



Personal Effects

BY SOLMAZ SHARIF

Like guns and cars, cameras
are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive.
—Susan Sontag

I place a photograph of my uncle on my computer desktop, which means I learn to ignore it. He stands by a tank, helmet tilting to his right, bootlaces tightened as if stitching together a wound. Alive the hand brings up a cigarette we won't see him taste. Last night I smoked one on the steps outside my barn apartment. A promise I broke myself. He promised himself he wouldn't and did. I smell my fingers and I am smelling his. Hands of smoke and gunpowder. Hands that promised they wouldn't, but did.

This album is a STOP-LOSS. By a dim lantern
or in the latrine
he flips through it.
He looks at himself
looking nearly as he does—
closest to himself then
as he could be, just learning
how to lean into his new body.
He suspends there
by STANDING ORDER,

a SPREADING FIRE in his chest,
his groin. He is on STAGE
for us to see him, see him?
He stands in the noontime sun.

A young soldier (pictured above) the son of an imam, brother to six, is among the latest casualties in the military campaign of Susangerd.

your whole body in a photo
your whole body
sitting on a crate
pressing your eyesocket
to the viewfinder
of a bazooka
crouched as you balance
the metal tube on your shoulder
in one you guide a belt of ammo
into the untiring weapon
proud
your elbow out as if
mid-waltz
your frame strong
and lightly supporting the gun
a kind of smile
ruining the picture

You're posing. You're scared.

A body falls

and you learn to step over

a loosened head. You begin to appreciate

the heft of your boot soles,

how they propel you,

how they can kick in

a face—

the collapse

of a canopy bed

in an aerial bombardment,

mosquito netting doused

in napalm—cheekbones fragile

as moth wings beneath the heel.

You tighten your laces

until they hold together

a capable man.

Whatever rains,

the weight of your feet

swings you forward,

goose-stepping pendulums

a body less and less yours—

a body, God knows,

is not what makes you

anyway. So the hands

that said they never would

begin finding

grenade pins around their fingers,

begin flipping through this album

with soot under their nails

you were not ready
But they issued the shovel and the rifle and you dug
But to watch you sitting there between the sandbags
But to watch the sand spilling out the bullet holes
But what did they expect
But what did they really think a sheet of metal could prevent
But I sat rolling little ears of pasta off my thumb like helmets
But it was not a table of fallen men
But my hand registered fatigue
But the men in fatigues were tired of sleeping in shifts
But you snuck into town and dialed home until you wrote your fingers
 were tired
But the code for Shiraz was down
But all of Shiraz was down
But the sheet lightning above the Ferris wheel of rusted bolts
But *I am sure they are alright* you wrote *Well* to reassure yourself
But the wind like an old mouth shaking the unnamed evergreen outside
 my window
But what I mean is I'd like very much to talk a bit

Hello

Operation Ramadan was an offensive in the Iran-Iraq War. It was launched by Iran in July 1982 near Basra and featured the use of human wave attacks in one of the largest land battles since World War II. **Aftermath:** The operation was the first of many disastrous offensives which cost thousands of lives on both sides. This one in general boosted the casualty limit up to 80,000 killed, 200,000 wounded, and 45,000 captured. In retrospect, the Iranians

lacked effective command and control, air support, and logistics to sustain an attack in the first place. Saddam Hussein offered several ceasefire attempts in the following year, none of which were accepted by the Revolutionary regime. ^[6] ^[dead link]

Congratulations and condolences

They would say
That's the house of a martyr
pointing with their nose
That's the mother of a martyr

They are building a museum
for the martyrs.
Some metal shelf
a white archival box

with his PERSONAL EFFECTS.

I am attempting my own

myth-making.
He didn't want to have
anything

to do with it.
White-shrouded, they circled

his corpse, the ridge of his nose
peaking the sheet
or shaded by the boxlid,
around Shah Cheragh.

Daily I sit
with the language
they've made

of our language

to NEUTRALIZE

the CAPABILITY of LOW DOLLAR VALUE ITEMS
like you.

You are what is referred to as
a "CASUALTY." Unclear whether
from a CATALYTIC or FRONTAL ATTACK, unclear

the final time you were addressed

thou, beloved. It was for us a
CATASTROPHIC EVENT.

Just, DESTROYED.

DIED OF WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION.

Yes, there was
EARLY WARNING.

You said you were especially scared
of mortar rounds.

In EXECUTION PLANNING, they weighed
the losses, the SUSTAINABILITY
and budgeted

for X number,
they budgeted for the phone call
to your mother and weighed that

against the amount saved in rations
and your taste for cigarettes

and the tea you poured your boys
and the tea you would've poured me
approaching *Hello*.

The change you collected in jars
jumping a bit

as the family learns to slam
the home's various doors.

How could she say
the things she does not
know. A poison

tipped arrow, she told
classmates at recess,
to the neck, hollow whistle

of it launched
from a blowgun
cutting the air between them.

According to most
definitions, I have never
been at war.

According to mine,
most of my life
spent there. Anthrax

in salt and pepper shakers,
patrol car windshields
with crosshairs painted over them,

some badge holding
my father's pocket contents
up to him and asking

where the cash is from.

The war in Iraq, I read,
is over now.

The last wheels gathering
into themselves
as they lift off

the sad tarmac. I say
begin. I say *end*
and you are to believe

this is what happens.
I say *chew 40 times*
before swallowing, slime,

and you go home to mother,
press a dog tag to your temple,
press a gun to that,

the tag flowering
into your skull. Thank God
for all-weather floor mats

and the slope of my personal driveway
and beer cans that change
color to let me know

they are cold enough.
The full-sized cab
smelling of iron and Axe body spray.

In 2003, a man held a fistful
of blood and brains to a PBS camera
and yelled

is this the freedom
they want for us? It was from his friend's
head. They were marching

as they figured Americans do.
Between them, hardly three horsepower
and still we shot him.

We say the war is over, but still
the woman leans across
the passenger seat

my son, my son.

I wasn't there

so I can't know, can I?

His mother's bed.

A grief we don't attempt to CONSOLE.

I killed him she'll tell me
years later. Fuck

CELESTIAL GUIDANCE

I killed him she'll say
in the midst of CIVIL AFFAIRS

he surprises, he arrives,
eyes taped shut, torso held together
by black thread, fridge-cold—

grief is a CLOSED AREA

CLUTTERED with his fork against the plate
and other forgotten musics.

The enlarged ID photo above her mantel
means I can know Amoo,
my dear COLLATERAL DAMAGE,

as only a state or a school might do.

each photo is an absence,
a thing gone, namely
a moment, sometimes cities,
a tour boat balanced
on a two-story home
miles from shore

He was, we hope, moved.
Moved, but we will have to guess by what:

- shampoo in her wet hair
- salty and fried breads
- the chase scene in *Bullitt*
- sangak fresh from the oven dampening the newspaper on the walk home from the baker's
- the arms of someone who smells nice to him in the morning
- the mouth of someone laced with bergamot or cardamom, who dances in the kitchen and lets whatever's on the stove burn. Who burns for him.

and beside him they burned,

they boiled, they fell,
shortly after a loud sound
that makes him piss himself.

- being nice to others
- loose change
- chess. He could beat all the brothers in chess.

He was moved like that
across a minefield—
moved by a hand we cannot see,

a hand that is all our hands combined.

at the bank
of some pond or salt marsh
tall grass
moustache
eyes closed
facing the sun
hands appear dead
by a fashion photographer's standard
your boots
like in the other photos
well worn
your nails square and closely cut
they are my nails
the army-issued belt
I would wear with Dickies
the army jacket
the Doc Martens
the military gear
that would stomp through my father's home
take that poster down my father said
it was Saddam in crosshairs
you are surrounded by the tall grass
and still I want to hiss
get down get down
so lit and tall
a stupid
thin helmet
between you and the gods

As Tolstoy wrote in a letter: *And yet, from nearby, all this wasn't at all as frightening as might be supposed . . . it was a question of who would burn the most powder, and at the very most 30 men were killed on both sides by these thousands of cannon shots . . .*

Or as I gleaned from your letters:

-

-

would, in Mashhad,

-

-

and my own broken Farsi.

-

-

freefall

-

-

then radio silence. An order

-

-

to disarm. *Stay.*

-

-

(*December*). They say move,

-

-

oil lamp. Two mines

-

-

as an anti-imperialist

-

-

tried to disarm, tried

-

-

maybe by the time you

-

-

Well. Ok. Sorry. I had

-

-

sorry. For this, I

-

-

By the time you

-

-

asking to bring you a camera,

an automatic please.

I search the cities where you were stationed

a ring of schoolboys

laid out on the plastic tarp

their crooked joints

a middle-aged man with

ground meat

where his foot used to be.
I looked
to see if I could find you

netting over your helmet.

In one letter,
you name the seventh killed
in your company

Well maybe I am next.
You didn't say much else

But it must have
He must have
To record the one name

and that being the name of a dead man

Ok. Bye for real
this time you signed off

on page 6.

His father grew very quiet
His father would
HEAVY DROP sob
behind a closed door

His father was
PERSON ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE EFFECTS
A PILLBOX of opium
in his sock drawer

you hand
plucked wild poppies
to soldier friends
imagine the wetness
at the broken stem
me and two girls
at a Birmingham back fence
clearing almost
an entire vine of honeysuckles
that sugar
tasting vaguely of grass
carnage of petals
and pistils licked clean
at our little bee feet

What I see are your hands
peeling apples, the skin curling
to the floor in one long unravel,

a spit-up film reel

loosened from its canister, and
I'm not even sure they are apples, quince,

pear, some desert potato with a stem.
From the number of peels
I assume you are feeding

the other men in your tent.
Your head is down.
Maybe the cameraman

asked you to look at him
and you couldn't stomach
it. Maybe around you,

today, they fell until
you didn't understand
how you hadn't

been hit.
I decide you are happy
for the knife

in your hands,
the white dust
on your bare feet. I am happy

to see your bare feet
in this photo. They are
the only things that

made me cry. It's that
they existed
and that they, appalling,

look so dead already.
I think it's fair to say
you want to do something

with your hands, whether
or not the photographer
placed the apples in front of you

whether or not they are
apples, whether or not
earlier that day you saw

a friend's lungs peeking
out the back of his throat.

I cannot name

the weapons leaning
on the wall behind you—Kalashnikovs?
Howitzers?—as you write

a letter. I wrote

*I burn my finger on the broiler
and smell trenches, my uncle*

pissing himself. "How can she write that?
She doesn't know," a friend, a daughter
of a Vietnam vet, told another friend,

another daughter of a Vietnam vet.

it was his bare toes
that made me cry
because I realized then he had toes
and because dusted in the white
desert sand they looked
like a corpse's toes
while his hands worked off a peel
inches above the earth

Operation Nasr, fought in early January 1981, was a major battle of the Iran-Iraq War. Three Iranian armored regiments advanced towards Iraqi forces who had invaded Iranian territory between the cities of Ahvaz, Susangerd, and Dezful. The Iraqi forces were alerted to this movement and feigned a withdrawal. The Iraqis formed three armored regiments into a three-sided box ambush. The Iranians blundered into the ambush and the two tank forces battled for four days in a sea of mud. The battle had been ordered by President Abdulhassan Banisadr who was hoping that a victory might shore up his deteriorating political position; instead the failure of the offensive helped to hasten his fall. [26]

I write him daily
And so I learn to ignore him
And so I begin to list pocket contents as if filing an autopsy report
And I place in his hands a metal tongue of a fly
And I place in his hands a metal tongue of a tank control board
And I place in his hands a Bic lighter and loose leaf paper
And I place in his hands a trigger, a shutter
And still not even a bar of his laughter
And by April the script in his letters grew tighter, barbed, men in a shoulder-
width trench
And when I sounded out M-EE-N to mean *mine* a hole appeared in the letter
and I couldn't look at it
And I drove into pothole after pothole
And I drove past a hundred balloons held down in a net
And gone even the netting over his helmet
And alive we bring up the hands to hold together his neck
And I place in his hands his head
And I place in his hands my hands
And I place in his eyes a LOOK we share in the rearview
And I place between us a bar of laughter
And I place between us the looking and the telling they want dead

Amoo,

In a tarot card reading
A asks "Are you open
to love? Are you keeping love in mind?"

Amoo, I think.

Amoo.

The word a moan

a blown kiss
the soft things it makes a mouth do.
Amoo, I thought

as he told me about the Page of Cups,
the echo of what
I've never called you.

Hello you'd approach
in the international terminal.
I'd be disheveled

from the search, raw.
Hello. Do you know who I am?
Amoo Javad I'd say.

The things a mouth wishes to
Amoo jan
or Amoo Javad

or Amoo joon Javad
Janam you would respond—
My life, my soul, you'd say—

Language and its expectations
teaches us
about the relationship

we would have had.

Na kheyr, for example—
that we need words

for refusal makes it likely
we would refuse things
of each other.

Or *Baleh*. As in you say
Do you know who I am
and I respond,

though you could be a number of brothers
from our albums,
Yes.

I wrote
I burn my finger on the broiler
and smell trenches, my uncle

pissing himself. How can she write that?
She doesn't know.

As if a film projection caught
in theater dust, I play it

out: I approach you

in the new Imam Khomeini Airport,

fluorescent-lit linoleum, you walk up
to meet me, both palms
behind your back
like a haji. You stoop, extend a hand

Hello. Do you know who I am?

Yes, I tell you, I half-lie,

Yes. An address, beloved
lit
a rooftop of doves

crouched to launch
Yes, Amoo.

How could I not?

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