

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *Surf Drills at Bodega Bay*
18" x 24" oil on linen
Part of the permanent collection
of the U.S. Coast Guard Art Program
by John Deckert
United States Marine Corps Reserve, 1966-1969

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Editor's Note

It is what it is.

If any year in modern times aligned with that threadbare adage, it's gotta be the last year or so. Pick your poison: Worldwide pandemic, racial and civil strife, political drama on steroids. We've got a little for everyone.

If we editors were asked to offer some comfort for what lies ahead—and we certainly haven't been asked—we might fall back on a truism that most service members learned to grudgingly accept: It is what you make it.

Yep, that's what they tell you when your orders say, Kunsan Air Base or Fort Polk or Barstow or Adak. And if you're a short-timer and get caught up in the gripe vine, you might just shrug and say, "Whatever." Or worse, that innocuous-sounding but ultimately spirit-sapping "It is what it is."

But if you end up serving for the long haul, "It is what you make it" more often than not turns out to be spot on. You can really make a difference—even in the worst of times and the worst of places—if you put the effort in, acknowledge the positive and shun the negative. Even better if you can form meaningful friendships in the chaos and find ways to channel that grumpy cat energy into something creative—and, no, by creative, I'm not talking about competing in the local pub crawl three years running.

For writers, channeling that energy and grit means, well, writing. Warrior Writers, poets, and artists have been doing that since the nation's first steps, the times that tried men's [and women's!] souls. That's right, they've been doing what they do in wars, strife and yes, even pandemics that (as difficult as it may be to imagine) have been far more devastating and catastrophic than anything we've witnessed over the last year.

Which is not to say things haven't been rough. Just that they could have been rougher...if our brothers and sisters before us had not made the most of the hand they'd been dealt . . . and had they not only repeated "It is what you make it" to themselves and their comrades, but somehow, somehow, actually believed it.

So let's do just that. Let's make the future about shunning "It is what it is" and embracing and believing "It is what you make it" so that the year ahead—with all its lingering challenges—isn't just a good year . . . but the best year of our lives.

The Editors

Non-fiction.

The Watch Continues

By Marissa Cruz

I learned of the USS *John S. McCain* collision while I was in a bunker carved out of a hill on a South Korean naval base. I was working as a Navy public affairs officer during the annual joint exercise between militaries of the United States and Republic of Korea. There was a break in the exercise to announce the news, but it still took a few repetitions for it to resonate that it was real. It was confusing to turn off the wargaming mindset and process the announcement.

The initial shock wore off and I felt helpless. There's inherent risk in military service, especially when deployed like the *McCain* sailors were, but that an accident could take lives just as quickly, was especially tragic. The collision felt personal even though I don't recall anyone specifically knowing any of the ten sailors who died. We all mourned just the same. We could easily imagine the feeling of a routine day broken by disaster, and then carrying on the next day with fellow sailors missing.

Our days during the exercise were a model of efficiency. The bus would leave our hotel at 7:15 each morning, pull into the base

at 7:45, and by 8:00 we'd be briefed by the overnight crews on the events of the previous half day. While the wargaming was anything but dull, the activities surrounding it had started to feel routine: sit through meetings, type a few reports, conduct a briefing, consume lots of coffee and snacks, get on the bus back to the hotel, repeat.

The bunker was like a casino. The lack of windows stripped any sense of time or place. The recycled air, always with a hint of recently nuked food, meant we could be in any office in the world. Emerging from the bunker to bright sunlight and salty air was a welcome reminder that we were, in fact, on the other side of the world.

One morning, as we took the winding final bend toward the base's front gate, some of us spotted the first aberration in the otherwise predictable chain of events. A huge sailboat was docked at the pier. Its shiny white hull stood out against a backdrop populated by discreet gray warships. Three tall masts pierced the overcast sky with colorful signal flags woven between them. The ship was straight out of a glass bottle. I could picture the crafty hobbyist who'd have put it together, glasses sliding down his nose as he held the ship up to a desk light, painting the white hull and adding a touch of light brown wood paneling. Much as when I was young, I was perplexed by how ships came to be in glass bottles, I was similarly intrigued by how this ship came to be at this pier.

What made this extravagant vessel's appearance especially unusual was that it wasn't at a public pier. Was I seeing things? This wasn't Jamestown or Boston, where you expect to see such vessels docked; this was an active military installation.

I wasn't alone in my curiosity. Excited chatter floated through the bus. Where did it come from? What was it doing here? And, most importantly, could we check it out?

Some people snapped cellphone photos. We all craned our necks in a final attempt to glean more information about the ship as the bus pulled up to the bunker.

By the next morning, as we began the descent to base, the ship came into view once more. We saw it had acquired a massive flag that drooped beside the mast, flat in the still August air. The green, white, and red columns suggested the ship was Italian. Some said they saw markings hidden in the middle, though, that it wasn't just a tri-color. Maybe it was the Mexican flag. By later that morning, word had spread that the ship was open for tours, answering at least one of our questions.

After my mid-morning snack, I went to the pier with two officers from my team. As we walked across the parking lot beside the ship, a small breeze exposed the full flag: the eagle, its mouth full of snake, answered one more question for us.

The ship was even more impressive up close. It was huge and the smell of varnish hit us hard as we approached the gangway. We were greeted immediately by a Mexican Naval Academy cadet in his crisp white dress uniform. He towered over us as he introduced himself and the ship, the *Cuauhtémoc*.

The source of the varnish smell quickly became apparent as we spotted the sailors speckling the deck, engaged in various cleaning tasks. All ships go through rigorous maintenance and cleaning routines when they're in port; the crew spends hours on end scrubbing, painting, and wiping all surfaces. This ship was no different. The scene felt straight out of central casting. Sailors in baggy white trousers and blue-and-white striped tops swabbed the deck around us. I half expected them to break into a sea shanty dancing a choreographed jig with their mops.

The cadet led us in quick steps on a tour of the main points of interest. There was a gold-plated helm at the center that added to my impression of the ship as being for display purposes only. He pointed out the ship's coat of arms and other relics, like the ship's telegraph. The *Cuauhtémoc* seemed frozen in time.

It was clear he'd done this before, guiding guests through the ship and explaining its history. His speech was measured; he found one appropriate word after another to describe the ship and the crew in English, and deftly used gestures to fill the gaps. He told us that they were in the middle of a nine-month trip to circumnavigate the globe—answering our final question. It turned out that this ship was actually prepared for seafaring of the most adventurous sort. The ship had done this before, but this year the circumnavigation was to commemorate the centennial of the proclamation of Mexico's constitution.

He said the ship was carrying more than two hundred cadets, enlisted sailors, and officers. They were traveling from port to port in a goodwill tour. While I had guessed that the ship had to have come from Mexico one way or another, the idea of it actually sailing that distance was still incomprehensible. It seemed built for port-side tours, not the perils of open-sea sailing: fires, machinery failures, pirates, men overboard, bad weather, collisions, navigation errors, choppy seas. By the time their expedition was over *Cuauhtémoc* would visit twelve countries and encounter two of the aforementioned perils.

Since we were fellow sailors, we got more than the standard tour the public received. We wanted to see what shipboard life was like for sailors from another country and our cadet obliged. He took us to the living quarters below deck. On our way we passed the galley. The scraping sounds of pots being dragged across burners, preparing lunch for the crew, reached us at the same moment as the aromas of the grilled meat. The uniformed cooks inside gave us a nod as we passed the narrow door that took us to the stairs.

What we were really curious to see was the berthing—where the sailors slept. The cadet explained that because most of the crew was resting from the ride to South Korea (and reenergizing for a night on the town) it would be too disruptive to poke around. Our tour took us to the dining spaces instead.

“This is the wardroom, where all of the officers eat,” he said. He swept his arm at the room, similar to the wardrooms of US ships we’d seen before: table-clothed tables, cushioned seats, and an air of faux formality. After seeing the activity of the kitchen I expected something more unique.

“The mess deck for everyone else is in the next room.” We nodded.

“What’s back there?” the lieutenant commander motioned toward the corner of the room where a drape half covered the doorway to a backroom.

“That? That is where we take classes.”

Beyond the practical training of steering the ship and learning to navigate, the cadets also had lessons during the day, he explained. The small classroom had just about a dozen desks, set in a circle along the outer edges of the room. We nodded.

The cadet then showed us the framed photographs that were posted along the wardroom’s walls. Each year, the crew selected a badge of sorts to symbolize their journey. Because not every trip was a circumnavigation, most of the badges were focused on specific regions, like the Mediterranean or the Americas. The plaques with these markers were concentrated in one corner of the room, next to the formal group portraits of previous crews. He became animated when showing us these photos, speaking faster and using more gestures to describe what he knew of these past trips. His pride in joining the ranks of those memorialized on the walls of the *Cuauhtémoc* was palpable.

What caught our attention, though, were the photos of sailors “lining the rigging.” Each time the ship sailed into a new location, the crew put on their dress uniforms to render the proper honors to the port they were entering, not unlike American sailors who “man the rails.” For US ships, manning the rails means the crew lines up at regular intervals along the deck rails. The practice has evolved such that today it’s used in passing honors for the President of the United

States, rulers of foreign nations, or members of a reigning royal family—and also when approaching the pier during a ship’s homecoming. The Mexican sailors, though, climbed much higher, atop the rigging, hundreds of feet in the air, as they sailed into a harbor. It’s an impressive display of courtesy not for the faint of heart. He didn’t tell us this, but I later discovered through Google searching that the sailors are secured with myriad safety harnesses. The knowledge didn’t make the display any less impressive to me.

Satisfied with the amount of behind-the-scenes shipboard life we had seen, we moved back above deck to make our way to the next stop on our tour: the bridge, the ship’s command center. On our way there, the cadet listed the countries they had visited so far on their circumnavigation: Panama, Spain, India, the Republic of the Philippines.

Spain was one crew favorite for the obvious reason of the lack of a language barrier. Philippines was another crew favorite for the obvious reason of the young age and majority male makeup of the sailors.

With each stop on *Cuauhtémoc’s* tour, the crew served as de facto ambassadors, opening the ship to the public for tours. They participated in cultural exchanges as well. In some corners of the world, they were the locals’ only encounter with foreigners, so they had to be on their best behavior. I could relate to this experience because it’s the very aspect that drew me to service in the first place. I’ve always felt that while the mission of our military is one of force, equally important are the humanitarian assistance and disaster support we provide. I appreciated this type of engagement and public diplomacy the crew was undertaking.

While most ships currently use computer-based navigation and automated systems to drive, the cadets on this cruise went back to the basics, learning to navigate by paper maps and the stars. Our tour guide pointed out the instruments on the control panels

and described how the cadets took turns steering the ship with the computers completely turned off. We learned that this practice was not without risk.

He told us of how one night he and a fellow cadet were standing watch and navigating celestially. The seas were unusually choppy and visibility poor. The ship made rolling drops across the waves and water was pouring over the deck as it lurched to and fro. Then, suddenly, a gust of wind united with a strong wave and overpowered the ship. The other cadet, slighter than himself, was thrown overboard.

The cadet was his girlfriend.

We weren't sure we were understanding him correctly because he was telling us this with an air of formality, as if he was explaining the barometer or some other instrument on the ship's panel.

There was a search.

Since this happened in the middle of the night, there was little hope of finding where she had gone overboard.

The search was eventually called off.

Her parents flew in to meet the ship at the next port.

There was some type of formal ceremony with the Mexican Chief of Naval Operations, the country's top naval officer, extending his condolences. (This part is fuzzy due to the language barrier.)

And then they sailed to the next stop.

"How long ago was this?"

"A few weeks."

"Shit."

He wasn't used to speaking about this part of his experience on the ship, but the act of sharing the story seemed, surprisingly, to lift his mood. I imagined how the other cadets must have treated him in the days and weeks that followed, what must have been left unsaid after her death. Did they avoid him, unsure of how to treat him? Did they overcompensate? Go out of their way to include him in conversations and activities?

He began to talk about his more recent experiences on the ship, the stops they'd made, what he'd learned in class and in navigation sessions with fellow cadets. They respected his space and need to mourn, but they also had an intuitive sense of when he needed distraction. While I had fixated on him losing his girlfriend I hadn't considered the crew had also lost a shipmate. They would have felt her loss as well.

Entire navies feel losses. Some things are universal.

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Crazy Cards

By Thibaut Delloue

Someone's nudging me awake. Did I miss my alarm? I swear I just fell asleep; squeezing a few hours of rest before my watch at 2:00 a.m., the rev watch, when I will stand on the bridge for five hours, drive the ship along an imaginary line, and stare at the pitch-dark ocean. I hate night watches. The sea is frightening in the dark; I can never shake off the feeling I'm going to run the ship aground or just disappear into oblivion altogether. "You awake?" one of the other junior officers is holding my curtains open and leaning his head into my rack, which on a warship feels more like a coffin than a bed. "Phone for you. Seems important." He's whispering, trying not to wake up the other guys sleeping in our berthing, a cramped maze we call the Jungle. It's home to about a dozen fresh-faced junior officers serving their first tour aboard a Navy ship.

At first, I'm furious. Sleep is sacred out at sea, and if this is my boss telling me my division fucked something up again, I swear I'm going to lose it. I'm supposed to navigate a warship in a few hours. Let me sleep, for fuck's sake. So I slide out of my rack; they are stacked three high and mine is the middle one. It takes some practice to ex-

tricate oneself from a Navy rack, especially when the whole ship is pitching and rolling in the open sea, but after months on deployment I manage it in one effortless movement. I weave through the tight corridors of the Jungle, my path marked only by the dim red lights that illuminate a naval vessel at night, and reluctantly put the phone to my ear: “This is Lieutenant junior grade Delloue, can I help you?” I say sardonically.

“Hey, it’s Mike.” Mike is our navigator; he’s got a tough job on-board and I don’t envy him. “I need you up on the bridge. We’re putting the RHIB in the water and you got chosen to be the boat officer. Congrats.” RHIB stands for Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat, a seven-meter powerboat that gets people to shore more quickly than mooring an eight thousand-ton warship.

I’m quickly jolted out of my half-awakened state. We don’t drive the boat in the middle of the night unless there’s an emergency, unless we need to get someone, or something, off the ship immediately. Where the hell could it be going anyway? Last time I looked at the chart, we were in the middle of the eastern Mediterranean.

“OK, I’ll be right there.” I don’t ask questions. I open up my coffin rack, where most of my belongings for a five month deployment fit into a few lunchbox-sized compartments, and throw on my underway uniform: T-shirt, blue coveralls that camouflage us perfectly against the ocean, ballcap, and the Navy’s inexplicably uncomfortable leather boots. My shipmate who answered the phone is already climbing back into his rack, and as I step onto the ladderwell out of our berthing, he eyes me with a wouldn’t-want-to-be-ya kind of look.

The ascent to the bridge from the Jungle, even after tracing the route hundreds of times, has always been my least favorite part of going on watch. Our berthing is way aft on the ship, below the waterline, so low that we can hear the seas crash into the hull as we sleep. It’s almost comforting. The bridge is nearly at the other end of the ship

and five decks higher. This time, though, I scramble up to it in just a few minutes. The first thing I notice when I open the watertight door leading into the bridge is that it's an especially dark night: cloudy, almost no moon, so black that I can barely distinguish where the ocean ends and the sky begins. The bridge is also dark, so watchstanders can adjust their eyes to the night, and I recognize its features only by the dim glow of its instrument panels. I've also spent close to a thousand hours up here, so I know this space intimately.

I instinctively make my way to the chart table, where I can see the navigator's bulky frame hunched over the electronic chart. Everyone is quiet, not exactly the emergency I was expecting, but I notice the captain is on the bridge too, his eyes quietly fixed out the window and past the bow. There's a large, dark landmass in front of us, maybe three or four miles away. Mike sees me approach, and he points to the chart.

"We're closing in to Cyprus and we'll lower the RHIB about a mile from land. You're going here." He shows me a small harbor and the buoys and lights I'll use as a guide. I find some blank paper and draw a crude chart of my own. The captain is only a few feet from us; he turns around and leans over the chart table.

"We've had a medical emergency," he tells me. "When you get to land there'll be an ambulance waiting. Doc's coming with you so you don't need to worry about any of that. Just get the boat there safely. You know what you're doing?"

"Yes, sir," I nod and grab a handheld radio before leaving the bridge. I know I have some time before we lower the boat, so I make a short detour to the wardroom, the place where officers eat, hoping someone has made coffee recently. I keep the lights off so I don't kill my night vision, though the room is lit somewhat by the red overhead lights in the passageway outside. I grab the large thermos and shake it; clearly it hasn't been refilled in hours, though there is still enough

tepid coffee inside to fill a cup. I gulp it down reluctantly, though since I'm running on about two hours of sleep and a long night lies ahead, I suppose I should be thankful. Nothing I hate more than no coffee before a night watch. One of our chiefs likes to say the navy runs on two things: marine fuel and coffee.

When I reach the weather deck, a dozen sailors have already manned their stations to lower the RHIB. I'm outside now, the air is warm and the sea calm, like it usually is in the summer off the coast of Cyprus. We've sailed south of this island several times during the deployment but have never moored there. I approach the boat davit, a small crane that swivels outward to the water below, attached to the RHIB by a wire. The deck lights are on and bathe us in a harsh yellow light; so much for my night vision. I'm expecting a horrifying scene, someone passed out or bloody, laying in a stretcher and clinging to life. Instead, I see one of our cooks, the one that works in the wardroom's galley and makes the officers' meals, dressed in civilian clothes. He appears composed, not looking at all like someone suffering a medical emergency. One of our corpsmen, the Navy term for a medic, stands besides him. Again, I don't ask questions. My job is to get him to shore. I can figure out the rest later.

The chief boatswain's mate is wrangling his small crew: "Tighten that lifejacket, there—Put on your chin strap—Tuck in your pant legs, shipmate." He's a large, intimidating man with a reputation for exactness and for always putting his sailors first. He likes to chide junior officers, too, respectfully of course.

"Been waiting for you, sir!" he tells me with a smile forming under his mustache, as he tosses a lifejacket and a helmet into my arms. I ask him who else is going into the boat and if he knows what's going on with our cook. He doesn't. I'm the only officer on the boat deck and I'll take charge of the RHIB, but until it goes in the water there's no question that Chief Boats, as he is affectionately called, is in charge. This

is not the bridge where officers normally stand watch; It's his show down here and I respect that. I turn on the radio and test the channel with the officer of the deck on the bridge.

"Read you Lima Charlie," he answers, informal speak for "loud and clear." The large landmass ahead of us is growing larger; finally the officer of the deck on the bridge above tells us to place the RHIB at the rail, or to unstrap it and swing it towards the ship's gunwales so we can embark. On one of the bridge's wings, the captain observes the operation and motions to the officer of the deck, who orders us to load, lower, and launch.

I step off the ship, our home for the last four months, and directly onto the small boat, along with a coxswain, an engineer, a rescue swimmer, a corpsman, and the cook himself. For now we are still suspended about twenty feet over the sea's black surface, held up by a wire and a few steadying lines. The ship moves slowly, about five knots, but I hear the infinite mass of water rushing against her. I signal a thumbs up to the chief boatswain's mate, who directs his sailors to lower the boat into the water with his booming voice. The wire holding us above the darkness below unravels from its pulley and we commence a slow descent, each of us firmly gripping the rails on the boat's center console. After a few seconds the boat's rigid hull makes contact with the water. The engineer starts the engine and we untie the steadying lines, then unhook the wire. The coxswain throttles forward and we veer sharply to starboard, away from our home and towards a strange, dark land. I take out my makeshift chart and compare it to the boat's GPS, indicating a course for the coxswain to steer, who by now is pushing his little vessel hard as its bow slams over the waves.

The warship, visible by her green and white navigation lights on her starboard side, is rapidly shrinking. Normally I love leaving the ship on deployment; this time, enveloped in darkness and powering

through the water, it's somewhat unsettling. Nobody speaks; the cook is despondent and appears ashamed, the way a child looks who's just been scolded.

"You all right?" I ask. He nods and manages a meek smile. About a mile away is a small harbor, clearly visible under the city's lights. I don't know what city it is. I don't even know what language they speak in Cyprus, to be honest. I'm looking for a green buoy, one of the markers I drew on my paper chart, and soon I see its flashing green light come into view. We keep it on our starboard side and continue towards the rock piles that make up the breakwater; we find the opening between the rocks and enter the small harbor. Suddenly the water is still, the harbor's lights dance on its surface. At one end there is a long wooden pier, and beyond that, in the parking lot, an ambulance is waiting as promised. After we tie the boat alongside the pier, the corpsman takes the cook by the arm and together they hurry towards the ambulance. I follow close behind; I'm responsible to the captain that his sailors make it safely to a hospital, after all. That's when I overhear their conversation and the mystery is broken.

The cook, earlier that night, had forced down a near-bottle's worth of aspirin in an apparent suicide attempt. Quickly wishing to reverse his decision, he rushed to the medical office and confessed the act to the corpsman on duty. The ship's entire medical team, alerted of the emergency, did their best to induce at least some of the poisonous stuff out of the patient's stomach. With access to only limited equipment, however, the chief corpsman, and our captain, believed it prudent to send the cook to the nearest hospital to pump the rest out.

As I look on dumbfounded, the cook and the corpsman climb into the ambulance and drive away. I attempt to contact the ship, but my handheld radio doesn't reach that far. I turn to my now-diminished crew: "Let's go back, I guess." We can no longer see the ship

from where we are; the sky is too dark and the lights onshore too bright. So we just drive the reciprocal course we originally steered, and a few minutes later three navigation lights, one green and two white, come into view, and soon after that the black form of a destroyer. After we are hoisted back up onto the ship, I realize it's just before 0200; time to head back to the bridge and stand watch for the next five hours. Hopefully someone made coffee.

Onboard Navy ships, there exists a term for those who express fake suicidal thoughts to get out of deployment. We call it “pulling the crazy card.” It's a rather merciless expression, one that doesn't exactly make room for the complexities of people's mental health, but it's not a surprising one. Abandoning your crew when a ship deployed is one of the most reprehensible crimes a sailor can commit, tantamount to walking away from your post in a war zone. I do not know if the cook was “pulling the crazy card” that night, or if he really did intend to kill himself. He returned to the ship months later, seemingly in high spirits, which fueled suspicion among the crew that he had staged the whole incident because he couldn't hack deployed life anymore. He wasn't the first one.

The Navy has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to sailors expressing thoughts of suicide. They are quickly sent to a Navy hospital and do not remain aboard deployed ships. Over two deployments, I had seen two other sailors depart the crew for confessing such thoughts to our medical staff. One had been in my own division, a seaman with only a few months of service to his name, and he was immediately vilified by his shipmates.

“This guy is full of shit,” one of the other sailors in the division confided in me. “He doesn't do any work, complains all the time, and won't shut up about the great things he'll accomplish when he gets out of the Navy. He's textbook crazy card.” As an officer it was not my place to agree with him.

What I do know is that being deployed on a Navy ship, staring at the endless ocean and the same steel bulkheads and passageways for months at a time, takes its toll on everyone. It's not natural for human beings to live on ships, after all, and no amount of modern comforts can make going out to sea for that long not fundamentally suck. How someone reaches their breaking point, or why they feel they must abandon their crew because of it, are difficult questions. The sea can take us to dark places, after all, and some of us have a hard time getting out.

Thibaut Delloue served for five years on active duty as a surface warfare officer in the U.S. Navy, first as the communications officer aboard the destroyer USS Carney in Spain, then as the navigator of the littoral combat ship USS Coronado in San Diego. He continues to serve in the Navy Reserve.

Dust to Dust

By Tristan Riesen

There was a hill near the COP. We rotated back and forth, three days on and three days off, up to the hill and back. By “three days off” I certainly don’t mean we were on vacation, but simply not on the hill. Off the hill wasn’t much easier. We were still on the COP, still patrolling the towns in and around Maiwand.

I was a mortarman, an indirect fire infantryman, attached to a platoon of scouts. There was some fighting, but not much. Pop-shots on our convoys, occasional firefights, and, of course, IEDs. Soldiers relished the rare coordinated ambush, or Small Kill Team which gave us the fortune of bringing the fight to the enemy.

No matter where I was Afghanistan always had the same extreme and terrible weather: Excruciatingly hot, frostbitten and cold, torrents of rain, and, worst of all, sandstorms.

Between the hill, the far away and inanimate enemy, and the weather, there was, all around us, Maiwand—a small part of northwest Kandahar. It was there I fought a war of proximity.

But there was beauty too. In the winter, the sunrise was always welcomed; in summer, wheat, poppies, and marijuana grew in lush

fields. The kindness of locals wasn't, I think, much different than a New Yorker's, unpredictable but always welcome.

At the beginning of the deployment, we fortified the hill and dug in machine gun positions. In our digging we excavated ancient artifacts and bones. Afghanistan has a long history of attempts by foreigners to conquer its lands. The bones could have belonged the Ancient Greeks, the British, or the Russians. Nobody knew. All three empires tried and failed to conquer Afghanistan. In fact, there was a big battle in Maiwand during the Second Anglo-Afghan War on July 27, 1880. Rudyard Kipling's poem, "That Day," dramatizes the battle. The men in the poem are confused, afraid, and unprepared. "We was rotten 'fore we started," Kipling says, "we was never disciplined."

The bones were reminders of that history, of the men that died for purposes similar to ours. Whatever that purpose was, mind you, I didn't know.

But like us they too had been hated. Afghan children would beg us for candy, and when we turned our backs they threw rocks. Quite a few soldiers had scars not from bullets or shrapnel, but from the propulsion of a hefty rock.

The looks we received from elder Afghans weren't any different. They were often filled with pure disdain. By the time I got to Afghanistan coalition forces had already been there almost a decade, and that contempt had grown, unbounded, each and every day.

I can still hear one squad leader, talking to a village elder.

"Fight for us," he said. "We have tanks."

The interpreter translated.

"He says, 'No.'"

"We'll keep bringing them, the tanks."

The man, without translation, shook his head.

"What? What the hell do you mean, 'No?'"

The man spoke, and then the translator.

“He says, “No, you won’t keep bringing tanks. He says you will leave Afghanistan. He says you will leave this land and its people.”

There is a very clear and vast chasm between our culture and Afghanistan’s.

For a brief stretch of the deployment our platoon worked with a group of Afghan National Police. The ANP wore drab gray uniforms and had thick mustaches. Ironically, most of them had been in prison at one time or another. The tattoos on their hands served as evidence of their incarceration. Worse still, almost all were pedophiles. From time to time I would go into their camp and see them, licking their lips and watching a DVD of a young, dancing boy.

Afghan soldiers, police, and interpreters had English soubriquets. The police chief, for instance, was named John. On the hill, I would smoke hash with John and his squad of police. I tried to communicate with each of them, to share alms. I bought a goat, and hired a halal butcher to bless the blade for slaughter. He pulled the goat into his lap and gripped its jaw shut. The guttural cry was stifled within.

The butcher stretched its neck backward, exposing the animal’s periwinkle jugular. The beating of its pulse continued long after he had cut its throat, and it died like everything else in Afghanistan, in the dust.

Afterward we all sat around a fire and ate the goat. In the months to come we would raid villages and arrest high value targets. I have watched the faces of numerous men disappear behind canvas bags, and John, the police chief, was often nearby.

Later, the company commander gave orders to arrest John. He had stolen police firearms from the hilltop—AK-47s, hand grenades, recoilless rifles, and anti-tank weapons—and sold them to the Taliban.

Intelligence came down to us a few days after. John had been spotted in a nearby village. I wasn't on the mission, but thankfully he didn't put up a fight. I shook my head as I imagined the bag placed over his head, and pictured his gait as he was loaded onto the back of the truck.

I saw him, briefly, once more. The platoon that picked him up had transported him to the COP before the ANP would take him to prison. Back to prison, technically. It was dark. John was in the back of a connex, sitting on his haunches. His hands were tied behind his back. A bag covered his face. I offered no water or reconciliation, and walked away.

It was decided that we should kick the Afghan police off the hill. It was ours now. The hill was our amnesty, a break from the war turned occupation. Most soldiers in Afghanistan were, after all, soldiers in name only. In reality, we were occupiers and police. That is to say, we had time on our hands.

For my part, I thought too damn much. I was pulled apart by American exceptionalism, the corruption of Afghanistan, and the immensity of emotion when you acknowledge the Long War may not only be Long, but, in fact, Never Ending.

The hill became a reprieve from that ground war below us. We were still on that ground, sure, but always at a greater distance.

Out of sight, out of mind, some soldiers say. We were like snipers, really, only too far away to hit our target.

One day a cat showed up on the hill. Naturally, I had heard of it before seeing it. The platoon, in the typical fashion of soldiers, instantly mythologized the feline.

"It's huge," one soldier said.

"Bigger than a dog," said another.

"Bigger than a really big dog."

"Should we kill it?"

“Why would we do that? It’s the only thing I want to see alive in this whole goddamned country.”

“But it’s eating your food,” the supply sergeant interjected.

To appease supply we asked the Special Forces engineer for some plywood. We obstructed the kitchen entrance to block the cat’s invasion. The kitchen was a kind of Afghan adobe, a mud house made of water, sand, and hay. It stayed cool in that adobe, and even kept most food from rotting.

But the next night our kitchen was ransacked.

“She even got past our guards.”

“How do you know she’s a she?”

“Aren’t all cats female?”

“You mean fe-line.”

“No, I mean fe-male.”

We again blocked the entrance, this time filling sandbag after sandbag and stacking each on top of the door. Sandbags, we knew, could stop small arms fire. We figured it would certainly stop a cat.

Again, the cat got in. From there I think it was a rather easy decision for Sergeant First Class Peterson, the platoon sergeant.

“If you see it,” he said, “kill it.”

That night I saw the cat for the first time while on guard duty. She crawled past the small makeshift side window of the bunker, and briefly stuck her head in. She had tan fur and a white snout like a goatee, a pink tongue and a blackhole nose, and two predator eyes. I blinked. She was still there, for a moment, and then carelessly slunk away. Her body passed by the window, and she moved toward the larger window with the machine gun. I raised my rifle and moved slowly forward. Through the window was the ink-blot sky, and stars overhead. I walked a few steps, stopped, and walked a few more. I came to the window. She had walked down the hill. I could barely

see her. I remember looking, through the paranoia green of night-vision, as she swayed, care-free and still weary, out into that desert night.

“They weren’t kidding,” I said the next day. “She is huge.”

“Bigger than a dog?” they asked.

“Bigger than a big dog,” I repeated.

“What? No way. Then why didn’t you kill her?”

I had completely forgotten about that order. Fear, I learned then, induces amnesia.

“Too fast,” I told the platoon. “Happened in the blink of an eye.”

I suppose I thought of myself as clever and added: “Didn’t want to waste a bullet.”

Someone spotted the cat later in the week, out on the plain below, near the place she had disappeared on me.

She still walked with an absent-minded sway, but from afar the wavering looked less exaggerated. There must have been a hatred within me which I projected onto her. It was her ability to live so wantonly free which guided my hate. It was a fear, not unlike the Afghan’s, that should not have been and yet was completely natural. It was, I think, one of the many hypocrisies of war.

Her head stayed low, eyes to the front, ears tilted forward. The tail swung from side to side, and was puffed up as if she had recently been in a fight. She was a predator after all, and had fought for her life each and every day of it.

Before we could shoot, she went into a wadi, and we lined the hill like the Doughboys did in the trenches.

I got on top of a bunker with my rifle and waited. The sun was going down, and the sweat soaked through my uniform. With each exhale, the dust below my chin kicked up and out, and was sucked into my mouth and lungs, leaving the gritty crunch of sand between my teeth.

It took an hour, maybe more. Most of the guys had hunted deer

at one time or another. They were patient, and, when she walked out, we fired.

The fatal bullet hit the spine, and the body flopped back and forth while the head remained an anchor pulled down to the earth. At first it was shocking, and not for the last time I watched in awe at death's power. The body didn't stop thrashing. The scene became graceless and unnecessary—undeserved even.

In short, the cat needed to end. There had been no ceremony, I thought. We did not bless our rifles, did not plan to consume her. She was sinking into somewhere, some where; a great gulf, maybe, a shore, a beach of dust.

“**B**et she'll make a nice rug,” a soldier said.

Sergeant Peterson ordered a few lingering Afghan police to drive two of us out and grab the dead cat's body. I had forgotten about the cat's drawn-out death, and was hoping Peterson would order me down the hill. That way I could at least tell about the time I went out and picked up that dead cat. Experience means everything to a soldier.

Instead, he sent two others. They drove down in a green four-door Ford Ranger, put her in a black plastic trash bag, and drove back to us.

She was some sort of wildcat, like a bobcat's Afghan cousin. All things considered, she was larger than a dog—was a bit larger, in fact, than a small lap dog.

“A bit smaller than I expected,” I said.

“True. But she is a girl, isn't she?”

We all nodded.

We took her into the bunker, hung her up by her two front paws, and skinned her.

The bullet had entered the bottom of her chin and exited near

the ear. A JFK joke was made which, I thought, was surprisingly accurate. The story of a bullet is about as wavering and powerful as myth. They are too unpredictable to know, beyond a reasonable doubt, how they will travel through the body, which parts they will violate, and where they will exit.

And wars, yes, wars are much the same.

Later, someone fixed her head to the front of an armored vehicle. The eyes were closed and the mouth open, her teeth ever sharp. The Afghans who already hated us pointed at her in wonder as we drove past them. It was the greatest of postures, hanging her up like that. It was violent and unexpected. We got rid of her when she turned into a nuisance and started attracting buzzards.

That's when her skull was torn from its bindings and thrown like an apple-core into the dust.

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Fiction.

Cathedral de Sequoia

By Brent Chisholm

Tuck took a deep breath and felt tense heat swell inside his cheeks against the cool spring breeze. Looks like no one lives here. Weeds waist high grew through the long gravel driveway, and the small barn and silos looked old and dirty. The shed door was open and off its track, jilted and hanging by a single runner. Or he could be in there; he could be anywhere. The rifle hung from his shoulder with the barrel pointed skyward behind his head, and he reminded himself, the oath obligated me to carry it, not to use it.

As he walked toward the old farmhouse, all was still except windbreak cottonwoods oscillating against blue sky far behind the farm, and his feet on the gravel made the only sound. The snap of a hunting bow startled him, and the arrow hushed as it passed his left shoulder. He nearly fell sideways as he hurried to the nearest tree. He didn't factor the wind, he thought. He found a cottonwood trunk and leaned back on it, retaining the lever action weapon behind his shoulder.

"Hansen, is that you?" Tuck yelled. Tree leaves swished in the wind, and then he heard another arrow sail by the tree, this time at

eye level. He needs time to nock another arrow. Tuck sprinted along the windbreak to another tree closer to the shed.

“Mr. Hansen! I’m looking for Mr. Hansen!” Tuck yelled. He held his breath and waited while a fly circled his face. An arrow stuck in the tree he was hiding behind; it sounded like a hammer hitting the trunk.

“Dang it Hansen, I’m not here to fight!” he yelled, though I can’t blame him.

“Go away. Go away or you’re dead!” came Hansen’s alcohol-laden voice. He’s in the shed with the broken door.

“**Y**ou’re DEAD!” cried Hansen. I may be. Today might be the day, thought Tuck. From his position on the field-side of the windbreak, he looked east across wheat and weeds growing mixed in the fields. He hasn’t been farming. He’s probably seen a liquor bottle every day, maybe more, for the last year and a half.

An arrow stuck deeply into the ground near his boots, just past the tree roots. He breathed deeply, Your will be done. Tuck stepped around the tree trunk and ran to the corrugated shed wall. He stepped into the opening next to the dilapidated door, dropped the rifle flat to the ground, and fell to his knees as his injured hip sharply protested. He winced and searched the dark shed, fumbling the words he’d rehearsed hundreds of times, “Can you forgive me?”

Somewhere among the shadowed farm implements, workbench, and fertilizer smell, the strings of a hunting bow creaked as Hansen pulled it tight. Tuck’s stomach tightened, and he heard a quiet breath, or maybe it was a sob, and the bow creaked again as Hansen slowly let the string forward.

“I can’t,” whispered Hansen. “I can’t forgive you. You killed them. YOU killed them!” He dropped the bow and in one motion, grabbed a heavy ax from the tool bench, rushing toward Tuck who still kneeled in the doorway, just a silhouette. Hansen raised the ax with both hands as

he approached, nearly running. Almost through the doorway and into the light, he saw the gun near the rifleman's knees. "Justice," he glimpsed, was inscribed in ornate cursive on the receiver. He pulled hard on the ax handle, and Tuck waited to receive the blow. I commend my soul into your . . . he prayed with gritted teeth and eyes pressed shut.

The ax head started its downward arc from above Hansen's head, caught the steel door rail, and broke from the wooden handle as sparks and splinters sprayed onto Tuck. Hansen fell to the ground in a surprised, drunken stumble, and as his cheek fell onto the gravel, he grunted hard. He'd deeply tasted the intent to take another's life. That made him sicker than the alcohol ever did, and he vomited.

Tears brimmed in Tuck's eyes too, but he stayed quiet and held them back as he rolled to his elbow and thigh.

"You're dead," said Hansen as he lifted his head from the ground. Small rocks stuck to the corner of his mouth. He looked down the driveway towards the road, and then passed out.

Tuck dusted off the walnut stock and blued rifle barrel; under his fingers he felt the history of the weapon, once smooth, now pitted and chipped, yet still structurally solid and comfortable in his hands. He brushed the etched word on one side of the rifle, "Justice," written in elegant script, and his fingers left clean spots where they lifted dust from each place he touched. He turned the rifle over and read on the other side, "Mercy," etched in the same style. Between the two words was a bullet in the action. Always chambered; always ready. That was the motto. He knew what he deserved. He'd been known as a rifleman his entire adult life, and he'd grown to abhor the job. He slung it over his shoulder as he stood, then he grabbed Hansen by the collar of his shirt and dragged him into the house.

The living room showed a layer of extended bachelorhood veneered over his mother's comforting touch; it was livable but not clean. Windows with uneven curtains provided limited light as the rifleman pulled Hansen onto a dirty couch. The refrigerator had no edible food,

and the pantry contained only some canned soups, beans, and chili. Coffee grounds speckled the counter tops.

Hansen woke slowly, and he wandered his semi-conscious mind where he visited memories of his parents on the farm. He remembered bouncing as the tractor rode on dark brown dirt, his father in the cab, teaching him how to drive straight lines and turn to the next row. He remembered the smell of bread baking in the oven. He ached deeply for his parents. Quickly, a throbbing headache drew him out of mournful memories to the darker present moment. The setting sun framed by slender windows seemed to weld shut his eyes, which he covered with his hand, and that brought to his nose the smell of an unbathed body mixed with unwashed clothes.

Still drunk, he struggled to open an eye and view the room. Now inside, he saw the familiar, depressing living room of his parents' house. He'd not cleaned it since they passed—*since they were murdered*, he thought. Sadness and rage seemed to draw his gut into itself, and he swiped the base of the couch for a bottle, any bottle, and found nothing.

“You won't find it,” said Tuck's coarse voice.

Startled, Hansen retracted his hand and the jolt made his head throb.

Hansen grumbled through a dry throat, “Get me a drink.”

“I can't. I tossed it.”

“Why?!”

There's booze somewhere in this house. Hansen tried to sit up but the headache held him down. He felt frozen, and then he vomited onto the floor. The unkempt farmhouse and Hansen smelled bad, and Hansen's alcoholic bile nearly forced Tuck to make his own contribution.

“I'm here to ask your forgiveness. What happened was an accident. I wouldn't be here if it were any other way. If I was a murderer, I wouldn't be here. That's all I wanted to say. I'm sorry, I'm . . .” the words caught in his throat.

“You killed them,” said Hansen as he drifted into sleep again, and silence once again saturated the room.

The setting sun lowered further as Tuck fought his own memories of that day, and of that battle. “It was an accident,” he breathed to himself. He stood from behind the couch and walked outside. The sun, just above the horizon, shimmered through the leaves. *Gettin’ cold*, he thought. He walked through the windbreak into the neglected field and looked skyward. No birds. He scanned the horizon and saw the tall trees and spires of the cathedral in the distance, and wondered if he’d be lucky enough to find small game or a prairie chicken for dinner. Looking east into the approaching umbra of night, he spotted some movement across the property. It’s always easier to see when you’re not looking into the sun.

Hours later, Hansen awoke to a pleasant scent he’d known years before. It was gamey; it was the savory smell of salt and cooked bird. Night rested upon the house and the living room was dark. His searching hand raked the base of the couch, and he found a plate of cold meat.

“You still here?” asked Hansen.

“Yep.”

Hansen laid in silence, finding himself subject to a lesser headache partially displaced by violent anger, sadness, and wrath that he couldn’t seem to unstick.

“I’m not taking this food. And you can shove it,” he said.

“That’s fine. I’ll leave whenever you want.” Hansen sighed and moved to a sitting position, head on hands and elbows on knees. His fingers brushed stiff whiskers and he tried to moisten his dry lips.

“There’s coffee by that plate.”

Hansen paused, *Well, I’ll just drink the real stuff later.*

“I poured out the alcohol. The stuff in the closet, the bedroom upstairs, the fridge and freezer, the barn. Everything is draining through the gravel outside.”

Hansen breathed hot ire, then he felt for the cup and drank room-temperature coffee from the cold mug. It tasted terrible, but his body craved liquid and it satisfied something in him.

“Get out,” groaned Hansen.

“Ok.” Tuck stood and his boots thumped as he walked across the floor in the darkness. Hansen peered through uncut hair in front of his eyes, saw the door open, and watched Tuck’s contour against a dim starlit world. The door closed and Hansen sat alone in the empty house. He stood, still holding the empty coffee mug, and he teetered briefly as he walked to the front door.

“Hey. You OWE me!” said Hansen as he pulled open the door. Tuck paused his walk to face the house. Hansen looked like a pale apparition framed by the doorway. The chilled air carried his voice to the windbreak which seemed to contain it.

Maybe I do, thought Tuck as he remembered Old Testament law for manslaughter. He couldn’t deny it. Some justice must occur.

“How about you kill yourself? That’d be a start,” said Hansen.

“I can’t do that.”

“You stick that gun in your mouth and pull the trigger,” he hissed. Tuck ran his fingers over the cold metal butt-plate near his hip, and stayed silent.

“I can’t forgive you,” said Hansen.

“You don’t have to. I’m sorry for what happened. What I said was true though, in court, it was an accident. I don’t deserve to be a free man now, but they let me out. There was worse guys than me, I guess. I’ve been looking to tell you: I’m sorry. I’m sorry that bullet hit your . . .” He paused. “I’m sorry they aren’t here. I’m sorry.”

Hansen nearly stopped his breathing. “They should be here. This is their house. They should be here, not you!”

“You’re right,” said Tuck. He turned and walked past the treeline, down the driveway, and onto the road. Left and right he looked, east and west, and prayed for direction. The moon was absent, and though

many, the stars above barely lit the road. He thought, *Seek first the kingdom. I'll go back to the cathedral.*

Hansen awoke to bright sunlight that again stung his eyes. Had one day passed? Two? Five? Sitting on the couch, he picked cold dry meat from the bones of what looked to be a grouse and poured the last of the cold coffee down his throat. His body ached, and yet, something had changed. He still hated Tuck, and sorrow nearly overwhelmed him, yet he felt a stillness he'd not known before. No family. He stood and looked out a window. Outside was a well-used tractor, dirty and dented, that he'd drunkenly driven into a tree trunk some time ago, though he couldn't remember when. He'd left it there after he woke up with his head laying on the steering wheel. No truck, he thought. No food. I have nothing but this house. He looked around. On every surface was thick dust that only time could accrue, accented by clothes, trash, and empty bottles. He walked outside and squinted his eyes against the rising sun while breathing mist into the morning.

He walked to one of the tractor's big tires and leaned against it. The smell of rubber, diesel, and soil caused him to grit his teeth through memories that had become clearer as time moved him further from his last drink. He remembered the feeling of moist soil softly collapsing under the big tires. I have this house, this tractor, and the fields. The door was open and he climbed inside. He brushed an old bird's nest off the seat. Dry grass, leaves, and bird droppings were everywhere—including the instrument panel under the steering wheel, which the birds apparently used as a perch. He reached under the rubber cushion to adjust the seat, and his fingers found the familiar curve of a glass bottle. White lightning? He brought the nearly full vessel to his lips and pulled heavily on the stinging clear alcohol. Instantly, he felt warmer and invigorated. At the very least, it seemed to dissolve some of his sorrow. Hansen reached to the key, turned it, and a few dim lights showed through the bird droppings. He checked the drive lever in neutral and pushed the start button.

The engine cranked slowly and then found a familiar rhythm, but it did not start, so he lifted his finger and waited. Though the noise of the engine startled him, he unconsciously dreaded any quiet moment that let his own thoughts surface, so he pushed the starter again and held it, and didn't let go, and he thought, I'll kill the battery if I have to. Hansen forced a great hardness to his face, and yet, a tear fell between the steering wheel spokes while the engine coughed, started, and then it found its steady breath in a rhythmic low chug. Knuckles white, he lifted his finger from the start button.

He looked over his shoulder: nothing on the PTO, nothing behind me, and so he dropped the gear handle into reverse. Slowly, he let the clutch up and through a great shaking of branches, peeling of bark, and crumbling of headlight pieces to the ground, he bounced away from the windbreak across the neglected field and toward the road.

Tuck prayed as he leaned against the wood pew in front of him, silently offering penance. He heard the priest offer absolution for those present, recite a prayer, and then everyone sat on their pews which creaked but did not echo as they did in traditional marble and stone buildings. Tuck strained and slowed as he passed through the pain in his sore left hip while he settled to his seat.

As a woman started the first reading, his eyes drifted to the cathedral itself. This was not his favorite religious building, but it was the closest. Its pillars were not stone. They were living old growth trees: live-roots-in-the-ground redwoods that he estimated to be twelve feet across. Like pillars, they were spaced along each side of the nave, and yet their trunks and branches had been trained into precise ceiling arches that met in a series of apexes along the center of the cathedral and also reached outward towards walls constituted by smaller trained trees and beautiful carved decorative panels beyond the outer aisles. Mosaics hung from ornate ropes rather than being built into walls. The trees, he estimated, in their great old age, grew

by such small increments that the carved wooden panels constituting the walls only needed to be trimmed or adjusted a few times per decade, if that.

Where clerestory windows might have been, stained glass portraits hung from branches that were almost three feet thick. Where there was no stained glass, carefully arched openings among the large and small branches allowed light into the cathedral. *This place is alive*, he thought.

The altar was on an elevated olive wood structure framed by intricate sculptures from the floor to the first thick branches above the priest's head. Chapels on either side of the nave were constructed, or rather grown and trained, into their own alcoves. Douglas fir constituted the chapel to his right, neatly maintained and trimmed, bent into beautifully woven arches so that tree trunks met where keystones might reside, and so that branches framed carvings of saints and Mary. Branches appeared braided in some places and grafted in others so that two trees were linked by shared limbs.

The people around him stood for the gospel reading, and so did he, hearing about Christ writing in the dirt as condemners slowly disappeared. Mass was a fog, and he abstained from communion. After the benediction, he wandered onto the granite front stairs of the cathedral: one of the few stone sections of the building. Before him, an open grass field lay covered in dew; it was a courtyard surrounded by more trees. There was nothing unusual about a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder, even in a church, and yet he tried to assume a non-threatening posture as he rejoined the flow of people exiting the cathedral towards the town.

He walked on the gravel city streets and avoided the plank board sidewalks and high curbs. He nodded hello and tried to smile without looking grim when he made eye contact with both men and women. Hard to polish a river rock, he thought, but people seemed unoffended and polite in their reciprocal greetings.

The main road out of town went past Hansen's farm, and taking a deep breath, he walked past the last few buildings and onto the long road that stretched westward. This was the shortest walk to the next town, a farm town, and he'd tried and failed with Hansen so it was time to move on. The other roads that might take him away from this place required a walk of several days through mountains and deep wilderness to even the smallest villages. He didn't know where he'd eat or sleep that night, and those concerns worried him only a little. *Give us this day our daily bread*, he thought as his stomach bubbled in agreement.

His eyes scanned across fields of wheat and still-young sunflowers. Ahead, a tractor approached and he moved to let it pass. He tipped his hat at the driver. It was Hansen.

"Hey!" yelled Hansen as he struggled to a stop. The tractor lurched, bounced, and halted. He looked down from the elevated cab.

"Hey, you owe me. You want forgiveness? You gotta earn it," said Hansen.

"What do you want?"

"You're going to work my farm. You're going to do it, and you're going to do it for free."

"I need food."

"You eat what you get yourself," said Hansen. "I'm driving to get supplies. You can start your trip to hell on my farm. You want forgiveness or not?"

"Yes."

"Then walk to the farm and start cleaning that shed, then get us dinner, and make coffee. I'm going to get a drink."

Tuck looked pensive.

"What?" asked Hansen, seeing Tuck's reluctance.

"I told the bottle shop not to sell . . ."

“Well I got something you don’t! Money! And they’ll take money over your stupid word. What are you doing? Get out of my life! Get to the farm or I’ll run you over!” he yelled as he pulled away and black smoke coughed from the exhaust.

Hours later as the sun turned red in the western sky, the tractor with one headlight pulled into the driveway near the shed where Tuck was working. He was inside trying to organize and take account of oils, grease, fuel, seed, tools, and fertilizers. From outside he heard, “I don’t know how you did it, rifleman, but they didn’t sell me nuthin! Nobody did! Give me that gun of yours!”

Hansen stood in the doorway of the shed. “Give me that gun,” he growled, fists clenched.

“Can’t.”

“You can and will. I’m getting even with you right now: you’re a dead man. Give me that gun.”

“I don’t have it.”

“You’ve never been away from that gun in your life. Don’t tell me that!”

“Look at me. I don’t have it.”

“Where is it?”

“Near, and hidden, where it will stay until we need it.”

“I need it. I need it now! What do you mean, ‘We need it’? You idiot. There’s a bullet in there with your name on it. I promise you that!”

“Maybe,” conceded Tuck as he drew his hands through a folded dirty rag. Who knows, he could be right.

“Gahhh! Get that tractor ready to seed. Get the drill on the back, now! No, get the plow on first, we’re already behind!” said Hansen over his shoulder as he disappeared from the barn door and stomped into the house.

Hansen set his jar of alcohol on the gas stove next to the burner he turned on with the intention of immediately making coffee, and in

his drunken state, failed to accomplish. He proceeded to the same couch where he awoke that morning, sat down, and again passed out.

Tuck smelled the fire before he saw it, and by the time he ran out of the shed, flames were crawling up the house's north side. He hurried around to the front door, stepped inside and found the room filling with white and black smoke as burning wood crackled in the kitchen. The heat took his breath away, and again he used two hands to grab Hansen by his dirty collared shirt and drag him through the front door. For the second time, Hansen lay unconscious on the gravel outside while Tuck shed tears, this time from the sting of acrid smoke in his eyes.

Tuck dragged an incoherent Hansen twice as far as the house was tall just in case it collapsed. As Tuck tried to unravel and dig a rotted hose from the dirt next to the barn, a wall of the house gave way, exposed the inferno, and collapsed onto Hansen's tractor.

The volunteer fire department gave a ride to Hansen who remained unconscious, and to Tuck with his rifle. Tuck was apparently stoic or not bothered by the inferno. The firemen incorrectly attributed that indifference to being "a tough guy who'd seen some stuff." They dropped the two men at the cathedral abbey. There, Hansen was placed by nurses into a hospital bed, and Tuck took a space in visiting quarters furnished with a bed, table, chair, kerosene lamp, and small chest for clothing or other possessions.

The next day Tuck sat by Hansen's bed as nurses tended to him between long intervals, and he eventually awoke. The soot had been cleaned from his face, and he was in a cotton medical gown. The small hospital had only a few beds and it was well lit by numerous tall slender windows on each wall. Unlike the cathedral, it was a normal stone building.

"What are you doing here? Where am I?" asked Hansen as he rubbed his eyes. Immediately, his anger simmered and started to boil.

“You’re in the Sequoia Hospital. You drank some, or most, of whatever I missed in the tractor. Do you remember . . . what happened?”

Hansen stared at Tuck as he searched for a memory, any memory, from the last few days. There wasn’t much; just the tractor ride, and food and . . . the stove, he remembered.

“I burned it down,” whispered Hansen. Agony washed through Hansen, whose eyes were glassy. Again, he tried to harden his face.

“I’m going to work your farm,” said Tuck, “The tractor suffered some too. I’m sorry, I tried to save it but the house was too hot.” *He has nothing but land*, thought Tuck.

“I have nothing, just . . . nothing. The shed?” He asked.

“Yep, the shed is there,” said Tuck.

“My dad’s old tools are in the shed,” said Hansen.

“What kind?”

“For fixing things, hand tools, nothing for workin’ a farm though. Nothing that could build a house. Just small tools.” He clenched his fist and winced from the IV needle in the back of his hand.

A nearby nurse said, “We need some work here. This building, and the cathedral. We need help with upkeep. Sorry to eavesdrop, but I just heard you say you had tools. The head nurse said so, and she heard it from the abbess in their meeting.” In his mind, Tuck saw what was possible and prayed. *I can’t force the guy to do it.*

“I got no place to live,” said Hansen, “I got no clothes, right? No nothing.” His voice was quiet.

“You have tools,” said Tuck, “and land.”

“I don’t know what’s in there. I’m not even sure I know how to use ‘em. My dad was the one that did all the building. He fixed everything, I just did the farm work.”

The nurse smiled, “Well, I think there’s open rooms in the monastery or maybe the visiting quarters.”

Hansen looked lost, or maybe he was mourning, Tuck couldn’t tell.

The young nurse continued, “We can get you out of here today if you want, that is, if you can eat some food and keep it down,” she said, “I can check on the lodging.” Her blonde hair bounced slightly beneath her cap as she walked away, pleased with herself.

“Hansen, I’m . . . I’m sorry. I tried to put it out, but the hose was rotten, and it was . . . ”

“No, don’t,” interrupted Hansen. “That was my drink and my stove. My family is gone, and I don’t want to think on that right now. The house is gone, and my dad’s tractor is . . . ”

“Burned, maybe fixable but looks like salvage to me . . . ” said Tuck.

“And you,” paused Hansen, “You were around for all of that.” He stared into Tuck’s hard eyes. “What am I supposed to make of that?” Hansen asked.

Tuck lowered his gaze to the floor. *Can’t argue with him there.*

“It’s probably time for me to go,” said Tuck. He stood, held his hat in one hand below his waist, and said, “I’m sorry, Hansen. I truly am.” He turned, and his boots clopped on the tile floor as he walked away.

“Hey!” Hansen said, “I . . . ” he paused and his face seemed to freeze for a brief moment. He looks like a pound animal: skinny like a starved dog and hopeless. I know that feeling, thought Tuck.

“I hope you rot,” seethed Hansen. Two nurses in the room gasped.

“You do what these ladies tell you,” said Tuck as he turned to leave Hansen once again.

Hansen watched Tuck push through the door as he donned his hat. It was the last time he saw Tuck alive, but not that last time he saw that rifle.

Low fast clouds dimmed the courtyard while Tuck crossed into the woods. Rain began to fall through redwood branches above him, and he thought again, *help me find my way.*

Brent Chisholm served fourteen years on active duty in the Air Force and is currently a reservist in the Midwest. His writing, both poetry and prose, reflects his interests in the outdoor life of a sportsman, faith, and military technology. Brent claims the Pacific Northwest as home.

Trade School

By David Gutierrez

It started with paper. We needed to shoot targets out to three hundred meters, so we started at twenty-five. The drill sergeants hung target sheets decorated with ten human silhouettes of different sizes. I needed two hits in each silhouette to ace the test. A drill sergeant named Peters took an interest in me. He was tall and lean, skin red from the sun, with a hooked nose and a short fuse. He stood behind my foxhole shouting and kicking divots of red clay into the back of my helmet between shots. Private Fuck-Face. The College Boy. Your shit shooting is going to get your buddies killed. It took me all day to get my hits. Drill Sergeant Peters rewarded the quick learners with extra dessert. I went to bed hungry.

The pop-up range was better. The field of thick, green grass swept down the first fifty meters before it rose up and away and melted into the horizon. Grassy knolls peppered the landscape, hiding the green, plastic silhouettes that popped up at programmed intervals and held for a few seconds before they disappeared from view. If I shot fast enough, the targets dropped. It was easier now—scanning, shifting, shooting—mechanics, not emotions. But with each good hit, my heart

jumped—a little jolt of happiness I learned to crave. Drill Sergeant Peters stood next to me with his arms crossed, his silence sweeter than any cake in the chow hall.

Rifles led to machine guns, which led to grenades, which led to bayonets and songs about watering the green grass with blood, and how napalm stuck to kids. An expert marksman earned a silver cross with a bull's-eye in the center, cradled by a wreath. It cost \$4.29 at the Post Exchange, and they took it out of our pay. It looked a lot like the Iron Cross of the Germans, but that was probably just coincidence.

Flat, faceless silhouettes gave way to paper people. Men with rifles and pistols, suicide bombers, Osama bin Laden. We called them other things: savages, hajis, ragheads. These targets were for the close-up work, twenty-five meters and in. Shooting and moving. Clearing rooms. At the unit, we spoke in euphemisms. We weren't killing people or shooting them in the face—we ran failure drills; we serviced a target. Two shots in the chest and one in the head? That's a Mozambique. My first shot needed to hit vitals in under a second. And once the first shot went, I didn't stop until I was close enough to rip the target off the wall or stab the paper man in the eye. That, I learned, was a dead check.

Paper people became three-dimensional foam. Hollow chests and heads filled with balloons wrapped by a single rubber band from which the targets hung. Good hits popped the balloons and dropped the foam, and as my assault cell flowed through the shoot house, the foam dummies dropped in their death slumps. I learned to follow my shots to the ground, to close the distance and contact shoot the foam terrorist in the face. Leave no balloons, they said. It wasn't a suggestion.

The paint rounds were fun. So were the live role players. The people moved, fired back, screamed when shot. They were told to go down when we shot them in the chest or head, but sometimes the role players wore thick clothing and didn't feel every hit. So, we'd shoot them in

the soft spots, too: neck, crotch, and thigh. That usually did the trick. A few fought back, so we beat them until they gave up. Once, Eddie took a rowdy girl by the ponytail and threw her across the room. She behaved after that.

After the paint came the war. Finally got my wish. My girlfriend stayed with me the week before I went to Afghanistan. It was cold in North Carolina, the grip of winter clung to the trees. We slept in my emptied apartment on a poncho liner I'd spread on the floor. There was a draft from the open window. The slow swirl of fan blades overhead. Emma rested her cheek against my chest as she cried. She said: I'm afraid you won't come back. It took a few years before I understood what she had meant.

All that mattered was the first kill. I needed to get it out of the way—**A** break my twenty-five-year slump. Everyone did, even the guys on the team who had done it before on a different deployment. The boss said we were only as relevant as our last kill. So, we raced each other through the mud compounds, desperate to make our bullets hit flesh. I got mine in a village outside Kajaki. They'd killed Eric a few hours before. We chased the Taliban down to a little cluster of compounds along the banks of the Helmand River, killing anyone with a weapon, or a radio, or a four-finger length beard. I watched a four-way trail intersection, waiting for half of the team to finish clearing a compound. When I peeked around the corner, I found two fighters sitting against a mud wall. Their weapons sat out of reach. The closest one wore brown man-jams and had a patchy beard, and he tilted his head as he spoke to his friend. I put the red dot of my sight on the patch of hair above his ear and held my breath. The dot moved in a lazy figure eight, pulsing with the beat of my heart as I squeezed the trigger. His head bounced with the shot. A flash of pink sprayed from his head and a flap of skin and skull folded over the side of his face. The man slammed into the wall behind him, lurched forward, then fell on his

side. The second Taliban scrambled to his feet, covered in the blood and brains of his friend. I shot him in the hip. He crawled away, dragging his dead leg behind him. I walked my rounds up his spine until the two friends had matching heads. At first, I wished someone from the team had been there to see it. Then I threw up. I covered my vomit with dirt before anyone came.

We killed a lot of them while they slept, staring through the green glow of night vision goggles, tracing our infrared lasers from belly to chest to face. The cell leader gave the silent count with flashes of his laser: one, two, shoot. The rule was this: don't shoot early, but don't not shoot. Killing was easiest in the heat of a gunfight, or when others watched. I struggled when it was just me and the guy shrank a little before the shot, as if his soul was trying to outrace the bullet. But I always shot. Shame's a hell of a motivator.

We celebrated with drinks once all ten of us had crossed the threshold. Just one glass. An eighteen-year scotch the boss had snuck through in his gun box. Stories were told, but never our own. I told Eric's, about the time he dropped the guy on a motorcycle with his machine gun. Grey Beard went headfirst over the handlebars and into a ditch. Only took one burst.

Eric had been sitting in the back of my truck when he spotted the motorcycle driving toward us. He said: Haji ain't fucking stopping, in his Boston twang. I said: Shoot that motherfucker. And that's exactly what Eric did.

I didn't tell that part of the story. And I didn't say how later, I found Eric on a hilltop at dusk watching the sun disappear behind the grey of the Washer Mountains, blank-faced and silent, scratching the back of his head. I wanted to ask him what it had felt like to kill someone, but I didn't. When he was still standing there half an hour after sunset, I wanted to ask him if he was okay. Was he replaying the tumbling old man in his head? Maybe he was enjoying the red and pink sky as it

was slowly swallowed by the horizon. Or maybe he was thinking about how in the desert, you could fall asleep staring at the Milky Way.

Eric's was the first kill of the deployment; had he been alive, we would have poured him an extra scotch for that.

We had snuck our own weapons through Customs: pistols, hunting rifles, black powder guns, even tomahawks and swords. One night, Tyler showed up for a mission with a flintlock rifle slung across his back. I laughed, but he killed a guy with it a few hours later. Bryce got one with his hatchet that Eddie was trying to shoot with a dueling pistol. Eddie said Bryce stole the kill. Bryce said Eddie took too long to shoot. And so, they fought. Eddie loaded the helo with a broken nose. After that, the boss wouldn't let us bring personal weapons on a hit.

I started drinking alone. Two drinks after lunch to calm the nerves. Three drinks before bed to cut the dreams. But three drinks led to four, and four led to eight, and after a while, I just drank until the world went dark. By the end of the trip, I could finish most of a bottle in one night. I liked whiskey, or spiced rum in the winter. Now, the stories were only told in post-op reports—bullet statements with photographs and annotated maps. Some guys kept photos of their kills and scrolled through them after a few drinks. At least I thought they did. I hoped it wasn't just me.

I learned to hate the phone. Emails and letters, too. Care packages sat unopened in the corner of my plywood room. Started burning them after a while. Wasn't angry with anyone—just didn't know what to say. Wasn't about to tell them the truth.

It became harder to massage the facts after Eric died. My girlfriend checked the papers. Set up news alerts once guys started dying until she figured out where we were.

“I read something,” said Emma.

“Wasn’t us.”

“It’s where Eric got killed.”

“Must have been someone else.” I had broken my hand on a guy’s face during a raid the night before and held the cast above my heart to stop the throbbing.

“You’re okay, right?”

“Of course.”

“But I read something.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

I rotated the handset so the microphone was above my nose. “I said I’m fine.”

“I can barely hear you,” said Emma.

I rotated the microphone above my head. “Is this better?” I wiggled the cord in the back of the phone. The line filled with static as the connection started to cut.

“I can’t hear you,” she said. “Are you still there?”

I cut the line. A few weeks later, I called back. I wish Emma had left me then.

I never kept a count. There’s a loose tally, and I could probably guess it close enough. I remember my first and my last. The ones between get a little blurry. Certain things linger: sights, smells, sounds. The transitions keep me up at night—those moments in which people passed from life to death, when their heads snapped, and their legs and arms stiffened and pushed against the earth as they stretched themselves toward whatever came next.

They never taught us how to deal with the other side of the job: the nightmares; feeling alone in a crowded room. I never learned how to come back, so I kept going. Home to desert. Desert to home. After

a while, I wasn't sure which was which. Each time I made it back to the States I felt more of a stranger, surrounded by familiar faces and places and I still got lost. I spoke less. Drank more. I folded into myself, passing a month of leave in an empty apartment with the lights off and the curtains drawn. I didn't bother to unpack, just waited for the next trip. And there was always another deployment; we always had someone else to kill.

After six months home, I kissed the same patch of tarmac in North Carolina and said my silent goodbyes. I boarded the aircraft, hung my hammock in the cabin, and tucked myself in for the trans-Atlantic flight. Eight hours to a refueling stop in Germany. Then eight more to Kandahar; we'd drive or take helicopters from there. I dry-swallowed two Ambien, closed my eyes, and tried to meditate before the pills took me, contemplating the beauty of a clean white wall. But the dead came calling, so, I did what I had been trained to do. I scanned their faces, checked their hands for radios or cell phones or guns. My trigger finger tapped my thumb in a steady rhythm, running failure drills and Mozambiques, one after the other in an endless stream.

I hoped my first kill of this deployment would be some big-name shithead we tracked for weeks. Maybe it would happen during one of those good back-and-forth gunfights—the kind that scared me into mumbling the Lord's Prayer between taking shots. I wanted it to be something straightforward, because those gray-area kills were getting to me. Kids. Ten or twelve years old. Lugging a mortar round for their daddy, or a box of ammo for their big brother, or reporting our position to their uncle's ambush team.

In the end, it wouldn't matter. If I had the angle, I'd do what needed to be done: raise the rifle, flick the safety, settle the sights, and break the shot. When I got it right, it was over in a few seconds or less.

And that's the beauty of it. The rifle bumps your shoulder, and the bullet hits its mark, and the body drops before you have a chance to realize what you've done. That comes later—when your war is over, and you have the rest of your life to think.

David Gutierrez was born in Iowa and served for more than a decade as a member of the US Army Special Forces (Green Berets). He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. David currently works in wildlife conservation in the Southwest United States, where he lives with his dog.

Poetry.

Remember The Helpers

David J. Ludlow

Those who do not know,
they have this disease.
Are less like humans,
and more like I .E. D.s.

They don't explode,
but they can still kill,
By being too close.
And it begins with the chills.

If you're lucky you make it to a place,
where bright surgical lights are the only sky.
Tubes and wires going everywhere,
Sadly this is real, it's not Sci Fi.

But there are heros roaming about,
Encased in scrubs.
Plastic visors covering their eyes,
and wearing gloves.

They all rolled the dice.
Not all of them win the toss.
And those who were our bravest assets,
Become our greatest loss.

David J. Ludlow's first military service was in the Navy from 1973 to 1977. He served aboard USS Franklin D. Roosevelt (CV42). Upon completion of that enlistment, David used the veteran's educational benefits to attend college. He received his B.A. in sociology and a commission as a second lieutenant from Army ROTC. David served from 1981-1984 at Ft. Polk, Louisiana. He is sixty-six years old, and a proud father, grandfather, and great grandfather.

The Rocket With My Name On It

Jimmy Pappas

My death landed one block away
from me on the roof of a Saigon theater,
spraying confetti death on a troupe
of actors singing in a play about
young peasant lovers working
on a French rubber plantation.
Some Native American tribes
spoke about a trickster god,
a coyote who liked to play
pranks on unsuspecting people.
He was in top form that night.

Jimmy Pappas served during the Vietnam War as an English language instructor training South Vietnamese soldiers. He is a retired teacher whose poems have been published in over 70 journals, including Sheila Na-Gig, Shot Glass Journal, Off the Coast, Boston Literary Magazine, and War, Literature and the Arts. His poem "Bobby's Story" about the life of a Vietnam veteran won the Rattle 2018 Readers Choice Award. It is contained in his full-length book of war-related poems Scream Wounds (A15 Press, 2019). His chapbook Falling off the Empire State Building was selected as a winner of the Rattle Chapbook Contest, and was published in March 2020.

He's a Matryoshka Doll

Don Purdy

He's a matryoshka doll
of reinvented selves,
of decades taken in stride,
memories shelved,
and emotions kept inside
He's the solid one within,
the unbreakable marine
betrayed by his eyes;
the disfigured figurine
deep within the lies
He's was the one underneath
the bodies stacked on top
The one they found later
when the shelling stopped;
down in the crater,
in the smoldering ground
under the other five,
the last one they found;
the only one alive
He's a matryoshka doll,
deep inside himself;
an unbreakable marine
who can't unfeel what he's felt
and can't unsee what he's seen

Don Purdy is a former naval aviator who served eight years on active duty as a carrier-based A-4 Skyhawk pilot and flew 228 combat missions over North Vietnam from 1967 through 1969. He retired from work as an airline pilot and NASA aviation safety analyst and currently lives with his wife in Berkeley, CA, where he spends time working in the PTSD program at the Oakland Vet Center and enjoying fly fishing, cycling, the banjo, art, and writing.

Back In Her Arms
Gerard Sarnat

Bad dad gone to war
alone with nurturing mom,
I could go anywhere
now safe in our little town.

Gerard Sarnat is a retired physician who's built/staffed homeless/ex-prisoner clinics. He was also a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. As a writer, he's won First Place in Poetry in the Arts Award, the Dorfman Prize, been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Awards, published four collections and appeared in Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Pomona, Brown, Columbia, Wesleyan, University of Chicago periodicals as well as in Review Berlin, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, American Journal Poetry, Free State Review, Poetry Quarterly, New Delta Review, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, San Francisco Magazine, and The New York Times.

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