

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

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On the cover:

“It was the second morning of a three day clearing operation on an island in the Tigris River not far from Bayji, Iraq, in November 2005. I was embedded with A CO. 1/187 Infantry, the 'Rakkasans.' I saw Willie, Doc and Tim in that field to my right, peeled off one frame of black-and-white film and ended up with this. ”

Bill Putnam enlisted in the Army in 1995 and served as a Patriot Missile Crewman and a public affairs specialist, deploying to Saudi Arabia, Kosovo, and Iraq. He left the Army in 2005 and began his freelance career by returning to Iraq for another nine months. His work has been published in newspapers and magazines around the world, appeared in an Oscar-nominated documentary; there have been three solo exhibitions of his war photography.

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Editor's Note

We're going to press with this edition of *O-Dark-Thirty* just a few days before the 70th Anniversary of the D-Day landings. Our World War II veterans are in their nineties now. We're losing them at a rate of nearly 1000 per day.

So we'd like to dedicate this edition of *O-Dark-Thirty* to the veterans of World War II. Tom Brokaw called them The Greatest Generation; they fought what Studs Terkel called The Good War. I'm sure they're too modest to believe they were the greatest, and I'm pretty sure none of them thought that war was good—I suspect that like every generation they hated it and what it did to them, their friends, and their families.

But here's to them, and their families, and the Gold Star families left behind.

As General Eisenhower said in his D-Day message to the troops, "The hopes and prayers of liberty loving people everywhere march with you." We can only add to that our eternal gratitude for your strength, integrity, and courage.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

Things I Learned During the War

By Matt Young

How to Live in the Third Person

This recruit is not special. He is like all other recruits. He will wake at the same time as other recruits, he will address other recruits by “Recruit [insert last name],” he will address Drill Instructors as, “Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name].” If a Drill Instructor is not available and he has needs to speak with one, he will stand at arms length from the hatch to the Senior Drill Instructor’s office, he will slap the two-inch-thick piece of raw pine nailed next to the door as hard as the nerve endings in his palm will allow, and he will announce, in a loud boisterous manner, “Recruit [insert last name] requests permission to speak with Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name], he will then wait at the position of attention until the Drill Instructor presents himself. This recruit will eat at the same time other recruits eat, piss when they piss, shit when they shit, run when they run, sweat when they sweat, shower when they shower.

He will lay awake in his rack at night at the position of attention, as he’s been trained. He will stare out the squad bay

window with the other recruits and watch the lights across the bay at the San Diego International Airport. He will see planes take off and land and think, like all the other recruits, that it might be easy to leave the squad bay late at night, and then sneak across the Recruit Depot and somehow make it to the airport where some valiant citizen will pay for a plane ticket to Canada. He thinks these thoughts until Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name] enters the squad bay and insults the recruit on duty's mother, and then tells him to shut off the lights. One hundred eyelids close in unison.

When he wakes at night, his bladder straining against his ever-receding waistline, this recruit must remember to do a set of no less than five pull-ups at the bars next to the entry of the head before entering and when leaving. This recruit's actions are to be monitored and documented by the recruit on duty that hour. This recruit can still make decisions of his own. For instance, he decides to multitask and use the shitters instead of just the urinal. The shitters do not have doors, but they have partitions, unlike most other places on the Depot. The squad bay shitters are only to be utilized at night, if this recruit or any other recruit is caught defecating in the shitters during daylight hours the punishment is the quarterdeck.

No recruits know what happens if a recruit is caught masturbating in the shitters. This recruit, nor any other recruit has been able to get a hard on since coming to the Depot. The imagined quarterdeck punishment makes these recruits ill and is enough to keep them impotent for thirteen weeks.

The quarterdeck is at once this recruit's friend and worst enemy. In the first weeks of living in the squad bay this recruit tried to avoid the quarterdeck, he refused to stare for too long at the ten by twenty square of deep ocean green linoleum, didn't even like to walk on it. The linoleum covering the floor of the rest of the

squad bay is black. This recruit believed, and to some extent still does believe, that the discoloration of the linoleum is not intentional. He believes the discoloration is caused by the countless gallons of sweat, blood, vomit, tears, snot, and bile absorbed from the bodies of past recruits. But the quarterdeck has also made this, and these, recruits strong. Time spent on the quarterdeck is referred to as “a slaying” by these recruits. Push-ups, right now; side straddle hops, right now; mountain climbers, right now; no, push-ups, right goddamned now; steam engines, right now; flutter-kicks, right now; side straddle hops, right goddamned now. These recruits have heard rumors; Drill Instructors are not to utilize the quarterdeck for more than five minutes at a time. The Drill Instructors seem immune to this mandate, either that, or time on the quarterdeck moves slower than actual time.

Later, digging a fighting hole into the side of a hill overlooking a main supply route in some desert country in one hundred twenty degree heat, this recruit will come to dream of those times on the quarterdeck, he will long for them. He’ll think back and he’ll wish he were there as Drill Instructor [insert rank and last name] spits wintergreen flavored chewing tobacco into this recruit’s face screaming, “Faster. Faster, right now. Faster, right goddamned now.”

*How to Survive for an Unreasonably Long Period of Time
Without Sleep While Living Out of a Patrol Base
in the Marshlands*

Masturbation is a means of survival. I mean it. Really. Jerking off has saved countless lives throughout countless wars. Probably all the way back during the Norman invasion of England in 1066 there were peasant soldiers manning the ramparts whacking away trying to stay awake during the night watch to sound the alarm

in case of raiders. Probably before that. In fact, I bet the reason the Trojan Horse worked at all was because some asshole sergeant in Troy's army put a eunuch on the wall to keep guard. He probably fell asleep because of course he couldn't flog the dolphin and boom, Troy's burned to the ground.

Maybe not, but I like to think so.

My grandfather wasn't in World War II. So he never talked about it when he was alive. But I bet if he had been there in the shit and I could ask him now how he stayed awake in the fighting holes on Peleliu he wouldn't tell me it was because he was so scared of dying he couldn't sleep. Imagine yourself in a fighting hole, in the complete dark of a tiny coral island in the middle of the Pacific, no food or freshwater for days, dysentery pooling in your grenade sump, waiting for the Japanese to make a banzai charge. Exhaustion sets in. Sleep becomes more alluring than the fear of death.

"Maybe I'll just close my eyes for a minute, just rest them," you think. Muscles soften. You can feel lashes colliding as your lids close. Breath comes easier. And then, just like that, you're stabbed in the gut with a goddamn samurai sword. So, no, fuck that. It wasn't fear keeping those boys alive, it was that they were looking out through the darkness thinking of Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth and whoever else, while they bopped the weasel.

They may have been the greatest generation, but when they got home don't forget they did so much fucking they caused a population boom that's had unparalleled worldwide socioeconomic effects.

So things don't change that much through the generations. I mean, it's not like I'm some sex-crazed maniac jerking off to inkblots that look like my mother. You try staying awake for fifty-six hours at a time. What does that do to a person? Watch lasts for hours. No longer than eight but never less than two, and then

you're out on patrol, then you're back on watch, and then you've got to find time to eat and whatnot, and then you're back on patrol. It helps if there are more new joins in the platoon, spreads out the workload. If not, well, you're pretty much fucked. The salts don't stand watch because they've done their time, so it falls on the new joins, the boots. How do they expect me to stay awake?

So here I stand, on top of a house commandeered from a woman and her kids or whoever else, behind a shit and clay wall that comes to chest height that probably couldn't stop a shot fired from a bb gun, my right eye full darkness and my left eye full of green from a single lens night vision goggle mounted to my helmet, staring out at the main road and fallow fields that surround us, fly undone, going to town on myself. Because I know the second I fall asleep that Trojan Horse will appear out of nowhere, and I'll be the asshole who goes down in history for letting it happen. I only have to make it until my watch is up.

How to Check for Internal Bleeding

First there is noise, but not noise like construction going on outside of my window noise. It is all-around noise. Noise that feels at once everywhere, and nowhere. Maybe I'm imagining it. It could be a dream, I think. Like one of the ones that feels like falling and then I wake up at a desk or a table or in my bed, jolting so hard the entire world notices. And it's slow because like I've learned, it's the shitty things that last longest.

There's the dust and dirt too, little particles hitting my face, so my eyes are closed, but not like they're closed in the daytime, when light shines through the thin membrane of my eyelids and gives the dark an orange rose tint. It's pitch behind my eyelids. That's impossible, I think, or maybe it is possible and I'm actually

asleep and that noise is the jolt that's going to wake me up and I'll be back at the patrol base, maybe having fallen out of bed. That doesn't seem so bad.

There's this feeling of weightlessness, too like being inside the Gravitron I used to ride at the Fireman's Carnival during the summers when I was a kid. But it isn't a dream and the noise isn't part of the jolt that's going to wake me up and I'm weightless not because I'm riding the Gravitron with my friends, but because our Humvee is flipping upside down. In fact, it's rolling. Sixteen thousand pounds of ammunition and engine components and equipment and up-armored steel and people, rolling and flipping down a cracked and decaying road in the southern desert outside Al Fallujah.

A blur of things, and then I wake up at the aid station, a large one-room tent, partitioned by plywood and paper curtains, I lay on a gurney under a starchy sheet while Navy doctors cut off my clothes and my boots. I try to tell them to stop, that those are my favorite pair of boots, but they cut them anyway.

There's air conditioning. I'm cold; I haven't been cold in months. It feels unnatural, like how people must've felt the first time they saw electric light. My back hurts, my right arm hurts, my head hurts, my right leg hurts. A male nurse asks me questions, and pushes different places on my belly.

"What's your name? What happened? Where are you? Do you feel nauseous? Did you throw up?"

I answer: Matt Young. I don't know. Iraq. Yes. Yes.

I tell him to turn off the AC. I'm cold. He jams an IV into my left arm—the one that didn't hurt—and walks away.

McKay, my vehicle commander is the only other person from my truck in the room with me. He's on a similar cot to my right. A female nurse pushes on his abdomen, and asks the same

questions my nurse asked me. McKay smiles at her, says something I can't hear, the nurse laughs. I watch his hand sneak behind her back and pinch the middle of her left buttock. She swats him away, laughs again, and leaves.

"Goddamn, Young," he says. "We picked the wrong job."

He tells me Owens and Keller got medevac'd elsewhere: Owens to surgical for brain scans, and Keller to Germany. "He won't be coming back," McKay says.

We lay there in silence for a few minutes, and I let those words sink in, wondering what they mean. My head's swimming, the queasy feeling I got before I passed out is coming back, my teeth start to chatter. I need to call home, I think.

"They're going to have to check us for internal bleeding," McKay says. "Hope you've washed your ass recently." He laughs a high-pitched wheezy laugh, like there's a dog toy stuck in his throat.

"What?"

"It's the easiest way for them to see if you're scrambled up inside. Soft tissue's what usually gets perforated, and since we were sitting on our asses and a fractured tailbone's hard to diagnose, it's just quicker than waiting to see if you shit blood," he says. "It ain't so bad. Hasn't your girl ever snuck one by you? Hell, I always act like I don't like it, but she knows I do."

McKay keeps talking about anal stimulation during sex. I hear him, nod and laugh at the right times, but I'm just watching the drip from the IV. I can feel the saline flowing into my vein, it's cold like the rest of the room, it's taking the heat right out of me. The queasy feeling comes in waves. Before I passed out I remember holding Keller's head between my knees trying to stabilize his cervical vertebrae. Our corpsman had taught us that before deployment. I remember most everyone made some sort of joke about their testicles being in close proximity to their partners' mouths. We'd

all laughed. Keller had been thrashing on the road when we'd found him ten meters from the Humvee. He'd been thrown out the gunner's turret, smashed his face on the spades of the fifty cal. Half his forehead was hanging down over his left eye, I could see the whiteness of his skull. He kept hitting himself in the face, screaming, trying to put words together that didn't make sense. So I put my knees on either side of his head and McKay held his arms down. I tried to soak some of the blood off his face, take care of the cuts and scrapes, tried to do the first-aid I'd been trained to do. When I touched his face, it felt crunchy, the skin dented in and stayed that way, like a Rice Krispie treat. That's when I vomited and passed out.

There are footsteps. The male and female nurses are back.

McKay starts to yell about how they better not put anything in his asshole. They look confused, they tell us we're free to go, they bring us new clothes and boots. The clothes are so clean, they don't fit quite right, there are no salt lines or bloodstains, no dust, no mud from fallow fields cakes the knees of the trousers. Like the past months have been erased somehow. I ask for my old clothes. They tell me they've already been burned. McKay asks the woman for two cigarettes, when she turns, he again pinches her butt cheek. She doesn't look back.

"Goddamn," he says. "We're in the wrong fucking job."

How to Be a Real Boy

Kee your hair long. If there's anything you've learned, it's to keep your hair long. It's the differentiating factor between the gung-ho brainwashed eighteen-year-old you were when you joined and the civilian you desperately want to be. It's the thing people notice first, the thing that doesn't fit in with certain types of clothing (mainly anything not a uniform). People peg you immediately.

They look at you and say, “Jarhead.” So you keep it long. You get a fingernail fade, if you’d been enlisted two years later the style would actually be in vogue, the 1920s Dust Bowl cut. You don’t shave on the weekends; two-day stubble does wonders. No one seems to give you a second look by Sunday evening. You drive to Irvine or even farther north to go to bars, try to dissociate with everything you’ve known for the past four years.

But it’s hard to fight, you’re not a civilian, and years from now when you’ve been out and you’re married and you’re in grad school and you’re trying to forget those times you chugged whiskey and fought and were shot at and lived in a hole and hated life and hated everyone and hated yourself and shot at mongrel dogs and screwed anything that moved and smoked two packs a day and hazed new joins and ran until you threw up because you were still drunk from the night before and made your family cry you’ll realize that you’ll never be a civilian. You’re destined to be some half-breed, like those mongrels you used to shoot in the desert.

And so it’s hard to come home.

Sometimes you find yourself giving up and drinking at the bars outside of base. You go with your platoon mates. You go and talk about fucking and fighting and shooting and drinking. You drink and drink until it feels like you’re downing in all that booze. Until it feels like your liver is pickled and you spew your guts into a urinal because you can’t find the toilet in the bathroom.

Then the bouncer tries to throw you out but one of your mates blindsides him in the jaw and then the bar is a wild rumpus. There should be Benny Hill music playing on the juke. There’s screaming and yelling and punching and kicking and you see the bouncer who tried to haul you out lying on the floor, groaning, trying to get back on his feet. Another of your mates runs over and field goals him right in the ribs, and you hear the bones crack, and

buddy's still kicking, slam dancing into the guy's gut and you just watch until someone else broadsides him and then they're tussling on the ground and you look around and there's an abandoned beer and your mouth is desert dry and tastes like vomit and so you drink it, and then you're wandering around drinking abandoned beers until there are sirens in the distance.

It's a long walk to base and the lot of you are laughing and trying to show swollen faces to one another in the dark. There's a pool inside the gate, maybe another half mile down the road, it's all lit bright blue and undulating shadows in the complete seaside desert darkness, just for you.

You're naked, climbing a wooden ladder to the top of a forty-foot-high platform used to simulate water entry from helicopters. The platform is covered in moldy stamped down Astroturf and squeaks and slides under the balls of your feet. The others are in the water, bobbing, floating on their backs, yelling at you through the dark.

Jump, they say. They start to drunkenly sing running cadence, their voices echoing off the wet concrete surrounding the pool.

And you do it. You jump into nothing, eyes shut, wind whirring over tiny hairs on your body, you fall for what seems like forever, fall into nothing. Just when you think you can sense the water rushing toward you and the voices of your buddies growing louder you keep falling. You've been falling so long you don't want to open your eyes for fear you'll find yourself floating in space, in a vacuum, nowhere to go, no way to change course. So, you just fall, and you keep falling, and hope that maybe sometime you'll land and it won't be hard and your friends will be there and you'll walk home wet feet squelching in your socks, teeth chattering against the cool coastal night and drink a beer and fall asleep. And so you will time to speed up; pray yell beg threaten bargain. But time chooses when it will and won't move for you, you know that. Sometimes you're just stuck jerking off until the next mission.

Matt Young writes short fiction and non-fiction. His work can be found in The Gold Man Review and Midwestern Gothic. While he calls Oregon home, he currently resides in Oxford, Ohio, with his wife, an overly energetic dog, and a runty cat. Matt is pursuing his MA in Creative Writing at Miami University.

Sayyed's Poem

By Jim Enderle

I stare at what seems like Iraq's only light bulb hanging directly over our huddled convoy team, its light shining onto our convoy commander unfolding maps on a humvee's hood, detailing the area of the night's mission. As the chart reveals—with few landmarks, markers, or highlights—there is little to love about this God-forsaken country. While we plan and wait, everything starts brightly, invariably dwindling to numerous shades of gray before being swallowed mercilessly by midnight darkness. At some point in my life I had an unquenchable desire to travel the world, but now, before this bleak 300-mile road to Baghdad, all I'm thinking about is camel spiders, scorpions, and IEDs.

The convoy weaves slowly along the maze-like road immediately outside the base and our new convoy interpreter, Sayyed, asks about my family, a topic I recently have totally avoided. What can him and I talk about, anyway? Sayyed mentions growing up in the marshlands of southern Iraq, and the only swamp I'd ever seen was when Chicago sewers clogged with leaves and water flooded over the curb during a heavy rain.

Somehow there is meditative solace in looking out of the humvee through the thick rear window glass, scouring the horizon for enemy threats. But Sayyed's questions are getting in the way of that focus. Beneath our body armor, our tan camouflaged uniforms are drenched, and their weight seems to press us into the hard metal seats. We desperately shift in the hopeless quest to find a comfortable position, which is much more important to me than this conversation. Since muttering single-syllable answers aren't deterring Sayyed, I provide a short description of my family.

"A wife and two sons. They're 14 and 12."

Our 22-man team, already on edge with rumors of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) had awaited the previous night's convoy as if it had been shuffling slowly toward us in the darkness. Few people understand the daunting amount of collaboration and teamwork it takes to make such a mission happen. Even the most meticulous planning only takes the night from "dangerous" to "less dangerous," creeping only a few increments toward the "safe" drives through the Connecticut countryside I remember more fondly every day. A slow-moving interpreter added to the mix made it all the more annoying; we're already behind schedule.

One hour into the convoy, the topic turns from questions about family to romance and what I see as women's role in American society, appearing to wait for tales of uninhibited American decadence. It was an odd question, even perverse. Cynically, I believe if my answer relates that I'm either drinking, taking drugs, or having an orgy, the conversation will end, and I resented Sayyed's supposed image of the average American. Yet another thought struck me—my own negative assumptions were at the root of anything from misunderstanding to combat.

"My cousin once arranged a double-date mostly because I had access to a car. The entire day was impromptu and fun with the girls wound up scoring tickets to a Madonna concert that night. After-

wards, they wanted to check into a motel for the night.” I say, smiling at the memory but still looking out the window into the darkness.

“So you spent the night with this woman you just met?” asked Sayyed as if it were a foregone conclusion.

“No, she wanted to be driven home so that’s what I did. On the way, she fell asleep and her head rested on my shoulder. I drove so stiffly that I thought my back muscles would spasm out of the fear I’d awaken her. I cherished that moment in a way I couldn’t describe to you.”

I felt a slight sense of accomplishment. A woman’s trust, it would occur to me later, is more difficult than to earn than her love. I knew this story had come to mind because I believed this dating experience was seemingly as impossible in Iraq as a water view. Turnabout is fair play and I asked about the role of women in present-day Iraq.

“Jim, I believe you’re asking me this because of the disparity you see between the treatments of women in our countries.” Sayyed said with an edge. Apparently he possessed the same passion for his beliefs. I could see his emphatic hand movements in my peripheral vision. “The 1970 Iraqi constitution gave women equity and liberty unmatched and more progressive than any in the Muslim world. You’ve read *Romeo and Juliet* while I read *Leila and Majnun* in Iraq. Married men and women in their households are precisely the same as anywhere else in the world. No difference. We love our wives in the same way, do you think this is true?” This is the conversation Sayyed seeks perhaps because of the implied generalization of my questions. As a former college professor he responds on an emotional, visceral level.

“This is what makes me angry Jim,” Sayyed continued “if Americans are so enlightened, why have women only been granted the right to vote in your country since 1921? Do you know statistics estimate that one in three women in your country are victims

of sexual assault or domestic violence? And I know that an equal number of women don't report their crimes—is this because you've given them the perfect system through which to remain safe? Who writes the rules that these women feel further injured? It sounds like your male-dominated culture would rather tell women they aren't worth the trouble.”

“We certainly have a long way to go. You have great points, Sayyed, but who would allow such statistics to be released in Iraq? I have to ask whether the percentages of women not reporting mistreatment in Iraq is so much higher. I mean, how dare she challenge or embarrass the man of the family outside the walls of her home?”

“It is not what you might think. We are not afraid of equal treatment of women in Iraq. Conservative yes, but progressive for our societies. But America imposes her will on others like a recovering addict would tell his friends with addictions to ‘just say no.’ Your government looks across the ocean at us through binoculars and believe your culture, as flawed as ours, is our answer. We don't believe this blindly because we look at you through the telescope of Iraqis who live in America. But this is where your problems are—you forget how valued humility is.”

Like an electrical device suddenly unplugged, Sayyed's head drops in prayer as we pass Suq Ash Shuyukh, to his beliefs, the most mournful patch of land on Earth. Almost four months earlier, a young woman had been murdered and left on the side of the road outside the town in an honor killing, an act reserved for those bringing shame upon their family. The tribal belief was that without proper cleansing and burial, the young woman would appear dirty and shamed through her judgment and carry her crime throughout her afterlife. In this place, though, without a drop of rain in four months, a dark bloodstain remains. We both sense it, but we cannot see it.

The following day, Sayyed hands me this poem handwritten from memory, and without saying a word turns and walks back to his tent.

*“When I love, I feel that I am the king of time
I possess the earth and everything on it and ride
into the sun upon my horse.
When I love, I become liquid light invisible to the eye
and the poems in my notebooks become fields of mimosa
and poppy.
When I love, the water gushes from my fingers
and grass grows on my tongue.
When I love, I become time outside all time.
When I love a woman all the trees run barefoot
toward me.”*

I wonder if Americans had witnessed video of the young woman’s execution at the hands of family, friends, and neighbors, and how they would have felt about it. My reaction, growing up near Chicago’s Wrigley Field, is the same as Sayyed’s. There is no nationalism in grief. I understand Sayyed’s point. If all human beings can share grief, we can share love—this possibility brings hope. Maybe the message of the young woman’s life, extinguished much too soon, can be a catalyst to closing the divide among a world mourning her loss.

Jim Enderle is a retired Navy Chief Hospital Corpsman most recently deploying for one year with an Army unit in the 2007 Iraqi Surge. Over the course of a series of convoys to Baghdad, he recorded his conversations with his highly educated and passionate interpreter, Sayyed. Jim continues to reveal these stories not only as a way of honoring the underrated service and value of a good interpreters, but to show that as different as we all may seem, we also have enough in common to build bridges.

Fiction.

The Blood Vial

By Bryon Reiger

At my grandfather's funeral, I remembered him reclined in the strait backed chair where he sat most days staring out a window. His checkered bathrobe hung open to reveal a hairless, alabaster chest. A glass vial the size of a man's finger was strung around his neck with a bootlace. The tube was filled with a deep red liquid and sealed at the top with a lump of black wax. "Sit." He motioned to a patch of carpet at his feet. I obeyed. His eyes did not look at me. They seemed not to look at anything for a long time. "It was chaos," he began. "Everywhere were the explosions of mortar shells, the smoke of discharge, screams of pain and warning. I was lost in a panic. Something lunged at me, a figure more like some ghoul than any man. Only after, when the man fell at my feet and his blood-frothed mouth said my name, did I realize what I had done. It was Vincent." He was hoarse. "It was an accident you see." He stared at me until I nodded. "That's when I stuck my canteen up to his wound." He lifted the tube off of his chest and held it out to me. "This is all that is left of Vincent." His voice cracked at the end.

I took the extended vial as an invitation and moved to touch it. When I was within inches, Jonas clamped his pale hand over my

boyish forearm. It hurt. I tried to pull away. He held my gaze with his colorless eyes. A sneer curled on his lips as we struggled. I pulled. He squeezed tighter on my arm, the sneer growing wide and wicked. Then, he pushed me. I landed on my elbows and slid back on the carpet. He laughed. His staccato series of hisses followed me all the way out to the porch.

When Grams came home I explained the whole thing. She put me before Jonas and raised my arm so the brush burn was level with his empty gaze. She showed him the bruises that had formed on my arm from his supernatural grip. He had no explanation. He merely assumed his usual state, mouth gaping, a line of drool running down his chin. He was gone again, kneeling in the mud with a canteen in his hand, collecting the last pulses of life from the mysterious Vincent.

I wanted that bottle. I wanted to destroy it. It was why I'd come to his funeral in the first place. However, when I placed my palm on his dead chest and felt inside the folds of his charcoal colored burial suit, it was missing. "I'm glad you could make it," a voice said. I turned to see my uncle standing with open arms. He had gained a lot of weight since I'd last seen him. I gave him an awkward hug. "There are some people I want you to meet." He beckoned me to follow him out to the foyer. There we found a wide-hipped woman surrounded by four gorilla-sized young men. Their suits did not contain them. "This is my wife, June, and her sons, Skip, Martin, Don, and Dave." They all smiled and embraced me. When I came up for air I saw a tall and slender woman leaning against the wall at the far end of the foyer. She was staring at us. When she saw I was looking at her, however, she lowered her eyes and slipped through a door marked "Office." Then, the minister blew through the foyer with solemn handshakes all around and it was time to start.

After the service we carried Jonas out in silence. Then, before I was ready, it was over. I did not want to go. The gloss black coffin rested on a lift. Next to the grave the diggers had covered a pile of dirt with artificial turf. "I always thought they buried them in the end. I was kind of looking forward to it." My uncle came and stood at my side. Gunshot sounds of car doors slamming gave over to silence.

"I saw what you were doing, earlier," he said. "You were looking for it." I did not reply. "You should know. I visited him once before he died, after June and I decided to get married. He didn't even recognize me. All he could do was babble on and on about Vincent and the war. For a while, as a kid, I was convinced he was making it all up. I thought he was acting crazy for the disability check. Then, after your grandmother died I blamed him, just like you blame him. But I realized, and you have to realize this too, he was just crazy." With this he gave me another hug. Then, he was gone. My grandmother had died when I was at school. She had a stroke while sitting in a chair right across from Jonas. He didn't even register it. When I came home she was on the floor. She'd been dead for hours.

Some distance away, sheltered in a small grove of trees, the same slender woman from the funeral home was raising her hands to the sky. I took off towards the grove but lost sight of her. When I arrived, there was no trace that she had even been there.

The next morning, still dressed in the thrift store suit I'd bought for the funeral, I maneuvered my way through a group of strange mourners and then slipped into the door marked office. I found myself in a dark hall lined with mahogany stained paneling. The carpet was a nauseating clash of red and black lines at right angles to each other. Rising to the right of me was a staircase blanketed

in the same strange pattern. Cold air rolled down it from some mysterious place above. The door at the end of the hall stood ajar, allowing a little florescent light to spill out.

“Hello,” she said when I poked my head through the door. She was seated on top of a desk, her legs twisted in the lotus position. “I’m afraid the office is closed right now.” I couldn’t move. I was young. Her near nakedness was strange and wonderful to me: the tension of her tank top, her slender arms resting on her knees, the slight indentions where her shoulders met her neck. “What do you want?” she asked.

“My grandfather.” I gestured behind me along the macabre hall. “You were at his funeral yesterday.”

“Oh, that.” She slid off the desk and stood at least half a foot taller than me. Her hair was a drift of thin braids collecting on her shoulders. “Sometimes people need a little help moving on.” She pulled a gym bag out from under the desk and produced from it the same black dress she had been wearing the day before.

“There was something else,” I said. She held still. “My grandfather always wore a sort of trinket around his neck, something that would mean a lot to me if I could find it. I thought maybe he might have had it on him when they brought him here.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “I didn’t see anything like that when I made him up.” She saw the question on my face. “I’m the cosmetologist here. I make up the bodies.”

“I didn’t know they did that sort of thing.”

“I do all the bodies. It helps the families when their loved ones look, you know, asleep, like they could wake up at any minute.”

“I guess that would help.”

“Didn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Didn’t it help?”

There had been a disturbing, life-like quality to my grandfather's face. "About the necklace?"

"Right." She turned on her heel. Her braids whispered in motion. She rummaged through the top drawer of her desk, and then the middle. Soon she had a pen and paper in hand. She scribbled something, folded it up neatly and placed it in my breast pocket. This intimate gesture made me light headed. "Sigmund, the embalmer, might know something about it. Call back tomorrow and I'll introduce you." I thanked her and shifted my weight from foot to foot. "So tomorrow?" She smiled.

"Yes." I left the office startled. Her incisors were long and filed to sharp points.

When I returned to my car, the motorcade of strangers was already lurching, vehicle by vehicle, out onto the main street. I decided to follow them and visit my grandfather's grave. I wanted to make sure they put him under the ground. A shadow fell over me from the passenger window. The cosmetologist was there. She'd slipped the same pillow case dress over her athletic frame, tied up her braids in a cheetah print wrap and glazed her eyelids with sparkling purple shadow. I had to scoot across the seat to roll down the window. "Ashanti," she said while sticking her slender hand through the window. Her fingernails were also filed to points and painted in deep purple.

"Jonas." The shared name struck me, as it always did, with a blow. The last of the funeral procession was moving away.

"I want to come. Do you mind?" Had she somehow read my thoughts? I pulled the latch and she slid in. The car was filled with an infusion of sweet sweat and lily perfume. When I turned to face the road, everyone was gone. "Don't worry," she said. "I know the way."

My uncle had purchased a simple chalk-white gravestone. *Jonas Black Sr. 1925-2004.* Ashanti and I stood in silence, staring at the still fresh dirt. “You hate him don’t you?” she said.

My face felt tight and hard, and then it softened. “It wasn’t his fault, not really. He was sick. It’s complicated.” Ashanti didn’t say anything. She was gazing down at me. Her arms hesitated at her side. Then, she was embracing me. She cradled my face in her chest and pressed her lips into the part of my hair. She inhaled my scent and traced circles on my back. Then, as quick as it started, she let me go and stepped away.

After the war Jonas had slipped in and out of rehab, jail, and countless halfway houses. He wore everyone down. My mother moved out at the age of fifteen and ended up pregnant with me. My father married her next to the canal in the backyard. They both became miserable. When they split I ended up back where she started. Then, my grandmother died and I moved out, quit school, picked up drugs. “It’s a curse. Who knows how far back it goes.” I said.

Ashanti lay behind me, pressed up against my naked body, licking the wounds she’d inflicted on my neck. “And you think destroying a trinket will fix it?” I shrugged. I wanted to turn and face her but there wasn’t room in my little twin bed. Instead I ran my hand over her moist thigh. She wiped away her braids from where they rested on my face and perched herself up on her elbow. I was just able to turn my head and glimpse the soft whites of her eyes. They seemed to be almost glowing.

The next morning we rode in to the funeral home together. She warned me about Sigmund. “He’s not used to dealing with the living.”

The dark hall enveloped us. She left me standing at the mouth of it while she went to tap on the “Employees Only” door. There was no answer. “He must still be upstairs.” There were two apartments above the funeral home. One was Ashanti’s. The other belonged to Sigmund. They branched out from a hall identical to the one below. Guttural laughter escaped from Sigmund’s room and echoed around us. It sounded like a seal bark. He was inside seated at a small wooden table. There was a bookcase against the far wall that held a picture of the Virgin Mary. He had on something that resembled a butcher’s smock and a pair of goggles rested on his bald and wrinkled head. He leaned over a hardback book. The remains of some meal festered on a plate across from him. “Hello Sigmund.” Ashanti greeted. Another seal bark escaped from his small frame. “This is my friend, Jonas.” He looked in our direction wearing a smile that revealed stained and missing teeth.

“Do you like ghost stories?” he asked. “I was just reading this one. A young man is haunted by visions of his lost love. He sees her at the beach where they first met, at the café where they used to dine, and on the street where they used to stroll on lazy afternoons. One day, crazy from the idea that his love might still be alive he exhumes her coffin and discovers that the body is still inside.” He laughed again.

“Sigmund. I have to ask you a question,” I said. His smile faded. He made a disappointed sound in the back of his throat and narrowed his eyes at us. Ashanti explained why we had come.

“So have you seen it?” I asked. He did not respond. His eyes returned to scanning back and forth across the page. After a few more tries we let him be. In the hall, Ashanti confessed that he was heavy into psychedelic drugs.

“He’s amazing though, one of the best embalmers in the state.”

Her apartment was also sparsely decorated. There were a few oil paintings depicting snakes and skeletons. In one corner there was a beaded mat before a makeshift altar of candles and incense. She invited me to kneel down with her. I did. She then lit a stick of incense. It smelled heavy and intoxicating. “Dawn,” she breathed its name into my ear. Next, she placed a candle into my hand, which she lit. Then, holding a candle, she asked me to do the same. When I’d succeeded in lighting it—my hand was shaking—we returned them to the altar. She bit into my neck.

Later, I collapsed next to her feeling empty of everything. She rested her head on my chest and mumbled something into it.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you still feel cursed?” We slept for a while. I woke up to find her missing. She’d gone downstairs to work, erasing the traces of death with makeup. Once I’d dressed myself I went to see if Sigmund’s suite was also empty. It was. I searched every corner, but the vial was not there. Out of curiosity I located the book that he had been reading. The large book was much lighter than it should have been. Inside, a hole had been cut through the pages to form a secret compartment. It contained a small plastic baggie. There were six little disks inside, the dried caps of psilocybin mushrooms. I tucked the bag into my pocket.

Ashanti was in the embalming room. I kissed her goodbye; her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, makeup stained rubber gloves on her hands, and beads of sweat on her forehead.

By midnight I had been tripping for hours. My mind was blank. Then, just like the picture warming on to an old TV screen, I remembered why I had come. Out of the car, the shovel looked alive. I had to force myself to stop staring at it. Then the cemetery wall rose into view. It seemed higher than I remembered. I cut

myself at the top on one of its steel spikes. The pain was pleasurable like Ashanti's bites. I tasted the blood. It was fantastic, warm, dense and salty. I almost didn't go on I was enjoying it so much. Then I saw what I had come for. The chalk white headstone read *Jonas Black Sr. 1925 - 2004*. My shovel bit the soil.

After what must have been hours, I stopped. The hole swallowed me up to my knees. The shovel was completely coated in my thick, wet blood. It was impossible to use. I was beginning to feel light headed. The wound, I realized, could not coagulate. My knees buckled under me and I fell on them in the cool dirt. I was thirsty. I was going to pass out. With everything left in me I shoved the headstone. It didn't budge. Spent, I collapsed on my back looking up at the starless black sky. Somewhere below me Jonas lay, his blood vial on him as it must have been (I'd looked everywhere else) laughing his staccato series of hisses.

I slept.

Light woke me. It was the intense brightness of heaven. "I found him like this," someone was saying.

"Look. He's waking up," said another voice. The light left me. When my eyes adjusted I saw two figures, a groundskeeper and a policeman. The cop had a flashlight. He used it to illuminate his face from below like someone telling a ghost story. "Welcome to the land of the living," the policeman said.

I spent the night in the ER where they dressed my wound and filled me with someone else's blood. Later, I pled guilty to grave desecration. I paid a heavy fine and got three months community service. Ashanti and I stayed together the entire three months. Then one day she asked me to move with her to New Orleans. I agreed at first out of excitement and then chickened out.

She'd been gone a week and I'd lost the impetus to do anything, least of all laundry. I was getting down to the bottom of my

sock drawer when I stumbled across a brown paper package marked “Jonas”. I tore open one side and dumped its contents into my hand. It was a photo of Ashanti, a close up of her slender torso. The blood vial rested, a benign trinket, in the folds of the bodice of her black dress.

Bryon Reiger is a nine year veteran of the US Army. He is currently pursuing his MFA in playwriting. He lives in New Orleans with his wife and two children

SHIBUYA STATION

By Tom Miller Juvik

After the taxi left the two soldiers at the curb, they watched its departure from the sidewalk in front of the hotel, their rumpled, half-filled duffle bags occupying the space between them. They were young men who wore blue jeans and windbreakers that were still creased from lying folded on the shelves of the P.X. at Camp Zama. Except for the golden promise shining from the lobby windows, night sealed most of the street from view.

“Tokyo, Japan.” Joe Schmidt’s voice was hushed with awe as he placed hands on hips and faced the modest, three-story hotel. “R&R, buddy. Can you believe it?”

Brushing a blond forelock from his brows, Mark Strange squinted beyond the houses and hillsides and miles of highway, as though attempting to catch a glimpse of the main gate at Camp Zama. That was where the burly, guttural-voiced cab driver picked them up. The meter was broken, he claimed, offering them a flat rate. Strange tried his hand at haggling, making only the slightest dent in the price before they reached agreement. Then, when they

were well underway, the driver decided that he had never heard of the Fairmont Hotel after all. He would find them a nice place, though—number one. The more questions Strange asked, the less English the driver seemed to comprehend as they cruised through the dark countryside toward lights that hinted a city.

Schmidt hitched his bag onto his shoulder and began trudging toward the double glass doors. “C'mon, man. Time to check in and get ready to boogie.”

Mark Strange shook his head, slipping his right hand into the pocket of his windbreaker and then recoiling from the cold steel of the grenade as though it had scalded his fingers. The briefing officer had warned them before they boarded the plane at Tan Son Nhut that transporting weapons and munitions was strictly forbidden, but Vietnam was a difficult habit to break.

Schmidt gripped the door handle and turned toward his friend, waiting for him to catch up. “Hey, man, don't look so bummed. R&R, buddy. Rock and roll.”

Strange peered into the lobby, then glanced over his shoulder. “Everything—it's too quiet.”

“Well, it is after midnight. Monday night, or something like that. Besides, we don't have any of that artillery and crap going off, so maybe it just seems quieter than it really is.” Schmidt laughed, a beefy guy with a boyish smile that aided him in cajoling his lean, tall companion. “You and me get checked in, we'll scare up some action, no sweat.”

During the time it took to register at the front desk and ride the elevator to the third floor, Strange attempted to convince himself that everything was fine. He and Schmidt had sat up most of last night in aluminum lawn chairs outside the hooch smoking weed and drinking beer out of rusty cans as they listened to the VC putting the hurt on outposts that were only a few miles distant. The air had been thick and stale, suffocating as they kept an eye

on the night, daring it to make a false move. Strange had been so certain that they would never escape this hell-hole to go on R&R that he had prayed for the rockets to drop in on them, ending the misery of hoping too much and believing too little.

But at dawn, they caught the chopper to Tan Son Nhut without a hitch. The toughest part had been to survive the nauseating cigarette-butt hangover that lined their guts like fur. After the plane lifted away from the runway, they slept it off until they landed at Camp Zama. And now the elevator doors were gliding open to reveal a carpeted hallway that led to their hotel room.

Strange wished he could generate some of Schmidt's enthusiasm, but he was unable to shake the remembrance of something greedy glinting from the driver's eyes as the taxi pulled away from the curb

Schmidt struggled with the key before pushing the door open. They stood in the entry for a long moment staring at the traditional Japanese beds, frameless with quilt-covered mattresses beckoning from floor level.

Strange's lips horse-fluttered under the influence of a monumental sigh. "This is some kind of rookie operation we got here, Schmidthead. I could just kick my own ass for choosing this place over Australia. Round-eyed women. A language that resembles English. An actual bed."

Schmidt opened the compact refrigerator and produced two bottles of Kirin. "This place ain't so bad."

With a slight bow, he presented his friend with a bottle of beer. Strange could not help but smile. The two men plopped into matching armchairs, drinking in silence until it became too much for Schmidt. He switched on the television.

"Whoa! Talk about weird." He laughed as he stood away from the screen. "I Love Lucy in Japanese. Listen to Ricky Ricardo. Man, what a crack-up!"

“Very entertaining,” Strange deadpanned. “Let’s bag the Ginza and sit here all week watching TV.”

“I’ve seen this episode before.” Schmidt switched it off and turned to his friend, holding up a half-empty bottle. “Chugalug?”

Strange stood, and both men clinked their bottles together before pressing them to their lips. In unison, their heads snapped backward, beer seeping from the corners of their mouths and down their chins. Both men emerged gasping.

Strange allowed his bottle to drop to the floor. “Hear that?”

“The bottle?”

“No, man, the sound of the Ginza. Why, I do believe the world-famous Towel Dancers are calling our names.”

“Yeah, baby, yeah.”

On the way down the hall, Schmidt could not contain himself. “We have to find a nice, warm bar right away. And women with some flesh on their bones. Chicks who look comfortable and smell real nice and know a thing or two about, you know . . . things.”

Strange shook his head, laughing in a way that was not a laugh. “I wish I’d been like you and never gone to those short-time joints on Cambo Row. I always feel so bad afterwards. I never admit it, but I do. It’s all so desperate. I wish I never got my ass kicked out of Penn State. I’m a screw-up, Schmidthead. We’re all screw-ups, anyone who ever set foot in the snakebit nation of Vietnam.”

After they stepped inside the elevator, Schmidt turned and stared at the door, willing it shut. A half-beat later, he spoke. “When we get where we’re going, I want you to call me ‘Joe,’ okay? Instead of Schmidthead? The girls will call me whatever you do, and I don’t want them to take me for a chump.”

“Joe.” Strange cocked his head, listening to the sound of it. “I almost forgot your name.”

Then the elevator door whispered open, and they were hurrying across the lobby toward the waiting night.

“Which way to the Ginza?” Strange called to the desk clerk.

The thin-lipped man studied them with twisted brows before replying with a backhanded wave. “Tokyo.” His eyes disappeared into some paperwork.

When the two men stepped outside, Mark Strange hunched his shoulders against the cold drizzle. Joe Schmidt struggled with the zipper on his jacket as they walked in silence. Strange listened to the sound of their heels clicking against the sidewalk and echoing from the bricks of the dark, slumbering buildings on either side of the street. The neighborhood appeared to be residential with a smattering of cafés and small grocery stores, all closed.

“We should try to find a good restaurant.” Schmidt nodded to himself. “Baumgartner says the Dai Ichi Hotel is the place to go if you want a steak. It costs a fortune, but they soak this Kobe beef in Hennessy and torch the sucker right there at your table.” He paused for a moment. “Truth be known, I’d just as soon have pizza.”

“They’ve got Ricky Ricardo, so they probably have pizza, too. Rice pizza. Topped with seaweed and octopus guts.”

Strange halted beneath a streetlamp and shook a couple of Marlboros loose from the pack. Schmidt accepted a cigarette, and then Strange pulled the other one free from the pack with his lips. He flipped his lighter open, and the two men leaned into the flame. Cigarettes flared to life, and Strange clicked the lighter shut. As the flame's scar dissipated from his vision, he saw that Schmidt was studying the shiny, rain-slicked street as though expecting someone to arrive.

“You’d think there’d be a bar open or something,” Strange said.

Schmidt showed his teeth, making his enunciation crisp and fastidious in the fashion of Rod Serling. “Two lonely soldiers in

search of the Ginza find themselves trapped in a dimension without sight, devoid of sound. Little do they realize that they have ventured into a place known as . . . The R&R Zone.”

“Damnitohell!” Strange screamed, tossing his cigarette and jamming his hands into the pockets of his jacket. His shoulders hunched as his fingers traced the ridges of the fragmentation grenade. “Where is everything? Just tell me that. I can’t hear squat except for you and me, Schmidthead, and I’ve been listening to that for months.”

When Strange pulled the grenade from his jacket, Schmidt stumbled back as though someone had just shoved him. Strange gripped the thing in a way that made it appear to be part of his fist, shaking it at the tops of the mute buildings.

“I could just pop this sucker right here, right now—break the goddamn spell.”

“Why the hell did you have to bring that thing?” A pained grimace creased Schmidt’s face as he ran his fingers across his forehead and into his scalp. “Why did you have to do that?”

“Well, Jesus, a guy’s been sleeping with his ammo belt for seven months, what do you expect? Things don’t just all of a sudden become okay.”

Joe Schmidt took a long drag from his cigarette, glanced over both shoulders, then held out his free hand.

Strange replied with a single shake of his head, but when their eyes met, he surrendered the grenade. He looked up at the moonless sky, and his hands disappeared into the back pockets of his jeans.

Schmidt tucked the grenade into his coat pocket. “Jeez, Strange.” He started to lift his cigarette to his lips and then halted, his face brightening. “Looks like there’s more light coming from around the next corner. Maybe there’s a bar, or we can at least score a cab to the Ginza.” He flicked his cigarette halfway across the street and took off running.

“You’ve got it wrong, Schmidthead,” Strange called before hurrying after him. “There is no Ginza, no Tokyo, no nothing. You hear me? We’re snakebit and it’s in our blood, now, like the screaming gonorrhoea. Charlie put the whammy on us, and that’s the long and the short of it.”

Schmidt turned halfway around, running in a sideways fashion. “Just follow me, buddy. Up here where the street splits, the lights are so bright, there just has to be something happening. Come on, Strange. Move it, move it, move it, buddy!”

“Jesus,” Strange muttered, but then he was laughing, watching the way Schmidt’s breath formed clouds that trailed his head like cartoon balloons.

When they came around the corner, the neon sign stopped them short. Chest heaving, Schmidt stared up at it without comment. Mark Strange stood just behind him, watching the way the red light splashed across his friend’s face. He understood the message even before he spotted the diagram on the wall of the building.

“Shit, man, it’s a map. Of the subway system.” Strange ventured closer, eyes settling on the English translation written beneath the Japanese characters. “Looks like we’re someplace called Shibuya Station.” He ran his finger down the line, squinting as he attempted to gauge the distance to Tokyo.

The drizzle began to increase, splattering the street around them in reflections of crimson.

Strange’s hand dropped, shoulders slumping as he turned to face his friend, “Taxi driver dropped us off in some other city—a suburb, maybe. Sonofabitch gets a kickback from the hotel, burns us for full fare.” He shook his head, resigned. “Goddamn VC.”

Schmidt’s voice battled past something thick in his throat. “I’m so tired of this shit. I mean is this the way everything’s going

to be from here on out? Because I'll tell you what, it's getting old, man. Really fucking old." He stepped forward, then, and disappeared through the entrance.

"Schmidt?"

"Just wait there," his voice echoed from inside the tiled entry. Strange's eyes patrolled the street in both directions. "You're not taking a piss or something in there, are you?" He felt the hurt welling inside his chest for both of them, but especially for Schmidt because he had tried so hard to believe. And because of this, he had lost so much more.

"Schmidthead? Joe? Hey, man, you okay in there?" When his friend did not reply, Strange made himself sound cheerful. "Look, don't sweat the small stuff, okay? How about we catch some shuteye and head into Tokyo first thing tomorrow. Godzilla and Mothra, they'll all be waiting to there to get shitfaced with us. What do you say, man?"

Strange heard something metallic rattle against pavement.

"Fire in the hole," and Schmidt came barreling out of the entrance.

Strange followed on his heels, sprinting across the street and ducking into the dubious protection of an alley as the grenade roared into bloom behind them. And although the concrete beneath their feet barely registered the explosion, Mark Strange accepted the profound truth that peopled the night and showered their existence with light from previously darkened windows—the miracle of Joe Schmidt creating life with a fragmentation grenade.

Tom Juvik has been writing short fiction since his return from Vietnam, where he served as an Air Force radio operator during the Tet Offensive. His work has won the Hackney Literary Award for short fiction, The Writers Digest Grand Prize, and the 2014 Stone Canoe Writer's Prize for Veterans. In a previous life, he taught high school social studies and was a staff writer for Comedy Central's "Almost Live."

AMUSEMENT FOR THE LAZY

Alexander Fenno

I poured myself a glass of water at noon. It was a green hued glass one might pour scotch into, a small chip on the rim of one side. I sipped the cool clear water as I stood in my kitchen, the sun's rays warm on my face through the sliding glass door. I placed the glass on the table by the couch of our kitchen lounge. There it stayed as I lay down to take my daily nap, satisfying my lethargy while the TV sang its lullaby.

I woke up drowsy and confused several hours later to a phone call from my wife, pestering me about sleeping in the middle of the day. I sat there for several minutes, phone in hand, trying to remember why I was sleeping in the middle of the day. Was I supposed to be somewhere? Were people waiting for me? I decided I didn't care and turned my attention to the film in my mouth. It reminded me of the cigarette I smoked before I laid down, two hours before. I looked to the table and my old green glass, retired from carrying Scottish nectar, being the dry drunk I was. The water inside would now be as lukewarm as a fair-weather Christian.

I leaned forward and took the glass in my hand. A fire in my tailbone ignited. I'd had a drunken fall down the stairs months ago

and it still hurt like hell. I sipped from it and clumsily dropped it back onto the table, making the water slosh but not spill. The water wasn't murky but it tasted odd, like iron and ashtray. Not pleasant . . . no. I didn't pour it out. It was time to stand up and remember who I was and what I was supposed to be doing. I stood and stumbled down stairs, knocking over mail on counters, slowly walking into the bright afternoon.

That night the glass stood ominously in the kitchen, absorbing the life and energy of my family. It fed from us like a depression on your energy, leaving a small black balloon hovering overhead. There was more than water now in that glass. The glass was more than just a silicone barrier. Before bed, as I cleared off counters and threw away food, I did everything but empty the glass. There it sat, all night, becoming.

In the morning I sat quietly in the dark with the glass. I imagined the manifest of living things in the glass. A universe of organisms; stars and planets and space dusts swirling transparent . . . was I the creator?

I was the demigod of the glass.

Immediately I felt a manic surge of energy. I picked it up and brought it to the sink, hesitating like the mother cat, about to lead its kittens into traffic. I wanted the tiny transparent universe to respect my power, to experience loss and regret. I wanted to murder my creation, but instead, reluctantly placed the glass on the window sill where dawn slowly crept over the trees. Pink and orange and silver light penetrated and shined through the glass. I wanted to taste it, to steal from it the life it had stolen from me. The water had grown grey. Maybe it was poison. I was sure it would taste foul.

I seized violently grasping but then slowly sipped from it, from her. I heard the scream of a chaste universe being dragged into the dark alley of my mouth. I placed her back down and gazed upon my creation triumphantly, but ashamed, the forbidden taste still

lingering. That universe was viscous and the taste of two days of life, of iron and dirt, were on my tongue.

I wondered if this was how God felt. Did He admire but also loathe us? Did He teeter on the edge of destruction and redemption? Was He enthralled with delight but miserable with anger, aching to gorge on us romantically, a lioness in the dark, dripping blood from her paw? Are we as vulnerable in the universe as a glass of stale water? Were we just grazing while Armageddon lurked in the tall grass? I couldn't take it anymore...

I lifted the glass and smashed it into the iron sink, the water and glass explosion all around my head.

My guttural scream bellowed in the empty kitchen as a glass shard sliced my hand, the blood mixing with water and glass swirling into the drain. I felt like an animal. I wanted. I ached . . .

I turned to the cabinet and took a new glass from the shelf . . .

Alexander Fenno, a Georgia native, is a retired Marine gunnery sergeant. Alex writes poetry, prose, flash fiction, and short stories. Alex is married with two children, loves to meditate in the afternoon sun, run along the Sligo Creek trail, and plays golf whenever the temperature is above 35 degrees.

Poetry.

Ishmael

Michael D. Fay

A poem, like the human body,
looks
a certain way.
Mrs. Remaley taught us that
in eighth grade.

Carefully placed words
a bit of rhythm
occasional rhyme.
Feel free
kids
to play with the grammar and spelling.

A good metaphor,
analogies tagged to Greek legends or the Bible
and
surprising turns of phrase
Are expected
If not
preferred should you care to reveal deep truths
and get a good grade.
Think of e.e. and the Niponized bit of the sixth!

Forty years later
spread-eagled
a dead mujh is still smoking.
his clothes burnt clean
away
into blue wisps over a caramelized date palm grove
full of hungry and talkative magpies.

That's not a real tan.
He's baked like a pig in a pit.
Two toasted hands curled up,
reminding us of our drill instructors'
soul piercing wisdom chants—
'Fingers curled as if holding in your palms a roll of dimes,
thumbs along the seams of your trousers you maggots!'
These crisp palms are turned skyward,
toasted fingers inboard
like Kilroy's from another war
like the sightless boiled white lidless eyes,
lightly gripping the air.

Where's the truth in his steaming and revealed innards
butchered out by a couple of fifty cal rounds?
No shaman will read these entrails.
No mother will weep.
No father will rent his clothes.
No priest will offer up this burnt offering of Abraham's
elder son.

No, just a couple of jarheads
starring and grinning

like school boys so happy to still be alive,
and saying
'Man, this guy is royally fucked up. It sucks being him.'
He's the son of a different mother.
We leave him to the chickens
who
apparently
will eat anything in a pinch
when abandoned to the desert.

Chief Warrant Officer-2 Michael D. Fay, USMC (retired), was the official combat artist for the Marine Corps from 2000 to 2010. During his career he served a total of nine combat tours. In retirement Fay is the founder and director of "The Joe Bonham Project", a collective of American illustrators who go into

Missing Piece Villanelle

John Rodriguez

I am shaped by the Korengal Valley.
Although I didn't stain its rocks red, didn't die,
it has taken a large piece out of me.

In my dreams, its green dark hills all I see,
the nightmares won't fade. No matter what I try
I am shaped by the Korengal Valley.

Eight men I knew now rest in a cemetery.
The best cut down without even a goodbye,
it has taken a large piece out of me.

The crack, whiz, and fear burned in memory,
tormented by actions untaken when the bullets did fly.
I am shaped by the Korengal Valley.

Now cold and distant, lacking all sympathy
for cowards who ran or those who never went, stood by—
it has taken a large piece out of me.

Can I escape this mental prison, become a parolee,
or will this haunt me torturing 'til the day I die?
I am shaped by the Korengal Valley.
It has taken a large piece out of me.

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

incoming

Carl Palmer

daughter pops bubble wrap
laughs as Daddy dives behind the couch
while on mid-tour leave from Iraq

Carl "Papa" Palmer, retired Army, retired FAA, now just plain retired, lives in University Place, WA. He has seven chapbooks and a contest-winning poem riding a bus somewhere in Seattle. Motto: Long Weekends Forever.

Troops in Contact

José Roman

At night, when the muzzle flashes
Hot brass, gun oil sprays
In the mouth and eyes. Metallic taste,
Smells of victory

Jose Roman enlisted in the Navy on Sept 11, 1991 and served for 22 years off and on active duty and as a reservist supporting the Naval Special Warfare community. He was re-called a number of times to active service to include deployments to South America, Europe, combat tours in Iraq in 2005-2006 and Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012. Jose retired in 2013 and is a Mission Continues Fellow working with Habitat for Humanity, he also works at Old Dominion University supporting student veterans, contributes as a freelance writer and works as a veterans advocate in his community.

UNTITLED

Edward Carn

left friends and paper towels
wiping the tragedy that
we all dismiss...

Wiping my windshield...baby now
Driving east, toward the dawn.

Interview.

A Conversation with Kelly S. Kennedy

Kelly Kennedy is the author of *They Fought for Each Other: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Hardest Hit Unit in Iraq*. She served in the Army from 1987 to 1993 including combat tours in Iraq and Somalia. In 2010, she received an Honorary Mention John B. Oakes environmental journalism award for her reporting on burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008, she was named a finalist for the Michael Kelly Award for a series, “Blood Brothers,” about a unit she embedded with in Iraq. She is also a 2008 Ochberg Fellow, sponsored by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma; and a 2008 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Foundation Fellow. Kelly is a health policy reporter at USA TODAY. She answered some questions for *O-Dark-Thirty* editor Ron Capps.

O-Dark-Thirty: *When did you first know you wanted to be a writer?*

Kelly S. Kennedy: In third grade, I wrote a story about monsters, and everybody laughed. I had glasses larger than my face, and I was

smaller than everybody, and it was this instant way to relate to the other kids when nothing else worked. I was hooked.

ODT: What about becoming a soldier? How did that come about? Why did you join the military?

KSK: I grew up in a small town in Indiana in the '80s, and my dad was a boilermaker. The steel industry wasn't great in the '80s, and I understood that I would need to help pay for my college education, so I joined the Army. My dad had been in the Air Force and said it was just like any other job.

ODT: Did your service lead to your becoming a writer? Did it inform your choice of subject matter, topics, stories?

KSK: When I got out of the Army, I immediately began writing about it. I had served in Desert Storm, and my friends were coming back sick. I've been writing about Gulf War illness since the beginning, though, fortunately, it has not affected me. While at college, there were rumblings (from people who hadn't served, of course) about why women shouldn't be in the military—something about trench warfare and yeast infections. I don't know what recent war they were thinking about, but I wrote about that, too. I didn't feel like they should be allowed to take my service away from me. But I also started writing fiction. At the beginning, I thought I was writing Army stories about being one of the guys, but the more I wrote, the more I realized my stories were about trying to convince people I was just one of the guys. Sometimes we lose the story of ourselves in the story we think we're supposed to tell.

ODT: Your book They Fought Each Other is a beautifully crafted

work about some very ugly things. During your time embedded with the 1/26th Infantry, did being a veteran, a woman, or a journalist effect the way the soldiers treated you?

KSK: Thanks! Maybe. They were used to having women embedded with them, and I don't think they had a great view on journalists in general because they felt they had been badly portrayed. Being a veteran definitely helped because they assumed I knew what they were talking about, and being a veteran means you're able to put up with a significant amount of pointless bullshit and that, like them, I was willing to serve, period.

There were times when I felt like they were protective of me in ways they weren't of Rick, the Army Times photographer who went with me. It wasn't that they seemed worried that I couldn't handle myself—more that no one wanted to be that guy who lost the reporter. But every time I embedded, if I went and sat by myself, inevitably, someone would come over and tell me some horrible story. Sometimes they cried. Because I was enough of an outsider, and maybe because I'm a woman, they felt safe telling me some of the things that hurt. In reporting, I had to make sure they understood my job was to tell those stories. Most of the time, they wanted people to know.

ODT: Did any of these effect how you went about your work?

KSK: I sat by myself more often. It's always hard walking into a situation where you don't know anyone. Photographers start messing around with their gear, and that always attracts people asking questions. I'm always careful not to say, "Well, back in my day . . ." because it was such a different place. But I learned to sit and type my notes or journal, or to ask them questions, of course, about

what they were doing. I just wanted them to get used to me—and I wanted to get a feel for who everybody was and how they fit in—before I started "working." And I always stayed with the enlisted guys. The story I wanted wasn't with the guys with the maps. I wanted people to understand that the service members I embedded with were individuals—often funny, strong in different ways, educated or not, conservative or liberal, scared, brave . . .

ODT: What was the hardest story to tell in the book?

KSK: There were so many stories that felt almost impossible to tell, and I felt, at times, as if I was living through all of their deaths again. I was with them June 21st, when they took their hardest hit and when a young, female MP was decapitated. But as so many people find, writing that story helped me sort it. Their refusal to go out made sense to me because of all the things that led up to it. I didn't think there was cowardice in that. I thought that their understanding that they would not be able to control themselves—as well as the fear that played into their ability to work, and their ability to move together as one on the decision—was strong. But ISG McKinney's death was beyond anything I'd written about before. I wasn't embedded with them when that happened, but I was in Iraq, and I was getting panicked emails. In every account, McKinney got so caught up in his inability to protect his men that he wasn't able to continue. Thinking about how he did it, reenacting it in my head to make sure I understood, reading the reports from men who obviously loved him and watched him do it, sitting with his dad and listening to stories of his youth, and then this continued thread of what a strong, good person he was left me in tears several times over. While writing these stories, I should have had help from a therapist, and I definitely should not have drunk as much. (When

I came back from a later embed in Afghanistan, I remembered and applied these rules. They're important.)

ODT: You seem to have become somewhat of a fixture at 1st Infantry Division events and you're still in touch regularly with members of the Blue Spaders and their families, right? Is that surprising to you? Did you think your relationship, both formal and informal, with the unit and the people would be so enduring?

KSK: If I could take back what happened June 21, I of course would. And as a journalist, I was careful to keep some distance until the book was out. But yes, I've been amazed by how the guys and their families have looked out for me. They were in such pain that day, but they were able to see beyond that to what the random reporter embedded with them might also be experiencing, and even on that day, there were people checking in on me. I'm going to a TAPS dinner with Jeff McKinney's dad this month, and he's family. I've visited McGinnis's grave with his brothers, and I cherish that. Ryan Woods' mom is this beautiful woman who has taken all of her sons' friends—and the random journalist—under her wing. A lot of the moms are like that. I talk to some of the guys on the phone or in emails. It's great to know how they're doing, even when they're going through rough periods. Doc Ray, who watched over me in Iraq, has triplets now, and I love to see the baby pics. They will all always be a part of my life.

ODT: What are you working on now?

KSK: A novel. It's about halfway done, and so much fun. There's a military bent to it, but it goes back to my time in and my stories about trying to fit in. It's a mystery novel that deals a lot with identity.

ODT: Why fiction now? Why this topic?

KSK: I needed something far away from work, and, as usual, the fiction takes on a lot of things I've dealt with myself, from divorce to loss to trying to float through this world as a woman with experiences that are different from the norm. I've served in two wars, had all of my belongings stolen, had my apartment condemned after a tornado hit it, started ballet lessons at age 30, worked as a dancer (not that kind of dancer), been dumped about a million times, and been laid off from what I thought was my dream job. I keep bouncing back up. I think the fiction book is ultimately about sorting out my personal life, having finally sorted out my professional life.

ODT: What else should readers know about Kelly Kennedy?

KSK: Isn't that funny? As a journalist, everyone assumes you're an awful like them, because when I talk with service members, I'm asking the questions and being careful not to give too much of myself away so as not to offend anyone. I cover the Affordable Care Act now, and I've covered everything from cops to education, but nothing ever felt as important to me as doing my best to cover the troops. For all the stories about battle plans and generals and wins and losses, I care most that we know who the people are who are serving, and that we know enough to keep our promises to them—and that, maybe, we think a little harder as voters about whether we want to do this to another, future generation.

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