THE BOY: ESSAYS AT WAR

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
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Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Nonfiction

by

Sean Robert Barnett
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The Boy: Essays at War is a collection of essays detailing a soldier’s personal experience as a ground combatant during the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003, his involvement with combat operations in Afghanistan in 2005, and his reintegration into civilian life after separating from the military. This collection focuses on the lasting social and psychological effects of violent combat on its participants. The essays often mimic the scattered and displaced mind of a veteran living with post-traumatic stress disorder.
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Boy: Essays at War* by Sean Robert Barnett, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts: Creative Nonfiction at San Francisco State University.

Chanan Tigay,
Professor of Creative Writing

Peter Orner,
Professor of Creative Writing
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Throughout this collection of essays, I have been inspired by many authors. From some, I have adapted a single line; in my essay, “Tough Rocks” I adapted a line from Brian Turner’s poem “Sadiq” from his collection Here, Bullet. My essay “The Masthead,” is an adaptation of Herman Melville’s chapter 35 “The Mast-head” from his novel Moby Dick. In my essay “28 April 2003,” I used the collected statistical data of PTSD from Sebastian Junger’s “Book One,” from his novel War.

And to all warfighters across distance and time, I am humbled and thank you for your sacrifices.
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Tough Rocks

In the morning, Sergeant Green woke me up for my guard shift. The Iraqi sun was just coming up and peeking through a window. The light in the room was ghostly off the faded blue walls, but it was bright enough that I didn’t have to squint. I put on my body armor and grabbed my M4, checking to ensure the already chambered round was still there. My rifle was never far, but checking was routine. I let out a breath, grabbed my helmet, and toed over the guys in my squad sleeping on the floor lined with worn out wrestling mats. Out in the main hall I gave the guy on watch a nod. He barely looked up, too focused on scanning the frequencies battling over the radio.

Outside the air was nice, which only lasted a few hours before the heat really took over. The Iraqis sleep late, so the morning guard shift was always just a warm breeze. Up on the corner wall tower, we made of scaffolding and remnant boards, I relieved Private Delgado from guard.

“About time, Barnett,” Delgado complained.

“I’m right on time fucker. Quit your bitchin’.”

I climbed up the tower and gave Delgado a smile. He giggled on his way down happy to go rack out for another hour. As he got his feet down on the rungs of the scaffolding I made like to kick him off, but only nudged him while smiling, “Getchur’ ass off my tower.”

“Whatever,” he smiled. “Oh B, here,” Delgado said handing me a water bottle with orange liquid in it. “You’re gonna love this shit. It’ll wake you right up.”
Delgado lifted an eyebrow and pointed a finger at me, “And don’t you give any ‘athat to these kids if you ain’t gonna finish it. I fuckin’ know Haji blew up the last package my mama sent me. So that Kool-Aid is runnin’ short, fool.”

He continued down the tower and went into our acquired compound. Baghdad was quiet in the mornings. I didn’t mind the guard shift.

I hadn’t received a letter for a while. If the supply truck did get hit and all the mail was blown up, no matter how depressing, that was still the best reason to not be getting any mail. I kept her picture and the most recent letter in a Ziploc bag tucked in the folds of the front of my body armor. While on the tower, I could have a moment to myself. A moment to remember her brown curly hair, and her skin, barely lighter than the girls here in Iraq. I loved her, and I thought about her every day.

On the tower, it must have been just before school started, I watched Iraqi kids fight over control of a soccer ball. The tower leaned on the corner of the cement wall surrounding the Pool House. The kids were playing carefree in the northern Baghdad streets with chunks of ancient asphalt spread out in the dust. The Pool House was our home for just a short time, but it was the best we had. It was a large building that used to be some type of rec-center. The brick wall, stucco’d a beautiful desert tan, stood about ten feet tall. It wrapped around the building and the Olympic size swimming pool. The high dive made a great machinegun nest. We kept a M240B up there. Watching the kids kicking the ball, I thought about how I hadn’t played like that in a long time.

At nine years old with my shoelaces untied and dangling, I was just like these
Iraqi boys. Chocolate stained on the stretched out collar of my favorite shirt; the one I wore at least three times a week. Summertime water fights, playing catch or tag or hide-and-go-seek with the lights off with a few friends and my little sister were the only propositions on the ballot. Signing up for T-ball was the biggest commitment I had ever made. My coach was nothing like a sergeant, yet still I remember feeling the pressure and the importance I held way out in right field.

The green hose in the front yard was my machinegun. Enemies attacked with water balloons and laughter and I was a strong kid defending my territory. I organized raids and reconnaissance missions happening just before dark with rings on the doorbells of my neighbors as I ran away avoiding capture.

I was a prisoner of war pulling weeds out of my mother’s garden when my report card came in the mail. Dirty cuticles on hands I’d only wash to be allowed at the dinner table. Riding my bicycle, I had no tactical premise when I would run over an empty soda can with the front tire of my silver bmx bike. Caught by the fork, the crushed can would wail as loud as I could imagine while jumping off the plywood and cinder block ramp that Little Johnny across the street had made. I always peddled harder and it was my chalk line that held the furthest mark. Battle scars and shrapnel wounds were quickly remedied, and the enemy leader turned into my caring mother—when I was a boy.

These Iraqi kids playing in the streets are a good memory of my past. My life has changed in this desert. My green parrot replaced with a concerned rifle. Untied shoelaces traded for plates of body armor. And the girl I loved reduced to a picture and a few folded
letters.

These kids, they don’t know the taste of chocolate or the sound of Mario Brother’s chiming on my Nintendo. They only know the smell of dust and the sound of screeching cars with warped brake rotors driving by.

What about the taste of water from my front yard hose, or the first time I kissed her? The tastes were so wonderful because in that moment I wanted nothing more. She was everything. They didn’t choose the one hundred and twenty-degree heat, or the gun fights that their fathers and older brothers often never returned from. Even so, their soccer ball never stopped spinning.

Even too late at night, on our raids, when we would kick down front doors, I’d often see a boy sitting on a mat with a ball, playing catch with the wall. His father would leave with us covered by a black pillowcase over his head. The boy’s older brother almost defended the family’s honor, but his father yelled through the blinding cloth, saving the oldest son’s life. The mother screaming and a baby crying. When the night comes, it falls hard in this city. Everyone carries the weight.

We’d leave often taking some of their blood, in their fathers or on their sleeves. We didn’t ask too many questions. And if an argument was made, our rifles did most of the talking. The ball would be still spinning alone on the floor as we’d leave the house, and the boy, curiously looking out the front window as his father is being taken away.

In the morning, again I would be posted on the tower as the sun came up. In the streets, the soccer game always continued, and I would be taken by my thoughts.
I wouldn’t say that after the first time it gets any easier. It’s different for sure, but easy, that’s just not a word I would use. If I had to tell someone, if it was my responsibility to prepare somebody for their first, I’d go about it completely different than how I learned.

Chronology is the problem. Emotions just don’t work like that. For some, sure the first time is a heavy blow, but it all depends on the situation. Maybe it’s kind of like falling in love. Life changing and shit. With butterflies that just don’t flutter all that much. At some point, maybe after you have been through two, or three, or even ten—and maybe even years later until you really feel it—eventually, to kill—will break your heart.

So I killed a man. No, not a man; he was only a boy. It doesn’t matter that I was a soldier at war with his country, he wasn’t the enemy. He wasn’t even old enough to grow a beard or even know what he was doing. The war declared on Iraq had nothing to do with this child. Fuck, it had nothing to do with me, but there we were. I wonder if he had ever been in love, even if only a crush. That one look into the eyes of the girl he never had the courage to speak to.

After we had torn through Al Samawah, but before we made it to Fallujah, there was a nameless village. Nameless at least in my memories. Almost completely forgettable, had it not been for the boy, maybe twelve years old, in the gray long sleeve shirt. Why do I remember the color of his shirt? That’s not important. I killed him.
My platoon’s rucksacks, packed with what was not vital to carry, were loaded back onto the two-and-a-half-ton truck. The trucks would wander in the rear, away from the fighting for weeks, but hopefully not months. It was a great boost in morale to be with our rucksacks. Not really the rucks themselves, but the short rest, a chance to change our fatigues, maybe a bag of mail waiting for us had managed to not get blown up, and a moment to pretend we were away from this place. With no better way to explain the feeling of pulling my sixty-pound rucksack off the truck, it was a luxury. But nothing like the normal use of the word.

We were moving north toward this nameless village. We had been walking for ten klicks more than we were told this next town was. Half following the river that would eventually lead us to Fallujah and nights just as dark as the day ahead. We came to the first farms of the village not too long after nightfall. Beyond what could grip onto the river, there wasn’t much around us. In every direction this place was dry and hot. Maybe a house or a small ranch would pop up off the road we took here, but there was nothing of real value. In the early mornings, trucks would push along supply lines of rice and vegetables and even long blocks of ice. They never stopped anywhere in the lonely desert, just passing through headed to the next city.

Al Samawah was a big place, and it seemed like we were there forever. Out here in the desert, it was just as foreign from the cities as places like Al Samawah were from home. When I finally would get back home to the United States, everything would be different. One of the hardest parts of war—is leaving it. The whole time I was in Iraq all I
wanted was to go home. When I returned, it wasn't the same. Her, my family, my friends, the cities, everything was different. A year after I returned from Iraq, I left for my second deployment to the Middle East. In the desert, it was the last time I truly felt that I was where I belonged.

The nameless fields of corn and squash scattered with the kinks of the dirty river. As we walked in a staggered line my team leader never stopped giving me shit. He was always on my ass. With good reason I suppose.

“Barnett, you pulling security?” Sergeant Green shot out.

“Roger sergeant,” I said.

“You betta be scannin’ those corn fields. One of yer sadiqis is gonna come out and shank yo’ass,” Sergeant Green whispered in the angry and loud way he always did.

“What the fuck are you two ladies talking about?” Sergeant Isom said as he came trotting up to Sergeant Green.

Sergeant Isom rarely let shit-talking go on without himself being involved. He continued his trot up to the front of the formation where I was on point. With a war cry that broke all our tactical silence, Sergeant Isom jumped up and kicked me in the back of the knee and yelled like some little ninja:

“Eye—yahh!”

My previously injured knee buckled, and I went down easy. I could have maintained myself on just going down on a knee, but then my squad leader finished his attack by jumping on my back and wrestling me to the ground. We both started laughing
and the rest of the squad stopped and just waited it out. Sergeant Isom knew that I could easily handle him, but he enjoyed his rank and messing with me.

Sergeant Green was less than entertained, but Sergeant Isom was his squad leader, so he usually put up with his shit.

“You two done playin’ tummy sticks? We do have some shit goin’ on ri’ here. I’m not askin’, so don’t tell, but save that shit fo’ when you get back on the block you fuckin’ fags,” Sergeant Green said.

Sergeant Isom gave a sinister little laugh and climbed off my back. I smiled as I thought, little fucker, and said nothing.

I took my position in the front, and with a few silent hand signals we were on the move again. Just off the side of the road I walked kicking through the squash field. Sergeant Isom was not happy with his leadership spot behind Sergeant Green and our team. He bumped Private Galvao back and took up his rifle just behind me. He was always reckless, but it never went sour when he was screwing off. He started singing his J-lo remix:

“Don’t be fooled by the rocks that I got! I’m still, I’m still Jamie from the block.”

The dust never seemed to settle outside of the cities. It caked my nose with a healthy layer. At least it didn’t smell. Out there things were much cleaner. There were no open sewage trenches, just canals to feed the crops. I felt much safer here too. Sure, the corn was a great place for the enemy to hide, but if we were to get ambushed, surely we’d be able to out gun the Iraqi’s toe-to-toe.
It was quiet again walking up the dark road toward the little town. The green glow from my night vision was monotonous across the fields. The river off to the right sparkled from the fractured starlight hitting off the tips of water shooting up from the rocks. Up the road, I could make out dark blocks in the distance; houses and farm shacks. We would find a decent sized one and rest for the night. The mission was to tromp through the town in the day so the locals would see us. I hoped we would find something to eat; something more than the stripped ‘Meal Ready to Eat’ in my cargo pocket.

We never carried what we didn’t need. Even the MREs weren’t ready enough. We tore open the plastic containers and stripped down the sleeves of Beefsteak with Mushrooms, Rice Pilaf, Country Captain Chicken, or if I got lucky, a Beef Enchilada meal. The extra packaging, the flameless heater and seasoning packets that came with every meal got tossed. And if I were unlucky enough to get the Charms candy, it was buried immediately, as they were the only superstitious thing that brought the rain. It didn’t matter that they were actually tasty; I got rid of them.

I kept my eyes open, looking back to Sergeant Green every now and then, occasionally hearing mumbles he made over the radio back to the lieutenant. With an opened hand Sergeant Green would shake his arm pointing ahead to tell me to keep on mission. We kept moving slowly carrying everything we needed.

Far out, within the blackness of a farm house, Galvao spotted a flash like from the river, but this was different. He stopped. Looking toward the farm, a tiny flame ignited in my night vision. The burn was slow, not like the reflections of starlight off the river.
Almost enjoyable for a moment. I froze; then slowly took a knee and reached for my Three-By scope to get a better look. Sergeant Isom quietly moved into position just behind me.

“Barnett?” Sergeant Isom whispered, “What it is Motha’ fucka’?”

“Haji,” I said. “I see him. He’s smoking,” I pointed up the road to a farm on the right side near the river. “There. I see ‘em.”

As Sergeant Green made his way up to us, I pointed, “He’s there.”

Sergeant Isom cleared his throat for the first time that night. Over the radio he called, “Two Six? Two Three, over.”

“This is Two Six. Go ahead,” the lieutenant responded.

“Six, we got one Haji outside up at this next farm house. I don’t think he has noticed us yet,” Sergeant Isom said.

“Roger, Two Three. Wait one, over.”

For a moment we stayed quiet. I didn’t take my eyes away from the farmer as he enjoyed his smoke after what must have been a tough day raising his fields. The light would grow and fade and turn into a star through my night vision. I focused in and could see nothing but the pulsing glow. Just for a moment, I forgot. I took in a breath as the light grew brighter. I exhaled and it dimmed.

The lieutenant came back on the radio, “Two Three, move to the farmer’s location. We will set up there for the night. Proceed with caution. How copy, over.”

“That’s a good copy. Setting up at farmer’s location. Two Three, out,” Sergeant
Isom said.

We picked up and continued alongside the road. We slowly walked to the farmer’s house, keeping silent. Sergeant Isom hung back in his normal position behind Sergeant Green and our alpha team.

As he came into sight, the farmer was staring out toward the river enjoying his rest from the backbreaking labor of working his field all day.

“Hey Green,” Sergeant Isom whispered.

“Yeah?”

“LT says to take your team and secure the farmer.” Sergeant Isom was excited.

“The rest of us will move into the house and secure the perimeter.”

Sergeant Green nodded, “Too easy.”

Sergeant Green, Galvao, Ruhlman, and I went up and spoke with the old man after we had frightened him coming from his rear.

“Salam,” I said.

The old man responded with a gasp. His hand moved to the center of his chest as he took a breath after he realized who we were.

Still a bit out of breath he said, “—Alaykum Salam.”

Galvao held the weight of his arm on the old man’s shoulder to encourage him to stay where he was, and he did. With the lieutenant, Sergeant Isom and the rest of the squad pushed inside quietly to a loud woman unhappy of the intrusion. The lieutenant talked to her, but after some minutes of yelling they gave up trying to reason with her.
Sergeant Isom mocked her yelling with his arms flailing in the air as he started skipping around the small house. His insulting antics were actually what threw the woman off and got her to calm down.

Sergeant Green and I sat down on either side of the old man when we heard the woman from inside the house begin her protest. My team leader told him that we were going to stay the night in his house in his minimal use of Arabic.

"My man, Ihneh nam...baitek," Sergeant Green said.

We gave him three large stolen stacks of cash. I could see his struggle with the sounds of his upset wife, but he must have understood our position. I imagine that this was not his first war. His breathing was deep and he awkwardly adjusted himself in his chair. He stayed calm.

Sleep that night was good: four hours, an hour up watching the road, and two more hours before we headed out.

While I was on guard, just before my shift was over, I saw the old man come out and light another smoke. With all of us here, I don’t blame him for not being able to sleep. He enjoyed the smoke, relaxing in the same chair where I met him. After he was finished, he picked himself up and headed out in-between his fields of corn. When he returned, a few minutes later, he had a blade in hand and a scrawny lamb in tow.

I watched him bleed it. A cut quickly halved its neck. Galvao came out and relieved me. It was three minutes past my shift.

"About fuckin’ time Andy," I said.
“Barnett, I don’t wanna hear it. Miller shoulda’ woke me up earlier. It takes me a minute, so fuck off,” Galvao said through his teeth. “Maybe—HEY, what the hell is Haji doing with that fuckin’ sword?”

I glanced back over at the old man and shrugged, “Making breakfast I guess,” I said.

“Really?”

“Why don’t you go fuckin’ ask him yourself,” I said walking away. “I’m gonna go rack out.”

Walking back into the farmer’s house, in the living room, Miller from first squad was up with the radio. Everyone else was hard asleep. I took off my helmet and slowly set my body armor down against the wall. I snugged up to the wall with my arms wrapped around my knees. My rifle pointed down in-between my legs. It didn’t take but a moment to fall asleep.

A scoop of rice and a small piece of lamb from the now calmed but irritated woman was a good breakfast as I pulled watch toward the river. I thought these offerings were generous. I would forget about the stolen cash towered in the RTO’s bag and how unwilling the woman really must have been. How did Galvao convince the farmer to give us his goat? I thought.

Crouching down out back, I dry shaved with a disposable razor that I never threw away. I cleaned the single blade with my thumb. I stood up and kept an eye out while Delgado squatted in a ditch near the cornfield. The river moved steady, but calm. I
enjoyed looking at the water.

We moved out toward the small village. It was early in the day; resistance was supposed to be highly unlikely here. The trucks with our gear finally caught up and were taking the long way around the village to meet us at the end. Without any issues, we would be on our way to Fallujah before the day was over and finally a chance to read the letter I was expecting. I tried not to stress the mail too much. Was she waiting? Or was she cheating? I'd really put it out of my mind.

Intel told us that we would have half the resistance in Fallujah as we did in Al Samawah. Intel was always that wrong though. It wasn’t that Fallujah was going to be much worse than Al Samawah, we were all just stretched thin at that point.

I'm sure she was waiting. She loved me, and I loved her. It was just so distracting, the talk between all the guys. A few weeks ago, Chris Grez from Second Squad got a letter from his sister saying that his girlfriend was sleeping around. I really tried to put it out of my head.

Two main roads cut through the village. One mimicked the river, trafficked by goats and asses and an occasional camel. The other road, a straight line that veered off out to the northwest. This one had cars that littered bumpers and body panels and trails of oil and coolant that eroded the center lane. Both were covered in red clay with gutters molded by hand, slimed with the waste of the homes lining either side. The gutters' open trenches carry the waste to the river. The same river mothers bathe their children and wash their clothes in. Where these young Iraqi girls learn the motherly trade of their
unfortunate future. Scrubbing dirt from their clothes in an ever-flowing river of filth. The Euphrates has been abandoned by any god that ever cared for it.

The farmer’s small children danced and sang as we left. They didn’t know why we were there. Nonetheless, we were exciting with the few bottles of water and foreign snacks we left with them. As my platoon walked up the road, my squad took the rear this time. With the sound of song and dance quickly fading, the silence of the heat began to set in. It was quiet, too hot for play. Morning burned away faster than normal. Ruhlman, Galvao, and I continuously looked back to cover our rear. Farmers slowly moved in their cornfields, stopping to look for a moment as we passed by.

The buzz of the radio sounded from Sergeant Isom. I heard something about the trucks having eyes on us. We were almost there.

A klick away the trucks waited. Almost an uneventful day in a nameless village I should never think of again, but I always will. As half the platoon passed a group of maybe four or five buildings to our left, the crack of four AK-47’s came from about twenty meters away from the right and just beyond the fields. I don’t understand what they were thinking. We’re forty strong as a light infantry platoon; they were but only an ill-equipped fire team. Bandoliers hung across their chests and shemaghs hid their faces. Within a minute, which lasts longer in the desert, my platoon ceased the four rifles. For a moment, maybe only a couple of seconds, I stared into the firing line. In bursts, controlled groups of fire and without speech, I watched my platoon bound toward the enemy. After my moment of distraction, I turned around to see my team leader down on a
knee, his rifle up and scanning the fields and buildings opposite the battle. Galvao and Ruhlman were already crouching into the prone and taking up security to the right flank of our attackers. I plopped down under the high-beating sun and aimed myself down the road into the gap of uncovered space. Getting down low I could see that the road was something like asphalt. Chunky like a street of flat rocks tiled together with dirt and silt and a thousand years of oil and grim holding it all together. I laid down and worked my elbows into small grooves in the road positioning my rifle pressed up to my face. My small assault pack clung tight to my back and I could feel the top of it limiting the movement of my helmet and pushing it down over my brow. The sunlight was so bright that day it seemed to curl over the brim of my helmet burning into my eyes. Even with the damage my eyes had taken from a blast during the Battle of Al Samawah days before, I was not squinting—but straining wide-eyed the way I’ve only done out of fear and uncertainty.

Percussions spinning out like rifle-born melodies were all I could hear. I remember all I could see were bright shades of browns and tans stretching around the fields and into the hills and even the clear sky was stripped of color. It was a quiet I had come to be familiar with. When the two boys came running out from behind one of the buildings opposite of the battle, it gave me a shock. A short moment where I took in too much air and it felt like I had sucked in vapors of anxiety. I’m thinking back to that moment, and I know that anxiety is not the correct way to explain it. It wasn't something comparable to biting your nails, or wearing all black in some sort of protest, or speaking
to a group of judgmental intellectuals in San Francisco, or to any sort of worry you’d have if you found yourself reading literary prose about a war so far and detached from your life, or to how you use terms of battle to describe your daily commute to a job that doesn’t require your blood and most definitely not your brothers’. It was a feeling of anxiety in the way that it tore out my gut from the inside. Like pain, real pain, and there is no choice but to just sit there with it.

This girl I dated, “war is so unnatural,” she said to me. I looked at her face glowing from the smart phone she seemed unable to separate from her hand. She recycled and had a gluten allergy and loved her vintage record player. She couldn’t handle confrontation and thought violence was oppression and smoked pot to calm her nerves and she couldn’t imagine ever living anywhere other than Berkeley or maybe somewhere in the nicer part of Oakland if the yard had room for a garden and she could still ride her ten-speed to work and to her yoga class and I’m certain that anxiety is not the right word for what I felt.

When the two boys came out, I saw my enemy and don’t know if I was exactly scared but my head was in the right place—a place I needed to be to continue staying alive.

Two young boys, maybe twelve years old, maybe younger, came running with rocks in their hands, but they could have been grenades. One boy was a bit faster than the other. I bet he knew it too. Boys like that, they never let each other forget who is stronger. I know this, because I was a boy like that.
The stronger boy, without a name, got within what he considered a good throwing distance. As his arm rocked back, I hesitated. He released what could have been a grenade; I shot him in the chest. The slower boy froze and dropped his two rocks to the ground. Then, what could have been a grenade, landed ten feet from me. Had it been a grenade, I would have not acted quickly enough to stay alive.

It was well planned. There was success in his eyes. Those few steps, the shifting of his waist preparing for the arching back of his arm and the launching of all his satisfaction into me, his enemy. It must have been at the apex of his throw. It was when the loose-fitting, gray, long-sleeve shirt slid down to his elbow. It was right then when he put all of his weight to his rear foot. When his thin and young arm was exposed to that near blinding sun.

My hands tightened around my rifle. The boy was too close and in the sight of my rifle his body filled my vision. With his hand rocking up and back it became a process. A system of checks moved through my mind. He’s running toward me, kill him. There’s something in his hand, kill him. He’s going to throw something, kill him. A grenade, kill him.

I’m holding my rifle. In my left hand I have the pistol grip secured tight. Centered between the two knuckles of my index finger, I begin to squeeze down on the trigger. My right hand steadies the forward grip on the barrel. The top of my rifle’s sight is holding up the bottom edge of my helmet. In this moment I can no longer feel the heat nor am I burdened by the bright light of the sun. Everything fades away and my mind has locked
onto this task.

It only takes one shot. I continue to squeeze the trigger. Time nearly stops as the firing pin is released and it slams into the back of the bullet, igniting the primer and causing the short chain of gunpowder to explode, the molded brass spins out of the barrel and shoots directly into the boy—center mass. He dies. His small frame cannot endure. Instantly he falls to the ground. A small halo of dust rises up around him. On either side the dust billows back into him like it’s a large hand grabbing and pulling him to the underneath. In the light haze the boy makes minor movement as blood pumps out of his chest, out of his small back. His gray shirt turns black. In a close perimeter around his body the dirt and the silt moisten and it looks like tar or motor oil, but not blood. Maybe it was just hard to imagine. Even standing there over his lifeless body, watching this child bleed out, I couldn’t imagine how he would die. I saw it. I did it. I watched it. But still, I don’t even believe it.

The rocks, they were a tough decision for anyone to make. They could have been grenades. After he fell to the ground, I finally released the trigger. It returned with a clunk and so did I. When it was all finished, I walked over and kicked the rock. I guess I was checking it. Making sure it was in fact a rock. It landed ten feet from me, but I felt it hit me—that’s the truth. With rocks that tough, the village didn’t need a name for me to remember it. I looked at the boy, and then we moved out in a bit more of a hurry than before. No one said anything. Not because it was a tragedy, hell most didn’t even notice, but because it was nothing and there was no need to speak of it. It was just a thing that
had happened. At the time it was a sort of necessity. Grenade, kill him. He’s throwing something, kill him. He’s running toward me, kill him. Where I was, who I was back then, I had to have a certain mind about the world. Something more like a dog than a man.

I took away that boy’s chance at a love story. The wonderful feeling of butterflies, getting love letters passed halfway around the world, talk of the future, the hope for the day it would all be perfect. She was perfect. That first moment I got off the airplane in North Carolina and saw her face. I almost didn’t recognize her, and I sure as hell barely knew what to do, how to act. I loved her, and she loved me. She did wait for me. And even years after, she continued to love me. He would never know any of it.

Fuck—even the day love ended. She couldn’t handle my nightmares or the way I acted when I was awake, if that’s what you’d call it. I wouldn’t let her drive and I yelled at her for not being a perfect navigator. She was a runner, on the high school cross country team all four years and then again through college. Really good too, the best. But all of the sudden she was too slow and her form was horrible and I told her like she was a disappointment. I could have kept my mouth shut, but grunts don’t think like that. It’s all or nothing, and there is no in-between. Full throttle pushing as hard as you can through the pain, the hunger, through any possibility of happiness. It was all stupid little things; they just built up, and I didn’t know how to handle them.

Her strength was beyond comprehension, but everyone has their limits. It was my constant drinking and the fact that I couldn’t show her that I loved her. I had forgotten
how. I never slept more than a few hours and was always anxious because of it. She was too calm, too relaxed; nothing seemed to faze her. I was detached from everything, and it wasn’t her or my friends or family or the cities that were different, it was me, and I didn’t know it. I couldn’t see it—that it was me who had changed. Scarred, deeper than the shrapnel in my knee. She left, and I don’t blame her. It was all my fault, I see that now.

It was worth it though. I knew what love was, real love. Through all the nights unslept and the days gone hungry, if only for a moment, I knew love. The boy never would.

Every morning, before I even have a chance to eat breakfast, I stomach the guilt. I wish I could trade that boy places. I would. Even right now, I owe him that—I always will.
The Masthead

We traverse what seems to be an endless ocean of sand. Dunes, the color of haze and often creating a blinding whiteness that waves into the winds. The warm breeze coats my face with silt clogging my tear ducts and filling my nose with a thick, dark snot. In the day and all throughout the nights while my platoon rests, a single man, a soldier, loses himself with the problems of the universe revolving within him, high up on the land-locked masthead. This watchman’s post is kept manned to the last; and not till the sandsailing-fighters return to port does he altogether relinquish the guard.

I climb up the rungs to the crow’s nest. A solitary perch. During my shift of nightwatch, scanning through a glowing green luminescence from the night vision goggles, I imagine that this desert, the Helmand Provence of Afghanistan, is a green bowl of chowder without ends. At the tripod of the Mark19 machinegun, I dine my thoughts on the flavor of dust. My standing orders fall to the wayside.

And it is here that a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no domestic afflictions; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner, and your bill of fare is immutable; if not—everlasting.

It is here, when the soldier is alone, tired from battle, broken from loss of brothers, and remembering home or at least some idea of it, and not knowing when he will return—or if, ever at all; it is here, that the soldier finds some form of sanctuary. In
the serene weather of the desert it is exceedingly pleasant, the masthead; nay, to a dreamy meditative man—it is delightful.
A Grammatical Teardown

How about we do a little structural work? Let’s start with a sentence and maybe we can tear it down—together. Or at least I’ll tear it down and you just observe—mindlessly most likely. Something simple yet meaningful; complicated however organized; destructive and creative. Alright, I assume it is up to me for the sentence selection. So here we go. The sentence is:

"The soldier regrets killing the boy with the gray shirt."

And without delay: "The" determiner, but also an article. "soldier" this is a noun and the subject. "regrets" is a verb and here I'm pretty sure it's an auxiliary verb because of 'killing'. Okay, so "killing"...'kill' is a noun right? No, wait. It's got to be a verb here and with the 'ing' and what does that mean? Progressive tense or a gerund. Oh shit, of course. I thought for a moment it was a noun, so, for sure it could maybe be a gerund. Auxiliary verb before it...yeah, it's a gerund. I think. Well, okay, so what's a gerund? They are verbs that act like nouns. Does that mean they are fake, or just hiding from something? Why should they worry? Verbs seem to be running this show. El hefe and shit! What's next? "the" —easy one, determiner/article. "boy," that’s a noun and another easy one—unless his name is Jody. Wait, there's more to it. “boy” is an object. Yeah, alright. Objects are important. They may not be the subject, but they are often the goal: the objective, the mission. The mission...what is it? What was the mission? I mean the object...oh yeah, the boy—he is it. Or—he was... "with" now that's a preposition and "the" well we went over that already, twice now. Are you listening? I'm sure you
understand. "gray" adjective, but did I spell it right? Yeah, I did, but 'grey' would be okay too, sort of. People are always spelling it that way. Why? Fuck it. "shirt" noun, easy. Are you with me so far? Because we just broke down a simple sentence. Nothing to it, right? Nothing? Like empty. Meaningless? Maybe not.

Alright, now what? I'll start from the back because somewhere I remember that being more effective. But honestly, I can't remember why. Must have been...never mind. So, what was the last thing "gray shirt," okay. That is a noun phrase, roger. I mean, yeah. Well, I really mean roger, but I'm not talking like that anymore. Add in "with" and now we're at a prepositional phrase. Preposition...umm, links nouns, pronouns, and, well, phrases and all that stuff together. This sounds like it should go in the front with 'pre' and all. Prefix, yeah, that's what that's called. Whatever. "boy with the gray shirt" again here is a noun phrase. This shit just keeps building on top of each other. They're just patterns, right? Same shit, over and over. Hmm? "the boy with the gray shirt" that there is a complete sentence right? No, yeah? It's not...but why? ...I'd say that. If someone asked me, "hey, who had a weapon?" I could respond with, "the boy with the gray shirt" right? Oh, something is missing. No. Nothing is missing, dammit. Is there? What is it? Parts of speech...think. They're all there, right? No. "boy" is not the subject is it? Damn, it's an object right? Fuck, we went over this already! This is confusing. So, is it okay to leave out the subject like that? I mean, whoever I'm talking to has got to know what I'm saying. Serious, right? You know what I'm saying, don't you?

"the soldier regrets" article, noun, verb. That is really short and it works. That's
definitely a sentence and I'm totally sure. I was sure. I saw him—he, he was right there and that's the fucking truth. But then...So, "regrets" all by itself is a verb phrase? And with "the" the noun “soldier” is a noun phrase. Articles are easy. Well, easy for me after tutoring ESL students for the last few years. Articles are a pain in the ass for Assyrian students. Arabs too. They always have trouble with their articles. The languages are similar, but don't fucking call an Assyrian an Arab. Big mistake. Give me a break though, I was eighteen when I left for Iraq, and I never paid attention in school. I miss the heat. I'm really drifting now. Gotta get back to this.

"the soldier regrets" is a noun phrase. All the rest of that shit is noun phrases paired with verb phrases and a prepositional phrase in there somewhere. So, as long as when I pair them up and I'm not bumping two verb phrases or two noun phrases together I can make a sentence. Does that sound right? I think so. Jeez, I really don't know. Three-seven-two-five, nothing stays alive. They made me memorize that shit. The maximum effective range of the 7.62 millimeter NATO round. Patterns, right? Simple. Just like the Beaten Zone. Too easy sergeant, too easy. Well, that actually does sound really easy. I can handle patterns. It's as simple as putting magnets or batteries together. Just two sides, pluses and minuses and there's got to be an equal amount, obviously. Two sides of it. Same thing—just two sides. You gotta see both though.

Now what? I should read the sentence again. "The soldier regrets killing the boy with the gray shirt" Alright, that sounds...well, maybe something is...no conjunctions? That's funny. It seems like sentences are always loaded with and, or, yet, however. It's
like people don't wanna stop talking. Blah, blah, blah. Just a bunch of bullshit. Do people even care what they're saying? What am I saying? Where is that line in which what is said and what is meant? Everything is between the lines, isn't it? Almost like what we're talking about doesn't mean shit and there is something else we're...

How could I add a conjunction to this sentence? I hate "furthermore," really I do. The ESL instructors really pushed that on the students. I miss tutoring. Jeez, I'm a nerd, right...conjunction...okay, I got it. I'll just add an 'and' and say whatever bullshit comes out. Whatever. It's not even a big deal.

"The soldier regrets killing the boy with the gray shirt and it hurts him, it breaks him, even as he does grammar."

That sounds right. I don't know about all that other shit, but I know that this is the truth.
Habibi

I left my heart in Baghdad with a young girl no more than ten years old. When I first saw her, on the eastern edge of a northern Baghdad market, she was struggling to drag an empty tank of propane through a refill line. Pressed against a wall of brick, and straightened with a coiled strand of razorwire, the women’s line gave an angry stare.

War had only been declared a few months earlier, but the world outside of this place quickly faded into a forgotten dream for the boys thrown into it. Concern about girlfriends, cars, and alcohol were only mentioned during long shifts of night watch between the soldiers. These topics were such fantastic ideas. The conversations were paired right along with equally important arguments. Stuff like—who would win in a fight, a Jedi or a vampire? Who had the longest time doing a keg stand back in high school? And whether or not fat chicks really gave better head? They’d talk about whose girlfriend back home was the hottest, and whose was cheating. Home was worlds away for these boys and yet it still haunted them even through the roughest of battle.

It was July and no way around it. Even at three o’clock in the morning, the heat was in the eighties, still boiling the ground long into the night. Had we sat still long enough to sleep a whole night through, rest still wasn’t possible. The heat was so bad, and our bodies were always trying to recover from the labors of the previous day. If by chance we slept for more than four hours straight, it was likely that we would have to be MedEvac’d to a rear aid station because of dehydration, which wasn’t the worst thing ever.
Dehydration, when it hits, you don’t even realize what’s wrong. It’s like you’re drunk. You start fumbling your words and stutter stepping even over flat ground. I made a trip after a long night raiding through the city followed by a long morning recon of a possible high value target in the area. Three days racked out with an IV hooked up to my arm was the best vacation I had ever had.

Soldiers don’t have so many choices when it comes down to it. They have to learn to move fast and stay quiet real quick. It didn’t come easy though. Most of the time in the first months we were there, somebody was tripping and falling, knocking over decorative pieces—mashing through the living rooms as we would always come barreling through the front doors. Most of the houses in Iraq were usually cluttered like the dash of a New York City taxi. I remember busting into a building from the street. In and up the stairs to the second level we went. I kicked my way through large clay jars in a hallway. It sounded like sand but probably rice poured out onto my boots and I just kept moving.

Trained as fighters, these men see their world through the crosshairs of their rifles. Just like any other limb, it felt like the rifles had a pulse that flowed right with us. We were blunt instruments, great at doing what we were trained to do. What we didn’t have, what we needed for this city, was a little grace.

“First Squad, First Squad, get it on. Move, move!” hollered Sergeant Isom.

Sergeant Isom, smaller than most, louder than most, was always full of adrenaline. He lived for the high pace of this job. There was a rumor going around the
platoon that he had over three hundred grand in the bank. The belief was that if a soldier had over a hundred grand that the military had to let him discharge as he could better support himself on the outside. So the only reason for Sergeant Isom being here was that he really wanted it.

“First Squad, the west gate just took an RPG and two grenades. We gonna go get some. Get yer gear on. Let’s go!” Sergeant Isom yelled with a smile ripping across his whole face.

Sitting on my cot, I quickly got into my body armor and flopped my helmet on. Nine of us were out the door. Two guys that had been on guard were sending their last rounds at the attackers driving away. Seven guys from my squad jumped in the cargo Humvee loaded down for a fight. Sergeant Green and I ran out passed the truck and the two guys on guard. We trotted off out the gate to clear the street for the truck. Side-by-side we moved down the dark street. After midnight, this part of the city’s power is cut. I took the right side of the street. Sergeant Green, my team leader, was to my left with eyes on that side of the road.

Over the handheld radio Sergeant Green called to Isom, “Two One, Two one? This is Two One Alpha, over.”

Sergeant Isom was always impatient. He was a short Filipino man and at first it was hard for me to take him seriously. I’m sure before Green radioed him he was twitching with anxiety.

“Go ahead Green, send that shit already. Dammit, is it clear or what?”
"Two One, it’s clear baby. Let’s do it,” Sergeant Green sang.

It was like that every time. Almost as if we were more excited to meet the flying bullets and shrapnel then they were to see us. Sergeant Green was my team leader. Above him, Sergeant Isom was our squad leader. Between the two, I had the coolest smooth-talking adrenaline-junkie psychopathic soldier of the whole platoon. Our Platoon Sergeant knew it too, and like a pack of dogs, he steered our bark and bite always toward the next door. Really, it was the best I could ask for, at least in this city.

Back in March, we were still in the desert coming up on Al Samawah. The enemy was stuck in, holding up an old cement factory for a base. Through the dunes too rough even for the trucks, we marched toward them too early as the sun was coming up. Once we were within sight of their binoculars, mortars came falling heavy on top of us.

War was new, and we all forgot everything under the stress of sixty millimeter rounds pounding the ground. At first in front of us, then behind us. The enemy spotter was walking the mortars closer and closer. Soon, if we didn’t do anything about it, they would figure out where we were, and then we’d be dead.

On top of all the stress out on those dunes, we hadn’t slept much at all. We were staying low as we called in for air support to take out the mortars. Bullets were flying over our heads. That was the first time I ever heard a bullet so close. The sound, it’s different than what I expected. Not so much like the movies. The wiz you’ll hear, that’s if the rounds are flying close. But if they’re right on top of us, if they’re moving close enough for you to touch with your hand, it’s way different and hard to explain. Maybe
like the bullet is moving too fast for the sound to do its job. It skips through the air, almost holding a beat as the sound tries to make it work. A crackle I suppose.

In these few months I had spent in Iraq, I acquired more memories than all four years of high school. The first week we stepped on Iraqi soil, Specialist Heit had a bullet zip right passed his head. It broke the frame of his glasses, took a chunk out of his ear, and popped out of the back of his helmet. The medic wanted to medevac him out, but Heit said that he was fine and he was. He patched up his ear, got a new helmet and kept the old one as a souvenir. Private Register survived three separate RPGs being fired at him without a scratch. The last one was fired from maybe a hundred meters away. It hit the ground, bounced up and flew right passed Register. Luckily the Iraqi’s can’t read Russian; the safety pin was never removed, so it didn’t even go off. His eyes stayed red after that though. He didn’t talk much anymore. Eventually he would be medevac’d out to Germany after an ambush on us.

At night on our raids, we shoot without much thought. In the darkness, it was easy to see this world as detached. That first step into a dark doorway is always the worst. Almost like putting on your tennis shoes before a run. It’s painful because of the future. Of what’s to come, and what’s possible to find behind that door. It’s nighttime, a completely different world.

We were less than ten klicks from the propane station, but nothing there was the same. English wasn’t spoken there. Only Jundi communicates between the platoon; an adapted shorthand jargon.
I was the number-one man for my team. First one through the door. Or as we call it, the fatal funnel. Galvao was the biggest guy in our squad. Four of us stacked on the left, he was on the right. With a squeeze on my shoulder and a head nod to Galvao, he came up from his sunken crouch and pressed his boot to the door’s handle with an intense force. The moment we entered it was as if time took a break. For that moment, not a sound, not a single breath. It’s just too fast. The room as I entered was crossed with the barrel of my rifle. Whether there are shots fired or silence, my blood pumps just as fast. This time, there was no one waiting behind door number one. The anticipation of when and where the silence will break fucks with my head.

Once my team was in the first room, eye contact and simple hand signals communicate between us in the green glow of our night vision goggles. The building, some type of office, had been identified as a hostile target. Sergeant Green nodded and pointed to the next door. We moved silently, further into the building. My rifle was cradled with a firm grip. My heart beat, a running cadence to the formation of my team stalking deeper into the darkness. A sound from the next room. The shift of a chair maybe. Someone was in there. Someone was waiting.

Sergeant Green loaded an HEDP round into his M203 grenade launcher. I gave Sergeant Green my eyes and swallowed the excess of saliva collected in my mouth. Down, almost on a knee, I let out the air from my lungs. I didn’t dare take my eyes off the door. Though I can’t see it, Galvao’s silhouette haunted over me. With a swift kick, the door busted open. Sergeant Green fired a grenade into the long hallway right behind
Galvao’s foot. Sergeant Green and Galvao spun away from the door, eyes shut, and mouths open when the explosion went off. *Bang*—and we funneled through the doorway. A cleansing breath of burning hot air as we pushed in. The room, blinded with the flash of our rifles. A man, armed but disoriented, takes two from my rifle, takes two from Sergeant Green’s. As he falls to the ground, he hits the chair, screeching it across the hard floor.

The banks in northern Baghdad were under carpets and mats; in the front grilles of ’86 Toyotas; in holes in the walls of overdressed living rooms; and far back in a kitchen drawer, stuffed into a calcified jar. My nose adapted to the scent of bills pressed with Saddam’s face. In blues, purples and greens, the money could never hide well enough. With a string of red though their chests, like yarn, we strung them together.

One night my squad got dropped off about ten klicks south of the Pool House. After the trucks left us, Second and Third Squad were to do a mounted patrol a few miles out. On our foot patrol, Ruhlman and I held point. Our squad was just doing a random route, more or less circling back toward our compound.

In a whisper but still able to yell, Sergeant Green said, “Barnett, what the fuck are you doin’?”

“Sergeant, I can barely see. My fuckin’ NVG’s aren’t workin’ worth shit.”

“Turn ‘em off and on again. They should work. And watch those fuckin’ roofs motha fucker. I don’t want you almost getting us killed again.”
“Roger Sergeant. My eyes—are pealed.” I fumbled with the switch on my night vision. “My night vision is up. That trick worked but I think the batteries are goin’ sergeant.”

We continued our patrol of the area. Coming across people, we always searched them. Hostile or not, we saw them as good as dead. In death, there was no need for money, so we took it. Right in the heat of things, I never thought it was going to be like this. Bullets and RPG’s flying right passed me, and I’m not really all that concerned about it.

The propane station operations were our primary mission during the day for about two months. We were sent to that part of Baghdad because it was a rough area and mostly for what needed to be done during the night. The propane tanks, used for cooking in people’s homes, had not been being fairly distributed. We pulled security and ensured that order was maintained. The market was filled with thieves and corruption, like it was right out of the movie Aladdin. There were no genies or flying carpets, but Americans with rifles were just as unreal I would imagine.

In this part of Baghdad, Al Shula the suburb was called, the city blocks were smaller. Originally designed to be about a hundred meter square blocks, they were quartered by long and latitude set alleys. The straight cut grid made it easy for us to communicate location. It also was great for the merchants. The propane station filled a corner of the crossing of the main road and an alley intersecting the blocks. One
intersection over, the market looked older than the buildings surrounding it. Cars didn’t drive on the road that the propane station and the market shared. Crowded with tarps, poles, rope supported canopies, the system of hooches were spread out like the remains of a forest fire. Every day entering this jungle wrenched my stomach.

I was barely nineteen, only a boy. That first day I saw her, crowded in the line with pushy women dressed in black, she looked so helpless. She wore a bright green dress down to her feet. In fact, I would soon come to realize that this green dress was one of her only options for clothes. Seeing her, something different boiled in my gut, something I had come to forget since I had been there. I walked over to her and reached down and grabbed the tank of propane out of her hands. She whimpered as if I was stealing it. And if I had, there was nothing she could have done about it. I smiled at her, and as if she could understand me I said,

“Don’t worry. I’m gonna get you a new one.”

As I started to walk away, I turned around and lifted my left hand from my rifle to tell her to follow me. In the United States, we face our palm up and curl our fingers in to signal for someone to follow us. Here is was just the opposite. At first I forgot this and she didn’t move. I turned my palm down and with a half-smile she started moving out toward the back of the line around the razorwire. Over my right shoulder, I carried the propane tank to the front where the new tanks were handed out. There, two lines met. To the right, the men always went first. To the left, the women went last.

I approached the older man in charge. Still nineteen years old, and still just a boy,
I set the propane tank down. Pointing to the lines with my freed hand, I said,

"From now on, the lines will alternate evenly."

Before the interpreter could translate, the man's brow fell. He knew what I was demanding by the gesture. This wasn't my culture. I didn't understand. I didn't care.

"And this tank is first—NOW," I said.

As I walked back to the rear of the line, I looked to my team leader. He just grinned and then gave me his back. I gave the young girl her new propane tank. She wouldn't look me in the eyes, but I'm sure she was thankful. Then she put the tank on its side and gave it a kick. As it rolled away, I stood confused about what I did. This act was not in my character. The sun must have brought out the worst of what I was supposed to be. So I drank some water and continued to patrol the propane line, which now was evenly moving between the left and right sides.

The new rule I had set at the propane station was enforced from the day I first saw the little girl and thereafter. The lines alternated: one woman, then one man. It was fairness that held the rotation. It was our way of saying, fuck you, to have a woman go first every day. I wasn't trying to make a stand for women's rights. I didn't have the prerogative of some humanitarian. And had one came and applauded my actions; I would have called him a faggot and kicked him to the ground. I was a paratrooper, a grunt, nineteen years old. I was just a boy.

By the third week, the young girl realized that she didn't have to use the line any longer. As soon as I saw her, her tank was on my shoulder. The older man who ran the
propane station never stopped giving me grief about replacing the girl’s tank. He would use logic in his argument against it.

The interpreter would smile as he translated, “If you want fair propane line, girl must wait same as everyone.”

But logic was never present in my thoughts. I didn’t care about the order or the rules. Not really. I was just doing what my gut told me to do. For whatever reason, that girl was more important than any of this shit.

The older man would stall and act as if he was busy day after day. He would take as long as he could to replace the girl’s tank. After I noticed this, I stopped the movement of the lines with the encouragement of my rifle. I stared straight through my rifle’s sight, into the older man’s eyes as I talked to the interpreter.

“Tell that fucker to replace it now. And until it’s done, no one else gets their tanks. And I don’t wanna hear anything about the line or the order. Nothing. Not a fucking word. Just get the goddamn tank,” I told him.

The interpreter translated. I’m sure it wasn’t exactly what I said, but I know it was with the same urgency. The older man didn’t say a single word. Sergeant Isom came over to help the situation. The propane manager thought he would victor.

“Tell him I will shoot him myself if he doesn’t do whatever the fuck Barnett wants. I know he’s a crazy ass white mother fucker, but I don’t care,” Sergeant Isom said.

The girl’s tank was replaced without question thereafter.

I began to give the girl my extra rations and bottled water, usually in handfuls.
She returned twice a week, Mondays and Fridays most often. I don’t know if I was more worried about bringing extra food and treats on those days, or if she was more worried about being there to receive them. All the skittles, M&M’s, cookies, and even the Charms from our MRE’s I would pocket for her. If she didn’t show up on a normal day, I worried that she may have been hurt, or maybe worse. On days I didn’t make it to the propane station, I hoped she worried. I hoped that she would miss me.

It must have been a month before she finally looked me square in the eyes for more than just an instant. She smiled. I had almost forgotten what one looked like from such a face. Her eyes, a sort of grayish, were three feet deep. Her skin set off a glow so bright I bet I could’ve seen her in the dark.

Soon, when heading to the propane station, I brought more treats than I normally would carry. I even had the interpreter buy a sturdy bag so the little girl could carry everything home. I could have taken a bag while walking through the market, but not for her. I wanted to pay for it. I wanted to be better for her. I guess I disregarded where the money was coming from. With the cash I acquired at night, I started buying her fruit and flatbread from the market. She came with the bag every day, always carrying her new smile.

My actions must have been contiguous. When we would get to the market in the morning, Private Galvao would go over to a baker’s stand and buy these sugary donut-hole things. Three foot tall riots would break out as he gave the platter away to all the kids. They would jump and chant his name, “Andy! Andy!” following us though the
crowded alleys lined with tarps draped over the merchant's treasures.

The riot would follow us to the propane station. Where the lines of empty cans changed from monotonous and angry black robes to what seemed an organized ballet of hidden flammable gas. The destruction these propane tanks possibly held was unknown in the midday. For cooking, or for cleaning of the water collected from the river, the lines in the afternoon were endured because it meant surviving. The heat, the one hundred and twenty degrees was horrible, but it was necessary.

On a Friday afternoon, all my efforts might have been for nothing. After I gave the little girl a bagful of goodies, and refilled her smile, a boy, maybe my age, tried to steal it. I yelled and he retreated empty handed. I lunged for him without thinking. He moved fast, but he couldn't out run my anger. I pushed through the crowded street, battering everyone in my path. I kicked an elderly man who couldn't evade me quick enough. I pressed my boot square to his chest and flattened him to the ground. My rifle came up easy, as if only my hand. With a bullet, like a red yarn thrown inside his heart, I wanted to kill the boy. But he was already gone.

In my frustration, I had knocked down my little girl to the ground. The rumble of the street, the edge of the northern Baghdad market had silenced, if only for this one moment in time. The boy was gone and I turned to see her fallen and my stomach tightened. I picked up the bag of goodies, still filled with her smile. I was sure it had broken. I thought she would be scared of me. I figured she would run away and never come back. I wouldn't blame her. But maybe she understood. She didn't care.
“La ali baba!” she said. No thief!

Without a hint of concern for what my carelessness had caused. The girl got up and dusted herself off. Maybe a scrapped elbow, and possibly torn green fabric, but she was fine. She walked right up to me, her smile, unscathed. With a hand reaching out, her eyes locked to mine,

“Habibi,” she said.

My love, she said.
San Francisco Heat

I roll over in my bed and look out the window.

It’s nice out tonight.

The sky is clear,

but I’m restless and hot

as if I were back home in Baghdad.

Even after the Iraqi sun falls

the streets still burn for hours.

Children sleep on the tile floors in kitchens

to stay just a bit cooler.

When I finally do fall asleep tonight,

I will be sure to step over them,

quietly.
Into the Uncanny

The neighbor complains that it’s too late and my motorcycle is too loud. I don’t know if it’s English that he thinks he’s speaking or if somehow he knows that I can understand him regardless. As I walk inside, I nod my head and wave my arm—no differently than I did the last time, and no differently than I’ll do the next time.

With a nearly empty coffee cup, I sit down and start typing on my laptop sitting in the computer chair my ex’s dad gave to me. The one he stole after his work went out of business. I’m in my room in San Francisco and my housemate keeps the heat up way too much during the night and it does nothing but help me forget where I am. Another gulp of whiskey and I’ll just assume that I am back in the desert.

It’s hot and I’m irritated and tired. All around me the sand goes on forever and the rough wind never stops. I’m only a few blocks up the hill from Mission Street, but I’m thousands of miles away in a place more familiar than anything. In an instant, I won’t be here any longer. In a flash, I’m taken back to the heat and the fear. Where I will be dreaming of snow covered mountains and thinking of walking in the icy mud along trails through thick evergreens, and thinking of cheeseburgers and Keystones and french-fries with vodka as bullets zip and crack over my head. I’ll be thinking of just how cold it could be and how the snow sticks to truck tires and melts in your hands and the guy next to me is bleeding out of his thigh and the blood—it’s just like red water. And then I’m here, in San Francisco, but still there. And I’m just typing and drinking and probably not making sense. I’m slipping off this chair and imagining so many times when I wasn’t in
this desert where I have fallen.

Right out of the stolen chair where I was typing on my computer, I fell back just like I often do. Down onto the ground where small rocks dig into my elbows as I kill those I’m certain are uncertain, and I can smell the Euphrates on my breath. I can feel it under my chin in that crease of skin that folds and ferments and on my eyebrows it gets heavy and almost painful. Without any sleep, I see giants walking through the Al Shula police station parking lot and ghosts come to me during nightwatch on Baghdad rooftops. Then it gets washed away with the rush of the Helmand River. I’m waist deep in the water and it’s pitch black outside and we shoot their guard dogs with M4 carbines before we enter. There is a little girl with big and wet eyes wearing a long green dress, and they are the largest eyes I have ever seen.

To the left, the books on my shelf vanish way above me and all I have are volumes of bullets scattered in the dirt and that’s comforting and I want to sleep curled up in the crater of a grenade blast and Sergeant Mora’s wife will thank me when we return from Afghanistan. So I’ll get up and walk outside where the night air is masked by a thin layer of fog. It rarely rains here in San Francisco regardless of what they’ve told me. I’ll take my motorcycle down Highway One until it’s so cold that the tips of my fingers begin to hurt. I do this so that I can remember that I am stuck in San Francisco and it’s only down low in the cracks where the desert lurks that I have to worry about how good this feels and how much I rely on the cup sitting on my table. So I pull off somewhere north of Santa Cruz and flip around. My fingers have gone numb and the ride back home is
something just past painful, it’s something familiar.

Back in my room grabbing the whiskey that sits on the floor next to the desk very near the stolen chair that my ex’s dad gave to me, I pour a drink into my coffee cup thinking how much the DUI costs versus the pain in my knee and the mess in my head that hasn’t ever gone away since I was in the war in the desert before I had an ex whose dad would give me a chair so that I may write and remember—but mostly forget.
Hotdogs

My girlfriend Natasha says, “da Mish,” in her Indian accent.

“What are you smiling at?” she asks and gives me a crooked look.

“Nothing babe,” I smile.

“Whatever,” she says.

Holding hands, we exit the bar and start walking down Mission Street in search for some food.

“What do you feel like eating?” she asks.

I’m lazy, and I just don’t want to sit in a restaurant next to anyone tonight. Maybe it’s because I’m a little drunk and probably still a bit high from the brownie we ate that morning, but I just want something easy.

“Let’s just get a fucking hotdog,” I say.

“Okay, but let’s grab some juice before we go home,” she says.

Every night on the corner of 16th and Valencia, the same guy sells hotdogs from a small steaming cart. He has bacon wrapped dogs, grilled onions, peppers, large bottles of mustard, mayo, and ketchup. They’re four dollars each.

I hand the guy a ten, “no change.”

“Gracias amigo,” he smiles and doesn’t make eye contact with me.

“Thank you,” I say.

We move to the very corner of the sidewalk and I lean myself against the street light. Natasha leans against me. As we eat, we watch the Friday night crowds walking the
For a moment, my mind drifts away. As I’m tracing the rooftops surrounding us, I sort of forget where I am. This feeling comes often. It’s the unrealness that I actually live in San Francisco. When my mind spins back into reality, my heart rate has elevated, but I smile forcing the feeling away.

I’m holding my wadded up foil wrapper and still chewing the last large bit of hotdog. I’ve got mustard smeared on the skin between my thumb and index finger. My mouth is so full I can barely breath. My girlfriend chomps on a jalapeno bending over so that the juices don’t drip on her bust. She takes a look at me seeing my usual mess and hands me a napkin.

While the light is red a mumbling man pushes a shopping cart across the street toward us. Traffic stops and bright lights illuminate the old man. The twenty-year olds standing on the corner of 16th street are quick to move away from the homeless man. Not a single conversation stops nor do any eyes leave glowing cell phones for more than a moment. Car horns honk and worn out brakes screech. The night is filled with laughter and flirting. I spot a white girl wearing a bindi and then make eye contact with Natasha. She rolls her eyes. She has stopped wearing a bindi or anything specifically identifying her heritage. The white girl says something about finding herself while hiking in Marin. Natasha takes in a breath and blows out the air in a near whistle.

I take in large scoops of air through my nose over the chewing of hotdog. I first learned how to control my breathing when I was eighteen years old. In August of 2001, I
joined the United States Army. I was young, and I really believed that I would spend the rest of my life in the military.

While I was in infantry school, we meditated daily. Days full of running and marching, push-ups, sit-ups, sprints and long runs, fireman carries through the sand, holding jugs of water during lunges, and all the ways to exercise that nobody can even imagine. I barely got a moment for chow, carried a near forty-pound rucksack on my back as we humped up and down through the Georgia forests, so exhausted I was falling asleep on the firing range during weapons qualification, and after the drill sergeants’ yelling and screaming and more push-ups and covered in bites from fire ants and on top of it all the southern humidity in August—when it was time to meditate, to train ourselves how to control our breath and heart rate—I couldn't be happier.

“Alright, privates,” a drill sergeant would yell. “Get yer goddamn rifles and get in the dirt.”

In the prone with my rifle firmly pressed to my shoulder, I focused my vision center mass on the face of another recruit staring right back at me. Often the drill sergeants would put us in two lines facing each other. This gave us the first look at a man down the barrel of our weapons.

“Nice controlled breaths now, privates,” the drill sergeant called.

With a face fixed in my rifle’s sight, the objective was to calm down and breathe. It would go quiet. The yelling would stop. My grip would steady the rifle and it was as if I melted into the metal. I wasn't able to fall asleep, but this training allowed my mind to
move somewhere out of normal consciousness. There’s no better way to describe this training than as, comfortable. I imagine that it’s designed that way. To build warfighters into finding comfort in this version of meditation. To find comfort in killing.

"Fuckin’ nice night out," I say with a mouthful.

"It’s beautiful," Natasha replies.

I swallow the rest of my hotdog and take the napkin from my girlfriend. It was never anything planned, but after these nights out sipping whiskey, it became a routine for us to stand on the corner of 16th and Valencia Street eating a street-cart hotdog in silence. We just ate and listened and watched all those passing by. The mindless chatter about nothing, the intellectual babbling of professionals, activists complaining, drunks making passes, a few tourists taking selfies and missing the best part of night. Groups of locals heading to dives, the lost wandering, the found are smiling and wearing yoga pants, and so many of the world’s most important agendas being flung around in the night air.

I licked the mustard off of my left hand. “You know how we talked about quitting drinking,” I said.

“I was just thinking about that,” Natasha replied.

On the outskirts of Al Samawah, Iraq I saw the first person that I had killed. It wasn’t the first time I killed someone, but the first one I saw up close. Most often the bodies would fall back behind whatever it was that the person was using for cover. Usually a building or a car. But in those fields in the southern part of Al Samawah where
my platoon made a stand fighting in what we would all end up calling the Palm Tree Perimeter, I saw the bodies stack up of those I killed. It was March 31st, 2003.

Natasha reached up to my face and wiped away a bit of hotdog trapped in my beard. Before she took her hand away, she gave the hair on my chin a tug forcing me to look down at her, and she shot me a smile.

Within the palm trees and trenches, my platoon set up what grunts call a patrol base. Ideally, a patrol base is where all the guys in the platoon make some sort of triangular shape with the machine gunners at the corners providing intersecting final firing lines for protection. The platoon sergeant and the lieutenant stash themselves in the middle somewhere and try to give out effective orders. It’s all a defensive tactic for those less than desirable situations.

The nine guys in my squad faced east and away from the city while the rest of the platoon covered the other directions. I was oriented out toward more fields and lines of irrigation ditches. Behind me, on the opposite side of my squad, was the first few streets of the city and the buildings quickly began to thicken.

It’s hard to explain such a circumstance. I mean, I can tell you what the grass looked like just beyond the trench I was crotched in. I can still see the small golden stalks of foxtails and the lines of dirt paths cut between the crop lines. I remember shifting my position to remain in the shade of a tall palm as the morning hours clocked by. And the faded colors of their clothes and how each one became soaked with blood so dark it seemed to be made of nothing. Like it was liquid absence covering their bodies. The dark
blood would travel up their clothes. Up and around waistlines, following their shoulders and hips. It seemed like where the clothes were tight the blood made its way up. This black liquid, defying gravity. I didn't understand it, but it made some sort of sense as my eyes would become locked into its blackness. I felt confused and as if I had been teleported into this world where life and death were synonymous.

My mind moved so far beyond my physical position that I remember not being able to understand what it was I was looking at. These bodies out in the grass in front of me, I knew that they were familiar, but I could not understand exactly what they were. There were two of them just in front of me. Motionless, one and then the other. From the left I saw a pair of feet bound in leather sandals. Moving my eyes to the right, a body rose and fell like a soft hill. Before it ended, there was another small hill that rose up again with the same darkness climbing up its crevices.

I flashback to my childhood and to the hills covered in dead grass on Highway 108 on the way up to Yosemite in the summertime. The details here within this patrol base, as unfortunate as they are, watching these bodies drain themselves of blood, the only way grunts ever find themselves establishing such a perimeter is only after better options have been exhausted.

I smile at Natasha. “I love you.”

She smiles back up at me, “I love you, too.”

I want to explain that, yes, the time my platoon and I spent in this particular patrol base was under unfavorable conditions. But, it would be no other way. These sorts of
tactics are designed for such an occurrence. To be in a patrol base, or any such fighting position in battle, is undesirable, yet understood to be of the norm. My platoon had created this perimeter as a means of survival.

Natasha and I find a trash bin and throw away the mustard stained napkins. At the corner store, each of us picks out a jug of fruit juice. We leave the crowded San Francisco night and make our way to my small apartment.

“I like when you wear a bindi,” I tell her. “I think it’s hot.”

“I don’t want to look like all these stupid white girls,” she says. “They don’t know what the hell it means. It’s fashion for them.”

“But you know what it means. It’s yours. Good or bad, it’s a part of you and fuck everyone else.”

We walk though dim lit alleyways to avoid the crowds. I watch the shadows jump around me. It’s difficult to tell whether or not I have come back down off my high. Sometimes, I wonder if this is real or if I am imagining it all.

The day before we arrived at our palm tree patrol base, we had fought at the cement factory and my platoon was nearly taken out by enemy mortars. As we marched through the night, my squad would end up running into Sergeant Andino’s squad. They were heading back and it seemed that something had really spooked Andino. That night, when we first entered the fields surrounded by palm trees, it was very different than the desert terrain I had been trained for and very much unexpected. We had walked all night and I became so tired that I started to hallucinate. I was seeing shadows jump around and
hearing whispers between the trees. At one point I remember coming across a flooded field. Looking down in it, my twisted mind saw the reflection of palm trees as pillars and the night sky seemed to be a marble floor. I was staring into a pond and I honestly believed that it was an underground palace. Even right now, this very moment that I’m writing, it feels like a lie to say that what I saw was just a reflection in a pond.

I lifted my rifle to the pond. “Sergeant Green,” I said. “I got something.”

My team leader had already passed the pond and came back over to me.

“What?”

“Down there,” I was panicked. “It’s some kind of structure.”

Sergeant Green looked at the water tilting his head.

“Barnett, what the fuck are you talking about?” Green leaned in and gave the water a kick. “That’s jus water, fool.”

Sergeant Green’s kick shot out ripples across the pond. The illusion that had trapped my mind vanished.

At the break of dawn we made to attack the enemy; except, the enemy wasn’t where our intel had led us. Flanked and ambushed, we had to fall back to those dirt trenches surrounded by palm trees. We found a field of dirt that didn’t look to have been tilled yet that season. The borders of the field were lined with irrigation trenches two to three feet deep. We used the trenches as fighting positions and it was such a mess and all of our plans were fucked.

In the trench, I felt closed off from the entire world. The home I had known
growing up was in a different untouchable universe and this field outside of my trench was beyond some sort of obstruction that only could be crossed by breaking the sound barrier. Those bodies lying in the tall grass, I knew they were real, but I imagined that they could not be touched or felt. As if they had transcended out of my space and into another dimension, somewhere darker and quiet.

Natasha and I lay facing each other in bed. The San Francisco air is blowing the curtain and giving it a light whip. Over the weekend, Natasha had taken me through steps to induce a pathway of mental exploration. After consistently consuming the correct drugs and through partnered meditation, Natasha was able to reach down low into my mind and give me an experience like nothing I felt before.

“You need to relax, Sean,” she tells me. “You’re safe here. There is nothing for you to think about. Just let your mind rest.”

I take in deep breaths and stretch myself out on the bed.

“No, be calm,” she says grabbing me at the collar. “You’re holding tension in your shoulders. Just relax.”

After some directions, Natasha gets me to loosen up. My body begins to break away from reality. My perception of the world and time itself begins to melt. It’s dark and my breathing is growing frantic as I tumble deeper and deeper into my mind.

She puts her hand on my cheek, “I’m here. I’m with you.”

It feels as if I’m being thrown down a tunnel that did not seem to end. My arms become metal and fuse themselves together with the sheets of the bed. I struggle to move.

She runs her thumb from the top of my forehead, over the tip of my nose, and then off my chin. I can hear her and I can feel her, but it begins to fade in waves. I feel her warm hand in one moment and then I can taste salt and dirt from the trench in the next.

“I’m with you,” she says.

With my body slung over the trench, I watched the first two Iraqis run by without a flinch.

“Barnett!” Sergeant Green yelled. “Shoot those motha’ fuckers. They’re flanking us.”

“But Sergeant,” I said. “They’re women.”

My team leader pulled himself up off the trench and while still keeping low he made a rush at me. “I know motha’ fucker,” grabbing my shoulder tight. “Kill ‘em before they kill us, goddammit.”

Natasha is rubbing her hand across my cheek, “I’m here.”

Sergeant Green fires his rifle. I look through my sight and see my target. I release the air from my lungs and squeeze the trigger. I imagine that I can hear the bullet enter flesh. It sounds like a rock plopping into water. I’m not sure if any of the memory of this sound is real. As the woman falls to the ground, she only makes a small yelp and then she is silent and still. My eyes lock onto her sandals. The leather straps look as though they are worn into her feet.
A strong breeze comes through the window and I can taste the fresh air. I construct an image of Natasha hanging out of the bedroom window. At first she just floats in the blue desert sky. But as if the sky is full of cracks, a liquid darkness creeps up and then I am down in the alleyway in San Francisco looking at her, but the city has vanished. I am alone in darkness and the only light I can see is glowing out from behind her in the bedroom window. She is just a silhouette now and I feel like I’m losing her.

“Sean,” She says. “Stay with me. I’m here.”

Another woman is making her way across my view. She is wearing a black shawl and a grey dress. She has something clutched in her hands. I lead out my shot in front of her. When she comes close enough, she sees the other bodies in the tall grass. She pauses for a moment. My team leader fires and I instinctively squeeze my trigger. This woman transforms herself into another hill in the grass. She rolls away as dark rivers climb up her body.

“Sean,” Natasha says.

She slips away from me. I cannot hear her any longer. Maybe, I push her away or maybe she was never even real. Whether I am crouched down in a trench right now or not, I am unsure. Is this dirt, this smell that I can never escape what’s real? A dry stench that’s not bad and not good. It’s just dirt, still on my hands as I’m eating hotdogs in San Francisco.
It was easy to Kill

After only a few weeks into war, it was nothing. The enemy, these men and boys armed with rifles, they justified my bullets. Running away they got shot in the back. No thoughts about it or regrets building up years after when the pounding fear surfaced because death was asking for me or for them. We all kept score. Nobody had nightmares waking up late in the night, screaming and scared. No wives and girlfriends leaving or hating. There was no panic or anxiety over traffic and lines in a liquor store. I didn't punch holes in walls and break doors off hinges. There was no struggle at VA hospitals. No denial of healthcare for the injuries acquired in battle. In the desert it was calm next to men willing to kill and stay up all night...sometimes, just talking. There were no feelings or memories of just how wrong it all was. It was easy because it was something like instinctual and it made us human. I had all the training, the preparation, the equipment, and their pleas to Allah meant nothing so we shot in the dark and during the day. And it was easy back then before there was an after. No consequences or side effects or any lingering regrets. Yes, it was easy to kill.
4 April 2003

In Al Samawah, Iraq there was a taxi with two men in it. They were driving right toward us in a white and orange paneled car that was just the same as most all taxis in Iraq. It was the middle of the day, and we were at war just near the Euphrates River. Intel had told us that the enemy was using white and orange vehicles to move personnel and supplies. Our orders were to cease these targets.

"If necessary, with deadly force," my platoon sergeant had said.

I wasn’t all that concerned about my duties as an infantryman. All I worried about was the next time we got to eat and the few moments of calm before I racked out. Faced with the taxi, there really wasn’t much thought in the moment. It happened—then it was over. I watched the two men die. It was uncomfortably hot; the sort of weather you just want to strip down to your underwear and sit in front of the air conditioner, complaining.

Days before, we had suffered with no sleep and little food. Moving away from our fight at the cement factory, and a battle the platoon would end up calling The Palm Tree Perimeter, we then fought right on the Euphrates between the bridges.

I can remember the sun when it came up that morning we made it to the large river. At first, I didn’t realize that it was getting light out. I had gotten used to the dark and the green glow of the night vision goggles. Using the farmers’ raised pathways between the irrigated fields, we collapsed our wedge formations and moved in a single file line, staying quiet. As we approached the city, houses and buildings thickened and
trench lines were replaced with sidewalks, palms and ferns turned to torn up asphalt, and rows of tasteless crops became broke down cars. Quickly, the forty guys in my platoon moved into the city spread out with rifles pointing in all directions. The city seemed to surround us. The feeling was gut-wrenching. All those walls, windows, doorways, and rooftops felt like they were falling on top of me. Up until this point we had remained in the outskirts where we could always see a good distance.

The cement factory battle was every bit of what I imagined desert warfare to be like: dunes that stretched out for miles, the enemy base off in the distance, mortar fire clocking in on us as we moved toward it. We made it to the dunes south of the cement factory on March twenty-forth. After a short rest during the night, we woke up to see that we were in a landfill. Once we were wrapping up the battle and had secured the cement factory, it was off into a jungle of palm trees and big ferns. It reminded me of all the Vietnam movies I had grown up watching—I hadn’t thought that this sort of terrain existed in the Middle East.

In the city, where I had done most of my combat training, I felt vulnerable under the rising sun. The decrepit stone walls of every building stood like they were just moments from crumbling down from the weight of AK-47s aching to point our direction.

Once the fields and open space was behind us, we abandoned our wedge formations as we moved around the scattered houses. Our movements turned to two man rushes from one covered position to another. My footsteps started to meander, finding all the cracks and holes in the dirt-laid path we were coming in on. Then the sun came
binding-over, thrashing everything into silhouettes. It was hard to see, and the enemy seemed to get a lot closer—as if there were eyes watching, surrounding us to attack.

About the time I could see the Euphrates come into view, the radio chatter started coming in heavy. The entire platoon, forty or so of us, moved in-between two buildings and took up security at both ends. In the distance, I could hear the ringing of .50 cal machineguns. The firing of the machinegun was a violent and peaceful noise all at once. As the bullets leave the barrel there is a low rumble from the explosion. It’s like the sound an old man makes when releasing his first drag off a cigar. Then there is a loud crack as the bullet breaks through the sound barrier. This is something like the crack of a whip—a bit of the sound, but mostly similar to the pain and the sting. As the bolt assembly charges back and forth and the expended rounds dance off the roofs of the Humvees and scatter onto the ground, it’s like hail and almost a happy sound. During all this it’s hard to pull away. I remember for moments losing myself to the heavy machineguns’ fire. Something like a siren calling causes enemy soldiers to look curiously searching for the source.

Within our small perimeter it was quiet with anxiety as we all listened to gunfire and what was coming over the radio. The lieutenant received orders, and the four squad leaders huddled to make a plan.

“Third Squad, let’s go,” my squad leader said after getting back from the huddle.

We jumped up and took off at a steady pace behind Second Squad heading for the Euphrates. The sun was up just enough for everything to be seen clear. It almost felt like
it was evening with the warm air—a dry heat like being up in the Sierra Nevada’s in the
summer.

We had to move a few city blocks to reach the river. Using hand and arm signals,
my squad bounded in two-man teams across the streets and alleyways staying as quiet as
we could. We arrived across the street from the bridge that Delta Company had secured.
My platoon stayed low and clung to the shelter of the surrounding buildings. The fighting
on the Euphrates had been going on for some time. Enemy pop-shots were coming from
multiple directions. The big machineguns were firing at such a rate it could have been
matched to the sound of a high revving motor.

Delta Company was a medium infantry unit, so they had trucks and heavy
weapons. Under the cover of their .50 cal machineguns, we crept down into the bank of
the river to make our move on toward the next bridge. Running out of the protection of
buildings, my heart began pounding as I crossed the road heading toward the river and
the Humvees on the bridge.

It was loud. The percussion of the .50 cal machineguns rang through my whole
body. The chiming of the expended rounds falling from the trucks’ turrets gave a sound
to the silent sprinkling of glitter onto Elmer’s glue and construction paper from when I
was in grade school making glittered Army tanks just knowing that all I wanted was to be
a soldier.

As I passed by, the Delta Company sergeant at the truck was using the small stone
wall of the bridge as cover. He was firing to the north toward the bridge held by the
Iraqis. Once he was out of ammo, he tucked down, reloaded, and gave me a salute-like wave with a half-smile I really didn’t understand. He then continued to fire.

With the rest of my squad, I got down into the bank of the river passing just to the left of the sergeant providing covering fire for us. Below the bridge it was dirty. Not just dirt and mud, but filth that had collected from the last thousand years. The smell and the grime stuck to my boots and knees, and my elbows and hands. My stomach hurt.

The bank of the river bent and flexed around weeds and trash, thorns and broken glass. We stopped, and the platoon started squirming up onto the bank.

“Spread out and pull security,” my squad leader said.

We were no more than one hundred meters away from the Delta Company bridge, but this was the best spot for us to breach the territory secured by the enemy. Enemy. When the Humvees back on the bridge stopped firing to reload, the cracks of AK-47s echoed and bullets spun over our heads. Some of my platoon was exchanging tones with the enemy, but I was facing across the road toward a city street that was all clear of any movement. In front of me: a two lane road running parallel with the Euphrates, ancient sidewalk, a plastered building with a thin metal door. I can’t remember the colors. Right now, the door is bright red. But that’s more of a feeling than what I saw back in 2003. Enemy—I don’t even know what that means anymore.

Eventually someone, who I’d bet wasn’t even there for the fight, would title it the Battle of Al Samawah. General Charles Swannack was the commander of this battle, but I tell you, he wasn’t there. Wikipedia will show you some facts, and some even accurate,
but it lacks truth.

They don’t know about the taxi; or stealing food; or how bad my stomach hurt that day. The battle wasn’t at all about whatever General Swannack said or what’s posted on Wikipedia. The truth is, the facts are almost worthless.

The river cut right in the middle of Al Samawah. Where the bridges were, it was a busy part of the city. In the early morning, the fighting lulled for a bit, and my platoon positioned between two of the bridges on the western bank. We were down in the dirt hiding the best we could in the nooks where women hung their river-soaked clothes out to dry. If we hadn’t been fighting out there, I’d imagine that soon the spot we were in would be crowded. Laundry was an early morning sport to avoid the heat and the smell that follows. The Euphrates, as glorious as it sounds, was nothing more than a flowing filth.

As we were smashed up against the dirt walls of the riverbank avoiding the sniper fire coming from the distant bridge, I could feel the stink creeping into my pores. The whole previous night we marched through farmlands canopied with giant palms. The trees were so tall through my night vision I could barely make out the tops. And if I did see them, I was almost falling over backward. The whole night seemed to never end. That day moved so fast once we made it to the river.

The distance between each bridge was just far enough away that the sniper fire we were taking from the next bridge up was less than accurate. But it kept us low.

We got orders to move into the city and to secure the area around the bridges.
Controlling the passage across the river was vital to our mission—something that never was explained to me nor did I care to understand. Just before we left, my stomach got sour and what little I had eaten was ready to come out.

From the small mound of trampled dirt, I lifted up my head to speak to my team leader. “Sarn’t Green, I gotta fuckin’ shit right now,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment scrunching his eyebrows down, “No way. We’re about to move motha fucka. Get yer ass facing west. Pull security, and when we move you know ya got point,” Sergeant Green snapped.

“Roger Sarn’t,” I replied.

I clenched my cheeks together and put the sight of my rifle back into my face. With the heat and the sweat and all the dust, I blinked down tight and opened my eyes wide. The blurriness cleared up a bit and I looked. There was a road in front of me that followed the river. It was paved once, now mostly dirt though. Beyond it were the buildings waiting for us. A thin metal door, gray and lightly hinged on a corner building looked to be a good destination. I would go first.

Waiting with my convulsing stomach, I looked over my rifle and imagined my slow walk up to the door. Maybe I would knock two or three times. Maybe someone would answer the door and invite us in. I would say, “yes please,” when offered tea even though I know Sergeant Green would not approve.

I tried to remember the sound of knocking. How did it sound on wooden front doors? Like when I was twelve years old. Knock, knock. “Can Johnny play?” Surely, this
would not be the same. For the Paratrooper, the number one man controls the flow. Everyone else follows close. No one straggles behind. Paratroopers are not afraid and they have no regrets. They do as they are told and they think on their feet. If there is a problem, shoot it.

I lifted my rifle back up and continued to scan over the riverbank into the city. This walk would go nothing like I imagined. I was afraid. Scared that there was going to be someone behind that door and I would have to gamble with his rifle and who would shoot first.

My squad, pinched between the river and covered from most enemy fire by the levee, was just north of the bridge Delta Company had secured. Up river about two hundred meters was the next bridge. There was an enemy sniper on that far bridge that began firing. He wrapped us all into the moment and kept us down low. Delta Company and one of our sniper teams were on the bridge behind us sending covering fire and trying to locate the enemy sniper.

Listening to rounds wiz over our heads, my squad was quiet and pressed to the dirt. I can remember tonguing the roof of my mouth to spread the bit of moisture just enough to be able to respond to my team leader.

"Barnett? You want me to take point?" Sergeant Green asked me.

"No Sarn’t, I got it. I’m good," But I wasn’t—good. I just had to shit, and I knew if I was leading I could get to the first building faster. Controlling the flow was important. When the platoon sergeant told us to go, I didn’t even wait for Sergeant Green. I stood up
digging my hands into the dirt to lift myself up and I booked it over the berm. As I ran, I kept my rifle up with my eyes looking just over the sight. I moved across the street and then right up to the front door of the closest building. Once there, I looked back to see the three other guys in my team just coming up. I looked at the thin metal door in front of me. It was dead bolted. I took a big step into it and charged it with a dropkick on the side with the hinges. The door popped loud with the middle and the bottom hinges busting right off. The top of the door twisted out and the bottom folded in.

With the door still partially attached, Private Galvao came up, tucked down, and muscled the door all the way off. He shoved it to the side and I slipped past him and we stormed the place real fast with Ruhlman and Sergeant Green right behind us. Galvao and I cleared the first room where I saw an empty closet. Sergeant Green and Ruhlman took the next room to the left. I stuck my head to the threshold of the door and said, "Clear."

"Clear," Sergeant Green responded.

"Moving," I said.

Galvao and I continued down the hallway. As I passed Sergeant Green he looked angry, maybe waiting for the wrong thing to happen. Luck would have it that the building was completely empty of people. Once it was cleared, I ran back to the first closet and stripped off my gear and pulled my pants down to my ankles. It was messy. Like a kid spraying chocolate milk out of his mouth from laughing so hard because his best friend had crushed his nuts on a handrail while they skateboarded—but out my ass.

I cleaned up using some of the clothes in the closet and put back on my gear. I ran
out and caught up with my squad, now smiling and feeling much better.

The day had only begun. Stealing food as we made our way through the city, the taxi, I'd take some shrapnel to my left knee, and not the first man I killed—but the first one I killed that seemed to really matter, would all come later that evening.

Al Samawah was a busy place, even during the war. I know the locals had to be suffering, but it seemed as though they didn’t skip a beat. As we were moving, clearing each and every building downtown, I saw a lot of people still doing what seemed to be their daily routine—maybe in a bit of a rush, but still working or shopping or whatever. It was somewhat comforting to see people out and about and for short moments it was almost like we weren’t at war.

The places we had been in the few weeks before, there was nobody around, unless they were shooting at us. Maybe it had only been a week since we had gotten there. Even at that early point in the war, time was lost to me.

Al Samawah is where I noticed it became complicated. It wasn’t just us versus an enemy. The enemy—if that’s what I’m supposed to say. Here, everyone was still living. Mothers and sons and daughters; Mechanics, construction workers, business types, the unemployed—they were all here. The only way I can come to define what enemy means is someone else. Someone not part of your struggle. Or maybe that’s not even right. Those whom I refer to as the enemy are very much a part of my struggle. Much more so than anyone back home.
Overall, that first day tramping through the city was alright. I kicked down maybe four or five times as many doors as shots I fired—which was a ratio I wouldn’t have during the rest of the declared part of the war. My platoon moved non-stop the whole day. From one building to the next. In that door, out this one. Up the stairs, hop over to the next roof and down the stairs of the next building. Like running through a maze starting from the finish. Even if we did find our way out, it was only to the beginning. The beginning of the next city or town or some desert road laced with explosives.

On two separate occasions I remember pushing though some little restaurants that day. They were more like the clustered taco trucks from back home rather than well-developed facilities. Neither were in a building designed for the purpose. It was a cramped city block and the restaurants were smashed into the bottom levels of anonymous buildings. When we cleared the first one, the two cooks didn’t make a sound. As we left, I watched Sergeant Green pull a leg off a freshly roasted chicken, so I grabbed the whole damn bird, bit a chunk out and wedged the rest under my left armpit and we kept moving. When my team cleared the next room, we tore into the chicken like dogs. As paratroopers, we were out on our own. The larger more conventional Army was yet to arrive and this is how it was the entire thirteen months we were in Iraq. Supply lines often didn’t reach us and finding food and water was just as important as dodging bullets. Sure, paratroopers jump out of airplanes—that’s a given. But, I would never claim that as their identifying feature. It’s more about going further and doing without.

Only about ten minutes after we left that first restaurant, we rolled into the second food
joint we’d find that day. Once it was cleared we stayed for a minute to eat.

“If it looks like fuckin’ food, put it in your damn mouth and then let’s roll
fuckers,” Sergeant Green said.

As we were rummaging through the food, just grabbing up whatever, I noticed
Galvao had grabbed a plate and was spooning some curry gently onto his dish. I think
that must have been near the moment he lost his mind. Acting all civilized did nothing to
get food down faster. I don’t know what he was thinking. I know he had to be just as
hungry as I was. I gave him shit about it later. He’d get real angry when we noticed the
little differences in his personality. I wouldn’t say Galvao was an odd guy, just not cut
from the same block as most of us grunts.

Andy Galvao was a beast of a man, yet just a teddy bear. I watched him rip off
doors with his bare hands, strangle men with rage in his eyes, and he kept a small
baseball bat in his pack for when he got angry. Sometimes he would beat those we had
detained with it, but usually he would just take out his anger on car windows and mirrors.
His knuckles would go white in frustration so often—I don’t think war was ever a good
place for him.

When it was quiet and our squad had time to rest, Galvao was always smiling and
happy. He would laugh uncontrollably at any jokes that were told. When we ate and slept,
he seemed to lose himself in the moment and happiness filled him up. It was like he could
remove himself from the war and go into another life, even when we were starving and
tired he was able to find a bit of calm.
I can remember a few times when I was truly starving. Where it felt like my body was eating itself. If it was food, and it wasn’t in the hands of somebody from my platoon, then it was mine. Hopefully the person with the food didn’t want to put up a fight. Honestly, I would say hunger is at least twice as powerful as fear. You forget about fear when your stomach starts growling like that.

Fortunately, the whole first day in Al Samawah was alright. If I remember correctly, the only shots I fired were warning shots to a Toyota Hilux pickup. The guy spun around quick and there was no problem.

There was fighting and killing and death everywhere that day. Just a block up or behind us, someone was getting shot. I don’t know why my platoon’s rifles stayed relatively cold that day. Maybe one of those gods had a plan. Or maybe Death was just too busy.

Finally, just as the sun was all about hidden behind the buildings, the lieutenant got orders over the radio for us to hold up for the night in the area. We secured a building on one of the main roads. The building was the area’s telephone relay station. Like most Iraqi buildings, it had a wall around it. This one maybe ten feet tall. It was sometime after 1900 hours local time and with the evening light the platoon got setup.

Sergeant Green and I pulled security out on the front road. Traffic had died down as the locals became well aware of our presence. When a stray vehicle did approach, Sergeant Green would fire off a warning shot to turn them around. This happened a few times. The day would have been not much worth mentioning before the arrival of the
taxi.

The orange skyline was traced with the tall buildings that lined the street—most being two, some three stories tall. It was like a rundown version of Market Street in San Francisco, left unkempt and given to the Iraqi sun. Nothing was in complete disrepair, just...behind on a few checks of the maintenance log. The city was a tough place—constructed with blocks of concrete, rebar, and mortar. Six hundred years from now when this war will seem more like legend than truth, I’m sure there will be more standing in Al Samawah than what is left in Babylon today.

Looking down the street, the buildings most all had hand-drawn roll up doors on the first floors. The second stories usually had small steel frame balconies. Every structure was somebody’s house in the upstairs. The bottom floors were always laid out as if the construction workers knew it would be used for business out of peoples’ garages. On this particular street, it was lined with merchants and off many of the balconies hung signs colored in hand painted Arabic. I never learned to read anything more than license plates, but it would come to be comforting seeing the language.

As I watched the sunset in front of the telephone relay building, it was starting to seem nice in this place. I don’t know what it was, the lack of sleep, the constant hunger, or the pills supposedly for malaria that I would later learn had all the same side effects as steroids and testosterone. Whichever it was, or a combination of all, the stress and the high pace was beginning to feel normal.

Maybe an hour after we were sitting out there pulling guard in front of the
telephone relay building, and with most of the platoon getting setup inside, a taxi came screaming onto the street. The car was jamming and headed straight for us. Orange and white paint job just like the rest except this one seemed to be in a hurry. Just the four of us out there on watch. Warning shots and waving arms, neither slowed the car down. It was getting close, too close.

We had been briefed about the possibility of suicide bombers, but had yet to run into any. Is it? I thought. I took a glance away from my rifle’s sight at Sergeant Green who seemed hesitant. I waited another moment. I’m sure it was only another second or two before I couldn’t wait any longer.

“Sarn’t Green?” I yelled.

He snapped back into it realizing what was going on, “Fire!” he yelled.

And we did.

I had a fresh magazine in my rifle. Thirty rounds full. I aimed at the windshield as I pulled the trigger over and over. I really would like to say that I had missed the car altogether, but they train us well. It wasn’t just random uncontrolled bursts in his direction. That’s what they do in the movies. As soon as he said fire, it wasn’t even like a decision. It was instinct.

The moment became silent. I used my thumb to rock the selector switch down from safe to semi; I let all the air out of my lungs; obtained a good sight picture of my target; closed my non-firing eye; and squeezed the trigger. After the first shot was fired I released the trigger which made a light thunk in returning. I couldn’t hear this, but I felt it
in my jaw. I repeated this again and again.

In Georgia, during Infantry School, I qualified expert the first time around. With all the yelling from the drill sergeants and the running and marching in cadence, shooting was just calming for me. In the barracks, I struggled to fold the sheets of my bed and did so many damned pushups because of it. The memorization and reciting of the Infantryman’s Creed I never could do and even the recruits next to me had to get down and push. I am the infantry. My country’s strength in war… That’s about all I remember. Even in North Carolina, once I got to my platoon and we went to the shooting range, I didn’t understand when some of the guys bitched about their rifles not being properly zeroed or that their sights were malfunctioning. I never had any problems shooting and Sergeant Green took note. I wasn’t good at plotting coordinates or giving IVs. I would forget the fine details of the battle drills and all the damn military acronyms and hand signals. Then another creed that I never was able to properly recite—recognizing that I volunteered… and something about the fact that I will always endeavor to uphold honor in my chosen profession… Along with the shooting I started to get good at pushups. Really good at pushups.

I can’t explain it. I look down the sight, pull the trigger, and hit the target. I did it during training, and I did it when the taxi wouldn’t stop.

After maybe five or ten seconds of firing at the taxi, my squad leader came hollering, “CEASE FIRE, CEASE FIRE. They’re fuckin’ dead, motherfuckers…Fuck!”

It was quiet and if there were any sounds the ringing in my ears shut it all out.
My squad leader took a breath and let it out his nose, “Fuckin’ Aye,” he said.

Still looking through my rifle’s sight, the passenger was motionless. The driver wasn’t. He opened his door and fell onto the ground. I don’t think his legs were working and his chest was red and wet—easy to see from thirty meters away. He fell and started crawling using his arms to pull himself like he was climbing straight up a wall. Even as bloody and tore up as he was, he still had a specific way about him. Like when you see someone’s walk and the way they carry themselves. Shoulders squared, brow leaned to a scowl. Like someone with pride and dignity or guilt and regret. He still had that.

That was the only time I had ever seen this man, but I am confident that if I could see him again, I would recognize him instantly. The way he moved—not elegant, but solid. Not many people can move like that. Not many have ever wanted something—anything like he did. It’s just not something I could forget.
In Al Shula

I used to live in Al Shula, a ghetto suburb in the northwest corner of Baghdad. This place became my element—or maybe it was me that became an element of the city. In battle, I knew all the rules because I made them. Danger was irrelevant in such an environment, in such a job. Often, I remember things differently. Maybe in ways I wished they would have gone.

In Al Shula, there were no plumbed gas lines. The city water was cycled on and off, most getting an hour or two in the mornings and a few more in the evenings. To cook, each home was fitted with hookups for small propane tanks just the same as I grew up using for backyard barbeques and camping trips. On each weekday, semi-trucks would come into town loaded with the filled propane. The tanks, painted oranges and reds, yellows and browns, all looked old with many dents and full of rust.

East of the market, the market that was cluttered with canopies and tarps, hooches strung every which way to hide produce and people from the blaring July heat, came the trucks hauling the propane. They rolled into a walled lot. Just as the sun was coming up, the trucks entered through the large steel gate. Around the right wall, a line of men stood waiting. To the left, a line of women. Everyone holding empty tanks of propane.

There was theft and corruption and surely much more going on than I could see. The owner would admit each woman only after at least a handful of men had come and gone with their newly filled propane tanks.

Sergeant Cottrell and one truck from Delta Company had been coming to the
propane station with my squad each day. They had a .50 cal mounted on the truck and it was nice to have the extra three guys with our squad. I never liked Cottrell. There was something about him that was strange. Something I didn’t trust and it wasn’t just that he was an outsider from my platoon, something in his nature didn’t settle well with my gut. Cottrell kept a pistol stuffed in his belt and an old Russian battle knife strapped to his boot that we had pulled off of an Iraqi officer’s body.

“They’re fuckin’ throwaways,” he said. “You know, in case I whack a civilian.”

He said this without a flinch or even a smile. He said it with authority and pride. Many of us had throwaways as the dangers in war come from all sides. It was the sort of thing that became unspoken policy and when we had to use them it was always a tense situation. Everyone joked about it during down time. Everyone joked about everything. But Cottrell wasn’t joking. He carried that pistol like it was owed to him. Like placing the false blame on the next unarmed kill was his privilege.

I can pick out a few different days when I lost count of how many innocent civilians I had killed. But those, they fit somewhere in this alien sense of necessity I’ve come to understand about war. Not to say that I at all understand war, just that I can imagine that these sorts of things are inevitable during battle. This is not how Cottrell thought.

After many nights unslept, nights rushing through doorways and down stairwells, nights spent with hard blinks from the flashes of muzzles and ringing ears after one, and two, and even ten rounds fired into a man—the days guarding the propane station came
like a vacation.

For hours my squad would patrol up and down the lines. Nine of us. Four on the right with the men. Four on the left with the women. Our squad leader bouncing back and forth and the three guys from Delta Company floating around.

I honestly can’t remember why I was on the right side that day. Always, my team had patrolled the left. It wasn't for any reason other than familiarity. My team knew the left-side line, full of women in black, and still to this day I have the street corner locked into my memory. But, for a moment of one day, I was on the right and I cannot remember why.

Both the lines, pressed against the walls were kept in order by our strung out coils of razorwire. Three-foot tall circles of wire like a stretched out Slinky laced with razorblades.

So, I’m standing on the right side with the men, I cannot remember why, and, this next part is a lie.

From within the line of men waiting in the July sun to receive their weekly bottle of propane, a man reached out and grabbed the barrel of my rifle. It was loud there. In the lines they were always pushing and arguing. Outside the lines, crowds of children, the elderly, and it seemed all of Al Shula came walking by in the mornings coming and going to the market. With his hand on my rifle and his weight pulling it down, I panicked. It was for only a short moment the struggle of his grip on my rifle. They train us infantry so well, our reactions to the unexpected, how we handle each situation with immediacy and
violence. It was but a second or two, until I shot him. I shot him dead and then it was finished, and I promise that's a lie. It just didn't happen that way.

Within a moment I got my footing and jerked my rifle away from the man. He was average size for an Iraqi and much smaller than me. It really took no effort for me to pull my rifle away. After I ripped the barrel of my M4 from his hands he lost his balance and fell into the three-foot tall circular strand of razorwire. Thinking about it now, maybe that was the reason. Maybe he grabbed my rifle only to catch his balance from falling. Before he could pull himself up—his forearm already bleeding and his sleeves caught on the burs of the wire, I slammed my right fist into the back of his head. I did this out of anger and for a moment I wanted him to die, and then I walked away.

Sergeant Cottrell maybe saw what had happened or maybe someone just told him, I don't remember. Not long after I walked away he moved over to the man that had fallen or maybe had meant to grab my rifle. Cottrell grabbed him and dragged him over the razorwire. Kicking and screaming, the Iraqi man could do nothing to defend himself. The other members of my squad raised their rifles at the crowd and no one made a move to help this man.

Cottrell was not a large guy but the constant battling made men forget of their limitations. I watched Cottrell take the man in his hands and lift him into the flatbed of our utility truck. He flex-cuffed the man down to the steal bed under the July sun. There was no conversation. Cottrell was the same rank as our squad leader. He was not in our platoon and out of the normal ranks. We had no real authority over him. None of us said
anything. The Iraqi man stayed in the sun for hours until around maybe two in the afternoon. Every so often Cottrell would go and jab him in the kidney and drink water in front of the man’s face. By the time we released him he couldn't walk. Cottrell threw him off the truck and into the dirt. And then we just left.
I was just sitting on an old dirty lawn chair facing our lot of cars scrutinizing gusts of wind passing within the trim saplings. My platoon, during night patrols, would find any locals out driving past midnight and what cars sat in front of my old chair would stay until noon just waiting for a pick up by a local.

As I sat in dark calm, my vision would go in and out, my mind almost dormant—but still fighting off a lurking coming oblivion. Sitting in proximity of my arms but facing contradictory to my sight of the lot, Andy Galvao was also fighting off his own sandman. Guard shifts in Iraq usually would turn this way—two grunts battling through a tranquil crack in an instant that should hold no significant combat. But, in no way is sitting on nightwatch a truly harmonious action during war.

And now, in cold night air living in San Francisco, I still to this day will vow what I saw. A giant. A giant man. This giant was walking—no, it was a casual stroll through this lot of cars in front of my old dirty chair. And thinking back, I had a gulping halt and my inhalation stood still. I thought, “Is this actually a giant man? Am I imagining this or is this...?”

My following thought was if showing Galvao of what I was looking at was such a good plan. Knowing Galvao’s hawkish ways, I was in favor of not informing him just this instant. I was not in fact all that firm on this giant’s physical form. Was this giant actually walking within this lot of cars? Was it not, through tall palms lining this lot, actually bombarding my mind? Or was I just having a fantastical imaginary trip from all
of my waking hours? War is not a light task and it would look that this crisis was simply a byproduct of what harsh timing surrounds such a point.

Without a word to Galvao, I saw this giant continuously dodging paint jobs and dirty rims with his two trunks softly stomping until his shadowy body had all but lost my sight back into a thick strata of tall and dark palms.

“B?” Galvao said.

“What’s up?” I said.

“It’s sort of dull out tonight. I’m almost catching Z’s at this point!”

“I know it,” I said. “I’m about losing it right now.”
28 April 2003

It’s been over ten years since I was in Fallujah. When US forces invaded Iraq, my platoon was among the first to enter into the country. Now, on Clement and 42nd avenue in San Francisco, I walk into a white building across from the main VA hospital. The sign reads, Behavioral Health.

“What sort of things trigger your intrusive memories, Sean?” Doctor Burkman asks.

I don't know how to answer her. When my mind slips away it seems random. I cannot pin it down to a set of actions, or any specific situation. Each week she struggles to get information. She establishes a plan for me. I’m to keep a daily log of my symptoms, record what I remember of my dreams, and how many hours I’m sleeping—or not. Medication is prescribed. A year goes by, and I do almost nothing of what she asks.

“Are you still talking with the men you served with?” she asks.

“Yeah, of course,” I say.

I think of Launder who I have gotten in contact with most recently. Doctor Burkman has more techniques for me to help with sleep. We talk about irritability and what makes me angry. I do my best to tone down what I tell her. Galvao was locked down two different times for violent outbursts. I know I couldn’t handle them holding me.

Launder and I had gotten a hold of each other this last summer after a few years of no contact. I had just finished my bachelor’s degree in San Francisco and spent the
summer working and taking trips on my motorcycle.

“So, you’re a daddy now?” I had said.

“Yep. Elody and Keagen are with my ex-wife. Harper is with a girl that used to write me weekly while we were in Iraq. And the current wife is actually cooking one up right now.”

“Fuck man, you’re a goddamn slut.”

“I suppose so,” he laughed. “What about you? What ever happened to that curly haired chick?”

“Oh, she’s been gone for years now,” I said.

“How’s Galvao doing?”

“He’s doing alright, finally,” I said.

As the summer went on, Launder and I continued to stay in touch. Mostly we spoke of the current events in our lives, but the past always seemed to work its way in. Since living in San Francisco, I had distanced myself from my old life. Often times after speaking with Launder, I would be left with an image of his face stuck in my mind.

Franklin was killed in 2005 while we were in Afghanistan. When the landmine went off, I was looking the other way. After we established a secure perimeter, the medic called for more supplies. I grabbed my aid bag and ran over. Franklin was making a gargling sound—choking on his own blood. Launder, who had been just outside the blast radius, was there in the turret of a humvee motionless. His face was pale white and splattered with blood and flesh.
Now, married with a few little redheaded kids, Launder seems to be happy. Like he has again found the calm he had when we were in Iraq. I can’t seem to shake the image of his blood-splattered face, but I find myself still looking up to him no differently than when we first met—when he first spoke to me.

By the end of April 2003, we had made it to Fallujah. Just over a month we had been at war, yet it already felt like so much more time had passed.

“Hey, Barnett, what’d you get?” Galvao asked.

“Fuckin’ Chilli Mac,” I said.

“Wanna trade for Beef Enchilada?”

I threw my MRE at Galvao’s chest, “Of course.”

We were held up in an old schoolhouse early that evening. A simple rectangular building that was two stories tall with hallways cut down the center. Big windows in each classroom looking out onto the schoolyard—except that we had busted out the glass and never went into the bottom floor classrooms. Grenades found their way into places like those. We kept to the hallway or the second floor and the machineguns stayed up on the roof. In the evening, we stayed hidden in the dark eating MREs, rereading letters kept in the folds of our body armor, and checking and rechecking our gear compulsively.

“How you up?” Sergeant Green asked me.

“No sergeant. I’m still down fifteen rounds,”

“That’s right.” My team leader pulled out one of his magazines, “Here, trade me. This one’s fully loaded,” he said.
I pulled out the half-empty mag from my chest-rig and handed it to him.

“Ya’ll finish chow motha’ fuckers. We roll out soon.” He glanced into the classroom door next to me and then walked past bobbing his head into the darkness.

“I fuckin’ love chilli mac,” Galvao said.

“That stuff gives me the shits,” I said. “But I think everything gives me the shits now.”

Galvao giggled and snorted like a little kid. He spat up some food as he laughed. I watched him eat some macaroni off his forearm and he continued to laugh in a sort of anxious fit.

Earlier that day, the three line squads of my platoon had been patrolling the central portion of the city. There was a large highway that ran right through Fallujah. Using the frontage road as a quick means to head back, we started taking pop shots from across the highway. With the traffic, and just too many buildings to really tell where the sniper fire was coming from, we could do nothing but run back into the safety of the city blocks. In the city, safety meant that the enemy had to fight us toe to toe.

“Let’s fucking go,” Sergeant Isom said running from the sniper fire.

“Fuck...fuck...FUCK,” Galvao yelled.

Turning into the first street we could, we all had come to a quick halt behind a car parked in a driveway. In the moment we all took to catch our breath, Galvao let out a burst of giggles shooting out spit through his closed lips. At the time, I just thought
Galvao was crazy for thinking the situations we’d get into were funny. I see now that his stress was so overwhelming that finding humor in it all was the only possibility he had for coping. Taking that long way back to the schoolhouse through the city, we would end up meeting some resistance in the streets. It wouldn’t last too long as some of the guys from First Squad would handle it fast.

In the dark hallway of the schoolhouse, Galvao made a sucking noise as he lapped up the food on his forearm. I smiled and continued to eat my Beef Enchilada meal.

“Third Squad, huddle up,” our squad leader said.

The eight of us sat up and moved into a close circle being careful we weren’t standing in line with the classroom doors.

“The platoon is going out again,” Sergeant Isom told us. “Launder is gonna come up front with us,” he continued. “We’ll put ‘em in the middle just behind your team, Sergeant Green.”

“Barnett, you hear that?” My team leader asked.

I nodded.

“If we make contact, we’ve got to make sure that his machinegun is rockin’ alright?”

We all made an assortment of sounds confirming our understanding. Even at this early point in the war, there was no question that Launder had killed more people than the whole rest of the platoon combined. During the Battle of Al Samawah it was Launder that held the enemy at bay at the cement factory while we waited for air support to come.
After we crossed into Al Samawah, fighting our way up the Euphrates and eventually making it to the telephone relay building, where we stayed for a couple nights, Launder manned the machinegun on the roof—night and day. Each time we were ambushed, he handled it.

Launder stayed close while we patrolled the city—never missing a step. His hefty legs seemed more like roots, always planted deep into the dirt. Although he never fell behind, every time I looked back at him his pace was slow as he trumped along. Low shoots of air pumped out of his nose. Launder’s pace of breath was not something you’d ever be impressed with unless you had lived the grunt’s life.

It was the end of April as we made our way up the streets and deeper into the city of Fallujah and sweat and salt flowed out starching our uniforms in rings. At every crease and fold—his pits, his crotch, and the trunk of his neck, Launder’s fatigues were soaked with white puddles that dried up and turned to chalk. During moments of rest, the nearly toxic stench burned my nose. Moving through the city streets and down alleyways and in-between tall buildings, I’d often become distracted by the tides of salt on Launder’s clothes. At a bridge or crossing a four-lane road, we would setup his machinegun and move quick-like in groups of two across the open space. Like the rings of a tree, Launder’s salt-stained uniform told stories of battle.

Each night while we were in Fallujah, we recreated these same movements through the city. Multiple platoons roaming about and waiting—and in a weird way—hoping for a firefight to break out. Fallujah isn’t a grand sort of place and it now is locked
into my mind as paired with cities like Oakland in California and Raleigh in North Carolina. The downtown of Fallujah has some larger buildings but nothing of architectural wonder. Artwork and graffiti are difficult to distinguish from one another on the walls of businesses and homes. Out on the streets, bold men would pull guns on us. Never before had we faced such a people.

“Alright, be ready. We’ll be leaving soon.” My squad leader said walking into the darkness of the hallway.

Galvao finished his food and seemed to calm down. He pulled the bolt assembly out of his M4 and wiped it down and put what I would say was too much oil on it. On the other side of Galvao, Private First Class Jack had his M249 opened up for cleaning. He was leaning against the wall legs spread out, the automatic rifle nestled in his crotch. While his right hand ragged down the weapon, his left was moving in the air like he was hitting the snare of a drum set. While out patrolling during the year we would spend in Iraq, I would begin to make it a habit of counting the seconds between Jack’s hand twitches.

From the dark hallway, we loaded on our gear and headed out into the city. As we walked through the evening, we stayed silent. My eyes scanned the tops of buildings and looked for movement in windows and doors. I was the point man for my team. Sergeant Green trailed doglegged behind me far enough away so that a grenade wouldn’t take us both. Jack and Galvao were behind him to the left and the right. At each intersection or any sort of obstacle, I’d look back to Sergeant Green to see if he had any instructions. If
we had to change up our movement the four of us would huddle up and make a plan. I remember taking these moments during our patrols to look at Launder hauling the heavy gear. I was curious how a paratrooper could be overweight and how he managed the weight of the machinegun. We had never spoken to each other at this point. Both of us were quiet—rarely engaging in the banter that so often seemed to keep the platoon happy.

An airborne infantry platoon is broken up into four squads—three line squads and one weapons squad. On the line squads we used lightweight carbine rifles and minimalized gear. Quick assaults, raids, and ambushes filled our time. Weapons Squad was never too far behind us, but they moved slower for good reason. The firepower took more time, more planning. Whenever there was a lull, fights would break out between the line guys over any little thing or nothing. When we were in cities like this, lots of talking happened between compressed jaws in that angry whisper-yell that couples do while fighting in public. Only about a month into the war we had started to adapt to it. Aggression kept us moving, always faster. When things slowed down and got quiet, little tics and individual compulsions would come out. Yet, the machine gunners usually kept to themselves, not seeming as on edge as the rest of us—but surely holding much more of the weight.

In the afternoon of April 28th 2003, my platoon was roaming around the city streets. At random, we would stop cars and search them for weapons. Usually the midday was uneventful.

“Hey! Put your hands up,” Sergeant Isom had yelled as if the man could
understand him.

We had stopped a car traveling on an empty street. With our rifles raised and pointed at his face, we walked up to the single man in the car. I circled around to the passenger side of the small sedan while my squad leader made for the driver’s door.

“Don’t move!”

At the same time, Sergeant Isom and I had opened the front doors of the car with our rifles still aimed at the driver. He said something and then in a dash he reached over for an AK-47 that was muzzle down on the passenger floor. My squad leader, a short Filipino man, was a good source of information, but our squad often had to take on the brute of our missions. I can remember so many times where I would have to interlock my fingers creating a step for my small squad leader. I would hoist him up over a wall or onto a roof. Many times Galvao would be up top and grabbing Sergeant Isom and pulling him up like a child.

“Don’t move!” Sergeant Isom repeated.

Knowing I couldn't shoot this guy without endangering my squad leader, and seeing him grasping the rifle, I dove into him. I jumped through the car tackling him and we both rolled out onto the street at the feet of my squad leader. It was a comical sort of scene that I would later be teased about. Sergeant Isom would be laughing and doing summersaults mocking how I fumbled my way right onto the ground.

In the moment that I tackled this man, I felt no humor. On top of him, I wrapped my hands around his neck and pressed my weight down hard. I was going to kill him, and
it wasn't emotional or because I was scared or even angry. It just made the best sense.


Sergeant Isom had pulled me off. The man rolled to his side and began coughing. I got up and as I was standing there a bit puzzled, my platoon searched his car. They took away his rifle and let him go. Launder wasn’t far away when this all happened. I looked at him crouched next to his machinegun. Eventually, he would tell me that it was my ruthless response to that situation that had gotten me the job as a machine gunner later that year.

After my time in the line squads, and after becoming a machine gunner and then making sergeant and leading my own men, then getting a long rifle, and years later after my discharge, putting all the pieces together had been a slow.

In San Francisco, I sat facing Doctor Burkman. I recognized one of the books on her shelf, “Hey, I’ve read that one.”

In the book, I had read about this study that was done during Vietnam. In situations of heightened stress, where the individual knows that life-threatening danger is coming, the levels of cortisol released by the adrenal gland steadily climb to allow the needed focus to face the situation. Humans have evolved to use this mixture of chemicals in small short doses to react to danger. The cortisol returns to normal levels when the threat is gone. At around 180 beats per minute the mind moves into a state of bewilderment and into delusion—a person at this point struggles to perform higher brain functions. Intestinal contractions and release, full-body convulsions, crying, and/or
freezing up are about all that can be expected from a person. The study showed that after prolonged combat the soldiers’ physiology begins to change. Cortisol levels begin balancing out during moments of high stress. Eventually the soldiers, during battles, would enter into a euphoric state of calm being able to think clearly and properly react to danger. While this adaptation allowed for the men to act most effectively during a firefight, their cortisol levels as well as heart rates would erratically rise in extended moments of physical and emotional rest. Combat becomes the norm. Battle becomes like an addictive drug. When it’s over, when soldiers are removed from the environment of warfare, their cortisol levels never return to where they were before. The physiological changes are permanent. The issues that are paired with these soldiers reentering society creates many challenges; however, there seems to be a natural balancing taking effect. Over the last few years it has been recorded that on average, twenty-two veterans commit suicide each day—effectively eliminating the social problems these individuals cause in their time after war.


A bit into our patrol that night of the 28th of April, we had reached a low bridge over a nearly empty river and would run across. Galvao and Jack went first to secure the opposite side. Once they were set, Sergeant Green and I made our move. Sergeant Isom moved with Launder and his assistant gunner. Then, the rest of the platoon made their way in two-man groups. It was a slow method, but it put the fewest guys in danger in a single moment. When Launder got across the bridge, he was breathing heavy in and out
of his nose. I was facing outward scanning for any enemy movement, yet the sound of Launder’s breathing held all my attention.

The locals didn’t react in the beginning. We made our presence easily known during the day roaming through the markets, stopping traffic downtown, and pushing into shops and restaurants whenever we got hungry. Then at night, we’d creep around looking for trouble. Without uniforms and ranks of their own, the enemy was difficult for us to find. Most often we were met with ambushes—first shoulder-fired rockets, then a slur of automatic bursts. Inaccurate, yet effective enough. It’s odd to think, but we actually adapted to this. We expected it and then every day we planned to react to it.

That evening in the spring of 2003, my platoon kept quiet walking through the streets. I was eighteen years old. Near the end of our patrol for the night, as we circled around to start heading back to the small school we had taken over, the locals had begun their rallying through the streets. They were chanting in cadence. To us, the Arabic voices sounded like angry yells, the sound of their steps like thunder moving closer and closer. When we came face to face with this mob, separating us from our acquired schoolhouse, our small bit of security, it seemed like the worst.

I remember taking cover as Sergeant Isom fired a few warning shots into the air. Specialist Jack and I ran and got down behind a large palm tree on the opposite side of the road from the rest of the platoon. I was on the left side closest to the buildings, Jack on the right closest to the street. Sergeant Isom and everyone else were ducking behind cars and folding themselves into the buildings. It took no real communication for us to
get down into position. In these moments early on in the war I remember this wave across my whole body. It was like my consciousness was being split from my physical self and although I knew what to do, I was slow to act—like I had to think out instructions for my body to perform and it would react seconds after. It was like I was operating my body like it was a piece of machinery. Later on in the war it would be much different. My body would eventually tune itself better and when firefights broke out it became an enjoyable game in my head of hide and seek and hitting my targets. Now, I consider the changing state of how my brain was releasing cortisol. In Fallujah, I hadn't yet made this adaptation fully. My heart was racing. I had to continuously blink to keep my vision clear and my breathing was fast.

As the mob of people approached, my stomach twisted up into my throat. My heart rate thumped against my ribcage and my hands tightened down white-knuckled on my rifle. When Sergeant Isom, from across the street, gave the order to fire warning shots, I heard “fire!”

I fired my rifle into the crowd of people. I didn't think to identify for myself whether or not these people were armed. One, two, then three people fell within the sight of my rifle and I kept firing. The crowd began to disperse. Screams. Men yelling. Women exhausting all of their lungs. In that moment my eyes panicked across the street. The people fled. My breath came in uncontrollable gasps. I stopped firing not because I realized what was happening but because I couldn't see anymore. The scattering crowd looked to me like an advancing army. I was so scared that I began convulsing and then I
just froze.

Jack grabbed me by the right shoulder. I couldn't understand him the first few times. “Barnett! Barnett! Let’s go!”

I pulled myself back away from the crowd and hunched over my rifle behind the palm tree. Jack was right there next to me kneeling and ready to dart across the street.

“Jack, Barnett. Let’s go!” Sergeant Isom yelled from across the street.

Jack sprang to his feet. I remember it was like I was falling into him. As he began to run, I followed right behind him with a sort of instinctual obedience. My feet felt like bricks. I still could barely see, but I kept moving. The whole platoon filed into an alley and we all just kept up a strong pace. The squads were all mixed together. Just a group of us running from what we thought was a violent mob. Never before had we faced an unarmed group like this. It was pretty clear that none of us understood. They were not firing at us, but everything else was the same as what battles we had been in before. I suppose that night was a learning curve. I can’t remember where I read it, but somewhere there was this line that went, there’s no way to create warriors but with war. I remember agreeing with this sort of thinking.

Launder had managed to get in the lead. His assistant gunner wasn't able to haul the weight during the patrol, so Launder had been carrying his machinegun, plus the tripod that the assistant gunner should have been carrying—adding an extra ten pounds to his load. That, plus the weight Launder carried everywhere he went made it hard to understand how he was able to keep up.
After days of pushing hard all throughout Fallujah, the run that night was difficult. We all were worn down, functioning as if hungover from a North Carolina weekend binge where the hallways of the barrack stunk of vomit and the cracks in the bathroom tile pooled with blood from arguments between us grunts. With three-hundred rounds of ammo on my chest, body armor, helmet, stripped down MREs, first aid supplies, canteens, and a half-full camelback I could only manage a motivated jog. With near twice as much of a load, Launder was able to keep just in front of me. I followed him, nearly winded watching the members of the platoon slowly falling back. Launder would end up leading the platoon all the way back to the schoolhouse.

When we finally returned to the schoolhouse after our retreat from the mobs, I felt a wave of relief rush through me. I was still breathing heavy. I didn't want to move or do anything. I felt happy that I was safe—happy that none of us were injured. After we all got settled in and our backs were almost comfortable and propped against the hallway walls, the rioting had come to the gates of the schoolhouse. It felt like the walls of the school would collapse. We moved up to the second floor and my squad pointed our rifles out the windows in every direction. I was next to Launder and his machinegun. Down on the street within the chaos of the mob, a group of people who seemed to be more organized made their way to the head of the crowd and right in front of the school’s main gate. They were carrying dead bodies over their heads. For a moment, it looked like people crowd surfing at a concert until I saw their dangling lifeless arms.

It was this school we had commandeered. Their children had been unable to
return. The protest was peaceful and just. For years after I felt no remorse. It was their fault—their fault for marching in the streets that night—I was so sure.

I’ve become accustomed, even comfortable, with nightmares. I shot and killed innocent people in Fallujah. Waking up three or four times during a five-hour night of sleep, still—over ten years later. I killed parents, only trying to do for their children. Stomach cramps in the mornings—Vicodin and Pepto for breakfast. Repeated recoils from my rifle. Repeated bodies falling to the ground. Repeated prescriptions for anxiety and insomnia. And after I had shot into the crowd, we left in a hurry for the schoolhouse. It was loud, but at the same time it was quiet. The stress was beginning to create a calm in my mind. I was still frantic as I scanned through the crowd, but my breathing had slowed.

Launder asked me, “Out on the street, you and Jack shot those people, didn’t you?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. I remember staring at a dead man’s limp left arm swinging back and forth on top of the crowd. “Yeah, I—I thought that they had…I just heard Sergeant Isom tell us to fire.”

Launder stared at me for a moment without saying anything else. He put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me closer. He squeezed down enough that it hurt, then let out a large breath and let me go with a single pat on the back. His eyes moved back to the crowd down on the street.

As the crowd assembled around us, my platoon reorganized in an effort to best
hold our position. Launder took his machinegun up to the roof, and my squad went back downstairs to help secure the gates. From within the school it was totally dark. I was crouched down in the yard with Sergeant Green pointing our rifles toward the streaks of light escaping the front gate. Outside of the walls, the streetlights dimly lit the city. I remember the steel gate swaying in cadence with the waves and chanting of the crowd. The rusted hinges and lock creaked like an old boat. From the dirt, I could no longer see the protesters nor the floating bodies passing between hands. From beneath this sea of people, my eyes scanned the hazy air just above the wall. I waited for something, maybe grenades, but maybe they would just be rocks.

When the first shot went off, there was only a short moment of silence afterward. The sound becomes so familiar. The difference between a blast from one of our rifles and the crack of an AK47s is as distinguishable as hearing the soft voice of a woman from that of a man’s. For whatever reason, or maybe no reason at all, someone from my platoon fired into the crowd. When this happened, any soldier who heard the shot go off that had even the slightest bit of uncertainty about the crowd down below, fired as well. From the dirt, I watched the gunfire above me. With quick flashes popping overhead, I tensed up and held my rifle at the ready. My eyes were locked onto the gate. As I waited for it to come crashing down and a flood of enemy to enter into the schoolyard, my heart rate took off and again my eyes began to glaze over.

The rally of fire only lasted a few moments. The machine gunners on the roof didn't open up at all. From the second floor, a single line squad responded to that first
shot like a chain reaction. Immediately after, the crowd dispersed and those that had been firing, stopped.

From down in the dirt and the dark, I could hear the screaming. The front gate became still and quiet and the streets echoed out away from the schoolhouse. I took in deep breaths lowering my rifle and returning to calm. We spent the rest of the night taking short shifts sleeping, leaving Fallujah as the sun came up the next morning. I would later learn that with that short burst of fire that came from the second floor, around twenty Iraqis had lost their lives.

It was only the beginning—just a single day during that first year I spent at war.

“"I need something stronger," I told Doctor Burkman.

She uncrossed her legs and adjusted herself in the office chair. “Sean, prolonged combat…it changes the mind. You know this. It’s different than anything else we face in life. PTSD is attributed to all sorts of occurrences, but it’s inaccurate to compare combat to…well, anything.” She swallowed and continued, “Everyone can agree that losing a child or a loved one, there’s nothing worse. And that’s probably true—at least in this state of mind. Combat—it’s different.”

“I know.” I said. “But I just need something to fix this. I need to sleep, and I need some help just leveling myself—”

She leaned into me a bit, one hand now holding onto her knees. “When someone dies it’s just death and it’s just once. Just a moment. A moment that happens and then it’s
over. It hurts but there is nothing more natural than death. In combat, you survive in that moment of fear and death and it doesn't ever stop. Your brain rewires itself, Sean. I’m here to help you learn to live this this,” She said. “I’ll continue to fill your prescriptions if they are helping, but medication won’t fix you. You’re not broken, just changed. This is just something you will have to learn to live with.”
Cheerleaders Always Win

The new lieutenant and I were pinned down between an 1980s Volkswagen sedan and a building. We hid behind the engine of the car keeping our heads no hirer than our knees. The other eight guys in my squad had scattered and found their own places to hide. Fire from multiple directions was coming in heavy. The lieutenant and I were meshed together behind the car’s wheel and motor as it seemed to provide the most protection. Pops and pings and the shattering of glass as bullets tore through the car; thuds and cracks and chunks of dust rising up from the asphalt. It was raining down rubble into the collar of my body armor from the exploding brick and mortar building beside us. Every time I moved and flexed trying to crouch myself into something smaller, something that I imagined would be invisible, the small rocks made their way deeper down my back and clung to the moist cotton that grinded my neck and back and the cusp of my armpits like sandpaper. The sling of my rifle kept the weapon tight and always in easy use. In this moment, my rifle was nearly flat in the dirt and my left knee was pressed against my ear and pushing my helmet to the side causing my chinstrap to dig into my jaw. Sweat came down my face and it felt like claws pulling back on me—scrapping me down into the dirt.

“Two-Six this is Two-Three,” I yelled into the radio. “We need immediate backup, over.”

“Three-Romeo, what’s your location? Over,” the radio operator back at the Pool House replied.

“Sir, what’s our grid?” I asked the lieutenant.
The rounds kept coming. Iraqi soldiers were spraying fire over the ledges of rooftops and through bedroom windows. I could see Sergeant Kitchens and Galvao across the street huddled together tucked into an entryway of a store. Their bodies twisted together and I remember seeing their feet extending out and I couldn't tell which foot belonged to which person. An Iraqi man came out of the doorway just to the right of them. He came out running with a rifle at the ready. His run was so very familiar. No different than something I've seen in films where a heavyset man takes off in a sort of cow's gallop with his head tucked down and his shoulders flared. He looked more ready to charge and ram himself through a wall then ready to fire his rifle.

"Sir?" I repeated.

Kitchens saw him almost instantly and although this Iraqi was large, their sizes rarely compared to ours. Kitchens towered over the man at least half a foot and after slamming him into the wall and disarming him, Kitchens began dragging him back. Galvao kicked in a thin metal door and Kitchens followed him with his prisoner and they were out of sight.

The rates of fire coming down on us had slowed. The burst of excitement in the ambush had subsided and now the enemy was making tactical decisions. They were moving closer and into better positions and they were firing just enough to keep us from moving without wasting too much ammo. Soon, they would make their way around our little car and it seemed at the time that there was nothing I could do about it—which was true.
“Sir, where are we?” I asked again.

The lieutenant used my knee to balance himself into a semi kneeling position still framed behind the front wheel of the car. Our helmets knocked together and either he was stepping on my fingers or I was pitting my elbow into his inner thigh. Occasional pings in the metal kept cadence and our necks tightened to the rhythm. He pulled out the GPS, but because it was covered in dirt, and because his eyes must had been glazed over with sweat and fear like mine were, he couldn’t read it.

“Six, I can’t get a grid,” I said. “We’re direction, west, of the Pool House, maybe two miles, over.”

“Roger, Three-Romeo,” Two-Six replied. “QRF in route. Give location description when you can, over.”

“Copy, QRF in route, over and out,” I said into the radio.

“Sir? QRF is coming, but they don’t know where we are. We need that grid, or something.”

The fire had settled down to an almost friendly amount. Like maybe they had changed their minds about wanting to kill us but kept firing only out of habit. The lieutenant lifted his head to look over the hood of the car. Three rounds struck the car in that moment. I yanked down on the front collar of his body armor and brought him back down behind the tire. A single rifle was unloaded onto our position. Twenty or so rounds chunked into the dirt and wall and pinged into the side panels of the Volkswagen and I tucked in deeper. I was low and breathing in dirt but I was seeing quiet green forests and
mountains covered in pure white snow. I want to go home, I thought.

The enemy’s fire suddenly increased. I could hear their rifles cracking in rapid bursts but there were no round signatures near our position. They weren’t firing at us. I shifted myself to get a better view of the rest of my squad tucked away along the street. Pink smoke used normally for signaling aircraft had filled the street behind us. My squad leader had provided some concealment for the back half of the squad and they carefully made their ways into better positions. Very soon, the six guys in my squad, excluding Kitchens, Galvao, and myself would flank the enemy force. By the time I was able to get correct grid coordinates from the GPS, and the reinforcements arrived to support us, all the Iraqis that had ambushed us were dead or had run away—not counting Sergeant Kitchen’s cow of a man prisoner.

When we returned to the Pool House, the lieutenant had some words with me.

“I’m your commanding officer, Barnett,” he said. “You can’t just grab me and—”

I imagine he had planned out a nice little speech for me, but I didn’t let him finish.

“Look sir,” I said putting a hand up in his face. “Your ass was being a little bitch. You couldn’t even read your GPS, so chill the fuck out.”

I walked away and into the main room of the Pool House. It was one of those rare days that a patrol had brought back some hot chow from the market. I grabbed a plate, filled it with some curry and chopped lamb, and sat down on a box of MREs next to Sergeant Pickens and Launder who were both using old Gatorade bottles as spit cups. From an eight-inch portable DVD player, Bring it On seemed to be on a constant loop.
We had that, and *Remember the Titans*. The cheerleaders seemed to always win. Between the foot patrols around Al Shula, guarding the market in the mornings, in the night stealing cars and raiding enemy compounds, and firefights right at our front doors, I don't think even with the countless times I’ve sat down to watch *Bring it On* that I’ve ever seen the entire film from start to finish—which isn’t a complaint.
Sergeant Mills’ Face

My platoon had been fighting in Iraq since late March. We were dropped in just outside of Nasiriyah as soon as the war was declared. Most of us in the platoon had lost count of how many shots we fired. It has gotten to the point where I only remember certain ones with clarity. But for Sergeant Mills, our platoon sergeant, August 5th was his very first.

As a platoon sergeant, it’s his job to be more of a traffic controller rather than a fighter. Most often, he wasn’t in the front when the fighting went down. We were living in Al Shula in the northern part of Baghdad, and the market was busy every day. Monday through Friday we would spend our mornings at the market. And when the propane trucks would arrive we would keep order as the locals traded in their empty propane tanks for new ones. Usually Sergeant Mills didn’t even come with us. On that day, he was just floating around being an extra grunt. The whole process had become routine and when the trucks finished we started to leave like any other day. In the swarm of the crowd, a man pulled out an old revolver and pointed it at Sergeant Mills’ head. He was maybe fifteen feet away. I saw Mills flinch and raise his rifle. When the man attempted to fire, the breach of the pistol flopped down. Sergeant Mills shot him square in the chest. The crowd dispersed and we soon left.

I rode in the back of the Humvee with Mills sitting across from me. I was among the lowest of ranks in the platoon. Sergeant Mills was the highest. Usually any conversation between us was all business. A professional level of distance was always
maintained between those in leadership positions and those at the bottom.

"That fucker was going to kill me," Mills said in an as-a-matter-of-fact tone.

I smiled back at him.

As we road back to the Pool House, I’ll never forget the look on his face. His eyebrows were calm and relaxed. He wasn’t scared or angry. The color had returned to his cheeks as the adrenaline had settled. He wasn’t contemplating the war or thinking about his career as a soldier or his responsibilities as a leader. His eyes scanned his equipment. He checked how many rounds he had left in his magazine and then took a drink of water from his camelback. I saw it in his eyes, he was just present. Just existing. No opinions or politics, and maybe empty in so many ways, but mostly, he was alive. There was this, truth, radiating out from him. Like all of civilization had been stripped away and he was, for the first time, allowed to be human. Sergeant Mills smiled big and leaned back against the bed of the truck. As the Humvee bumped its way through the Iraqi streets, Mills let his body bounce and move with the hits from the road. He quit resisting. For a moment, I think, he left the war. He found peace just sitting there in his body and a smile ripped across his face.
Falafel

Looking down, the river seems to cut through this desert like a snake. I pull myself up from my rifle and try to rub the headache and sweat from my eyes. I continue looking and wonder how the San-Jin farmers thrive on this slithering oasis. They keep to themselves, not siding with the Taliban nor trusting us enough to help. Fields of corn and dope trace the banks of the river. Ditches and scattered farm buildings hide our enemy well. Yet often, I fire my rifle.

The air blows hot—like sticking my face to an empty oven. The terrain all around is rough with sandstone, dunes of shale, and head-sized jagged rocks. The hills and mountains in this desert are something like eroded cliffs and towers of dirt, etched away by the frequent sandblasting of the harsh wind, and in the distance the mountains are faded and monstrous. I think that they are the northern part of the Himalayas, but I’m not sure at the time. That’s not the sort of thing I would have known. I’m taken in by the sight, occasionally glancing above my rifle’s scope. Sometimes I imagine leaving this place and being up in the snow-covered peaks or anywhere else.

Through my scope, I see a Muj soldier and I take the shot. The bolt of my rifle slams back, ejecting a single casing and it falls and chimes when it hits the rocks. I am reminded of the sound of the large clock my grandfather had when I was a young boy. I’ve always heard it gets easier. I imagine that my grandfather would have told me the truth if he’d had the chance. The waves of heat across my brow, the rocks stabbing into my elbows, and the untrusting river all pile on top of me. The truth, it creeps up. Not right
away—but it comes, slow-like. No different than cancer, I figure.

The enemy soldier I have just shot drops his rifle and falls to the ground. Private First Class White, lying right next to me, calls out the shot.

"Ya got him," he says and continues scanning—seeming to not care a bit for the man bleeding to death at the other end of my scope.

It only took a few weeks for White to adjust out here in the desert. When we first arrived in Afghanistan back in July, it was the first time he had ever left the United States. Before the military, he had never left Nebraska. He didn't grow up on the reservation, but he talked about spending a lot of time there—with his grandparents and cousins and working with his uncle every single summer growing up. It was pretty common for guys like him to join—especially in a unit like ours.

Small and detached, we fight with little support. Always on the move and covering our own asses. Special operations units aren't made up of high school quarterbacks or prom kings. It takes tough kids—usually the fatherless and those who've grown up around drugs and alcohol and violence. Adapting to the infantry is easier that way. Most of the jocks and the suburban kids get washed out, or if they make it through all the training they'll get sent to a Charlie or Delta company where they never see much action other than a motorpool or guarding a front gate.

From the beginning of the year and regardless of the rainy months in the springtime in North Carolina, I had White training hard with me. After morning physical training, where we would run a few miles up and down Ardennes Street and do our daily
workout, when most of the platoon would be just leaving chow, take their time showering or just fucking off before someone noticed, I had White out with me humping through the hills, loaded down with all our combat gear.

I tried to quickly recreate what I had learned from my former team leaders and all the time I had spent in war, but yelling and over-explaining wasn't my way. I made 2005 no less difficult of a year for the both of us than when I was a private. I used what tactics I learned on the line squads from Sergeant Green and all the ballistics that Launder had taught me to teach my young soldier. I didn't trust White because of his lack of experience and because he wasn't raised like me—in a family of soldiers. So, I spent every moment trying to change that. In the rain and the mud or all sweaty in the summer humidity, I quizzed White on radio procedures, our weapons systems, techniques of fire, ballistics, first aid, and all the basics of soldiering.

Out in Area J, off of Longstreet Road, we would head straight into the woods and up the hills. Small rips of sky, a color of blue that maybe a mountain bird could hatch, were tearing between smoky clouds just beyond the high branches. We would march in silence, White following my lead over the higher ridges and down through the creek beds full of sand and muck. After doing this for a while White began to pick up on what I was teaching him about reacting and maintaining balance with his surroundings. I didn't want him to have to think about what we were doing. I wanted him to feel it—as I did.

I remember the two of us coming up on a ridgeline on a dark and cloudy morning in the southeastern part of Fort Bragg. I had waited to stop until I could really feel the
straps of my pack digging into my shoulders and the ache in my knee became a numbness I could feel from hip to foot. These pains were nothing uncommon and the chafed skin was rough and almost calloused. My knee, damaged from shrapnel days into the Battle of Al Samawah, had become accustomed to the gnawing while slugging through the hills.

I slowed down, shrugging my shoulders together. “Take a knee,” I said. We both got down on a knee facing each other with our eyes scanning in opposite directions. We had been walking for some time, but White didn't seem winded. His breathing was calm and he seemed comfortable enough. We were out in the middle of the forest where the woods were especially thick.

“Tell me whatcha’ see, White,” I said.

“Sergeant...well,” White looked around for a moment. “Sergeant, we’ve been moving south, maybe south southeast along a ridgeline. We crossed one dried up creek...ah—”

"How do you know our direction?" I asked.

"Well—it's way before noon and all the shadows must be to the west right now," White pointed, "so that's gotta be north, thataway."

“Alright,” I said.

We picked up and continued hiking into the afternoon. With any spare moment we trained just like this. Out in the woods, up and down the streets, and even following the line squads as they practiced clearing rooms and kicking in doors.
On the firing range we would shoot and I would have him do pushups if he wasn't able to properly judge the distance of the targets. By the end of the day, he would be exhausted and angry with me.

"Sergeant," White said as he lifted himself onto his hands. "If I keep doing pushups, I'm only gonna get more tired and it's gonna be harder to shoot."

"If you can't do your job when you're tired, then what good are you?" I said.

In the desert, the heat is not something we could have easily prepared for. Lying on this hill in the western part of Afghanistan is a suffering all on its own. Behind us, Franklin, our forward observer, is manning the radio and keeping us in close tabs with the approaching assault team. I can hear the exhaustion in his voice.

"Hey, the squad...is on the move," Franklin relays from the radio chatter. "They're headed northwest up the river on our side. Sergeant Miller wants to know...when you guys have eyes on."

"I'll let you know when we do," White says. "How far out are they?"

I look up from my scope to my left, where our guys will be coming from.

"Miller says maybe half a klick," Franklin says.

"Tell Miller to pull away from the river," I say. "I won't be able to cover him if he is on the far side of that group of houses."

"Roger," Franklin says.

Over the radio Franklin calls to Miller, "Rabel Two? Rabel Two? This is Rabel
One Romeo, over.”

…


After a moment Franklin says, “Miller’s got it, B.”

I keep looking out over the valley, planning out if I were to attack our squad, how I’d do it. I go over multiple possibilities, then I look back up at the distant mountains and think of the wind blowing around the snow way high up there and completely out of reach.

“—Sergeant B, tree line,” White says. “Far right building traversing the field, right. Two hundred meters maybe, roger? You see him? It looks like he’s got a weapon and he’s sure the fuck creepin’.”

I look back into my scope and adjust to White’s instructions, “Yeah.”

As I fix myself to aim, I take in a breath. Once I see my target, I release all the air from my lungs, pull my rifle tight into me, and slowly squeeze the trigger. This all seems to last for a good amount of time, but really, it’s maybe three or four seconds. The rifle fires—it causes me to blink and maybe my heart skips for just a moment. I breathe in and count in my head. One, two, three bringing my breathing back on pace and reacquire my view of the target. The man is motionless on the ground. I look at him and keep my breathing calm.

“Tango down, tango down,” White says in a singsong sort of way.
We are posted up on a hilltop and on the same ridgeline as us, Sergeant Grez and Private Lewis cover nearly the same area from about a hundred meters to the north. We are looking down onto a group of buildings surrounded by crops bordering San-Jin in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. Just past the buildings and stretching from our left to right flanks is the Helmand River. The entire location is remote and other than my Long Range Surveillance detachment, a single ODA team, and a few other guys here for logistical support there are no other coalition forces in this entire province. The closest airbase is in Kandahar about a hundred and fifty kilometers to the east. But this is where the area’s Taliban is operating from. So, this is where the small group of us live. Most often, we move at night and remain quiet until we cannot.

To establish long rifles on the high ground, the five of us rode in on a Blackhawk twenty-four hours before the mission would take place. The bird dropped us off just far enough away so that we had to walk all night, just to sit here all day.

Through the darkness with our night vision on, we made our way up the hills coming from the east. White took point without needing any instruction. Franklin, hung in the back—a little on edge and out of breath.

We moved silently avoiding anything looking to have people nearby. Never in the Middle East had I seen dogs kept as pets, but here they were often used as watchdogs—barking if ever we came to close.

The moon was bright and the air felt nice as we humped through the rocks. Maybe a bit complacent, I took off my night vision and enjoyed the walk in the dark. When it
was time for Grez and Lewis to split off, we took a knee. Grez pulled out his GPS and we discussed the details of the mission briefly. It was simple, a repetition of the same thing we had done multiple times. Setup overwatch on nearby high ground while the assault team attacks the target. White, still down on a knee, pointed in the direction he thought we should go. I nodded, we all got up, and continued moving. When we finally arrived and Franklin caught his breath, he called over to Sergeant Grez and Lewis to make sure they were set. The sun was soon to be up and we would spend most of the day digging into our position and staying low and quiet. The assault team wouldn't be coming until the early evening and for the whole day we just observed and took notes on the activity down below. Unlike how it's glorified in the movies, this is the majority of our job—staying low on a hill and not really doing much of anything. The only benefit to these long stretches of time was the chance to talk shit and laugh, which was otherwise a luxury we didn't have.

In the early summer, before we had left for Afghanistan, we were at Ft. Bragg, in an auditorium of the JFK Special Warfare School. I remember falling asleep during a ballistics course to a monotonous instructor drilling the same information I had heard over and over. The M118, a 7.62 millimeter match grade ammunition. The maximum effective range of your weapon system will be approximately 900 meters. At twelve centimeters of human flesh, or any such media, the round quickly begins to yaw and tumble, effectively ripping through tissue and organs.

My grip tightens on the rifle and I squint to expel the excess of sweat. Breathing
in and out, I can smell the lingering of burnt gunpowder. I can taste the blued steel coming off in hot waves from my rifle even as the sun makes its way down. Any moment now, from the southeast and following the Helmand River, our assault team will come and attack this compound we've been staked-out watching all day. As they move into their attack, overwatch is our only responsibility and we will stay out of harm's way with long rifles and radios.

The evening is upon us and although the Helmand River rushes down below, the air is hot and dry. The sun seems to be brighter here, like it is much closer than normal and beating down with more weight. The scarf on my head is like an empty beach, lined with rings of salt from my constant sweat. This brown cloth is pulled down low over my face, and when I move my eye to the sight of my rifle—the scarf and my scope touch, and most of the sunlight is blocked from my vision. Even shielded from the sun, I'm still squinting through sunglasses with streaks of sweat running down the rims.

With no other targets in sight and a bit of quiet in the desert, White continues talking.

“So then I was like, No fuck you asshole. Take the damn money and give me the fuckin’ falafel. But he knew that the money was stolen. He wouldn’t fuckin’ take it. I mean, the dude lives right there. Of course those fucks are all talking about—RIGHT building, right side! You see him? B, There. Back corner, one hundred mikes. Sergeant B!”

White is lying so close to me that I can feel the movement of his arm as he is
stabbing at the air as he points. Shifting my hips just to my left and simultaneously taking
in a breath through my nose, I find the man White has spotted.


Again, I empty my lungs and my pulse goes still. I shoot, and this time I miss.
The guy takes cover and is out of sight.

White lets out a little laugh, “Was he not standing still enough for you, Sergeant
B?”

“I guess not,” I say. I sort of smile at the thought.

The hum of a light wind across the Afghani valley is the only sound for a moment
before White continues telling his story. I just breathe and lie in the dirt and the rocks
listening to the quiet. I’m uncomfortable, but okay with it. So I just lie there.

I am nine years old with my grandfather as he sits on the edge of his bed, hands at
his sides, shaking from the pain in his back and knees, and weak from the rot in his bones
and in his lungs. Getting up is becoming more and more painful, so he just sits—
uncomfortable. On his wall there are golden crossed rifles hanging in a framed case
sprinkled with dust. I look at the medals, and I know they are important. He attempts to
get up again but fails. I look away.

He groans and coughs and then points to the rifles on the wall, “That means, I am
a soldier. A fighter.”

After a moment of silently scanning, White continues with his story. “So anyway,
of course these fuckin’ guys are all talking shit together,” he says. “I don’t fuckin’ give a
damn what the issue is, I was just fucking hungry and trying to get some falafel, ya know what I mean? And I’m fuckin’ paying the guy. So, I don’t see the fuckin’ problem. Better than shoving my goddamn rifle in his face, right?”

I pull away from my rifle but keep my eyes looking out into the valley and think for a moment. “Well, yeah.”

I think back to fighting in Iraq during the initial invasion. I remember being in an irrigation trench and surrounded by palm trees. Our entire company had made its way into an area dense with palms just outside of Al Samawah. It was there we set up fighting positions to hold off the advancing enemy. My team was facing out back toward nothing much but more palms and fields. Most of the fighting and the direction of the city were on the opposite side. The perimeter we made was about ten by fifteen meters. The trenches we were in were about two to three feet deep. I hugged over the wall of the trench with my rifle aimed out. It was so early in the war; I remember not even being all that scared yet. A few Iraqis ran through the field maybe ten meters in front of me. I just watched them and did nothing. My team leader came from my right side and started firing. Two of them fell to the ground. My team leader then began yelling at me. Right there in the middle of battle, in that dirty trench he had me doing pushups for not shooting the enemy. As he yelled at me and ordered me to kill anyone that I saw moving outside our lines, I was filled with anger. I was confused by it all and after my pushups were done, I got back up to my position on the small trench. I then followed his orders.

“Sergeant B,” White says pulling me back into the moment.
He directs me to another target. I get the man in my sights. He is moving carefully around some farm equipment but the shot is an easy one. I have the man centered in my sight—crosshairs locked onto him center mass. He continues moving and is soon out of sight.

“Didn’t have the shot,” I say.

A few weeks ago, Specialist Felix was injured during an ambush in San-Jin. He was in the turret of a Humvee manning the only Mark19 we had. While under fire, the driver of the truck took a rough path off the road to avoid the enemy. The safety pin that held the massive automatic grenade launcher to the top of the truck had come out. When the truck started bucking through the rocks, the gun came out of its mount. Felix managed to hold onto it for a bit until he was slammed around too. Of all things, he broke his tailbone and stayed with us at the base but was out of the fight for the next few weeks. Everyone had their share of bangs and bruises. One of the ODA guys was shot and killed while we were on mission just before that. During that month, and it was a stupid mistake, I broke two of the bones in my left hand. And on October seventh, only weeks after this mission, Franklin was killed.

When it happens, when one of us dies or is injured, whatever is done afterward never makes it any better. It’s just a reaction. Sometimes, we would get real quiet and slow, or loud and aggressive. I pushed people to the ground while patrolling the markets—half afraid of everyone and half angry. Without some sort of relief, the stress makes you start spinning. Fights would break out between us sometimes after an incident.
No one would ever dare blame another man, but the frustration wasn’t bearable.

On one occasion we had good intel that a local had information on the Taliban’s operations in the area. He wouldn’t talk in fear of the repercussions. I don’t know who started it, but we burned that guy’s house down to the dirt. I even have a photo of the medic posing in front of the flames. Death within the platoon—it’s not like a coworker is transferring to a different department or quitting. And it’s different than an elderly family member passing on or even a freak accident a friend gets into. When someone in the platoon dies while at war, it’s because they were killed. When it happens, I’ll get sad, then angry and then sad again. But more so than all that, it’s a relief. For one more day has passed and it wasn't me that died.

While out on missions, we’d take money from people. Not that any of it was needed. It was just a thing to do. And stealing food was something we picked up in Iraq. During the invasion of Iraq in March of ’03, my platoon was dropped off by a C130 some distance into the country. Officially, we were a detachment off of another main unit for the deployment and didn’t really have a proper place in the war. This surely wasn’t a mistake by any means and left us disposable for use in all the unknown situations. The Army was sure to get us constant resupply of ammunition and other mission essential equipment, but often we found ourselves going a bit hungry in between the food drops. It only seemed logical to make our way to the restaurants. Al Samawah had the best flat bread and we’d just take it in stacks or stuffed in our pockets. In the ruins of Babylon, we filled our canteens with chai, and these dishes of spicy peanut-like things got thrown into
each other's mouths as a sort of game. The roasted chicken in Baghdad was the best thing I've ever tasted. Chickens on the streets pecking through trash and then snatched up right there in the markets. They would get their heads chopped off and feathers plucked and it seemed like only minutes and they were spinning over an open flame—seasoned and everything.

Behind my rifle, I continue scanning the valley and trace the Helmand River up and down in the area where I know our guys will soon be approaching. Looking through the scope for hours on end is a strenuous task. My vision goes in and out and sometimes it's hard to focus when I'm only half inside my mind anyhow.

To avoid the headaches, I pull myself up and away from the scope and look far off at the mountain range. The blue mountains look foreign to the desert. From my camelback, I drink some water that's maybe eighty-five degrees and run my tongue across the front of my teeth cleaning the layer built up by dust and thick saliva, and this is as luxurious of a moment as I've felt in months.

The entire time we have been perched on this hill, Franklin has been behind us on the radio and reporting the action back to our commander. Normally, he stays out of our talks and White's ranting about whatever fixation he has this week. But today, he felt he should chime in.

"Well, White," Franklin says. "Aren't you just the saint of the fucking desert?"

White is quiet for only a short moment, "Excuse me?"

"There's no reason you should be hounding on the guy selling falafels, White."
Franklin says. “He’s got his own fucking principles. And this is his home, asshole. If he doesn’t want your dirty ass money, good. I’m proud of the fucker.”

“I stole that money from the fuckin’ drug dealers, shit for brains!” White says.

“I’m fuckin’ doing this place a service! That guy should be happy.”

“Well, shit,” Franklin says. “I nominate Private White as the new Redistribution Officer of the Helmand Province!”

Franklin starts to laugh real hard, and I let out a few chuckles and the smile stays on my face for a while.

White leans into me, and I hear him make an annoyed sniff. I can’t see his face because of my headscarf, but I’m smiling big with my eyebrows lifted high. White is a shit-talker and I usually just let him ramble on. I’m entertained to hear Franklin jab at him.

White rolls onto his left side, still lying down, and looks back at Franklin.

“Hey Radioman, shut the fuck up! Falafel dude is a fucking Haji, bottom line. I should smoke his ass anyhow. He’s probably over there right now gearing to shoot us—And who the fuck are you? Some NATO relief faggot?”

From the same building I’ve been watching, I can see movement. I want to defuse White, so I fire without a clear target. My rifle goes off and White snaps back around looking for what is going on and this quiets him down.

“Stay focused, White,” I tell him.

“Roger, Sergeant,” he replies.
Around us as the day gets a bit cooler the valley begins to swarm with enemy fighters. Along with the three of us on this hill and Grez and Lewis, not far off, a squad of nine grunts is moving toward the buildings we are suppressing. The sun is still hot, but soon it will turn red and bury itself into the mountains. We will have attacked another Taliban hide on this evening, and tonight after many hours of fighting we will return to our small base outside of Gereshk, to rigid cots and more ammunition.

In a low voice, “Can you believe this guy?” White says, “Fucking Haji loving fag—.”

I pull myself away from my rifle and take a breath. I wipe the sweat out of my eyes and off my sunglasses with my scarf.

"What if it was you? Wouldn't you act the same?" I say.

White is quick to response. “B, I wouldn’t be selling no Goddamn falafels, that’s for damn sure. I’d be huntin’ motha fuckin’ fools down and taking care of my shit. These fuckin’ drug runners are owning this country and ain’t nobody but us is standing up to them. And now the Taliban are all up in the mix and we know that fuckin’ drug money is supplying the weapons."

White is in a rant now and his voice has raised to a quiet yell. As he speaks asserting his opinion his hand jabs down into the dirt accentuating the point.

"I'm sick of this shit," he goes on. "This is what we're here to do. To sniff out all these mother fuckers. There's just too many bitch-asses too scared to even help themselves."
White is breathing harder now and I can almost feel the heat coming off him.

I reposition myself behind my rifle and dig my elbows into the rocks. White seems to quiet down after this, and we don’t bring up the issue for the rest of the time on the hill. We focus on our job and soon our assaulting squad gets within eyesight and they overtake the buildings. After it is all over and the air has become completely dark, the Blackhawks come and take our platoon. Back at our base, we will refit, and rest, and wait until our next mission and it is like nothing has changed.

Headed back in the helicopter, White sits next to me, Franklin just across. The engine is loud, and we can’t hear anything, so nobody talks. As we fly back to our base in the absolute darkness of the desert, I try to remember what day of the week it is. I can’t. I’m confident that it is still September, but it may already be October and the weather has not changed much so I really cannot tell. With each deployment, the more time I have spent in the desert, it has become more familiar and blended together. I don’t think the reasons have become much more clear, but I know I have found a calm in the discomfort. I know White cares about what we are doing out here, it’s just confusing for him—as it was for me during my first time in war. I understand his frustration and the need to react. But I’ve seen the way he smiles and laughs at the kids playing outside the market in Gereshk. And a couple times a week, when the merchant that we let into our base to sell odd trinkets and some good food comes, White plays soccer with the man’s son out on the helipad. He talks about ex-girlfriends and dreams about Taco Bell and what type of car he’ll buy when we get back. So often, I forget that White is only nineteen years old.
Hurricane Katrina

In the summer of 2004, a hurricane hit Florida and then made its way up to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I was stationed. My platoon had recently gotten back from thirteen months in Iraq. The wind and rain were so strong that while on a morning run up Ardennes Avenue with my platoon, I remember a gust of wind coming and knocking us all over. The buckets of rain falling down were so heavy I could barely see the guy running in front of me. We all laughed after the wind took us to the ground. We turned around and made our way back to the barracks and stayed inside for the remainder of the day. It was fun, something different to break up the monotony of our constant training. The heavy rains came and for a few days it was exciting to see how our commanders would navigate our schedule around the weather. We’d do field training that kept us outside in the mud. I remember lots of small-unit tactics; drills out in the woods in Area J. It was like a game to us and at the end of each day the storm never really was a concern up in North Carolina.

In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit, I was living just outside of the small village of Gereshk in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. My unit, the 74th LRS-D, had just under a hundred grunts in it. We were on an eight-day supply cycle—meaning that regardless of what was going on for the outside world, the best we could hope for was more food, water, mail, and ammo to be delivered every eight days. The only time this cycle was ever broken was to transport our causalities.

There’s no way I could specifically remember one of the many times the Chinook
helicopter dropped off our crates of supplies. Each and every time the helicopter came it was an exciting event and it seemed like we all started to live life on an eight-day calendar. This was true up until the time the supplies came delivering news of the hurricane. There was only one guy in the platoon from Louisiana. Private First Class Benny Franklin, hometown of Hammond, just east of Baton Rouge. My friend Franklin is the only reason I have any sort of knowledge of the destruction the hurricane caused. If not for him, there would have been no reason for me to even hear about it, as I was halfway around the world dealing with all sorts of issues needing my attention.

In our small desert base, we had three computers using some crappy satellite connection that felt barely faster than the dial up internet I grew up with. Franklin would check his email every few days, the same as most of us. He had a lull in communication with both his mom and his girlfriend. Franklin didn't mention this to any of us until the chopper landed with a Red Cross message telling of the general situation happening off the southern coast. In total, maybe it was only three or four days before his girlfriend finally was able to email him. But out there in the desert with nothing to occupy your time but battle and the in between, the mind wanders. Ideas corrupt. Most of the platoon, myself included, became enthralled with this drama Franklin was facing back home. We all tried to be reassuring, but mostly I think we were just curious and craving the outside world.

After our missions, we would off-load from the Blackhawks and head to our tents to take off our combat gear. We cleaned off our weapons, reloaded our ammunition, refilled water, and sometimes washed off bloodstains. A fair number of us from the
platoon would head to the large room in the small building where the computers were kept. In 2003, when we invaded Iraq, it was important that after each battle the platoon discussed and learned from each experience. But in Afghanistan, these After Action Reports became casual. Battle had become instinctual. This familiarity—this comfort with conflict—I see now how this made life for the new guys so much more stressful.

When I stepped down onto Iraqi soil in the early part of 2003, my entire chain of command had zero actual combat experience. We all learned and faced war as equals. In Afghanistan in 2005, we did not have this same equality between those that had served in Iraq and those new to the military.

Whoever went to the computers after that Red Cross call, they would always let Franklin go first. Him checking his email became entertainment, like a daytime TV drama.

“Hey man, any word?” someone would ask.

“Naw, nothing yet,” Franklin would say.

Franklin’s girlfriend had made it up north, suffering a few days without electricity before she arrived at a family member’s home. All of Franklin’s family survived, but nearly all of their property was destroy.

Franklin was killed during a battle in Qal’eh-ye Gaz on October 7th, 2005. We had been in back and forth engagement with the Taliban for a few days. Right on the Helmand River, we’d take some of their ground, forcing them in retreat with our superior weapons and training, then they would take it back pushing us into corners and ambushes
with their superior knowledge of the country and mountain terrain.

We called in a medevac immediately, but the helicopters wouldn't come near us until we suppressed the enemy. I don't know if it was ten minutes or two hours, but the entire time we were getting the area secure, I felt angrier then I ever had before. Here these helicopter pilots were not willing to come save my friend because of some government order to preserve the multimillion-dollar helicopter rather than to save a life. Franklin died in the dirt and his whole life back home was destroyed. None of it seemed fair—that's really all I know about Hurricane Katrina.
Hunting

In the fall of 2000, my family covered the dining room table with one of those crunchy blue traps. The same kind our neighbor had covering his fishing boat parked in the side yard in the winter. I'd hear it flapping in the wind while pulling apart the wiring harness of my 1965 Volkswagen Bug that nearly never ran. A two hundred pound four-point buck hung in the garage.

The first moment I kneeled down into the fresh Oregon snow next to the still warm animal, I cut out the scent glands in its hind legs with my buck knife. Now in the garage, with the deer already skinned and decapitated, I gave it a good shake and watched the last few drops of blood splatter onto the garage floor. With one hand untying the knot from the rafter, I slung the deer over my shoulder and carried it into the kitchen.

"Dammit Sean, don't get any blood on the carpet!" My mother yelled.

Without responding or making any effort to change my pace, I continued my way to the tarped table and threw the carcass down making sure it made a good thud.

My mother began shifting the already organized sheets of wax paper on the kitchen counter and my stepdad pulled out his olive drab canvas pouch and set it on the table next to the deer. He unsnapped the buttons and unrolled the green rack of filet knives. My favorite one had a dirty near-white handle. I'm not sure if that was the original color or if the years of blood stain have given it the off coloring. The handle was straight without any sort of ergonomic grip. It was an old knife. The blade was shorter than the rest and maybe barely six inches long from base to the rounded tip. All the other
knives had very thin ten-inch blades that were best designed for making the precise cuts needed in butchering the large game. Their handles were all a bright blue and each had the same hilt ensuring safe use of the blade.

My mother would do a test cut with one knife and then another. As she set down the rejects my stepdad remained silent as he’d pick up the discarded blades and run them over the sharpening stone a few times. I knew that after our last butchering he carefully cleaned and sharpened each of the knives, but he was not one for conflict during our food preparation. Even with the sharpest of knives, my mother’s craft in butchering only ever yielded a few cuts until she became impatient and moved herself to packaging the steaks into our freezer and carefully organized the only red meat we’d eat all year.

With my knife, the only one that never was fought over, not even by my stepbrother who seemed to challenge me at every chance, I sat down and began hacking away at the deer. I used the heavy blade with pride. Twice the thickness of all the others, keeping the edge took stages and eventually my stepdad wouldn’t sharpen it anymore.

“Sean, you need to sharpen this knife yourself,” he said. “It takes too long. Why don’t you just use one of the new ones I bought?”

I learned how to work the metal into the stone. I’d have to run the blade slowly across the sharpening stone at a low angle to remove as much metal as I could from the cutting edge. The grind of the blade nearly reached out to an eighth of an inch. I did this so that when I started my final cut at a forty-five degree angle the tip closed down into an edge much sharper than any of the modern blue handled blades the rest of my family
used. The old metal often needed quick touch ups from the blood-wet stone, but it became a rhythm for me. The drawback of my knife was the straight handle. With splashes of blood and the juices from the meat, a few times while I was cutting my hand would slip down and I’d slice the inner side of my left index finger.

By the time I was a junior in high school we had given up hunting with rifles and switched to using bows—something I protested extensively. Much like my old filet knife, I had grown very fond of my rifle. Something about the tool, the simple piece of machinery, was very attractive to me and at that point I didn’t understand just how much I would come to not only adore my firearms, but depend on the technology for my survival. Each of the men in my family got compound bows. My mother immediately insisted that her and my little sister would get bows as well, but neither of them were strong enough to pull back the strings. My bow, randomly coming from a pawnshop in Reno, was for a lefty. I am left handed in everything I do and it would not be until I joined the military that I discovered my equal eye dominance and ability to shoot a rifle being nearly identical with both hands, but pulling back on a bow only ever felt comfortable right-handed. So, with a left-handed bow I learned to shoot right-handed. At first, because of the shape of modern bows, the bowstring ripped through the soft flesh of my forearm. I’d wrap a piece of leather around my arm and dealt with the pain until I learned how to hold the bow just right. Even knowing of the high possibility of pain to follow each draw of the string, I practiced every day.

In the fall, tracking elk was my favorite. Though much larger than the mule deer
we often hunted, elk were quiet, moved in much smaller herds, and somehow even with their large size were almost invisible. My stepdad, stepbrother, and I would all split up. After making plans on the Forest Service map, we would head out before the sun came up. When we were tracking, we’d split up and usually not see each other until late in the day—after I had eaten the three tuna sandwiches I had made and after I had been tired and bored for hours. After a few days of individual tracking and comparing what we saw and arguing over which ridgelines made good flanks, we would step out on an organized hunt each of us moving along consecutive paths to flush out the tracked herd. It was a simple and effective system. It was something that would make hunting men—not easier—but simple. I understood the necessity. Hidden in a second floor building and scanning some cross street in Fallujah, or staked out on a hill top looking down on the Helmand River, I could see the cold mountains up passed Shasta and the muddy snow tracks our pickups left around camp in the southern Oregon forests. I would relive the moments of hunting with my family while in the desert. Again and again I found myself wishing to return. The smell of evergreens, the numb in my toes while standing perfectly still to listen for movement, barbequing squirrels over the campfire for a few bites of tasteless lean meat, gnawing on cold jerky from last year’s hunt or smoked halibut that my uncle had caught in Alaska, the dogs chasing birds, and then the satisfaction of a meal at home with onions and tomatoes from the garden, I missed it all while in the desert.
October Seventh

Once in a while, not often, but once in a while, I’ll wake up late in the night. It’ll be 3AM dark out and just as quiet. My heart will be pounding, jaw locked down, and my fists clenched tight sometimes snagging a piece of my sheets as I come out of nightmare. It will take a second, just a short moment. I’ll take in a few deep breaths, open my jaw, and release the sheets. I’ll reach up and grab my pillow and bury myself into it. Usually, this is where I start to cry. Not a lot, but little. I’m just in disbelief. I can hardly accept that this, my life, is real.

In some ways, I feel that I need the hot desert winds and that comforting smell after firing my rifle. I crave the feeling of prop-wash and burn of JP8 when boarding an aircraft, being rigged up for a jump, that one week out of the whole damn year that it snows and ices over on Fort Bragg and young soldiers’ cars ram and crash into each other. I miss the taste of falafel and roasted chicken from the Baghdad markets, the stark smell of sweat and the grim building up in the corners of my eyes, one of my brothers behind me and always watching out, patrolling for days in the mountains of the Afghanistan, seeing the world through night vision goggles, giving money to kids for ratting out Taliban members, taking hard banks while flying in a Blackhawk with the doors open wide, handing out AK-47s to the home owners in Al Shula to help them secure a bit of safety, watching men bleeding out, and that feeling of hope that’s never been stronger then while in battle. It’s all misplaced, and I resist it most all of the time. But this is my truth.
It’s October and there is a strong breeze out in the bay. I’m sitting next to strangers looking at sailboats and yachts that seemed to be moored by size or expense. I have things to do. Errands to run, friends to meet up with, and work waiting for me. These tasks are important, I tell myself. Sometimes, I almost believe that. Ten years ago to the day, I was in Afghanistan. Franklin was killed.

We had been battling for days on the outskirts of San-Jin in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. It seemed that most of the fighting took place along the Helmand River just south of the Musaqara Fork. Looking back now, it was likely because of us sticking to the river that had made it a hot spot. We had a small outpost named Camp Price. It was barely one mile in diameter and near the river and just off the main highway where the small town of Gereshk sits.

In the evening of October 6th 2005, my platoon had established ourselves on a hilltop overlooking the Helmand River where we were in good view of San-Jin. Second Squad set out that afternoon to go probe around for the Muj hiding out on the far side of the river. After they found the enemy and began exchanging rounds, my squad moved out on foot to provide a flanking support.

We crossed the Helmand River at a wide spot that was below my waist. Removing boots and socks, Private White and I waded through the river first. At its deepest, the water was just barely coming into the pockets of my pants.

“Can’t we find a spot that doesn’t go higher than our knees,” White said. “I’d really prefer it if my dick didn't get wet.”
After White and I made it across, laced up our boots, and perched ourselves up above the riverbank, two at a time the entire squad made their way through the water with boots hung around their necks. Over the radio we could hear that not only was Second Squad fighting, but the rest of the platoon back on the hilltop had also been attacked. With the last few guys tying up their boots, Ruhlman and I took another look at the map and plotted out a quicker path to Second Squad. We would go over a ridgeline and through a bit rougher terrain than originally planned. The moon was bright and full that night. I turned off my NODs, unclipped my helmet, and attached it to my assault pack. Once my eyes adjusted to the moonlight, I could see nearly as well as I could through my night vision goggles. Late in the night, we shot some watchdogs as we came up on a settlement. We were unable to acquire radio communication by that point and we had no idea whether or not we should continue on to help Second, or return to the hilltop and help the rest of the platoon.

We kept heading toward Second Squad for a few more hours. Without communication, and now miles away from anyone else in our unit, the nine of us were forced to camp out in a cornfield for the night. The Taliban wasn’t ever far and this was their territory. Temperatures dropped so low that it was difficult to sleep.

Before the sun came up that next morning, we were able to reestablish radio communication with the platoon. Second Squad had managed to outgun their foes and our platoon sergeant told us to make our way back to the hilltop. The whole excursion ended up being just a twenty-hour hiking trip with nothing gained.
When we returned to the hill sometime in the late afternoon of October seventh, our platoon had been without sleep. They had spent the whole night fighting and when we walked passed Launder up in one of the Humvee turrets, he grabbed a handful of expended machinegun rounds and threw them at us like confetti.

“You missed all the fun, ladies,” Launder said.

My squad got to our Humvees and we were finally able to take a break. Second Squad was still across the river making their way back. Not too long after we settled in, Second again started taking fire from the enemy. Sergeant Washington and the mortar team setup their tube and prepared for a fire mission. Franklin, our radio operator, called in to Second Squad and began plotting out the trajectory of where our guys were and where the enemy was.

When the fire mission began, I was just sitting in my Humvee looking out onto the river. I was way too far to actually see anything, but looking in the direction I knew Second Squad was at gave me some sort of satisfaction. Watching the mortarmen fire off rounds was always a treat. I was amazed at how they could possibly calculate where the mortars would land.

Over the radio in the last few moments before the mortars hit their targets, I could hear a very high amount of stress coming from Second. They were low on ammo and the enemy was closing in on their location. Luckily, the mortars came raining down and completely eliminated the enemy soldiers. Up on the hilltop, with Second now safe and making their way to us, it was time for us to leave as additional Taliban fighters would be
heading our way. As the guys in my squad prepared us to leave, I looked out toward the river pulling security with my long rifle. Behind me, not far from where the mortar pit had been, a large explosion went off.

I looked back and saw Franklin’s body on its way down to the ground still maybe ten feet in the air. None of us knew what had happened. It wasn't clear whether it was a landmine, an enemy mortar, or an RPG. The medic immediately rushed over to Franklin and the rest of the platoon fell into their fighting positions. After a few moments of scanning our surroundings, no other attacks came at us. Franklin had stepped on a landmine.

The medic called for help and because I was the one in my squad with medical training, I ran over with my aid bag. By this point, I was seasoned. I had been to war already, the same as most of my platoon. I had seen death before—ours and theirs. I had learned to continue on through fear and up until this moment I had done so without struggle. But when I got to Franklin, I didn't know what to do. I froze.

Sergeant Safstrom held the IV bag as the medic pushed in morphine and controlled the bleeding. Safstrom had his other hand on Franklin’s chest or maybe it was his neck, holding back the blood.

Franklin was still moving. They were like convulsions. Violent twitching attempts to remain alive. The medic stuck in another morphine. Franklin was making some sort of noise—choking on his blood, I suppose. The medic was yelling and moving fast. I’m not sure if he was giving me instructions. I couldn’t hear or move or anything. I just stood
there trapped inside my body. I couldn't tell you how long it was, but after all of Franklin's movements and sounds stopped, after the medic had seemed to pull every single piece of medical equipment out of his bag, Safstrom said, “He’s gone.”

When he said this, leaning over his dear friend, I saw the effort it took for him to speak. To get the words out he had to extend out his jaw and fight back the tightened muscles flexing it closed. It was almost a cry or a howl. Like some dog in the night lost and scared calling out to its pack.

“He’s gone.”

The medic seemed to work more frantically after this, but he too finally stopped. He just sat there holding onto Franklin. I watched Safstrom get up to his feet very slowly. He dropped the empty IV bag down in the dirt and then took a few steps backward and then turned around and walked away. He got maybe only ten feet before he fell to his knees and put his face into his hands. It looked like he was praying, and I’m sure he was crying.

In the movies, someone always comes out with a nice sheet to cover the departed. Here, the medic was just sitting there with Franklin’s head resting on his thigh. He held one of his hands over Franklin’s torn open neck. The medic was quiet and still, drenched in blood and dust. Tears came out of his eyes, but he just remained there for a long time until the helicopter finally came and then they loaded Franklin onto the bird and flew away.

For a moment nobody moved or talked. Most of the guys in the platoon were
circled out in our trucks in about a twenty-meter perimeter. We were along the Helmond River right near San-Jin and Qal’eh-ye Gaz and there was still an enemy looking for a fight. There may have been more casualties if we didn't move. Our platoon sergeant snapped at us to get our shit together and ordered us to head out.


“Roger sergeant,” I replied.

Safstrom was still kneeled down. He had one knee on the ground, and the other bent up holding the weight of his body. He wasn't crying anymore, just quiet.

“Hey man,” I said. “We gotta roll out.”

The ride back to our base was quiet and lonely. I was in the lead truck and with no sounds from any of us inside, it was as if I was all alone driving down some endless desert highway. To be honest, this was nice. With what was going on in my head I needed the simple task of just driving home. I would occasionally look over at Safstrom in the passenger seat. His eyes remained locked out a thousand meters. He wasn't even in the truck. I don't think he was anywhere right then.

As warfighters, we didn't have the luxury to change too much in our routine. As soon as we got back to our base in Gereshk, we refitted our trucks with fuel, ammo, and cleaned out the silt-filled air filters and all the expended bullet casings. Then we reloaded our personal ammo, water, and medical supplies. Each time this was finished the guys all went one of four different ways: to the shitter, the shower, to chow, or to the computer for an email. I usually went to chow first. This day was no different, except those of us eating
remained silent.

When I was finished eating and the sun had gone down, I meandered my way back from the small chow building to my tent. Walking in the sand I wasn't making any noise when I came up on Sergeant Renegar, our platoon sergeant, somewhat hiding between some shipping containers. He had been a real hardass that day. An argument for him being totally heartless about Franklin's death would have been an easy sell. But here he was, the leader of our whole platoon, crying so hard he was hyperventilating. I only stood there for a moment before I walked away.

On the night of October Eighth, about two-thirds of my platoon loaded up into our Humvees and set out for Kandahar Air Base. Once there, we said our farewells to Franklin with a standard military ceremony. His casket was covered in a US flag, and then loaded into the back of a C17 Globemaster. One at a time, each man in the platoon walked up to the casket, gave Franklin a final salute, and then stepped away.

That night, while heading back up to Gereshk, our convoy was ambushed. From our left flank, a group of soldiers opened up on us. Multiple rocket propelled grenades were fired, along with many automatic rifles. I was in the lead truck and a single RPG flew just in front of the hood of my truck. The Humvee behind me took a hit to the engine. The driver of that truck, Private Mejia, took serious shrapnel to his left leg.

The guys in the turrets immediately began firing their machineguns. Each of the guys inside the trucks got out and without much verbal communication a group made to assault the enemy force. Being in the lead vehicle, Sergeant Mora and his guys
established security on the road. I went to check on the Humvee behind us. It was clearly damaged far beyond repair. Sergeant Grez drug Mejia out of the truck and was fast to tie up a tourniquet just above his left knee. Knowing that our cherry lieutenant wouldn’t have a plan I made out to find him in the dark. When I found him, he was on the radio to our commander.

“Roger, sir. We’ll get the Humvee back on the road ASAP and be on our way.”

“LT,” I said. “That truck is not going anywhere. It’s beyond repair. We have to leave it.”

Back into the radio the lieutenant said, “Sir, I’m getting word that the Humvee cannot be fixed.”

The commander responded with an aggravated tone. I couldn’t exactly make out what he was saying, but I knew he wasn’t getting the message. I held out my hand telling the new lieutenant to give me the mic.

“Sir, this is Sergeant Barnett,” I yelled into the mic. “The Humvee that was hit is beyond repair. We are removing all sensitive items from the truck and then we are going to leave it here. Arrange for someone to come recover it. How copy, over?”

I handed the radio mic back to my lieutenant, “You heard what I said, now let’s make it happen.”

The rifle fire ceased. Our attackers had run away and if we did manage to kill any of them, it was too dark to be looking for bodies.

I went back to the damaged truck, “Strip all sensitive items off of this truck right
now,” I yelled. “Once you’re done let’s get the fuck out of here. We need to get Mejia back to Kandahar.”

At this point those that had left to flank the enemy had returned. Nobody else was hurt. Grez had managed to stop the bleeding, but Mejia was not in good shape.

“We gotta get him in a truck and get him to some medics,” Grez said.

Grez and I carried Mejia to the nearest Humvee. We didn’t have a litter and every step we took seemed to be excruciating for Mejia. Once we got him in, everyone was about ready to go. I jumped in the back with Mejia and we all took off flooring it back to the air base.

On October ninth, Mejia was flown out to Germany, and the rest of us made the drive back up to Gereshk. For the rest of the time we were in Afghanistan, things went a little different. After a day of rest, our commander started planning our next big mission. Nearly every time we went to San-Jin we were attacked. Usually the Taliban would ambush us and we would react. For the rest of the deployment our unit acted a bit outside of the rules of engagement. Rather than wait for the enemy to engage us, we took an aggressive fight straight to them.

By the time our unit returned to Fort Bragg, Mejia was already medically discharged from the Army and back in California. It wouldn’t be until the winter of 2015 that I would see him again. At his wedding I was able to see him and a few other guys from the platoon. Mejia showed us all his scars from the attack and he told us about the years of recovery it took to heal and relearn how to walk. We had a few drinks, told a few
tales, and gave a moment for our friend, Benny S. Franklin.

I only knew Franklin as a soldier, but the measurement of a man’s quality becomes very clear while in battle. Franklin was of the highest quality of men I’ve known. He had this way about him where he could maintain balance not only in himself, but radiated it to all of us around him. We would get in some bad situations; Franklin would perform his job flawlessly. During our time in Afghanistan we faced an enemy that knew their terrain very well. Often, we found ourselves getting ambushed and overrun. Often, our scrapped together plans would fail and it was the strength and intelligent of men like Franklin that got us through it all. Franklin’s voice over the radio as he was plotting targets and trajectories, and guiding our mortarmen and air support, became this calming reassurance for me during battle. When we would get back to our small compound outside of the town of Gereshk, Franklin would be hosting a group of guys in bouts of shit-talking and singing and always laughter. He owned that basketball court on days we weren’t out fighting. And that smile of his seemed to cut right through the gruff of us all. I’m humbled to have served with such a man.
The Taxi Driver’s Wife

After I shot the man in the taxi, and after I had watched him die, my squad leader pulled us in and we set up our gear for the night. Second Squad went and pushed the car down an alley. I don’t know what they did with the bodies, not even now, I have never asked. The sun went down and the sky streaked like a fire barely lit. Then it was dark—really dark. It was only the first few days into April, 2003. We were in Al Samawah and the war had just begun and very soon so many things would end up so much worse. But for a few hours that night I was able to sleep—simply too tired to stress over this taxi driver. This man I killed. This man I watched die, slowly bleeding out in the street. Over a decade has passed. The man from the taxi, the driver, I killed him. I shot him multiple times in the chest and then I stopped. His death was slow. After crawling from his car and out on the street, with his blood filling the cracks in the asphalt, he died. I can still see him. He was a thin man. Not clean shaven, but without a beard. He couldn’t have been too old. I’m thirty-two years old now, and most likely older then he was.

I think about him and I wonder. What was his life before that day? Did he have a family? A wife? Children? Kids that would have waited surely for weeks for their father to return home. Even a few months later, after his wife had moved the kids and herself to her brother’s home two cities away, she still looked, waiting for him, out of a tear in the blanket taped to the front room window just the same as every family began to do to prevent the shards of glass from shattering in after bullets. She had no other choice because her heart had gone out that day in the taxi.
When an occasional guest would approach the front door, she would instantly know that it was not him. She could never forget his walk and how he stood. He never was a good dancer, but it didn’t seem to keep him from smiling and acting a bit goofy the day they married. She loved him for every bit of his rigid swagger. Nothing could change that. When he held his firstborn, then second, and finally his third child for the very first times, he stood tall, shoulders back. If you didn’t know him, you’d think he was completely uncomfortable. That’d be furthest from the true. Finally, the day would come that she would tell her oldest son about what happened to his father. She had wanted so badly to just burst out in tears and completely let go of herself. But she didn’t. She waited until she knew she could speak to her son with strength.

“While your father was rushing to return home, the Americans shot and killed him,” she said. “The soldiers feared that in his rush to simply get back home, that he was a suicide bomber. They were greatly mistaken,” she cried.

Though he didn't speak, she would see in her son’s tear-filled eyes. “What a shame, what a waste.”

“Yes,” she would say. “Yes, it is.”
Post-war Erotica

My girlfriend likes it rough. It’s to the point that I often find myself uncomfortable. My mind fazes in and out of the moment. The old brick wall in the apartment waves in and out of focus. My eyes follow the mortar lines trying to keep calm. I get turned on that she is enjoying me; that she wants me. Her hands are clenching at my muscles and clawing into my back. She drags her full lips across my chest and her teeth graze my nipple. My hand is gripped around her neck as I’m thrusting my cock inside of her. And then her moans turn to screams and the headboard is slamming against the bricks.

I flip her over onto her knees, grab her hands, and tie them up around her back. I use a single piece of paracord for the knot. It’s 550-pound test line. A three-foot piece that I had cut off of my parachute after a rough and tangled landing in the mountains east of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I use the same quick knot to tie her hands as I used to tie up Iraqi prisoners. I can do this knot without looking. I yank on her arms pulling the knot tight. As I do this, some aggressive instinct kicks in and my jaw clenches down.

In Al Shula, Iraq, the lieutenant and I were pinned down taking fire from multiple directions. We had hidden ourselves behind a small car, crouching behind the engine as bullets came slamming into the metal panels and windows. The lieutenant and I mashed our bodies together. Our knees interlocked, he flattens his chest against his thighs in a low squat, and I crouched down over his head holding my rifle on top of his back trying to make us into the tightest and smallest space I could. Underneath me, he was trying to
manipulate the controls of his GPS. The ambush left us pinned down without reinforcements.

"Sir, I need our location," I said.

When a lull in fire came, the lieutenant lifted his head up and almost immediately a burst of rounds came smashing into the dirt and the car. I grabbed my lieutenant’s body armor pulling him back into our cowering huddle.

She’s nearly naked, only half wearing the lingerie I’ve undone and ripped off of her. She likes when I smash her face into the bed. For her, the struggle in finding a good breath is arousing. Natasha is bent over with her ass up and her legs spread open. I’m on my knees behind her. I reach my hand down to spread her moisture and then guide myself inside her.

“Oh god,” she says into the sheets.

I start slow, only giving enough that it’s teasing for her. She is quiet and still. My hands are firm holding her waist. I run my fingers up and down the small of her back and move myself deeper inside. She hums and her tied up hands shift as if she is trying to escape. I bend over into her and reach my hand underneath grabbing one of her breasts. I slide my other arm beneath her neck until my forearm is pressing against her throat. I tighten myself down onto her and then thrust myself deep inside. Into the sheets her screams are muffled. I stay down on top of her kissing until my mouth finds the skin at the base of her neck. I sink my teeth into her flesh and continue thrusting into her with a slow pace. Again muffled into the sheets, she lets out a deep moan.
"Spank me," she says.

I lift myself up off of her back and again grip her waist and pulling her into me as I thrust. When I slap her ass I smile watching the red outlines of my hand begin to make odd shapes as if they were clouds of flesh. These shapes entertain me, but I don't find the hitting arousing. With my hands gripping the sides of her butt, I'm thrusting myself in and out and trying to keep her bent at just the correct angle. When I lift up my left hand to give her another hit, I struggle to keep the rhythm of pushing myself inside her. I strike down and my hand lands at an odd angle and the loud smack that I know will satisfy her is unachieved.

"Again," she tells me, and I do it.

After a few minutes, I pull loose the knot on the paracord. Still behind her, I reach my left hand under and across her body. I grab her right leg and pull it up—no different than if I were starting a chainsaw. Her small body flips over and now she is on her back. She likes me to choke her. I've learned well enough so that she doesn't have to ask and when we are finished she usually tells me how much she loves that I just take control. It takes some effort to keep my cock hard when she asks for more violence. My hand around her neck, it's not something I enjoy, but I've grown used to it. As I'm watching her breathing, making sure it doesn't stop longer than what I assume she can survive, I keep myself thrusting inside her at a fast enough pace so that my distracted mind doesn't interfere with the stiff blood flow needed to continue.

After sex, her nipples are bitten and bloody. As we walk to breakfast the mornings
after, she groans climbing down the stairs and her thighs are bruised. In streaks of twos and threes I have scabbed over scratches running across my back and shoulders. My heart rate never settles, and I won’t admit what Natasha and I are doing to my therapist.

I choked a man in Fallujah. After wrestling him out of his car, I mounted myself on top of him. Both of my hands wrapped around his neck and all of my weight pressing down. My only thought was to kill him. In the moment, I didn't even think why, but I was certain that he needed to die.

“Hit me,” she wheezes out with my palm pressed to her throat.

I take in a breath before striking Natasha’s face. As I lift my hand up, I hold my breath. I can see the look on her face. Her lips are parted and her teeth clenched together. I know what she is thinking. She has already decided that I haven’t hit her hard enough. I have to remind myself that the violence I know is different. This is something else when I lay my hands on her and behind closed doors it’s okay because she wants it. Maybe she needs it. I don't know. Her thick eyebrows are gnarled and aimed right at me. I’ll obey her.

In Al Shula, Iraq, a man had reached for my rifle. We had been spending long days out in the market patrolling up and down the streets. When his hand grabbed my rifle and he began to pull, I didn't even think. Immediately my right fist jolted for his face. With my left hand, I pulled back on my rifle. After a few rapid punches to his face, I stopped. Gripping my rifle tight, I took a few steps back and took a quick look around. The market was crowded and Sergeant Green was making his way toward me. It felt
good to release my anger, like the satisfaction of biting into a juicy steak. I felt comfort in this man’s suffering and I was almost thankful for his assault. I could have pushed him. I could have backed away and shot him dead and sometimes I wish I had so that I could have ended his suffering. But making his face bleed, as he lay there helpless and weak, was much more fulfilling.

“Fuckin’ do it,” Natasha says through her clenched teeth.

As I bring my hand to her face, I make sure to make contact square on her cheek. I hit her so that her head will rotate to the side taking most of the momentum. I’m familiar with how to take and dish out a punch. Even with an open hand I know the damage I could cause to this body nearly half the size of mine. Once my hand meets her face, I thrust myself deeper and continue to fuck her hard. I have to do this. I have to keep fucking her hard or I will lose my erection.

She lets out a yell and there is a quick second I see despair in her eyes. I lose my breath at the sight. The instant is over and she again clenches her jaw and her determined stare and the grip she has on me all return. Her brown cheek turns red. She lunges up into me and her breathing has quickened and her hands claw into me. She brings a hand to my face and squeezes my jaw.

“Again, fucker,” she says.

When I strike her, one of her hands digs sharp fingernails into my thigh. She is pulling me into her harder and faster. Her other hand grabs the muscle just under my armpit and it hurts me. I stay focused on her eyes. They are beautiful, and I’m in love
with her. If I lean close and try to kiss her, she will bite me. So, I keep my distance maintaining a firm grip on her throat, and I keep my pace.

“Yes—” she moans through a snarled face.

When her legs start to quiver and it feels like I must have blood dripping down my back, the look on her face changes. She presses her lips tight together and she begins to hum. It's a quiet moan, and I can hear her nearly making words in her throat humming lyrics to the pace of my thrust. I ease up my grip and move my hand from her neck down to just firmly holding her shoulder with my thumb tracing her collarbone. Her eyebrows turn soft. The clenched teeth open and she is breathing with short and soft panting each time she exhales. Her hair is fanned out around her head creating a black void surrounding her face. Her heart is beating so hard that I can feel it in my stomach. She smiles at me, and for a short moment we lock eyes and I smile back. Her eyes shut and she moves one of her hands into my hair with a soft grip. My eyes are closed when a strain of my hair falls next to my face. I forget about the brick wall. I leave San Francisco behind and I leave the desert thousands of miles away.

“Here’s a good spot,” Sergeant Mora said. “It’s a bit of a depression already and it’s just behind the Humvee. We can sleep here.”

I looked around at the terrain, thinking of the possible avenues of attack.

“Hey Mora, I don't think that’s a good spot,” I said.

I went on to explain how I would attack us and that where he was suggesting wasn't a good option. We both agreed to move over about ten meters into an alternate
depression in the hillside.

It was the early part of September of 2005, Mora and I sat in the dirt up on that hilltop in the middle of the night. We were just talking and taking a moment trying to understand our lives. During our conversation, our platoon was engaging in a firefight. The spot that Mora had originally suggested was now a five-foot-deep crater. When the rocket exploded, I was awoken from the blast and the raining down of dirt. I remember shaking out my collar and dirt and small rocks falling down my shoulders and chest and much of it all getting wedged into my beltline. I pointed down into the crater and smiled.

"Barnett, I hate you," Mora said.

With a smile, I got up to a low crouch and made my way over to some of the guys in our squad. I clicked the safety off on my rifle and began helping to eliminate the attacking enemy.

With both hands Natasha pushes me back so that I land sitting down on the bed still between her legs. She slides herself around and takes my cock into her mouth. I fall back on the bed and again close my eyes and again I forget about the bricks in the wall. It feels as if my whole body levitates. I'm floating there and all the sensations seem to heighten and dull. Her hand squeezes the base of my cock. I close my fists catching the bed sheets and try not to respond with any pelvic twitching. A loud car drives past on the street below. I start listening to the muffled chaos of the city. The sounds coming in, or me going out—I'm with Natasha again. My heart is pumping and I'm nervous.

I focus on my breathing and calm myself. My clenched fists send jolts of
adrenaline throughout my body. The pleasure, in some way I find myself become helpless and maybe a little afraid just before I release. When I let go, the smell of the desert vanishes.

When it’s over, Natasha is laying there for a bit just smiling and still holding my cock. She takes one more lick cleaning up any reminisce and then rolls over onto her back. It’s quiet in the dark room barely lit by the lights coming in from 15th Street. The cool wind blows in from the window and a wave of goose bumps scale across my body and for this moment I am here. It’s just her and I laying in the dark, and my mind is empty as I fall asleep.
Very Unhealthy

I double, then triple
painkiller prescription.
Under my blankets
I float
a foot above my bed
my mind moves
out of the desert
and onto beaches with friends.

The sound of gunfire
The smell of blood
The shrapnel in my knee,
The ocean waves take me
away from it all
for a moment.

A friend is shot and dying.
Another has stepped on a mine
in front of me.
I'm squeezing onto the bloody leg
of one of my young soldiers.

And I am killing

the same little boy

Everyday.

They tell me I shouldn't abuse

my medications. They say

I drink too much and it's all

very unhealthy.

I wonder what they

really know about

very unhealthy.
Quit

A good friend of mine, and someone I trusted with my life on countless occasions—he killed himself today. He didn’t leave a note. He didn’t tell anyone a damn thing. He just quit.

Enough with the bullshit. He was done thinking about it, dreaming of it, stressing over it in every situation, and especially hearing others talk about it like it was this condition or grouping of letters that can be classified into something to be signed off on. The war in Iraq changed him. There was nothing to be done about it.

The flashbacks in traffic, or while standing in a crowd and the nightmares most nights and the constant anxiety; never being able to fully relax pacing at four in the morning with a loaded rifle and six fully loaded magazines stashed next to the SAPI plates stolen from the armory. It’s carrying buck knives in classrooms, 550 cord in back pockets and a Sig or a Glock during mass and while grocery shopping. It’s all a repeated school of what had happened. It was us doing horrible things at the whim of the American people who wanted it all but who turned away in denial the moment the order was called. And when we landed behind enemy lines in Iraq, it was barely 2003 and my good friend and I both had our nineteenth birthdays that summer.

And what’s left? Most of us slip by unnoticed medicated with drugs and alcohol and adrenaline to subside it just enough. After it’s over there aren’t too many options. We can stay in and keep fighting and humping the weight—which is probably best as the insanity of it all never has a chance to catch up. Getting out of the military means a try at
college and a job, but most grunts fail at one or both. Within their first year of getting out, Launder and Grez were already on academic probation. Launder found a factory job driving a forklift somewhere south of Columbus, Ohio. Grez stayed in North Carolina for a girl. So when school didn’t work out, and the girl didn’t work out, he just joined right back up. He wasn’t happy so he started hopping tours—this is where a grunt keeps changing his assigned unit to one that is overseas. The pay is better and the Army sure as hell don’t mind.

Even if there is some recognition of success it doesn’t always work out. McKean and Ryan both got their Master’s degrees after they got out, one in land management and the other in business of some sort. McKean had been with the same chick all through college. She was a nice girl, real sweetheart.

“You know man, I’m sick of dealing with people,” McKean had told me. “Why should I have to deal with this bitch? I’d rather just jack off to porn,” and then he dumped her.

Ryan was unemployed after college with no aspirations to work in his field. Well, he’d been making his way up the Boston drug trade and when I saw him in Vegas for Casiano’s bachelor party he had been clean for four months.

“It’s all profit now, Bah-nett,” He told me. “I got connections coming in from fawking Canada now.”

If I was never thanked for my service in the military again, it would be just fine. I don’t like thinking about how you don’t know what you’re talking about. Your protests to
war are empty because war to you is this abstract ideal that you assume you disagree
with. I am against having young men and women fight in unnecessary battle, yes. I think
it is wrong to justify a war when there is clearly not a sound commitment by all the
people of a nation, yes. But war—you cannot be against it any more than you can be
against fear or regret or denial.

Just outside of Al Samawah in some rice fields that were lined with palm trees, I
killed two unarmed women that were running for their safety. One, then the other. The
circumstances, well, they were just that. In a small village, its name I’ve forgotten, I
killed a little boy in a gray long sleeve shirt. Fallujah got hectic, and I was scared. I shot
into a crowd. I saw them carry away at least three bodies. I dropkicked a frail old man in
the chest while in the market of Al Shula. He was in my way as I was chasing down a
boy that was maybe the same age I had been. I remember all that I wanted was to kill that
boy—to shoot him in the skull. I wanted to kill him more than anything, and I was
shaking with rage when he vanished into the thick of people.

Sometimes I get quiet, and I just don’t want to talk to anyone. My knuckles begin
to swell and the bones in my hand, the ones that didn’t heal quite right after an accident in
the Helmand Province of Afghanistan, start to throb. My knees start to feel cold and the
pain from the remnants of shrapnel seems to heighten my hearing. The bumps and chatter
of people force my jaw to close and the only thing I can do is to leave. Just go away.

“Bah-nett,” Ryan had said. “Ya gotta use layers. Don’t jus drink ya-self stupid. Or
kill ya-self on that fawking motorcycle. The Tramadol is great and the VA loves handing
those out. But be careful, if you take too much your cack won’t get hard. And that’s fawking the worst,” Ryan had laughed. “I say wake up with ah Vicodin, then smoke a bowl ba-fore you head out.”

In Iraq, after a firefight in the streets of Baghdad, a man had thrown down his rifle and surrendered. When I got to him, I palmed his face and slammed his head into the stucco building. Still taking fire, I stayed low while pinning the man to the wall. Just above me the wall spat out chunks and dust as the enemy tried to kill me. I remember that day being hot. When the dust came falling down, it stuck to my sweaty face. My eyes had already been red and burning for hours from the salt oozing out my pores. My knee gave out a numbing pain that climbed up my leg with each of the hard thumps of my heartbeat. My hand, which had moved from this man’s head to his throat, was flexed and my forearm began to twitch. I assumed I would not survive the day. When I think about this time in my life, I miss it.

Last year, Gowell had a long layover in San Francisco. He rode the train in, and I took him to the Tempest. Just a shitty bar south of Market Street. After that first deployment to Iraq he had switched units and I had not seen him since.

“How the fuck…” Gowell said looking over his shoulder. “How in fuckin’ hell do you live here?”

“It’s alright. I like it here,” I said.

“Too much for me, that’s for damn sure. Shit’s just too close. People fuckin’ creeping up on you.”
“Yeah, I suppose,” I said drinking my beer. “But you’d get used to it.”

“Maybe. Sort of like Baghdad—before the fall of course. So are you staying around here after you finish up with school?” he asked.

“I don’t have a plan yet.”

When we were done and he left to return to the airport and go back home to Colorado, I realized that this man, this stranger and my brother, didn’t belong here. He was lost in this world he didn’t fit into and he would have to fake it for the rest of his life.

From the inside of a black pillowcase, many never saw their families again. Whether they were good or bad or just in the wrong place, all too often we made mistakes. Creating bastard children like it was done on a factory-line somewhere in the Midwest where land is cheap. Nebraska maybe, just a shithole bastard-factory that nobody could care less about.

Machineguns make heads pop like balloons filled with red paint. On a windy day, red mist changes the blue sky and the air, even as hot as it is in July in the Middle East, it gets darker. Grenades and bombs rip limbs off leaving people bleeding out for minutes before they die.

PFC Launder, with his M240B machinegun, literally cut people in half. One time, it’s so unbelievable, this guy was running real fast, moving on a ridgeline about fifty meters away from the machinegun. PFC Launder was cyclic with the gun set on the third gas setting: he was shootin’ rapid fire. Launder traversed right into the running guy’s path. His upper body flew about five feet while his lower fell right down. Right in half,
like you wouldn’t believe.

They killed Mohammad’s wife and two children because he was helping us Americans by being an interpreter during our night raids. He wore a black mask and body armor, covered head to toe to conceal his identity. None of it mattered when they just followed him home one night. They raped her before they cut her throat. A bullet in each of his baby’s heads. They made him watch. He didn’t tell us about the sound she made as the knife ripped her across the throat. Or the smell of the tears pouring out of his little boy and little girl just before the trigger was pulled. Once, then twice. They just left him there. Crying and ruined—that’s how we found him.

In Al Samawah there was a car probably with just two normal hard working Iraqi guys in a hurry. Maybe rushing to a sick baby or home to see their wives. The passenger never made it out of his seat. He was dead instantly. The driver, after being filled with bullet holes, opened his door and fell onto the street. Someone called a cease-fire and we watched him die. Scrapping at the asphalt, he was trying as hard as he could to live. I had never before seen someone want something so badly. I have so much trouble remembering so many things. Why is it—why is this memory always present?

In the Helmand Provence in Afghanistan, four Afghani’ police officers didn’t understand our tactics and we didn’t understand theirs. They were just trying to help us during a firefight in Qal’eh-Ye Gaz. Coming from the rear, we got spooked. Sergeant Mora called out enemy contact rear. We slaughtered them and in that moment it was nothing. I would have felt more watching a rat getting its head chopped off in a trap.
Afterward, we drug the bodies out of the Toyota pickup. They were clearly wearing the uniforms that we had given them. The floorboards pooled with the clotting red blood. When Sergeant Hood opened the tailgate to drag out the four lifeless bodies, like a flash flood, blood came pouring out splashing onto his boots. The thick layer of dust instantly absorbed the blood that fell to the ground. The tops of Hood’s boots were bright red when he came walking back from the truck.

I watched Private Franklin—he was just in front of me—the explosion was so fast. His face was shredded. The gurgling from his throat—his jaw was completely gone. The Medevac chopper wouldn’t come get him; it was still too hot at the LZ. When we finally cleared the area, and the Blackhawk came and then took Franklin away, nobody talked. It was different that time. His unborn son was still kickin’ at mama’s belly; He wasn’t supposed to die.

Sergeant Shafstrom and Sergeant Launder lost it. Launder just didn’t talk or eat or anything. He went inside of himself. Shafstrom got violent. A few innocent people suffered, but we all just let him go crazy.

“I’m just trying to stay out of trouble now,” Washington told me while I visited him in San Diego. “I’ve got a kid on the east coast, and I’m trying to do this school thing, but I just don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. This place...it’s not home anymore” he had told me.

I think about my friend Mohammed and the sound of his wife as her throat was cut and his children—his fucking little girl and his little boy. And Franklin, as he died,
choking on his blood—red bubbles pouring out of what was left of his jaw and a hissing like he was trying to speak. Then the man full of bullet holes that crawled out of the taxi—his fingernails tore out the asphalt as he tried with everything he had—all of them, they felt desire like none of us—and especially none of you, could ever understand. I don’t desire anything, not like that.

It’s not about glory. It’s not about being tough or strong or right or being good with a rifle or quick in the night or hard on the outside. It’s just what’s left over. After everything has been taken away. There is nothing special or good or anything to be admired. What makes a warrior—soldier, interpreter, or even the little boy I killed—is all that has been taken away. Stripped down and left with nothing more than guilt and pain. It’s a sickness worse than cancer because you don’t die from it and you can’t feel it in your bones or on your skin. It hurts and eats away in a place deeper than anyone has ever been able to touch. And when a friend, a brother, puts a pistol to his head, I understand. It breaks my fucking heart, but I get it. If only for a moment, and if only in part.

I’ll miss you, bud. I know you didn’t want it this way.