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Tomb of the Unknowns

by Christopher Notarnicola

about 50,000 words

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

from *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* by Grace Paley

“I want to be buried where nobody will ever find me.”

from *Company K* by William March

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, the front—only that which the camera needs to convince your friends and family of your newfound commitment to country. 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 remain to collect blessings long after you've returned. They will say you take a handsome picture. How strange to be the center of attention. They will comment on 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 brows and knowingly say, no, thank you. 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 photos 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, and your glossy, cross-sectioned past in a four-by-six stack at the bottom of your footlocker. They take another photo and add one more to the line. He sighs and asks if you think real dress blues feel that way—tight at the throat—and you tell him you wouldn’t know. He stifles a laugh, supposing you’re right. Then he asks if you smiled in your photo, and you ask from the corner of your lips if he’s serious, and he breaks out in laughter. You straighten up and fight the urge to smile as 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, a quick sprint apart, 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, and they both go down. Woodchips in his bootlaces, in the air, in the soft skin at the base of the other's skull. Are they still screaming? The pads sharpen, steel his fists. He cocks back the stick for another strike as his opponent defends with forearms locked and blocking an otherwise unguarded face, eyes wide and cutting between tumbling headgear and a rush of red. Another whistle takes the edge off the violence, and everything again goes slack and still. They collect and pass off the equipment, and two new recruits take their stance, don helmets, arm themselves and aim their padded knife ends. He studies these competitors—their grip or fear. A whistle sings. They charge, and 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 on 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. This isn't my phone. When I hang up, please delete this number.

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 stats from any year—video games operate on combat-based objectives and mechanics), you agree, 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 have 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?

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 the odd storage facility touting climate control, night security, 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'd rather have stayed, on your way to someplace you'd 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 down or turn gray and break off in the wind or otherwise transform as they drift 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 board, finger-painted in neon brights across twin-size bed sheets, tied by their corners to the galvanized arms of highway fences, interlocked and side by side and overlapping along the highway, calling 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 stay and are taken away. When you first wind your way through military town, you and your route are separate. Then the roundabouts and shortcuts and offramps become you, bound and waiting for you to drive back the loops and unwind the self and recollect the slack in the road. To find one’s place is to discover oneself. To revisit is to remember.

You'll 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’ll make no purchase. When

you make to leave an employee will ask if you need help finding what you're looking for. You'll use the word perusing and say you're 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 say 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 start. 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 taught you to never order cappuccino after noon and 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 slid out of her jeans and slipped her fingers over yours, and she touched herself with your hand. She built up breath, cursed and bit into your shoulder, and she smiled with those faraway lips. Cold coffee in hand, she spoke of tremendous solitude, papers drawn, the wait, a formal separation pending, him—a soon-to-be ex-husband overseas—a false step. Oh, she said. You didn't know. You'll revisit the parking lot during daylight though you will remember the space after sundown, periodic darks beneath a

streetlight, shadows punctuated by sudden brights, a halogen bulb struggling 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 leave the highway, one storage facility advertising an auction on derelict units, four identical barbershops, and the rest. Years later, you'll 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. You'll catch errant strands as you run your fingers down the road and through your thinning memory.

Stateside 1

I imagine death, for him, was just another break from convention. Parris Island, South Carolina. Basic training and three months hard eye contact across the squad bay. Can't look anywhere else in the nude. Can't look anywhere but ahead when the screaming comes from all sides. He wasn't pretty, so Staff Sergeant would let him know. Boy, they once told him, you must have drawn that face from the discard pile. We returned from training one day to find our footlockers dumped, our personal effects strewn across the floor—a shuffled sense of self. We each learned about the other while collecting and trading our scattered belongings. He liked anime heroines, pacing, pretending, seventies science fiction horror musicals. He became, for me, the definition of difference—a living schism among strangling regulation.

Camp Geiger, North Carolina where east coast graduates train for combat. He and I slipped letters into a mailbox at the edge of the woods, a combat training no-no, which were never delivered. Mine was addressed to a girl I might have loved. His letter was addressed to a funeral director, his father.

Automotive maintenance technician school, Camp Johnson, North Carolina—months of mechanical training. As with much, we had little say in our circumstances. We fixed components and ran in formation. We wandered the base at night, broke into a gymnasium, climbed the rafters, hawked our defiance and spit onto the hardwood court—remnants of a teenage rebellion. We searched for cemeteries, escape tunnels, secret bunkers. We studied the same texts, tested well, then traded mass-market fiction and irreverent comics. Marines in our neighboring rooms came and went with their graduating classes. We installed an engine and brought it to life. By absolute chance we spent a halfyear with each as the other's consistency in company.

Permanent duty stations—assigned to different companies on the same base. Cherry Point, North Carolina. Just one barracks apart. We spent weekends exploring cemeteries in surrounding towns, scouring stones for the loftiest inscriptions. We drove to the state capital for a horror picture show on the big screen. Performers ran the floor and pantomimed the film in what they call a shadow cast. We ran with them, our foreheads marked *V* to signify our first attendance. He shouted at gaps in the dialogue and sang along and threw rice at the screen. He smiled as he told me of pains in his sides, and we laughed it off. He smiled when he reminded me weeks later. He smiled still when he told me the pain was putting on a show somewhere deep down in his gut. So hard did we laugh at ourselves that year. Holding ourselves. Bursting almost.

He told Staff Sergeant after some weeks. So hard did we run back then. Tough it out, devil dog, here we go, don't quit now, tough it out. Killer! If only I had been in his company. Devil! Pain is weakness leaving the body. Let me hear you say it! He held onto his guts. Let me hear you scream.

He told a doctor when he could no longer sleep, couldn't keep food, couldn't eat. He was tested, admitted, force fed in a hospital and marked on the wrist. Cancer of some gastrointestinal kind—too far along. He was medically discharged from the Marine Corps eleven months into a four-year contract, permitted to die in his childhood home.

We spoke once on the phone, his words soft and low and busy with breath. I imagine his father must have held the receiver to his ear. He spoke of heaven—up there—a place in which we would be neighbors and outcasts and friends once again. I hadn't known him to be spiritual. I spoke little, forever between words, pacing the brick corridors of the barracks between our barracks, dying for him to end the call. I imagine his father prepared his body. I imagine him the way I met him, naked and standing at attention across the squad bay, staring into my eyes, saying

nothing and something significant. I signed off with a weak joke about him outrunning me in a race to the other side, and he told me he would take the long way, if he could, to let me catch up.

Some months prior, he brought up my collection of death photos, myself and some friends in variations on postmortem still life, some of which he had seen scattered across our squad bay before we wore the symbols of a Marine. He wanted me to make him up, to kill him like I'd killed the others, fabricate an unlikely death, to set him up like cinema and immortalize him—slumped and bloodied—and to orchestrate a resurrection. We made gore from corn syrup and food dye. I shot him behind a movie theater against a wall near the dumpster. He slouched there as he imagined the dead would slouch. We pulled an eye from his face—a grape in a long tissue paper socket—poured blood in cascades down his cheek, down the curve of his neck into a dark pool at his collar. He struggled to hold back his smile. We recorded a video in which he sits up from his death, stands with a stoop as if pained at the waist, lifts the dangling eye from his face and slings it against the backside of the theater where it splashes red and sticks. Strange graffiti blesses the wall above, saying something and wanting 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 are voluntold. No one promised a pleasure cruise. 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 basic 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

I wonder if death, for him, was little more than the end of a long night. Cherry Point, North Carolina. Different platoons, but we bonded over mud bogs and black humor. We drank and drove off road, spun our trucks through wet ruts in dark sand. He rolled his on its side, survived through a passenger window. His father was killed years prior in a similar incident, smaller vehicle. We shared a home state, drives south, dinners with our mothers. We stopped to fuck ex-girlfriends who no longer permitted us to make love, made light of our poor performances. We swapped whiskey shots and metal tracks on the ride back, windows down and volume up all the way to the guard gates, then we straightened up and settled down to get back on base. Quiet! Staff Sergeant is sleeping.

He suffered a depression confused with anxiety, struggled to sleep. He fought it until it showed, then sought help—sedative-hypnotics, reuptake inhibitors, blood pressure regulators. Awake in the quiet. We drank our aides and shared his medicine and swapped prescriptions with other medicated marines. Good sense of humor, they would say, and good looking out of uniform, but that guy gets bad, 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's always scared of it, like he needs someone in there with him. Keeping watch. We went out when we could, talked at strangers, often 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 a few bad habits. They dated and moved things forward and moved in together and 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. We kept up like

we had—laughed at ourselves and drank too much, drove our trucks into deeper and deeper waters until they became stuck, ran chains around the axels and pulled each other out in reverse. He seems happy, they would tell me. 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 that, like the dead in my pictures, like my other friends turned corpses arranged in corn syrup and food dye. I kept a collection and an instant camera in the backseat. We shot him wrapped in chains, spotted with wounds in the bed of my truck, covered in rust and blood, iron-depletion on aged iron. This was my last shot of this kind. We recorded a video in which he lays there in the back of the truck 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 and meet his mother at the hospital. New Bern, North Carolina. His mother, they told me, happened to be visiting. Accidental overdose, maybe. What timing. My old friend called it in. 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 requested, please—are you ready?—please 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 two hands at my arm. The nurse went out. I pulled aside the curtain.

He sat up fast with excited eyes then shut them hard as he might have in jest. He went limp and fell back to the bed. His mother tightened to my side, wrapped her arms and sank nails into my chest. Again, he sat up, fast and horrible with tension all over. His eyes opened wide and

we looked him over and he looked somewhere between us as his lids dropped and his body softened and fell back. Convulsions on loop. His mother unhooked and let herself to the floor as he sat back up, alarmed and staring off, and I let myself to the floor to be with her or to be away from his stare. He fell back and lurched and continued like that above, the bed frame rattling, linkages 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 bone-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 couldn't say all of funeral. Of course, I told her, and I apologized for crying.

He spent months in a vegetative state, in homecare where he grew up, and died sometime after I was discharged, after I moved out of state and enrolled in community college, long after I lost touch with his mother. I learned of his death through my old friend who moved out of their home by the cemetery to look after him, to play metal tracks and waft whiskey under his nostrils, to remind him every morning that it was time to wake up. We lifted our glasses in his name once at a birthday party. His family must have held a funeral service. I never asked.

When I arrived at the hospital that day, I first spoke first with Staff Sergeant—a uniformed statue in the waiting room. Seizures or convulsions, he told me. His mother won't see him without an escort, won't go in there with anyone but you. This won't be easy, he told me. I

needed to walk a mother into the room where her son would most likely die. Make yourself strong, he told me. Be a blank slate for her, a presence and therefore a comfort, however small.

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 into some form of 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's no other way to say this. You're going in that hospital 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 came all the way here. You belong in that room. You're already there. The only thing left to do is decide on your reasons.

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

Make yourself present, he told me. We can't always control the things we must do, what happens to those around us and who we should be for the people we love, but we can always choose our reasons. Staff Sergeant joined his hands behind my head and spoke through the tunnel of his arms. You have your reasons already.

Be a friend, he told me, or he didn't 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, look, of course this situation is 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 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 simply 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 to hold me at his eye-level and tell me to wake up. Wake up, Marine. Maybe this one isn't about you.

To Deaden the Nerve

Marines sit cross-legged and loosen their limbs and hold their bare knees against the wet morning grass to stretch their groins near the flight line behind company headquarters as 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. The Marines ready for deployment. A small spider clings to a nearby fence. One marine uses a brittle vine to coax the creature away from the kudzu locks and into the mouth of a water bottle. Another rushes to suggest the species—Brown Recluse—and its necrotic capabilities. Another still suggests a sporting match against his Emperor Scorpion—quiet—not-so-hidden back in the barracks at the back of his room on the top shelf of his wall locker. The spider flinches, tucks its legs to its body, and is swept into the bottle where it sprawls and scrambles for traction against slick walls. Water drops 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, with stiff elbows and clenched fists, rotate at the hips 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—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 bottle sits against the fence some distance from the marines who 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—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 body hardening, perhaps, is to eliminate the need to turn aside. The Marine Corps Martial Arts program no longer employs such training due to the tendency for body hardening exercises to result in injury. Blench—in the Old English, deceive—may serve as synonym.

A wall locker frames the match—arachnids at dusk. Marines crowd into a barracks room, bound over beds toward the back wall where one locker shines with doors opened wide. They corral and lean in 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, undershirts and boot socks, there, high upon arched legs stands the

Emperor, stinger aloft, basking in the warmth of a lamp clamped to the corner of its small, plastic cage with slotted lid atop and a handle—a cage intended for transport, 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. 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 fuse and pool. All watch as the Emperor stands handsome and aware beneath the yellow light of a single bulb while the spider withdraws its legs and contracts its wet body, tightening and rising like a middle knuckle. Someone mimics the sound of a bell, and the marines steady themselves, watching close, waiting for the first move.

The scorpion jumps and clambers across the plastic floor to the spider who cowers in a small pool. Touch gloves, someone calls out, and the Emperor holds its pincers aloft as the Recluse shrinks between the shadows of its claws. In a sudden fit, the scorpion lowers its body, jerks its head, extends its sensitive jaws, and begins taking up water droplet by droplet, devouring the puddle with delicate fervor. The spider remains small and still in the center. The scorpion stoops to drink its fill, and then, once sated, returns to its place beneath the warmth of the lamp. Again, the Emperor bathes in light. The Recluse sits in the wet where it fell.

This, the marines agree, is a fucking letdown, and they begin to leave, one by one pulling away from their frenzied expectations. 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, hypothesize 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 in the grass of the barracks' courtyard while others watch from inside with bets and hope that our bugs

might yet commence their fight. 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.

With the darkening of the evening, the rising of Taps—a melancholic bugle call with the sonic reach of turbine engines. Across base, as is the custom, everyone outside is stopping—running formations at a halt, vehicles pulled to the shoulder of the road—the only movement that of the breeze if there is a breeze, the rustle of small animals through the leaves, and the two Marines charged with removing the American flag for the night as Taps plays them out. The call rolls through the barracks yard where the wrestling marines unlock one another and drop their roles as Emperor or Recluse to rise and stand together as proper Marines at attention. They face the general direction of, for they cannot see past the surrounding brick walls, the American flag. Observers jeer from open windows, their fight spoiled yet again, and chide the Marines for being caught outside, for their inattention to the hour. Fix your posture out there, you hard charging heroes! 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, someone chimes in from afar. Another shouts, alright, that's 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 quiet. The joking stops, though its echoes remain. Twenty-four notes hang over a chasm of rest.

The marines fidget in the yard, caught and well-taught, unable to break attention during the somber call 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, swelling jaws and necks, fossilizing, arms embedded in their sides, coiling their fingers, digging thumbnails into pant seams to prolong 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 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.

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 *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 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.

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 comforting place—cab of your truck or the library floor with a strange 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 are 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. You 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 poor dears you leave in your wakes, blood and tears, 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'd answer a 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 internet access on base. We know you can sound off, but you choose to fade in this radio silence. Over and out. But that's not what we say, is it? It's either over or out—over to wait for a reply or out to end communications. Everyone should know there is no over and.

It's 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 and 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, carpools and youth, 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 through the desert to safeguard supplies across northern Iraq. We provide security for contracted civilian trucks which carry supplies more efficiently than even our largest rig, the Logistics Vehicle System or LVS (pronounced letter by letter). 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 (a tractor trailer or box truck—known as Seven-Tons for the vehicle's maximum off-road payload capacity). All vehicles are fitted or designed with armor plating and most come equipped with a turret and a medium or high-caliber machine gun. I keep our trucks running, but until something breaks, I ride in a turret on top of a Seven-Ton. Secondary jobs often come with deployment, and jobs like mechanic are quick to land secondary duties. A marine is only useful behind a wrench when things need fixing. A marine, I know, is always useful behind a gun.

Just a routine stop. Somewhere, Anbar province. Someone needs to stretch, probably, or relieve some other bodily urge. No buildings or trees or powerlines. Good stretch of road—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 until horizon in either direction beyond. I hang my feet from the turret and knock sand into the cab, kick at my driver's helmet. He throws a forearm and 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 up there and that he knows how badly I want to switch places for just a little a while—right?—and to fuck off. Seven hours into a ten-hour drive.

My gun aims out over the driver's side. On the road, the vacancy that floods this country with a startling and sometimes terrifying loneliness suddenly becomes the wellhead of its appeal. Our field of fire is an expanse of tired earth expressing itself through wrinkles in a seemingly infinite bed sheet—gold woven through fine-grade wool. The world bends away to an impossible horizon, perfect and soft—an impossibly cool pillow under silken skies.

My driver shouts for my attention as I notice why he's calling. An MRAP and two Seven-Tons approach one after the other in the oncoming lane—our vehicles—the last in the convoy. I unlock the turret and rotate my gun's line of fire away from their path as they pass, and their turret gunners wave, and I wave back before they disappear beyond the tractor trailers ahead. Nothing on radio. Follow procedure. We are now the final truck. My gun is now the rear gun. I lock the turret on the highway behind and train the barrel down to where the road tucks beneath the blanket horizon.

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 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 and sustaining 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, the individual member of the United States military is 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 extended. Views gone static. I bundle a sweater around my neck and slouch in the turret, kick my boots over the buttstock. The gun aims for the sky. Armored walls capture the pulse of the engine as it idles in rhythm below. My driver empties himself against a front tire as 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. Just off the side of the road (differences between concrete and sand disappear with scale—from very far or very close, indistinguishable). The flash again. Steady light. The haze of distance and then a spark of clarity. The flash—a reflection, a pane of glass, an oncoming vehicle.

I tell my driver we have a vehicle en route, and he asks politely if I will fuck off. It's too far away to know anything with certainty, but I begin to consider (unconsciously recall, perhaps, what I have been trained to consider) that this driver may be taking a one-way trip, that our convoy could be its only destination. I shout at my driver to look if he doesn't believe, 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, the car is slowing. Well what? It's slowing isn't it? I stand, sling my rifle across my chest and wave my arms, hands high, palms out, fingers spread wide. They won't go any higher. 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. When viewing the highway through this glass, these markings overlay the road and may indicate an accurate scale, but when I change my point of view as I must to escalate force—to stand and signal the approaching vehicle with my hands—then the scale 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 previously observed. I ask my driver what he thinks of the meters, and he tells me he has my back no matter the meters, and we exchange some fuck offs, and I raise my rifle.

An off-white sedan, two doors, boxy with tiny wheels. I wave my rifle toward the roadside—like this, follow the barrel—to no effect. Broad shoulders in the driver's seat. Passenger seats dark and empty. Everything about this vehicle feels heavy and alone and approaching still. I drop my rifle, raise my rifle, drop it again. I reach for a flare in the ammunition can at my side, the gun in its mount, the distance.

I have no idea what to call the distance between the bullets in the belt that hang from my gun and this vehicle's glinting windshield, the tiny metal grill at the front of the car, or the empty road before. Like in practice, I summon 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 at all. Am I within signal range? I waved, gave those hand signs,

but he can't know, really, 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 to the windshield. One last warning—a pen flare above the turret's forward shields. A single red star straight at the vehicle, at the windshield, the shimmer. The flare impacts the glass, ricochets through the air in a wild arc, and burns out in a bounce on hard-packed sand (I once, as a child, put several BBs into an armadillo). The vehicle veers into the oncoming lane (sudden, a boyhood remembered—who asked for this?—and it bled, crawled off, but I didn't see it die, so dense the foliage). The driver slings open his door. The vehicle screams to a halt (I've conjured too much with this of the armadillo—its plated hide, the reddening of its scales—in writing, a big didactic flag). I steady my gun, my nerve, pull back the charging handle to load a round into the chamber (memory, I'm afraid, calls upon what it will, assigns to us its own grand little significances which we may relay or ignore), and I sight in.

The driver steps out of his car, hands overhead, his face in contortions. I train down on his chest. My driver, I 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 shadows 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, empty as mine had been, signaling above the tiny mark at the tip of my gun, high as they would reach into vacant air.

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 build, strew, the turn and scaffold, 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 floor and—what décor?—the crown molding, every tiny space engrained, filed down, surging red. Toy trucks 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 turned to face the rest of the line. One stood 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 unsigned greeting cards which we use to say things we aren't sure how to say to people for whom we aren't 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 aren't, really, though you are, in abstract terms, certainly not not proud. We never mind. We welcome abstraction, and we get it. The greeting card box holds only so many variants.

Demonstrations in a Throughway

A protest, we were told, or a gathering—some kind 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 of fragmented radio transmissions, the hand and arm signals of turret gunners, and the recollections of low-ranking marines who leapfrogged information on foot from truck to truck, 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—still too far back in the convoy to detect any such vitality in the town ahead. 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 staggered through an impatience and inactivity which made leaving the relative safety of armored vehicles to explore a dried gully and nearby 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 young daughter, 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 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 gully. I turned the momentum of my downward run into a climb up and onto the gully's opposite ridge, my rifle at the ready, helmet askew, where I stopped, righted my headgear, scanned the distance, spotted no immediate threat, and turned

back to the road to take in the view. I framed a quick picture with my point-and-shoot camera—my truck and candid driver at some distance 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, on course to meet halfway 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 composed of hard-packed clay and filled to capacity, it seemed, with the dead—hundreds of graves bulging from their slopes, hillsides mounded with dirt and blooming with red and coffee-colored rocks in body-sized rings, each grave headed with flat 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 and 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—the marine primarily citing longer hours on the road, higher target value, and lower pay, and the civilian citing a lesser vehicle and light body armor, 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 said, if we ever get moving again. Then the civilian said not to bother 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 has ever said it better than this right here. And he shut his eyes hard as if struggling to remember and 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. And if you can picture those words inscribed as they are and will forever be, 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, and I agreed, but before we separated I lowered my camera and 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 down low 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 word, sometimes at the start and sometimes at a random word, and then the other would recite a full line up to another similarly placed word after which the initiator would pick up and carry the line again to the next word, 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 or the other 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, 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 and 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 we found we had known something different—a singular difference in wording—and within that one difference we found differences of our own. We 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 synonymous. Does not a loss of dream seem more significant than the loss of life? My driver, my brother, my confidant, my friend—how 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 armored glass knowing he couldn't, at that distance, have seen us. 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 our convoy pulled away from the gravehills and 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. Our 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 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 quiet homes and storefronts, along the restful streets of a ghost town, and between the four corners at town center where some few civilians—two young men and their grandmothers, 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 fruit among leaves and branches and varicolored bruises, spotting a missing child, and 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 ripe fruit from dying trees, and put them down like children. We're talking about conditioning a preattentive 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, the under-ripe on the branch. A certain visual acumen translates to social awareness. The word veteran will continue to skew our discourse. Militants appear civilian. We describe the pop-out effect as phenomenon, feature integration as theory. Returning figures should not expect 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 directions, 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 and we only live, he says, 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 alright, though I still don't know what that means, word came down or alright, 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'd 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 thicken, grow low, 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 small base on one periphery where diesel-fueled light rushed like flood waters to lap and taper at the perimeter wall where we parked our trucks in convoy-order. All artificial light, it seemed, 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. My driver, to my relief, 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, more to the point, 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, 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 to your discount midnight hip-hop. Who's everyone? Everyone who can't sleep. Who 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. Damn, got fools out here dropping dimes, calling me out, guess it's like that now. It's been like that. When I haven't crashed a vehicle yet. Exactly, not yet, and you haven't eaten yet either, so come with and let's get 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, Corporal!

I returned a salute without turning from the sky, trailed my fingers across the night and let my hand drop to the cool steel of the bed. There exists a tired so total that it eclipses all other sensations 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, sputtering generators between tents, canvas doors flapping open, closed, open over treble-high music and lyrics in falsetto and laughs escaped from bunks and machine-conditioned air to phase out through a temperate desert and drift into ambience.

I nodded out for a moment before the steel bed sent chills—a compulsory shake, and I found myself back in the realm of the sensate. Then, as if beamed from below against a dark vaulted ceiling there came one impossible, spirited point— a brightness, a tiny wavering, a speck calling out for attention, shimmering, broken off and differentiating itself from the other visible layers of universe, unconcerned, vivid and strayed, alive in dozens of lines torn into the night, a quiet violence, a private performance in the ether, a sudden animation of light.

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? And where will you go when you go? As quickly as you have arrived, surely you will be quick to leave. 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. A bioluminescence gone rogue. A star wrestling with its newfound consciousness or it's 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, moved into and out of space, zigged, 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 my 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 paper tray—sliced lamb au jus sectioned from diced potatoes and the remaining spinach. I sat up, took the tray and began to eat, and 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—ha! 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, way out here in the middle of the night, 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, and my driver and I laid back and shared body armor for a pillow. He told me I seemed overwhelmed, and I asked him how I might seem 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 comes from outer space or around the corner or from out in the middle of an open field or down some 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. He 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 don't know from where the shots came. 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 issued from the houses near the road or the houses beyond, the bushes or the downed palm at the river's edge, or the hills beyond that. You had music in your ears. 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, truck by truck. You shoulder your gun to present an aggressive posture, as you were trained, to secure against further attack, wait, 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 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 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 being young? 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 says 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 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, then the idling of the engine again.

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

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

You adjust, steady, fire another two. No visible impact, no return fire.

The last of the trucks drive on and up the road. The gunner atop beckons as she spins 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 strain 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 and the intersection and down a small 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 refer to simply as over there. Feather trigger—a few plinks from the rifle when you could have switched to the automatic, held it down, 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 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 began to understand that there are different kinds of combat action. There is an aggressive kind like in the movies, for example, where Marines kick in doors with practiced efficiency, clear, clear, clearing house after house down the whole of a street—action initiated. Then there is a passive kind about which they don't make so many movies where marines truck supplies through industrial complexes and farms, along tired railroutes and through cities horrific with vantage, down dirt roads and town roads and potholed highway after nowhere highway until suddenly they cannot—cue the explosion—action accepted.

He drove third in a line of twenty-two convoy vehicles, his helmet and ballistic eyeglasses strapped on, neck guard snapped to the flak jacket about his chest with armored plates in the front, back, and sides, fire-resistant camouflage all the way down to his groin guard and 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 steadied the wheel, fought touches of apathy, fed side-talk to his passengers—chatty Lieutenant, sleeping-again interpreter—and sent tiny prayers of vigilance to his gunner above. There is no higher power than you, he said, up there with those fifty-caliber belts. He maintained standard dispersion—four or six imagined vehicles between his and the vehicle ahead. He followed at this distance, followed the vehicle ahead and followed the broken highway shoulder 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 dove into a hole in the road. 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 jacket, a knee wedged between the steering column and the wheel, his helmet low over his brow. Bits of roadside shot high and rained down, 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 as he unbuckled. He was restrained—a hand upon his shoulder, a squeeze around the back of his neck, a firm shake. Okay, we're alright, 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 and blackened his thoughts. The vehicle went nowhere.

Lieutenant radioed, and 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 to conduct a post-blast analysis. Might as well get comfortable. He sat in the driver's seat of their deadlined vehicle with his hands, for some reason, on the wheel, and he recalled the last time they 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 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, bleeding still—for nearly two hours. Bomb techs finally roll up storied with how they got the call and rushed out, hit a roadside explosive en route with no casualties although the IED majorly trashed an MRAP—a six-hundred-thousand dollar hit to bring a little robo-camera down the road so we could 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 story, he told Lieutenant, would not make for a good joke. This time it was a device. This time the blast was so close they hardly saw it. This time with the damaged truck and the rubble raining down and the hole in the road and the storm in his leg, this time there was no mistaking. 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. Furious, Lieutenant chased 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—steel bent in on itself or sent someplace too far to find. An absence of road. Mangled machinery. The mechanic jumped out to make an assessment when Lieutenant 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.

An agitation near the bone, galvanic, a hot bloom and collapse, static on loop, a meddling pulse. He transferred with Lieutenant to a vehicle further down the convoy, Staff Sergeant's MRAP—a cautious walk between trucks made long by weighty, 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, and the convoy resumed.

He sat facing Staff Sergeant in a backseat. They spoke little just as they would have along any route, incident or not. He laced his fingers beneath his thigh to cradle his leg, to suspend his pain over the remainder of their drive. Staff Sergeant coughed and grumbled and nodded across the cab, unstrapped one kneepad and, in an attempt at solidarity, perhaps, polished the cap of his own knee and made light of the situation—hey, it only hurts because you're alive. A lesson on yet another kind of combat action which takes place at a distance, many ragged years, maybe, or 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, and a bundle of new white boot socks, two three-packs of condoms, and his only pair of American-made blue jeans which he had worn and worn until they were as 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 and floodgates 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. Back porches jutted out along the base of the dam, balconies staggered up the retaining walls—concrete blocked and stacked eight-stories to the overpass and helipad and towering mechanisms at the top, inclined before the weight of all that water. Each place an apartment 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 size 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 dam and the quiet homes above 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. Officers, he observed, tend to speak as if always running for office.

The after-action report will reflect the reality of events. What does reality of events mean? Location and what happened, who responded and how quickly—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—but the after-action report will largely reflect whether or not personnel sustained injury, to what degree, and to what extent these injuries may have been prevented. What does that mean, prevented? You're limp. What limp? Well, it may be true that operating the vehicle is more difficult with knee pads on, however we have protocol for good reason and that reality will be reflected in the after-action report.

Combat action of a few more kinds. There is that 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 civilian until he suffers

sometime later from wounds invisible, flared and untreated, source of attack forgotten or altogether unknown—action delayed. Then, another kind of combat action in which a marine is wounded due to his own negligence—action reported—or due to his own competence—an inaction, maybe—or due to an improvised explosive device set off before a human being 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 ask, only to experience a chronic and bearable pain without seeing himself as complicit in its cause—action denied.

Their return convoy followed the controlled flow of the Euphrates. Powerlines and palms flashed past—dark shatterings against a bright sky. 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 to 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 grips 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 banana nut 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 splashing off of one another, a fountain of 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 spoonful from the packet? Are there boys who choose, like girls, perhaps, to stay away from the road, boys who must stay away? What reason keeps 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. What becomes of their bounties? Are they studied or 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 colorfully wrapped candies bursts from the top of the following truck, a font 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, stand aside with arms crossed or hands on their impatient hips, then 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, though 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, wow, I suppose I too was this gung-ho. 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. His passenger will scramble, brace with an arm 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 keep up the panic until he cannot help but to allow a smile to creep in as he gently levels the wheel and applies the brakes. The Seven-Ton will slow as they snake between barricades toward the guard gate with 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, did you? 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—a sick sheep losing the flock. Alright, let's think seriously about this. 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, the ram skull 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 (come to think of it) an abstract 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. The front gate sparkled with orange hints of the rising sun. A line of trucks processed through and onto base, each stopping to clear their weapons of ammunition. Unseen guards waited behind concrete and plywood and armored glass above, probably waking 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, as the position was largely 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 of my body's autonomic processes and not some more conscious repetition. Sand-filled oil drums—a clearing barrel before every base. We park, get out, aim rifles down, barrel to open barrel, unhinge magazine from magazine well, and sling back the charging handle to eject, if there was one in the chamber, a live round of ammunition—weapons rendered chemically inert—the pulling of the trigger, then, only a slide and the 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, humiliated in their demotion of duties and promotional stagnation while their former peers rose through ranks collecting honors at which they, the negligent, would never have the chance. Other apparitions—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 and 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 inactively involved, as if recalling the emotional impact of something I had done once in a dream. The empty chamber—an exhale of fire. The ejection port cover open as if mouthed, as if shocked, as if hungry for another round. My 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 there, without intent, at the front gate 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 stood outside, rifle aimed into the clearing barrel, staring up at the guard tower, waiting for terms. A marine—military police, 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, 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, and he seemed to wait as I did, for 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 when I was not looking to be excused but understood. 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, around 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 high 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. 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 climbs to 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 says, 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 me to lay my head with true east. And when those inevitable thoughts of home invade my final mind and split my sense of self, bring me together 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. I will follow the hood of this truck wherever it may lead, he says, 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 speed and stability of the compass and the gravity of novel imagery, his trepidations about the area of operation and the route ahead. It isn't standard, his behavior, of course not, but we appreciate his appeal to the world for cardinal truths. He is us reminding us of how little we know—though we call one true, there are many useful norths. If ever we find ourselves at the start of another convoy having forgotten for a moment why we've come all this way or where we intend to go, we need only look up and we'll find him there, plotting and counting on four perfect corners of the globe.

Sandstorm 4

Watch me and make yourself useful already. I'm going for a run, but help me, please, before you watch me enter the world. Tie me a scarf so I might see—my delicate face—woolen blend, flax cool, patterned diamond after my moves—right? Watch me angle vamoose. As if we were the only two left 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, whipping 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—this is living. Has it taken my face? Tie me reigns to settle with nature and, if you can't tell, let me holdfast and watch—for as long as these winds will allow—how airborne particulates grow in abundance while growing less, less, and less obvious.

Privates First Class

We never noted the roads so lonely as they were on the ride north, those quick villages and market towns where men tended the fields near their homes while boys tended to sheep near the roads. Some played ball in one dusty roundabout at the center of town while others circled them on sputtering motorbikes. Because we saw no women, some of us 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 parade on by?

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 the women who hide. The men who stare you down as you pass, they are the ones. Looking, 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, shadows homebound.

Why hide if they've done nothing? Why not also show themselves as fearless? Should we believe that a militant husband would stand in plain sight while his innocent wife cowers 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 of military age, our interpreter told us, guilty or otherwise.

They must 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.

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. They expect we won't come looking.

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

We never noted the roads so lonely as they were on that ride south, our imaginations reeling with what was expected, with what we might do, with 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 didn't start beating your chest until evening when Doc, the one you admired—everyone admired—hovered in her free-spirited time about the motor pool. Point to a marine who didn't 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. Behold, listen and you may learn. To read auras one must look beyond body. To divine, to distinguish, to discern a person's character, 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 poured oil and fastened caps while she studied the corners of shipping containers, the plywood doorways of offices near your platoon's maintenance bays. She played well the role of an occultist, choreographed, must have memorized the lexicon of 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 steel 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 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 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. Three ghostly strays of blonde escaped from beneath her cap showing 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 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 fountains 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 down 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 up 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 back 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, somewhere. 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

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 on 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 marines 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, beckoned with oil-stained fingers, a wrench in your eager hand. Your troops scraped their boots across the

ground, beckoned with grunts and howls. Your aura, Doc said, as far as I can tell, is as green as any I've seen. You bellowed and beat at your chest with a fist. Your troops 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.

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. Through the turret, mirror blue spliced with desert digital—your gunner's legs a stone bridge on the sky. Then a vagueness like sunlight touching glass, the dry glisten of raw gold. Then red, solids ground and steamed and coming together as clouds. And then a collapse, and you climb hand over hand over fist to scale the storm. Outside, 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 chunks of tire, sinking. If the earth finds the frame, the truck is stuck—does, is. 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 run the chains. Inside, and the door holds. Surely the breath erodes the throat. You put it in neutral. Snatch—a tension bridge to inch you back. The engine eats and, beneath, treads reveal their hunger. The windpipe—a two-lane highway. Cut the wheel and climb. They've loosed the chains. Shift high and drive. A sky path, 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 with 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, a growing sign, in communicating so long then so brief in its stay—whoosh—and long again in its going away, a sign shrinking through mirrors without color or language, losing shape, 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're 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, at a limit of two per Marine. The first of these occasions fell upon the Marine Corps birthday, a holiday whereupon our platoon was scheduled to have 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 necessarily changed, and that evening our platoon, instead, rallied and readied our trucks for a two-day supply run to some of the infantry camped out someplace south of Mosul. Their holiday, we decided on our return trip, made a joke of complaining about ours. We didn't get those two beers, but these guys never got the option. So, instead of indulging, we delivered our cargo and shared a meal with those Marines camped out in the middle of the desert, and although it was overcooked or too cold or badly handled 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 their coolers. They were still cold when we returned, but 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 belated birthday celebration. There they would wait in the cold dark until the next base-sanctioned holiday.

Thanksgiving, our second beer-worthy celebration, occasioned a full renewal of its name, and each of us gave thanks for the opportunity to forget our obligations for a while, to crack open a few cans, clank them together, 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 their beers, everyone in our platoon enjoyed double the standard allotment—four

beautiful, ordinary cans of beer—which was enough after months of abstinence to get most of us good and drunk. Some of us stood in line and ate turkey legs and piles of mashed potatoes and sweet potato pie in the dining hall, but the cleverest of us avoided dinner entirely, as tempting as a classic American meal may have seemed to us then, so that we might enjoy our limited drinks to maximum effect. We few fancied ourselves the historical purists. The 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 one hand and his other hand covering his eyes, as if he imagined with a child's logic that if 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 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 lips, and with the pop of the tab still lingering in the air, the beer disappeared. He held the empty can high in one hand, 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 goodnights, but some few of us,

still feeling the ardor and the thinning spell of drink in our blood, that old familiar ease in our veins, found ourselves in the gym. Was it the fluorescence, we later asked, the white light in the windows that drew us to the gym 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 settled down and stiffened our backs and held on tight and pressed our fists into the air with relative ease. Then we stacked more. We took turns stacking weights and sliding beneath and heaving them in the face of gravity until there were no plates left alongside our bench. Then we borrowed from nearby benches and took their weight as our own. We lifted more from faraway racks. When we ran out of plates, we filled our daypacks with water bottles and strapped them onto the weights, tied our boots at their lace ends 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 or take us by force back to our trucks or our homes, and 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, okay, but she'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, thrust, grab hold of those love handles and flutter some fifty-caliber carnage from on high. Trigger thumbs. Rounds on rounds. Pink clouds. Belts on belts. Keep her 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. Take time for one shot and be the one killed. Hey, accuracy by volume—machine gunner modus operandi. Is that really what they say? Or, if you mount the M240, you get both—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 needed. Nothing too big to carry, right, like a nine on the thigh, in and out of the truck, sprint and roll, handheld, hey, no problem. No range, either. So, keep it on the go. Point blank. Concealed, see, up the sleeve if need be. First do no harm. Now isn't that sweet. Give me back my Mk 19. Show off. 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, well, nothing beats a fixed bayonet. Face to face. Maybe a buttstock to the chest. Blade in hand. Shit, hand to hand. A swift kick and a hammer fist. A war cry and a running start. A photo of Staff Sergeant's face mid war cry. Blown up to the size of a road sign. Lashed to the grill of our lead truck like a warning. Why warn them? Try Staff Sergeant's face just before orgasm. All the yikes. Cruel and unusual. A weapon of mass destruction? Best defense—blindness. Imagine the collaterals. Staff Sergeant

himself, though. Staff Sergeant as weapon? As attachment, maybe. As bipod. Oh, Staff Sergeant as stabilizer. For? Would have to be heavy. With kick. And lots of moving parts. Right, or too big to shoulder alone.

Held Fast in Place

He faltered as he stood from the convoy brief where he absorbed a patchwork of instruction. A graylight morning. He fought a 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 behind, 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—with a concussive voice, a 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 hurt. Ouch—a jab from one of his own. Staff Sergeant's use of the plural means it came from someone in his platoon. Our turn—likely Staff Sergeant's driver. No matter. He straightened, moved on and toward their trucks which idled in line at the edge of the maintenance bay. He offered no comment in return, aching with lightning clouds in his legs as he walked, gaining distance from the group, alone.

Back then, back on the road, after the hit—the rubble rain and the missing steel and the hole left in the earth—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, 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 unknown and potentially dangerous roads seemed to have frittered then and failed him on that walk between trucks, 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 left their mangled truck and the ruined highway behind, veered, cut 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 run and ran to what he assumed would be a 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 ribbons of fine sand after each step. 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, slapped his helmet, 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 step 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, and

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 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 can't 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 she continues 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 Christmas for a blink with one eye in each available color of everything.

Rabia Railway

For breakfast, tuna from a pouch, water to wash it down, a fist-sized can of extra-caffeinated soda to cleanse the palate with either power or citrus—neither an indication of flavor. For lunch, peanut butter from a pouch over tortillas, water to swallow, 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 over plastic cloths patterned after the American flag. Our seats overlooked the Syrian border, a high arch to mark the crossing—a waypoint between Al-Shaddadah and Mosul. Some of my platoon sat still in plastic chairs while some could not. 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, and we left cash on the counter where he could see, then pulled the tables together and waited with busy feet 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. We helped ourselves to a cooler and used the counter to crack the tops from glass soda bottles, and we cracked jokes about sharing drinks from another era like soldiers from another kind of war. I started a debated on whether it was right to eat over an American flag—but it's a tablecloth! A griddle hissed and drowned our musings. We kept quiet then, and we listened for signs of a freshness we'd almost forgotten.

Staff Sergeant popped in to call us back for the convoy just as the chef delivered steaming plates to our tables. Bull hell, Staff Sergeant, 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, look, and I shoveled chopped meat with my fingers, wrapped soft bread like a shroud in my hands, took a bite and the rest spilled through my fingers. The others at the table hunched over their plates and did the same, shoveling and biting and spilling their warmth.

Easy, Staff Sergeant told us, we're not animals. We chewed fast and swallowed hard. He stood over our tables and studied our plates, told us to slow, to breathe, to eat how we eat 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, 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 road, on the railway side, on the drive into town. We have goats, then. 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. We have chicken, then. What, he asked, haven't you seen? What haven't we seen? No one saw sheep around, but we had seen small herds of sheep following boys, some time ago, out in the country. But no sheep now, he asked, here in town? No, I told him, not lately, not here in town. Well, he said as he uncrossed his arms, there it is, and he left us to study our plates.

There what is? The punchline, probably. What punchline? We marinated on the moment, our plates cooling between our hands. Staff Sergeant just told a kind of joke. We wondered through our teeth. About eating sheep? Afraid so. We lowered our heads and ate quickly and imagined Staff Sergeant wearing a crooked smile as he walked down the line toward his truck. I suppose the joke is that we haven't seen any sheep because they cooked every single sheep to feed us this meal. And, that's not possible. And that's where the humor comes from. It's impossible to know if we ate even one sheep, so it's humorous to suggest that we ate every sheep in town. Then where are the shepherds? We tired our jaws to finish. Explanation, somehow, took from taste. I sat with my bites, held 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 the tips of your fingers and feel how fast we inflate. 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 highway ahead while his gunner, instead of signaling for the distancing trucks, dropped into the cab with a pointed thumb—some assistant driver. Didn't you fill up before we left?

He carried his scream 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. He landed, jumped and flailed and screamed for help, landed and panted through his nose. Over the turret's cowl he watched a line of vehicles shrink as their truck—last in the lineup—lost speed and hummed to a halt. The convoy pulled steadily away. He arched his back and screamed 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 thin cloud sailed overhead, its shadow slicing the bright highway. Then the nearest truck stopped, followed by the one ahead and then a chain reaction up the rest of the convoy. 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. He bent at the waist and aimed 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 windshield frame. I did, just so you know. His voice cracked and worsened with each vowel. You see what I did? His driver and gunner nodded—yes, of course—avoided any protest or mockery, and agreed in silence to give him some space. Security checks would be in order. They both 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 check—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 that, and the others will smile wide and shake 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 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 as he noticed the mistake when the clear basin of the fuel water separator grew 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 nothing to say but missed his voice already. 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 theirs 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 tuned 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 with lots of screaming. They abandoned the radio at the front gates and came to another silent agreement about which of them would siphon the tank. He leaned against the passenger window. They counted on fast fingers—one, two, three, not it! He pushed his helmet low over his brow. Guess that means you're it, church mouse. He tucked his hands into the pits of his flak. Any objection?

He slid one end of a black tube into the fuel tank, fed it to the bottom, then plopped down onto a cushioned track of top sand carved up by a front tire. 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, and his breath failed to bring the remaining liquid out of the tank. His coughs and nauseated pallor brought on a chorus of chuckles. 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, on with the show. With a white-spirit burn on his tongue, he repositioned himself and pulled again, this time with less breath, and the 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 font of sickness.

He jumped back and dropped the hose and loosed the rush of antifreeze onto 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 started off toward a nearby pallet of water bottles to wash himself clean, then turned back at their laughter and rushed toward 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 long breath through his nose, dropped his arms, and 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 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, then 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 in a line at the rim. A propane sigh fills the room. I nod and hand off the 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 among the ruins of a strange place and to know he had been there and, in signaling his presence, remains. In wartime we manufacture hope—to stumble upon the prolific *Kilroy was here*—the hope, perhaps, 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 passed down to ensure the survival of the organism—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 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 present reality. *What,* he asked from a bus seat—thick black ink on a gray vinyl canvas—*Toast can't ride the bus?* 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 where once it may have consoled. Kilroy asks the viewer to look back—*was here*—where Toast 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, a simple star between bulbous cheeks, thighs held high, lower legs and feet flopped casually aside. Her posture might appear, briefly, to signify the ears of a rabbit. The phrase *Bunny awaits* accompanied her at least once, etched on the inside glass of a Hum-Vee passenger window. Then came MikeMike, the ascending grenade, commonly seen careening in blue or black streaks across tabletops around 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. Skull Henry was a human skull whose name might have been Henry, though I found this unlikely as the skull was always exclaiming the name Henry as if Henry was a friend only just then spotted some distance away or as if the skull, every time, mistook the viewer for this Henry character, whoever he was, which must have been awkward for anyone who didn't share his name. *Henry!* Why would anyone shout their own name? Those few actual Henrys who might have come upon Skull Henry painted alongside a concrete barrier just before a main gate, perhaps, or scratched into the underside of a toilet seat cover must have reacted somewhat awkwardly—recognized suddenly by a faceless stranger—at least the first time.

And, among others, Kilroy. I reproduced him in oil, my thumb thickening his fingers and the curve of his nose down the dessert-shaded bumper of my truck. I penciled and pinned him to the scheduling boards in the armory. I ladled him out in sand over the pavement before company headquarters. I littered my notebooks and folded him once into a loose page, tore him to bits, and

scattered him in a violent wind. I spread legends of him in the dining hall. Have you heard, I said 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, 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. But 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 here, 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 a future conflict—our present in which we've agreed upon no single mascot to doodle en masse or 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's not what we're used to. How, then, can we leave it to the viewer to understand, without much more than a sketch, just who has been where? We sketch with many hands and view the 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 and leave 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. 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 flames through holes where the metal had blued and weakened and aerated the fire to send ashes aglow through the rising heat. A kind of campfire 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 of her unintended 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 she read it, followed the letter back up the chain, and was immediately approved to take off for New York, to travel home on emergency leave. She set to packing a bag that same evening. Her father was dying. 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.

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 yoga videos molding herself into more and more difficult poses, where her cat would claw the carpet, 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 creased 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. She thought about his service, how her father kept not a single memento from what he called two shattered years in Vietnam. She thought of

children, about having three, about showing them and theirs some trinkets from way back when grandma was in The Middle East—medals, ribbons, her chevrons, a rifle badge, identification tags nested in her boots—and she thought 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 apart from the other bodies who came to mourn, as if she were hired, as if her body was placed there to fill the billet of some governing sentry—the body of a security guard employed instead of that of a daughter home on emergency leave. She felt the same, she claimed, as she had felt at her cousin's wedding the year prior, 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 dignified. Above all, standing guard at the head of her father's casket, she felt more useful than she had felt since she had been 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, she admitted, to be back in the desert—back with us—because the whole trip went like a dream in that fleeting, uncanny way, not convincing enough to fool you into believing it was real, but real enough to stay with you like any other memory for a short time through the morning. An emergency flight from Iraq to the states should register as real. Still have the letter, she told us,

flashing it, fanning the flames over the barrel. Still, she couldn't shake the belief that it never happened. Some real and vital thing, she said, stayed—can you imagine?—stayed 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, no, it's nothing glamorous, not even, not even scheduled until tomorrow, come back tomorrow morning, yes, eat and spend some time with family, get some sleep, really, go ahead and get some sleep, come back tomorrow and we'll figure something out. She went home, slept little, tried but could not remember her dreams. When she returned the next day, her father's body had been burned away, reduced to bone-shaped minerals, the bone shapes broken to bits, the bits swept, bagged, and neatly packed into a lacquered, cherry wood box. The rule: we simply do not practice open cremation, please, our deepest apologies, miss, here you are, your father.

She brought the box to her childhood home, to her mother who wouldn't 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 carpet between her crossed legs, and slid open the base. Inside she found a thick plastic bag filled with her father's cremains and, resting on top, 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 small tag, retrieved her own bag and pulled out her boots, stripped the laces from the left and threaded one end through the hole. She rethreaded the laces and tucked her father's crematorium tag between the second and third eyelet from the toe, tight in

overlap with her own tag, his numbers next to her numbers, snug there against the tongue. Then she slid the box closed and slipped her boots over her bare feet.

Only child of the deceased, she told us, and she clicked her heels to attention. We looked down through the heat and sand and dust and bits of ash called to air by her treads. She tossed the letter into the open mouth of the burn barrel where the heat lifted and unfolded the paper and sent it tumbling and opening through the smoke. She caught it with one hand as it sailed overhead, and she held it there for a moment before she brought it down in her fist, folded it, 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 tag, and we asked her to show. Loosen the laces and pull out the tongue! She grinned and knelt and, while she untied her boot, she asked us to promise, if possible, to resist the urge to turn away. Why would we turn away? Promise you won't sleep or be with anyone else, that you will find a way to stay, to watch. We can stay. 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 this is against the rules. She pulled her laces from their eyelets, her hand over the tags, and she made us wait, made us promise, and we did—as if we had the authority—promise to be there, to see her, to never turn away and to watch, to see whatever we might need to see even if we had to 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. Someone calls to it by name, All Clear, and clarity rushes toward, though at the feet of All it cannot arrive. To 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. 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, well, then there won't be any room for us marines when the mortars 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 eyes 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 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 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, rust in 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 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 out of the pit and onto harder 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're 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 bravery.

FPO AE

I left the shops beneath the Al Asad stadium with a four-band puzzle ring. The proprietor asked if I was sure I didn't want a designer suit, fabric direct from the factory, a fraction 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 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 its 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 alright, 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 fell 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, well, it may have rusted, may have absorbed the moisture in her skin and fused the bands solid or, given enough time, it may have corroded

and collapsed into so many irreconcilable bits. 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 reconcile the pieces, and that she repurposed the puzzle as part of another strange investment—a moment in a time capsule, perhaps, or 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

All the boys, it seemed, were gathered at town's edge. I stepped down from my truck with my rifle in patrol carry. Powerlines sagged between poles cemented into damaged oil drums every few blocks along a low wall—the bounds of a neighborhood. Adolescent boys stood in a group at the edge of a field between their homes and our trucks, watching, calling to younger friends beyond the wall—the Americans are here! A group of men watched from a distance and knotted their 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 insouciance of junior marines and non-commissioned officers from other platoons, 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 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 my 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 ballots in hand, scanning strange new lists for a familiar name. For many of us, 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 threw 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 in the box and tell us, alright, alright, the party's over.

The boy with the ball cocked back and kicked it, and I lunged and caught it with the toe of my boot just 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 and scanned the adults who watched from a distance for my play. I dribbled it through the dirt then cocked back

and booted the ball which took flight and spun toward the town, swerved, bounced down center toward the gap between posts, and stopped 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. I pushed a pass to the adults who let the ball roll between them, losing momentum as it rolled along the wall. The boys slid in and recovered the pass and kept the game going. We lowered our guards for a while and played easily around our trucks, and no one broke up the game or split us into teams or 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 and shouting and running back waving about paper currency, a steel whistle, an American football, shining coins from various visiting nations, and other such 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 shoulder, calling out to the boys who, much the way I would have at their age, slipped into an alien and undeniably curious quiet. They leaned over one another to look with hands behind their backs, refusing to touch, refusing to take the magazine from my hands. In sudden cultural panic as I noticed a 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 tore and unboxed the cardboard and flung aside the scraps as they scooped and fumbled little brown meal packages downfield in a trail straight 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 heads and hands so close to low-hanging powerlines.

We finished our job and waved goodbye and followed those powerlines out of town. 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 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 at the edge of some 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 When Strummed

I woke on an off day alone in my can—a small trailer with a single door and one window where 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 two metal wall lockers and nightstands, blanketed over stiff 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 between cans. I drifted after the sound, one row over, further, two cans down where peppered applause rose and fell from behind a familiar door. I invited myself in and found some of my platoon gathered around a bed, cross-legged against the walls or seated on the floor with knees in their hands, rocking, nodding and waving me inside—hurry, let's go, close the door. A noncommissioned one-man-band struck another chord, his studied fingers against the unpracticed neck of an acoustic guitar. Who sent your guitar out? 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're really doing this, aren't we? Some of us sang in extremes—stressed or dreamy falsetto or 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 stranger. All of us had learned the song, though 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, 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 messages—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 / 'cause god's a big fat jerk.

Always read the fine print. As we sang these barroom chants and sailor songs, these criticisms and irreverent tales of unknown marines, so 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 hands held every marine's attention with the same gravity as gloved hands picking and pulling wires from live ordnance at the roadside. We admired the artful diversion. Some of us played along. One thrashed broom quills in lieu of an electric guitar. Another feigned saxophone with 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, a discordant fist, vibrations knocked straight through the floor where grains of sand must have hopped unseen. We stopped the music for the drumming, for the shouting about other Marines—think about it, alright, sleeping right across the way, just back from their convoy, remember, no one's on their own program out here and everyone needs their sleep when they can get it, now that's the end of the damned singalong—and we stood quiet and absent and still, each of us fighting the tension held in our backs, in our arms tight at our sides or wrapped around and hugging rifles to our knotted chests, slow to release as the shouting stopped and Staff Sergeant's tired grumbles faded off and our rifle stocks found the floor once again. At least it wasn't indirect fire. Our musical fists fell into silent, bloodless hands.

We began to relax. Well, I offered, I guess that's the end of the singalong. Many tisked their tongues or sucked their teeth or cursed with long, breathy vowels or agreed in a silence, a low kick at the air, a reluctant nod, and made their way outside where they stayed to hold open the door. I waved them off—you heard the boss—and the door closed with a stutter. A broom fell from the frame to the floor, a dividing line between twin beds. I sat on one side, the one-man-band on the other. Hey, I said, our song never got around to me. He buffed a scuff from the heel of his guitar, from 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, 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 will warp the neck if you leave the guitar in tune. Too much tension over too much time. Then the neck bows and the strings sit further from the frets, and the notes get harder to hit and to hold. Best to let them loose and tune them back up before the next singalong. We'd be singing again before long. We can't help but jab at our soft spots, and there's always another song so long as our soft spots still show. I tightened my fists and sang without tune.

Expertise / still fucked up your knees.

You're so smart / but no purple heart.

We'll always find ways to jab at the little crater left on the road, the hesitation in our steps. I held no rhythm, kicked at the broom on the floor. If you don't mind, I said, 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, but it's absolutely everywhere. 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's mine is yours. He nodded toward the broom and he knelt and wiped a hand across the floor as he reached beneath the bed for his rifle—it's everywhere here too.

Vehicle Dispersion

Just ahead, the gunner spins his turret over the passenger's side. Your driver shouts up to confirm what you can see—enemy contact right! Flashes from the roof of a small shop, maybe from small windows on the second floor, just ahead, a few truck-lengths up the road. The forward truck slows, returns fire, and your driver coasts behind, brakes to maintain proper vehicle dispersion. He tells you to look where you are looking, right, your turret already facing the firefight. He rants, they're practically at a standstill up there, really, drinking it in—do you see this?—the gunner ahead racing the barrel, hot, orange, tracer rounds every fifth, flares by which to pause and take notes, probably, all the details Lieutenant will need in order to put them in for that combat action ribbon, oh, oh yeah, and they're going to get it too. Their gun sings ahead in staccato digging whole notes from a storefront. The target building sends each crack bounding like a ricochet, echoes from the low wall and shuttered windows across the street and back and forth and on down the road where you wait atop your truck to advance into combat. You rack one from the belt to the chamber, shoulder your gun. The wind dies. A rest. Flashes drop and fire fades of a sudden, the forward skirmish at some bridge or break or end. Right, enough already, push then, push on! Push—your driver entreats progress and laments the ceasing of return fire, the suppression of enemy contact, the quiet 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 through that previously violent space before the small shop. You reseat the buttstock into your shoulder and tighten your grip on the approach.

Some ways ahead, the turret swings toward the driver's side as their truck races off to catch the rest of the convoy. Your nose gives a twitch in the dissolving gun smoke, sulfuric signatures on air, hot metals heaving. Brass casings jewel the road. You coast by storefront.

Awning fabrics billow and dip, and soccer jerseys and slacks and other various clothing items hang there from angle-iron frames and catch flight somehow and swing from tiny hooks. Something falls to the dirt—the inconsequence of a breeze. Small craters draw your attention across a low wall before a window. Your driver calms the engine, lingers, idles past. Buckets and tins and plastic packets and various shimmering cookwares litter the ground near an overturned wheelbarrow. Your driver tells you he cannot hold for long—you hear?—need to punch it soon to catch up to the convoy and close this ridiculous dispersion. Many outdoor shelves keep hold of their pristine pots and baskets and wide spools of cloth. You follow the trails in the walls, scan second floor windows, trace iron sights 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 he stands on the accelerator. The turbine whines and holds high as the engine bursts to life, and those shots from the left come on strong and bleed into the armor's vibration in a sonic violence, the build-up toward a belligerent crescendo. You 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, just behind yours, way too close and at a full stop before the little building on the left, gunner engaged already with the enemy in the window, his barrel singing rounds, the rounds bursting and burning through concrete as your driver sustains acceleration and your truck reels helplessly away. Your finger slumps against the dead trigger. You push your shoulder hard into the trembling stock, the quiet gun, as the rest of the street flashes past and your truck takes you miles from the engagement.

The truck behind shrinks before the small shop riddled with holes, before that place across the street where the flashes are dying. The shrinking gunner swaps rounds there with an

enemy you could hear but did not see, and the sound of their music shrinks too. Everything lessens as your driver speeds to meet with forward trucks. He knocks your legs and reminds you to spin your turret back over the passenger's side—you know how it goes—hey, no sense in longing, alright, we slowed until there was no more slowing and then things went just how they were supposed to go, and, well, there's no shame in that. You spin your turret back. No shame in following—sure there's not. Engagements just ahead and just behind, and you didn't fire a single round. The rest of the town wavers as you pass then flickers out of existence and like a flash you're back to the static of open desert. The truck ahead is a thumbnail, a chip in the horizon. They gunned it all the way to the edge of the world. Your driver guns it and carries you toward them, from a duet back to a full platoon. The truck behind is probably, by the quiet, disengaged some distance back and following. Winds swell and surround, 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 and keeping just so far apart. Your driver pats your boots, and your arms go cold and, oh—look at you—you've been shouldering the gun for too long. You look ahead to where the sky swallows the road, where the forward truck should be growing closer and closer but somehow has become even more distant. You leave the gun in its mount. You sit back in the turret and imagine yourself lost, your truck too far beyond standard dispersion, always too fast or too slow. You imagine, whether you're behind the gun or behind the wheel, 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 no longer satisfy.

So quiet. 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 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, his bobbing fingers a comic-strip width 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, not without the heft of comment, of satire, politic. Ha! We do laugh in analog. I might say this—the scene 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 I would bother with how things were or seemed beyond any given scene.

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 were to 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 into my chest where they whipped about like curls of smoke through a drafty room. Then I was firing again, another, I don't know, so many rounds into plaster and dirt which burst from the edge of the frame and rained down the low wall or jumped up and fell back through the shadows inside that derelict building. Again, I released and 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. Typically, she told me, gunfire will arise in conjunction with an explosion, but since this was not such a complex attack, well, 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 three seconds, 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 and facing me, bloodied but not beaten, his rifle perched at the edge of the frame where he could steady his shaking hands and brace his barrel and fire a single round which might skim the body of my gun to 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 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, inanimate 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 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. The poor dears who will rush to hug him, the fumes their embraces will loose upon the welcoming. I assumed his decidedly unhygienic maneuver was some form of reactionary protest, conscious in formation or otherwise, as the inauguration of this personally and professionally subversive move 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, I am blissfully 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 around 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 staphylococcus 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. We 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 punishment—the same reason he let the infection build nearly to the point of immobility, until they contemplated whether it was safe to allow him to keep his own limb. Maltreat your body, he said, and someone may take it from your charge. I imagine he couldn't feel much about 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 warned him, and thinks he welcomed the flood of pain in the hope he might pass out from it, assuming she would necessarily bathe him either way and preferring to ward the whole of the experience from his memory. He woke shiny and sterile and wrapped about the leg with brilliant gauze.

Maybe, he told us, it will scar up in a way that would pass as a bullet wound. We all know why a Marine would prefer a bullet wound to a staph infection. There's still time, we told him. Maybe you'll get your bullet wound yet. An entry and an exit, then, he said, or 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 additional putrefaction for weeks following Doc's procedure, and so he had to clean it daily—all of us, Doc most of all, holding him accountable. This may have caused him to shower even less often, though his wound remained immaculate. He took to carrying packages of sterile wipes 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 it looked like the bony mouth of a fish gasping for air, and he would gasp in time with the opening and closing of the flesh as if his leg were 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 and unraveled his bandages and unpacked the hole in his skin and took a permanent marker to his thigh. He 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 just then sailing in from the long drought of the dessert war—a comedy 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 held a note 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 then seemed suddenly and unmistakably like 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.

Mouth of the River

Some have been and could tell of a palace, mosaic columns between mounds of silver, porcelain baths brimming like plates of powder-blue glass which break for the body and dash over diamond tiles like shattered crystal falls. Paradise scythed along the Euphrates. A hungry bend in the fertile crescent. He has been to the banks on laundry day. Living glade on growing shores where tall grasses writhe and send out the breeze to call up the goitered gazelle, sandgrouse, and some few clever trees—pistachio, hawthorn, and plum. Iraq has no control of its tributaries. Fists work the plunge, gray-white studs jeweling waves, alive with suds carried down, rocking. The cradle, they say, of civilization. Who we were swells the earth. He has been and could not tell. A deep bight losing volume.

Models of Recognition

While resupplying an infantry platoon camped 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. Our platoon 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 outpost had become, as the infantry phrased it, white noise. 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, however, was the refueling of vehicles parked at strategic points about their ringed encampment.

At some juncture on the road between Sal Sinjar and this unnamed post, the pump on the 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 pretending to think 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. I caught myself stutter-stepping down a ravine toward what might have been, long ago, a river—dried up and wide enough for two Hum-Vees, deep enough to sink a Seven-Ton. And it was this idea—to park our truck up on the bank and their trucks down in the river bed in order to feed fuel from one to the others using the unhurried yet ceaseless flow of gravity—which granted me the liberty to stare hard into a patch of eroded earth and emerge, as I had, with the unshakable image of a smiling face. But not merely a smile. The others also observed the face as they brought down their trucks and sat with me atop the tank, ankles crossed upon the coupling between hoses, awaiting a leisured refuel and staring into the opposing wall of

the once-river at what we decided was the most obvious and uncanny expression—a face fixed mid-laugh, a laugh solidified at the very peak of hysterics.

Can't you see it already? Where waters once crumbled and carried away bits of river's edge there stood a fine collection of rock in walls of sand 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 horizontal lines as if by surprise. And the eyes cinched against hilarity—a small earthen cliff for the left over a crested sliver of shade opposed by midday sun. An intelligent row of stones for the right, lighter brown than the other would-be eye, sure, but too obvious in its ocular fidelity not to call to mind the balance of reflection, the symmetry of a glance—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 unwrinkled 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 banks do 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 which beamed and turned up in either direction 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 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 sounded 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 as if trying to figure out if the person he now faced was worth any more of his words.

He asked why I wouldn't just say I didn't know. I don't know. Are you afraid of not knowing? I don't think so. The truth, he told me, so you can feel 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*—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 didn't write why before he died, so now 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 to commit them to memory. And we dip needles in them and punch the words into our arms and make them permanent over and over and over. And we notice them 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 the words are always there, right in front of us. And most of the time we don't see them. And when we do see them, we don't see 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 civilians, two, or unfazed, carry, shroud, or the word fatal.

New Year's

I never missed a kiss. Not even the seemingly indomitable odds of 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 after eleven by the time I make way to the Al Asad recreation center, walking fast through the rows of our portable neighborhood, convincing myself Doc will still be there—where else would she go? My rifle swings in one hand where it hangs from its sling and bounces with each step. Laptop lights from a few of the windows. Steam pillows through a trailer door—look at that—nearly midnight and the showers are still hot. I hide my nose in my neckline for a deep breath—do I smell already? Shadows by the old bunkers, in the cutouts and ground cover serving as rendezvous points for lovers—fraternizers, brave and forbidden copulators, secret carnal operatives, infiltration teams, special units skilled in bodily reconnaissance—quiet as they sometimes aren't this time of night. The dining facility is floodlit and dead except for two guards on their way out. Jambo, you guys. Jambo, the guards reply with smiles which never fail to echo.

I'm still smiling at the entrance to the recreation center, and I remind myself to drop it. Bass pulses through the wall. 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 dance. Late night on Al Asad, there really is nowhere else to go. The gym, perhaps. The picnic tables near the snack trailers—fast food pizza and burgers which have oddly similar tastes. The old theater where arriving troops are briefed and departing troops debriefed and in which, it is rumored, officers commingle for drinks after dark. The motor pool, quiet and dim. 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 to be transformed into a fitted suit, puzzle boxes and puzzle rings and, at times, the only decent coffee on base.

I point the barrel of my rifle into a sand-filled drum by the door, pull the charging handle back and ensure the chamber is empty before letting it loose, and I enter. Some of my platoon are already inside, jumping and stomping and moving in arrhythmia through some kind of dance under green lasers and fractured reflections of white light in a central disco ball. Someone seated on a stool near the door rips a ticket, hands me half, and stuffs the other half into a sock. Should 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 Air Force personnel 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 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 settles to a fading beat. He 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 a 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 prop myself, and she helps keep me up with her hands under my arms. We finish our hug and move like some of the others move where the music is loudest. Party lights break up the air 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 master of ceremonies 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 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'll 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, 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 to 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 and proclaim New York a fractal city in which each piece shows itself as proportional to the whole, like snow and garbage, 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 don't know, I tell her, over there, against the wall. Where were you? In the fray, she says. 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 little trailers of our neighborhood. Cool air and clear skies get us looking up and talking about stars. There're just so many. There are, she tells me, so don't overthink it, but I do, and I let my nerves make me quiet. 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 of our little, makeshift neighborhood.

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. Why don't you come by some time and I'll hook you up? She hooks a lot of marines up, so says Doc. Hooks them up in groups too, how she likes it—the ultimate control. Oh, she says, you didn't know, well, if what they're running is a train then that makes her the engine and 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 together 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 every marine 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 alright and softly closes the door. I walk down the row in the direction of my little aluminum room before I stop—why so hesitant? You enjoyed yourselves, shared something on that walk. She invited you 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 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, well, 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, my hands vibrating with doubt over my rifle dangling between my knees, a new portable gaming system beneath one arm, the rest of the base dark and quiet and disappearing at my back. Yeah, 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 structures. 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 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 bonafide 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 at 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 losing sand from punctures 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 short 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 head, a white disk. In the backseat of your car the flat top of Marine Corps dress blues catches green as an old friend crumbles bud between his fingertips and looks up to see if you mind, and through the mirror you tell him 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 his wrists, a brass eagle, globe, and anchor scratched and tarnished but now and then 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.

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 which 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.

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.

Separation 1

Say there is an animal in you. This animal 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 now it's my turn—but we don't take turns at puzzles—while you wait to pick through the pile and pull out all 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 alongside one of my oldest friends, offered us wisps of wisdom the way fathers sometimes choose to, and, after I enlisted, he scolded me for not soliciting his advice on my future. 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, no matter the forecast. We caught up beneath and swapped pleasantries there as if we had spoken more than twice in four years. A clasp rung the pole and called our attention to the top where sun-faded blue, white, and red ribbons hugged the talons of a brass eagle. The rest of the flag had weathered and dissolved with the breeze into a solution of sky. Fended off a few calls about its condition, he told me—lots of complaints in July, so neighbors say—and I told those fair-weather patriots to fuck off because one of my boys is fighting for that flag and they know the deal, it stays up there as long as he's over there, and here you are at last. I appreciate the gesture, I told him, and if I could do something special, believe me, I would, but I don't know the special way to retire a flag, although you might just take it down. Just take it down, he repeated. I would be glad to bring you a new one and put it up for you as soon as, well, when are you usually home? 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? They don't. Over there. My old friend's father had mistaken enlistment for deployment or deployment for an education. He probably pictured me in full silhouette, rifle in hand, combat ready and poised against a setting sun whenever he happened to look up to find less and less fabric, less richness and definition, less meaning flying over his front yard. Maybe he assumed I did most of my learning not on the American coast but someplace ambiguous, overseas, in country, or—as we

say—over there. It occurs to me now that he may not have been wrong. A father figure should recognize the shape of his sons. I promised to find out what to do with what was left of his flag, how to properly retire his 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, no runner's high and no 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? Is it at all possible that I am actually better off because of my experiences overseas? It is possible you feel that way, but we'll get there. I do feel that way. Let's get back to this guy on campus, the one who served, like you, with the military. He isn't being treated either. Does he feel he is better off because of his experiences? I don't know, but he convinced me to continue to run so I wouldn't shock my system now that I'm free to be lazy again. You run often, then. Often enough. Do you worry about becoming lazy? I'm saying I only worry when I'm lazy. He needed to share that advice with you, needed you to understand, and needed a friend, perhaps. Yes, well, he didn't end up my best buddy or anything, just passed along some advice, 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. Ah, the dog depends on you as a caregiver while your roommate is out. I would have said caretaker. Caretaker, caregiver, same difference. They sound like they should be opposites. 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. Well, 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 am. 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, call him from far and he will come running or I can tell him to stay and he will stand at my side and wait, point at the ground and he will sit, snap fingers and he will give me his eyes as I watch him curb his curiosity while 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 don'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, then, what it looks like, let's start there. Didn't you see it just then, see its weight across my shoulders, paws in my hands? I saw a dog, yes. Let's keep it that way. What way is that? You seeing your dog on my shoulders and me imagining 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's 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 Iraq, if they're shipping him out soon, if to, when to expect him back, what postal code to use when sending packages over there, what kinds of things she's allowed to send, and which are the best kinds 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 and which of them are actually single. Another uncle, 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 the women 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 opened it up and dumped an entire can of ammunition and then, under enemy fire, had to sling open that tray on the top, you know, and slap on another belt and sight back in and cock the handle back and open it back up, tracer rounds burning red through the barrel, brass raining over a pile of hot shells at his feet, ringing in his ears and machine gun smoke filling his lungs. He will be asked if he has a favorite smell. In a letter, another uncle, basic training dropout

from a time between wars, 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 thinks the good folks over at Veterans Affairs asked leading questions about his post-deployment behavior to procure from him the answers they had already imagined. On campus, a fellow college student will ask if he ever 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 always dishes gratitude 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. He will be asked if he plans to write about this stuff, you know, his experiences, and why not. He will ask himself why he thinks he has any 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? I have been told duality is a flight of fancy. You can be that which is inside or that which is out, but you cannot be that which is the self and that which is the world. These, the 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 taken as history, as ingressions and explosions on an otherwise impermeable timeline. 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. I have been told it takes many un-plane-like folds to form paper aircraft. When I let go, I must imagine enough time is carried aloft.

Services Rendered

You stand in line for coffee 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 row of books standing among other clothbound spines, a brass-plated ram skull, and glass orbs bursting with succulents—thick-fleshed, drought resistant, beautifully diverse xerophytes—resilient blooms structurally adapted to arid climes. The barista brandishes and calls out 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, no kidding, I guess you'd have to really want to join, well, 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 where a chair rail divides the paint—deep blue over a muted 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 thanks, but, no, that's 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