

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

Spring 2015
Volume 3 Number 3

On the cover: *Constancy*, oil on panel
by Jonathan Gehrkin.
First Place winner of the 2015
inaugural Student Veterans of America (SVA)
juried art competition "Warpaint."

“I decided to make this image with two key ideas: that time passes from left to right portrayed by the flag we wear on our uniforms and, the legacy of the service we give to our country is a cyclical one, like that of a watch face.

My grandfather served in the Army, my brother is a Marine, etc.

The major symbols for the military are behind the figure. The symbols of the future are in front. The paintbrush and tube are symbols for history, education, and knowledge. The cards represent chance, and risk. While the USO coin is just one victory of many. The cups and vessel represent the fragility of the individual and his or her endeavors. The painting that hangs behind the figure quite literally represents the long road that is life for every soldier.

The figure looks at his watch waiting patiently; I chose to use an action figure to represent the young age when I realized I wanted to be a soldier. I believe that idealizing civic virtues represented by positions of service such as soldiers, police, EMS, and firemen, is a commonality among servicemen and women. It is something we are given.”

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1985,
Johnathan is a candidate for BFA in Painting
at the Maryland Institute College of Art, class of 2017.

He is a veteran of the United States Army
where he served as a helicopter maintainer from 2006 to 2012.
He currently lives and teaches art in Baltimore, Maryland.

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ISSN: 2325-3002 (Print)

ISSN: 2325-3010 (Online)

Editor's Note

The editorial board of *O-Dark-Thirty* is pleased to welcome two new members. Carmelinda Blagg, our contributing editor, has published fiction online and in print. Her work has been anthologized in the 2009 *Best of the Web*, and she has received an Individual Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council. Her parents served in World War II, three of her brothers served in Vietnam, and a fourth brother also has a military career. Art Editor Michael Fay, a retired Chief Warrant Officer-2 and Marine Corps combat artist, served in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Mike chose this issue's cover art, and has already made several excellent cover recommendations for future issues that we look forward to sharing with you.

We're also pleased to offer some exciting new writing this quarter. The stories and poems are set in locales as exotic as the Gulf of Oman, a mortuary in Iraq, and Vietnam's central highlands—and as familiar as a graffiti-covered park and a rundown urban neighborhood in America. Protagonists and narrators explore complex relationships with enemies seen and unseen, American and Allied comrades-in-arms, a parent, a spouse, a small child. Finally, in an interview with Veterans Writing Project director Ron Capps, National Book Award winner Phil Klay (*Redeployment*) shares some thoughts on storytelling and war. We hope you will enjoy reading the selections as much as we did.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

Annuit Coeptis

By Matthew Chabin

One day the Captain's voice came over the IMC, and it was bad news. Our space shuttle, the *Columbia*, had broken up on reentry. Seven astronauts were pronounced "missing," and we were told to pray for their families.

The bare facts were bad enough, but there were dire symbolic implications as well. Since its inception, the space program had been entwined with our national mythos, a triumph of modernism that paradoxically ratified our claim to divine favor. Since the moon landing in '69, our flag had compassed the globe some 12,250 times, our power waxing larger concurrently, in pointed contrast to the clay-footed titan of Soviet power as it stumbled into the dust. But what we faced now was not, as in the Cold War, a rival vision of modernism, but rather a spiritualized anti-modernism, and now the invisible hand seemed suddenly to be against us, knocking our solar chariot right out of the sky. You didn't have to fathom their theology to know how the mullahs and the warlords would be spinning this one, and in a way, maybe we had that coming.

It was perverse to think like this, of course. I should stow my blasphemy and pray for the families like the Captain said; let Chaps

work out the higher sense in fitting with his pay grade. Then again, praying for the families of seven dead people, with our mission and our cargo and our imminent destination . . . wasn't that also a little perverse?

From the Journal: "Arabian Sea/Gulf of Oman"
(Some few days before my 23rd birthday)

We pull into Fujairah about once a week to refuel. This must be the very asshole of the world. There's a giant cargo-loading . . . THING—I don't know what to call it, fuckin' steel beast—a bunch of giant cranes up and down the pier, and it looks like they're doing their level best to tear down the hills. There's a series of low rubble mounds, just piles of debris and broken rock, and behind that some taller, natural but barren-looking red crags. The air is filthy with dust and orange smog, and when the sun sets behind those rocks it's like the day is crashing and grinding itself out like a cigarette, and then hot, soupy dusk.

They don't let us off the ship here. We sweat. We toil on the lines and the rig stations while mosquitoes fly off with our blood. When we're done refueling we take in all the lines and set the fucking sea and anchor detail, usually well after dark. We sit in the doghouse in the hot, sticky dark, while SEAL divers swim through the water below with flashlights checking for bombs. We sit in the darkness with our aches and our discontent, silent and sick of each other, sick of the Navy, of the sea, and of piss-miserable places like this one.

I wake up tired, go to bed tired; I'm tired and dirty all day. Got another letter from Kate. I don't see a way out. I know that I can't walk away from this girl and I can't have her either. Bad straits.

Speaking of which, we will soon be heading up the Strait of Hormuz and into the Gulf.

From his 19th century opium daze, S.T. Coleridge was describing my surroundings with unnerving accuracy:

*About, about, in reel and rout,
The death-fires danced at night
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt blue, and green and white.*

We'd sailed the Strait, slipped through in the dead of night with the ship's lights tweaked to look like a merchant vessel. Now in the darkness we could see the fires of offshore oil rigs far out on the water, burning waste fumes as they slurped raw sludge from beneath the sea floor. Was it true? Had the Chaplain's god really sent us here to secure America's oil? These nagging thoughts were no good—certainly not mission-essential—what with the Iranians pointing a whole shoreline of missiles at us and the sun cooking our asses like salted shrimp on a skillet. *Just do the job man, do the job.*

*All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the moon.*

If I managed to steal an hour to myself, I slipped away to the fan room and read, just dove in and forgot as much as I could. The social life of the ship had deteriorated since the extension. This was our seventh month at sea. The heat and the topsy-turvy cabin-fever

engendered all sorts of bad behavior. One of the boatswain's mates from Second Division skulled a kid with a metal chair and knocked him out cold (Boats was Hawaiian; presumably, there had been some racial comment). He ended up losing a stripe for it. Then BM1 Barston, First Division's Leading Petty Officer, got caught rutting in a storage locker with York, a dim little cat-brained girl from Texas who happened to be directly under his command. So Barston lost a stripe as well, and we got a new LPO.

*And some in dreams assured were
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow.*

In boot camp, each recruit had been allowed one spiritual text for Sunday reading. Mine was the Bhagavad Gita, the great Hindu dialogue between a warrior and his charioteer (who happens to be God). I found the expansive, life-affirming tone of the instruction both thrilling and profound. *Embrace your karma! Let fly your arrows! Seek the yoga of equanimity for all is resolved in death, and these are but shadows.* It took the reader beyond conventional ethics, beyond good and evil, exhorting him only to live in the moment and embrace his true self. An empowering message, but empowering for what? What does it say that the book was reputedly a favorite with both Gandhi *and* Eichmann?

Now I was reading up on Buddhism for the Chaplain's insipid World Religion class, revisiting the tenets of my upbringing. These meshed uncomfortably with the world-bestrident Aryan heroism, and produced a much different mood. In this light, I felt myself to be something absurd, a puffed-up little fish, poisoned by my own

hypocrisies. Buddhism, of all religions, is probably the least amenable to the business of war.

“Port to bridge, there’s a dead dolphin . . . ’bout thirty yards out at three-four-five. Looks like someone took a big ol’ bite out of him, oh . . . yeah . . . We’re gonna need a bigger boat, copy?”

*The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.*

“Copy.”

What’s striking about “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is the way the spiritual crisis is resolved. In this ostensibly Christian allegory, the afflicted sailor does not ask forgiveness for shooting the albatross. Instead, his burden drops away when he sees some beautiful water snakes and is moved to bless them. Though he is ridden with guilt, delight is the salvific humor which enables him to pray, the spontaneous and joyous affirmation of the fallen world that takes him outside of himself. Ex-stasis; *ecstasy*.

So I followed the Mariner’s example, and blessed some water snakes. They weren’t hard to find. I went to the bulwark and saluted the first and the second and the third that swam by, and felt a little better. Even if I looked three sheets to fucking batshit.

At 0415 we were jolted awake by the General Quarters alarm. We rolled out into the aisles as the lights flickered on, wordlessly going for our lockers and pulling on our coveralls and boots. Within minutes the Captain’s voice came over the 1MC, announcing that our destroyers had launched a predawn strike against Iraq.

We weren't totally surprised. Forty-eight hours ago President Bush had issued an ultimatum to Saddam: clear out of town or prepare for war. We'd gone to Level-2 watch conditions, doubling up on the lookout posts and standing down from all menial duties, and we'd started wearing our gas masks around on our hips. We were issued a shot of atropine¹ and a shot of 2-PAM chloride, just in case we fumbled the mask and got a snoot-full of nerve agent. This emergency cocktail would play hell with our systems, but it would keep us from shitting and spitting ourselves to death.

After a scramble and some announcements, we stood down from General Quarters and more or less went about our day. The TV in the galley showed the missiles being launched from our smallboys in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. The Captain was more talkative than usual, giving us updates. He told us a couple times that this was a noble war. Hell, aren't they all?

The initial reports on Operation Shock and Awe were all good, speculation that Saddam might already be a smear in a glass parking lot. By day five, the news was more mixed. There was a rumor going around that we'd lost something like thirteen tanks² outside some little town we were trying to take, and a more reliable report that we were missing twelve guys after an Iraqi ambush. What was certain was that all the ordnance we'd hauled over was being put to use, blasting an ancient land back to its ancient beginnings.

On about the fifth or sixth day of the war, the Captain announced that we had "the mother of all sand storms" riding up our

¹Fact: atropine is a helluva drug! It is extracted from the mandrake root, believed in ancient times to grow from the spilled semen of hanged men. Cleopatra reportedly took it to dilate her eyes and aid her in the seduction of Roman generals. It has long been a staple of poisoners, alchemists and sorcerers, and now protects sailors against the malign chemistry of their enemies.

ass. Until then, I'd thought sand storms were strictly a land phenomenon, but this one had apparently blown out to sea. We stepped out on deck for that day's underway replenishment (refueling operation) and into a Martian seascape, a sky of red-brown earth shredding itself against the turbid swells. The sand flew into our clothes, our equipment, our mouths, and if not for our goggles we would have been really blinded. An unrep is dicey enough under good conditions. This, in one humble seaman's opinion, was ridiculous.

We'd been out on deck just long enough to get set up when, suddenly, the titanic outline of an aircraft carrier loomed visible about 300 yards off our port stern, closing fast. It made me think of that Star Trek movie, *Spock Saves the Whales*³, when the Klingon Bird of Prey de-cloaks over the little whaling ship. Indeed, our Gunner's Mates stepped up and fired tiny harpoons at the monster, flying canisters trailing shot lines. These were gathered by the crew on the other side and soon the fuel lines were up and we were pumping. We started sending over crates of ordnance on the span-wires, the encased bombs scrawled with messages: "*Heads up Haji!*" "*Allah Akboom!*" "*Happy Ramadan!*" Between the skinning hulls of the two ships the Bernoulli effect made a cataract of dark, roaring blood.

It was a long day working in the dust. Eventually we passed out of the storm and the sun emerged from its smoking garret in the west. When the last crate was sent we stood down by turns, sipping water inside the bay doors, playing cards, dozing on cargo netting, until finally, it was time to wrap. We uncoupled the hoses, took in the lines. Our breakaway song was "Bombs over Baghdad" as the carrier unfurled the Stars and Stripes from its fantail.

And we danced like the devils of Pandemonium.

²While American Abrams tanks were taken out of action by enemy fire, no crew members were lost. Overall, we ran the table on Saddam's tank corps.

³Not the real title.

Matthew Chabin, from Portland, Oregon, served in the US Navy from 2001 to 2005. He earned a BA in Literature from Southern Oregon University, and has lived in the Czech Republic, India, and now Japan—where he will soon be married.

You Never Forget Your First

By Lyndon Moore

Winter time in Iraq is the rainy season. You wouldn't think it would rain in the desert, especially in a place the grunts called "the sandbox," but it does. The rain falls in giant, weighty drops as heavy as paint and turns all that dirt and sand into mud. Thick clumps of mud cling to your boots and cakes up so that in no time you have enough of the brown gunk to build a house on the bottom of your feet, though everyone scrapes it off on the edge of a sidewalk or a door's threshold to any of the pre-fabricated buildings. When the rain stops, enormous puddles and small ponds have formed over a few short hours on the base so that you're forced to use the sidewalks for a change instead of cutting right across the dirt like you've been used to.

It hadn't started raining just yet, but it was September and the night had a crispness to it that made a few soldiers and airmen break out their fleece zip-ups to keep away the cold. Things were quiet, at least quiet for me. I was working, if you could call it that, in the base gym where, for six nights a week, I kept the fridge stocked with potable bottled water, wiped down the weightlifting equipment,

put away the dumbbells and took out the oversized bags of trash filled with dozens and dozens of empty water bottles. I even organized basketball games every now and then, three on three ball games or Army versus Air Force volleyball games. It's funny, war. People think it's all blood and guts, firefights and heroism, and I suppose it is, but it can also be boring and monotonous. Troops need a place to unwind and blow off steam. Working out or a friendly competition helps to keep morale up. Anything to take your mind off the daily grind of soldiering and war.

That was the war for me, or so I thought, until I got my first phone call from my Master Sergeant. When our unit had first arrived in country and we were assigning jobs, I ended up getting tasked to be on the mortuary team for the base. Someone has to do it, and besides, we had been trained to do it during our technical school. We didn't use real people, but mannequins filled with ball bearings to make them feel heavy, like a real body. Sometimes they were missing an arm or a leg, and we would load them up onto a stretcher and pretend to process their remains—tentatively identifying them as Sergeant So-and-so and documenting all of their personal effects on a regulation form for just that purpose.

The ride from the gym to the morgue was a tense one. I strapped on my body armor, grabbed my helmet and hopped into the back of an old beat-up white pickup truck we used to get around on base and headed over to what was called “the dark side.” This is where the Army lived. At first I thought it was a crack on the differences in living quarters between the Army and the Air Force. A popular myth among the Army was that the Air Force received higher pay than the grunts, but this wasn't true. What the Air Force did have was better living quarters.

Before the invasion the base had been an Iraqi air base, but after it was taken over, the Army moved into some of the old build-

ings and barracks that had formerly housed Iraqi soldiers. Most of the buildings were squat, brown, stuccoed buildings with cracks in the walls and chipped tan and brown paint. Some were worse, with gaping holes in the walls from the fighting when the base was first taken. Because of this damage to the infrastructure, that side of the base experienced frequent blackouts from loss of power and so it became known as the “dark side.” The name stuck and I suppose it fit. Many combat operations occurred at night and most casualties seemed to happen at night.

I arrived at the morgue to see an Army ambulance with some medics unloading a guy on a stretcher. A *body* on a stretcher. His blood leaked down onto the dry earth in a thick heavy stream of drops, like maple syrup out of the bottle. It formed into big dark blobs speckled with dust and seeped into the ground. *Was he dead?* I wondered. *Yes, he was dead, obviously,* I told myself. But the first time you see that much blood, your first KIA, you almost don’t believe it at first. This isn’t the war you see in movies. There were no heroics, no histrionics, just a dead soldier on a stretcher, as pale and as real as a thick piece of clay.

Inside the morgue I helped pick up the body and move him over onto a gurney where the medical examiner, a major, could examine him and sign off on his cause of death. Wasn’t it obvious? One side of his head had been crushed.

The Army medics who had delivered the body hung around, keeping to themselves in a corner of the room, making small talk, and occasionally exchanging a quiet smile or muffled chuckle. I guess they had done this before and I wondered quietly how many times they had been players in this same scene. Others, like the guy’s buddies who showed up fresh from the field still outfitted in their battle-rattle, were in a state of shock and disbelief. You can see the whole gamut of human emotion cross a man’s face when he looks

down at a dead brother-in-arms: disbelief that he is really lying there, dead; rage that “they had got him” and that he had been killed; love and compassion that this had been done to him and that their buddy looked like this; and fear that the same thing could happen to them. After all, he’d been a good soldier. He hadn’t done anything wrong or stupid. He didn’t die on account of any tactical mistake he had made. I found out that he had been the gunner on a Humvee that had rolled over and crushed him while his team had been pursuing some insurgents. It was just a case of wrong place, wrong time—and that can happen to any man.

The mortuary NCOIC, a thin, quiet, unassuming man who had already been in country a year, shooed the grunts away. We needed our space to work, but he also knew it doesn’t do a soldier any good to look at his dead buddy for too long, let alone when he is lying naked on a gurney.

But I looked at him. I looked at him for what felt like a lifetime, his whole lifetime, and I delicately turned and repositioned his body while the medical examiner and his assistant, a butter-bar lieutenant, filled out their paperwork with matter-of-fact detachment and clinical precision. I stared into the lifeless blue of his eyes that were as absent as a cloudless sky. *Did he have a good life?* I wondered, whatever that meant. *Did he get to do all the things you hope any young man gets to do—raise hell, fall in love, sleep with a good looking gal? Would he leave behind a tender-eyed young woman who sobbed over her lost love? Did he have kids? He was someone’s kid. What would his folks think? Would their loss be worth it? Was his loss worth it? Was any of this pain and suffering and loss worth it?*

I picked his body up with the help of another soldier and placed it into a dark green body bag. This was then placed inside of a metal case, those infamous, flag-covered metal cases that had already become ubiquitous with the war. As we wheeled the metal

case on a small gurney into a freezer to temporarily store his remains until he was repatriated back to the States, I had no idea that I would be repeating this very same process over and over again for the next several months.

Years later I had been transferred to a base in Montana, where life was slow and our operations tempo was even slower. One day while feeling nostalgic I looked him up on the Internet. I still remembered his name—I could never forget it—and I remembered the month he had died. It was easy finding him. I typed his name and theater of operations where he had died into an Internet search engine and in seconds there he was on a computer screen, still alive, looking back at me with a smile on his face and the light of the living in his eyes.

He had liked camping and played football in high school. An article mentioned that he had been going home on leave in two weeks before he was killed, presumably to marry his girlfriend. I remembered as much from the bloodstained letter we had found in the pocket of his uniform.

I began to cry again. More tears to add to those I had wept the past few years when a memory of him or another dead soldier crept back into my waking life, or when a war movie or news of the troops back in the desert would flash across the television screen while I was channel surfing. I was there, again, awash in the pale red glow of the tactical light in the rear of an Army ambulance as the mortuary NCOIC and I transported his flag-draped transfer case to the airfield to make it back home to his next of kin. I looked down and picked a stray loose thread from the flag, laid my hand flat upon it and said a silent prayer for him. I looked back up and read that he was from Montana and had been buried in the town where I was now stationed.

I don't know how long I had been sitting there, staring at the computer screen, staring back into a past that still seemed

very present, but suddenly I felt like I had to do something. Here, now, the first dead soldier I had ever seen, the first poor boy whose eyes I had stared into after the spark had been crushed out of them, was lying in a cemetery only a few miles away.

What do I do? What should I do? Do I go find the cemetery and walk past the rows of head stones, searching for his name? Should I iron my dress uniform and straighten my ribbons before seeing him? Would I stand strong at attention before his grave and snap a final sad salute? Could I remain stoic and poised with only a single tear rolling slowly down my cheek to show my pain, like some scene from a movie? Or would I stand and whisper, “I’m so sorry you died,” before exploding into tears, bawling? *You had so much to live for. What the hell am I still doing alive? It isn’t right.*

In the end I never visited his grave. I feel guilty about it, like the guilt you feel when you make your girlfriend cry or that first time you realize you disappointed your parents and that they are right to be disappointed in you. I was afraid—I’m still afraid—of how I would react when I walked past the names of the dead, searching for the one that has been burnt forever into my memory. There had been other dead soldiers, some whose names I never learned, some whose names I didn’t want to learn, but you never forget your first.

Lyndon Moore served with the United States Air Force for five years in mission support. He provided mortuary services while deployed to Iraq and later assisted in search and recovery operations of pilots and aircraft. After separating from the military he earned his bachelor's of nursing science degree from the University of Indiana. He currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky and works as a registered nurse. In his spare time he enjoys writing, yoga, and practicing martial arts.

The Search for Tai

By James Hurley

Tai was a little on the short side, with dark skin and a big smile. He was usually the first among us to let loose a belly laugh, a rare sound in the Vietnamese jungle. Our unit, the First Air Mobile Cavalry Division, braved the Central Highlands of Vietnam; Tai was our interpreter, and I was his shadow in charge of his protection.

I'm ashamed to say that, at first, I thought badly of Tai. When my sergeant major introduced us in September 1965, I felt repelled. Tai was one of the few South Vietnamese men in our troop and, driven by the intensity of war, I was paranoid that he could be a VC. I had come to Vietnam to serve my country, not to guard a potential spy. I was extra worried since Tai knew the layout of our camp and where we kept our fuel, ammo, and explosives—information that could kill.

Tai and I spent almost every moment together. Our unit worked hard to clear jungle and build bunkers; it was rough work, especially with the VC lobbing mortars around camp. There wasn't much time for talk, but when the day was done I would learn a little more about Tai. He was uncomfortable too, unsure of our American

customs. Yet despite the great divide of our cultural backgrounds, we found that we shared the same beliefs. Tai deeply wished for a democratic Vietnam; having spent his last six years as a soldier, he hoped to build a better future for his country. I was a twenty-one-year-old recruit who believed that the Vietnamese people deserved their independence. While our time in Vietnam would be a hellish struggle, it would also make Tai and me true brothers.

Tai and I mustered through the heat of the jungle, through the monsoons and the mud. Each new day was a new hardship, but somehow Tai always had a grin to share with me come sundown. I learned to trust his experience and appreciate his easy humor. Once he had eased into his new unit, he proved to be quite the jokester; his smart remarks often got the rest of us chuckling, and he was fun to laugh at in turn. I often prodded him about how lucky he was to be exempt from guard duty. Our superiors feared that Tai's Asian features might get him mistaken for the enemy, so he got to sleep away his nights while the rest of us took shifts. "Perhaps I should get myself some Asian eyes," I would tell him. He would always respond, "Hurley, eat more rice."

I admired Tai in other ways. A devoted father and husband, he often spoke about his love for his wife and children. They had moved to An Khe, where Tai was based, so they could be a closer family. Tai was always happy to spend time with them and regretted how he had to return to camp before dark. His children were innocent and delightful and enjoyed calling me Uncle Hurley.

But of course, war is difficult, and it is hardest on the most vulnerable members of our families. One day we received an emergency call: Tai's five-year-old daughter had been seriously burned and required evacuation. She was medically field dressed and needed transportation to Qui Nhon Burn Center, where she could be treated.

We never learned how the child had received the burns, only that they were serious. As the weather was not conducive to an airlift,

I volunteered to drive. We would take the jeep, a safer bet than the big ambulance with red cross targets on the sides, but I still got the butterflies thinking of how we would be alone on the dangerous Highway Nineteen. My sergeant took the backseat with the firepower and field radio. Tai cradled his daughter's head in his lap throughout the bumpy, hasty ride, speaking to her in soft Vietnamese every time she cried out.

Tai was far from himself after that incident. He blamed himself for his decision to move his family to An Khe. His constant worry was painful to see. I stood strong by his side, just like any good friend would, but I was also moved by his grief. I felt the strength of his love and the depth of his pain. Tai visited his daughter at the burn center whenever he could. Thankfully, she slowly recovered, sitting in bed with more stuffed animals than she could hold. As his daughter healed so did my friend. I was so glad to see both of them doing better.

Once, Tai asked about the US Civil War, as his own country was divided between North and South. A few American soldiers, some from the North and some from the South, were present. We explained the facts—the Southern plantation owners and their belief in slavery, the breaking of the Union, and the eventual war. After a lengthy discussion, Tai said he was happy that slavery had been abolished, and how pleased he was that the South had won the war. We all roared with laughter. Tai was confused at first, but then he was laughing too.

On a quiet night, holed up in the bunkers, I asked Tai for a favor—in case I didn't make it out alive, he would write to my parents. "Tell them that I was proud to serve," I said. I thought a letter from a Vietnamese soldier would have more impact, since my dad had felt that we Americans should have stayed at home. Tai wrote down my folks' address and tucked the paper in his wallet. In turn, I promised that I would assist his family should his luck run out.

By April 1966, my tour of duty was over. It was strangely difficult, knowing that while I enjoyed my freedom in the US Tai would stay behind to fight. As I prepared to board a flight for the first leg of my redeployment, Tai approached me and removed his dog tags from his neck. He placed one in my hand as we shared a last handshake. “One day, we’ll meet again to celebrate a democratic Vietnam,” he said. Even with the hope of this promise, I ached as I said goodbye.

I received a few letters from Tai over the next months. They were just spare pages covered in his loopy handwriting, but hearing his small talk—the things he was doing, how he missed me—made me so happy. Yet suddenly, I heard from friends that Tai had received orders to stop writing to me, the reasons unclear. I still received a few secret letters from Tai, passed to me by friends, but I wrote back saying that we should stop correspondence. It would mean serious trouble if we were caught. As soon as the war ended, we would be able to converse freely. That was the last I heard from Tai.

Vietnam was always one bad dream away. My nightmares were full of my memories of battle and the injuries our personnel suffered. Other dreams were of Tai: he was searching for me, but I could never call out to him. I would wake trying to respond to his voice. My wakeful hours were restless as well; the news was full of negative reports and the complaints of protesters. I could not bear to watch TV, since I felt like the rest of the country was going against everything I believed in. The deeper I buried my feelings, the worse I felt.

Then came 1975 and the fall of Saigon. I felt such a pain in my gut, knowing all the sacrifices of our personnel. All that bloodshed and still no democracy. I always thought the South Vietnamese people should have had the right to choose their own way of government. Now it had all been in vain. I feared even more for Tai and his family.

Time trickled onwards: I married Karen, my devoted girlfriend; I saw my children come into the world. I kept Tai alive in my

heart, putting his name on the license plate of my car and keeping his dog tag close. I lost five other close friends in Vietnam, and had visited each of their graves; Tai was on the only one unaccounted for. I wondered about him: Where was he? What was he doing? Was he even alive? I was afraid to dig for answers; if Tai had survived the war, I feared the communist government might harm him or his family if they learned that he kept correspondence with an American soldier. Staying quiet was a wrenching challenge, but one I bore for the possibility of Tai's peace.

The months turned to years, the years into decades. My children grew and left the nest. My hair had grayed by the turn of the century. By then, it had been almost thirty years since the war. Still no word from Tai. It was time to begin searching.

Though I feared the worst, I held onto the chance that Tai's silence had to do with complications regarding the communist government. I had a few precious pictures of Tai, still young and decked in fatigues. In my favorite photo, we stood together, smiling, my hand around his shoulder. I circulated this picture in Vietnamese newspapers, asking for information on Tai's whereabouts.

I received many well-intended responses, but I also got hate mail voicing negative opinions of Vietnam veterans. One person even sent me a virus that fried my computer. Some strangers contacted me, saying they could help; they only needed money in order to run ads in newspapers. I sent them funds, hoping for good news, but there was only silence. For a few months, I gave up hope.

Then I received an e-mail from Hoang Nguyen. He was a Silicon Valley software engineer in his forties and had caught a whiff of my search online. His father had served in the South Vietnamese army and had connections in the Central Highlands, where Tai and I had served. Tai's family had lived in Da Lat, a city in that same region. Although Hoang had been living in the U.S. for nearly twenty years, he operated a private charity to help out the

less fortunate children in his native country. He promised to find clues about Tai's whereabouts during a routine homecoming visit.

I was misty-eyed when I read Hoang's emails. It was moving to be the recipient of such kindness, especially when it came from a complete stranger. Excited and nervous, I waited for more news. Hoang e-mailed again and said that some people had seen the search posters and had recognized Tai's face. With additional radio and TV ads, Tai's name would soon be on the lips of the whole Da Lat community.

The trail was getting hotter. The closer I got to finding Tai's whereabouts, the more nervous I felt. Finally, I got an email from Hoang, along with a few pictures.

Tai had been killed in an ambush along the Cambodian border. Tai's wife, Nga, had been called to identify his remains, as his dog tags and wallet had been missing from his body. I was filled with a cocktail of emotions: I had lost another friend to the war, but I had finally come to know of his fate. While it had been almost forty years since Tai and I had parted ways, I still cherished his memory. In a way, our friendship had persisted despite the time between us.

In February 2005, I accompanied Hoang on a trip to Vietnam to visit Tai's family. I would see Nga and her children for the first time in decades. Karen and I flew from our home in Florida and landed in hot, humid Saigon. There, we were greeted by Tai's son. Though he spoke no English, his company filled me with joy. Hoang translated our conversation as we drove to Da Lat, home to the rest of Tai's family.

Tai's family members greeted us with smiles and hugs. I even met Tai's daughter, the little girl who had been badly burned. She was smiling despite the scars beneath her long, silk skirt. Nga, her hair a curly cloud of white, showed me to Tai's altar. He was photographed in uniform, impeccable and proud. I learned that Nga had never remarried and had worked hard to raise the children by herself.

Before visiting Tai's gravesite, I returned his dog tag back to Nga. I felt that she should have it, as Tai's other dog tags had been lost in battle. We walked to the cemetery; it was well-groomed and located on a hill overlooking Da Lat. An altar and stone enclosure with Tai's photo marked where his body lay. Finally, as I stood by his side once again, I was overcome; I remembered the good and bad times we shared, the laughter and the gunfire, the sweat and the dreams.

That day, I felt that I had become part of Tai's family. We spoke the language of love through our eyes and smiles. There was not a dry eye to be seen. For the first time since our separation and my years spent waiting and searching, I felt closure; I could see that Tai was dearly loved and would never be forgotten. Surrounded by family and buried near home, he was at peace with himself and the world. How proud it is for a person to give his life fighting for his country.

After a few days of visiting, Karen and I readied to say goodbye to Tai's family. They were so kind and so proud, and it was a blessing to have met them. I hoped to e-mail Nga frequently and send her family supplemental money for the years to come. I would support Tai's family in his stead, just as he would have done for me had our fates been reversed.

Before leaving, Nga handed me back Tai's dog tag. "Our family has decided that you should keep this tag beside your own," she said. I was shocked, but gratefully accepted the gift, just as I had accepted it from Tai himself many years ago. Today the tags hang side by side in a private place in my home, where they will be together until the end.

James L. Hurley volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army in 1963, and completed basic infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana and medical corps training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. He served with The Second Infantry Division, which

deployed in 1965 to Vietnam's Central Highlands. He remains in contact with the family of Sergeant Huynh Da Tai ("Tai") in Vietnam via email. Mr. Hurley lives with his wife of forty-seven years, Karen. He would like to thank Elizabeth Nguyen for her assistance with this manuscript.

Fiction.

Playground Patriots

By Peter Beckstrom

I function best when I'm high. My work truck helps get me there. Her name is Eunice. When you name a truck, suddenly it's more than tin and gears. Superstitious nonsense, but you can't always choose your religion. Eunice is a white Silverado, and apart from the St. Petersburg Pelican and the Parks and Rec decals, she's bone white and jacked up. She gets me high so I can look down on the world. Up here, I see what's coming.

Stopped at a red light, headed for maintenance at Borf Park, I can see for blocks. To my left in the adjacent platinum Mercedes convertible is a bronzed trophy wife wearing a Rolex the color of her car and a diamond the size of a 7.62 round. To my right—inside Eunice—is my co-worker, Kasey. We have been sharing the cab for ten months. Kasey is in his late forties. Time has been nasty to him. Life has scraped over his face like worn brake pads over a rotor past its prime, leaving facial canals that could hide a cocktail straw. He walks around as if his boots are on backward. I don't know if he's coming or going. That's all there is to Kasey.

The light winks green and Eunice brings us to our next stop. Borf Park covers three square acres on the corner block, stretching

to its corners flat and tight like saran-wrapped leftovers. Kasey and I go to several parks each day per our list, but this is among my favorites. It's small, quick to clean. I like to mix a few smaller parks into our daily schedule. The small ones are an easy check in the box. When the day ends, back at HQ our boss sees checks. That's good. It looks like you're working hard. Working hard is job security. I know all about security.

My watchtower is the color of antique photos left on a sunny windowsill: the same as the surrounding desert, the same as our uniforms. I knew being deployed would deprive me of life's flavor, but it never occurred to me that I might be deprived of its color as well. My line of sight through the tower's porthole allows me to see as far as the heat mirages allow, which isn't far on a mid-July day in Iraq. The tower reaches up over the Hesco barrier to its front for an unimpeded view of a rocky, arid sandscape, not the smooth dunes that Hollywood portrays. Although films may try, there is nothing romantic about the desert. Everything good dies under a desert sun.

The tower's interior holds two five-gallon buckets. Two places to sit until one of us needs to shit. Randall, my A-duty, never shits on watch. He pisses a lot though on account of the Rip-Its he shotguns to stay awake. They don't work well for him; I toss stray 5.56 brass at him when I catch him dozing. Christ, he'd probably fall asleep tweaking on meth at a Metallica concert. The only other décor is last month's *Maxim* magazine, jizz crust on the floor, and a laminated poster remarking on the perils of complacency in bold military font that reminds me of the M*A*S*H logo. Randall has brought his iPod with small, can speakers: a minor distraction, which I allow. The Alice in Chains song "Rooster" drains from the cans.

"Listen to the lyrics," I say.

“Jesus H. Christ, Dane. We listen to the song about three times a shift. I know what the fuckin’ song says and not once does it mention a Marine.”

“No shit. It’s poetic. Instead of saying Marine, they say ‘Army greens were no safe bet’. So, if you’re in Vietnam whackin’ gooks from fifteen hundred meters, it’s safe to assume if you’re not Army—and you’re definitely not in the Chair Force or the Navy because you’re in the bush to begin with—you’re most likely a Marine.”

“I’m pickin’ up what you’re layin’ down, but it doesn’t mention sniping gooks from a click and half. Not once. Explain that?”

“Haven’t you even heard of Carlos Hathcock? You must’ve been a PI Marine, huh?”

From my watchtower—on the northeast corner of Al Asad Airbase, Al Anbar province—I spy a cadre of hajjis inside the base at the adjacent DRMO lot rooting through garbage. They’re a raggedy bunch with black straw beards and pleated, white kufiyas covering their domes. Their long, threadbare gowns slide over oily metal parts as they stoop to rummage. I have seen them cannibalize parts from DRMO before and—not so coincidentally—a day or two later IEDs are exploded in neighboring areas against convoy units.

“Get the SOG on the hooks and tell ’em to send up the MPs,” I say. “Hajjis are rootin’ through DRMO.”

Randall leans over to get a better view through the porthole. One of the hajjis holds up a cylindrical steel tube and points to an open end as he talks to his buddy. The buddy holds his arms high and lowers them to his sides in dramatic fashion.

“Dane, c’mon man. They do this all of the time and are always cleared by highers. Can’t we just let it go? I don’t wanna deal with MPs today.”

My tongue feels pasted to the grooves on the roof of my mouth. When I’m upset, my mouth gets dry. I guess my body needs all the fluid it can get to fight the rage fire in my mind.

“Maybe this is the time they don’t get cleared and find the ‘whatchamafuckit’ to put into their IEDs and blow up some Marines. Are you a blue falcon, Randall? Buddy fucker, huh? You wanna fuck your buddies? Get on the hooks.”

Kasey and I exit Eunice and head to Borf’s playground in the corner of the park, furthest from the street. We recon the area to check for garbage and determine what kind of tools we may need for maintenance. This park is in a decent enough area, unlike parks near the Trop that have the occasional uncapped syringe, which is why I wear hard-soled Danner boots. Kasey lives near here. He showed me his place once, but I wasn’t paying attention. As we approach the playground, Kasey heads left around the swings while I get up on the equipment. The equipment has stairs leading up to a platform. Atop the platform, to the right, is a monkey bar apparatus with orange, powder-coated, metal bars. To the left is a blue plastic tube with an embedded ladder that arcs to the ground. Straight ahead is the open yellow slide.

I nearly miss it, probably because I’m being complacent, on autopilot. The black paint spreads like a fresh scar atop yellow flesh. It’s a halogen-illuminated road sign forecasting what’s to come: gas station next exit, Holiday Inn five miles, anti-war propaganda ahead, change lanes. The graffiti has been stenciled. Some of the detail is too fine for it to be done any other way. Whoever did it probably doesn’t even call it graffiti, calls it tagging, or even worse, art. The graffiti doesn’t say anything, and neither do I. It’s just an image of some hajji cutting the head off an American. Seeing this, in one of my parks, gets my mouth drier than a summer sidewalk during a drought. My mind unfolds a list of appropriate reactions to addressing this misplaced hate.

I motion for Kasey to come over, not because I care what he thinks, I just want a distraction. Kasey comes up from behind and peeks around my left side. His next inhalation sounds like sand sweeping over more sand. He asks me what I think it means. I tell him what I think. He asks how I know the kneeling fella in the image is an American.

“Kasey, of course it’s an American. Clearly, being that we are at war with jihadists, this image represents some towelhead killing an American. Lookatit.”

I’m no doctor, but I dissect that image like a surgeon, cutting out every clue.

“The hajji standing over the kneeling blindfolded guy is wearing a ‘kufiya’, what we call a towel. He has a scimitar—which is a hajji sword—drawn halfway across the kneeling guy’s neck. Clearly, this is a symbol, Kasey. It’s like terrible poetry. If you want to symbolize something, you don’t just say it. Does this really need further explanation?”

“We’ll just clean it up, Dane. We’ve dealt with graffiti before.”

My anger trickles down my arms to calming fingertips that trace the lines of my palm.

“This is about as disrespectful as it gets to a veteran, Kasey. It’s fuckin’ treason.”

Kasey becomes quiet and studies the top of his boots. Kasey might be the religious type. I never heard him curse. I put an extra oomph behind that f-bomb. He seems afflicted.

“Look. I didn’t come home from the sandbox to encounter this shit in my own backyard. Let’s get rid of it,” I say.

Kasey suggests we pick up the trash first.

“No. We clean it now.”

We get rid of the graffiti. In a week, it comes back like a flaky, rubbery scab. Then again the next week, and the next and the next.

It's always in the same place. Each week we clean the wound, but it keeps getting infected. I know this limb needs amputation, but Kasey doesn't have the stomach for what's next. It falls on me, as it always does.

Randall makes the call to the higher-ups, but I don't wait for the MPs. I open the tower's hatch, climb down the ladder, and make my way a hundred meters to the DRMO lot. I speed walk so I can get to them as fast as I can, while retaining the appearance of control. As I approach, the hajjis stop rooting around and stare at me.

"You can't be here!"

They startle at my volume and tone. The closest one to me speaks in jarringly, broken English.

"It ok sir, we be here, boss told us look for part."

"I don't care."

The DRMO manager, at the sight of a tuned-up Marine in full combat gear with a loaded M-16 A4, leaves his shack and jogs over to us. He's an American, slim bordering on malnourished, metallic-gray sideburns, wearing cargo khakis and a grey Members Only jacket. His carriage recalls floppy string cheese beyond its expiration date.

"Hiya, devil dog. These guys have permission from the brass. I – I checked their IDs."

"Bullshit."

The man stands with a lean favoring his right side. He looks down to examine the laces wound over the tongue of his boot. He looks up at the chevrons on the center of my flak.

"Corporal, if – if you wanna double check, that's fine. You – you can use the phone in my office."

"I don't need to check anything twice. These hajjis need to get the fuck outta here."

My eyes lock up tight around his. I let them wrestle a bit, as to make him sufficiently uncomfortable. Using my best thousand-yard voice, I tell him to go back to his hole.

The manager backs up a few steps, spins on his right heel, and scoots back to the shack. I turn to the wanna-be-jihadists, still facing me. I pull up my rifle from the ready position, train it on the nearest hajji's left eyeball, and tell them all to get on their knees. No translation necessary, my rifle speaks any language. They get down and place their palms outward. The only sound comes from the hajji that first spoke. He hums a haunting tune, like a dying prayer. We stay that way until the MPs arrive: me aiming death, them praying life.

After Kasey and I wash off the treasonous slogan for the fourth time I decide to be proactive. At dusk, I begin sitting in a friendly oak with a tactical vantage of the playground. I find a comfortable resting position a dozen feet up at the crux of two massive limbs. Scarred bark tells of love affairs and visitors past. At the junction of the two limbs is a shallow depression filled with dirt, acorn hats, and a few tan cigarette butts. I bring a Nalgene bottle filled with water and my moonbeam. A nearby street light dimly illuminates the playground. Its crackling fluorescence casts a dull, flickering artificiality. My first night is fruitless. My second night is interrupted by a group of teens smoking dope while spinning on the merry-go-round. My third night bears the apple I came for: the traitor. He's a boy, probably thirteen or fourteen. He shows up at 2130. I know it is him before he pulls out the stencil and can of Krylon spray paint. Just a little bit longer—to catch him in the act—then I pluck him.

The MPs arrive in their Humvee. I'm glad; my arms are beginning to tire from bearing my rifle. Instead of the hajjis being placed in

the MP's rifle scopes, I am. They roll me up, place me in the Humvee, and bring me to the brig. The JAG levels charges against me under Articles 92 and 97 of the UCMJ before the end of the workday. I don't fight them; I overstepped my authority as a corporal. In the end, it always comes down to a game of rock-paper-rank. Every Marine knows which one wins, although I often forget. One week later, I'm out of the brig. All charges dropped. According to the brig guard that brought me chow my last day, the three hajji scavengers were part of a local terrorist cell gathering IED components. They used our trash to kill us. I wasn't paranoid. I did the right thing. Higher-ups had it hushed up, and they gave me a choice: dishonorable discharge later, or an honorable one now. My bird home came two months early, EAS shortly after.

The boy enters Borf Park from a small thicket approximately a football field's length from my position. He meanders to the swing set, and removing the stencil and spray can from the front pocket on his black hoodie, places them on the ground. The boy hops on a swing wrapped up twice around the top pole, starts swinging, and begins singing. A melody I won't forget. It was the same song that hajji at the DRMO facility hummed. The dying prayer.

The boy stops swinging and singing, grabs his gear, and saunters to the slide. He goes right up it, his rubber soles gripping the hard yellow plastic. Once at the top, the boy gives a turkey peek left and right, not seeming overly concerned with the possibility of being caught. He's complacent. He places the stencil in the same spot as always and lets out measured bursts of black mist from his Krylon can. I climb down from my perch, glide on my balled feet across the lawn to the stairs that lead up to the yellow slide, to that traitorous bastard, to the black paint that has stained my own back-

yard. As I mount the equipment, my feet slap against the rubber-coated metal. The boy turns. Our eyes can't meet in the flickering dark. He doesn't escape. He stands there, and straightening himself, puts forth his biggest voice to impress a single idea.

"I can get more paint."

I flip on my moonbeam, take two steps forward, and come chest to face with the boy. I'm tall, but this child makes me a Sequoia next to a sapling. His face turns up, nose first, to taunt me with pride. My nose turns down, face first, to beat it back. To many, my stature is imposing. My body hasn't yet been ravaged by a civilian life. Labor makes me as hard now as I ever was, but this boy won't subscribe to that. The arrogance of youth, and the inexperience of never receiving a raw beating, has this boy entrenched in his ignorance. The boy stands erect—a barrier between myself and his work—making him taller than he has any right to be. If my stature won't intimidate him, then maybe my words will.

"I'll end you, boy. The cops are gonna arrest two people tonight if you wanna play alpha male."

His response is as unexpected as it is disarming.

"Wars are won one hill at a time."

"This ain't a hill, and you ain't a warrior, boy."

"Stop calling me that!" The boy's shoulders shift back as his chest inflates. His bony fingers tuck and form squared fists.

"What? Boy?"

"Yeah, I know what you're doing." His chest rises and falls with the cadence of his words.

"What's that?"

"My dad says its dee-hugh-men-I-sing."

"Huh?" My confusion spelled out in tone.

"Soldiers do it so they don't feel bad about killin' kids."

"What do you know about soldiers?"

“My dad says they’re fighting the wrong war.”

“Your dad shouldn’t talk so much.”

“My dad says if I don’t stand now, then I’ll crawl the rest of my life.”

I relax my body. The tension in my shoulders melts, leaving me soggy with emotions.

“Kid, give it a rest. The world ain’t as bad as your dad says. Who do you think is gonna see that slide? See that image?” The boy remains quiet. “No one that matters or cares, that’s for sure.”

My mouth is full of saliva. I don’t want to swallow though. It makes you look weak. I turn my head right, and spit a gooey gob that lands ten feet away on the lawn. The sound of throat lube being gathered into another mouth reaches my ear like a baseball hitting a mitt. The boy lobs his gob two feet further than mine. Not to be outdone by a kid in a black hoodie and yellow, neon Nikes, I spit again, beating him by a foot. We go back and forth until we’re both leaning on the rail, flinging our heads back and forth trying to get an ideal arc for distance. We stop after realizing we can no longer outdo each other. I lean back, hands gripping the orange railing. Without looking at him, I speak.

“Where do you live, kid?”

“Why?”

“If I ain’t calling the cops on you, the least I’m gonna do is walk you home and talk to your dad.”

The kid looks at the lawn, then at me, then back at the lawn. Options are best weighed against your immediate environment.

“C’mon. I’ll show you,” the kid says without looking at me.

He turns and walks down the equipment stairs. I follow him at first, and then match his stride. We walk side by side out of the park and down the sidewalk heading south. As we continue to walk, he hums to himself that same melody as before.

“What are you humming?”

“A song.”

“Where did you learn it?” I ask. The boy looks down at his bright neon shoes reflecting streetlight onto his worn, blue jeans.

“My grandfather would sing it at daily prayer.”

“Where is he now?”

“Gone.”

The sidewalk narrows and I walk partially behind his right side. He seems in no hurry to introduce me to dad. The kid eventually stops next to a sandy path edged with cracked, red brick and peppered with broken, pearlescent shells. The path leads to a dinky, stucco house with flaking paint and rusty gutters that bend and droop like my grandfather’s jowls. Four stairs composed of concrete, and missing chunks from their corners, lead up to the front door. There is warm light coming from the edge of a curtain hanging in one of the street-facing windows.

“Is this home?”

The boy climbs the stairs to the door and draws a key ring from his pocket with only one brass key. He unlocks the deadbolt, and stops. He turns to face me, shorter now, not as tall as before.

“Do you still want to talk to my dad?”

“Yeah.”

The kid nudges the door like he’s cracking open a casket. He shouts for his dad. I walk up the path and stop at the base of the stairs.

Kasey answers the door holding a half-eaten granny smith apple. Kasey my co-worker. Kasey—the kid’s father—stands over me, looking down.

With surprise and confusion dancing over his age-scarred face, he asks, “Dane? What is it?”

My scalp carpet stands at attention. The kid huddles next to Kasey. We see each other. He doesn’t stand as strong as he stood

earlier, like David wielding a sling before Goliath. Now, he's an autumn leaf waiting for the gust of my words to cast him down, or keep him aloft.

“Eunice ran out of gas. Could you spare a jug?”

Peter Beckstrom is a former United States Marine who served twice in Iraq during OIF. Currently, he is happily dragging himself through Stetson University College of Law in pursuit of his Juris Doctor, and is a member of the DD-214 Writer's Workshop in Tampa. You can find more of his work in BlazeVOX, The Freshwater Review, and Blue Moon Literary Art & Review.

Steel Rain

By Fred Cutter

"Investigator needs to speak with you again, how copy? Over."

Donovan scanned the pre-dawn horizon of southern Iraq from the guard shack entrance that controlled the sparse highway traffic north of their forward operating base. The barren sea of sand was broken only by the highway and intermittent underbrush, which, he suspected, provided excellent sniper concealment. He pushed the talk button on his handheld radio.

"Copy, will report after shift ends in ten mikes."

"What do they want to know?" Schroeder asked from inside the shack.

Donovan scowled and checked his watch. The Criminal Investigation Command was less unpleasant to talk to than Schroeder. Last night, Donovan had spent three hours with investigators about his twin brother's alleged crimes as a serial killer. Three hours of lost sleep, of cross-examination—as though he himself had committed those atrocities.

So now the investigators wanted another shot at him. What was that about? Donovan continued his threat scan of the desert.

Schroeder said, “Too bad you gotta duck out of here early. I think Kelly is on the roster.”

“Bet you’re happy.”

“What, you don’t like her?”

“What’s to like? She’s married.”

“Yeah, so what? C’mon, man, we’ve been here four months, and I bet you’re dying of thirst. You’d love to dip your bucket down *that* well,” Schroeder said, and he laughed.

“I’m not thirsty.” Donovan tensed. Schroeder’s cackle carried through the desert silence. They’d have difficulty spotting a camouflaged sniper in full daylight.

“You’re a liar, man. Everyone needs a sip of water from time to time.” He paused. “Or a nice long gulp.”

Donovan winced at the accusation of being called a liar. “You might wanna think about boiling the water ’round here first.”

Schroeder roared with laughter, as though that was the funniest damn thing he had ever heard. “Think her husband knows?”

Who cares if her husband knows? Donovan stepped away from the shack and sat on the concrete barrier that controlled oncoming highway traffic. He rocked back and forth in count to the passing seconds.

Schroeder said, “So tell me about your twin, man. You anything like him?”

The media frenzy surrounding his twin’s arrest was hard to miss, even from within the technological austerity of southern Iraq. Donovan would rather go back to talking about Kelly, though he hadn’t seen her all week. She had been too busy with work for him, or so she had said. It had to be a lie. A camp as small as theirs, less than five hundred personnel, in an area with infrequent attacks, less than one every other month or so, didn’t exactly come with a demanding work schedule. She was seeing someone else, and Donovan suppressed

a wave of nausea at the thought of Schroeder being that someone else. Worse was the thought she had lied to him.

Bitch.

Schroeder said, “It was weird when his picture came up on the news. Looks just like you.”

“You’re a real genius.” Donovan checked his watch again.

“How can you live with yourself, when your twin’s such a— ”

“Let it go.” Donovan’s trigger finger itched to fire on Schroeder. He scanned the area again with binoculars now that he had some visibility in the predawn light. A village of ramshackle homes of earth and wood was to the west. Children played soccer near a dry well outside the town. Donovan relaxed. The parents wouldn’t let their children play outside if an attack was imminent.

Donovan scanned to the north, to the highway. A local national wove around the first of the barriers a quarter mile away.

Donovan glanced back at Schroeder, who had also spied the local national. “Grab the terp.”

“Ours didn’t report in today. Something about a migraine.”

Donovan gritted his teeth. If true, then the Sergeant of the Guard should have provided a substitute. “Then call into the SOG and get us a damn interpreter.”

“You got the handheld, genius,” Schroeder said as he leaned against the stack of radio mounts on the desk.

Donovan stifled a groan at Schroeder’s laziness. He pulled the handheld from his vest. He glared in Schroeder’s direction as he called in. “Rock One-Four, this is Rock Two-Five. I need a terp. We got a LN approaching on foot.”

Donovan stepped back from the barrier to the door. Schroeder remained at the desk and peered out the north window. The local national could be an insurgent or terrorist, or just some poor bastard whose wife and kids were held hostage under threat of death unless

he walked up to a checkpoint with a bomb vest strapped over his chest. Or he could be nobody.

Schroeder grabbed a microphone to broadcast his voice through a roof speaker. He ran his finger down a list of phrases on a reference card taped to the wall.

“*Qef, Inbatih.*”

The LN neither stopped nor dropped to the ground. Not surprising, Donovan thought, since Schroeder sounded about as threatening as a six year old schoolgirl.

Donovan checked on the children. “It’s probably nothing. The kids didn’t mention anything was going on.”

“What are you talking about?”

Donovan gestured in the direction of the town. “I was on a Civil Affairs mission last week, and the kids promised to tell us if *alibaba* is in the area.”

“What’s that?”

“Their word for insurgent or criminal.”

“What’s going on?” a voice asked. Kelly stood at the shack’s rear entrance. She had left the Humvee running for Donovan, but he couldn’t leave now, even with an investigator waiting.

Schroeder squinted into binoculars. “We gotta LN coming on foot.”

“Where’s the interpreter?” she asked as she closed the door.

“On the way. Supposedly.”

Kelly grabbed the microphone from Schroeder and removed her helmet. Her black hair was pulled into a tight bun, which revealed a bruise beneath her left ear. Donovan reflexively squeezed the trigger on his carbine, but the safety was still on.

She raised the microphone to within an inch of her lips and spoke rapidly in Arabic.

Schroeder looked at her, stunned. “What did you say?”

“I said ‘stop or we’ll pop a round in your dumb ass,’ is what I said.”

Kelly smiled at Schroeder as she peered into her own binoculars. She stepped outside, as though drawing a few steps closer to the LN would make a difference. She lowered the binoculars . . . her forehead burst open, her body slammed into the outside wall, and blood sprayed across the wall and window.

Donovan dived for the ground and reached for the handheld. Blood glistened on what remained of Kelly’s face.

“This is Two-Five. Soldier down, One-Four, get the QRF out here now, we are taking sniper fire.”

Schroeder looked down at Kelly, now slumped against the wall. Blood trickled in a dozen lines down the wall, adding to the blood pool on the asphalt. Schroeder dropped to his knees and vomited.

A round splintered the doorframe where Schroeder’s head had been only a second before.

The radio cackled. “Stand by.”

Donovan caught his breath and tried to focus. The camp’s Quick Reaction Force carried enough firepower to level a neighborhood. Or a well, if the sniper emplaced near the well. *That would be justice.* Those kids had to know. Everyone knows everything in a town this small.

Donovan crawled up against the nearest barrier, to keep Kelly’s blood from soaking into his uniform. Blood seeped across the expanse of pavement between him and the door.

That could have been me.

Schroeder lay against the wall inside the shack, where they could see each other through the door.

The radio beeped. “Rock Two-Five, standby for QRF, ten mikes, over.”

Donovan squeezed the radio and resisted the urge to slam it

against the pavement. Ten minutes? “Tell them to bring body bags. We might not be alive by then.” He dropped the radio on the pavement and didn’t catch the reply. He looked at Schroeder. “Are you crying?”

“Where’s that LN?” Schroeder wiped his eyes and looked away from Kelly.

The barriers were laid out in a zigzag to prevent traffic from running the checkpoint.

Donovan said, “Scoot up against the far wall inside the shack and see if he’s still coming.”

“You look. Just peek around the corner of the barrier or something.”

“You’re protected by the shack. That window will stop a sniper round.”

“You don’t know that,” he hissed.

You’re right, I don’t really know that. “I swear if you don’t back up to that wall right now, I’ll kill you myself.”

Schroeder scooted back into the shack to keep away from Kelly’s blood now seeping through the door. “Fine. You better be right about this.” He crawled a few feet to the rear wall and stood.

“Can you see him?” Donovan asked, but Schroeder’s eyes were closed. Donovan pounded the barrier and cursed. “Open your eyes, for Chrissake man!”

“He’s like three hundred meters out.”

Donovan gestured to shoot.

Schroeder shook his head. “He could be innocent, for all we know.”

Donovan rolled his eyes. “And he could be Santa Claus, bringing us a bomb. Too bad for him!”

“You’d kill an innocent guy?”

Donovan stopped. The current rules of engagement explicitly stated lethal force could only be applied to targets displaying hostile

action. The LN hadn't done that yet. *But he's a local national that had to know about this attack.* That meant he wasn't innocent in Donovan's eyes.

Good enough.

Donovan jabbed his index finger in the LN's direction.

"Roger that." Schroeder raised his carbine and fired two rounds. Donovan screamed from the report against his ears. He couldn't hear his breathing. The pain pierced through his ears into his skull.

A moment passed and the pain subsided. "Did you hit him?"

Schroeder shrugged. "He's not coming anymore."

"When did you put in earplugs?" The orange rubber tips of standard Army hearing protection protruded from Schroeder's ears.

"I wear 'em all the time out here. Never know when you'll need them."

Why didn't I think of that?

"What's that smell?" Schroeder asked.

Donovan sniffed. "She musta shit herself after getting shot." He pinched his nose with his thumb and index finger. At least her head had stopped pulsing blood. Her lifeless left eye had been blown half out of the socket and stared accusingly at him. "Can you see anything else?"

"No. Maybe the sniper is gone."

At the moment, Kelly had more of a brain than Schroeder.

A round ricocheted off the pavement inches from Donovan's face. He scooted closer to the highway center. Where did that come from?

"What happened?"

"I almost got my head blown off!" Donovan caught his breath, and his heart froze. The round that almost killed him had bounced off the pavement and struck a barrier along the opposite side of the highway. It had come directly from the west. But Kelly had faced

north and had been shot above her right eye. Donovan stared at the half of Kelly's head still somewhat recognizable: Her left ear under matted, bloodied hair . . . the bite on her neck he had not left.

Kelly had been shot above her right eye.

Donovan's heart skipped as his eyes followed the trajectory of the latest sniper round, from the pavement inches from his face to the barrier across the highway.

Kelly had been shot over— The trajectories made no sense.

Unless there are two snipers.

Donovan held his breath as the realization hit him. They had zero chance of surviving a coordinated sniper attack.

So why hadn't Schroeder been shot in the growing light? The shack had been dark. The lights were off. The sniper teams couldn't see into the shack before the sunrise.

Schroeder squinted in the sunlight now streaming into the shack through the window as the sun rose. He shielded his eyes with his palm.

Should I warn him?

Schroeder dropped and the wall behind him splintered where the round smashed through the plywood. His mouth opened in a silent scream as he slumped to his side.

Donovan flipped around so he faced the edge of the road. He didn't want his face in Kelly's blood. The barriers lining the western side of the road had a break in them through which he could see the well where the kids played. *How could they be oblivious to the gunfire?* Maybe gunfire was such a normal part of life for them that they didn't even hear it anymore. He was about to look through binoculars at the children when he caught a bright, brief flash of light on the desert floor.

Sunlight reflection off a sniper's scope.

This one couldn't have killed Schroeder. It was the sniper who had tried to flush him out.

The flash reappeared.

I'm in his line of sight. Donovan slid along the barrier far enough that the flash wouldn't be visible. He reached into a cargo pocket for his foldout map. The well was about seven hundred meters away. Donovan had no idea where the other sniper hid along the highway, but at least he had a good location for the one to the west. He traced his finger on the map along an invisible line between his position and the well. The sniper was somewhere along that line.

He closed his eyes and tried to visualize where along that line he had seen the sniper. The desert floor provided no frame of reference for judging that distance, and Donovan wouldn't risk another look.

Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone.

He fumbled with the handheld radio, switched the radio channel to the artillery frequency.

"Bulldog Two-Zero, Rock Two-Five, immediate suppression, direction four nine hundred, distance seven hundred, over."

The Fire Direction Center replied, "Immediate suppression, direction four nine hundred, distance seven hundred, out."

He transmitted his own location. The FDC repeated it and said, "Authenticate *Romeo Oscar*, over."

Donovan pulled a card stuffed into his notebook that had the camp artillery unit's *Call For Fire* instructions and a list of daily authentication words. Today's was *HARMONIZES*.

What letter would be between R and O?

"I authenticate *Mike*, out."

The FDC would need a moment to compute the data. Another round ricocheted with a puff of asphalt. The sniper must still be trying to flush him out into the open.

The radio beeped as a new voice announced: "Rock Two-Five, this is Bulldog Two-Six, target is restricted due to residential proximity and collateral damage potential."

Donovan expected that response, but not from the young lieutenant running the FDC. “Acknowledged. I have visual confirmation of target along reported azimuth—”

“Two-Five, render first aid and standby for QRF—”

Donovan cut him off. “Negative. Two already down at my location, and I am under active suppressive sniper fire from that target, break.” He squinted at the map and conducted a quick estimate, what he sometimes called a Mark-1 eyeball of location proximities. “Target is outside *danger close* range to myself and residential population.”

Donovan held his breath again.

Silence.

He shivered. Eerie, how a desert saturated with death could fall into such an unearthly silence.

Donovan ticked off the seconds on his fingers, and knew he pushed the limits of the truth with that last transmission. *Danger close* was within six hundred meters of the impact, and the well sat at just outside that range to both the guard shack and the village. He imagined the Fire Direction Officer, a young officer with no time outside the wire, arguing over the merits of this request with his chain of command.

The radio beeped as a *boom* echoed from the south. “Shot, over.”

A second *boom* echoed.

“Splash, over,” the FDC said. The first round was five seconds out from its target. One would detonate on impact and the other was timed for an airburst.

Donovan reached for the binoculars when the rounds impacted. He shifted to where he could see through the barriers. The rounds exploded with simultaneous precision over and upon target. A cloud of dust and smoke plumed around the well and obscured his view.

The radio on the desk in the shack beeped. “Rock Two-Five, this is Kilo Three-Five, en route to your location.”

Here comes the QRF, aroused from restful sleep or their video games, to save the day.

It's about time . . .

Donovan caught movement midway to the well. The sniper sprinted for the town. *Too bad I can't level that goddamn place.*

He switched back to the guard channel and said, "Sniper routed, visible due west."

The QRF machine gun's rhythmic cadence carried from behind the shack. The turret gunner must be having a blast. Donovan had been a machine gunner on convoys before and relished the memories of mowing down enemy targets. At that range the sniper was impossible to miss. Donovan raised his binoculars again and scanned the well. Dust and smoke clung to the desert floor and drifted north with a gentle southern breeze that he didn't feel.

The machine gun went silent.

Donovan reported, "Second sniper target along highway to the north of my location. Be advised—exact location unknown."

Where are those kids? He wanted some to survive and suffer. Two soldiers were dead. Those kids promised to warn of impending attacks. They would pay for their lies.

Three vehicles roared past from the south. The machine gun fired again.

Donovan pushed himself off the ground and sat on the barrier. Dust exploded from the desert floor to the north as the machine gun peppered the area. The local national from earlier ran into the open desert but fell forward when the gunner fired.

Donovan switched to the artillery channel and said, "End mission, no casualties, over."

So that was it. He faced the well and raised his binoculars. A crowd ran from the town, parents frantic for their dead children, parents paying for their idiocy for letting their children play outside

in a war zone, parents paying for the broken promise to warn the camp of any impending attacks.

Once this was all over, he looked forward to a nice long morning nap. *I still need to talk to that investigator.* Donovan sighed. *I had told them the truth. What more could they want to know?*

A flash of sunlight reflected off the desert floor to the northwest.

Donovan's heart froze. That LN was not the second sniper. He slid off the barrier as a round struck him just below his throat. He stumbled and fell back on Kelly. Blood spurted from his neck. Air gurgled through blood when he tried to scream. The QRF pulled up and a medic jumped out of the closest vehicle.

Donovan pressed his hands to the wound, unable to draw breath, choking on blood, squirming, desperate for air, but then the pain faded and his vision dimmed, and he couldn't help but feel satisfaction at the beauty of this death, irony at the lauds he would receive for sacrificing his life for a good that was greater than even himself.

Donovan could live with that.

Fred Cutter is a retired U.S. Army officer now living in Fayetteville, North Carolina with his wife and daughter. His writings have been published in a variety of genres, from Christian fiction to literary fiction. He also served as dramaturg and developmental editor for the recent production of Box Step, a play produced by Methodist University.

Carnival Duck

By W.J. Lapham

How fragile is life, that a few drops of a clear liquid can end it? Or a tiny pill; a sprinkle of thin, white dust, cooked. Or a single, well-aimed, spinning bullet. We cling to life as we would a life preserver in deep water. Fear of death propels every decision we make.

I've seen my brother tormented in a hospital bed just to squeeze out a few more days of life. For a few minutes more. I've wondered, why him? I was there to see the urn set in a cold hole. I've seen the grave marker with his dates. Here he began; there he ended, tubes bringing him oxygen. He was scared. I was scared for him.

It doesn't work to press one's body into the side of a bare mountain to hide from incoming rounds coming from the other side of the valley. The shooter can still see his target, camouflage uniform or not. It is bad to be a target for a shooter you can't see.

A bullet struck a rock near my face and a piece of it lodged in my cheekbone. Non-dominant eye, fortunately. Got lucky there. Fragments lodged in my cornea; they hurt worse than the punch in the cheek. Both eyes filled with tears. The medic would have come,

so I didn't call him. I continued along the trail, running. The shooter might've hit me in the open. Luck does play a role. I don't care what anybody says about that shit.

The trail was at the bottom of a pool of clear water. To my left was a mountain. I only wish I could have chopped it down with the edge of my hand, like Jimi sang. To my right was a thousand-foot rock'n'roll tumble. War is a matter of probabilities. Figuring the odds, assessing the risks, taking chances. The stakes are as high as they can be.

I imagine a bulletproof bubble around me. I think it's always going to be the other guy who is going to get hit, even buddies. Never me. Before the first shot in a duel, it's always the other guy who is going to die no matter which guy is thinking it.

I reached a tree and stopped running. It was one of those scrawny ironwood trees that stick out from the sides of mountains, Wile E. Coyote style. Fucking thing was probably born when Jesus roamed the earth. Old. I wasn't fooling my adversary. He had been following my progress. I had heard the ricochets, like in the movies. I wasn't up against some highly trained sniper team, nor was I protected against ill fortune. But the ironwood did provide a shred of confidence. It increased my chances of survival. My brain distorted time and space.

The tree absorbed a round. I could feel the thing shudder. I said sorry and thanks.

I scanned the other side with my scope. Good scope, made in Wixom, Michigan. I wasn't likely to find the guy unless he moved or fired a shot. He fired and I ducked after the round flew high. The Taliban gave kids five bucks and an AK and sent them over the ridge to harass us. We usually killed the kids. Had to. One of them could get lucky if he got enough practice.

This kid was an awful shot, but I was not comfortable with his learning curve. From the kneeling position I took aim in his vicinity

and waited for his next shot. When it came, I took its bearing and squeezed off a round at him.

My right arm sticks out when I shoot. His shot shattered my elbow. I took off running before I assessed my shot. If he was dead he wouldn't shoot anymore; if not, I still needed help. It's hard to bandage an elbow alone. I zipped a tourniquet on my arm to stop the bleeding. Nothing I could do for the exposed bones. It felt like somebody had taken a sledgehammer to it. I left my spot and scrambled uphill. Nobody runs uphill when they're hurt. I felt like a carnival duck in a shooting gallery. I had to get over the ridge.

More rocks exploded around me, more shots rang out. The kid was alive and shooting. Guys ask for God's help at times like this. I hope for some stupid luck. Not just dumb luck, stupid luck. A sharpshooter would have a hard time hitting me from that distance while I was moving. The kid was not a sharpshooter. If he hit me again, well, fuck, who wants to think about that. I scrambled, driving my feet like at football practice. Get out of my way—end zone.

Angry bees approach by stealth. I don't worry about the ones I can see. Their focus is not on me. Same with bullets.

I can manage fear. Nothing to it.

William Lapham is a thirty-year veteran of the U.S. Navy submarine service. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, Plainfield, VT, which he attended on the GI Bill Yellow Ribbon program. He teaches freshman composition at Lansing Community College and Davenport University.

Poetry.

Father, Found

Caroline Bock

He's as skinny as I ever saw him
in that black and white photograph
 Shirtless against a handwritten sign
 B's Chicken Farm, Korea Division
On a hill that never had a name or
he was never informed of the designation
 Running radio wire, not so
 different than chicken wire except
 for the guns and dysentery and
 frost biting bitter and black-hearted
Back home, he worked his family's Jersey farm
he knew how vicious
the chicks could be
ready to pluck one another's eyes out
for an extra spike of grain

Caroline Bock is the author of the critically acclaimed young adult novels Before My Eyes (St. Martin's Press, 2014) and Lie (St. Martin's Press, 2011). Her poetry has appeared in Ploughshares and Prometheus, and she is currently at work at another novel, which opens in Italy during World War II. Her father and mother were Army veterans.

What I Miss

Robert Sanders

I miss the empty places
With nothing in between

The ghost haunted ruins
Of forgotten eastern kings

Where you see the goats atremble
As they hop along the cliff

And the lizards scamper madly
For the shade beneath its lip

I miss the dusty open places
Where the rocks are smokin' hot

The sun glares off the sand
That's painful bright all day

The summers are so hot
You're too dried out to piss

And the winter nights so cold
It freezes when you spit

When you're gone and half forgotten
Your wife forgot your name

You worry if it'll hurt when
You finally make it home

Don't whine, don't cry
Just soldier on

Words forgot, laughs forgot
There's nothing but the job.

Robert Sanders is a retired Marine with four combat tours in the Middle East. He grew up in the Middle East and now lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. He currently works as a meat cutter.

Collateral Damage

John Rodriguez

The best years of my life
were given away wholesale
as I struggled along, your wife

and companion, but I couldn't unveil
what demons were in your heart—
hidden away like the holy grail.

Did you think I couldn't hack it? Would depart
if I knew the things you'd done
or seen? That whenever I looked at you I'd start

to picture you with your gun
hunting men in those distant hills?
I can't believe killing became a fun

adrenaline rush of you racking up kills.
It's not that but the things you didn't say
(*I love you*) that really give me the chills.

I'm living with a stranger, your thoughts stay
in your valley nursing a grudge I can't cut through.
I won't let you drag me down, acting this way.

I know you don't think this is true,
but this decision is a knife —
that kills me as much as it hurts you.

John Rodriguez is an infantry officer in the United States Army. He served on active duty from 2006 to 2012 and currently serves in the Maryland National Guard. John served in Afghanistan as a rifle platoon leader and rifle company executive officer in Kunar Province from 2008 to 2009.

Interview.

A Few Minutes with Phil Klay

Phil Klay's collection of short stories *Redeployment* won the National Book Award for fiction in 2014. Klay was a Marine officer and served in Iraq in 2007-2008. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College and received an MFA from Hunter College. Veterans Writing Project Director Ron Capps interviewed Phil for *O-Dark-Thirty*.

O-Dark-Thirty: *You served as a Marine officer after graduating from Dartmouth. Were there many Ivy League grads in your OCS (Officer Candidate School) or TBS (The Basic School) classes?*

Phil Klay: There were a few Ivy Leaguers there. When I graduated from Dartmouth, I was commissioned into the Marine Corps alongside two other students. I think it's not just that going into the military is an oddity at an Ivy League school so much as it is an oddity in America in general. It's a relatively small, volunteer military, and that has a variety of consequences in terms of the civilian-military relationship.

ODT: *Other than the topics you chose to write about in **Redeployment**, did your military experience influence your writing or your choice to write?*

PK: I always wrote. I think what my military experience did was give me a subject that I felt was desperately important to get right, important enough that I'd have to set aside my ego and be ruthless with my own work. I was no longer just writing stories to please myself. I felt like there was something desperately important to communicate, and so I wrote in a kind of terror, with this imaginary line of veterans waiting beyond the door to kick my ass if I screwed it up.

ODT: *You have spoken eloquently about the importance of an expanded and ongoing discussion among veterans and civilians (non-veterans) regarding war and the consequences of war. You said, "war is too strange to process alone." Care to expand on that?*

PK: Personally, I don't ever feel like I've truly understood something until I've talked it out, had my assumptions challenged, and worked an issue over with other people. I think that process needs to happen on an interpersonal level, and it has to happen in society as well. This goes back to the issue of the small, all-volunteer military. If we, as citizens, want to take our responsibilities seriously, we need to talk about the wars that have been fought on our behalf. We need to engage in the work of trying to understand what we've done and what that means. And we need a lot of voices in the room.

RC: *You chose a collection of short stories as your first major work. Why?*

PK: Short stories were, for me, the best way to express what I wanted to about the wars. I wanted a group of voices telling different stories,

I wanted characters who might disagree with each other about what their war meant, and I wanted stories of war that you don't usually see. That seemed a more fitting approach to the Iraq War, for me, than one unified narrative.

ODT: *You wrote in many different voices but generally hewed close to a single topic. Was that something you decided on early in the project, or something that became evident as the work progressed, or something else?*

PK: I was trying to ask myself questions about the war from a lot of different angles. For example, the subject of killing. The narrator of the first story has a very different relationship to the act of killing than does the narrator of "After Action Report," who agrees to take credit for a shooting done by a friend, or the narrator of "Ten Klinks South," who is part of an artillery unit that never gets a chance to even see the people they were shooting at.

ODT: *There seems to be quite a literary scene among veterans in New York City these days: you, Matt Gallagher, the team over at Words After War, Maurice DeCaul, so many others. It looks a bit like the end of the 1940s through the early 1960s, when all the World War II and Korean War era vets, like Charles Portis, Bill Zinsser, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, and Gay Talese were all in New York. What is it about New York City—I mean you grew up there, right? But still . . .*

PK: Yes, it's really incredible. Well, there has been a lot of support for veterans in this city. There's a variety of organizations, like NYU's Veteran's Writer's Workshop, Words After War, Voices from War, and so on, that are dedicated to developing a community of people writing about conflict.

ODT: *2014 was quite a year for you: publication of *Redeployment*, a National Book Award, the John Leonard prize. What are you working on now?*

PK: I've got a couple things I'm working on, but I'm keeping them close to the vest for now. We'll see how they turn out.

###

Acknowledgements

*O-Dark-Thirty is supported by the Boeing Company
and the National Endowment for the Arts,
which have partnered to support arts outreach
to military communities since 2004.
Previously, Boeing supported the NEA's
Operation Homecoming,
a creative writing program for
U.S. troops and their families.*



Our supporters include

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Production support provided by

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