their home country. "They love it, man. Can't get enough," he told me. "They've got me on all kinds of pills, you know," he continued. "I haven't been exactly stone sober since before I got out."



Hermann Dittich, 1889, from Handbuch der Anatomie der Tiere für Künstler (University of Wisconsin collections).

“Is that all you’re on?” I asked him. “The pharmaceuticals, I mean?”

He grinned. “I’ve been taking just about anything I can get my hands on—street pharmaceuticals, whatever,” he chuckled.

“It really is rough over there, isn’t it?” I said stupidly, thinking outloud.

He laughed. “Shit, man, that part was easy. Over there, I knew my job and I was good at it. I didn’t have to worry about bills or what I was going to make for dinner. The enemy was clear. He was the guy shooting at me and my brothers. I only had to focus on staying alive.

Over there all the bullshit is cut out. Life is just having to survive. The petty shit didn't matter like it does here. It's coming back here that's the hard part. Over here I gotta worry about being evicted if I don't pay the bills. Over here I gotta fit into this consuming, selfish society. No one knows what I did over there," he said, gazing out over the forest, "and they don't care. And now that I'm back it's hard to tell who the fucking enemies are. The bad guys here aren't shooting at me. Here they sit behind big desks in expensive suits at the bank when I try to get a loan or they stand there with their arms folded when I try explaining how I could just use a break. They blend in with everyone else. And the enemies over there are harder to recognize too, now that I'm removed from it. I gotta keep telling myself what we did over there—what I did over there—what we are still doing over there—is right. I can't live thinking what I did over there was a waste. I have to tell myself it was worth it all. I don't have a choice." Trey's hand began to tremble, but he noticed and tucked it into his jacket pocket before I could ask about it.

\*

Something inside of me shattered then, something which was already cracked. I never should have been a part of this, I told myself. It kills me to see someone I love in the shape he's in. Trey had been a gung-ho person his whole life. He was always wound tight. The reason he was in the military to begin with was because he was caught selling weed in high school and given the ultimatum between jail time and the Army. He chose the Army, but he doesn't deserve this, I remember telling myself, no one deserves this, to be used up and left out alone, utterly reeling from the fall. I can't be a part of something that does this to anyone no matter the side. I can't, I argued. Suddenly the war became concrete for me, the abstractions now solidified. A fog descended I haven't been able to shake since.

Returning to Ballston Spa and the Knoll's Atomic Power

Laboratory, I resolve to start the process of actually trying to get myself relieved from active duty with an honorable discharge. I set up a meeting with the yeoman regarding the application for receiving conscientious objector status, a designation placed upon some people due to their spiritual belief regarding the sacredness of human life, disallowing harm or death to another person. When the day comes, I find the yeoman to be a nice guy. He wears black-rimmed glasses and has large Sailor Jerry tattoos stitched along his arms: pinup girls wearing Navy uniforms and sailing ships flying banners, sea monsters and anchors. "I've never seen one of these go through, just so you know," he tells me outright, "but I'll try my best to help you along the way." He goes over the paperwork I'm to fill out to put the process in motion. He tells me I'll have to build a case for myself, much like an attorney, with corroborating evidence showing beyond a doubt that my belief against harming another human being for any reason is contradictory to my moral obligations. Normally in these situations the person trying to prove oneself can lean on letters and statements from spiritual leaders or fellow church members, but I don't have any spiritual leaders, and I haven't been to church in years so it's not an option available to me. The meeting only serves to reiterate how improbable this route will be. Instead of my hope being renewed, I feel as though my last option has disintegrated. The earth has crumbled beneath my feet where I fall five-hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface.

The next several weeks are spent with my black-polished boots hovering, floating above the steel-grated decks of my engine room, the whirring of the steam turbines, the hum of oil pumps, the clicking of meters counting off various plant pressures and temperatures acting as my soundtrack. Time churns on ahead of me, catching me in its slipstream just behind enough to be unable to catch up. I wake up, attend to my duties, drive home, and fall asleep without much of anything coming into actual contact with me. The memories of

the day glide straight through much like the unseen gamma radiation from the reactor itself.

\*

It's an unseasonably cold night in November and sleep won't come to me. Something forces me get dressed and leave the apartment, which I rarely do, makes me walk the streets of my little town. The cold doesn't faze me. My phone rings, but I don't pay it any mind. I can see myself from behind, as though I'm walking a few steps back. I watch myself, the silvery mist exiting my lips to wrap about my head before dissipating into the air. My phone rings again, the vibration of it carries through my thigh. I continue to follow me around the block, back to my building's door and up the two flights of stairs and into the bathroom where I can see myself shutting the door. The light is on, but I don't recall if I turned it on. My phone rings again. It's my father. I press the silent button and the vibration stops. Four missed calls, the screen reads. I can see my hand reach up to the shelf beside the mirror. I watch my fingers lift the straight razor my roommate uses to keep the nape of his neck clean. Without a sense of any feeling at all, I observe myself open the razor, placing its surgical edge against the bluish twists of veins within my wrist, and then I hear the vibration of the phone against the ceramic sink. I look down, this time inside myself, and see that it is again my father. Still holding the razor in my leading hand, I slowly pick up the phone after a few rings.

"Hello."

"Hey, Son..." my father's familiar voice trails off.

"Hey, Dad."

"It's Trey," he says.

Silence.

“Son?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Trey’s shot himself.”

“Is he—?”

“No, he’s been airlifted to the hospital. They say he’s gonna make it.”

Silence.

“We’re, uh, hoping you can make it down here. Seeing you would, well it would...I know it’d make him feel better.”

\*

With four days off between my shifts, I get a plane ticket to Memphis, where my brother picks me up from the airport with a glowing smile and a hug lasting longer than I’m used to. After a night spent at my mother’s, my brother drops me off at the entrance to the hospital where Trey’s being treated. There, I speak to a nurse and she directs me to the ICU. Trey’s father, Uncle Mark, sits on the floor against the wall smiling faintly as I walk to him. His face is sagging beneath the heaviness of sleepless nights. His eyes are blackened.

“How is he?”

“He’s doing great after the shit he pulled,” he says. “I should’ve told you, he’ll be going into surgery here in a little while...he blew out part of his tongue. He’s on a lot of morphine.”

“Can he talk?”

“He tries to talk,” he says. “He’s been singing.”

He leads me, in an exhausted shuffle, to Trey’s room.

“He got really excited when I told him you were coming,” he tells me. He stays outside the door as I enter.

I find Trey sitting up in bed, legs stretched, smiling the best he can as I walk in.

“Hey Cuz,” he slurs, with upturned inflection.

“Hey...Trey. How are you, man?”

“I’m fucked up, isn’t it obvious?” he says, smiling through his eyes because his mouth won’t cooperate.

His speech comes out mushed and drunken, but I’m able to make out some of what he’s trying to say. His face is bloated and highlighted yellow with shadows of bluish-purple bruising. He wears a metal halo, a cylindrical cage around his face, screwed straight to his skull to prevent any movement of his neck. The force of the bullet broke his neck in two places. They haven’t been able to bathe him properly since he got here because of the risk involved with moving him so he uses a suction tube to clean himself: his saliva, snot, sweat, the thick oil excreting from his pores. His skin has a fluorescent sheen to it from the glaze of the stuff. My eyes follow the journey of his murky fluids through a transparent rubber tube from the vacuum he holds in his hand, through the air, collected finally inside a clear plastic jar filled with liquid the color of yellowed bile mounted above his head onto the white wall behind him. The sucking sound of the tube against his skin pierces worse than any dissonant tone.

He speaks in a garbled mess like a three-year-old trying to tell a story, so he asks me to hand over a white board lying on the stand next to the table. I uncap the marker and situate the board upon his lap. He has a difficult time holding the navy-blue marker and I have to reposition it between the fingers of his right hand more than once. The words are hard to make out as his handwriting is nearly as garbled as his speech. I have to reread the scribbled lines over and over



again before I'm able to decipher them.

"I've been rapping for the nurses," he writes right before launching into some ridiculous, incoherent freestyle about who knows what, as only the syllables and a specific rhythm are detectable. I'm laughing the whole time, more than I have in a long while. He's keeping rhythm by drumming along on the chrome bed railing. It's ridiculous. He writes how he's been hallucinating on the morphine he controls via pump with his left hand. He briefly describes surreal scenes of fantastical creatures and dream-world happenings. His brain tricks him sometimes into believing the halo is a chain-link fence his head is caught in. He writes of hearing the voices of the nurses gossiping and his mind blending it with his memory, building shitty soup operas he can't escape.

"devil playing with my trigger," he writes. "angels...scared. deserted me. dont understand. they're automated...dont know how it is to be gods experiment, guinea pigs with habit and conscience...grieve truth." He points to himself with the marker before writing, "still here."

One of the nurses comes to prep him for surgery, casually offering something to the effect of, "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine." She's telling him, "There's nothing to worry about." She's making an honest effort at resting his nerves, but a switch in his brain throws and he lights up. He pushes her with strength I wouldn't expect him capable of, and he starts frantically pulling at the IVs in his arm. I don't know what to do. I'm helpless. I stand frozen witnessing the scene as if I'm somewhere else watching it. He jerks the needles from his veins causing blood to run in trickles down his arms and onto the clean sheets before splattering abstract forms on the dustless white tiles below. Trey tears the electrical monitors from his chest, from his temples.

He's screaming and for the first time I'm able to make it out,

at least I imagine I can. "STOP! STOP! MY DOGS! MY DOGS! HE'S KILLING THEM! HE'S GOING TO FUCKING KILL THEM ALL!"

He's slinging blood around the room. He yells something about a horrific worm eating his roosters alive, struggling to explain to the staff the triggers aren't working on any of his guns, he's trying like hell to fight a war unfolding within his mind and all I can do is stand there, mouth open and wide-eyed watching the nurses freak out. The nurse who'd been shoved has picked herself from the floor and is now crying, her body limp and trembling against the wall. The doctor runs in with another nurse, yells for me to leave and from outside the room through the glass, my uncle and I watch as the doctor strains to pin Trey's upper body to the bed, shouting coarse commands for one nurse to "Hold the legs!" for the other to go get some medicine I've never heard of. The new nurse runs from the room returning a few moments later unwrapping a needle from its sterilized plastic, her face changing to iron as she plunges the needle into Trey's jugular, pushing the stopper down, injecting him with calm. She then inches away and watches, taking her place beside the first nurse still against the wall staring straight-faced and drained, the front of her uniform speckled crimson, Pollock-like, with blood. Almost immediately, Trey recedes. His breathing slows as his eyes collapse into shallow holes.

The surgery is rescheduled.

I walk down the hallway with Uncle Mark. "I'm the only one who can really figure out what he's saying," Uncle Mark says. "Just like when he was a toddler. From what I've been able to make out, he was playing Russian Roulette with this homeless kid who's been coming around his place. He told me this kid came over with the gun and was talking about wanting to kill himself so Trey says he decides he's gonna scare it out of him, said he told the guy they were going to play a game. He said he put two bullets in the gun, spun the chamber, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger, and when nothing

happened he handed it to the other guy but the guy was too scared so then he put it in his mouth and..." Uncle Mark demonstrates with his fingers, throwing his head back in an act he's probably been continually playing out in his head since it happened. He then turns and looks me straight in the eyes, his gaze commanding mine. "Trey said he knew he would save him, the kid." His eyes drop to the floor. "Here, I thought worrying about him dying stopped when he came back...I never imagined this."

\*

Upon my return to New York, I sit with my advisor, a Chief at the plant, and I tell him about what's happened with Trey and about my decision to apply for conscientious objector. He seems to care about what I'm saying, asking me straight away, "Have you had suicidal thoughts?"

"Uh...well..." I slip, having not expected the question. "I mean, I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it."

"I want to take you to the hospital so they can ask you some questions, just to see if everything is all right," he says grabbing his jacket. "Can we do that?"

I nod.

The next morning, as instructed, I see the base counselor, a pudgy, balding, middle-aged man named Joe Aschner, who grew up in the city; a civilian, thankfully. He sits behind a cluttered desk beside a bookshelf lined with psychology manuals. He gazes out through large, unfashionable glasses wrapped in a disheveled blue sweater vest, khakis, and worn brown loafers. He smiles when I enter. He introduces himself with a moist handshake as I sit across from him avoiding his eyes. He knows why I'm here and begins by asking general questions about my life: where I'm from, my age, my interests. "In your own words can you tell me why you are here?" he asks.

"I don't belong here," I tell him. "I made a mistake and now I'm finding it difficult to live with the decision."

He nods. Then he asks me if I read, and we begin to talk about books and authors. I tell him I've been reading Kierkegaard, how I understand what he means when he says in *Either/Or*, "I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle." Joe puts down his notebook and tries to lighten my mood. He asks if I listen to music and I nod. He tells me how he loves jazz, especially the standards: Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker and though I share his love of them, I don't feel like talking.

"Have you thought about medications to help?"

"I'm not gonna take the meds," I tell him.

He nods.

\*

Over the next few weeks, though the dream-states still hold sway over me, bringing with them a numbness I find hard to shake, and though the agoraphobia continues to try to coax me to remain beneath the familiar weight of my covers, I now hear the imagined words of Trey to the homeless kid echoing through my head. "You don't deserve death...You're just a fuckin' coward." The words help to ground me in some way, help me to place myself inside myself. My sessions with my counselor, Joe, begin to become the highlight of my week.

I start to feel again. Sadness mostly, but any feeling is welcomed at this point. And then, at the end of one of our sessions, Joe with uncharacteristic professionalism, seriously gazing into my eyes, tells me, "I have determined that due to conflicting with your moral beliefs, your involvement with the military is producing such stress upon you that it has affected your mental state to such a degree that it has placed your well-being in jeopardy. You are not fit for duty, which

places both you and those around you at risk. Since you refuse medication, the only course of action we have is let you go. It is necessary for your improvement. I am going to write a recommendation for you to see the Navy's head psychology department in Groton. I am going to recommend you be discharged as soon as possible. We will see if they agree." We share a smile.

\*

When the time comes, I drive several hours to Groton, I've been pacing back and forth wearing ruts in my mind. I'm panicking. My heart jumps along with my legs.

I sign in with the uniformed receptionist and she tells to take a seat in the waiting room. It's bland, nearly empty: no magazines to read, no inspirational posters to occupy my eyes. I'm alone in a race with my thoughts. After what feels like an hour or more a tall slender woman in a beige uniform addresses me, motioning for me to follow. She leads me to a computer at a lone cubicle in a room down the hall where I'm asked to sit down and complete a series of questions on the screen.

Would you like to be a florist? Yes or No.

Well it depends, I think to myself. Maybe.

Have you always loved your father? Yes or No.

Yes. I mean I've been pissed off with him, but yes.

Do you have a difficult time relating to others? Yes or No.

Well, sometimes...I don't think any more than what's normal.

Do you tend to choose jobs below your skill level? Yes or No.

Uh...I'm not sure. Always? I mean, I have, but...

There are hundreds of these questions, all asking me to tell the whole truth in a single word. It's impossible to do

honestly so I end up choosing conflicting answers to make them believe I've completely lost it. Afterward, the lady prints my results and takes them with us as we walk to the doctor's office. He sits in the far corner at a large wooden desk crowded with a computer and thick piles of white printer paper. The lighting is low and a dull brown washes the room. I sit in an uncomfortable chair as he takes my folder from the young officer before she turns to leave, pulling the door behind her. He reads silently for a few minutes then asks what I think has caused my "problem." I tell him in bare words I'm in the process of applying for conscientious objector status. He glances up from the folder to give me a quick glare before glancing back down. I stare at my shoes against the brown carpet as they lay paralyzed. "You want out of the Navy?" he asks bluntly.

"I don't think the Navy is what's best for me," I say.

"You're clearly not fit for duty," he says gruffly. "It doesn't take a doctor to see that."

I don't respond.

"Well," he says, as he takes his pen to a paper in my folder, "I'm going to recommend you be discharged administratively. The medical route would take too long." Then without looking up he tells me, "You can go now."

It's all I can do not to jump up and yell and scream and slap and kiss the old man's face and throw his piles of other people's problems and unreliable test results off the desk and into the air, dancing in circles as they fall. The news anchors me to the ground, the first real taste of certainty in months, the finest words I've ever heard, the voice of a mother waking a newborn from dark dreams.

\*

A couple months after returning home, I take the highway down

from Memphis to Holly Springs to visit Trey. The disassociation, the fogged trances I lived with for so long have dispersed. The darkness has lifted for the most part and I'm wading through possibility as a new acquaintance. Some days I just drive without destination. Some days I sit reading for hours in the park in midtown. Some days I do nothing but lie in bed, content with simply being my own once more. As I wheel the car onto the gravel drive, I stop at the gate where I'm met with aggressive barking and snarling from several pit bulls. My attempts at calming them accomplish nothing, but moments later I see the familiar swaggered gait of Trey making his way to me. "Okay, okay," he says, speaking lovingly to the dogs. "That's my good boys. That's my good boys," he praises them before looking toward me.

We sit on his porch steps in the golden light of the late afternoon sun, the clatter of the summer insects spilling out from the trees and thick underbrush as the heat lays upon our shoulders. Trey no longer wears the shining metal halo and he looks fully recovered but for the fact that he can't quite turn his head more than 45 degrees to the left. I sit on his right. "Just had a new litter of chicks hatch last week," he tells me, rubbing one of his dogs between the ears. "And the tomatoes are growing like crazy, man. So much to do," he says, "I can barely keep it together."

"Sounds like you're doing well."

He nods. "Neck hurts sometimes. But I'm okay."

"You ever see the kid anymore?" I ask him.

"I do," he says. "Got him working for me. Just too damn much to do on my own. Started when I was still in the halo. Showed up one day and asked what he could do, so I showed him how to tend to the garden, how to handle the horses. Ain't bad, but got lots left to learn. Still acts like a dumb kid most the time."

I watch as he fingers a tick stuck to his dog's ear. It's deeply embedded and the dog whimpers as Trey plucks it off. A thin ribbon of blood drips down the fur of his neck from the wound. Trey takes a lighter from his pocket and holds the flame to it between his fingers. I hear the parasite singe and then pop.

"Trey," I suddenly blurt out, "that kid didn't come over that night, did he?"

Trey tosses the spent body of the tick into the dirt before continuing to search for another on the dog's other ear.

I watch his fingers pass through the dog's fur as he smiles faintly, nodding.

I immediately turn away as my eyes fill with tears.

"Thank you, Trey," I tell him, the words falling from my mouth between breaths.

"Don't mention it, Cuz," he says, removing another tick from his dog. "Couldn't have you cuttin' out early on me, now could I?"

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## **New Fiction from Ken Galbreath: "Checkpoint"**

In high school, I was invisible—acne and braces, last year's wardrobe. I didn't have close friends. My grades weren't going to win me any scholarships. The football coach offered me the equipment manager's position after tryouts.

In the ninth grade, 9/11 happened. In tenth grade, I watched



the Air Force drop daisy cutters on Tora Bora. In my junior year, I watched the Marines level Fallujah. There were yellow ribbon magnets on every car and American flags on every porch. The military was a way to be somebody.

So after I graduated, I ran to the recruiter's office; shaved my head before I even shipped out. Some guys hated basic training. Not me. I couldn't wait to get home in my dress uniform and strut through town, to show all those people who had looked over me or looked through me instead of looking at me. I'd be impossible to miss with a chest full of ribbons and medals.

I finished basic and shipped to Fort Bragg. My unit deployed to Iraq three weeks later, just in time for me to get some. But our area of operations was only peace and the endless desert. Nobody had died in almost a year. No Americans.

My platoon drove around Iraq in humvees, pointing our guns at the horizon, hoping to draw fire. We escorted supply convoys. We transported detainees. We set up checkpoints.

The recruiter never said shit about supply convoys. And he definitely didn't mention sitting at a checkpoint, in a hundred and fifty degrees, in body armor, in a truck in the desert, just sitting. That lying prick told me about kicking in doors, calling in airstrikes, airborne infiltrations. Never checkpoints.

But, no shit, there we were.

When we arrived, the lieutenant radioed in our coordinates. Sergeant Schwartz and the other team leaders arranged orange cones and stretched out large, spiral coils of barbed wire creating a temporary barrier. Two soldiers positioned signs at either end of the checkpoint. In Arabic and English, they read, "Caution. Stop Here. U.S. Forces Checkpoint Ahead. Wait for Instructions. Deadly Force Authorized. Caution." My job was to stand in the turret and man the .50 caliber machine

gun, to provide security while the other guys set up.

Sergeant Schwartz pulled the heavy door shut as he got back into the truck.

“And now we wait,” he said.

Scwhartz took a pinch of snuff and tucked it in his bottom lip. He passed the can to Carpenter, the driver. I heard them spitting into empty bottles. Out past the barrel of the .50, the dirt road shimmered like water. Two hours went by, then three. Farmers’ trucks kicked up dust as they drove from one rural village to the next.



Ramadi, Iraq (Feb. 20, 2005). U.S. Navy photo by Photographer’s Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy.

So far, we had searched two vehicles and had found nothing.

“Hey Sergeant Schwartz,” I called down from the turret. “Is it always like this?”

"Like what?"

"This..." I said, "boring."

"The last deployment wasn't," he said. "We were up near Baghdad. Urban environment."

"What's the craziest thing you ever found?"

"No shit," he said. "This one time, we stopped a car full of midget hajjis."

Schwartz told us that Bobby Barrow, one of the other team's sergeants, had halted four lanes of traffic so he could take pictures. This was back when he and Schwartz were still privates. While Bobby was getting his picture taken, the search team found a wooden box full of Iraqi money hidden under a spare tire. So Bobby and Schwartz had to zip tie all these tiny little hands together while the lieutenant radioed headquarters. Turns out, all the money had Saddam's face on it, so they let the driver keep it. Before they left, one of the Iraqis tried to get Barrow to marry his daughter and take her home to America.

"Bobby told him, I can't take no hajji girl home to my mama!" Schwartz finished, laughing.

A truck approached.

"Punisher 7," I called it in. "This is Punisher 4. Vehicle approaching from the south. Over."

"Roger. Over." The bored reply.

A door clunked open and the truck rocked as Sergeant Schwartz stepped out. I heard the team leaders from the other trucks doing the same. Out at the furthest clump of orange cones, the white pickup truck slowed, as if the driver was reading the sign. I stood in the gun turret and held my hands and arms straight out in front of me like a traffic cop, but he kept

driving, rolling past the sign.

The team leaders, standing in the road beside my truck, raised their long guns and pulled the butt stocks tight into their shoulders.

I fired a signal flare, a warning. The flaming red ball arced past his windshield.

Still, the pickup didn't stop; it accelerated toward the barbed wire, our position.

"Light him up!" Sergeant Schwartz nodded at me.

I aimed. I fired three rounds.

The pickup lurched and jerked and skidded to a halt. The passenger's side sagged off the dirt road into an irrigation ditch. A door screeched open, and three female figures scrambled out, screaming and crying. The search team corralled them. Someone shouted, "Clear!"

There was nothing in the truck.

And then Doc sprinted up and pulled the driver out. She laid him on his back in the road, cut his pants apart, and stuffed handfuls of gauze into the gaping wound in his groin. And then she gave up. I heard the call for a body bag on the radio.

I clambered up out of the turret, pulled my headset off, and ignored Carpenter's questions about what I was doing, his warnings that I would be in trouble for leaving. I marched down the road, around the serpentine of barbed wire to where the truck had stopped.

One round had passed through the windshield of the truck high on the passenger's side, a cloudy spider web centered around a clean hole. Another hole in the grill, driver's side. Fluids leaked from under the truck, oil and antifreeze. Blood soaked the driver's seat, dripped out the door and puddled in the

sand to form tiny lakes.

I caught glimpses of the driver, with all of the people crowded around: the platoon sergeant, the medic, the team leaders, too busy talking about the details of "the report" to notice his wispy moustache. They didn't see the zits that dotted his face, because they were talking about proper escalation of force. They didn't notice me either, standing outside of their huddle.

Two young girls wailed on the side of the road. Their mother, or grandmother, was ancient and dry. The lieutenant asked the interpreter why they didn't stop at the sign, and the interpreter turned to the woman and said something in Arabic.

Her voice was papyrus. She held her hands out in front of her and patted her breast with her hand.

"She says they didn't know what to do," the interpreter said.

"Did they not read the sign?" the lieutenant asked.

"She says there is no school here," said Nasir.

The old woman patted her chest again and again.

"There's no school here," the lieutenant said, almost to himself. And then, not so quietly, "JESUS! FUCK!"

Heads turned to look at him, including the platoon sergeant's. I stood in the middle of the road. His eyes flicked to the empty turret 40 meters away.

"What are you worried about that for?" He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "You're supposed to be worried about your fucking sector of fire, dumbass." He shoved and pulled me to the truck and ordered me back up into the turret.

I watched my sector while the platoon packed up road cones and signs. They loaded everything into the trucks.

The platoon sergeant and interpreter spoke to the old woman, telling her how to file a claim. They gave her a piece of paper with the information printed on it. Before they left, Schwartz kneeled and offered the girls a package of M&Ms. The smaller girl burst into tears and clung to the woman's *burqa*.

As they walked away, the old woman stopped and rasped at me, "Asif."

"I don't speak your language," I told her. "I don't understand."

"She says she is sorry," Nasir said.

\*

On the ride back to base, Schwartz kept telling me not to worry. We did everything by the book.

"You'll have to write a statement when we get back. Probably answer some questions, but just tell the truth," he said. "We did it all by the book."

It was annoying, the way he kept repeating himself.

I finished my tour of duty. The army gave me a medal. Later, they gave me my discharge papers. I grew out my hair and enrolled at a state university.

I didn't strut around town in my dress uniform.

\*

Two years later, Carpenter's email arrived. It was short.

"Hey G," he wrote. "I don't know if you heard, but Schwartz died. Wanted you to know. Hope you're doing good."

The first email came a week after I left the army. Donahue died. Suicide attack in Baghdad. Last year it was Bethea. IED on some road in Afghanistan. He had gotten married the month

before. Now Schwartz.

At the bottom of Carpenter's email, there was a link to an obituary. "Staff Sergeant Michael A. Schwartzberger, age 32, died on..."

I hadn't talked to Schwartz, or practically anyone from the unit, since I left the army, but I felt like there ought to be more than just some dates and a list of people he left behind.

I read his name over and over. Schwartzberger. The name tape on his uniform had the tiniest little letters so that they would all fit. We had just called him Schwartz.

I emailed my professors and left that morning.

\*

The honor guard stood off to the side with their rifles. Some hairless kid in a baggy dress jacket held a bugle.

Standing behind the crowd, I searched the backs of heads for familiar faces. Bobby Barrow was conspicuous, his shoulders as broad as ever. He was the only person in a dress uniform who wasn't part of the honor guard. Carpenter would be here somewhere.

The chaplain stood next to the coffin rambling through generic scripture— *The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart. The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil*— I wanted to shout him down. I wanted to tell Schwartz's *real* story.

Schwartz was 20 when he joined the Army.

His grandfather and his father worked in Youngstown, but Schwartz was born the year after the steel industry moved to China. There was no future at the plant.

The Volunteer Fire Department didn't offer a pension. No

benefits package either. Fourteen dollars an hour might have been enough for him and Melissa, just the two of them, but then the baby came.

Schwartz was an all-American kid: athlete, honors student, Eagle Scout. The recruiters had hounded him right after high school. Then, he had tucked their cards into his wallet and nodded and smiled. When things got tight, he dug through the drawer in the kitchen where old wallet clutter was archived with dead batteries and receipts of questionable importance.

Melissa's belly was seven-months-fat when the recruiter came to pick up Schwartz for basic training. She sobbed on the porch while Schwartz rode away.

"Don't worry," the recruiter told him in the car. "You'll be gone for a couple of months, and then you'll move her and the kid down to Fort Bragg, and you'll see her every night. Except for a training exercise every now and then."

After basic training, he moved Melissa and Emily to Fort Bragg. He spent every night with them, except for the occasional training exercise.

After 9/11, the exercises came more often. The nights he spent at home, he lay awake, straining to sleep. He never explained it explicitly, but I understood. Some part of him needed to record the sound of his wife's soft snores or the smell of her hair. He needed to absorb the blank hiss of the baby monitor.

On a tiny base in Khost Province, he earned an Army Commendation Medal and corporal's stripes. He kept a picture of his daughter in his helmet. He wrote letters home every week. The letters never mentioned rockets or mortars or any kind of trouble. He told Melissa about his promotion. He wrote how much he missed her.

They had been in Afghanistan for six months and already there were murmurs about Iraq.



He received another medal and another promotion in Baghdad. He wrote letters. He kept a copy of his wife's sonogram along with the pictures tucked in his helmet. The unit arranged it so that he could make a phone call home on the day that Ashley was born.

These are the stories he told us while we were overseas together—his third deployment, my first and only.

\*

Schwartz's unit was still in Afghanistan. The honor guard had been scraped together from the fuckups left at Fort Bragg. The rifle detail and the bugler were privates, fresh out of basic training or discipline cases. The detail's leader was a fat, dumpy sergeant first class. All of the able bodies, and minds, were in Afghanistan.

The chaplain finished the service. The fat sergeant stepped up to the casket and raised his right arm in a slow salute. I watched to see who would jump at the first volley of shots. As the last volley's echo rolled through the cemetery, the bugler started to play "Taps."

It wasn't even a real bugle. There were so many funerals, and so few trained buglers, that the army had to use fakes. The digital bugles played a perfect rendition every time, but anyone who ever played a brass instrument would be able to look at the kid in the baggy jacket and tell he wasn't playing. He didn't even know how to hold the fucking thing.

The fat sergeant handed the folded flag to Schwartz's mom.

Some of the attendees walked back to their cars. Others waited to pay their respects to Schwartz's parents, still seated, looking as if they'd be guarding his grave forever.

\*

Bobby, Carpenter, and I met at a bar near my hotel.

Neither of them knew how Schwartz had died. Bobby said Schwartz's unit had deployed eight or nine months ago, but like the rest of us, he'd lost track of Schwartz after leaving Fort Bragg. Carpenter hadn't really talked to anyone since he'd been kicked out—cocaine.

Schwartz's honor guard walked into the bar a little after sundown. They were in civilian clothes, but I recognized the fat sergeant who had handed the flag to Schwartz's parents. Bobby asked about my hair: "So, when your girlfriend is pegging you, does she pull your hair? You know? And, do you have to put it back in a bun when you're licking her balls..."

I nodded toward the door, distracting him.

"Hey bartender," he yelled. "Get these boys some drinks!"

We sat at a table and told stories about Schwartz. Bobby had known him far longer than me; Carpenter too, so I let them do the talking. I was drunk. I smiled and nodded in the right places, chimed in with exclamations when I was expected to.

We kept waiting for the fat sergeant and the honor guard to open up. They were happy to drink on Bobby's tab, but they stayed quiet, like we were still at the funeral. They seemed surprised by the way we described him. It was like they had never even met Schwartz.

We wanted to hear their stories about him, but what we really wanted was to know how he died. The obituary had said nothing, not even *where* he died. And it wasn't like he was a spy, out doing something classified. He was in the fucking field artillery.

The jukebox died. Bobby was content to give it a rest. There was a lull in storytime.

"Tell 'em about that kid you smoked at that checkpoint," Carpenter said.

My stomach dropped. I focused on the beads of condensation running down a bottle of beer, but all I could see was that dusty, old woman. I could hear her voice, her rusty tongue dragging across the roof of her mouth. *Asif*.

*She says she is sorry.*

I struggled away from the memory and looked up, hoping for an interruption, an earthquake, a meteor strike, anything not to have to relive it.

The men from Schwartz's honor guard stared at me hungrily, waiting for blood. Bobby wouldn't meet my gaze. He understood that this was necessary. If I shared my story of bloodshed, then they would tell us what happened to Schwartz.

Blood calls for blood.

"So," I said, "this kid, who it turned out couldn't read, blew through a sign at our checkpoint, and I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out—."

"Dude!" Carpenter interrupted me. "Tell it *right*, man!" He turned to the fat sergeant and the rifle detail. "So no shit, there we were, in the middle of this fucking dirt road ..."

He told it all.

When Carpenter finished, the fat sergeant raised his bottle towards me, and then everyone at the table did the same. I waggled my bottle side to side. The label lay in shreds on the table.

"Sorry boys," I said. "I'm empty."

"Get me one too!" Carpenter called as I walked away from the table.

The parking lot was dark and cool. I pondered getting in my car and driving back to Asheville. The keys were in my hand.

Raised voices and breaking glass forced me to do an about face.

Inside, Bobby stood in front of his overturned chair, red-faced, cursing down at the fat sergeant. "You don't fucking know. You weren't there, you tubby shit!"

And now the fat man jerked to his feet knocking his chair to the ground too. "Listen, sergeant." He pointed his sausage fingers in Bobby's face. "You need to tone it down. I don't know who it is that you guys knew, but it wasn't the guy that I knew. Schwartz was a fucking shit bag and a drunk. That's why they left him in the rear."

"What?" Bobby's arms sagged.

When a unit deployed, they left people back in the States to take care of admin stuff— bitch work. They called it rear detachment. It was for broke-dicks, whiners, fuckups. Schwartz wasn't any of those things. This was a mistake.

"They. Left. Him. In The. Rear," the fat sergeant repeated, accentuating every word. "Schwartz got a DUI, and then he got busted for being drunk on duty. His ex took his daughters and got a *restraining order*. He was about to get busted down to sergeant."

"Liar!" Bobby said. Angry tears brimmed from his blue eyes.

"That morning, when he didn't show up to P.T. formation, no one blinked, because, like I said, Schwartz was a fuckup. When he missed 0900 formation too, we sent a couple guys to his quarters."

Bobby made harsh cawing sounds and the tears spilled over.

The fat sergeant continued. "When they knocked, no one answered, but they knew something was wrong. So, they broke in. They found him in the garage, in his truck with the engine running."

Bobby crumpled into a chair. Until now, I'd never seen him look deflated.

"Did he leave a note?" I asked.

"Sort of," the fat sergeant said. "That's how the guys knew something was wrong when they went to Schwartz' place. He wrote *Sorry* in giant, spray paint letters across the garage door."

*Asif.*

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## **New Fiction from John Darcy: "Sorry I Missed Your Call"**



An hour before the drive, Bubs finds himself sucking down an edible. A big blowout blowtorched dab of a brownie. He could feel it stonerizing his insides the second the swallow went down, that ashy grass-stained aftertaste staking a claim on

his tongue

Been doing a lot of things like that, lately. Ill-advised things. Bubs' best guess pins the start of it back to February. March at the latest. And he didn't know where the hell this getting out of bed problem came from. The brownie was the prize he'd promised himself for completing the task this morning. Bubs has even stopped spying both ways when crossing the street. He just kind of steps out off the curb.

The weed thing's, like, not a big deal? is the argument he tries to make to Omar, his driver's licenseless trip mate and his best friend, hopefully, still.

'Why the whole thing?' Omar asks. His jaw is doing that thing it does when he's not happy. 'Why not just a bite?'

Bubs sags his shoulders in a sort of shrug. He does, however, feel Omar's disappointment as if it's parental in origin, a weathered, rock-like thing, barely shining in the clear bluish glimmer of this dazzling late-May morning, a steely cold shameswave of the someone-expected-better-from-you variety.

Omar says, 'You do remember what we're doing here, yeah? Let's try not to forget.'

Bubs does remember what they're doing, thank you very much, but he gets to thinking about the purpose of the trip, about how Germ might feel when he understands that Omar and Bubs are not just saying hello, are not just passing through with their sights trained on simple catch-up, that their actual mission is to complete a very serious and sober welfare check.

'No snacks in that bag by chance?' Bubs says in his best McConaughey.

'Seriously?'

'There's this side effect of THC called the munchies. Familiar?'

Omar's face says he isn't having it, isn't going to have it, today. Head to toe, Omar is one smooth motherfucker. A good six inches taller than Bubs, he's got that chill studied coolness of a hipster high school teacher, the dark haired young socialist you could probably call for a lift after getting blind on UV Blue. It's a first impression thing, impossible to miss.

Bubs can still remember when he had the experience. Fresh off zero hours of sleep, Bubs was getting his face melted off by the acid rain spittle of a Ft. Benning drill sergeant, a walking little napoleon complex who still shows up in nightmares from time to time. For taking too long to get his ass off the bus, Bubs was sentenced to a viscous fucking tongue lashing and a hip toss up the aisle. When he finally made it down the rubber-ribbed steps up front, he saw the formation of new recruits caught in a chokehold of screams and he went to join them in the full nelson, this new clan, his first tribe. Some were doing pushups and it was hot, hot as Bubs could ever remember feeling, and mainly his brain told him, Might have messed up here, Might have made the wrong choice. Then he saw what would turn out to be Omar, front and center, not a drop of sweat even thinking about trying him, not a screaming campaign hat anywhere near, as if a memo had made the rounds before the shark attack, indicating one young soldier in particular it would probably be better not to mess with.

'Okay then,' Bubs says, 'coffee it is. Java. Brain fuel.' The high still hasn't hit fully. He is looking forward to its blanketing caress, the slow juicy haymaker of it.

Strapped in, tunes on, shades perched smooth on the oily bridge of his bony nose, Bubs pulls out of the dashed-off fire lane in front of Omar's building. Bubs wouldn't call himself handsome, exactly. Especially not next to Omar. Adequate, maybe. Passable. His lips are on the thin side, pincer-like where they curve into each other. On his head an orchestra of



dark black hair sits crazy and unbrushed, the texture of very fine straw. A spiraling tattoo of ones and zeros on his left forearm spells out BINARY CODE in binary. There is an efficiency to his composition. His dad used to say, *It's like you were made on an assembly line except with the brains God gave a dog.* Ignoring that last part, Bubs is thankful for the proportionality, though if anything he feels it makes him look calculated, indifferent, lame.

That said, Bubs comes alive behind the wheel. The inside-out knowledge he has of his machine, a stock Impreza with more miles than he'd care to admit, makes him proud as an honor roll dad. It takes some foreplay to shift from second to third, but timed properly the latent torque is enough to shove his heart against his ribcage. It's two make-and-models away from being a full-on rally car, and Bubs loves to remind himself of this fact. He basks in it, the low-level ladder rung of his vehicle, its impossible potential.

'Can I get one of those?' Bubs says. Omar has a cigarette rappelling from his mouth. He smokes a snooty, hard-to-find Turkish brand. It's the kind of thing that'd drive Bubs up the wall with anybody else.

Omar says, 'Always hanging with the smokers, never has any smokes.'

'Come on,' Bubs says, and Omar lights one up for him.

Bubs rolls down the windows in reply.

A rush of air and motion.

Before long they're gaining speed.

The wind blasts a racket through the nicotined interior. Sunlight is just absolutely pouring down, swallowing them up, threatening to swallow them whole.

Bubs says, 'What I didn't expect is that it'd be Germ.'

'Not really about how someone looks or acts, you know? Germ's been through a lot.'

'I mean who hasn't?

'I think the divorce puts him in a higher tax bracket.'

'I get that,' Bubs says.

'And his mom's cancer stuff.'

'I really get it. But sometimes it is the biggest fuck up—right? It's the king of the fuck ups, who, you know.'

'Fucks up?'

'Nailed it.'

'Sometimes,' Omar says. 'Maybe sometimes.'

'Not that Germ is one of those guys.'

'Not at all.'

'Just generally speaking. You see my water bottle anywhere?'

Omar says, 'What happens when that shit hits you too hard and we have to pull over?'

'Not even on my radar. I like driving high anyway. There's this thing about it, yeah? There's this way it makes you feel.'

Omar had wanted to hit the road at ten-thirty, introduce themselves to Chicago traffic no later than one in the afternoon. Bubs makes no bones about the delay being his fault. Rolling from his sheets today, phone flashing a harsh nine thirty, it was about the earliest he'd mustered all year.

Omar, on the other hand, has really got his shit sorted. Bubs thinks he should run one of those schemey self-help seminars. Only with Omar it wouldn't be sleaze. It would be blue-suited

and cologned, sharp, deathly fucking sharp. When Omar was enrolled on the GI Bill, he did some day trading on the side. He came out of college well in the black, psych degree in hand. Bubs had signed up for a few certificate courses at the technical college in Janesville, decided not to go.

There is a possibility, Bubs sometimes thinks, that his closeness with Omar finds its bedrock on their uneven terrain of accomplishment. That it's a necessary condition for their continued buddy status, a cornerstone from the start. He supposes there are worse foundations for a friendship, although it seems to him like a fuel source that'll eventually burn itself out. Bubs prays it does not. While it collapses his heart to imagine life without his best friend, Bubs is pleased that he struggles to picture the full bleak immensity of it. It is a good sign. Like checking your own pulse, surprised to feel the beating.

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Bubs curves the car through the interchange and hauls them onto I90. He asks Omar to remind him about the plan. 'The plan,' Omar says, 'is to just see how he's doing. Snag a beer. Check out where he's living. Face to face stuff.'

Bubs is glad about the beer. He is also glad his eyes are on the road, preventing Omar from seeing how bright they flare at the sound. That's another thing about Omar. He's never tapping on his phone during a conversation. He'll even say, like, *One sec, let me just pop this off, don't want it interrupting us*, and leave it clear in the other room.

'I'm excited to see him,' Bubs says.

'Yeah.'

'Honestly I am.'

'Okay,' Omar says.

Unsure of what Omar's deal is today, Bubs keeps focused on the southbound highway. The straightness of the road. Its continued reappearance on the far edge of his sightline leads Bubs to think that it wasn't so much built as dreamed, less engineered than imagined, plopped right into place from way up above, signage and all, aligned just so. If there's a single cloud in the sky Bubs cannot for the life of him find it.

'Germ is a good guy,' Omar says, apropos of nothing Bubs can gather. 'He'll be glad you came with.'

He asks Omar, 'How many guys we lose this last year?'

'I think it's three. Three or six. I can't remember which. But it's one of those.'

'How come we didn't go to any of the funerals?'

'I don't know,' Omar says. 'How am I supposed to know?'

'The war back home.'

'What?'

'That's what it's getting called,' Bubs says. 'The war back home.'

Omar rockets around, real intense with the motion. His dark eyes are little discs of deep set stormclouds. 'Why does everything have to have a name? Why can't it just be people trying to figure stuff out?'

'I mean it wasn't me that came up with it.'

'Sure,' Omar says, slinking his head back, turning it to look out on the sectioned squares of farmland around the road. It's the only thing a person could look at on this stretch of federal street. Bulky portions of agriculture and landmass, barbed and divided, flat yet somehow still rolling, rippling, flowing. Cows out to pasture whiz by in the distance, lifeless

specs against the green.

It's no surprise to Bubs that Omar took the reins in planning the check-up on Germ. What he can't figure out is why he himself was enlisted for duty. Bubs doesn't think of himself as a great instiller of confidence. Not really a compelling life-affirmer. But he is happy Omar asked him to come along, and he is happy he'd said yes since it would have been so much easier to say no. It's gotten so simple—and Bubs isn't sure why—to do nothing, nothing at all.

Germ is still an hour and a half away, but Bubs is getting the brunt of it now, getting socked by a storm of monster waves. A high tide of heady realizations. He has stepped up and done the right thing by coming along. This much he knows. He is doing what he is supposed to do: you help when you're able, you do what you can to endure; you carve out as much space as the world allows and if the world doesn't budge you gotta get yourself real low and push back, push hard, knowing it might not come to much. Bubs feels swaddled in something bright and endlessly comforting, wrapped and entwined, tight as granite, in the grand silky fabric of it. With a kind of worldwide tenderness moving through his body, the mot juste of existence takes shape on his tongue. For the first time in his life, Bubs sees the answers to his questions dead ahead. He's got them dead to rights. And it's just as he reaches out to grab them, to give them a healthy once-over, that a sweet lemony haze washes over the frontside of his horizon.

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Bubs, higher than he has been in his entire life, sits in a patch of tall grass near the picnic area of a rest stop south of Rockford. Omar is on the phone.

Here, knees tight to chest, Bubs recalls with a good bit of nostalgia the appearance of Germ in his life. Jeremey Heck Jr., known as Germ, got his sticky nickname due to the

astounding biohazard dirtiness of his Ft. Bragg barracks room. More than the room itself was the way Germ managed to clean it up on inspection day. Bubs couldn't dismiss the possibility of little animated birds swooping through the window to help tidy up the filth. Bubs and Omar, bunkmates through basic training and airborne school, kept their lucky streak alive when orders came down sending them to the same platoon. The two of them learned early on that they had both grown up in Madison, had lived on opposite sides of the isthmus and attended opposing high schools, had both frenched Anna Cloverman and gotten the same tight slap of rejection when they'd tried to slither a hand down her jeans. And though they'd never directly met before boot camp, they sort of got the picture that this strange lifelong proximity meant they had most likely been at the same place at the same time—Eric Daniel's historic Halloween banger, most likely—and that this was as close to a sign from the universe as anybody was going to get. Unscrambling the source code, they figured it meant they oughta have each other's backs, ensure the other's safe return to the selfsame home. Germ and his petri dish lived straight across the hall from Bubs and Omar, and, according to Germ's account, got snatched up orbit-like in the pair's friendship. Bubs' nickname has an origin story, too. His last name is Bubsmiester. People just chopped off the suffix.

Bubs sees Omar standing above him. The grass is barely wet against his pants, coolly warm, smattered with leftover dew. Straight to his twelve o'clock, making a rug of shade for which Bubs is super grateful, Omar says something kind and reassuring.

'I'm really sorry, man,' Bubs says.

'It's all right.'

'I am really high.'

'You said that already.'

'I really am, though.'

Omar says, 'It's all good. Don't worry.'

Bubs likes the phrase, recommitting it to memory. How many times has he told someone not to worry? Not enough.

A spray of shade over Omar's collar. It passes quick. Bubs sees, understands, makes note of and comes to realize that he is happy where he is. Soothed. His best friend is a stone's throw. The weather is stupid calm. Exposed out here, sun on his skin, Bubs wonders if he might be able to undo all the damage he's done, unwind his own hurt into a manageable enough thread. He imagines constructing a kind of personal murder board for his own personal fuck ups. With enough hard work, he thinks he can do it. Because here's the thing: It's all bullshit anyway. So why not try. Failing that, he would settle for a glass of water. Sometimes he worries about having an unsuitable brain.

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Sunlight. Slow breeze. Lulling hum of the interstate. Omar is out of sight now. Bubs knows he is arraigning things, talking with Germ, fixing what Bubs has broken. Impaired, definitely still impaired, Bubs stands up, wobbling, and goes towards the main a-frame building.

He passes the huge towering map of the state and the free-standing little dusty cubicle of waterpark brochures. The bubbler inside is broken; the vending machine doesn't take debits; the sink in the bathroom is automatic, and Bubs waves and waves his hand at the sensor but nothing comes. He is as thirsty as he can ever remember being, and fucking saying something, that is.

He decides to make himself stay with the discomfort, lets it ride through him like a train or a skateboard or some other thing that rolls and glides and breezes.

Inside the building, he slips out a side door. He makes his way over a field of mown grass into a thicket of sick-looking trees. Bubs keeps the trucker's parking lot on his right when he moves into the bramble. When he heads back, he's just gotta keep the blacktop on his left.

Now he is here, alone, standing at the mud-slathered edge of some kind of retaining pond. A nasty spot, about the size of an above ground pool. The water is dark, murky. A kind of loose film of grime covers its surface. The water buzzes with tiny bugs, the swirling gray leftovers of vehicular exhaust. A few branches hang over the water at uncertain angles. Bubs pulls out his phone, sees a missed call from Omar.

He feels the sun on his back, feels it lowering against his spine. His surroundings are summer and sky. He stares at the pond, dirty and calm, the color of old dryer lint. He watches its surface do things with the light. Bubs bends down, brushes away a layer of dirt and gristle, cups his hands, fills them with water, and drinks.

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When he makes his way back from the water, a silvery trembling thrashing in his stomach, he tells Omar what he's done. Omar, without a change on his face or a clue in his eyes, balls his left hand and hits Bubs on the side of the head and Bubs hears the tinnitus in his right ear, always present, spike like a line on a chart and he is on the ground; the pain is hot and tender, but its heat is concentrated, boxed, not overwhelming him, and he groans a little mainly from the shock of it, the power of the strike and the unforgivingness of the ground.

Omar offers down a hand. Bubs takes it.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'It's all right,' he answers.



'I shouldn't have done that.'

'I shouldn't have, either.'

The silence in a way becomes to Bubs like a kind of song, rhythmic and brassy and tempo-heavy. A few birds fly sorties along vapor trails in the sky. Part of Bubs' gut feel like it's at a rolling boil.

'You know what you have to do, yeah?' Omar says.

Bubs does know, thank you very much. He stares a patch of prickly grass, mainly at the space between blades. He says to Omar, 'Alright, alright. You know I'm a real retcher so plug your ears.' Bubs bends down and aims his middle finger to the back of his mouth.

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They move to a different piece of real estate after Bubs' hurl. He flips his middle finger, the slimy one, at the mess he made. This makes Omar laugh. With the last of the high still dribbling out of him, Bubs recalls with a fondness bordering on sorrow when the three of them—himself, Omar, and Germ—timed their terminal leave and Army departures for the same day. Piled into a younger version of Bubs' beloved whip, together they drove off Ft. Bragg for the final time, flipping the bird to the gate guards on their way out, sticky pre-rolled already sparked, two or three extras stinking up the center console. For Bubs it's a source of serious regret. What good does it do to give your past the middle finger? Talk about a waste of time. It's the only thing that remains, sure as the resin on the inside of a bong—nothing is forever except your past. But Bubs knows they were different then, on the far shore of that four year lapse of time: Germ, down half a finger from a faulty .50 caliber spring, marriage on the rocks but hopeful for a rescue operation; Omar, newly purple-hearted, lost in a lagoon of survivor's guilt, dreamily hearing at all hours the deep metallic click of the pressure

cooker bomb whose fuse tripped but ordinance didn't; and Bubs—bias as he might be for knowing more about himself than his friends—coming off a less than honorable discharge for pissing hot, testing positive for an amphetamine they didn't mind him taking down range, driving too fast towards middle America with his two best buds, ripping huge and unholy tokes from the joint and feeling more than anything like he was alone, cheated out of some promised purpose and belonging, a sort of cancerous growth of dejection sprouting tendrilly in his guts, as lonely leaving the Army as he was going in.

'You can't worry about that stuff anymore,' Bubs hears Omar saying, either somewhere in his head or right there in front of him. He isn't entirely sure. 'The stuff you wish you did different? I think that'll eat you a-fucking-live.'

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Back at home, three days later, Bubs snoozes his alarm only four times. It is Friday, and through the slats in his blinds the day broadcasts a teaser trailer: cloudless, bright, disturbingly blue. It's been like that for a stretch now. Bubs knows the rain will come, is coming soon, but it isn't here yet. Before leaving to pick up Omar, Bubs decides to call his father, himself a veteran. 'It's not so much the bad stuff staying with you,' his father tells him, 'as it is the good stuff that you miss.'

Germ is driving up for lunch. After the rest stop, Omar said it might be better if Germ made the jump north to Madison. Bubs agreed.

When Bubs sees Germ outside the restaurant, he is surprised to see a person that looks exactly like someone who does not need help. Healthy skin, clipped nails, sweater crisp like hospital cornering. A damn near pregnancy glow.

'This is the place you picked?' Germ says. He has a small nose, short sandy hair. The smile might burst off his face.

'Nah, no way, this won't work. You know what we need? Tall boys and a secret spot. You guys know a secret spot?'

'This fucking guy,' Omar says.

'I know one,' Bubs offers. 'I know where to go.'

Doubled up on six-packs, Bubs leads the way. It served as his go-to toke location in high school. They weave down the downtown one-ways and steam towards the lake. The stocky city skyline is a jagged EKG in the rearview. They park near the bike path trailhead. Exercisers stretch their calves against car tires, dressed in tight cycling attire. The air is warm and still, a breathy room-temperature bubble. It isn't a long walk to the clearing. Bubs hears Germ pop a preliminary can.

The spot hasn't changed. Set into a downslope, peeling towards the water, it's a dewy little outcrop shaded by oaks and maples and shrubs, a few logs and damp boulders for sitting. There is even a metal folding chair, a new addition. The memories Bubs has of the place come back in a clattering stampede. Starlight. Music. Older-brother-bought booze.

'This,' Germ says. 'Much more like it.' The water is so still Bubs can barely believe it. Doorway-cracks of light drip down through the trees. Beers are passed around.

Omar says, 'You know what I was thinking about the other day? Adkins and his fucking trains. In the arms room, remember?'

'Jesus,' Germ says. 'The trainset. He had the fucking little trees and conductors and everything. The whole floor, covered with his trainset.'

Bubs goes, 'And then the suits came in to inspect the arms room? You remember that guys' face? Like he had to control-alt-delete himself because he had no idea what he was seeing.'

'And the chickens,' says Germ. 'You remember the chickens? We show up one morning, and it's pretty early, we were going to a

range or something, and what's-his-name had a fucking kennel full of chickens.'

'What was it that he said again?' Bubs asks. The lapping of the lake fills the gaps between his words. Omar hands each of them a cigarette.

'I said to him, like, basically, What the fuck? And he goes, Well, I couldn't keep them *outside*. As if that fucking answers my questions?'

'Man,' Omar says. 'What the hell was that guys' name? Apple-something. Something with fruit.'

'*Something with fruit*,' Bubs says. 'Helpful.'

'It's good to be here with you guys,' Germ says. 'We live pretty close, you know, relatively speaking, but we don't see each other enough. That's my fault.'

'Shut up. Nobody's fault,' says Omar. 'We all have stuff going on.'

Bubs, feeling like now is the time, says, 'It wasn't Germ we were going to check on, was it? If you wanted to do a little intervention or whatever, you didn't have to drag me down to Chicago.'

'You didn't actually make it,' Germ says. 'Just to be clear.'

'You guys could have just told me though.'

'Probably true,' Omar says. 'Guess I was worried you wouldn't come, you know?'

'I get it.'

Germ goes, 'How often would you say you're getting blitzed and driving, though?'

'Follow up,' Omar jumps in. 'How often would you say you're

drinking, like, industrial runoff?’

‘Choke on it. That was a one-time thing.’

Germ now, ‘Doesn’t seem like it.’

‘I’m figuring things out,’ Bubs goes.

Omar, his eyes jumping from the lake and back to Bubs, asks, ‘Should we head out?’

‘Not sure. What do you think?’ Bubs says.

Germ says, ‘What, nobody wants to ask me?’

Bubs takes a drink, then a drag. Sitting there with his friends, Bubs sees the moment as pound-for-pound one of the better ones he’s had in some time. He is also proud of himself for noticing this—the pleasantness, the ambient joy—while still in the middle of it. Not much feels like it’s changed, except for maybe everything. His stomach still gives him a pang or two, the side of his face faintly red.

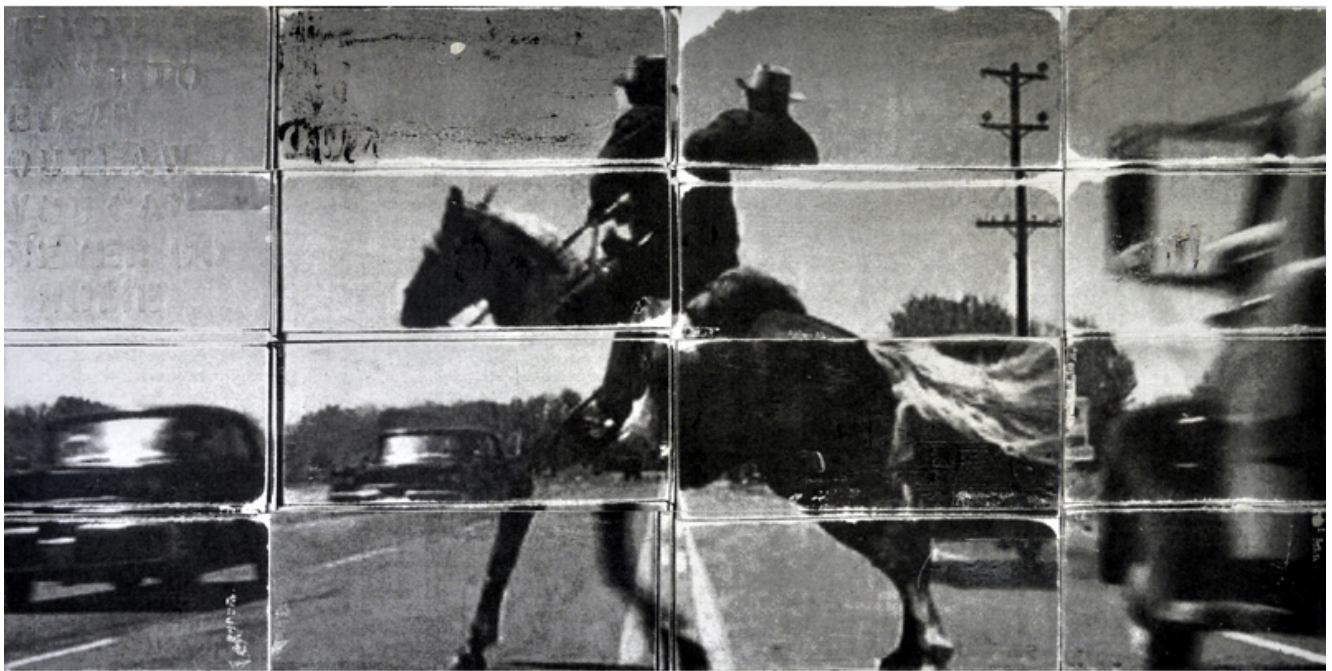
They toss a few smiles back and forth. The summer daylight shows no signs of retreat. Omar, stubbing out his cigarette, looks over to Germ and says, ‘Okay then, what now?’

‘No idea.’

But Bubs has one. He polishes off his beer and slips his feet from his shoes. He aims his body at the shoreline. Moving towards it, he sheds his belt and his pants and his shirt. There are only a few yards left before the land gives way. He crashes into the water and strokes out into the blue. A chill comes over him in layers but before long it’s gone and he feels himself floating, sinking, floating again, drifting, and the silence surrounding him is broken by the sound of two splashes somewhere behind him.

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# New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Title and Price”



Art by Gordon McConnell. ON THE ROAD, photomontage and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

It was not rare to see horses on Main Street when I was growing up in this town. I was spindly and spry then, when distances were calculated by how much jerky and water to pack, when the idea of pocket-sized computers was still the realm of science-fiction, the same stuff as teleportation devices and alien invasions. Around the house an intricate network of deer trails canvased the woods like a sense of smell. I'd run them through the sagebrush and chokecherries, shivering in the shade of dense lodgepole pine stands. Still panting, I'd knock

on a neighbor's door and ask a mother if her child could go to the river.

We'd walk miles in our minds, finely-tuned to the snapping of dry branches in the needle-cast, summoning to our soft skin the possibility of predators emerging with the warmth of a late spring day. The distant sound of swift water rushing over boulders always made us start running.

Rays broke on the surface and scattered as if through a fractured emerald onto the slick stones below, shimmering off the scales of large trout and made hazy where their tails whipped up a cloud of fine silt, spooked by our careless approach. In the deeper pools heated by afternoon sun there was no place for our bodies to know their own boundaries. It was a richer kind of air through which every motion rippled to the bank and returned to us, but slower, expanding.

Where the May and June runoff cut the bank from beneath a large cottonwood its roots reached exposed like tentacles into the water. By mid-summer we could entwine our arms in them and float on the surface cutting the gentled current with our heads as we looked to the bottom and into the shadows, hoping the fish might not mind our company and maybe even glide along the length of our bodies. We would bask on the smooth, day-baked stones, let the sun dry us, scratch the sand from our scalps and feel clean, even a little magical walking home.

In late summer my father would wake me before dawn with his large hand on my shoulder, the smell of coffee drifting in behind him. A quiet blue light through the trees laid our shadows down before us on the trail, fishing poles sprouting from our heads like antennae. Sleep still in my eyes, I imagined being led to the river by some dreamed extension of myself, one who might rather do anything than trick a fish into swallowing a hook just to turn it back to the current, stunned and bleeding. Tearing barbs from their mouths and throats then holding them like trophies while they mouthed the

air was a suffering I learned to fold into layers of pride. I'd ask why we didn't keep them and was told there was no need.

The temperature dropped sharply near the river as soon as it could be heard. My skin raised with the chill and my heart sank to hear my father's pace quicken. He inhaled the cool morning into his nostrils with pious vigor. Later, looking upstream, he welled with pride to see my pole bowed down to the weight and fight of a large trout. He laughed and shouted, "Fish on!" as he made his way toward me with the net in his hand.

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I knew they were Cal's boots stomping around on the hardwood. His restless energy vibrated through the floor and into my head. I gathered my jacket back into a lumpy pillow and tried to fall asleep again. He opened the front door then stomped back, smacking me on the head as he passed with the rolled up newspaper he had retrieved then trumpeted the first few notes of reveille through it.

Every minute or so, just as I started to doze off, he'd loudly clear his throat, pick up the paper by either side and *pop* it as if to freshen the news before smoothing it back down on the table. I squinted with one eye and leered at him across the room with all the hungover evil I could conjure. His hair was cow-licked where his head had finally come to rest after the long night of drinking and dancing, embellishing war stories, and doing whatever we thought those stories gave us license to do.

Every couple of weeks it seemed we began making feints into blackout territory, each night a fresh chance to regain the thrill of courting death and going *once more unto the breach*, as Cal liked to call it. Empty bottles stood gathered together on the table. From my floor's-eye-view they looked like a city



of glass buildings. I remembered Cal upending one then musing woozily to it, "Thank you for your service," as he added it to the skyline. I remembered dancing wildly to Louis Prima and an almost inhumanly beautiful, dark-haired young woman yelling at me and storming out into the snow—*Oh, Marie! Tell me you love me.* I let out a long dramatic groan and rolled onto my back.

"Where'd she go, Cal? Where's the girl of my dreams? The love of my life?"

Even when he wasn't reading the paper he never really listened to anybody. He ignored me and started reading out loud: "*At 3:36 a.m. a woman reported a nude man at Main Street and 3rd Avenue jogging with a hammer and chanting...*" In the seven years I'd known him, reading the police blotter had become something of a ritual, one which required coffee to be fully appreciated first thing in the morning. I reminded him of this. He told me to get up and make it myself.

"Wouldn't go in there barefoot," he added without looking up from the paper as I pulled myself off the floor.

"Why not?"

He scoffed.

I stepped into a pair of Cal's beat-up cowboy boots by the door and walked to the kitchen. It looked like a grenade had gone off. Cabinet doors were splintered on the linoleum or dangling from their hinges, the breakfast table and chairs laid upended surrounded by shards of bottles and dishes. In a corner the coffee machine was in pieces, all of it soaking in pools of wine. My eyes rolled over the scene turning up little flashes of memory. My stomach began to turn. I knew what had happened but I asked Cal anyway.

"*You* happened, you crazy bastard. You went dark as the devil."

I was locked inside my skull again, where Cal's voice echoed

absently like some tired machine switched-on and abandoned. I remembered a dream-like space where time and gravity unfixed themselves and there was nothing to give my body shape but vague, immovable objects where the waves crashed; where I wanted wild and inexplicable things; to catch a rattlesnake, kiss it on the mouth, grip it by the jaws and pull it over my head like a balaclava. I wanted to vibrate. To hum and rattle into pieces.

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Cal and I would jog from downtown calling cadence like the ghosts of soldiers, released to haunt everyone's dreams on those snowy, sleeping streets. We would call on the emptiness to recognize us, to embrace us as its own: *Mama, mama can't you see...what the Army's done to me?* We'd wake up and drink coffee and read the paper like we'd aged a hundred years overnight.

Cal said we needed to quit blowing money on hangovers and buy a couple horses already. I could usually count on this train of thought after a night of dragging our drunk bodies around town. "All my old tack's just gatherin' dust in my aunt's barn. Bet she'd probably cut us some slack on a couple geezers. Get us started anyway. Get us outta this shithole and into the wild anyway." He'd dream us there and try to convince me it was what we were put on earth to do. That one cool morning we'd saddle those horses and disappear like phantoms into some blue shadowland, as if somewhere just beyond the horizon a paradise was waiting to be reclaimed. "We'll sell everything and just go. What's the song say? *Rob the grave of the setting sun.*"

He'd *pop* the paper as if to set it all in motion. I'd go along, too sick and tired to pretend like I had a better idea. Not to say he didn't have something. Cal had vision. If anyone did, he had the drive to turn back the clock, or if not, at least smash the damn thing and start from scratch. He accused

the world of trying to pull one over on him, trying to wash his brain clean of some ancient instinct. He knew better though. He could see it all happening right before his eyes. And he'd be damned if so-called *progress* was going to catch him sleeping. He'd roll a fat joint and lay on his back on the hardwood floor, blowing clouds of smoke at the ceiling, picturing exactly how he was being screwed out of his destiny.

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In a sterile, over-air-conditioned conference room Cal pictured a three-point-plan written on a dry erase board. He could hear the *whisk* and *thwack* of an aluminum pointer striking the whiteboard under each number as a buttoned-down agent eyes one of the many pale faces around the table. "One," said the agent with detached authority, "Disenfranchise." Cal saw him swat the board under the next word, scan and lock eyes with a different face. "Two," he shouted this time, making his victim pucker and quiver, "Romanticize." Then a *thwack* and a new face for the third and final pronouncement: "Commodify."

The room nodded in obedient assent. "It's that simple, men. If it ain't broke don't fix it." He then led them in a three-count, swatting each word down the list for punctuation and lastly under the slogan written above them all, which they uttered in solemn unison. I heard Cal's voice before I walked in. He was laying on the floor, chanting at the ceiling: "*Kill the Cowboy, save the boots!*"

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When Cal came home from areas he often referred to as the "wild west," he felt everything harassing him, closing in on him, telling him he was too late. "Too many goddamn people on this earth. *Zombies*," he'd correct himself, "and their kiss-ass little cyber-lives; big-money buyin' up the whole goddamn valley, pricin' out *real* goddamn people; fuckin' movie-star

wannabes turnin' working ranches into playthings...." He'd work himself up and have to roll a joint. Though he would never admit it, he was paralyzed with fear. He saw the way of his father and grandfather, his birthright, the way of the cowboy "going the way of the Indian," as he put it. He laid on the floor throughout the day exhaling thick clouds at the ceiling and rubbing his temples. Images of conspiracy and betrayal loosened and drifted from his mind. *Like Judas*, he thought, feeling suddenly a new, special kinship with Jesus.

He pictured a resurrected Christ clinching a thin cigarillo between his teeth and squinting through the shadow of a sharp, felt brim. He saw the hand of God drawing the cold, heavy steel from his holster as he considered a man in a business suit kneeling before him, shielding the sun from his eyes. Arrayed in that righteous light, thumbing back the hammer and tenderly touching the muzzle to the man's impure lips, Jesus smiled—Cal smiled. "Kiss *this*," they said.

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When I came home I burned my uniform with all its ribbons and badges. Made a ceremony of it and everything. Cal considered it an act of treason and shunned me for months. But, for better or worse, I was bound to him. And him to me. Without Cal's kind of animal sensitivity and callous justice, I might not have made it home at all.

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We put it behind us, both desperate for an old kind of familiarity, even if a false and decidedly immoderate one. I had developed lofty ideas of self-deconstructionism, that I was somehow dismantling something broken inside my head. And I did truly believe this. But after a couple bottles of wine it became tiresome and all I had was bleary aim at something near pleasure. I could at least hit the present moment, it being a pretty big target. In it I surrendered to a sense of time and

gravity backing their screws out of my bones. Every motion seemed fluid, intuitive, rippling out from my body toward some mystical integration, but ultimately retuning a kind of lazy hypnotism—the kind of magic you long to believe but also loathe for the weakness that longing betrays. That was the general, dull ache of it. Things that could never truly be, maybe never were at all. Out of place. Out of time. But we soldiered on through the illusion, allowing the selves we remembered being to manifest friction for traction.

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It was a Friday night. Every Friday night art galleries on main street opened their doors and offered complimentary wine to anyone who entered so long as they pretended to care about the stuff inside. Cal and I used to make it our duty to impose and make sure that no wine went to waste. We filled and refilled plastic cups as if hydrating for a mission. Once loose enough, we'd liberate bottles from the table and walk around with them, standing in front of Western landscape paintings, probing the air for volatility.

"Me. Oh. My," Cal would say, adding a little whistle. "A damn sight better than the real thing, you ask me. Who in his right mind would ford that river horseback in *real* life? You know there's rattlers in there will swim right in your saddlebag and take a nap, and you never even know it till you reach in there happy as an idiot for the wineskin...then fffft, ffft fft..." he struck my forearm, shoulder then the side of my neck with his fingers as fangs, "It's goodnight, Irene, goodnight."

I'd hum and turn the price-tag, speaking with a degree of dismay, "How could you live with yourself knowing someone else walked out of here with this beauty?" Then feigning a scan of the gallery for someone to talk to, I'd say, "I must have it."

The night would go on like that until we reached a kind of

critical mass, finally just walking out the door, bottles in hand, whistling, humming, leaning into a kind of warning buzz.

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Some mornings after a night of unraveling Cal and I would meet in a coffee shop to spool back into the form of something socially acceptable. We'd read the paper at a corner table and psychically loom. The walls were almost always hung with big glossy photographs of wildlife. Under each photo was a little wooden placard with a title and price. Above Cal's head was a photo of a herd of bison. Hungover and slightly nauseous, I sipped my coffee and stared at it osmotically.

I looked down at Cal. His head was lowered to the paper. Not moving his eyes from an article he took a sip from his mug and made a sound like he was expelling steam.

"Did exactly what I knew they would," he said without looking up, after a minute going on, "Abandoned their tanks and guns...our tanks and guns...burned their uniforms and ran away like babies from the boogeyman." He loudly folded up the paper in disgust and stared off toward the front windows. "You can lead a horse to water," he said to himself, raising his mug again. "Fucking cowards."

I looked up at the photo then down at Cal. Nothing mattered all of a sudden. I felt the urge to throw my coffee in his face, walk out and never think twice about anything ever again.

Cal had his visions. I had mine.

The feeling surged then dissolved. I looked back up at the photo and imagined us just out of frame sitting our horses, Cal's eye laid down the barrel of a rifle. Very near us the photographer stood aiming his camera down the slope. Cal tested the wind then reached to make adjustments to his sights

as the photographer made adjustments to his camera. Seasons altered when I blinked. The river valley below flashed white and frozen then vibrant and lush, full of grazing bison, then hazy red as if lit by a smoke-veiled sun.

Cal spun his horse a half-turn then kicked up his legs and spun his body the opposite way. He laid his barrel across the horse's hindquarter, lowered his body behind it and wrapped his legs around the horse's neck. Chinning a mocking glance at the photographer then looking down at the heard, he wagered he could shoot more of them. They both squinted with one eye, fingertips poised.

I couldn't discern the explosion of gunpowder from the snapping of the shutter. They were simultaneous and unmitigated. Cal seemed to levitate above his horse, purring with the recoil and instantly, expertly retracting the bolt with the meat of his palm, extracting each cartridge with a shimmering *ting*, then racking the bolt forward, slightly adjusting his aim and firing again. His zeal was as lethal and endless as his ammunition. The stampeding herd was swallowed up in a cloak of dust but Cal continued shooting, now indiscriminately, wildly into the cloud until finally spinning on his haunches back riderwise, sheathing his rifle and trotting down the slope.

Streams of blood merged into pools, gathering momentum through dirt for the river, then dripped viscous over the bank and into the current, carried down-valley, frothing over boulders and swirling into sun-warmed eddies. Our horses emerged on the other side as if dipped up to the withers in rusty oil. We made camp atop the opposite plateau.

I saw our fire spitting embers up at the night. I saw Cal's face warping through the flames, a mesmerized glimmer there. I saw him get up, walk to his horse and reach into his saddlebag for the wineskin.

I wanted to tell him he was nothing, tell him to swallow his tongue and get out of my head. But I drank my coffee and agreed. "Fucking cowards."

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We rolled cigarettes and sauntered from one art gallery to the next, getting drunker, whistling and humming obnoxiously. Cal hurled a wine bottle like a grenade over his head and didn't look to see where it shattered. All glass started to pulse with fragility. From the street the galleries looked like snow-globes, I thought. We watched them sip their drinks and attempt to shake their evening into something special. Cal and I joined them. I overheard someone suggest that the price-tag dangling from a bison skull was "irrelevant, really." I laughed out loud. Everyone seemed to be laughing. I drank deeply from a bottle and laughed again. A laugh I hardly recognized.

From the sidewalk I peered back inside through my reflection in the window, suddenly paralyzed. They swirled their cups. A weird light shifted through the window onto them. I saw a race of aliens discussing a different skull: "This," one said, cupping it like a wineglass, "this was one of the snow-globe dwellers. They were the first to be eradicated or relocated. They seemed to possess no memory nor useful skill to contribute to the re-cultivation of these once fertile lands." The alien swirled it and took another drink. "We were baffled, and quite frankly horrified, to see them building their settlements on the richest soil in the valley. Even worse, they hunted large creatures for the size of their crowns, not the yield of their sustenance. They tricked fish into swallowing hooks on strings that they might enjoy the suffering and fear transferred to their hands, just to rip the hook from their flesh and throw them back to repeat the ritual." Exhaling sharply then making a motion to drink but balking, the being continued, "In fact, we have discovered evidence that their economy relied heavily on these 'sports,'



as they called them.” They all drank and another chimed in, “Where they got the food they actually consumed is another story entirely.” Their long antennae wobbled as they shook their heads and sipped from their cranial vessels, “Savages, I tell you. *Real* savages.”

Apparently, there was one more gallery, though I couldn't really say.

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The last thing I remember is standing in front of a hundred old machine parts—gears, springs, brackets—all tack-welded into the form of a giant bison skull. Its hollow eye-sockets glowed with electric lights timed to change every few seconds from white to green to red. I looked around and saw everyone taking photos of the sculpture with their phones then bow their heads. Their faces glowed piously, bathed in the light of their screens.

I saw them growing undead, praying as though from that liquid crystal had whispered a promise of immortality. I saw the ghost within it baiting them, desperate for them to vacate their own minds that it might take up residence and power there. I saw them offering their knowledge and memory, their lives as tribute.

I saw horses and a long, cold winter. I saw ribboned stacks of paper bills, photographs, paintings and furniture piled high in the center of a room. I saw fire in the floor, fire licking at the rafters. I saw blood rising to my skin in a vacuum ravenous for it, inhaling me as if for the marrow in my bones, as if to extract from my body that which my dreams had promised it.

I saw white then green then red.

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The judge gave me my own private cell and some time to think about my life choices, as he put it. Miraculously, the only book I could get my hands on when the library cart rolled by was *The Death of Jim Loney* by James Welch. Jim Loney is my age, estranged from his community and going "gently insane" on his drunken descent toward "noble, inevitable self-destruction," as one reviewer suggested. I had to laugh. I read it in one sitting. Then I cried. Simple tears at first as I reluctantly turned the final pages, feeling that the resolution would be far too costly. Then involuntary, spine-binding weeping to the edge of suffocation and back. An hour, maybe two, three before the waves subsided. Rolling over, I mouthed silent, unknown things at the ceiling, staring holes through it. I traced forms of animals on the naked cinder-blocks and wanted to die.

The night before I was released, I dreamed. I stood under bright stars at arms-length from a fire. I reached in with my hand and held it there, entranced by the impossibility of not being burned. There was a metallic *clink* followed by a voice. "Will is fate," it said. I turned to see him bent to the ground with a hammer in hand. Around his wrists were manacles attached to a length of chain rooted in stone. He set the hammer to mark his aim then raised it above his head and swung it, sending the sound into the night and a splash of sparks to the ground. Without looking up he said, "Until it breaks," and marked his aim again. He punctuated himself with the slow but deliberate rhythm of a simple machine made to mark its own rate of function: "Will is fate..." *clink*... "Until it breaks..." *clink*... And on and on, chanting through the night.

I turned back to the fire and felt the memory of stepping into it. There was a vibration each time the hammer struck. The light began to pulse. A step closer brought a roar like waking up at sea in a terrible storm followed by a deeper vibration, a kind of rhythmic thudding and a drone of voices. As I stepped fully into the flames figures appeared to be weaving

themselves into each other, their bodies bound up in one form of writhing then another, their desperate faces mouthing the air, their arms and hands hitting me unfeelingly as I pushed my way through. Everything mounted into a violent, unbearable wave of anguish. I was knocked to the ground and began scrambling furiously. The thudding grew in my hands and knees, in my stomach, vibrating everything into one densely concentrated center until it could no longer contain itself. Light flashed from the core of an explosion, consuming everything. Then darkness. Silence. I felt the coolness of night as if directly on skinless muscle.

I woke up and stared at the ceiling, something inching its way from my stomach into my throat and finally over my lips, so delicately that even I could not quite make it out. Though I understood. *Kill the soldier, save the man.*

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Cal picked me up. He rolled around the corner of the jail in my 1986 Land Cruiser. The old leaf spring suspension had long since lost its spring and took all bumps under the tired, squeaking protest of its joints. From a dead stop it coughed up a little cloud of exhaust and could putter up to sixty-five mph given a long enough, flat enough stretch of highway. I smiled to see it parked at the curb.

Cal waited for me to move but I just stood there and stared at him through a fog of breath. His hand went up as if to ask if I was getting in or not. He eventually got the picture, opened his door and circled around front to the passenger side, lunging toward me, shouting "Shotgun!" in my ear as he passed. He didn't even have a driver's license.

In fact, I wasn't sure if Cal existed at all. As far as I knew he had gone completely off the grid. In his mind, veterans of our stripe were all on a secret government watchlist. He believed the state was not so obtuse as to train us to abandon

empathy, kill on command, send us to war, and then simply release us back into the world with a pat on the back, an unlimited prescription for drugs and a suicide hotline card without at least keeping an eye on us, see if we could still play the game without getting too wise. Cal had it all worked out. When he smoked he became very lucid, almost telepathic, he claimed. He'd lay on the floor blowing thick clouds at the ceiling and intercept conference calls from the Pentagon between a handful of politicians, a data-storage gate-keeper, and a spooky DoD agent going on about "*the imperative to track and, when necessary, guide liabilities as they are released back into the mainstream.*" There would be unofficial requests for sensitive information and off-the-books transactions.

Cal would close his eyes, point to both of his temples and see top-secret memos appearing in encrypted email inboxes regarding a surveillance operation to acquire location- and activity-intel on veterans who meet signal criteria. He'd start listing them: "...combat...college...debt-free...single..." as if straining to receive each word which, according to him, constituted a probability of ideological disillusionment and sedition sufficient to red-flag an individual for life. According to Cal, one of us was on the fast-track to being "disappeared." He'd relight his joint and blow smoke, occasionally mumbling another paranoid stream of thought: "If credibility is established by credit...and credit is debt..." He'd take a long drag and ash in the big planter pot then keep going: "...and debt is forced labor, and forced labor is the mechanization of humans, and..." and on and on.

He tapped out a short couple of beats on the dash board. "The Colonel's looking for guns," he said to the windshield, waiting to see if I'd respond, then continued, "I told him we'd meet just as soon as I could spring your sorry ass." What he meant was *hired* guns. The Colonel was actually a retired Army Colonel who by whatever nebulous network of connections was eager to put together a private security team to head back

into high-conflict areas. His types of teams ran defense and often offense for god-knows-who, doing things that made for long redactions in official reports. The one certainty was the money. "A hundred fifty Gs for six-month's work, boy." I could tell by his voice Cal was already there. He never really left. "Fuck it," he said, "I'll text him right now."

I don't know why I didn't tell him not to. The cold, clean air drafted through the window and I was just glad to be feeling and breathing it. I couldn't summon the energy to negate anything that was going to happen. He plugged the auxiliary cable into his phone as he read the Colonel's text. "*Sanctuary. One hour.*" He cocked his head at me, "There it is. Let's get a few freedom beers in you, partner." He scrolled down his screen and selected *Oh, Marie* by Louis Prima, rolled the volume knob, drummed the dash with his hands and yowled as the cymbals and sax really kicked in, "*Once more unto the breach!*"

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I righted the table and chairs, found a broom and swept all the glass, mopped the floor and fastened the cabinet doors best I could back on their hinges. Cal sat at the table with the paper, occasionally reading out loud something that twisted up in his mind just right. I finished putting the kitchen back in order, poured myself a glass of water and sat down across from him. Without looking up he said something about meeting the Colonel again to iron out the details, sign some papers for clearance. It hadn't registered to me that a decision had been made, as though I was simply caught up in some kind of entropic undertow. I didn't even know how many days I'd been waiting to get spat out and wash ashore. But there I was. He told me I better go warm up the beast.

On cold mornings, because the cable was broken, I had to pop the hood of the Cruiser and manually wedge the choke closed with a stone that had sat in the console for years and just so

happened to be the ideal size, apparently waiting for that very purpose. We cut tracks through a couple inches of fresh snow, hit main street and headed downtown. The sidewalks were empty. We sipped coffee at our usual table in the corner and waited for the Colonel.

Every few feet on the walls were different glossy photos—a silhouetted elk, spotted whitetail, nesting blue herons, rainbow trout. Above Cal's head was a photo of a single bison, its eyes like polished obsidian squinting against wind-driven snow directly into the lens. Written beneath it on a little wooden placard was the title and the price: *Winter Hunt, \$290*. It was number four of twenty-three prints. I scratched out the math on a napkin and said the amount to myself. Cal asked what it was. Ignoring him I looked around the shop counting the photos with similar placards and did that math. "One hundred thousand, fifty dollars." I sat there waiting for whatever else was rising to the surface.

Cal sensed a shift and switched to recruiter-mode. "Don't get weird on me, son. We'll be out of this sorry shithole by tomorrow. There's a zero-six-thirty to Seattle, Seattle to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to a nice desert paradise, eighty-five degrees. Masters of our own destiny again." He kicked my chair to get my eyes off the photo. "Hey, you listening to me? Don't forget you're getting paid to get the hell out of this phony-ass town to do some *real* shit again. It should be the easiest decision you ever made."

I stared into my coffee and spun the mug a half-circle by the handle and muttered it back to myself. "The easiest decision."

"The *easiest*. What's there to think about?"

"You ever wonder why it's easy?"

"Christ almighty. Is your head screwed on? I just told you why."

"I don't think I need easy. I don't need a way out of here." I sort of rolled my eyes around the coffee shop then leveled them across the table. "I need a way out of *here*," I said, reaching across the table and tapping Cal's temple with my finger. He grabbed my wrist and stared at me, then through me as he let go. He wasn't there anymore. I stood up sharply, knocking my chair over. A couple heads turned to see what was happening. I picked up the chair, gathering myself upright, then pushed it back under the table and inhaled slowly. "Thank you for your service, Cal." I apologized to no one in particular then turned and walked out the door.

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The Cruiser stuttered faithfully into action. I pointed west and drove until all signs of civilization faded but the road itself and a few old ranch houses. I drove for an hour, then two, in silence except for tires on pavement and crisp air whistling through a crack in the window. I knew where I was going. Soon the road turned to frozen dirt and up ahead cut through the crest of a ridge at the base of a giant V in the earth before descending sharply into the river valley. I could hear the glimmer in my father's voice telling me I'd better hold onto something as the truck accelerated toward what looked like the edge of the world.

Even though I knew what was coming my stomach would rise into my throat, out of my body it seemed, and stay suspended somewhere above in a moment of perfect weightlessness before rushing back into me like a flood as the wheels received the full weight of the truck again. With a big youthful grin he would gently apply the brakes and, taking in the view, exhale as though to slow down his heart. I let myself believe that was the memory which accompanied him over the edge when his heart finally slowed to a stop.

The width of the valley was marked distinctly by sheer plateau walls like far-reaching bookends. It spanned maybe a mile at

most and was never so narrow that you could throw a stone from one side to the other. The road sort of disintegrated into a primitive two-track used occasionally to hay cattle and check fences. But there were no cattle to be seen and all the post-latch gates were laid open. Where the way intersected the river I turned left paralleling it upstream through dormant, snow-dusted grass and sagebrush. In the narrow sections of river the water was frozen solid like frosted glass and I wondered how thick, if it could be driven across without breaking through or getting stuck. A couple of times I passed large stones and nearly stopped to hoist them from the bank down onto the ice but decided to keep going.

Eventually the road curved out into the field and then back toward the river-crossing. I held the wheel at an angle and the slight pull felt like being in a slingshot. Depressing the pedal and bracing either side of the wheel my head hit the roof as I sped over a sharp dip at the bank. Ice shards and water instantly cascaded over the hood and windshield. I instinctively ducked and held my breath, pinning the accelerator to the floor, feeling each stone under the tires claim a little more momentum. And like a beast whipped to the brink, hissing plumes of steam and coughing, the vehicle limped up the bank on the other side. I managed to coax it to the foot of the escarpment, where it sputtered to a halt alongside a small juniper. There was no sense in trying to start it again but I tried anyway, turning the ignition over and over until there was nothing. I opened the door, stepped out and closed it, reluctantly accepting I was stuck there.

When I was just a boy, standing very near that same place, I'd look up the steep slope to the base of the cliff with dread anticipating the burning in my lungs and thighs, the terrible thirst and having to claw through the crevice at the top. Somehow everything I'd seen since in no way diminished that feeling of dread. I started hiking.

Halfway up I kicked through the snow a bit, more for the



memory than anything. In the summer if you dug around in the talus you could sometimes find tooled stones, pieces of spear or arrowheads, even bison remains, bone shards. I was so much smaller then, when the world went on forever yet seemed closer somehow. Peering up to the top of the cliff I would shudder to imagine an entire herd leaping one after the other from the edge and plummeting toward me, the frantic adrenaline in their eyes, the earth heaving under the impact of their massive bodies. Young men would peer panting from the edge down to the bloodied arms of women expertly stripping those bodies of their hides and carving the meat from their bones. They would be all around me as I made my way up the slope to the base of the cliff wall.

The only way to the top was through an opening there wide enough for one person. It led through the stone where water had eroded its way for thousands of years through weaknesses and where very little light penetrated. Acute claustrophobia held each breath just out of reach as I inched my way up and through, relieved only in the assurance that at least in the winter, rattlesnakes lay dormant, brumating in their dens, their hibernacula. In my mind they were coiled tightly together, purring through dreams in the buried warmth of the earth around me. My skin ran flush with a surge of heat then shivered in the last shadow as I pulled myself finally from the hole at the lip of the plateau. Catching my breath, I turned to survey the valley. Behind a thin veil of clouds the sun was soft and low on the horizon. I stepped back from the edge and picked a couple of rocks from beneath the snow. Flinging them underhand I watched them spin silent in the air and tumble down the slope. I threw one half-heartedly at the Cruiser before sitting down and staring out across the valley.

It seemed there was nothing in sight to indicate *when* I was. It was all time and no time at all. I plucked a sprig of sagebrush, rolled it in my fingers and held it under my nose, inhaling its sweetness, cool like mint in the back of the

throat. I scratched up a small handful of icy snow, compressed it in my palm and sucked the moisture from it. Tracing the river upstream I saw sun-baked ground and fine clouds of dust rising along the banks behind horse-drawn travois, the sinew-lashed lodgepole bowed under a winter's rations. I saw naked young men and women washing blood from their bodies where the current was swift. I felt everything slow and waited for darkness.

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## **New Poetry from Frank Blake**



Poet Frank Blake during his Army service.

### **We came home**

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

No more mission

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



We missed each other

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

We were bored

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

And none of us yearn for combat

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

And now we know

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

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

And it's hard

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

So our only option

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

So we try

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

Because not all of us can

Because some didn't make it back.

## **Tracer**

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

Zips towards the enemy  
A laser of lead and anger

Ricochet path betrayed by a bright glow

The rule is

That for every one you see

There are many more you don't

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

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

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



## **Descent**

On the escalator at the airport

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

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

It had patches from his units and friends and adventures

It had the same contents as mine

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

And guilt that he had made it back

And fear for what to do next

And memories of things he should not have done

And dreams of little girls dying

And lessons about leadership

And instincts to make his bed

And tears from current day family strife

And resumes to find new jobs

And drinks for when times get hard

And pills from the doctors

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

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

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# New Fiction by John M. McNamara: "The Mayor of West Callahan Creek"

A bare bulb in a hooded fixture illuminated the sign. Fog obscured the wooden placard, and as Joseph neared it, the black lettering seemed to recede into the white plywood. It read:

WEST CALLAHAN CREEK  
POPULATION 1,187  
EST. 1866  
CITY LIMITS  
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

Prosecuted for what? Joseph Hunter walked his bicycle along the highway shoulder; the rear axle ticked off his progress like a metronome, tires crunched on the gravel. He paused and stared across the embankment at the billboard, and then chuckled.

The ashen fog had intensified since Joseph battled the shadows earlier that afternoon, enshrouding him more thoroughly than the day before, clouding his concentration and fuzzing his perceptions. The attack came as suddenly as an ambush. He'd developed an instinct for anticipating the murkiness, but it had descended upon him with viciousness soon after he crested the tallest of the hills on Highway 22, which paralleled the Loup River. He had pedaled off the road and kicked down the bike's stand, then squatted and caught his breath. Under an overcast and featureless sky, he rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. Then the choking shadows, their edges indistinct, (they lacked clarity, which he assumed meant he lacked it as well), assaulted in full force. His chest constricted and the panic rippled; the sensation felt



like his organs were being drawn through seams in his skin. Deliberate breathing, measured and slow. Fingertips pressed firmly against the temples in circular rotation, eyelids lowered while his thoughts focused upon past recoveries.



Paul Vogler, Lane Near A Small Town, 1864.

No one had agreed with his decision to undertake this journey, not parents, therapist, or friends. To a person they fretted about the solitude, about his coping mechanisms, about tendencies they dared not name. His therapist warned about the risks of self-diagnosis, the danger of assuming Joseph knew what was best for Joseph. It's the brain telling the brain how to fix the brain, she'd said. It's unreliable.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, assessing the location for possible campsites. He made out a barely visible fence line beyond the sign, rows of barbed wire on wooden posts, and

continued rolling his bicycle slowly, keeping to the edge of the highway in the limited visibility, fearful that in the fog a vehicle would encounter him with no time to react, to swerve and avoid striking him. He'd witnessed IEDs heave men and metal skyward in sooty, sandy-brown plumes, and believed the mockery of a collision on an American roadside might prove more than he could process. In the distance he spied spires of evenly-spaced lights vanishing up into the fog, each encircled by a woolly halo. Silos, he realized, like so many he'd encountered in towns across the prairie. They sharpened in definition as he neared the gated entrance to the co-op. Farther down the road he saw a dome of diffused light.

As he approached, its structure materialized: a Gas'n'Go with two pumps and a manual car wash bay. A widow sign advertised cold beer.

A hundred yards or so beyond the store, Joseph crossed a bridge with a low, steel railing, peered down at the slow-moving water, and imagined it must be the creek that offered the town its name. On the other side of the bridge, the gravel edge gave way to asphalt. The entrance to a parking lot; a single pinkish bulb cast an aura on the space. Joseph read the redwood sign with mustard-colored, inset lettering: West Callahan Creek Park. Below the lamp, a path led away from the empty parking lot; Joseph wheeled his bicycle and the small trailer in which he towed his camping supplies past the circle of light, along that dark path, navigating more by intuition than sight. He stopped, retrieved a flashlight from a pouch on the trailer, and switched it on. The fog refracted the beam into a ball of hazy illumination, affording little visibility of his surroundings, but he did discern a curtain of drooping tree branches a short distance from the path. Willows. They favored stream and creek banks, he knew; he switched off the flashlight and steered his bicycle toward them.

Joseph managed to pitch the tent in the foggy twilight (the mechanics had become rote during the two weeks of his trip),

and when he'd spread the foam camping mat and unrolled his bag, he lay quietly on his back and listened to the environmental sounds: a sluggish hint of water, feathery wisps of the willow branches chafing when a breeze rippled, and (undulating along the creek like a current), the metallic clatter of a hog feeder. He dined on dried fruit, a handful of mixed nuts, two strips of beef jerky, and a packet of cookies, checked his cell phone for messages, surprised when he saw three bars in the upper corner (it seemed West Callahan Creek had a cell tower nearby), and then lifted the tent flap to go out and relieve himself. It was an evening routine he followed with rare deviation. (One afternoon when the western sky portended thunderstorms, he stayed in a no-name motel, lavishly soaking in a hot tub in the dark bathroom as the thunder bouldered, lightning illuminated the room, and the rain strafed the windows). He lay on his sleeping bag, reading of a North Vietnamese soldier who had survived that war on his Kindle for an hour before stripping to his underwear, rolling to his side and closing his eyes, wondering what dreams he might encounter, and how much of them he would recall in the morning.

—

Hello, someone called. Wake up in there.

Joseph stirred and rose to a sitting position as he realized someone stood outside the tent.

Hey. Open up.

Joseph said he was awake and slid into his jeans, then unzipped the tent and crawled out into bright sunlight. The fog had disappeared and as he stood, he glanced quickly at the topography of the park: flat ground, the willows trees he had discerned the previous evening lining the bank of the narrow creek.

This isn't a camping area.

Joseph shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the sheriff's deputy who had retreated a step or two from the tent entrance.

Sorry. Last night in the fog, I couldn't make out much and I needed somewhere to sleep.

Well, it's a violation. I'm going to have to take you into town. Judge will probably fine you. Let's go.

The sheriff removed handcuffs from his equipment belt and gestured for Joseph to turn around.

Are you serious? He couldn't read the man's eyes behind his sunglasses, to determine if his tactic was to scare Joseph into quickly moving on, not lingering in the town.

Dead serious. Turn around.

Joseph stepped toward the man, who gripped his wrist and sefficiently around. The sheriff affixed restraints to his wrist, gripped his elbow and guided him toward the path.

What about my stuff?

We'll collect it for you.

During the short drive, while the deputy radioed in that he had a prisoner in custody, Joseph tamped down anger and worried about a rise of the shadows. The patrol car, with emergency lights flashing and siren keening, circled a three-story, red brick courthouse, situated in a town square ringed by storefronts. The deputy completed a loop of the building before steering the car to the rear of the structure. He parked beside a set of concrete steps leading to an iron door.

He opened the rear door and rested a hand on Joseph's head, as he had when he placed him in the back seat at the park. Up the steps, he indicated. His tone, calm, without inflection.

The heavy door opened onto a small holding area with a polished wooden floor; another deputy behind a half wall, the upper section caged with chain link fencing, except for a small slotted opening on the countertop.

Vagrancy. The arresting deputy nodded to his counterpart, who smirked as he reached under the counter. A loud buzz sounded and he steered Joseph through another door, into a windowless, high-ceilinged corridor; creamy globes Joseph associated with school rooms hung from the ceiling.

Is this really necessary? Joseph loathed the plaintive quality of his own voice, as though he'd galvanized the words with solicitousness.

You can ask the judge.

At the end of the corridor, the deputy turned a polished brass handle and ushered Joseph across the threshold, into a courtroom filled with people, who rose almost in unison and began applauding. He turned his head to the right, where a woman wearing black robes rose from her chair behind the elevated judge's bench, and with a wooden gavel in her hand, motioned for the deputy to bring Joseph to the area directly before the bench. She extended her arms and patted the air a few times, urging the people in the gallery to sit and grow quiet.

What is your name? Her voice startled Joseph, her tone officious but her smile playful.

Joseph Hunter.

The deputy gripped his wrists and unlocked the handcuffs. Joseph swiveled his head and studied the people in the wooden rows behind him. Everyone smiling, a few nodding and waving to him. His imagination flashed visions of horror movies through his mind, of human sacrifice cults and inbred cannibal creatures, and then he turned back to the judge, asking what

the hell was going on.

You've been found guilty of violating our municipal code, Joseph Hunter. Do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?

Twittering and laughter from the crowd.

What is happening here? Are you kidding me? He rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had bound him.

I'm quite serious. The judge leaned across the bench and aimed the gavel at Joseph. You do have a choice how you serve your sentence. Three days in jail. She paused and her eyes glinted as she surveyed the rows of people behind Joseph. Or you can serve as the honorary mayor of our town for this weekend's sesquicentennial celebration.

The entire gallery erupted once again in applause as the deputy clapped Joseph on his back, leaned in and whispered an apology for the cuffs.

Personally, the judge said, I recommend you accept our offer as mayor.

Joseph stood dumbfounded as people streamed out of the wooden seats, entered the area beyond the counsel tables, and crowded around him in front of the judge's bench.

He wanted to ask again if the judge was serious, but within the new context of the celebrity she had asked to confer on him.

Quite a bait and switch, he said to the deputy, who stood with his arms behind his back in a parade-rest position. The man, his eyes unmasked now, squinted as a smile enveloped his face.

We like a little theater, he replied.

A balding man gripped Joseph's hand, pumping it as he

introduced himself as the office holder Joseph would supplant for the two-day celebration of the town's one-hundred-fiftieth celebration.

Ben Hampton. Happy to relinquish my duties and responsibilities, young man. Welcome to West Callahan Creek.

The judge banged her gavel several times, calling for quiet. The prisoner hasn't chosen his sentence yet. What do you say, Joseph Hunter?

Joseph wagged his head, glanced around at the folks in the courtroom, and then looked up at the judge. That's *Mayor* Joseph Hunter, your honor.

More laughter and applause, as Ben Hampton led Joseph out of the courtroom, trailed by townspeople. Let's get you settled at the hotel. It's really more of a bed and breakfast. Only four rooms, but they're clean and comfy. You'll like it there.

How did you choose me? Joseph followed Ben Hampton outside the courthouse, down a wide set of stone stairs, and onto the green expanse of the tree-lined lawn.

We left it up to the sheriff. The town did the same for its centennial and it seemed like a fine gesture for this anniversary. You kind of surprised us, though. We thought he'd nab a speeder where the limit falls from fifty-five down to twenty-five. The twenty-five-mile-an-hour sign *might* be blocked by a low-hanging tree limb. He chuckled. But finding you was good fortune. I hope all the festivities won't inconvenience you unduly.



Gale Stockwell, Parkville, Main Street, 1933.

They arrived at a stone walkway in front of a two-story Victorian, crowned by a cupola with a pheasant weather vane, bedecked with gingerbread trim, trellises along the wrap-around porch laced with blooming vines; two women Joseph assumed were mother and daughter stood on the porch, smiling as he and Ben Hampton climbed the steps.

Good morning, mayor, the older woman said, looking directly at Joseph. Her gravelly voice reminded Joseph of the sound of his tires on the roadway edge in the fog. Your room is ready and I've laid out your things. She wore a wrap-around denim skirt and a pale blue cotton blouse.

Joseph paused until he felt a hand on the small of his back. He glanced sideways at Ben Hampton, who arched his eyebrows, nodded.



The younger woman, light brown hair pulled back in a long braid, wore black shorts and a sleeveless blouse, flesh-colored, pale against her tanned arms. She held open the screened door and Joseph entered the house. In the foyer stood a round oak table, covered in a lace cloth, upon which rested a vase of black-eyed-susans. To his right he saw a sitting room, with several upholstered wingback chairs, a red brick fireplace, and a settee with carved wood legs. To the left a dining room with a long table that he surmised could easily sit twelve people.

I'm Sally Hutchins and this is my daughter Peggy.

He noted resemblances between the two women: blue-gray eyes, brown hair (worn longer by Peggy than her mother, and with straw-colored highlights), the square shape of the hands.

Here's your room key. It's up the stairs, last one on the left, with a view of the gardens out back. Why don't you take some time to freshen up and I'll come get you around noon for lunch?

Joseph thanked her, mounted the staircase, and turned left along a corridor papered with a pattern of alternating rose and lavender stripes. The door to his room hung open and as he entered he saw his clothing laid out on the canopied bed. In the adjacent bathroom, his sparse toiletries had been arranged on the black granite vanity. The floor was covered with white, octagonal tiles, the walls with white subway tiles; he twisted the taps of the claw foot tub and tugged the pull-chain handle of the old-fashioned commode; the water tank elevated above the bowl whooshed, and Joseph chuckled. He wondered how he could have achieved a greater contrast between the claustrophobic fog of the previous evening and the expansiveness of the morning's surprising revelations.

As he had the night of the thunderstorm, Joseph drew a hot bath and lay with a wet washcloth over his eyes, recalling

what have given him the impetus to begin this trip: sessions with the therapist, isolating himself in his parent's house, watching marathon reruns of *Law & Order* and its spinoffs, eventually switching off the television because he needed no reminders of how horrible people could be to one another. Deciding to act according to his nature as a fighter, to learn to cope with the shadows without assistance, but not pushing himself to exhaustion. Going the distance, but not at a sprint. Trimming away life's excess to reveal a core, essential truth about himself.

The darkness imposed by the washcloth reminded him of the previous day's fog, how at twilight it had enshrouded him in a gray chrysalis. Something his father had expressed as Joseph left: hopefulness that his quest would be successful. He may not have fully understood his son's need for this journey, but he identified with it as a mission. He had served in Vietnam. His father's father had served in the second world war. Joseph associated singular smells with each man: cigarette smoke with his grandfather, Lava soap with his father. As a child, Joseph watched TV shows with his father about war: *Combat*, *Twelve O'clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes*. When he asked why there no shows about Vietnam, his father said they didn't make TV shows about wars that were lost.

As he dried himself with the plush bath towel, Joseph wondered: if he had a son, what smell would the boy associate with him?

Through the window overlooking the back yard, he watched Peggy clipping herbs from a raised-bed garden. Her braid slipped over her shoulder and she flipped it back; as she moved down the row of plants, it continued to slide over her shoulder and she continued to flip it away from her work. Retaking the same ground again and again, he observed.

When he sat at the dining room table with Sally and Peggy Hutchins and saw the size of the grilled pork chop on his plate (an inch-and-a-half thick, stuffed with a sage dressing), he nearly chuckled. After the meal, Ben Hamilton arrived with a garment bag: khaki slacks, white Oxford shirt, red tie, and Navy blue blazer. We guessed your size, he said. Weren't sure if you were traveling with dress-up clothes. Why don't you change and then I'll take you on a tour of the town? Introduce you to some of the people who'll be attending the dinner tonight at the lodge.

Joseph nodded, slinging the garment bag over his arm and retreating to his room. He had urged Sally and Peggy Hutchins to talk about themselves during lunch. People enjoyed that, he knew, and regardless of whether they blared like a horn or whispered secrets, it kept them from asking questions of him.

The clothes fit: not tight but also not loose enough to make him appear clownish. When he descended the stairs to the foyer, Ben Hamilton offered a thumbs-up. Sally Hutchins brushed an imaginary fleck of lint from his shoulder and bestowed a proprietary smile.

The two of them walked back toward the town square, which Joseph noticed had been transformed: patriotic bunting draped from building fronts, lamp posts, and second-story windows; a grandstand in front of the courthouse; and a banner stretched across the street proclaiming the celebration of the town's founding in 1866. He and Ben Hamilton greeted folks who extended their hands, welcoming and congratulating Joseph. Most of the people on the street fit a curious demographic, old people and teens; there was hardly anyone Joseph's age and he imagined them fleeing the town for more exciting settings as soon as they reached the age of mobility.

They circled the town square. The barber, pointing a finger at the hair falling onto Joseph's collar, offered a free trim, which Joseph declined. At a florist shop, a woman pinned a red

carnation in the buttonhole of the blazer lapel. Hand-crafted caramel was presented at a candy store. Every stop brought excessive yet heartfelt generosity and hospitality. He developed a soreness in his neck from the frequent nodding and tension in his jaw from the repeated grinning. But his anxiety of meeting new and unfamiliar people remained submerged as Ben Hamilton introduced person after person, names that floated away like windblown pollen, faces that morphed into a single countenance of genial salutation.

Fear of the shadows often menaced more frighteningly than the shadows themselves; he'd described the fear to the therapist as a light gray hint of the ebony darkness. Being enveloped by them was the least amniotic feeling he could imagine. When he told her he was unsure how to live, she counseled that PTSD was not a weakness.

Acknowledge it. Understand what it is, she'd said, and you'll learn to control and handle it.

But it had not been in his nature to wait, so he embarked on the trip, and in a paradoxical twist, conceded that patience was one of the trip's most constructive lessons.

Many of the people they encountered expressed hope that Joseph was not too inconvenienced by his honorary incarceration, to which he responded that all he was losing was time. Thoughts of loss had consumed him when he returned from the army, but one stood out above the others: loss of feeling that his childhood home was home. The absence of people his age in the town and his urge to leave home reminded him of an old song lyric: *How you gonna keep'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree.*

For Joseph it was the shadows; for the town's youth it was the escape of the gritty sameness of their lives. Had any of them chosen the army, he wondered? And would they come to regret their decisions? The therapist told him regret was punishment

levied by an internal authority. Self-imposed penance, she said. Forgiveness doesn't always come at a cost.

As they approached the bed and breakfast, Ben Hamilton laid out the schedule for the celebrations: a dinner that night at the lodge, a parade the following day (during which Joseph would serve as the Marshall), and then a cookout at the park and fireworks.

Sally and Peggy will drive you to the lodge tonight. I'll see you then, he said, and then walked away, a man with purpose in his stride.

Instead of mounting the steps to the porch, Joseph followed a flagstone path around the house to the garden in which he'd seen Peggy Hutchins clipping herbs. In a gazebo at the rear of the yard, he removed his blazer, reclined on a padded chaise, and closed his eyes, birdsong in the trees surrounding the yard serenading him. He had encountered so many birds on the trip and lamented not having brought a field guide to help identify them. One vestige of life in the army: the ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime, under nearly any conditions.

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The lodge hall struck Joseph as a haphazard fusion of a high school cafeteria and a roadhouse bar. It was cluttered with folding tables and chairs. Large, metal-framed windows overlooked the gravel parking lot on one side, and on the other a corn field. Framed photos hung on the wall of stiff men in dark suits, aligned in stiffer rows in front of the building. Guided to a raised dais, Joseph passed folks he'd met that afternoon, who greeted him with the intimacy of an old friend. The closeness of the space and the volume of people (more than a hundred, he estimated), sparked worry that the shadows would harass him. He envisioned them reaching out from the walls to harass him; a fear of reacting to them in the environment that engendered them often doubled the

anxiety. A nagging feature of fear: it rarely emerged in a pragmatic location. Of course, what sort of location would that be, Joseph mused.

Remarks followed dinner. Ben Hamilton. The judge who had sentenced him and other town officials, but the keynote address was delivered by Selma Fenstrom, introduced as the town's unofficial historian, a retired teacher and part-time librarian.

Joseph Patrick Callahan, veteran of the civil war, served in the 18<sup>th</sup> Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, fought in several notable battles: Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, where he sustained a bullet wound to his lower left leg, and as a result, he walked with a slight limp for the remainder of his life. Achieved the rank of sergeant. Returned to his home in Bristol after the war, but soon embarked west, by train to Omaha, and then, burdened with the tools and trappings of a farmer in the bed of a buckboard, followed the Platte River, turning north where it was joined by the Loup River and diverting then again along a then-unnamed creek. He paused one night to camp and, according to his journal, (the prized possession of the West Callahan Creek Library collection), determined he'd put enough distance between himself and Massachusetts to forget his home and memories of the war.

Joseph Callahan quickly learned he possessed no aptitude for farming and after two disappointing seasons turned instead to shop keeping, establishing and managing a general store for neighboring farmers and ranchers. The town of West Callahan Creek grew around the store, (Selma Fenstrom noted that the official date of incorporation differed from the date of Callahan's arrival on this stretch of prairie, as detailed in his journal; they preferred the latter for purposes of marking anniversaries).

She spoke of Callahan's service as the town's first mayor, a

thirteen-year tenure, his reluctance to observe the tenth anniversary of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, his contrary attitude toward the neighboring Pawnee, Ponca, and Arapaho, (contrary to that of other settlers, Callahan advocated peaceful relations), and how he riled many townspeople by banning the wearing of firearms within the town boundaries. But he was overall a popular, if at times moody, citizen and public servant. Selma Fenstrom continued with her biography of Callahan, but Joseph latched onto the single word: *moody*. Was there within his journal a more detailed account of the cause of his moodiness? Sipping from his water, Joseph scanned the crowded room: Many of the attendees nodded at her recollections about the town's growth, its sons who had served in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No mention of any active duty service members or casualties from Afghanistan or Iraq, and Joseph hoped the town's youth had wised up to the nationalistic rhetoric of army recruiters.

One hundred and fifty years on this prairie we call home, Sarah Fenstrom said, born of a wanderlust by a man from Massachusetts who answered the call of his country to preserve the union.

Joseph side-glanced at her as she neared her conclusion. A birdlike woman, with closely-cropped graying hair, wire-rimmed round glasses that reminded him of photos of John Lennon. Her voice belied her slight frame. Strong and confident. The commanding projection of a teacher accustomed to corralling fidgeting children.

In his final journal entries, Callahan reflected on his life, and logged his life's greatest regret: he never married, never fathered any daughters or sons, remained disheartened within his pride that the town bearing his name would never be home to any descendants. But, Selma Fenstrom concluded, we are all the children of our founding father, Joseph Patrick Callahan.

The crowd applauded as she shuffled her pages and nodded once,

then twice, and waved a hand at the audience, returning to her seat on the end of the dais opposite from Joseph. Ben Hamilton rose to the microphone, as Joseph stared at Selma Fenstrom, determined to speak with her at the conclusion of the dinner. Reminding everyone that during the town's centennial, an honorary mayor had been drafted to oversee the celebrations, Ben Hamilton indicated Joseph with an extended arm, his palm up, gesturing for him to stand. Joseph complied, facing the room, grinning, bobbing his head, glancing at Selma Fenstrom, whom he discovered had been studying him in profile, squinting through her eyeglasses, smiling in a manner that made him feel she recognized in him something he didn't wish to reveal.

Mayor Joseph Hunter, would you care to say a few words?

Ben Hamilton's request startled Joseph, and he glared at the man for a moment as applause rippled through the room and people stood, chanting *Speech! Speech!*

Ben Hamilton beckoned him with a wave of his arm and stepped from the microphone.

Refusing was an untenable position, so Joseph stood, walked to the tabletop lectern, gripping it with both hands, and surveyed the crowded room as a tightening in his sternum warned that the shadows lurked patiently on the periphery of the room, awaiting the most inopportune moment to cloak him in debilitating fear and anxiety. But they remained at a distance, and he wondered if the good nature and the good will of the assembled people kept them at bay.

Thank you all, he said, hopeful his amplified voice repelled the shadows, even if temporarily. It's an honor to be your honor.

Laughter coursed through the room. Joseph wondered if cheerfulness and good spirits could also inhibit his shadows.

I've been given every hospitality. I'm very grateful and



looking forward to tomorrow's festivities. Thank you all. He waved an arm above his head in a sweeping arc and stepped back from the lectern, nodding and smiling like a campaigning politician, and then returned to his seat. He glanced quickly at Selma Fenstrom; she stared at him with a close-lipped grin and nodded at him as she sluggishly blinked.

As Ben Hamilton announced an official end to the evening, Joseph side-stepped behind those seated on the dais until he stood beside Selma Fenstrom's chair.

I'd like to hear more about Joseph Callahan, he said. If you have some time.

The woman's eyes softened as she rose from her chair. Why don't I meet you at Sally's and we can talk there?

Joseph nodded. Thank you.

—

Selma Fenstrom's late husband, a Marine veteran of the Korean War, exhibited symptoms of PTSD, although the condition then was called combat exhaustion or fatigue. His spells, she called them, never turned violent, but her research into the life of the town's founder uncovered what she called common singularities.

It's a contradiction in terms, I know, but too many quirks in their character aligned like fence posts.

Callahan's journal alternated between brief and lengthy discourses. The short entries recorded mundane, day-to-day goings-on, notes about the weather (an unremitting concern in an agricultural community). But the longer entries revealed the man.

Bared his soul, she said. It was tortured at times by recollections of the war. He wasn't alone in that out here on the prairie. Many veterans from both sides went west after the

war. Seeking what they couldn't find any more at home.

Callahan wrote that he knew when to stop his travels because it was in his nature to recognize it.

As I suppose you'll know as well. It'll be in your nature to know. Selma Fenstrom sat on the settee in the sitting room, cradling a glass of bourbon in both hands. Sally Hutchins had escorted them to the room, returned with the bottle and glasses, and then withdrawn as though she and Selma Fenstrom had choreographed the scene.

You mentioned he had a reputation for being moody. Joseph traced the rim of his glass with the tip of a forefinger.

Those were other people's observations. Nothing too erratic. He mentioned trying to control his spells. That's what he called them. He described how his conscience haunted him, like a specter, often at night, and at other, inopportune times.

Joseph chuckled at the mention of inconvenient timing.

Like yours, right? Selma Fenstrom lifted the bourbon to her lips and gazed at Joseph over the rim of the glass.

Sconces on either side of the fireplace and a floor lamp behind the settee illuminated the room in a golden glow, casting shadows in a variety of geometric forms against the walls, papered in a pattern of tiny roses among giant peony blooms. No good time for them, Joseph said. Did Callahan mention how he coped with his spells?

No. Only that they occurred. But he wrote about how coming west affected them. Founding this town gave him a new flag under which to fight. That's a direct quote. An allusion to his war experiences, I'm sure.

A new flag. I like that, Joseph said.

A flag that represented him, not a nation at war. That's what

I want to believe. And that Joseph Patrick Callahan founded this town as a form of occupational therapy, long before the benefits of such an approach were even anticipated. He never called his spells demons. He understood what haunted him. Not a single incident but the cumulative experiences of his wartime years. We're a curious lot, you know, people. We strive to isolate a problem's cause, then fix it.

One fell swoop.

Exactly. Ridding the body of a parasite, but without destroying the host.

I've been questioning whether that's possible.

Oh, my boy. It's possible. Callahan wrote that toward the end of his life he felt like a husk, but he didn't have the resources available to you today. Ironically, he was surrounded by men who shared similar experiences; talking to them might have helped quell the spells. Selma Fenstrom laughed at her own rhyming phrase. He could have held a group therapy session in his general store. Wouldn't that have been a sight to set tongues wagging!

It would have done them a world of good.

I think that's exactly what Callahan sought. A world of good. Not of war. Not of destruction and death. Just a world of good. And he tried to establish that here. His writings reveal his wishes in that regard.

He sounds like an interesting man.

He was. Like many public figures, we've mythologized him, sanded down his rough spots to fashion a presentable figure. But I've glimpsed into his soul, as trite as that sounds. He possessed the breadth of a prairie sky and the depth and of the deepest well. A fascinating man.

Do you think he ever achieved his redemption?

Fascinating question. In all his writing, I've never seen him use that term. Unlike a lot of the people at the time, he was not religious. But I suppose redemption was wrapped up in what he sought. What about you, Joseph Hunter. Do you seek redemption?

Not by that name. Maybe reconciliation.

Selma Fenstrom nodded, braced herself on the arm of the settee and rose. It's been a pleasure meeting you. She extended her arm and Joseph gripped her warm hand in his own. Trust your nature to help you recognize when it's your time to stop. She clasped Joseph's hand in hers as he walked her through the foyer to the door.

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Seated in the grandstand in front of the court house, Joseph (wearing a blue sash with the word MARSHALL emblazoned in gold satin letters) applauded bands, floats bedecked in crepe-paper flowers and tugged by tractors, a convoy of fire trucks from neighboring towns, a procession of antique automobiles restored to pristine condition, and a bearded man in the uniform of a Union sergeant, riding a black horse and waving a sword at the crowds lining the streets that enclosed the square. Trailing the Callahan figure in a ragged picket line, half a dozen other men in Union garb paused every few yards and fired off a volley from their antique rifles. Joseph winced at the first report, but with repetition grew more confident the gunfire would not trigger the shadows.



Ferdinand Krumholtz, Dom Pedro II. von Brasilien, 1849.

He recalled his conversation with Selma Fenstrom, realizing

his predisposition to try and glean wisdom from her familiarity with Callahan. Tracing the name of his spells through the histories of war: shell shock, battle fatigue, stress response syndrome, PTSD. Even Job, the embodiment of patience, was said to have suffered mental disturbances from battle. Every person around him bore a smile and he imagined that later circumstances in their lives might enforce grimaces or expressions of sadness; nothing was permanent. But then, the grimaces and expressions of sadness held to impermanence as well. He remembered moments when he and his brothers rested, post-action, guzzling water, leaning their backs against walls, removing their helmets and shading their eyes beneath blinding, cloudless skies, and then regarded one another as similar smiles and then laughter erupted to rinse the amassed tension from the clustered squad members. The parade. Could it be his victory parade? The conquest of fear. The taming of the shadows.

At the cook-out in the park, Joseph wandered among the crowd, asking questions, listening to the answers, and revealing some of his story to those who asked about his life. Person after person thanked him for his service, to which he nodded and told them they were welcome. His father early in young Joseph's life had emphasized the importance of how to receive a compliment. It's a gift to the giver to acknowledge their thanks, he'd said. Tell them they're welcome and look them in the eye.

The fireworks that night drew a collective *ooing* and *aahing* approval of the gathered onlookers, and although Joseph flinched at the first noisy bursts, he soon relaxed on a grassy spot in the park, watching the display with what he could only define as a lightness in his heart, a sensation he wondered if Callahan had ever experienced in this town that bore his name. The deafening finale brought him and those around him to their feet in explosive clapping, and as the quiet night replaced the booming echoes, Joseph joined Sally

and Peggy Hutchins for the ride back to the bed and breakfast.

As they wished him good night and walked toward their rooms at the rear of the house, Joseph felt an urge to ask them to linger, to engage them in conversation, could envision night stretching into dawn, as it had sometimes in Iraq, as man after man talked, the subjects varied and unimportant, camaraderie being the unspoken objective.

In the morning, Joseph descended the stairs for breakfast, with Ben Hamilton, Sally and Peggy Hutchins. He had hoped to say good bye to Selma Fenstrom, but reasoned such a farewell might seem anticlimactic. She'd provided Joseph all the assistance she had to offer the night before. At the conclusion of the light meal, the mother and daughter flanked him as they descended the steps to his bicycle and trailer. At the curb beside the sheriff's squad car, the conjoined vehicles rested, cleaned and polished, the blue frame glinting in the morning sunlight.

As befits mayoral transport, the sheriff said, emerging from his car. I'm going to escort you to the town line.

Joseph grinned, gripping the hand of Ben Hamilton, looking him in the eye as the man thanked him for being such a good sport, accepted hugs from both Sally and Peggy Hutchins, and then mounted his bicycle and followed the sheriff's car, its emergency lights flashing, as it crept back toward the town square, where several people paused and waved at Joseph, wishing him good fortune and a safe journey. No one had gathered to see him off or welcome him back from Iraq. A few blocks from the square, the sheriff steered to the shoulder and turned off his lights. Joseph pulled astride the driver's window.

I know you're not a marine, the sheriff said, but *Semper Fi*.

Joseph eyed him and the sheriff chuckled.

First gulf war.

Thanks, Joseph said. For everything.

Our pleasure. Stay safe.

Watching the car complete a gravel-spitting U-turn and speed back toward town, the sheriff blasting the siren briefly as he waved his farewell, Joseph recalled Selma Fenstrom's confidence that his nature would allow him to recognize his destination, if not his destiny, that he would receive a signal that he finally knew himself. Shadows, he considered, might darken and diminish his vision, but they need not blind him.

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## New Poetry by Lynn Houston

### You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather. I'm trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip



the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.

I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.

In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one

to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,

its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers  
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,  
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost.*



## **You Send Very Little News**

*You don't know all the time I'm killin'.*

*I watch it pass 'til nothing's left . . .*

*I let my memory carry on.*

–Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read  
beyond what operational security allows.

You say it's dirty there and hot. There's sand  
everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass  
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose  
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant  
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.



## **They Lie Who Don't Admit Despair**

*I'm trying not to think about you,  
but when this combine rocks and rolls,  
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,  
the way your leaving shook my soul.*

–Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

I've had some dark moments  
while you've been gone.  
Mostly I've been okay, having  
made up my bullheaded mind  
to just get through it.  
But last night you said  
that in a few weeks you will  
ask me to stop sending mail,

because you are that close  
to coming home. And I felt  
a lightness I haven't known  
since meeting you.  
From that first day,  
this absence weighed on us.  
When you return, we will  
be together for the first time  
without the threat  
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning  
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.  
I imagine you smiling.  
I'm smiling, too, listening  
to the house creak.  
Imagining you here.

### **You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home**

When we began, our hummingbird bodies  
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,  
dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar  
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it  
all again, but with sweetness.  
All the beauty of bodies in love.  
How generous is war  
to give us two beginnings.

### **At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return**

The fish aren't biting on Key Largo  
the morning we spend together

after you return. You nap all day,  
sheets spiraled like a carapace  
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,  
stroke the hair you've grown long,  
and ask what it was like over there.  
But you pull the blankets higher  
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway  
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,  
find me on the dock where we drink beer  
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,  
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,  
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—  
you've seen them at night tucked into the nooks  
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;  
you've seen their eyes blink open in the beam  
of your dive light; you've even seen one wake  
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.  
*They have nerve endings there, you tell me.*  
*They can feel when something touches their shell.*

When you return from the reef, I ask you  
again how it was over there, and this time  
you begin to tell me what you can.



## **The Persistence of Measurement**

*There'll be a thousand miles between us  
when I pass the border guard.*

*Is that thunder in the distance,  
or just the breaking of my heart?*

—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries  
a lamb—a runt who'd only lived a few days—  
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,  
as he presses his face to the cold wool  
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed  
my hair or pressed his body against mine?  
Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn't know. I was not given the dignity of a burial, just an email sent after he'd been drinking, blaming me for asking too many questions, asking too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.  
It is still the season of waiting.  
I look out the window of the room  
where I waited faithfully for half a year,  
where I wrote him daily.  
The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape  
of farm animals, and birds become the plane  
that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting  
for the return of the man I met in summer,  
before the deployment changed him.  
But that man is thousands of miles away.  
He will always be thousands of miles away.

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## **Noble Accounts: American War Stories, American Mothers, and Failed American Dreams**



In the social history of our country, the current cultural moment may seem particularly conducive to division, denial and fear. But in his 1962 essay “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” James Baldwin exposes what he sees as a specifically American character trait: panic at the idea that our dreams have failed, and the complacency that “so inadequately masks [this] panic.” Discussing the great American novelists up to the time of his writing, he elaborates: “all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen. And the panic... comes out of the fact that we are not confronting the awful question of whether or not all our dreams have failed... How have we managed to become what we have, in fact, become? And if we are, as indeed we seem to be, so empty and so desperate, what are we to do about it?” In life, as in fiction, this is an incendiary question.

Baldwin posits that “the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.” Living as we now do in what some deem a post-truth society, would a novelist hewing to Baldwin’s definition be noble or naïve?

Acknowledging the prominence of war literature in the American canon, Baldwin takes issue with those who idolize the giants—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Faulkner— and complain that the younger generation doesn’t live up to their legacy. “It is inane...” he says, “to compare the literary harvest of World War II with that of World War I—not only because we do not, after all, fight wars in order to produce literature, but also



because the two wars had nothing in common.”

As Michael Carson discussed on this site, Sam Sacks, in *Harper's*, lately took up the question of war literature and the prominence of the first person account. In [“First-Person Shooters: What’s Missing in Contemporary War Fiction,”](#) Sacks echoed Baldwin’s characterization of the American public as complacent, pointing out that the tendency to praise modern war writing “ennobles the account while deploring the event.” Returning soldiers, attempting to process or at least to share their experiences through literature, are met with a “disconnected,” “distractable” public. In Phil Klay’s much-praised *Redeployment*, Sacks observes, “redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly [the Terror Wars] were about.”

Does incomprehension, then, become the only thing the narrator and the reader have in common? It is personal experience that gives soldier-writers the authority to attempt to write about war, but it is also this very experience that distances them from their audience.

Sacks takes issue with soldiers’ personal accounts as literature. Citing an argument by Eric Bennett, he says, “Nearly all recent war writing has been cultivated in the hothouse of creative-writing programs. No wonder so much of it looks alike.” (I would argue that there’s something of a post hoc fallacy here, and point out that given the opportunity to use the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans already inclined toward writing might understandably choose to go for an arts degree that would otherwise seem impractical and/or financially out of reach.)

Sacks asks, “What might the novel be capable of—aesthetically and politically—if it broke out of its obsessively curated pigeonholes of first-person experience?” While this is a tantalizing question, some of the best fictional portraits of twentieth-century Americans were necessarily based on such

specific “pigeonholes,” isolated as the characters were by madness, geography, oppression, alienation, or a host of other factors. This was true not only for soldiers, but for women in various circumstances, notably that of the “desperate housewife”. This hyper-personal view through which we filtered literature over the last century paved the way for current trends; some dismiss the primacy of first-person accounts, others criticize the rise of “identity politics,” and the cult of the individual perhaps enforces our general cultural narcissism. Certainly the legacy of individuality, while containing elements we can be proud of, contributed to the rise of social media as both useful tool and scourge (depending on who you’re talking to). We hurtle insults; we troll each other; the more civilized and less anonymous among us agree to disagree. Maybe, as Baldwin implied, what unites us is our shared panic.

Failed dreams and illusions littered the ground in mid-twentieth century America. In *Fifth Avenue, 5 a.m.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman*, Sam Wasson observes: “With an unprecedented degree of leisure time, and more media access than ever before, the Fifties woman was the single most vulnerable woman in American history to the grasp of prefab wholesale thought, and by extension, to the men who made it.” These living Barbies in their gilded cages, straining against intellectual stultification, lead us to a generation of characters like Maria in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and, much later, Betty Draper in Matt Weiner’s *Mad Men*. In one episode of that show, a newly divorced mother moves to the suburbs and is regarded as an alien for, among other infractions, taking long aimless walks. “Where are you going?” a housewife asks, seething with disdain and suspicion.

Didion’s Maria is nearly incapacitated by “the unspeakable peril in the everyday... In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.” This is

reminiscent of stories of American soldiers in Vietnam, getting stoned out of their minds or slipping into heroin to numb their terror. Maria lives during the same era, but rather than being on her belly in a jungle, or marching in Mississippi facing down guns, riot gear, and water hoses, she is in L.A. on a vast freeway of loneliness, surrounded by drugs, vapidty and self-deception. After her husband leaves her, she sleeps near the pool, though sleeping outdoors strikes her as the "first step toward something unnameable." Hers is a very specific and isolated terror, perhaps even its own type of war. Can one human being's abject fear of annihilation be distinguished from another's? As readers, we may become irritated by the overly personal account, especially when the speaker is perceived as privileged, selfish, or narcissistic. But, says Baldwin, "What the writer is always trying to do is utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be." Sacks thinks recent war writing has it backward, trying to shoehorn the universal into the particular: "The public's unprecedented disconnection from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan—wars waged by a volunteer army and funded with borrowed money—has made it all the more eager to genuflect before the writing that has emerged from these conflicts. As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption, veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian."

Lucia Berlin's Korean War-era story, "Lead Street, Albuquerque," depicts a brilliant young artist who avoids military orders by getting his new wife pregnant. After she has the baby, his wife—another Maria—gazes out of the hospital window and smiles, saying, "How come nobody ever talks about this? About dying or being born?"

The next war, Vietnam, would be the first "television

war," and there would then be plenty of talk about dying. But unlike the men his age who are sent to be killed, Maria's husband, who "hated the baby's smells," is above such earthbound matters. (Except, of course, when having sex with his mistress, as he was doing when the baby was born). At the end of the story, the artist abandons Maria when she informs him that she is pregnant again. He leaves behind his rare, caged birds, which Maria gives to a neighbor. The story could be read as a sly take on McCarthy-era fear of artists and bohemians as morally corrupt and un-American, or it could stand on its merits as a depiction of one woman's reality.

Berlin tells, in an indirect way, a woman's experience (or non-experience) of a war. Where, I wonder, is the great American "spouse left behind during wartime" novel? The great one written by a female veteran? Sacks reminds us that "There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached."

What does it mean for our cultural conceptions of "big ticket items" like war, morality, and artistic authority that we live in a country with a long history of women's voices being silenced? This history strengthens the case for the centrality of personal experience in fiction. Still, Sacks's characterization makes sense. We, the somatized public, are supposedly at a safe remove from the dangers of war, praising the accounts of those who return without having to comprehend their realities or condone the act of war itself. "Ennobl[ing] the account while deploring the event."

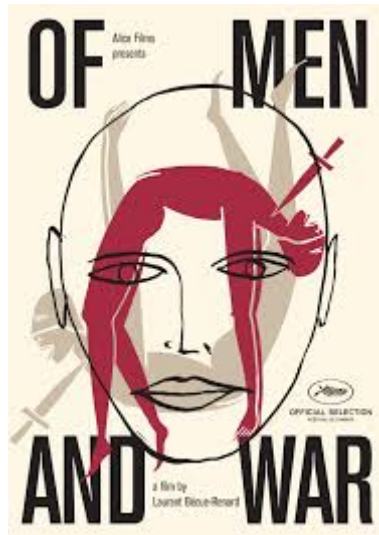
It strikes me that we do the opposite with certain women's experiences. Mothering, for example. The "mommy wars", in fact, have this as a basic tenet: motherhood is an inherently noble pursuit, the most important job you'll ever have, etc. ad nauseam, but you're doing it wrong. Here is a kind of symmetry; men can't physically experience childbirth, and women have not—historically, officially—been able to

experience combat.

Baldwin said that “The multiple truths about a people are revealed by that people’s artists—that is what the artists are for.” This is interesting, given Berlin’s antagonist artist character, obviously not the kind of artist Baldwin was thinking of. Or perhaps he was including such nasty characters? Maybe our dreams have failed: the American dream of what it is to be a mother, an artist, a soldier, a reader, a citizen. Perhaps they have failed because no American is able to fit these notions as neatly as we would like, now or ever. Baldwin also called this nation one “in which words are mostly used to cover the speaker, not to wake him up.” Is panic and its attendant complacency surprising in a country where your youth doesn’t belong to you, nor your body, your time with a new baby, or your privacy? And why shouldn’t our fiction reflect our personal experiences of these failed dreams?

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## **In Laurent Bécue-Renard’s Of Men and War War Is Not Tragic But Embarrassing**



In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argued that every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. There is truth to this. Some soldiers do go to war expecting an exciting adventure. Some don't expect to be killed or even think about their chances of being killed. Some don't dwell on the fact that they have guns and will have to shoot the enemy. But most do. Most are rational actors with the same evidence we all have at our disposal: namely, war involves violence. So why are they so often surprised when the war they go to turns out to be, well, violent?

Though concerned with what happens to soldiers after war, the question of imagined experience versus actual experience haunts Laurent Bécue-Renard's powerful documentary *Of Men and War*. Following several veterans at the Pathway Home, a California facility established to help traumatized veterans find meaning in trauma, Bécue-Renard reveals that the men fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan did not find the experience worse than expected, not exactly—they found it more humiliating than expected.

According to the documented counseling sessions, many of the veterans at the Pathway Home participated in firefights, staunched the bleeding of ruptured bodies, and helped collect dead bodies. That they did these things should surprise no one. I would be hard-pressed to imagine anybody who did not

know these things happen when you bring rifles and bombs to a place with a bunch of rifles and bombs. And, not surprisingly, the Pathway veterans tell very few of these traditional wartime stories. Only a few seem particularly upset by the fact that they had to kill an enemy, or lost a battle buddy or even their own combat injuries. This is not to say that these things did not upset them, only that they do not explain why they are at Pathway Home.

The veterans do, though, tell a whole lot of accident stories. One tells the story of how he kicked in a door and broke the neck of a little boy who was about to open the door. One tells about getting a lifelong disability because he jumped from a helicopter five or six feet to the ground and landed wrong. One tells about watching a tanker pull a gun out of the turret and how the tanker blew his own head off. Another tells about leaning into a fridge to get his best friend a Monster energy drink and pulling his M-4 trigger and killing his best friend.

After the release of *American Sniper*, Americans had a national conversation about PTSD (or what passes for a national conversation in America). In the movie version, American Sniper Chris Kyle's decision to kill a child and save American soldiers haunts him. But most soldiers would not be haunted by this. This is a straightforward exchange, a decision that involved conscious volition and a commitment to save fellow soldiers. It is the same logic with which we drone bomb and carpet bomb and drop nuclear bombs on cities—horrible, morally suspect, but (for many) a necessary utilitarian sacrifice that comes with war. Moments like this do not haunt the soldiers at the Pathway Home. In the Pathway Home version, the sniper would have tried shooting the boy and shot an American soldier or shot the wrong boy or failed to make the shot and all the soldiers died. That's what haunts. Accidents haunt.

Kicking in a door and breaking a child's neck cannot be rationalized. The soldier who did this in *Of Men and War*—an

obviously decent and empathetic man—tries to blame it on bad Iraqi parenting. He tries to blame the boy. He tries to blame it on himself. But it can't be explained. It can't be reduced to any schema. It is just stupid and horrible and unfair. The boy is dead and you didn't mean to kill him. That's it. It is a stupid accident. It is humiliating. It sucks. It is impossible to lend meaning to such a moment and such a story because embarrassments like that don't deserve meaning—they resist explication not through their horror but their arbitrary horror.

In "The Chaff," a short story by Brian Van Reet, the narrator describes how what troubles veterans is seldom what most would consider traumatic. Instead, the narrator finds himself overwhelmed in civilian life by a trivial moment, an action and event not especially traumatic. The narrator of Matthew Hefti's novel, *A Hard and Heavy Thing*, obsesses for years over a practical joke involving a pebble—"the stupid, galling, rebarbative, pestilent, abrasive carking rock"—rather than the actual violence the pebble supposedly caused. The opening line of Phil Klay's National Book Award winning *Redeployment*, "We shot dogs," has similar implications. Soldiers go to war to kill humans. Soldiers (and civilians) do not expect to kill dogs. Soldiers remember the dead dogs, not the person of whatever age or gender they had to kill to save friends or because some Captain told them to (the ending of Klay's story suggests the multiple moral ironies inherent in such logic).

From different angles, Van Reet, Hefti, Klay and Bécue-Renard approach the idiosyncratic nature of PTSD—not its horror, not its thousand-yard stare, how war was so much worse than expected, but its very ridiculousness, the awkward and absurd and pathetically embarrassing nature of war. There is nothing dignified about the denizens of Pathway Home. These veterans do not stare into the abyss. They do not see any heart of darkness. They have no access to some existential truth. They



have not returned sadder and wiser men. They are simply lost men stuck on what might not have been, how something as silly as forgetting to un-chamber a round or buckle a seatbelt killed their best friend.

Young men and women do not join the military thinking that it will all be a walk in the park and that war's violence won't affect them. They are not imbeciles. What soldiers do miss is that the violence they will face is often desperately pedestrian, something that could have happened to them back home, which has no meaning other than the fact that it happened. Wrestling with sheer happenstance is not an easy thing to do for civilians. It is even harder to do with several thousand years of war mythology and sentimentalizing telling you that an accident has a larger meaning when it clearly does not. By immersing us in the experience of the men at Pathway Home, Bécue-Renard's provocative documentary wrestles with this disconnect. Let us hope the people who send these young men and women to war start wrestling with it too.