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Tomb of the Unknowns

by Christopher Notarnicola

about 55,000 words

"Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life."

Grace Paley, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*

“I took off my identification tags and threw them into the wire, as far as I could. I tore to pieces the letters and the photographs I carried and scattered the fragments. I threw my helmet away, so that no one could guess my identity from the serial number stamped on the sweatband. Then I lay back exultant!”

William March, *Company K*

“But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?”

Sir Thomas Browne, *Urn Burial*

Available in Standard Sizes

You stand in line with the unphotographed. They call you without your name. Important now is your image. Straighten up, they say, and they press to your chest a jacket—a half-jacket, piece of an iconic dress uniform, that which the camera needs to convince your friends and family of your newfound commitment to country—the front. Look this way, they say, and they dare you to smile. You do not smile. They take the picture and they take the half-jacket before the flash haze fades. Your mother will keep a two-by-three in the visor of her car for the eight months you spend overseas. Her mother will pin a five-by-seven to the prayer board in the vestibule of her church where it will collect blessings long after you have returned. They will say you take a handsome picture. How strange to be the center of attention. They will praise your development from a curious child into this—this Marine in their hands—and you will thank them, and they will lower their chins and lift their knowing smiles when they thank you instead. You struggle to refocus your vision. They shove you off and shout for quiet and call for the next in line. Uniforms hang at attention. You stand in line with the photographed. One in front asks if you think there will be more pictures or if the one is all. You imagine one is all, whisper one is all, but you tell yourself there will be more, at least as many as have come before, and you tell yourself never to forget the instant camera in the backseat of your truck, the unexposed three-by-threes waiting there in the dark, or your glossy and cross-sectioned past in a four-by-six stack at the bottom of your footlocker. They take another, and another joins the line. He asks if you imagine real dress blues feel that way—tight at the throat—and you ask why your imagination would be any sharper than his, and he stifles a laugh. He asks if you smiled in your photo, and you ask from the corner of your lips if he's serious. They shout for stillness, and he breaks out in nervous laughter. You stand in line and curl your lips and fight a growing urge to join him. Another flash brightens the room.

Instead of a Bayonet

A pad around the end of a pugil stick—red where there would be a blade. Two recruits square for a bout, soft and quiet before they go hard and charging and are made to scream. One tucks the dull end of the stick beneath his arm, tight to his side, and aims the bright end at the helmet of the other. A pugil stick to the ground earns a win. A helmet to the ground earns bragging rights and a borrowed phone for an otherwise impossible call home. A whistle kills the stillness, and the two race toward collision. Six quick steps and they both go down. Woodchips in his bootlaces and through the air. Dirt in the soft skin at the base of the other's skull. Are they still screaming? Cushions sharpen, steel his fists. He cocks back the pugil stick for another strike. His opponent defends, forearms stacked against an otherwise unguarded face, eyes wide and cutting between tumbling headgear and the inbound rush of red. Another whistle takes the edge off the violence, and everything again goes slack and still, and the colors fall before the blow. The recruits collect and pass off their equipment, and two more take their stance, don helmets, arm themselves, aim their red-padded knife ends. He studies the new competitors—their grip or fear. A whistle sings. They charge, and the length of his throat burns while they scream.

That night, he will have three minutes to make two phone calls—his mother and his high school girlfriend. The latter will not recognize him, assuming one of her classmates is having fun at her expense, and she will spend most of their allotted time guessing the biblical names of other boys—all four gospels, two prophets, a high-ranking angel—convinced one will attach itself to the scorched voice at the other end of the call. The former will know him after a confused and questioning moment, his words like soft steps on the gravel drive, though he will begin their conversation as only her son could—hi mom. You cannot reach me here. When I hang up, please delete this number.

On the Rifle Range

She and her bunkmate pulled targets behind the berm. Her brother said he always hated this part. A chorus of fire snapped overhead. Her bunkmate finally mentioned hearing night whispers. Every round broke the sound barrier. Her brother had never heard or never mentioned hearing anything at night. They pulled down the target, and she found the puncture and scored the shot and marked the score for the shooter who laid on her belly five-hundred yards up range awaiting the rise of the target with its new sign—a white disk if the round punched through the black, a black if through the white. They set a white disc and levered the target high. A volley echoed from the shooting line through the trees where it slowed and fell and died in the shadows beneath the greenery. Lips slipped apart without language. She and her brother wore camouflage when they were young and could hide anyplace, even a bright living room. Suddenly sunlight. Her bunkmate readied another white disk. What an excuse to scream, she said of a shot through the black where there would be a face. Her brother received a similar wound. They brought down the paper target—a weak-shouldered silhouette framed by clouds and then woodwork and then dirt behind the berm. Night whistles, her bunkmate corrected, not whispers. An opening where there was no mouth. Wind and buried song. She pressed her ear to the shot, and they whistled there like dreams against a mound of earth and practice rounds.

Enunciation Starts with E

The base commander, whose picture was posted among those in the hallway somewhere in order of authority between the Platoon Sergeant of motor transport and the President of the United States of America, had decided to visit every marine under his charge, to address them face-to-face, shake hands with each, maybe shout something like Oorah or Semper Fidelis to boost their collective esprit de corps, then carry on in his usual silence upon the wall as we passed by his image on our occasional way to the toilet. The build-up to this unprecedented and high-priority visit induced many unprecedented and high-priority happenings. We scrubbed oil stains for days. We purged shelves of unused equipment. We pressed creases into our coveralls. Company First Sergeant was seen sporting a high and tight—a hairstyle he had notoriously avoided since recruit training back in the stone age. Lieutenant was said to have spit-shined his bars so that his rank insignia resembled tiny bricks of gold instead of their usual slabs of butter on his collar. Staff Sergeant showed up wearing his inspection-ready uniform which he set aside for just such an occasion and which included his flawless and much-talked-about but rarely seen parade boots—tall treads bolstering bright beige leather on which the eagle, globe, and anchor of the Marine Corps emblem showed deep and textured and raw like a living sear left by a branding iron.

We stood side-by-side in the spotless maintenance bay so the General could make his way through in a straight line without worrying about whose face he had not yet faced or whose hand he had left unshaken. He went around with an entourage, so we were told. His people passed word to company headquarters who passed word to Lieutenant who passed word to Staff Sergeant who passed it to our Platoon Sergeant who finally passed the word to us. The word: Our platoon will come to attention when the General enters, then move to parade rest when called at ease at which time the General will approach each individual Marine, shake their hand, perhaps say some small,

meaningless thing to which each Marine will respond in the proper affirmative, meaning yessir, until the entirety of the platoon has interfaced with the base commander at which time he will make a general announcement of good will and fidelity, and the platoon will come to attention once more as the General exits. Oh, and a photographer will be doing what photographers do.

It all went pretty much the way of the word as it was passed down from the base commander's people to the lowest ranking of us motor transport marines, and we each shook the General's hand—not too hard, it suddenly struck me as I reached for his grip, but not with such a lightness as to imply a weak constitution and thus an overall weakness in the combat readiness of the platoon which would certainly reflect the weakness of our immediate leadership in the eyes of the General, a reflection bound to result in a string of communications regarding said weakness and bring about, no doubt, a swift and brutal training regimen borne more of spite than of combat necessity and made more brutal by the ever presence of that unanswerable question regarding whether or not we reciprocated handshakes with appropriate firmness—and the photographer framed and reframed some photographs while most everyone answered some few basic questions about their interest in the Marine Corps and their unyielding commitment to our great nation. When the General released my hand, however, he asked what I liked to do for fun—a question not often posed between those meeting for the first time—and I defaulted in my hasty reply to an activity I had taken up while standing twenty-four hour guard duty at the barracks. Reading, I told him, though it was less reading and more just thumbing alphabetically through a dictionary I had found in the bottom drawer of the duty officer's desk. I had left off on the letter E, though I did not relay this specific progress to the General. I told him simply that I read for fun which, aside from systematically skimming between the big letters printed inside the tapered impressions at the edge

of a thousand or so bible-thin pages with a hope that I might one day be able to boast with some confidence that I had read the whole of the English dictionary, I did not.

When he then asked if I read fiction or nonfiction—the only follow-up question he posed in response to any of our answers—I began to stutter. My stutter: a partial enunciation of the word fiction with the prefix non spliced into the middle as if non were the word's natural second syllable which I let linger as I rallied an attempt to finish my truncated pronouncement of the word fiction which slipped effortlessly back into a vowel-heavy expression of the prefix non before the entire word fiction followed again which must have created a sound that at least somewhat resembled the word nonfiction until I dragged out another fiction but held the consonants too long while I tried to squeeze the word sir in there somewhere, and I began to hear myself half-speaking the same nonsensical utterances over and over like the victim of a mild seizure, and I struggled to remember whether the dictionary was considered a work of fiction or nonfiction and which of those words meant that its contents were true.

The base commander raised his eyebrows and latched onto my shoulder and lowered his voice to offer something of a consolation in that he tended to confuse the same two words himself sometimes. I wrenched my lips and braced my hands at the small of my back and lifted my chest as I imagined a strong and capable warrior would lift his chest when standing face-to-face with a high-ranking military official. I called him sir and thanked him and called him sir again. The General and I held our pose. Our platoon stood still and at ease though every one of them seethed with the echo of my stuttering and burned with the image of my befuddled face which reddened in the heat of their sidelong stares. The photographer took a photograph none of us have seen.

Calls of Duty

When you write to them about training for (you call it war because that's the word you imagine them reading no matter the word you write) war, they say they wish it didn't remind them of video games—a medium dominated on every platform by the shooter genre which rose to popularity in the early nineties after the U.S. Persian Gulf conflicts (correlation, likely not causation) and which may or may not prioritize a first-person perspective (though first-person points of view dominate the form) with the frame of action surrounding an (unknown or known) avatar who interacts with the world (primarily) through weapon-based combat. You write back about marines (read young adults) who spend their off-time playing video games in barracks rooms (read bunk beds) where they wield pixel-approximated weapons which resemble factory-assembled weapons on which they were trained as well as weapons fantastically (often beautifully) beyond pragmatics. Isn't a Marine playing a first-person shooter, they write back (verbatim—no judgement), a bit on the nose? More than a bit (most—pull statistics from any year—video games operate on combat-based objectives and mechanics) though (assuming now a need to inform) (what they read, well, you can't imagine what they must read) most marines qualify on their weapons only once in a year, never fire even a single round in play, and will rarely need to return fire in combat, so if not video games (you hone this materializing question with care, recognizing even before forming it on the page as a construction of the worst condescension, sharp and pointed as rhetoric), would you rather this remind you of the movies?

Stateside 1

Yet another break from convention. He died stateside from a simple notion he could never quite put into deep enough words.

Every day for thirteen weeks we made eye contact across the squad bay on Parris Island. Can't look anywhere else in the nude, in the dark of the morning when the screaming comes from all sides. The others said he had been dealt a bad hand at birth. He wasn't pretty. They told him he must have drawn his face from the discard pile. When he was not looking across at me, he looked down at his belly.

Our platoon returned from training one day to find our footlockers dumped, our personal effects strewn across the floor—this became a regular occurrence—and we gradually learned about each other while collecting and trading our scattered belongings. Most of us kept letters from home, fresh socks, hygiene supplies, some few conventional photographs—graduation, girlfriend, a small house on a wide lake. I kept some photos of myself and some friends in staged variations on postmortem still life. Death photos they called them. He kept no photos of friends or family, only cutouts of comic book heroines, a magazine article about seventies science fiction horror musicals, and his own ink drawings which combined the aesthetics of the two. While our platoon sorted through the shuffle, they often lumped his and my belongings into the same pile.

We graduated together and landed in the same combat training school. Traffic along North Carolina's Route Seventeen echoed through the trees beyond Camp Geiger and taunted us as we marched. He and I slipped letters into a mailbox at the edge of the woods—a combat training no-no. They were never delivered. Mine was addressed to a girl I might have loved. His letter was addressed to his father, a funeral director.

Familiarity is uncommon. Most training platoons will end up scattered across the country by the occupational point in the training cycle. We shared a job title and a barracks room and a class in the automotive maintenance school, Camp Johnson, North Carolina, with little say in these circumstances. We fixed components and ran in formation—months of mechanical training. We broke once into the gymnasium, climbed to the rafters, hawked our defiance down and spit onto hardwood court—remnants of a teenage rebellion. We wandered the base at night, searched the dark for hidden graves, escape tunnels, secret bunkers. We studied little and tested well, traded mass-market fiction and irreverent comics. We installed an engine and brought it to life. Half of our first year behind us—each the other's best sense of constancy.

At Cherry Point, North Carolina, we landed in different companies, roomed just one barracks apart—the most distance we had known since we had met. We worked on separate trucks during the week and spent weekends together exploring cemeteries in surrounding towns, scouring stones for the oldest dates or the loftiest inscriptions. The macabre consumed us—lost in the decay of the American South. He smiled the first time he mentioned a churn in his stomach, and we laughed the language away. He smiled again when he revisited the notion some weeks later as something akin to pain, and we began to question our humor. He smiled still when he told me this idea inside him was begging his body to curl into his guts, asking him to lay down on the moss and rest there with the dirt beneath the stones for probably forever. So hard did we laugh at ourselves that year, holding ourselves, bursting almost.

He told a Staff Sergeant when the thought of his stomach outpaced those of his mind. So hard did we run back then. Tough it out, devil dog, here we go, no stopping now, here we go, tough it out, all the way, here we go. Tough it out means keep your mouth shut. Killer! To have stayed in his company. Devil! Pain is weakness leaving the body, they say. Let me hear you say it! He

kicked up his heels and crossed his arms and held onto his guts as he ran—more slowly than he could have imagined. Let me hear you say it, shout it, scream.

He told a doctor when he could no longer sleep, could hardly keep food, could no longer eat. They tested him, admitted him, force fed him in a hospital and marked him on the wrist. Cancer of some gastrointestinal kind—too far along. He dropped a full uniform size. The Marine Corps medically discharged him somewhere around eleven months into his four-year contract, permitted him to die in his childhood home.

We spoke once on the phone—I imagine his father held the receiver to his ear. His words were slow to connect, riddled with breath. He spoke of heaven—a place where we could be roommates and outcasts and friends once again. I had never known him to be spiritual. During training we went to church to escape the noise—was that only me? I spoke little, pacing the brick corridors of the barracks between our barracks, dying for him to end the call. I imagine his father must have prepared his body. I imagine him the way I met him—naked and standing at attention across the squad bay, staring into my eyes while the strange scraps of us swirled from our footlockers and fell in a mess on the floor between our feet, saying nothing and something significant. I ended our conversation with something insincere about him outrunning me in a race to the other side, and he told me he would take the long way if only so I could catch up.

Some months prior, he brought up my collection of death photos, many of which he had seen scattered many times across the floor of our squad bay before we wore the symbols of Marines. He wanted me to make him up, to kill him like I had killed myself and so many others, to fabricate his unlikely death, set him up like cinema and immortalize his corpse—slumped and bloodied and fantastic with carnage. He asked me to lay him to rest and to orchestrate a miraculous resurrection. We made gore from corn syrup and food dye. I shot him behind a movie theater

against a wall near a dumpster, and he slouched there as he imagined the unloved would land—tossed, perhaps, from a slow-moving vehicle. We bloodied a socket and pulled out an eye—white grape in a twirl of tissue paper—cascades of blood down his cheek, down the curve of his neck to a dark pool at his collar. We wondered if we had devised the least likely death for a United States Marine, and he struggled to hold back his smile. The shutter took him in. We recorded a video in which he sits up with diligence as if working out the onset of rigor mortis. He stands with a stoop, knotted at the waist. He looks past the camera, wipes his face to catch his bad eye, dangles it by the nerve, and slings it against the back of the theater where it splashes blood and sticks. Graffiti blesses the wall above, saying something and wanting for context.

Non-deployable Unit

Night pressed its options to the window—a veil of possibility. I volunteered to go with an expeditionary unit. At what time did that shiplife dream—lower deck, maintenance rounds, shore leave, a midnight love in every port—wake to bright new orders for deployment to Iraq with a combat logistics unit? Everyone up. Marines never volunteer, they get voluntold. No one promised a pleasure cruise. So much sand in my sleepy eyes.

Parking lights cast the barracks in amber—red bricks aglow beneath a moongone sky. I sat at the glass with the drama of orders like I had the morning I left for recruit training. How my mother cried through a smile when the recruiter knocked—it's only the Carolinas. See you in a few months. How she smiled through tears when I was stationed—non-deployable means our unit doesn't go overseas. Home every holiday. How she would burst—well, I volunteered to go. Orders are orders. Just a few months, remember? The Middle East. What if we call the place Southwest Asia?

Pressure teased a pathetic drizzle from low-hanging clouds—an aborted outpour. I abandoned the window for the bed not because I was tired but because I had been juggling my phone, putting off calls, checking and rechecking the time. We had to be up early, the whole company, to test and record our fitness. Grass would stay wet through the night, would soak through our clothes as we held one another's legs and sat up into generous counts—one, two, five, nine—to fall back on soft ground. I left the blinds open and stared for some time at the shadows they made across that yellow room, and I imagined myself for a dark moment before sleep as someone for whom all mornings had already come and gone.

Stateside 2

Like nodding off after several sleepless nights. He died stateside, somewhere between the waking world and wherever we go when we close our eyes.

We bonded over black humor and the mud bogs outside Cherry Point, North Carolina. We drank too much and drove off road, spun our trucks through wet ruts in dark sand. He once rolled his on its side, survived through a passenger window. His father was killed years prior in a similar incident, smaller vehicle. We drove hours to share dinners with our mothers. We drove farther to fuck ex-girlfriends who no longer permitted us to make love. We made light of our poor performances, swapped whiskey shots and metal tracks on the ride back, volume up all the way to the guard gates where we straightened up and settled down to get back on base. Quiet! Staff Sergeant is sleeping.

He suffered a depression confused with anxiety, struggled get out of bed or to sit still and to sleep. He fought it until it showed, then sought help—blood pressure regulators, reuptake inhibitors, sedative-hypnotics. Awake in the quiet, we drank our aides and shared medicines and swapped prescription with other medicated marines. Good sense of humor, they would say, and good looking out of uniform too, but that guy gets so bad you can see it when it hits him like road signs in headlights, like the whites of their eyes after warning shots, like he sees something out there in the dark and it’s always something awful, like he needs someone in there with him, someone keeping watch. We went out when we could, talked at strangers, went home alone. We were bounced one afternoon from a gentleman's club after he asked a dancer what her father did for a living.

An old friend of mine came to visit, and they fell into some comfort—shared laughs and long nights, dark jokes and more than a few bad habits. They co-leased a home with a half-number

in the address and a cemetery in the backyard. Other marines called this progress. What progress, they would tell me, what a good look for him. We kept up like we had—laughed at ourselves and drank too much, drove our trucks into deeper and darker waters until they became stuck in the bog. We ran chains around the axels and pulled each other out in reverse. He seems happy, they would tell me. In wet rot and decay to our waists. I would tell them I had never known him to be happier.

He wanted for death in digital, to see himself made up, stuck in still life, killed off like the dead in my pictures, like my other friends turned corpses and covered in corn syrup and food dye. A cross section in a stack of similar photos. We shot him wrapped in chains and spotted with wounds in the bed of my truck, covered in rust and dried blood. He wanted to look dragged through the dirt. He wanted to look abandoned and then found. This was my last shot of this kind. We recorded a video in which he lays there in the bed for a short while before he sits up as fast as he can under the weight of those chains, and he screams as if waking from—he may have suggested waking to—some nightmare.

A phone call, then orders to change into civilian clothes to meet his mother at the hospital in New Bern, North Carolina. His mother, they told me, happened to be visiting. Accidental overdose, maybe. What timing! My old friend called it in, spoke of strange noises in bed, spasms, gurgles and choking and sputters in the early morning dark. He wouldn't open his eyes.

His mother hadn't yet seen him, demanded an escort—the only other marine she once fed, like her son, at her kitchen table—or else she would never go in. Cold room. Tang of antiseptic. Curtains on tracks around the bed. A nurse held us—are you ready?—and asked us to prepare. Bed sheets in whisper. Prepare for? He's in critical condition. And that means? Bed frame in groans. His mother moved us past the talk with her hands around my arm. The nurse left, and I pulled aside the curtain.

He sat up fast, excited and staring off, then closed his eyes and fell back to the bed as he might have in jest. He went limp as he lay there. His mother tightened to my side. He tightened at the waist and sat up, fast again and horrible with tension. She clenched her arms and sank nails into my chest. His eyes opened too wide and we looked him over and he looked somewhere between us as his eyelids dropped and his body softened and fell back again to the bed which shook and ached. Convulsions on loop. His mother unhooked her arms and let herself to the floor as he sat back up, alarmed and staring off, and I lowered myself to the floor to be with her or to be away from his stare. He fell back and sat up and continued in that cycle above us, the bed frame rattling aluminum, every link flexing to hold him. His mother began to cry. She rose to a knee, and I helped her to her feet—our movements absent and slow like our thoughts, like our words would be when later we managed some few of them outside the hospital. We stood and watched the haywire mechanics of his body, and she held me through his spasms, and I held her arms which went marble white as they tightened around mine, and I held myself very still for her.

We moved each other away from the bed—a brush, a nudge, an exhausted and careful sigh—into the hall and down, into the elevator and down, then outside. Neither of us managed a goodbye. She asked if she could count on me to be there. To be? Child, she told me, there will be a funeral, but she could not say all of funeral. Of course, I told her, and I apologized for crying.

His seizures lessened. He spent months in a vegetative state in a back room of the home he last had before his enlistment. He died sometime after I was discharged, after I moved out of state and enrolled in community college. I learned of his death through my old friend who moved out of their home by the cemetery to look after him with his mother, to play metal tracks on full volume, to waft whiskey under his nostrils, to remind him every morning that it was time to wake

up. We once lifted our glasses in his name at a birthday party but don't mention him much anymore. His family must have held a funeral service. I never asked.

When I arrived at the hospital that day, I spoke first with Staff Sergeant who waited for me like a uniformed statue in the waiting room. Seizures or convulsions, he told me. His mother will not see him without an escort, will not go in with anyone but you. This will not be easy, he told me. Make yourself strong. Be a blank slate for her, a presence and therefore a comfort, however small. He told me I needed to walk a mother into the room where her son would most likely die.

I don't think—repeating—I don't think I can, don't want to, want to remember my—stuttering—my friend this way, in a coma, in pain, in—what are we in?—in crisis. Staff Sergeant clapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me upright so that I stood near attention. That must be tough, he told me—repeating—in pain, in crisis. Down the hall is a mother dying to see her son, and she called for you. There is no other way to say this. You are going in that room. You can go in for her or for him or for me or for you, but you are going. He tightened his grip. You belong in that room. You might as well picture yourself there. You are in there already. The only thing you can do now is decide on your reasons.

What a silly thing to imagine I could remember anyone any one way.

We cannot always control the things we must do, he told me, what happens to those in the next room or who we must be for the people in front of us, but we can always choose our reasons. Staff Sergeant joined his hands behind my head and spoke through the tunnel of his arms. You are lucky, he said, for the chance to choose before you walk through that door.

Be a friend, he told me, or those are not the words he used and I'm inventing this part or misremembering. Staff Sergeant wisdom is seldom so pillowed. If I could shape my memory of this moment he would tell me this situation is, of course, not ideal, but no ideal is ever a suitable

substitute for reality, and we might better understand our experiences if we examine each—the ideal and the real—as determinative and characteristic of the other. But that was not the way he spoke, and if it were, I don't think I would have heard him. Maybe he would ask if I considered myself a friend when it came easy, and what I might call myself now that friendship was never more difficult. Sounds like an answer, Staff Sergeant, not a question. Then you take those extremes—the answer and the question—and smash them together and pick up the pieces and arrange them for yourself. That sounds more like something he would tell me. You enter that room and you make up your reasons. Or maybe he would hold me for just this moment, lace his fingers at the back of my neck and tighten the heels of his palms behind my ears and lift me by the base of my skull, keep me at his eye-level and shout at me to wake up. Wake up, Marine! Maybe this one is not about you.

Iconography

Always faithful across chest, a *tattered ribbon* touting *Semper Fidelis* secured with a *pin* in each clavicle. Upon shoulder, forearm, or hip, an *eagle* perched on *globe* over ship's *anchor* in emblematic monochrome. The *flag* anyplace, in every *American* iteration, in all manner of conditions. Along lower limbs, ankles to knees where *swallow* meets *bulldog* meets *shellback turtle* in *ropes* in *knots* over *anchors crossed*, *compass rose*, *nautic star*, an intimate exhibition of bygone service, eras galleried, happenings made permanent and grandfathered against recent prohibitions—*placement of tattoos on the lower leg and foot which are interconnected and exceed the definition of a single tattoo are now prohibited*. To uphold image, a new Marine Corps Order—*individual tattoos must remain separate and distinct.* Ring finger, marriage hand, a *band black*ing three bad initials—a former fiancée. A *six pack* among the suggestion of abdominals, *cans* over muscles labeled *Beer* for clarity turned comedy. Rainbowed over pubic mound, graded red to violet, *Punish ment*, spaced as such so two left fingers in the right mood might block the ultimate and penultimate letters there to turn a broken noun into one full sentence, an almost-infliction into a request or an order—*Punish me*—audience dependent. Right hand, outward face of the salute, striking edge of the palm, a crude *penis*—take that, sir or ma'am!—with *balls*, self-drawn, free of charge. The s*tem* and *seed*ed remains of a *fruit* on the wrist with advice: *eat the apple*—coded to signify its response: fuck the Corps. Above the *heart* or, better put, in the place where one holds a hand while pledging allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stands, a photo-realist *muscle* severed from circulation at each would-be connecting *artery* or *vein*, anatomy loosed, *wet* and hanged as if from hooks before a busy chest to suggest, perhaps, this *organ* shot *life* into *flesh* only *moments* ago.

To Deaden the Nerve

Marines sit on the ground with their feet in their hands, their bare knees against the wet morning grass to stretch their groins, to gather themselves near the flight line behind company headquarters. They await the arrival of their instructor, the start of their next round of martial arts training. They wait to advance, to add to their takedowns and submissions, to harden their bodies, train with new weapons, trade tan for grey belts and—Oohrah!—increase their chances for promotion. Nearby planes taxi, spooling turbines. A spider clings to falling greenery on the perimeter fence. The Marines ready for deployment. One drops his stretch and takes up a brittle vine to coax the creature away from kudzu locks and into the mouth of an empty water bottle. Another rushes to suggest the species—Brown Recluse—and its necrotic capabilities. Yet another suggests a sporting match against his Emperor Scorpion—not so loud—not-so-hidden back in the barracks, back of his room, top shelf of his wall locker. The spider flinches, tucks its legs, balls its body, and tumbles into the bottle where it sprawls and scrambles for traction against the slick plastic walls. Water drops slip down and collect in the struggle.

Body hardening exercises are intended to deaden the nerves used most during Marine Corps Martial Arts training, to toughen areas of the body which might prove sensitive to aggressive contact. In the hardening of the arms, for instance, two marines stand one pace apart and rotate at the hips with stiff elbows and clenched fists to repeatedly collide the forearms along the radial nerve. Legs too—the peroneal nerve is hardened with an exchange of partial roundhouse kicks, striking with the lower shin or instep against the meaty portion of the outer thigh. To harden the abdominals, marines will exchange fist to stomach strikes, careful to avoid the navel, the xiphoid, the ribs, sternum, and forward protrusions of the hip bone. Their instructor shouts, by way of motivation, some non-words. He mirrors their moves with more and more intensity, counts them

out with sharp consonants and long, graveled vowels. He commands them to count with him—louder, now—to lean into their strikes, to shout out their breath and to stop flinching—really, get a grip, wincing like children from flying bugs in the yard.

The spider sits in the base of the bottle. Marines continue to strike one another—a convulsive communication between pairs across the spread of just one pace, one arm's length—sometimes heavy and sometimes with a lightness which may or may not be reciprocated. They count strikes at the peak of their volume, numbers bursting with breath, and they continue to flinch and to wince—so much tightening and contracting of the face which, although commonly understood as the communication of weakness, is the body's autonomic motion toward strength. The body knows, when confronted with great pain or when remembering or forecasting such a blow, to flinch or to wince—in the Old French, a turn aside. Aside—where, of course, the nerve endings are less sensitive, the skin conditioned to regular and more aggressive contact, the body naturally hardened. Flinch—to summon hardness, to bring forth and expose the deadened side. The aim of this training, perhaps, is to eliminate the need to turn. Blench—in the Old English, deceive—may serve as synonym. The Marine Corps Martial Arts program does eventually abandon the practice of body hardening due to a tendency for such exercises to result in injury.

A wall locker frames the match—arachnids at dusk. Marines crowd into a barracks room, scramble through the doorway and bound over beds toward the back wall where one locker shines with doors opened wide. They corral and lean into the lamplight and hoist themselves on chairs or hold one another's shoulders to gain vantage, leg muscles engorged, the striking edges of arms inflamed like their eyes, like their savage hopes. Above the hanging uniforms—khaki service shirts, green and blue jackets pressed and creased with intention, single chevrons patched over starched and stiff sleeves—on a shelf between folded blocks of undershirts and boot socks, high

upon arched legs there stands the Emperor, dark and still, stinger aloft, basking in the warmth of an aluminum-shaded lamp clamped to the corner of the slotted lid of its plastic cage, small with a carrying handle, designed for temporary and not long-term habitation. The scorpion holds wide its pincers. Bets are placed. Someone takes on the mantle of ring announcer, speaking into his fist. Some few dollar bills fly and are collected. A hatch in the lid is lifted. The spider bottle is uncapped, overturned, shaken into the open cage. The Recluse falls to the plastic floor in a light shower. Droplets splash and pool. All watch as the Emperor stands handsome and aware beneath the yellow light of a single bulb while the displaced spider withdraws its legs and contracts its wet body, tightening and rising like a middle knuckle. Someone mimics the sound of a bell. Marines steady themselves, watching close, waiting for the first move.

Only a moment passes, a flinch, and then the scorpion kicks from its corner and clambers across the plastic floor to meet the spider who cowers in a small pool. Touch gloves, someone calls out as the Emperor holds its pincers aloft and the Recluse shrinks between the shadows of its claws. In a sudden fit, the scorpion drops its body, twitches its tail, thrusts its sensitive jaws, and begins taking up water droplet by droplet, devouring the puddle around the spider with delicate fervor. The Recluse remains small and still in the center of the cage. The scorpion stoops to drink its fill, and then, once sated, returns to its place beneath the warmth of the lamp. Again, the Emperor stands tall, bathed in light. The Recluse sits in the wet where it fell.

This, they all agree, is not what they had in mind—a total fucking letdown—and they begin letting the tension from their fists, pulling away from their frenzied expectations as they leave the room. Someone jostles the cage. Another barrels past with an elbow strike to the door of the wall locker. Some few of them step outside to discuss the scorpion's misdirected motivations, the spider's refusal to transcend obvious behaviors implied by its name. They reverse their wagers

made, suppose a fight took place and imagine more violent outcomes, and some few of them, as if only just inspired, roleplay these imagined versions of the match on all fours, grappling in the grass in the barracks' courtyard while others watch from inside with reinstated bets and a collected hope that their bugs might yet realize the fight they had envisioned. Others still turn from the bout and walk off with comments on the absurdity of an impromptu wrestling match—haven't we had enough?—after training all day.

The darkening of the evening brings the beginning of Taps—a melancholic bugle with the sonic reach of turbine engines. Across base, as is the custom at dusk, everyone outdoors is stopped—running formations at a halt, vehicles pulled to the shoulder of the road—with all attentions turned toward the American flag. At the close of every day the entire installation goes still, the only errant movement that of the breeze if there is a breeze, the rustle of small animals through the leaves, and the two Marines charged with lowering the base commander's flag for the night as Taps plays them out.

The bugle call rolls through the barracks yard where the wrestlers unlock one another and drop their roles as Emperor or Recluse to rise together as proper Marines at attention. Observers jeer from open windows, their fight spoiled yet again, and chide the others for being caught outside in the half-light—their inattention to the hour. Fix your posture out there, you hard-charging heroes! They stand in the courtyard and face the same general direction for they cannot see the flag past the surrounding brick buildings. The bugle plays on, stretching sound, drawing out each blow like a shadow over sunset. Laughter echoes down the walkway and across the grass. They steady their breathing to stand impossibly still. Oh, don't flinch now—an anonymous voice from afar. Another shouts that he's heard enough—how about we lock it up and show some respect for the dead? Right, respect for the dead. Taps plays on—an appeal to quietude. The joking stops

though its echoes remain. Twenty-four notes hang over a chasm of rest. Marines fidget in the yard, caught and well-taught, unable to break attention during the somber song of the bugle, and they begin to flex their muscles in response to the shouts and jabs of their peers, pressing tight their lips, clenching teeth and swelling their necks, fossilizing—arms embedded in their sides, fingers coiled, thumbnails buried in the seams of their trousers—prolonging this flinch through that note or that blench through this note as if Taps were a proper song and a gradual hardening of the body the only befitting dance.

With one long rest and a quick call from the horn, Taps will end, and the Marines will release. Taps will end, and they will charge from the yard in a savage attack against those who issued taunts from barracks windows. Taps will end, and they will reflect on the dead and march virtuous to their rooms to prepare for the morning's run with ice over knotted muscles atop crisp sheets in single beds. Taps will end, and they will go lax where they stand and imagine themselves looking out at their ridiculous bodies from a barrack's room window, standing, just standing out there and staring numb into bricks, and they will echo the laughs of the others and they will imagine Taps playing again—the soft blows which signal more than the end of another day—and they will take care, next time, to note the hour of the eve.

Military Town

You know you're in military town because you're a comfortable walking distance from a barber shop which is only ever a stone’s throw from a tattoo parlor which is a spitfall from two identical bars, a gentlemen's club, and—there you go—another barber shop which starts the series again with some variation to account for the occasional pre-owned car lot offering low-interest military loans or a storage facility touting climate control, night watch, vacant units, stainless locks for sale. On the day you arrive the place seems at once timeless and temporary and all too familiar.

A decade after your enlistment you will find yourself back in military town observing anew, passing through on your way from someplace you would rather have stayed, on your way to someplace you would rather already be. Fertile grounds. Nostalgia blooms. You’ll find your favorite barber, there—or was it across the street?—where you paid for the same haircut every Sunday and grew to crave that skin-tight fade the way a summer sheep longs to be shorn. The soft scream of a landing jet. A traffic star at the five-way intersection. Those two guards at the front gate who stare while you turn your truck away from base, watching you, following close the way they never would have when you wore their same hairstyle.

In Jacksonville, North Carolina, which some ironically call Actionville, you could have your hair cut by a new barber every week for a year, though with employee turnover in military town, you learn this experiment could last indefinitely. Enlistments sweep through like seasons. All the elements slow and freeze and drip and melt or turn gray and break off in the wind or otherwise transform as they drift down and meander gradually toward new ground, and the place—miraculous—remains as it was. If you wanted to spend a full year moving your things across Havelock, North Carolina, which some appropriately call Have-Not, you could lock your

belongings behind the roll-up door of a new facility on the first of each month, storing your way along Route Seventy, boxing your belongings straight through military town.

On your way in you see *welcome home* messages hand-scribbled in dark letters on unboxed cardboard and poster boards, finger-painted in neon brights across twin-size bed sheets tied by their corners to the galvanized arms of highway fences, interlocked, side by side, and overlapping along the highway. They call by rank to those missed and returning. You will not see these messages when you return some years later, as you will arrive after an unspecified time near the end of the week when in lieu of the above welcome you will find those same highway fences littered with the hard-to-reach threads and tacky memories of homecoming—bits of duct tape, twine, and tattered yellow ribbon where welcome words once signaled from between bolted metal signs which read *all banners and signs will be removed every Thursday*. Forgetting, a necessity of returning. Make way.

In the mapping, in the cut-throughs and alleyways and side streets, there hides some irrevocable expression of you—symbolic and anonymous—a you lodged in place and dislocated in time. Addressed there is a self—future and former and suspended—knotted up and refusing to come undone from the paths of all the others who come through and go on, who wend about and stay or are taken away. When you first find your way through military town, you and your route are separate and distinct. Then the roundabouts and shortcuts and offramps become you, bound up and waiting for you to drive back the loops and unwind the self and recollect the slack in the flagging road. To find one's way is to discover oneself. To revisit is to remember.

You will end up, like a character fleeing the dawn of apocalypse, at the mall. As you had while you were stationed, you will absently haunt the bookstore, photograph their central display of Marine Corps literature, reflect upon how little has changed. You will make no purchase. When

you make to leave an employee will ask if you need help finding what you are looking for. You'll use the word perusing and say you are not looking for anything specific, and when you receive no reply you'll go on to mention that a full decade has passed since your last visit although it might as well have been a year—laughing—or a day with how little has changed. All kinds of things have changed, the employee will remark in defense and with convincing sincerity, like the music department, for example—pointing—which used to be over there, and over here—see—here is where fiction used to start.

The bookseller's conception of change, though site-specific and comically scaled, fundamentally compliments your own. Do you see? All those café tables where there was once classical composition, the middle of history where fiction used to end. The ideas are so close—interchangeable, even—even if the whole layout is different.

Nothing stays the same shape forever. In the parking lot outside the bookstore you will approximate the space where you sipped your first espresso. All that new bitterness one night in the backseat of hers—a friend of a friend who talked fresh of divorce, who told you to never order a cappuccino after noon, who taught you the meaning of the phrase faux pas, who unbuttoned her jeans for you and begged you to slip your fingers inside. I want to kiss you, you told her. With coffee breath? Here, she said as she reached across your seat and took you by your stiff wrist, turning and shifting her weight to free her legs. Let me help, she said as she slid out of her jeans and slipped her fingers over yours and touched herself with your hand. She built up her breath, cursed and bit into your shoulder, and she smiled with those satisfied, faraway lips. She spoke into the rim of her empty cup about solitude and the drawing of papers, tremendous uncertainty and the wait and a formal separation, and him—a soon-to-be ex-husband overseas—a false step. Oh, she said. You didn't know. You will revisit the parking lot during daylight, though you will

remember the space after sundown. Periodic darks rushed to fill the void beneath the streetlight. Shadows punctuated by sudden brights. A halogen bulb struggled to break night above her car.

You will leave the parking lot, leave military town as before, before an overhead light can flash and flicker on and off and on with some irregularity. On the day you arrive, you drive without aim, taking it all in—this vague and familiar place, your new home. You count more than a dozen welcome signs as you enter from the highway, one storage facility advertising an upcoming auction on derelict units, four identical barbershops, and the rest. Years later, you will take that route in reverse, hug the outside lane around the curve of an onramp, roll your windows down to let the speed take your hair—growing and graying. Take note of how it moves. Shake it out in the wind. Try to catch a loose strand as you drive. Run your fingers up and back and down the road and through your thinning memory.

Fair in Love

Your roommate walks in on you touching yourself. You lurch, shut your pornography, throw a top sheet over your lower body. He doesn't flinch, your roommate, who also seems immune to sleep. He grabs a beer from the mini-fridge while singing out a couplet from a popular running cadence—Born in the woods, raised by a bear / Double set of dog teeth, triple coat of hair—before he asks, anyone famous? No, you say. Well, maybe. Don't want to know. He was in Iraq while you had your own room. You struggle with his company—the jokes and nonchalance, the bed creaks above in the night. He sits at your side, cracks his beer, snatches your foot through the sheet. I can leave, he offers, if you need to finish.

What a thought—what a guy—but you couldn't if you tried, the easing of embarrassment your current and sole objective. Imagine a time past this time, a time before you were so literally and unalterably caught with your pants down. If only your arousal would subside. If only you could straighten up, speed-dress, leave to some quiet and familiar place—cab of your truck or the library floor with an old book, a warm meal, a paper cup brimming with espresso foam—or to a time when you were at liberty to be left alone.

You're hungry, he says, so get out. Get up and go get some. Hey, I get it. You're young and frustrated and—it's so obvious—floundering in your sexual prime, damn near forbidden to touch any woman in this town, any body on this base. No action this month, right? When's the last time? Contrary to the wisdom of the cadence call—The first and the fifteenth we get paid / The second and the sixteenth we get laid / The third and the seventeenth we're all broke / Marine Corps pay is a fucking joke. Come on. Repeat after me. One, two, three and a quarter / I got a date with Staff Sergeant's daughter / Four, five, six and a dime / Told him I'd have her home by nine / Seven,

eight, nine and a penny / Staff Sergeant thinks I'm not getting any / But Staff Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, he's a sucker / He doesn't know that I'm going to…

Whoa, now. He tightens his grip around your foot and shakes your leg as he continues. Keep away from the ladies, killer. If you kids were allowed to make up your own ending, well, we could have us an inter-unit incident on our hands. You could be subject to non-judicial punishment—busted down. But I—boom!—lose your rank. We just—blam!—there goes your liberty. Not that the ladies are interested, devil. In you? No, you Marines are just alike. The dearests you leave in your wakes. Blood and fears, heartquakes and tearfalls when they ship you off and, oh, how you fail to package your love. All those one-way words. Tell us our letters get lost in the mail. We answer every call—we know you can make calls. You will try to say you can't make calls over there. What about Lieutenant's satellite phone? Have you tried to find a post box? Other spouses get calls and letters and emails. What about the computers on base? We know all about computers on base. We know you can sound off if you want, but you choose to fade in this radio silence. Over and out—but that's not what we say, is it? We say either over or out—over to wait for a reply or out to end communications. Everyone should know there is no over and.

An old story spread out across a few cadences. But it's all there in song. Listen for the ending and sing along—Staff Sergeant told her not to go downtown / Too many devil dogs hanging around / His daughter knew better and she went anyway / And this is what Staff Sergeant had to say. Your roommate slugs his beer, raises his volume as he sings—Three months later all was well / Six months later she began to swell / Nine months later, out it came / A mean little devil with a dog tag chain. The cadence goes on and repeats with little variation. He tugs your foot once more before he throws the sheet from your bare legs and laughs as you scramble for cover. Calm down, he says climbing aloft. You're not, no matter what they tell you, at war.

A Brief and Partial History of Attack and Defense

We brought troops in trucks, and they looted ordnance by the cache to improvise explosions along common routes. We armed and armored vehicles, and they added munition, buried devices. We spent millions on mine roller attachments, and they rolled out ten more feet of wire, moved forward their triggers, timed and remotely controlled detonations. We jammed radio frequencies, and they moved receivers from our radii. We trained drivers and gunners to detect disturbed earth, abandoned streets, and they camouflaged weapons in waste, carcasses, road signs, low walls. Disruption and obstruction down every road. We invented vehicles designed to explode, and they added material, shaped charges, directed their blasts to punch slag through steel bellies. We maneuvered with speed, developed a tact, focused and pushed through complex attacks, and they loaded their vehicles, brought us their bombs. We trained drivers and gunners to detect sagged suspension, speeds of approach, sole operation, military-aged men behind the wheel, and they quickened, trained and made militants of the unsuspected, the carpools, the youth and elders in the oncoming lane. We made mistakes, and they raised awareness. We developed procedures for the escalation of force, and they asked from some distance how we would know, how we could operate without knowledge of which among us posed serious threat. We perceived threat in everyone, in every place, and they continue asking.

The Smallest Scale

Military vehicles stream across the desert to safeguard supplies through northern Iraq. Combat logistics battalions provide combat logistics companies which provide motor transport platoons which provide marines who provide security for contracted civilians whose tractor trailers carry supplies more efficiently than even our largest rig, the Logistics Vehicle System or LVS (pronounced letter by letter, also called dragons for their age and size). We keep a few in our fleet, but we don't use the LVS much anymore. Instead, we drive High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles or HMMWVs (Hum-Vees, an aggressive reverberation in pronouncement—start at the back of the throat and drive the word straight through the teeth), Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles or MRAPs (Em-Raps, start anywhere and drive them straight through anything), and Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacements or MTVRs (six-wheeled tactical rigs known commonly as Seven-Tons for their maximum off-road payload capacity). All vehicles are retrofitted or designed with armor plating and ballistic glass, and most have a rotating turret and a medium or high-caliber machine gun mounted atop the cab. My job is to keep these trucks running. Until something breaks, however, I ride atop the cab of a Seven-Ton. Secondary jobs often come with deployment, and jobs like mechanic are quick to become secondary duty. A marine is only useful behind a wrench when things need fixing. A marine (we know) is always useful behind a gun.

Routine stop (somewhere, Anbar province) so someone in the lead can stretch or relieve some other bodily urge. No buildings or trees or powerlines, (good stretch of highway) no abandoned market or train station or fuel station or burnt-out vehicles (to worry the eye). Few of our trucks idle behind like many more ahead, and the road runs straight to the horizon in either direction. I hang my feet into the turret, kick at my driver and shower him with fine sand. He throws a forearm, and I raise my boots, and he tells me to fuck off and that he's kidding and that

he loves me and that it's so obvious I've been sleeping and that he knows how badly I want to switch places for just a little a while (right?) and then again to fuck off (seven hours into a ten-hour drive).

My gun aims (empty sights on empty sights) at the nothingness (out on the road, the vacancy that floods the countryside with a startling and sometimes terrifying loneliness suddenly becomes the wellhead of its appeal) over the shoulder and into the barren air on the driver's side. Field of fire (an expanse of tired earth expressing itself through wrinkles in a seemingly infinite bed sheet, swathes of gold woven through fine-grade wool) void of targets. The world bends away to an impossible horizon (perfect and soft, impossibly cool, a pillow under silken skies).

My driver shouts for my attention as an MRAP and two Seven-Tons approach one after the other in the oncoming lane (the last three in our convoy). I unlock the turret and rotate my line of fire away from their path. Each of the three turret gunners waves as they pass, and I wave back before they disappear beyond the tractor trailers ahead (nothing on radio, follow procedure). We are the final truck, my gun the last. I spin the turret to the rear, lock in on the highway, train the barrel down to where the road (tucks beneath the blanket horizon) disappears.

Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF (War, or The War in Iraq, so say headlines). The United States military is putting on a different face (headlines again). To reduce the number of civilian casualties and begin to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people (the familiar rhetoric of another war), we are shifting our focus (helping more, hurting less). This is no longer an invasion (so says Staff Sergeant). The large-scale effort involves building a singular democratic Iraqi system of government capable of defending itself against terrorism. On a smaller scale, the United States military is helping to protect local populations by identifying and eliminating terrorist threats which may exist in and around local communities while training Iraqi forces to do the same. On

an even smaller scale, individual United States military members are carefully assessing each potential threat and following escalation of force procedures, or EOF (don't kill innocent people and create more enemies, foreign and domestic), to maintain security and establish stability.

Escalation of force procedures for convoy turret gunners:

150 meters—give hand and arm signals to the oncoming vehicle

100 meters—shoot a pen flare oblique to the vehicle

75 meters—use the M16 service rifle, fire warning shots at the road and oblique

50 meters—switch to the mounted turret gun, fire disabling shots into the vehicle's grill, hood, and engine block

25 meters—fire kill shots into the driver's windshield

No one can stare at empty highway forever (routine stop no longer, views gone static, tired eyes in trickery). I bunch a sweater around my neck and slouch in the turret, kick my boots over the buttstock, recline. My gun aims high (armored walls capture the pulse of the engine as it idles in heartbeat rhythm below). My driver relieves himself against a front tire. I fight to stay awake.

A flash in the distance (no, not a flash, yes), a flash on the ground or just above the road, a flash just off the roadside (differences between concrete and sand disappear with scale (all things very far or very close, indistinguishable)). The flash again and a shimmer (a spark of clarity in the haze of distance). A reflection, a pane of glass, an oncoming vehicle.

I tell my driver (oncoming vehicle) and he asks politely if I will fuck off. It's too far to know anything with certainty, but I begin to consider (unconsciously recall (perhaps) what I was trained to consider) that this driver may be taking a one-way trip, that our convoy could be its intended and only destination. I urge my driver to look back down the highway (oncoming vehicle), and I know he is looking when he sends up another slew of fucks and offs. Then we

volley our unknowns: Does it look weighted? How's the suspension in the rear? How fast is it coming? Would you drive so fast with explosives in your trunk? What if? Could the driver be late for work? Work where? What job? What job? Does that look like five-hundred meters to you? Well, is the car slowing? Well (standing, rifle slung across chest, arms waving, palms out, fingers spread wide, hands high (no one could hold them any higher)) what? It is going to stop, isn't it? Can he see (us? can he see) me?

On the turret's forward glass some marine from some previous deployment has drawn black lines in permanent ink (one small mark for each of the distances addressed in escalation of force procedures) to mark the meters. When viewing the highway through this glass, these markings overlay the road (an indication of scale), but when I change my point of view as I must to escalate force (to stand with high hands and arms as signals of warning for an approaching vehicle) then the overlay changes too, and I can never be certain when I return to the glass if the meters I am reading then are the same as the meters I read before. I ask my driver what he thinks of the meters, and he tells me he has my back no matter the meters (oncoming vehicle), and we exchange some fuck offs, and I raise my rifle.

The car (mid-size sedan, off white and boxy with dents in the hood, foggy headlights, tiny wheels) approaches still. I wave my rifle toward the roadside (the windshield cracked and glittered) to no effect. Broad shoulders in the driver's seat (though these may be accurate, the details surrounding the approaching vehicle are narrative inventions (a measure of distance between reader and character (the narrator here had no access to such (slow, detracting) observations) with or without the honesty of parentheticals)). The rest of the seats are empty (dark or indistinct (or otherwise described to slow the moment and signify increasing anxiety or danger or mystery)). Still (approaching (the car should read as amorphous and intangible and)) approaching. I sling my

rifle, raise my rifle, sling it again. I reach for a flare in the ammunition can at my side, the gun in its mount (oncoming (the distance) vehicle), the flare again.

I don't know (what to call) the distance between the bullets in the belt that hang from my gun and this vehicle's (glinting) windshield, the grill at the front of the car, or the (empty) road before. I summon (as in training) the word range. I imagine the vehicle is well within demobilization range, that the driver may have even crossed within windshield range, but I can't know for sure. He can't know (are we within signal range?) at all. I waved, gave those hand signs, but he can't know how close he might be to that last black mark on the glass, that final escalation (the floating bottom line) which says I am in range to do whatever is necessary.

Or he does know and he's testing that line to learn how close he can get.

Perhaps he's a decoy, a scout sent to our convoy to learn how close we will allow him.

Perhaps I've let him too close already.

Perhaps he's not a decoy at all.

Perhaps he's the payload and we're (already) within his range.

I drop into the turret, press the stock to my shoulder, lower my sights and aim straight through the driver's windshield (one last warning). A pen flare above the turret's forward shields (a red star straight at the vehicle, at the glass, the shimmer, the glare and shards of sunshine). It impacts the windshield, ricochets through the air in a winding arc and burns out in the sand after a bounce on the shoulder of the road (a child put several BBs into an armadillo). The vehicle veers into the oncoming lane (it began (a boyhood remembered (who asked for this?)) to bleed as it crawled away, and no one watched it die (so dense, the foliage)). The car screams (and this conjures too much with the armadillo (plated hide, the slow reddening of scales (an obvious correlation)), in writing, a big didactic flag), and it skids to a halt. I steady my gun (nerve) and pull back the

charging handle (a round in the chamber (memory, unfortunately, calls upon what it will when it will and assigns to us its own grand little significances which we may attempt to relay or ignore)), and I sight in.

The driver slings open his door and steps out of his car with hands overhead (his face in contortions). I train down on his chest. My driver (we assume) presents a similarly aggressive posture below as he shouts fuck off and what might be some translated equivalent. My thumb locks the pistol grip (the recoil will be minimal). My index finger settles the idling in the curve of the trigger (the shots will be automatic). Iron sights mantle my vision (the rear aperture brackets the world). The front sight post snaps into focus (a massive column, black and monolithic) before the silhouette of a man stripped of detail apart from his two long arms with wide hands (loud as mine had been) signaling above the tiny mark at the tip of my gun (high as they would reach) as if holding up the sky.

Sandstorm 1

One afternoon, the wind played the sand into storm. How fine, he told the wind as he coughed through his nose and spit orange onto carried airs. How fine these grains which grabbed at his hair and layered him. He watched himself grow thick like the earth in the sky. Winds raised a wall in the distance, pushed close and heaved as in breath or swell. Others brushed tired earth from their sleeves and reclined into a light sleep on worn cots under the cover of weeping canvas. Dust soured fluorescents, rusted fixtures. Some strange thing—yes—is building. He followed the strew, build, turn, a scaffold of shredded bricks tossed in the gale. We will soon have a great room of the outdoors, an opening through which to run.

He ran with a child's fervor, everything new and blind and heavy with solitude. He grew loud with powder on his lungs, grout in his lips. Shut him up! He unhinged and howled through his teeth. Inverted airs—shut him in with the wind! Surroundings made tactile and, after all that violent machinery, bored. The walls match the ceiling and—what décor?—the crown molding and carpet, every tiny space engrained and surging red. Toy trucks left scattered about. What decorum whipping past, and still we must unman the ground. Abrasion in fast forward.

Sandstorm! Sandstorm! Earth, and earth on tongue. Sandstorm! It is sweet, he collected. It is sweet and honorable, and the wind will put the sand to strange work for only a short while.

The Cleaners

A burst of cloth over shoulder where pants and shirts and rotten skivvies pushed sweat and powdered earth down his back. He waited in the fluorescent cool of a doublewide laundry trailer. Three weeks' mess in a mesh bag. Washers and dryers beat staccato behind a counter, their cords jigging other cords, extensions and power strips chained as electric daisies. His stains swelled, grew buff over camouflage, the digital whirled in dirt, desert pixels under bits of actual desert, set and static as visual noise. The laundry attendant, a contracted employee from Uganda, tapped the tip of a pen against the stainless countertop, advanced the line in Swahili.

Jambo! He stepped forward, deployed into line after line. Otherwise, what, he could handwash the filth in a bend of the Euphrates. No line at the banks. Drivelines, broken white lines, supply lines. This base to that. Line of sight, vision, of fire. Longitude. Show me latitude on gridlines. When a truck breaks down, is blown up, that vehicle is deadlined. Alright, Marines. Again, phone lines are down, whole base is offline. Another casualty? Something along those lines. Bad, bad timing. He wanted to call his fiancée, drop a line to his father. Top brass needs time to untangle details, tell it like story, one event before another. No status updates, no, no pictures of the dead online before dress blues, white gloves, corners and folds for a spotless flag. In order, now. Who initiated contact? Who returned fire? Timeline? Listen. It happened. Just. Like.

Two marines rushed into the trailer, dirty, jumped to the front of the laundry line. Hey, there. They toppled a plastic chair. Come on. He was standing, waiting, the very next in line. He held rank, patience, so many dirty clothes over shoulder, same as they held in their arms, same as everyone had on. He had others behind. No, this is how this works, he said. This is the line.

The two at the front moved fast. One looked back, took in the line. The other dropped a heft of laundry on the counter. Both gave it their eyes. The Ugandan national gave it his eyes, must have seen, sensed us—how tense—shuffled laundry slips, said nothing.

What we do is wait in line. We are each tired and angry and just. You can wait in line with us.

Together, the marines at the counter stood and faced the rest of the line. One stepped forward, arm extended, fist filled with uniform held balled and black where blood mixed with earth, stained and scorched fabric blasting through small gaps where fingers could not hold, fire and red where it bloomed with wet, unwieldy with shakes from hand to arm to chest as when holding the trigger of a crew-served weapon, automatic as if fighting, fighting the weight of some historic armor which would have been carried in more than one hand, borne with the help of an unnamed squire, lost now—even in deed—to history. There were eight uniforms in their pile.

He saw the color on them, dropped the laundry bag from his shoulder, turned out his palms. He may have said some small thing. What words? What line delivered would clarify enough? So many in line must have seen the color, seen the clothes before he spoke on their behalf, seen and said nothing.

He stood and waited and felt silly in his desires for stainless uniforms, a touch of order, the chance to hear a kindness from anyone back home, the right words, a hot meal. He shared an early dinner with some of the infantry. They talked of boycotting patrols for their awful, awful logistics. Getting there's the worst. It's not the mission, they said. Firefight's a firefight. Combat, that part, can do. It's moving place to place in boxes. What are we supposed to… IED punches a hole… truck goes up like… clouds? Alternative: Let us fly high, jump out, chute in all quiet, get done what needs done, rendezvous after on foot. Drop us a line from the belly of a bird and we'll hook

it up, fly the whole route hugged up on landing gear if that's all we got. Keep your roads. Somebody ought to sabotage those deathtraps, blood busses, coffins, gurneys, body bags on wheels. Keep us off and keep your roads. They talked like this as they ate in the dining facility. Cornish hen was on the menu. Dinnertime, short lines. Breakfast brought a crowd. The two marines at the front of the laundry line stuffed eight bloodied uniforms into two mesh bags, handed them to the Ugandan national who took their heft with ease, slung them into a bin, called for the next in line.

Jambo! Fourteen hours until his next convoy. Jambo, jambo. The Swahili hello always sounded to him like the word jumbo, and he imagined a reality in which every contracted employee did exchange greetings of such grandeur. Hello! You are very large! You are a greatness! Hello! Fourteen hours to keep his roads. Jambo! Next in line. Jumbo, he said to the laundry attendant as he shouldered his uniforms and stepped forward to have them cleaned. You are not insignificant.

Dearest Marines

Our platoon receives a box of unused greeting cards which we use to say things we are not sure how to say to people for whom we are not sure what to feel. You use them this way too, cards and greetings. This is what they are for. *We're so proud*—when you are not though you are, in abstract terms, certainly not not proud. We never mind the abstract terms. We seek abstraction and we get a boxload, and we pick through greetings that do not not represent what we feel, and we select a few and scribble our names and send them back with love. With apologies, the greeting card box holds only so many variants.

Demonstration in a Throughway

A protest, we were told, or some type of organized demonstration in a throughway town. Our lead truck stopped which means we all stopped—forty or more military and contracted civilian trucks at standard dispersions along one of two paved roads whose four-way intersection served as town center. Through a communication relay consisting of fragmented radio transmissions, the hand and arm signals of turret gunners, and the recollections of low-ranking marines who leapfrogged information over short stretches of roadway between trucks, we at the rear of the convoy learned of this impediment—an apparent crowd which outnumbered, for the first time on any road, our platoon. We were still too far back in the lineup to detect any such vitality. While the foremost trucks dealt with the logistics problems presented by what was later reported as a dense and spirited assembly of moderate risk, we few staggered through an impatience and inactivity of a kind which made leaving the relative safety of an armored vehicle to explore a dried gully and the surrounding hills seem not just a reasonable act but an act born of necessity, perhaps of inevitability. If one of us were killed, we realized, by roadside explosives or by the sporadic gunfire of an indignant and surviving farmer—his wife and two sons, of course, killed collaterally during the early days—or by a complex attack planned and executed by any number of known militant groups in conjunction with the commotion or, in this context, the distraction which had caused the trucks in the latter half of the convoy to stop just where they had stopped, well, our needless deaths would be our own dumb fault.

I ran off the road and down a ditch cracking dried earth underfoot and tailing dust and gravel through the bed of a former waterway. I climbed up and onto the gully's opposite ridge, my rifle at the ready, helmet askew, where I stopped to right my headgear and scan the distance. With no immediate or visibly distant threat, I turned back toward the road to enjoy the view, and I aimed

my palm-sized point-and-shoot camera for a quick picture—my truck and candid driver some distance below, a dismal shot like hundreds of similar moments resolved in six megapixels and stored right there in my cargo pocket. My driver made his way along the road before our truck to meet half way with the civilian driver who was also on foot and backtracking the distance between his truck and ours.

In the other direction, beyond the gully and away from the road, some few empty sand hills invited a climb. After cresting the first and waving back to my compatriots with hand signals to the intended tune of *now you take my picture* which in retrospect and all likelihood must have been too small and specific to communicate anything at that distance, I realized the hills were neither entirely sand nor entirely empty as some were hills compacted with clay and filled to capacity, it seemed, with the dead—hundreds of graves bulging from their slopes, hillsides mounded and blooming with red and coffee-colored rocks in body-sized rings, each grave headed with narrow stones molded from the same hardpacked earth. I took pictures in which these grave sites recall the image of unattended flower beds but for the arrow-like peak atop each beautifully inscribed headstone which shuttles the eye from one stone to the next, up through their ranks, all the way up to the crown of the hill, through the photo's uppermost frame, and beyond.

When I returned to the road, I showed my pictures of the gravehills to the two drivers who stood where they met in the space about halfway between trucks engaged in a debate over which of them had the tougher job—my fellow marine primarily citing longer hours on the road, higher target value, and lower pay, and the civilian driver citing a lesser vehicle and light body armor and holding obstinately to his contrary position as a means of humoring the spirit of debate, probably, and thus more tolerably passing the time. My driver told me I should ask our interpreter to translate some of the script on the headstones, that is, he added, if we ever got moving again. Then the

civilian told us not to bother the interpreter because he could tell us what was written on the headstones because it's always the same thing written on every headstone, and no epitaph had ever said it better. And he shut his eyes hard as if struggling to remember. And he cleared his throat before he spoke.

Ye young and beautiful, the dust you tread is youth and beauty's dark and lifeless bed. The rose rejoiced to blush upon her cheek and health and gladness in her smile to speak, but cold consumption breathed upon her bloom and rose and smile swept withering to the tomb. Ye too like her shall fade and droop and die and close on dearest life a freezing eye.

Epitaph, he told us—our expressions must have betrayed our knowledge—is what they call the thing written on a headstone, so you'll just have to imagine it there, like a poem covered in moss, nearly wiped out from decades of wear, in the shade of an oak or some such tree, at the head of a girl's grave, middle of New Bern, North Carolina. He spoke with a seriousness I am unable to convey beyond an absence of description. And if you can picture those words inscribed as they are and will forever be, he told us, then maybe you too will see them written on the face of every standing stone.

I asked, by way of compliment, if he would allow me to record him saying what he had just said, the epitaph and the rest, and he rolled his shoulders and turned his chin to the hills and said we all ought to get back to our trucks. I agreed, but before we separated I lowered my camera and switched the function to video, and I told him I had a great memory, and I asked him to give me the epitaph one more time, and I promised him if he were to speak it slow and true the way he just had that I would never forget it, and he did, eyes closed again, making steady moves toward his truck, one step back for every other word while I followed with my camera in my palm capturing stuttered footage of the road and my boots as they stepped along to the rhythm of a

distant albeit serviceable recitation—the ever-epitaph. He told me he'd hold me to my word, might even quiz me if he found me hunched over breakfast in a dining hall or in line at the cleaners or halted out on the road again, but our conversation then, by circumstances outside of my understanding, was to be our only.

My driver and I listened to that recording over and again, and turned it even into a game of collaborative recitation in which one of us would begin with a single word, sometimes at the start of a line and sometimes at a random word, and then the other would recite a full line up to a similarly placed word after which the initiator would pick up and carry the line again to the next word in the measure and so on until we had relayed the length of the epitaph. It's not a poem, we would say in mock defense, it's a memory, legend, a piece of history. The piece became so ingrained in our everyday system of communication that, in a great hurry or through exhaustion or when in need of instant and uncomplicated camaraderie, one of us might just shout the first word of the epitaph and the other would reply with the last, and something very near telepathic would come over us between *Ye* and *eye*, and we would conjure what we might then have called the essence of understanding or of knowing and of being known.

Some months later, during post-deployment leave, my driver and I made a pilgrimage to New Bern, North Carolina to track down and bear witness to this stone which over anecdote and so much distance we had come to know so well—each having incorporated its mythos into our specific and otherwise unspoken appreciation of the other. We wandered much of the day through the cemetery in the center of town taking pictures under gated archways and reading through faded or overgrown stones, transfixed once by the sudden whirl of bats into the early evening sky. We found the headstone just before sundown, moss-ridden and timeworn and in memory of a girl, as described, and we found that the civilian truck driver had remembered the epitaph verbatim with

the exception of the penultimate word in the first rhyming couplet or, in keeping with our resistance to discussing the epitaph in poetic terms, the second-to-last word in the first sentence—*lifeless*, as in *youth and beauty's dark and lifeless bed*. The phrase sounded so pedestrian after the fact. Of course her bed is lifeless—it is a grave, after all—but, as we verified the words etched there at the head of her plot, youth and beauty's bed is also *dreamless*.

Marines, especially those deployed, quickly become familiar with the idea of lifelessness. If initially resistant to the concept, we can at least claim some familiarity with the practicalities of death—identification tags stamped and laced into our boots, last wills and testaments written and signed. Lifelessness had become a tiresome inevitability. Dreamlessness was, to me, a fresh take on nonexistence, and I began to work through what I spoke of as a necessary recodification. *The dust you tread is youth and beauty's dark and dreamless bed*—dark and dreamless.

We had gone in search of the source—the epitaph in its intended form—in search of the words we were sure we had already known, but with our discovery came the realization that we had known something different—a singular difference in wording—and within that single difference we discovered differences of our own. My driver and I disagreed on the importance of this revelation, whether the change, as I experienced it, from *lifeless* to *dreamless* was, in fact, a kind of revelation, and what, if revelatory, this new language laid bare. I proceeded through the lasting implications of dreamlessness as distinct from lifelessness. Though easily understood as interdependent, the terms are not at all synonymous. Does not a loss of dream seem more significant than the loss of life? My driver, my brother, my confidant and friend—how suddenly difficult it had become to call him a friend—killed my line of inquiry there with claims of simplicity and unmitigated understanding. Enough already—to him the epitaph remained just as significant and immutable as when we had first heard it in that space between trucks on that

nowhere road all those months past. Nothing's changed, he insisted, when the inability to live implies the inability to dream, although the alliteration in the stone version, as he put it, was a nice touch. *Dark and dreamless.* Or did he say it was touching?

I ran the whole way back—a short sprint down a desert road—and my driver and I made it back into the cab of our truck before the civilian driver made it back into his. He gave us a big wave as he climbed up, and we waved back from behind the armored windshield knowing he could not have seen us at that distance. I replayed my secret recording of the epitaph for the first time, and my driver and I began our individual commitments to memory which would evolve into our aforementioned and as yet unconsecrated game. We passed the time that way until the convoy pulled away from the gravehills and processed toward the center of town. Our drives proved so often so eventless that we considered ourselves lucky for this chance encounter with a protest of some magnitude. The convoy followed course and, as our truck approached the storied site of the assembly, we shared our excitement with rifles and cameras at the ready, our forefingers light and busy with anticipation. We picked up speed and echoed the low hum of our tires against the road as we rolled into town. The tail end of our convoy passed at standard dispersions between darkened homes and storefronts, around piles of trash spilling into the restful streets of a ghost town, and between four quiet corners at town center where three civilians—two young men and their mother, perhaps, cloaked in black—waited to cross the intersection.

Parallel Search Processing

We find ourselves considering appearance. Studies overcast fields of visual perception. Like figures assemble among nonspecific structures. We go on and on about distinction. An array of distractors will camouflage targets. Common tasks of visual perception include, for example, selecting ripened fruit among leaves and branches and varicolored bruises, spotting a missing child, or reading. Identification is primary to conversation. Top-down processes dictate the effectiveness of visual search within complex scenarios. Prior exposure to visual stimuli greatly increases the likelihood of real-world recognition. We read body forms between buildings, pick them out like fresh fruit from dying trees, or put them down like children. We are talking about conditioning for pre-attentive observation. Imagine the difficulty of discernment without precedent. Exposure dictates all accessible intentions. Individuals lose nearly all definition in uniformed context. This is us opening a dialogue on extrospection. Lateral masking obscures similar entities in close, close, close proximity. We strive always to see the missing, the asemic, or the under-ripe on the limb. Certain visual acumen translates to social awareness. The word veteran will continue to skew our discourse. Militants appear civilian. The word terrorist. The word objective. We describe the pop-out effect as phenomenon, feature integration as theory. The eye expects differentiation. Point out the aggressor among the innocuous. Distinguish the unafflicted from the unknown.

Natural as a Sigh

It is difficult for you, when they call it a theater of operations or, more dramatically, a theater of war, to see yourself as more than a player. These orders are your stage direction, and this base and that town and the roads between and the trucks that carry you along, your stage. Places, everyone. Heavy machine gunner, your supporting role, a practiced performance at once coveted and reviled—some say cursed—cast, adapted, and produced over and again and played variously since the humble beginnings of theater itself. Line. Your getup doesn't help. Line.

Your driver tells you his mother stabbed herself six times in the chest with a flat-tip screwdriver while he was home on pre-deployment leave. She'd never been very good, he says, at sobriety, and the littlest things would send her off the wagon, so to speak. He had just finished changing a bulb in the domed fixture above the dining table, and they were discussing the logistics of shipping an ice-cream cake over for his birthday. That's when she picked up the flat-tip, he says, with two hands and started punching it into her chest and tearing these big red holes in her t-shirt. He grabbed her wrists and shook her to the floor, and she lost consciousness. You react with muted physicality. He had been drinking too, but he picked her up and laid her across the back seat of her sedan. She doesn't weigh much, he says, and we only live a few blocks from the hospital. This is where you break the monologue with vague sympathies. Your driver tells you his mother didn't die, but it was quite the traumatic experience. I saw her nipples, he says. He had only told that story one other time, and Staff Sergeant asked if he needed to see someone and talk it out and take a psychological evaluation and maybe stay back with another platoon and not deploy to Iraq or if he could tighten up and take his pack and board the plane like the rest. The show must go on. I've been having nightmares, he says, I think because my birthday is coming up. This is where you come in again, sympathetic, with a question about the kinds of nightmares he's been having. He

spent that night in a hospital chair, his mother's blood browning his jeans. The following morning, he slept in her bed. His leave ended before his mother regained consciousness. She was still in the hospital, he says, when we got on the plane in Kuwait, but Staff Sergeant told me word came down that she was all right, though I still don't know what that means, word came down or all right, and I still haven't received a letter from her, and I keep dreaming about this package that arrives on my birthday. This is where you finish the scene dripping with empathy, and the lights go down on the word melted.

The production enjoys an extended run, and your part evolves beyond the act. You no longer recite your lines but exhale them, natural as a sigh, and you find it difficult to imagine your next role or to recall who it was you had been looking for, what else you saw in yourself before rehearsals began. The public will begin to see a character in your face. The theater is dimly lit, and it is difficult for you to track your position by the movement of their eyes. When the houselights come up, step forward and take your bows and be grateful the roses and the poppies are not falling for you.

Sandstorm 2

It grows along our HESCO barrier, slow wall against fast wall, sand creeping aside and over like vine-spread in time-lapse. We are being fortified, reinforced by nature. Now would be a great time to ATTACK but sand in storm does equalize, deathlike, does send us and them into places good for hiding lest we allow our bodies worn thin, red wind. Perimeter walls grow thick and low and ramped and knolled and calling. We no longer prepare for EGRESS. This land builds upon itself, subsumes any still thing, creeps in and encourages stillness during storm. If I run, I may stay above, may keep from what has come to feel entombment. What ancient barrier? Walls turned inclined GROUND. What perimeter? I may run into another who runs. He may stop for me. I may stop for him—just perception, a shadow before my nose, his voice with wind, in mine his breath—we are out of it. FRIEND or foe? We have only a storm-length to decide. We have only to notice this erosion upon us.

Objects in Space

Laid out on the flatbed after one leg of a two-day convoy, all I wanted was sleep. I settled, instead, for a few hours of stillness—flak folded under head, rifle pillowed between thighs—all too glad to partner with any state south of attention before tending again to the needs of the road. Others ran off to chow or to the cots set aside for our platoon or else they stayed up in good company and talked their ways past. I drifted my sights through the night. An orange glow muddied the rest of the base on one periphery where diesel-fueled light rushed like flood waters to taper and lap at the perimeter wall where we had parked our trucks in convoy order. All artificial light was given to darkness over the wall beyond which shone only the brilliance of cosmic light—an immense darkness punctuated by stars so convincing in their proximity that I had to continually recognize them as celestial non-entities and not some more immediate terrestrial concerns. I had never seen a constellation reach down and touch the horizon, parallel it seemed, as if it could scoop up the sand or step down and charge me where I lay. Above swirled gasses so aroused in their ignitions that the blanket blacks and pinhole whites with which I had come to associate the night sky seemed to fraternize as if churned into the most captivating grays—gunmetal and smoke. And my fellows on the ground—caffeine carry them, sync their motivated hearts and call their cadence on—were slow that night to leave me with this newly sacred view. Someone was shouting something at me about food. My driver came to my defense.

He's sleeping. Chow's on, Corporal! Sleeping, as in not to be disturbed. You sleep when you're dead, killer. Wake him and you'll see a killer. Frag out! Don't play like that, and where would you get a frag grenade? You want to know the truth, then poof, uh-oh, I'm about to blow, drop a beat on this fool, I'm too cool for your brain, kick the chains, if you really want to know, say go, and I'll show, rock a flatbed beat, hits deep like a bass kick, face it, I'm dope, dope, I'm

about to blow, start the truck, give a fuck, go on light the engine up and watch me kick it, switch it, Haditha style freestyle, oh, oh, oh, kick a beat, with the diesel I flow, flow, flow, son! Wow. And that's just a little taste of what I got in the chamber. Bravo, bravo, but how about we fuck off with that anti-lullaby so maybe the man can close his eyes and catch a little sleep. What, no one wants to hear my Em-Raps? No, not now, not later, and while we're dishing honest criticism here, no one wants you to call them Em-Raps. Come on, now, I work hard on my music. Very well, and if you can't sleep then that's on you, but don't subject everyone else to your discount midnight hip-hop. Who's everyone else? Everyone else who can't sleep. Discount? Fire sale. Who else can't sleep? Oh, not you, well then good, tell me it's a rumor because Staff Sergeant is looking to chew your ass for staying up all night and then nodding out on the road like we hear you've been doing, swerving into the oncoming lane, dreaming and driving. Got fools out here dropping dimes, calling me out, so it's like that now. It's been like that. When I haven't crashed a truck yet. Exactly, not yet, and you haven't eaten yet either, so let's go get you some hot chow unless you want to repeat a cold bag of tuna for dinner. Oh, yes sir, I'm gone with a salute and a mic drop and a thank you and sweet dreams to you, Corporal!

I returned a salute without turning from the sky, trailed my fingers across the night and let my hand drop to the cool of the steel bed. There exists a tired so total that it eclipses all other sensations, a tired wherein even a desire to sleep becomes something present yet unchangeable, attached yet untouchable—the would-be shapes cast upon the ground if exhaustion could block enough shine to form shadows. I began to lose the sky as I lost the distant arguments of others, the deep hum of heavy equipment, generators sputtering between tents, canvas doors flapping open, closed, open over treble-high music and lyrics in falsetto and laughs escaped from bunks through machine-conditioned air to phase out through a temperate desert and drift into ambience.

I nodded out for a moment before the bed caught me and sent chills. One compulsory shake and I found myself back in the realm of the sensate. Then as if beamed from below and cast against a dark vaulted ceiling there came one point of light—a brightness, impossible and spirited, a tiny wavering speck calling out for attention, a tear, a rush, a shimmer broken off and differentiating itself from the other visible layers of universe, distant and unconcerned as a flash in the firmament, a burn, a crash, vivid and strayed and alive in dozens of lines torn into the night like a quiet violence, a private performance on the stage of the ether, burst and outbroken and animated in air.

Well, hello, little light. How like a star you seem, yet how close you must be. Or are you very far? How like some craft you hover and yet how quick your appearance, how forceful your stops. From where? Can you say? Can you write it on the airs? Will you go very soon, and where will you go when you leave? As quickly as you have arrived, surely you will be quick to go. With a trick of the eye and a dash of alien strange. Anyone? Anyone else? Anyone else see this moving star right now? All you need to do is look up. A lofted flare caught in a current. Phosphorescence for its own sake. Or a drone, perhaps. Are you being controlled? Are you one of ours? Or no one's, then, but hopefully your own. Bioluminescence gone rogue. A star wrestling with its newfound consciousness or chasing its long-lost conscience. A fit of celestial sentience. A shining mythology not yet embraced. Hypothesis? Let us make an educated guess, you and me.

The unknown point flickered, darted and sank, moved into and out of the black of space, zigged, dimmed and shone bright, frittered, and in the flashy manner of its emergence, of course, it disappeared. I lay searching the speckled sky for a short while before company returned. Creamed spinach splashed against my hand as it fell to the flatbed followed by a rifle and then my driver who hoisted himself over tire treads to join me on the back of our truck. I wiped my hand on my hip while he held over my chest a rigid paper tray—sliced lamb au jus sectioned from diced

potatoes and the remaining spinach. I sat up with the tray and began to eat. I asked if he saw—just up there—what I had seen.

You're welcome for your dinner, your highness. Yeah, the flicker. Couldn't miss it. Saw one of that kind last deployment too but didn't feel the need to speak to it. Sounding off like some lost woodland child hoping the fairy lights will guide him back to his village. Saw just what you saw, for sure, but sure didn't see it the way you saw it. You know, you can't go back to your village, little boy. Don't recommend the spinach. Not so sure it's spinach anymore. But you'll need your strength. The fairies out here, you see, eat lost boys for dinner. Don't teach you that back home, do they? And the fairies way out here in the middle of the desert in the middle of the night like this, those fairies are always the hungriest. They were all out of bread, so fuck off and maybe get in there yourself if you feel like complaining. Stale anyway, so they say. It's always on its way out. Alien, you imagine, or were you guessing maybe it was unmanned aerial? Well, now it's gone and you're a terrible scientist. Some of us say they're carnivorous desert fay folk but, you know, whatever helps you sleep.

I ate the lamb and tossed the tray. My driver and I laid back and shared body armor for a pillow. I watched the sky and listened as our exhalations grew loud and began to fall into rhythm. He told me I looked lately like I was maybe a little overwhelmed, and I asked how I might look if I were appropriately whelmed. He said I had to know—right—that he would have my back no matter the trouble to our front, no matter—listen up, this is serious—no matter if it came from outer space or around the corner or from a fairy village out in the middle of a dead-black field or down some nameless nowhere road, and I affirmed his assertion not as a fact unalterably known to me but as a truth wholly and at times exhaustively experienced. I don't care, he told me, if you know it or experience it or whatever you call it so long as you heard me say it and you keep that

shit with you. Keep it where, I didn't ask, and for how long? Countless points of light began to converge. A diesel engine cranked and came knocking to life somewhere further down the line. My driver slept unmoved beneath bleeding stars and slow-growing twilight until headlights shot in and threw off the night and asked us to rally for another drive.

First Contact

The first time you take fire you hesitate to return because you cannot identify the source. You know which side of the truck—driver's where two rounds plink-plinked the door quick as mean knocks—but you don't know whether they came from the houses near the road or the houses beyond, the bushes or the downed palm at the river's edge, or from the hills beyond that. You had music in your ears. A breeze shuttles sand across the street in waves. You study topography from the turret atop your truck which sits high in the middle of one intersection blocking two small roads near the Euphrates. The rest of the convoy passes through. You shoulder your gun to present an aggressive posture as you were trained to secure against further attack. You wait in the quiet and wonder if the sounds you heard were fire in truth. Earbuds hang. Audio files shuffle. You forget what song was playing—details, details—though you never listen closely enough.

Your driver seems more certain, says he saw no muzzle flash but heard it sure as anything and asks with some sarcasm if return fire is in order—warning shots, maybe, something high and hard in that general direction. You ask if he can verify the impacts, and he laughs a little too loudly and lowers his head and asks why you're not returning fire. You ask if it could have been rocks, maybe rocks thrown by kids, some kids hiding now, hiding and giggling violent belly giggles, rebellion and adrenaline all over, covering their mouths and holding themselves crossed behind a low wall, flitting and kicking up more little rocks to reload their small arms. Don't you remember? You threw rocks all the time. You threw rocks just because. These rounds, you say over the stock, over the hills, can travel two miles. What distance. Shoot low, your driver shouts into the rattling dash, or pop a flare to scare them off or light up the whole damn road—who cares?—but we can't just sit here and take fire. Another convoy truck passes. What little noise apart from those plinks.

The engine idles and the latch on your ammunition box chatters as you scan the distance for cover. From where would you fire? Then, flashes atop a small hill beyond the river, the plink of a single round, the crackle of others passed, faint echoes of fire from the houses across the street. The chatter of the ammunition box. The idling of the engine again.

You raise your rifle and sight in. A dark rise on a bright hill—the origin of flashes.

Steady, exhale, return three rounds. A truck passes.

You take in a breath, adjust, exhale another two rounds. No visible impact, no return fire.

The last of the trucks drive on and up the road as the gunner atop beckons and spins in her turret. Your driver knocks your boots—convoy's up, let's go, time to roll. The hill remains. The dark rise remains. Your truck lurches and rolls, and you begin to lose the rise, but you lower your aim and unlock your turret and spin to keep sight of that dark target as your truck pulls off and away from the Euphrates, from the houses, from that intersection and down a narrow road in the wake of the convoy. You wonder if two good shots could have done it—three poor ones? The hill shrinks and begins to dissolve into a vast country which you will later simply refer to as over there. Feather trigger—a few plinks from the rifle when you could have switched to the automatic, held the trigger and dumped the belt over there and been sure. Looking back is a tough view, the past a range of such vague places. Your earbuds dance against your chest. The wind picks up, and your gun rattles in its mount, and you hope an uncomfortable hope that another flash will flash from that dark rise on the bright hill before you are too far to tell, before you are too far to tell a proper story—details, a good story needs details—of that first time you took fire.

Kind of Combat Action

After his truck hit an IED—or does the explosive device hit the truck?—he came to the realization that there could exist many different kinds of combat action. There was an aggressive kind like in the cities and in the movies where Marines kicked down doors with practiced efficiency to clear, clear, clear house after house down the whole of a street—action initiated. Then there was a more passive kind of combat action that took place far from the cities and about which they don't make so many movies wherein marines trucked supplies through industrial complexes and farm lands, along tired railroutes and through mountain towns horrific with vantage, down dirt roads and unmarked trails and potholed highway after no-name highway until suddenly they could not—cue the explosion—action accepted.

He drove third in a line of twenty-two convoy vehicles. He wore ballistic eyewear and a helmet, neck guard attached to the flak jacket about his chest with armored plates at the breast and back and ribs, groin protector snapped and flapping over fire-resistant camouflage which covered him all the way down to his steel-toed boots. He buckled himself in the bullet-proof cab of the MRAP for a quick run to Haditha Dam and back—nothing new. He followed the road against the flow of the Euphrates, aburst with greenery—palms like areal fireworks in celebration of life over the river. He steadied the wheel and fought frequent touches of apathy and complacency and boredom, fed side-talk to his passengers—chatty Lieutenant, sleeping-again interpreter—and sent a tiny prayer of vigilance to his gunner above. There is no higher power than you—legs dangling through the turret hole in their roof—you up there with iron sights and those fifty-caliber belts. He maintained standard dispersion—four or six imagined vehicles between his and the vehicle ahead—and followed at the designated distance, followed the vehicle in front of his and the broken shoulder of the highway and the scratches and scuffs in his windshield which seemed to float above

the ribboned heat like phantoms from the dead face of the road. He followed straight through an improvised explosion.

A device blew—just like that—and the truck kipped and bounced and took a nosedive into a hole in the highway. His vision went bad signal like chewed lines, his mind in bad time—slow heaving electric thoughts. His legs smacked unregistered beneath the dash. He found himself low in his seat—a posture he might have taken while trying to sleep—chin tucked into the throat of his flak, a knee wedged between the steering column and the wheel, his helmet cocked low over his brow. Bits of roadside shot high and rained over the MRAP, and he mistook the sound of falling rubble for incoming rounds—enemy fire. The rocks dinged and pinged from steel and glass. He clawed the door for his rifle, struggled to unlock his knee, freed and beat his footing from the firewall, shot up into his flak and unbuckled. He was restrained—a hand upon his shoulder, a grip, a firm shake and a slap across the back of his neck. Okay, all right, everyone's up—Lieutenant's invaluable concern—can we push through? Vehicles one and two had stopped some distance ahead. He jammed the accelerator imagining only just then the possibility and trauma of a second explosion. A growl broke from beneath the cab. An electric knife bolted his knee, struck his tongue, blacked his thoughts. The vehicle went nowhere.

The blast took most of the engine compartment, a front quarter panel, and the front passenger-side wheel. Lieutenant radioed while they sat in their blown-up cab to wait for the wrecker truck on its way from the rear of the convoy and for the explosive ordnance disposal unit on their way from Al Asad—post-blast analysis—might as well get comfortable. He sat in the driver's seat with his hands for some reason on the wheel, and he recalled the last time they had radioed for explosives on the road.

A small town in Anbar province. Point-gunner spots a donkey in the oncoming lane—you

never find a donkey unattended—pulls optics and sees a wound badly stitched and bleeding down the poor animal's side. Oh, that's just sick. That's a dirty, dirty trick. Old jenny's too broke to work, would need to put her down anyway so why not take a few of those Americans out while we're in the killing mood? Lieutenant verifies at the halt, shares the gunner's suspicions, and calls it in. The convoy sits and waits for an ordnance disposal unit to roll up and defuse the jackass bomb—patient even at death's edge, nosing to graze at the shoulder of the road, shambling and bleeding for nearly two hours. The bomb techs finally roll up storied with how they got the call and rushed out and hit a roadside explosive en route with no casualties, although the IED majorly trashed an MRAP—a six-hundred-thousand dollar hit. They go through a whole lot of trouble and no little expense to bring a remote controlled robo-camera down the road so we can safely observe old donkey deathtrap out there, wounded and bleeding, sure, but she's not what the D—everyone's laughing already. Donkey, they say, is not what the D in IED stands for.

When a blast goes off, then everyone can be sure. This time it was a device. This story, he told Lieutenant, would not make for a humorous anecdote. This time the blast was so close they hardly saw it. With the damaged truck and the melting rubber and the rubble raining down and the absence of highway and the storm in his leg, there was no mistaking this time. His back tensed for one spastic moment before his knee distracted him again—a sharpness with voltage—and he opened his door for some air. Lieutenant opened his door at the same time, and a flurry ripped through the cab taking with it a lapful of papers—passenger and cargo manifests, maps and coordinates and evacuation procedures, color codes for flares and star clusters and whatever else a low-ranking officer might not remember while outside the wire. Lieutenant barreled out to chase those little white security risks as they whooped and looped and feathered along the road.

The gunner above maintained a field of fire past low-hanging powerlines—or was there a

loss of consciousness?—over an unworked pasture. The wrecker rolled up from the rear of the convoy, backed up to what was left of the front of the MRAP—so much steel bent in on itself or sent someplace too far to find. An abandonment. So much mangled machinery. The mechanic jumped out to make an assessment when Lieutenant rushed back and got loud about security protocol and some moderate risk of secondary devices, and they argued for a moment about how best to execute a tactical tow before abandoning the conversation in lieu of their specialized tasks. There were still the minor issues of dragging the deadlined vehicle back to base and deciding where its passengers would ride for the remainder of the convoy.

An agitation near the bone—galvanic—a hot bloom and collapse, a meddling pulse and shock, static on loop. He transferred with Lieutenant to a vehicle further down the lineup—Staff Sergeant's MRAP. A cautious walk between trucks made long by weighty and careful steps. The gunner and interpreter slept in the back of a Seven-Ton even further down the line. The ordnance unit showed up and cleared the scene—yes, there certainly was an explosion here—without further incident. The wrecker truck hooked up the wreck. The convoy resumed.

He and Staff Sergeant sat facing one another and spoke as little as they would have along any route, explosion or not. He laced his fingers beneath his thigh, cradled his leg to suspend his pain. Staff Sergeant smiled and unstrapped one kneepad, rolled up his pantleg and, in what may have been an attempt at solidarity, nursed the cap of his own knee. It only hurts, he said, because you are alive. A lesson on yet another kind of combat action which can only take place at a distance, many ragged years back or maybe just four to six truck-lengths behind, reducible to a single maxim, a one-off which humors levitation some time thereafter—action recognized.

Knee pads never made it out of his sea bag, packed beneath his rack along with some souvenir M16 magazines swiped by a friend at the armory, a bundle of new white boot socks, two

three-packs of ultra-thin condoms, and his only pair of American-made blue jeans which he washed only when they had become visibly soiled and which he put on night after night so that they became as easy and soft as sleepwear.

Just behind schedule, they rolled up and over the Haditha hydroelectric dam. The Euphrates river pooled on one side and spilled its regular route through narrow tunnels on the other—power on command—the ancient urgency of waters held and metered and mechanized, converted, wired, structured and strung upon poles and transmitted across vanishing distances in all directions. They stopped and staged their convoy on the spilling side where many locals, it seemed, had found their homes. Porches and balconies jutted out along the base of the dam, staggered up the retaining walls where concrete climbed eight-stories or more to the overpass where a road and helipad and towering mechanisms loomed before the weight of all that water. Apartments, each prised from a vital notch in the structure—living spaces with air-conditioners rattling their bolts from the face of the dam, wooden ladders linking ledge to ledge the whole way up, a day's laundry slumped to dry over spliced and sagging powerlines, satellite dishes of various sizes all aimed at the same point in the sky. He drifted into a walk along the riverbank, only just beginning to favor his good leg, and he scanned the quiet homes along the dam and the swirling river below. Fish broke through the turbulence as low-flying birds circled above. Lieutenant approached and summoned him for a talk. The ground gave with each step, pulpy with mist from the spillway. They swapped formalities over the rush of the river.

The after-action report will reflect the reality of events. Officers, he observed, tended to speak as if always running for office. What does reality of events mean? Location and what happened, who responded and how quickly—and this is important because I know you have your feelings about space constraints in the MRAP, how tight they can be in the cab and how difficult

this makes them to operate—whether or not personnel sustained injury, to what degree, and to what extent these injuries may have been prevented. What does that mean, prevented? Your limp. What limp? While it may be true that operating the vehicle is more difficult with knee pads on, we have personal protective equipment protocols in place for good reason, and that reality will be reflected in the after-action report.

So many kinds of combat action came to him on that convoy back from Haditha Dam. Combat action can be that latent and correlative kind common among war stories in which a Marine experiences an attack on his life after which he carries on with or without physical injury as an emotionally cavalier and relatively unfazed member of the armed service and then as a military veteran and civilian once again until maybe he suffers at some later junction from wounds invisible and suddenly flared and too-long untreated, source of attack ignored or forgotten or altogether unknown—action delayed. Or combat action can be of another kind entirely, like that old adage about the pen and the sword, like the written account of combat—after action—involving a marine wounded by his own negligence—action reported—or by his insistence on his own brand of competence—an inaction, maybe—or by an improvised explosive device set off before a vulnerable man who will shutter every time he stands and who wants more than the purple heart he might have earned and about which he will never inquire only to experience a chronic and bearable pain without understanding himself as complicit in its cause—action denied.

Their return convoy followed the southeasterly flow of the Euphrates. Powerlines and palms flashed past—dark splits and shatterings against an overbright sky. About the river, low-flying birds attacked fish over slow-moving waters.

Juvenescence

Children rush to the roadside with little English—mister, mister—and little arms reaching out toward passing trucks and up to their turrets for a chance to catch some exotic bite. Marines have been known to toss packaged foods. The convoy slows as boys amass along the shoulders. Turret gunners variously make themselves known.

The first lowers ballistic shades and leans into the hand grip of a mounted automatic to posture as he imagines a hard, unfeeling thing must posture in the steel cradle atop the lead vehicle of a United States military convoy—the pacemaker, tone setter, head of the snake, tip of the spear. He scans the crowd from a height which privileges the presence of adult males and denies the cries of children.

Check it, the second shouts into the cab with a request for his driver to pass along a granola bar or bag of chips or banana muffin or some meaningless thing to throw like a frag grenade. Come on—don't you want to see them explode?—all those kids jumping into and crashing against one another, a fan of falling fingers and open hands and skinny forearms, heads crying and knocking into teeny knuckles, fists and elbows flailing and crashing and breaking apart like fireworks for one small taste from the vending machine.

Another lifts the buttstock as high as the mount will allow, shoulders the automatic with one hand welded around the pistol grip, the other along the upper curve of the stock, his sights aimed close and low. He centers the front post in the rear aperture and whispers bursts like fire, his tongue flecking heat from between graveled teeth, his arms tense, flexing, tugging the stock to mock the stutter of recoil as he holds his sights on the montage of boys blurred and passing before his barrel, little excited bodies jumping and shouting in one noised and graphic and red-ribboned mass.

Do you think they're really this hungry, these kids, or is it the novelty of our foodstuffs? Isn't the risk of aggression—I mean, look at us—enough to keep them away? Would I, in their place, rush out for the chance to catch a packet of government-issued peanut butter? Why only boys? What do the girls do when the convoys roll through and the boys rush to the streets? Do they hide? Do they want to hide? Do the boys find the girls later and share a little taste? Are there boys who choose, like girls perhaps, to stay away from the road? Are there boys who must stay away? What reasons keep a boy from joining all these others in their hopes and hollers for attention, for some foreign surprise, some mystery item tossed at random? Peanut allergy, perhaps. More for the rest, none for the resting. What becomes of their bounties? Are they studied, exhibited, treasured? Are they cherished—for how long?—before they are consumed?

Truck five's gunner knits his knees to hold his bladder, and he expresses his discomfort to his driver who does her best to finish a bottle of water and thus provide for him a vessel in which to discharge as they continue through town. She passes up the mostly-empty bottle, and he scrambles down into the cab, stands on the seat, turns away from her, unbuttons his trousers, lines up the shot, hole to hole, and relieves himself with all the modesty he can manage after holding back for so many bumped and broken miles. Having endured the sound and smell of his urination at a proximity previously unknown to her and privy perhaps only to his future boys who will learn to do the same by observing their father's evacuatory functions at just such eye, ear, and nose level, she requests that he hurry—please, in the name of decency just finish pissing already and ditch that bottle as soon as humanly possible—a request he honors with seriousness and empathy, tightening and shaking off early, fastening the plastic cap with care, and launching the bottle overhead in a blind arc through the open turret. When he rises to resume his position atop the truck,

he spies a gaggle of children just down the road fighting for possession of—what?—he cannot imagine.

A handful of colorful candies bursts from the top of the following truck, a fount sprung in all directions like the ejection of nonessential elements from the blowhole of a great migrating whale which then recedes from its breach to maintain course on its passage underwater through tons of living micronutrition, unconcerned.

The following truck slows, swerves around children who kneel and sprawl to pick the most vibrant bits from the road. They horde colors in bundled t-shirts or pocket them fast and grab for more or unwrap their haul and hide them in quick mouths so they may request again—mister, mister—with puffed-up cheeks and pebbled hands. The gunner waves with warnings of safety, gestures urgent and kind. He sends open-armed apologies for obstructing their way. They part ahead of his truck and stand aside with arms crossed, glares in their impatient eyes, before they reconvene to continue their search for hints of color on the cheerless road.

Children loosen primary teeth on hard candies, toughen jaw muscles in chewy sweets, and continue as before—mister, mister—as another truck approaches, a high-caliber automatic mounted to the roof and aimed at the rear. The turret is unmanned.

Sandstorm 3

Even back home when the afternoon sky would darken like a four o'clock mechanism, there fell some magic with storm—walls of rain that split all outdoors into so many little rooms. I would lose myself in the corridors between. Where summer was the slow acceptance of heat, rain was the sudden acceptance of cool. Catch cool on the tongue, swallow, save it down deep for that fire before sunset. Still an open-mouthed child under rainstorm, I am said to be a Marine under sand. But storm brings sand like magic too, the greatest rooms a kid has ever seen—trap doors and all—though the desert drops walls more like summer than like rain, slow to show enchantment, stronger and longer to make children of those of us silly enough to run smiling through, rifles slung across our backs, collecting magic in the gaps between gritty teeth.

Touching

Across the desert, marines are touching themselves. This is happening. One is slouched against the rear wall of a guard post at the north-facing perimeter of a forward operating base unbuttoning his trousers to air out his barrel, to clear out his bore before his partner returns with a box of hot, cockblocking chow.

Another is scrubbing one out in the head, dribbles in waterdrops running, stretching, wrapping as tentacles down and about one leg, slipping, falling, layering the gelatin film floor and sticking there, straining his relief through drain holes, congealing, clogging, rising to the thin swimming surface of the shower basin to float, unavoidable—phylum: Cnidaria, subphylum: Medusozoa, order: Militarae, family: Marine—known colloquially as the great shower jelly, a little studied and highly debated subclass of gelatinous zooplankton indigenous only to American occupied regions of Southwest Asia, though commonly found in thriving populations aboard naval vessels and as dehydrated specimens among the lower garment wear of returning military figures, entirely unsuitable for taxonomical analysis.

This too is happening. In an office chair, one swivels a slow but full one hundred and eighty degrees from her computer, screen gone dark, headphone cord jumping as rope, carrying a throated chorus in stereo, a barrage of muffled climaxes, supercut, surging through and rippling beneath her imagination as she bounces wrist on thigh, fingers wearing thin her orgasmic dam until it can no longer hold the flow of her self-satisfaction, her solace, her anxieties slipping from goosebumped curves into faux-leather cracks and down through tunneled pores in the foam cushion beneath, sighing as she stands from her seat in release.

Two are swapping photos of their significant others, imagining touching or being touched by them or watching a touching, touching while watching them touch one another. An officer in

his quarters touches a lover in the past. A sleepless Private First Class touches the only person she travels home to see in the darkness behind her company armory. This, this and more is happening in the desert. Marines are touching themselves in uniform and, at times, without—naked, fleshing—the way you touch, maybe, when you touch yourself across whatever clime, whatever it is you happen to be touching when you make your time to feel.

Turnover

Heavy and fast, Seven-Tons brake using compressed air and a pneumatic drum—a counterintuitive system for shade tree mechanics, perhaps, who may be more familiar with the hydraulic disc brakes common to personal vehicles. A pneumatic drum system applies pressure to air-driven pistons designed to release the existing pressure of springs which, by default, hold pads against a drum's inner wall with enough friction to stop an armored vehicle and keep it still.

His first convoy stopped not far outside the wire. It was dark, but he could still make out the serpentine barriers behind, the concertina wire and warning signs bounding spotlights from Al Asad's gate. Two decrepit boxcars slouched against dunes, trackless and wind worn, mysterious in their displacement. He rode with a driver from another battalion, one foot out the door, already walking across the flight line, mind already set on American grounds. Training summoned a movement. Hey, he said, shouldn't we step out, do our security checks, five and twenty-fives, you know, scan for threat? The driver laughed, you go for it, hero.

His final convoy will be much like his first except he will drive with a stateside mind, one arm on the wheel, and his passenger from another battalion, green as a riverbank, will tsk-tsk over music from a battery-operated speaker, insisting they monitor the communication radio instead. Nothing ever comes through on the radio, okay, you use your eyes out here, look. He'll lower the music and close his eyes. Get a decent playlist together. He'll turn the dial to maximum volume. It's all about staying awake!

Depression of the Seven-Ton brake pedal initiates a letting of pressure. A sudden loss of system pressure, for illustration, means immediate and maximum spring pressure—a full brake. The building of pneumatic pressure means a possibility for release.

On his first convoy, he scanned the roadside through armored glass, from an open door, from the bottom step, from the nearby ground, slow to exit, careful not to set off the explosives surely concealed behind two-liter bottles, aluminum scrap, displaced earth, behind every suspicious rock or mound of rubble. He scoffed at his driver. Any of this could be an IED, and you, you're not even going to check! A laugh from the darkness, a flicker from a flashlight, then a hardy you-got-this from his driver whose nonchalance disturbed and, in a strange way, comforted. Just going to take a little nap up here, but you be sure to keep me posted on whether someone planted a bomb, oh, how great that would be, right on the road to the main gate, out in the open like this, right in our front driveway.

On his final convoy, he will wear his flack loose and his neck guard low. He will sometimes lose sight of the road, whoa, and his passenger will smack the dash as they skirt the shoulder. Hey now, he'll say as if he'd been alert all the while, it's time to wake up, baby, we're almost home.

The Seven-Ton's onboard air compressor uses a governor to maintain brake system pressure between a preset minimum and maximum by monitoring the pressure of the air compressed and stored in a service reservoir. When the service reservoir inevitably reaches maximum pressure, the governor tells an unloader mechanism to stop the compressor from compressing and storing more air, then stabilizes the reservoir by causing the system to purge—a sudden release of air and moisture from a valve beneath the cab.

On his first convoy, he scanned the distance in the dark while his driver mocked his vigilance from the cab. He rushed his silly-feeling search, found no immediate threats, and turned to climb back into the truck just as a blast of air erupted from beneath the cab. A sudden bloom of dust. The earth jumped and chased him off in a cloud. He flew up and into the cab and bounced across the seat on his belly, his legs dangling from the open door, his rifle clattering to the floor,

his helmet tucked against his driver's hilarious hip. They shook for different reasons, then he settled and smiled as he recognized the sound—the brakes, a release of air pressure, the valve beneath the cab—and they shook with laughter the same.

On his final convoy, most of his platoon will be through their last serpentine by the time his truck approaches the main gate. He will recall his first convoy scare and he will stamp his foot to the floor of the cab to wake his sleeping passenger. Brakes are out again, goddamn faulty equipment, here-we-go, look alive, brother, this is bound to be a bad one. He will hurdle their truck toward the concrete barricades, swerving along the road in an attempt, he will say, to slow the heaving beast. There's no way we'll make the serpentine at this speed. Best to kick it side to side, maybe, get the truck to turn over, skid to a stop. His passenger will scramble and brace for a crash with a an arm against the dash and the other at the door, razor wire building out the window, spotlights growing bright on their looks of belief and disbelief, confusion and panic and dread. He will speed on and ramp up the panic until he cannot help but to allow a smile to creep in, and he gently levels the wheel and applies the brakes. The Seven-Ton will slow as they snake between barricades toward the guard gate with chuckles and choice words, and, for comfort, the story of how he nearly gave himself a heart attack on his first convoy—IED checks, precision timing, the damn air pressure release valve. Come on, he'll say, you didn't really think the brakes went out. That's not even how they work, the brakes on these things. You should know, and you should start thinking on how you'll pull one on your replacement. You should have seen your face—fleeced white and lost like that one lame sheep trailing too far behind the flock. Let's think seriously about this now. What else didn't I know when I was you?

Ram Skull

We found a ram skull on the roadside. On a routine stop (the convoy, after long, allows for an honest stretch) a ram skull called to us. Flatland to either side, (expecting change) a roam through immensity. Black horns in the gleam, orbital eclipse, the mandible rogued (a finite stop, always). Quick! We lashed it to the grille with a bit of paracord—higher, higher—so the horns peaked like they would in charge, and we became the ram crew. Driver, our ram ship captain. Ram gunner atop with bone shard shells and (looking back) a shoulder tattoo which resembled the curve of ram horns. Clouds even look (in the pictures you take, the skull blocks the place where your own heads should be) like a ram absorbing the shock of another ram, (is it another ram?) or rather, another ram skull.

Clearing and Being Cleared

The dark of night was already yielding to the gray thrust of another day, that flint sky a sign of another ordinary, spectacular, and largely ignored ignition which, when seen, sparks the eye and unveils the tired mind and burns away every imagined shroud of exhaustion down to the body, skeletal, mechanical and functioning, maybe, yet faltering at the will of the self. A line of trucks processed through and onto base, each stopping to clear their weapons of ammunition. The front gate sparkled with orange hints of the rising sun. Unseen guards watched from behind concrete and plywood and armored glass above, probably rising from sleeplessness as was I, except their sleepless night had been steady, a night behind concertina wire and sandbags and a two-story rise and not a roving night in the cab of a tow truck set late in a line of moving targets. I stood beside our truck, idling, spotlights blinding the road before the gate, Al Asad airbase just rousing back to life over the walls. My passenger or—the position was mislabeled—my assistant driver wiped sleep from his eyes and quickly carried on with our morning routine, his magazines stowed in their magazine pouches and the barrel of his rifle aimed into the open mouth of a clearing barrel where he slung the charging handle back and let it fall into place—cleared—his weapon unloaded, the chamber empty as it had been over the course of our drive.

A well-worn groove—this reentry custom had become so familiar that it felt, like the physical mechanics of driving, as if clearing my rifle had become one more of my body's autonomic processes and not some more conscious repetition. Sand-filled oil drums—a clearing barrel before every base. We would park, get out, aim our rifles down, barrel to open barrel, unhinge magazines from magazine wells, and wrench back the charging handles to eject any live rounds of ammunition—weapons rendered chemically inert—the pulling of a trigger then only the slide and ineffectual snap of a firing pin. Standard practice when entering a US military base from

an area of operation. Also, to ensure safe operation on base, a clearing barrel before most buildings. Safety is paramount where fire is concerned—a truism known to every marine in vague terms and from the ghost stories of those who came before, those for whom safety was a lesser concern and who suffered socially after the unintended discharging of their rifles, humiliated in their demotion of duties and endless promotional stagnation while their former peers rose through ranks collecting honors at which they—the negligent—would never have the chance. Other apparitions include those who suffered discharge from service compounded with the shame of self-inflicted injury or—the ultimate punishment—an other-than-honorable death. I proceeded through the motions, aimed my rifle barrel into the clearing barrel with no ghosts of any kind on my mind, and something woke.

The muzzle sparked life into the dark and a brass casing spun from the ejection port as the pistol grip shot back into my hand and the bolt slammed to a stop. My finger jumped from the trigger. I understood the entirety of the event in an instant as if observing the actions of someone else from above, as if had been somehow inactively involved, as if recalling the emotional impact of a thing I had done once in a long-ago dream. The empty chamber—an exhale of fire. The ejection port cover hung open as if mouthed, as if shocked, as if hungry for another round. The order of operations was all wrong. I must have pulled the charging handle without removing the magazine, pulled the trigger with a live round in the chamber, discharged my weapon without intent right there at the front gate, a round fired directly beneath the guard tower. A second round failed to properly load, jammed atop the magazine, teeth of the bolt biting a brass tongue, that ejection port screaming. This is the chasm from which ghosts are let into the world. The only round I released while deployed—unintended. This will be the start of my suffering, my dissolution, my

discorporation. This is how I disappear—with shame and without explanation and by my own hand.

Stunned, holding my weapon still, passenger cleared and gawking—no doubt—from the safety of our truck, I scanned the height of the guard tower, rifle aimed into the clearing barrel, waiting for terms. A gate guard stared down at me from over a chest-high barrier. He may have been there the whole time, may have witnessed this—what he must surely term my negligence. I stared up at him with questions for eyes, and he stared back at me through sunglasses which, in twilight even more so than in daylight, lent him an inhuman air. His cool and silence and statuesque resolve weighted the morning and prolonged the moment and made for a dangerous mood like a visible moon during daylight. We watched one another as if both of us were waiting for some acknowledgement, perhaps, or for one of us to start a dialogue, to bring forward some accusation, to say some reckless, indicting thing. I could have. I might have told him it was an accident—the shot he had certainly heard and may have seen—though neither of us had access to language which could accommodate accident in these circumstances. Accident went out the year before I enlisted and since then the unintended discharge of a firearm would default to the language of negligence. Any explanation which ignored the possibility of negligence was bound to come across as excuse and excuse as admission of guilt. The clearing barrel, I could have shouted up at him, is for clearing, designed and purposed for the safe ejection of rounds, for the expulsion of munition through regular discharge. If the clearing barrel is not a failure-free space, then nothing is. The missteps and merits of every happening are context dependent—can't you see? Let us then exchange every medal for handcuffs, combat action ribbons for blindfolds, and let us all face the firing squad of our own design.

I could have pled, implored the guard and begged reason—look, no harm done. The sand and the metal and the angle of the barrel, all intended to safely catch a fired round. Better here than in the gym or at the motor pool with all that equipment. Better here than at the friendlies in the recreation center or the dining hall where we sit side by side in long rows. Better here than in my leg, through my own shin or the tongue of my boot for a quick ticket home. I could have reached into the barrel and pulled the mangled round from the sand and raised it and shown it to have done no harm—here, take it—could have held it high and felt how its heat had already begun to fade, how it weighed no more than a fistful of grains, forgettable in the palm. I could have asked the guard if it were better that we all fear the safe clearing of our rifles for the risk of discharge, the wakeful ear of gate guards and subsequent reports, echoes a career over, never fading, an endless summons, the conjuring of a living ghost.

Unsure if he would hear, unsure what I was expected to do then except to clear my rifle once more, with care this time—magazine removed and stored, chamber empty and dim and still reflecting the softness of a day's first light—I stayed silent and waited for his move. The guard turned to overlook the base where the rest of our convoy made their way toward a rest they had carefully earned. I dropped the magazine from the well and locked back the bolt. The bitten round fell where it remains to this day, probably, bootheel deep in the sand. The guard said nothing before he disappeared into his tower. The gates remained open. The chamber of my rifle remained open. I slapped the side of the stock and the bolt catch dropped and the buffer spring drove the carrier group into the chamber which sent the empty bolt crashing home, as we call it, where, as I like to say, it sleeps.

Cardinal

Before every convoy, one marine in our platoon stands on the hood of his truck, bows his head to consult the face of his compass, turns about four degrees to adjust for magnetic declination, and squares off with true north. From there he prays his prayer of absolute direction. Dear world, he begins. No matter where this vehicle takes me, please let me never forget the aim of true north. If I somehow find myself at the mercy of my feet, let me remember the depths of true south. Should I topple and fall from the turret and tumble through a crumbling ravine, allow my head to rest at true east. And when those thoughts of home invade my final mind where three directions fight to shred my sense of self, bring me balance again with the comforts of true west. He has never missed a prayer, and we have never lost our way—not that the one necessitates the other. No one gets lost anymore. We have a global positioning system and the tracks of those who have been before. I will follow the hood of this truck, he concludes, wherever it may lead, for no waypoint could be clearer, but let me never mistake forward for absolution, backward for resurrection, or left or right for true for anyone but me and then, differently, for you. His ritual varies little—a choice phrase here or there—though it does vary in length depending on the stability of the compass needle and the gravity of novel imagery, the speed of the platoon's departure, his trepidations about the area of operation and dangers reported along the route ahead. This is not standard, his behavior—of course not—but we appreciate his appeal to the world for cardinal truths. He is one of us reminding all of us how little we know. Although we have labeled one as true, there are many useful norths. If ever we find ourselves at the start of another drive having forgotten for a moment why we travel such distances or where this distance leaves us, we need only find his truck and look up. He will be there atop the hood, facing true north, plotting and praying, recalling his song into cradled hands, counting on four perfect corners of the globe.

Sandstorm 4

Watch me and make yourself useful already. I am going for a run. Help me before you watch me enter the world. Tie me a scarf so I might see—my delicate face—through a woolen blend, flax cool, patterned diamond after my moves—right? Watch me angle vamoose. As if we were the only two with the power to move. Watch me juke this wind straight up the middle and then off, sidestepping clouds to shirk this shamal and ride western like folklore, headdress unscrambling in telltale ribbons, rippling and roaring among—a storm within the storm—my southeasterly wake. Listen as that howl takes on your sound. Fold a flag in reverse if you agree this—this silly business of running into the wind—is living. Has it taken my face? Tie me reigns to settle with nature and if you cannot tell, let me holdfast and watch—so long as these winds will allow—how airborne particulates grow in abundance while growing less, less, and less obvious.

Steel Beneath Your Chin

You let it go too long, so you might have half-expected Staff Sergeant to pull you aside after the convoy, this being the third time he had gone out of his way to address the length of your hair, but I bet you never expected him to snag a fistful the way he did when you turned your back and sucked your teeth—grooming regulations are just nonsense rules—all startle-stepped and tight-scalped with that why-me wince on your face as he pulled your gaze to the sun while in that same moment he pulled a folding knife from his hip pocket, flicked out the blade, and pressed the dull side to your neck through one continuous draw across your bulging windpipe, a slow hiss slipping from between his gritted teeth which beamed the way they would have if you had just told him the most hilarious joke anyone had ever heard, though none of us mistook the look he gave for a smile, and he asked if you thought his grip on your skull or the steel beneath your chin might help you to better understand the intent of grooming regulations since words, as he phrased it, seemed to make no more sense than noise, and you failed to nod as you coughed in the affirmative, and he lifted the knife and hooked away the blade, the point of which had scored the soft skin around your throat and left a reddening reminder of its course and of Staff Sergeant's message—some rules come from a very real place—which we all understood when he released your hair to let you go in avoidance of wherever that place may be.

Privates First Class

We never noted the roads so lonely as they were on the ride north through those quick villages and market towns where men tended the fields near their homes while boys tended to sheep near rows of half-buried tires along the roadside edges of their grazing grounds. Some young boys played ball in one dusty roundabout at the center of town while others circled them on sputtering motorbikes. Because we saw no women, we suggested that it must have been the women who were behind the most brutal attacks, the women who had planned and planted the most insidious devices along roads near the cities. Why else would the men show themselves so readily? Why else would they allow their boys to play outside, to ride aside our trucks, to stand alone in their driveways and watch us parade past?

Nonsense, our interpreter told us. The men are capable of the worst, as they have been for as long as there has been war. Women, like children, are the last to take up arms. You should keep eyes, he told us, for the men who stand tall beside their homes, and you should get rid of these visions of women who hide. The men who stare you down as you pass, they are the ones—look—watching everything. Look out for them. These are the people who, no matter what they have done—look at them—they have nothing left to fear.

What room does that leave for the women?

The innocent crouch in the darkest rooms, women among them, wrapped in shadow and homebound until our trucks fade from sound.

Why hide if they've done nothing wrong? Why not also stand out and show fearlessness? Should we believe that a militant husband would stand in plain sight while his innocent wife hides in the dark? It would be difficult to find a woman without fault who did not stand beside her man, guilty of attacks or otherwise.

You will not find a woman like your ideas of women.

What ideas of women?

Women of military age, our interpreter told us. Women like you. Women for you.

Then they hide, we deduced, out of guilt of their deeds!

They hide out of need, he said, to remain out of mind, out of sight, out of range and away from us. We all learn from experience. The women are practiced at hiding, the men at presenting, and it is sensible to remain, to keep to these practiced ways when the Americans roll into town.

Devil's advocate—the women would also hide, right, if they were guilty of attacks.

Devils? Guilty is guilty. Devils itching for guilty hands. If you find a woman in hiding, you go ahead and kill her.

Well, obviously that goes against regulations. And they expect we won't come looking.

You know, our interpreter told us, they expect you will do far worse than look or kill.

We never noted the roads so lonely as they were on that return trip south, our imaginations reeling with what was expected, with what we might do, what might have been done. Our interpreter knew a thing or two. We never set eyes on a woman our own age, and we never saw one man above suspicion.

All Hallows

You had never beat at your chest until that evening when Doc, the one you admired—everyone admired—hovered in her free-spirited time about the motor pool. There was not a marine who did not attend to her movements, the way she seemed to summon them without tuition. She crossed the lot in absence, followed some unfelt current toward your line, your trucks, toward your platoon where she was held by colors there and stayed arrested to read auras in the airspace around your marines.

This, she said, is how my mother would do it, without hands, you see, though you might have watched mystics in movies wave about their charming arms, may have seen clairvoyants on film who read auras with open hands as if touching, as if we could sense color with these, the deadened faces of our palms. Fabrications. Bad acts. I can see, she said, just as you can see, using these eyes and not this body. No, we do not read with the body. The eyes, like the aura, are not the body. Fuel your vision and you may learn. To read auras one must look beyond body. To divine, to distinguish, to discern a person's character, she said, the body should very nearly disappear.

She wove herself among your ranks, among your vehicles where you hunched beneath hoods to read hash marks on dipsticks, cleaning them of their auburn and burnt honey drool. You checked the fluids in the last of your trucks while she studied the corners of shipping containers and the plywood doorway of Staff Sergeant's office near your platoon's maintenance bays. She played well the role of an occultist, choreographed, must have memorized the lexicon of all things spiritual, emanating, and she sold herself as literate in the hidden chroma of the living.

And of the dead? You turned from your work with a wrench in your hand. You had to ask if she communed with the dead. She dropped her gaze and stopped her steps which had until then been steady toward one of your marines who sat at a picnic table gnawing jerky. Your question

disturbed her dance. Amused, the lone marine tore salted flesh from his grip and watched as Doc granted you her attention. Two others dropped from a pull-up bar, improvised gymnastics, their landings loud with excited dirt. A gaggle more who had been spinning an axe some distance into a sheet of plywood drifted near to gather beneath the corrugated awning in the maintenance bays, the last of them dropping the handle in annoyance with claims of having gotten it, the axe head wedged in a body-shaped target—the goal of a game they had devised to kill time before Doc swept in like a west wind. Some unseen marine turned down some distant music.

Around this time of year, she said, when I could easily bring us closer to the dead, what with so much black and decay before our minds in fall time, I prefer instead to direct attentions toward the energies of life and light. That is, she proposed as she spun, the tips of her fingers tickling at the high tin roof, if there are no objections. Your entire platoon stood enchanted around a stall at the end of the line where Doc performed in a space meant for a six-wheeled truck. She stepped back and slowly let fall her arms. Her spotless boots tracked oil spit and tobacco stains across the concrete slab. She pressed her palms together before her chest, eyes closed. Ghostly strays of blonde escaped from the knot of hair beneath her cover and showed the direction of an otherwise undetectable breeze. You and your marines raised no objections, and Doc went forth conducting magic.

Months later we find a ram skull on the roadside.

I pitch a film concept to four willing marines. Think found footage. Think docufiction. Think shaky camera work, no-name actors—that's you—bloody totems, oblique nods to the violence enacted between cuts, blurry horrors just offscreen. What horrors! What horrors, you wonder. Allow me to tell, brave warriors, of the dreaded manticore. Oh, the name trembles my very thoughts. A barbarous villain, body of a lion, swift as a sandstorm, face of a man, teeth as

numerous as those of the great white shark, with the sting of a scorpion, heart of a mountain, and a belly as insatiable as the lightless center of a black hole—capable of consuming time, space, energy itself. You, valiant marines, will help track and kill this mighty beast in the Middle East. Heroes all! Except one of you. I'll need one of you to play the monster.

I, non-commissioned officer and creator, naturally, direct and shoot the film. I also act lead—Monster Hunter number one. Three marines play Monster Hunters two, three, and four. One marine cloaked in a brown blanket and crowned with our roadside ram skull plays The Monster—a creature as close to manticore as manageable. I imagine the final scene as a caustic showdown between man and beast, the monster spouting founts of blood from vital wounds. For special effects, we crack and slice sticks of chemical luminescence, drain their neon green glow into the barrel of a syringe which we acquire with thanks to the lovely and generous Doc who denies us the needle and asks only that we not further incriminate her by sharing our intentions. But Doc, I tell her as she goes la-la-la not hearing with a finger in each ear, you could be the star!

COLD OPEN:

EXT. IRAQ, SAL SINJAR, MARINE CORPS MOTOR POOL — NIGHT

The moon is nearly full. Shadowed trucks surround. Generators rattle in the distance. A Monster Hunter turns the camera on himself, his eyes wide and busy.

MH1

Okay, I think this is it. We've wounded the beast and with the help of brother night we've been able to track it by its blood which, as you can see…

The camera spins. The ground blurs then snaps into focus.

MH1 (V.O.)

…glows an otherworldly green.

The camera pans. Monster Hunters two, three, and four stare into the lens, the pale curves of their faces variously broken with swaths of axle grease.

MH2

It's over there, Corporal. Just behind the Hum-Vee.

MH3

Should we shoot it?

MH4

No way. Staff Sergeant will hear. I have this axe? We could go at its throat. Corporal, what say you?

MH4 brandishes a long-handled axe, blade scuffed and bouncing muted moonlight.

MH1 (V.O.)

The axe is the weapon, then. Get close. Make it count. You may have only one chance at this.

The camera shakes as it pans across spots of luminous green trailed over an otherwise colorless sand.

CUT TO:

The motor pool fell into an unusual calm, and nobody moved as Doc continued to perform. Imagine, she said, the view through a window from inside your home. Middle America, maybe. To see the yard, which at any time of year—don't let winter fool you—is a meticulous composition of life and light in camouflage, you must see beyond the wall in which the window is set, the curtains and the split blinds, the window glass with fingerprints near the latch and—yes—your

own reflection marred with every imperfection built into the glass itself, water spots from the sprinklers or when was the last time it rained? All that between you and your vision, between you and the yard. You look out from your home and you see the yard not despite but alongside or perhaps only because of these mediums.

We are not somewhere in the middle of America, you deduced, and you continued as if giving an appropriate order, as if speaking directly to her but at a volume meant for the rest of your platoon. We're here in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, Doc, but you go ahead and do your thing. Look beyond me and tell me what you see. Read my aura. I'm dying, if you couldn't tell, to know what color you'll conjure up. It's all around me, right, like a glow, like a window frame, surrounding me the way a moat surrounds a castle, or is it over my shoulders like some medieval armor? Bring it in, troops, everyone bring it in. We're about to learn the color of my invisible armor. Shall we place bets? Let's place bets. Who's got their money on Marine Corps green?

Your marines gathered as she stood before you, hand in hand at the small of her back, everything about her at ease. You tensed your shoulders and looked as though you would hit her or step through to off-balance her stance and sweep her leg and take her to the floor and kiss her all the way down, or as if you might just be willing to placate what you perceived as her approaching hostilities, though it pained you, choosing to stand down to allow her to continue entertaining your marines for just this dull moment, but not for long. It was as if you saw her manner as necessary and pleasantly distracting yet ultimately unsustainable. She stood before you, at home away from home. She looked you over, saw you apart from you, your troops coiled around you in a tightening ring of anticipation, and she shook her head. I can't, she said, although of course I can, but you will draw wild conclusions. At this, you roared. Your marines roared after, demanding insight. I can tell you what I see, she cautioned, but please, take care not to misinterpret.

You straightened your back, rolled your shoulders, barreled your chest, and beckoned with oil-stained fingers, a wrench in your eager hand. Your troops scraped their boots across the ground and beckoned with grunts and howls. Your aura, Doc said, as far as I can tell, is as green as any I have seen. You bellowed and beat at your chest with a fist. Your troops danced and beat at their chests to your cadence. Easy, she said, please. There is a garden in your heart which you might tend with some delicacy.

In Ram Corpse

He slept among a pile of used truck tires, bald or blown or spidered with dry rot, his legs crossed at the ankles, hips down in the hole, arms hooked through monstrous treads to keep the rest of him from falling through. We lounged in pallet-wood chairs on the other side of the pile and woke him with our excitement as we came up with another anagram for Marine Corps—*Arsenic Romp*—a fitting analogy which resonated as soon as we spoke it and caused us to laugh at the connections between words. He called us over because he heard us laughing and matching up letters one by one and repeating the phrase and cracking ourselves up. He didn't find it so funny. We explained the rules of the anagram game and defined our latest anagram in its comedic context—arsenic with its history as a subtle killer, romp as an allusion to our youth—and he played it like he understood our intent but disapproved of our humor. What else you got? *A Crimes Porn*, we told him, which he dismissed on the grounds of sexual frustration, and so we didn't even mention *I Scream Porn* or our favorite—*Cream Prison*. That's when we noticed a scorpion doing the bellycrawl up the digital steps of his camouflage trousers, one pixel at a time, creeping right along the thin fabric over his shin. When it stopped crawling, its quarter-sized body blended with the desert pattern so subtly that after we looked away to unsling our rifles and pull off our covers for weapons, we had trouble finding it again. There's a scorpion, we told him as we scanned his legs for movement, somewhere on you, and he told us he knew and to leave it alone. You knew? Of course, he said with a nonchalance to compliment his posture, and he asked if we had come up with any more anagrams. *Cam Prisoner, Reap Crimson*. Any others? *Mr. Pain Score, Mr. Panic Rose, Mr. RIP Oceans*. Now why, he asked, do they have to be so macabre? There are other misters, we told him, but they don't make much sense. *Mr. Iron Space, Mr. Coarse Nip*. Now that, he said, chuckling and bouncing in the tire and brushing sand from his sleeves, is funny. We moved

in close and scanned his pantlegs and found the scorpion again when it twitched its tail, and we scanned the nearby tires and the ground beneath our feet to ensure there were no more, and we asked why he wasn't more concerned about the potential dangers of the small but venomous creature crawling up his pantleg. He shifted and caught sight of the scorpion—its tiny tan claws held forth, a tinge of green visible between segments of its body—and he told us he was plenty concerned as he lounged back and stared off at the trucks beyond his boots. Then why don't you kill it or let us kill it for you? The scorpion twitched, inched further up his leg, stopped aside his knee, faded back into a swatch of the desert design. Remain, he said as he reclined into the tire and let his body sink. Remain what? Remain, he said, works for Marine, and he had to remind us we were playing a game about anagrams. *Remain*—we spelled it in the air, letter by letter, and we agreed that it worked for Marine so we challenged him on the rest—what will you do with Corps? I could never kill it unless it stung me, he said, even though I could easily kill it and would like to kill it now, just like you, but there are rules. There are rules, we told him, for the anagram game too—you can't leave Corps as Corps. He asked why not, not expecting a response, and we reminded him we were having a conversation about a scorpion.

Sandstorm 5

Shift into a low gear and let the engine eat. Rivers and creeks follow the wind, trickle and sink. Rubber chews and hacks earth. The turret shows mirror-blue spliced with desert digital, your gunner's legs a stone bridge on the sky. Then a vagueness like sunlight tapping glass, the dry glisten of raw gold. Then red, solids ground and steamed and brought together as clouds. Then a collapse, and you climb hand over hand over fist to scale the storm. Step out and assess your tear in the mud when a grain of sand breaks rank, catches flight, shoots the chassis, and vaults your ruts to find one incredulous eye. A long tear purges, streams, is caught in exhale and carried off—farewell. You must dry with the inside of your collar. All winds work to unpiece their contacts. Lashes lost among tire shreds, sinking. If the earth finds the frame, the truck will remain found or stuck. An armored door hinges, threatening closure, and you lose sight of the driver's seat. Another truck will pull you out in reverse—a substantial, inoperative scene. Meantime, airs while and bend against the flow of waters. Consider the force of your lungs. They've already run the chains. A step inside, the door holds. Surely the breath erodes the throat. Shift into neutral. Snatch—a tension bridge to inch you back. The engine eats and, aside the skid plates, treads reveal their hunger. The windpipe—a two-lane highway. Cut the wheel and climb. They've already loosed the chains. Shift high and drive off. A sky path, a bridge, a clearing—you and the wind have shared direction.

Like Closing Distance

To approximate combat action? Signage at highway speeds.

There, in the distance, over the shoulder of the road, a too-small sign too far in the future to hold meaning now. You know where you're going—up ahead.

You identify color but not shape. You track the sign as you approach, and it sharpens, brightens, takes form, stands and speaks out.

The sign is as loud as it will become with enough space, enough time still, to allow your reaction. You may now receive and appropriate the message.

What is the message? Stop ahead—maybe—lane ends, no passing lane, merge left, beware or caution or yield, exit only, merge right, stay in your vehicle, no exit this lane.

The sign rushes for attention, expands although its message does not evolve, commands more and more of the available eye, windshield, sky. Watch, now. You are watching the sign. Watch the road!

Then you pass—like that—and the sign appears to pass in the opposite direction.

What will you do? What did it mean?

You and the road sign were at your closest for only a flash.

What length in its coming, that slow-grown expression, then brief in its stay—whoosh—and so long again in its going away. A sign shrinks through mirrors, absent of color or language, losing shape and losing, in time, whatever it had been trying to tell you.

You drive for a while at highway speeds before—there—in the distance, another sign.

Is that another sign in the distance?

Again—watch. Are you watching? You are about to drive past.

You scan the roadside beyond.

Kings of Thanksgiving

Twice the time of year occasioned a celebration worthy of drink—beers, cold American beers—limited to two per Marine. The first of these occasions fell upon the Marine Corps birthday, a holiday whereupon our platoon was scheduled to take the night off to feast on the traditional lobster, steak, and birthday cake prepared for the entire base in the Al Asad dining facilities, but our schedule was changed that afternoon and our platoon instead spent the evening readying our trucks for a two-day supply run to some of the infantry who were apparently running low on essentials someplace south of Mosul. Their holiday, we decided on our return trip, made a joke of complaining about ours. We missed those two beers we were promised, but the infantry guys never even got an offer. Instead of indulging or lamenting we delivered our cargo with speed and efficiency, and we shared a belated holiday meal with those lonely Marines camped out in the middle of the desert. Although it was overcooked or too cold or badly jostled on the drive, that lobster, steak, and birthday cake brought us at once as far from and as close to home as any of us could ever claim to have been.

Back on Al Asad, under lock and careful watch at the motor pool, our beers waited in what remained of the ice in two long coolers. The cans were still frosty when we returned, and Staff Sergeant quickly hauled them off to company headquarters where they were kept refrigerated on Lieutenant's orders—it's too risky to hold a birthday celebration after the fact. Would we have embarrassed him in a revelry of our own design? They were ordered to wait for us there in the frigid dark, marked with our platoon number, until the next base-sanctioned holiday.

Each of us gave true thanks on Thanksgiving, our second beer-worthy celebration, for the opportunity to forget our obligations, to crack open a few beers, clank cans, and drain them in the name of fellowship. That Thursday while those in every other platoon savored their two-beer limit

or bargained with others for the consumption of theirs, everyone in our platoon enjoyed double the standard allotment, four ordinary and beautiful cans, which was enough after months of abstinence to get most of us good and drunk. Some swayed in line at the dining hall and shoveled down the traditional slabs of turkey, piles of potatoes mashed into a brown gravy paste, and savored a generous chunk of buckle-busting pie. The cleverest of us, however, avoided dinner entirely. Tempting as an American holiday meal may have been to us then, we intended to allow our alcoholic beverages to take maximum effect. We fancied ourselves historical purists—Royal Marines they once called us—for the U.S. Marine Corps was founded, after all, in a bar.

We gathered in the motor pool and played the radio loud and sang along and even instigated a dance competition in which, despite his hesitations, Staff Sergeant partook with a beer in hand and the other covering his eyes as if he imagined with a child's logic that when he could not see all of us then we must also be unable to see his dance. We cheered him on long past his brief and uninspired moves, and our raucous celebration caught the attention of our Lieutenant whom we convinced after some good-natured provocation—come on, college boy, show us how it's done!—to shotgun a beer. With a silver pen aimed at the base of a glistening can, he scanned the motor pool for his superiors just as we might have done before a similar stunt. He made us put away our cameras—be real, now, do you want to see me do this or not?—and he punched a hole in the aluminum side which sent a stream of foam cascading through his fingers. Another quick glance around as he raised the can to his lip and, with the pop of the tab still lingering in the air, the beer slipped into oblivion. He held the empty can high, crushed it to unanimous applause, offered Staff Sergeant a quick explanation—for morale, you understand—and bid us all goodnight.

Many of us followed suit and shotgunned our beers before we peeled off to hit the showers while the water was still warm or to jump on the net before the power went black or to make a

quick call before the phone lines could choke out our long-distance goodnights, but some few of us, still feeling the ardor and thinning spell of drink in our blood, that freshly forgotten ease in our veins, found our way to the gym. Was it the fluorescence, we later asked, the white light in the windows that drew us to the weight room like flying bugs to a headlamp, or was it that there simply was nowhere else to go, no other place in which to test ourselves, nowhere else calling attention to itself as a proving ground, a direct challenge to our loosening inhibitions?

We rallied around a bench and stacked our usual plates on either side of the bar, and we laid back and stiffened our necks and held on tight as we pressed our fists into the air with relative ease. Then we stacked more. We took turns stacking weights, sliding beneath and gripping the bar and heaving it in the face of gravity until there were no weights we had not borne over our chests. We borrowed from nearby benches and took their weight as our own. We lifted more from faraway racks. When we ran out of Olympic plates, we filled our daypacks with bottled water and strapped them on top, tied our boots at their laces and draped them over the far ends of the bar. Our blood ran hot in our heads, and we laughed at how little we struggled. We held more weight than we had ever held, all that was available to us and more, all that our creativity would allow, and we resolved to stay like that—yes, forever—unless someone came along to cut out the lights and take us by force back to our trucks at the motor pool or to our little makeshift beds on the other side of base or to our childhood homes on the other side of the world where long ago we crowned ourselves the undisputed kings of Thanksgiving.

Weapons We Talk About When We Talk

About the M16 service rifle. Might jam in a sandstorm, all right, but it's lightweight and on target most days. Pink mist. Keep it. Give me the M2, all day with that butterfly trigger, shoot from the hip, grab hold of those love handles and flutter some fifty-caliber carnage from on high. Trigger thumbs. Rounds on rounds. Pink clouds. Burning through belts. Keep that chamber fed and never play dead. What happened to one shot one kill? Only applies to the AT4. Brilliant tagline, for sure, like sign me up to swing a broad sword and release the dragon. The commercial kill. Show me a one shot Marine when real rounds come back in bursts. Fantasy fire. Spray and pray. Take time for one shot and be the one killed. Hey, accuracy by volume. Machine gunner modus operandi. Is that really what you say? Or, if you mount the M240, you get accuracy and volume. Big guns and big dreams with big talk of manning crew-served weapons alone. Yikes. Keep those extra barrels and belts. Headspace and timing. No calibration here. Nothing too big to carry, right, like a nine on the thigh, in and out of the truck, sprint and roll, handheld, look, no problem. No range, either. Keep it on the go. Point blank. Concealed, see, up the sleeve if need be. Execution style. If only we could. Tough moves from lots of squeaky-clean hands. No excuse. Can't pull a trigger without just cause. Where's the practical application, the shit, you know, the suck? Where's the fight they've been talking about? Careful with those complaints. Complaints from the man with no shoes until he meets a man with no feet. Shoes? Complaints from the man with no combat until he meets a man with no feet. First do no harm. Now isn't that a sweet catch phrase. Give me back my Mk 19. Maximum harm. Fireworks show. Why not? Let the belt hang, mount up and drop rounds downrange. You want accuracy by volume? Grenades in full-auto means accuracy by magic. Poof, and you've got purple fog from a crowd. Yikes on yikes. Might as well call in artillery. Where's the heart in a call? Oh, for a heart kill nothing beats a fixed

bayonet. Squared off, chest to chest. Blade in hand. Nix the blade and go hand to hand. A swift kick and a hammer fist. Headbutt with a running start and a war cry. Staff Sergeant's war cry. Staff Sergeant's face mid war cry. Or his photo blown up, size of a road sign. Like a warning lashed to the grill of our lead truck. Warning? Why warn them? Same tactic but make it Staff Sergeant's face just before orgasm. All the yikes. Kamikaze mission. Cruel and unusual. A weapon of mass destruction? Best defense, blindness. Suicide. Imagine the collaterals. Staff Sergeant himself, though. Staff Sergeant as weapon? As attachment, maybe. A swivel mount or bipod. Right, Staff Sergeant as stabilizer. For? Would have to be something heavy. With kick. And lots of moving parts. A weapon too big to shoulder alone.

Held Fast in Place

He faltered as he stood from the convoy brief where he absorbed a sprinkling of instruction. A graylight morning. He fought the fog like all the others after late meals, lukewarm showers, involved sleep over the short end of a cold night. Lieutenant dismissed the platoon, and they began to dissolve into the motor pool—soluble and suddenly immersed in some greater solution. He lagged, dipped as he walked and favored one good leg. Oh, so now you're hurting—words from ahead, an accusation issued by a marine from another platoon, perhaps, alien in tone and unrecognized until Staff Sergeant whipped back in his defense. Alright—concussive and with tactile volume—how about his truck was blown the fuck up and that means you shut your mouth until we get our turn and you really find out what it means to be hurting or to feel anything at all. Ouch—a jab from one of his own. Staff Sergeant's use of the plural meant it came from someone in his platoon. Our turn—likely Staff Sergeant's driver. No matter. He straightened, walked on and toward their trucks which idled in line at the edge of the maintenance bay. He offered no comment in return, clouded with lightning in his leg, gaining distance from the group, alone.

Back then, back on the road, back in the convoy after the hit—the rubble rain and the missing steel and the hole left in the earth beneath the highway—he cobbled the walk from his deadlined MRAP to the MRAP idling behind. A few truck-lengths sprawled forever in the mind—steps commanded and heaved and cast forth with care, footfalls which through the inside vantage of ballistic glass, just one truck away, must have appeared steps unabridged, bold and accomplishing steps, when they were to him a fractured ambulance—one last step stuttering into and through the progress of each step new and discovering. He had long since fortified himself against worries brought on by roadside explosives, their inherent trauma and unpredictability—either hit one or not, become an unlucky survivor or die in the blast, suffer from prolonged anxiety

or determine that dread can only corrode one's sense of the unaffected present for so long—but the logic and reason which had protected and even propelled him through the intersections of so many unmarked and potentially dangerous roads seemed then to have frittered and failed him on that walk between trucks, each stride a reach into the unknown, each step another into doubt, deepening.

Standard operating procedure is clear. Marines are to remain on the road after an explosion. On the road? Explosives only blow on the road. We were almost killed on the road.

He ran away, left their mangled truck and the ruined highway behind, veered out and leapt from the pavement and started carving a path into the desert and away from their convoy. He shot through the sand where he picked up a sprint and went full speed to what he assumed would be a safe distance—far enough out of range—before he slowed and turned and made his way back down the line, his path paralleling the road where he was sure another eruption would send earth and steel and unsuspecting flesh to damaging heights and beyond. He waved his concerns, shouted, and tried to encourage others to follow him off, off, off the road. Lieutenant spotted him out in the open and came running after, wind tearing away fine ribbons of sand after each of his steps. They met out where no man, perhaps, had ever set foot. Lieutenant wrapped him as if in fraternal embrace, as a loved one might hug him after a long time away, then shook him, knocked his helmet with the meaty side of a fist, spun him fast, and shoved him—what's with you?—in the direction of the road. They forged a new path back toward the highway, then walked toward the following truck as they were supposed to, in lockstep over broken pavement, together.

Adrenaline wore slow with worry once more as he finished the forever walk, as he opened the back door to Staff Sergeant's MRAP, as he buckled up and reeled in a back seat. The convoy resumed, and their truck swerved around potholes and away from roadside rubbish. His knees

knocked and shocked him the way they would every time the truck bucked over rubble over the remainder of that drive, the same way they would strike him over every drive following—a slicing jolt—an attack he began to recognize once again when he rose from that groggy morning convoy brief, when he broke from the rest of his platoon, when some of them jabbed at him for his new and necessary limp. He crossed the motor pool at his own pace, keeping his words to himself, and walked straight to his new MRAP which idled in line with the other trucks at the start of their next drive. He put himself in the path of his vehicle, the most heavily armored of all the trucks, and he threw his arms out wide and pressed his chest to the warmth of a headlight, one hand on the hood and the other hand open against the grill, vibrating.

One Cries Abandon

To aim—empty doorways before her sights. Always decision in flux, pervasive with lunacy a pretext for rapid breathing in any circumstance. Her face in her dirty hands—their motives, beyond mission, unknown. A sightless creature awaits assuasive charms. Can a little blonde house fix or avert? Nonspecific neighborhoods chew, heaving change. Her ability, her vulgarity—straight as a likeness—you cannot imagine. This uncertainty—she pictures all at once—the absorbent frame, hurt or delighted as motioned around being, disconnected or uncovered and, of all things, trivial. Affective—tense and quiver without blood to show. The terms we set upon no longer course. Newly arraigned rations incite a pretending—former complaints conspired against—and the rear sight aperture will often cradle her search for some anxious, crying habitat.

Down from Sinjar

Orders said haul our happy platoon up the Sinjar Mountains, and, at the convoy brief, Lieutenant told us this is what we had trained for—honest—when we had been running routes outside the wire for months. If where we were headed was what we had trained for, we couldn't help but wonder what was supposed to have prepared us for where we had been, for the operations and orders we carried out in those places. Staff Sergeant told us we had to stay vigilant—the sound advice he always issued before a convoy—and we laughed the way we always laughed, with our heads cocked to our shoulders, humor primed and chambered in our throats to later explode when we mimicked Staff Sergeant's mumble and drawl and his unrepentant mispronunciation of the word vigilant so that it sounded time and again and with exponential hilarity like the word belligerent. This is a dangerous area of operation. Good to go. I need every one of you to stay belligerent. Copy that, Staff Sergeant. Stay hostile, aggressive, engaged in combat. We were to remain at war.

Sinjar Mountain burst through the monotony of our Anbar routes, and we welcomed the rising landscape with its heightened threat levels and our additional difficulties defending vehicles from potential attacks on a third axis. Height had been of little concern. This is what we trained for. Ridges broke upward and forward and corralled the road as we climbed. Small, unadorned homes sat high on plateaus, their walls the same dust-and-rock texture as the surrounding earth. We scanned open windows and studied for the intentions of those who may or may not have waited inside. Our trucks whirred high through their turbine inductors and churned a howl from their great knobbed tires which must have echoed and telegraphed our approach across staggered farmland for miles. Young boys waited, waved from rooftops as we passed. A pool of short grasses waited below, waved in a wind churned within the bounds of mule-high stone walls. We watched from

behind ballistic glass and mounted guns and steel doors with hinged openings large enough for a rifle barrel or for a bunch of contorted fingers to press through and wiggle return greetings, muted waves, as we rolled on and up the mountain. We engaged with no enemy combatants.

We reached our destination at the peak, where we were debriefed—great job, great job this morning, everyone, really—and we sat against rocks and ate hot lunch from paper trays. Great job: resupply radio communication personnel stationed way, way up, somewhere north of four thousand feet. This height may be one reason locals consider the Sinjar Mountains a sacred place, why the Yazidis—a minority monotheistic community located primarily in northwestern Iraq—built Chermera Temple on the mountain's highest point, where the ridge slopes to the south and drops almost vertical at its northern edge. This temple, no bigger than our trucks, reached into the heavens as if continuing the rise of the mountain itself, a stone-white peak topped by three spheres and a spire which held a crescent moon against the midday sky. This, it seemed, was what we had trained for, and many of us wondered at its beauty. When asked, our interpreter—a southern Iraqi of Muslim faith who called himself Joe—claimed the temple was ancient, older than the trees, and shied from further questions with warnings to stay far. Devils inside. A place of devil worship. We should not stay here. Joe refused to entertain our continued interest and finished his meal in the back of a truck.

We took photos near the temple at the top of the mountain, where coils of concertina wire banned us from entering, from verifying or discrediting our only available interpretation, and kept us penned in our devilish curiosities. We raised rifles over the desert beyond. We posed, waved to the camera, took photos of ourselves with horrified faces. We mimicked the temple and crouched at the cliff, the steel toes of our boots conducting jolts of adrenaline from northern sky, from soft metals stratified into the mountainside below. Our boot-laced tags glimmered with bits of our

names and our various bodily numbers, plain statements of our religious preferences or lack thereof. At the top of the mountain next to that lonely temple, we kicked at loose earth and watched it fall over the edge to crumble and collect and settle against its larger self.

Staff Sergeant snatched us up—hey, reign it in—and told us stories of bombings, skirmishes reported near the Syrian border. This area more than any. Let me catch you playing. Let me catch you sleeping out there, I swear, kill you before you kill us all. A cabled antenna loomed. Some marines some time before had erected a communications relay just steps from the temple—a tower meant to intercept conversations from personnel on southern ground, to hurl signals to listening personnel someplace north and below. Or perhaps it went from north to south. Or both ways. Either way, they couldn't communicate through the mountain, so they had to send messages up one side and back down.

Our return convoy was an improvisation of jake brakes, sporadic compressions in release, diesel engine pops, cylinders sputtering and choking on pistons as we slow-coasted the same winding roads we had climbed. We rattled the ground, noised the air.

Years after our convoy to the top, we hear news of what has come to be called the Sinjar massacre—the isolation, abduction, rape, and murder of thousands of Yazidi people by Islamic State terrorists—which forced tens of thousands of civilians into life-threatening exile among the Sinjar Mountains. Long past active duty, many of us respond with familiar bravado—they're lucky we weren't over there, never would have happened with us on the ground, given a chance at them now we would take it, take those terrorists out, save those civilians, drive the children back to their towns, to their farms, back to their quiet family homes—discounting, of course, the school of thought that cites our presence in the Sinjar region as the main progenitor of this hostility, and discounting further the history of atrocities visited upon Yazidi people. Many of those exiled do

make it home, some years later. Many return to a familiar place which no longer resembles the home they left. Many of those killed are found in mass, unmarked graves. The outcomes for many more remain unknown.

The Yazidis use the Sinjar Mountains to commune with a higher power—some deity or devil depending on who you ask—to send their conversations way up, higher than any peak, or to drop their thoughts with the volume and momentum only a mountain can bestow. We too recognized the communication advantages available in the Sinjar Mountains. We drove up, parked our trucks at the peak, razor-wired gates around a small temple, and sent a radio fence to unclimbable heights. I was never the religious type. I go more for plain statements or lack thereof. Still—and I don't speak for my platoon here—I feel like asking someone to forgive us for using that mountain, for passing our own conversations over, for talking up and back down to ourselves.

We descended through late afternoon, rangebroken rear views, ridges shrinking behind. The convoy struggled to slow. Two boys smiled from the roadside where they had stopped with their saddled mule, four jugs tethered to its sides. They waved. We waved. Water jugs, from the perspective of a military convoy, look a lot like jugs of fuel. These boys were either working their fields or improvising an explosive device. This is what we had trained for, now, stay belligerent, but we could not, and no one waved them aside or stopped to investigate. Tall grasses waved from their terraced patches. We lost our jobs in the scenery, in the vista of a region at war. To stand on a roof or at the edge of a mountain or the edge of a road and to communicate, to signal toward that which we fail to understand, this is how we remain belligerent or vigilant—words which, for us, had taken on the same significance—to remain awake and at watch, mindful, confrontational, to hold a peaceful demonstration, or, as in vigil, to make spiritual preparations or to pray.

Sandstorm 6

Everything goes red, and you joke about Christmas. When you look at the world through night vision goggles, everything goes green. While the sand and the wind kick the seasons around, you make merry for a blink with one eye in each available color of everything.

Rabia Railway

For breakfast, tuna from a pouch and water to wash it down, a fist-sized can of extra-caffeinated soda to cleanse the palate with power or citrus—neither an indication of flavor. For lunch, peanut butter from a pouch over tortillas with water to swallow and the same energy drink finish. Cautious and calloused and craving a change, we braved dinner in a plywood shack near the train station. We sat at three wooden tables covered in thin plastic patterned after the American flag. Our seats overlooked the Syrian border, a high arch to mark the crossing, a busy waypoint between Al-Shaddadah and Mosul. Some of my platoon sat back in plastic chairs while some could not—hunched and bouncing their heels and drumming their knees to keep busy. The proprietor busied himself in a back room. No price and no menu. We waved and held up fingers for the number of meals we would need, left cash on the counter where easily seen, pulled together the tables, and waited there with anxious eyes and high hopes for enough time to take in a hot meal before Staff Sergeant called us back for the return convoy.

An unseen fire lit the doorway behind the counter. Some of us helped ourselves to a cooler and used the counter to crack tops from glass soda bottles, clinked the bottlenecks, and cracked jokes about sharing drinks from another era like soldiers from a different kind of war. I started a debated on whether it was right to eat over an American flag—this one is, first, a tablecloth! A griddle hissed and drowned our musings. We kept quiet then and listened for the sear of a freshness we had almost forgotten.

Staff Sergeant popped in to call us back for the convoy just as the chef delivered steaming plates to our tables—what timing, look, when the pita's still warm! Warmth and ambrosia. Everything swirled. Fresh rice and rank, duty, respect, and jasmine. We can eat fast, I told him, and I shoveled chopped meat with my fingers, wrapped soft bread like a shroud in my hands, took

a bite and let the rest spilled through my fingers. The others at the table craned over their plates and did the same, shoveling and biting and spilling warmth from their hands.

Easy, Staff Sergeant told us, we're not animals. We chewed fast and swallowed hard. He stood over our tables, studied our plates, and told us to slow, to breathe, to eat well and to hurry back. Then with an uncharacteristic smirk he asked what we supposed we were eating. I wolfed down a bite and thought back to the animals I had seen on our drive. He loomed with arms heavy across his chest, waiting for us to clear our wordless mouths. I flushed my throat with a swig of soda—suppose it could be goat. Staff Sergeant asked if we had seen goats around, and we told him we had seen them on the railway side of the road on our drive into town. We have goats, then, so what else? Chicken, someone suggested. Staff Sergeant asked if we had seen chicken around. We had, maybe, or we had seen some plump birds packed and stacked in crates in the back of some trucks only moments before we arrived. So, we have chickens. I tightened my throat between bite and breath. What animals, he asked, haven't you seen? No one had seen any sheep, but we had seen some small herds following boys some time ago, some distance back, out in the country. But no sheep now, he asked, here in town? No, I told him, not here in town. Well, he said as he uncrossed his arms, there it is. And he left us to study our plates.

There it is—the punchline. What punchline? We marinated on the moment, our plates cooling between busy hands. Did Staff Sergeant just tell a bad joke? We wondered through our teeth—about eating sheep? Afraid so. We lowered our heads and bit with hesitant bites and imagined Staff Sergeant wearing a crooked smile as he walked away from the shack and down the line toward his truck. I suppose the joke is that we hadn't seen any sheep around because they cooked every single sheep to feed us our meal. And that's not possible. So that's where the humor comes from. Impossible to know if we ate even one sheep, so it's humorous to suggest that we ate

every sheep in town. We tired our jaws to finish. Then where are the shepherds? Explanation, somehow, took from taste. I sat with my bites, tossed and chewed and forced my tongue through the valleys of my teeth, pulled at each unknown piece for flavor, but all I took with me was Staff Sergeant's unusual attempt to amuse, the warmth of that meal in my mouth, and an after-warmth that still won't stay down in my gut.

Vulnerability in a Sense

Around our gear—ballistic eyewear and jackets, weighted groin guards and pads stitched with skid plates in place of our bulging knees—we remain unprotected against some few fatal attacks. The inner thigh, for example, where femoral networks commune and command legs to hold or to run, flinch or envelop—blood rushed faster than consciousness, nerves signaled to action before I can possibly know—was that a tickle or a threat? Approach our thighs with a look and watch us squirm. Beneath the arm, for example, warm as an invitation to the heart, airs exchanged there and kept, every vital thing encaged, entreating—you need only slip between bones. Approach our ribs with just the tip of a finger and feel the recoil of breath. Along the neck, for example, laid bare on either side between the collarbone and earlobe, skin there soft and unhandled and beneath which a fenced musculature guards the carotids and their carrying of blood to the brain, to the flushing face—the cringe I must make, the lilt and shake of my head meant to signify approval and its opposite, both want and the intolerable lightness of your lips. Approach our necks with a kiss and we may not survive. Our uniforms have been issued. Our responses, in each case, unlearned. The smile, for example.

Laurel and Patina

Seventeen convoys in the passenger seat, helpless behind layered glass and the streaming world. He said nothing when things went antic. He said nothing when their truck fell behind and out of radio range. He said nothing when his turret gunner's faulty headspace caused the fifty to jam during small arms fire. He said nothing when his driver nodded out over and over and he had to catch the wheel again and again to keep them from diving into the Euphrates. But he could no longer muscle his lips when their truck ran out of fuel and his driver let off the accelerator with an exhausted sigh and the rest of their convoy continued to fade down the naked desert highway while his gunner, instead of signaling ahead for the distancing trucks, dropped into the cab with a pointed thumb—some assistant driver. Didn't you fuel up before we left Al Asad?

He started a scream and carried it over his gunner's shoulders onto the seatback and up into the turret where he climbed to his feet and threw himself into the air, arms wide, legs split over the mounted gun, his voice harsh and dissipating like the wind in his face. Their truck slowed, its tires growling against the road. He jumped and flailed and screamed again for help, crossed his arms, panted through his nose. The line of vehicles shrank over the turret's cowl as their truck—last in the lineup—hummed to a halt. He arched his back and primed his throat. The convoy continued to pull steadily away. He sent up a scream, pushed until he was out of air, then raised his arms once more and swelled his sternum and pulled in breath until his lungs throbbed and dared to break their cage. A sliver of cloud sailed overhead, its thin shadow a slice through the bright highway.

When they were nearly too far back to tell, the nearest truck stopped. Then the one ahead stopped. Then a chain reaction all the way up, and ruck by truck the whole convoy appeared to stop. Someone reached up from the cab, tugged his pantleg and said something about a radio miracle—they're coming back for us! He held his breath for one more pulse before the scream he

had built-up erupted from deep in his chest like a long-suppressed cough, and he bent at the waist and held his knees and aimed it down through the turret—a trembled, satisfied, emptying blow.

I did that, he said as one of their trucks grew larger and larger in the frame of their windshield. I did, just so you know. His voice cracked and worsened with each vowel. The three of them sat in the cab, watching. You see what I did? His driver and gunner nodded to avoid any protest or mockery—yes, of course—and they agreed in silence to give him space. Security checks would be in order. They shuffled out on the driver's side as the maintenance truck approached. What's this, he rasped from the passenger seat, security checks? Out here—fading—in the middle of nothing? Since when do we do our checks—but his vocal cords froze, and that was the end of his voice for three days.

When he regains his powers of speech during their next convoy, he will apologize for his outlandish behavior, for freaking out and jumping up into the turret and screaming down at them like he did, and the others will smile wide and take his hand and clap him on the side of his shoulder and tell him not to mention it.

He turned the ignition until the mechanic told him to stop. We'll need to siphon it out when we get back to base, the mechanic said, meaning one of you will need to siphon the gunk out of the tank. What should have been a quick fix became a minor ordeal and a deadlined vehicle when his driver grabbed the wrong jerrycan from the bed of the maintenance truck and filled their fuel tank with nearly twenty liters of antifreeze. The engine cranked and cranked and fed the wrong lifeblood through the wrong system. The mechanic laughed when he noticed the mistake, the clear basin of the fuel water separator growing cloudy, algal, sour-candied, then comically toxic. Too dangerous to take care of it out on the road, they decided, so they set the trucks up for a tow.

He had little to say, though he might have weighed in if he could have summoned his voice. The tow bar rattled and clinked between bumpers like a worn coupling between railcars. Another truck took the rear security position, and the maintenance truck dragged their truck clanging and clunking to somewhere near the center of the convoy. He nursed his throat in the passenger seat as his driver kept the wheel steady and made small talk with his gunner who, no longer needed above, sat in the middle seat tuning in to the communications radio where the mechanic, because of their proximity to his truck, was pumping in music from covertly installed speakers. What's he got on? Something metal—double bass beneath lots of screaming. They abandoned the radio at the front gates and came to another silent agreement about how to decide which of them would siphon the antifreeze from the fuel tank. He leaned against the passenger window tracking the flow of razor wire and barrier walls. They counted on fast fingers—one, two, three, not it! His helmet fell low across his brow. Guess that means you're it, church mouse. He tucked his hands into the pits of his flak jacket. Any objection?

He slid one end of a dark rubber tube into the fuel tank, fed it to the bottom, then dropped onto a track of top sand that had been carved up by the truck's front tires. He shimmied the hose through his hands until he had hold of the opposite end, wiped it clear of sand, clung to it with a fist at his lips, and, having never started a siphon, he inhaled as if preparing to spend maximum time underwater. The diesel fumes flooded his lungs before any fluid reached the crest in the tube. His breath failed to bring the remaining liquid out of the tank. The tube gasped as if taking the breath from him, and he began to cough. His coughs and nauseated pallor brought on a chorus of chuckles from the others who watched from a comfortable distance. Pull with your cheeks, the mechanic coached. Like a fine cigar, suggested his driver. Suck out that slime already, said his gunner, let's go, hero, on with the show. With a white-spirit burn on his tongue, he repositioned

himself before the end of the tube, emptied his chest, and pulled again, this time with less breath. Antifreeze climbed from the tank and crested the rise and caught the flow of gravity in the lower half of the tube where it raced through his fist and crashed into his unexpecting face like a fount of sickness.

A rush of antifreeze flooded the sand. The others kicked in fits of laughter or fell holding their bellies, curling in on themselves while the soft ground around them clumped and softened, stricken with neon rivulets and sinking pools of lime. He turned away and started toward a nearby pallet of water bottles to wash himself clean, then quickly turned back at their laughter and rushed them, his boots stamping the sickly mud, wet hands aside his face, fingers wide and wriggling at either cheek, his lips tinged and dripping green, his grimace aglow at the gumline. The others unwound themselves or feigned bravado and told him he was crazy, but they paid attention to him and they stopped up their laughs. He took in a staggered breath through his nose, dropped his arms, exhaled hard through his teeth where a film of antifreeze bubbled at the gaps. Some few small bubbles broke from his smile, caught the glow of the sun, and took flight as he signaled his terms. I drive next time, he told them. Next time—spitting laurel and patina, pantomiming the wheel and pointing to their truck—next time you scream to be remembered.

Finely Ground and Unfiltered

I try Turkish coffee while looking through a surprising collection of bootleg movies. The collector squats and wafts a brass cezve through a propane flame before filling her own cup and killing the burner. A dark droplet hangs from the pouring lip. Hundreds of titles surround. I ask why she brings in so many romantic dramas. The wall of new arrivals looks like those of stateside rental stores but for the muted colors, the slight blur of home-printed text, and the slant of the shelves. She tells me she only brings in what sells. I pull a familiar title and read my skepticism aloud—a troubled boy and wealthy young woman fall in love but must separate because of their social differences. She sits in a folding chair and sips her coffee and tells me people love a simple story. I put the movie back and tell her I found the synopsis deceptive, the quality poor, and the ending terribly sad. She finishes her coffee and folds her chair and straightens a high shelf. I search through titles in a lower row. She pulls the same movie and inspects the cover which shows the troubled boy and wealthy young woman embracing in the rain, and she tells me it doesn't look like it should have a sad ending. Well, I tell her as I tip back the last of my coffee, this doesn't taste like mud. She juggles the movie, holds it like an agreement between hands, and bends it until it breaks. The dark droplet falls from the pouring lip to the burner where it seethes. She picks up some shards and tucks the pieces into her folded chair before she scoops more grounds from a tin on the floor. She asks if I really thought it would taste like mud when so many enjoy their coffee this way. I read the dregs in my cup and ask why those romantic dramas sell so damn well. She asks if I'd like another. A dark arrow draws a bead on my chest, spent grounds taking aim at the rim. A propane sigh fills the room. I hand over the empty cup, and she tells me she’ll try to bring in a better copy.

Kilroy Was There

It must have been a great comfort, at one time, to have come across a symbol so singular, so identifiable as Kilroy—cartoon beads staring out, two hands hoisting a bald or balding head above a linear barrier, that pendant nose lopped overtop—to find oneself in uniform among the ruins of a strange country and to know he had been there and, in signaling his presence through a familiar language, remains. In wartime we manufacture hope—to stumble upon the prolific *Kilroy was here*—the hope of outlasting, of being at once widespread and solitaire, of stability in times of great rubble. Did the greatest generation hold auditions, try out and crumple up and cast off other scribbles before selecting and replicating Kilroy like genetic code—a permanent imprint chosen and etched deep into the sleepy steel bowels of a gunship, painted beneath the wings of a bomber, printed and passed between prisoners of war or left in the cells to ensure the survival of future generations—or was he the obvious choice? Only in looking back, it seems, do we complicate the effortless transparency of such a sign as we project ourselves through his penpoint eyes or blind them with our flair for obscurity—the unknowns surrounding his creation and reproduction and proliferation—a lack of personal history now part of Kilroy's appeal.

He is not ours. Our generation has no single drawing which we might carve upon a stone monument to our conflict, but we did carry our imaginations with us overseas and we did sketch a variety of figures—the latest no more lasting or significant than the first. Singularity no longer satisfies. On a bus ride across Al Asad Airbase, I first came across Toast—two long arms spread from a cross-section of sliced bread, wide eyes scowling through the upper crust, a complaint ballooning from a frown—at odds with his reality at present. *What,* he asks from a bus seat—hasty black ink running light across gray vinyl—*Toast can't ride the bus?* A guarded statement if we assume toast is anticipating the viewers disapproval, or a line of dramatic irony, perhaps, if we

assume Toast does not know that he speaks to the viewer from the platform of a bus ride. He poses this rhetoric from the back of a headrest, so perhaps he does know that he, in fact, can ride the bus and is lamenting the ephemeral nature of his situation—he rides the bus at present but is unable to ride the bus indefinitely. The endurance of an individual sign frightens in Iraq where in France it may have consoled. Kilroy asks the viewer to look back—*was here*—where Toast defends his present or begs a forecasting—*what?* Mimetic variance assures us when patterns churn our guts. Kilroy becomes Toast and we focus on the becoming.

Toast soon gave way to Bunny which conjured the bottom-up view of a naked woman on her back, an Arabic star or asterisk between bulbous cheeks, thighs held high, lower legs and feet flopped casually aside. The outline of her posture might appear, briefly, to signify the silhouette of a rabbit. The phrase *Bunny awaits* accompanied her at least once, scrawled on the inside glass of a Hum-Vee passenger window. Then came MikeMike, the ascending grenade, commonly seen streaking in blue or black ink across tabletops on various forward operating bases within Anbar province. Then Tomcat, a stick figure with an oversized head, blank except for a wide set of whiskers. Pole was an unadorned flagpole. Rock or Something could be any irregular shape enclosed around the words *rock or something*, cribbed from the visual element of the sixth step in the instructions for operating the flameless ration heater contained within our ready-to-eat meal packages. Skull Henry was a human skull whose name might have been Henry, though the skull was always exclaiming the name Henry as if Henry was a familiar acquaintance only just then spotted some distance away, or as if the overexcited skull, every time, mistook the viewer for this Henry character, whoever he was, which must have been perpetually awkward for the skull and equally awkward for the viewer regardless of their name. *Henry!* Why would anyone shout their own name out of context?

Among this cast of characters, Kilroy became unrecognizable. I reproduced him in oil, my thumb thickening the curve of his nose down the dessert-shaded bumper of my truck. I penciled and pinned him to the scheduling board in the armory. I ladled him out in sand over the pavement before company headquarters. I littered my notebooks with his likeness, folded him once into a loose page, tore him to bits, and scattered him in a violent wind over an abandoned farm. I spread legends of him in the dining hall. Have you heard, I asked between bites, of this Kilroy guy? Total legend. But none of it came back to me. I saw him often, but every Kilroy I found was a Kilroy I had produced, and the more I saw of him the more I was reminded of myself—the places I had been and had yet to go—and I began to resent his image and to distance myself from him as when given enough time before a mirror one will grow estranged from a previously familiar reflection.

In my attempt to revive and reapply this symbol, I stripped it of its former significance—a sound repeated, made mute. Then there were the other symbols which were perhaps too various to matter—a cacophony. Then again, perhaps their variance is the reason they matter. And here I have broken some vital element of these signs in transmuting them from image into words, from ephemera into memorabilia, and I have made of them both less and more than what they were—to what end? A caricature of toast may now be imagined and interpreted in the context of American-occupied Iraq at will.

All that was becoming now is—so much concrete where we once skipped stones. Kilroy was there because someone drew him up and put him there, and a great heft of a generation carried him along, but that was somewhere else and long ago, and I brought him a little bit further down the line, or tried, but he did not bring to us what he once brought to some—a photograph instead of a memory. Signs from a previous generation do not cross the path of time unscathed, it seems, and when we reach back and patch them up and stand them next to our own symbols, we afflict

them with the sensibilities of the future—a conflict of present in which we've agreed upon no single mascot to doodle en masse, no one drawing to seek out for comfort among ruined walls—and we decide the old signs must no longer signify what they used to. Or they do, but that is not what we are used to. How then can we leave it to the viewer to understand, without a definite character sketch, just who has been where? We sketch with many hands and view a variety of signs from different angles, in different light, and we try dimly to understand which is vital for us, what code we intend to pass on in our collective effort to survive. Ours may be an age of too many signs or of none so true. We will draw oodles of silly figures before our time is through, leaving many small comforts behind.

Red Cross Letters Never Burn

Her father, she told us, had fallen ill. We stood with her around the burn barrel watching fractured sheets of plywood disappear in flame. We burned scrap wood and pallet wood and parcel papers addressed with our names and the names of our loved ones lest they make it, somehow, into enemy hands. The sides of the barrel showed fire through holes where the metal had blued and weakened and aerated the burn to send ashes aglow through the rising heat. A kind of camper's mentality came over us as we shielded our eyes from the smoke, prodding combustibles where they eluded their inevitable ignitions, and we implored her to recount the letter she'd received, to regale us with stories from her recent and unfortunate travelogue.

Her mother, she told us, contacted the American Red Cross Emergency Communications Center who sent word overseas and fast. The letter shot down our chain of command and into her open hands where she held news of her father's illness. She followed those words back up the chain and was immediately approved for emergency leave. She set to packing a bag that same evening. Her father was dying in New York. She landed stateside twenty-two hours later. Her father was dead. She mourned for three days, helped her mother arrange things, collect things, sift through and clear away her father's no-longer-needed and soon-to-be-donated things. What's left, she said, is a mess of crumbled bones in a thick plastic bag inside a pretty little box, and that's all.

We wrung her for story. Red Cross vacation, we said. We should be so lucky. Time in the Big Apple. Look at us. Just one bite. Time in the real. We're starving out here. Tell us! Tell all! We've never been so hungry for detail. Tell us the Statue of Liberty is still standing, arm still held high, torch still aflame above her fist. Can you tell? Kill our fathers, wouldn't we, for a Manhattan weekend. Kill for family kind enough to send up the Red Cross. Time in the sticky sick Hudson. Down on ground zero. Tell us you went there. Tell us you went to Times Square. We would have,

would have stolen stories to tell. Kill us a father. Make something up! New York, New York. Tell us twice! Tell us you spun through the ice rink and spit against wind at the top of the tallest building. Which is it? Take your time. Make up a lie. Take as much as you need, please, as if time were comprised only of that which we've collected here, time made in this country, scooped from and measured in relation to this earth alone, hash marks in the sand to remind us only of now after now after now, sand trickling not through the hourglass or through gaps between fingers but from palm to open palm, passed forever between these chaliced hands. Kill us a father, wouldn't we? Help us break it up. Help us kill time. Tell us of death and help us to die. What of the big city? If we went and came back and, somehow, we could not speak, we would struggle through sound making new signs to tell you—you being us. Look at us! We've been waiting, dying to hear you tell us a story we've already imagined.

She told us we were mistaken, that her family lived upstate, that she went nowhere near, thought nothing of the city. She couldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time. They held a wake in her childhood home, casket near the big bay window. Really, she said, in the living room of all rooms. She stood for several hours where she used to color, where she would sit before the television molding herself into more and more difficult yoga poses, where her cat would claw the rug, where she would find her father dreaming on the end of the couch, his neck thick and sweating against the once-black leather worn gray and worthless and comfortable.

Nobody sleeps, she said, the way a body is posed in a casket. She stood guard at her father's head, hands behind her back, feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, where she longed for her dress uniform packed at the bottom of her sea bag, plagued with wrinkles. She wore a new black dress. He wore an old blue suit. His cheeks were rouged, the loose skin on his neck made-up and pulled taut across his throat. He kept not a single memento, she told us, from what he called

two shattered years in Vietnam. She talked of having children, three or four, and showing them trinkets from way back when grandma was in The Middle East—service medals, ribbons, her chevrons, an expert rifle badge, and an identification tag nested in the tongue of her boot—and she said something about the stubbornness of wrinkles, how they would stay and spread and attack so much more than her uniforms by then.

She stood near her father's casket and she invented rules: not allowed to sit, not allowed, not allowed to slouch or kneel on the floor with your mother—help her up!—not allowed to eat, not allowed, not to swallow or twitch or unclench your jaw, not allowed, no, no you're not. She grew old, she told us, and she left herself. She stood before her father, but she watched over him from someplace above and outside of her body which must have appeared, she said, as a thing apart from the other bodies who came to mourn, as if she were hired, as if her body was a statue, a stand-in placed there to fill the billet of some governing body—the body of a sentry on guard and not that of a grieving daughter in her family home. This phenomenon, she claimed, was much the same at her cousin's wedding the year prior were she stood as a lone bridesmaid with unoccupied hands—spring for the damn flowers!—out of uniform, out of her body, and—can you believe it?—comfortable, respected and respectful, attentive and present and dignified. During the time she spent standing guard at the head of her father's casket, she told us, she was the closest she had ever been to home.

Go ahead and laugh, she told us, and she gave us permission as she laughed over the fire. But there's something nice, she said, about being back. Nice to have made it home, of course, to have seen her father off in a sense, to have held her mother who could hardly stand. But nice too, she admitted, to be back in the desert—back with us—because the whole trip stateside went like a dream in that fleeting and uncanny way about dreams, not convincing enough to fool you into

believing they're real but real enough to stay with you like any other memory for a short time through the morning. An emergency trip from Iraq to New York should register as real. The letter is proof, she told us as she flashed it and fanned the flames over the barrel. Still she struggled to tamp the strangeness of belief in her gut. Some real and vital thing, she said, stayed—can you imagine?—here in this place where we wake dreaming, mouths wet, drooling stuttered fantasies of New York City. And she told us she wanted more than anything to feel that kind of awake.

All the real parts, she said, are kept from us. When the wake ended, she helped carry her father's casket out of her childhood home and into the back of a van. She followed the van to the crematory, asked to watch him enter the furnace and was prohibited. This is against the rules: not allowed, simply not how it's done, and surely you don't want to see when it's nothing glamorous, and it's not even scheduled until, well, come back tomorrow morning after you've eaten, go on, spend some time with family, get some sleep, really, get some sleep and come back tomorrow when you're feeling better. She went home, ate little, slept little, tried but could not remember her dreams. When she returned the next morning, her father had been burned away, his body reduced to bone-shaped minerals, his bone shapes broken to bits, his bits swept, bagged, and neatly packed into a lacquered, cherry wood box. The rules: we simply do not practice open cremation, please, our deepest sympathies, miss, here you are, your father.

She brought the box to her childhood home, to her mother who would not see it. She sat on the floor in the empty living room with her back against the gray corner of their couch, set the box upside-down on the rug between her crossed legs, and slid open the base. Inside she found a thick plastic bag filled with her father's cremains and, resting atop, a small metal disk blued from heat, hole-punched and stamped with a five-digit number for the purpose, she assumed, of identification. She took the identification tag and ran for her bag and pulled out her boots. She

stripped the laces from the left, threaded them through the hole in the tag, and slipped her boots over her bare feet. Before she tightened the laces, she tucked her father's crematorium tag between the second and third eyelet from the toe, his tag in overlap with her own tag, his numbers and her numbers, snug there against the base of the tongue.

Only child of the deceased, she told us, and she clicked her heels to attention. We looked down through the heat and sand and bits of ash called to air by her treads. She finished her story and tossed the Red Cross letter into the open mouth of the burn barrel where the heat caught a fold and lifted the paper and sent it tumbling and opening through a column of smoke. The letter rose high then peeled off and banked like a paper aircraft in a slow spiral back to earth. She positioned herself beneath and caught the letter with one hand as it whirled overhead, and she held it there for a moment before she brought it down in her fist, creased it once, twice, and slid it into her breast pocket where she pressed it flat beneath the Marine Corps emblem.

That's not the truth, we said about the identification tags, and we asked her to prove the truth of her story. Show us what you have told us. Loosen the laces and pull out the tongue! She grinned and knelt and pulled up her pantleg, and while she began to untie her boots, she asked us to promise to resist the urge to turn away. Why would we turn away? Promise you won't sleep or lose your ground but will find a way to stay with me and to watch. We can stay with you. We can watch. We want to see! Promise someone will be there—can you promise?—when this body disappears, even if in fire, even if it becomes difficult to endure, even if this is against the rules. She pulled her laces from their eyelets, her hand over the tongue, and she made us wait, made us promise those promises, and we did—as if we had the authority—promise to be there, to stay with her and to watch, to never turn away and to see whatever we might need to see even if we must hold open our eyes.

Sandstorm 7

And then someone calls the condition of the air—All Clear! But you've been there under stormfall, adjusted, conditioned your perspective to depend upon deficiencies, obscurities, a lack of… Well, now, when we use the word All, look, we leave tracks as if no one has set foot where we shuffle lineographic through sand, outset knobs bending stylus feet behind a tiny, sky-shaken easel. …just now, now that we've All been given over to clarity. Call Clear for All or for I? This is a particulate matter. There appears to be some great-needed lymph emerging from fragmented airs. It hovers while someone calls to it by name—All Clear! And clarity rushes forth though at the feet of All it cannot arrive. For some, there remain shapes in low-hanging clouds.

Indirect Fire

You don't need to puff your chest against the point of impact. Slim odds you'll meet your end at the tip of a mortar shell. They aren't aiming for you. Indirect fire. They're hardly aiming.

Winds shuttle sands across base. Sands hold their grainy billion bodies against bags at the bottoms of tents, truck treads, between poured concrete barricades and shipping containers, and they fall granular to pile and bury one another in rectangular pits—defensive cover dug in efforts against all manner of superficial explosion. Tasked with digging and displacing excess sand, he stands at the edge of the pit with a shovel over shoulder. Hey there sandy sand, he says, if you fill these pits when there's no indirect fire then there won't be any room for us marines when the shells and oh-wells and hey-nows drop and pop and startle us scrambling from sleep.

It's the shrapnel. You go ahead and lay in your rack with your feet crossed and your eyelids held tight. Drape that flak like a blanket across your chest. No one's dragging you to cover. No one's shaking you awake.

He shoots the spade through loose earth, scoops and scrapes sand along the face of one failing wall, then slings the shovelful behind. Each grain, unknowing, follows the arc of the shovel in air across the pit—a grainbow from end to end. He stands, peeks over the earth—no one—then carries the shovel as he would a drill rifle in execution of right shoulder arms. He marches the perimeter of the pit, exaggerated, ironclad as a sentry changing post before White House doors. Could bury the whole platoon, he says, yes sir—what a time saver!—after that one in one-billion projectile drops straight in the bucket, swoosh, splash, but oh, sandy sand, until then I must respectfully ask that you maintain the structural integrity of this here rectangle, this vital wound in the earth, this indirect fire pit—please, keep up your walls, man!—and leave diving space for twenty or more terrified bodies and souls.

Get spooked, wake and run late and you may die here alone. No one near. Not your comrades in cover just steps away, together, waiting. Not your faceless enemy three klicks out.

Years later he will hear a radio report of a Syrian child only just developing the ability to speak. A boy stammers. A mother watches her child start at nearby explosions. The fighting homes in as bombs sound with more and more frequency. He will recall this broadcast one day in July as his hometown blows fireworks from a barge off the coast. Young ones wail over the noise. A father removes his children who verbalize the extent of their fear. Surrounded by loved ones on a holiday beach, he will shovel his feet through the shore and imagine an unknown Syrian boy who struggles to communicate even a word through bombardment and his mother who can do nothing to stop the noise, and he will allow himself to cry.

Sands fall with a small breeze, thin cascades over the east wall of the pit. Get on in, he says, while there's getting to be got. He dams a stream with one hand. Grains pool there, fine and falling, rust from his palm. If I put you back up, sandy sand—oh, how well we each know the other by now—you're coming right back in this pit. I know you are. He turns over his hand. He shakes his close friends from his fingers, from his trousers and the tops of his boots, stands upon them, grinds smooth their backs, packs their little bodies for steps, steps and climbs as he flings them innumerably behind. He scrambles up and onto high ground.

You'll make this yours. The spade will never leave you. You will stand post at this pit to monitor and displace errant sands. Rack here. Chow here. Write letters home here and tell of your job to anyone who thinks they are brave enough to love you. No one needs to know why you spend your days in a truck-sized hole. Tell them. Tell them and see if they can't know. Tell them and test—the way a Marine might test fealties feigning sleep under fire—the depth of their so-called bravery.

FPO AE

From one of the shops beneath the Al Asad stadium, I bought a four-band puzzle ring. The proprietor asked if I was sure I did not want a designer suit—fabric direct from the factory, fractions of retail costs, custom fit—and I told him I was not sure about much of anything except that a custom suit would not fit for long. Deployment changes one's shape—not unlike, I would learn, a homecoming.

Some weeks later I sent the puzzle ring off in an envelope addressed to a girl pregnant with another boy's boy. Our connection, we acknowledged, was a strange investment on both our parts—she, a soon-to-be single mother, and I whose future we did not dare discuss. Before it went off with a letter—all too brief, so she jabbed—I wore the ring on the little finger of my marriage hand, turning it, worrying at its bands, working my fingernails through the grooves. I took it apart and put it back together again and again until I had managed the mechanics of the puzzle with the kind of practiced efficiency with which I could unbuild and reassemble my rifle—skills I would only come to utilize in the killing of time.

In her reply, studded with a familiar flirtation and polished with just a touch of genuine annoyance, she rebuked the postal service for its apparent inertia—six weeks it takes, I mean, it arrived all right, but the eagle may not be their most appropriate symbol. She thanked me with similar barbs—the ring is beautiful, but there are no assembly instructions, and, you know me, I won't be able to resist taking this thing apart.

With a twist and a tap, the puzzle would fall into a jangle of gnarled bands—an awkward linkage of non-precious metals. If she wore the ring with the kind of fidelity one might have come to expect from stories of wartime romance, its metals may have rusted, may have absorbed the moisture in her skin and fused the bands solid or, given enough time, may have corroded and

collapsed into so many irreconcilable fragments. She may have foreseen these endings. If she remained true to her word and took the ring apart, then I imagine it stayed apart, that she never attempted to reconnect the pieces, and that she repurposed the puzzle as part of another strange investment—a moment in a time capsule, perhaps, or as one small element of a multimedia collage, the totem for an incantation, or as the tinny jingle above a camera lens to catch the curious eye of a newborn boy.

Elections at a Distance

All the boys, it seemed, were gathered at town's edge. I stepped down from my truck with my rifle in patrol carry. Powerlines made up the bounds of a neighborhood, wires sagged between poles cemented into damaged oil drums every few blocks along a low wall. Adolescent boys watched us from the outskirts in a small cluster at the edge of a field between their homes and our trucks, testing the atmosphere and calling to younger friends beyond the wall—the Americans are here! A group of men watched from a distance with knotted arms while the boys waved theirs in wild motions across the field, pointing toward two plastic pipes standing upright to mark their goal in the dirt. One boy juggled a ball between energetic feet. Our arrival interrupted their soccer game.

Some months prior, Staff Sergeant delivers a box of absentee ballots. He is frustrated having overheard the political indifference of junior marines and of non-commissioned officers in other platoons, furious that he is not authorized to order each of us to cast a vote—one way or another. You ought to vote, he tells us, because you are American citizens and it's your right and you're Marines which should make it your duty to vote because you can't even name a job outside of government that allows every one of its employees to vote on who gets to boss them around. He mutters his commands as if we weren't gathered there, listening. Everyone gets a ballot even if they think they have a good enough reason not to vote. He slices open the box and turns it over and a brick of papers drops out onto a plywood table and the tabletop sags under its weight. So I can't order you to vote, he tells us as he walks off with the empty box, but I can tell you that every Marine in this platoon will take a ballot and every ballot will be returned.

We take our ballots and debate red versus blue. You know, the elephant would win in a cage match, the donkey in a sprint. Our flippant candor forces one impassioned Corporal onto her soapbox—a box of ready to eat meals which she pulls by plastic binds from beneath the steps of a

Seven-Ton and on which she actually stands to broadcast her doubts over our group as we marvel at the magnanimity of choice or hurry to jot in our opinions or falter with the enigma of the ballots in our hands, scanning strange new lists for a familiar name. For many, this is our first election. What you should consider, she states from on high, is how much choice you really have when your options are either red or blue, you see, this isn't freedom of choice, right, like how easy it is to preach on the importance of voting when a year of our pay, all of our pay combined, wouldn't bring any of our names close to those printed on this ballot. How many of you know what it costs to campaign? Show of hands if you know the term gerrymandering? Put your hands down. Do any of you know how the electoral college works, where our system comes from, how far your vote goes or what it would mean if every one of us were to throw these ballots in the burn barrel and demanded change and choice and not the illusion of consequence? We laugh and call her a communist and a racist and an idealist and other unflattering ists amid our laughter. Corporal throws up her hands and steps down from her box and laughs with us, at us, and we turn up the motor pool radio and pile our variously convicted ballots there in the open disk tray where they stay until Staff Sergeant returns to collect them and stuff them back into the box. And he tells us, alright, alright, the party's over.

The boy with the soccer ball cocked back and kicked it, and I lunged and caught it with the toe of my boot just before it shot beneath the cab of my truck. Most of our platoon was busy unloading concrete barricades beyond the field in the narrow streets of the neighborhood on the other side of the wall—our first in a series of deliveries to surrounding Sinjar towns in preparation for Iraqi provincial elections. Staff Sergeant directed their placement. The rest of our platoon stood guard by our trucks or kicked about the field as if on casual patrol. I held the ball underfoot and scanned the adults who watched from a distance for my play. I dribbled it through the dirt then

cocked back and drove my instep which connected hard and sent the ball on a low curve through the air, down center toward the gap between posts, bouncing once, twice through the dust before it stopped just short of the goal at the far end of the field. The group of boys hesitated for a breath then darted after the ball and resumed slipping and kicking up dust. Some of us joined them in a free-for-all. I pushed a pass to the adults who separated to let the ball roll between them, losing momentum as it nudged along the wall. The boys slid in and recovered the pass and lobbed it overhead, back onto the field, and we kept the game going. We lowered our guards and played easily around our trucks, and no one called a foul or cited the rules or split us into teams, and none of us kept score.

I exchanged dramatic hand signals with a small group near my cab, then we exchanged some money—this is a dollar bill, see, to trade if you have something to trade—which sent them running away and shouting and running back waving paper currency or a steel whistle or an American football or shining coins from various visiting nations or other such casually acquired and forfeitable treasures. Every other marine, I noticed, had similarly drawn their own little crowd. I traded green for orange—dollars for dinar—and when my group of boys and I exhausted our modes of auditory communication—language fumbles, religious tunes, claps, snaps in bad time, call and response whistles—I climbed into the cab and returned with a men's interest magazine which fell open in my hand as I dropped from the steps. A nude model unfolded from the center, creased at her thighs and shoulders, calling out to the boys who slipped into an alien and undeniably curious quiet much the way I would have at that same age. They leaned over one another to look with hands behind their backs, refusing to touch, refusing to take the magazine from my hands. In a sudden cultural panic as I noticed the group of adults cautioning, pointing, approaching, I bunched up the centerfold and stashed the rag in a gap beneath the cab. To distract from this faux

pas, I pulled from between the steps a box of ready-to-eat meals. The box tumbled and landed on its side and sat there among settling dirt for a quick moment before the kids dove upon it and snapped through its plastic binds. They unboxed the cardboard and flung aside the scraps as they scooped and fumbled little brown meal packages downfield and back to the wall around their neighborhood. The adults settled back into their watchful group. The boys climbed the wall and lifted their bounties and danced atop the high stones in celebration, their excited hands so close to low-hanging powerlines.

We finished our job and lined up our trucks in convoy order and followed those powerlines out of town. The boys resumed their game or traded odd treasures with one another or stood atop the wall at the edge of their neighborhood and waved goodbye. When I was a boy I would ride along with my head against the car window and look up at the series of powerlines which ran alongside the road and seemed to dip and rise over the crossbeams at the tops of poles like the tracks of some repetitive yet sure-to-be-thrilling roller coaster, and I always pictured myself on that ride in some impossible cart, excitement all the way up, stomach in my throat at each belt-cinching hurdle, my hands brave and waving high. The tracks ended suddenly, as powerlines often do, spiked into the sand or veered toward the last house over the wall at the edge of an unknown neighborhood where boys play games in dirt fields just outside of town and follow powerlines along a low wall or through the windows of moving cars, maybe, and imagine I don’t know what. For what other strange reason might a boy choose to throw his hands in the air?

Parallel—a Maneuver

Thirst as opposing force, contained—a pallet of plastic bottles. Tanks pass—a sonication. Sure grit coordinated against polarities in the shape of their fouling—a jet-fueled aggregation—momentary hinderance pitched high. Piss in the air as there most certainly is sand in your water. Trucks racket away beneath a dissipating—worry-like—into and through some fluid past where leaky tanks in convoy stream off-road and around. They—freeway by tracks and tradition. We—blacktop and history as bound. Screams from machinery invite chase—old as aircraft with painted teeth. You cannot outrun the wait. Drink—a swish and down.

The Sound Nerves Make

An off day, alone in my room—a small trailer with a single door and one window. Sunlight balked at the blinds. I slipped out of bed, and my bare feet sensed what I could not see—sand sneaked in, ferried on overnight airs through door seams and cracks in worn window seals to collect and settle over the metal wall lockers and lampshades and nightstands, blanketed over stiff white sheets on twin beds, thrown like a beige rug across the floor—a small problem for another time. I dressed, slung my rifle, and left partial bootprints where a fine sand tucked itself beneath the threshold.

Outside, muted strings carried down the walkway between trailers. I drifted after the sound, one row over, two trailers down where peppered applause rose and fell from behind a familiar door. I invited myself in and found most of my platoon gathered around a bed standing cross-legged and reclined against the walls or seated on the floor with their knees in their hands, rocking, nodding hello and waving me inside—hurry, let's go, close the door. A noncommissioned one-man-band struck another chord, his studied fingers bridged across the unpracticed neck of an acoustic guitar—who sent your six-string all the way out here? Quiet—a perfect harmony. Then a motivational tune.

From the halls of Montezuma / To the shores of Tripoli / We fight our country's battles / In the air, on land, and sea.

What began as a near-faithful rendition of the Marine's Hymn devolved into a riotous chorus of snickers—we are really doing this, aren't we? Some of us sang in extremely stressed or dreamy falsetto, baritone, or gutted vocal fry while others mouthed the lyrics and nodded along as they might mime their participation in a birthday song for a distant relative. All of us had learned the so-called hymn and had belted out the first verse at our graduation ceremonies, but none of us

remembered every word or at least none of us would admit to having access to such fanatical memory. We stumbled toward the final lines.

If the Army and the Navy / Ever look on heaven's scenes / They will find the streets are guarded / By United States Marines.

Applause and a round of big laughs turned into slow admissions of our faulty timekeeping, improvisations, rhythmic interpretations, scathing lyrical deviations, and a repetition of those few true verses we all knew too well followed by critical analyses of their content—why would we agree to stand guard at the gates of heaven? Everyone else gets eternal paradise and The Marines get stuck with more guard duty.

If we all end up in heaven / And they put our butts to work / We'll say no thanks and head for hell / because god's a goddamn jerk.

Always read the fine print. As we sang these barroom chants and sailor songs, these criticisms in green and irreverent tales of unknown marines, so too it went with our own stories, pointing around and singing out one another's flaws, celebrating our hypocrisies in rhyme, those idiosyncrasies and tics known best among those who would, those who spend meal after meal after another foreign mile watching and watching out for each other, working around and with and for one another, distracting constantly and reciprocally from the unbearable keeping of time.

You're so fat / Our truck's going flat.

Counting sheep / You can't even sleep.

Smell so bad / I can't even rhyme.

The noncommissioned one-man-band contorted his fingers to pick and press chords from the strings of his instrument, and those awkwardly musical hands held everyone's attention as if they were technically precise hands selecting and pulling wires from live ordnance at the roadside.

The gravity held us the same, and we admired the artful diversion. Some of us played along. One thrashed broom quills in lieu of an electric guitar. Another feigned saxophone with his lips over the barrel of his rifle. And we became, for the moment, a band of many men. Marines laughed and shuffled in step to the music. One drummed to the beat on a metal wall locker, snare out near the corners, toms on the hollow sides, the open door a cymbal, handles loose and jangling as tambourines. Then the deepest bass came bounding in—yikes. Too fast and way off rhythm—listen—from somewhere outside.

Staff Sergeant beat against the outer wall with a fist meant for discord. Vibrations knocked and spread down through the wall and across the floor where grains of sand must have hopped unseen. We stopped the music for his drumming, for his shouting about other Marines—think about it, all right, asleep right across the way here, just back from their convoy and wanting quiet like you want for quiet when you lay your head, so tighten up and keep it down and, hey, no one's on their own program out here so that's the end of the damn singalong. We stood quiet and absent and still, our arms locked around our rifles and pressed against our knotted chests, slow to release as the shouting stopped and Staff Sergeant's tired grumbles faded off and our rifles slid down the face of our uniforms as their stocks found the floor once again and our arms went tired at our sides and our musical fists fell into silent, bloodless hands.

We all supposed that was the closing note. Many huffed or sucked their teeth or cursed with long vowels or agreed in a reluctant and breathy quiet, a low kick at the air, a chin tucked in disapproval, and they made their way outside where they stayed and held open the door. I waved them off—you heard the boss—and the door closed with a stutter. A broom fell from the edge of the frame to the floor and made a dividing line between twin beds. I sat on one side, the one-man-band on the other. Our song never got around to me. He buffed a scuff from the heel of his guitar,

the back of the neck, a curve in the body. Everyone got a little ditty, but it never got around to me—where's my ditty? He plucked a high string and sent it low, a down-tuning with modest turns from slender knobs, a letting of tension held along the neck. The strings went slack, and the guitar fell tuneless, the one-man-band songdumb—steel strings tend to warp the neck if you leave the guitar untouched and in tune. Too much tension over too much time. The neck will bow and cause the strings to sit further from the frets, and then the notes become harder to feel and to hold. He would tune them again before the next singalong, before long. We can't help but jab at our soft spots, and there's always another song to sing so long as our soft spots still show. I tightened my fists and sang out of time.

Expertise / still fucked up your knees.

You're so smart / but no purple heart.

We would always find ways to jab at the little craters left on the road, the gaps between our memories and our accolades, the hesitation left in our steps. I sang without tune and kicked at the broom on the floor—if you don't mind, I need to borrow your other instrument here for the sandstorm that blew through over at mine, covered everything, a layer so fine you can hardly see it until you wipe it away. The one-man-band smoothed a wrinkle from the sheets at the edge of his bed, laid the guitar head against his pillow, and told me I never have to ask—what is mine is yours. He nodded toward the broom and knelt, wiped a hand across the floor as he reached beneath the bed for his rifle—it's everywhere here too.

Vehicle Dispersion

Ahead, the gunner spins his turret over the passenger's side. Your driver shouts up to confirm what you can hear—enemy contact right! Flashes from the roof of a small shop or from the small windows on the second floor, a few truck-lengths up the road. The shots come on like a trill or a stutter, like a set of rimshots in a roll on an overtight snare. The forward truck slows, returns fire, and your driver coasts behind, rides the brakes to maintain proper vehicle dispersion. He tells you to look where you are looking, your turret already facing the firefight, and he rants about their position. They're practically at a standstill up there, really, taking this as their moment, basking in it—do you see this?—racing the barrel hot and glowing, burning up the sky with those tracers every fifth round like they needed flares to see, mark time and make a scene, to give them enough reason to take notes, to take in all the details Lieutenant will need to put them in for that combat action ribbon—look at them up there—and they're going to get it too. Their gun screams and the fire sings back in rounds. The target building sends each crack bounding like a ricochet, echoes from the low wall and shuttered windows across the street, back and forth and back down the road where you wait atop your truck to advance into combat. You check the feed tray, situate your rounds. Staccato punches whole notes into a storefront. You rack one from the belt to the chamber, shoulder your gun. The wind dies. The fire slows and then stops. Flashes drop and the echoes fade from the street. A breath in the rest, the forward skirmish at some bridge or break or end. Right, enough already, push then, push on—your driver entreats progress and laments the ceasing of return fire, the suppression of enemy contact, the dissolution of the engagement, the ribbons you two could have earned. He kicks the accelerator as the truck ahead makes way, and you begin to move down the street and into that previously violent space before the small shop. You reseat the buttstock in your shoulder and tighten your grip on the approach.

That truck tears down the road ahead, the turret spinning in celebration as they race off to catch the rest of the convoy. A twitch in the dissolving gun smoke, sulfuric signatures on air, hot metals heaving, bright and sour. Brass casings jewel the road. Your gun rattles in its mount as you coast by storefront. Awning fabrics billow and dip and sway in the wind. Soccer jerseys and slacks and other various clothing items hang there from angle-iron frames and catch flight and twist and swing from tiny hooks. The awning frame groans. Something falls to the dirt and clangs—the inconsequence of a breeze. Pockmarks and craters draw your attention across a low wall before a window. Your driver calms the engine, lingering, idling past. Plastic buckets and cracked ceramics and vacuum-sealed packets and various shimmering pots and pans litter the ground near an overturned wheelbarrow. Your driver tells you he cannot hold for long—you hear?—and he suggest you pull the trigger if you want to claim combat action before he punches the pedal to catch up to the rest of the convoy to close that ridiculous dispersion ahead. Many outdoor shelves keep hold of their pristine pots and canvas baskets and wide spools of cloth. You follow the trails in the walls, scan those small windows on the second floor, trace the iron sights of your gun along their sills, across their hollows to their crowning curves and down when—there it is—shots sing out again. Rounds bell some resonant piece of your truck's armor. Your driver conducts through the noise—contact left! Contact left this time, and the engine turbine screams as he stands on the accelerator. The wind whips through and whines past the turret shields as the engine bursts to life, and those shots from the left come on strong and bleed into the armor's vibration, a blind violence repeating and rising like percussion in a build toward crescendo. You seat your finger in the curve of the trigger and spin your turret toward the fire, and your line of sight crosses the rear of your truck, and you find the rest of the convoy caught up, the following truck right there, stopped just behind yours in complete ignorance of standard dispersion, way too close and at in position before

the little building on the left, gunner engaged already with the enemy in the window, his barrel sending flashes and singing out, rounds bursting and burning through the wall, beating the concrete around one little window as your driver sustains his acceleration and your truck reels helplessly away. You tighten at the pistol grip. Your finger drops from the trigger. Your shoulder rides the trembling stock, the steel going cold in the wind, the rest of the street flashing past as your truck pulls you miles from the engagement.

The truck behind continues to fire as it shrinks before the small shop now riddled with holes. Smoke overtakes the flashes. The gunner pauses for a beat before sending another round to an enemy you heard but did not see, and the volume of the fire shrinks too until sound is totally lost to distance. Everything about that place lessens as your driver speeds to meet with the forward trucks. He knocks your legs and reminds you to spin your turret back over the passenger's side—you know how it goes, and there's no sense in thinking on it or longing for what's gone, right, when we slowed until there was no more slowing and then things went just how they were supposed to go, and there's no shame in that. You spin your turret back. No shame in following, in maintaining dispersion—sure there's not. Engagements just ahead and just behind, and you didn't fire a single round. The rest of the place wavers in the periphery, small homes and storefronts and roadside markets on the outskirts of town blending as individual beats in a drum roll before the whole of the place bounces out of existence, and like a crash you're back to the drone of open desert. The truck ahead is a blip, a front sight post, a chip in the horizon. They gunned it all the way to the edge of the world. Your driver guns it too and carries you toward them, a duet toward an orchestration. The truck behind is probably, by the quiet, disengaged and some distance back and following. A firefight in the front row, a platoon in the pit. Speed brings the wind to a swell, a torrent in one ear and a steady whisper in the other. The whole convoy will be caught up before

long—an infinitesimal loss of rubber over a blind stretch of pavement—trucks racing to stay together to keep just so far apart. Your driver pats your boots. Your arms go cold and—look at you, you're still shouldering the gun. Ahead, the sky muffles the road. The forward truck should be growing larger and thus closer but has somehow become smaller and even more distant. You leave the gun in its mount, sit back in the turret, and imagine yourself lost. Your truck has fallen too far beyond standard dispersion, always too fast or too slow, and you entertain the possibility that you will never catch up.

Sandstorm 8

Looking on from over shoulder you might say yes, of course grist and ground mites borne by air will aggravate the eye, lessen digestion, acuity, or linear definition, surroundings now surrounded, a comfortable discernment swallowed more and more by a not-so-clever guise—this weather. It's a blur! Such atmosphere, these times. I might respond, looking back, sure, it's a blur, at least until Earth herself sickens and throws fair-weather up and out through her sunshiny beam—a bile you never knew she kept until you saw it spewed in the form of glory after gunfire to hit and drip effortless bright down the chests of boy and girls who can no longer stand for more than one granular moment in places stormpast. Consistencies, it would seem, no longer satisfy.

I haven't disturbed, I hope. It's only analogy.

Well, you've made things seem quite grim—this noxious insistence on obscurity.

Well, I do see with an aggravated eye.

Oh, now, don't get cute, using people's might-say words against them—here we go.

Looking on you might say alright, just conjure for me what you see when you look back on the lighter side, images frothed in a softer wind. I may say I see a low-ranking officer lose his hat to the gust, his bobbing fingers a comic-strip away from the crescent bill, chasing and reaching in perpetuity toward the fitted back, tickling at a front panel marked Marine Corps—an eagle that never loses its claw on globe and anchor—flailing at the sweat-soaked crown collecting sand in furious tumbles like weeds collect weeds over a great American West. A funny chase, you might say, but not so light and not without the heft of comment, of satire, politic. Ha! We do laugh in analog. I might say this—the image of the officer chasing his hat in the wind—seemed or was feathered to me then, levitous, lighthearted if you like, though if you haven't a lightness of eye I don't know why we should bother with how things were or seemed beyond any given image.

Right About the Clavicle

I hit him with the first, I knew, right about the clavicle, but I held the trigger anyway and dumped, I don't know, twenty or so rounds into that empty window frame because I was afraid I might have known wrong. Our truck was being held up by the truck ahead which started taking fire from the left, sporadic shots from below, rounds slicing the air down the road and crashing into the armor there along the driver's side. I shouldered my gun and I saw, beneath my turret, in a derelict building across from a little bodega only a few yards ahead, flashes blooming on a windowsill with every crack of the rifle. I could only see the muzzle and the fire and not the enemy, so I kicked at my driver and shouted for her to pull forward against her better judgement, against standard operating procedure, way too close to the truck ahead of ours and into the line of fire. I steadied and aimed at about the spot I imagined the window would land as she let off the brake and pulled us into the fray. He fell in my sights just before we rolled into his, so you could say the kill, aiming-wise—if we should call it a kill—is as much my driver's as it is mine though she'd deny this outright and I'd never argue.

A cloud spilled from the window. I released the trigger and my gun settled back into its mount and its vibrations crept up my fingers and swept along my arm and surged into my chest where they spread unseen like thin curls of smoke through a drafty room. Then I was firing another, I don't know, so many rounds into plaster and dirt which burst from the edge of the frame and rained down the front of that low wall or jumped up and fell back through the window and disappeared into the shadows within that derelict building. Again, I released. I stopped firing and what I had known suddenly became everything I might not know about the man with the rifle behind the window who fired, I don't know, ten or twelve rounds at the truck ahead of mine which by this time, my driver later informed me, was careening down the road on its way out of town to

catch up, like we should have been, with the rest of our convoy. When asked why she kept our truck there before that derelict building across from the little bodega for so long while I fired burst after burst into an empty window, she told me she didn't know except that she thought we were relatively safe and that she experienced no immediate urge to drive on. You seemed to have things under control, she told me, and typically gunfire will arise in conjunction with an explosion, but since this was not such a complex attack, well, figured we might as well put rounds down range.

I put another ten or fifteen rounds, as my driver put it, down range. In the gaps between those bursts of fire which must have been, I don't know, one or two or no more than five seconds long, I stared out between the turret's forward shields and down along the barrel into that empty window frame where, in a fit of imagination, I brought him back up, standing in that open window and facing me, bloodied but not beaten, his rifle perched at the edge of the frame where he could steady his shaking and brace his barrel to fire a single round which might skim the body of my gun and follow a line straight into the turret where it would sneak between that vulnerable space at the top of my vest and enter, punching through fabric and skin and shattering my collar and sending bone shards into my neck, tearing through my throat, leaving me jellied and ribboned and slumped over the buttstock of my mounted gun, legs dangling into the cab of our truck, choking on my own blood and raining trauma down upon my driver's shoulders. I squeezed the trigger again and let off, I don't know, another round or twenty as she carried me away from that place.

Lambs in a Pen

We broke once upon an upended farm. Gobbets of grainfield and drought spat and grew dangerous, unbound by houses abandoned, unawares. Preserved by accident, a sudden amount of complicated doubt crouched nearby to sling its fractured branches. Three lambs decomposed in a pen. So awful—the kids grew disillusioned—what glory? More than usual, grassless stones drew bright attention, nearby limbs. We emptied ourselves, and they motioned us from nerves or roots.

Sloth, That Wicked Siren

Why he stopped showering, no one could say for sure, though everyone had their guesses. Most assumed it was a matter of convenience which evolved into laziness and then absentminded comfort. Showers, the somewhat infrequent occasions that they were, became difficult to appreciate in the dark, wrapped in cold, wading waist-deep through lack-of-sleep, the length of the day dragging the body down with more weight than the collected grime of the road.

He'd gone nose-blind, as they say, as those closest to him might have, as the rest of our platoon had not. Some claimed he hadn't, in fact, stopped showering but was only entertaining an extended break between showers as a matter of pattern fulfillment—shower at every other opportunity, then every third, quarterly, and so on until he'd finally reached some staggering interval which might last him the remainder of his time in country and carry him well into his post-deployment leave. Pity the poor dears who will rush to hug him! The fumes their embraces will loose upon the welcoming! His decidedly unhygienic maneuver may have been some form of reactionary protest, conscious or otherwise. The inauguration of this personally and professionally subversive step toward putrefaction seemed to coincide with a bout of small arms fire in which he had successfully engaged. How his combat experience links causally to his decision to avoid the showers, however, we must remain unaware. When asked, he parried the inquiry with a dismissive hand and retaliated with a strike to the obvious—this is a war zone, man. The armory's always open if you're itching for something to clean.

Because we had spent so much time around him and as much mindpower on the origins of his anti-antiseptic behavior, it came as no surprise to everyone except Doc that he came down with what she called a floriferous staphylococcal bacterial infection which had germinated on his upper thigh, took root in the pocket of a single hair follicle, and blossomed into a blistering daisy with

red ulcers petaled around florets of honey-crust toxins, all stemming from a central, festering pustule.

He must have quietly borne this affliction for weeks before we finally caught him struggling to climb into his truck and sent him straight to Doc who, against his wishes, purged the affected area, sliced him open and drained, she told us, nearly a pint of fluid from his leg. Why he refused the local anesthetic, we may never know. Some say he enjoyed the pain—the same reason he let the infection build nearly to the point of immobility, until all the company's Corpsmen gathered to contemplate whether it was safe to allow him to keep his own limb. Maltreat your body, he told us, and somebody may take it from your charge. Maybe he couldn't feel much of his thigh anyway, swollen as it had become, and so he assumed a surgical slice amid all that existing carnage wouldn't even register. Doc, however, says he knew full well how much it would hurt—having counseled him and confirmed and reconfirmed his decision. She thinks he probably welcomed the flood of pain with the hope that he would pass out, assuming she would necessarily bathe him either way and preferring to ward the whole of the experience from his memory. He awoke shiny and sterile and wrapped about the leg with brilliant white gauze.

His vision, he told us, had slowly turned to static from the outside until it collapsed at the middle where everything went black. Maybe the scar will pass as a bullet wound. We all knew why a Marine would prefer a bullet wound to a staph infection. There's still time, we told him, to land an actual bullet wound. Then, of course, he would call them two bullet wounds—double the stories for the working girls back home. The infection cleared up quickly, but the wound was deep and at risk for a necrotic relapse for weeks following Doc's procedure, and so he had to clean it daily with all of us, Doc most of all, holding him accountable. This supervised sanitation may have caused him to shower even less frequently, though his wound remained immaculate. He took to

carrying packages of sterile wipes in his cargo pocket and thin-ribboned gauze with which to stuff the hole in his thigh—a performance for our benefit and a necessity of effective healing. Often, while he changed the dressing, he would put on a kind of show, holding his thigh with both hands, a thumb on either side of the gash, pulling his skin apart and letting it loose so that the wound opened and shut like the bony mouth of a fish gasping for water. He would gasp in time with the opening and closing of the flesh as if his leg was drying out, struggling for life on land, and he would beg us—his audience—to drag him to the showers.

Once, out on the road, out of boredom perhaps or as a means of airing his wounds, he gathered us around his leg and unraveled his bandages and unpacked the hole in his skin. He took a permanent marker to his thigh and drew two wonky circles around splotches for eyes, a cascade of squiggles for hair, and he, puppeteer-like, worked his red-lipped wound as if she were a lady of the night singing out from the docks and calling to the boys in uniform who were just then sailing in from the long drought of the desert war, like some traveling stage show from another era. We laughed as he continued to wrench open her jaws and voice her calls to the returning masses, and we slapped our thighs and whistled back, and it went on like that until she sang a high note and held it too long and opened her lips too wide and tore something deep in her throat and gagged on her own blood and let it spill from the corner of her failing lips which suddenly and unmistakably returned to a break in bloodless skin. He must not have felt it but marked some pain on our faces. He wiped the stream of blood through her hair and shut her up with a mouthful of cotton.

Where she went and why we never saw her again, only he could say, though everyone has their guesses. I imagine she'll be there to welcome him home.

Of the River

Some have been and could tell of the palatial—mosaic columns and mounds of silver and rivers routed through porcelain baths brimming and still as cobalt glass which breaks for the body and dives over diamond-patterned floors like shattered crystal falls—evaporating. A hungry bend in the fertile crescent where living glade writhes to send out the breeze—paradise scythed along the Euphrates—and growing shores call upon the ram and sandgrouse and some few clever trees. Pistachio! Hawthorn! Plum!

A mouth does not control its tributaries.

The portal of speech drains while headwaters swell.

Fists work the plunge and glaucous studs jewel fleeting waves—laundry day—alive with suds carried down and rocking. A home of earth embedded in the treads of his boots. He has been and could tell of nothing so glamorous—a deep bight dammed and losing volume—as the cradle, they say, of civilization.

Models of Recognition

While resupplying a platoon camped out upon what seemed the barren-most swath of desert in northwestern Iraq, I experienced the psychological phenomenon known as pareidolia—the mistaking of random stimuli for some familiar pattern—lunar geography, say, for a rabbit. We staged our trucks and offloaded various consumable and hygienic supplies, and, due to popular demand, many of us generously parted with our monthly reading material. The pages of the magazines passed around their barren outpost had become, as the infantry phrased it, white noise. Though many of them quickly slipped off toward their tents in transparent appreciation of our second-hand men's interest issues, the most vital element of our mission was the refueling of their vehicles parked at strategic security points about their ringed encampment.

At some juncture on the road between Sal Sinjar and this unnamed post, the pump on our fuel truck had failed—something to do with ignition—and I with all my mechanical training could devise no viable repair. While pacing and stalling and dwelling on this problem of how to get fuel from the large tank on our truck to the small tanks in theirs, I stumbled quite literally upon a solution when I caught myself stutter-stepping down a ravine toward what might have been, long ago, a river—dried up and wide enough to drive each of their trucks through, one by one. It was this unorthodox solution to park our fuel truck up on the bank and to use the unhurried yet ceaseless flow of gravity to feed fuel down to their trucks in the riverbed which granted me the liberty to stare for too long into a patch of eroded earth and emerge, as I had, with the unshakable image of a smiling face—not merely some generic and cartoonish facsimile of a smile, but a smile lived, mired and intelligible, petrified, inviting. The infantry saw it too as they brought down their trucks and sat with me atop the fuel tank, ankles crossed upon the coupling between hoses, staring into

the opposing wall of the once-river at what we decided was the most uncanny expression—a rugged face fixed mid-laugh, delicate and crumbling, a laugh poised at the very peak of hysterics.

Can't you see it? Where waters once collapsed and carried off the river's edge there stood a fine abrasion of rock and sand, a wall graded over curves from would-be banks, rounded at the top and shaved down from soft and new to forged and cracked—the forehead and brow chiseled with wrinkles as if by surprise. And the eyes cinched against hilarity—a small earthen cliff for the left eye over a crested sliver of shade opposed by midday sun. An intelligent row of stones for the right eye, lighter than its fellow would-be eye, sure, but too obvious in its ocular fidelity not to call to mind the balance of reflection, the symmetry of a squint or glare—very nearly the eyes of an exhausted child. Then the indentation beneath, perhaps that of a small boulder suddenly and in a violent wind removed to make way for negative space which when viewed from head-on appeared to bulge beautifully forth—an illusion and yet an unmistakable nose, resolute and seemingly unkinked by the chuckling in the cheeks. And the smile, there, the feature furthest down which appeared to curve even though we know from aerial photographs that the waters did not curve in this place, inflected across the breadth of our visual pane—the valleyed river bed when viewed from the uppermost vantage of the fuel tank—an improbable and impossibly convincing smile, beamed skyward at either end, outlasting the face in both directions for unknown distances.

Where nothing appears to thrive, I told the drivers—now refueled—we may still find laughter. And they laughed at me, mostly, though they saw it too—the pareidolia—that human face in dry earth.

While some of the infantry helped us reel in the fuel hoses and secure the straps to the beds of our trucks, one of them pulled me aside and asked if I thought I was pretty smart—pareidolia this and that—and he told me, if I was so smart, that I ought to know where the term Semper

Fidelis comes from. Do you know how it became the Marine Corps motto? I told him I knew the phrase was Latin for always faithful—a factoid embedded in the memory of all marines—and he suggested that I was not so smart, that I only tried very hard to sound smart but was, in all likelihood, the kind of person who made a pastime of sleeping with sheep. I did not correct this suggestion which seemed to convince him that I possessed some intelligence or, at least, that I was not so bestially inclined.

He stared me down and told me I was not worth any more of his words, then asked why I wouldn't just admit that I didn't know the answer to his question. I don't know. Are you afraid of not knowing? I don't think so. The truth, he told me, so you can pretend like you know, is that no living person knows—no living person knows why Semper Fidelis is our motto. He rolled up one sleeve to reveal *Semper*—block letters in black ink embedded within the skin of his forearm—a common tattoo. Commandant so-and-so declared it the official motto some generations ago and he never wrote why before he died, so now beyond that we'll never know. And now you know, he told me as he rolled up the other sleeve to reveal *Fidelis*. And we repeat the words as loud as we can, and we commit them to memory. And we dip needles in the words and punch them into our arms and take them with us wherever we go. And we notice the words there sometimes when we're alone or when someone points them out to us or when we stumble upon a reason to show them off, even though they are always there, right in front of us. And most of the time we don't see the words. And when we do see them, we don't recognize them as words at all.

Unfazed Civilians Shroud and Carry Two from Fatal Accident

When recalling vehicular collision, we summon the word accident, though this description is a mistaking of the event. For accident, we need an absence of indication, an all-party acceptance of irresponsibility, a causal shift—human to happenstance—wherein no actor or observer may claim conscious influence over or extraneous knowledge of an event's generation. What happened? It was an accident—common to a description of events past. We rarely have accidents. Inquiries which follow vehicular collision, however, employ the language of cause and effect—who did what first and then what happened?—to determine which of the involved parties, perhaps some foreign third, are at fault. Fault, unlike accident, features readily in past, present, and future. It was our fault. We are at fault. Don't fault me for what I am about to do. Civilian vehicles collide before a military convoy. A flash, then a wreckage exists. A body is ejected some distance. Blood ferries gravel from the road, red then black where heaving fragmentation. Observation may affect behavior. Accident necessitates avoidance—a disregard—and the word, except to signify a happening, obscures all of what we intend for it to represent. We may use accident, still, to describe vehicular collision, but now that we must decide upon appropriate terms with which to relay the event for an unknown observer—or are you, at last, an involved party?—we might reckon with alternatives. We might recall the language of collision and its aftermath to revisit the title and similarly try our use of civilians, two, or unfazed, carry, shroud, or the word fatal.

New Year's

I never missed a kiss. Not even the seemingly indomitable odds in a war zone, I would later brag in broad strokes over drinks, could stop these lips. True, in essence, statistics did not inhibit my ongoing tradition of locking lips on the eve of a new year, however the insinuation that the sheer magnetism of my mouth or that my own canoodling prowess had anything to do with my success in maintaining said tradition, well—like most of the desert—it doesn't hold water.

It's past eleven by the time I make way to the Al Asad recreation center, walking fast through the rows of our portable neighborhood, convinced Doc will still be there—where else would she go? My rifle swings at my side where it hangs from its sling and bounces with each step. Laptops screens glow cold in surrounding windows. Steam pillows through a trailer door—look at that—nearly midnight and the showers are still hot. Shadows by the old bunkers, the new rendezvous spot for lovers, quiet as they sometimes aren't this time of night.

Bass pulses through recreation center walls. I didn't realize there would be music—lovely—but there are no convoys scheduled for the first of the year, as it happens, and I guess that's reason enough to pretend to dance. Late night on Al Asad and there really is nowhere else to go. The gym, perhaps. The picnic tables near the snack trailers for fast food pizza and burgers which have oddly similar tastes. Then there's the old theater where new troops are briefed, where old troops are debriefed, and in which it is rumored the officers commingle for drinks after dark. The motor pool is dead, quiet and dim like the stadium where foreign nationals set up shop beneath the stands to sell souvenir non-essentials—silk scarves, Iraqi currency, bootleg movies, designer cloth in bulk or in a fitted suit, puzzle boxes, puzzle rings and, at times, the only decent coffee on base. Nowhere to go but inside. I point my rifle into a clearing barrel by the door, check the chamber, and enter. Some of my platoon are already inside, jumping and stomping and moving in

arrhythmia through something like dance under green lasers and fractured reflections of white lights in a central disco ball. Someone on a stool near the door rips a ticket, hands me half, and stuffs the other half into a sock—I keep this? Only, she says, if you want to win. I do, so I do.

I drift past the dance floor and settle against an empty wall near a pool table where a foursome collects and racks nine balls. Marines and Navy Corpsmen and some few unknowns in uniform dance and drink non-alcoholic beer or dark juice from plastic cups while others play board games and card games at small tables, and everyone looks comfortable. Someone breaks a diamond and the cue ball jumps the bumpers at the edge of the table and rolls along the floor untouched by dancing boots until it finds the master of ceremonies across the room who scoops it up and sings to it in one hand as he twirls to the music and makes his way back to the pool table where, as if finishing one of his practiced dance moves, he ladles the ball back onto the felt where it rolls and slows to a fading beat. The MC wears a white jacket and desert digital camouflage trousers and novelty glasses with plastic lenses molded to resemble frothy mugs of beer, and he sees, somehow, the ticket stub in my hand and something else in my eyes, and he announces into his microphone that someone looks ready to win some prizes before another beat starts up and he grooves backward to resume his practiced moves on the dance floor.

Doc hits me from the side with a hug that nearly throws us both through the wall. She keeps her footing and I am embarrassed to lose mine as I stumble and struggle to hide my thrill as she helps keep me upright with hands under my arms. We finish our hug and move the way some of the others move where the music is loudest. Party lights break the air between us as popular music from another generation instigates a group dance like at a wedding, but we're all bone sober and still somehow operating outside of ourselves and moving through lasers and songs and from hand to hand, interlocking uniformed arms and shouting the lyrics we know and by periodic miracle

harmonizing. Then the music goes down and the man with the microphone calls some numbers and some of us win some prizes, and one number matches the number on my ticket and I walk off with a portable gaming system before everyone begins a loud count backward from ten. The system comes with a battery charger and a soccer game and the latest first-person shooter. I drift off and wonder with my prize against the back wall by the pool table. The new year arrives to big cheers.

Years later I will reunite with two fellow marines and our Lieutenant in Manhattan where we slip on curbside trash in the freezing night as we slide through the doorway of a pub to escape the falling snow. We will share drinks around a high table and bring up a memory, and I will tell them, yes, of course I remember Doc—we hooked up—and I will use the phrase hook up as if it were not a bit of language, systematized and context dependent, wholly forgetting or ignoring those words as ones often used to euphemize sex. Their faces will beam with creative interpretation. A hook-up—a deployment anomaly. Once the back slaps start and shots are splashed across the table with congratulations, I will drink and find it difficult to correct their assumptions. This untruth will slosh in me long after we leave the bar. I will watch the snowfall block after block as it tamps the runnel stench, dampens traffic, and scatters every moving light in Times Square where I will dance without music and proclaim New York a fractal city in which each piece shows itself as proportional to the whole like snow and garbage with shit and magic in equal measure, and our Lieutenant, a resident of the city and our leader still, will applaud my claim with a caveat—if only any place could be so simple, my friend, you should visit more often.

Doc wants to know where I was for the countdown—didn't see you. I tell her I don't know and point to where I was standing against the wall—where were you? She tilts her head toward the dance floor and tells me she was in the fray. The last song fades and the lights come up and the room goes beige and boring, and Doc and I leave with everyone else before we break off and walk

together in the dark toward the rows of little trailers that make up our temporary neighborhood. Cool air and clear skies get us looking up and talking about stars—there are just so many. There are, she tells me, and she tells me to not overthink it, but I do, and I let my nerves make me and keep me distant. She shivers in her fleece, and I put an arm around her shoulders, and we walk in step until my rifle knocks against her knee, and I apologize, and we separate. The bunkers are not as quiet as they were earlier that night. Bright passions now slip unconcerned from the hiding dark. We make wide eyes and giggle as we pass, and we walk on through the uniform rows.

Lights shine through a blue sheet in one window—a broad-minded Sergeant with an open invitation. Hey, you'd look alright, she once told me, if you'd just pluck those eyebrows, so why don't you come by some time and I'll hook you up? She hooks a lot of guys up, so says Doc. Hooks them up in groups too, how she likes it—the ultimate control. Oh, Doc says, you didn't know, so what they're running is a train and that makes her the engine which means all those little boxcar boys would go nowhere if she didn't give them the chance to tug-tug along. If I were to have accepted the Sergeant's invitation, that would make my second go of hooking up. My first was with a girl I'd loved since I was a boy who, although we were not dating at the time, resolved to sleep with me once more before my deployment to Iraq as a kind of send-off. She later recruited her sorority sisters to write letters to everyone in my platoon. How many other platoons get hooked up like that? But don't worry, she told me, I won't write to you if it's too painful. We had been separated for some time by then, and although I corresponded with an unknown college sophomore in Central Florida, I always imagined I was writing to her.

I leave Doc in her doorway with an awkward smile, a happy new year, a step back, perhaps even a wave. She tells me she had a good time, and I echo her sentiment, and she pauses there for a moment before she says all right and softly closes the door. I walk down the row in the direction

of my aluminum room before I stop—why so hesitant? We enjoyed ourselves, shared something on that walk. She invited me to meet, to dance, to walk with her, so—I know, I know I should go back, and I do. My knock is quick and too loud.

She opens her door—hello again. She's let her hair down already and I can hardly remember the importance of words. I tell her I don't know what I'm doing and that it would be foolish if I didn't ask and it's kind of this tradition I've had to kiss on the new year and lots of people have this tradition and would she mind terribly if we—you know, have you heard of a new year's kiss? Doc motions for me to come close, and we stand at her open door, she in her tan fleece, rose-gold aura from a nightlight behind, me with my rifle dangling between my knees, my hands vibrating with doubt, a new portable gaming system beneath one arm, and the rest of the base dark and disappearing at my back. Yes, she tells me, I know a new year's kiss, and she leans through her doorway, but this doesn't really count, and she touches my neck, so long after the countdown, and she lets her breath fall over me, not quite the same, and she closes her eyes, is it? We kiss, of course, and it wasn't.

Sandstorm 9

Miles per hour. Until we have reference, however, we feel only passage and structure. Power station, culvert, ram skull, cemetery, farmyard, railway, children waving hello for the last time. An entire town in which—tick tock—among other chronic impressions, anniversaries are celebrated. A swirl. Regional florescence in distance. We are far from arrival, so close to needing celebration, and there goes a tiny town into sudden reds spun as if arranged to be wound in the dust of our bypassing.

Forward, we like to say when things seem very still, progress. Fast, as if we drove trucks fit to outrun even wildly inattentive storms, clocking speed by all rearward appearance. We matched with stormpace for some length, kept before or perhaps towing along our windborne and desert-heaving devotee.

Then a hail fell. With nothing else to mark our passage we thought every shield-riming pellet a bona fide sign of the end, long awaited, welcomed and pained and slowing—our sense of time and other passing things.

Formations in Crystal

Iraqi police divide the road—a checkpoint—plywood and sandbags and ballistic windows built into a booth which resembles those of toll roads back home except where obviously attacked, splintered, canvas sacks peppered and punctured and losing sand to the wind, glass fractured so badly police must stand exposed or crouch behind an open door to assess threats posed by an approaching vehicle. A truck stops at a red light near the mall in military town, a windshield-level bumper-sticker, black behind white letters to be clear, in Arabic and English—*Caution stay 100 meters back or you will be shot*. Marines train with rifles and pull targets behind a downrange berm, scan silhouettes for one tunnel of light among body-shaped black, the passage of a round, prepared to mark and score the shot, to sling the target again into the shooter's sights with an absence indicated by presence and contrast—where there was a hole in the mouth, a white disk. In the backseat of your truck the flat top of Marine Corps dress blues catches green as an old friend crumbles bud between his fingertips and looks at you through the rearview mirror to see if you mind, and you tell his reflection that you do not mind as you weigh the sanctity of objects against that of relations for perhaps the first time, and you continue to drive, and the flower continues sprinkling into glitter, and the rearview shows your hat—in military jargon your cover, a term which can refer both to uniform headgear and protection from enemy fire—rocking beneath your old friend's busy wrists, the brass Marine Corps emblem scratched and tarnished but now and then catching light and shimmering above the brim. A one-dollar coin serves as a symbol for luck because that is how Staff Sergeant made it seem in his fist, forever ago. This is a rock, I say in defense of the mass on my desk, and an unopened geode.

Dockenhaus and Home

In each room someone is doing something. Grandma declines the paper at the dining table. Baby Sis burns kerosene in the garage. Pop fiddles F.M. dials in the study. Brother wears tan boots to shower. Oh, brother… They don't come off! My nieces play traffic police in the foyer—one drives, the other polices. Halt! This is a one way. Hallways become highway tunnels. Chase me! Stairs remain stairs. We should put brother back in uniform. Look look look at our dollhouse where, stand here, you pretend there is a wall but there isn't. Um… Dolls can't know! They don't see our hands. We can put them, if you want, we can put them in different ways. My nieces play house in the guest room. Baby Sis sleeps across a range in the kitchen. Brother digs from the attic a bolt-action Mauser. Someone should supervise. Grandma saddles Pop for one good shoulder ride. Git! Pop falls in the salon, is forgotten. Grandma flips through the non-wall and out. Freeze! You're under arrest, devil dog. Bang! That's not, that's not what you call your uncle. Great Grandma calls you devil dog. The girls evoke history. Teufel hund. And? Great Grandma says we'd all speak German if it wasn't for… Great Grandma will be dead soon. Ooh, I'm telling. Well, I am telling too. Bang! Bang! Shots through the ceiling and my nieces tear off in fits. They would want Grandma in the living room. Shall we sit Pop in his big chair? Yikes, the quiet in this place. Let us put Brother before the television set, turn it on before we go.

You Receive a Certificate of Commendation

For outstanding achievement in the performance of your duties while serving as your platoon's quality control non-commissioned officer during transport and combat logistics operations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. You spend your deployment money on a sixty-eight Thunderbird, vinyl interior, pearl white with a navy top, chrome bumpers that reflect the world. *For consistently maintaining a readiness rate of better than ninety percent for the platoon's twenty-one principal vehicles throughout the deployment.* You pick up your mother and drive with no aim and recount some deployment anecdotes for her, and she notes how you don't turn to look at her when you speak, how this is a good thing, how refreshing it is to see anyone these days drive with such attention to the road, so you face her when you respond though your attentions tend toward traffic. Your mother applauds the car as capable, your aesthetic as classic. The Thunderbird stalls once at a railroad crossing and you must use a wrench to jump the starter circuit. *For serving as the platoon mechanic for more than forty combat logistics patrols covering nearly ten thousand miles. For, on more than ten occasions, making quick fixes of vehicles experiencing mechanical issues which allowed the convoy to remain a hard target and continue the mission.* One day, while you are away, the Thunderbird catches fire and burns for nearly an hour before the fire department arrives with chemicals to extinguish the flames. Your mother will allow you to keep its charred shell in the yard beside her house where as a child you imagined keeping your dream car, gleaming like a trophy, though you and your mother and the firefighters agree that what remains of the Thunderbird is worth no more than the weight of its metal. When you visit you sometimes note the rusting bumper, the paint curling from the hood, the dead headlights sending back the faint orange of a corner streetlight, and you note how no matter the condition, no matter the time passed, your mother will never ask you to restore it or to sell it for parts or for scrap or to recycle it already

so it can become something new. *For demonstrating outstanding motivation and dedication to duty which are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Marine Corps.* You will do her the favor soon, maybe, when the crumbling vehicle in her yard becomes something other than the prize you won with your deployment, when corrosion takes over where fire left off, and you will make that call and the tow truck will come to drag it down the drive and down the road past the streetlight where it will disappear at last around the corner, and you will look back on the dead space in the side yard, and you will go light in the chest and you won't know what it is you're missing.

Separation 1

Say there is an animal in you. The animal in me is not a whale or fox or fish or dog-faced baboon or any kind of bird. We liken behavior to instinct. Neither ram nor sheep. My gunfire to dramatic punctuation—an assent. Retracted beneath every being, a playful morpheme perched. The human creature endures and is refused, so we pick apart a habitat, fieldstrip and examine what surrounds. Doctor numbers and tally patterns and marry wild edges, jig-made and discussed. Say we try our hand at an overturned puzzle. Our hand—a group of similar shapes. You assemble one corner and tell me it's my turn—but we don't take turns at puzzles—and you pick through the pile to pull out the pieces I've failed to find with olive drab claws.

Field Protective Mask

There is a public restroom in the downtown mall which smells so much like the inside of the M40 field protective mask that he stops to check his right side as the door swings closed. He doesn't wear a belt anymore. The sound of the door latch is so close to the sound an M16 service rifle makes when the bolt is released into the upper receiver, when it's sent home, when it crashes into the chamber that he laughs at the comparison.

Two urinals are wrapped in black garbage bags. A paper sign reads *Out of Service*. Tiles around the toilets are wet. Stalls are unoccupied. One toilet is covered in liquid shit and yellowed tissue. A face hides behind an illegible signature—black swirls across a mirror above the sink. He runs the push-button faucet. No one speaks directly about what he is supposed to do. Some places smell like gas masks. He pulls a paper towel from plastic teeth, blocks the drain holes. Water rinses the bowl and rises. He bends, lowers his face, splashes. Droplets slip down his chin, around his neck, fall to the counter, to the floor. A scream might help. The faucet stops itself. He laughs to imagine that this should be his disorder.

Action. The movie version of him screams into the sink something that would shatter the porcelain and the mirror, boil the water, turn the tiles on the floor, bring steam from the walls, burst the pipes, crack apart the fluorescents to rain toxic powder over his eyes and make mud of his face. He screams for his friends still in the Carolinas, California, Al-Anbar, Kabul. A line in the script makes an artful comparison between his voice and a dog whistle, his scream and a death sentence—audible to most, resonant for few. Yellow. Fluid. Nothing moves through space the way it used to. The script doesn't mention this part. He breaks the fourth wall and the camera pans. A trumpet cuts out a full beat behind the rest of the band. His tinnitus as the shot pans back and his

mouth fills. He cries, spits, lifts his head and bleeds water down the drain, begins to laugh once more. Cut.

Nothing is on his side. He is unequipped. The M40 sometimes smells like chlorine and water. He cleans floors with a similar mixture. The public restroom sets a drama. He edits on the fly and tells himself stories which make him laugh, machine gun rattle like an inside joke, flashes on a darkened hillside, impacts like nearby whispers and laughs like stories of relief. Everything has similar sounds. No one stays the same shape forever. Some things smell like other things. Friends are waiting in the food court. He opens the door and backs against a wall to allow room for a stranger. A silence passes between them. He listens for the door, breathes in through his nose, laughs to exhale, then exits. He listens for the sound again on his way out.

Proper Retirement

A father figure asked if I would retire his flag. He raised me as much as he had raised any of the kids in our neighborhood, offered us wisps of wisdom in his front yard the way fathers sometimes choose to. When I enlisted in the Marine Corps, he scolded me for not soliciting his advice on my future. What in heaven, he asked, is wrong with the Air Force? The day of my going away party for which he funded the open bar—a hefty bill, so neighbors say—he cemented a flagpole in his front yard where he flew a single American flag through the duration of my enlistment. We lost touch over time and deployment but caught up after he caught me on a bike ride through the old neighborhood. We swapped pleasantries over a healthy patch of grass in his front yard and commented on the weather like we had spoken more than twice in four years. The wind swung a heavy clasp which rung the flagpole and called our attention up the draw rope to a tangle of sun-faded ribbons, tattered and caught in the talons of a brass eagle. The rest of the flag must have come apart and dissolved into a solution of sky. Fended off more than a few calls, he told me, about its condition—fair complaints, so neighbors say—but one of my boys is fighting for that flag so they ought to know it stays up there as long as he's over there, and here you are to give it a proper retirement at last. I thanked him for the gesture and told him I would be honored to retire his flag for him if I knew the proper way to retire a flag, although, I said, you might just go ahead and take it down yourself. Go ahead and take it down, he repeated, myself. I told him he had my permission and that I would bring him a new one. He thanked me, of course. But there was still the issue, he returned, of what to do with the old flag once it was down. Don't they teach you how to retire a flag over there? Over there, I repeated. Meaning Iraq, perhaps. A father figure is entitled to mistake enlistment for deployment or deployment for an education. He probably pictured me in full silhouette, rifle in hand, combat ready and standing alone in a wind-ravaged

desert when on many lonesome evenings he happened to look up to find less fabric flying, less richness in the stripes and definition in the stars, less meaning stitched together and poised at full mast up there against the setting sun. Maybe he assumed I did most of my learning not on the American coast but someplace ambiguous, overseas—in country, as we say—or over there. It occurs to me now that he may not have been wrong. A father figure might correctly imagine the shape of his sons. I did not learn how to retire the flag, but I did learn that a razorblade and a match are kept inside the brass ball at the top of every base commander's flagpole so that, in the event of an enemy takeover, the last survivor can make the climb, remove the finial, and use the contents therein to destroy the flag lest Old Glory fall into enemy hands. When I relayed this knowledge on the day we spoke around the flagpole in his front yard, he denied any interest in the subject, wondering how on earth I could believe that war was no more than a game of capture the flag. Really, he said, after all you kids have been through. A father figure might imagine everyone in the shape of his sons. Some claim there is also a single bullet stashed in the brass atop the flagpole—death, so they say, before dishonor—and a grain of rice for strength or a penny for luck or solvency in desperate times. He stood in his yard and stared far into the sky. These narratives surrounding the items kept at the top of the base commander's flagpole are likely the fictional products of a larger cultural mythos as no official military regulation supports their claims, but I can't say I know of anyone who has been up there to confirm or deny their validity first-hand, and I wouldn't put it past the culture of a military installation to have realized its own mythology. A father figure might imagine every shape in one of his sons. The breeze knocked the clasp through the gaps in our conversation. I promised then to find out what to do with what was left of his flag, how to properly retire a tattered symbol, but I never did. He took it down himself some weeks later—an ordeal, so neighbors say—canting the pole in the process, and he has yet to raise another.

Separation 2

Tell me of a time when you felt needed by another, when you felt that some other depended, perhaps desperately, upon you. Upon me. You may consider family or friends, a colleague, someone close, a significant other or roommate. I got it. Take all the time you need. I have a time in mind now. Whenever you're ready. I stopped running when I got out, but I started again in college after a guy on campus, a prior ordnance guy, told me that it's dramatic changes to our physiology which cause the greatest difficulties in adjusting to the pace of civilian living. No regular endorphin release. No routine dopamine rush or runner's high or utter collapse. Tough to chase those extremes. Correct me if we're wrong, but the body becomes accustomed to such extremes. You're not wrong. We have been or our bodies have been, in a sense, conditioned to produce and receive our chemicals, have come to expect certain feelings, regular feeling, a condition, I believe, not dissimilar to addiction. Well, now you wouldn't want to use that language. No, I suppose I wouldn't. You aren't being treated for substance abuse. No one's being treated. What's that supposed to mean? It is entirely possible that I am actually better off because of my experiences. It is possible you imagine yourself that way, but we'll get around to that. I do imagine myself that way. Let's get back to this guy on campus, the one who served, like you, and his theory on readjustment. He isn't being treated either. Does he feel he is better off because of his experiences? Most military veterans are not worse-off, but we don't like to talk about that story. We? People, us. What story would you like to talk about? This guy on campus, he convinced me to keep up with running every week so I wouldn't shock my system now that I'm free to be lazy again. You run often, then. Often enough. Are you saying you worry about becoming lazy? I'm saying I only worry when I'm lazy. He needed to share that that theory, that advice with you, needed you to understand, to benefit, and perhaps he needed a friend, He didn't end up my best

buddy or anything, but I wasn't thinking of him when you asked about a time when I felt needed, the way you phrased it, desperately needed. You want to pick this whole process apart. I want to pick every process apart. Tell me what you had in mind. In those suggestions, roommate, and so I thought of mine and then her dog, a seventy-pound mutt with selective hearing, and how my roommate works evenings and goes out most nights which means her dog spends half his waking life in my care. You may find the company of a pet therapeutic. We get along, lets me lay on him and I move with his breath, lets me take him for runs and he keeps up and he listens to me the way he never would listen to her or to anyone. The dog depends on you as caregiver while your roommate is out. I would have said caretaker. Caretaker, caregiver, same difference. They sound like they should be opposites. Well, we usually use caretaker to describe one who looks after a place, like an old house. Or a cemetery. Right, but not a dog. Caretaker feels right for a dog. Do you feel you've taken more care than you've given? Yes, exactly. This dog needs you, depends on you for its daily comforts. Yes, but only after I nearly killed him. Now, physical abuse is a tough way to train a dog. If running is abuse. Say more. He dropped back on our first run, slowed after a mile or so, struggled to keep pace with a jog, then a walk, then he collapsed at my feet and I tried to get him up but he wouldn't move, and I had to carry him home on my shoulders, draped around my neck, legs over my chest, his paws in my hands, his heat and heart and breath on me, his ribs flexing with every step. You've told this story before. I have. You seem proud. I'm not not proud. That dog needed you to carry it home and you, if you'll permit the equation, needed that dog. I suppose. With the dog you have some practiced thing to tell, a moment from your civilian life in which you can be the hero. Right, I see myself as a hero now, thanks for the help. It is important for you to think on these moments, to think in terms of need, to keep this idea of necessity at the fore and to recognize that such instances of mutual dependence occur far more often than you

probably realize. I can see how this could be a useful outlook, or inlook. A looking around, we might say. He listens to me now. You mean your roommate's dog. I take him outside without a leash and he listens to me like he would never listen to her or to anyone before. You do make an impact. I can call him from far and he will come running or I can tell him to stay and he will stand at my side, point at the ground and he will sit, snap fingers and he will give me his eyes while I watch him curb his curiosity as other dogs pass. Let's have you think of another time, if you can, same idea, when you were needed. He only listens to me like this, only after that run, after he was too tired to stand, too tired to do anything other than trust me with his life. This seems quite important to you. More than important. More important than important? I am the reason he lives, the reason he rushes to the door, the reason he understands gratitude, loyalty, purpose. Talk to me about your sense of purpose. I am still talking about my roommate's dog. I wonder why you won't call this dog by its name. I do. You didn't name it just now. I did not. You haven't mentioned its name this whole time. I have not. But you will call the dog's name, for instance, when you are together, when you want it to listen. That's right. And yet you won't use its name when you tell of it proudly in story. Is that suddenly a problem? What is the name of your roommate's dog? Silly. What's silly? The names we give to dogs. Why don't you tell me this dog's silly name? There is only one dog in this story. I see. You see and you feel without need for silly names. Tell me a little more about it, what it looks like, let's start there. Didn't you see him, see his weight across my shoulders, see his worry on my back, his life in my hands? I saw a nondescript dog, yes. Let's keep it that way. What way is that? You seeing your dog on my shoulders and me knowing the dog I carried home.

Bullets in a Low Wall

What bothers him most looking back on their brief stay—brief, they agree now despite their words then on deserts and eternity, as a morning run is to the rest of the day—what bothers him most isn't imagining again his death of a sudden, an explosion unwitnessed except by those missed who swerve around wreckage to look elsewhere, no enemy anyplace, hiding in automated detonation, implicit and lasting uncertainty, tension drawn all the way west and plucked familiar from curbside trash, radials blown from rims abandoned in emergency lanes where any variation might indicate, well, the end—driving or riding along—awaiting that indefensible moment sure to arrive given time, given to acceptance and occasional rejections of certain fates between which he still moves and, in movement, has grown comfortable, but, to return, what bothers him most is the impossibility of looking back on their brief stay without the infringement of image, a medium before and since abstracting deployment—his photographs—bullet craters in home sides, shots embedded across a low wall, pockmarks patterned on storefronts in tiny depressions which at this distance from where their passing seems most brief, those holes most gravid, might constellate as stars will into any of night's innumerable figures to relay some applicable mythology, to connect and morph and take up significant shape like that of a horned animal or an armed hero in the sky from where they would signal down toward some greater narrative explanation, but they do not—the impossibility of looking back without imagination, feeling with specificity, unknowing presence from moments passed, briefly pictured, and passed on.

Questions Passed in Future Tense

He will be asked if he knows what he is doing. An uncle will ask, at his going away party, if he would like to get into a rental van and just drive, no questions asked, all the way to the border if necessary. He will be asked if boot camp is as hard, really, as they say it is or if it's all mental. He will be asked if they're feeding him, whether he's allowed to write back, receive pictures, magazines, candy, or not. He will be asked how much they get paid, how much leave he has saved. His mother will ask what a non-deployable unit means, why her, why her son would ever volunteer with a deployable unit, why Southwest Asia, if to—when to—expect him back, what postal code to use to send packages over there, what things she's allowed to send, and which are the best kind of socks. An ex-girlfriend will ask if it's a bad idea to write, if he thinks her sorority sisters would make good pen pals, if the rest of his platoon would be interested in a long-distance connection and which of them are actually single. Staff Sergeant will dump a box mail and ask why the hell he joined up with so much love back home. Another uncle and veteran of a different war will ask if he fucked any whores—no judgement, hey, in country long enough and they all start to look, well—if he even saw any whores, and just what kind of war is being fought over there without whores. He will be asked if he ever got the chance to haul off and punch one of those terrorists, to rattle their bones and knock the rags from their skull. He will be asked if it's true that the women over there have the most beautiful eyes. Friends will ask over drinks if he carried a machine gun, if he has a favorite weapon, if machine guns are hard to carry, if machine guns are his favorite, if he ever held the trigger and opened it all the way up and dumped an entire can of ammunition and then, under enemy fire, had to sling open that feed tray and slap on another belt and pull the charging handle to load another round and reseat the stock in his shoulder to follow the sights down the barrel and hold that trigger again, opening back up, tracer rounds burning red through

the air, brass raining over a pile of hot shells at his feet, ringing in his ears and machine gun smoke swelling his lungs. He will be asked if he has a favorite smell. At a birthday party, another uncle will compare him to the Christian messiah and ask if he will share his plan to save the world. His friends will point to his growing hair, make similar comparisons to the Christian messiah, and ask in jest for forgiveness—almighty son of the father, Jarhead Jesus, warrior savior. A fellow veteran will ask if he spoke with someone during separation, if he registered with Veterans Affairs, if they asked the same questions about his behavior and if he thought they were trying to procure from him a set of answers they had already imagined. On a university campus, a classmate will ask if he killed anyone, if that was a terrible question, if he'll accept an apology—but how can it not be a yes or a no?—or if he hates it when people apologize, the way everyone seems conditioned to offer thanks like a reflex. He will be asked how he could not be traumatized, if he feels lucky or if, perhaps, he hasn't yet realized. An old friend will ask why there are billboards advertising the rate of veteran suicides when the same statistic for construction workers seems more alarming. He will ask who authors those billboard advertisements and how much it costs to rent a billboard. He will be asked if he plans to write about this stuff, you know, his experiences, and why not. He will ask why he should have an obligation to respond to the question of war, and if anyone, so far, has been satisfied with an answer.

Separation 3

Your knee. Have you noticed? (You got me—the simplest symptom to fake) It's been bouncing this whole time. (Oh, stop it) Haven't you (A giveaway) noticed? (Gee, now that you mention it) Would you say you are inclined to notice your surroundings more (More now than before deployment) often (Always) than you notice your own (My own body) behaviors? Would you say (I would say, yes, I would say that I do), would you say you (I most certainly, brokenly do) have trouble (Oh, trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble) communicating your thoughts and (feelings) your intentions to others? (You've noticed) Nervous? (Of) Of failure, perhaps. (Look at me wondering how success looks to you) Do you toss in your sleep? (I can't) Shakes? (Stop) How's your knee then? (Meeting your expectations)

Anonymity is a Coward's Uniform

Often, the words not to mention as prelude to mentioning. I find it difficult to avoid both the pretend and the reveal, not to mention the novel. To read is not to deploy, though part of me does go somewhere while some of me stays with the pages. Who then do you see when you read me partway in, partway gone? To imagine is to know of that which otherwise remains unrealized. You can be that which is inside or that on the outs, but you cannot be that which is the self and that which is the world. Imagine duality as a flight of fancy. These highlights bracket us like quick stories in a margin. Often, the text as conversation, not construction. What then do we call this used object? I do not keep books which have been annotated for fear they will be found, the marginalia read and mistaken for indications of character, dog-eared corners flattened as history or followed as ingressions and explosions on an otherwise impermeable timeline where each fold, each passage or image or character creased may appear pivotal, personal, shaped by a familiar voice and telling. Often, the words a period of time when time or an absence of words would suffice. To write is to spend an absence of words with the self. A collection of un-plane-like folds will combine to form paper aircraft. When I let go, I must imagine enough of the unmentioned is carried aloft.

Services Rendered

You stand in line in a coffee shop far from military town. One in front orders cappuccino—never, after noon you order espresso—and the barista goes to work. A pour in a stainless pitcher, steam injection, the building of froth. One behind sighs at a phone. From a rusted shelf, an unknown guitarist replays through speakers which resemble a stack of books set among other earth-toned and clothbound spines, one brass-plated ram skull, and some glass orbs bursting with succulents—thick-fleshed, drought resistant, beautifully diverse xerophytes—their blooms rugged with adaptation. The barista brandishes a cappuccino, then calls for the next in line. You order one shot, please, to go, and you pay for your order, and the bank logo on your credit card starts, as it sometimes does, a military conversation. Oh, right… Marine Corps… well, if you don't have any other plans and you've got your mind set on… is your older brother… happy? You take back your card and you take the barista's phone from the counter where she abandons it by way of response before turning aside to address your order. Her older brother—that first strange picture of a Marine in the appearance of dress blues—his hair dark and short where yours has grown out and gone more than a bit gray. Looking good, you say as you stare past the counter at the far wall. A chair rail divides the paint—deep blue trimmed over a softened red. Didn't smile in my photo either, but, you know, that doesn't mean we forgot how. You smile, and she returns to the counter with a return smile and a little paper cup filled with espresso. You exchange her phone for your coffee. This place used to be a barber shop, you tell her, when I was about your age, and she tells you she knows, it wasn't so long ago, and oh, she forgot to give you a military discount, and you raise your little paper cup with polite refusal, that's kind but not necessary, and she doesn't insist. You leave the coffee shop the way other customers leave—unceremonious and with thanks for services rendered. The barista waves and calls next in line. You wave goodbye and you struggle to

remember the last time anyone let you walk away without a fight. An augmented chord carries. Sunlight ricochets from a passing vehicle. Your order is already going cold in your hands.

End