

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *PTSD*,
digital image by Brett Lewis.

Brett Lewis served in Air Force intelligence from 1986 to 1991. His photography has appeared in a baseball-themed Opening Week show in Las Vegas and was selected for publication in *Weird West Virginia*, and his poetry has appeared in the *Kanawha Review*. He lives in West Virginia, where he works for the U.S. Postal Service and waits hand and foot on a small rescue cat named Luna.

In addition to photography, Brett works with digital imagery and in acrylic. *PTSD* expresses the hopelessness and frustration that many experience from having a condition that is not physically visible.

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Editors' Note

I was both excited and honored when Ron Capps asked me to take responsibility for co-editing *The Review* with our fiction editor Jim Mathews, who now also serves *O-Dark-Thirty's* senior editor. I should have been scared. Putting together a print volume is a major undertaking. Jim and I simply could not do it without the hard work and staunch support of *ODT's* nonfiction editor Dario DiBattista and poetry editor Fred Foote, or without the superhuman patience of production manager Janis Albuquerque, who has been teaching us the mechanics of getting *The Review* into print. But our deepest appreciation goes to our contributors, whose submissions make producing both *The Review* and its online counterpart *The Report* always a pleasure.

One of the greatest pleasures for me is the variety in the submissions we receive. *O-Dark-Thirty* receives work covering the time span from the Civil War to just a few months before the author hit the “send” key; veterans of all branches of the service, their family members, and even veteran Allies from as far away as Denmark have shared their stories and poems with us. We were pleased to be able to select work reflecting that diversity of voice and perception for our Veterans Day issue, just as we remember and honor veterans of all branches who served in past and present conflicts each year on November 11.

Jim and I remain committed to publishing the best fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in both the online and print editions of *O-Dark-Thirty*. We're interested in being a first “home” for the work of emerging writers. We're pleased to consider submissions from

Allied veterans and their family members. We also look forward to reading more work from veteran writers that isn't directly concerned with the military experience. Most of all, we hope to receive many more submissions from veterans and family members who once believed that their stories didn't count because they fought in an unpopular war, because they didn't have a traditional combat experience, because they are from a group marginalized in society, or because they formerly lacked the confidence to write.

All these voices, in concert, are important. No single writer, however effective or brilliant or interesting, can tell the whole story of a war or paint a complete picture of military service. And many stories from the most recent wars and from those in our past remain unheard.

We are pleased to bring you some of those previously unheard stories in the pages that follow.

Jerri Bell

Non-fiction.

Orders for Vietnam

By Raymond Palmer

I'm pretty sure that my father loved me, even though he could never say the words. The closest he ever came would be when he blurted out, "I'm so proud of you!" He wasn't much for hugs or any physical affection either. But I thought I could detect his love in the sparkle in his eyes when he saw me, particularly when we had been separated for a long time. I figured that was about all the expression of emotion he could muster. A child of the Depression—he grew up on a farm in the dustbowl, no less. His own father abandoned the family when he was nine.

One thing I did know about my father, and our relationship, was that we were intensely competitive, especially whenever we played any kind of sport, especially table games. When I was a teenager, our ping-pong battles were legendary—my brother claimed he could hear us from a friend's house a mile across the valley, screaming at each other and banging the paddles against the table.

Later, as I grew closer to manhood and his reflexes slowed, the venue shifted to a basement pool table. My father's experience,

finesse, and strategy gave him the edge in a game where strength and speed didn't count for much. But I was learning and gaining on him, leading toward an inevitable result that he fought against with all the determination he could muster. This led to more cursing and an occasional whip of a pool cue against the table. His cursing grew more desperate and creative—expletives that I could not have even imagined.

Naturally, I showed no mercy. The idea of surpassing my father in yet another contest of skills was an intoxicating thought. Our rivalry was so intense that each of us used every tactical and psychological advantage we could, and nothing was off limits. So I waited for just the right moment to deliver the news.

My opportunity came at the decisive moment of a close and hard-fought game, when one good shot would break the game open and determine the winner. We each had about three balls left, awkwardly spread around the table. I had just missed a particularly tough shot—I always took the bolder, riskier shots, while my father went for the high percentages and often took advantage of my misses.

I left him an open shot. He jumped to the table with a glee that he could barely disguise—he knew he had me. He carefully lined up the shot and slowly moved the cue back and forth a few times to settle himself down. At last, he drew farther back to make the shot.

“Dad,” I interjected, causing him to pause.

“Hunh?” he muttered.

“I just got orders to Vietnam.”

His eyes popped wide open and his glasses went slightly askew as he jerked the shot, badly mishitting the cue ball. Then I ran the table. In fact, I had received my orders weeks before this game of pool, but I had not told my family.

I always sensed that my father regretted not having served in the Armed Forces in World War II. Not that he hadn't tried; some months before Pearl Harbor he had tried to enlist in the Navy, but was rejected for color-blindness—a condition I'm sure he had, based on his choice of neckties. And he certainly did contribute to the war effort. He worked at a Remington Arms munitions factory outside of Denver that produced millions of bullets for the M-1 rifle, which I'm sure was appreciated by soldiers in both the European and Pacific theaters.

But I remembered my Little League games and Boy Scout events where he seemed to wilt in the presence of the other fathers who sported tattoos and beer bellies and who spoke aggressively, seemingly ready for a fistfight on a moment's notice. These men were ex-Navy, Marines, and Army—the real heroes. Whenever any of these men brought up a reference to the war, my father always remained silent, not even mentioning all those bullets his factory made.

So I always had a sense that our family had an unfulfilled debt to the country. And I remember saying to myself, “Don't worry, Dad, I'll take care of it.”

Later, I readied my uniform as we prepared to go to church. I made sure my paratrooper boots and brass had an extra shine and sparkle to them. I was proud of what the uniform represented and what it said about me. It was the fall of 1967 and many Americans were beginning to have misgivings about the war. I wasn't sure myself if the war made any sense, but at that moment, the historical and political context was secondary. I was proud to show the uniform of the 101st Airborne Division, and for the first time in my life, I really felt like a man.

I looked forward to showing off my duds to these plain Wyoming people (my family had just moved from California in the previous year—both my folks grew up on Midwestern farms and wanted to “go home” to Middle America). It is cold in Wyoming in early November and my father wore a heavy coat in a picture of us my mother took that Sunday morning. But I wore nothing over the uniform—I wanted everyone to see it. The blue infantry rope, the parachutist’s badge, the glider patch on my garrison cap, the green trousers bloused into my spit-shined paratrooper boots and of course, the Screaming Eagle patch of the 101st Airborne.

As we approached the church, people did indeed notice me and reacted with what I took to be awe. The minister greeted us as we entered the sanctuary. His eyes glistened, and he seemed physically shaken as he clasped my hand.

During the service, the minister broke from his prepared sermon to talk about the sacrifices of war, and asked God to protect the young men in uniform and to give solace to their families. I felt another surge of pride to have been recognized. I looked over to my father and was surprised to see tears running down his face. It was the only time I had ever seen him cry.

Ray Palmer served with Delta Company, 3/187th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam from November 1967 to October 1968. His battalion received a Presidential Unit Citation, a Valorous Unit Award, and a Meritorious Unit Award during his tour. “Orders for Vietnam” is excerpted from his memoir-in-progress, which describes his service and a recurrence of PTSD that lasted from 2002 until 2007. He currently works for the federal government at an agency that keeps the lights on, and lives near Washington, DC with his wife of 32 years. They have two grown sons.

Shadows in the Night

By Christopher Baumer

I wake to the nudge of a boot in my side. It's my turn in the gun.

It doesn't take long to get my gear on; we wear most of it while we sleep. I realize how worn my body feels while climbing into the turret. After checking the gun, by clearing the rounds from the feed tray and ensuring that the charging handle is free of grit and slides easily in its channel, I reload the belt of ammunition and lean back into the cold steel that rises behind me.

There is no moon, but the night sky is dotted with thousands of stars, casting an eerie light across the desert. My vehicle sits in the middle of the road, on the outermost perimeter of our make-shift base. Mine are the first set of eyes that would see anyone approaching from this direction. Below me, protected by armor two inches thick, the others sleep. I have a wife back home, a family composed of the same success stories and disappointing failures as any other, but out here I feel completely alone.

Staring into the shadows cast by the stars, my tired eyes register movement. A flash of motion in my peripheral vision alerts

my senses. Yet when I whip my head in that direction, prepared for men holding RPGs and explosive devices, there is nothing there.

To keep awake, I think about the world that I left behind. All of the things that I cannot be a part of while living in this desert. I wonder how my wife is doing, and who she shares her fears with while I am away. I have written a stack of letters, but haven't been able to send them home for over a month now. I wonder if my dog will recognize me when I return. He was just a pup when I left, a cleaner and healthier version of the mangy strays that wander this country. A brother weighs heavy on my mind, as he was struggling with addiction when I left. I wonder if my father was ever able to get him to rehab or if I just haven't yet received the letter telling me that he is gone.

Deep into the blackness ahead, I see movement again. I wait, thinking that it might be another case of fatigue playing tricks, but then I see it again. I wrap my hands around the grips of the machine gun mounted before me, and slowly move the barrel until it is pointed towards where the movement occurred. Under the starlight, each drift of sand casts a long shadow, like a black pond with no reflection. A few minutes take hours to pass. I begin to settle back in the turret (*false alarm*, I speak softly into the silence) when my eyes lock in on the threat.

Our convoy took a dirt road, barely decipherable in the daytime, to arrive at our current location. While setting up our security perimeter, my vehicle was positioned directly across this road, tasked with defending against any incoming traffic that may stumble across our platoon. This dirt road, only discernible in the night if you know that it exists, stretches out away from me.

It is on this road that I see the movement. In and out of the shadows, something is approaching. At its current distance, it is little more than a gray blob. It bounces as it moves, like an old jalopy from a black and white film, but much smaller.

It cannot be a man; it is too small and moving too fast. A terrifying image of a robot with tracked wheels for feet and explosives strapped to its frame crosses my mind, and I rack the handle on my 240G machine gun to load a round into the chamber. The thing steadily approaches, now traveling in a shallow rut on the side of the road, making a straight course towards me.

The sound of my heart beating thumps in my ears, and my eyes are no longer tired. I want to wake the guys sleeping below me, but I cannot take my eyes off the incoming threat. With one leg, I wave my foot around in the vehicle, hoping to kick someone awake. I feel only air, and realize that they will have to wake to the rhythmic sounds of gunfire.

Leaning into the turret, energized now with the target before me, I sight in on the creature bobbing my direction. My finger wraps around the trigger and rests lightly against the metal, applying slight pressure. The creature continues to get closer. Before I squeeze the trigger and drive back the shadows and silence with the orange flash and mechanical rhythm of war, I come to a realization.

The creature is not a robot. It is not a small vehicle filled with explosives.

It is a dog.

It's just a stray dog, ribs showing through its sides, exploring the desert in search of food. I watch it bob and weave over and around each mound of sand. This country is filled with these mutts, each one unsettling to those of us that have pets of our own.

The dog moves quietly past my vehicle and fades into the night.

Months later, I will return home and be reunited with the life that I knew before I left. The transition will take time. For a while, the nightmares will wake me, leaving me staring into blackness like I once did from a gun turret, my heart pounding and my chest heaving.

The desert will never leave me. I will see the shadows from a starry night sky, those empty spaces, being cast across the peaks of

sand drifts. I will feel the cold chill of steel against my back as I sit in the turret and the steady weight of my flak jacket and Kevlar helmet as I stare through the sights of my machine gun. I will remember this dog on the other side of the world, alone, just trying to survive.

Christopher Baumer completed a combat deployment to Afghanistan in 2011. He is currently a Staff Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps Reserve, where he serves as a platoon sergeant and a heavy equipment operator. He is also a Liberal Studies major at Oregon State University, and plans on pursuing an MFA once his Bachelor's studies are complete.

Green Plastic Soldiers

By Holly Thomas

White paint chipped off the door when he pried it open. G.I. Joes toppled down on us, parachuting from the top shelf. A wave of toy guns crashed at our feet. He hadn't cleaned out his closet since he'd been back from Iraq.

He said he wanted to throw away as much as he could to make room for the clothes that took up most of the floor space and some of my stuff. We had just moved in with his parents and were sharing his childhood bedroom. So we began picking up the toys and setting them in a cardboard box. Water guns, Nerf guns, and wooden-carved guns all made it into the box. Not one was thrown away. Not even the broken ones.

He took out a Nerf gun and began shooting me.

"I can't throw these away," he said playfully.

I watched him examine the gun with a boyish grin. I wondered how he smiled holding a real one, if he ever smiled with it in his hands. When does a soldier smile? It'd been a few years now since he'd come home and he rarely smiled and when he did, it wasn't always real. I wanted to ask him what happened there that kept his grin so nonexis-

tent most of his days with me. I wondered if I could make his smiles real again, like in the pictures before he went there.

A rainbow of colors caught my eye from the closet from karate belts that dangled from hangers. He never mentioned he knew martial arts. I paraded the belts, waving them above my head, trying to spark a laugh from the one staring blankly at the closet. He didn't notice me. I followed his hazy eyes to a uniform in the corner. I wanted to reach in and grab it. I wanted to ask him to model what a real soldier wore. I bit my tongue. I wanted a real picture of him in uniform, but I couldn't ask him that. I didn't want him to think I was weird. So I went with "dorky" and continued prancing around the room with the belts.

"You're silly," he chuckled, grabbing at the belts.

Yes, a smile. He playfully grabbed my arm and pulled me in. He stared at me. I dropped the belts. He leaned in and our noses grazed. We kissed. I wrapped my arms around his neck, but instead of a long romantic kiss, it fell short when I felt a sharp pain on the sole of my foot.

"Ouch!" I yelled.

He laughed at the green plastic stuck to the bottom of my foot. I picked the karate belts up from the floor, remembering what had intrigued me before his lips.

"Did you use karate in the Army?" I glanced at him to see if I spoke too soon.

"Soldiers use a mix of martial arts during war," he said. "We figure out quickly what works in reality."

I didn't want to seem too interested, though I was. I picked up a bag and started to scope the floor and closet for trash. I hoped he would continue to talk, but when I looked at his face, I saw his eyes were glazed over, filled with the past, and I knew he was in a state I could never understand.

"So you never karate-chopped anyone?" I joked. I wanted to bring him back to the present.

He gave me a half-smile. “No one karate-chops in the Army.”

I ducked as he threw a pillow my way. A pillow fight broke out and I stumbled inside the closet, landing on top of a pile of shotgun shells and paint balls. When I started to get up, I saw a long bag hidden in the far corner of the closet.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I told him.

He left the room to make some iced tea so I decided to crawl over to the mysterious bag and look inside. I tugged at the zipper and saw the long barrel of a gun. My heart pounded and I felt slightly nervous, like I was doing something I shouldn’t. I caressed the metal in disbelief that it was real. I never grew up in a house with guns. I could not believe I had been sleeping so close to one. I took the gun completely out of the bag and held it up as if to shoot. A disturbing smile lit my face as a feeling of power flowed through me, and I gently touched the trigger. He told me he was ten years old when he shot his first rifle—such a strong feeling of power to have at such a young age. I wondered if he would let me shoot it.

I heard him walking out of the kitchen and coming down the hallway. I quickly put the gun back in its bag. I didn’t want him to find me playing with it. He opened the door, but I was still inside the closet.

“What are you doing?” he asked as I crawled out. I grabbed a pile of birthday cards.

“Um . . . where do you want these to go?”

He glanced at them quickly.

“Put them in the top drawer,” he said, pointing to his dresser.

I walked across the mess of stuff that had spilled out of the closet. I placed the cards in the drawer. He didn’t keep clothes in his dresser drawers; he kept things that were meaningful or valuable.

I walked back to the closet. I was fighting in my head not to ask him about the gun.

“You have a gun,” I pointed out nervously. I didn’t want to say it, but it slipped out.

He dropped a tub of clothes on the futon and stared at me.

“Don’t worry, it’s not loaded. I’m very safe with my weapons,” he assured me.

I fidgeted with my hands, staring back into the closet.

“Weapons?”

The plural word made me skittish.

“Rifles, hunting knives, bows...” he listed.

I knew he’d hunted since he was a kid and it was only natural for him to collect them as he grew, but it still bothered me that I was sleeping in a room with things that can kill. I tried to appear composed, but his “it’s ok, don’t worry,” proved I couldn’t act.

I emptied the bottom and top shelves completely, placing everything on the remaining space on the bed. We went through figurines and mini cars, which he played with before pitching them into the trash. He went from age twenty-four to eight in an instant when he got ahold of his old toys.

“These are some of the reasons I joined the Army,” he said proudly as he held up a plastic gun and a military figure. I knew this moment was a chance to ask him the question that had been at the tip of my tongue since the day I met him. I didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable, but it was an inviting comment that I had to seize, while risking the consequences of prying.

“Why did you join the Army?”

There had to be more to it than just toys. Maybe it wasn’t the perfect moment to ask. While I was waiting for the “none of your business” response that I had heard him say before to others, he looked at me wide-eyed and shrugged.

“I always grew up playing with G.I. Joes and watching war movies. It felt natural to join,” he explained. He threw a handful more into the trash. “I guess I always knew I would.”

He began putting away the rest of the fallen things, organizing them in boxes by categories only known to him. I didn't say a word. I'd waited for so long to have this conversation, but nothing came out of my mouth.

"There were other reasons," he muttered.

Not able to control my curiosity, I asked him to go on.

"I joined the Reserve to help pay for college. I don't know how to explain it, but school didn't feel right at the time. I wanted to be full time in the Army," he said. "I got to the point where it wasn't enough to be in the Reserves, with everything going on in the world."

While he continued to organize, he told me how he'd wanted to make a difference and how skipping class and partying at school wasn't benefiting anyone. He stayed less than a semester.

"Ouch," I squealed. I'd stepped on a miniature tank. I pulled the plastic off my foot a second time. I held it in my hand and thought about him playing with it as a kid. I wondered if while dragging this tank across the floor, he ever imagined that one day he'd be maneuvering one around bombs.

I found out he drove a tank in Iraq the first day he rode in my car. He made it clear that I wasn't a good driver, something I can't completely dispute. He told me he drove a tank in the Army and even though it had been among the landmines, riding as a passenger in my car was scarier. He'd laughed as he said it, but the way he gripped the door made me try a little harder to be a better driver.

"Check these out!" he shouted enthusiastically.

He had opened a tub full of football pads and practice jerseys. I knew he was a football player because of the helmet he proudly displayed on top of his dresser and a scar on his shoulder from an injury on the field. Football is a huge deal in his small hometown.

My eye caught a sparkle hanging in the closet. I pointed and laughed at a purple sequined vest. He pulled it out and held it up.

“An old Halloween costume?” I laughed.

“No. It’s a show choir outfit,” he snapped, wiping off the dust.

My mouth dropped. Why wasn’t he embarrassed?

“You were in show choir? How did I not know that?”

“What can I say? I sing and dance.”

“Try it on!” I pleaded.

“It doesn’t fit,” he said, with one arm in.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of a dancing soldier. My mind started wandering to the idea of him side-by-side with Fred Astaire in *White Christmas*.

“I’d sing to you, but I’ve got to get ready to work,” he said.

We both worked new part-time jobs trying to pay off our debt and build savings. He worked as a chef at a restaurant thirty minutes away and took classes at the university forty-five minutes away. I worked at the community college twenty minutes away. Even with a bachelor’s degree, finding a job here was almost impossible. It was 2008 and journalists called it the start of a recession. Gas prices kept going up so my search was limited. We had two dogs to take care of and barely enough money to support ourselves. We needed his family’s help. It sucked that we couldn’t do it alone, but we couldn’t afford pride. We were lucky, though, as just working part-time gave us time to hang out and relax through this transition.

To be honest, it was comforting being under the same roof with a dad. His parents were still married and mine divorced when I was very young. I think under any other circumstances, a girl in her early twenties would have found the situation horrendous, but I got to experience a fantasy I’d had since childhood, a mom and a dad living together in the same house. I liked his parents. They were good to me. There were always people around to talk to.

After he left, I continued to clean, throwing away trash he had stuffed in the corners over the years and adding more to the laundry

pile. As I stacked books on the top shelf, my eyes kept returning to his uniform. I looked over both shoulders to make sure no one was present. I studied the camouflage and traced his last name with my finger. I had seen photos of him wearing his gear, but holding the real uniform was emotional for me. It made it all too real.

I went back to organizing his things, trying not to think of what he must have experienced while wearing his camouflage. Images of him dodging bullets, withstanding heat and watching death lingered in my mind. I realized halfway through cleaning how great an impact our parents' advice to us as children has on our lives. My mother gave me a diary when I was five years old. I've been writing ever since. He was given plastic guns and grew up to be a soldier. The gifts we receive, the things we play with, do shape our lives.

He didn't want to clean for several days. The remaining piles of clothes and hunting gear stood tall in the corner. I didn't understand why he'd suddenly lost interest. He ignored the mess by the closet door. I put away what I could.

A week after we initially started the housekeeping, he came home from work drunk. His dad started lecturing him on how irresponsible it was to drink so early in the day. I thought perhaps the episode had been instigated by the emotions dredged up from the cleaning.

"Grow up," his dad muttered in anger. He threw his hands in the air and I could see his veins pop in frustration.

"I've watched heads get cut off. How much more growing up do I have to do?" he shouted.

I don't know why, but I immediately wrote down his words and then began to cry. I crumpled the paper and stuffed it in my pocket. Hurrying back into his room, I wiped the tears so my eyes could wander, staring down the uniform, the gun, and the toys.

As the two continued to argue, I crawled into the closet, hiding in the corner with the door slightly opened for light. I used to take the

same position when I was little every time my parents fought. Trying to get comfortable, thinking I'd be there for a while, I sat on something hard. I pulled a small baby doll from under me. Huh? Hidden beneath all his masculine toys was a baby doll.

I held the baby to my chest and buried my face. I continued to hear them scream and shout. For so long I'd wanted to hear about his time in Iraq, but now that I could hear things, horrible things, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't process the images that were coming into my head. How could he have lived through that? I wanted so badly to hold him and tell him I was sorry he was bound to memories I could never fathom.

I stayed in the closet until the yelling diminished to mere muttering I couldn't make into words. I sat on the bed and realized I was still holding the doll in my arms.

I walked into the kitchen after I heard his dad leave the room. I found him leaning against the counter. He nodded toward the backyard and I followed. Without a word, I sat beside him in a lawn chair. We watched the trees sway and listened to the dogs bark. And then he spoke.

“You think I'm messed up in the head, don't you?”

Messed up? The fact that he continues on day after day with the heavy memories that weigh him down—he's resilient.

I didn't answer him with words. There was no simple way to say “no” in that moment. Instead, I kissed his cheek, grabbed his hand and laid my head on his shoulder. Letting him know he was okay and I was okay with him.

“You have a baby doll in your closet,” I said out of nowhere.

We both began to laugh.

“That's Mikey,” he said, with a real smile.

That's what I love about him. After all the shit he has been through, he can still laugh.

I knew that day I wouldn't always be able to make him laugh so easily. He would have good days and he would have bad days. There would be days I could hold him and take him out of his head and then there were the days I felt absolutely worthless. But in those moments of disarray, I knew eventually we'd end up sitting on the back porch laughing together.

After watching friends and family members deploy in 2003, Holly Thomas began to write what she observed as they each came back from war. Originally from central Illinois, she currently resides in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she continues to write poetry and creative nonfiction.

Fiction.

Road to Freedom

By S. D. Gale

*Their souls have gone on to that Heaven of light
Still the echo comes back to us—‘Fight the Good Fight’
—John V. Rabbits, “Fight the Good Fight”*

We had been around Sable Island and watched the horses there graze on the long grass and trot down the sandy shores, the wind fluttering their manes and tails. We had sailed south around the heel of Nova Scotia into the Bay of Fundy and farther south into the Gulf of Maine, into the waters of the United States of America, where the coastal villages’ wooden piers, docks, and moored ships were the same as those back home in Newfoundland. Been past icebergs that were the size of the foothills near Cape Ray. Heck, we had sailed as far east as the Grand Banks, to where all you could see with a spyglass on the horizon was rolling blue in every single direction. But it was in 1941, as war raged across the Atlantic, that *The Waddler* forged home through heavy seas to St. John’s, her hold brimming with cod. And as the gales of November stalked us like a blue shark on a sea lion’s backside, Patty

shared a tale from the Great War that drastically altered the course of my life.

“Pay heed, lad,” said Uncle Patty. He held the wheel true, gazing out into the night. “The German horde was fearless that day at the Battle of Arras. They poured up from their holes. Chargin’ through the rain and mist and smoke as if one-horned demons *crawlin’* from the abyss. Sent by Lucifer himself. Only us Blue Puttees held ‘em back. Wave after wave stormed our line, their rifles tipped with bayonets. Bloodlust in their eyes, screaming *An griff*.”

“What’s it mean?” I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth: to Patty, interruptions might as well have been hurled insults.

He scowled at me and cleared his throat. “It means *attack*, lad. Our Vickers cut them down. Mortars exploded, yet still the Huns charged.” Sheet rain pelted the wheelhouse’s windows. A gust buffeted *The Waddler’s* hull, and she swayed as she rose from a trough atop a roller to an ocean of undulating darkness. Patty pulled long and hard on his briar pipe, the smouldering tobacco illuming his grey whiskers and crooked nose. He was silent a moment before he exhaled a thick smoke that crawled up around his wool toque and hit the tobacco stain on the wooden ceiling. “No time to be scared. Get you killed on a field of combat, it will.”

Patty placed his briar down, and hunching over the wheel, he peered out the window. His eyes slowly narrowed, then he clenched his jaw. “*Hang on, lad*.” I lunged and clutched the steel handrail, bracing myself for a ride just as the ship’s bow began to rise. Patty stared straight ahead. The brass plotters and chart slid off the table, skidded across the floor, and struck the rear wall. Patty’s briar fell next and rolled to my feet. Then a mighty gust hit the starboard hull, rocking the ship to and fro, as she ascended a monster wave.

Patty's wiry frame was unbudging—his legs were rooted like oak trees. The wheel shimmied, and his forearms bulged as he held it. White water sprayed across the deck and pounded the windows, another gust hit the hull, then a loose line lashed the wheelhouse. Patty growled over the chaos and shoved the throttle forward. The diesel's pistons fired like a salvo as *The Waddler* struggled to meet the demand.

All the tales of lost ship and crew swallowed by the Atlantic surged from my memory. I tightened my grip on the rail, a panic coursing through my body.

With the angle of the bow, we would have gazed at the celestial bodies if it were a cloudless night. It felt like we were riding heavenward without the possibility of ever reaching it. Rain machine-gunned the bow windows, a foot from Patty's face. I readied myself for them to implode, for glass shards to slice and gouge our flesh, and for our blood to paint the inside of the wheelhouse. As the wave thrust the ship back in an easterly direction, my guts churned and my heart began to punch against my chest, as if wanting to break free of my body. I shut my eyes, gritted my teeth, and panted as if I had already plunged into the frigid ocean and joined the lost.

As *The Waddler* was on the verge of flipping end over end, and I envisioned Patty and I stuck inside the wheelhouse while the ship sunk into the fathoms, the bow began to dip. And it was then I realized we had crested the monster. I opened my eyes. Patty stood steadfast, chest heaving, as we descended into a wide trough.

"Bloody rogue wave," said Patty, his voice firm. "Y'alright, lad?"

"I'm well," I squeaked: my ability to compose myself was not nearly as developed as Patty's, nor at that time did I believe it ever would be. I released the rail and opened and closed my hands a few times to loosen them up. Patty's posture relaxed, yet his eyes

remained like full moons, unmoving from the ocean before us. “Pass me my briar,” he said.

I stooped and picked up the briar at my feet and tottered over to Patty. He released one hand from the ship’s wheel, and with the nonchalance I admired, he grabbed the briar and took a long pull from the still smouldering tobacco. *The Waddler* steadily resumed her rhythmic rise and fall, nor’easter’s wind swaying her a wee bit. When I returned from tying off the loose line, Patty took out his knife from the sheath on his hip and carved a nick on the wheel beside the eleven others: one for every time he felt he had been close to meeting his maker. It was the third nick since I had been fishing with him.

“Where was I? Ah, yes. A quagmire of mud, blood, and souls. But the order came and the Blue Puttees obeyed. Climbed from the trenches we’d called home for a month. Stepped over bodies. Pushed on by hollers from our chums, our piper, and visions of glory. *By God*, we charged.” He bowed his head, and gave it a wag and tapped his briar against the ship’s wheel and seemed to dwell a moment. “I saw what no creature of God should.”

I thought of the photos I had seen: the twisted bodies with their grinning faces, seemingly petrified in some act—charging or fleeing—and the miles of mud pocked with craters; gapping trenches and shorn tree trunks; and barbed wire stretched across the land like sutures.

“Was there gas?”

“No gas. Cannons. Blood. Bullets. And iron. On that April mornin’ in 1917. Five hundred men—sons, brothers, fathers—charged the German line and ran along the duckboards. Some shot, some blown up, others drowned in the mud and blood. Only a handful made 'er back. Your father led the men—fearless—and fell that day. He made it farther than any soldier . . . the road to

freedom is paved in blood, lad. Some of it ours. *Remember that.* Our family's given *enough* to the British Empire."

Patty blamed my mother's, his sister's, death on the war as well: he believed the grief from losing my father had snuffed out her innocent life. To me, Helen Gerard was only a memory—long brown hair, woollen shirt and white blouse, hanging linen on the clothesline, humming songs. Nothing more. And all I had of my father was the sole photograph of him in uniform before he sailed to Europe and the stories told by Patty. Still, my parents' deaths clung to me like wood smoke to a wool sweater—the very fibre—always present in every scrap, voyage, and challenge. I tasted my tears before I was aware that I was crying. It was too dark for them to be seen, I figured, so I just let them run. A sombre silence then fell between us. Patty's vigilant eyes roved the ocean. I wondered if the same feelings were stirring in him, as I stared out into the night and listened to the sheet rain and *The Waddler's* hull crash on the waves. He had rambled about war, bits and pieces, but neither in such detail nor when clean from the ale and spirits. Why had he chosen then to tell the story—the wolfpacks sinking ships off the coast? Perhaps all the men enlisting to go fight the Axis of Evil had triggered it, or maybe he simply felt it time a son learned of bravery from a father no longer alive to teach. He had never been one to talk of feelings or to explain himself or to listen to anyone do such.

As we continued home through the night, the ocean soothed and the winds softened and Patty told stories about romance and sea monsters, and in between the stories he would load his briar, strike a match, and puff till it glowed. They were stories he had told a hundred times, stories that I relished and that never lost their appeal. And come the blue of early morn, we sighted the beacon from Fort Amherst Lighthouse, signalling that *The Waddler* and her crew had arrived home safely once again.

In the harbour, large hulls jutted from the ocean like looming icebergs with numbers and names like *Britannia* or *Gibraltar* or *Norfolk*, and I could smell rusty steel and fresh paint too. I had never seen that much tonnage in one place. There were merchant ships, preparing for the risky crossing of the Atlantic to bring vital cargo to Britain, and American destroyers and frigates. Ships I had sighted for years, wishing I was aboard, headed for a foreign port and adventure. The American army base at St. John's, the naval base at Argentia, and the air force base at Stephenville had sprung up in a matter of weeks, lifting Newfoundland from poor to flush in under a year, and giving the impression the U.S. was at war, even though it had not yet officially made the declaration.

Throughout the morning, with gulls circling over the smell of cod guts and diving at scraps tossed into the ocean, we unloaded our catch. I listened to the sailors on the pier talking about Nazi coups across Europe and North Africa and other places I had never heard of before. Come noon, I was scrubbing the deck when a British merchant sailor climbed atop a crate on the pier as if it was a podium. He waved his arms and called out until a group of a dozen or so sailors and fishermen formed around him, then he began to speak. I leaned the deck brush against the wheelhouse, climbed over the gunwale, and leapt onto the pier and strolled over to listen. The men around the crate were silent, looking up at him as if his words had become images and those images were being stamped into their eyes.

"...and the RAF has staved off the brunt of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain," he said. "But bombs continue to rain down and raze whole city blocks in London. Killing men, women and children. If Great Britain falls, North America is sure to fall." When he finished, the men shot questions in such a frenzy that I could not make a single one out. The sailor hopped down and began to confer with them.

Gazing east, I recalled the story of the Spanish town Guernica. I pictured the Luftwaffe's fighter planes and bombers emerging from the ashen clouds over the harbour, the fighters strafing St. John's streets, and people running, wailing, and screaming. The bombers dropping their payloads on homes and shops. Everything I had known for years turning to fiery rubble and death.

A holler from Patty jostled me back to reality. He was standing on the *The Waddler's* deck. He gestured toward the brush and shook his head, his smoking briar hanging from his mouth. Nodding, I raised my hand and gave a wave. As I hurried back to finish cleaning the ship, the possibility of a Nazi invasion seemed more real to me than ever. And it was right then, I made the decision to enlist, to drive the Huns back into their holes—back to Lucifer himself.

After we finished up in the harbour, I headed to The Church Lads' Brigade Armoury, home of The Blue Puttees. It was situated on Harvey Road in the military district of St. John's. Ever since I moved from Cape Ray to St. John's to live with Patty, I had watched parades there, listening to the pipe-band's drums and skirling bagpipes. I marched up to the armoury's white facade and towers, and arrived at its heavy, wooden double door under the concrete archway on which I knocked four times, each time louder than the previous. A moment passed, and then I heard a latch unlocking and one side of the door opened. A young clerk greeted me, shook my hand, and asked me my business. After I informed him that I wanted to enlist, he led me into the armoury. There was a large indoor parade square with two large rectangles, one inside the other, their lines painted in white. On the other side of the armoury there was a door on which FIRING RANGE was stenciled in red. I could see flags on the right-hand side: British, French, American. Laughter

echoed from somewhere. The clerk led me to the right and then left down a long hallway past one solid wooden door. He stopped at the second and rapped quickly twice, the echo resounding in the hallway. From inside a gruff voice ordered us to enter. The clerk smiled and winked, and headed back down the hallway. I entered the door and was greeted by the smell of stale tobacco smoke and a hint of aftershave. A grizzled old officer sat across a barren desk with a shellacked top, his hands steepled in front of him. He ran me up and down with his grey eyes as I shut the door and walked toward him. The hefty cluster of medals on his olive green uniform would have made him a good anchor. On the walls there were photos of ships and servicemen, and a bookcase was set against the wall behind him to his left, stacked full. And against it leaned a flagpole with what looked to be a furred Union Jack on the end.

“I want to enlist in Her Majesty’s army, sir,” I said, hands clasped behind my back.

“Have a seat.” He gestured to a wooden chair in front of the desk. “Why do you want to join?”

“Do my part to stop the Nazis,” I said, sitting down on the wooden chair.

He grinned as he opened his desk drawer and removed some papers, and then slid them over the desktop. “We can use more brave young men such as yourself. What’s your name?”

“Thomas Paul Gerard.”

He paused a moment and nodded a few times, tapped his pen on the desk.

“You’ll make a fine Blue Puttee in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, my boy. Call me Officer Muldar.” He extended a hand and we shook, and I felt thick calluses, the kind only earned by hard work.

“How tall are you, lad?”

“Five foot eleven,” I said. “Half inch taller with my boots on.”

His right eyebrow rose and he jotted down my height on the enlistment papers. "How many stone?"

I thought of the fish scales on the pier. "Eleven, five. Give or take."

"Schooling?" he asked, continuing to fill out the papers.

"My uncle taught me arithmetic, how to read charts, maps," I said, and gestured to his bookshelf. "And books, I read lots of books and newspapers, too."

"Way of living?"

"Fisherman, on my uncle's boat. *The Waddler*."

"You're blood to Patrick Burl," he said. And I was unsure from the way he had said it if he had meant it as a question, so I simply gave a quick yes. He grunted and rubbed his chin, handed me the ink pen and stabbed his finger at three lines on the paper, and told me to sign my name.

I scrawled my signature on the lines without reading a single typed word.

He scooped the papers up and slipped them back into the drawer as naturally as I baited hooks on *The Waddler's* long line and said, "You begin basic training tomorrow. Be back here at 0600 hours, get your kit in order."

"Yes, Officer Muldar." I saluted.

"The Huns will not subjugate the world with men such as you committed to the fight for freedom," he said, his voice taking on a Churchill tone. "Say goodbye to your family and friends. And your lady if you have one." He rested his fingers on the desktop and leaned forward. His grey eyes widened, alight. "It may be some time before you return."

We shook hands again. I stood, pushed the chair against the desk, and went to the door. As I turned the doorknob, he spoke softly: "Your father would be proud."

I paused, my back to him, feeling the cool brass of the door-knob in my fingers. “Sir, my father died at the Battle of Arras.”

“I know, son. A tough man and brave soldier.”

When I exited the armoury, I felt raw yet relieved, as if I had cleaned and dressed a wound on my body. I wondered how my father and Patty had felt back in 1916 after they enlisted, as I strode along Harvey Road into a light snowfall falling from a darkening sky, toward my own frontline, not in Europe or Africa, but right there in St. John's.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the smoky haze, as thick as harbour fog, in Cale's Beer Parlour. A haven for townies, loggers, and all those who earned a living from the ocean. Everyone fresh off the dole with war-effort pay to spend. The Tabernacle Trio, a folk band I had heard many a time, was playing an unfamiliar tune and the patrons followed along with claps, stomps, and drunken tongues:

“Gone to Russia to find some oil, in a fountain he will boil . . . round, round, Hitler's grave . . . round, round, we go . . .”

I spotted my uncle through the smoke and revelry at his corner table, his back to the wall. Gesticulating, briar in hand, he was in the midst of narrating a tale to a spellbound audience. Wending around some jiggling patrons, I made my way to his table. Patty had yet to see me when he thudded his mug down, sloshing ale. He then lifted his arms above his head: “. . . it came like Neptune's spear risin' from the depths to take *The Waddler* and her crew to a watery grave—a *two-hundred-footer*. A wall of water. A leviathan, gentleman.”

He snatched his mug, took a deep swig, and hunched forward, gazing around the table. “Didn't bat an eye. My nephew and I rode—”

“Stop your *balderdash*,” yelled a man from two tables over. “Just like the time you caught a mermaid on your long line. Everyone knows you're full of—”

“Only thing everyone knows, Ben, is your tart’s ways when you’re gone to sea,” hollered Patty, springing out of his chair. Francine was a French lass who had been attached to Ben ever since her father had gone missing while lobstering in his skiff a few years before. She was half Ben’s age and true to Patty’s claim, as I am sure a good many in Cale’s could attest. I cringed. The parlour silenced and the band stopped playing.

When words lashed in Cale’s, a fisticuffs or two usually followed. If provoked, Patty could dole out a brute licking. And neither man nor nature stood much of a chance against him in a clash. Watched him bite a man’s ear clean off, wash it down with ale as the poor fella writhed and moaned on the floor, covering his remaining ear, hoping Patty was not hankering for dessert, no doubt. A chair’s feet scraped on the wooden floor. Someone coughed. All eyes were fixed on Patty.

Ben slammed his mug down, knocking over the drinks at his table. His three chums were unsure of what they should do, their heads swiveling around, trying to read the mood of the patrons, perhaps the way their favour was leaning. As he pumped his fist at Patty, Ben’s eyes bulged out of his red, veiny face. “I’ve known you for twenty years, Patty. But you ever talk about Francine that way again . . . and . . .” He sprung up, kicked over his chair, and stormed across the parlour and out the door, tailed by a cloud of smoke. A man shut the door. It was silent for a moment, then The Tabernacle Trio stalled up with a song. Patrons clashed mugs; they began to stomp and clap as if nothing had happened.

“There you are, lad,” said Patty. He leaned over and pulled out a chair for me, hops and pipe tobacco strong on his breath. Patty’s chum, John, greeted me with a stiff handshake. Patty poured me a mug of ale.

“Where the hell you been?” asked Patty.

“C.L.B. Armoury.” I sat down.

“Whatcha doin’ there?” He took a swig.

The Trio’s fiddler screeched to life, so I leaned toward him and spoke loudly: “I enlisted. Begin basic training tomorrow at 0600—”

Patty’s mouth burst open, showering the table and John with ale. “Are you bloody daft? Tell me you’re jokin’?”

“Jesus almighty, Patty. Couldn’t you’ve aimed that spout down?” said John. He shook his head, mopping his cheek with a sleeve.

“Let me speak to my nephew,” said Patty, ignoring the grievance. “Family affairs, you see.”

John got up, and headed to the bar, mug in hand.

Patty’s eyes narrowed. And I pretended not to notice while he studied me, while holding his briar in his fingertips, chewing on the stem, as he did when mulling something over. “I promised your mother I’d look after you as she lay on her deathbed.” The vibrations in the floorboards made it impossible to tell if I was shaking or not.

“It’s my *choice*,” I said. “I’m a man. I made the decision and I’ll live with it.”

“That’s the problem. Tommy. You got a scurvy dog’s chance at living *if* you go over there. All those books got you hungry for adventure. You don’t need to go to war. We can head farther out. We can try new fishin’ grounds. Even return to the Banks,” he said excitedly. “In a few years you’ll own half *The Waddler*. We’ll be partners. Me and you—or you and me. We’ll bring catches home so heavy they’ll call us the scourge of the Atlantic. Regular old pirates we’ll be.”

“I’m going.” I clenched my jaw as I had seen Patty do all my life.

“Our family’s given *enough* blood to the British Empire. We’ve been over this and over it. It’s not our war.”

“It is our war. It’s every British son and daughter’s war. It’s every free man, woman, and child’s war. The Nazis aren’t going to

leave. U-boats are sinking ships in our waters.” I waved at the ceiling. “Next the Luftwaffe will be dropping bombs.”

He hammered the table, his face fierce. He pointed the stem of his briar at me. “One more soldier won’t make a difference.”

“What about the two who left here in 1916—did they make a difference?”

“I should have known you’d be as unpredictable and bold as your father. Almost the same words came from his mouth. And I bit. Hook, line, and sinker. Saw what no man ever should. Watched your father cut down, couldn’t get to him before the crows stole his eyes and flies laid eggs in the holes. Watched your mother fade to nothin’.” He shook his head back and forth and he sighed a great sigh, as if he had just seen a great tragedy. We both picked up our mugs and began to drink, only feet away yet fathoms apart.

Over the last year, he had to have known there was a yearning in me. Young, bold, proud, determined. The questions I would ask sailors, or others we knew who had enlisted. It was then I understood why he had decided to tell me the tale of Arras. Because he knew I was on the cusp of enlisting. He could see it. He loved me and wanted to protect me from the atrocities he had experienced, what had killed my father.

We sat silently as John jiggered with a buxom lass of ill repute and the music and merriment carried on around us. Patty was motionless, his briar smokeless at arm’s length.

A good time passed before Patty ordered two more flagons of ale. It was not until we were into the second one before the mood seemed calmer between us and our tongues began to loosen. We spoke no more of war. Instead, we reminisced about adventure and bravery as we drank late into the night in Cale’s smoky and raucous parlour with the rugged men who braved the elements and the women who braved those men.

In the early morning dark, I walked along Harvey Road, blinking sleep from my eyes. A heavy snow was falling, swirling about, and a gale from the harbour whistled along the cobbled streets and narrow laneways, carrying wood smoke from chimneys and the blare from a ship's horn. The stone homes rose two or three stories on either side of the road, their windowpanes frosty. I imagined people inside wrapped in their quilts and wool blankets, as I had been an hour ago before Patty woke me up and hugged me, saying farewell.

A few minutes along, the armoury's towers appeared through the dark sky and falling snow. As I got closer, I could make out the bagpipes skirling faintly. Then I thought I heard footsteps crunching softly behind me. When I turned around, I saw only my vanishing tracks on Harvey Road, the road to freedom.

S.D. Gale is a writer and English tutor in British Columbia, Canada. When he is not writing or mentoring men with brain injuries, he is reading classic and contemporary literature. His grandfather was a Korean War veteran. His father and uncle are veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces; his father served in Operation Desert Storm and Bosnia, and his uncle served in Afghanistan. "Road to Freedom" is dedicated to his grandfather, Gerard Gale, whose Airborne wings have inspired more dreams than he could have imagined.

Friendly Fire

By Bruce Meredith

A light danced around me, illuminating a patch of cropped rubber trees before settling on my face. At ten yards, I recognized the lanky silhouette aiming a flashlight at my head.

“Walker, the Colonel wants to see you now,” Simpson said, trying to make his high-pitched voice sound authoritative. “And he’s pissed.”

Three months into his job, Specialist 5 Jeffery Simpson, the company clerk, had become a perfectly calibrated barometer, able to detect small changes of pressure in Lieutenant Colonel Melvin Otis, the battalion commander, and Gene Gatlin, his administrative NCO. As a Spec 4 battalion law clerk, I valued his weather alerts, especially today.

“What’s the problem?” Simpson’s flashlight followed me as I knelt to check the lacing on my right boot, causing the butt of my M-16 rifle to hit the ground. Just above my ankle, I could see a slight bulge. I rechecked the safety and glanced towards the solitary, pilotless LOH helicopter next to me. The light shot sky-

ward and then disappeared as Simpson stuck the flashlight into a pocket. Within seconds, he joined me on the concrete slab that served as the waiting area for helicopter transport.

“Not sure,” Simpson said, resting his hand on my shoulder as he tried to catch his breath. “Gatlin was in the old man’s office. As soon as he got out, he ordered me to bring your ass to headquarters ASAP. Two MPs were pulling up. Word is two radio guys shot a gun bunny last night.”

“Jeffery, I’ve got a court-martial at 0800 in Nha Trang. Lieutenant March will have my ass if I’m late.”

“The Colonel wants you at headquarters now. I don’t give a shit about March.”

“I’ll be right behind you. I need to get my files together.” I moved to a metal bench, sat down, and pretended to inventory three manila folders that had been wedged into a frayed copy of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I bent over and rubbed my hand just above the top of my boots. I could hear the slight crackle of cellophane that contained what I was assured was an ounce of prime quality marijuana. Even a novice supplier would have made contingency plans to dispose of the dope, but I never dealt and rarely smoked. I was just helping out Lieutenant March, my new friend.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight,” Simpson said. “Never knew you were so goddamned important. Besides, March is an asshole. Gatlin can’t stand the guy.”

I’d first met Lieutenant March when I was assigned to assist him with his first summary court martial. A ROTC business major from New Orleans, Benjamin March was a small, wiry guy who spoke with a beguiling combination of his father’s Boston and his mother’s Savannah accents. He had become an officer because he thought it would catapult him into a top law school and then success in business. He’d spent a year in artillery in Germany before talking his

way into becoming a non-JAG legal officer. Like me, he hated the war, but hadn't taken to the streets to protest it. I liked March because he treated me as his equal and deferred to my legal advice. Even though March had a shiny silver bar, I outranked him in the world that mattered most to him. I had completed a year at a highly rated law school. In order to get that additional year of school, I'd had to enlist and make a non-binding promise to be an officer. I was sent for artillery training with committed officer candidates, but on the eve of OCS training, I disappointed my father and exercised my right to keep my two-year enlistment and follow rather than give orders. Lieutenant March was the path not taken.

Drinking at a bar with March after a court martial ten days earlier, I'd bragged about how easy it was to get dope in Ban Me Thuot and he'd begged me to bring him some, claiming he couldn't trust his fellow officers. Helping him, I thought, would be easy, and ensure regular trips to Nha Trang's white beaches and shadowy bars. A week later, a Vietnamese woman who pressed our fatigues gave me the grass for a pack of Kools and a dollar bill.

"We need to haul ass," said Simpson, squinting at his watch.

For a second, I debated whether to tell Simpson about the dope, but I didn't trust him. Simpson drank a lot and talked a lot when he drank. The story would get back to Gatlin and the Colonel within a week. Proof or no proof, they'd have my ass.

Even in a place where joints could be substituted for poker chips in some hootches, smoking dope still carried risks. Soldiers got busted, even though most officers and NCOs did not actively look for weed. No need to broadcast problems up the chain of command. There was a risk of being stoned during an enemy attack, but the Viet Cong had little reason to waste ammunition on a battalion headquarters where typewriters greatly outnumbered our small 105 cannons. I suspected our one prior mortar attack had been a practice exercise for Viet Cong rookies. The VC's real interest was the air base

five clicks east that housed attack helicopters and the big 155s. On night guard duty, I would watch, at a safe distance, the nighttime volleys of enemy mortar rounds and return artillery fire in the eastern sky. On some of those nights, the smell of marijuana lured me back to late spring concerts on the Union Terrace at the University of Wisconsin.

Distrust of America and its current holy war had become a religion for many, and for many of the GIs on fire bases around Ban Me Thuot, smoking weed was its chief sacrament. Just as with traditional worship, religious fervor varied. There were atheists who hated dope, mostly lifers who drank beer or bourbon. There were the zealots, who took communion daily from shared joints, and a group like me, who limited their participation to the Sabbath and established holy days, inhaling just enough incense to provide solemnity and group acceptance. Last week's events should have reinforced the risks of our new religion.

Our supply sergeant had procured *Night of the Living Dead* and constructed a huge outdoor screen by sewing several bed sheets together. News spread and soldiers from the field and outlying bases found excuses to make the pilgrimage to celebrate the occasion. Some of my friends in fire direction control, my actual MOS, convinced me a few tokes were needed to prepare for a zombie invasion, but the dope made me edgy as I watched zombies encircle the dilapidated building into which the living had fled. I felt real terror as the living dead piled against each other moaning for human flesh. The crowd took sides. Some shouted out tactical suggestions to the human defenders while a smaller but louder contingent urged the zombies onward. I was too stoned to take sides.

As the movie neared its climax, a zombie hand broke through a window, and some defenders moved to the top of an isolated house and began firing and throwing gasoline at the marauders. At that instant, a mortar exploded just outside our perimeter and I heard machine gun fire whistle above my head. The zombies were real.

Sirens ordered us to our designated places on the perimeter. Too stoned to focus, I searched for my weapon before realizing I'd left it in my hooch. By the time I located my weapon and headed to the perimeter, the night had grown quiet and sirens sounded the all clear. The sheets had been pulled down, leaving us to argue whether the humans survived.

Before falling asleep, we debated what had happened in those few minutes. Some argued that it was a probe to test our defenses. Others speculated that some secret military initiative had made us useful and therefore vulnerable. The next day we learned there had been no enemy attack. The night's fireworks had started when our area's indigenous Montagnards had become enraged over an incident involving an ARVN soldier and a Montagnard woman and showed their indignation by lobbing mortars at the ARVN base next to us. The ARVN soldiers had returned machine gun fire until each side's officers stepped in and ended the honor feud. Two of our soldiers had been injured, one severely enough to require a medevac. That night my friends concluded we needed a follow-up service but I declined. I debated radioing Lieutenant March to tell him that I couldn't bring the marijuana, but my boast now felt like an order.

"Walker, quit sightseeing and move your ass," Simpson said, as I searched for escape routes. I spied Chief Warrant Officer Johnson, my pilot, lumbering to the chopper pad and sipping a cup of coffee.

"Simpson, I need to go back and tell Johnson to radio March that I'll be late."

"Forget March, he's just a fucking lieutenant. We work for a lieutenant colonel. It's the zombies you need to fear," Simpson said, extending his hands downward, dragging his feet and making loud moaning sounds. "I bet you don't even know how to kill one." He turned and looked me in the face. "Focus on the head. Body shots just slow them down."

I could now make out battalion headquarters and Simpson picked up the pace.

“The MPs are still there. I can see their jeep lights,” Simpson said. “Someone’s in deep shit.”

I could make out Gatlin talking to the MPs. He’d been a linebacker on his high school football team in Tennessee before he got into trouble and talked his way into the army to avoid expulsion and jail. His enlistment had restored his honor and his father’s approval. He’d gained a little weight but hadn’t lost too much speed in the ensuing ten years. Gatlin had selected me to replace the battalion law clerk sent stateside when his mother and father were severely injured in a car crash. I’d been trained to calculate the trajectories of artillery shells, but at a battalion meeting three days after my arrival, I shouted out my proficiency in law and typing. The latter was only marginally true but one year of law school already had taught me that marginally true was often good enough.

Gatlin didn’t care for me. I’d lived a pampered city life. He’d had to fight to survive. I liked to read and had never hunted or fished. He hummed Hank Williams; I listened to Crosby, Stills and Nash. He loved his country; I hated the war. Our biggest difference, however, was that he had experience commanding an artillery line. I knew lots of words but had no useful skills.

Things had started to change one day when I saw Gatlin frowning, humped over his desk studying a book to help him pass his GED, a prerequisite for promotion to E-7 and better jobs. I asked if I could help. As smart as he was, he couldn’t get the math, just couldn’t understand why multiplying a negative by another negative suddenly made everything positive. I’d spent the summer after graduation teaching algebra to inner city kids and soon discovered the same strategies I used there worked with Gatlin. Within days, he was getting the answers right. A month later he passed his test.

After that, we had an understanding. I had helped him advance in the army; he would get me through it.

I looked around and saw my salvation, an outdoor latrine, less than a hundred yards away. "Simpson, take my files. I need to piss."

"You can hold it," Simpson said, sounding like my father.

I was ready to ditch Simpson and dump my dope in the crapper, when we saw Gatlin waving to us. "Get your asses down here," he bellowed.

I glanced at my lacing and picked up the pace. The mud filled with gravel as we approached the windowless, green-on-green aluminum building that served as battalion headquarters. Sergeant Gatlin was talking to the MPs standing in front of our battalion's large wooden marquee, surrounded by two diminutive palm trees. The marquee featured an old cannon resting on our motto, "The Enforcers." A barbet chirped its incessant high-pitched mating call, and I could smell our shit being burned outside of the latrine, an assignment sometimes imposed in lieu of formal discipline. Gatlin dismissed the MPs and turned towards us.

"I got him, sergeant," Simpson said as if presenting his bounty to the sheriff. I brushed through my hair and tucked my shirt in.

"Walker, the old man wants to see you now. This is serious. None of your college-boy jokes." Gatlin eyed me and shook his head. He hated my mustache, but it was within regulations, just a sliver compared to hefty, unkempt bristles on the sunburned faces of those coming in from the field.

"And leave your weapon at the door. I don't want a fucking clerk accidentally shooting my CO." He put his hand on my back and led me into Colonel Johnson's office. I saluted, took my helmet off, and stood at attention. Gatlin stood at the back of the room.

"At ease, Walker," the Colonel said, setting his glasses on the wooden desk. "Walker, there was a fight at a poker game and a soldier got shot."

As I had expected, another friendly fire investigation. They came in multiple shapes: soldiers shooting each other, sometimes by accident, other times by design, sometimes a confusing mixture. Friendly fire incidents took more of my time than dealing with standard infractions like missing assignments, insubordination, or using drugs and they were much harder to handle. Serious stuff like fragging was handled by the Military Police and real Judge Advocate General lawyers, but even my routine cases could produce significant prison time back in the States.

Investigating these incidents reminded me of a paranormal scientist investigating reports of ghosts; it was risky trying to quantify something your bosses didn't believe existed. Well-disciplined troops aren't supposed to shoot each other, but unlike the ghost sounds, blood didn't vanish at sunrise. There had been two incidents last week. One was the military equivalent to a Three Stooges' fight; the other had turned deadly serious.

The Colonel liked that I could soften the official narratives, but there were more significant pressures. Friendly fire incidents implied a dereliction of command that could kill careers, but ascertaining responsibility and assigning blame could be tricky. When trouble arose, the jockeying reminded me of Chutes and Ladders, a board game I'd played as a child. In the Vietnam version, individual officers and NCOs tried to move to safety by finding a ladder to climb above responsibility or a chute to push someone down. The lower the rank, the more slippery the ladder and the steeper the chute. I had become a confidante of the Colonel because I'd figured out that the trick to the game was to get to the finish line by travelling one of two distinct routes: you could create a twilight where the players' markers were difficult to pinpoint and responsibility and blame hard to discern; or else find a way to ascertain clear guilt, offer a scapegoat and put the board back in its box. Today, my goal was to hide my marker.

“Is the soldier all right?” I asked, hoping the incident would be minor and I would be dismissed quickly.

“The soldier wasn’t hurt too bad, probably an accident,” the Colonel said. “Everyone was drunk and horsing around. That’s not our problem. When Gatlin went to investigate, he smelled marijuana all over the fucking place. Goddamnit, Walker, this isn’t Haight-Ashbury. We’re in a war. I can’t have it.”

“What would you like me to do, sir?”

“I need to put the fear of God back in the troops. You and Gatlin need to conduct a search of Bravo Company. I want it done by the book, and I want the court martials to stand. I’ll accompany you.”

“Yes, sir.” I couldn’t tell him I had no idea how to do a search, but I knew soldiers had almost no legal rights. Most anything the CO did that wasn’t blatantly discriminatory would stand and that, as well as the package in my pants, was what terrified me.

“Sir, I need to use the bathroom.”

“Do it quickly,” Gatlin said from behind me.

Headquarters had one of our base’s few indoor latrines. A hole in a wooden board served as a toilet, with a short wooden divider separating it from the metal urinal. I could sprinkle the dope down the toilet and throw the bag in the trash. I pushed the door open, mumbling my strategy.

“Walker, what’s bothering you this morning?” came the voice of Major Alexander, our Executive officer, seated on the toilet, a section of Stars and Stripes on the floor.

“Just thinking about my day, sir.” I moved to the urinal and tried to pee, praying for the sound of toilet paper being pulled from its canister.

“Let’s get going, Walker,” Gatlin yelled. The major picked up another section of the paper.

Now was my time to confess and seek mercy. A confession might avoid anything on a permanent record, but any deal would

require me to tell how I got the marijuana and for whom it was intended. Even then, mercy was not assured. A junior law clerk might make the perfect scapegoat. I had only one option: to exude so much confidence that no one would question my integrity. I looked in the mirror and made sure I looked like a soldier, cleaned up my boots with a paper towel, pushed the cellophane bag to conceal any bulge, and walked into the awaiting ambush.

I grabbed a pen and note pad. The Colonel fastened his holster and led the procession out of headquarters to Bravo Company, two football fields away. Gatlin walked just behind him, and then the MPs. I straggled behind and calculated the possible damage if I were caught: a summary court martial, a felony conviction, a ruined legal career, my parents' painful stares, and a new job in the jungle. All for an ounce of dope I never would inhale.

After work, over a beer with friends, I'd mock many of the hapless individuals who became the subjects of military justice, but at night when I couldn't sleep, I would imagine writing their stories. Some had seemed wired for failure, but many were victims of minor miscalculations, chance encounters that exaggerated small character flaws, or simple bad luck. Contrary to what my father had taught me, random events wrote a person's biography as much as character and planning. Grunt folklore claimed that either there was a bullet with your name on it, or there wasn't. I felt like I had autographed mine.

"Walker, get up here, and tell us what to do," said the Colonel as we approached the barracks and scattered hooches that comprised Bravo company, a motley mix of line artillerymen and some combat engineers.

"Sir, if they haven't left for work, I would search their surroundings. If they were smoking last night, they may have left their marijuana in plain view." Plain view was the stateside exception that allowed a warrantless search. That doctrine had little applicability to

Vietnam, but it was the only ladder I could spot. My biggest worry was a lethal chute: if our men thought I was trying to bust them, I'd become a target.

As we approached the barracks, a rectangular Rube Goldberg mix of old lumber, aluminum and mosquito netting housing twenty or so soldiers, Gatlin moved to the front. He pushed open the screen door.

“Attention!” he bellowed, as the Colonel and MPs followed him in.

“Last night a soldier was shot, by his own troops. The smell of marijuana was so strong the Viet Cong could have sniffed our location ten clicks away. Sergeant Gatlin will conduct a search of the barracks. Specialist Walker will assist him.”

I hovered in the background, contemplating the Army's logic. Two drunks accidentally shoot another soldier and we look for marijuana. No need, however, to understand the Army's logic, just to survive it.

“If anyone has anything they don't want me to find,” the Colonel continued, “you can give it to the MPs now and I'll treat you leniently. Otherwise, I'll throw the book at you.” The Colonel then turned and left the barracks.

Everyone remained at attention. The soldiers stared at each other. A tall acned soldier looked like he was about to cry before moving to his duffel bags and pulling out a small bag.

“You did the right thing, soldier,” Gatlin said. The MPs swept in.

A Mexican-American soldier pulled a joint from his pants pocket. An MP cuffed the soldiers and escorted them out of the building. Tomorrow, I would find out if they had made the right choice. At the moment, the question was whether their surrender had provided the necessary fear of the Lord or had only whetted the Army's appetite for additional scapegoats.

The Sergeant moved down the line. Most soldiers had cots and duffel bags, but the more permanent residents had constructed beds and storage shelves. I decided to take my cues from Gatlin. He spotted an unshaven soldier with crumpled fatigues.

“Walker, dump his duffel bag and search his belongings.” I emptied the bag, producing a messy mixture of clothes, personal hygiene products, coins, some pictures, and lots of letters. I decided not to mention the plain view doctrine. I pushed around his clothing but did not look inside his socks. Gatlin didn’t say anything. Instead, he looked at the pile of letters.

“Got a girlfriend back home, soldier?” Gatlin said.

“Not anymore, Sergeant. The letters are from my mother.”

“Do you write her back, soldier?”

“Every week, Sergeant,” the soldier stammered.

“You’re a good son. Mothers like to hear from their kids,” Gatlin said, turning toward the group. “You all need to write home. Mothers worry a lot. They also like it if their kids look good, not like a raccoon jumping out of a garbage can. Understand, soldier?”

We were halfway through. The sergeant moved on to a black soldier, a Specialist 4. He had a bed and mattress as well as a makeshift chest of drawers. “Walker, search his stuff.”

I pulled up his mattress and sifted quickly through his belongings: nothing incriminating, except for three packs of Kools. Gatlin moved next to him and eyed the cigarette packs. Menthol-flavored Kools were the kind preferred by black soldiers, but also by the Vietnamese, producing the highest marijuana-for-cigarette exchange rate. Joints were often rolled into cigarettes and hidden in cigarette packages.

“Been smoking long, soldier?”

“Since high school, Sergeant.”

“Better quit, the Surgeon General says it’ll kill you.”

Gatlin picked up the pace. I could see the finish line and, for the first time began to relax when he walked towards a well-dressed soldier and looked him up and down.

“Carrying something in your pants, soldier?” I saw the bulge in his fatigues and glanced at my right pant leg. “Common place to hide dope. Walker, check it out.”

My face grew flush. I knelt and felt several packets just above his boots. “Pull up his pants leg, Walker,” Gatlin ordered.

My cellophane bag felt like a live grenade as I yanked his fatigues from his boots. Three packages of condoms fell to the ground. The rest of the soldiers grimaced, trying to hide smiles.

“Big day planned, soldier?”

“I wanted to be prepared, Sergeant.”

“Must have been a Boy Scout, Specialist.” The sergeant grabbed the condoms. “No merit badges tonight. If I smell marijuana again, we’ll be back!” Gatlin turned and led the procession out. As we headed back to headquarters, Gatlin turned to me. “You can go to your court martial, Walker, but tell Lieutenant March there’s no reason an officer can’t handle matters by himself.”

As Gatlin left, Simpson ran up beside me. “You left your files in the office,” he said.

“Thanks Jeffery. I need to move. Johnson’s been there for almost an hour.”

Simpson followed me to the chopper pad, demanding to know what had happened. I told him to ask Gatlin or just make something up like he usually did.

“Walker, get your butt on board,” Chief Warrant Officer Johnson yelled. The chopper’s blades sputtered and engaged. “I’ve got things to do in Nha Trang, and we might take some detours.”

I jumped into the chopper’s back seat, put my M-16 on the floor and set the files next to me. Simpson flipped me the bird as the chopper pulled away.

“Not feeling social today?” Johnson shouted over the pulsing hum of the rotary blades.

“Just a bad day, need room to work,” I said, tightening my seat belt. Johnson put on his headphones and announced his departure as we embarked on the hour trip to Nha Trang.

Ordinarily, Johnson and I shared office gossip. Today, I silently surveyed the lush jungle as we cruised above the war. Although a few law clerks had been shot down, most trips resembled amusement rides, a few sharp turns and dips creating an illusion of risk. I tried to keep my mind off the morning events by reviewing the files of those scheduled to receive military justice: a one-day AWOL, an ugly bar fight, possession of marijuana, all of which could produce felony convictions and the ensuing collateral damage. These soldiers’ best hope was that the Army’s prosecutor had made afternoon plans.

After I finished with the files, I sat back and surveyed the jungle. Since the raids into Cambodia had slowed, the Viet Cong and American troops had started shadow boxing. Three years after Tet, it was as if the combatants had whispered the end of the play to each other and didn’t want to risk their lives before the curtain fell. And when the Viet Cong withheld fire, we started shooting ourselves.

The helicopter moved as if floating through a graceful helix. Suddenly, I was pushed forward by a quick dip, followed by a sharp bank that threw me against the window. I thought I heard a bullet hit the steel casing just behind me. My files scattered on the floor. I hoped my breakfast wouldn’t follow.

“Hang on, Walker, we’re going up.” The chopper pulled up and began to weave. “We’re going back for some intel. Could be a VC company, need to see if they’re worth a gunship.” The helicopter circled back down in sharp random circles. We had volunteered to walk point and entice fire, and I felt like an older student had taped a “hit me” sign on my back. We circled for five minutes, but no one accepted our invitation to take a shot.

“Shit. They’re onto us,” Johnson barked. He pulled the helicopter back up. “No medals today. You can go back to sleep.”

I gathered the files from the floor. The nuns had trained me to see bad events as divine warnings. Today’s was straight from the Old Testament. When my nerves had settled, I again checked my package. Twenty minutes later we landed just outside of Nha Trang where a PFC was waiting to chauffeur me to my court martials.

“Nice job, Chief,” I said, as I gathered my files, “even if you almost got me killed.” In that instant, I felt as if I had managed something heroic, if only as a bystander.

“I’ll probably get a second chance,” Johnson said, as another chief warrant officer pulled up and waved Johnson into his jeep. “See you at 1600 hours. Be on time for a change.”

The private drove me through the palm-laced streets of Nha Trang. Near the beach, we reached the main office of the artillery command for II Corps that had once housed the French. I could feel the cooling breeze from the South China Sea. The jeep stopped near a small building behind the main complex.

“Lieutenant March told me to get him when you arrived,” said the private first class. “Wait here. I think the hearings may have started.” A few minutes later, the private remerged.

“He’ll call a recess soon.”

March appeared ten minutes later. “Sorry I’m late, sir. Had a difficult morning, took some fire on the way in.” I didn’t mention the search.

“No problem, looks like all but one will settle,” March said, ignoring my near hit. “I may not need you at all. It’s an easy case. I can manage the official summary.”

“Which one’s still on?” I said, wondering if I should sit in to pass the time.

“The marijuana case. The soldier claims it wasn’t his dope, another soldier set him up.”

“Why not a plea deal, push it under the rug? And he might be telling the truth. I’ve seen it happen. He’s thirty days short.”

“Not sure I can,” said March. “Two weeks ago, an order came down from II Corps to crack down. Word’s getting back home about all the drugs, and it’s making it seem that no one over here cares if we win. Just last week, two officers got busted. A high school infantry OCS idiot reported them. I hate those guys. No common sense.”

“Sir, it’s a summary court martial, we create the record. We don’t have to ruin his life.”

“The brass and JAG are on my ass. I need a stiff sentence,” March said, displaying no hint of personal conflict.

I looked around and decided to play my trump card, aware that it could backfire. “Sir, it’s a perfect day and I have an ounce of marijuana above my boots.”

March stared at me. I could tell he was debating whether my suggestion was a show of friendship or a threat. “I’ll talk to the prosecutor,” he said.

“Sir, I have a suggestion. Everyone might be happy if you bust him and give him a disciplinary transfer. Let him burn shit for his last month.”

I killed time by finding a makeshift courtyard and pacing around the two benches underneath large palm trees. The events of the day began to make a perverse kind of sense. Headquarters had turned up the heat so Otis needed to show a response and March needed a safer supplier. Gatlin was ordered to provide the few sacrificial offerings, but made sure the Army got the minimum.

March returned and ended my speculation. “Everyone liked your idea. The guy will burn shit.”

“Well, sir, there’s a lot of shit over here that needs to be burned.” I suspected this deal had cemented some other soldier’s unforgiving sentence, but I had done what I could to contain the war’s reach.

“So, John, do you have my package?”

“Let’s go the beach, sir. It’s safer. Do you have a pack of cigarettes?”

“No, why?”

“Put the dope behind your cigarettes. No one will look there.”

We went to the beach and bought two beers, and I transferred the marijuana. It was undamaged by the day’s events. We had our usual conversations about the war, law school, and Army life, but Lieutenant March and his silver bar had lost their luster. I was early for my flight back.

The next morning, Gatlin greeted me as I entered the office. “Johnson told me you guys took some fire.”

“Just a little, Sergeant,” I said. “Sometimes I think we should put an inscription on my helicopter, let the enemy know there’s just a law clerk on board.”

Gatlin smiled and shook his head. “Big mistake, Walker. Our own troops will figure it out, and they’re much better shots.”

Bruce Meredith grew up in St. Louis, spending summers ushering at Sportsmen Park, where he watched Stan Musial play his last game. He studied law and sociology at the University of Wisconsin until the US Army intervened and sent him to Fort Leonard Wood in June of 1969. In June of 1970 he was sent to Vietnam, where he spent most of his time as a law clerk in Ban Me Thuot and a Military Intelligence clerk in Nha Trang. After returning from Vietnam, he finished law school and served as a law clerk for the federal judge assigned to the Gainesville Eight trial, in which the US Justice Department prosecuted and acquitted eight Vietnam veterans for conspiracy to violently disrupt the 1972 Republican convention. He began to write fiction after retiring from his legal position. He wishes to thank local veteran writing group The Deadly Writers Patrol members for their invaluable insights, inspiration and technical help in writing “Friendly Fire” and other stories.

Like Home

By Emily Hoover

If I could look through one of the many boarded-up windows around me, I might be able to see the enemy hiding somewhere nearby—amidst the skewed about debris and dry, desert dust. They're waiting patiently for our movement with machine-gun metabolism and hard, dry eyes. I suppose it's safe to mock them now, the fucking towel heads. The dead are outside, piled on top of one another like toys, like numbers on a chalkboard.

“You know it's not your fault, what happened to Bisiada,” Scotty says, the silence between us excruciating. The building we're in looks ready to collapse; my heart beats furiously. We're close to each other, close enough to shake hands, but we remain motionless, crouching low. Both of our backs are glued to the wall, and we fear standing upright. “I know it's real cruel I say this, but he served his purpose. Showed us there's still someone out here. He fought 'til the end. You can't never escape no gut shot.”

I nod, experiencing a dull pain in my knees; I haven't squatted for this long since I played catcher in high school. He's right, after

all, but Scotty shakes his head. “Our boys are dropping like flies,” he says. “Gives a whole new meaning to ‘One, two, three, four, United States Marine Corps,’ don’t it?” He chuckles a little, the laugh stripped of its heartiness, and then lights a broken cigarette. He puffs in quick, sharp bursts and finally notices the smoke escaping from the Marlboro label. After ripping off the filter, he takes a better, longer drag. He removes loose tobacco from his tongue and looks up at me, pleased.

I nod again and remove the only cigarette I have from behind my ear. I don’t really want to smoke it, but I fear I won’t get a second chance. The thought of it, of Bisiada’s dusty tan boots turning red, washes over me like rain. “Yep,” I say softly. I light the cigarette and admire the glowing embers as they fall to the concrete floor, becoming ash.

The air at home is much different than the desert. Both are hot, but in Florida, you’re always damp in typically dry places and sopping wet in naturally moist places, until late in the evening, when the moonlight reflects off the ocean like hope. I tell the guys that all the time, when I get sunburned on my forearm after driving the Humvee for an hour and everybody goes crazy. *This is nothing*, I say, my resilient skin the toughest part of me. *The sun’s hardcore as fuck out here, sure, but it doesn’t measure up to heat and humidity in the swamp.* Scotty always agrees. He still owns a riverboat out in Arkansas somewhere.

The airplane approaches the gate, and the flight attendant tells us we can turn on our cell phones and other hand-held devices. My watch reads 1500.

I catch the scent of the blue-haired lady in the middle seat next to me—a mix of lavender and Werther’s butterscotch candies—

and my nose reaches for home, for the tropical aroma of citrus and salt. It's there, but faint. I look out the window—the window-seat passenger is still snoozing—and see the sky is big and blue with wispy clouds.

The plane's passengers rise collectively as all wheels come to a halt; frequent flyers are also veterans of sorts. The blue-haired lady closes her book. I let out a yawn and grab my sea bag from the overhead compartment.

"Excuse me, young man," the blue-haired lady says, standing and leaning her body against the chair in front of her. "Could you get my suitcase? It's the leather one, the color of Merlot." I can tell she's jonesing for a glass; I'd consider joining her for a beer or two, if she'd offer.

I oblige, slinging my sea bag over my shoulder as I jimmy her bag free.

"Thank you kindly," she says.

"My pleasure." I'm jarred by the sound of my voice. I'm standing in the aisle now, taller than almost everyone around. I hear bags rustling, families chatting, sickly passengers hacking up lungs.

"Home for good or just for leave?" a man in a business suit asks, casually. He's standing behind me, holding a newspaper; it's the *Wall Street Journal*.

I was looking forward to being anonymous, if only for a plane ride. "Leave," I say. "My sister's getting married. I just got back to the States last week after a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan."

His eyes narrow. "You must be beat. Are you going back?"

"We're on call for thirty days."

"Where are you stationed now?"

"Twenty-nine Palms." I think of Bisiada; he couldn't wait to get back to The Palms.

"I know it well," the man says, smiling. "I did four years and

then went to college and law school.” The line begins to move. “Are you connecting?”

I shake my head. “Nope. This is home.”

Scotty stands up for less than a second to adjust his bag, and his swift movements shoot through my thoughts of home like a torpedo. He puts his helmet on with a loud thump and I do the same, our backs still against the wall. I check to see if my boots are tied tight. Affirmative. Scotty's back on his knees and crawling. I follow, feeling oddly safe against the cold, sunless concrete.

“I don't think they can see us from here,” I say.

“Oh, *he* can. He just can't get a shot. Stay low.” Scotty coughs and looks back at me. “Don't ever underestimate them, Phillips. Remember what they told you in boot camp: expect everything.” He points to a corner across the room. There's a tiny hole in the boarded-up window, and he intends to go there. Scotty's movement is quick, serpent-like; he's certainly earned the title of veteran, whether we get out of here or not. I crawl over Bisiada's corpse, which is positioned in the middle of the entryway.

My dad is quiet in the car, quieter than I expected. The tattoos on his forearms, acquired in Thailand and other various ports during his time in the Navy, are worn with a pride that reflects off the pollen-caked windshield, but the images depicted are almost unrecognizable on his tan, freckly skin. There is an eagle holding an anchor on one arm and two green tree frogs on the other. When he opens and closes a fist, you can tell the frogs are fucking.

I know a part of him is pissed about me getting out, but when I said I wanted to get a business degree with my GI bill, he was satisfied. He's proud of me for my service, but he has trouble with

things like that, with speaking and sharing, ever since Mom passed away. He was on his last deployment when they called to tell him about the accident.

“Might have a job lined up for you,” he says, turning over his shoulder before changing lanes.

We pass the overpass that spells out *Daytona Beach* in bright yellow cursive. As if we'd miss it otherwise. The idea of home, as a place, feels strangely soggy, like the oily sub sandwiches I remember from childhood. Maybe it's just the humidity. I've been in the desert for too long.

“Oh yeah?” I smile at him.

He looks at me momentarily and puts his eyes back on the road. “It's not anything you have to take up permanently. But I've got a buddy at the Legion who has a landscaping business. Told him you're out for good in sixty days and savvy with an edger.”

“Thanks, Pop.”

An enemy sniper is hiding somewhere inside of the dilapidated building ahead. He's been on a five-month killing spree and has taken out a lot of our guys, among others. It is Scotty's job to find out where the fucker is exactly and blast him to Hell. I'm supposed to be helping him, but he looks like he's got everything under control.

“So, we wait.” My words reverberate and I feel hollow.

Scotty tosses me a cigarette. “We wait 'til there's movement and then . . .” He trails off, his eyes fixed on the dust outside. I nod, because I know what happens *then*. I put the cigarette behind my ear.

Bisiada's blood, drying now, covers Scotty's shoulders and back; he doesn't seem to notice. He holds his rifle with prowess, concentration—as if the part of Bisiada he can't wash off is guiding him.

Bisiada's body is yellow—bile-colored, nicotine-stained. If it weren't for the color, you'd think he was just enjoying a pleasant snooze after a tiresome day. His eyes are closed and his mouth is open slightly.

I remember it was Bisiada's plan to retreat back to the building where we had first been, where we are now. *Something just doesn't feel right*, he said, and we ignored him. *We should go back and regroup; we can just break in.*

After the shots, it was hell for us to watch him fall and try to crawl back to us, like something out of *Platoon*. He screamed like a parentless child, but he kept moving, coughing blood. When he made it about halfway, Scotty told me to shoot at the building in front of us. I obeyed, emptying my magazine. Scotty ran to him and lifted him; meanwhile, the enemy's gun was silent. Black blood spewed from Bisiada's nose and mouth. He had crimson stains on his abdomen and his right kneecap, the latter being where he was shot first.

The air was eerie, quiet, as I led us back to this building and kicked open the door. Bisiada died before Scotty removed him from his back; we both knew and said nothing. If only we had listened to him, things might be different.

Pop opens the garage door and my heart drops to my stomach. I leave the car quickly, without speaking, and approach the bike, caressing it like I would a woman's thighs.

The motorcycle, a black Honda Shadow, looks as good as it did when I first saw it almost four years ago. Before I crashed it at Bike-toberfest and traded my biker-fantasy for the more plausible and joined the Marine Corps.

“I can't believe this,” I say. I'm beaming—smiling so hard it hurts. “How did you do it?”

He pops the trunk. "It's called money, son."

I laugh. "You said you sold it on Craigslist. Told me while I was in Afghanistan because you knew I wouldn't cry in front of the guys."

He chuckles. "Well, I lied. Kept her here and fixed her up myself."

"Wow," I say, seeing my own reflection in the chrome. "You're really something else."

"Motorcycle license still current?"

"It expires on my birthday." We're standing eye-level now, as equals.

"Welcome home, Robert. I missed you."

We hug briefly, but tightly.

"I'm not home yet, not for good."

He smiles weakly; I know he gets lonely sometimes. "Thirty days on call and thirty more days in The Palms," he says. "It'll be over before you know it."

The echo of a gunshot shatters my thoughts and I look up to Scotty. He is laughing; I can almost see the adrenaline running through him. "And *that's*," he pauses for effect, "how we fuckin' do it, Phillips. Woo!"

"So you got him?"

"Hell yes, I fucking got him. I saw something move real quick and reacted. Shot him right in the fucking face."

"Good," I say and close my eyes. Scotty is gloating. I don't disturb him or endorse him; instead, I just listen to the sound of my own breath—the melodic rise and fall. He radios back to base and announces our victory, says we'll be back soon.

He lights a cigarette. "You know something, Phillips?" he asks, after some time.

"What's that?"

“This is the best cigarette I’ve ever fuckin’ had. Did you know that?”

“That’s good to hear,” I say, my eyes still closed.

“Do you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because we completed our mission. With only one casualty, God rest his soul.” He pauses for a moment, out of respect, and then I can hear the smile spreading across his cheeks. “I might be mistaken, man, but this cigarette tastes like home.”

My sister Alma is smart to get married in the morning. May in Florida is no picnic. The ceremony is on the beach (as it should be) at 1100 sharp. Pop and I have to ride our bikes out of the suburbs, over the Flagler Beach Bridge, and down old A1A to get there. As I steer the bike over the bridge—Pop just ahead of me on his Harley, the horizon opening to reveal the dark blue ocean—the breeze is misty, salty, familiar. It’s as if I never left, never crashed four years ago, never deployed.

Just north of Ormond Beach, before the sunscreened chaos of Daytona, a white altar with painted-on moon phases stands beside unlit tiki lamps. There are sixteen white chairs staked in the sand near the dunes. I follow as Pop takes the aisle seat in the front row, near Abe’s parents.

“Robert,” Abe’s father says, surprised. He stands to shake my hand. “Looking good, son.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say. I nod and smile at his wife. She smiles back.

“Tom told us you’re getting out soon.”

“Yes, sir.” We shake hands.

“Not a career man like your dad, then?”

“No, sir,” I say, shaking my head. “Not me.”

He laughs, so I laugh with him.

Pop stands and puts his hand on my shoulder, reassuringly. "Robert here is a college man," he says.

I take my seat.

The female officiator is looking over her notes. She's in her late 50s, but she has fake tits that make it look like she's in her late 30s. She's in a gold sundress with matching gold sandals. Abe and his three groomsmen stand next to her, wearing khaki shorts and collared shirts. They notice what I notice about the officiator, I'm sure; they're whispering and laughing.

Other wedding guests arrive, most of them barefooted, salty, and ready for the beach. I don't recognize anyone other than Pop and Abe's parents.

Pop leans in. "Showtime."

"Should I go with you, see Alma, give her a kiss or something?"

He stands and shakes his head. "She said she didn't want to see you before the ceremony." He rolls his eyes, playfully. "You always stress her out."

Scotty grabs Bisiada's tags. "I think I can carry him back, Phillips."
"Let me do it."

He chuckles. "Nah, I got it. I've seen your CFT scores. You ain't one for the buddy carry." Scotty brushes his fingertips against Bisiada's forehead, gently, as if he fears waking him. He lifts Bisiada and motions for my exit.

"You go ahead," I say.

Scotty opens the door. "Now you follow low. I don't know if any others are hiding." He moves into the sun.

He adjusts the dead weight on his back and breaks into a run, making it safely to a beat-up car. Then he moves to another building

a few feet ahead. I follow, trying to mimic his agile movements, carrying only my pack.

He turns to me—we're feet apart—and points to a shack to the north of us; it's in the direction of the Humvee, I realize. I nod, and he parrots me. Just as he hustles across the open street, my own feet stop; I search for breath. My knees buckle, and I fall against the brick building behind me.

Scotty falls to the ground almost as quickly as the gunshot sounds. A pool of blood grows beside his head. I look to my left, right, and left again; I see no one, no movement. Bisiada's body is on the ground, cast aside like trash. Scotty's lifeless body looks like a cross; he has both arms extended, his rifle is against his chest, and his legs are together.

The roads are unusually clear for a Saturday night. Pop stays behind me, except for stoplights. We each had a beer at the reception, and we both danced with Alma, who never looked more beautiful. The beer was enough to relax me, but not enough to keep me out of my head.

We come over the bridge and onto the mainland; the sun is setting in the western sky, leaving patchy, fiery clouds. I remember Scotty and imagine him riding too, taking in this warm, summer air.

Twilight descends, a gray fog, and I see the lights of a shopping plaza on my left and a stoplight far in the distance. Everything else is darkening slowly. The Honda's engine rattles beneath me, feeling like thunder, like home.

A white car approaches the stop sign to my right. The driver doesn't make a complete stop and pulls out, turning right. I don't have time to stop, but I slow down. Just as I consider weaving into the left lane, my bike hits the back of the car—I see it's a Ford—and I'm thrust over the car in two loud thumps. My face slides

across the asphalt as I tumble; I can no longer feel my legs. When the movement stops, my brain catches up, and I realize I'm immobile in a ditch, next to a vacant lot. The streetlight above me replaces natural light.

Pop's here. My helmet's off. My head is in his lap. He's not crying, but he's rocking me, petting the hair on my head. There's a woman sobbing somewhere and a man on the phone; his voice is shaking. I can feel blood trickling down my forehead and onto my nose. Pop wipes it away.

I try to kick open the door of the shack. It's heavy. My breath is shallow. My heart beats quickly. I kick again. When I open the door, I collapse onto the floor, and dust envelops me.

When the battalion comes for me, it smells like morning. I'm on a stretcher, strapped in, and my face is golden, warm. My lips are dry, chapped, splitting. Boots are everywhere. I think of Bisiada and Scotty.

Pop is still rocking me, but I can't see the lines on his face or the color of his eyes. Color drains from everything. Breathing is difficult—sharp, like glass. There's a lump in my throat; when I cough, I taste something metallic and wet: blood. I cough again, and a bubble of red snot seeps from my nostrils. I hear sirens in the distance, but they feel oceans away. My vision blurs as I fix my eyes on the cypress trees above. I'm home.

Emily Hoover is a poet and fiction writer living in Flagstaff, Arizona; she is the wife of a disabled Navy veteran. Currently, Emily is teaching English Composition and working on an MFA in Creative Writing at Northern Arizona University. When she's not writing, reading, or grading, she enjoys cooking, taking photos, and practicing yoga.

IMAGINING IRAQ

By Bárbara Mujica

He spoke in a monotone, as though reciting a prayer learned in childhood, and he never looked me in the eye.

“We were in a little village outside of Al-Karmah,” he began, “about sixteen clicks northeast of Fallujah. Karmah, ha! What a dumb name. It was the most violent city in Iraq.”

“I thought that was Fallujah.”

“This was worse. At least there’s a wall around Fallujah. Here there was nothing. No protection at all. The bastards could walk right into town and attack our patrols. IEDs, mortar attacks, all that shit. We lost so many guys . . .” He fell into silence.

I sat there waiting. “Want some more coffee?” I asked finally.

“Nah . . . yeah, sure. Why not?”

I got up and took the pot off the stove.

He sipped his coffee slowly, as if reluctant to go on.

“Al-Karmah was an Al-Qaida stronghold, a tribal safe haven.”

Another pause.

“After the Awakening—you know, when the Sunni sheiks finally decided to work with the Marines instead of Al-Qaida because

Al-Qaida was too fucking violent—things changed. People started to report the smugglers. We'd go into these little villages, and the people would tell us where the weapons caches were. A lot of them had lost family members to Al-Qaida, see? Somebody didn't go along with what Al-Qaida wanted, and the next morning the head of one of their kids would show up on their doorstep. They were brutal bastards, Al-Qaida. They'd cut off kids' heads to intimidate their parents. I liked the Iraqi people well enough, the ones I met, but the terrorists, I never felt an ounce of regret about taking one of those guys out."

It was the longest snatch of language I'd heard from him since he'd moved in, and the first time I'd heard him swear. Corey Frater almost never talked, and when he did, he was polite and soft-spoken. If he said *damn* or even *jerk*, he excused himself first. "The guy was . . . excuse me, ma'am . . . but the guy was a real jerk."

I'd had a room to let, and he answered my ad. I liked him right away. A brawny young vet with blond hair, impenetrable blue eyes, and a square jaw, he reminded me of the men in the recruiting advertisements: "The few. The proud. The Marines." And he reminded me of my son, Ignacio.

"Naturally," I said. "That was your job: to stop Al-Qaida."

"Yeah," he said. "To stop Al-Qaida."

He slouched down in his chair. His jaw tightened slightly, and I didn't know whether he was going to go on. The aroma of coffee filled the kitchen, giving the place a warm, cozy feel, but I knew he was a million miles away, in some godforsaken village on the outskirts of the inappropriately named city of Al-Karmah.

"It's actually a beautiful place," he said abruptly. He laughed. "When the sunlight glimmers on the river, it's breathtaking. Parts of the Tigris-Euphrates valley are so green. It's where the Garden of Eden was. Sometimes I thought, if I have to die over here, this is a good place."

A frisson shot up my arm. I wondered if my son had ever had that same thought.

“Sometimes we parachuted in. We'd sneak into a village at night to gather information. But that day we went in by truck. We made a lot of noise, too much noise. There were six of us—five Marines and a terp . . . you know . . . an interpreter, named Hakim. Except for the part that's irrigated, it's all sand. Sand everywhere. A great big sandbox. We called it moon dust. It was so fine and silty that it got into everything—under your nails, into your nose, into your skin. You had to be careful it didn't get into the engine because it could wreck your truck. We had to change air filters all the time.” He fidgeted with a napkin and then sipped his coffee.

“We were supposed to move in for a few days and scout around. Who was with us, who was against, that sort of thing. We the village and that they'd hidden weapons somewhere. A favorite place was the school. If there were bombs in a school, you didn't want to go in because then they'd set them off and kill a bunch of kids. They knew the Americans didn't want civilian casualties, especially not children, so that's where they'd hide their hardware, the bastards.”

I scrutinized his face for traces of anger, but in spite of his harsh words, he appeared composed.

Suddenly he sprang up. “I'm sorry, ma'am. I shouldn't be bothering you with this.”

“You're not bothering me at all,” I countered. “It's interesting. Please go on.”

He hesitated, nodded, and then shrugged. I wondered what he was thinking. It was obvious he didn't like to talk about the war. Before then, I had no idea where he'd been, what he'd done. Now I learned that he was a staff sergeant, a recon guy in charge of a small team of Marines, and a master freefall parachutist. His specialty was

dropping in behind enemy lines in the dead of night to gather intelligence with all kinds of fancy surveillance equipment.

“Have some more coffee, Corey,” I said, getting up. “I have some blueberry muffins too. Want one?” I didn’t want him to stop talking. My own son had never told me anything at all about the war, and I was ravenous for information. I opened a package of muffins and put them on a plate, wondering what it would feel like to jump out of a plane at 29,000 feet. Does your stomach float up to your throat? Are you terrified your chute won’t open? Can you breathe normally? I speculated about whether Ignacio had ever plunged into enemy territory that way. I thought not. He was an infantry Marine. He strode up to a house and kicked in the door. At least, that was my understanding of things.

“This time we didn’t parachute in,” he said, as though reading my thoughts. “Of the five Americans, Jake was the only one who hadn’t done this gig before, and he made me a little nervous. The rest of us, including Hakim, had been together for weeks. Each guy knew his job and everybody else’s. Unless we met with resistance and got into a firefight or something like that, these operations usually went off like clockwork—especially now that the Sunnis were mostly cooperating. It was Jake’s fault we made too much noise. I told him to slow the motor, to cool it, but he was determined to roar into town. ‘We’re Americans and we’re here to save you!’ That kind of shit. I was afraid he’d frighten the folks and cause bad feelings.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, but not with the Humvee.”

He sat for a moment staring into space, lost in the depths of his memory.

“Another muffin, Corey?”

He blinked and started, as though awakening from a trance. “A man came out to meet us. He was one of the village elders. In a community like that, a stranger draws attention. Hakim explained our mission to him and told him we’d be there for a few days. We

were gathering information, and we needed a base of operations. Could he find us a house?”

I imagined the elder: a wizened old man with shrewd ferret eyes in a brown, lackluster face. I imagined him wearing a long, colorless *dishdasha* and a red and white checked *keffiyeh*—the kind of headdress Arab men wear to protect themselves from the sun. (I knew what a *keffiyeh* was because Ignacio had e-mailed me pictures.) I conjured up the man's small but sturdy frame, his leathery skin, his dusty sandals, his gnarled hands reeking of sheep dung and aniseed. He stood enveloped in the implacable Iraqi sunlight against a blue, motionless sky, bereft of even a single languorous cloud. Ribbons of light reached out of the heavens and splintered into the distant Euphrates. I had spent years imagining Iraq, wondering what it was like to tread that silty sand under the relentless, blazing sun, carrying sixty pounds of gear on my back, plus weapons. My son had done it. Corey had done it. And with a mother's obsessiveness, I had created and recreated in my mind the experiences I thought they had lived through. But, of course, I couldn't know what it was like . . . not at all, not really.

“Was he angry, the elder?”

“He didn't seem angry. He showed us to the home of his son, Ali. He thought it would be appropriate for our needs, he said.”

“His own son? How generous. He must have been on our side.”

“By then, most of the Sunni sheiks were.”

I hesitated. “Can you tell me what the house looked like?” I was afraid that if I asked too many questions, he would shut down again, and maybe this time he'd refuse to go on.

“It was pretty large for a rural house, but then, Ali was the son of an elder. When you went through the front door, you found yourself in a sizeable main room. That was the plan of most of the houses. Off to the sides were the kitchen and bedrooms. You could access the main room from any part of the house. There were no

doors. Americans think privacy is a big deal, but Iraqis don't. The floors were concrete and there was almost no furniture. People sit on the floor to eat, the men first, and then the women and children. We looked around and decided the place was perfect for us. I asked Hashim to thank Ali and his father and promised we'd take good care of everything.

“Of course, Jake had to go and say something stupid. ‘Nice digs for a bunch of towel-heads,’ he said. There was another guy, Dave, a radio operator. He turned around to Jake and snapped, ‘Shut up, you moron.’ He'd taken a dislike to Jake from the beginning.”

“Did you meet the family?”

“They were all there. Ali, his wife Farrah, and four children. Ali was the one who talked to us, of course. He came out to greet us with his two little boys. I guess they were about nine and six or seven. The wife and two little girls stayed in the kitchen. The tiniest one—she couldn't have been more than three—hid behind a barrel and peeped out at us. She was the cutest little thing, with enormous brown eyes, puffy cheeks, and a captivating smile. Her name was Leyla. I wanted to pick her up and squeeze her. She and her sister, who was about five, would catch my glance and burst into giggles. I wished I had a teddy bear or something to give her. I put my hand in my pocket and found some candy—we always carried candy to hand out to the children—and the older girl tiptoed out of the kitchen and took it from me. Then she turned around and scampered back, shrieking with laughter.”

Corey was smiling broadly. For a moment he had abandoned his reserve and let himself go. But then he drifted back into melancholy.

“It was a sheep herding area, and all the men were shepherds, so of course they had a dog. It was out in the pen, a beautiful herder, tan and black with huge brown intelligent eyes. It looked as though it were smiling at us. Iraqis don't usually get sentimental about pets the

way we do, but a shepherd needs his dog, and Ali clearly loved this one. The family was going to vacate the house for us—they would be staying with cousins—but they were going to have to leave the dog behind. I never caught what his name was, but we called him Raj.

“Dave said we could feed him our MREs, since that's all that military grub was good for anyway. We all laughed, but then Jake made a crack about using the dog for target practice. Dave was really getting pissed. ‘Shut the fuck up, you asshole,’ he snapped. I’m sorry, ma’am, but that’s the way Marines talk.”

“That must have been awful for the family! Imagine having to hand over your house to a bunch of foreign soldiers.”

Corey sighed. “I know. I felt terrible about it. And they were so gracious. Imagine, before they left, Farrah spent hours cooking. She left us enough food for a week! Even meat! And, you know, meat is a luxury.”

I imagined Farrah, invisible under her long abaya, her head covered with a hijab, scurrying around her kitchen to prepare food for foreigners, only to have to abandon her house afterward.

“‘Don’t worry about the dog,’ I told Ali when they left. ‘We’ll take care of him.’ Little Leyla gave me a big smile and stuffed a fig into my hand. ‘I think she likes you,’ Ali told me. He said it in fractured English, laughing.”

Corey took a sip of coffee.

“It must be cold,” I said. “I’ll get you a new one.”

He shook his head. “Please don’t bother, ma’am. Cold coffee's not the worst thing I’ve ever dealt with.”

“Of course not, but . . .”

He wasn't listening. He'd slipped back into gloom. His dejection wasn't perceptible in his eyes or his mouth, but only in that slight tightening of the jaw—and the silence.

Suddenly I felt embarrassed. I had urged him to talk out of . . . what? Greed. Greed for what? Vicarious experience. I ached to know

what I could never know: what it was like to be there. I'd been selfish, and I felt contrite.

"You don't have to go on," I said softly. "I can see it brings back bad memories."

He turned to me and shrugged. "No big deal," he said in that offhanded tone soldiers use when they try to convince you that something truly horrific hasn't affected them. "No big deal." The stoics. The real men. The tough guys. The few, the proud, the Marines. Ignacio used that tone too, when his best friend and future housemate got blown to smithereens by an IED.

"After they left, the dog became restless." Corey was clearly determined to finish the story. "He missed them, and he didn't like that strange people were living in the house.

"Dave went out to calm him down. 'It's okay, Raj,' he kept saying. 'Come on, Raj, let's play ball!' But we didn't have a ball, so he threw a stick instead. 'Go ahead, Raj! Go fetch it.' Gradually Raj got into it. He ran after the stick and brought it back a couple of times. Dave and I gave him some MREs and roared with laughter when he gobbled them up. Dave snickered. 'See?' he said. 'I told you that stuff wasn't fit for human consumption!'

"At dusk Raj grew distressed again. He paced and barked and whined. He knew something was wrong. Ali hadn't taken him out with the sheep, and the family hadn't come back from wherever they were. By nightfall, the dog was miserable. 'Shut that fucking dog up or none of us will get any sleep,' Jake kept complaining. 'Put a blanket over your head, asshole,' Dave fired back.

"But by the third night, all of us were frazzled. Raj had a sharp bark that pierced you like a bullet, and his whining sounded like the howl of a coyote. He was driving everybody nuts, even Dave. All night long he yapped and yowled.

"But then, suddenly, the barking stopped.

"When I got up the next morning and went out to the pen,

there was Raj, dead, lying in a brown pool of blood. Jake had put a silencer on his gun and gone out and shot him.”

Corey's voice quivered slightly, and his eyes looked faintly swollen.

“I opened the pen and stood there looking at that poor animal, the one we'd promised to take care of. ‘What the hell's the matter with you, you idiot?’ I said to Jake. ‘Why'd you have to go and kill the fucking dog? These people were nice to us! This could have been a productive experience, man. Winning hearts and minds and all that crap, remember?’

“Jake just stood there with a warped grin on his face. Suddenly Dave flew at him with a snarl. He punched him in the jaw so hard I thought he'd kill him. Jake stumbled and then went crashing into the sand. For a moment, he didn't move. But then he pulled himself up. He gawked at us awhile and then burst out laughing. He just roared with laughter. His whole body was covered with blood and dog shit.”

Corey pursed his lips and looked blankly at the opposite wall. “I'm sorry, ma'am. I shouldn't have told you. I don't know why I did.”

I longed to reach out and squeeze his hand, but I knew better.

“It's just that . . . It was such a lovely family. They were so friendly, so anxious to cooperate. And then the fucking moron . . . sorry, ma'am . . . and then Jake goes and kills their dog.”

I sensed his rage, even as he struggled to regain his stoic demeanor.

“Thanks for the coffee, ma'am.” He stood up, took his cup to the sink, and washed it, careful to keep his back toward me the whole time.

I grasped then what I hadn't before: Raj was the whole war—the lost buddies, the wailing children, the sudden explosions followed by intense darkness, the sirens in the night. Raj was the senseless death of innocents and the tears shed in secret by so many

soldiers—Corey, Dave, Ignacio . . . all of them. Raj was the Iraq I just couldn't fathom, just couldn't imagine, no matter how hard I tried.

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The Black Metal Bracelet

By Kama Shockey

D*on't pick up, don't pick up, please don't answer the fucking phone,* he muttered into the receiver. She did, though, on the third ring.

“Hello? Hank? Is that you?” She must have seen the foreign number. No one else from this hellhole would be calling her. At least he hoped not.

“Yeah, it's me. Can you hear me Okay?”

“Not really, the delay is worse than usual. And static. Can you hear me?”

“No. Hang tight, I'll wait for Miller to get off the phone and I'll use his. This one's a piece of shit.”

“No, don't hang up. Not yet. It's been too long. Don't go,” she pleaded.

“I'll call you right back, I promise.”

He hung up before she could protest more. He contemplated leaving the MWR and not calling her back, telling her something came up—it wouldn't be too far from the truth around here, but he thought of the girls and how they would see right through to

her worry. She carried it with her, in her belly, sick with it, she told him. He believed her.

Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck. He dialed her number again. Miller was taken back to his room in his wheelchair, head down. Had been down since the blast. She picked up sooner this time, breathless.

“Hey. That wasn’t too long.”

“No, I told Miller until his son could talk back, he needed half the time on the phone. A third, the way our girls ramble.” She laughed, a small weightless chuckle, but he’d heard it. How long had it been since he’d really made her laugh, from her stomach, doubled over and snorting—that snorting he’d found irresistible and neurotic all at once. Too damn long.

“Yeah, they’re sleeping now. Want me to wake them up?”

“Nah, let them rest. You need it as much as them.”

“You have no idea. Thanks. If you call back tomorrow, it’s Saturday here, they’ll be around.”

“We’ll see. How’s school? Macy doing okay?” Off in the distance a speaker crackled to life and began the evening call to prayer. He put a pillow to his other ear. Ached to be closer to her, farther from this. All of this.

“Sure, told her teacher her dad is killing bad guys with guns so we had to have a little talk about what is appropriate at school, but other than that, not too bad, I guess.” Again, the bubble of laughter rose to meet him, an ocean away. “But tell me about you. I want to hear about you.”

“Not too much to say,” he replied, and even as the words traveled across the universe to her, his cheek ached and he winced. Put his fingers to the bandages that hid the twenty-four stitches. That reminded him how close he was to losing his right eye. His daughters would be scared of him, scarred and not quite whole, an ugly rose-tinted line that made his smile seem fake, sinister. At least if he’d lost

the eye, he could wear a patch and for a few years he'd be the cool dad. The pirate, back from his adventure. He'd be something to show off. Now he was just another casualty, another war freak with external scars to match the ones on the inside. *Fuck*. He hated lying to her.

“How is the car?” It was benign, stupid, to ask about something so trivial. To keep from her the one thing he called to say. She took the bait and rambled about the oil, the mechanic giving her twenty percent off because she actually knew her stuff, and maybe she'd mentioned her husband was on deployment, but hey, it worked, so why shouldn't she benefit sometimes from what was otherwise a shitty situation. He listened to her, closed his eyes, walked himself through her day alongside her.

Getting coffee, pouring it to the brim because she needed every bit of caffeine she could get. He always laughed at that. Pour another cup after the first, he'd tell her. No, she was a one-cup girl. She always said this, paper towel in hand, cleaning up the coffee that spilled on the way to the breakfast bar.

Getting two sips in, eyes closed, soft smile on her lips that parted for coffee the same way they parted for him. Then a gentle thud from the back room and her eyes would open, smile broaden, cup set down, as she headed back for kisses and hugs he knew she wished could last forever.

Getting the girls ready, pigtails for one, braid for the other, then the first wants a braid like her sister, so teeth are rushed, lunches thrown together, a perfunctory kiss for him, but eyes that say she wants more, eyes that say what the swelling below his boxers is answering back. The shrug that tells him to wait, that she's late, that once the girls are in bed . . .

But that last part doesn't happen anymore, not with him a world away, unable to grab the yogurts, the tiny shoes that will

be replaced with bigger sizes by the time he returns. His chest ached more, deeper than the wound on his cheek, and he fought off the nausea that came more often now.

“ . . . so I guess you can say the deployment curse has hit in full swing.” She trailed off, waiting for him to reply. He missed everything she said, lost in the lilt of her voice, the edginess that gave way to something more sultry, that voice of hers had always turned him on.

“Wow, sorry.” It was all he could offer. He may have been heralded a hero, a Purple Heart recipient, but he was useless to her then.

“Yeah, not to worry though. We’re fine. I want you to know I’m handling it, that’s all. Keep your mind in the game. Focus, okay? Don’t worry about us.” *Don’t worry. Don’t worry.* He was at red, orange at least—they all were. Combat stress, constant fire from the bushes, that last explosion. Worry was hard-wired into his system now. But how to tell her that, explain how he might never make it back to white. She might not either, he figured. She might always worry he might get pulled back out. Which was why he couldn’t tell her about his injury. Not yet. No need to worry her unnecessarily. He was out of harm’s way now, but how long would that last? His wound, the one he bore on the outside, was superficial. He would recover and his men would need him. The ones that were left. He wore a bracelet, a black metal band with the names of the men they had lost so far engraved. He twisted it around his wrist, traced the names of Lopez and Langford, wondered if another name would fit. Hoped he wouldn’t have to find out.

“I love you, Alex.”

“I love you too.”

“Can you do something for me? Just talk. I want to hear your voice. Tell me anything. What you ate for lunch, I don’t care, just keep talking.” Silence on the other end as his words trailed along the phone lines and found their way to her. Longer for her to respond.

“Hank. I don’t know. Life here is boring, compared to what you know, at least.” Boring. He longed for boring, for decisions that couldn’t end in a ball of fire, couldn’t kill the men who trusted him.

“I want boring. Talk to me.”

“OK, this is weird, but if you need it . . .” She continued about her lunch—avocado and salsa on chips, smothered in cheese. She wanted a beer, but how would that look when it wasn’t even noon? He salivated at the mention of salsa and almost asked her to stop when she mentioned the beer.

He looked at his lunch tray, pasta in a kind of meat sauce, apples in syrup, peeled and barely resembling their original form. He hadn’t bitten through a fresh piece of fruit in four months, hadn’t felt a good buzz in as long.

She was talking still, running through topics. Her morning jog—hotter now, harder to get through it later in the day after she dropped the girls off at school. Maybe she’d go to the base gym for the summer. Her job—mundane, she wished she could do more, wished she was closer to a city so she could teach again. She missed the books, the lectures, the papers from thoughtful students. Wouldn’t even mind the kids who goofed off, didn’t take her seriously, as long as she knew she was getting through to some of them.

He wanted to give her that, the chance to thrive, to stay in a job longer than two years, but what would he do if he wasn’t a Marine? He could be a cop, something with a gun, which is all he knew. He was too old to go back to school. Not really, but he couldn’t imagine starting over on a college campus somewhere. What would he study? This was all he was interested in. He touched the bracelet, cool beneath his calloused fingertips.

No one back home would understand. He would be an anomaly, a Marine-turned-civilian, a veteran. *Veteran* sounded so final, like that was the culmination of who he was, what he would achieve. In

a way, it was. No matter what else he did, he'd never have as much pride in his work as he did in the Marines.

“Did you get the care package we sent?” It took him a moment to realize the scope of the conversation had shifted, that she had asked him a question.

“Yeah, thanks. The books look great. And thanks for the ramen. Tell the girls I loved the drawings. They're hanging up over my bunk.” He closed his eyes, unwilling to picture the FOB where the men were, tried to imagine only his bunk. His sleeping system, the books she'd sent holding up the right side of his cot where the rod had snapped off. His daughters' pictures crudely taped up on the concrete slab behind his head. What had they drawn? A dolphin, the beach, and he thought he remembered a crab in a shell.

“How are the guys?” *Shit, shit, shit.* Any question but that. Now he had to tell her, had to explain why he was back at Camp Leatherneck, was in the hospital and probably would be for the next week or so. Tell her the only reason he could call was because he was back where they had satellite coverage. Still no fruit though, definitely no beer. He waited too long, she asked again. Concerned now.

“Hank? How are the guys?”

“We lost Langford and Lopez. Brian and Mark.” Part of the story, a half-truth. A morsel from this place he could share because he knew she'd find out sooner or later through the gossip lines and social networking. Platitudes from families who knew they were close with both men, their wives. All of them curious, glad the tragedy did not edge closer to them.

“Oh my God. How?”

“Long story. Combat. I'll tell you when I get home.” A pause. She expected more, he knew.

“Jesus, Hank. I'm so sorry.” The silence crackled, her breathing

replaced with the time and space between them. “How are you holding up? Are you hurt?” There it was. The question. Anything other than the truth was a lie, but none of it, not even the bold truth would answer what she wanted to know.

He imagined the two helmets, covering two rifles, two pairs of boots in front, across camp. They would be silhouettes now in the twilight. Two bodies gone, Marines killed in action, only part of their uniform left as a reminder. His eyes closed, the memorial service replayed behind his lids against any will he might have had before the attack. The roll call, the names thrown out by angry voices, thrown back only by the walls of the barracks. Echoes of the living to replace the voices no longer heard. He pulled the black metal bracelet up his forearm until it wouldn't go further, stretched the skin, pulled the muscles and cut off the blood supply. Let it sit there, his arm pulsing, hurting, his fingers turning white, then blue. Then let it fall back again.

“I'm fine,” he told her. “Fine.”

Kama Shockey is an MFA candidate at Northern Arizona University, where she teaches composition and serves as the Editor in Chief of Thin Air, the masters program's literary magazine. She had a monthly column and two additional pieces (including a cover story) in Military Spouse Magazine, and her essays and book reviews are forthcoming in FlagLive and Northern Arizona's Mountain Living Magazine. Her fiction has been published in Bird's Thumb and O-Dark Thirty's The Report, and is forthcoming in the Narrow Chimney Anthology. She is working on a linked collection of short stories.

Poetry.

The Bishop's Hat

By Leo Cunningham

The Bishop speaks of the barefoot King,
Holding a golden staff and jeweled hat.

Beautiful purple velvet and sequins covers his wrinkled body.
While my socks have holes inside of worn out shoes.

Five steps higher, he stands on his altar, looking down.
All I see are long hairs from inside his nose.

I learn more from the man on the subway, who hasn't showered.
Men shouldn't smell like oils and perfume.
I like the smell of reality.

Leo Cunningham grew up in Philadelphia above a family-owned Irish pub and served as a Reconnaissance Operator in the U.S. Marine Corps in the GWOT. After his honorable discharge, he attended the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts and studied film and television production. He currently resides with his wife and three sons on a family farm and writes original poetry, novels and screenplays.

Monsoon

By Frank Light

The monsoon slinks along the ridge
a cat to her prey
syrup off a pancake
old soldiers home on a holiday

As a draftee, Frank Light worked for Civilian Irregular Defense Group Finance, 5th Special Forces Group, in Vietnam 1967-1968. He's now writing his way through retirement from the State Department. Adaptions from a draft memoir titled Adjust to Dust: On the Backroads of Southern Afghanistan have appeared in literary magazines.

20 to life

By David Bublitz

if they wanted me
to collect a check
buy expensive
shoes wear a tie
pay taxes sleep
at night raise
a son teach
him how to be
a man if they
wanted me
to live
why did
they give me
this gun

David R. Bublitz is the son of a veteran. David has completed an MFA at the Oklahoma City University Red Earth program. He teaches journalism courses at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, while advising for the student-run CU Collegian newspaper.

Interview.

A Conversation with David Abrams

David Abrams was born in Pennsylvania and grew up in Jackson, Wyoming. He earned a BA in English from the University of Oregon and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. He now lives in Butte, Montana with his wife.

He retired in 2008 after a 20-year career in the active-duty Army as a journalist. He served in Thailand, Japan, Africa, Alaska, Texas, Georgia and the Pentagon. He was named the Department of Defense's Military Journalist of the Year in 1994 and received several other military commendations throughout his career.

In 2005, he joined the 3rd Infantry Division and deployed to Baghdad in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The journal he kept during that year formed the blueprint for his novel *Fobbit*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2012 and a Best Book of 2012 by *Paste Magazine*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and Barnes and Noble. It was also featured as part of B&N's Discover Great New Writers program. One of his short stories, "Roll Call," was included in the anthology *Fire and Forget* (Da Capo Press, 2013), and his essay

“Tenuous Tethers” appeared in the anthology *Red, White & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, World War II to Present* (Potomac Books, 2014). His short stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and have appeared in *Esquire*, *Narrative*, *Electric Literature*, *Consequence*, *Salamander*, *The Literarian*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Five Chapters*, *The Missouri Review*, and many other places. His work has also appeared in the *New York Times* and *Salon*. He blogs about literature and the writing life at *The Quivering Pen*.

O-Dark-Thirty Managing Editor Jerri Bell has been an avid reader of both the blog and newsletter from *The Quivering Pen* since the spring of 2011. She recently spoke with David Abrams about his blog, war literature, reading and writing, and his novel-in-progress.

O-Dark-Thirty: How did you decide to start The Quivering Pen, and how do you keep it going while promoting Fobbit, working on a new book, holding down a day job, and pitching in on all sorts of odd jobs at your wife Jean’s small business?

David Abrams: First of all, thanks for reading the blog. *The Quivering Pen* is truly a labor of love which eats up a lot of my free time and it's gratifying to know someone out there is reading it and buying some books based on my suggestions. Because that's really the impetus behind starting the blog: getting people interested and excited about literature—in particular, contemporary fiction. I'd toyed around with the idea of doing a blog for a while—maybe four or six months—before I committed to it. I was afraid it would pull me away from “real writing,” and it did, but over the years, I've taught myself to relax about that because it *is* “real writing,” as long as you're putting your heart and mind into what you type.

I won't lie—the initial reason I started the blog was to develop a pre-publication presence on the web. I started *The Quivering Pen*

in May 2010 when, I wrote, I was "days away from typing the final period of *Fobbit: A Novel*." The early days of the blog were heavy with posts about excerpts from drafts of the novel and excerpts from the journal I kept during my deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2005. But then, as I figured it would, my compulsive reading habits and love for books I've read (and those I was about to read) started taking over and eventually I ended up with a blog that looks a lot like it does today: less about me and more about other authors—which is just the way I like it.

My routine is this: I get up at 3:45 a.m. each day, get a cup of coffee and a glass of water, then go to my small office on the second floor of our 1920s Craftsman home here in Butte, Montana. I might read for fifteen or twenty minutes, and check email, but I try to get down to business as soon as I can because I have a lot of work to do before I head off to my regular (paying!) Day Job. I probably put in an average of two hours per day, seven days a week at the blog; the only income I have is when readers click on the Litbreaker ads which you see on the top and sides of the blog. It probably comes out to something like twenty-five cents an hour—so I'm hardly in this for the money.

While there are some regular, programmatic features at the blog ("Trailer Park Tuesday," "Friday Freebie," "Sunday Sentence," and "My First Time" on Mondays), the rest of the time I don't know what I'm going to write about before I sit down at my desk. Most of what comes out is pretty raw and unpolished and, occasionally, regrettably bad; but I really don't have time to go back and make each blog post a literary gem. In fact, I've found that the few times I really work hard on a blog post, polish it, get it sounding beautiful and well-edited—well, those hardly ever get that many page views. Sure, I get joy out of creating these mini-essays, but I do get depressed that very few people seem to be reading them.

ODT: *In several of your Quivering Pen posts and interviews, you've described reading Joseph Heller's Catch-22 when you were in Iraq, and how it informed your vision for Fobbit. You've also reviewed many of the books coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What do you think that the writing coming out of the most recent wars in has in common with literature from previous wars? What do you see that's new and different from the literature of past wars?*

DA: From Hemingway to Phil Klay, we're all just trying to make sense out of the nonsense. No matter how well they're couched in political rhetoric and justified by military tactics, wars are essentially legalized murder. One man takes another man's life over an argument about real estate or ideology. As Karl Marlantes says in his book *What It Is Like to Go to War* (a book I recommend everyone should read before our country commits another single person to combat): "Warriors must touch their souls because their job involves killing people." That's some heavy shit to lay on the mind of a writer, and while we all process it in different ways and at different speeds, it all comes down to working out a complexity of emotion on the page. To paraphrase Tim O'Brien, we've carried all we could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things we carried. War is one of the most powerful, potent subjects a person can write about and I think it's produced some of the best literature in our history. And veterans certainly don't have sole jurisdiction over this—look at the recent great books produced by non-veterans like Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*), Roxana Robinson (*Sparta*), Cara Hoffman (*Be Safe I Love You*) and Katey Schultz (*Flashes of War*), to name just a few.

ODT: *So there's a growing body—maybe even a sort of canon, now—of literature from the recent wars. What stories do you think remain to be written? What hasn't yet been said?*

DA: Just as Plato (or was it Santayana?) once said, “Only the dead have seen the end of war,” I don't think we'll ever see the end of war literature. There are as many war stories waiting to be told as there are fingers in the Pentagon ready to type the next OPORD. I'm constantly, and pleasantly, surprised by the many different ways authors are able to describe the combat experience. To use just two recent examples, I would never have predicted a novel about soldiers at a Dallas Cowboys football game would produce such a rich war satire, but Ben Fountain did it with *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*; or that describing the daily task of repairing roads in Iraq after IED attacks would bring us a novel as gripping as Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives*. Who knows what remains to be said? Only the novelist packing his duffel bag for the next war really knows—and even he or she won't really know until years later, probably.

ODT: *In a November 2013 Quivering Pen newsletter, you shared a brief excerpt from the draft manuscript of your new novel—about “soldiers hiking on foot from one end of Baghdad to the other” in 2006 “in order to attend the memorial service for their beloved platoon sergeant, recently killed by a roadside bomb.” They steal a Humvee from the motor pool and set off for the other side of the city, but it breaks down less than a mile outside the Forward Operating Base's entry control point. They're stranded with no communications and dwindling ammo. Here's that excerpt:*

We keep walking-through the dust, through the thirst, through the rising heat, and now, through the growing crowd of Iraqis who are starting to fill the marketplace with their goats, their dishdashas, their cooking smoke.

We are hungry.

None of us had time to grab chow this morning before we stole the Humvee and none of us thought to grab an MRE from the back seat after it broke down two miles from the Entry Control Point. And now our stomachs think our throats have been cut.

We round a corner and push forward into the marketplace. Skinned goats hang on ropes. Pyramids of pomegranates, figs, neon-yellow mangoes. Two men crouch over a grated fire, turning puddle-shaped slabs of naan with their bare hands. We can smell the sweet yeast and it drives us crazy.

You said that this was “raw and far from perfect,” but I’m hooked. Although many writers don’t like to talk about works in progress, I’m going to ask anyway. What can you tell O-Dark-Thirty readers about your next book?

DA: I abandoned the title *FOB Sorrow* at some point and am now waiting for inspiration to strike. I’m still only about one-third or maybe one-half of the way through the first draft, so it’s been slow going. Someday soon, I hope (and my editor really hopes) that I’ll have a major burst of energy that will take me across the finish line.

ODT: *You seem very disciplined about your writing. You get up at 0345 to write before you start your day job; you review books and write content for The Quivering Pen, and get other contributors to write for it; and you keep a list of the books you’ve read in a year to share with your readers. What habits have helped most to make you a better reader and better writer?*

DA: Let me begin by saying, I’m hardly one who practices what he preaches. I’ll just get that out there in case anyone is even remotely

thinking of emulating me. I do have regimented habits and I maintain a modicum of discipline, but really when it comes down to it, I blur those lines every day. What should happen each day is: 3:45, Alarm; 3:50, Coffee Brewed and All Preparatory Throat-Clearing Complete; 4:02, Begin Writing (not Blogging, not Email-Checking, not Tweeting); 6:52, Set Aside the Day's Writing and Begin Making Breakfast Before Going to the Day Job. That's not how it works. I put myself through a lot of throat-clearing and distracting mental gymnastics every morning before any work gets done on the novel or short stories.

I will say this, though—and I still offer this as a piece of valid advice to working writers—if you're looking to "find the time" to write, you'll never find it. You have to MAKE the time to write. You have to consciously tell yourself, "Okay, I'm going to shove these excuses aside and just sit down and do it, for real." This is what happened to me about two-thirds of the way through the first draft of *Fobbit*. I'd been going around saying, "Gee, I wish I could find the time to write." Then one day, it was like someone threw a brick at my head: "Hey, Stupid! You're never going to find the time. Time doesn't need to be found—it's there. It's always been there, waiting for you." And so that's what I did. The next morning, I set my alarm an hour earlier and kicked the excuses to the curb, and just sat down and started typing. I made the time. I didn't wait for it to find me.

ODT: I've seen photos of your library and of parts of your house. You must have thousands of books, and I'm guessing that Jean uses her excellent decorating skills to help keep them so tidy and attractive and photogenic (unlike the sloppy piles toppling over in just about every room in my house). If you had to recommend just one of those books to readers and writers who are veterans or family members, what would it be, and why?

DA: Wow, that's a Sophie's Choice kind of question, isn't it? How could I possibly decide?

I do think Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War* is important in so many ways, so that would probably be my recommendation.

ODT: *What final words of advice would you offer to veterans or family members who want to write about their experiences with the military?*

DA: So, here's where I sneak in my second book recommendation: if you want to know how to tell a war story—true or otherwise—you should read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. It's the perfect how-to Owner's Manual for writing the war experience.

Another thing I'd say is: give yourself permission to tell your story in its own time. It took me six years to finish *Fobbit*; *Catch-22* was published about sixteen years after Joseph Heller returned from war; it took Karl Marlantes about thirty years to get *Matterhorn* published. We all have different timelines. We all have to allow ourselves time to simmer, time to percolate, and time to eventually bring our stories to a boil.

ODT: *Thanks for spending some time with us while your second novel is simmering and percolating!*

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